

**WOMEN POETS, FEMINISM AND THE
SONNET IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-
FIRST CENTURIES: AN AMERICAN
NARRATIVE**

by

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A thesis submitted to
The University of Birmingham
for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English
College of Arts and Law
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April 2013

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Marion Thain, for helping me realise this thesis. Thanks also go to Deborah Longworth for stepping in and seeing the project through to completion, and Dick Ellis for providing a valuable perspective.

I am extremely grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for providing funding for my thesis, enabling me to concentrate fully on the project.

During my research, I have relied on the help of a number of poets to uncover the breadth of women's sonneteering in the contemporary era: Kim Bridgford, Andrea Carter Brown, Sarah Busse, Melissa Cannon, Wanda Coleman, Martha Collins, Denise Duhamel, Sarah Gorham, Susan Gubernat, Heidi Hart, Lyn Hejinian, Julie Kane, Sylvia Kantaris, Tatyana Mishel, Harryette Mullen, Wanda Phipps, Denise Riley, Stephanie Strickland, Marilyn L. Taylor and Kathrine Varnes. My thanks also to Marsha Bryant, Nancy Honicker, Stacy Hubbard, Lynn Keller and David Knox for providing me with their essays.

Thanks go to all of those poets and executors who have allowed me to cite poems in full in the thesis, including: Holly Peppe, literary executor for Edna St. Vincent Millay, Claire Reinertsen, Copyright & Permissions Manager, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc./Liveright Publishing Corp. for citation of Adrienne Rich, Marilyn Hacker, Marilyn Nelson and Erica Bossier, Permissions Co-ordinator, LSU Press, Moira Egan, Tatyana Mishel, and Juliana Spahr. Special mention must go to Moira Egan, Marilyn Nelson, and Marilyn Hacker who proved to be especially accommodating and helpful.

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There have been several special teachers and tutors throughout my life who have inspired, encouraged and helped me get to where I am today and one particular piece of advice that has been my inspiration: reach for the moon and even if you miss you'll be amongst the stars. I am grateful to these teachers for feeding my curiosity and pushing me to achieve.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my family without whom none of this would have been possible. To my nan who takes so much pride in all that I do. To my parents for their unerring belief and support. To my brother for making me do this in the first place and to Max for being there for me throughout. With all my love.

Dedication

In loving memory of my grandparents.

Abstract

Initially developed and perfected by male poets, the history of the sonnet has been characterised by androcentrism. Yet from its inception the sonnet has also been adopted by women. In recent years feminist critics have begun to redress the form's gender imbalance, but most studies of the female-authored sonnet have excluded the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and thus one of the most important periods in women's history – the rise of feminism – leading to a flawed narrative of the genre. Repositioning Edna St. Vincent Millay as the starting point in a twentieth-century tradition, this study begins where most others end and examines how the emergence and development of feminism, specifically in an American context, underscores a significant female narrative of the sonnet that emerges outside of the male tradition. By reading the works of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Adrienne Rich, Marilyn Hacker, Marilyn Nelson and Moira Egan within their specific feminist contexts and within the broader trajectory of feminism, it is possible to see how women in the era took ownership of the form. Ultimately, the thesis suggests that feminism has shaped an important narrative in the history of the genre that means today the sonnet is no longer exclusively male.

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Introduction

Our silence attests...to a failure to ask the right questions about how traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet may serve the needs of women poets. (Fried 1)

This thesis intends to challenge the dominant thinking on the androcentrism of the sonnet. It seeks to claim for female poets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries not only greater recognition and value for their contributions to the genre, and admittance to the canon, but also the distinction of a vital tradition accessible via a feminist epistemology. Indeed, the thesis will examine how the development of feminism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a specific focus on an American context, has facilitated the development of a vital female-authored sonnet tradition that has released the genre from its patriarchal bias and made it into a legitimate and powerful female mode.

In recent history feminist critics have been keen to uncover and promote female presence in the sonnet tradition. However, whilst it is accepted that women can, and have, written sonnets, theirs is still a peripheral and secondary story, with continued debate over women's claims upon the sonnet and the gendered ideology of the genre. Some critics have suggested that because of the sonnet's masculine tradition and phallic direction, despite her intentions and politics, the female poet who appropriates the form, inevitably ends up being implicated in the sexist ideology of the genre and failing to assert a genuine female narrative (Homans 573-4; Jones 58). As Natasha Distiller has argued, the position of the female sonneteer

is something of an oxymoron (163). However, other than a cursory nod towards Edna St. Vincent Millay, studies of the female-authored sonnet have failed to address the radically transformative period of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet it is this period that witnessed a revolution in women's lives, with the most sustained and successful exposure of, and challenge against, oppressive gender systems and hierarchies. The current gap in the female-authored sonnet narrative threatens to leave us with a skewed tradition and incomplete knowledge of the genre. Indeed, it is only within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (at least publically) that female sonneteers have been as prolific as male sonneteers; thus without acknowledgment of this period the sonnet will continue to be associated primarily with men. By reading the works of five American female sonneteers in light of their particular feminist contexts, the thesis will demonstrate the importance of women's sonnets in this period. Even though it has been suggested that the sonnet can never truly escape its masculine past and be a vehicle for female ends (Distiller 170; Jones 58), given the rise of a visible and universal feminist movement and the gradual breakdown of the old patriarchal order, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries signal an important development in the female-authored sonnet narrative and the emergence of a genuine female countertradition.

Despite originating over eight centuries ago, the sonnet, as Tony Cousins and Peter Howarth identify, has been a continuing presence in western literature (2), with significant developments and models not only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the sonnet originally flourished, but in every century since its emergence, including the as yet narrow plot of the twenty-first century. Unlike the shifting fortunes of forms such as the roundel, rhyme royal, ghazal and villanelle,

which have experienced epochs of virtual obscurity and can generally be aligned with a particular period, the sonnet, although experiencing varying degrees of popularity and production, has been omnipresent throughout literary history. Indeed, whilst the Renaissance figures significantly in the genre because of the growth of the form in England and the revolutionary interventions of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare and Milton, amongst others, the popularity and relevance of the form today is borne witness to in a recent flurry of influential sonnet texts, including *The Making of a Sonnet* (Hirsch and Boland, 2008), *The Art of the Sonnet* (Burt and Mikics, 2010) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (Cousins and Howarth, 2011). As these critical texts show, the sonnet maintains a foremost place in literary consciousness. However, the sonnet's past still holds court over its presence which unless redressed will also limit its future. It is to this end that the thesis will explore the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

From its earliest days women have engaged with the sonnet. In the non-Anglophone tradition, women's engagement with the genre has been traced back by critics including Rosalind Smith and Mary Moore to the sixteenth century with Vittoria Colonna, Louise Labé and Gaspara Stampa, whilst in the English tradition it has been dated to 1560 with Anne Locke's 'A Meditation of A Penitent Sinner' (Spiller, 'A Literary First'). Throughout literary history ever since, examples can be found of women's sonneteering and a strong and prolific tradition begins to emerge that undermines their assumed absence and male dominance in the genre. Indeed, whilst the growth of Petrarchism with its gendered roles of desiring, speaking male subject and desired, silent female object defined the expectations of the genre, there is nothing inherently exclusionary in the form that precludes women's

participation and achievement. Thus even against the androcentric backdrop of Petrarchan love women have negotiated the sonnet for themselves. For the sonnet, as Don Paterson suggests, is essentially a form for human thought in any and all of its guises (xxvii). As such, women as readily as men are capable of adopting the form and making it their own. Indeed, each individual poet possesses the power to redefine the scope of the genre, and women, who have found it difficult to enter the sonnet within the masculine tradition of Petrarchism, have had to consistently challenge and rethink the genre to accommodate themselves. Thus we find amongst the very earliest examples Anne Locke replacing Petrarchism with religious exegesis – ‘Loe prostrate, Lorde, before thy face I lye/ With sighes depe drawne depe sorrowe to expresse’ (1-2) – and Mary Wroth introducing a female Petrarchan subject – ‘I offer to your trust/ This crowne, my self, and all that I have’ (13: 12-13).

Women’s sonnets have always necessarily had to respond to, either implicitly or explicitly, a male tradition and thus arguably there has always been a nascent feminism embedded in the practice and art of women’s sonneteering. However, much attention in recent years has been given primarily to the nineteenth century as marking the beginnings of a vital female (Billone) – even feminist (Chapman 105) – sonnet tradition. Whilst this thesis does not intend to question the importance of female sonneteers in the nineteenth century, it intends to suggest that the development and growth of a vital and dominant feminist movement in, and across, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries offered new and different contexts for women’s lives that changed their relationship to, and appropriation of, the genre and radically redefined the female-authored sonnet in ways that were not possible in the

nascent feminist context of the previous century. Although Jodi Lustig argues that simply because nineteenth-century women were writing at a time when a patriarchal gender ideology prevailed it did not inherently follow that they could not conceive of different realities in their sonnets (113), the realisation of these different realities in women's lived experiences throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries precipitates significant transformations in the sonnet. Thus despite the work of feminist critics such as Amy Billone and Alison Chapman on the nineteenth century, as well as the work of Rosalind Smith and Mary Moore who have sought to reclaim and discover women sonneteers from across literary history providing us with a completely revitalised canon and strong claims for a female tradition of the sonnet as far back as the sixteenth century, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which gendered lives have experienced drastic changes, offers the most obvious and, arguably, the most significant context for exploring and uncovering such a tradition.

Today, contrary to popular belief, the sonnet is written by women as often as it is by men. However in the literature surrounding the genre the old guard prevails and women's importance and equality remain obscured. For example, anthologies, criticism and studies of the sonnet tend to betray an inherent androcentrism and Renaissance bias that has been absorbed into the canon. Although to some extent this reflects an historical and literary realism based on male and female access to education, writing opportunities and literary production, it often, specifically in terms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, reflects a debilitating bias that continues to devalue the female sonneteer, as will now be explored.

There are approximately thirteen anthologies dedicated to the sonnet currently in circulation. Whilst four of these texts have been published in America¹ and three in Britain², the remaining six³ have a dual publication history and all are readily available on both sides of the Atlantic, showing a sense of an Anglophone tradition in which British and American sonneteers are naturally, even at times unconsciously, interwoven and thus all serve as appropriate and practical references for this thesis.

The presence of a genre-based field attests to the sonnet's significance and popularity, and the anthologies are meant to present the most important examples of the form. They are thus integral to the dissemination, valuation and reception of the sonnet – and specifically to the formation of the sonnet canon, as Natalie Houston clarifies, 'any anthology...attaches cultural value to certain texts, teaching readers about its particular definition of "art" or "poetry"' ('Anthologies' 365). The selection of texts is therefore not an indiscriminate, but rather an ideological, practice, again to borrow from Houston, reflecting and creating literary history, and describing and enforcing the boundaries to literary knowledge (361, 365). In deconstructing the composition and selection of current sonnet anthologies it is possible to explore the boundaries that have been set for the reader's knowledge of

¹ *The Sonnet: An Anthology* – Bender and Squier; *150 Contemporary Sonnets* – Baer; *American Sonnets* – Bromwich; *Hot Sonnets* – Egan and Harriss.

² *101 Sonnets* – Paterson; *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* – Hilson; *The Anthem Anthology of Victorian Sonnets* – Allen.

³ *A Century of Sonnets* – Feldman and Robinson; *The Oxford Book of Sonnets* - Fuller; *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* - Levin; *Sonnets from Dante to the Present* - Hollander; *The Making of a Sonnet* – Hirsch and Boland; *The Art of the Sonnet* – Burt and Mikics.

the sonnet and in doing so a number of representational failings and, consequently, ideological patterns emerge that reinforce the need for this current thesis.

Of the thirteen anthologies, five of these, *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic Era Revival* (Feldman and Robinson, 1999), *150 Contemporary Sonnets* (Baer, 2005), *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Hilson, 2008), *The Anthem Anthology of Victorian Sonnets* (Allen, 2011) and *Hot Sonnets* (Egan and Harriss, 2011) are confined to specific eras and do not attempt to portray a complete history of the genre. Meanwhile *The Sonnet: An Anthology. A Comprehensive Selection of British and American Sonnets from the Renaissance to the Present* (Bender and Squier) which was first published in 1965, with a subsequent edition in 1987 has now been superseded. The focus of my bibliographic survey has thus been on the seven remaining anthologies: *101 Sonnets* (Paterson, 1999), *The Oxford Book of Sonnets* (Fuller, 2000), *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (Levin, 2001), *Sonnets from Dante to the Present* (Hollander, 2001), *American Sonnets: An Anthology* (Bromwich, 2007), *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology* (Hirsch and Boland, 2008) and *The Art of the Sonnet* (Burt and Mikics, 2010). Each of these anthologies attempts to present a history of the sonnet and has been published in, and around, the new millennium in a period of renewed interest and impetus in sonnet studies. These anthologies have access to the latest knowledge and resources on the sonnet and thus reflect current ideology.

None of the seven anthologies have over a 27% representation of women: *The Art of the Sonnet* emerging as the most representative anthology with 24 women to 65 men (26.96%), and *101 Sonnets*, the worst with a meagre 14 women to 87 men

(13.86%). When examining the actual number of sonnets by male and female writers included in these anthologies, the figure is even more disproportionate, with the worst example being 190 male-authored sonnets to 29 female-authored sonnets (13.2%) in *Sonnets from Dante to the Present*. In terms of the actual number of women represented, the fewest is 10 in *American Sonnets* and the most is 82 in *The Making of a Sonnet*. Yet even *The Making of a Sonnet* does not offer full representation for female sonneteers. Indeed, it excludes a number of female sonneteers who are included in the other anthologies, such as May Swenson and Eavan Boland, as well as a host of other women, most notably contemporary poets, including figures such as Olena Kalytiak Davis and Wanda Phipps, who have been excluded from all of the anthologies. The impetus of all of these anthologies is thus always weighted towards the male sonneteer, creating an impression of the sonnet as a largely male practice and constructing generic knowledge within gendered boundaries.

As well as limiting knowledge of the sonnet along these gendered boundaries, the number of female poets represented further delimits the genre. Indeed, only 131⁴ women are represented across the entire seven anthologies; a figure which is surpassed both in *The Oxford Book of Sonnets* (146), and *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (180) for male sonneteers alone and is nearly doubled in *The Making of a Sonnet* (252). Only Edna St. Vincent Millay is represented in all of the anthologies, and only three other women – Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti – feature in six of the seven anthologies. Seventy-six women,

⁴ Of the 131 female sonneteers, 68 are American, 46 are British, 3 poets represent Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, 2 poets are Italian, with 1 poet representing France, Mexico, Switzerland, Vietnam, Venezuela and Israel.

including popular and prestigious figures such as Charlotte Mew, George Eliot and Anne Sexton, are represented in only one anthology, whilst a whole range of poets, including noted figures like Caroline Norton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and modern writers like Ros Barber and Kim Addonizio, do not appear in any of the anthologies. Another significant failing is in the relative absence of black and ethnic female poets. Arguably, the sonnet does not have such a broad and rich history in non-white or non-western cultures, particularly pre-twentieth century, however the complete exclusion of black women writers in *Sonnets from Dante* and significantly, *American Sonnets*⁵ ignores the extremely significant contribution of these writers. Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove appear most frequently amongst non-white writers and thus assume the place of authority, whilst Una Marson, Lucille Clifton, Moniza Alvi and Natasha Trethewey who have all used the form, are absented, contributing to the preservation of a white bias within the sonnet.

Turning to a final point on the representation of women in the anthologies, four different women are given the privileged position of being the first female representative – a position which implicitly assumes their ordinary status in a female sonnet tradition – with a gap of 340 years between the earliest (Vittoria Colonna) and latest of these women (Helen Hunt Jackson). This discrepancy underlines the lack of understanding and research into, as well as the lack of significance given to, women's contributions to the sonnet. Given the different publication dates of the anthologies, the women that occupy the terminal positions are more necessarily, diverse, with a different poet used in each instance. Both *The*

⁵ America has perhaps the strongest black female sonnet tradition beginning with Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) and Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935).

Penguin Book of the Sonnet and *The Art of the Sonnet* bring the canon right up to date with their inclusions of Beth Ann Fennelly and Martha Serpas, respectively. Whilst the choice of Alice Oswald in *The Oxford Book of Sonnets* is somewhat justified given the anthology's publication in 2000, before writers such as Natasha Trethewey and Moira Egan had begun to publish. However, despite presenting a chronology of the sonnet, the remaining anthologies again limit the knowledge of the female-authored sonnet through their final poetic choices. Indeed, in *The Making of a Sonnet*, *American Sonnets* and *Sonnets from Dante*, all published in the new millennium, the choices of Sandra Mcpherson, Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Jennings signify the failure to adequately acknowledge and value contemporary sonnets. An important intervention in this trend has been made by the publication of *Hot Sonnets*, which innovatively uses Millay as the point of departure to create a new lineage that takes the sonnet to its most recent point in women's history with the likes of Jessica Piazza, Sandra Beasley, Mela Kirkpatrick and Chloe Haralambous; names which are not only unfamiliar to sonnet studies but are largely new to the poetic scene as a whole. This project exposes the very narrowness and conservatism of the so-called panhistorical anthologies and encourages a rethinking of the canon from the vantage point of the twenty-first century.

In addition to *Hot Sonnets*, *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* is a groundbreaking anthology for sonnet studies. In his introduction, commenting on the predictability of anthological selections, Jeff Hilson writes that 'on the whole reading through the Twentieth century contributions of these big press editions [of sonnet anthologies] was, and continues to be, a disheartening experience' (9). He argues that anthologies assume the 'face of inclusivity' as a cover up for a conservative,

personal and elitist canon, suggesting that this conspiracy of the sonnet has led to the publication of 'what is effectively the same anthology' (9): a claim which seems to be supported by the survey outlined above. Instead, Hilson argues, 'what is needed is a radical defamiliarisation of the sonnet' (14), thus *The Reality Street Book* stands as a radical alternative to the mainstream anthology, incorporating the voices, forms and styles that seem to be excluded from the canon as a means of protecting its image, in order to give the "other" story of the sonnet. Women poets, Hilson makes clear in his introduction (11-12), are integral to this project and thus in place of the twentieth-century doyennes of Millay and Elinor Wylie that recur in the pages of the mainstream anthologies, appear names which are completely absent from all other sonnet anthologies, including Geraldine Monk, Kathleen Fraser and Abigail Osborne. Indeed, of the twenty one women included in the anthology, only three, Alice Notley, Bernadette Mayer and Michelle Leggott, appear in any of the other sonnet anthologies and then only once. Although *The Reality Street Book* conforms to the male bias in the canon, it does much to expand women's contributions and to introduce neglected names back into the tradition, at once stretching the sonnet remit and exposing the limitations of the current female canon.

Finally, on the topic of anthologies, two recent additions have helped to centralise women's poetics of form: *A Formal Feeling Comes* (Finch, 1994) and *An Exaltation of Forms* (Finch and Varnes, 2002). Although *A Formal Feeling Comes* is not dedicated to the sonnet, 37 sonnets written by 22 different female poets are included, as well as two introductory essays on the sonnet form by Rita Dove and Maureen Seaton. Thirteen poets are included in the anthology that are absent from the other anthologies. In *An Exaltation of Forms*, the emphasis is on contemporary

formalist poetry rather than women poets, with chapters dedicated to individual forms. Notably, whilst the chapter on the ghazal is overseen by Agha Shahid Ali – the icon of the form, the chapter on the sonnet is compiled by a female sonneteer, Marilyn Hacker. Although Hacker chooses only 3 female- to 6 male-authored sonnets, her identification with the form signals a changing tide in the gender ideology of the sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Despite the advancements of the anthologies of Egan, Hilson, and Finch and Varnes, the narrative of the female-authored sonnet is still far from complete, with no authoritative lineage or comprehensive canon. The failure to depict adequately the range of female sonneteers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries specifically hampers the emergence of a strong contemporary tradition that challenges the masculine bias of the genre. It seems that the need for a comprehensive, separate anthology of women's sonnets, along the lines of recent gynocentric anthologies such as *Modern Women Poets* (Rees-Jones, 2005) and *When She Named Fire* (Budy, 2009), and encompassing the depth of *The Anthem Anthology of Victorian Sonnets* (Allen, 2011) is a priority, not in order to undermine the male tradition or argue for a separate female tradition, but like these other anthologies, to allow a greater focus on, and to recognise the range and importance of the contributions of, women. In order to develop this anthology, however, we will need more studies of female sonneteers within criticism, and this will mean redressing the partial processes of selection, assessment and valuation that have impaired the canon, as will now be addressed.

Traditionally, amongst the most familiar and foremost studies about the sonnet have been Wilkins's 'The Invention of the Sonnet' (1915), Crosland's *The English Sonnet* (1917), Oppenheimer's *The Birth of the Modern Mind* (1989) and Spiller's *The Development of the Sonnet* (1992). Each of these reflects a predilection for the sonnet's furthest past and an emphasis on male contributions. Although this signals a degree of realism, it also reflects the gendering of academia and literature particularly prior to the second wave of feminism. Critics wishing to claim the rightful places for women sonneteers in the canon are thus confronted by centuries' worth of knowledge production that has cemented the canon as a largely androcentric domain. American female sonneteers also suffer from the added bias of Eurocentrism which defines the field.

A search on the MLA International Bibliography for the sonnet, brings up over 4000 results, with a significant dominance by male authors. Indeed, a comparative search based on the formula "author" plus "sonnet" reveals 1244 results for Shakespeare, 251 for Milton and 93 for Spenser, in contrast to 67 for Barrett Browning, 38 for Wroth, 28 for Rossetti, 17 for Millay and 16 for Locke, with female sonneteers connected to a specifically American tradition, including Lizette Woodworth Reese, Helen Hunt Jackson and Emma Lazarus bearing no results.⁶ Whilst this is only a very primitive methodology, the results nevertheless show the general bias towards male, and disregard for female, sonneteers. Indeed, in Spiller's *The Development of the Sonnet* which was published in 1992, during a period of increasing interest in Locke, which Spiller himself was engaged with, as he notes in 'A Literary First': 'I was fortunate enough to receive a lot of information

⁶ Search results as of 5 Nov. 2012.

about Locke's sonnets from Susanne Woods' (42), he gives only two passing references to her, and three to Wroth, whilst entire chapters are given to Wyatt, Sidney and Shakespeare. In contrast, Rosalind Smith has recently given monographic treatment to an exclusively female history of the genre focusing on a sixty year period, which encompasses Spiller's historical remit, in which not only are Locke and Wroth given their own considerable chapters, but so too are Mary Stuart and the arguably female author of the Pandora Sonnets. Smith argues that women's absence from the canon should not be accepted as a 'straightforward example of feminine limitation' (1), and her study, which uncovers the wealth and significance of female sonneteering, shows up the critical failings of other commentators.

That these main studies of the sonnet have also focused on its earliest periodicity, largely concluding with Milton or another Renaissance figure, has also meant that the canon has been formed on the basis of a period in which women's sonneteering was not as encouraged or publicised, and specifically without regard to the flourishing contemporary moment.⁷ As the history of the American sonnet has emerged largely only since the nineteenth century (David Bromwich commences his anthology *American Sonnets* in 1848 with John Quincy Adams' 'To the Sun-Dial' and identifies the first female-authored sonnet in his collection in 1886 with Helen

⁷ The online sonnet journal *14 by 14* (Bloxsom) which ran from December 2007 to August 2011 features 52 female sonneteers; a further 7 female sonneteers are represented in *Sixty-Six: The Journal of Sonnet Studies* (Bos and Delaney) which produced four issues across 2008 and 2009; 10 additional female sonneteers appear in the December 2006 'Sonnet Feature' from *The Cortland Review* (Wallace); the 'Sonnet Scrolls' on the *Poetry Porch* website feature a further 39 female sonneteers (Wilson); and Mezzo Cammin an additional 47 (Bridgford). In terms of print publications *Hot Sonnets* (Egan and Harriss) adds a further 20 different names; *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* (Lumsden and Stonborough) 13; and *Adventures in Form* (Chivers) 5, totalling 193 female sonneteers currently writing taken from a far from comprehensive snapshot of sonnet activity.

Hunt Jackson's 'Crossed Threads'), the chronological focus of these main studies precludes this whole narrative. There is no publication charting the history of the sonnet, not least the female-authored sonnet, in the twentieth and/or twenty-first centuries. Despite the title of Lustig's thesis 'The Modern Female Sonneteers: Redressing the Tradition' (2007), which seems to answer the call for a study of modern women's sonnets, rather than a study of the twentieth century, Lustig commences her study in the eighteenth century with Mary Robinson, tracing a tradition through Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Augusta Webster before concluding with Millay, that fails to address significantly the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Millay's end-place in Lustig's study is echoed in the only two panhistorical studies of a female sonnet tradition by Mary Moore and Natasha Distiller, contributing to an aborted and distorted narrative of the female-authored sonnet. Although individual articles and essays on figures including Marilyn Hacker and Bernadette Mayer are beginning to challenge this narrative, no monographic work has been conducted that definitively rewrites the lineage. The closest work to this end has been the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (2011), in which as well as chapters on 'The Romantic Sonnet' and 'The Victorian Sonnet', there are three chapters dedicated to 'Contemporary Poets and the Sonnet', 'The Modern Sonnet' and 'The Contemporary Sonnet'. Whilst none of these chapters have a specific focus on women's sonnets, they all benefit from the latest gynocentric focus in sonnet studies and incorporate a wealth of twentieth and twenty-first century female poets, both familiar and unknown. This work highlights the absence of criticism with regard to the contemporary period and points to the worthiness and importance of studying this area, as Howarth argues, 'the sonnet became more innovative in form and more diverse in content than in any previous age' (226). Significantly, the twentieth

century also marked a major shift in women's history in which education, writing and publication exploded, reaching levels similar to men for the first time in history. It is thus a breakthrough period for women's sonneteering and thus in the history and canon of the genre.

Undoubtedly, the remit of sonnet studies has dramatically transformed since 1990, and especially in the new millennium, with perspectives, prerogatives and personages all reflecting the postmodernist turn to diversity, contemporaneity and ambiguity. Sonnet studies have also been revolutionised by feminism. Firstly, the number of female sonneteers to feature in studies has been expanded from the generally acknowledged sextet of Locke, Wroth, Smith, Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Millay to include voices as historically, racially and ideologically varied as Saint Catherine of Siena, Mary Tighe and Gwendolyn Brooks; there is still however a long way to go before female sonneteers have received due critical attention. Whilst Charlotte Smith and Augusta Webster are beginning to attract significant interest⁸, the pre-twentieth-century myopia continues to obscure the hundreds of female poets who have contributed to the sonnet in most recent history. The majority of female names that occupy the three twentieth-century anthologies, 150

⁸ A comparative MLA search to that done on page 12 brings up 39 results for Charlotte Smith and one of the major developments has been recognition of her significance in the Romantic era sonnet revival, as Adela Pinch explains 'she played a major role in reviving the sonnet from the comparative disrepute into which it had fallen in the eighteenth century and thus enabled the romantic poets' further use of the form' (58). Meanwhile, although an MLA search of Augusta Webster brings up only 5 results, with an additional result when the search includes *Mother and Daughter* (Webster's prominent sonnet sequence), the reprinting of her work particularly since 1999 with the Broadview Press edition of her *Selected Poems*, and specifically the 2008 Dodo Press and 2010 Kessinger Press publications of *Mother and Daughter*, suggest Webster's renewed visibility in very recent history, which is attested to by the emergence of critical studies since 2008. Indeed, all of the MLA results, as well as Jodi Lustig's 'The Modern Female Sonneteers', which features a chapter on Webster, have appeared since 2008, suggesting an emergent field of study.

Contemporary Sonnets, *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* and *Hot Sonnets*, are largely missing from the critical arena of the sonnet, despite the range and influence of these poets. Feminism has, however, encouraged the critical interaction between previously isolated, and seemingly disconnected, female voices, as in Madeline Bassnett's 'Injoying of True Joye the Most, and Best': Desire and the Sonnet Sequences of Lady Mary Wroth and Adrienne Rich', laying the foundation for a female sonnet tradition. Indeed, prior to 2000, there were no panhistorical studies of women sonneteers; today there are six – four monographs: *Desiring Voices: Women sonneteers and Petrarchism* (Moore, 2000); *Sonnets and the English Woman Writer, 1560-1621: The Politics of Absence* (Smith, 2005); *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Billone, 2007); *Desire and Gender in the Sonnet Tradition* (Distiller, 2008); one dissertation: 'The Modern Female Sonneteers: Redressing the Tradition' (Lustig, 2007), and one book chapter 'Towards a New History: Fin de Siècle Women Poets and the Sonnet' (Houston, 2003). Despite these gains however, the female-authored sonnet still has a largely insufficient criticism, with key British figures such as Smith and Barrett Browning still dominating the field to the detriment of other writers, and creating a pre-twentieth-century myopia.

Both the anthological and critical fields have thus contributed, and continue to contribute, to a gendered and historically biased canon. Indeed, the main perceptions that are ministered by these works are of male dominance and female inferiority, and of the Renaissance as the apogee of the sonnet, with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, dominated by Modernism's turn away from form and a focus on experimental and innovative poetics, lying in its shadow. These prejudices

thus significantly limit the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the full spectrum and tradition of the genre, leaving us in the twenty-first century, by and large, with fifteenth-century generic expectations, artistic judgements and literary icons. Given that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been amongst the most transformative epochs in history, with Modernism, feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, not to mention groundbreaking developments in science, psychology, and technology, radically changing our knowledge systems, the current body of criticism is significantly inadequate, and the absence of any study of women's sonnets in this period is preventing a full history of the genre and preserving a model of the sonnet and sonneteer that fails to reflect the transformations of the modern era.

In order to plug these historical and gendered gaps, and in an attempt to open up the canon, this current study will consider women's sonnets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Taking a similar approach to *Hot Sonnets*, the thesis will use Millay as its starting point, therefore beginning where all current panhistorical studies end and in doing so will suggest that Millay represents not the end of a female sonnet tradition but its beginning in the twentieth-century western feminist world.

The thesis will be structured around the three generally characterised moments of feminism – the first, second and third waves. It would be remiss of me not to mention the criticism that has been levelled at the wave theory. Indeed, in recent years critics such as Nancy Hewitt, Becky Thompson and Cathryn Bailey have all problematised what they see as the simplistic, monolithic and exclusionary nature of

the model. However, as yet, there is no alternative comprehensive or universally satisfactory model for tracing the history of feminism. Nonetheless, there has clearly been an evolution in feminism and some pivotal changes in feminist politics that separate out distinctive periods and, whilst the precise chronologies of these periods is fuzzy, splitting the twentieth century into three moments based around the wave model not only represents current critical practice, but also allows for a clear representation of the marked historical changes in feminism in the period. That is, by looking at feminism within these three different segments we can see very generically the conceptual shifts that have occurred across the century. My aim in this thesis is to situate female sonneteers within their specific feminist moment in history in order to trace a narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that figures how the different feminist contexts of the writers impacted their sonneteering. As such, the wave model which allows me to address the chronological evolution of feminism and distinctions between historical moments thus satisfies the needs of this current study.

Whilst adhering to the three waves, I do however, challenge and expand their remit on theoretical grounds. The first wave is thus extended beyond 1920 – the attainment of the vote in America – in reflection of what Nancy Cott has identified as the misleadingly narrow conflation of feminism with suffragism (3) and the recognition of a wider body of feminist aims and debates that were present in the period and continued beyond the achievement of suffrage. Similarly, the second wave, which critics generally bracket as beginning in the 1960s and reaching a peak in the mid-1970s (Le Gates 364; Humm, *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* 252), will be both pushed back to the 1950s in recognition of both the English translation of

Simone De Beauvoir's movement-changing text, *The Second Sex*, and recent criticism that identifies the emergence of feminism in the 'family-centred years' following World War Two (Ryan 41), and pushed forward into the 1980s in recognition of both what Nancy Whittier defines as more individual and daily forms of feminism (3-4), as well as the growth of lesbian feminism in this period (20). Finally the third wave, which is the most contentious and still has neither the authority or ratification of the other two waves⁹ is traced back to the emergence of a distinctive women-of-colour feminism in the 1980s whereby the term was first mentioned (Gillis, Howie and Munford xxii), thus challenging popular associations with Rebecca Walker (Heywood 1: xv; Genz and Brabon 157) and a younger, groovier generation (Gillis, Howie and Munford xxvii). Here, the wave model is most clearly exposed as flawed, and the thesis in this section picks up on the racial myopia of western feminism and the importance of women-of-colour feminism. The third wave is further complicated by the advent of postfeminism – a phenomenon which emerged around the same time (Gamble 52) and has itself suffered from ambiguity (Genz and Brabon 1; Genz 336). It is postfeminism to which the final chapter of the thesis turns in recognition of the complexity and diversity of contemporary feminism.

Whilst some may disagree with the timeline of the waves, they are intended to show the changing realities of feminism at given moments of history. If we apply twenty-first century definitions of the various waves we lose a lot of the historic

⁹ In the 2005 edition of *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Humm) and Marlene LeGates' *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society* there are no entries for, or discussion of, the third wave, whilst in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (Gamble), whilst the first and second wave each get their own chapters, the third wave is included, almost as an aside, in a brief discussion as part of a chapter on postfeminism.

importance and understanding of feminism. Therefore, the thesis looks at feminism in its historically-specific contexts to reveal the discourses and delineations that shaped contemporary thought in order to realise the narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although chronological progression is not always important to individual chapters, there is some sense of evolution in the thesis as a whole. Indeed, whilst the chapters represent synchronic approaches to individual sonneteers, the thesis represents a diachronic approach. Essentially, the juxtaposition of the chapters, each with their particular feminist context, traces the different faces of the sonnet to emerge throughout the twentieth century and although a direct trajectory is not identified, there is a sense in which the sonnets of subsequent chapters reflect new engagements with the form that are only made possible because of the changing context.

The thesis is not intended to be a survey but rather a discussion of the various interactions with the sonnet by specific poets in different feminist contexts. Five writers are thus chosen as case studies: Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), Marilyn Hacker (1942), Marilyn Nelson (1946) and Moira Egan (1962). With the focus on only five poets, a lot of women are inevitably omitted and given the criticism outlined above, the thesis could be seen to be engaging in its own insidious canon-making. However, the intention of the thesis is to plug the historical and gendered gaps of current sonnet criticism, specifically of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and to create a feminist narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition. Poets were chosen therefore to represent the historical and feminist span of the period. As many additional sonneteers as space allows have been included as references within the chapters; even so it has not

been possible to give due attention to the myriad women poets working with the genre across the century. It is hoped however that this study will ignite interest in the period and prompt further studies that will contribute to a fuller account of the female-authored sonnet tradition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ideally, it is hoped that a comprehensive Anglophone anthology in the vein of the recent *Anthem Anthology of the Victorian Sonnet* will emerge out of this study and a very basic outline for this, founded on the research of the thesis, is included in Appendix A.

The thesis opens with an exploration of Millay, who has become an almost stock figure in the sonnet tradition. Her inclusion therefore is unlikely to raise much curiosity. However, her choice within this thesis is not meant to be merely routine, but rather is central to a feminist rethinking of the sonnet narrative. Indeed, Millay has become an automatic choice within the canon, particularly, as outlined above, as the endpoint within a gynocentric narrative, and this automatism has significantly delimited Millay's value and role. Her position at the start of this thesis, as well as the central taxonomy of feminism that structures the thesis thus encourages a new approach to Millay's sonnets. Whilst the chapter offered the chance to discover unrepresented names like Una Marson or new names like Constance Ada Renshaw, ultimately Millay represented the most significant contribution to a female-authored narrative of the sonnet within the feminist historiography of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The thesis thus refigures Millay as the point of departure for a new tradition of the female-authored sonnet.

Chapter 2 turns to Adrienne Rich to explore the sonnet's uneasy relationship with second wave feminism and to suggest that the form did not disappear in the context, but rather diversified. The choice of Rich as the principal sonneteer from the early second wave is considerably more problematic than that of Millay. Although the selection of significant female sonneteers is notably reduced in this period, Gwendolyn Brooks and Elizabeth Jennings stand out as possible precedents. Indeed, Brooks appears in three out of the seven anthologies surveyed, whilst Jennings' oeuvre, although little represented, comprises hundreds of sonnets, including a vast body of unpublished sonnets in her manuscripts. However, neither poet has a particular resonance with the feminist context: Brooks was more aligned with a black nationalism, whilst Jennings's religious zeal eclipsed any connection with contemporary gender politics. In contrast, Rich shows an interesting relationship to feminism and whilst her later works show little engagement with the sonnet, in the period of the early second wave Rich was still very much battling with, and negotiating, the formal ethos in which she was trained. This chapter is the only one to assume an explicit chronological progression in the poet's oeuvre and does so to reflect the particular evolution of the sonnet within the rapidly changing and radicalising historical and biographical context of Rich. Her evolving attitudes to feminism and form provide a significant chapter to the narrative of the female-authored sonnet.

Chapter three features Marilyn Hacker, who, in very recent times, has received greater attention from the likes of Lynn Keller and Mary Biggs, and is present in four of the sonnet anthologies. Hacker is one of the most prolific sonneteers of the last forty years. Excluding *Going Back to the River* (1990), which includes only two

poems that use the sonnet form – ‘Letter from Goose Creek: April’ and ‘Separate Lives’ (both consisting of seven sonnets each), her remaining thirteen collections all feature the sonnet to a large degree. Indeed, in these collections, the sonnet accounts for at least 22% (15 sonnets) of the poems in the case of *Presentation Piece* (1974), rising to 97% (175 sonnets) in *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986), with an average proportion of sonnets of 55% and an average across the oeuvre of 62%. Furthermore, with a total output of over 400 sonnets, Hacker is a formidable presence in the genre and a verifiable choice for the thesis. Although Hacker has written much in the 1990s and 2000s, her sonnets from the late second wave are the focus of the chapter as she significantly contributes to the sonnet narrative of this particular feminist context.

The turn to the third wave and the modern era is characterised by a seeming explosion of female sonneteering which makes selection less straightforward. Indeed, in relation to the fourth chapter, the 1990s witnessed significant contributions to the sonnet by poets including Eavan Boland, Rita Dove, Carol Ann Duffy, Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer and Marilyn Nelson. Whilst Boland and Duffy are the most familiar of these names, their engagement with the sonnet does not define their poetics in the period. Meanwhile Hejinian and Mayer offer some of the most innovative sonneteering in the period, but their relationship to postmodernism precedes their relationship to feminism and therefore their inclusion in this thesis cannot be justified above those poets grounded more definitively in the feminist context. Although Dove may be more canonical, Nelson is chosen for the fourth chapter as her sonnets more specifically engage with the black feminist roots of the third wave.

The problem of choice is again pertinent to the final chapter, with an even greater range of sonneteers and body of works to select from. The survey of anthologies and critical studies has shown the range of different poets that have been assigned as the concluding figure in the female-authored sonnet narrative and the distortions and ambiguities this has caused. There is no foremost figure who emerges from these texts as the obvious and unrivalled choice for the culmination of the contemporary history of the female-authored sonnet, and indeed many of the selections are outdated (Jennings, Oswald, McPherson) or unfounded (Serpas, Fennelly). Moira Egan however represents both a current and prolific sonneteer and, importantly, in terms of the feminist narrative, brings the thesis right up to the present moment.

It was not the original intention of this thesis for all five principal sonneteers to be American. However, in selecting the poets, American figures emerged as the strongest candidates for a female-authored sonnet tradition of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, pointing to, perhaps, the fact that American female poets are not as chained to the difficult, and often marginalising, literary past of the genre as their British counterparts. Indeed, although American women of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries share with British women the same precedents and icons of the form, including the masculine authors of the patriarchal master discourses of the genre – Petrarch, Shakespeare, Wyatt – they are also somewhat distanced both psychologically and geographically from these traditions and, in addition, are not subject to a similarly pervasive lineage of their own. This distance it seems has enabled them greater liberty and ease with which to engage with, and respond to,

the sonnet, hence the dominance we find of American female sonneteers (60%) to British female sonneteers (40%) in the sonnet anthologies. This is not to say that American female sonneteers have not suffered with the gendered politics of exclusion that have defined the genre, but rather that they write from a position further removed from the tradition than British women. Despite the success of American female sonneteers, however, it is British female sonneteers that dominate criticism and the canon and it is essential for the female narrative of the sonnet, particularly given their contribution in the twentieth century, that American as well as British women are fully acknowledged.¹⁰ The historic and feminist contextualisation of the chapters is therefore rooted in the American. However, each chapter includes both American and British poets as points of comparison and reference. Indeed, the Anglophone focus is crucial to developing a full history of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and is evident in the main studies and anthologies. Whilst the predominant focus on American female poets may seem to downplay the place of British female poets and thus undermine the project of expanding the sonnet tradition, it must be recognised that the lineage traced in this thesis is only one of many potential narratives and it is hoped that other researchers will pursue different avenues to continue to build the female-authored sonnet tradition.

¹⁰ Whilst a tradition of the British female-authored sonnet has begun to be traced right back to the sixteenth century with Locke and followed through names such as Wroth, Seward, Smith, Barrett Browning and Rossetti, the American female-authored tradition, although obviously less historic, remains significantly unexplored. Although Helen Hunt Jackson, Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Emma Lazarus are given some sense of precedence they are not given the authority of Wroth and Barrett Browning in their contexts. More worryingly, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Louise Chandler Moulton, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, Phoebe Cary, Alice Cary, Lucy Larcom, Celia Thaxter, Sophie Jewett and Edith Thomas, all prolific female sonneteers, fail to feature anywhere in the narrative.

The emergence of feminism has been one of the most influential social and political movements of the twentieth century and 'has significantly extended the ideological and social choices available to many women' (Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 65). Inevitably, as well as politicising women's lives, feminism has also politicised their writing and reading practices (ibid. 10). Feminist criticism has encouraged a recovery and reevaluation of women's writing that has drastically reshaped the canon and literary knowledge, and has, particularly since 2000, been a maturing methodological approach to studies of the sonnet, as evidenced in the works of Distiller, Moore and Houston. However, the tendency has been towards a gynocriticism, which seeks to establish a female tradition of the sonnet, rather than a feminist literary criticism, which analyses the sonnets from a specifically feminist perspective. Whilst this gynocritical approach is crucial to the selection of sonnets for the thesis and continuing the work of defining a female tradition of sonneteers into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is the particular feminist-based approach to analysis that is the defining principle of this study, situating sonnets within their particular feminist contexts and charting the transformations in the female-authored sonnet narrative in light of the evolution of American feminism.

This feminist contextualisation may seem somewhat contradictory to a formal study of the sonnet. However, feminism has challenged the belief that literature is independent of history. Indeed, as Shira Wolosky confirms the 'introduction of gender as a category of aesthetic analysis...challenges the very notion of aesthetics as a separate and self-defined sphere. The text instead emerges as an intersecting site of multiple domains and discourses' (572). She adds that 'no text lacks gender' (583) and gender 'shapes modes of address, representations of the self, and

social, political, and cultural references and implications' (584). In her chapter on 'The sonnet, subjectivity and gender', Diane Henderson explains how the introduction of gender analysis to sonnet studies 'upended presumptions about what was known and valued in ways that made space for new voices, new conceptions of authorial success and new motivations to read poetry' (61). Any study of female-authored sonnets thus inevitably inscribes gender as a point of analysis, but as Wolosky explains a fully realised feminist poetics should address both the historicist forces that frame and enter art and the formal, compositional ways in which they do so (576). The answer lies in a feminist relational aesthetic.

Such a methodology is situated in a return to the text and a close reading that is attentive to aspects of artistic form and technique and their importance as purposive negotiations and arbiters of meaning. This focus on the text drives the analysis in this thesis, with close readings of three key sonnets within each chapter. Only three sonnets are examined per writer due to issues of space and the necessary detail of close reading. These three examples are not intended to reflect the writer's entire oeuvre but to highlight some of their significant modes of engagement with the sonnet. The failure to conduct a close reading in a thesis on the sonnet – perhaps the most aesthetically identifiable and formally rigorous poetic form of all – would be incongruous with the cohering principle of this study and completely deleterious to the essence of the genre. Indeed, the sonnet is commensurate with form. Each of the close readings within the thesis thus engages micrologically with aspects of theme, subjectivity, form and language to uncover various effects and meanings. Close reading necessarily involves a certain degree of interpretative conjecture. The readings in this thesis are therefore not the only credible readings of the poems, but

are necessarily informed, and arguably delimited, by the other main interpretative prerogative of the thesis: feminism. It is thus that the close readings of the sonnets in this thesis are specifically embedded within the particular interpretative framework of feminism to explore new possibilities of meaning.

Indeed, the recognition of gender introduces new parameters for understanding these matters of textuality; namely the specific historical, political, social and ideological contexts of women's lives that play an important role in determining the possibilities of the text. As Rita Felski confirms: 'a feminist literary theory is dependent upon a feminist social theory, which can relate texts to changing ideological structures as they affect women as social subjects. Such an approach makes it possible to address the historically and culturally diverse relations between politics and literature, and to consider the possibility that literary forms may take on quite different social and political meanings in relation to changing cultural perspectives and struggles over meaning and interpretation' (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 8). Largely, until recently the sonnet has been considered as a rather fixed form, both structurally and ideologically. However, by placing each sonnet within its particular feminist moment and identifying the changing faces of feminism, the thesis will begin to demonstrate the scope and possibilities of the genre in women's hands. Indeed, the notion of multiple and diverse meanings of feminism, rather than a single, fixed meaning, has only become prominent in the last few years with the works of critics like Ann Braithwaite (337, 342), but proves to be a significant development for the future of feminist literary theory that will allow the full reach of feminism to be discovered and the full range of feminist voices to emerge. A feminist relational aesthetics allows for a dialectical relationship between

formalism and historicity that ensures that the female-authored sonnet can be fully understood as a text that works within, and against, both genre and culture and will finally give twentieth- and twenty-first-century female sonneteers the attention, value and respect they deserve.

Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Emergence of a Feminist Sonnet Tradition

Whilst Christopher Beach (7) and Marion Thain ('Poetry' 223) both identify 1892, which saw the deaths of Tennyson and Walt Whitman, following those of Matthew Arnold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as an important moment in the denouement of nineteenth-century poetry, more significantly to the tradition of the female-authored sonnet narrative was 1894, which saw the deaths of Augusta Webster and Christina Rossetti, following on from the passings of the major female sonneteers, Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1861, Caroline Norton in 1877, Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885 and Emma Lazarus in 1887. By the end of the nineteenth century, the nucleus of the Victorian female sonnet tradition had thus ceased. In addition, the technological, economic and social revolutions that occurred in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continued to escalate in the early twentieth century contributed to a dramatic modernisation of the western world, making the twentieth century a very different place from that of its predecessor. The twentieth century thus marked a crucial point of transition in the narrative of the female-authored sonnet, and the rise of feminism and the resultant changes in women's lives in the period served to accentuate the new era.

Indeed, although there was a discernible women's movement in the nineteenth century – the origins of the first wave are traced back to the 'Declaration of Sentiments' in 1848 and *The Subjection of Women* in 1869 – it was only by the end of the century that significant changes began to be registered in women's lives. As Mary Chapman and Angela Mills assert, by the turn of the century 'almost everything demanded...in the "Declaration of Sentiments" – a woman's right to

personal freedom, to education, to earn a living and claim her wages, to own property, to make contracts, to obtain divorce, and to retain custody of children – had been achieved’ (170). Unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her Victorian contemporary female sonneteers who grew up before the ‘Declaration of Sentiments’ and *The Subjection of Women* and thus with the largely nascent feminism of the nineteenth century, female sonneteers of the new century grew up with feminism as a vital and ascendant movement. Although the Oxford English Dictionary traces the earliest usage of feminism as a political term in its adjectival form to 1852 and in its nominal form to 1895, significantly, as Nancy Cott and Christine Stansell explain, it was only in the 1910s that feminism as a ‘synonym for women’s rights’ (Stansell 227) really emerged, marking the evolution in attitudes and thinking that signalled ‘the end of the woman movement and embarkation on a modern agenda’ (Cott 4) and differentiated this generation not only from their foremothers, but all previous generations, for whom this lexicon, and thus ideology, was not available. Thus although feminism emerged substantially in the nineteenth century, it was in the early twentieth century that it prospered. Whilst much has been written on feminism and the Victorian sonnet, the realisation and emergence of a palpable and pronounced feminist movement in the twentieth century establishes a significant new phase in the female-authored sonnet narrative.¹¹

¹¹ Showalter’s differentiation of The Female and Feminist Phase in women’s literature encapsulates this shift from a nineteenth century sonnet tradition in which ‘women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalised its assumptions about female nature’ and an emerging feminist tradition of the twentieth century in which women were ‘historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity’ of their foremothers and to use literature to frankly dramatise the previously silenced, or obliquely referenced, ‘ordeals of wronged womanhood’(35).

In modern thought, first wave feminism generally tends to be aligned with the suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, this definition, is both erroneous and anachronistic: 'historians' tendency to lump together the woman movement, the chronology of the suffrage movement, and the vocabulary of feminism has been misleading for our comprehension of the early twentieth century' (Cott 3-4). Whilst the suffrage movement was an indispensable and central expression of the women's movement, it was only one part of a larger feminist movement. Indeed, in 1911, *The Freewoman* proclaimed 'Feminism is the whole issue, political enfranchisement a branch issue' (Marsden and Gawthorpe 3). As Sheila Rowbotham confirms this wider women's movement challenged 'gender divisions, sexual attitudes, family arrangements, ways of doing housework and mothering, existing forms of consumption and paid working conditions' (3). The diversity of its aims can be seen in the diversity of its adherents and their concerns: Margaret Sanger on birth control; Jane Addams on social housing; Cicely Hamilton on marriage; Voltairine de Cleyre on anarchism; Crystal Eastman on socialism; Ada Nield Chew on housekeeping; and Dora Forster on sexuality. First wave feminism cannot thus only be understood as defining a fight for the vote; it must be understood as a fundamental challenge to women's lives that signifies a decisive rupture with the past. Moving towards a fuller understanding of first wave feminism will open up the sonnet narrative and allow for the acknowledgement of the importance and innovation of Millay's work within the feminist context of the twentieth century.

Millay's inclusion in the sonnet narrative is unquestionable. As outlined in the introduction, she is both omnipresent in sonnet anthologies and critical surveys, and

is given prominence in the transhistorical surveys of women's sonnets. However, her inclusion in a study of the intersections between modern feminism and the sonnet, is far from unequivocal. Indeed, as the foremost works of Moore, Distiller and Lustig exemplify, Millay is often situated at the end of a female sonnet tradition that predates the modern feminist movement. Contemporary tendencies to conflate first wave feminism with suffragism and to project late-twentieth century definitions of feminism would largely exclude Millay from a female-authored sonnet narrative of the twenty and twenty-first centuries, instead identifying poets like Charlotte Perkins Gilman or Alice Duer Miller, whose collections *Suffrage Songs and Verses* (1911) and *Are Women People?* (1915) exemplify suffrage politics, as the source of a feminist narrative. It is here then that a broader understanding of first wave feminism helps to secure Millay's position in a female-authored sonnet narrative of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and identify her significance to a modern female tradition of the sonnet. Indeed, Millay, as Patricia Klemans emphasises, 'belonged to a generation which saw women finally get the vote and a generation of young women for whom there were considerable changes' (18). Furthermore, she grew up in a matriarchal household, was a graduate of the sororial Vassar College, lived out the radically progressive life of free love, creativity and unorthodoxy in Greenwich Village,¹² was seen by many as the prototype of modern woman (Newcomb 262), and even in marriage refused a traditional household setup staging

¹² Gerald McFarland in *Inside Greenwich Village*, Nina Miller in *Making Love Modern* and most recently Melissa Bradshaw in 'Performing Greenwich Village Bohemianism' all discuss the importance of Greenwich Village as a geographical and ideological nexus for free love, anarchism, and bohemianism; the 'engine of modernity in America' (Miller 6) and; 'an enclave of countercultural forces' (Bradshaw 147). Christine Stansell's *American Moderns* has been instrumental in defining the feminist milieu of The Village: 'certainly never before, and probably not since, did a group of self-proclaimed innovators tie their ambitions so tightly to women, and not just a token handful but whole troops of women, waving the flag of sexual equality' (7).

a role reversal with her husband and continuing her free love philosophy (Milford 336-339). Reading Millay's sonnets within these contexts will thus help to recalibrate her position from that of endpoint in a nascent feminist sonnet tradition to the starting point in a modern feminist tradition.

Millay wrote sonnets from the outset of her poetic journey, beginning with *Renascence and Other Poems* (1917). She continued to engage prolifically with the form in all of her subsequent publications, although most monumentally in *Fatal Interview* (1931), which is singularly given to a 52 sonnet sequence. For a number of reasons, the thesis will concentrate only on Millay's sonnets up to and including this collection. Firstly, the period from *Renascence* to *Fatal Interview* is the most chronologically synonymous with first wave feminism (understood in its broader definition): it is generally agreed that in the 1930s and 1940s feminism entered a period of abeyance that signified the end of the first wave.¹³ Furthermore it is generally Millay's works up to and including *Fatal Interview* that have largely been

¹³ Although the achievement of the vote signalled the primary endeavour of first wave feminism, the movement did not disappear entirely after 1920. Instead many of the leading voices in the suffrage campaign turned to new priorities. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew reinforce this finding: 'the traditional view of the women's movement is that it died after women won suffrage and was resurrected only in the 1960s when a "second wave" of feminism picked up where the "first wave left off. Most women's rights activists, however, felt no sense of an ending on August 23, 1920...Instead, leaders of the various suffrage organizations asked themselves and their supporters: What next?' (2:227). Many of the documents that Keetley and Pettegrew include in the section 'Feminist Politics Beyond Suffrage', in particular the section on 'Political Mobilization', represent the vitality of feminism in the 1920s. At a very primitive level, the chronological weighting of documents in the text highlights the vitality of feminism in the 1920s. Indeed, although only 26 documents are included from the 1920s in comparison to 39 in the 1910s, this is the second highest number in the text. In comparison, the 1930s is represented by 11 documents – a figure lower than that for the 1900s when 'feminism' as a term was not even in existence. Further, the number of documents representing the 1930s signals the greatest decline within the entire anthology between consecutive decades, representing a 58% fall from the 26 documents of the 1920s, thus suggesting the dwindling of feminism around this time.

used to commit her to a prefeminist narrative of the sonnet¹⁴ and it is therefore the intention to reassess these poems in light of a feminist reading to establish Millay's place in a twentieth and twenty-first century narrative of the sonnet.

'Bluebeard'

The 1890s saw the emergence of a figure that was to redefine womanhood: the New Woman. Gail Finney writes that:

the New Woman typically values self-fulfilment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty of combining such equality with marriage; is more open about her sexuality than the 'Old Woman'; is well-educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and, accordingly, prefers comfortable clothes (sometimes male attire) to traditional female garb. (95-6)

Although the New Woman has entered the popular imagination as a cycling, smoking revolutionary, Angelique Richardson emphasises that 'the New Woman took many forms and cannot be characterized by a single set of ideas' (xxxiii). Obviously not all women adopted New Womanhood, but nevertheless its impact was pervasive, forcing the Woman Question (xxxvi) and campaigns for women's

¹⁴ Indeed, Mary Moore, Jodi Lustig and Natasha Distiller all focus on Millay's work up to *Fatal Interview with Wine from These Grapes, Conversation at Midnight, Huntsman, What Quarry?, There Are No Islands, Any More: Lines Written in Passion and in Deep Concern for England, France, and My Own Country, Make Bright the Arrows, The Murder of Lidice* all excluded from their analyses.

rights into public prominence (Richardson and Willis 13) and challenging the restrictive roles, rigid boundaries and dominant expectations of women. Whilst the New Woman tends to be associated with the fin de siècle, for a new generation who grew up with her as an established and prevalent figure, she served as a model of emancipated womanhood and an alternative lifestyle that offered a different route to the traditional angel in the house, as Sally Ledger confirms: 'feminists of the early twentieth century regarded the New Woman as an enduring cultural icon' (2). It is within this context that 'Bluebeard' will be examined.

This door you might not open, and you did;
So enter now, and see for what slight thing
You are betrayed.... Here is no treasure hid,
No cauldron, no clear crystal mirroring
The sought-for Truth, no heads of women slain
For greed like yours, no writhings of distress;
But only what you see,...Look yet again:
An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless.
Yet this alone out of my life I kept
Unto myself, lest any know me quite;
And you did so profane me when you crept
Unto the threshold of this room tonight
That I must never more behold your face.
This now is yours. I seek another place.¹⁵

¹⁵ Edna St. Vincent Millay, 'Bluebeard', *Collected Sonnets*, Rev. ed., New York: Harper, 1988. 6. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

This is the last of six independent sonnets taken from Millay's first publication, *Renascence* (1917). The sonnet engages with the myth of Bluebeard: a macabre folktale variously concocted around uxoricide, based on the central leitmotif of a locked room. Millay appropriates the character and narrative of Bluebeard in the sonnet to create a fresh reading of gender relations and privacy for the modern woman.

On a basic narratorial level, the sonnet opens with the pivotal moment in the Bluebeard myth in which the intruder enters the forbidden room. Millay does not clarify the gendered roles of intruder and intruded; thus, in nineteen separate critical readings of the sonnet, we find nine that support a reading of the intruder as female and ten which support a reading of the intruder as male. Both of Millay's biographers, Nancy Milford (135-6) and Daniel Epstein (109), as well as leading feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (81) belong to the former camp, and indeed the title, anticipates this reading.¹⁶ These readings however fail to place the poem within its historical, social and literary contexts and thus have delivered analyses that emphasise the sonnet as a narrative about 'a melancholy man of secrets' (Milford, 135) and the 'greedy intrusiveness' of a wife (136) that are incompatible with the poem's milieu. Indeed, situating the poem within its contexts solves these inconsistencies and points towards a more substantive reading based on a female persona.

¹⁶ Interestingly, this is the only sonnet in *Renascence* to employ a title, and is one of only 8 sonnets across the whole of Millay's 178-sonnet oeuvre, as represented in *Collected Poems*, to do so.

Firstly, of the five other sonnets in *Renascence*, two have a strongly female persona and the others, even when there is no clearly denominated female, have no strong suggestions of a male persona and are more readily rendered female. More telling is the assertion, in line with Stephen Burt and David Mikics, that the sonnet is strongly linked to the issues of 'woman's dilemma' in the period (245). Indeed, the fundamental change to the narrative which sees the room transformed from a den of iniquity into the 'empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless' (Millay, 'Bluebeard' 8)¹⁷ does not really have any weight for a male reading, but rather aligns with the contemporaneous female predicament of limited privacy and masculine control. Finally, although the title anticipates a male mythopoesis, the gendering of the myth, as Casie Hermansson suggests, had undergone significant challenges in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in reworkings such as *Bluebeard's Keys* (1875) by Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Ariadne and Bluebeard* (1901) by Maurice Maeterlinck, and *Bluebeard A Musical Fantasy* (1914) by Kate Douglas Wiggin (123). Thus by Millay's time *Bluebeard* was a site of feminist resistance and challenge (Hermansson 143). As such it follows that the narrative of Millay's sonnet depicts the male as intruder unlawfully opening the door to the female's room to discover what lies within. Unlike the horrors or treasures he expects to find, he is greeted merely by emptiness; this is no wiccan dungeon or plenteous coffer but an 'empty room' and the male's intrusion thus emerges as obtrusive and impertinent. This room is the female's only private domain, but the male's entrance destroys this and leaves the female dispossessed. Having had her space defiled and her privacy lost, she concedes the room to the male and vows to find 'another place' of her own.

¹⁷ All numerical references relating to poems in the thesis indicate line numbers.

Less constrained by Victorian norms and domesticity and less devoted to men and marriage, indeed reflecting an emerging form of emancipated womanhood, as Susan Freeman suggests ('The New Woman'), the New Woman embodied first wave feminism's challenging of female consciousness about male dominance and gendered hierarchies (Lavender). In *Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), Gilman reflected this new awareness of, and critical opposition to, male domination of gendered relations and realities: 'we have had almost universally what is called an Androcentric Culture. The history such as it was, was made and written by men' (17) and 'arranged for his convenience' (164). In Millay's 'Bluebeard' we find this new feminist consciousness manifested in the sonnet's theme. In the sonnets of Barrett Browning and Rossetti, despite the fact that they interject in the male tradition of Petrarchism, they maintain the androcentric theme of love and commitment to the beloved. In fact, by inserting the female into the role of desperate, despairing lover, the sonnets can actually be seen to amplify the androcentrism of the theme by reflecting the female's absolute devotion to, dependence on, and reverence of, the male: 'I will not soil thy purple with my dust,/ Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass' (Barrett Browning 'IX' 11-12).

In contrast, in using the myth of 'Bluebeard' Millay turns away from the sentimentalised, patriarchal gendered relations of Petrarchism and its theme of oppressive – and largely female self-defeating – love, introducing a much more critical and antagonistic thematic, centred around questions of privacy, space and freedom within heterosexual unions, that aligns with the contexts of New Womanhood and first wave feminism. Indeed, Millay takes the very grandeur and

predominance of love courted in the sonnets of her foremothers and inverts it, offering not a lofty vision of heterosexual relations but rather a prosaic and disparaging depiction of the incongruities, flaws and shortcomings of married life:

you did so profane me when you crept,

Unto the threshold of this room tonight. ('Bluebeard' 11-12)

Gone here are the romantic ideals of love to be replaced by a critical and sinister portrait of debasement and violation. This is not the beatific heterosexual ideal of Barrett Browning, but the feminist realisation of the New Woman. Crucially, by transposing intruder and intruded in the sonnet, Millay stages a feminist purging of the androcentric myth turning it against the male and supporting a female politics. Indeed, written in 1697 and purported to be based on the fifteenth-century nobleman Gilles de Laval Rais (Hermansson 18), the original myth was firmly located in a patriarchal world. As such, the myth epitomised phallogocentric bias, for despite the female's escape and the savage, unabsolvable crimes of the male, the drama unfolded around the plot of female transgression, creating an allegory against female curiosity and disobedience. Even when the narrative was appropriated by Millay's near-contemporaries Rose Terry Cooke in 1861 and Clara Doty Bates in 1881, although both poets attempted to offer a female rendition of the myth, they both maintained the patriarchal relations and hierarchies of the original myth: "'You've been where I forbade you! Now you shall go there to stay!/ Prepare yourself to die at once!" he cried' (Bates, 'Bluebeard' 74-75). Millay's reconfiguration of the myth to delineate a male trespasser entering a female room thus brings out the contemporary feminist debates over privacy, power, and servitude in the marital

home that were erupting in the early twentieth-century (Rowbotham, 132). Rather than belonging to a female tradition of the sonnet, 'Bluebeard' clearly dissociates Millay from the poetics of Barrett Browning, Cooke and Bates and establishes her as part of a twentieth and twenty-first century feminist narrative.

Millay's reworking of the Bluebeard myth brings subjectivity to the fore in the sonnet, aligning it with contemporary feminist questions over women's identity and their sense of self in marriage. Although female sonneteers throughout history had negotiated the female I, for instance in Christina Rossetti's 'Monna Innominata', there remained at the start of the twentieth century, as the ratio of male to female sonneteers (18:4) in the 'Twentieth Century' section of *The Making of a Sonnet* up to Millay attest, a masculine imperative in the genre, which challenged women's use of the first person pronoun and expression of their gender. As such a number of Millay's contemporaries were continuing to present what Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle describe as a 'self-denying aesthetic' (29). For instance, although Dorothy Wellesley uses the lyric I in 'Spring', there is no indication of a specifically female speaker: 'So would I bid thee come upon a day/ Of sun-warm wind' (1-2). Even more ambivalently, in both Helen Hunt Jackson's 'Calendar of Sonnets' and Eva Gore-Booth's sequence 'Finger-Posts' the lyric I is completely absent. In some cases, such as Sara Teasdale's 'Crowned', we begin to see not only the realisation of a female self, but, importantly to the creation of a female-authored sonnet tradition, the negotiation of that self with contemporary feminist politics of women's place and role; a trait that is more evident in the period outside of the sonnet in lyrics such as Teasdale's 'The Wind': 'I am a woman, I am weak,/ And custom leads me as one blind' (5-6).

In 'Bluebeard' Millay dramatises the female 'I' thus aligning with what Freeman identifies as the New Woman's emphasis on autonomy and individuality ('The New Woman'). However, the questions over the subject's gender threaten to deny the female self and prevent the sonnet from engaging in a dialectic with feminism. Yet this very obscurity bespeaks the sonnet's critical engagement with contemporary feminism. For in *Our Androcentric Culture*, Gilman writes:

given a proprietary family, where the man holds the woman primarily for his satisfaction and service – then necessarily he shuts her up and keeps her for these purposes. Being so kept, she cannot develop humanly, as he has, through social contact, social service, true social life. (39)

Female selfhood and autonomy, it is suggested, is compromised by life with the male. The equivocation over the female gendering of I in 'Bluebeard' that has complicated readings of the sonnet, thus reflects the difficulty of female self-development within the patriarchal relationship. This context helps to elucidate the importance and nature of the closed room.

Indeed, Gilman wrote that 'the progressive individuation of human beings requires...one room at least for each person' (*Women and Economics* 258). For the female who was denied autonomy and subjectivity in the home through her subordination by, and duty to, the male, a room of one's own was particularly integral to her selfhood.

Look yet again:

An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless

Yet this alone out of my life I kept

Unto myself, lest any know me quite. (Millay, 'Bluebeard' 7-10)

Although the narrative of the sonnet is clearly presented in the first person, the poetic I emerges over halfway through the sonnet within the private space of the room thus highlighting the sense in which the female only becomes a self beyond the communal space, and significantly the masculine domain, of the home. The packing of four personal pronouns into the confined and hermetic space of the second pair of lines above reflects the interment of the female's self exclusively into the private room. The absence of any second person pronouns within the description suggests that the room serves specifically as a space outside of male control, where the female is free to develop away from the demands of her role as wife.

And you did so profane me when you crept

Unto the threshold of this room tonight. (11-12)

The sanctity of the room and the female self however seem undone by the male's appearance. Indeed, in these lines the male is placed in the role of actor, and the two verbs with which he is associated 'profane' and 'crept' signify acts against the female. Further in the first line, the female personal pronoun 'me' is literally entrapped by the two enveloping second person pronouns 'you' suggesting the male's entrapment of the female. Whilst Burt and Mikics suggest that 'profane'

conjures and reverses a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* to stage Millay's antiromantic conclusion in 'Bluebeard' (244), there are moreover strong reminiscences of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* in this extract, in particular Tarquin's trespass into Lucrece's room – 'drives the creeping thief to some regard/ the threshold grates the door to have him heard' (305-306) – which culminates in her rape and eventual suicide. These negative associations hang ominously over these lines. In fact the use of 'profane' to describe the male's trespass into the room suggests that the very act is akin to rape and, indeed, read in light of Jane Clapperton's declaration that the room was forbidden to anyone 'uninvited by the inmate' (qtd. in Rowbotham 135), this assertion is given historical credence. Further negative associations are conjured by the sonnet's reminiscences of Gilman's haunting short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892). Given these echoes it seems that 'Bluebeard' demonstrates the ultimate loss of the female's autonomy. However, in the final lines of the sonnet, Millay enacts a feminist revision:

I must never more behold your face

This now is yours. I seek another place. ('Bluebeard' 13-14)

Although the female gives up her room, this is not an act of resignation but ultimately one of emancipation. As the dual appearance of the lyric 'I' suggests, the female is emerging out of self-objectification into selfhood. She is not simply abandoning her room, but rather her marriage and home and consequently the constrictive and self-defeating role of wife. The separation and balancing of the final line into two sentences suggests the divorce of male and female and enacts the female's emergence out of the couple into a separate identity. This reading aligns

with Cheryl Walker's reading of a male intruder and her conclusion that the proud woman ultimately eludes her lover (180). 'Bluebeard' thus stages a demonstration, critique and dismantling of the difficulties of female self-realisation in the patriarchal home in line with contemporary feminist politics.

These difficulties are played out in Millay's appropriation of the sonnet form. As women were experiencing new levels of freedom in the early twentieth century with increasing numbers entering universities and professions (Lavender; Richardson xxxvii), and the New Woman emerging as an apogee of this feminist emancipation, the realisation of the oppressiveness of the marital home and patriarchal relationships, as well as the need for space of one's own was becoming increasingly significant. Millay herself who had grown up in a matriarchal household and had attended the all-female Vassar college had first-hand experience of living outside male intervention and was thus a product of these new feminist possibilities.

Aesthetically, metrically and rhythmically, 'Bluebeard' stands as a consummate exemplar of the Shakespearean sonnet. The compact, quadratical form is amplified by the similarly lengthened lines and the consolidation of the sonnet into a single unit. Such regularity and orthodoxy aligns the sonnet with its historic (read patriarchal) past and thus seems to underline a non-feminist poetics. However, given the feminist context of her milieu and subject matter, Millay's adherence to the sonnet form gains new signification. Indeed, rather than being imitative or conformist, the sonnet emerges as performative and critical and gives further credence to a reading of a male rather than female intruder. For whilst Gilbert and Gubar reading a female intruder suggest the sonnet represents the "Secret

Chambers of the man's mind' (81), more tellingly read from the perspective of a male intruder, the sonnet serves to enact and critique the restrictiveness and confinement of women within the patriarchal home. The absence of independent stanzas and white spaces suggests the lack of freedom for the female and her exclusion from the world outside her home: her entrapment in the heterosexual union and life. Similarly, the narrowness and brevity of the sonnet emphasises Millay's feminist critique of the retarding and repressive containment of the female within patriarchal society. Indeed, the monolithic space of the sonnet embodies the metaphor of the cage that feminists like Mary Coolidge (73) used to condemn women's interment in the patriarchal home. It is a locked and fixed space of the male's making and authority, in which he imprisons the female, defines the parameters of her life, and prevents her engaging in public life. The sonnet thus offers the perfect imitation of these circumstances and a means of depicting and critiquing the stultifying constraints placed on women.

The patterning of end-stopped lines and enjambment specifically enacts the gender politics of space and privacy.

This door you might not open, and you did;

So enter now, and see for what slight thing

You are betrayed...Here is no treasure hid (Millay, 'Bluebeard' 1-3)

The end-stopping of the opening line represents the hermeticism of the female's room; the sanctity and privacy of this space maintained by the closure of the door. However, as the door is opened by the male, Millay turns to enjambment in the

sonnet's second line: the breach has been broken. The move from end-stopped to enjambed lines reflects the male's incursion into, and destruction of, the female's private space. It signals his freedom and authority within the patriarchal home, his complete dominion over the female, and the female's inability to escape him. The opening of the door has broken down the final vestige of female privacy and autonomy and the blurring of lines brought about by the enjambment signals the male usurpation of female space and her inevitable assimilation by him. She is not a separate being, but his property, part of a partnership defined by him. The use of ellipsis interrupts the flow created by the enjambment and represents the female's attempt to hold on to her space and privacy for a few moments more. However, the delay is futile and the enjambment that follows signifies the male's triumph over the female, reflecting the realities of married life according to Gilman: 'the male is esteemed the "head of the family", it belongs to him, he maintains it' (*Androcentric Culture* 40) and at the heart of it lies the reality that 'the woman in marrying becomes the house-servant...of the man' (*Women* 219) , untiringly cooking, washing, sweeping, dusting, sewing and mending for the male as well as attending to his sexual needs (Gilman, *Androcentric Culture* 36-37).

However, in line with the feminist politics of the era and the New Woman that called for women to rise up out of their oppression – 'Believe that...the wife should not be the unpaid servant of the husband...You do not belong to him' (Belmont 666) – the syntactical composition of the final lines of 'Bluebeard' challenges the patriarchal dominance figured in the sonnet and define the female's emancipation:

Unto the threshold of this room tonight

That I must never more behold your face.

This now is yours. I seek another place. (12-14)

Here, the full stop at the end of line thirteen – only the second up to this point in the sonnet – terminates the enjambment and symbolically reflects the female's refusal to subsume to patriarchal dominance. Structurally, it prevents the couplet from being absorbed into the quatrain, allowing the couplet to retain its subversive and emphatic force and as such securing the female's power. However, it also breaks up the couplet as a single unit, reflecting the female's rejection of coupledness and her turn away from the compulsory politics of heterosexuality. Indeed, the deployment of three out of the four sonnet's full stops from the end of line thirteen to the end of line fourteen represents a challenge to the harmonious and monolithic couplet and instead establishes new boundaries, defined by the female. She is replacing the accepted and androcentric ways of being and knowing with her own realities. Although the sonnet remains intact, in the context of this poem and the female's closing declaration to find 'another place', the full stop at the sonnet's close reflects the end of this chapter in the female's life. The white space that follows the sonnet's final declaration becomes symbolic of the world of freedom and possibility that exists for the female outside of the patriarchal home. In it we see the realisation of a feminist future: 'salvation lies in an energetic march onward towards a brighter and clearer future. We are in need of an unhampered growth out of all traditions and habits...to cut loose from the weight of prejudices, traditions and customs' (Goldman 15-16). Rather than conservative or imitative therefore, Millay uses the history and structure of the sonnet to perform women's entrapment by patriarchy, manipulating internal boundaries and divisions to stage a feminist redefinition of the

gendered politics of space, and, ultimately, pointing to new possibilities for women both in life and in the sonnet.

With women's increasing access to education and the professions, and the fight for suffrage and democracy, women were beginning to challenge male supremacy and assert their own will and value. This was, as Carrie Chapman Catt argued, 'the woman's hour' (198). This growing confidence and dissension finds expression in Millay's language use in 'Bluebeard'. Barrett Browning's 'Sonnet XXXVII' opens with the deferential 'Pardon, oh pardon' (1), and 'Sonnet XXVII' with the encomiastic 'My own Beloved, who has lifted me/ From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown' (1-2). In Rossetti's 'Monna Innominata' we find similar expressions of praise for the beloved and assertions of female inferiority: 'I feel your honour'd excellence, and see / Myself unworthy of the happier call' (9:3-4). Although feminist critics may be keen to read these expressions as ironical feminist performances of femininity, the ambiguity over this ironic potential and the ability to read these expressions literally as espousals of feminine modesty and inferiority within their patriarchal Victorian context highlights the difficulty for these poets of completely extricating themselves from 'the accommodating postures of femininity' of their time (Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' 35). These sonnets, although progressive for their time, ultimately reflect the historical conditions of their writers, namely the absence of a tangible feminist movement and the continuation of patriarchal lore, what Billone defines as their attachment to 'Romantic and Victorian presumptions about gender' (5). In contrast, the opening lines of 'Bluebeard' read:

This door you might not open, and you did;

So enter now, and see for what slight thing

You are betrayed. (1-3)

Unlike the problematic irony of Barrett Browning and Rossetti, in which the women become implicated in the sexist ideology they try to undermine, here, any linguistic deference to, and exaltation of, the male is replaced by contempt and censure. Indeed, in the opening line we find the female proscribing the male's behaviour to him, and although arguably the deontic form of the verb 'might' is less authoritative than the epistemic 'must' or 'should', it significantly disengages from the deferential tone of Barrett Browning or Rossetti, marking the emergence of a distinctive female-authored sonnet narrative in the feminist era of the twentieth century. There is no love or compassion for the male in these lines, only disappointment and bitterness. With the imperative 'so enter now' the female continues to direct the male. Significantly, by granting him access to her room she gains some control over his trespassing. Indeed, in contrast to *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Rape of Lucrece* where the male enters the female room as he chooses, specifically disregarding any sense of female permission, here although the male has already opened the door, by instructing him to enter the female denies being subjugated or exploited by him. Similarly, in contrast to the original Bluebeard myth in which the female goes against the male's commands and unlawfully enters his domain thereby completely renouncing his authority, here the female's ordering of the male moderates his transgression and his dominance over her.

Although the female has been betrayed and undone by the male, the language of the sonnet reflects not weakness but defiance. The anaphora of the negative

article 'no' in the middle of the sonnet serves to emphasise the erroneousness of the male with regard to his suspicions over the sins of the female's room and thus condemn him: 'no treasure hid,/ no cauldron' (3-4), no heads of women slain/ For greed like yours' (5-6). However, it also serves to create a discordant and hostile tone in the poem that rather than depicting the female as meek and obliging and the heterosexual partnership as cohesive and wondrous establishes the former as bold and resistant and the latter as divisive and imperfect. When compared with Myrtle Reed's 'Devotion' (1910) – 'Thou art my tenderness – my roses, Dear–/ I am a woman and thou art my soul' (13-14) – or Nita Pierson's 'Sonnet V' (1916) – 'And now! Life's all I center in your heart,/ Content to guide my rushlight by your star' (9-10) – the feminist tenor of 'Bluebeard' emerges. Indeed, in contrast to these effusive declarations of love, Millay's female offers only criticism of the male: 'you did so profane me' ('Bluebeard' 6). In the final couplet of the sonnet, we see the feminist spirit of the poem in full: 'I must never more behold your face./ This now is yours. I seek another place' (13-14). Gone is the fealty and submission of Rossetti and Barrett Browning. Instead in the use of the epistemic modal 'must' and the negative 'never', the female expresses separation and volition. The final sentiment 'This now is yours. I seek another place', shows the female's unwillingness to live under the male's dominion and her decision to quit this oppressive relationship. 'Bluebeard' thus assumes its place in a twentieth-century feminist narrative of the female-authored sonnet.

'Sonnet XVII' – Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree

By 1920, partial suffrage had been secured, bringing to an end 'an important chapter in the women's rights movement' (Lunardini 150). It is this victory with the vote that has led to the distorted and incomplete narrative of first wave feminism and the sense, as Cott explains, 'of the demise of feminism in the 1920s' (4), rather than the recognition that the vote represented a turning point in the lives of women. Indeed, the vote signified the end of an era in patriarchal history; away from the feudal concept of the male as the head of the family, 'its sole link to the outside world and its spokesman in the state' (Kraditor 25). Women, particularly those of the older generation, who had been entrapped by patriarchal systems and thought, now had new possibilities. It is within this context of the political and social liberation of women and the destabilisation of the patriarch brought about by the vote and its effects on women's consciousness that Sonnet 'XVII' from 'Ungrafted Tree' is to be read.

Gazing upon him now, severe and dead,
It seemed a curious thing that she had lain
Beside him many a night in that cold bed,
And that had been which would not be again.
From his desirous body the great heat
Was gone at last, it seemed, and the taut nerves
Loosened forever. Formally the sheet
Set forth for her to-day those heavy curves
And lengths familiar as the bedroom door.

She was as one that 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.¹⁸

This sonnet is taken from Millay's fourth collection, *The Harp-Weaver* (1924). The collection is comprised of a number of miscellaneous poems and sonnets and an independent, numbered sonnet sequence entitled 'Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree', of which this sonnet is the last. In a collection that contains such notable, and readily feminist, sonnets as 'I being born a woman' and 'Oh, oh you will be sorry for that word', the choice of 'Sonnet XVII', from the less overtly feminist, even some might say patriarchal, sequence 'Ungrafted Tree' may seem idiosyncratic. However, sonnets like 'I being born a woman' which are generally aligned with a feminist politics – as outlined by critics including Patricia Klemans and, more recently, Suzanne Clark and Diane Henderson – would not contribute much to this discussion of Millay's sonnets and would leave open the more ambiguous sonnets to anti-feminist interpretations which would threaten Millay's position in this revised sonnet narrative. 'Ungrafted Tree' which has an ambiguous relationship to feminist critique because of its essentially sombre and seemingly repressive portrayal of the wife's obligation to care for her estranged husband thus offers a means of consolidating Millay's place in a twentieth-century feminist narrative of the sonnet. On a basic narratorial level, the sequence depicts an estranged wife's return to the

¹⁸ Edna St. Vincent Millay, 'Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree: XVII', *Collected Sonnets*, Rev. ed., New York: Harper, 1988. 62. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the shortened form of the title 'Sonnet XVII'.

marital home to care for her dying husband; her resumption of her wifely duties; her painful memories of this former life; and ultimately the death of the husband. 'Sonnet XVII' opens with the wife surveying her husband's corpse and contemplating on their past and musing on her future. Looking at his familiar shape in death, the female sees her husband as never before – weak and inconsequential – and is finally freed of him.

The era following the vote marked a gradual transition from old, patriarchal to more modern systems and possibilities for women, not least in their relationships with men. In 1913 Inez Milholland, having witnessed women's partial gaining of the vote in 'California, Oregon, Kansas, Arizona, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Washington' (34), anticipated the continued struggle over gender equality that would follow the achievement of suffrage in 1920:

We are releasing a full half of our people from a sex-property enslavement that has endured, through various modification, from the dim background of history until the present time. There is no use in blinking the fact that we can not liberate women without ultimately finding ourselves facing radical changes in her relations with man as regards the two vital matters of property and sex. (37)

These feminist sentiments find expression in the theme of 'Sonnet XVII'. As with 'Bluebeard', Millay foregoes the romantic and affirmative bonds between male and female that can be found in the sonnets of Barrett Browning and Rossetti, as well as contemporaries such as Julia Stockton Dinsmore and Eleanor Farjeon. Instead, in

the feminist spirit of Milholland – someone to whom Millay was significantly connected ideologically, geographically and emotionally¹⁹ – Millay focuses her sonnet on the enslavement of women in, and ultimately the emancipation from, stifling heterosexual partnerships. As Marie Stopes suggested in 1918, ‘there is no doubt that Love loses, in the haste and bustle of our modern turmoil, not only much of its charm and grace, but some of its vital essence’ (26).

The two females of ‘Bluebeard’ and ‘Ungrafted Tree’ seem to be separate characters. However, in ‘Bluebeard’ Millay concludes with the female on the verge of walking out of her oppressive marriage, whilst in ‘Ungrafted Tree’, she opens with a female, who is estranged from her husband, returning to a similarly oppressive relationship. It seems possible therefore that ‘Ungrafted Tree’ is a continuation of the story Millay provides us with in ‘Bluebeard’. Despite the female relinquishing the patriarchal marriage and her role as wife in ‘Bluebeard’ and walking out into an emancipated future, Millay shows us in ‘Ungrafted Tree’ the enduring yoke of marriage and influence of the male within a patriarchal world. Indeed, whilst ‘Bluebeard’ was written in 1917 at a time during which the fight for suffrage was intense with a belief that it would bring women liberation²⁰, in 1924 when ‘Ungrafted Tree’ was published the vote had failed to deliver women the emancipation they had anticipated. Feminists like Milholland had realised that the very structure of gender

¹⁹ Milholland was indeed a prominent figure in Millay’s life, not only did Millay write a sonnet ‘To Inez Millholland’ in 1923 which was read at the unveiling of a statue for women’s rights, but in the same year she married Milholland’s widower Eugen Boissevain.

²⁰ See for example, Catharine Waugh McCulloch, “The Protective Value of the Ballot.”; Anna Howard Shaw, “Equal Suffrage -- A Problem of Political Justice.”; Julia Ward Howe, “Woman and the Suffrage: The Case for Woman Suffrage.”; and Anna G. Spencer, “The Logical Basis of Woman Suffrage.”

and social relations would need overhauling to enact any real change (37). In 'Ungrafted Tree' the theme of female duty and service to the male, specifically, beyond the breakdown of marriage, figures the coercive and delimiting bonds between male and female that maintained women's oppression after the vote. Thus whilst 'Bluebeard' figures the female's estrangement from the male as emancipatory, in 'Sonnet XVII' only the male's death finally relinquishes the female of her obligation and bond to him: 'for once, not hers, unclassified' (14). Instead of sadness and loss, we find pragmatism and sterility, and just as marriage is purged of its romantic illusions so too is death. In Barrett Browning's 'Sonnet XLIII' she concludes 'and if God choose,/ I shall but love thee better after death' (13-14), whilst Rossetti writes 'death be strong, yet love is strong as death' (7:14). Both poets see death not as an end to their love but rather as a continuation, even strengthening of their bond, that aligns with the idealisation of love within the patriarchal tradition. However, in a world in which the partnership has been deromanticised, Millay rewrites death to signify the end of the patriarchal marriage for the female. Whilst Edward Zuk suggests that the sequence raises the question as to whether the female achieves any form of independence or remains a psychological prisoner to the marriage (172), textually and ideologically there seems no debate: 'that had been which would not be again' (Millay, 'Sonnet XVII' 4). The death of the husband undoes the wife's bind, releasing her indefinitely from her duty and subservience, thus figuring 'the liberation of a sex' (Milholland). As such, despite the pessimistic overtones of 'Ungrafted Tree', the sequence, specifically in the final sonnet, represents not the victory of patriarchal lore, but rather the liberation of the female. It is a feminist critique and anachronising of patriarchal marriage.

Although suffrage may not have brought the revolutionary changes in women's lives that supporters had dreamed of, it was a significant step in women's subjectivity (Buhle and Buhle 45). Not only did it affirm women's identity as political subjects but it marked a more general form of self-actualisation (Rowbotham 2; Buhle and Buhle 45). As Elizabeth Breuer outlined: 'for...the anti-feminist, there is only one way out, admitting inferiority, and accepting it, hugging old traditions and making the most of them' (551). However, she concludes of the new generation of women under feminism: 'for herself and for those she loves and for the women to come she has made life a more free, a more noble thing' based on honouring themselves and their hopes (551). This manifested in the clearly feminine 'I' of poets like H.D. in *Hymen* (1921), as well as in Millay's own sonnets such as 'I shall forget you presently my dear' and 'Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word' which display a more assertive female subject than the deliberately androgynous 'I' of 'Bluebeard'.

In the 'Ungrafted Tree' sonnets, this female 'I' is replaced by the third person pronoun 'she' and thus the sonnets seem to sit uncomfortably with a feminist assertion of subjectivity and autonomy. Indeed, here we clearly see the self-denying aesthetic (Dowson and Entwistle 29), with the female, although the subject of the poem, the object of narration, as such being represented rather than representing herself. However, the choice of 'she' is crucial to Millay's feminist challenge of patriarchal marriage. Indeed, it serves to relegate and safely contain the patriarchal images of domesticity, obligation and submission that are depicted in the sequence to a past time and generation of women. With its narratorial feel, it

makes the antifeminist sentiments and scenarios of the sequence seem distant and remote, belonging to fable and history rather than reality. Susan Freeman's suggestion that New Women expressed autonomy and individuality, not least in their tendency to reject their mothers' ways in favour of new, modern choices, offers a particular interpretation of this historical narrative ('The New Woman'). Indeed, although the sequence does not religiously match biographical fact, its dedication to Cora Millay and strong resonances of unhappy and repressive marriage render it emblematic of Cora's difficult marriage to Henry Tollman Millay which resulted in divorce and estrangement (Milford 26; 29). As such, 'she' can be read as, if not a direct representation of Cora Millay, at least a representation of the stifling domestic and marital circumstances of Millay's mother's generation. Specifically, therefore, the use of 'she' rather than 'I' signifies not the sonnet's negation of subjectivity per se, but rather the difficult position of Millay's foremothers, and indeed mother, in attaining subjectivity given their belonging to a generation that grew up before the advent of a certified feminism and in which patriarchal marriage remained imperative. 'She' thus emerges as a means of establishing critical distance from a patriarchal past, allowing Millay to depict and critique this past from the vantage point of modern feminism and, specifically, relegate it to the annals of history, suggesting the ways in which modern women have progressed from this situation.

As well as serving to create distance from the patriarchal marriage, the use of 'she' exposes and critiques the gender essentialism to be found in the traditional patriarchal marriage. Indeed, in 1915 Elsie Clews Parsons explained how gender, rather than personality or love, determined the relations between the sexes: 'men and women associate...merely as sexes' (79). A number of commentators were

beginning to challenge the ideology that women were primarily wives and mothers, instead asserting their identities as individuals and human beings (McCulloch 153; Belmont 549). Patriarchal marriage however reduced women to their gender and operated on the basis of the binary opposition between the sexes. Male and female were seen to be the fundamental classifications and were inherently binaristic, depending on their reciprocal terms for meaning and value. However, within binaries, one aspect always gains dominance, and within a patriarchal hegemony this was inevitably the male. The use of the she/him binary within 'Sonnet XVII' thus emphasises the gendered bind and draws out the interdependence of these two identities. In contrast to the I/you dichotomy, it specifically denies the partners from emerging as human subjects, instead relegating them merely to their physical and sexual attributes. Although the male is silenced and seemingly objectified, in the context of the sequence, namely the female's return to care for him, and her deference to his needs, he emerges as a potent force over her and seemingly as the dominant partner. Indeed, the whole sequence is based on the female's obligation to the male, and in the opening words of 'Sonnet XVII' – 'Gazing upon him now, severe' (1) – the male continues to function as a controlling and repressive force in the female's life. As such, the sonnet seems to contradict a feminist politics.

However, the use of the subject pronoun 'she' for the female and, generally, the object pronoun 'him' for the male, seems to give the female a degree of subjectivity and superiority over the male – which is furthered by Millay's use of free indirect style to admit the voice of the female whilst completely silencing the male: "It seemed a curious thing that she had lain/ Beside him many a night in that cold bed"

(2-3). Whilst the use of 'she' rather than 'I' suggests that having returned to the homestead and the role of wife, the female is forced into a gendered identity that denies her free subjectivity, the emergence of her thoughts through the use of free indirect style suggests that she does not relinquish her inner sense of self. Furthermore, in figuring the male's death, Millay undoes his power and significantly undoes the gender binary that yokes the female to the male. Indeed, by referring to the male as 'unclassified' (14). Millay removes his gender and thus completely severs the link with the female, thereby simultaneously releasing her from the prison of her gender. In 1920, Crystal Eastman, made the feminist declaration 'Now We Can Begin' (238) to underline women's having reached a position in which to finally change their lives, and at the end of 'Sonnet XVII' with the death of her husband and release from wifedom Millay's female persona is also, finally, in a position to begin.

The 1920s witnessed the explosion of Modernism – a movement that advocated the 'literary-aesthetic and epistemological rejection of the conventions, assumptions, procedures and perceptions' of former ages, manifested poetically in 'radical innovation in artistic form' and experiments in style that often precipitated free verse (Poplawski ix). In 1922, T.S.Eliot published the lodestar of the Modernist movement, *The Wasteland*, a work which would cement Modernism's status as the poetic movement non-pareil of the period and redefine the landscape of poetry. In the following year, the publication of D.H Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* and Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium* all signalled the vitality and dominance of Modernism, and the virtual valediction to the sonnet. The growth of women's modernism in the 1920s with the works of Amy

Lowell, Mina Loy and H.D also offered new directions for women's poetry. The aim, as Maren Tova Linett expresses in the 'Introduction' to *the Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers*, was for women to find ways to view and express themselves outside the parameters of patriarchy (3). For many this meant turning away from the sonnet. As such, neither H.D's *Hymen* (1921) nor *Heliodora* (1924), nor Marianne Moore's *Poems* (1921), contain any sonnets. Millay's commitment to the sonnet thus emerges as somewhat conservative and even antithetical to a feminist poetics. However, such readings fail to understand the gender politics at play in Millay's appropriations of the sonnet.

Indeed, in 'Ungrafted Tree', Millay's sonnets do not just participate in the male tradition, but, as Clark suggests (5), importantly trouble it, opening up a space for difference, and ultimately, a point that Clark does not make, resistance and subversion. In contrast to Lizette Woodworth Reese and Julia Stockton Dinsmore who use the sonnet in a formally conventional and aesthetically rigid way and thus ultimately succumb to the patriarchal narratives of gender, in 'Ungrafted Tree' Millay uses the form in unorthodox ways that show a rebellious and ironic relationship to the genre that unsettles and explodes its patriarchal order. In fact, Millay's sonnets show the same feminist strategies that Miranda Hickman identifies as those used by Modernist female poets, including the disrupting of ordinary readerly procedures; ironic distancing from received ideas, conventional practices and traditional pieties (36); feminist dodging, and wily avoidance of, expectations that can often rush in on a woman (40-41) and; capturing and critiquing the plight of women in some way socially trapped (43). Thus instead of a conservative correlative to the female Modernist poetics, Millay's 'Ungrafted Tree' sonnets should be read as a critique of

'cultural ideology from inside its technology' (Clark 4). Specifically, they should be read from a contemporaneous feminist perspective in terms of women's continued struggle for freedom in the domain of marriage and divorce following the achievement of suffrage. As Anne Martin stated in 1922, 'women are not 'free' and the equals of men, even with the vote in their hand. The United States is...a sex aristocracy' (259). The sonnet more than any other genre allows Millay to confront this sex aristocracy and to play out 'women's struggle toward emergence and assertion of self amidst forces that would impede their freedom' (E. Smith 43). That the sequence starts from the moment that the female returns to her former life and the patriarchal home 'so she came back into his house again' (Millay, 'Sonnet I' 1) and ends with the death of the patriarch and thus the female's final exit from the home suggests that Millay uses the sonnet to evoke the disenfranchisement the estranged wife suffers in returning to her life with the male, whilst the replication of the form across seventeen poems evokes the monotony of this life. That the wife's life outside of the patriarchal marriage is not represented in the sonnets hints at the freedom and flexibility of her life away from the patriarch. Millay's adoption of the sonnet thus underpins a feminist poetics in which she uses the form emblematically to engage with gender politics.

Although Millay uses the sonnet to stage patriarchy's confinement of the female, we see her troubling the internal dynamics of form in line with the agitation and rebellion that characterised the contemporary feminist movement. Indeed, in Minnie Ferris Hauenstein's sonnet 'The Woman', which offers a conventional Petrarchan ideal of love, she uses consummate end-stopped lines which preserve the patriarchal tradition. In Millay's 'Ungrafted Tree' sonnets, in contrast, we see a

mixture of end-stopped and enjambed lines, including, as Irene Fairley notes, five sonnets that extend just a single sentence across their length ('Gendered Language and Form'). Although 'Sonnet XVII' is not one of these sonnets, it shows a similar disinclination to lineation. Most notably, following a largely end-stopped opening quatrain that serves to establish the female's assimilation into, and obeisance of, the rigid, controlled and delimited role of wife within the patriarchal home, the realisation that the husband's death marks the end of the female's obligation to him – 'that had been which would not be again' (4) – coincides with the emergence of enjambment in the sonnet: 'From his desirous body the great heat/ Was gone at last, it seemed, and the taut nerves/ loosened forever' (5-7). In the enjambment we see the female's psychological and emotional release. Indeed, whilst the male's presence has entrapped her, his death liberates her. The enjambment completely shatters the octet, undoing the rigid structure of the sonnet and suggesting the female's liberation from male regulation and order. However, the greatest manifestation of the female's rebellion comes in Millay's revisioning of the couplet:

The man who eats his victuals at her side,

Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified. (13-14)

Whilst the couplet remains intact as a syntactical and structural unit, aesthetically and rhythmically, Millay disturbs its cohesion through the use of the final heptametric line. This innovation sets the sequence apart from Millay's other sonnets and thus must be understood in relation to the specific content of the poem: the estranged wife's return to the patriarchal home. Mary Moore suggests that like the unmatched couple of the poems, the couplet's last line refuses to couple (196).

It signifies how the estranged wife can no longer sit comfortably within marriage and the home; she has outgrown it. Whilst the conventional aesthetic and metre of the sonnet in the first thirteen lines represents the seeming ability of the patriarchal system to hold the female, the final line represents the female's defiance of the rigid expectations and boundaries placed on her, and destabilises the entire sonnet. Zuk argues that the heptameter 'amounts to a form of awkwardness' that casts doubt on the woman's progress and future (172). However, it is not awkwardness that the line connotes but apostasy: a refusal by the female to be limited, or conform, to patriarchal order and logic, and specifically her place and deindividuation within a couple. The heptametric lines distinguish Millay's sonnet both from her contemporaries, such as Dinsmore and Hauenstein, and her predecessors, including Barrett Browning and Rossetti, and suggest her significance to a twentieth and twenty-first century feminist narrative of the sonnet.

Millay's feminist critique of patriarchal marriage further manifests itself in the language of 'Sonnet XVII'. Like Ellen Key, who chronicled the negative as well as the positive side of love: 'marriage is degraded to the coarsest sexual habits, the most shameless traffic, the most agonising soul-murders, the most inhuman cruelties, the grossest infringements of liberty' (1911, 290), and Marie Stopes, who began her exploration of love in marriage with the proclamation that 'too many who marry expecting joy are bitterly disappointed' (1918, 9), Millay's sonnet shares a certain pragmatism and pessimism towards marriage, and in its language we can clearly see the feminist rejection of the phallogocentric marital ideal of love and a turn towards a more sober vision told from the female perspective. In Barrett Browning's 'Sonnet X' she writes:

And love is fire. And when I say at need
I love thee ... mark I love thee – in thy sight
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine. (5-9)

Here, we see the glorification of love manifested through the poet's hyperbole and metaphor; a tradition that continued into the twentieth century, for instance in 'To An Absent Lover' by Helen Hunt Jackson. In Dinsmore's 'A Sonnet Sequence' even lost love is treated with reverence and idealism:

I love him as the lone harp loves the hands
That once drew music from its silent strings,
I love him as the caged bird loves the wings
That bore it far to free and flowery lands. ('Sonnet XV', 1-4)

In contrast stands Millay's opening line in 'Sonnet XVII':

Gazing upon him now, severe and dead. (1)

Unlike Barrett Browning or Dinsmore, the language here is devoid of any grandeur or romance. Millay uses a prosaic lexis and syntax that purges the line of the poetic diction, metaphorical tropes and rhetorical devices that serve to aggrandise love in Barrett Browning and Dinsmore's sonnets, instead stripping language down to a

spartan form that signifies the lovelessness and apathy of the male-female relationship in Millay's 'Ungrafted Tree' sequence. Specifically, this line enacts a macabre reversal of the Petrarchan convention of honorific female blazon, substituting the extended eulogy of a vibrant female body with a brusque and dispassionate single line comment on the lifeless male corpse. In contrast to the libidinous sight of the female body, the male is transfigured into a grotesque memento mori as Millay highlights the sterility of the relationship. Awakened to the inequalities and oppressions of marriage, the female no longer idolises the male nor idealises marriage, rather she has come to disdain both, and is thus able to look dispassionately, even with relief, at the male's death: 'From his desirous body the great heat/ Was gone at last, it seemed' (4-5). Indeed, the language that is used after the male's death serves to show the way in which death, the great leveller, undoes the patriarch's power, shattering the illusion of superiority and reverence:

a man she never saw before —

The man who eats his victuals at her side,

Small, and absurd. (12-14)

In death, the wife finally sees her husband in a new light; he is not the powerful and impressive male to whom she must rigidly obey, but simply a meagre and ridiculous figure. As Millay's abandonment of poetic diction and romantic posturing suggests, the patriarchal illusion has been broken and the female is finally freed. As such, 'Sonnet XVII' stands as an example of the intersection between the sonnet and a first wave feminist politics of the restrictive power of patriarchal marriage.

'Yet in an hour to come, disdainful dust'

Throughout the early twentieth century, the ideal of free love challenged many of the taboos and expectations of sexuality. Its homage to freedom, independence and pleasure appealed to modern feminists, like Emma Goldman, Edith Ellis and Crystal Eastman, all of whom shared the radically bohemian milieu of Greenwich Village with Millay. Angela Marie Howard suggests that free love has not always been adequately acknowledged as a feminist issue (338), again underlining the critical failure to view feminism synchronically. For, in the 1920s, free love was central to challenging gender equality and women's subordination to men; protesting the patriarchal restrictions of marriage; advocating female desire; and arguing for the reform of contraception, marital sexual abuse and sex education (Howard 337-8; Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern* 103). Publications by the sexologist Havelock Ellis and his wife Edith Ellis, as well as those of Dora Forster and Marie Stopes, ensured that a new frankness about sexuality and a new concept of love entered the public domain. Women were made to expect more pleasure and freedom in marriage and sexuality – even the prospect of pre-marital liaisons (Forster 47) – and love became indicative of women's rights, not only to their bodies, but also to their choices, desires and pleasures (Howard 338). This is not to say that all women advocated free love or that marriage became extinct, indeed Christina Simmons argues that women continued to face the cultural, psychological and material power of marriage (*Making* 104). Nevertheless, free love proved pertinent to feminist debates of the time, and was responsible for bringing the issues of sexual desire and activity into revised notions of marriage (Simmons, *Making* 104). Specifically, it offers an important context for reading 'Fatal Interview VIII'.

Yet in an hour to come, disdainful dust,
You shall be bowed and brought to bed with me.
While the blood roars, or when the blood is rust
About a broken engine, this shall be.
If not today, then later; if not here
On the green grass, with sighing and delight,
Then under it, all in good time, my dear,
We shall be laid together in the night.
And ruder and more violent, be assured,
Than the desirous body's heat and sweat
That shameful kiss by more than night obscured
Wherewith at length the scornfullest mouth is met.
Life has no friend; her converts later or soon
Slide back to feed the dragon with the moon.²¹

This sonnet is the eighth in a sequence of fifty-two that comprise the collection *Fatal Interview* (1931). The sequence charts the course of a love affair between an older woman and a younger man, from the female perspective, from inception to consummation to demise. Although Millay was no longer physically situated within Greenwich Village in 1931, the sequence reflects the influence of its rebellious gender politics, free love sentiments and sexual revolutionism that gave Millay a

²¹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, 'Fatal Interview VIII', *Collected Sonnets*, Rev. ed., New York: Harper, 1988. 77. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, as 'Fatal Interview VIII'.

reputation as the personification of liberated New Womanhood and the embodiment of the free love ethos (Miller 11). As Millay's biographer, Nancy Milford, confirms: 'she slept with men and women and wrote about it in lyrics and sonnets that blazed with wit and sexual daring' (xii-xiii). On a basic narratorial level, this sonnet explores this sexual daring, as the female speaker forthrightly declares to the reluctant male that she will sleep with him in spite of his unwillingness whether this be in the pleasure of the act in the living or in the violation of his body in death, where even the most resistant of lovers are conquered. Ultimately, the speaker argues that life is fragile and in the end people seize on the chance for physical love.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, free love became a vital and radical movement advocating sexual expression and rejecting marital bondage (Howard 337-338). At its heart was Victoria Woodhull, who, as one of the first American female advocates of free love and a leading light in the suffrage movement represented the union of feminism and free love (Dubois 'Feminism and Free Love'). In *Tried as by Fire* (1874), Woodhull writes:

When woman rises from sexual slavery into freedom, into the ownership and control of her sexual organs, and man is obliged to respect this freedom, then will this instinct become pure and holy; then will woman be raised from the iniquity and morbidness in which she now wallows for existence, and the intensity and glory of her creative functions be increased a hundred-fold. (40)

In the 1920s, a new generation of women who had grown up with the successes of the 'Declaration of Sentiments', the icon of the New Woman and the discourse of

feminism, and had recently secured the vote, were defining a new social code which saw a renewed interest in sex and the 'mechanics of pleasure' (Ayers, 137). Free love once again took central stage. In 1925, Dora Russell proclaimed: 'the important task of... feminism is to accept and proclaim sex; to bury for ever the lie that has too long corrupted our society – the lie that the body is a hindrance to the mind, and sex a necessary evil to be endured for the perpetuation of our race' (14). In the theme of 'Fatal Interview VIII' we see how Millay's poetics are situated within this feminist context and thus position her within a twentieth and twenty-first century feminist narrative of the sonnet.

Distiller notes that whilst it was possible for female sonneteers of the nineteenth century to celebrate love in the sonnet, passion still needed to be contained and controlled (171). Barrett Browning's 'Sonnet XII' exemplifies this Victorian constraint of passion, as the theme focuses on metaphysical love: 'Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,/ And placed it by thee on a golden throne' (11-12). Even in 1905, Lily Nightingale's sonnet sequence reflects this same tendency towards platonic love, with a direct invective against passion:

The little, lesser loves do feed on kisses,
And many a fond endearment seals their plight,
Our love hath treasure far above such blisses,
Our love's a dual star that leaped one night. ('Sonnet XXXIX' 1-4)

In contrast, in Millay's 'Fatal Interview VIII' the theme of platonic love is replaced by female desire and eroticism: 'You shall be bowed and brought to bed with me' (1),

marking the zeitgeist of free love and representing the possibilities and convictions of desire 'for a female lover who can both speak and consummate her love' (Distiller 158). Millay leaves behind the spiritual posturing and abstinence of Barrett Browning and Nightingale to assert the female's sexuality: this is the love sonnet in which woman has risen 'into the ownership and control of her sexual organs' (Woodhull 40) and commands when, and with whom, she wishes to use them. In Edna Worthley Underwood's suggestively titled *Garden of Desire: Love Sonnets to a Spanish Monk* (1913), sexuality is even more pronounced: 'Yes, yes, the storm's first kiss! Thus – thus – kiss me!/ Unchain the whirlwinds of your wild desire/ And blind me, blind me, with the lightning's fire!' ('Sonnet VI', 12-14). However, there is still a sense in this sonnet of affection and devotion between male and female, as evidenced in the sentimental mood and depiction of the lovers: 'Upon my eyes like rain your kisses fall,/ Soft rain that maketh to be sweet the Spring' (1-2).

In contrast, in Millay's 'Fatal Interview VIII' sexuality seems to be completely decoupled from an emotionally engaged and committed relationship: 'While the blood roars, or when the blood is rust' (3). This is female sexual freedom at its riotous best and demonstrating its feminist politics, with women free to enter into non-productive sexual relations without the commitment, obligation or regard to legal, social or doctrinal restrictions of monogamy, marriage or procreation (Howard 337; Simmons, *Making* 103). Female sexuality is not polite and decorous, rather Millay figures the sexual experimentation of Greenwich Village, where the 'freedom to take and dismiss lovers' (Saville 36), engage in casual sex and 'taboo sexual experiences' (Pennington 118), led to the creation of what Chauncey describes as a sexually "free zone" (qtd. in Munt 40) that 'conferred on the area an embryonic

stature as erotica unbound' (Munt 39). Although the sonnet does not necessarily reach these erotic heights, we certainly see a degree of sexual licence and experimentation that registers the radical sentiments of the subculture. Indeed, phrases such as 'you shall be bowed and brought to bed with me' (1) and 'and ruder and more violent' (9) establish an aggressive female sexuality across the sonnet that hints at the sadistic. Millay's theme of unrepressed female sexuality thus transforms the sonnet from the patriarchal, Victorian configuration of feminine virtue and asexuality to a mode that figures the feminist assertion of women's desire and control.

Marlene Le Gates notes that some of the older feminists, including pioneering thinkers like Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, rejected this new emphasis on sexuality, perceiving it more as a means to please men than to achieve equal rights (302). Sheila Jeffreys concurs, arguing that female sexual experimentation failed to 'challenge the sexual status quo, in which women were expected to be dependent on men' and to engage in intercourse 'whether they liked it or not' (159). However, for the younger generation of feminists, sexuality challenged the constraints of femininity (Greenberg and Watts 268) and was seen to offer a path to individual freedom and personal growth (Pennington 118). Central to this feminist conception of sexuality was the fact that 'women rather than men were becoming the active agents in altering sexual relations' (Rowbotham 53). Indeed, we find in the sexology works of Forster and Stopes, the birth control arguments of Margaret Sanger, and the female supporters of the free love movement, women challenging their traditional, subordinate role as sexual objects to become sexual subjects.

In Underwood's sonnets, we find the manifestation of this sexual subjectivity in the use of a female first person narrative in a sexually active lyric: 'Upon my breast bunched black your bright curls lay –/ Bacchante and Pan were we that night' ('Sonnet IV' 9-10). However, there is a sense that women's sexual subjectivity is primarily used in what Ellen Carol Dubois describes as a negative form ('Feminism and Free Love'), that is the female's power lies in her capacity to reject – 'No! No! I told you once, twice, thrice,– this wise,/ And firmly I said it despite the hand/ That clung about my breasts, the vice-like band ('Sonnet III' 1-3) – or accept the sexual advances of the male – 'Yes, yes, the storm's first kiss! Thus– *thus*– kiss me!' ('Sonnet VI' 12) – rather than enforcing her own sexual demands. Indeed, although the female takes on the role of subject and expresses her desire, she still very much ministers to the male's consent rather than dominating the situation. Her passion and sexuality are never truly uninhibited or autonomous. However, in Millay's 'Fatal Interview VIII' we see the feminist realisation of a truly agentive and domineering sexual subject. Indeed, in the opening lines in which the female directs the sexual act and the male's role in it, Millay transforms the negative sexual subjectivity of Underwood into a positive, feminist, sexual subjectivity. It is Millay's specific appropriation, and deployment, of a female subject within the *carpe diem* lyric that helps to achieve this.

Traditionally, the *carpe diem* lyric was a male persuasive performance aimed at securing sex with a female object of desire: 'Now let us sport us while we may;/ And now, like am'rous birds of prey' (Marvell 'To His Coy Mistress' 37-38); 'Then, Celia, let us reap our joys/ Ere time such goodly fruit destroys' (Carew 'Song: Persuasions

to Enjoy' 5-6); 'Die with the Scandall of a whore,/ And never know the joy' (Wilmot 'A Song' 15-16). It was an expression of the male's sexual dominance, assertiveness and desire. When Ella Wheeler Wilcox appropriated the carpe diem lyric in 1872 in 'Arise', she completely absolved it of its heterosexual past, instead using it to encourage a spiritual and moral proactivism: 'Think you life was made for dreaming, nothing more,/ When God's work lies all unfinished at your door?' (9-10). Similarly, when Sara Teasdale wrote the carpe diem lyric 'Barter' in 1917 – by which time, thanks to Mabel Dodge Luhan's radical salon, the Heterodoxy Club,²² publication of *The Masses*, as well as the creation of a network of America's leading cultural radicals, Greenwich Village had, as Gerald McFarland notes, popularised free love ('Greenwich Village' 322) – she too ignored the sexual overtones of the genre and of the age to write a lyric about life's treasures, in which a very platonic mention of love – 'Eyes that love you, arms that hold' (Teasdale 10) – is embedded in a range of more esoteric and transcendental pleasures: 'children's faces looking up' (5), 'Music like a curve of gold' (8), 'Scent of pine trees in the rain' (9). In contrast, Millay not only maintains the focus on heterosexuality and desire of the Cavalier carpe diem lyrics, but adds the eroticism of the Libertines which is accentuated by the zeitgeist of free love, thus exposing the conservatism of Wilcox and Teasdale and defining a feminist poetics of sexual subjectivity.

²² The Heterodoxy Club was 'a women's group devoted to feminism by way of counterculture' (Keetley and Pettegrew 2:5) in which some of the most progressive and wilful female figures of the period met regularly to discuss matters of the day – of which the woman's question was central – and whose members 'were amongst the first to use the term "feminism" in a self-conscious way' (Schwarz, Peiss, Simmons 119). Judith Schwarz, Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons note that members of Heterodoxy 'explored women's intellectual and psychological repression, their desire for self-fulfilment, and the historic opening of new experiences and opportunities' (119) but importantly they 'also challenged the boundaries of traditional sexual and gender roles...asserting themselves as sexual beings—and denying the old double standard of sexual morality' (119-120).

Specifically, in adopting and amplifying the sexual bravado and aggression of the *carpe diem* lyric in expressions such as 'we shall be laid together in the night' (Millay 'Fatal Interview VIII' 8) and 'the desirous body's heat and sweat' (10), but replacing the male with a female speaker, Millay exposes and disturbs the patriarchal monopoly on desire. She claims for the female not only a sexual identity, but specifically the same sexual needs and urges as the male. In doing so, she reflects the feminist challenges of free love to female subordination to men, gender inequality and the sexual standards and restrictions placed on women. Indeed, rather than being at the mercy of the male, it is the female who is shown to define and choose her desire: 'on the green grass, with sighing and delight' (6). Further by placing the male in the role of sexual object – 'you shall be bowed and brought to bed with me' (1) – Millay refuses to acknowledge the male's desires and depicts him merely as an accessory to female gratification. In denying the male's voice, desire and subjectivity, Millay releases the female from the oppressive role of object, or even victim, translating sexuality from patriarchal dominance to feminist definition. Although the use of 'we' threatens to subsume the female self in a patriarchal union, it is the female who determines and instigates this relationship, thus it is that whilst she emerges intact, the male loses his subjectivity. As Stacy Carson Hubbard notes in her influential discussion of Millay's *carpe diem* lyrics, 'Millay's sonnets speak for the possibility of life after virginity; they imagine an endlessly renewable sexuality, a self-distribution without self-loss' (106). Thus Millay appropriates the *carpe diem* lyric in ways that reflect the influence of free love and bohemianism to assert a positive female subjectivity that transforms the sonnet into a feminist vehicle. As Distiller argues, the sonnet 'cannot help but read as feminist when a female claims

the position of desiring subject and when she publishes her sexuality without shame' (156).

By the 1930s, as Howarth outlines in his chapter on 'The Modern Sonnet', Modernism had made the sonnet largely outmoded (228). In 1927, Gertrude Stein's 'Patriarchal Poetry: A Sonnet', reiterated this stance for female Modernists, with a parody of the genre that Karen Jackson Ford has suggested revealed 'that love poems of this sort celebrate unequal relations between men and women and exploit the female object of love as a means of validating the male speaker' ('An Essay'):

her beauties

Her charms her qualities her joyous nature

All of it makes of her husband

A proud and happy man. (Stein 14-18)

That Stein's eighteen line form is also about her own 'unorthodox lesbian relationship' (Ford 'An Essay') further underscores the limitations of the sonnet to speak of modern women's desire. Indeed, as Debra Fried has claimed, 'woman's desire cannot resonate in the room of the sonnet with the same force as' the male's (14). In order to depict her lesbian desire, Mina Loy uses a variety of free verse forms in *Songs to Joannes* (1917):

Something taking shape

Something that has a new name

A new dimension

A new use

A new illusion ('XIII', 3-7)

It was through 'breaking up the apparatuses through which meaning is determined and distributed' (Lyon qtd. in Lyon and Majerus), that is disrupting the form of the sonnet as in Stein or abandoning it altogether as in Loy, that these female poets could more easily escape patriarchal poetry and fashion their own desires. Millay's use of a consummate Shakespearean sonnet in 'Fatal Interview VIII' thus seems somewhat antithetical to a feminist poetics. Indeed, even in contrast to 'Bluebeard' and 'Sonnet XVII' from 'Ungrafted Tree', both of which employ various challenges to the traditional form to dismantle the patriarchal logic of the genre, 'Fatal Interview VIII' is formally conventional.

However, within the context of the sonnet, specifically the transversing of gender roles to bespeak the female's sexual domination of the male, this formal convention, rather than detracting from or lessening, actually contributes, and is integral, to the feminist poetics. Indeed, we see the sexually dominant female turning the sonnet against the male, and using its tendency for order, constraint and enclosure to enact the female's sexual entrapment of him. She uses the very tools that the male sonneteer has traditionally used to control his subject matter – the female – to portray her mastery over him. The commitment to the end-stopped line thus serves to reflect the female's restriction of the male's possibilities, whilst the rigid sonnet form overall signifies the male's inability to escape the female's demands. As Moore confirms, 'a sonnet intricately encloses its content, often with bodily and erotic connotations: it is an erotic mirror, an intricately wrought vial, a reproductive space,

a human body' (9). Millay's decision to use the sonnet to express the female *carpe diem* lyric intensifies her sense of dominion and the male's futility. Confirming that women could take charge of sexuality and exploit the male to their ends, the female resurrects the sonnet's cage and imprisons the male, transforming the mode from one associated with women's victimisation (Stanbrough 198) to one emblematic of women's mastery. Although writing about Millay's use of the Petrarchan sonnet, Jo Ellen Kaiser's suggestion that the form is 'an ironic gesture that contributes to the sense that this female speaker has absolute control over her romance' (34) is pertinent to Millay's use of the Shakespearean form in 'Fatal Interview VIII'. Indeed, in using the Shakespearean sonnet with its emphatic closural couplet, Millay anticipates from the poem's very beginning the sexual triumph of the female. Millay's consummate construction of the sonnet thus becomes in the context of the female *carpe diem* lyric and the contemporary context of female evocation of free love and sexuality, a feminist poetics that speaks of female desire, control and dominance as equivalent to the male.

Central to improving and normalising female sexuality was the articulation of 'a new language of sexuality' (Rowbotham 68) that could destabilise the 'the hidden world of forbidden sex' (73). This emerges in two linguistic features within 'Fatal Interview VIII': the first, a language of female agency and, the second, a language of female desire. In terms of agency, three of the main verbs in the sonnet are deontic modal verbs that depict female control: 'You shall be bowed and brought to bed with me' (2), 'this shall be' (4), and 'we shall be laid together in the night' (8). In all of these instances, 'shall' is used to express female certainty and male obligation and aligns with the new self-assurance and determination of women particularly in

matters of the flesh. In contrast, we find in Barrett Browning's 'Sonnet XVI' a conditional language that relies on male agency: 'If thou invite me forth, / I rise above abasement at the word' (12-13); in Myrtle Reed's 'Choice' a language that denies female agency: 'If I could choose...I would be thy solace and thy shield,/ If I could choose – if I could choose for thee!' (9-14); and in Dinsmore's 'Sonnet XXIII' a language of female futility: 'Is there some word that love has known since Eve/ But left unsaid? Oh! might I find it now/ To bind it like a bay leaf for his brow' (1-3). The language of Millay's 'Fatal Interview VIII' emerges in comparison as a strong assertion of female power. The first use of the deontic modal verb in the sonnet highlights this as the female dictates the male's sexual behaviour with 'shall' reflecting the male's inescapability from her orders. The verbs that 'shall' regulates reinforce the sense of the male's subjugation – 'bowed' signifying a physical lowering of oneself in deference to another, whilst 'brought' is a transitive verb requiring a direct object – in this case the male – which represents the submissive conveying of a thing to a person. In both instances, the male is subordinated to the authority of the female. In 'this shall be', 'this' refers deictically to the male's being 'bowed and brought to bed' and 'shall' functions to further reinforce the inevitability of this sexual union. Meanwhile, the third usage of the modal verb in 'we shall be laid together in the night' reflects the male double bind of either physically giving into the female in life or enduring her throughout the infiniteness of death. Significantly, as Hubbard highlights, unlike Marvell, Millay here does not offer the lover a choice between being taken by her or by death's worms, instead the choice is between consummation in life or consummation in death (109): either way the female will have her way and be fulfilled. Lustig argues that the use of the future tense and passive voice in these constructions actually adds a sense of

tenuousness and contingency to the female's power (275). However, the female's very act of asserting the future and the male's destiny reflects a wilful and confident statement of control and influence. Modal verbs thus become a linguistic means of authority for the female and align with the modern liberated woman's assertiveness and sexual agency.

In contrast to this assertiveness, the use of a metaphoric language to represent female sexuality seems to curb the transparency and force of the female sexual act and thus to court a conservatism that was more associated with earlier attitudes towards sexuality, as espoused by the safe and platonic expressions in Barrett Browning's 'XXXVIII': 'First time he kissed me, he but only kissed/ The fingers of this hand' (1-2) and Dinsmore's 'XIII': 'Once when he held my hand, along my hand/ With slow caressing finger tip he traced/ A blue vein's current' (1-3). However, in 'Fatal Interview VIII' Millay renounces the tame intimacy of these lyrics to depict the erotic relationship, and although the metaphorical expressionism of the sonnet may suggest conservatism, it can actually be seen to engage with the contemporary feminist ambitions of free love of releasing the female body and desire from male possession. As Meridel LeSueur explained, many women of the time 'felt sex was a humiliating force, symbolic of their repression...and it represented to them violence, rape and enslavement' (qtd. in Rowbotham 65). Therefore by veiling the erotic and the female body through metaphor, Millay is able to create a feminist sexual sonnet that gives women access to the pleasures and practices of sexuality whilst denying men the gratification that leads to the objectification of women. Indeed by obscuring the actual act, Millay conceals the female body from a male fantasy or gaze and thus prevents her from losing dominance and subjectivity. Furthermore, it also

obscures the male and thus serves to have a disempowering effect on him that renders him as less of a threat to the female's authority.

In 'The eyes of body' (1934) Valentine Ackland, however, comes close to an explicit and liberated portrait of female sexual intimacy:

My hand, being deft and delicate, displays

Unerring judgement; cleaves between your thighs. (9-10)

Here, the sensual, alliterative language and the representation of body parts clearly depict sexual intimacy. However, the focus is on two female lovers. As such, the transparency of these lines suggests the freedom from exploitation for women in the lesbian partnership, and thus implies that the figurative writings of sexuality in sonnets such as Millay's reflect the anxiety and subordination of women in male-dominated heterosexual relationships. Metaphor thus comes to represent the fear of male abuse, even rape, of the female body. In contrast, Ackland makes the sexual relationship in her sonnet visible to men in order to show that women can escape being sexually objectified and used by men. Here men can view women in the sexual act, but lesbianism denies them any involvement or any means of controlling the female. Heterosexuality, however, was the socially dominant mode in the early twentieth century and thus women sought to find feminist means of escaping its restrictions (Rowbotham 79). By making the male only a liminal identity in the heterosexual act and focusing more on the act itself, Millay thus ensures the emphasis remains on female desire and sexual agency. She thus situates 'Fatal Interview VIII' amongst the feminist sexual revisionists of the day who 'proclaimed a

modernist liberation from a repressive Victorian past' (Simmons, 'Modern Sexuality' 157-8) and in her exploration of unrepressed, unapologetic female sexuality transforms the sonnet into a vehicle for a contemporary feminist politics.

Conclusion

One's conclusion will depend on how we read [Millay] – from inside or outside her time (R. Johnson 128)

Millay's place in the sonnet tradition has long been guaranteed, but often this has been at the end of a non-feminist tradition. This positioning and interpretation however reflects critical failings in the treatment of Millay – namely critical parachronism – whereby modern critics have projected the thoughts and definitions of their own time onto Millay's oeuvre rather than reading her sonnets with an understanding of the contemporary context. This chapter has attempted to outline the historical feminist conditions of possibility that distinguish Millay from her predecessors and allow her to assume her place in a twentieth and twenty-first century feminist narrative of the female-authored sonnet.

Indeed, situating her in her context in 'the left, as a new woman, as a friend of Emma Goldman and Lola Ridge...as her independent mother's daughter' (Clark 25), as a part of a matriarchal household, as sister, as a graduate of Vassar College, as a bohemian of Greenwich Village, as a flapper and as 'inheritor of feminist Inez Milholland's task' (Clark 25), it is finally possible to uncover the contemporary feminism of her works. We see in Millay's sonnets the beginning of a

new tradition, a feminist tradition, in which a new prototype of woman, emancipated by the vote, educated at college and believing in her equality with man, takes on the form and rather than sitting comfortably within the patriarch's house, begins to test its limits and hammer at its doors. To echo Ernest Smith, Millay thus redefines the sonnet and woman's place in it (49) forever signalling a new relationship to the form defined by appropriation and subversion that would develop across the twentieth and twenty first centuries with the progress of feminism, as will now be seen in the poetics of Adrienne Rich.

Feminist Radicalisation and the Development of Adrienne Rich's

Sonneteering

Although, as the previous chapter has shown, feminism continued to reverberate in the thirties after the winning of the vote, there was a general waning of intensity and purpose. Indeed, in the second volume of the anthology *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism*, the number of articles pertaining to the feminist movement increases each decade from the 1890s to the 1910s, with 5 in the 1890s, 14 in the 1900s and 39 in the 1910s, before slightly falling off in the 1920s with 26 and then significantly falling thereon with 11 articles in the 1930s and 1940s, and only 4 in the 1950s, reiterating the rise and fall of first wave feminism (Keetley and Pettegrew). With the Second World War, it seems the final nail was effectively put in the coffin of the early twentieth-century women's movement (Lovenduski 31), as a focus on national security and cooperation ensured that women's energy was directed away from feminism (May 130). This was furthered in the post-war years by a return to patriarchal ideals of male leadership and female domesticity (Dicker 65). For women born after 1920 therefore, feminism was, if not dead, dormant, as Judith Hole and Ellen Levine claim (15), at least in terms of a visible activism and coherent politics, and would not rise to prominence again for nearly forty years.

Described variously as tumultuous (Mara) and rebellious (Bookchin), and in terms of a counterculture (McConnell), the 1950s through the 1960s was a period of unrest. Politically it was marked with the sovereignty of centre-right Republican governments that placed renewed emphases on the family, and consequently

femininity (Domosh and Seager 24). However, somewhat in response to these politics and their deficiencies, as Imelda Whelehan notes, the period also witnessed 'a marked upsurge in radical political agitation' (69), which was exemplified by the development and actions of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, Students for a Democratic Society, Anti-Vietnam movements and the New Left. Women were integral members in all of these movements; however, so too was sexism (Echols, 26), and as Sarah Gamble notes, it was women's disillusionment with, and realisation of, their secondary status within these groups that helped them to develop their own women's movement replete with a dedicated gender politics (310).

In France, the foundations had already been laid for a new women's movement with the publication of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949. The completion and publication of an English translation in 1953 soon spread these ideas transnationally. This text stood as a readymade *vade mecum* of a new feminist impetus, and is believed to have shaped the politics of such leading second wave figures as Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Ti-Grace Atkinson and Germaine Greer (Belasco 214; Fallaize 9). Indeed, De Beauvoir's text coined the phrase 'women's liberation' (Gianoulis 'Women's Liberation Movement') which was to become the moniker of the second wave and, as Women of Youth Against War and Racism proclaimed in 1970, marked a fundamental change in the character of the women's movement from the earlier concepts of suffrage and equal rights that had defined the first wave (40). In *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Maggie Humm summarises: 'women's liberation coheres around the struggle against sexism (or false consciousness)' (308).

Despite the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1953 however, it was not until the mid-1960s that the second wave flourished.²³ During this time, the women's movement became more widespread and active, with women staging a number of protests, conferences and group meetings, and publishing journals and monographs. The Second Wave reached a peak in the early 1970s (LeGates 364) but by this time its imprints were largely indelible. Again the anthologies *Public Women, Public Words* highlight these trends, with the 1950s represented by only four articles, whilst 23 texts cover the 1960s and 51 texts the 1970s (Keetley and Pettegrew). The Second Wave, and its particular emphasis on women's liberation, was, as Humm suggests, a significant moment that not only changed the course in women's history but in history in general, marking a decisive break from the past and shaping the contemporary world (*Dictionary of Feminist Thought* 307). This chapter will consider the radicalisation of feminism that occurs in this period as the context for exploring the continuation of the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition in the work of Adrienne Rich.

The inclusion of Adrienne Rich in a study of the sonnet may seem somewhat incongruous. Indeed in 'Love Poem', published in Rich's 1989 collection *Time's Power*, she declares: 'to write for you/ a pretty sonnet/ would be untrue' (12-14), and across her corpus the form is largely negligible amongst a wealth of free verse lyrics

²³ Although critics like Stephanie Coontz are increasingly tracing the second wave back to the housewives of the 1950s, it is generally agreed that it is with the emergence of an activist and visible women's movement in the 1960s that second wave feminism was born (Whelehan 8). Whilst the publication of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 has been credited with launching the second wave (Coontz xv), it was really in the mid to late 1960s, particularly 1968, as a number of critics agree (Whelehan 4; Evans 62; Le Gates 327), which was the year that Marsha Lear coined the term, that second wave feminism was realised.

and ghazals. However, Rich's relatively minimal engagement with the sonnet and her changing reactions to, and appropriations of, the form are symptomatic of the idiosyncratic relationship between the sonnet and the evolving feminism of the second wave.

Even a cursory look at the anthologies and poetic texts dating from this period uncovers a conspicuous absence of female-authored sonnets. Indeed, only the British poet Elizabeth Jennings writes sonnets in significant numbers throughout the second wave, and these are largely incongruous with contemporary feminism. Elsewhere, other female poets, reflecting the contradictions of the times, either write sonnets sparingly, in the case of Muriel Rukeyser, and Anne Sexton, or actively abandon, or choose not to engage with, the form, sometimes indefinitely or else for a marked period in their writing, as in the case of Gwendolyn Brooks. The sonnet and feminist poetry then seem to be two separate, even mutually exclusive, entities in the period.

Sylvia Plath however contradicts this premise. Unfortunately though, and importantly for this thesis, her untimely death in 1963, at the age of only 30, predated by eight days the publication of what many see as the catalyst of second-wave feminism, *The Feminine Mystique*, and significantly, therefore, the full emergence and fulfilment of the movement and its politics. Rich in contrast is clearly situated in this entire historical trajectory and with a single sonnet in *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), her second publication but the first collection that coincides with the emerging second wave; two sonnets and several near-sonnets in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963); one sonnet and several near-sonnets in *Necessities of Life*

(1966); two sonnets and two near-sonnets in *Leaflets* (1969); no sonnets in *The Will to Change* (1971);²⁴ four sonnets in *Diving into the wreck* (1973) and; finally from this period, two sonnets and several near-sonnets in *Twenty One Love Poems* (1976), with a further five fourteen-line poems in *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) we see not only the existence of a female-authored sonnet, but, specifically the challenges to, and negotiations of, the genre that define the difficult relationship with second-wave feminism, that points to a whole new (counter-) tradition of female sonneteering.

'The Insusceptibles'

As it has already been suggested, following World War two, women were largely encouraged to return to the domestic sphere and thus in the 1950s many women were pursuing conservative roles as daughters, wives and mothers (Dicker 64). However the public advocacy given to domesticity, marriage and family was essentially a patriarchal construction used to keep women in their place and further an androcentric way of life. As Sally Thomason notes, 'patriarchal values were deeply embedded in American culture and tacitly influenced the behavior and predisposition of people' (32). De Beauvoir raised these issues in her revolutionary text *The Second Sex*, drawing attention to the masculine oppression of women and the stultifying effects of feminine roles. Whilst De Beauvoir's text may have encouraged women's recognition of the illusoriness and arbitrariness of domestic

²⁴ *The Diamond Cutters, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, Necessities of Life, Leaflets* and *The Will to Change* are all taken from Rich's *Collected Early Poems*.

and familial totality, the lack of a women's movement and the dominance of patriarchal gender hierarchies in the 1950s helped instil a false consciousness that largely militated against a feminist uprising (Coontz 57). However, some women did begin to experience feelings of 'deep discontent' (Weiss 16), but because of the patriarchal circumstances governing their lives, most women did not, or were unable to, give voice to these frustrations in the early 1950s. Thus, I argue, appeared a latent – an unfulfilled and sometimes even unacknowledged – feminist philosophy.²⁵ It is in this context that 'The Insusceptibles' will be addressed.

Then the long sunlight lying on the sea
Fell, folded gold on gold; and slowly we
Took up our decks of cards, our parasols,
The picnic hamper and the sandblown shawls
And climbed the dunes in silence. There were two
Who lagged behind as lovers sometimes do,
And took a different road. For us the night
Was final, and by artificial light
We came indoors to sleep. No envy there
Of those who might be watching anywhere
The lustres of the summer dark, to trace
Some vagrant splinter blazing out of space.

²⁵ Although the roots of the second wave seem to lie in the 1950s, to suggest a more elaborate or collective picture of feminism would ring untrue, as Coontz confirms 'until they read *The Feminine Mystique*, these women had no language to understand their conflicted feelings and no way to justify their inchoate desire to get "something else, something more, out of life"' (57).

No thought of them, save in a lower room
To leave a light for them when they should come.²⁶

This sonnet comes from Rich's second collection *The Diamond Cutters* (1955); the first text to be published after her marriage in 1953 to Alfred Conrad and in the year of the birth of her first son. It portrays a scene from a relationship and contrasts the relative intimacies between two couples – that of the narrator and her partner who are 'insusceptible' to romance and love, and that of another couple who are the true lovers.

Adrienne Rich's focus on the platonic and domestic heterosexual partnership in 'The Insusceptibles' seems to align with, and advocate, the patriarchal prioritisation of marriage in the 1950s and return to the prefeminist poetics of Barrett Browning and Rossetti. Indeed, gone are the severe and disparaging poetics of Millay's 'Bluebeard' or the sexualised and rebellious poetics of 'Fatal Interview VIII'. Instead, the idyllic depiction of the sunset and the allusion to a picnic at the commencement of Rich's sonnet seems to signify the veritable 'American Dream' of marriage and family that became the touchstone for life in the Reconstruction period (Dicker 65). Lombardo confirms that 'the 1950s was the culmination of the modern individualistic and romantic vision of marriage' (7). The sonnet, although not as romantic as Lombardo's vision, presents a reverent scene of order and normalcy in the heterosexual partnership. In Muriel Rukeyser's contemporaneous *Body of Waking*

²⁶ Adrienne Rich, 'The Insusceptibles', *Collected Early Poems 1950-1970*. New York: Norton, 1984. 74. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

(1958), there are no similarly themed poems. Instead, the majority of poems disengage from the history, and thus the patriarchal context, of the period, using myth and allegory to explore specifically feminist themes, as in the onset of, and social reaction, to female puberty in 'Rite', and the ascension of women from oppression in the poem beginning 'Long enough, long enough'. Similarly in Sylvia Plath's juvenilia from the same period we find poems that largely deal with the disappointment and disillusionment, rather than the grandeur, of love. In the somberly titled 'To a Jilted Lover' she writes 'I am still/ blazing in my golden hell' (26-27), whilst even the romantically-titled 'Trio of Love Songs' ends with the darkly gruesome:

If you pluck out my heart
to find out what makes it move,
you'll halt the clock
that syncopates our love. (3:13-16)

'The Insusceptibles' thus seems incompatible with a feminist narrative of the sonnet and seems to support the majority of criticism that attributes Rich's feminist poetics to her work from the 1960s onwards.

However, in her article 'Adrienne Rich and the Women's Liberation Movement', Susan Sheridan begins to unpick this critical schema, suggesting a protofeminist element in Rich's work (27). Although Sheridan fails to go back as far as *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd identify in the same year the 'emergence of an oppositional discourse regarding dominant myths of the

happy housewife' (11). Rich who had abandoned the opportunities of her college education and married at the age of 24, having her first child within two years, in order that she could fulfil what she saw as 'a full woman's life', was soon encountering the oppressive and unsatisfying realities of domestic life that marked this emergent feminist ideology (Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken' 173). Indeed, Barbara Ryan has offered an important revisioning of feminism that encourages us to look anew at the 1950s, when she writes 'the rebirth of feminism can be traced back to the family-centred years' (41). Therefore, although Rich's sonnet focuses on heterosexual partnership, in her specific treatment of marriage we can find a latent feminism, beginning in the sonnet's very title.

In his work on paratexts, Gerard Genette identifies the title as one of the accompanying productions of a text (1), what he variously calls an assistant and accessory to the text (410). It offers the way into the text, a 'threshold', but importantly acts as a 'conveyor of commentary' (2), that is 'it can make known an intention, or an interpretation by an author' (11). The title as authorial paratext (9) thus serves to contextualise and elucidate on the issues within a poem. If we look at the title of Rich's sonnet, 'The Insusceptibles', it seems disjunctive to a poem about love, particularly in comparison with unequivocal titles such as Una Marson's 'The Heart's Strength'. Not only does Rich give no indication of a thematic of love in her title, she nominalises the common adjectival form 'susceptible' to create a new noun form 'insusceptibles' that leaves the meaning ambiguous. Whilst Rich alludes to love and marriage explicitly in three titles in *The Diamond Cutters*,²⁷ her failure to do so in the title of 'The Insusceptibles' suggests a rejection of these values in the

²⁷ 'Love in the Museum', 'The Marriage Portion' and 'Lovers and Like Children'.

sonnet. Instead, 'The Insusceptibles', with its improvised meaning of those who are incapable of being influenced or affected, encourages us to read the sonnet as expressive of the couple's indifference to romance and love. It suggests the presence of what Elaine Showalter has identified as a dominant and muted story ('Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' 204) within women's poetry of the time, which can help elucidate the feminist qualities of Rich's sonnet.

'In the purest feminist literary criticism', explains Showalter, readers are 'presented with a radical alteration of our vision, a demand that we see meaning in what has previously been empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint' (435). As Claire Keyes concurs, for women writers particularly in the patriarchal context of the 1950s, the dominant story coincided with mainstream masculine hegemony (*Aesthetics of Power* 15), but in the muted story it is possible to see the feminist subconscious. Thus despite the dominant story of marital security and success in 'The Insusceptibles', Rich offers us a muted story of marital despondency and ennui that aligns with the feminist poetics of Plath.

For instance, in Rich's use of *medias res*, such that the sonnet opens after the conclusion of the picnic, the reader only gains access to the scene at its ending, notably denying representation of the romantic and pleasurable images of the picnic. The falling sunlight of the sonnet's opening lines seems to symbolise the end of all romantic illusions and suggests that the couple's relationship is defined not by the brightness of the day but rather by the darkness and sterility of night. To borrow from drama, the sonnet opens after the rising action and climax of the narrative,

leaving only the falling action, denouement or catastrophe. As such, the sonnet emerges as a correlative to Plath's 'Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea' whose melancholic sense of loss seems to bespeak the demise of the lovers' relationship: 'cold and final, the imagination/ shuts down its fabled summer house' (1-2). The parallels with Plath's poem confirm the darker underbelly of 'The Insusceptibles' and Keyes' proposition that, 'the "plots" of Rich's early poems may present an orthodox "vase", but the muted story emerges as the true "face" of the poet' (*Aesthetics* 15-6). Rather than a sonnet about marital harmony and success that aligns with a prefeminist poetics therefore, the theme of the sonnet emerges as one of lack and sorrow that corresponds with the emergent feminism of the housewife. By reading the double-voicedness of the poem, 'The Insusceptibles' which poses as orthodoxy, in fact emerges as a feminist palimpsest of the sonnet.

Although in the 1950s female poets were still not always explicit in the gendering of the lyric 'I' or the deliverance thereby of a female self-construction, as in the 'gender-shy lyricism' (Dowson and Entwistle 89) of Muriel Rukeyser's 'King's Mountain' and Elizabeth Jennings' 'Identity', the deployment of the 'I' suggests female recognition of their capacity for selfhood and the potential for a feminist poetics of female experience. The absence of the lyric 'I' in 'The Insusceptibles' is thus conspicuous. Rich herself wrote that in the period of 'The Insusceptibles' she did not have the courage to use the pronoun 'I', nor 'to write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience' ('When we dead awaken' 175). As Erkkila suggests, 'the masking ... corresponds with the masking that characterized [Rich's] life in the early fifties' (547). Indeed, the priority placed on marriage in the 1950s led many women, both freely and arbitrarily, into wedlock (Weiss 16).

Women thus gave up independence to become wives (May 167), and consequently many, including Rich, experienced a loss of selfhood and self-importance (Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken' 173). The absence of a lyric 'I', and specifically a female 'I', in 'The Insusceptibles' thus represents the dilemma of female subjectivity within the patriarchal context of the era, threatening to align the sonnet with antifeminism.

Indeed, throughout the sonnet the lyric 'I' is replaced by the first person plural pronoun 'we':

slowly we

Took up our decks of cards, our parasols. (2-3)

The substitution of the first person singular for the first person plural pronoun serves to indicate the primacy of the couple and suggests the elimination of their individual subjectivities. Specifically, it signals the elimination of the female subject within marriage and substantiates the claims of De Beauvoir in her chapter 'The Married Woman' that the wife takes the man's name, 'his religion, his class, his circle; she joins his family, she becomes his 'half' (449). However, although on the surface 'we' refers to the unit of the couple and the dominant story of partnership, it is always adopted and co-opted by only one of the couple at a given time, either the male or female partner, who is the speaker or narrator. As such, it loses its collective identity to the perspective, will and prejudices of the individual subject. When Rich writes the seemingly compliant and gender-neutral 'we' in 'The Insusceptibles', therefore, her gender and voice are projected into the poem, imposing a female subject. Thus in the example, 'we/ took up our deck of cards' (2-3), whilst the statement seems to

objectively describe the shared experience of the couple, it is only the female partner who is describing the experience and defining the reality. Michael Toolan's comments on the bi-directionality of narrative are pertinent here to understanding how the emergence of a female narrator contributes to Rich's feminist poetics in 'The Insusceptibles'. Indeed, he explains that the particular focalisation on a given object or scene reveals the object or scene, *but importantly, must also 'reveal the perspective and ideology' of the narrator* (62) (my italics). Thus rather than a narrative that expresses the shared sentiments of the couple, we have the subjective perspective of a singular female narrator, again allowing for the emergence of a feminist textual subconscious within the seemingly objective narrative of the sonnet.

For us the night

Was final, and by artificial light

We came indoors to sleep. (Rich 'The Insusceptibles' 7-9)

Here, then, rather than objective commentary on the couple's nocturnal retirement, the narration harbours the female undervoice that exposes the speaker's nostalgia for a different relationship and her unhappiness in her own situation. Indeed, 'the night was final' and 'we came indoors to sleep' intimate the absence of passion in the marriage and point to a very pragmatic and sober vision of their lives. As with theme, Rich constructs a multi-level reading of subjectivity congruent with the conditions of contemporary female life, in which the female subject assumes her place within the normal framework of the heterosexual couple, but significantly

infiltrates the narrative voice of 'we' instilling a subversive feminist subconscious that allows the possibility of a feminist reading of the sonnet.

The context of domestic repression and feminist stirring that has been explored thus far elucidates Rich's use of form in 'The Insusceptibles'. Although the sonnet may seem somewhat conservative when viewed in light of Suzanne Juhasz's assertion that the feminist poet of the period worked 'harder to find...forms that could speak of the nonverbal, transcendent and profound layers' of female experience (29), 'The Insusceptibles' marks the only sonnet in *The Diamond Cutters*. On average, the poems in the collection have around 36 lines with several extending to between 60 and 100 lines, and two with over 150 lines. Furthermore, only eight of the poems in the collection, including 'The Insusceptibles', are structured as monolithic forms. By placing 'The Insusceptibles' in the context of the longer, scattered and looser poems of *The Diamond Cutters*, we see that Rich's choice of the sonnet was not routine and indicative of her commitment to the patriarchal ideologies of the genre or her creation of a non-feminist poetics, but rather symbolic, using the conservative and restrictive space, shape and associations of the form to enact the poem's feminist critique of women's circumstances. Indeed, the form adds to the sense of confinement and entrapment of the female and gives the poem's remonstrations about the situation of women and the fallacy of marriage greater validity. As Kim Whitehead confirms, 'highly formalist poems would feel like the homes [women] had been confined to in the 1950s' (8). The sonnet embodies Diana Wallace's notion of the 'coercive domestic ideology' of the period (qtd. in Dowson and Entwistle 125); the inescapability of marriage (Weiss 16); the 'comfortable concentration camp' that was the home

(Friedan 228); the stultifying effects on women's lives and minds that marriage enforced. Indeed, the compression of the form aligns with De Beauvoir's assessment of wifedom: 'when she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland, the forests were hers. Now she is confined to a restricted space...walls cut off the horizon' (469). Again the poem points to the interplay of the dominant and muted story, with the traditional patriarchal connotations of the form of order and unity undercut by a feminist association with oppression and control. Just as she does with theme and subjectivity, in her use of form Rich seems to be engaging in the feminist poetic practice of 'making the hidden known' (Whitehead 23).

Rich's innovative use of rhyming couplets can be seen as part of the sonnet's feminist emblematicism. Unlike the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan or Shakespearean mode whereby rhymes are variously separated and delayed, in 'The Insusceptibles' Rich adjoins every line directly to a neighbouring line. The lack of space between rhyming units denies any sense of the words as individual units and dilutes their semantic force. Rather the words become immolated to their aurality, losing their individual essence to the prerogative of the dual rhyme. As such, the concentration and force of the rhyme scheme serves to mimic the deindividuating and repressive institution of the partnership that is figured in the sonnet's theme. Indeed, each pair of end words can be seen to represent the male and female partner, and the rhyme represents their union and their subsequent loss of identity. The inevitability of the rhyme which is amplified by the use of rhyming couplets, reflects the predominance of the couple in the 1950s and the fact as Clark Vincent asserted in 1953 that the female lived 'in a society permeated with the values and desirability of a marriage' (567). However, significantly, despite the

impression of permanence and stability created by the rhyming couplets, Rich's final end rhyme room/come disrupts the entire performance, constituting as it does at best a half-rhyme or arguably even consonance. The rhyme scheme which threatens to impose a patriarchal order of cohesion and rigidity is thus subverted and the unity and harmony that defines the relationship is exposed as fallible.

If we understand the feminist context of the day, in which women were becoming conscious of, and beginning to struggle against, especially internally, the oppressions and ideologies they were faced with in life, in particular with regard to the expectations and conventions of love and marriage, it is possible to find within the dialectical play of external and internal form the enactment of a feminist insurrection.

And climbed the dunes in silence. There were two
Who lagged behind as lovers sometimes do,
And took a different road. (Rich, 'The Insusceptibles' 5-7)

Here, whilst the rhyme attempts to neatly join the sonnet to create a melodious, harmonious and buoyant atmosphere, reflecting the idealism with which heterosexual partnership was defined in the period, the metre and enjambment used disrupts the sonnet's rhythm creating a faltering read that undermines the force and integrity of the rhyme. Although enjambment was a popular technique and can be seen in Denise Levertov's 'The Instant' from the same period, its use within the comparative forms of Levertov's free verse and Rich's sonnet are telling. Indeed, in Levertov's poem she creates her own form, choosing line length and

metre. Enjambment then is not a reflection of an inherent struggle between content and form, but rather a contrived one. In contrast, Rich's choice of the sonnet imposes lineation. Enjambment thus reflects a natural disjuncture between form and content, and specifically, in the context of 'The Insusceptibles', between the male and female. Indeed, whilst the external form of the sonnet represented by shape, structure and rhyme enacts the controlling and restrictive institution of patriarchal marriage, Rich's degradation of internal form can be read as a reflection of the female's rebellion against, and frustration with, these patriarchal forces. Specifically following Freud's conceptual emergence of the theory of the id, ego and superego in 1923, the dialectical play of internal and external form in 'The Insusceptibles' can be read as the struggle between the female unconscious and conscious. Indeed, the external form can be seen to represent the female's consciousness or ego which was responsible for blocking the demands of the superego. Specifically, the use of a conventionally aesthetic and rigid sonnet, conjures the masculine heritage of the form and symbolises women's co-optation of the patriarchal false consciousness surrounding gender roles and relationships. Meanwhile the internal disintegrations of form represent the eruptions of the female unconsciousness or superego – the female's desire for self-fulfilment and subjectivity which was repressed in the heterosexual relationship – which reflects the female's feminist awakening. However it is read, in contrast to the antifeminist connotations of the genre, Rich's use of the sonnet serves to give greater force and mimesis to a feminist representation of the difficulties and frustrations of women's lives in the context of the marriage dictum and the wifhood principle of the 1950s.

Often having to give up their own ambitions and choosing between partnership and a career, as Rich did in 1953, many women soon found themselves unfulfilled (Cargan 14). However, without a feminist movement or language as Stephanie Coontz highlights (57), these assumptions find their expression not in systemic exposés of patriarchy, but rather latent sentiments of discontent. In 'The Insusceptibles', we can find a linguistic plane upon which these sentiments emerge, not least through a subtle language of 'them' and 'us'.

There were two
Who lagged behind as lovers sometimes do,
And took a different road. (5-7)

As exemplified here, Rich seems to use an objective language in the sonnet. However, her establishment of two distinct partnerships, the 'we' which contains the female narrator and her partner, and them, established in the construction 'there were two', which defines another couple, and the language she attributes to each, creates a binary logic which imparts signification and connotation. For instance, the phrase '[we] climbed the dunes in silence' (5) is a seemingly neutral construct devoid of judgment or bias, as is 'there were two who lagged behind as lovers sometimes do'. However, when these two statements are juxtaposed and input into the binary relationship of them/us, the nuances of the phrases emerge. By inputting a binary structure, Rich creates a comparison between the couples that draws out a feminist politics in the sonnet. Indeed, in Jennings' 'Winter Love' the focus singularly rests on one couple and the absence of another couple by which to compare and

contrast the lovers ensures that there is no feminist assessment of the relationships. As Ferdinand de Saussure confirms, 'the binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value and meaning' (qtd. in Fogarty 'Binary Oppositions'). As such, the language choices used for each couple in 'The Insusceptibles' inflect the meaning of each phrase. Thus the intimacy of 'lovers' and 'lagged behind' and conversely the detachment and drudgery of 'climbed' and 'silence' are brought out of the otherwise neutral language by the binary structure, and the relationships of the two couples are consequently contrasted. The feminist critique of the heterosexual partnership emerges in the negative implications that the binarism imparts on the narrator's relationship. Rich's construction of the binary opposition is subtle; although she uses 'we' and 'them', lexical choices are not directly comparative or explicitly positive or negative. Again, on a surface level, she maintains a conformity and objectivity that is representative of the female's adoption of the dominant patriarchal story of partnership. However, the insertion of the binary serves to instil a latent, yet puissant, feminist critique that reflects the internalised and subconscious nature of women's emerging rebellion. Despite the seeming conservatism of the sonnet and the adherence to patriarchal narratives of heterosexual relationships, 'The Insusceptibles' offers an important example of Rich's feminist negotiation of the genre in light of the contemporary politics of the day.

'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law 10'

In the early 1960s, with the approval of the first oral contraceptive for women (1960), the publication of the radical text *Sex and the Single Girl* by Helen Gurley

Brown and the establishment of the Committee on the Status of Women in the United States in 1961, the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the report from the heretofore mentioned Committee in 1963, feminism was gaining momentum and more women were coming into feminist consciousness. However, it would not be until 1966 that the National Organization for Women – the pivotal organisation of the second wave – would be founded. Nevertheless, the political and activist climate that characterised the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, and saw the emergence of a widespread and diverse counterculture movement, represented by Civil Rights, student and antiwar movements, provided a progressive context for the emergence of a feminist movement (Dicker 66). It is within this revolutionary context that 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law: 10' is considered.

Well,

she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.

Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,
taking the light upon her
at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter,

poised, still coming,

her fine blades making the air wince
but her cargo

no promise then:
delivered
palpable
ours.²⁸

This poem is the final section in the sequence 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law' taken from the eponymous collection, published in 1963. The sequence consists of ten asymmetrical fragments and although only one section – section three – conforms – albeit it loosely – to the genre of the sonnet, there is a strong impression of, and reference to, a sonnet sequence that warrants a reading of these poems in the context of a female-authored sonnet tradition. Marilyn Hacker confirms '*Snapshots* is strengthened by a shadow presence of the sonnet sequence' ('The Young Insurgent' n.pag). The sequence addresses the various oppressions that have shaped women's identities, lives, and future. Each poem stands as an independent unit, introducing a different facet of women's experience, but the sequence as a whole charts a feminist odyssey – the emergence of women from oppression into liberation. 'Snapshots 10' stands as the sequence's conclusion and the vision of a feminist future.

Although there was still not a visible feminist movement in 1963, as Betty Friedan's declaration that feminism was dead in *The Feminine Mystique* in the same year attests (77), changes were taking place, particularly in the realms of employment, birth control and education that were encouraging women into full

²⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law: 10', *Collected Early Poems 1950-1970*. New York: Norton, 1984. 149. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the shortened form of the title 'Snapshots 10'.

feminist consciousness and the desire for change (Coontz; *The Feminist Chronicles* website). We see this manifested in the theme of 'Snapshots 10'. Indeed, unlike the themes of love and marriage that had significantly defined the male tradition of the form and thus become part of its patriarchal heritage, 'Snapshots 10' figures female empowerment and hope, concluding the sequence's trajectory of female awakening, from women 'mouldering like wedding cake' (Rich, 'Snapshots 1' 7) to the arrival of a female luminary who will lead women forth: 'her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge/ breasted and glancing through the currents' ('Snapshots 10' 4-5). As Cheri Langdell describes, 'the poem ends with an apotheosis: the appearance of a female god, the New Woman who will save women' (64). This sits in parallel to the feminist context of the period: 'the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women...to become complete' (Friedan 309). Furthermore, the emergence of a female deity in the poem who will offer women salvation and emancipation points to several women in the period who were leading women's rights into the second wave, including Indira Gandhi who became President of the Congress Party in India in 1959, Eleanor Flexner who published *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States* in 1959, Esther Peterson who was appointed as the head of the Women's Bureau in 1961 and influenced the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women (Freeman 'The Women's Liberation Movement'), Betty Friedan who published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and even Sylvia Plath who published *The Colossus and Other Poems* in 1960 and *The Bell Jar* in 1963. Perhaps the most pertinent to Rich, however, may be De Beauvoir, whose influence Rich credits in 'An Interview' with Elly Belkin (qtd in Yorke, *Passion, Politics and the Body* 31) and whose echoes, as critics like Keyes ('The

Angels Chiding' 48) and Hacker ('The Young Insurgent') attest, are clearly felt in the final lines of 'Snapshots 10'. Regardless of her identity, the female deity and the depiction of salvation situates the poem within the contemporary feminist context.

The feminist tenor of the sonnet's theme is confirmed through comparison with other feminist poetics of the period. Indeed, in both Levertov's 'The Wings' and Sexton's 'Consorting with angels' there is a similar exploration of female power and potential: 'inimical power, cold/ whirling out of it and/ around me and / sweeping you flat' (Levertov 11-14); 'I was not a woman anymore,/ not one thing or the other' (Sexton 34-35), in which women are shown emerging from their biology and the narrow walls of home (Friedan 273) and envisioning themselves in new, puissant and transcendent forms. All of these poems reflect a move from the 'coercive domestic ideology' (Wallace qtd. in Dowson and Entwistle 125) of the 1950s to mythopoeia, and this mythology allows the poets to escape the limiting conventions and expectations of patriarchy and to create a positive and omnipotent vision of women. In contrast, in Jennings' 'The Annunciation' which strives for a spiritual transcendence for women, the poem concludes with a non-feminist vision: 'So from her ecstasy she moves/ And turns to human things' (19-20). In Juhasz's exploration of the transformations from a feminist poetry of the first wave to that of the second wave she describes the new generation of poems as those which 'reach other spaces ...as the poetry moves in widening circles from the world of one woman into myth and history' (23) and in 'Snapshots 10' we see this realised.

Whilst women's experience as wives and mothers in the 1950s often led to a loss of selfhood, what Friedan terms the 'forfeited self' (250), the emergence into

feminist consciousness taking place in the period, exemplified by De Beauvoir's chapter on 'The Independent Woman' (689), led to reconnection with self, gender and worth. By rising above their domestic roles, addressing their experiences as women and beginning to reflect on issues that were specific to them, women could reclaim space as subjects, take possession over self-definition, and elevate their position. Rich claimed that only by reading *The Second Sex* did she have the courage to write *Snapshots* ('An Interview' by Bulkin qtd. in Yorke, *Passion* 31).

Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge. (Rich, 'Snapshots 10' 4)

Here, then, the inclusion of the 'I' represents the emergence of self-definition and self-exploration in Rich's poetry and undoes the curse of female alterity. Although the use of 'I' does not guarantee a feminist poetics, it signals a move from a 'self-denying' (Dowson and Entwistle 29) to a self-actualising aesthetic. If we look at Rich's oeuvre we can see how *Snapshots* figures this feminist prerogative of self. Indeed, whereas in Rich's first collection *A Change of World* published in 1951, 37% of the poems contain the lyric 'I' and in her second collection *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) this increases marginally to 39%, in *Snapshots* (1963) the figure is 59%. Although this does not match the poetics of Anne Sexton, whose collections *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *All my Pretty Ones* (1962)²⁹ show an 86% usage of 'I' and thus a significant emphasis on the self-telling lyrics that Whitehead identifies as part of a feminist poetics (29), Rich's poems show the feminist emergence of self in the period. In comparison, in Jennings' coetaneous collection *Recoveries* (1964), only 38% of the poems contain 'I': a figure which corresponds to

²⁹ Taken from Sexton's *The Complete Poems*.

Rich's work from a decade earlier and reflects Jennings' disengagement from feminism. Compared to Rich's use of 'we' in 'The Insusceptibles', the female 'I' in 'Snapshots 10' figures the feminist shift from identifying the female as part of a couple to an individual. Thus although seemingly negligible and commonplace, when considered in the context of Rich's oeuvre and the feminist politics of the period, the use of 'I' in 'Snapshots 10' uncovers a feminist poetics.

However, despite the presence of this 'I', somewhat unexpectedly, and saliently, it is not the focal subject of 'Snapshots 10'.

Well,

she's long about her coming. (1-2)

Here, 'she' introduces a female other who is the main focus of the poem and largely waives the significance of the lyric 'I'. Indeed, whilst 'I' appears only once in the poem, seven pronouns relating to the female other are used. Similarly, whilst 'she' denotes the second word of the poem, Rich delays the introduction of 'I' until the fourth line again seemingly subsuming the female subject to the female other. Essentially, the entire poem is not a portrait of the female narrator as in Sexton's 'Her Kind', but rather a depiction of the female other, given exclusively to describing her advent. This dynamic and prioritisation seems to counter a feminist poetics. Indeed, as highlighted in the discussion of Millay's 'Sonnet XVII' from the 'Ungrafted Tree' sequence, 'she' relegates the female to object status and gendered entity, in contrast to the subjectification and transcendence of 'I'.

However, Rich's female other reflects what Susan Stanford Friedman defines as the maternal principle necessary to counter patriarchy (229); she is a figure for the women's movement. Aligning with the development of a mass feminism that was building in the period, 'she' is the female other who will lead and define women like the female 'I'. Specifically, 'she' reduces the female to the essentialist identity of her gender, but rather than a negative reality, this serves to remove the female from the social and political forces that control and disempower her, consigning her purely to her body and a primitive and undiluted matriarchal state of potential to present a potent vision of the female as she is outside of the intervention of patriarchy. The female 'I', as daughter-in-law, invokes what Hacker defines 'as dogsbody and scapegoat to her husband's extended family' ('The Young Insurgent') and is depicted throughout the sequence through a series of images of entrapment and degradation, summed up in 'Snapshots 8' as follows –

"You all die at fifteen," said Diderot,
and turn part legend, part convention.
Still, eyes inaccurately dream
behind closed windows blankening with steam.
Deliciously, all that we might have been,
all that we were--fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition--. (1-7)

In contrast, 'she' who is not defined as a daughter-in-law and thus not linked to the male or the patriarchal home serves in the final fragment of the sequence to

embody a new, emancipated and empowered prototype for women. Rich suggests that although the daughter-in-law, or indeed the wife, can be a subject, she is delimited significantly by the demands and constrictions of marriage. As such, it is the female deity, who is removed from this reality and offers a positive and assertive identity, who is necessarily given the priority in Rich's poetics of feminist advancement.

Given its fifteen lines and general incongruity with the traditional sonnet form, the designation, and very inclusion of 'Snapshots 10' within this thesis may seem unfounded or even erroneous, particularly in light of traditional definitions such as those by Burt and Mikics which define the sonnet as 'a poem of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, divided by its rhymes' (3). However, John Cuddon's definition offers a less rigid sense of the sonnet: 'the *ordinary* sonnet consists of 14 lines, *usually* in iambic pentameters, with considerable *variations* in rhyme scheme' (my italics) (843-4). Here, the epistemic modality of Cuddon's definition, suggests the potential for diversity within the sonnet that can help categorise Rich's sonneteering. But it is Howarth's explanation of the modern sonnet that really characterises the relationship to form in the period and warrants Rich's place in a feminist sonnet tradition:

Rather than being an a-priori list of requirements to which the poet's skill must bend the modern sonnet became a genre, a set of expectations that the poet might conform to, rebel against or simply sidle along with for as long as necessary. To survive in an anti-authoritarian age, the sonnet had to incorporate a sense of process and the possibility of being otherwise into its

accomplishment, rather than already knowing the solution from the start.
(230)

In her poems, Rich offers us shadow sonnets that encourage us to ask questions over the fixed notion of the sonnet and to understand how the form had to become something different in the face of second wave feminism.

In the early 1960s Rich had not yet either fully renounced her patriarchal past or fully adopted her feminist identity.³⁰ Thus *Snapshots* represents the generic fallout of the incompatible confluence of Rich's formalist heritage and her emerging feminism. Like Shakespeare's own fifteen-line sonnets and George Meredith's sixteen-line sonnets therefore, Rich's fifteen-line form acts as a parallax:

These patterns, allowed to be a little more resilient, followed not so rigorously, can inform new poems in such a manner that a sonnet...is not written but suggested. This is the allusory pattern and it has its own uses: it stirs old associations...and it surprises our expectations by being not fully the form it reminds us of...even the suggestion of the form...can haunt a good poem like a ghost'. (Williams 11-12)

Rich's heterometric 15-line sonnet thus should be seen to serve as a palimpsest which challenges the male sonnet, and its cult of masculinity and patriarchy.

³⁰ Indeed, it was not until the 1970s, with 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971), 'Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying' (1975) and the groundbreaking *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (1976) that Rich began to write the prose works that would underpin her feminist ideology.

Well,

she's long about her coming, who must be. ('Snapshots 10' 1-2)

The opening word of the poem as demonstrated here is not just indented but rather aligned to the poem's right. The use of ekthesis in the subsequent lines creates a traditionally straight vertical line of text that accentuates the misalignment of 'Well'. As Whitehead attests, a significant amount of the feminist poetry written in the period of 'Snapshots 10' was constructed from free and open verse (27) with emphasis on the shape and layout of the poem on the page, as in Marianne Moore's 'O to be a Dragon' and Diane Wakoski's 'Coins and Coffins under my bed'. This format allowed feminists to craft a poetry that not only expressed, but *represented* 'the precise, imagistic notation of female states of mind' (Erkkila, 159) and specifically the anger, energy and disorder of women at the start of the struggle for liberation in the 1960s. Rich's layout of 'Snapshots 10' thus engages with this feminist performance of form. The positioning of the first word reflects the delayed arrival of the female heroine; the reader has to literally wait until the end of the line for her coming, representing the period of relative feminist silence and inactivity, before the emergence of a new feminist moment. Further, it enacts the defiance of the female, emphasising her refusal to accept the rules of, and to conform with, phallogocentrism. Although Rich engages with a more traditional form of lineation in lines two to five which serves to mimic the patriarchal form, the narrowing form from line six onwards represents the female's stripping away of the patriarchal traditions of the sonnet and creation of a new, female-defined form that translates the feminist

logic of the poem. That the final line of the sonnet, and the one which prevents it from being a fourteen-line form, is singularly given to the possessive pronoun 'ours' which describes a female collective in the poem, enacts the female usurpation of the male tradition. As Whitehead confirms, feminist poetry of the period was characterised by the desire to strip form of superfluous meaning and flourish, and to remove poetry from the realm of the elite, the masculine – which could twist it to suit its meaning – and place it in the realm of the 'common' woman (27). Rich's innovations to the sonnet represent the feminist transformation of the genre, removing the constrictions and expectations of the form in order to deny patriarchy and to more accurately represent women's experience and knowledge. This is, as Langdell defines, a new structure for the first revolutionary epic poem of the women's movement (64).

In line with the emerging poetics of Sexton in 'The Operation' and later 'Menstruation at forty' that privileged the female body and distinguished it from the male body, Rich denies the lyrical androgyny and universalism of a nonfeminist poetics found in the likes of Jennings' 'Sequence in Hospital', instead, here, exalting the female's body and mind:

Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents. (4-5)

When Rich describes the female deity of her feminist vision as 'breasted', significantly with the word emphasised at the head of the line, she revalues female physicality and prioritises her over the male. There is a decidedly fantastical and

mythic element to Rich's lexicon and tone which, in its departure from the ordinary and banal, serves to elevate the female deity and endow her with values of transcendence and omnipotence that upraise the female race. Indeed, in the language of the poem's opening we find, in 'her coming' (2), 'merciless' (3), 'the light' (6), echoes of the Second Coming and Jesus Christ as figured in Mark 13:26: 'Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory' and Hebrews 9:28: 'unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation' (*King James Version*). As such, Rich appropriates the iconography and symbolism of patriarchal religion to give to the female the unparalleled importance of the male god and to suggest a Second Coming, but specifically, a Second Coming of womankind, a Second Wave. This is a feminist scripture for women's liberation.

In the succeeding lines, the female deity is described as:

at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter. (Rich, 'Snapshots 10' 7-8)

Critics such as Keyes ('The Angels Chiding' 49) and Judith McDaniel (313) emphasise the masculinity of this description, with Keyes concluding that the image sums up the complex of Rich's poetic consciousness in the volume and specifically her continued desire for masculine approval (49). Whilst the images instil a certain engagement with the masculine, rather than subsuming to their patriarchal potential, Rich uses them to appropriate phallogocentric forms of knowledge. That is Rich compares her female to, but importantly exceeds, the definitions of beauty and

grandeur of patriarchal logic (boy, helicopter) in order to show the female's ability to measure up to, and surpass, masculine ideals. Specifically, by comparing the deity to a boy rather than a man, Rich associates with the innocence and pre-pubesence of the boy before he is fully metamorphosed, and interred, into the patriarch. She is thus able to take positive connotations from the patriarchal image – purity and decency – to define female beauty. Similarly, the helicopter seems an anomalous image to describe the female, particularly as by 1963, it had taken on a new, predominantly hostile signification, as symbolic of the Vietnam War. Indeed 'the Vietnam War was the first real helicopter war' ('Helicopters at War'). However, with Rich's helicopter delivering salvation not troops or war, Rich purges the image of its negative masculine associations and instead appropriates only its connotations of flight and progressiveness to figure the advancement of women and the transcendence of patriarchal expectations and restriction, what Marsha Bryant defines as the release from 'domestic confinement' (231) but more broadly defines the emergence of women into a full, modern potential. As such, 'Snapshots 10' marks the development of feminism in Rich's female-authored sonnet.

'Twenty One Love Poems: VI'

From 1963 through the 1970s feminism experienced one of its most momentous periods, with the founding of NOW in 1966, and what Imelda Whelehan (4) and Astrid Henry (67) define as the beginning of second wave feminism in 1968 with 'the public manifestations of New Left radicalism' (Whelehan 4), the Miss America Protest and the publication of *Notes from the First Year* (Henry 67). This period as the articles in *Public Women, Public Words* demonstrate was to redefine the aims

and methodologies of feminism, leaving behind conservative proclamations of equality and assertively seeking out liberation (Echols 12). During this time feminism was at its most visible, ambitious and proliferant, as Sara Evans' moniker 'the golden years' attests (61), largely, as Keetley and Pettegrew (3:4) and Alice Echols' *Daring to Be Bad* highlight, as a result of the concomitant rise of radical feminism and its proactive, militant spirit. The effect was that women's lives were considerably, and largely irreversibly, transformed, and women, both as a collective and as individuals, began to assume full personhood and challenge patriarchal rule. It is within this rapidly changing and feminist-centric context that poem 'VI' from *Twenty One Love Poems* will now be analysed.

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own —
only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
handling power-tools or steering-wheel
or touching a human face ... Such hands could turn
the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship
through icebergs, or piece together
the fine, needle-like sherds of a great krater-cup
bearing on its sides
figures of ecstatic women striding
to the sibyl's den or the Eleusinian cave—
such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence
with such restraint, with such a grasp

of the range and limits of violence

that violence ever after would be obsolete.³¹

This poem comes from Rich's tenth collection *Twenty One Love Poems* which was composed between 1974 and 1976, and originally published as a chapbook by Effie's Press, a small women's Press, in 1976. The sequence of twenty-two poems offers various portraits of love between women and as its publication history and content suggests this is 'a poetry that refuses to succumb to the lies she [both Rich as an individual and as a lesbian] must utter while living within the confines of a heterosexual culture' (Diehl 408). 'Twenty One: VI' focuses on the female's adoration of the beloved that launches into a celebration of women's talents and powers.

As outlined by Keetley and Pettegrew, following the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the 1970s very much became the era of lesbian feminism (3:103), with the foundation of groups such as Radicalesbians and The Furies, hundreds of periodicals including *Purple Rage* and *Ain't I a Woman*, as well as dedicated lesbian presses such as Out and Out Books and Diana Press. Lesbian feminism was the radical fulfilment of second wave feminism's attack on patriarchy: 'heterosexuality ties each woman to a man...if women still give primary commitment and energy to the oppressors how can we...free ourselves?' (Brown 118). In replacing the traditional heterosexual theme of love with that of lesbian love in 'Sonnet VI' Rich thus establishes a feminist

³¹ Adrienne Rich, 'Twenty One Love Poems: VI', *The Dream of a Common Language*, New York: Norton, 1978, 27-28. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the shortened form of the title 'Twenty One: VI'.

poetics that sits alongside other collections like Rita Mae Brown's *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1971) and Judy Grahn's *Edward Dyke and Other Poems* (1971).

In Grahn's sonnet 'in the place where' we similarly see her revise the theme of love in light of this aesthetic as she describes with candour and eroticism her female partner's body and their intimacy. Whilst Grahn pursues a personal poetics in her sonnet, focusing exclusively on the physical relationship with a single other, Rich diverges from personal sentiment into the political in 'Twenty One: VI'. Love for a single woman is the starting point for a radical feminist politics of gyneolatry, as the sonnet becomes an affirmation of female power and magnificence:

Such hands could turn
the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship (5-7)

In Rich's shift of focus from the dyadic and sexual love poem to a celebration of women as a class, she encapsulates the ethos of the defining manifesto of the Radicalesbians, 'The Woman-Identified Woman' (1970), that the psychological, social and political commitments between women, as well as the sexual, were integral to women's emancipation: 'it is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution' (112). Rich thus completely undoes the patriarchal meanings and functions of the sonnet and transforms it into an entirely gynocentric form.

Throughout the period, lesbian feminists commented on and critiqued the delimiting force of the male on the female: the man 'confirms his image of us – of what we have to be in order to be acceptable by him – but not our real selves; he confirms our womanhood – as he defines it, in relation to him – but cannot confirm our personhood, our own selves as absolutes' ('The Woman-Identified-Woman' 111). By focusing on lesbian love, Rich inevitably removes this oppressive male principle and instead offers, in the subjectivities of 'you' and 'I', a new vision devoid of hierarchy and difference.

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own. (Rich, 'Twenty One: VI' 1)

Indeed, here, Rich removes the asymmetry of the heterosexual binary relationship by using the phrase 'precisely equal'. Further the chiasmatic structure of the line in which 'you' is placed in the head position, I – in the expression 'my own' – in the end position, and the parallelism created by the use of 'precisely equal to' which refers back to the 'small hands' of 'you' and creates a mirror image of them for 'I', represents the balance and equivalence of the two personae. Although Humm recognises that the I of the sequence is female, she asserts that the poems are subject to a masculine voice that uncovers the heterosexual element of Rich's Eros ('Occupied Territories' 161). Such a reading threatens to invoke the deleterious male principle and undermine the poem's feminism. However, Humm's reading seems to be more theoretical than substantial. Indeed, in 'Twenty One: VI' there is no sense of a masculine voice behind the female I nor of a heterosexual element. Rather, as McDaniel attests, 'the strength in these poems is the discovery of the self in another' (320). As such the sonnet aligns with the emphasis on the centrality and

primacy of women in the second wave. Lucy Collins explains: 'in a feminist political context, the love poem...must either belong to or dissent from a long tradition of love poetry which sees the woman as an object before the gaze of a man' (151) and in the subjectivities of 'Twenty One: VI' we see how Rich radically dissents.

Whilst Rich succeeds in creating a positive and empowering female dynamic that removes women from their bind to the male, female subjectivity seems complicated by the apparent relegation of women from complete, coherent selves into disembodied and unconscious hands:

in these hands

I could trust the world, or in many hands like these. (2-3)

Indeed, the synecdoche threatens to invoke the dehumanising and objectifying blazon of the patriarchal love sonnet. However, rather than delimit the female, the focus on the hands can actually be seen to further separate, and thus save, her from the male. Indeed, unlike a focus on women's faces, breasts or bodies as in Howard Phelps Putnam's 'Sonnets to Some Sexual Organs: 1. Female' (1971), Charles Simic's 'Breasts' (1974) and Russell Edson's 'Conjugal' (1976) which continue the tradition of negating the female by limiting her to sexual object of the male's gaze and possession, the hands in Rich's sonnet 'free women from their traditional roles' ('To the Women of the Left' 17) releasing them from their patriarchally-defined social and reproductive identities. Indeed, the hands symbolise women's creative, practical and technical skills, thereby denying these roles

exclusively to men and giving women greater acknowledgement and independence. As such, Rich transforms women from objects of the gaze to active and capable subjects and succeeds in the second wave aims of challenging the narrow images of women and the gendered division of skills that supported the domination of patriarchy – what Rich would later identify in ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1980) as the sex-role stereotyping that deflects women from science, technology, and other ‘masculine’ pursuits (640) – as well as the lesbian feminist aims of challenging the continuation of the belief in sex complementarity and the female need for men.

Simultaneously, however, the hands harbour a hidden eroticism. Indeed, critics including Mandy Merck and Colleen Lamos have identified the significance of women’s hands to a ‘lesbian erotic imaginary’ (Lamos 107). Thus whilst the hands in the sonnet clearly demarcate women’s intellectual and practical capabilities and detract from male eroticism, they also engage with a latent ‘lesbian symbology’ (Thain, ‘Damnable Aestheticism’ 319) that connects the sonnet to a body of poems in which hands figure lesbian sexuality, including Field’s ‘The iris was yellow’, Swenson’s ‘In Love Made Visible’ and Ackland’s ‘The Eyes of body’. Whilst on the surface, hands, therefore, serve to protect the female from male possession in Rich’s sonnet, conversely they allow for the development of lesbian desire, representing the fact, as Juhasz notes, that unlike first wave feminist poetry, second wave feminist poetry is no longer in reaction to the male, showing greater commitment to exclusively female culture (28). The radical transformation of subjectivity in ‘Twenty One: VI’ thus firmly situates Rich’s poetics in a contemporary feminist politics and further purges the genre from the male.

Unlike the visually striking, emblematic and unconventional sonnets of *Snapshots*, the sonnets of *Twenty One Love Poems*, whilst still unorthodox, are significantly more congruous with the traditional sonnet. Indeed, whereas the sonnets in Rich's *Snapshots* range from three to twenty two lines with an average length of twelve lines and a tendency towards heterometre, *Twenty One Love Poems* have a narrower range of twelve to twenty-one lines, an average length, almost comparable with the sonnet, of fifteen lines and greater use of isometre. The resemblances with the sonnet are significant, especially in the sixteen-line 'Twenty One: VI', and thus seem to depart from the radicalised and dogmatic feminist spirit of the day. However, as Alice Templeton notes, the poems are specifically designed to conjure the sonnet and encourage us to recognise 'the ideologies associated with heterosexuality...that these love poems positions themselves against' (qtd. in Cary Nelson). As such, form in *Twenty One Love Poems* must be understood in terms of its lesbian feminist context, in particular the lesbian's desire for her love to be recognised, visible and authenticated in a society overwhelmed by heteronormativity. As the standard of the love lyric, the sonnet allows Rich to 'intervene in the ostensible inevitability of heterosexuality' (Keetley and Pettegrew 3:103), yet seize the affirmative and imperative space of the genre to validate a lesbian love poetics. However, given that gay liberation sought to free and differentiate lesbians from traditional, masculine, 'heterosexual structures' (Radicalesbians 111) and purport 'new definitions of reality' (Sheridan 35), Rich necessarily reshapes form.

Following Kevin McGuirk's assertion that 'these lovers will not live in "sonnets, little rooms"' (74), the use of sixteen rather than fourteen lines in 'Twenty One: VI'

begins to redefine the sonnet and thus challenge the patriarchal, heterosexual norm of love. Significantly, by expanding rather than shortening the sonnet, Rich's poem realises the traditional sonnet before dismissing it. Here, we see the realisation of Howarth's testimonial that in the modern sonnet 'form is present in a new way through not being obviously there in the older sense' (233). In Grahn's 'Common Woman Poems' this is taken even further with seven sonnets ranging from twenty-one to thirty-two lines. As she explains: 'I conceived of them as flexible, self-defining sonnets, seeing that each woman would let me know how many lines were needed to portray her in one long, informative thought' (60). Rather than a fixed form, the sonnet thus responds to the individual circumstances of women's experiences.

In 'Twenty One: VI', the extra two lines serve to represent Rich's expanding of the boundaries and definitions of love in line with the contents of the poem. That is, Rich uses sixteen lines to expose the circumscribed, patriarchal vision of heterosexual, erotic love that was bound up with the fourteen-line form, and to suggest instead a broader conception of gynocentric love. This includes both lesbian sexual love which was deemed to be more substantial, authentic and magnanimous than that possible in the inherently unequal and obligatory heterosexual union (Radicalesbians 111-112; R. Brown 118), as well as the various sororial, emotional, psychical, intellectual, political and social commitments between women that were part of an expanded notion of female relational bonds. The expanding of the form thus bespeaks the greater depth and substance of this love: it literally overrides the rigid form of the sonnet and thus exposes the conventional heterosexual love found therein as regulated, reserved and limited. In contrast, in 'The Floating Poem', Rich uses only twelve lines. However, rather than signalling a

lesser love, the shortened form in this instance serves to allow the depiction and validation of an intimate and erotic lesbian love by preventing the realisation of the sonnet and thus stymieing the patriarchal, heterosexual and hierarchic ideologies of the fourteen line form. Lesbian love is thus able to exist in a primal, uncorrupted space without heterosexual norms and expectations tainting it.

In 1976 when *Twenty One Love Poems* was published, although gay liberation had gained significant momentum in the years following the Stonewall Riots (Keetley and Pettegrew 3:103), homosexuality was still largely marginalised as a deviant lifestyle and was far from achieving equality with heterosexuality. We can thus see in the relative tightness and control of Rich's sonnets in *Twenty One Love Poems*, particularly in comparison to the exploded sonnets of Grahn, the construction of what Bassnett defines as a protective space that shields the lesbian couple (61), or alternatively the 'closet' (Winning 50) in which homosexual individuals in the 1970s were still entrapped. The imitation yet subversion of the sonnet form is thus indicative of the lesbian's desire to authenticate, yet shield, her love within the heteronormative world of the 1970s.

In their 1972 'Statement of Purpose', the Westchester Radical Feminists wrote:

we have viewed the world and our condition from the level of the patriarchal ideas...We now recognize that these patriarchal concepts have and still do dominate and control our lives, but our thinking, hopes and aspirations are changing. We are analyzing our past, present and future according to new

feminist concepts and are beginning to discover that there are new ways of dealing with our...lives' (26).

They recognised that female oppression and male supremacy was simply a consequence of patriarchal dominance rather than a social and cultural reality. In 'Twenty One: VI', Rich lays claim to the language and associations of the patriarch to begin to subvert the male-female hierarchy and point to a feminist future.

Such hands could turn
the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship
through icebergs. (5-8)

As already outlined, Rich uses the synecdoche of female hands to translate traditionally male roles into female roles. Here then the first image is taken from the male-dominated world of medicine, but Rich uses the specific image of obstetrics to create a more female-defined space and suggest women's superior ability to conduct intranatal surgery. In order to assert the full potential of women, Rich uses juxtaposition to emphasise the range of their capabilities. Indeed, the shift from the first to the second image in the above example is not only a shift from the field of obstetrics to exploration, but also a shift from biological science to physical science, from the interior, warm, diminutive space of the maternity ward, and more figuratively of the female body, to the external, cold, extensive space of the outside world, and finally from the comfort of civilisation to the hostility of nature. Unlike the first image which primarily promotes skills of precision, delicacy and dexterity, the

second image is particularly associated with bravery, endurance and leadership thereby highlighting women's versatility and proficiency. Thus in the co-optation of male imagery we see the sonnet aligning with the destruction of the sex roles that was advocated by The Feminists in their tract 'A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles' (1969).

Piece together

the fine, needle-like sherds of a great krater-cup

bearing on its sides

figures of ecstatic women striding

to the sibyl's den or Eleusinian cave. (Rich, 'Twenty One: VI' 8-12)

Here, Rich makes explicit a more gynarchic order with the use of more female images. Again she borrows from the masculine realms of archaeology and geology but the allusion to 'ecstatic women', the 'sibyl' and the 'Eleusinian' cave – the location for Kore's descent into the underworld and the veritable *mise en scene* for the fundamental female myth of Demeter and Kore – translate the male act into a feminist historical recovery of women's matrilineage. Rich implies that women's administration of archaeology will create very different results and possibilities, not least in recognising and validating the place of women in history. Rich's handling of language is quite a revolutionary act in which she removes the patriarchal bias, inserts the female and shapes a new gynocentric reality. Indeed, whilst other poets such as Alta in 'The Wound Will Heal Us' attempt to fuse a gynocentric language out of the unique bodily experiences and rhythms of the female, and Sexton in her *Transformations* (1971) poems adopts a gynocentric language of myth and fairy

tale, Rich steals the oppressor's language and uses it to challenge delimiting sex roles and the primacy of the male. Within the seemingly hostile terrain of the second wave, 'Twenty One: VI' emerges as a radical appropriation of the sonnet that exemplifies Rich's feminist negotiation of genre and contribution to a twentieth and twenty-first century narrative of the female-authored sonnet.

Conclusion

Looking through the poetry collections and anthologies dating from the earliest years of the second wave to its peak in the 1970s, it is easy to assume that the sonnet was largely abandoned in the period, and in critical studies, including the historical narratives of Distiller and Moore, this seems to be the consensus. However, a study of Rich begins to raise questions over this theory and to revise our very conceptions of the sonnet, introducing a significant retelling of the female-authored sonnet narrative in the second wave.

As a woman educated in the New Critical atmosphere of the 1950s, the sonnet emerged for Rich as a pharos for poetry. However, with the development of second wave feminism, its challenges to phallogocentrism and the emergence of a lesbian feminist principle, the sonnet became increasingly associated with patriarchy and necessarily had to change. Thus we find in Rich's oeuvre not a static and conventional form, but an organic and dynamic form, with a variety of quasi- or shadow sonnets in which the sonnet is a veritable presence yet never perfectly realised. These sonnets insist on the need to reconsider the traditional male sonnet definitions and to employ new feminist definitions that develop those of Cuddon and

Howard with a particularly female focus and allow for an understanding of the particular intersections and negotiations between second wave feminism and the sonnet. In doing so, we will begin to be able to challenge the orthodoxy about the incompatibility of the sonnet and second wave feminism, and finally to read this period in the narrative of the female-authored sonnet not as one of absence, but rather of innovation, experimentation and metamorphosis. Rich's sonnets sit at the heart of this theory and like Millay before her, reflect the feminist conditions of possibility of her time, establishing her as the 'prophet', the 'Cassandra' (Sheridan 25) of the female-authored sonnet narrative of the second wave.

Marilyn Hacker and the Sonnet in a New Formalist Age

Despite its chronological adjacency to the fervid feminist decade of the 1970s, the 1980s stood as a very different era, with a marked shift in the politics of feminism and consequently the feminist conditions of possibility surrounding the female-authored sonnet. It has generally been held, that the 1980s was a period of 'backlash' (Evans, 'Feminism in the 1980s' 86) – what Susan Faludi, the author who popularised the notion, defines as 'a powerful counterassault' on the gains of the women's movement (12) that made feminism unpopular and retrogressive. Indeed, as Nancy Whittier explains, feminism faced opposition in the period from a growing antifeminist sentiment which was cemented with the rise of the New Right, setting the tone for a more conservative politics that saw the withdrawal of economic resources and political support for women's movements (20, 80). However, despite its predominance, the backlash narrative is far from the full story of feminism in the 1980s, as Evans suggests: 'backlash...could not turn back a tidal wave of change' ('Feminism' 90). Therefore, rather than vanishing, feminism simply evolved in light of the social and political circumstances it faced (Whittier 3, 25). Thus whilst the backlash myth presents an obstacle to the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition, an understanding of the political and historical context of the 1980s helps to reveal the continuation of feminism, and offer a new hermeneutics for the female-authored sonnet, not least when coupled with the emerging literary context of the day – New Formalism.

Coined in 1985, New Formalism is defined as 'a reaction in late [twentieth century] poetry, against free verse and a return to metrical verse and fixed stanza

forms' (Brogan 834). Recognising, as Dana Gioia points out, that poetry had grown 'remote and inbred' ('The Poet in an Age of Prose' 38) and free verse had become orthodoxy ('Notes on the New Formalism' 29), the New Formalist poets who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s sought to make poetry once more accessible, democratic and relevant (Hoffman 19; McPhillips 1). More than simply a revival of formal verse however, New Formalism represents 'a radical shift in sensibility' (McPhillips 6). Indeed, central to New Formalism has been a move towards colloquial diction, contemporary subject matter and popular culture (McPhillips 8; Gioia, 'The Poet in an Age of Prose' 38) that distinguishes the movement not only, as Gioia highlights, from its formal predecessors ('The Poet' 37), but significantly from its *immediate non-formal* predecessors. Time, in particular the Modernist period, had, as Terry Brogan highlights, stripped forms of much of their associative baggage allowing them to become simply opportunities, strategies – ways of proceeding (835). Poets were able not only to discover these traditional forms once again but significantly to 'make them new' (Brogan 835).

Although New Formalism has often been seen as something of a misnomer, with formalist poetry omnipresent throughout the twentieth century (Brogan 835-6), rather New Formalism signals a more widespread engagement with, increased popularity of, and sustained emphasis on, formal poetry. Indeed, it is evident from anthologies such as *Rebel Angels: 25 poets of the New Formalism* (Jarman and Mason, 1996), *A Formal Feeling Comes* (Finch, 1994) and texts such as *The New Formalism* (McPhillips, 2003) and *After New Formalism* (Finch, 1999), that the 1980s saw a resurgence of formalist poetics that distinguished it from previous literary moments. Similarly, one need only compare the relative ease with which a

female sonneteer can be found in the 1980s with the 1960s and 1970s to perceive the reality of New Formalism to the female-authored sonnet. As Finch summarises in her introduction to the feminist anthology *A Formal Feeling Comes*, '[female] poets...are reclaiming a formal inheritance more openly than women have done in many decades, and their work demonstrates that the long tradition of women's formal poetry is evolving once again' (3). For the female-authored sonnet, the 1980s thus marks an important and decisive moment that would redefine the tradition and Marilyn Hacker is central to this.

Although Hacker contests the notion of New Formalism and thus her status as a New Formalist writer ('Re: Sonnets'), she is an ever-present figure in discussions of the movement, labelled amongst 'New Formalist's most noted poets' ('A Brief Guide to New Formalism'), and, along with Dana Gioia, as one of the leaders of the movement (Turco 902). In *The Face of Poetry*, Margaretta Mitchell and Zack Rogow even go so far as to claim that Hacker 'helped inspire an entire movement of poetry...New Formalism' (109). Hacker's poetry certainly reflects a commitment to form that distinguishes her from her predecessors.

Indeed, for those who argue against a formalist shift in the 1980s, and Hacker's definition as a New Formalist, one need only compare the presence of the sonnet in the works of Hacker and Rich. Across Rich's oeuvre from her first publication *A Change of World* in 1951 to *A Wild Patience has taken me this far* in 1982, which culminates her poetry of the 1970s moving into the era of New Formalism, we see the following: 3 sonnets, reflecting 7.5% of the collection in *A Change of World* (1951); 1 sonnet, reflecting 2.2% of the collection in *The Diamond Cutters* (1955); 2

sonnets reflecting 3.4% of the collection in *Snapshots of A Daughter-in-Law* (1963); 1 sonnet reflecting 2.6% of the collection in *Necessities of Life* (1966); 2 sonnets reflecting 3.5% of the collection in *Leaflets* (1969); no sonnets in a collection of 64 poems in *The Will to Change* (1971); 4 sonnets reflecting 8.3% of the collection in *Diving into the Wreck* (1973); 3 sonnets reflecting 3.8% of the collection in *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978); and no sonnets in a collection of 33 poems in *A Wild Patience* (1982). In contrast in Hacker's work from her first collection *Presentation Piece* in 1974 to *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons* in 1986, we see the following: 15 sonnets in *Presentation Piece* (1974) reflecting 22.7% of the collection; 26 sonnets in *Separations* (1976) reflecting 41.9% of the collection; 52 sonnets in *Taking Notice* (1980) reflecting 61.2% of the collection; 20 sonnets in *Assumptions* (1985) representing 51.3% of the collection; and 175 sonnets in *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986) reflecting 97% of the collection. The number and percentage of sonnets in each writer's collection clearly shows the marked difference between Rich's and Hacker's engagement with formalism and the changing literary traditions.

Whilst writers like Julia Alvarez, Molly Peacock and Rachel Hadas all reflect this same trend, Hacker has been chosen over these writers as she serves as the forerunner of this new poetic impulse. Furthermore, whilst many of the emerging poets of the 1980s show an engagement with the sonnet in their collections none of them reflect the scale or consistency of Hacker's use of the sonnet. Indeed, in an opus that contains fourteen collections and spans over three decades, the sonnet is not just an occasional presence but often the very essence of Hacker's poetics. Similarly, whilst poets like Marie Ponsot and Muriel Rukeyser continued to work with

the sonnet in the 1980s, they belong to an earlier generation and do not reflect the particular feminist and formalist contexts of the 1980s. In contrast, Hacker, who was born in 1942, came of age with feminism in the 1960s and began writing in the 1970s, is specifically situated in both the second wave, and, in particular, the distinct moment of the 1980s, which saw feminism's maturation. Given both her historicity and standing therefore, Hacker is the exclusive choice, for this chapter.

Although Hacker has written profusely in the 1990s and the new millennium, for the purposes of this thesis to show the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition in relation to the trajectory of feminism, it is important in this chapter to give precedence to her work from the 1980s. This decade-long focus, which narrows down to the collections *Taking Notice*, *Assumptions* and *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons*, may seem limited. However, these collections comprise 247 sonnets. Exceeding even Shakespeare in its scope, this snapshot of Hacker's oeuvre thus offers a significant focus. More importantly, this selection reflects the specific feminist and literary conditions of the transformative 1980s.

'Ordinary Women I'

Feminism has largely been understood and practiced as a mass movement, not least in the 1960s and 1970s. However, with the economic and political context of the 1980s this collective organising was not as feasible (Whittier 2) and feminism inevitably had to evolve to survive: 'as the political context became less receptive to feminist claims, the actions that were possible and effective were more modest and limited than in the previous decade' (Whittier 222). As Sarah Green outlines (3), the

period witnessed a fundamental shift from movement – public protest – to lifestyle politics – ‘the politicized actions of individuals in their daily lives’ (Whittier 4). Although critics have condemned lifestyle politics as ‘navel-gazing introspection’ (Genz and Brabon 87), ‘ghettoized’ (Parmar 58) and ‘anathema to radical feminism’ (Taylor and Rupp 41), in the antagonistic climate of the 1980s it offered a real, viable form of feminist advocacy. As Whittier explains, ‘even as movement veterans withdrew from organized feminism, they continued to weave their politics into their daily lives, challenging undesirable assumptions and prescriptions about women and their position both directly and symbolically’ (119-120).³² It is in this context of individual feminist activism and consciousness that ‘Ordinary Women I’ will be read.

I am the woman you see in Blooming-
dale’s ruffling the rack of children’s sweaters
on sale, trying on tweed slacks in Better
Sportswear, which I won’t buy, browsing and homing
in on unmatched striped sheets on January
Clearance. Rapt with textures, women escalate
leisurely. This is our protectorate.
Our brown or pink skins flush over furry

³² This emphasis on the everyday found expression in *The Practice of Everyday Life* written in 1980 by Michel de Certeau, and translated into English in 1984. Although the project was not specifically feminist, the discussion of the ways in which individuals rebel against the ruling systems and authorities in their everyday life – ‘many everyday practices are...victories of the “weak” over the “strong”, clever tricks...maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. The Greeks called these “ways of operating” *mētis*’ (xix) – corresponded with the realities of everyday feminism. In the second volume, published in 1994 and translated in 1998, this feminist application was realised in Luce Giard’s discussion of female cooking, what she coined ‘le peuple féminin des cuisines’, translated as ‘Kitchen Women Nation’ (xlili), outlining the empowering, creative and matrilineal possibilities of cooking.

or frayed coats in smoothing taupe light. We do
not shuffle aside for the man, who is
not here, who built this shelter, our consuming
career. What I am saying to you is
I am the woman you will see blooming
up from our terror; with women: me, you.³³

This sonnet comes from *Taking Notice* (1980). It sees the female narrator explaining her seemingly quotidian and menial shopping habits. However, the activity and setting of female shopping becomes a symbol for women's affiliation, support and separatism from masculinist dominance. The sonnet assumes the status of feminist statement ending with a rallying directive for women to unite with other women and defy male proscriptions on their behaviour and expectations.

As women tried to pursue feminism through their daily lives and actions, they found new outlets for their activism: 'feminists from this political generation challenge dominant definitions of women in their workplaces through jobs oriented toward social change and in the way they structure their relationships, spend their leisure time, dress and behave and raise children' (Whittier 120). This challenging of traditional behaviours and values finds expression in the theme of 'Ordinary Women I'. Indeed, whilst a number of the poems in Lilian Mohin's *One Foot On the Mountain* and Honor Moore's *Poems from the Women's Movement* reflect an

³³ Marilyn Hacker, 'Ordinary Women I', *Taking Notice*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, 79. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

everyday feminism, this is normally pursued in terms of prevailing sites of resistance, such as personal relationships in 'for lyser' (Womun), and families in 'Emergency Ward New Year's Eve' (Wills). However, in 'Ordinary Women I' Hacker's focus for her everyday feminism is shopping. This is a less obvious site of struggle, as the absence of any comparable poems in Mohin and Moore attests. However, although there is nothing inherently female about shopping, it was largely associated with women, (Willis 'Women and the Myth of Consumerism'). Themes of love and family had traditionally been shaped by men so even when women took them on from a feminist standpoint in the era there was still a sense in which they were patriarchal themes. Shopping offers an escape from these thematic expectations and traditions and helps to feminise the sonnet.

However, despite its gynocentrism, shopping has been seen as a patriarchal means of female oppression. Indeed in Ellen Willis's 'Women and the Myth of Consumerism' (1970) she writes:

for women, buying and wearing clothes and beauty aids is not so much consumption as work. One of a woman's jobs in this society is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and make up are tools of the trade. Similarly, buying food and household furnishings is a domestic task; it is the wife's chore to pick out the commodities that will be consumed by the whole family. (15)

Thus the theme of shopping threatens to demonstrate women's blind collusion in patriarchy and to undermine a feminist poetics of Hacker's sonnet. However, this

strong patriarchal association creates the opportunity for the staging of an 'everyday rebellion' that aligns with the feminist activism of the period.

trying on tweed slacks in Better

Sportswear, which I won't buy, browsing. (Hacker, 'Ordinary Women I' 3-4)

Here, Hacker replaces consumption with 'window-shopping'. Although this may seem a trivial act, and far from the feminist insurgency pursued in 'coming out celibate' (Astra) or 'Dressed to kill' with the lines 'if you don't take your slimey masculine eyes/ off me/ I will whip out the collapsible submachine gun...and blast you off the face of the earth' (P. Jennings 11-15), it reflects a significant disobedience and rebellion against male expectations and constraints over female behaviour. In 'Some Reflections on Separatism and Power' (1978), Marilyn Frye declared that 'when the powerful label something or dub it or baptize it, the thing becomes what they call it' thus 'when women separate (...break out...transcend...shove aside) we are simultaneously controlling access and defining' (105). Within this context and understood in light of patriarchy's use of consumption to maintain women's domestic and sexual roles, particularly with the reassertion of patriarchal values in the 1980s (Gordon and Hunter 237), the female's 'window-shopping' becomes a powerful act of resistance and invalidation. Hacker removes the patriarchal senses of duty, subservience and capitalism redefining shopping, in line with the positive feminist possibilities indicated by Ann Oakley (71), as a form of escapism, freedom and pleasure. Shopping becomes a site for an oppositional, gynocentric expression of rebellion that fits in with the

emergence of an everyday feminism and offers an escape from more rigidly patriarchal themes and institutions.

The thematic also aids the creation of a feminist poetics through the delineation of subjectivity. In 'Sex, Family and the New Right' (1977), Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter asserted that the New Right cultural politics of sex and family were not only 'a backlash against women's liberation movements' but were also 'a reassertion of patriarchal forms of family structure and male dominance' (237). With its insistence on traditional gender roles and systems, the New Right in the 1980s threatened to consign women back to their subordinate positions as the object in a binary relationship with the dominant male, undoing the gains made by feminism across the century. However, in getting women out of the house and into the feminised world of shopping through her revision of theme, Hacker removes the female from the central site of patriarchal control and definition and specifically the presence of the male, placing her instead in a gynocentric space that offers the opportunity for female self-formation and –awareness in a largely male-free environment. Thus unlike in Alicia Ostriker's 'The Marriage Nocturne' whose delineation of abuse in lines such as, 'her eyes gaze back at him like walls/ Where you still can see the marks of the shelling' (26-27), places the female in a dialectical relationship with the male, the patriarchal relationship is removed in 'Ordinary Women I'. However unlike a number of other feminist poems of the period, including Martha Courtot's 'i am a woman in ice' and Anne Waldman's 'Lady Tactics', in which the male is removed entirely creating a decidedly gynocentric lyric, the male appears in 'Ordinary Women I' thus denying the liberating separatist space of Courtot and Waldman. However, when the male is presented in the sonnet, he is reduced to the single

word 'man' in the inconspicuously non-descript position in the middle of the tenth line. He is here literally subsumed by the sonnet. Furthermore, the refusal to place the male in the position of 'you' reinforces the female's subjectivity by denying the realisation of a male-female binary relationship and thus the female's competition for, and generally inevitable failure to achieve, primacy. In defining the female as independent of the male, we thus see the sonnet's alignment with contemporary separatist feminism: 'feminist separation is...separation of various kinds and modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of their privilege' (Frye 96).

However there is a 'you' present in the sonnet, which threatens to entrap the female in a restrictive and self-defeating binary relationship:

What I am saying to you is

I am the woman you will see blooming

up from our terror. (Hacker, 'Ordinary Women I' 12-14)

Given the shared experience and identity indicated in 'our terror', 'you' emerges as female. Whilst this promises a less hierarchical and unequal relationship than the heterosexual dichotomy, even in the seemingly liberatory gynocentric lesbian lyrics of Hollerith's 'Sleeping at my side' or maternal lyrics of Shirley Kaufman's 'The Mountain' the binary female relationship often emerges as all-consuming and hierarchical. However, whilst both I and you are female in 'Ordinary Women I', Hacker removes them from the intense, monopolistic relationships of lovers, sisters,

mothers, daughters, or even friends. Instead, the women are strangers; 'I' is an active feminist and 'you' is the non-active feminist who I is calling to action. These two women are thus connected not in a sexual or familial bond, but rather a political one, which is both more liberating for the women and more threatening to patriarchy. Further, the I/you relationship occurs only twice in the poem reiterating that these women are neither locked into an intense or permanent bond, nor rely on each other for self-assertion. Indeed, the I/you dichotomy appears only at the very start and end of the sonnet, with the two subjectivities merged under the plural pronouns 'we' and 'our' in the middle of the sonnet – representing the feminist collective. As such, Hacker rescues the female from the restrictive and self-defeating bind of the binary relationship, placing her in a political coalition with her fellow woman, marked by flexibility and provisionality, that is reminiscent of the female collectives defined in 'Women are getting together all over the world' (Switchbored). As such she creates a positive and rebellious identity for women that secures their subjectivity and independence, thus transforming the sonnet into a space not of disempowering heterosexual, but fulfilling homosocial, relations.

In 'Ordinary Women I' Hacker uses a conventional and rigid sonnet. This is in contrast to a number of other poets of the time, including Sonia Sanchez and Bernadette Mayer, who played with the shape and structure of the sonnet, challenging its accepted form and patriarchal heritage. Although Hacker's choice of the sonnet may seem to be arbitrary – indeed *Taking Notice* contains 52 sonnets – the collection also features rondeaux and quatrains, as well as less rigid free verse forms in 'Prayer for My Daughter' and 'Up from D.C'. Furthermore, in the accompanying 'Ordinary Women II' which is an unflinching portrayal of the

impoverished lives of women, Hacker uses free verse. As such, the choice of the sonnet in 'Ordinary Women I' assumes greater importance, and challenges simplistic readings of Hacker's formalism. Indeed, Lynn Keller has defined Hacker's sonnets in *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons* as establishing a 'performative formalism' (156), and this sense of form as enactment can help uncover the feminist politics of 'Ordinary Women I'.

Understood in light of Oakley and Willis's definition as patriarchal construct, rather than neutral spaces, shops therefore become discursive sites of patriarchal manipulation and definition. As Rob Shields confirms: 'they can be studied for the cultural presuppositions and power relations which they impose' (3). Hacker's sonnet can thus be read as embodying the patriarchally defined and delimited shop and consumerism as a whole. Indeed, as a patriarchal form, the sonnet is suited to performing the gendered politics of consumer space and ideology. The neat quadratic shape of the sonnet thus serves to reflect the four walls that demarcate the shop and the space that is controlled by patriarchy. The tight and rigid lines reflect the ways in which female consumer and social behaviour is contained and prescribed within the patriarchal order. The sonnet thus seems to emerge as a negative depiction of male control over women. However, Whittier explains that women's everyday rebellions in the era demonstrated a refusal to act according to patriarchy's rules thereby invalidating its underlying values (4). As Certeau elaborates, the uses of space, the ways of frequenting or dwelling in a place and of establishing a kind of reliability within the situations imposed on individuals make it possible to reappropriate these spaces (xxii-xxiv). Thus whilst Hacker maintains the external form of the sonnet to replicate the patriarchal institution of shopping, in the

internal play of form we see the figuration of women's resistance to this order, destabilising its logic and structure, and offering the realisation of a feminist poetics.

I am the woman you see in Blooming-
dale's ruffling the rack of children's sweaters. (Hacker, 'Ordinary Women I'
13-14)

Here Hacker maintains the metre to reflect the physical space of the shop and the controlling system of patriarchy. However, whereas in 'For a housewife' Gill Hague uses linear semantics to represent the woman's entrapment in the house 'Woman at home/ I am,/ clamped between these walls' (1-3) – the contracted and fragmented syntax symbolising the woman's oppression – Hacker uses enjambment to deny the triumph of patriarchy. Writing on Gloria Steinem's 'outrageous acts', Mary Rogers and C.D. Garrett explain that feminist acts of resistance entail 'border crossing or boundary breaking' that challenge restrictions on female behaviour, protest oppressive practices, or burst limits on female agency and growth (80). The syntactical force of Hacker's writing reflects Steinem's 'boundary breaking'. With a shrewd word break, the enjambment not only completely dismantles linearity and thus patriarchal structure, but transforms Bloomingdale's – a patriarchal symbol of consumer culture – into blooming – a symbol used to evoke female progress. In describing the subversive potential of shopping, Shields writes: it 'may simply take the form of ironic remarks or parodic actions which only temporarily destabilize the authority of the social order at the micro-scale, in some cases the carnivalesque is marked by full-scale revolts, eruptions of violence and major transgression of social norms' (8). In Hacker's

enjambment we see the manifestation of feminist inversion, but it is at the juncture of the octave and sestet that we find the true feminist insurgency, as the 'parodic actions' become 'major transgressions':

Clearance. Rapt with textures, women escalate
leisurely. This is our protectorate.
Our brown or pink skins flush with furry
or frayed coats in smoothing taupe light. We do
not shuffle aside for the man. (6-10)

Indeed, given that the sonnet is constructed in the Petrarchan form, evident from the rhyme scheme, these lines should contain the volta, marking a decisive shift from the octave to the sestet. However, Hacker's play with enjambment and sentencing completely impedes the structuring principle of the sonnet. Hacker runs her enjambment across the stanzaic boundary, merging line eight and nine into a single grammatical unit and pushing the volta back from the start, to the final two words, of line nine. As such, Hacker not only suggests the ways in which the female's actions undermine the patriarchal conventions of shopping but significantly the complete rejection of the male rules and regulations that maintain status quo and order. The safe, regulating, masculinist space of the shop is thus dismantled and transformed into an arena for feminist expression and activism.

This feminist activism is realised in the language of Hacker's sonnet. In the 'Myth of Consumerism' (1970) Willis suggested that women's purchases made them pawns in the patriarchal system (15). However, in using material verbs Hacker gives

women back their agency. Specifically, in using verbs unrelated to the act of purchasing, she undoes the sense of female compliance, offering instead verbs that inject a degree of subversion: 'ruffling the rack of children's sweaters'. In several feminist poems in the period this subversion is figured specifically in terms of female violence against the male, including in Kathleen McKay's 'To Phil (if he wakes up)': 'I killed him...I smiled at him once and the knife slid in' (9-15), Barbara Zanditon's 'Wishing to cut through to bone: II': 'Gently I run my knife across your belly/ Then with a sudden force/ plunge the blade deep into your skin' (17-19), and Ann Oosthuizen's 'Bulletins from the front line': 'we will assault all' (13). These declarations of female violence against the male thus pit Hacker's 'ruffling' as a trivial, or even delusive, feminism. However, viewed in light of the myth of consumerism and the patriarchal hegemony of shopping, as well as the decline of political feminism, it emerges as a real feminist challenge to male control over shopping and the sexual, commercial and domestic roles that constrain women.

We do

not shuffle aside for the man, who is

not here, who built this shelter. (Hacker, 'Ordinary Women I' 9-11)

Here the female is again aligned with a material verb 'shuffle aside' but the negative construction serves to distance her from the implications of meekness, and specifically deference to the male. In her treatise on the creation of a feminist activism, Frye argued that 'no-saying' was indicative of female control and usurpation of male control (104). Thus the very act of negation serves to reflect the female's insurgency. Hacker thus brings an end to the female's obligatory

‘consuming career’ – the end of patriarchal domination over shopping – opening the door to a feminist alternative – ‘I am the woman you will see blooming’ (13). ‘Ordinary Women I’ reflects the emergent feminist possibilities within the backlash era, specifically the changing dynamic of feminism to a smaller, more individualised form that Whittier describes, and continues the twentieth and twenty-first century narrative of the female-authored sonnet.

‘Three Sonnets for Iva’

Although feminist pioneers like Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman had offered early support for contraception and a woman’s right to choose pregnancy, and Sylvia Plath had written starkly and uncompromisingly on the difficulties of mothering, these critical voices were often isolated and seemingly perverse, as throughout the early twentieth century motherhood was largely understood as a natural and fulfilling vocation (Kinser, *Motherhood and Feminism* 17). However, in the second wave as feminists began to awaken to patriarchy and tackle the causes of their oppression, motherhood was finally dissected. Whilst the second wave began with anarcha- and radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone advocating antinatalism (*The Dialectic of Sex* 1970), *Of Woman Born* (1976) signalled a new direction in the feminist theory of motherhood (ibid. 85). Centred on the realisation of motherhood as patriarchal institution, it separated the reproductive possibility from the experiential reality of mothering. Women began to realise that motherhood had been co-opted by patriarchy and began to ‘talk about motherhood, mothering and reproduction in their own right’ (ibid. 96), encompassing the negative, as well as the positive realities. However, Amber Kinser notes that in the 1980s the renewed

conservative political stronghold of the New Right saw a return to pronatalism and family-centric rhetoric that sought to reinforce patriarchal control of motherhood (ibid. 107). However, propelled by the emerging lesbian, cultural and difference feminisms, women challenged this reality seeking new approaches to motherhood outside of the institution of the patriarchal, heterosexist, white nuclear family (ibid. 96). It is within this context that the next sonnet will be considered.

He tips his boy baby's hands in an icy
stream from the mountaintop. The velvet cheek
of sky is like a child's in a backpack
carrier. Then wrote his anthology
piece, began it while she changed the Pamper
full of mustardy shit. Again rage
blisters my wet forehead as the page
stays blank, and you tug my jeans knee, whimper
"I want you!" I want you, too. In the child-
sized rowboat in Regent's Park, sick with a man,
and I hadn't spoken to another
grown-up for two days, I played Amazon
Queen and Princess with you. You splashed pond water
Outside my fantasy, nineteen months old.³⁴

³⁴ Marilyn Hacker, 'Three Sonnets for Iva', *Taking Notice*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, 79. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the shortened form 'Three Sonnets: I'.

This sonnet appears in *Taking Notice* (1980) as the first in a trilogy of sonnets entitled 'Three Sonnets for Iva'. The sonnets are addressed to Hacker's daughter, her only child with her husband Samuel Delany, born in 1974. Essentially, the sonnet depicts the discrepancies between fathering and mothering – between their relative work/parenting balances, their relative ease, struggle, and independence – and between the nuclear family and the single mother family, criticising the unequal domestic and professional duties of mother and father, and the proscriptions placed on mothering.

In *The Making of the Sonnet*, of 57 female-authored sonnets from Wroth to Hacker, only two have a thematic of motherhood³⁵, whilst in *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* of 78 sonnets, there are no sonnets with such a thematic. Where it does feature as in Aphra Behn's 'Epitaph on the Tombstone of a Child' (1685), it does not have a particularly feminist tenor; a quality that characterises the notable contribution to the thematic – Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter* (1895) sequence. Even in Muriel Rukeyser's 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child', written in 1948 in the aftermath of feminism's emergence, the emphasis on the emotional and biological imperatives of motherhood somewhat partake in the patriarchal ideologies of maternalism. It would seem therefore that the theme of motherhood in 'Three Sonnets for Iva' is anathema to a feminist poetics. However, the feminist theorising of motherhood that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, alongside an advancement in reproductive technologies, completely changed the discursive landscape of mothering. In 1976, writing on the patriarchal dominion over mothering, Rich

³⁵ Aphra Behn, 'Epitaph on the Tombstone of a Child, the Last of Seven That Died Before; Gwen Harwood, 'In the Park'.

proclaimed: 'for the first time in history, a pervasive recognition is developing that the patriarchal system cannot answer for itself; that it is not inevitable; that it is transitory; and that the cross-cultural, global domination of women by men can no longer be either denied or defended' (*Of Woman Born* 56). It is this recognition of the patriarchal control over motherhood that allows Hacker to write a feminist poetics of mothering.

Wrote his anthology

piece, began it while she changed the Pamper. (Hacker, 'Three Sonnets: I' 4-5)

Here, the father is presented as a marginal and egocentric parent who engages briefly in his son's life but foregoes the menial domestic tasks in pursuit of a higher professional and creative imperative. In contrast, the mother is depicted solely as a parent and the one responsible for the unpleasant and banal parenting duties. This portrait supports the findings of contemporary feminists including Sara Ruddick and Nancy Chodorow, regarding the patriarchal ideology of sexual difference operational in the nuclear family. Whilst single motherhood offers a seeming escape from this patriarchal model, Hacker depicts it not as an idealised utopia but rather as an oppressive reality defined by isolation, deindividuation and total consumption: 'again rage/ blisters my wet forehead as the page/ stays blank, and you tug my jeans' (6-8). This depiction is reminiscent of Rich's experience: 'as soon as he [her son] felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys' (*Of Woman Born* 23). It seems then that Hacker's sonnet espouses the anarcha-feminism of critics like Firestone

who argued that only by 'freeing women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology' could women end patriarchal oppression (206).

However, both the negative portraits of mothering in the nuclear family and single motherhood critique not motherhood itself, but patriarchal control of the institution. Indeed, in the 1980s the rise of the New Right saw a renewed emphasis on 'patriarchal forms of family structure and male dominance' (Gordon and Hunter 237) and a consequent antagonism of alternative, in particular matriarchal, family units, as restrictions on daycare and women's wages meant that women struggled to adequately provide for their children outside of the patriarchal nuclear family (Kinser, *Motherhood* 98). Separated from her husband several years previous and finally divorced in 1980, Hacker herself belonged to this marginalised world. It is these circumstances that we find critiqued in the sonnet as Hacker highlights the mother's servile place in the nuclear family: 'wrote his anthology/ piece began it while she changed the Pamper/ full of mustardy shit' (4-6), and the strain on the single mother: 'I hadn't spoken to another/ grown-up for two days' (11-12). However, crucially, we also find in these depictions, affirmations of motherhood. Indeed, although the exchange between the mother and baby in the nuclear family depicts the most base and unpleasant of parental experiences, the connection with, and nurturance of, the child suggests, in contrast to the father whose input is ambiguous and trivial, the mother's essential value and importance. Similarly, the representation of the single mother and her daughter furthers this picture, reflecting mutual love, affection and dependence. Indeed whilst Hacker condemns patriarchy's shaping of mothering experiences, she never condemns motherhood

itself, instead hinting at the power of the mother and the need for a feminist, even matriarchal, redefinition of family, parenting and society.

In their feminist exposés of the patriarchal institution of mothering, Rich refers to the 'Kingdom of the Fathers' (*Of Woman Born* 56) and Marcia Westkott to the 'world of the fathers' (16), emphasising the paternal privilege and dominance of society. In order to 'dethrone patriarchal definitions of...motherhood' (DuPlessis 10), the kingdom of the fathers thus had to be destroyed, as Ruddick proclaimed at the end of her feminist polemic 'Maternal Thinking' (1980): 'There will be no more Fathers' (362). This manifests itself in the feminist poetry of the period through the exclusion of the father. Andrea O'Reilly has explained that patriarchal narratives are enacted through maternal erasure and displacement (92), thus it follows that feminist narratives assume the inverse process of paternal erasure and displacement. In *One Foot on the Mountain* and *Poems from the Women's Movement*, we find this paternal omission in 77% of the motherhood poems and in *Tangled Vines* (Lifshin) in a comparable 78% of the poems. Indeed, in Sandra Hochman's 'Thoughts About My Daughter Before Sleep', the father is not only omitted but his very role is undermined: 'I wonder how I came to give life to you' (1:12), 'I marvel to have made you perfect' (2:7), aligning the poetics with Valerie Solanas' rejection in her SCUM manifesto (1967) of the need for the male in reproduction (172) and the historical realisation of artificial reproduction in the period. Indeed, this was the era of the first test tube baby (1978), the growth of fertility clinics, and the rise of assisted reproductive technologies, including artificial insemination and in-vitro fertilisation all of which undermined the sexual presence of the male and his very function.

Hacker's presentation of the father thus seems contrary to a feminist poetics. Indeed, he is introduced in the first word of the sonnet and assumes the focus of the opening four lines, whilst the mother in the nuclear family does not appear until line five, realised only through the single pronoun 'she', whose central position in the line dilutes her presence, and the single mother even later in line seven. However, this focus on the father simply serves to highlight the patriarchal bias in the nuclear family and society as a whole and the relative subordination of mothers, thus contributing to Hacker's feminist poetics. Indeed, despite the focus on him, it is the single mother who is granted the role of lyric 'I' in the sonnet, asserting her prioritisation in Hacker's feminist poetics. In contrast, the father in the nuclear family is assigned the third person pronoun and as such is dispossessed of centrality and precedence and transformed into a caricature. The mother too is assigned the third person but Hacker uses this again to critique the nuclear family and specifically the gender essentialism – in which the mother is relegated to her gender and a particular set of responsibilities that are granted to her by virtue of her sex – upon which it functioned. By making the single mother a first person subject whilst defining the nuclear mother through third person, Hacker suggests that women can only gain centrality, value and identity as individuals rather than exclusively as mothers outside of a patriarchal nuclear family which relegates them to their sex. Hacker thus undoes the prioritisation on the nuclear family, and in particular the father, enacting O'Reilly's theory of displacement (92). The single mother emerges out of the wreckage intact and offers a glimpse of a matriarchal future in which women are both mothers and subjects.

In the seminal feminist text on motherhood in the period, *Of Woman Born*, Rich wrote that 'the mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship. In the creation of the patriarchal family, violence is done to this fundamental human unit' (127). Thus in Hacker's inscription of mother and child to the I/you relationship we see the sonnet's alignment with the contemporary feminist discourse of motherhood. Hacker not only removes the father from the primary relationship I/you, thereby removing the inherent oppression and objectification of the female, but removes him entirely from the family unit. Without the male, there is no presence to directly control the woman's experience of mothering, to instil the law of the father. In contrast in 'Quotations from Charwoman Me', Robin Morgan places mother and father in the I/you relationship, relegating the child to third person. This suggests the way in which patriarchy prioritises the female's role as wife – servicing him – over her role as mother. The replacement of the sexual with the maternal relationship in Hacker thus signals the female's rejection of male dominance and the move towards a feminist ethos; a move that is furthered by the specifically gynocentric focus on the mother-daughter bond.

Rich proclaimed that 'the cathexis between the mother and daughter is the great unwritten story' (*Of Woman born* 225). Indeed, it was the mother-son dyad that dominated art, theology and social science (226). However, feminists in the period began to express fears and suspicions over mothering sons: 'mothers need to understand that we are creating and nurturing the agents of our own oppression...society will pull them from our arms, set them above us and make them the source of our degradation' (Arcana qtd. in O'Reilly 94), with Solanas going as far as to pose 'whether or not to continue to reproduce males' (174). The mother-

daughter dyad in contrast began to be seen as an integral and determinative bond, generating a plethora of feminist studies in the area by Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, and, of course, Adrienne Rich.³⁶ Thus in contrast to Toi Derricote's 'In Knowledge of Young Boys' and Pan Van Twest's 'poem to my son', whose mother-son lyrics, despite any feminist intentions of the poems, inevitably contain within them the threat of the patriarch, Hacker's mother-daughter dyad in 'Three Sonnets : I' situates the sonnet within contemporary feminist discourses on the power and significance of the matrilineage. Hacker does however depict the son in the nuclear family and thus introduces the problematic patriarchal element. Indeed, the exchange between father and son – the tipping of the baby's hands into the stream – seems to read as the father's baptism of his son into the patriarchal order, in line with Rich's description in her chapter 'Mother and Son, Woman and Man': 'the fathers have of course demanded sons...the ideal resolution of the Oedipus complex is for the boy to give up his attachment to his mother, and to internalize and identify with his father' (195, 197). That the mother's sole exchange with the son is to change his soiled nappy hints at the beginnings of his dominance and degradation of her and his emergence into his patriarchal role. The sonnet is not a devaluation of sons per se, but again a critique of the pervasive and perverse culture of patriarchy in which normal development demands of sons their withdrawal from their mothers to enter the 'Kingdom of the fathers'. The single mother-daughter union thus offers a feminist corrective to this reality, and importantly the opportunity to forge empowering and egalitarian relationships beyond the rule of the father.

³⁶ See Chodorow, 'Mothering, Object-Relations, and the Female Oedipal Configuration', Irigaray 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' and Rich *Of Woman Born*. Marianne Hirsch's review essay 'Mothers and Daughters' offers a more comprehensive catalogue of relevant studies of this kind from the period.

Although the mother-daughter bond was considered to be more positive for women (Rich *Of Woman Born* 226), there was a recognition in the period of its potential destructiveness and oppressiveness: 'the mother-daughter relationship... is liable to be excessive in the direction of allowing no room for separation or difference' (Chodorow, 'Family Structure' 59). The very title of Lyn Lifshin's anthology of mother-daughter verse *Tangled Vines* reflects this sense of suffocation, which is exemplified in Audre Lorde's 'What My Child Learns of the Sea' – 'more than blood/ or the milk I have given/ one day a strange girl will step/ to the back of the mirror/ cutting my ropes' (12-16) – and Shirley Kaufman's 'Mothers, Daughters' – 'We gnaw at each other's/ skulls. Give me what's mine./ I'd haul her back, choking/ myself in her, herself/ in me' (10-13). In these instances the mother-daughter binary becomes simply another objectifying and hierarchising dyad; it reflects the matrophobic impulse (Rich *Of Woman Born* 235). However, the inverse of matrophobia was the Eleusinian impulse (ibid. 238) – the mother/daughter bond as the epitome of symbiosis and mutuality. Indeed, feminist psychoanalytic critics of the second wave, emphasised not only the mother's self-definition through the daughter, but inversely the daughter's attachment to, identification with, and development through, the mother: 'probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other' (ibid. 225-226). In Hacker's sonnet the exclamatory 'I want you!' (9), which would traditionally serve in the love sonnet as a marker of phallogentric dominance and control, is complemented by a second 'I want you' in the sonnet – a literal mirroring of desire and identity – highlighting the reciprocity and mutuality between the maternal 'I' and filial 'you'. It

echoes Irigaray's chiasmatic reflections on the mother-daughter bond in 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' (1981): 'I look like you, you look like me. I look at myself in you, you look at yourself in me...Living mirrors' (61). Thus Hacker creates a positive dialogic poetics of mother and daughterhood that recognises the feminist sense of mutuality and reciprocity to be found in maternal relationships. Hers is a feminist poetics of Eleusinia.

Whilst Hacker works so thoroughly to challenge the patriarchal institutions of family and motherhood through her revisions to theme and subjectivity, it may seem that her efforts to do so are undermined by her adoption of the sonnet form and its patriarchal affiliations. Of twenty eight poems that focus on motherhood in the feminist anthologies by Moore and Mohin, only one, Sonia Sanchez's 'personal letter #2' is a fourteen line poem, which, given its free verse style, short heterometric lines of between three and eight syllables which create a narrow, rectangular shape, its lack of rhyme and its disregard of the normal structuring of the sonnet, including the position of the volta, defies simple categorisation as a sonnet. Even in the motherhood anthology *Tangled Vines*, of eighty poems only two are sonnets, and one of these is by Hacker herself. Although, Arlene Stone dedicates 104 sonnets to the theme in *Son Sonnets* (1994), her poetics is the exception and perhaps reflects the political shift from the 1980s to the 1990s. The common practice in maternal poems tends towards free verse, heterometre and unconventional mise-en-page. Indeed, form is often central to the expression of theme in these poems, with short versification in Alta's 'Miscarriage' echoing the premature ending of life, whilst Clifton uses internal gaps in 'the lost baby poem' to literally carve out the absences of the child, and Fanny Howe in 'The Nursery'

deploys non-linear, scattered lyrics to represent the chaotic and indiscriminate nature of mothering. It would seem that the sonnet – the instrument and verse of the patriarchy – with its imposed length and order, its narrowness and regularity, thus sits counter to a feminist poetics of motherhood. However, it is the very rigidity of the form and its patriarchal associations that helps to characterise Hacker's feminist poetics by figuring the oppressiveness and tyranny of the patriarchally-defined and controlled institution of motherhood. Indeed, the hermetic space of the sonnet figures patriarchy's complete interment of the mother into that role and identity and the fixed and exacting expectations on her.

However, we find in the subversion of the formal expectations of the sonnet Hacker's feminist challenge:

full of mustardy shit. Again rage

blisters my wet forehead as the page. (6-7)

Here, Hacker undoes the traditional isometre of the sonnet, by inserting two catalectic lines. Although the abridged lines are not visually anomalous and do not really contaminate the shape of the sonnet, aurally they signal a discontinuity, which is emphasised by their positioning between two pentametric lines. It is in these catalectic lines that the portrait of the nuclear family that has been pursued in the opening lines is finally exposed and the female asserts her anger. The breakdown in metre undoes the order and regularity of the conventional pentameter and thus represents the disruption of the patriarchal narrative of motherhood and the incursion of the critical female voice. Furthermore, these lines are the only two

within the sonnet in which perfect rhyme is used and the rhyme itself rage/page echoes the discontent of the female. All of the other rhymes in the sonnet are deconstructed by using half-rhyme (icy/anthology; Pamper/whimper; another/water), consonance (cheek/backpack; child/old), and oblique rhyme (man/Amazon). This serves to disrupt the neat and harmonious rhymes of the traditional sonnet and unsettle the rhythm and order of the poem in order to emphasise the disjunction between the difficult realities of mothering and the idealised patriarchal fallacies. Indeed, none of the motherhood poems in the anthologies by Mohin, Moore or Lifshin (excluding the poems by Hacker) use full-rhyme, even the quasi-formal 'Song' by Joan Larkin evades rhyme in its quatrains, as demonstrated through the end words right/fat/scabs/bad. It seems that the consummation of rhyme fails to address the difficult, antagonistic and irregular experiences of motherhood. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), Helene Cixous wrote that 'it is by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic' (881), they will forge the 'antilogos weapon' (880). The deconstruction of rhyme, as well as other formal techniques including enjambment, thus serves as part of Hacker's antilogos weapon, that 'breaks the old circuits' (ibid 890) of phallogocentrism and allows Hacker to construct her own poetics of motherhood.

Cixous proclaimed in the same essay that 'a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments' (888). It is this sense of simmering feminist energy that characterises Hacker's language use as part of the feminist poetics in the sonnet.

He tips his boy baby's hands in an icy
stream from the mountaintop. The velvet cheek
of sky is like a child's in a backpack carrier. (1-3)

Here, the natural images serve to present the father-son union in a utopian ideal. The exchange is portrayed as a tender moment that highlights the father's parental involvement in the nuclear family. Beneath this perfect facade however we see the smouldering of feminist critique. Indeed, the father's 'tipping' of his baby son's hands into an 'icy' stream suggests carelessness, even neglect. Furthermore, that Hacker's use of the sonnet's only simile is found in the description of fathering highlights the constructedness and artifice of the scene. The actual vehicle of the simile 'the child in a backpack carrier' establishes a repressive and coercive image of the child that provides an incongruity to the innocence and freedom of the scene. Hacker thus picks away at the supposed idealism of the father-son scene to hint at the shortcomings in the father's role.

In line five, the focus of the sonnet shifts to the mother:

she changed the Pamper
full of mustardy shit. (5-6)

In contrast to the 'icy stream' (1) and 'velvet cheek' (2) that underpinned the experience of the father, the mother's experience is defined by 'Pamper' and 'mustardy shit'. The abruptness of the materiality and banality of these images

register the 'volcanic' surge of the feminist text. No longer able to maintain the cool and objective facade, the narrator literally boils over. According to Rich, it was anger that characterised the experiences of mothers in patriarchy: 'We spoke in the sometimes tentative, sometimes rising, sometimes bitterly witty, unrhetorical tones and language of women...who found...common ground in an unacceptable, but undeniable anger' (*Of Woman Born* 24). From the depiction of the father to that of the mother we see the rising, bitterly witty, unrhetorical tones and language of this female anger. However, as the narrative turns to the portrait of the single mother, the narrator regains control. Anger is never far from the surface, as in 'in the child-sized rowboat' (Hacker 'Three Sonnets: 1' 9-10), however in the image of the Amazon Queen and Princess feminist energy is redirected into a positive impulse. Indeed, the reference points back to the image of the matriarchy and an earlier civilisation 'in which mother-right, not father-right prevailed; in which matrilineality and matrifocality played a part; in which women were active and admired participants in all of culture' (Rich *Of Woman Born* 85). This idea of a matriarchal order affirmed the feminist knowledge that 'a man may not be psychologically necessary or desirable to the mother-child exclusivity' (Deutsch qtd in Chodorow, 'The Cycle' 14). Rich wrote that:

in transfiguring and enslaving the woman, the womb – the ultimate source of this power – has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness...until a strong line of love, confirmation and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman...women will still be wandering in the wilderness'. (*Of Woman Born* 68)

In Hacker's Amazonian mother and daughterhood she reinstates the power of the womb and begins the process of bringing women in from out of this patriarchal wilderness. This sonnet thus assumes its place in a female-authored narrative of the sonnet in the feminist context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

'Eight Days in April: 6'

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s lesbian feminism rapidly evolved, gaining significant visibility and influence (Whittier 155), not least through the emergence of key texts including Rich's paradigmatic 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience' (1980). Far from its modest roots at the beginning of the 1970s, by the 1980s, Margaret Cruikshank argues, lesbianism had been demystified: 'To the degree that it seemed normal and ordinary to the women choosing it, lesbianism had become a fixture of American life, an institution rather than a handful of women' (158). She adds that lesbian feminism grew both 'stronger within itself' and 'made a greater impact on the outside world' (158). Although lesbianism made great strides in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was still a marginal and secondary lifestyle (D'Emilio 108), not least in the face of the conservative retrenchment that came with the installation of the Reagan administration (Whittier 20). Nevertheless it was at the forefront of the feminist revolution. It is within these contexts that the final sonnet should be read.

Your face blazing above me like a sun-
deity, framed in red-gold flames, *gynandre*
in the travail of pleasure, urgent, tender

terrible – my epithalamion
circles that luminous intaglio
– and you under me as I take you there,
and you opening me in your mouth where
the waves inevitably overflow
restraint. No, no, that isn't the whole thing
(also you drive like cop shows, and you sing
gravel and gold, are street-smart, book-smart,
laugh from your gut) but it is (a soothing
poultice applied to my afflicted part)
the central nervous system and the heart.³⁷

This sonnet is taken from *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986). The collection traces the narrative of a love affair between two women in the form of individually-told sonnets. This is the sixty-first poem in the one hundred and eighty strong sequence, and is the sixth sonnet in the mini-sequence 'Eight Days In April'. Although the sonnets are linked thematically, each has its own focus and stands alone as a separate sonnet. 'Eight Days 6' contemplates the physical relationship between the two female lovers.

Despite the visibility of lesbian feminism throughout the 1970s, the intimacies and realities of lesbian life and sexuality became increasingly veiled behind the

³⁷ Marilyn Hacker, 'Eight Days in April: 6', *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, New York: Norton, 1986, 70. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the shortened form of the title 'Eight Days: 6'.

socio-political agenda that developed around the movement (Sullivan 34). Indeed, in 1980, Rich's introduction of the lesbian continuum – 'a range...of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman' ('Compulsory Heterosexuality' 648) – largely cemented the divorce of lesbianism from its genital meaning, transforming it from sexual preference to a political identity. However, in the sex wars in the 1980s, frustration with lesbian feminism's rigid sexual politics (Chenier) and the repression of sexual practices (Sides 118) came to the fore, as sex radical feminists sought to reinstate sexuality, rather than sisterhood, as the ground for lesbian feminism (Terry 331). However, the religious Right continued to promote heterosexuality as the main and normative practice and was buttressed by the AIDS epidemic that devastated the gay communities (Garber 582). Nevertheless, sex radical lesbian feminists showed a renewed desire to centralise and normalise lesbian sexuality, as Linda Garber explains in order to further liberation through sexual freedom (582). By defining themselves through their sexual desire, lesbian feminists reinstated a fundamental opposition to a patriarchal culture that characterised and controlled female sexuality 'in terms of how it attends, responds, or appeals to the sexuality of men' (Whisman 115). This context elucidates the feminist poetics of Hacker's theme in 'Eights Days: 6'.

In the opening lines Hacker establishes the sensuality, eroticism and intimacy of the poem:

Your face blazing above me like a sun-
deity, framed in red-gold flames. (Hacker, 'Eight Days: 6' 1-2)

With the positioning of the bodies and the eulogy of the face, this is a portrait of two women clearly in the situation of love-making, as such it contrasts with Rich's 'Twenty One: VI', analysed in the previous chapter, as well as Sheila Shulman's 'HARD WORDS or, Why Lesbians have to be Philosophers', in which the erotic, physical aspect of lesbianism is relegated whilst the political, civic aspect is prioritised. In 'Having Kittens About Having Babies III', almost the numerical midpoint of Hacker's sequence, the sonnet opens:

They get to make their loves the focal point
of Real Life: last names, trust funds, architecture,
reify them, while we are, they conjecture,
erotic *frissons*, birds of passage, quaint
embellishments in margins. (1-5)

Here Hacker confronts the inauthenticity, marginalisation and inferiority attributed to lesbianism in a society governed by heterosexual privilege. In this directly political aside, we find the feminist agenda and structure underpinning *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*: the desire to take lesbianism from being 'quaint embellishments in margins' to being 'the focal point of Real Life'. Thus in 'Eight Days: 6' instead of a focus on lesbian feminism as a generic and mystical bond between women, as implicated in Rich and Shulman, which palliates the erotic liaisons between women in a rhetoric of platonic and civic rights, Hacker focuses on the physical and physiological experience of lesbianism. As such she situates her sonnet in the emergent lesbian sex-positive and –explicit poetic tradition of Caroline

Griffin in 'We are pressed so close' and Pat Parker in 'For Willyce' that align with the concomitant emergence of the lesbian sex-positive groups Samois in 1978 and Lesbian Sex Mafia in 1981. The feminist editors of *Powers of Desire* (1983) emphasised that 'the denial of female erotic pleasure...was a quintessential expression of the sexism that oppressed women' (Snitow, Stansell and Thompson 277). Thus Hacker's thematic of lesbian sexuality serves to escape this sexism, but also works to challenge the dominance of heterosexuality. Hacker's sonnet stands as a critical intervention in the narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth century, transforming the sonnet into a vehicle for a radical, sex-positive lesbian poetics of love. As Nancy Honicker attests: 'through the act of writing, a fragile, new center is formed, in a movement away from the "margins" for a tale of lesbian love' (98).

Elizabeth Wilson wrote that many women in the era felt that a relationship with a man involved the collapse of their identity, whilst lesbianism by contrast became the arena for the flowering of womanhood (216). Lesbianism offered women the opportunity to 'imagine a sexual politics' to counterpose the male privilege and female subordination that underpinned the values of the New Right (Snitow, Stansell and Thompson 12). It is in this light that Hacker's handling of subjectivity must be regarded in the creation of a feminist poetics in 'Eight Days: 6', not least through the feminisation of I/you that clearly challenges the heterosexual norm and the ideology that women were 'dependent on men for romantic/sexual love and satisfaction' (Ferguson 164). In her essay on erotic domination and the roles of master and slave (1983), Jessica Benjamin asserted that each gender represents one half of a polarized whole; a division that always instils competition and

hierarchy (294). However, the sameness of the women in Hacker's sonnet speaks of the possibility of 'purging the bedroom of inequality' (Snitow, Stansell and Thompson 277).

Indeed, in 'Eight Days: 6' we find six first person and eight second person pronouns. In contrast to the subordination of you to the lyric I that Jan Montefiore identifies in the patriarchal heterosexual sonnet – "Thou" is, to the "I", primarily a means of self-definition reflecting "I" back to itself" (99) which leads, Montefiore concludes, to you being 'denied full humanity' and 'rendered negative' (109) – and that lesbian feminist critics of the time delineated in patriarchal relationships,³⁸ Hacker redefines the dynamics of the I/you relationship, making 'you' an equal, present and vital partner. It could be argued that the use of more second person than first person pronouns actually instils inequality, simply making 'you' the dominant partner. However, in the octave which details the sexual act, the proportion of first and second person pronouns is exactly equivalent. This suggests that lesbian sexuality is not based on the oppressive systems of dominance and submission that feminists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and Sharon Deevey (qtd. in Douglas 156, 158) found in heterosexual practices, but rather on equivalence and partnership. Furthermore, although the blazon of the opening lines threatens to relegate the female beloved to sexual object, Hacker prevents the act from becoming exploitative voyeurism by depicting the narrator not as detached onlooker, nor the beloved as unaware victim, but both as active, consensual

³⁸ For example, Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote 'Sex acts as a reassuring reminder of his [the male's] class supremacy...sex acts as a convenient reminder to the female of her class inferiority' (qtd. in Douglas 156); Sharon Deevey wrote 'every fuck is a rape...because every man has power and privilege over women' (qtd. in Douglas 158).

participants. In 'your face blazing above me' (1), whilst the use of the preposition 'above' may threaten to instil an asymmetrical hierarchy, in the subsequent 'you under me' Hacker reverses the positions of the lovers, offering a vision of the fluidity and variety of subject positions and dynamics within lesbianism:

- and **you** under **me** as I take **you** there,
and **you** opening **me** in **your** mouth where. (6-7)

The swapping and interweaving of pronouns in these lines further shows the give and take of this sexual union. That the pronouns are separated each time by only one word reflects the intimacy of the couple. This is not a monolateral fantasy conducted from afar but a shared bilateral experience of intimacy. Both lovers are given one verb each in which they are positioned as actors and their partners as recipients: 'I take you there', 'you opening me'. Whilst there was much discussion in the period of the violence and oppressiveness of lesbian relationships, both of the verbs Hacker uses here are passive. In fact rather than subjugate the beloved both verbs seem to serve her, reflecting Snitow, Stansell and Thompson's declaration that female-controlled sexuality brings not 'a new level of subjugation but an affirmation of identity and power' (27). Indeed, in 'I take you there', the verb signals the lover's taking of the beloved to an erotic climax, whilst in 'you opening me' there is a similar sense of erotic stimulation that seems to define a lesbian utopia that aligns with Jane Donawerth's conception of a 'place where lesbian pleasure can be real' (94). Although some lesbian feminists including Amber Hollibaugh and Cherie Moraga (1981) found this narrative of egalitarian sexuality oppressive and misleading (58) and elsewhere in Hacker's sequence, she adopts a variety of

different positions that challenge this monolithism – in ‘You, little one, are just the kind of boy’ and ‘Eight Days in April: 3’ Hacker engages with butch/femme roles, whilst in ‘Having Kittens About Having Babies I’ and ‘A couple’ Jewish bitches singing Motown’ she highlights ‘gender-bending’, whilst ‘Sometimes, when you’re asleep, I want to do’ serves as a lesbian masturbatory lyric – ‘Eight Days: 6’ serves to reflect the positive and reciprocal nature of lesbianism as a challenge to the notions of deviance and disorder that were levelled at it and specifically to offer an empowering alternative to heterosexuality.

David Caplan has argued that prior to the 1980s previous generations of gay and lesbian poets decried the sonnet as ‘too untrue’ or ‘patriarchal’ to express their experiences (72), hence Rich’s metamorphosis of the sonnet from its original fourteen line form to her twelve to twenty-three line versions of the sonnet in *Twenty One Love Poems*. Indeed, the sonnet, with its code of compulsory heterosexuality (Nelson, ‘Owning the Masters’ 10), had been integral to the perpetuation of the heterosexual bias and the marginalisation of homosexual love. In ‘Eight Days: 6’ however Hacker returns the sonnet to its original fourteen line form, but, rather than regressive, Hacker’s formalism represents the new opportunities for the form in the period. In his chapter ‘When Form Comes out of the Closet’ Caplan reiterates this possibility, arguing that since the 1980s gay and lesbian poets have both dominated and reinvigorated the love sonnet (62). He suggests that the queering of Shakespeare in the period ‘recast the sonnet as an obvious vehicle for gay and lesbian desire’ (71-2). Hacker’s appropriation of the sonnet is thus indicative of the attempts by gay and lesbian poets to destabilise the dominance and hegemony of heterosexuality and valorise and authenticate their own desires. It aligns with the

pro-sex feminist aim of destigmatising lesbian sexuality and challenges the contemporary perceptions of deviance and abnormality launched at homosexuality by the New Right (D'Emilio 108). In contrast, in 'For Willyce', Parker creates a unique form replete with scattered lyrics and heterometric lines for her poetics of lesbian sexuality. Her form attests to the difference and novelty of lesbian desire and seems to undermine Hacker's poetics as assimilationist. However, Parker's innovative form inevitably stages the transgressiveness of lesbianism, keeping it in the margins both of society and literary tradition. In her essay 'Constructing a lesbian poetics for survival', Liz Yorke's argument that 'the task for the lesbian poet is...not one of searching for the repressed 'authentic' lesbian voice rather it involves deconstructing the heterosexual matrix' (189), points to the need to engage with the patriarchal structures and discourses of sexuality. In using the sonnet, Hacker addresses the very nexus of this 'heterosexual matrix' and, placing the lesbian within the form, causes the system to implode.

Central to Hacker's destabilising of the heterosexual lyric is her insistent use of enjambment:

and you opening me in your mouth where
the waves inevitably overflow
restraint. ('Eight Days: 6' 7-9)

Here, we can see how Hacker largely erodes the linear unit of the sonnet by driving the lexis and syntax across the linear boundaries. The enjambment prevents the poetics from falling in line with the patriarchal norms, expectations and standards of

the heterosexual sonnet. It reflects Jonathon Dollimore's theory of 'transgressive inscription': 'a mode of transgression which seeks not to escape from existing structures but rather a subversive reinscription within them, and in the process their dislocation or displacement' (285), specifically the perverse dynamic whose effect is to generate 'internal instabilities within repressive norms' (33). The running over of meaning across linear boundaries thus destabilises the heterosexual sonnet and allows the space to be freed for a lesbian poetics. Indeed, enjambment serves to enact what Yorke has defined in lesbian poetics as 'lesbian libidinal intensity' ('British Lesbian Poetics' 80) and Keller refers to as the 'wildness' and 'excess' of sexuality (171). The overflowing of one line into another represents the fluidity of lesbian sexuality as well as the symbiosis of the female bodies, as Caplan confirms (84); a point which Hacker herself seems to attest to in these lines where enjambment breaks down the fundamental barrier between octave and sestet, as the climax of the lesbian sexual act literally overflows restraint and conventional order:

you opening me in your mouth where
the waves inevitably overflow
restraint. ('Eight Days: 6' 7-9)

Reflecting the passion and excitement of the pairing – the *jouissance* – Hacker subversively reinscribes lesbian desire into the sonnet at once eradicating the repressive heterosexual norms of the genre.

In discussing the sequence as a whole, Keller points out that Hacker's use of enjambment thwarts her sonnets' rhyme schemes (171), and this is indeed the case in 'Eight Days: 6'. However, what is also noticeable is Hacker's coterminous subduing of the rhyme scheme itself through the use of half rhymes, as in sun/epithalamion, *gynandre*/tender, thing/soothing. Although the sonnet uses more full rhymes than either 'Ordinary Women I' or 'Three Sonnets: I', the presence of half rhymes still serves to disrupt the overarching rhythm and order.

In *Beautiful Barbarians* (Mohin, 1986), the majority of lesbian poetics share this renunciation of rhyme. Rhyme seems to be avoided as a symbol of an artificial technique that cannot accurately render lesbian sexuality, as Snitow, Stansell and Thompson confirmed 'sex cannot be approached mechanistically' (12). Specifically, given the indigency of rhyme to the traditional, patriarchal, heterosexual sonnet, it thus becomes indicative of a heteronormative reality. When coupled with the heavy enjambment in Hacker's sonnet, the rhyme scheme becomes largely redundant, most notably in the octave, which depicts the sexual act between the two women. The diluting of the rhyme in the octave serves to challenge lesbian intercourse as formulaic or monotonous, instead depicting versatility and excitement. The use of several different rhymes and rhyme types further replicates the diverse and multiplex connections between lesbian lovers, with the envelope rhyme and the shift from abba to cddc emulating the swapping of roles and positions. Lesbian sexuality thus emerges as liberatingly fluid and aleatory. Within this context, the use of the single full rhyme in the octave becomes emphasised:

– and you under me as I take you there,
and you opening me in your mouth where. (Hacker, 'Eight Days: 6' 6-7)

It is in these lines in which Hacker depicts the actual sexual intimacy of the two women. As such the consummation and harmony of the full rhyme reflects the point of sexual merger between the two women and the orgasmic moment of synthesis. The half rhymes thus emerge as the linked yet incomplete moments of passion during the love-making, in which the females are still separate beings, that precede and build towards the becoming of one flesh. This is the poetic climax of the sexual act. Where the octave uses varying rhyme to figure the interactions of women in the sexual union, the sestet deploys full rhyme to assert the fixity and consistency of the women's bond. Hacker thus transforms the sonnet from a mechanized formula expressing the degenerativeness and sterility of heterosexual love to an organic outpouring of lesbian passion.

In line with the lesbian sex radical reclamation and affirmation of sexuality, a number of texts from the era show an unprecedented and uninhibited use of language, not least in the pioneering issue of *Heresies* ('The Sex Issue' 1981), whose opening piece 'Typical Week and a Half' begins with the uncompromising 'Mon. Fantasized fucking a woman with a penis' (1). This unsuppressed lexicon also infiltrates a number of lesbian poetics, including Caroline Griffin's 'We are pressed so close', Sheila Shulman's 'This morning though you aren't here' and Tina Kendall's 'dawning II'. However, it is Irare Sabàsu's 'Island Cabin' (1981) that exemplifies the linguistic unrestraint of the moment in which explicit, uncensored, erotic, and even pornographic, descriptions and representations of lesbian sexual

practices replace the silences, shame and negativity. In comparison to these lyrics, the language of Hacker's sonnet appears rather conservative:

in the travail of pleasure, urgent, tender
terrible – my epithalamion
circles that luminous intaglio. ('Eights Days: 6' 3-5)

Indeed, as these lines exemplify, Hacker removes any reference to genitalia or explicit sex acts that the sex radical texts foreground. Hacker's language seems more akin to poetic diction than the language of the libido, and, in the context of the literal, vernacular, arguably even coarse and profligate lexis of Sabàsu, bespeaks a proximity to the metaphoric that seems to embody the 'adopted strategies of concealment' ('Constructing a lesbian poetics' 188) that Yorke identifies as one of the means by which lesbian poets silenced and repressed their sexuality. Indeed, Hacker's 'travail of pleasure' (3), 'you under me' (6) and 'opening me (7)' all represent euphemisms for the sexual act that places the sonnet in linguistic opposition to the technique of dysphemism found in Sabàsu.

However, Ann Ferguson proclaimed that it was 'the trivializing of lesbian relationships through the emphasis on genital practice that continued to stigmatize lesbianism' (162). In an attempt to celebrate and destigmatise lesbianism therefore Hacker's euphemism serves to remove the possible crudeness and lewdness of the sexual act and represent it as unadulterated and pure. Indeed, in the context of the AIDS epidemic and the New Right channelling of a moral panic surrounding homosexuality (Weeks 99), Hacker strips the lesbian sexual act down to a neutral

and innocent portrait of reciprocity and sensuality, removing it of all pejorativeness, deviance and disgust, and thus liberating it to assume legitimacy and authenticity. The use of 'blazing' (1), 'sun-deity' (1-2), 'gynandre' (2), 'epithalamion' (4) and 'luminous intaglio' (5) serve to heighten and romanticise the portrait of lesbian love; to raise it from the corporeal level of the purely physical to the ethereal level of transcendence. Whilst elsewhere in the sonnet sequence we find the more dysphemistic and explicit language of the sex radicals, for instance in the erotic fantasy in 'O, little horny one', and the raw eroticism in 'First I want to make you come in my hand', as well as the largely sexless language to be found in other moments of domestic life in 'Over the hump to the quotidian' and separation in 'Will one year bracket us from start to finish', in 'Sonnet 6' Hacker specifically 'places her work within, and in dialogue with' (Keller 160) the great heterosexual romance narrative in order to assert the authenticity and beauty of lesbianism. The use of a grandiose diction in the octave recalls the Renaissance sonnet sequence and threatens to consign the lesbian love to an irredeemable and lost past, thus in the sestet, the narrator's colloquial words bring the poem into the present day, ensuring that the lesbian love of the sonnet is given contemporary credence and value.

Couched in these linguistic terms Hacker delivers a pro-sex lesbian sonnet that both claims for lesbian sexuality the eminence and authenticity of the romance narrative, but also situates the narrative in the present moment to make the poem a narrative of modern lesbian desire and life. 'Eight Days: 6' is a significant contribution to the female-authored sonnet narrative of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose negotiation of, and relationship to, the sonnet tradition, can be best summarised by the lyrics of J.P.Hollerith's 'Annotations':

We would have it otherwise
We on the margins
We slant-written against the text of the world
Scrawly and scribbly
We crowd round your black marks
Your rubricated headlines
We are your comment
We annotate, we say:
The text is not all there is, Not all
There is, not all.³⁹

Conclusion

Although Adrienne Rich and Marilyn Hacker are separated in birth by only thirteen years and thus fall within the same feminist wave, significant changes were taking place that made them part of two very different worlds, ideologies and literary traditions. Indeed, unlike Rich, Hacker was never part of a pre-feminist age. Furthermore, she began writing in feminism's period of maturation and abeyance, as well as in a new phase of literary history which saw a return to formalist poetics and new opportunities for the sonnet.

³⁹ J.P.Hollerith, 'Annotations', *Beautiful Barbarians: lesbian feminist poetry*, ed. Lilian Mohin, London: Onlywomen Press, 1986. 123.

In a generation that abandoned the sonnet as a relic of the 'ancien regime' (Howarth 226), and in which feminist poets in particular struggled to reconcile the patriarchal heritage of the form with their feminist politics, Hacker showed that it was not necessary to obliterate or renounce the sonnet to create a feminist poetics. Instead, she takes on the form without fear or guilt of her gender, using the specifically gynocentric themes of shopping, motherhood and lesbianism, replete with their female subjects to feminise the sonnet and in doing so to de-essentialise the form (Keller 157) and prove the arbitrariness of the genre's patriarchal bias. Rather than being entrapped by the form, her widespread use of enjambment, internal play and negotiations with rhyme all serve to mould the form to her feminist poetics. Not only does she prove that women can really make the sonnet their own, but crucially to a feminist poetics, that the sonnet's history and form 'provides the freedom to say more not less' (Honicker 101) through the dialectic play with feminist content and context. Although Hacker takes issue with the label New Formalism, an examination of her poetics in particular in relation to her predecessors gives credence to Hacker's position at the forefront of a new feminist formalist movement and thus her significance to the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition.

Women-of-colour Feminism and the Sonnets of Marilyn Nelson

Unlike the clear demarcation separating first from second wave feminism, the transition from second to third wave is fraught with ambiguity (Dicker 103). However, it is generally held that throughout the 1980s, due to the internal ruptures caused by the sex wars and the impact of postmodernism, the second wave gradually imploded and a new third wave emerged (Keetley and Pettegrew 3:430). Central to this shift were black feminists. Indeed, third wave feminism first appeared in the mid-1980s in the discussion and writings about the intersection of feminism and racism by women of colour who were a part of the second wave but who were becoming increasingly aware of the racial inadequacies and ethnic myopias of the movement (Kinser, 'Negotiating Spaces' 130). In this original context the term signified a racially defined feminism that theorised the specific experiences of women of colour. Socially, multiculturalism, as Keetley and Pettegrew outline, won a foothold in the 1980s as a result of shifting borders and increased immigration (3:301). Discussions of race and ethnicity thus became more prominent and women of colour began to challenge what Gayatri Spivak and Chela Sandoval refer to as the 'hegemonic feminism' of the white-led women's movement (Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur' 271; Sandoval, 'U.S. Third World' 5).

However, throughout the 1990s, the third wave became synonymous with various other feminist movements, such that the original racial meaning of the term has largely been lost (Henry 24). Even in the extensive collection *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism* (2006), which identifies itself as 'the essential reference' (xi) on the movement, Leslie Heywood in the introduction fails to address the third wave's origins in women-of-colour

feminism, instead identifying a formational period from 1991-1995 in which the key issue was the debate between third wave and postfeminism and the pivotal figure was Naomi Wolf (xv). Even Muriel Whetstone-Sims' entry on black feminism in the *Encyclopedia* gives no credence to black women's role in third wave feminism (39-42). Thus although black women have met with more success and visibility in the third wave (Kinser, 'Negotiating Spaces' 130), they still struggle to occupy prominent feminist space, and despite its origins, the third wave has become largely synonymous with white feminists and non-racial politics. As Astrid Henry summarises: 'the intense...focus given to Roiphe and other white "dissenter" feminists has tended to obscure one of the most exciting aspects of this burgeoning movement: namely, that the third wave is truly a multiracial, multiethnic coalition of young activists and writers' (32).

Kimberly Springer's 'Third Wave Black Feminism?' (2002) and Kinser's 'Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism' (2004) have been pivotal in exposing the prominence of black women in feminism and the restrictions preventing their inclusion in the historic record. Central to this has been a critique of the wave metaphor that underpins the history of feminism. As Claire Snyder summarises: 'the entire wave metaphor is organized around the activities of white women, overlooking the activist work of black women that preceded and followed the so-called waves' (192). The emergence of third wave women-of-colour feminism represents a challenge to conventional notions of the wave theory. Indeed, the movement does not come after the second wave but is grounded in, and evolves out of, it (Kinser, 'Negotiating Spaces' 141). As the so-called second wave declined throughout the 1980s, women of colour feminisms continued to develop with

notable works such as hooks' *Ain't I a woman* (1981), Davis' *Women, Race and Class* (1983), and King's 'Multiple Jeopardy' (1988). When viewed from these vantage points, the wave metaphor as it currently stands becomes untenable (Springer 1062), and the erasure of black women from the third wave emerges as yet further proof of the biases and omissions of current feminist hermeneutics. Indeed, as Beverley Guy-Sheftall outlines, black feminism came of age in the 1990s (18). It is during this period that we find some of the most influential and transformative women-of-colour feminist narratives.⁴⁰ The success of these feminisms was aided by the sympathetic postmodernism of the age (Snyder 186-7): a zeitgeist whose emphasis on plurality, difference and alterity corresponded with the women-of-colour feminists' focus on non-white, non-western and marginal subjects. To ignore black feminism's importance to the third wave is thus to perpetuate the racial myopia of much feminist criticism and to present a flawed and incomplete historical narrative. It is for these reasons that the focus of this chapter will be women-of-colour feminism.

When thinking of women's sonneteering in the third wave moment of the 1990s, Marilyn Nelson is very likely not the first name one would consider. However, in light of the racial discussion of the third wave, African-American writer Marilyn Nelson

⁴⁰Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.' (1991), Beverley Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995), June Jordan 'Where is the Sisterhood?' (1996), bell hooks *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000). *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, edited by Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rahman in 2002 offers one of the most recent additions and introduces the next generation of black feminists and black feminist thought.

becomes a crucial figure in the feminist narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth century. The absence of any core ethnic female sonneteers up to this point in the thesis is not meant to discount the contributions of these writers, but rather reflects both the white bias of contemporary first and second wave feminist politics and the complicated relationship between black women and the sonnet. It is only in the 1990s, with the intersections of a New Formalist tradition, in which the sonnet had largely been purged of its delimiting ideology, and a black feminism of the third wave, that we see sonnets by women of colour really flourishing. At the heart of this we find Marilyn Nelson, whose own sonneteering aligns with the emergence of third wave feminism.

Indeed, whilst neither of Nelson's first collections written in 1978 and 1985 feature a sonnet, her third collection, *The Homeplace* (1990), contains several sonnets which are specifically related to the narrative of Nelson's family's history as black Americans. *Partial Truth* (1992), a fourteen-sonnet sequence; *The Fields of Praise* (1997), Nelson's collection of New and Selected Poems, with its 'Thus Far by Faith' and 'Still Faith' sequences; *She-Devil Circus* (2001), a chapbook of sonnets and; *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005), a crown of sonnets, underscore Nelson's commitment to the sonnet and, specifically, her negotiation of the form from a black female perspective. Despite, her substantial engagement with the form, however, Nelson appears in only two of the main anthologies of the genre. A number of significant black female sonneteers who are Nelson's contemporaries or near-contemporaries fare even worse, with Wanda Coleman and Wanda Phipps – both prolific sonneteers – excluded from the anthologies, along with several ethnic female sonneteers of the new millennium, including poets such as Mimi Khalvati

and Natasha Trethewey. In contrast, Carol Ann Duffy, whose sonnet output is quantitatively similar to Nelson's, appears in four of the anthologies, and herein lies the effects of a distorted feminist history. It is crucial therefore to return the third wave to its racial origins in order to retain the diversity and plurality of the feminist movement, but also to give black female poets their rightful place in a sonnet narrative of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and produce the most comprehensive and representative narrative possible. Although Rita Dove is perhaps a more prolific sonneteer, Nelson's sonnets are significantly aligned with the various politics of black feminism. It is within this context therefore that the thesis will now analyse the sonnets of Nelson.

'Beauty Shoppe'

Keetley and Pettegrew outline how the historical oppression experienced by black men and women in slavery, segregation and racial violence led to a special solidarity between them (3:51). Black women came to see it as their role to support the black male in his quest for emancipation and power (Keetley and Pettegrew 3:53; Wallace 86) and through this affiliation with the black male, came to identify their discrimination not with gender but race (Murray 186). However, throughout the 1960s, Keetley and Pettegrew suggest, 'as Black nationalism, Black Power and the Black Muslim organization took greater hold', black women became more conscious, and less accepting, of 'the cult of masculinity' and sexism perpetuated by black men (3:51). The men who were supposed to share with the women their struggle and success proved, as Barbara Omolade argues, to adopt the very patriarchal structures of the people who had oppressed them (361). The realisation

came that although black men may have been victimized by racism, sexism allowed them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 16). Central to the third wave women-of-colour feminism was thus the idea of 'multiple jeopardy' – that black women are confronted by several forms of oppression (King 42) – and specifically, as the pivotal Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings of 1991 that ignited the third wave demonstrated, that black women suffered oppression by black men (Dicker 117). It is within this context that 'Beauty Shoppe' should be explored.

Yes, girl, he was fine. All night he'd groan I love you
baby, marry me, let me do it to you: Girl, he made my toes
curl. Then he got transferred. I quit my job put my
furniture in storage, took my son out of school like a fool,
and waited for him to come back and get me. After a couple
of weeks, I got worried. Come a month of his silence,
I was praying he hadn't got himself killed. I called
his barracks every night, but they always said he was out.
After nights of calling I'd got to know the voice
of this white boy who said I'm sorry to tell you this,
Alberta, but he's been here every time you've called.
He won't come to the phone. All the other Negro
guys are laughing at you. You shouldn't call again;
he's not worth it. Girl, that nigger broke my heart.⁴¹

⁴¹ Marilyn Nelson, 'Beauty Shoppe', *The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997, 175. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

'Beauty Shoppe' comes from the collection *The Fields of Praise*, and is part of a thematically linked sequence of sonnets entitled 'Still Faith' (1997), which Nelson describes as the result of a period of exploration into the 'theology of radical evil' ('Re: Sonnets'). Although less informed by this theology than other sonnets in the sequence, such as 'No No, Bad Daddy' which deals with child abuse or 'Impala' which concerns rape, 'Beauty Shoppe' shares the same sense of depravity and immorality, depicting a black female's story of exploitation and humiliation by a black male partner.

Given the assumed solidarity between black men and black women and the emphasis placed on racial oppression over all other forms of oppression, it was extremely difficult, as Barbara Smith acknowledges in her preface to *Home Girls* (1983), to convince black women to take black sexism seriously (xv), despite the fact that critics like Gloria Joseph were emphasising the fact that black men had learnt 'to dominate, exploit, and oppress Black women' in a way that was 'degrading and oppressive to the Black woman' (1981, 100). In 1991, the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearing, which saw African American law professor, Hill, accuse her former employer, Thomas, an African American judge who was vying for an appointment to the Supreme Court, of sexual harassment, brought the issues of gender conflict in the Black community clearly, but controversially, to the fore. Although many black women felt critical of Hill for challenging the racial solidarity that was believed to underpin the black community (P.H.Collins 137), the event was significant in the development of a third wave black feminism, as texts such as *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas* (1995) prove, and specifically, in

'opening a window' (Smitherman 11) on examining the potentially oppressive personal relationships between black men and black women. We find the expression of this third wave black feminism in the theme in 'Beauty Shoppe'.

In *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* and *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945*, black women's poetry is significantly bound up with racial identity and affiliation, as a survey of the titles show: 'On Being Brought from Africa to America', 'Bury Me in a Free Land', 'White Things', 'Old Black Men', 'To a Dark Girl', 'For My People', 'Medgar Evers', 'slaveship', 'Letters from a New England Negro'. None of these poems even figure the relationship between the black male and female. In the few poems that speak of love, none of them explicitly define the male lover's race, but nevertheless they all exalt the relationship with the male. In Georgia Douglas Johnson's 'I want to die while you love me' (1922) she writes: 'Your kisses – turbulent, unspent,/ To warm me when I'm dead' (7-8), whilst in Gwendolyn Brooks' 'To Be in Love' (1963) she writes: 'When he/ Shuts a door– / Is not there–/ Your arms are water' (17-20). There is no sense in any of these poems of the oppressiveness of the black male or the destructive power of black relations. However, in 'Beauty Shoppe', Nelson marks the transition to a third wave black feminism when she transforms the theme of her poem away from racial solidarity and a eulogy of love to depict the misplacement of female loyalty, and deference to, the black male, and his abuse of her love:

I quit my job put my
furniture in storage, took my son out of school like a fool,
and waited for him to come back and get me. (3-5)

Instead of a romantic vision of mutual intimacy and affection, in these lines we see the black female's ceding of her own life to follow the male, echoing Frances Beal's claims that the black female lives as satellite to the black male (1970, 341). However, although the sonnet bespeaks female subjugation, the use of the past tense serves to gain critical distance for the black female from the events in the narrative. Indeed, like Millay's modern female who speaks from the other side of the emancipation of women to write retrospectively and critically on marriage in 'Ungrafted Tree', Nelson's female speaks from the other side of black sexism in the third wave to write retrospectively and critically on her relationship with the male.

he's been here every time you've called.

He won't come to the phone. All the other Negro
guys are laughing at you. (11-13)

Here then we see the myth of racial solidarity and the black female's commitment to the black male come crashing down, aligning the sonnet with the examination of intraracial politics of Deborah King (1988) and others, and the possibility highlighted by the Hill-Thomas hearings that black women are susceptible to abuse and exploitation by black men. Leaving behind the 'grip of Black Macho' (Wallace 87), Nelson's thematic acknowledges the possibility of black sexism and the fact that black men are not necessarily allies, but can also be oppressors.

As the previous chapters have suggested, by the end of the second wave white female sonneteers commonly adopted the traditionally masculine 'I' of the sonnet.

However, whilst the lyric I may no longer have seemed bound to the masculine, there was a sense even in the post-Civil War, globalised world that the subject of the sonnet was still inflected by whiteness (Burt 252-3) – a phenomenon that had been reinforced by the abandonment of the genre by black writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks. The advent of a black feminist third wave, predicated on a postmodern sense of subjectivity, therefore encouraged a decisive tectonic shift in the narrative of female-authored sonnets. In 1997, Rosemarie Thomson argued that ‘perhaps the fundamental aim of African American women’s writing is to construct a black female subject that displaces the negative cultural images generated by America’s aggregate history of racism and sexism’ (103), whilst Heidi Safia Mirza emphasised the need to challenge black women’s negation from discourse and to invoke their selves (4). Kinser, referencing the work of Sandoval, suggests that the very essence of the third wave, as it was originally conceived as a race-based politics by women of colour feminists, was the development of a new subjectivity that honoured race (‘Negotiating Spaces’ 131). To borrow from the title of bell hooks’ 1984 book, the aim was to move black women ‘from the margins to the centre’ of feminism and representation. In Nelson’s appropriation of the lyric I by a black female in the sonnet we thus see the manifestation of this.

Indeed, the black female subject serves to undo the invisibility and objectification of black women both in society and in the sonnet tradition and to emphasise their agency, knowledge and uniqueness. Significantly, Nelson uses the capitalised form of the first person pronoun. In contrast in the contemporaneous ‘Heart (W)rap’, which figures the black female’s losses in love, Shamshad Khan uses the lower case first person pronoun to signify the female’s vulnerability. Elsewhere, in Melvina

Hazard's 'Unnamed', the lower case first person pronoun serves to represent the black female's incomplete sense of self: 'i am often mispronounced/ in common conversation' (2:1-2). Despite the authority implied by the first person pronoun, its lower case form literally becomes subsumed within the poem losing its force and authority and representing the difficulty of black female subjectivity. Whilst Nelson's capitalisation of the first person pronoun in 'Beauty Shoppe' may at first appear inconspicuous, within this context therefore, it gains significance. Instead of defining her by lack or asymmetry, Nelson's capitalisation of her female I thus bestows her black female subject with the same authority and totality as the white male and female and black male subjects. Further, unlike the lower case form, the capitalised I ensures that the black female subject is successfully and definitively brought from the margins to the centre of discourse.

The negotiation of power and authority between the black male and black female was central to many third wave black feminist texts, challenging the traditional hierarchies and conventions in which the black female accepted unquestioningly the dominance of the black male. In 'Black Macho and Black Feminism' (1983), Linda Powell exposes the patriarchal system that had long been veiled in the black community: 'Black men like white men share a special kind of freedom with regard to women' (279) – 'Black male privilege *does* exist...Black men do wield power over Black women' (283). In 'Hearts of Darkness' (1983) Omolade reiterated this stance:

even after the end of slavery when the white patriarch receded, maleness and femaleness continued to be defined by patriarchal structures, with black men declaring wardship over black women. In the black community the norm

of manhood was patriarchal power; the norm of womanhood was adherence to it. (361)

We find in the manifestations and criticism of these relationships in 'Beauty Shoppe' the sonnet's engagement with a black feminist politics.

In Patience Agbabi's 'Sentences', Hope Massiah's 'Experiment' and Alice Walker's 'Never Offer Your Heart to Someone Who Eats Hearts', the race of the male is never directly referenced. So in expressions of the male's abuse and exploitation of the female, as in 'he slaps her a bit to keep her quiet/ she doesn't really put up a fight/ then he puts it in her and pushes with all his might' (Agbabi 26-28), although the male may not be black, the failure to acknowledge his race avoids the direct issue of black sexism and the naming of the black men as oppressors. In contrast, Nelson's explicit 'that Nigger' (14) ensures that the black male is incriminated. Thus in the gender relations figured in 'Beauty Shoppe', Nelson explicitly depicts the oppressive hierarchies of black male and female.

In the emergence of the black male as subject in the opening line of the sonnet, Nelson seems to evoke the supremacy of the black male. The very narrative seems to be occasioned by, and revolve around, him. Indeed, whilst both male and female have sixteen personal pronouns, there are thirteen male gendered pronouns compared to eleven first person pronouns identifying the female. Similarly whilst the male has ten subject pronouns (63%) and six object pronouns (37%), the female has five subject pronouns (31%) – half the number of the male – and eleven object pronouns (69%) – nearly double that of the male. These figures thus seem to

reinforce the significance of the black male in the black female's life, and, importantly, his supremacy. In Shamshad Khan's 'a day out' there are fifteen personal pronouns attributed to the female in a poem of only ninety-three words (16.1%) and no other person pronouns, serving to make the poem a really intense introspection into the self of the black female: 'The warmth on me is making my insides feel more like my outsides' (v). Similarly in Opal Palmer Adisa's 'Tired' there are 51 personal pronouns representing the female, with a quarter of the seventy-six lines beginning with 'I', and the black male is again excluded. The composition of the pronouns in Nelson's sonnet thus seems to militate against the prioritisation, and independence, of the black female.

However, despite the seeming insistence on the male, Nelson disempowers him and thus develops a feminist poetics. Firstly, although she uses direct speech, 'All night he'd groan I love you/ baby, marry me, let me do it to you' (1-2), the black male speaker is not present and his words, taken out of their original context and performed by the female, lose their illocutionary force. Indeed, as the words that were once aimed at the female by the male now become appropriated by her they become dissimulated; their original meaning and delivery become open to the female's performance and there is a sense in which her co-optation of the words harbours an inherent critique of the male. Indeed, the art of impersonation or ventriloquism fundamentally involves mimicry and pastiche, as Vivian Patraka explains, 'the point of ventriloquism is to...throw the voice so that its source is obliterated as...is the ideology of its own making' (33). The female thus becomes master of the male, he her puppet, with his words becoming part of the subversive performance of female parody in which the male is caricatured and ridiculed. Nelson

also omits the grammatically requisite speech marks from the male's discourse which further seems to alienate him from his words and moderate their controlling force. Furthermore, although the male is granted the subject pronouns in the direct speech, these account for only a fifth of the pronouns used to identify him in the sonnet, with the predominant form being the third person pronoun 'he' which opens the sonnet. This serves to undermine his binary relationship to the female and, with the use of the past tense, to distance him from her.

The male's negation is taken even further by the setting of the sonnet. In 1992, bell hooks wrote that in order to deal with the problem of black sexism 'what we need is a feminist revolution in Black life' beginning with black women joining together to address the issues of abusive male dominance and power ('Feminism—It's a Black Thang!' 504). In her informative work *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, Tiffany Gill identifies the historical importance of the black female beauty shop as an 'incubator for black women's political activism' (1). She suggests that the black beauty shop was not only a 'black space' but also, importantly, a 'women's space' (3), where women came together without the black male's presence to offer 'relational sustenance' (Stevens 111). The title of Nelson's sonnet thus establishes both the female and feminist setting of the poem.

Although Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* published in 1991 had suggested the patriarchal control over the beauty industry (12), Nelson's sonnet, which never makes any reference to beauty treatments or processes, is less concerned with the beauty shop as industry than with the beauty shop as female space and as such

ensures any patriarchal associations are negated. Indeed, the antiquated spelling of the title conjures the historic associations of the beauty shop as a site of female community and specifically a time before the cosmetic industry had been co-opted. In the framing references to a female beautician: 'Yes, girl, he was fine' (1), 'Girl, that nigger broke my heart' (14), we thus see this emphasis on a female supportive space. The beautician is figured not as a stranger but rather as an ally, with the denomination 'girl' not only reinforcing the gynocentrism of this relationship but also serving as a term of connection and endearment. Kevin Quashie explains that the girlfriend, rather than a sexual or competitive other, is 'someone who makes it possible for a black female subject to bring more of herself into consideration' (18), a means of identifying relationally, and a conduit for self-exploration. The setting of the beauty shop thus creates the conditions for black female coalition and kinship beyond the influence of male control that allows Nelson to develop a space for a black feminist politics of black sexism. Thus although the male seems to be dominant in the sonnet, Nelson in fact systematically nullifies his power and allows the female to emerge as the primary subject of 'Beauty Shoppe' at once challenging the insidious and destructive hierarchies that existed in the black community.

In light of the Anita Hill case and the new discussions emerging out of it, Paula Giddings argued in 1992 that 'black men and women have not had their own sexual revolution...We need a discourse that will help us understand modern ideas about gender and sex/gender systems, about male privilege and about power relations' (46-7). It is within these contexts that Nelson's use of the sonnet in 'Beauty Shoppe' can be read into a third wave black feminist epistemology. Indeed, the long history of the sonnet as a form for love poetry, offered black women the discourse they

needed to deal with the issues of sex/gender systems, male privilege and power relations that had defined their heterosexual relations with black men.

In the twelfth part of 'A Poem in Twelve Rounds', which centres on the racism Muhammad Ali faced: 'They called me "the fistic pariah"' (1), Elizabeth Alexander fragments and distorts the sonnet in such a way that it completely defamiliarises the genre, making it a sign of Ali's renunciation of the racist, white elite.

Here I am,
like the song says
come and take me,

"The People's Champ,"

myself,
Muhammad. (9-14)

However whilst Alexander's poem is about race relations and thus finds the space of the sonnet antagonistic to her needs, Nelson's sonnet is primarily about gender relations and thus engages with the form. As such, she maintains the basic fourteen line structure of the sonnet and its conventional shape as she appropriates the discourse of heterosexual relations. However, as with third wave black feminists entering feminism in the period, once within the discourse Nelson makes changes to the sonnet to acknowledge and accommodate the different experiences of the black female. Amongst these changes are Nelson's use of a heterometric line,

ranging from the hypermetric pentameter of the last line to heptameter, that results in over fifteen extra metrical feet in 'Beauty Shoppe' compared with the traditional pentametric sonnet.

Although the sonnet had undergone various reconfigurations to its shape and layout across the twentieth century, New Formalism heralded a return to the genre's aesthetic roots, and pentameter was still very much the accepted form of the sonnet. Nelson's revisions to the line are thus notable. In contrast to Amiri Baraka who in 'Two Gardens' more than halves the syllables in the sonnet and consequently significantly narrows the already 'scanty plot'⁴² of the form as she reflects the black female narrator's sense of being made up of halves, Nelson's expansion of the form suggests the black female speaker's refusal to be confined by the limited definitions of sexuality and love placed on her. Indeed, her very narrative of black women's experiences in love, which had historically been denied, reflects an expansion of knowledge and as such it follows that the sonnet form necessarily becomes enlarged. She is literally widening and adding to discourse and culture. It is an assertion of her right to speak and of the difference of her story from existing narratives. In a similar way, the expansion of the form comes to suggest the poem's challenge to the narrow and regulated narratives about the positive experiences of stability, security and support that dominated black gender relations. As the Hill-Thomas Hearings proved, black gender relations were not always pleasant and orderly, and black sexism was a troubling and dissident matter that breached the accepted and popular paradigms of black relations. As such, Nelson's rejection of the pentametric line for an expanded metre mimics the black female's rejection of

⁴² Taken from line 11 'Nuns Fret Not at Their Convents Narrow Rooms' by Wordsworth.

the accepted and safe forms of knowledge regarding relationships, which kept the issues of black male abuse and sexism repressed, for a more open and complex portrait of black gender relations that captures the deviance and disruptiveness of antagonistic black relationships.

As well as transforming metre, Nelson also challenges generic conventions by omitting endrhyme. Only three of the poems included in *bittersweet* (McCarthy 1998) – the anthology of Contemporary Black Women’s Poetry – contain notable endrhyme and this is never handled conventionally. In Agbabi’s free verse poem ‘Sentences’ over a quarter of the rhymes are based on the same rhyming field, with several of the rhyming words, such as ‘night’ and ‘right’, actually repeated. Moreover, 57 of the 93 rhyming words share the same [ai] vowel sound, as in wife/light/why/twice. This repetition serves to create an ominous and oppressive feel to the poem, with the repeated words wife/night/fight/life/right becoming a haunting chant of the female’s entrapment in her abusive marriage. In contrast, Nelson’s decision to omit endrhyme from her sonnet reflects the black female’s refusal for her story of black gender relations to be bound by the definitions and limitations of the traditional story of gender relations. Again she is insisting on the nonconformity and distinction of her experiences. Specifically, as endrhyme traditionally instils order and harmony to the sonnet, its absence in ‘Beauty Shoppe’ serves to reinforce the discordance of the black gender relations in the sonnet’s narrative. The black female is not offering a positive depiction of unity and love but rather of abuse and disconnection and the lack of rhyme serves to emphasise her narrative’s disharmony. As such, Nelson appropriates the love sonnet for a third wave black feminism.

Rashmi Varma argues that ‘an important thread in the elaboration of a critical tradition of black women’s lives has been the importance of black women’s experience, their ways of knowing and being in the world’ (239), and this manifests poetically in a concern with language. In the use of phonetics in Sanchez’s ‘Towhomitmayconcern’, dialect – or more accurately, ethnolect – in Nora Naranjo-Morse’s ‘Gia’s Song’, and the allusion to blues in Margaret Walker’s ‘Inflation Blues’, we find a strong inclination towards orality as part of the presentation of black female experience. Do Veanna Fulton writes ‘instead of reifying concepts or worldviews that privilege western beliefs and values of literacy, linearity and “logic”, oral discourse...in texts by African Americans illustrate an alternative epistemology that affirms Black subjectivity’ (12). For black women, the oral discourse also signifies the power to speak against the ‘silencing dynamics of a male-dominated society’ (Leonard 169). Thus in the opening discourse marker ‘yes’ Nelson asserts the speech act of the black female and situates her sonnet within a third wave black feminism. As Fulton suggests, ‘in texts in which the author combines the oral and written...readers simultaneously read and hear the “sounds of Blackness”’ (7). In presenting a spoken language in ‘Beauty Shoppe’ the black female seems to literally come forth out of the sonnet into embodiment. Her words become palpable and her presence can be felt, thereby ensuring the affirmation of black female subjectivity and the place of the black female in American society.

Meanwhile, the specific forms the language takes in ‘Beauty Shoppe’ serve to centralise and authenticate a black female epistemology:

took my son out of school like a fool,
and waited for him to come back and get me. (4-5)

Here, the straightforwardness and literalness of the black female's language distinguishes it from the heightened form of poetic diction. It reflects the different ways of knowing for black women that have grown out of their experiences of oppression, as Fulton confirms: 'an epistemology...emerges from both Black women's experiences of racial, gender, and class oppression and from a culture developed in opposition to these oppressions' (11). Importantly, however, unlike Naranjo-Morse and other black female poets, Nelson does not specifically use an ethnolect or creole. Thus whilst she asserts the importance of orality to black female definition and culture, the use of a standardised form of English serves to allow her important narrative, that challenges traditional orthodoxy about gender relations and specifically the assumed positive and loving relations between black men and black women, to move from the margins to the centre of knowledge and discourse. It allows her to enter and revise mainstream ideology such that notions of black sexism and black female oppression can be prioritised and authenticated. The black female's language thus challenges the dominant forms of epistemology, asserting her own epistemology as a valid and vital alternative in the construction of African American culture. 'Beauty Shoppe' thus signals the important intersection of the sonnet with black feminism and the ways in which the narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is subsequently, and crucially, revised.

'Sisters'

With slogans such as 'Sisterhood is Powerful' (Morgan) and theories such as the 'woman-identified woman' (Radicalesbians), feminism defined itself in the second wave in terms of supportive and constructive relationships between women in the face of oppression from men. However, throughout the second wave, women became increasingly aware of the ways in which women oppressed one another, leading Audre Lorde to announce in 1984 'there is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist' (Age 116). For women of colour this was predominantly understood in terms of racial differences with white women. However, throughout the third wave, as theories of multiple jeopardy and axes of oppression emerged, there was an increasing awareness of class, social and personal differences that divided women of colour and potentially antagonised relationships between them (Keetley and Pettegrew 3:301). In 1982 Sandoval concluded there was 'no simple, easy sisterhood for U.S. third world feminists' ('Feminism and Racism' 68), contributing to the realisation of 'the illusion of sisterhood' (Hirsch and Keller 1). It is within this context, that Nelson's sonnet 'Sisters' will be read.

The school bus drove us home from high school where
we got off in the Negro neighbourhood
and several times a week there was a fight:
one sister called another sister "hoe,"
pulled out black handfuls of her straightened hair,
clawed at her face and hands, and ripped her shirt.

I walked home. I believed in sisterhood.
I still do, after thirty years, although
I'll never understand why several white
sisters walked on me as if I was dirt.
We were all sisters, feminists, I thought,
forgetting what those catfights should have taught.
I was too well brought-up, too middle class
to call a heifer out, and whup her ass.⁴³

This sonnet appeared in the chapbook *Partial Truth* (1992). The collection is comprised of fourteen individually titled sonnets that concern themselves with human relationships. The majority of the sonnets focus on a strained relationship between the female persona and her husband, but 'Sisters' stands as a foray into the relationship between females. The sonnet recalls the conflicts between female companions both of the same and different races and figures the disunity amongst women which contrasts with the narrator's notion of sisterhood.

In 1992 in her chapter 'Beyond Sisterhood' from *Feminism Without Illusions*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese outlined the historical significance of sisterhood, explaining that 'since time immemorial, women have drawn upon the metaphor of sisterhood to express the quality of their relations with one another and to endure and resist oppression' (12). Within the black community, as Katrina McDonald notes,

⁴³ Marilyn Nelson, 'Sisters', *Partial Truth*, Willington: The Kutenai Press, 1992. N.pag. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

sisterhood has been particularly prominent (35), from the networks of everyday resistance in the slave community (Fox-Genovese 12) through the black women's clubs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McDonald 49), to the institutionalised sisterhood fostered in black churches (Dill 134). Sisterhood thus emerged as a positive and constructive ideal in the black community. Whilst racial differences that disrupted a monolithic sense of sisterhood were tantamount to black feminist discussions, black sisterhood remained largely intact, as Felly Simmonds confirms: 'although we are quite willing to engage in debates on sisterhood at local and global levels we have failed to have constructive debates between ourselves about *our* differences and how we can unite through this diversity and the commonality of our experiences' (24). However, the advent of the third wave with its emphasis on difference finally exploded the myth of automatic gender-ethnic solidarity. Building on the work of hooks, Rosemarie Tong explains that there is a major difference between bourgeois women's liberation, sisterhood and third wave multicultural and global feminist sisterhood, in which the latter rejects the sentimentalised support system of the former and offers instead 'a type of sisterhood that begins with women honestly acknowledging each others' differences, and ending with women using these very same differences' to reach their common goals (186). It is this context that informs the thematic of Marilyn Nelson's 'Sisters'.

Indeed, the very title of Nelson's sonnet conjures the notion of sisterhood, and the sense of partnership and coalition believed to exist between women. As a poem written by a black female, the title suggests the reclamation of the notion of sisterhood from its white context and specifically draws on the history of black

women's sisterhood. However, writing with the 'realities of fractured discourses' (Hirsch and Keller 1), the title 'Sisters', far from the idealised paradigm of the 1970s, becomes a contested and ruptured concept. Unlike Robin Morgan's 'Letter to a Sister Underground' which defined the bourgeois women's liberation ideal of sisterhood and Lucille Clifton's 'in salem' which defined the black ideal of sisterhood, Nelson's 'Sisters' with its focus on both inter- and intraracial conflict challenges these simplistic and idealised visions of compatibility and support. Indeed, Nelson both demythologises the universal sisterhood espoused by white women by portraying how 'several white/ sisters walked on me' (9-10), but crucially, in terms of defining a third wave black feminist epistemology that recognises the multiple oppressions of black women, also critiques the notion of black solidarity by describing how 'one sister called another sister "hoe"' (4). To build on Simmonds, Nelson points to the problems that arise when women use both the political labels, Women and Black, as unproblematic starting points for sisterhood, and fail to acknowledge the personal, economic, social and cultural differences that separate women (25). As Simmonds suggests '(mis)uses of the concept of sisterhood has left us...vulnerable to those sisters with whom we share commonalities' (23) fostering a sense of shared oppression and unity that conceals the oppression that women can suffer at the hands of other women. By dismantling the twin peaks of gender and gender-ethnic solidarity, Nelson's sonnet thus exposes the illusion of sisterhood and contributes to a third wave black feminism that acknowledges other factors dividing women, including race, class, and geography, that can contribute to their oppression.

The development of feminism from a monolithic theory of women's domination by men to a complex theory of a 'matrix of domination' (P. H. Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 21) by women of colour in the third wave manifests in the subjectivities in 'Sisters'. In Eleanor Brown's 'Fifty Sonnets' she adopts a female lyric 'I' and male lyric 'you', signifying the traditional feminist idea of gender oppression. In contrast, in 'Sisters', Nelson maintains the female 'I' but removes the male not only from the binaristic form 'you' but altogether from the sonnet thereby seemingly creating a gynocentric space that reflects the empowering community that feminists, particularly second wave separatist feminists, believed to exist between women.

The school bus drove us home from high school where
we got off in the Negro neighbourhood. (Nelson, 'Sisters' 1-2)

Indeed, in these first lines, the use of 'us' and 'we' precedes the use of 'I' suggesting the black female's sense of shared identity with other girls of her race and her sense of self not as an individual but as a group member, reflecting Fox-Genovese's thesis that 'sisterhood entwined and empowered' (13) women based on a 'common history of subordination and repression' (12). The emphasis on the group of girls disembarking 'in the Negro neighbourhood' ensures that this sisterhood is defined along racial lines, building on the sense of ethnic solidarity that black feminists promoted over gender solidarity. These black girls are shown to share a racial and geographic demography and the narrator's use of the plural pronoun forms underlines her belief in these similarities as sufficient grounds for an uncomplicated and constructive sisterhood.

However, as early as 1979 Toni Morrison had posited the notion of intraracial conflict in her speech 'Cinderella's Stepsisters': 'I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other, professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence' (qtd. in McDonald 3). This sense of intragroup tension was picked up in the 1980s and 1990s by hooks (*Feminist Theory*) and Nancie Caraway (*Segregated Sisterhood*) and continued to inform a third wave multicultural feminism that was insistent on recognising the multiple jeopardies faced by women and the differences that lay between them. Thus we find the unravelling of the illusion of sisterhood manifested in Nelson's handling of subjectivity:

several times a week there was a fight:
one sister called another sister "hoe". (3-4)

Here, the pronoun 'we' is absented as Nelson splits the collective grouping into 'one sister' and 'another sister'. The supportive, communal sisterhood is broken down into divisive, individual sisters, as Nelson depicts the different experiences, backgrounds, emotions and personalities that interrupt the cohesive script of sisterhood. Nelson's continued use of 'sister' to define the two girls even as they fight draws attention to the racial background that continues to unite the two girls but also offers an ironic portrait of the illusion of sisterhood. The symmetry of the words in the line highlights the girls' similarities, but the doubling of the words also highlights their separateness. The final word 'hoe' serves to differentiate the one sister from the other and, with its connotations of sexual promiscuity, points to sexual and emotional competitiveness as the source of the intraracial oppression. As McDonald argues, 'intragroup tension and at times...conscious and unconscious

discriminative behaviour...rears its ugly head in the competitiveness that black women sometimes feel and show toward one another in the...dating and marriage market' (5). Regardless of the nature of the difference, Nelson's portrait of the conflict and separation between two girls from the same racial background highlights the fact that commonality does not guarantee unity, for as Caraway describes there exists 'difference within difference and margins within margins' (186). Nelson also exposes the racism and fallacy of universal sisterhood as promoted by second wave feminists, by using the adjective 'white' to highlight the existence of race and identify it as a fundamental source of identity and difference, but crucially by presenting the 'white sisters' as the ones to undermine sisterhood: 'several white/ sisters walked on me as if I was dirt' (9-10). Although sisterhood claimed to offer a positive and supportive means of identification, Nelson shows that often it was 'a painful source of factionalization' (Mann and Huffman 59). The appearance of hostility and oppression coupled with the complete absence of the male serves to undo the gender feminist myth that women's oppression was singularly caused by men.

The prevalence of an idealised concept of sisterhood and its subsequent deconstruction in the third wave is manifested in Nelson's use of the sonnet form in 'Sisters'. Many of the black female poets of the era continued to choose to write poetry in more experimental, open and amorphous forms, as represented by the eclectic lyrics in *bittersweet*, including Akure Wall's 'Merman', Sujata Bhatt's 'Swami Anand', Merle Collins' 'Hoping' and Ntozake Shange's 'Oh, I'm 10 Months Pregnant'. In this context, Nelson's sonnet emerges not only as idiosyncratic, and potentially regressive, but also particularly rigid and inhibited: a fact that is

emphasised through Nelson's decision to use a strict pentameter in 'Sisters' rather than the expanded form used in 'Beauty Shoppe' which partially weakened the form's restrictive structure. 'Sisters' certainly invokes the traditional sonnet and conjures its associations of integrity, perfection and harmony, and in this way Nelson uses the particularly conventional form to represent the idealised notion of sisterhood that was promoted by feminists and in which the sonnet's narrator believes. However, the rigid and uncompromising manner of the sonnet harbours a sense of regimentation and control that begins to suggest the hegemonic nature of feminism's concept of sisterhood. That is the positive values of sisterhood – its harmony, unity and integrity – are not a natural phenomenon, but a very carefully controlled and regulated illusion. In contrast to a longer and less uniform structure which implies expansiveness and diversity, the limited space and monolithic form of the sonnet similarly speaks of the narrow and undeveloped status of sisterhood and the fact that it is based on a very limited ideology and range of women. As such, the sonnet as apotheosis of unity and coherence offers Nelson the means of representing the ideal of sisterhood, whilst its particular restrictions and circumscriptions start to expose the fallacies of that ideal. In order to show up the gap between the ideal and reality more explicitly, Nelson disrupts the perfection of the sonnet with her unusual rhyme scheme – abcdaebdceffgg.

Unlike the closely linked and realised rhymes found in the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet, in the original rhyme scheme Nelson uses in 'Sisters' she significantly separates rhyming pairs. Indeed, rather than the two lines between rhymes in the Shakespearean sonnet, and the consecutive 'a' rhymes and three lines between 'b' rhymes in the Petrarchan sonnet, rhyming pairs are often

separated by four lines in 'Sisters'. Given that Nelson fashions this scheme herself, it seems to have significance to the meaning of the sonnet, and indeed, it seems to signify the dislocation between women, and the weakness of the supposedly robust gender and ethnic connections. As such, whilst the rhyme figures the similarities between women, the intervening lines highlight the multiple divisions that inhibited uncomplicated relationships between women – Collins's notion of the 'matrix of domination' (*Black Feminist Thought* 21). For instance, if we take each rhyme to signify a different 'axis' of oppression ('a'=gender, 'b'=race, 'c'= class, and so on), we see the way in which points of similarity are disrupted by the intersections of various points of difference, preventing a straightforward or solid connection between individuals. The separation of the rhyming pairs in the sonnet leads to the rhyme being largely negated, such that the reader is left with a sense of dissonance rather than coherence. It suggests the way in which the connections between women are undermined, and ultimately can be lost, by the various divisions that separate them. The fact that the rhymes are not easily perceived but have to be sought out suggests sistering is not effortless but rather 'hard work' (Ang-Lygate, Corrin and Henry 1). Nelson's use and downgrading of rhyme in the sonnet suggests that connections between women are not absolute and stable but precarious and fallible, and as the different rhymes have varying degrees of success in the sonnet from the full rhyme of where/hair, to the semi-rhyme of hoe/although, so too, it is implied, do the relationships between women.

Nelson's variation of the rhyme scheme also serves to disrupt the overall structure of the sonnet. 'Sisters' splits into a ten line stanza and two couplets: a form which takes the Petrarchan convention of imbalance and conflict to a point of

irresolvable disequilibrium. Indeed, where the octave and the sestet in the Petrarchan sonnet are only slightly disproportionate suggesting the balance of conflict and resolution, here Nelson depicts the problem of sisterhood as one that outweighs any easy resolution. The appearance of two couplets reinforces this sense. Indeed, in the pertinently entitled subsection 'A Poem Inside a Poem: the Final Couplet', Clara Calvo and Jean Jacques Weber write that the 'couplet functions...as a conclusion, a denouement, but...also frequently expresses a moral, a piece of advice' (9). The single couplet thus offers a nice, neat summation to a sonnet. In contrast, Nelson's two couplets redouble the moral lessons of the poem emphasising that there is much to learn with regard to sisterhood and suggesting that no easy resolution exists. Nelson's revisioning of the sonnet's structure and rhyme thus serves to expose the imperfections of the ideal of sisterhood.

The deidealisation of sisterhood also manifests in the language of 'Sisters'. During the second wave, sisterhood emerged as a positive political discourse, with an ideal 'couched in the rhetoric of kinship' (Oyewumi), nurturance and affinity. In 1984, *Sisterhood is Global* – the sequel to Robin Morgan's foundational text in the field *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) – expanded the ideal to a global, universal sisterhood. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, with works such as Dill's 'Race, Class and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood' (1983), Caraway's *Segregated Sisterhood* (1991) and Carby's 'White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood' (1997), a less optimistic vision of sisterhood emerged, leading to the coining of the term 'sororophobia' by Helena Michie (1992, 9). Simmonds explains that 'out there in the real world, in the year that *Sisterhood is*

Global was published...sisterhood as a central ideology for feminism was being called into question' (21) and in 'Sisters' we see this clash:

The school bus drove us home from high school, where
we got off in the Negro neighbourhood. (Nelson 1-2)

These opening lines which literally depict the move from the school to the street, enact the move from theoretical sisterhood contained within the safe space of the institution to experiential sisterhood negotiated in the uncontrolled space of the real world. As the girls disembark the school bus, they leave behind the controlled environment of the academy and enter the outside world where the material and ideological differences between them have free rein. The juxtaposition of 'we got off in the Negro neighbourhood' with the ensuing line 'several times a week there was a fight' in which the narrative moves immediately from the girls entering their domain to them fighting highlights the prevalence and primacy of these tensions. The phrase 'several times a week' further indicates the frequency of these conflicts and highlights the extent of the illusion of sisterhood. Nelson's repetition of sister and its various derivatives in her use of polyptoton throughout the sonnet serves to conjure up the narrator's belief in a sense of kinship and unity. However, a language of violence and dissension works to undermine these values:

One sister called another sister "hoe,"
pulled out black handfuls of her straightened hair,
clawed at her face and hands, and ripped her shirt. (4-6)

Here, for instance, the juxtaposition of sister and hoe, the first a supposed term of endearment and connection and the latter a term of indignation and offense, shows the ease with which the positive relationships between women turn into negative relationships. Meanwhile the use of the verbs 'pulled out', 'clawed' and 'ripped' all point to the physical conflicts between girls. By the end of the sonnet, therefore, 'sister' is largely divorced from its second wave feminist ideal becoming an ironic term encapsulating not affinity and support but rivalry and antagonism. 'Sisters' emerges as a significant example of Nelson's contributions to a feminist narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the third wave.

'Chosen'

The black feminist movement of the third wave was founded on a need to differentiate black female experience, history and knowledge from the prevailing white archetype of mainstream feminism: to distinguish a black herstory – a conscious black female genderized history (Wright 288). Mainstream feminism purported to offer a feminist epistemology for all women, but as long as this theory was being driven by white women, it potentially expedited a racial bias that ignored racial differences. In 'Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave' (1982) Erlene Stetson outlined the importance of black women's chattel pasts to their histories, and throughout the 1980s, female neo-slave narratives emerged which challenged both the white 'authorial compromises' (Bell 8) and male bias (Aljoe 673) predominant in slave narratives to not only 'recover the marginalized and previously silenced' (674) voices of female slaves but specifically to 'realize pride in culture and women and

heritage' (Woo 313) that underpinned a black feminist epistemology. Black feminists like Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class* (1983), Barbara Omolade in 'Hearts of Darkness' (1983) and Darlene Clark Hine in 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West' (1988) engaged with the history of enslavement to figure an exclusive black feminism that acknowledged the specific interstices of black women's experiences and oppressions. Although the tradition that developed was largely dominated by the novel (Rushdy qtd. in V. Smith 169), it offers a crucial context for understanding Nelson's 'Chosen' and its importance to a female-authored sonnet narrative.

Diverne wanted to die, that August night
his face hung over hers, a sweating moon.
She wished so hard, she killed part of her heart.

If she had died, her one begotten son,
her life's one light, would never have been born.
Pomp Atwood might have been another man:

born with a single race, another name.

Diverne might not have known the starburst joy
her son would give her. And the man who came

out of a twelve-room house and ran to her
close shack across three yards that night, to leap
onto her cornshuck pallet. Pomp was their

share of the future. And it wasn't rape.

In spite of her raw terror. And his whip.⁴⁴

'Chosen' was published in *The Homeplace* (1990); a collection that records Nelson's family history beginning with the sale of her great-great-grandmother, Diverne, into slavery, ('Marilyn Nelson: Biography'). More than personal anecdote however, the collection represents the story of African-American history replete with issues of slavery, racism, miscegenation, segregation and enfranchisement. On a basic narratorial level, 'Chosen' addresses Diverne's rape by her slavemaster and her wish to die following this violation. However, the resultant bearing and person of her only son complicates the questions of domination, miscegenation and race.

Historically, as King made clear in her influential text 'Multiple Jeopardies' in 1989, the experience of black women was taken to be synonymous with that of either black men or white women: 'it is mistakenly granted that either there is no difference in being black and female from being generically black (i.e. male) or generically female (i.e. white)' (45). However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s third wave black feminists began to insist on the limitations of these narratives for black women, who, as Guy-Sheftall explained, 'experience a special kind of oppression which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identities' (2). In 'At Age 4' Candance Gardner's thematic of female sexualisation – 'bloodied residue/ of a torn hymen' (6-7) – emphasises the

⁴⁴ Marilyn Nelson, 'Chosen', *The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997, 84. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

expression of an exclusively gendered theme whilst race is completely excluded. In contrast, in Jackie Kay's 'In My Country' we find the expression of a theme deeply rooted in race in which the black female's gender is subsumed. Neither of these poetics therefore reflect the specific intersections of race, gender and other oppressions in black women's lives, but in the thematic of 'Chosen' we find the emergence of a third wave black feminist epistemology that recognises the 'dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism' (King 43) that distinctively circumscribe the lives of black women. Indeed, Nelson's theme is that of interracial rape and miscegenation in slavery, in which the rape of the black female by the white male specifically transforms the gendered basis of rape simultaneously into a racialised experience, underscoring Angela Harris' acknowledgment that rape is as 'deeply rooted in color' for the black female 'as gender' (598), whilst the focus on the enslaved black woman additionally serves to transform the racialised basis of slavery simultaneously into a gendered experience. Whilst the theme of rape presents a predominantly female experience, and the theme of slavery presents a predominantly black experience, the combination of the two helps to forge a uniquely black female experience that challenges both the masculine bias in the story of slavery (Stetson 62) and the white bias in the story of rape (Crenshaw)⁴⁵ and the black female's silencing and exclusion from both of these scripts. Indeed, as Angela Harris (598) and Merrill Smith (x) concur, for black women slavery and rape were interconnected in a way that distinguished the history of their oppression

⁴⁵ Not only is white women's rape likely to be taken more seriously than that of women of colour (Crenshaw), but significantly black women have historically been depicted, particularly in the image of the hypersexual jezebel, as 'always already aroused, available for, and open to sexual activity' leading to the conclusion that black women are unrapable (Mance 474). As Angela Harris summarises: 'rape was something that only happened to white women; what happened to black women was simply life' (599). The very possibility of black women's rape has thus been brought into question.

from black men and white women. Nelson thus figures the crucial intervention of third wave black feminist in the female-authored sonnet narrative through the emergence of a specifically black female thematic.

Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard assert that all forms of oppression devalue the subjectivity of the oppressed (199), thus it follows that by virtue of race and gender, as Ann Du Cille confirms, 'black women are not only the second sex – the Other in postmodern parlance, but...the last race the most oppressed, the most marginalized' (592). Indeed, slavery confirmed the black women's dual oppressions, as at once racialised 'objects of production' and gendered objects of 'sexual reproduction' (Alberto 279). As a result black women, took on another Otherness – a hyperstatic alterity (Du Cille 592); their experience during slavery, Dorothy Roberts confirms, 'provides the most brutal example of the denial of autonomy' (7). With the emergence of black and postcolonial feminisms in the third wave that sought to deliver a unique black feminist epistemology, authenticating black experience and challenging the dominant scripts of black women's lives, black women sought 'to speak critically and oppositionally from the still radically unspeakable position of 'the Other' (Wallace qtd. in Harrison 234), to investigate 'not only the history of Third World Women or their testimony but also the production of the colonial object' (Spivak, 'Feminism' 81). We find this search for subjectivity in the complicated realities of otherness pursued in 'Chosen'.

By making the black female slave the subject of the poem, Nelson immediately challenges her historic objectification. Her appearance in the very first word of the sonnet signals the centrality that Nelson's sonnet gives to the largely marginalised

and invisible figure of the black female slave. Specifically, by using her name, Nelson establishes a sense of identity – an affirmation of the individual rather than her subjugation to a racial, gendered or enslaved community. Whilst Diverne's son is also named in the sonnet, again to reinforce his humanity and identity, specifically given his precarious status as 'mulatto', the white slavemaster remains unnamed both as a denial of his significance and humanity, but also to suggest that his actions are not individual to him but indicative of the whole community of white slaveowners. Thus through naming, Nelson inverts the orthodox subject-object, superior-inferior, human-inhuman hierarchies of slavery elevating the black female slave from her circumscribed role.

Further, across the poem, Nelson uses fourteen nouns and pronouns to refer to the black female slave, in comparison to three used to refer to the male slaveowner. This serves to ensure that the emphasis and focus of the poem is decidedly on the enslaved black female. Indeed, one in just over every eight words in the sonnet refers directly to her. However, Nelson's use of the third person pronoun 'she' rather than the first person 'I' seems to compromise the subjectivity of the female. Indeed, in contrast to Maya Angelou's 'Phenomenal Woman' in which the first person pronoun serves to assert the black female's own sense of self and worth, Nelson's 'she' positions the female not as a woman defining or controlling herself but rather as a woman being defined and controlled. As such, it serves to symbolise the complicated nature of subjectivity for the black female slave, specifically, of developing an assertive and authentic idea of self when she was socially and culturally objectified both by her race and gender.

However, although the use of the third person pronoun threatens to objectify the female, Nelson's use of free indirect style challenges this simplified view. Indeed, we find in 'Chosen' the emergence of Diverne's thoughts and feelings: 'her one begotten son,/ her life's one light' (4-5), and whilst the indirect style of these sentiments serves to reflect the complex external pressures and expectations preventing the black female slave's open and forthright development of self, importantly they suggest the internal development of self. As Patricia Hill Collins concurs, 'black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradiction separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other' (*Black Feminist Thought* 110). Nelson's style of narration with its use of the third person pronoun that figures the enslaved black female's objectification by others, and the free indirect discourse that figures the black female's inner thoughts and feelings therefore reproduces this conflict of identity, whilst challenging the straightforward objectification of the black female slave.

The female's subjectivity is, however, complicated by the actions of the white male in the sonnet. Indeed, although the male is made only a minimal presence in the sonnet, all of his appearances assert his dominance and the female's subjugation. In his first appearance in 'his face hung over hers' (Nelson, 'Chosen' 2), he is given the role of subject, whilst the female, as the direct object pronoun in the clause, emerges as his subordinate. The depiction of his face hanging over hers presents an ominous and threatening dynamic, in which his physical position implies his material and sexual mastery of her and her powerlessness. In the second instance, in 'the man who came/ out of a twelve-room house and ran to her/

close shack across three yards that night to leap/ onto her cornshuck pallet' (9-12), although the male is only referenced once, Nelson uses zeugma to expand the noun's command to all three verbs which link together to ultimately depict the rape of the female. In the final reference, the male himself is metonymically substituted for 'his whip' (14) and in this symbol we find the very essence of the male's control over, and mistreatment and dehumanisation of, the black female. As such, it seems that the objectification and subordination of the enslaved black female is maintained.

However, in her 1990 essay on the slave heritage in African American women's novels, Barbara Christian, suggested that motherhood allowed enslaved black women to delve into themselves as subjects and emerge out of objectivity (97), and it is here that we find the ultimate triumph of black female subjectivity over objectivity in the sonnet: 'Diverne might not have known the starburst joy/ her son would give her' (Nelson 8-9). Indeed, despite the objectifying and demeaning impulses that are figured in the sonnet, Diverne's role as mother is shown to give her a worth and value that negates these circumstances. This is evidenced most significantly in Diverne's declaration 'it wasn't rape' (13), which although seems to suggest her acceptance of patriarchal ideology and abuse, actually reflects motherhood's ability to save Diverne from the potentially disastrous and harmful realities of her rape, to give her meaning and purpose. As such, 'Chosen' represents the unique negotiations of black female subjectivity, acknowledging the competing forces that have worked to deny the black female's selfhood but ultimately asserting her triumph, presenting a feminist revisioning of slavery that challenges adverse orthodox representations of the enslaved black female as a

helpless, ignorant or weak object instead depicting her as a resilient and honourable subject and thus serving as the basis for a renewed black feminist lineage and history.

Given the form's origins, the sonnet stands as the apotheosis of white patriarchy. As such, it poses a dilemma for black female poets, as Yomna Mohamed Saber explains, 'the sonnet as a form poses a challenge for black poets who endeavour to approach a Euro-American form while trying to prove their black cultural authenticity' (56). However, as a form in which the dual identities of masculinity and whiteness combine so intrinsically, the sonnet represents the multiple, concomitant oppressions facing black women and a zone in which the black female is confronted by negation and oppression. It thus serves as the perfect crucible for Nelson's poetics of black female slavery. Whereas Dove describes the sonnet as a 'beautiful bubble' that holds off the chaos which is lurking outside (xi), in 'Chosen' rather than a safe place that keeps people out, Nelson transforms the bubble into a prison that keeps people in. With its tight and hermetic shape, Nelson uses the sonnet to embody the enslavement of black women by the white patriarchal slave trade. The narrowness of the form signifies the deprivations and limitations suffered by the enslaved black woman, whilst the regimentation and structure of the sonnet genre reflects the harsh and inflexible proscriptions placed on their lives. As well as on the macro-level of the sonnet, Nelson also figures the circumstances of black female enslavement on a micro-level in her adherence to pentameter to suggest the ways in which all aspects of the enslaved black female's life were controlled and delimited. Specifically, as a staple of the white male sonnet tradition, the pentameter itself further signals the dominance of the white patriarchy. It would seem therefore

that Nelson's use of the sonnet and adherence to strict structural principles negates the subversive, critical and authenticating uses that black poets such as Sanchez and Clifton found in the form and thus situates 'Chosen' outside of a feminist poetics. However, in Nelson's division of the sonnet into tercets, we begin to see the emergence of this poetics.

Indeed, although the tercets are governed by pentameter and have a strong sense of symmetry and order that seems to continue the representation of female imprisonment and restriction, the fact that they are not particularly conventional or accepted stanza forms within the sonnet suggests that Nelson is challenging the dominance and orthodoxy of white patriarchy. By breaking the sonnet up into these atypical verses, Nelson compromises the immediate classification and aesthetic unity of the sonnet, thus undermining its authority and status. As such, it represents the black female revision to the dominant story of slavery. Similarly, the tercets serve to challenge the monolithism of the sonnet, presenting, at least relative to the sonnet, a much more flexible and open form that attests to the enslaved black woman's refusal to be assimilated or completely subsumed to the patriarchal order. The work of Mary Romero and Abigail Stewart on master narratives, and of Brinda Mehta on dislodging dominant narratives helps to illuminate the feminist signification of Nelson's tercets. Romero and Stewart argue that master narratives serve as frameworks which restrict and confine people (xiii-xiv), whilst Mehta argues that black women should embrace a particular strategy of transformational discursive transgression that deconstructs colonial and patriarchal world views (81-82). Within these contexts, the disintegration of the sonnet reads as part of a dialectics of struggle that sees the black female challenging the authority of the master narrative

of slavery. To borrow from Felski, Nelson's deconstructed sonnet serves to figure the hybridised and fractured experiences of the migratory subject (*Literature after Feminism* 87).

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldua contributed one of the most important theories of multiracial feminism – that of the borderlands, in which 'crossing over' ('La Conciencia' 77) and 'perpetual transition' (78) are crucial to challenging the marginalisation of the oppressed. Carol Boyce-Davies writes that 'movement and crossing over is a necessary antidote to the paralysis of oppression and depression' (11) and in this context Nelson's use of enjambment gains greater significance as an expression of the 'consciousness of expansion and dialogics of movement' (3). In the opening tercet, Nelson uses end-stopped lines which echo the sense of the female's resignation to her enslavement. She conforms to the boundaries that keep her in her place. However, in the second tercet, which figures the birth of her son Nelson moves away from the stultifying end-stopping towards a freer and more fluid form which continues across the remainder of the sonnet. Again we see how motherhood empowers and ennobles the enslaved black female to transcend the oppression of her situation. Although the regularity of the tercets suggests that Diverne is still physically and politically enslaved, enjambment signifies the fact that she is, at least psychologically and emotionally, no longer a victim to the oppression. Some of the boundaries that kept her subjugated and desperate have been overcome and the power of the male to control and oppress her has also been challenged. The enjambment between tercets specifically indicates the breaking down of control and limitation. We see, as Crystal Johnson suggests, the black female slave taking what little control she has over her life in order to gain integrity

and meaning (39). Furthermore, the enjambment figures a more ambiguous view of life, suggesting that male domination and female oppression within slavery, as well as the distinction between the white male slavemaster and the enslaved black female, is not so clear-cut from a black female standpoint. Thus in 'Chosen' Nelson creates a transgressive poetics that figures the dialectics of black women's oppression and engages with the contemporary politics of boundaries and disruption to underline a third wave black feminism.

Central to third wave black feminism was the acknowledgment and development of a black women's standpoint – 'a particular intellectual place from which people see and understand social reality' (Wheeler 23). Specifically, black feminist thought 'encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who actually live it' (Wheeler 20). Patricia Hill Collins has been instrumental in bringing to prominence the theory of a black female standpoint. She recognised that 'black women's efforts in dealing with the effects of interlocking...oppression might produce a standpoint quite distinct from, and in many ways opposed to, that of white male insiders' ('Learning from the Outsider Within' S26). Thus in contrast to white or black male standpoints on slavery, the black female standpoint offered the chance for a corrective to the misogynist, dehumanising and victimising narratives of women that could be used positively to outline a 'tradition of supreme perseverance and heroic resistance' (Davis 'Reflections' 216) and a 'legacy...[of] new womanhood' (Davis *Women, Race and Class* 29). It is this sense of a black female standpoint on slavery, in contrast to the coloniser's standpoint, that situates the language use in 'Chosen' within a third wave black feminism.

In the opening line of the poem, Nelson delivers a very emphatic, prosaic and sombre pronunciation of the enslaved black woman's death wish. This immediately serves to present slavery in its pessimistic and harrowing reality, refusing to mollify or conceal the experience. Karen McCarthy in the opening line of 'The Last Slavery Poem' uses a much more symbolic and imagistic language than Nelson: 'The thunderous sky sweats her bloody child/ Watch the bodies drop, flip flop' (1-2), which similarly presents a portentous and horrific depiction of slavery. However, whereas McCarthy's imagism offers a nightmarish vision, the metaphor makes this vision seem artificial and unbelievable, Nelson's literal language gives a very forthright and unequivocal tone to the opening that authenticates the desperation of the female slave.

Having clarified the position on slavery and the female's lot, Nelson turns to a more poetic, figurative diction in 'Chosen' that aligns it with McCarthy's poem: his face hung over hers, a sweating moon (2). In this, the second line, Nelson shifts immediately away from the prosaic and explicit. Here, the figurative language helps to censor the dehumanising and debasing image of rape and thus salvage for the enslaved black female some dignity. The first clause uses euphemism and metaphor to veil the sexual violative act, protecting the female from the horror and debilitation of the crime, whilst it uses blazon and synecdoche not to glorify the male but rather to reduce him from a powerful whole into a single body part thus making him seem less invincible. Further, by limiting him to his face, the poem crucially conceals his genitalia and thus the black female is shielded from the actual depiction of the rape.

In the second clause, 'sweating' serves to depict the male as a filthy and grotesque being, whilst also pointing to the aggressiveness of his sexual exertions. Meanwhile, the use of 'moon' as the vehicle of the metaphor serves to signify the male's race, but, also, its associations with the night and darkness, suggest the luridness and malevolence of the male's violation. In the later reference to the white male: 'who came/ out of a twelve room house and ran to her/ close shack across three yards that night to leap/ onto her cornshuck pallet' (9-12), although the language seems to be largely literal and neutral, Nelson's focus on the minutiae of the settings serves not only to establish the economic and social differential between the pairing but again to detract from the actual act of rape. Whilst the verbs describe the male's journey to get to the female, they all conceal more lurid and violent implications of male sexual mastery and exploitation. Thus in these ways, Nelson's language use serves to villainise the male without completely objectifying the female.

In contrast to the euphemistic, negating language used to depict the white slavemaster, Nelson's only use of poetic diction in the sonnet comes in the enslaved black woman's descriptions of her son:

her one begotten son,

her life's one light (4-5);

the starburst joy

her son gave her. (8-9)

Both images use a hyperbolic and grand expressionism that encapsulate joy and pride, and thus contrasts significantly to the tenor of the references relating to the white slavemaster. Specifically, where the slavemaster is represented with the darkness of night and the shadowy light of the moon, both images of the son figure incandescent light. Indeed, whilst the moon serves as a foreboding and funereal image of the white male's nocturnal life, suggesting both his insidious behaviour and his sexual conquests, the son's description as a star signals brightness and hope that takes away some of the gloom and pessimism associated with the night. He is, the symbolism suggests, the antithesis to, and subjugator of, the slavemaster: the protagonist of the female's narrative. Several poems including both Thomas Campbell's and William Blake's 'To The Evening Star' underscore the positive associations of astral imagery: 'Thy radiant crown/ Put on, and smile upon our evening bed!' (Blake 3-4). However, it is in Sara Teasdale's 'Winter Stars' that this imagery specifically serves to uncover a feminist poetics of aspiration:

From windows in my father's house,
Dreaming my dreams on winter nights,
watched Orion as a girl
Above another city's lights. (9-12)

Nelson's symbolism thus sits in these contexts as figuring the female's salvation from the horrors of her current life and the male slavemaster.

Further the images also harbour religious connotations. Indeed, the allusion to the star, its sense of hope and the figure of the son seems to conjure associations

with the Star of Bethlehem and the arrival of Jesus, mankind's liberator: 'When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy' (Matt. 2.9-10). Indeed, in Vachel Lindsay's 'Star of my Heart' and Eugene Field's 'Star of the East' stars are particularly associated with the coming of Jesus and man's salvation:

Star of the East! show us the way
In wisdom undefiled
To seek that manger out and lay
Our gifts before the child--
To bring our hearts and offer them
Unto our King in Bethlehem! (Field 13-18)

Similarly, the female's description of her son as 'life's one light' (Nelson 'Chosen' 5) echoes the biblical associations of Jesus with light: '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). The son thus becomes the Son, and emerges as a symbol of salvation and liberation. He is the enslaved black female's hope and saviour. In this context, the moon imagery can be re-envisioned as a symbol of paganism and thus the white slavemaster's heathenism. A religious reading also sheds light on the sonnet's title 'Chosen': 'But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet. 2.9). Rather than futile persecution, the plight of the

enslaved black woman becomes imbued with significance and religious purpose. She no longer sees her lot as hopeless and cruel, but teleological. Thus we find in 'Chosen' the essence of a black female standpoint on slavery and specifically a sense of how that standpoint feeds a meaningful and redemptive black feminist epistemology that allows the black female slave to emerge as a positive and important feminist figure. 'Chosen' thus emerges as a crucial example of the intersections between a third wave black feminism and the sonnet.

Conclusion

Within anthologies of the sonnet and black women's poetry, as well as within studies of the genre, the narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth century emerges as largely white. Whilst this reflects some literary truth in the earlier decades of the century, it cannot hold for contemporary poetry. The misappropriation of the term third wave within contemporary consciousness, away from its origins with a women-of-colour feminism, has significantly deemphasised the racial focus of feminism in the period and contributed to the continuation of colour-blindness within the female-authored sonnet narrative. It was during this third wave, which coincided with the unprecedented opening up of the sonnet to new voices and realities under New Formalism, that the sonnet became a more popular mode for black female poets. Perhaps this chapter more than any other shows the need for a feminist revision of the sonnet tradition and the importance of a historically grounded feminist relational aesthetics, and Marilyn Nelson, as one of the earliest black female New Formalists, offers a crucial route into this feminist narrative.

Her poetics of the sonnet reflect a black feminist epistemology in which the unique experiences of black women as they sit at the intersections of various interlocking oppressions critique and redefine the scope of the genre. Significantly, her sonnets engage with the fact of multiculturalism and the changing ethnic demographics of society in the 1990s to figure the black female's sense of identity and inclusion within an American tradition. As the world has become increasingly multicultural, so too has the female-authored sonnet but we stand to lose the multiplicity and diversity of the narrative if we subsume to the white narrative of feminism. Whilst, given the nature of this thesis, it has only been possible to address one of the many black female poets who have used the sonnet form in the third wave, an understanding not only of the racial origins of the third wave but women-of-colour feminism in general will help to illuminate the works of writers like Wanda Coleman, Wanda Phipps, Natasha Trethewey and Mimi Khalvati and continue the process of developing a comprehensive female-authored sonnet narrative.

Moira Egan and the Sonnet in the Postfeminist Age

The previous chapter has given prominence to the originary zeitgeist of the third wave – recognising the place of women-of-colour in both the feminist and female-authored sonnet narratives. However, third wave feminism is defined by its eclecticism – as proven by the diversity of titles in anthologies of the movement, such as ‘brideland’ (Wolf) and ‘how does a supermodel do feminism?’ (Webb) in *To Be Real* (R.Walker); ‘It’s a Big Fat Revolution’ (Lamm) and ‘Chicks Goin’ At It’ (Higginbotham) from *Listen Up* (Findlen); ‘A Tale of Two Feminisms: Power and Victimization in Contemporary Feminist Debate’ (Soriso) and ‘Hip-Hop Matters: Rewriting the Sexual Politics of Rap Music’ (Niesel) in *Third Wave Agenda* (Heywood and Drake); ‘The Transfeminist Manifesto’ (Koyama) and ‘Pranks and Fake Porn: Doing Feminism My Way’ (Wong) in *Catching a Wave* (Dicker and Piepmeier); and ‘Kicking Ass is Comfort Food’: Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon’ (Pender) and ‘“Wake Up and Smell the Lipgloss”: Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power’ (Munford) in *Third Wave Feminism* (Gillis, Howie and Munford) – and thus cannot be simplistically conflated with women-of-colour feminism or any other single theory. Third wave feminism has been further problematised by postfeminism and whilst critics like Angela McRobbie are keen to dismiss its importance and value (1), postfeminism offers a crucial context in the period for tracing new paradigms in the female-authored sonnet narrative.

When postfeminism first emerged as a term in the media in the 1980s⁴⁶, it signalled the 'pastness' of feminism (Genz and Brabon 3), part of a backlash rhetoric that served to dismantle and weaken the movement. It thus became seen as somewhat antagonistic to feminism. However, as Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford point out, within academic feminism, postfeminism became identified as 'not the "after the fact" postfeminism of the media' but rather 'feminism within poststructuralist theory' (168). As Deborah Siegel confirms, 'postfeminism refers to the challenges of current feminist theory and practices as informed by poststructural, postmodern and multiculturalist modes of analysis' (82). More generally, postfeminism has emerged as a new phase in feminism which is suited to a different generation of women in the new millennium who have both grown up in a post-second wave and within a postmodern world (Genz and Brabon 12). Julie Ewington eruditely sums up the position when she argues that 'it is not feminism we are "post" but one historical phase of feminist politics' (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 11).

Postfeminism thus rejects second wave feminism in favour of what have diversely been called 'lifestyle feminisms' (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* 5), 'groovy feminisms' (Heywood and Drake 1), 'individualistic feminisms' (Coulthard 172) or 'power feminism' (Wolf, *Fire With Fire* 147). These feminisms include variants such as Girlie feminism, Girl Power, Femmenism, Lipstick Feminism, Stiletto Feminism, Do-Me Feminism and Sex-Positive Feminism. Although some critics have dismissed these feminisms as apolitical, whimsical and even sexist with

⁴⁶ Although the OED notes that postfeminist in its nominal form first appeared in 1919 and in its adjectival form in 1965, postfeminism as a noun is deemed to originate in 1983 in *Time*, whilst there is also a strong case for it originating in 1982 in Susan Bolotin's 'Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation' in *The New York Times Magazine*. Certainly, the discourse of postfeminism that emerged in the 1980s marked its popular and contemporary usage.

the monikers 'feminism-lite' (Baumgardner and Richards 139) or pseudofeminisms (Faludi, 'I'm Not a Feminist' 487), others have asserted their feminist value, recognising that these lifestyle politics which are 'an expression of female agency and self-determination' (Genz and Brabon 12) are necessarily symptomatic of feminism today. Natasha Walter suggests that 'the further we get along the road to equality the easier feminists should feel about the decisions of individual women to wear traditionally elegant clothes, or to spend time waxing their legs or painting their nails' (*New Feminism* 86). Thus postfeminism is seen as representing 'feminism's growth beyond a unified political agenda and its fracturing into competing, sometimes antagonistic, strands' (Harzewski 151). Several feminists including Jessica Valenti (174) and Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (48) have echoed Wolf's assertion that feminism has as many faces today as there are women (Wolf, *Fire* 84) and postfeminism with its emphasis on individual feminism addresses the difficulty, even irrelevance, of any totalising, universalising or essentialist feminism. Therefore, whether or not we see postfeminism as a legitimate feminist movement, it represents an important moment in the narrative of feminism and a necessary and enlightening context for understanding modern women's lives and values. Furthermore, in the narrative of the female-authored sonnet, and its modern day manifestation, postfeminism is the feminist epistemology by which many of today's female sonneteers should be assessed, and it is in this light that this chapter will analyse the sonnets of Moira Egan.

To many, Egan is likely to be unfamiliar and thus her inclusion in this thesis may seem somewhat specious. However, Egan's sonnets sit clearly within the postfeminist zeitgeist of the age and represent this new tradition in the female-

authored sonnet narrative. She belongs to the rich, maturing and exocentric corpus of female sonneteers that have emerged in the last fifteen years and are clearly shaped by postfeminist debates. Indeed, her own co-edited anthology *Hot Sonnets* (2011) serves as an introduction to this new generation of poets who are taking the sonnet forward into the new millennium. This emerging generation of female sonneteers is particularly vast. However, the majority of these writers are still largely marginalised within the sonnet canon and have not been included in the latest transhistorical sonnet anthologies or sonnet studies, pointing to a significant flaw in the current canon and emphasising the need for a feminist reevaluation. Admittedly rather than a specifically gendered issue, the matter of exclusion is largely one of periodisation at this point. Nonetheless it is important that we begin to appraise and promote the sonneteering of the emergent generation of female poets to ensure that they are fully admitted to the canon and to prevent a continuation of the gender bias that currently thwarts the narrative.

Many of the contemporary figures in *Hot Sonnets*, in addition to several others emerging in contemporary anthologies such as *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* (2011), *I am twenty people! A third anthology from The Poetry School* (2007), and the annual *Forward* and *The Best American Poetry* anthologies from the new millennium could have been selected as the focus for this final chapter, however Moira Egan's sonnets perfectly encapsulate the varying faces of postfeminism and the emphasis on individual, lifestyle choices. The inclusion of Egan in the thesis thus represents the meeting between postfeminism and the sonnet taking the narrative of the female-authored sonnet into the twenty first century.

'Millay Goes Down'

Whilst the 1980s saw the battle for a new sex-positive feminism, its real impact has been on today's generation of women. Indeed, for women born and entering maturation in the 1990s and 2000s, sexual liberation was their birthright (Henry 90). It heralded the arrival of a new culture of sexuality, in which women were not only reunited with their libido, to reference Germaine Greer (qtd. in Weinraub 'Opinions That May Shock the Faithful'), but actively embraced and celebrated it. It became permissible, and thus more prevalent, for women to be sexually active, controlling, unreserved, experimental, explicit and promiscuous, leading to the birth of 'do-me' feminism, which Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon describe as 'a highly sexualised version of power feminism...that sees sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation' (91). As with other postfeminist discourses, 'do-me' feminism is open to criticisms of antifeminism and has been challenged as regressive, submissive and illusory: 'the new sexual liberation...looks too uncannily like the old sexism' (Walter, *Living Dolls* 34). However, for a new generation of women, who rejected what they saw as the old-fashioned, restrictive feminism of the second wave, 'do-me' feminism offered a paradigm that aligned with their idea of a 'feminism fit for the new millennium' whose sexual determination and agency served to demonstrate their rights and equality (Genz and Brabon 12). Indeed, it allowed women to take back control over their bodies and sexuality, to turn their backs on a hostile view of sexuality as victimisation (Walter, *New Feminism* 120) and to 'enjoy sex without being held back by traditional social expectations' (*Living Dolls* 84). It enabled women, as Tad Friend, who coined the term in 1994, suggests, to move 'from the paradigm of sexual abuse to the

paradigm of sexual pleasure' (qtd. in Henry 111). 'Do-me' feminism thus signals the ways in which women found feminism in sexuality in the new millennium. It is in this context that 'Millay Goes Down' will be assessed.

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why?
And where? Yes, there. That summer in the barn,
he'd spread me on the hay bales, sixty-nine,
oblivious to scratches, clothes half-on,
we'd take forever. Salty, sweaty both,
and kissing back the taste, each other on
each other's avid lips. I learned a truth
perhaps more grown than I was then, so when
a lady I know says she won't do this,
that that's what whores are for, it makes me sad.
It seems a gift, devotion at the source
of all our humanness; best when, instead
of needing gesture, pressure, *Please, go south*,
he softly asks me, Do you want my mouth?⁴⁷

This sonnet was published in *Spin* (2010). It exposes the pleasures and thrills of the sexual act, providing a modern, explicit and positive representation of sex for women that encourages a feminist rethinking of sexuality.

⁴⁷ Moira Egan, 'Millay Goes Down', *Spin*, Washington: Entasis Press, 2010, 55. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

In the new millennium, many discussions of feminism have centred on today's culture of sexuality, from Ariel Levy's condemnation of 'raunch culture' (2005) and Gail Dines' representation of 'pornland' (2010) to Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti's polemic of affirmative action 'Yes means Yes' (2008). This modern culture of sexuality is defined by an increase in acceptability, accessibility and explicitness of all things sexual: what Feona Atwood terms the 'sexualization of culture' (2009), Brian McNair 'striptease culture' (2002) and Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen, and Laura Saarenmaa 'pornification' (2007).⁴⁸ Whilst these terms, as well as the main third wave feminist texts, harbour an inherently critical attitude towards the new sexuality, there is also an acknowledgement of its benefits for women, even amongst its critics: 'it is wonderful to know that many women, just like many men...feel that they can now choose their sexual partners and their sexual behaviour with confidence' (Walter, *Living Dolls* 95), as well as a celebration: 'sex is a good thing. A great thing. Perhaps the best thing ever' (Valenti 33). This postfeminist engagement with, positive revaluation, and release from earlier models, of sexuality manifests in Egan's thematic in 'Millay Goes Down'.

The very title of Egan's sonnet underscores the sexualisation of the lyric. Indeed, although individually the words are neutral and even collectively allow for an interpretation of a descent or decline, within a modern context 'goes down' has emerged as a euphemism for oral sex and the erotic. If we compare this title to those of Nelson in the previous chapter from only a decade earlier – 'Beauty Shoppe', 'Sisters' and 'Chosen' – we see how the postfeminist culture of hypersexuality redirects the narrative of the sonnet. Specifically, the juxtaposition of

⁴⁸ All terms are taken from the book titles.

Millay and 'goes down' reflects the postfeminist generation's rewriting of, and liberation from, the sexual taboos and expectations of the past, showing how 'the shift into a culture of "post-feminism" alters the terms upon which a politics of "reading sex" is made' (Sonnet 167). We can see this cultural shift in the anthology *The Best American Erotic Poems: From 1800 to the Present* (2008). Amongst poets born before 1940, there are 41 erotic poems (73%) written by men compared to 15 (27%) by women. In contrast, for poets born after 1940, we see something of a sea-change, with 31 erotic poems (41%) in the anthology written by men and 45 by women (59%), and this shift is even more pronounced with poets born after 1960 with 9 poems by men (30%) and 21 by women (70%). Furthermore, the titles of the poems by women reflect the postfeminist culture of sexuality, from the suggestive 'Sonnet from the Groin' and 'Ode to Semen' to the downright carnal 'Bareback Pantoum' and 'How to Have an Orgasm: Examples'. Although this methodology is far from comprehensive, it shows women's increasing engagement with sexuality particularly in the contemporary world. Egan's sonnet, with its playfully erotic title, sits within this company and aligns with the postfeminist engagement with sexuality.

Whilst a number of sonnets from the period make sexuality their theme and thus align with the feminist affirmation of female desire, their themes just as easily confirm anti-feminist politics of sexual subordination and co-optation.⁴⁹ However, in 'Millay Goes Down', whilst Egan's theme is similarly female sexualisation, specifically she creates a feminist politics by figuring modern female sexuality in contrast, and as a corrective, to the restrictive and regulated taboos, stereotypes

⁴⁹ See for example Clarinda Harris 'Thunder', Julie Kane 'Finale', Susan McLean 'Your Other Women', Jill Alexander Essbaum 'I Swanned'.

and expectations of the past. Central to this is Egan's pastiche of Millay's opening line of 'Sonnet XLII' from *The Harp-Weaver* (1924):

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why?

And where? Yes, there. That summer in the barn,

he'd spread me on the hay bales, sixty nine. (Egan 'Millay Goes Down' 1-3)

Pastiche frees the signifier from its fixed frame of reference and shows how original texts become dispossessed by history (Perez-Torres 194). Egan's use and appropriation of Millay's line thus allows her to portray the resignification of intimacy in the contemporary context. Angela Alaimo O'Donnell takes the same Millayan line in her 'Homage to St. Edna: A Sonnenizio'. However, as the title attests, O'Donnell's sonnet is a panegyric to Millay. Using Kim Addonizio's invention, the *sonnenizio* in which a poem is constructed by appropriating the first line of another poem, then focusing on a particular word (or words) which is repeated across the sonnet to provide a commentary on a theme (Addonizio 33), O'Donnell fixates on 'kiss' and 'lips' to create a sonnet that draws out the intimacy, but ultimately shows up the modesty of Millay: 'as secret as the first kiss of the young,/ as chastened as the kiss of hand in glove' (9-10).

In contrast, Egan uses Millay's line in an ordinary sonnet rather than a *sonnenizio* not as a point of connection to, but rather of separation from the past. In Millay's sonnet, the line is composed in the declarative mode and introduces the sonnet's consideration of past loves. It encompasses themes of nostalgia and loss deeply rooted in the first wave's conceptions and taboos of love and is delivered in

a tone of regret. In contrast, although Egan keeps the line intact, she confines it to the poetic line and transforms it into a question. In doing so, the line becomes not a statement of loss but rather a playful probing of sexual experience. Themes of nostalgia are replaced by those of sexuality and the tone changes to one of veneration and wonder. Millay's sonnet of lost love and regret is metamorphosed into a sonnet of erotic remembrance and sexuality as Egan explicitly invites a rethinking of feminism and love within the terms of a sexually liberated and assertive contemporary world. Natasha Walter notes that 'in previous generations many women writers had to repress their physical needs and experiences in order to fall within social conventions...feminism was needed to release women from that repression' (*Living Dolls* 101). Although Millay herself was something of a sexually progressive and revolutionary figure, Egan's sexualisation of Millay's poetics highlights the contrasting feminist conditions of possibility for both writers and the ways in which a postfeminist 'do-me' feminism explicitly redefines the female-authored sonnet narrative. The use of Millay as a starting point in Egan's sonnet serves to enact the changing realities of sexuality: not least in attitudes towards pornography.

In 1999, Debbie Stoller wrote:

The terrain of sexuality is one that has until recently been conquered, navigated, and mapped out by the male of the species, leaving women behind to find our own way in the dark. From fucking around to cursing like sailors to watching porn to shaking our booties at the local strip joint, we are sexual adventuresses ... In our quest for total sexual satisfaction, we shall

leave no sex toy unturned and no sexual avenue unexplored. Women are trying their hands (and other body parts) at everything from phone sex to cybersex, solo sex to group sex, heterosexual to homosexual. Lusty feminists of the third wave, we're more than ready to drag-race down sexual roads less traveled (84).⁵⁰

When Egan turns to the portrayal of female sexual exploits and a celebration of non-vanilla sexual practices she literally turns her back on the modesty topos of her foremothers and joins other feminist poets who were navigating the 'terrain of sexuality' and travelling down Stoller's previously untraveled sexual roads, including Julie Kane – 'in that drive before you came/ you'd flip me over, finish doggy-style' ('Finale' 3-4), Sharon Dolin – 'the way you lick my breasts, my toes, my nose and O' ('Now That' 7) and Jenny Factor – 'I stroked my nightgown feeling oddly sick/ spread-eagled on the bed, finger to tit' ('Unravelling at the Name: 2' 13-14), 'My pinkie on the silk around her anus/ How she arches, pelvis lifts' ('Unravelling: 5' 8-9), 'I liked sex more/ Than kissing; all the textures – scrotum, cock' ('Unravelling: 9' 6-7). In describing the sexual positions ('sixty-nine', 'please, go south'), the bodily ('salty, sweaty both') and physical intimacy ('each other on/ each other's avid lips), Egan's sonnet exceeds the boundaries of the erotic – the idea of passionate love used by feminists like Steinem to salvage sexuality from pornography (241) – and approaches the somewhat problematic terrain of pornography that had been

⁵⁰ Moira Egan's introduction to *Hot Sonnets* parallels Debbie Stoller's affirmation of the multiplicitous and diverse sexualities when she writes: 'You hold in your warm hands a collection of exquisite sonnets that explore the joys of the one-night stand and of married love; the soft, the sweet, the warm embrace, and the crack of leather onto bare flesh; the gay, the straight, the celibate; taste, smell, (obviously) touch, and sound, and the visual, the "bivalve, cleft-fleshed fruit," "that wiggly bulbous member" (27).

admonished by antipornography feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon for its representation of the domination and violation of women ('Reflections' 1303).

Even third wave feminists found it exacting to reconcile the fundamentally pornographic impetus of the new hypersexual culture: 'the new conception of raunch culture as a path to liberation rather than oppression is a convenient fantasy with nothing to back it up' (Levy 82). However, some feminists began to see the myopia of antipornography feminism and believed an expansion of the pornographic imagination, based particularly around the production and consumption of pornography by women and the introduction of female pleasure into the debate would help to demystify and broaden it from a negative, monolithic, patriarchal construction, to a site of female empowerment and pleasure (Waters 256). Thus we find in Egan's explicit, yet positive, depiction of sexuality, pornography not as gratification or titillation for the male, but conversely an expression of female pleasure and choice that underscores debates surrounding gender expectations and restrictions, social attitudes and taboos. As Genz and Brabon confirm: 'sexuality...undergoes a resignification whereby it comes to be associated with feminist ideas of female emancipation and self-determination rather than its previous connotations of patriarchal oppression and subjugation' (93). Egan's adoption of sexuality as the theme of her sonnet reflects the decolonisation of the patriarchal and phallogentric, as well as the antifeminist, associations of sexuality and its feminist revisioning.

Although women had gained much ground throughout the twentieth century in achieving subjectivity, even in the 1990s and new millennium sexual subjectivity still

proved to be a point of contention, particularly with regard to heterosexuality, because of what Andrea Dworkin defines as 'intercourse in a man-made world' (1). Objectification became the shibboleth of women's sexual lives for antipornography feminists like MacKinnon, who argued that 'women's intimate experience of sexual objectification...is definitive of and synonymous with women's lives as gender female' (qtd. in Nussbaum 250), and Dworkin, who suggested women experience the 'reduction of humanity into being an object for sex' (18). Ultimately, objectification 'cuts women off from full self-expression and self-determination (Nussbaum 250), as Lina Papadaki concurs, 'she is reduced to the status of thing, something with no autonomy or subjectivity that exists solely to be used, and possibly violated and abused' ('What is Objectification' 21). However, 'do-me' feminism criticises as reductive this view of female sexuality and heterosexual relationships: 'unless feminists acknowledge the confidence and pride women have often felt within heterosexual culture, they run the risk of placing women as victims even when they are not, and so reducing women's potential power' (Walter, *New Feminism* 113). We have thus seen the emergence of a new 'knowing, active and heterosexually desiring' female sexual subject (Genz and Brabon 91) and a new configuration of heterosexual relations which affirm female power rather than diminish it (Wolf, *Fire* 201), and we find this manifested in 'Millay Goes Down'.

Indeed, it is the female in 'Millay Goes Down' who is given the role of the lyric 'I' and thus becomes the subject of the sonnet. Given the sonnet's sexual explicitness and erotic themes, the female 'I' specifically takes on the role of sexual subject. Thus we have a female not only talking about sex, but specifically celebrating the libidinous and asserting women's sexual desire. Egan offers what Baumgardner and

Richards have defined as the positive examples of women's subjectification: 'all have parlayed their sexual selves into power in feminist ways...They are whole women – both confident and conscious' (103). However, although the female is the subject of the sonnet, all uses of the first person subject pronoun 'I' come outside of the sexual relationship with the male. Within this relationship, in contrast, the female is given two first person object pronouns ('he'd spread me' (2); 'he softly asks me' (14)) and a second person object pronoun ('do you want' (14)). In contrast the male is never referred to with the object pronoun; in the sexual encounter he is given only subject and possessive forms of the pronoun. It seems therefore that Egan's sonnet endorses the anti-sexuality theory that 'objectification is inevitably present within all sexual relationships between men (who are by definition the objectifiers) and women (who are by definition the objectified)' (Papadaki, 'Sexual Objectification' 343). Rosalind Gill suggests that 'subjectification is just how we 'do' objectification today' (*Gender and the Media* 111). Indeed, critics including Levy (195), Walter (*Living Dolls* 5-6) and Redfern and Aune (60) have suggested that women's sexuality is simply a smokescreen of equality presenting liberation and empowerment when in fact women are actually just pleasing men. Indeed, when we compare the sexual subjectivity in Molly Peacock's and Jenny Factor's lesbian poetics we find that the female emerges, through the use of first person object and possessive pronouns, as the active, controlling partner living out her sexual desires unreservedly:

I reach my arms toward the inverted throes
of your breasts, and as I touch your orange nipples ('I Consider the
Possibility' 9-10)

My tongue set loose
finding where she wants me, sucking her,
my hand inside her. ('Unravelling at the Name: 5' 5-7)

Interestingly, in Addonizio's 'First Poem For You', by removing any masculine markers of the beloved, the narrator is similarly able to assert her sexual subjectivity:

When I pull you

to me taking you until we're spent
and quiet on the sheets, I love to kiss
the pictures in your skin. (7-10)

It seems therefore that female sexual subjectivity can only be realised in the absence of men.

However, in 1995 Martha Nussbaum radically redefined objectivity as delimited within anti-pornography feminism. Building on comments by Cass Sunstein that objectification could be a wonderful part of sexual life, she argued that the context of human relationships affected objectivity such that it could in fact be positive or benign (271). Nussbaum distinguishes between negative objectification (that of the anti-pornography feminists) in which a person's humanity is denied (249-250), and positive/benign objectification in which it is not, and, as Papadaki clarifies, may even

be acknowledged or promoted ('Understanding Objectification' 9). Benign objectification is defined in terms of: 'complete absence of instrumentalization'; symmetry and mutuality; 'a context of mutual respect and rough social equality'; 'intense concern for the subjectivity of the partner'; 'enormous trust' and; 'the surrender of autonomy and even of agency and subjectivity are joyous, a kind of victorious achievement' (Nussbaum 275-276). In 2000, Leslie Green further added: 'in ordinary sex we need others as objects in some of the most ordinary sense of the term: they are intentional objects of our desire, we want to see, smell, touch and taste their bodies. This is not yet sexual objectification, however, for that involves subjectifying them to our purposes without regard to their own' (45).

Looking more closely at 'Millay Goes Down' within these new terms of definition, we find that although the female is the object in the sexual encounter with the male and he is the subject, there is a significant emphasis on consent and consideration ('Do you want my mouth?'), enjoyment ('it seems a gift') and equality ('both'). Indeed, within the sexual act, the number of pronouns related to the female and those related to the male are completely equivalent and the use of isocolon as in 'he'd spread me' (3) and 'do you want my' (14) presents male and female in a reciprocal balance. Although the male may be the subject in these constructions, therefore, the consistent balancing with the female highlights the interdependence of the partners: a fact that is emphasised by the use of four plural pronouns within the sexual act in which male and female are united:

we'd take forever. Salty, sweaty both,
and kissing back the taste, each other on
each other's avid lips. (4-6)

'We', 'both' and 'each other' figure the mutuality of the sexual partnership and suggest equal levels of objectification and subjectification. Whilst MacKinnon and Dworkin talk of male and female as individual, and specifically antagonistic, entities when outlining their theories of negative objectification⁵¹, in the works of Nussbaum and Papadaki we find the emergence of reciprocity, and specifically, the pronoun 'each other' as a sign of a benign/positive objectification.⁵² Thus its appearance in 'Millay Goes Down' reinforces the sense of Egan's 'do-me' feminist revision of sexuality in terms that allow for the realisation of female power and agency in heterosexuality through a recognition of mutuality and reciprocity. Furthermore, we find none of the criteria that Dworkin and MacKinnon outlined in their Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance (1983)⁵³ in the representation of the female in

⁵¹ For instance in *Feminism Unmodified*, MacKinnon writes: 'sexualized objectification is what defines women as sexual and as women under male supremacy' (50), whilst in *Intercourse* Dworkin writes: 'in becoming an object so that he can objectify her so that he can fuck her, she begins a political collaboration with his dominance' (179).

⁵² For instance in 'Objectification', Nussbaum writes: 'in the willingness to permit another person to be this close' (275), whilst in 'What is Objectification', Papadaki writes: 'overall in their relationship they treat each other as more than mere instruments' (25).

⁵³ The Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance was originally composed by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon in 1983 to outlaw all pornography which it defines as including one or more of the following:

- a. women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or
- b. women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy humiliation or pain; or
- c. women are presented as sexual objects experiencing sexual pleasure in rape, incest, or other sexual assault; or
- d. women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or
- e. women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display; or
- f. women's body parts-including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, or buttocks-are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or

Egan's sonnet, nor largely the criteria in Nussbaum's (1995), and later Rae Langton's (2009), definitions of objectivity.⁵⁴ However, conversely, in the sonnet's conclusion, there do seem to be hints towards the possibility of female objectification of the male:

Please, go south,

he softly asks me, Do you want my mouth? (13-14)

Here, the sonnet ends with the male meeting the female's desire for cunnilingus. Both John Gagnon (qtd. in Knox and Zusman 'Sexuality') and Lauren Rosewarne (119) identify cunnilingus as a sign of the male's physical and symbolic subordination to the female, and, certainly, there is a sense of female pleasure and male subordination in these lines. However, in contrast to Amy Lemmon's 'Invitation' in which the sense of male objectification is much stronger thanks to the

g. women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or
h. women are presented in scenarios of degradation, humiliation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual'. (Dworkin and Mackinnon, Appendix)

⁵⁴ Nussbaum's seven criteria were defined as follows:

'Instrumentality': the objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes;

'Denial of autonomy': the objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;

'Inertness': the objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;

'Fungibility': the objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types;

'Violability': the objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into;

'Ownership': the objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc;

'Denial of subjectivity': the objectifier treats the object as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account'. (257)

Rae Langton added three more features in 2009:

'reduction to body': the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts;

'reduction to appearance': the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses;

'silencing': the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak'. (qtd. in Papadaki 'Feminist Perspectives on Objectification')

complete silencing and instrumentalising of the male, the hints of male objectification in Egan's conclusion are tempered by his volition and the female's refusal, as evidenced by her unspoken wishes, to demand or dictate the male's behaviour. As such, although the sonnet bespeaks the possibility of male objectification, it largely emerges more as a representation of mutuality, respect and equality that insists that sex does not have to equal exploitation (Valenti 53). Rather than simply objectification and victimisation, female sexuality understood from a 'do-me' feminist perspective can be a positive and empowering act of self-will (Sonnet 174). As Valenti argues, 'we're making the choice to participate, therefore it's powerful' (47).

In his essay on the contemporary sonnet, Stephen Burt argues that 'because we recognize the sonnet as a form from the past, a form with its own past, a poet who adopts it...acknowledges some sort of past in her poem' (246). Egan however not only acknowledges, but through the poem's title and opening line, deliberately conjures and elicits a first wave feminist past, specifically a past which predates the modern female sexual revolution and symbolises a patriarchal context of female sexuality. The maintenance of the monolithic structure of the sonnet and the regular shape of the form in 'Millay Goes Down', particularly in light of the opening up and revising of shape and form, not only in the radical innovations of poets like Emily Critchley in *Sonnets for Luke* and Olena Kalytiak Davis in *Shattered Sonnets*, but also the seemingly trivial dissecting of the monolithic form into conventional stanzas as in 'Infidelity' by Nausheen Eusef as well as unconventional stanzas as in Abigail Morley's 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy' and Doris Watts' 'Hammer and Anvil', thus creates a very traditional sonnet form that seems to project the sonnet's patriarchal,

antisexual ideologies and thus intrude in the sonnet's pro-sex politics. Indeed, unlike Amy Gerstler's 'Ode to Semen' which comprises a twenty two-line form with heterometric, unjustified lines and Catherine Bowman's 'Demographics' which comprises a fifty-three line form of alternate indented lines, in which both poets invent novel, irregular and expansive forms to express the jouissance and abandon of female sexuality, although the contents of Egan's sonnet very clearly assert a liberated and open sexuality, the structure and rigidity of the form seem to contradict these possibilities and deny a postfeminist poetics of sexual liberation. It seems that the sonnet form in 'Millay Goes Down' highlights what critics such as Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter have defined as the 'illusions of postfeminism'.⁵⁵ That is, the notion that whilst women have broken out of the cage of chastity, this has been replaced by a new cage of hypersexuality which holds women back from liberation and within patriarchal control (Walter, *Living Dolls* 101). The use of a sonnet form to figure a hypersexual poetics thus seems to align with this sense of women's sexuality, not as liberated and empowering, but rather as shaped, and controlled, by patriarchy, and consequently threatens to undo the feminist progress of the lyrics.

However, Redell Olsen suggests that 'contemporary poets...are involved in a play of identification and subversion of the forms and traditions of poetry' (49). He suggests that poets draw attention to form and genre before recasting them in contemporary settings (44). Specifically, in relation to postfeminism, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra write that it 'displaces older forms of trivialisation, generating a sense of newness, yet it also refreshes long familiar themes of gendered

⁵⁵ Taken from the title of the eponymous work.

representation demonstrating the ongoing urgency of sparking feminist critique' (22). For 'do-me' feminism, 'postfeminism trades on a notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist' (Negra 2), 'a joyous liberation from ideological shackles' (Gamble 44) and the emergence of a female who is 'assertive, exuberantly pro-sex yet determined to hold her own in a man's world' (Genz and Brabon 92). Given its history and structure, the sonnet embodied the rigid, anti-sex tradition that 'do-me' feminism sought to usurp. Thus rather than depicting the triumph of patriarchy and antisexuality, understood in light of Olsen and Negra, Egan's maintaining of form should be seen as erecting the old, conservative, patriarchal systems and expectations of female sexuality merely in order that they can be critiqued and subverted.

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why?

And where? Yes, there. That summer in the barn,

He'd spread me on the hay bales, sixty-nine. (Egan, 'Millay Goes Down' 1-3)

Thus whilst the opening line with its end-stopping and linearity mimics the traditional sonnet form, the rupturing of the second line and the insertion of caesurae serves to completely disrupt the rhythm and integrity of the line. The use of enjambment further denies the conventions of the sonnet. Importantly, it serves to prioritise content over form and, given that Egan's content reflects a postfeminist politics of sexual liberation, whilst the sonnet form, specifically in its unexperimental, rigid manifestation, aligns predominantly with the earliest conservative and modest tradition of intense yet, importantly, platonic and unconsummated love, we see how the ideologies of form are overcome to ensure a poetics of sexuality. In ignoring and

overcoming the expectation to lineation, Egan figures the female's refusal to be delimited by, or to adhere to, patriarchal expectations on her sexual behaviour. Whilst lineation serves to symbolise sexual restraint, modesty and propriety, as well as the control over bodily desires and urges and the independence of the individual, Egan's fragmentation of the line symbolises the disruption of the totalising discourses of sexuality and her enjambment figures the liberation and excess of female sexuality – the movement, dynamism, boundary-crossing and body-merging of sex. Egan's breaking down and out of the line literally leaves behind the sexually-repressed worlds of Millay⁵⁶, patriarchy and the conventional sonnet, highlighting the incompatibility of these expectations for modern women. The sonnet thus emerges not as a delimiting or negating force to a postfeminist poetics of sexuality but rather a source of satire through which Egan distances her sexual politics from the repressive systems of the past.

Egan plays with other elements of the form in order to destabilise and disrupt the sexual and gender ideologies and the universalising and totalising scripts of heterosexuality. For instance, Egan largely replaces the conventional end-rhymes of the sonnet with a system of half-rhymes and consonance that unsettle the visual and aural expectations of the form. No rhyme is given to correspond with the endrhyme 'why' in the opening line appropriated from Millay. This serves to reflect the divergence from, and irrelevance of, the modesty and constraint of the sexual past in the contemporary world. Although 'why' does share assonance, through its diphthong, with the endrhyme of line three 'nine', the dominant nasal sounds in

⁵⁶ That is the 1920s world in which sexuality was still a contentious issue rather than the specifically progressive subculture of Greenwich Village to which Millay belonged

'nine' overpower this assonantal link, again serving to suggest the postfeminist departure from the earlier context.

Instead of rhyme, Egan uses two main forms of consonance for the end words: the nasal 'n' sounds, outlined already, and the fricative 'th' and 's' sounds as in both/truth/this/source, with a third form, the plosive 'd' in sad/instead employed only once.

Salty, sweaty, both,
and kissing back the taste, each other on
each other's avid lips. I learned a truth
perhaps more grown that I was then, so when (5-8)

Notably, the fricatives occur not only at the end of the first and third lines here but across the quatrain – and indeed, the sonnet – as a whole creating a sensual sound that echoes the erogenous mood and erotic content of the poem. The choice of consonance instead of rhyme reflects a less permanent and fixed form that serves to represent a more fluid and permeable notion of heterosexuality marking the shift from monogamous life partnerships to the postfeminist free play of casual sex, as evidenced in Valenti's directive: 'have sex with whoever you like and as many people as you like' (32). Although the consonance is structured around a scheme of ababdcdefefgg thereby joining words together into pairs and suggesting the uniting of male and female into units, it offers much more plurality and interchangeability. For instance, 'barn' which connects consonantly with 'on' also links with its adjacent end-word 'nine' as well as 'on' and 'when' in the next quatrain. Similarly, all of the

end-words in the final quatrain this/sad/source/instead link with one another, as well as with 'south' in the rhyming couplet, via sibilance. This ambiguity and fungibility between pairings reflects the modern reality of sexual promiscuity and variety. There is no longer one set way of experiencing partnership but myriad choices that are available for women to explore. The fun and joy in finding unprecedented connections between words as is created through the consonance rather than the automatic connections made by rhyme points to the merits of sexual liberation over conservatism. That the only full rhyme in the sonnet is that of south/mouth in which both words link to the act of cunnilingus emphasises female pleasure and sexual fulfilment. It is a decisive and assertive expression of 'do-me' feminist politics and a significant challenge to, and revision of, the ideologies of the traditional sonnet.

In *Fire with Fire* (1994), Wolf wrote that feminism required 'a sexual yes as well as a sexual no' (199), and in the exclamation 'Yes' in the second line of 'Millay Goes Down', as the female begins to explore her sexual history, Egan specifically engages with the sex-positive rhetoric and discourse of 'do-me' feminism. This positive assertion serves to challenge the sex-negative discourse perceived as defining the sexual repressiveness of the second wave and earlier feminisms and broadening the range of valid feminist positions towards sexuality. By saying 'yes' out loud, the female 'changes the accepted passage of heterosexual energy' (Walter, *New Feminism* 117). That is she turns her back on repressive versions of heterosexuality that confine female sexuality to degradation, exploitation and profanity and proudly stands behind her sexual choices and behaviours in a way that empowers her. Indeed, like the essays in the 'Sex and the Thinking Girl' section of the *Bust Guide to New Girl Order* (1999), Egan's sonnet celebrates the

postfeminist realisation of pleasure and desire. The explicit referencing of 'sixty-nine' and to cunnilingus signals the rejection of shame and modesty and the emergence of freedom and control, situating the sonnet in a body of contemporary erotic poetics whose language figures the postfeminist undoing of sexual stigma and taboo.

In Addonizio's forthrightly titled poem, 'Fuck', she writes:

in the beginning was the word
and it was good, it meant one human

entering another and it's still
what I love, the word made
flesh. Fuck me, I say to the one
whose lovely body I want close

and as we fuck I know it's holy
a psalm, a hymn'. (43-50)

Thus she reclaims the word from obscenity and vulgarity, returning it to a sense of intimacy, even spirituality, to celebrate sexuality. In 'Francesca Says Too Much', Olena Kalytiak Davis figures the jouissance of sexuality: 'i was so alive! o, to again have/ someone's occhi and fingers and penes on in me' (11-12). Although earlier female poets, including, to some extent Millay and Rich, but certainly Hacker, had used sexually positive and explicit language, Egan belongs to a new postfeminist

generation for whom such language is much more available and prevalent, not merely as part of a counterculture or lesbian culture but of an everyday, heterosexual culture of sexuality and desire. All of these poems reflect in their open and positive representations of sexuality, the postfeminist challenge to the 'silence about sex, socially constructed modesty, and self-regulating repression of behaviour and fantasy' (M.Johnson 1), which Egan tackles directly in the second half of the sonnet.

In the line 'each other's avid lips. I learned a truth' (Egan 'Millay Goes Down' 7), the light, sexual rhetoric literally collides with a serious, dialectic rhetoric. The reciprocity of 'each other' is replaced by the singularity of the female 'I', whilst the erotic image of the lips is replaced by the metaphysical, theoretical image of truth as the sonnet turns from the simple pleasures of 'do-me' feminism to the political issues and controversies surrounding sexuality in feminist debate. This section of the sonnet contains the only negative construction in the poem: 'a lady I know says she won't do this' (9). Whilst this is a perfectly common negative form of the modal verb, its appearance reflects the change in tone as the sonnet moves from a joyful language of sexual licence to a sober language of sexual judgement:

a lady I know says she won't do this,
that that's what whores are for, it makes me sad. (9-10)

Here, Egan uses the slang term 'whores' pejoratively to suggest a negative judgement of female sexuality, which seemingly disaffirms all of the positive descriptions of sexuality in the first half of the sonnet. In Henry's *Not My Mother's*

Sister (2004) she outlines the ways in which the third wave feminists rebelled against the orthodoxies of second wave feminism. Central to this was a condemnation of what they saw as second wave's puritanical and regulating force (1). Henry argues that feminism was like a stern mother telling women how to behave (1), but many third wave feminists came to see these second wave mothers as 'embarrassingly out of touch' (Siegel 75). Thus when Egan credits the term 'whore' to 'a lady', a noun which connotes a specific class and maturity of women, she critiques the particular moralistic and old-fashioned attitude towards female sexuality rather than sexuality itself. The lady emerges as a rather pathetic and sorrowful figure and shows up the losses in living a life circumscribed by sexual morals. As such, although she does not embrace the term in the way that Tatyana Mishel does with the term 'slut' in her empoweringly named 'Slut Sonnets' in which the term is reclaimed as a moniker for female freedom and agency, Egan undoes the negative connotations of the word 'whore' by depicting it as part of a repressive and strict anti-sexuality ideology that is divorced from the realities of sexual pleasure and adventure. In the shift to a more serious and didactic language and a negative and moralistic attitude, in particular as it is juxtaposed with the light, positive language of the sonnet's opening, Egan systematically undoes the power and appeal of antisexuality feminism. The return to a description of sexuality as 'a gift, devotion' in the final lines seeks to expose the frailties and biases of the antisexuality thinking and to promote sexuality. Henry writes: 'reacting against what they find missing in second-wave feminism, many younger feminists are trying to create a feminism which can give them what they want: a sexual culture that includes joy, pleasure, and freedom' (113) and in the clash between a sexually explicit and playful language and an anti-sexual moralising and sober language we

find the 'do-me' feminist's rebellion against what she perceives as the failings of anti-sex feminisms. Within 'do-me' feminism, sexual pleasure – specifically heterosexual pleasure – is indicative of modern feminism and the journey away from the repressive scripts of earlier generations. 'Millay Goes Down' thus figures an important aspect of a postfeminist poetics that redefines the narrative of the female-authored sonnet in the twenty-first century.

'Bar Napkin Sonnet 21'

In her 1994 power-feminist manifesto *Fire With Fire*, Wolf writes that 'women are at a point in history when they are fed up with the reminders of their oppression, and are moved far more effectively by appeals to their strength, resourcefulness and sense of responsibility' (41). She thus envisages a move from the victim feminism of old which encouraged women to define themselves through oppression and vulnerability to a new power feminism that encourages women to define themselves through the pleasures and strengths of femaleness (58). As is the pluralistic, postmodern nature of postfeminism, there is no unambiguous or monolithic form of power feminism, it is simply that which makes 'women stronger in ways that each woman is entitled to define for herself' (143). However, one of the ways in which power feminism has been realised has been in the arena of heterosexuality – not simply sexuality as in 'do-me' feminism but also in the social and romantic relationships between men and women. Although several critics have commented on the revival of romance in postfeminism⁵⁷, there has also been a power feminist

⁵⁷ See Stephanie Harzewski *Chick-Lit and Postfeminism*, Stephanie Genz 'Singled-Out', and Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff 'Rewriting the romance : new femininities in chick lit?'

rejection of the conventional metanarratives of romance, as Walter explains, the 'romantic ideal which meant so much to previous generations of women, the belief that one day you would find a man who would be the love of your life and you the love of his has died' (*Living Dolls* 88). It is within this context that 'Sonnet 21' will be analysed.

I keep a file of pick-up lines. *Your smile*
is bright enough to launch a thousand ships.
Hey, Cleo, you're my lily of the Nile.
Where do you keep the winder for those hips?
Your ankles are so slender I could cry
or kiss your feet, or fall at them for life.
The literary one: *When small birds sigh...*
The honest one: *Distract me from my wife.*
And weighing in at worst, I think, *Your tits*
are dynamite. To that, I'm proud to say
(precocious, seventeen, I took no shit)
I said, *Watch out; they'll blow up in your face.*
Take note, my dears, who are so very clever:
I want to fall in love, but not for ever.⁵⁸

This sonnet is the twenty-first in a sequence of twenty four linked sonnets entitled *Bar Napkin Sonnets* (2009) which charts the experiences of an

⁵⁸ Moira Egan, 'Sonnet 21', *Bar Napkin Sonnets*, New York: The Ledge Press, 2009, 21. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

independent, emancipated and agentive modern woman engaging in drinking, socialising, dating and personal liaisons in the context of twenty-first-century life and expectations. 'Sonnet 21' engages in a postfeminist play with male wooing, in particular the technique of chat up lines. The female deconstructs several examples in a show of perspicacity and urbaneness undoing the power of male manipulation and expectation, and presenting her own relationship destiny.

Writing on female romance in the late 1990s and first decade of the twentieth century, Stephanie Harzewski suggests that 'whereas Adrienne Rich's thesis in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" is that heterosexuality operates as a nonchoice for women, functioning as an institution through which patriarchy is manifested and maintained', a new stage of straight relations – post-compulsory heterosexuality – has emerged in which women are less gullible towards romantic myths, less dependent on, or directed by, relationships and may remain celibate (11). This 'post-compulsory heterosexuality' offers what Whelehan defines as a 'postfeminist narrative of heterosex and romance' (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 85) – that is a new, pragmatic vision of love and relationships that has emerged with a new generation of women who have grown up in a period in which postmodernism has deconstructed the principles of romance, in which feminism has given them agency, independence and choice, and in which new dating and relationship patterns – including the rise of the singleton and the increased age of marriage for women – have redefined the heteroscript (Harzewski 3-4). We see the impact of this postfeminist narrative on the sonnet in the theme of 'Sonnet 21'.

Indeed, far from the idealisation of love and relationships that defined the traditional sonnet at the start of the twentieth century, Egan offers us a cynical portrait of modern dating and romance. The theme is not the power or grandeur of love and women's convictions in it, but rather the superficiality and transience of lust, depicted through the central motif of the chat-up line, and specifically women's cognisance of, and resistance to, male tactics. In seeing through the male chat-up lines as expressions of romance to performances of entrapment we see the shift from victim to power feminism and the realisation of women's agency, choice and autonomy in relationships. The postfeminist woman of the sonnet is both more assured in her sexuality and less dependent on the male for safety, security and happiness. She is no longer the unknowing victim of male desire and lust and is confident enough to reject men and follow her own script of love.

In Julie Stoner's 'Dear John (Drafts 1-4)' the power feminist narrative of post-compulsory heterosexuality emerges in the female's refusal to accept, and subsequent ending of, an unsatisfying relationship. Again the grand narrative of love is shown to be outdated and flawed within a postfeminist context that recognises the realities of affairs, sex, promiscuity and divorce. In Stoner's sonnet, the female only emerges into power once she has experienced, and arguably got hurt in, compulsory heterosexuality. Similarly, Kathrine Varnes' sonnet sequence 'His Next Ex-Wife' depicts the female as victim of the male's extramarital transgressions, but whereas Stoner's female leaves the relationship empowered, Varnes' female assumes a slower transition into power. In contrast to both Stoner and Varnes, Egan's sonnet represents an empowering portrait of female agency and volition without the negative associations of mistreatment or exploitation. In choosing to

focus not on love, sex or partnerships, but rather dating and singlehood, Egan presents a more powerful situation for the female. Thus Egan's portrait of the female's pragmatism and control over dating and relationships situates the sonnet within a power feminist depiction of post-compulsory heterosexuality.

Wolf, in *Fire With Fire*, popularised the notion of a contemporary genderquake: a shift in power from men to women that has 'changed forever what it means to be female' (57). Although Wolf writes predominantly about the genderquake in terms of political and social power, in the new millennium, this power has also infiltrated the personal and romantic spheres, redefining gender roles, hierarchies and relationships as we see in 'Sonnet 21'. On a very basic level, we find the female as the subject of the sonnet. Indeed, the female 'I' is omnipresent throughout the sonnet, appearing as the first word of both the sonnet's opening and closing lines thus marking her significance. Although not a particularly intrinsic innovation for this period, within the context of a post-compulsory heterosexuality, replete with a less idealised, even critical conception of love, the prioritisation and use of a female subject begins to uncover the genderquake, specifically the changing role of women from their complicitous belief and congenial role in the heterosexual union to their antagonistic and autonomous position as independent women.

In Sharon Dolin's 'Now That I Have Lain With You' which does not engage with a post-compulsory heterosexuality but rather continues the theme of romantic bliss – 'Away, my soul's conjoined, I'm twain with you' (8) – despite the use of 'I' the female subject of the poem emerges as significantly less powerful and independent. In constructions, such as 'I'm proud to say' (Egan, 'Sonnet 21' 10) and 'I took no shit'

(11), in contrast, Egan's female signifies her staunch and disruptive independence. Significantly, in all of the constructions that feature the female I there is never a (direct) male subject, as such the female emerges as a strongly autonomous woman who neither views herself as a correlative to the male nor for whom the male is either a necessity or an auxiliary for her self. In contrast, in Laura Maffei's 'The Gambit', although the poem adopts a female I, she defines herself specifically through her relationship to the male and specifically in deference and dependence on him: 'you finesse/ a mini-violation and I laugh' (4-5). In Jill Alexander Essbaum's 'Oh We Are Dancing' even though the male singular subject is used only once in the expression 'oh you' (14) its positioning as the very final words of the poem reinstate his importance and expose the whole of the female performance as revolving around him. Even when the female is given the seemingly agentive role in a relationship with the male, as in Amy Lemmon's 'Invitation', she is still shown to need the male: 'I'll entertain your body's carnival' (14). Baumgardner and Richards wrote that 'women need to be free agents of their own destinies' (33) and by eschewing her identification with, and dependence on, the male, specifically through denying the traditional binary of I/you in her sonnet, Egan dissociates her sonnet from the patriarchal and heterosexual imperatives of these other poems, enabling her female to emerge as a powerful and independent free agent.

However, Egan does include the male in the sonnet. Indeed, around three quarters of the sonnet is assigned to a series of male voices. Compared to a majority of female-authored sonnets which are entirely given to the female voice, including Maggie Wells' 'Sonnet to the Groin' and Egan's own 'Millay Goes Down',

the male voices in 'Sonnet 21' account for a significant and commanding proportion of the sonnet that thus greatly reduce and eliminate the female:

Hey, Cleo, you're my lily of the Nile. (3);

Where do you keep the winder for those hips? (4);

*Your ankles are so slender I could cry
or kiss your feet, or fall at them (5-6);*

When small birds sigh...(7);

Distract me from my wife. (8);

*Your tits
are dynamite. (9-10)*

Furthermore, within these male chat-up lines, we find the male as subject and the female as object. Indeed, although the female appears as subject six times in the sonnet, within the male discourse she appears equally as often as object. The male voices thus threaten to challenge female subjectivity and to restore patriarchal order within the sonnet. However, Harzewski writes that the 'heroine's relation to men is often closer to that of the picaresque than that of romance' (33). Ultimately, she argues that the heroine comes to displace the hero who himself is relegated to

cipher (33). In the female's satiric ventriloquism of the male in Egan's sonnet we see this scenario played out.

Indeed, the caveat 'I keep a file of pick-up lines' (1) that precedes the male chat-up lines signals the female's appropriation and control over the male's words and directs our interpretation away from a straightforward, objective reading that may emphasise the traditional gender hierarchies and roles denoted in the lines, to a critical, feminist reading that highlights the patriarchal prerogative of the words and encourages us to reject their ideology of gender relationships. Specifically, although the words originally belonged to the male, the female excludes him from the poem and in relinquishing his words, we see the genderquake in action. The italicisation of the chat-up lines, which contrasts with the roman typography of the female's words and offers a more artificial and pretentious form that underscores their performativity, further serves to subvert the power and authority of the male's words and thus their patriarchal emphasis. Similarly in '*When small birds sigh...*' (7), the female's abbreviations of the male's speech interrupt the patriarchal logic and intent not only of the current male speaker but also of the original male speaker of Theodore Roethke's sensually phallogentric and voyeuristic poem 'I Knew a Woman' from whence this phrase is appropriated. Despite, the presence of the male's rhetoric therefore, the satirical framework that the female clearly develops ensures that the male subject/female object binary is completely invalidated. The use of five female first person pronouns in the sestet and the turn away from the male to the female perspective and discourse embodies the rejection and obsolescence of these patriarchal narratives and the triumph of power feminism. Egan's sonnet thus

displaces the traditional romantic heterosexual binary and hierarchy with a power feminist assertion of female independence and control.

Astrid Henry in a subsection of her text *Not my Mother's Sister* entitled 'Heterosexuality: the love that finally does speak its name?' identifies the reclamation of heterosexuality as central to the third wave's disengagement from second wave feminist politics (113). Indeed, in contrast to what Walter defines as the second wave's suspicion and antipathy to heterosexual love (*New Feminism* 106-7), the third wave has seen a resurgent focus on heterosexual love, as Henry identifies (111). The reinstatement of heterosexual love has lent itself to a revival of the sonnet – traditionally the mode of the love lyric – in contemporary poetry, and although the new millennium has seen some of the most radical experimentations with the sonnet amongst female poets, including Juliana Spahr and Karen Volkman, within heterosexual poetics we find a penchant for formal conservatism, exemplified by the likes of Kathrine Varnes. Indeed of sixty seven poems in *Hot Sonnets*, only five depart significantly from a conventional sonnet formula, and one of these – Peacock's 'I Consider the Possibility' – comprises a lesbian poetics which specifically figures the narrator's deviation from her heterosexuality towards a lesbian experimentation that accounts for the divergence from a traditional to an innovative form. Egan's choice of the sonnet in her 'Bar Napkin' sequence thus sits within this context as a means of engaging with heterosexuality and love, but rather than always adhering to form in the sequence, Egan's sonnets show varying degrees of formalism. In 'New Year's Eve with Caesura', she foregoes practically all of the formal conventions of the sonnet, except the criteria of fourteen lines, dissecting the sonnet into two columns separated by a tab break and opting out of

any tangible rhyme or metre. Elsewhere, in 'Bar Napkin Sonnet 7' she includes some degree of rhythm and unity but denies a straightforward classification of rhyme or mode. In 'Bar Napkin Sonnet 21', however, the sonnet is conspicuously conventional. Indeed, visually, the sonnet forms the traditional quadratic shape and as such contrasts with its paired 'Sonnet 20' whose lines form arcs on the page. Furthermore, the conventions of rhyme and metre are also largely adhered to. The formal conventionality of 'Sonnet 21' is thus significant and seems to conjure and reinforce the traditional patriarchal narrative of heterosex and romance.

However, as the content attests, Egan's sonnet is not a glorification of, or commitment to, heterosexual love, but rather a satirical and picaresque play of romantic ideals informed by the post-compulsory narrative of heterosexuality and a postfeminist spirit of rebellion and independence. Egan's use of a formally conventional sonnet therefore must be read as an example of feminist parody. Cuddon defines parody as 'the imitative use of the words, style, attitude, tone and ideas of an author in such a way as to make them ridiculous...a kind of satirical mimicry' (640). Linda Hutcheon has been particularly integral to explaining parody's importance to a feminist poetics. She writes, 'by using postmodern parodic modes of installing and then subverting conventions...representations of women can be 'de-doxified' (147). This can help explain the tendency to formal conservatism in several of the poems in *Hot Sonnets*. Indeed, female poets can be seen to use the sonnet to conjure the original mode with its patriarchal ideologies before using subversive and satiric content to dissociate their poetics and politics from, and to expose the irrelevance and anachronism of, the sonnet's past. Egan's strict sonnet form in 'Sonnet 21' is thus played off against the critical and parodic treatment of

male seduction in the content to become a feminist source of 'postmodern parodic' (Hutcheon 147). The conventional sonnet comes to reflect the trite, old-fashioned and artificial nature of the male's seduction. Indeed, the poem seems to suggest that the traditional sonnet is as clichéd as the male chat-up line.

Whilst the content points to the satiric treatment of form, the use of rhyme also serves to underwrite the conventional idealised narrative of heterosex and romance. Egan's use of perfect rhyme distinguishes 'Sonnet 21' from other sonnets in the sequence, including the half rhyme of 'Sonnet 6' as in 'pretty/energy', 'water/order', the assonance of 'Sonnet 16' as in 'wife/lights', 'own/home', and the final eye rhyme in 'Sonnet 11' of 'one/alone'. The perfect rhymes of 'Sonnet 21' keep up the conventions of the sonnet and thus seem to perpetuate the traditional romance narrative of the genre. However, as with form, rhyme serves not a purely formal, but a parodic, function in Egan's 'Sonnet 21'. Indeed, the use of perfect rhyme exaggerates the perfection of the sonnet in such a way as to emphasise the artifice and bombast of the male's seduction. Furthermore, the actual rhyming words Egan chooses subvert and ridicule the harmonising and idealising unity of the rhymes and the sense of romance therein. In smile/Nile the cliché of the imagery serves to satirise the male's triteness and show up the triviality of the romantic illusions. Meanwhile, despite the romantic gestures in 'Your ankles are so slender I could cry' (5) and 'When small birds sigh' (7), Egan's rhyme of cry/sigh surreptitiously and ironically subverts the positive associations in the line by emphasising these negative words, thus transforming the portrait of grand romance into a subtle critique of a more melancholy and frustrated romantic experience. Egan draws out the negative undertone veiled deeply within the male's romantic idealism to expose

the darker and less favourable side of romance that lurks behind the romantic facade. Thus when the words *life/wife* convene the perfect rhyme creates a foreboding patriarchal sense of wifedom's vassalage. Significantly the use of traditional end-stopped lines, which again imparts the formal idealism of the traditional sonnet, emphasises these rhyming words such that their disruptive and subversive force is amplified and the idealism of the male's words is undermined. Furthermore, whilst enjambment instils a sense of discursive realism and authenticity, end-stopped lines, particularly in the contemporary era, can appear artificial, even bombastic. Therefore, the rigid linearity of 'Sonnet 21' rather than connoting poetic perfection satirises the inauthenticity of the male's seduction.

In the second half of the sonnet, in which the male's speech is replaced by the female's cogitations, the rhymes become less clichéd and more polemic. In '*tits/shit*', Egan merges the less romantic, more sexualised male reference with the unpretentious and combative female expletive. The off-rhyme of the pairing and the impudent nature of the rhyming words highlights the defective and degenerative nature of the modern heterosexual partnership. Unlike the full rhymes in the octave that underpin the male's illusions and pretensions to heterosexual unity and harmony, the disjunctive rhymes of the sestet reflect the female's refuting of these ideals and her disinclination to the sort of asinine and arbitrary relationships defined in the male's chat-up lines and symbolised by the perfect rhyme. Thus in '*say/face*', full rhyme is replaced by assonance and the imperfection of the rhyme bespeaks the feminist challenge to the myths of heterosexuality. Finally, Egan ends her sonnet with a feminine rhyme '*clever/ever*' that contrasts with all of the preceding masculine rhymes. The usurpation of the masculine norm by the feminine rhyme in

the final couplet enacts the ultimate feminist rejection of the male ideology and undoes the patriarchal imperatives of the earlier lines. The extra syllable that defines the feminine from the masculine rhyme also shows up the simplicity and lack of sophistication of the male form, again serving to ridicule and reject patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, whereas masculine rhyme is used in the alternate lines of the sonnet's arch-rhyme and suggests the dissonance of the patriarchal logic, the use of feminine rhyme in the adjacent lines of the couplet gives greater harmony and thus force to the feminine rhyme. Egan's handling of rhyme thus reflects power feminism's ability to disrupt and rearticulate patriarchal realities in line with the progress of modern women.

Wolf writes that power feminism 'examines closely the forces arrayed against a woman so she can exert her power more effectively' (*Fire* 149). This can help explain Egan's focus on the language of the male in 'Sonnet 21'. Indeed, as has already been established, the majority of the sonnet is given to examples of male language use but, in line with Wolf, we are encouraged to uncover the ways in which Egan uses this to discredit the power of the male and empower the female, most importantly through the application of metaphoric and figurative language. Indeed of the seven male chat-up lines, six use some form of figurative language. The opening example establishes the pervasiveness and fundamentality of this phenomenon:

Your smile

is bright enough to launch a thousand ships. (1-2)

Here the language seems to venerate the female, specifically through the figurative expression of the idiom. However, metaphor and figuration are deeply rooted in the tradition of rhetoric, what Cuddon defines as 'the art of using language for persuasion' (747). Thus we are encouraged to see beyond the mere illocutionary function of the male's language to uncover its perlocutionary function as sexual manipulation. Rather than informative and factual, the figurative language uncovers the persuasive and directive imperative behind the male's words. Thus in the extensive use of metaphor in the male's language, Egan points to the artifice and performance of the male's words, ultimately compromising their power over the female. As such, in this example, the hyperbole of the rhetoric uncovers the sycophancy of his words, whilst the use of a commonplace idiom reflects the vacancy of his sentiments and his indifference to the woman. Indeed, the generic nature of the idiom and lack of any specific personalisation suggests that the line is used without thought or meaning. By substituting 'face' in the traditional idiom for 'smile' it may suggest the male's attention to, and interest in, this particular female. However, the reference to a bright smile actually adds another generic cliché, thereby doubling the artifice and vacancy of his words, whilst the shift from face to smile indicates the narrowing of the male's focus and an even greater disinterest in the female as a whole and complete individual. Furthermore, the reference to launching ships represents a historical reality that has largely little significance or relevance in modern life and thus again shows the meaningless of the male's words. Ironically, the idiom also harbours a rebellious feminist element that undermines the very patriarchal prerogative of the male's words. Indeed, the idiom originates from Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1604) and refers to Helen of Troy. Although the phrase alludes to Helen's beauty, and this is the meaning behind

the male's words in the sonnet, it also points to Helen's power to control and manipulate men, as the original lines from *Doctor Faustus* elucidate:

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? (12: 81-82)

The male seems ignorant of the subversive feminist potential in his words, but Egan's use of the image encourages this sense of latent female power, which is followed up in the subsequent chat-up line:

Hey, Cleo, you're my lily of the Nile. (3)

Here, the male refers to Cleopatra, but as with the allusion to Helen, seems unaware of the feminist association. For him, Cleo serves as a pun that gives meaning to his reference to the female as 'lily of the Nile' and establishes the sense of the female's importance and value to him. However, like Helen, Cleopatra wielded a significant power and authority. As ruler, Cleopatra was the dominant figurehead, and all of her male subjects were thus her inferior and at her mercy. Thus whilst the male words assert his possession and sovereignty over the female, the allusion to Cleopatra subverts this definition and places the male in the female's thralldom. The use of a metaphor also serves to highlight the artifice of the male's words. Indeed, rather than a literal declaration of the female's qualities, the implicitness of the metaphor denies any real substance to the male's compliment. Furthermore, as David Putner explains, 'although metaphor undoubtedly deals in likeness, similarity, it also deals in unlikeness and dissimilarity... challenging our

notions of the similarity that exists between things; how alike they are; and in what ways, in fact, they are irreconcilably unlike' (9). Thus here, although the male attempts to compare the female to Cleopatra and a flower, the metaphor actually serves to emphasise the disparity between them and uncover the male's disingenuity. Rather than amplifying his sentiments, the metaphor dilutes them. Again the male's words are deflated and his power over the female undone.

In 'The literary one: *When small birds sigh...*' (7), Egan makes the feminist deconstructive and interpretative frame explicit thus ensuring that the male's words are never read objectively and that the seemingly sentimental and charming locutionary expression is disrupted. By defining the words as 'the literary one' Egan encourages us to identify Roethke's 'I Knew a Woman' (1958) as the source of the expression and the means to uncover the male's intention. Karl Markoff writes that at first glance Roethke's poem seems 'completely innocent', but, citing the line 'what prodigious mowing we did make' in which he identifies 'mow' as denoting sexual intercourse in Scottish dialect, notes that 'even lines easily passed over have hidden sexual connotations' (qtd. in Nelson and Kalaidjian). Other sexual puns within the poem are more obvious: 'she taught me Touch, that undulant white skin' (Roethke 10), 'coming behind her for her pretty sake' (13), 'these old bones live to learn her wanton ways:/ (I measure time by how a body sways.)' (27-8). Roethke's poem with its double meanings thus embodies perfectly the duplicitous meanings of the male chat-up lines, exposing the artifice of male romantic sentiment. The power and significance of male language, particularly romantic language and its effects on the female, are thus undermined and rearticulated in 'Sonnet 21', and in the sestet we see in the language attributed to the female her immunity to these male

deceptions and ultimately her power and agency. 'Sonnet 21' thus signals the significance of this postfeminist discourse in the female-authored sonnet narrative.

'Bar Napkin Sonnet 1'

'One of the biggest problems with feminism', writes Wolf, 'is that women fear that it has come to embody a rigid code of required attitudes and types of behaviour' (*Fire* 66): this however has begun to change in the new millennium with the advent of lifestyle and 'pick n mix' feminism. Whilst lifestyle feminism argues that 'everyone has their own version of feminism (Valenti 174)', 'pick n mix' feminism asserts women's rights to choose from various feminisms to forge their own definitions, as Baumgardner and Richards explain: 'today, women can be as serious as Friedan and as sexual as Gurley Brown' (153). hooks has criticised these new individual feminisms for removing the movement's political drive and clarity (*Feminism is for Everybody* 5-6), whilst Phyllis Chesler deems the emerging 'pick n mix' feminism as selfish ('Selfishness'). Unquestionably lifestyle and 'pick n mix' feminisms are personal and individualistic but herein lies the essence and power of postfeminism, in which personal feminism is no longer subordinated to political feminism and the empowerment of individual women is validated. The analysis of 'Sonnet 1' will engage with this phenomenon of 'pick n mix' feminism.

"A glass of wine, a napkin, and a pen
are all I need, believe me, sir, I'm fine —"
(Oh please, why can't he just leave me alone?
Do I look incomplete somehow, a *yin*

without her *yang*, that perfume by Jovan,
—O stinky musk, the Seventies defined!—
whose bottles, shaped like woman and her man
fit well together, but looked weird alone?)
Then Mr. Gorgeous, watching me all night
to his amusement, walks across the room.
“I’m sorry, I was listening to your *no*’s.”
He offers me an origami rose:
his pen’s the stem, a napkin is the bloom.
His wine divines my inner vamp (all night).⁵⁹

This is the first sonnet from the ‘Bar Napkin Sonnets’ crown. It exemplifies many of the themes, sentiments and moods that characterise the sequence and establishes the postfeminist spirit of contradiction and fluidity.

Walter explains that ‘in this generation, women have begun to feel empowered by the range of behaviour that is now acceptable, a range that...feminism has achieved for us’ (*New Feminism* 77). ‘Pick n mix’ feminism exemplifies this new culture of choice and vacillation, where women can be proud and explicit in one’s gender, be feminine in their dress and desire for romance yet still subscribe to the original feminist theories of equality and choice (Wadsworth, Soames). We find this manifested in the theme of ‘Sonnet 1’. As has been suggested, given the conceptual shift in understanding relationships between men and women in the new

⁵⁹ Moira Egan, ‘Sonnet 1’, *Bar Napkin Sonnets*, New York: The Ledge Press, 2009, 1. Subsequent reference to the poem appears parenthetically in the text, where necessary, using the title of the poem.

millennium, the rigid thinking that all heterosexual relationships were oppressive and harmful had been displaced, and the narrative of romance and heterosex became central to postfeminism and consequently emerges across the corpus of contemporary women's sonneteering. Already we have seen it as the focus for both 'Millay Goes Down' and 'Bar Napkin Sonnet 21' and it emerges again in 'Sonnet 1'. Crucially, however, we find trenchant differences between the handling of the theme. In 'Millay Goes Down' we had the affirmative celebration of heterosexual relationships and female sexuality, whilst in 'Sonnet 21' we had the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality. Essentially these two sonnets offer us contradictory positions on heterosexuality, and across the spectrum of female sonneteers this contradictoriness is replicated. In Marilyn Taylor's 'Rhetoric' we see the female renouncing the male beloved: 'You're not my lucky star, you are a damn/ black hole, I do not love you' (2-3), whilst in Susan McLean's 'Dark Shadows' the female is completely given in to love for him: "Give me that stake right through the heart" (14). These variations on a theme reflect the diversity and plurality of postfeminism.

In 'Sonnet 1', we find the two antagonistic feminisms of 'Millay Goes Down' and 'Sonnet 21' conflated to forge a 'pick n mix' feminism that signals the postfeminist flexibility of gender politics.

(Oh please, why can't he just leave me alone?...) (3)

In this example, Egan espouses, although somewhat more tamely, the power feminist's position of female rejection of male romantic advances. Here we have the politics of post-compulsory heterosexuality as adopted in 'Sonnet 21'.

Then Mr. Gorgeous...

walks across the room...

His wine divines my inner vamp (all night). (9-11)

In these lines, female rejection of the male gives way to female attraction, echoing the pleasure of heterosexuality found in Egan's 'do-me' feminist sonnet 'Millay Goes Down'. Rather than presenting an either/or depiction of romance, Egan offers a both/and option in which feminine and feminist are reconciled. Wolf writes that 'when people feel they have no options, they cling to the assurances of polarized certainties. It is only when people feel rich in confidence and space that they dare to pursue the subtleties of...both/and thinking' (*Fire* 119). Women, the sonnet suggests, are free to reject or enter into relationships as they please. Gone is the rigid thinking that defined heterosexuality as women's dutiful prerogative and ultimate blessing in the period of first wave feminism, as is the condemnation of heterosexuality as an oppressive patriarchal institution of separatist and lesbian feminists of the second wave. Instead, heterosexuality is figured as female choice, and specifically as a flexible choice, such that the sonnet's theme is neither exclusively or rigidly a positive exaltation nor a negative critique of male-female relationships but a recognition of the diverse experiences and circumstances in women's sexual lives. Here we find the sensual elements of Millay's *Fatal Interview* – 'his wine divines my inner vamp (all night)' (Egan, 'Sonnet 1' 14) – alongside the empowered and defiant elements of Rich's *Snapshots* and Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of Seasons* – 'Do I look incomplete somehow, a *yin*/ without her *yang*?' (4-5) – to reflect the composite realities of postfeminism. Egan negotiates

the duality of modern female heterosexuality to represent both its conflict and instability, but also fluidity and freedom. Neither feminism nor romance are any longer simple, monolithic phenomena and as such Egan's sonnet is constructed from conflicting realities and attitudes to signify the evolution of feminist thought and its heterogeneity in contemporary life.

Across the twentieth century, feminism has endeavoured to define female identity in meaningful and empowering ways. Central to this has been the challenge to women's definition as object and Other, and instead an assertion of her status as subject. However within postfeminism, roles and identities are complicated by the notion that women have achieved equality, making their identity as victims, inferiors and objects seemingly redundant. Similarly, within postfeminist heterosexual relationships, objectification offers the potential for female empowerment and can be a desirable role (Valenti 46-7), whilst desire for, and commitment to, the male is destigmatised by women's economic and legal autonomy. Baumgardner and Richards explain: 'the point is not that a woman shouldn't want a man or desire his companionship or his body or his kindnesses, but that a woman shouldn't *have* to rely on a man' (41). Although many feminists have challenged these assumptions for restoring oppressive gender roles and ignoring the continuing material inequalities in women's relationships with men⁶⁰, for this new generation of women greater fluidity and flexibility in their roles and relationships and the ability, even desire, to be 'the object of lust' without being the victim underscores the successes of feminism (Walter, *New Feminism* 195).

⁶⁰ See Natasha Walter's *Living Dolls* and *The New Feminism* (specifically pages 3-4); Redfern and Aune's *Reclaiming the F Word*; and Baumgardner and Richards' *Manifesta*.

In 'Sonnet 1', the female is granted the role of subject, typifying the realisation of women's agency and selfhood in the contemporary era. Specifically as heterosexual subject, Egan represents the emergence of women as agents of their own desires and destinies in gendered relationships, rather than only victims and objects. As Walter suggests, 'now that women are...constructing their own stories of sexuality and ensuring that these are heard, we need no longer insist on a version of heterosexual culture that sights women as victims' (113-114). Thus in the octave, we find five seven pronouns relating to the female narrator, whilst only one male pronoun is used. The predominance of the female pronouns clearly establish her significance, but it is the disproportion between male and female pronouns that serves to underline her independence and self-sufficiency. Indeed, the single male pronoun highlights her lack of interest in, and obligation to, the male. She no longer has to pair off automatically and mandatorily with the male for survival and happiness and thus emerges as having greater control over her destiny and desires. The octave clearly establishes the female as a heterosexual subject and independent agent, aligning with the notion of postfeminist freedom and choice.

However, in the sestet, the female is dissociated from the lyric I, and it is the second male that assumes the role of subject, with the female emerging on four separate occasions as object in his purview: 'He offers me an origami rose' (12). This seems to restore a patriarchal order and ultimately reflect the female's subordination. However, rather than an oppressive or undesirable identity, the female seems to enjoy and be empowered by the interests of a desirable male. As the moniker 'Mr Gorgeous' suggests, this male is not someone the female wants to

distance herself from but is rather keen to attract. Her status as object thus becomes a site of confidence, reward and empowerment, as it serves to get her the man. Furthermore, although the statement 'Mr Gorgeous, watching me all night' makes her the seemingly passive object of Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze, by using third person pronouns with the male and maintaining a first person focus on the female, Egan does not allow the male's gaze to be realised. Instead we see not the female through the male's eyes but, paradoxically, the male watching the female through the eyes of the female. This implies that the female herself is watching and gazing at the male, and indeed, it is her that emerges as 'the bearer of the look of the spectator' who according to Mulvey thus controls the fantasy and becomes the representative of power (443). Whilst the male may be objectifying and sexualising the female, the sonnet leaves us with no doubt that she too has been objectifying and sexualising him. As such, rather than very definitive subject and object positions, there is a sense of mutual and reciprocal roles that suggest the equality that a new generation of women, brought up with a belief in feminism's accomplishment, attribute to heterosexual relations. In contrast, in Maffei's 'The Gambit', although the female is granted the lyric 'I' the roles of subject and object are very clearly delineated between male and female. Indeed, unlike the reciprocal gaze in 'Sonnet 1' which establishes the interest and agency of both partners, in Maffei's sonnet the male approaches and enacts physical contact behind the female's back thus without her consent or knowledge: 'Before I hear/ your footsteps up behind me, you finesse/ a mini-violation' (3-5). Although the female ultimately revels in the intimacy, her volition and desire are negated. As the title suggests, she is clearly a pawn to the male's desire. In contrast in 'Sonnet 1', although the male approaches the female, she is still shown to be an agentive subject for she chooses

to accept his advances not because she is obliged to but because she wants to. Like her dismissal of the first male in the sestet, her acceptance of the second male reflects her power.

Finally, in the actual exchange between male and female, the fluid roles of subject and object are reflected by the diversity of pronouns. Indeed, the male is granted the first person pronoun twice and the third person pronoun three times, whilst the female is granted the second person pronoun once and the first person pronoun three times. Furthermore, the female never assumes an unambiguous role as object, for even in the male's speech, it is 'your *no's*' (Egan, 'Sonnet 1' 11), that is the female's speech, rather than the female herself, that is objectified. Similarly, in all of the exchanges in which the male is subject and the female object, the verbs temper any sense of oppressive female objectification and male dominance. Indeed, 'listening' (11) reflects a behavioural process that denies the male's actual impact or imposition on the female, instead suggesting his attentiveness and interest in her. Similarly, in 'he offers me' (12), the female is positioned as beneficiary rather than object of the male action, whilst the male's treatment of the female is again depicted as considerate rather than selfish. In contrast in Maffei's sonnet, the male's actions all signal his physical imposition on the female 'your finger in my ponytail' (1). Furthermore, that these actions are largely done behind the female's back places her in a particularly subordinate position and instils a sense of male violation. The seemingly mock-threatening statements 'your footsteps up behind me' (4), 'mini-violation' (5) and 'pouncing like a cat/upon' (8-9) thus actually reveal the male's incursions and underline the female's co-optation. In Egan, although it may be argued that the male is simply performing the role of

gallant suitor to manipulate the female, the sonnet suggests that it benefits and satisfies the desires of the female and as such she emerges not as a victim but a beneficiary. Indeed, whilst the first male failed to play the role the female demanded, the second male seems to tailor his behaviour according to the female's desire and, as such, whether a performance or not, the female ultimately succeeds in getting what she wants. In these ways, Egan challenges the simplistic binaries of male and female and subject and object, reflecting the negotiations of gender roles and identities in a postfeminist world in which heterosexual relations have been redefined.

In 2008, *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* was published by Jeff Hilson. It included the most experimental negotiations of the sonnet of recent years, from Harryette Mullen's prose sonnets, Lyn Hejinian's paragraph sonnets and Sophie Robinson's justified sonnets that remove the genre's linearity and length, Rachel Blau Du Plessis's elliptical sonnets and Kathleen Fraser's hypertextual sonnets that complicate the genre's unity, and finally Mary Ellen Solt's non-linguistic, semiotic sonnet that challenges the very nature of the genre as text. In contrast to these sonnets, 'Sonnet 1' is linearly and formally regular and hence generically recognisable. Whereas the experimental sonnets represent a postmodern/poststructural feminism that rests on 'ontological uncertainty' (Genz and Brabon 109), Egan's conventional sonnet reflects postfeminism's 'epistemological anchorage' (114). Thus whilst Mullen and others challenge the very structures and systems of meaning, Egan's sonnet maintains these systems as a means of exploring postfeminism's negotiation of the world. Sarah Projansky suggests that postfeminism simultaneously balances 'feminist and antifeminist,

liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive' narratives (68). In her article on 'pick n mix' feminism, Catherine Redfern writes: 'I know this article is jumbled and mixed up: full of random thoughts and conflicting ideas...but that's where I am right now. I'm pickin' and mixin'" ('Pick 'n' Mix Feminism'). Like Redfern, Egan's sonnet represents the jumbling and mixing of values and ideologies that is symptomatic of 'pick n mix' postfeminism. Specifically, she uses the binarism of the Petrarchan sonnet to evoke the contradictions, shifts and conflicts of postfeminism and having the right to vacillate between different ways of living and being.

In the octave it is hard to detect a rhyme scheme as Egan uses no full rhymes. There is a preference for consonant rhyme as in defined/alone/pen/Jovan. Indeed, all of the end words are linked by the nasal 'n' sounds. However, the choice of consonance over rhyme prevents the lines from fully cohering, thereby denying the power of rhyme or rhythm and representing the disconnection between the female and male. This is no harmonious coupling. Indeed, whereas Midge Goldberg uses full paired rhymes in 'Flume Ride' to demonstrate the bonds between the male and female ('You're arms slide around my waist and we are going/ and I am pressed full length back into you') (1-2), Egan's rejection of rhyme echoes the female's distance from the male and their uncoupling that is depicted in the narrative. The repetition of a single sound creates a powerful and strong reverberation in the sonnet which serves to accentuate the female's singularity of vision and thought. Unlike the eclectic sounds of Goldberg's sonnet (going, you, twisting, gravity, hills, falling, there) which introduce new and different elements to the sound to give a sense of vivacity, the dominant 'n' sound in Egan's sonnet is repetitive and insistent, emphasising the female's tedium and defiance towards the male. There is no joy or

energy here, only monotony. Finally in the octave, Egan uses a mixture of monosyllabic (*pen/yin*) and polysyllabic end words (*alone/Jovan*) which further disrupt the sonnet's pull towards formal integrity and precision and act to represent the female's refusal of integrity with the male. Significantly, the only true rhyme in the octave is *Jovan/man*, but as a semi-rhyme it denies the perfection of a full rhyme. The inclusion of 'man' in this close but unfulfilled rhyme signifies the male's incongruity to the female's world. Overall, the unfulfilled rhymes in the octave represent the female's refusal to harmonise with the male, whilst the prevalence of consonance creates a sense of the female's emotional and psychological state of mind. Formally these features serve to complicate the rhyme scheme of the octave, creating a sense of dissonance rather than unity and as such furthering the impression of the female's disconnection and independence from the male.

'Then Mr Gorgeous' marks the beginning of the sestet and signifies the sonnet's shift in tone, mood and feminism towards a more romantic ideal. Whereas in the octave there was no clear definition of rhyming words and thus no overall rhyme scheme, in the sestet there is a distinguishable rhyme pattern of *abccba* constructed from distinct rhyming pairs. Like Goldberg's paired rhymes, Egan's rhymes in the sestet reflect the female's amenableness to this new male and their connection, whilst the fullness of these rhymes (*room/bloom*) suggest the perfection of the couple. The rhyme *no's/rose* encapsulates the female's romantic transformation, with 'no's' signifying the negation and independence of the female in the sestet (offering a hermeneutic for reading the prevalence of 'n' in the octave as a form of negation) and 'rose', the conventional symbol of love, highlighting her conversion to romantic openness and partnership.

Both in the octave and sestet, Egan uses identical rhyme, but the particular rhymes emphasise the contradictory romantic positions of the female. Indeed, whereas the rhyme of 'alone' emphasises the independence of the female in the octave, the identical rhyme 'all night' in the sestet, which points to the male and female's liaison, emphasises their bond. Although the identical rhyme 'all night' incorporates both words, the end rhyme is monosyllabic as with all of the other end rhymes in the sestet. Unlike the mixture of polysyllabic and monosyllabic endings in the octave therefore which created irregularity and dissonance and thus represented the female's rebellion against harmonising with the male, the monosyllabism in the sestet creates aural coherence and perfection that mimics the female's connection to the male. Interestingly, the polysyllabism of the octave prevents the masculine rhymes from dominating, whilst the monosyllabism of the sestet prioritises the masculine rhyme. This again echoes the shift from female rejection to female desire of the male in the sonnet. Finally, the chiasmatic construction of the rhyme scheme articulates balance and symmetry and thus evokes the parallelism between male and female. Whilst the rhythmic dissonance and disorder in the octave evokes the female's independence and belligerence in line with power and gender feminism, the formal regularity and rhythmic consummation in the sestet reflect the female's sentimentality and femininity in line with girlie and lipstick feminism. Overall, Egan uses the bilateralism of the Petrarchan sonnet to reflect the postfeminist contradictions and variations of 'pick n mix' feminism.

Whilst discourses like Girlie, 'do-me' and queer feminisms offer individual examples of postfeminist counterdiscourses, 'pick n mix' feminism offers a plurality of postfeminist counterdiscourses. It is the ultimate in postfeminist contradiction and diversity and Egan enacts this in the shifting and playful negotiations of these various counterdiscourses.

"A glass of wine, a napkin, and a pen
are all I need, believe me, sir, I'm fine—". (Egan, 'Sonnet 1' 1-2)

In these lines, the language is symptomatic of power feminism. The wine, napkin and pen are symbols of the female's independence and intellectualism, whilst the impersonal and aloof 'sir' and the declarations of satisfaction 'all I need', 'I'm fine' represent the female's antipathy to compulsory heterosexuality and her sense of self-sufficiency. The female takes control over her life and relationships and rejects the male in a display of female choice and agency, akin to the power feminist discourse used in Marilyn Taylor's 'Rhetoric'. This language of rejection becomes a language of criticism and scorn in:

Do I look incomplete somehow, a *yin*
without her *yang*. (Egan, 'Sonnet 1' 4-5)

Here, the female challenges the essentialism and normativity of gender expectations in a display of both power feminism and new feminism. The apostrophe 'O stinky musk, the Seventies defined!/ whose bottles, shaped like woman and her man' (6-7) presents a critique of the gender essentialism of the

1970s and implicitly undermines the second wave insistence on gender binarism and interdependence. The language of power and new feminism thus serves to present a postfeminist counterdiscourse of female independence.

However, in line with 'pick n mix' feminism, Egan introduces an alternative language in the sestet beginning with the reference 'Then Mr. Gorgeous'. This reference counters the asceticism and romantic disinterest of the earlier language and reflects a Girlie feminism – a reclaiming of one's female body and heterosexual desires.

He offers me an origami rose

his pen's the stem, a napkin is the bloom.

His wine divines my inner vamp (all night). (Egan, 'Sonnet 1', 12-14)

Here, Egan reworks the three elements that were used to symbolise female independence into a symbol of love and fertility. The 'glass of wine' becomes 'his wine' marking the transition from female independence to engagement with the male. Similarly, the pen, which symbolised the female's intellectual autonomy and creativity is revisioned as a phallic symbol of sexuality and fertility in its reconstitution as a stem. Finally, the napkin, which had similar connotations of female intellectualism and creativity, serving as it does in the sequence as the receptacle for female poetry, again is revisioned as a symbol of sexuality and fertility in the yonic form of the bloom. Significantly Egan uses chiasmus, reordering the wine, napkin and pen of the opening line into pen, napkin and wine and in doing so creates a perfect mirroring to the sonnet that highlights the male's compatibility

to, and reciprocity with, the female. The heterosexuality of the language and the use of innuendo thus pertains to a Girlie and 'do-me' feminism that contrasts with the asexuality and independence of the power and gender feminism. Here we have the power feminism of Wolf, the new feminism of Walter, the girlie feminism of Baumgardner and Richards, the lifestyle feminism of *Bust* and the babe feminism of Valenti all included to various degrees to create a 'pick n mix' feminist sonnet that encapsulates postfeminism's turn from monolithism and homogeneity to plurality and diversity. 'Sonnet 1' thus radically redefines the nature and meaning of the sonnet offering an important development in the female-authored sonnet tradition.

Conclusion

There has been, and still continues to be, some debate over the meaning, and consequently the significance of postfeminism, to feminist politics, which has largely denied it becoming an integral component of feminism. However, at the end of the twentieth century and into the new millennium, critics like Braithwaite (2002) have paved the way for a resignification and revaluation of postfeminism that recognises its critical importance and theoretical currency. These critics show how postfeminism is indicative of the new generation of women and of the contradictoriness, plurality and instability of women's lives (Braithwaite 341). Postfeminism challenges the monolithism and homogeneity of feminism and recognises that in the postmodern world feminism must have 'as many faces as there are women' (Wolf, *Fire* 84). As Walter conceives: 'any feminism that attempts to...send us down one path, is now doomed to failure' (*New Feminism* 77). Postfeminism, far from being a triviality, and because of, rather than in spite of, its

contradictoriness and negotiation of antifeminism and patriarchy, thus represents a significant context for reading the contemporary world. Indeed, regardless of one's assessment and use of the term, Patricia Mann argues that 'feminists should use it to announce the advent of a significantly different stage of gendered social conflicts and changes' (213). It is, as Braithwaite argues, feminism today (341) and is therefore crucial to understanding the female-authored sonnet in recent history.

Although largely unknown, Moira Egan's sonnets reflect the significance of a postfeminist poetics. When Addonizio writes of Egan's sonnets, 'If Edna Millay had been born half a century or so later, she might have penned something like these' (qtd. in 'Our Books'), she gets to the heart of Egan's postfeminist poetics in their feminist contemporaneity and evolution. Indeed, Egan's sonnets are distinctively, and can only be, products of a postmodern and postfeminist world. They show a rearticulation of theme, subjectivity, form and language informed by the postfeminist zeitgeist of contradiction, uncertainty, possibility and diversity. They are symbols of feminism's gains, but also of its limitations. For some purists like Chesler and hooks, Egan's sonnets would read as regressions into pre- or anti-feminism, but this, as Braithwaite has eruditely explained, only makes sense if one believes there is only one stable meaning for feminism (337). In a postmodern world, such stability is impossible, and Egan's sonnets reflect this realisation, encouraging a rethinking of what constitutes feminism through a negotiation of the various terms of understanding and opposition – feminist, antifeminist, femininity, misogyny, gynocentrism and phallogentrism. Situated in this philosophical and epistemological context, Egan's sonnets reflect a watershed in the narrative of the female-authored sonnet created by the culmination of three waves of feminism and the transition into

a postfeminist world. Had Edna Millay been born into the third wave she may indeed have penned these sonnets, but because Egan was born into the third wave she *did*. The journey from Millay to Egan is the story of feminism's evolution played out in the sonnet.

Conclusion

From the outset, feminist critics have struggled to reconcile the notion of an empowering, innovative and liberated female-authored sonnet with what Henderson has called the 'putatively patriarchal' (56) and Julia Alvarez the 'male labyrinth' (17) of a form 'constructed so clearly to the specifications of the male desire' (Homans 574). As Gwyn Fox has explained:

The problem for women poets is that, in joining a certain "school" of poetry writing, they must perforce use the method already laid down, a masculine style intended for masculine readers. (203)

From its earliest appearance in the thirteenth century, the sonnet's development has taken place in a largely patriarchal society. The masculine imperative and patriarchal hegemony of the form thus promptly became ingrained and have continued to thwart the meaning and value of the female-authored sonnet ever since, with questions over whether the sonnet is ever fully redeemable for women (Caplan 67; Homans 573-4), or whether female sonneteers can ever completely escape the ghost of tradition and the eventual imbrication in the genre's sexist ideology (Distiller 170): 'gender was seen not only to shape but to circumscribe the woman writer's engagement with the genre, and even to preclude its possibility' (Smith 5).

In recent years feminist critics including Mary Moore (2000), Rosalind Smith (2005) and Natasha Distiller (2008) have begun to deconstruct this simplistic and

essentialist reading of gender and genre, but the critical and historical limitations of these studies have ultimately kept the female-authored sonnet locked into an unconquerable battle with patriarchy. Indeed, all of the existing monographs dedicated to women's sonnets have focused on the female-authored sonnet in periods that predate feminism, thus despite their intentions to reclaim the sonnet for an empowering female poetics, they are all negated to some extent by the prefeminist conditions of impossibility that define their choices. The systemic ignorance of the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has failed to acknowledge the important intervention of feminism in the female-authored sonnet narrative, and it is this that defines the thesis' unique contribution to knowledge. The feminist theoretical drive and contextualised readings in the thesis have challenged the existing scripts of the female-authored sonnet and attempted to redress gendered and historical biases in the sonnet narrative. This study has demonstrated the importance of women's sonnets of the twentieth and twenty first century and offers the possibility of finally rescuing the female-authored sonnet from its male bind.

One of the main findings to emerge from this thesis has been the recognition that the twentieth and twenty-first century female-authored sonnet represents a vital and genuine countertradition. The female poets examined here do not just enter into the male tradition, but actively subvert, explode, and move away from a masculinist tradition towards a gynocentric tradition. The rise of feminism is central to this. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the developments of the women's movement across the twentieth and twenty first centuries unravelled and redefined the patriarchal gender politics that had historically dominated gender relations. As the

chapters of the thesis have depicted, feminism largely broke down the vestiges of the masculine tradition, freeing women significantly from repressive gender norms, expectations and hierarchies. Thus it follows that as feminism evolved, the possibilities for the female-authored sonnet evolved too, releasing the floodgates for a dramatic and unprecedented re-envisioning and reworking of the sonnet by female poets. In the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition, the twentieth and twenty first centuries stand as the equivalent of the sixteenth century to the Anglophone male sonnet.

The thesis has also attested to the importance of a historically relational feminism, that is, a recognition of the various faces of feminism across history. Indeed, as each chapter has shown, feminism is neither a monolithic nor static ideology. By understanding the changing feminist circumstances and the particular feminist contexts of individual writers we are able to liberate the modern female-authored sonnet from reductive and misogynistic readings. The feminist theory that has underpinned this thesis introduces an important way of reading the female-authored sonnet in the twentieth and twenty first centuries that redeems the period and its writers, and allows the emergence of a variety of neglected women's voices. Indeed, the thesis has reimagined the place of Millay and Rich in literary, and specifically, the sonnet tradition, as well as furthering the significance of Hacker and Nelson, and introducing the work of Egan. The Millay-Rich-Hacker-Nelson-Egan collective dramatically revises the dominant Anglo-centric Wroth-Smith-Barrett Browning-Rossetti-Millay model that informs much of the female-authored sonnet narrative, not least in the principal panhistorical works in the field by Moore and, to a lesser degree, Distiller and Lustig. However, this is not meant to be read as a

definitive or restrictive model, rather it is hoped that it will simply be the first of many reconfigurations of a female-authored sonnet tradition. Indeed, in following an American narrative in this thesis, many sonneteers had to be excluded, and although additional sonneteers have been referenced throughout, it is hoped that other names, including British and ethnic Anglophone poets, will form the basis for future studies of the female-authored sonnet. Indeed, it is crucial that, as many female sonneteers as possible are studied, and filter into criticism, the canon and the academy, so that we learn of the important contribution to the sonnet by figures like Hacker and Egan alongside Shakespeare and Hopkins.

The focus on female-authored sonnets in the twentieth and twenty first centuries has also allowed this thesis to challenge a pervasive myth regarding women's formalist poetics: that free and experimental verse was the only choice for a progressive female poetics in the period and that the sonnet was free verse's embarrassingly conservative cousin.⁶¹ Indeed, much of the talk of women's poetry in the twentieth and twenty first centuries has been couched in terms of free and experimental poetics (Whitehead; Kinnahan) and feminist critics seem reluctant to speak of the sonnet, because of its relationship to form and tradition, hence the dearth of studies in the field. Whilst the thesis, specifically in the case of the early second wave, has acknowledged that the sonnet did prove a difficult bedfellow for feminism, it has also recognised that the form was a continual presence across the period and often shows sophisticated and fascinating negotiations with feminism. This thesis has remapped the sonnet into modern women's poetry and has

⁶¹ See Howarth 225 on the archaism of the sonnet and Whitehead 8, 27-8 on the connection between free verse and feminism.

challenged the popular focus on non-formalist poetics by critics such as Whitehead and Kinnahan. Specifically, instead of seeing more open or experimental forms as containing greater possibility for subversion of the patriarchal and expression of the female as Keller summarises (158), it has been demonstrated that the female formalist sonnet, with its specific engagement with a patriarchal tradition can be even more subversive. Indeed, by situating their poetry within, and against, the sonnet tradition, Millay, Rich, Hacker, Nelson and Egan are able to undermine and supplant patriarchal ideologies. The sonnet in many ways therefore allows for a greater female rebellion and triumph than the open forms which leave the masculine traditions unscathed. Therefore whilst critics such as Whitehead attest to the critical prioritisation of 'free verse, organic verse [and] open forms' in a progressive woman's poetic movement (27), the sonnet deserves its place within these discussions, as critical to what Whitehead herself defines as the ways in which women's poetics expose and revolutionize the poetry establishment (xii).

This thesis has thus demonstrated that the twentieth and twenty-first century female-authored sonnet is crucial to challenging the views that women are stuck in the patriarchal tradition of the sonnet and that the sonnet is a gendered and essentialist form that inevitably suppresses the female (Homans 574). It must be understood that the masculine bias in the genre is a result of the patriarchal conditions of possibility that have characterised history and thought, rather than anything inherent in the form. Although the sonnet will inevitably retain its masculinist past, the thesis has shown that this should no longer cloud its present or future. The twentieth century has witnessed the gradual relinquishing of the form from its masculine imperatives, demonstrating that the sonnet can speak as

adequately of, and for, women, accommodating their voices, values and ideologies. It is hoped that a greater focus on the twentieth and twenty first century will help eradicate the masculinist bias that has overwhelmed the sonnet, so that subsequent generations of literature students will be able to counterbalance the form's early masculine history against the form's recent feminist emergence to develop a fuller and more nuanced portrait of the sonnet and its relationship with gender.

In the twenty and twenty first centuries, the sonnet, to borrow from Brogan, has largely been freed from its baggage (835) and now stands as an autarchic and pliable form that can take on many different guises. As feminism has developed from its first wave origins through the second and third waves across the twentieth century, so too have female interactions with, and negotiations of, the form, and as the feminist conditions of possibility continue to evolve the future of the sonnet will inevitably evolve with it. And with talk of a fourth wave, there are perhaps already stirrings of a new phase in the female-authored sonnet tradition. At this point I will briefly turn to this new development in order to reflect on the future possibilities for the female-authored sonnet narrative pursued in this thesis.

The female authored-sonnet in a fourth wave digital feminist age?

A number of critics including new generation feminists such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Violet Socks have recently begun to speak of a fourth wave. Although such suggestions are still tentative and there is not yet sufficient evidence of, or claims for, the movement, the new millennium has certainly witnessed a revolution that has changed women's lives and the constitution of society and

power: computer and online technology. Indeed, although there are a number of competing discourses of the fourth wave⁶², a significant strain has emerged that focuses on digital technologies. Jessica Valenti suggests that the fourth wave may be online (“Questions”), whilst Bonnie Erbe has asserted that the fourth wave will be the child of the internet (“Will there be a fourth wave”). Unlike cyberfeminism which emerged in the early 1990s when computer technologies and the internet were still not fully known, developed or integrated and thus reflected a rather surrealistic and abstract portrait of feminism in the digital age based on disembodiment and the cyborg, today we have reached a stage at which the personal computer and the internet are not mysterious harbingers of a disembodied future but rather ordinary components of daily life, resulting in what Veronica Hollinger terms ‘the technological imagination’ (180). As Teresa De Lauretis explains: ‘technology...shapes our perceptions and cognitive processes, mediates our relationships with objects of the material and physical world, and our relationship with our own or other bodies’ (qtd. in Hollinger 174). Across the critical spectrum it is agreed that women today are thus shaped by the digital world (Wajcman; Hawthorne and Klein; Morris), and as such we have entered a new stage of feminism.

Although digital technologies may have been developed by men with male interests in mind (Wajcman 27), unleashed into a feminist world, these technologies

⁶² Peay speaks of a fourth wave in terms of ‘a fusion of spirituality and social justice’ with women at the vanguard of a movement for world peace (‘Feminism’s Fourth Wave’); Socks delineates it in terms of ‘a return to the power and clarity and sisterhood of the second wave’ but with the benefits of third wave feminism (‘How would you’) and Baumgardner defines it as stemming from a generation of women who are ‘tech-savvy and gender-sophisticated’ and are living out the theories of the third wave (250).

have exceeded male intentions and become co-opted by women who have taken advantage of the contradictory possibilities and potentials they contain (Plant 116; Wajcman 120). It is not possible, nor particularly necessary, to go into the nuances of the debate about gendered ownership, access and use of new technologies, but on a very general level, women are increasingly disregarding technology as essentially male and are becoming more committed and willing technological users (Wajcman 109). Indeed whilst men may write the codes and program the systems, their presence is largely unfelt by women who use these technologies to their own ends (Herbst 136). New technologies, which promote access, democracy, participation and degendering have become the privileged places of power and resistance today (Volkart 115). Thus feminism finds in these systems not only new means of resistance and empowerment but also new spaces and new configurations for these projects (Pollock and Sutton 34). As Judy Wajcman discerningly puts it: 'far from being a technology of male dominance, computing is a libratory technology for women which delivers a post-patriarchal future' (66).

This technology thus offers a crucial new intersection for feminism and the sonnet. If the digital revolution heralds a post-patriarchal future, the wide-scale emasculation of the sonnet and adoption by the female that has taken place in the last century is likely to only be amplified by the emergent technofeminism. This discussion is not intended to be a thorough assessment of feminism and technology, indeed that would require its own paper, but rather I wish to show that the female-authored sonnet tradition mapped in this thesis is not the end story and that the feminist hermeneutics used in this thesis should be used to continue the process of mapping the tradition in the future. I will now briefly look at three ways in

which technofeminism has begun to impact the female-authored sonnet narrative and moves the narrative forward.

Found Poetry and Juliana Spahr's Power Sonnets

Technology has led to the creation of a 'free social information facility' (Schiller qtd. in Stafford 141), in which limitless information can be accessed, appropriated and redistributed by anyone. Renate Klein asserts that in this technological age information equals knowledge which in turn equals power (188). The digital revolution has granted women access to, and appropriation of, these resources in an unparalleled way. Male-controlled and distributed knowledge has thus been made fragile and protean and the internet has encouraged a culture of co-optation and the blurring of boundaries that speak to feminist prerogatives of usurping male power and challenging phallogocentrism. The stirrings of this fourth wave in the female-authored sonnet narrative can be located in the found poetry of Juliana Spahr; a genre defined as follows:

Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems. A pure found poem consists exclusively of outside texts: the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form, such as where to break a line, are left to the poet. ('Poetic Form: Found Poem')

Although found poetry has its origins in the Modernist poetics of Pound and Eliot, the internet – or information superhighway – as Adalaide Morris (32, 34) suggests, has completely revolutionised our access to, and relationship with, texts. Newspapers, speeches, letters, encyclopaedias, propaganda, advertising, and much more are at the fingertips of women worldwide, and in the liberated space of the internet women are free to engage with, subvert and reimagine the information they find; a practice exemplified in Spahr's *Powersonnets* (2000). Although Spahr's hypotexts are taken from both offline (*YM*, *New Yorker*, *Harpers*, *Spin* and *Art Forum*) and online resources (White House Website, Wired website, University of Hawai'i, Manoa website), her engagement with these texts in her sonnets all reflect the feminist 'technological imagination' (Hollinger 180) with regard to the indeterminacy and appropriation of information.

Spahr constructs her sonnets (see figure 1) entirely from other texts, through a process of selective appropriation of the original, and in doing so she creates parodic and subversive paraphrases that usurp, contest or amplify the tones, values or subtexts of the original to speak a feminist politics. Both visually, technically and thematically the sonnet is taken even further from its masculine heritage, becoming a vehicle for a feminist politics of knowledge and its control.

AFTER ROGER D. HODGE

"Onan the Magnificent: the Triumph of the Testicle in Contemporary Art," *Harper's*, March 2000

The 1990s were the decade of the genital.
And Matthew Barney is the Michelangelo of genital art
whose work transcends all the alleged perversions of his genital
precursors. Barney's work sets about redeeming genital art.

It remains only to give Barney's style a name of sufficient grandeur. Let us
call it Onanism.

Some have dismissed the Men's Movement as yet another manifestation of
sexual narcissism.

Others have mocked its claims that men have been victimized by femi-
nism and its alleged excesses.

These critics miss the point. It is so very hard to become a man, Barney
confesses.

Everything threatens to strip us of our biological birthright simply for as-
serting our essential, metaphysical manliness.

Barney teaches us to listen to our own being, to celebrate our virility,
yelling wildly as we reassert our spiritual leadership in a society that sys-
tematically

neglects its sons, forcing them to sit still in our feminized classrooms, then
yoking them to the rule of humorless, man-hating wives. Only thus,
only by stripping ourselves of a false and feminine metaphysics, can
we recover our essential masculine essence and escape the tragedy
of the testes.

What stands revealed in the splendid light of Barney's triumph is the
profound philosophical importance of the genital strain in contempo-
rary art—and yet Onanism also represents the End of genital art, its
sublime perversion and abstraction, genital art that has broken free of
quodidian images of actually existing pudenda and achieved a state of
pure, unadulterated, prepubescent play.

Indeed, Onanism maybe be the only original and vital artistic movement
in the world today.

Figure 1: After Roger D. Hodge (Spahr, *Powersonnets*)

'Breathe forth the sound anew alter'd as gentle day': The SonNets of Jen Bervin

Whilst Spahr's female-authored sonnets reflect the engagement between feminism and the information age, on a more basic level the computer itself has dramatically impacted women's lives, including women's writing. The computer has destabilised and diversified the notion of text and layout through its various typological possibilities, promoting a non-linear, multilayered and dialogic concept of text that contrasts with the traditional, static, lineated text (Arnold 271). Women as computer users have thus gained new levels of control, engagement and play with regard to their writing that they can use to disrupt phallogocentric norms. This offers the potential to create an 'entirely new geography or topography' (Arnold 259) of writing that undoes the dominance of masculinist definitions of literature. Jen Bervin has directly addressed these issues in *Nets* (2004), in which she takes 130 of Shakespeare's sonnets and presents them in a faded undertext whilst emboldening certain words to create new poetries. As Bervin explains:

I stripped Shakespeare's sonnets bare to the "nets" to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible—a divergent elsewhere. When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page; when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest. (*Nets*, 'Working Note')

Thus Bervin uses the tools of word-processing and formatting to create fascinating palimpsests which literally enact the feminist politics of tradition, literature, ownership and creativity as enabled by the digital revolution:

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
Hast thou, **the master-mistress of my passion**;
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With **shifting** change, as is false women's fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all 'hues' in his controlling,
Much steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
And **by** addition me of thee defeated,
By **adding** one thing to my purpose **nothing**.
But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure. ('Sonnet 20', *Nets*)

In his digital essay “roses no such roses”: Jen Bervin’s *Nets* and the Sonnet Tradition from Shakespeare to the Postmoderns’, W.Scott Howard legitimately asks whether these works are still sonnets, and whilst the destabilisation of genre, specifically the master narrative, seems to be part of Bervin’s project, the sonnet is integral to her poetics. Indeed, rather than simply printing her edited words in coherent verses as in:

master-mistress of my
shifting
by
adding nothing
prick'd thee out for pleasure

or similar formations thereon, Bervin keeps her words within the sonnet, thereby demanding their relationship to the form be recognised and a feminist reading of the status of the sonnet be pursued. Indeed, Bervin's poetics depend on the sonnet to evince the force of her palimpsest. As Renee Riese Hubert explains, 'the palimpsest consists in the erasure or displacement of a text in favour of another. It suggests, moreover, the irregular and diverse layering of linguistic strata, which mutually transform and expose one another' (118). Bervin's 'writings-through' (Metres) of Shakespeare emerge as feminist commentaries on, and rewritings of his sonnets, that attest to the need to update and revise the tradition for the modern, feminist age. To borrow from Scarlet Pollock and Jo Sutton, Bervin's palimpsests thus allow for the poetics to become meditations on alterity (39), with male and female, past and present, Shakespearean sonnet and sonNET, patriarchal and feminist sustained in a dialectical relationship.

More than this however, the possibilities offered by the computer allow the text to literally perform these engagements of alterity. As Paul Collins explains: '*Nets* has the strange feel of verbal topography: the original sonnet text is a sort of plain that single, select words soar up from like jagged spires' ('The Lost Symphony'). The

poetics Bervin weaves literally rise up from the ashes of the Shakespearean monument; they are visual enactments of the female sonnet tradition's relinquishing of the restraints and conventions of the male tradition. In his discussion of digital poetics Loss Pequeño Glazier notes that 'writing is less than exclusively the projection of ideas from the flat, uniform plane of print. The text now revels in radical forms of adjacency' (176). In Bervin the adjacency of the faded undertext and the emboldened lyric seem to create 3D versions of the sonnet in which the female's poetics are placed in relationship to, and dialogue with, the masculine text. This multilayering encourages us to see the gendered layers of the sonnet tradition, and specifically by drawing out a feminist text from the masculine original Bervin mediates our relationship to the patriarchal sonnets of the past. With the aid of computer systems and typological options, Bervin's 3D sonnets represent Espen Aarseth's ergodic literature (1), challenging the masculine ways of reading, engaging with, and creating sonnets as monologic, unidirectional texts and instead modelling dynamic and performative sonnet matrixes that attest to the death of the patriarchal tradition in the feminist, postmodern, digital world.

The Collaborative Female-authored sonnet sequence

One of the main feminist developments brought about by the digital revolution has been the opportunity for connectivity and communication between women (Pollock and Sutton, 33; Hawthorne and Klein, 8). Virtual communities and gatherings of women have exploded, with women creating various networks at their will. Hawthorne and Klein have suggested that technology can provide direct interaction between women outside of male influence (14). Indeed, the internet

offers a space in which users can construct their own idealised communities (Wajcman, 57), determining the rules of entrance and exclusion, as well as the rules of participation and conduct. For women this can mean a space for escaping masculine social relations, traditional gender hierarchies and expectations, and creating feminist utopias. These new feminist conditions of possibility have begun to shape women's writing, as female poets, following Pollock and Sutton's hypotheses, use the internet as a place 'to be heard, to listen, to be included and to make alliances' (34).

WOMPO – 'an international listserv devoted to the discussion of Women's Poetry' ('WOMPO') – has been the meeting place for a new phase in the female-authored sonnet tradition – the collaborative female sonnet. In March 2005, Kathrine Varnes posted a tentative call for six female sonneteers on WOMPO to write a collaborative sonnet crown:

Dear Wompo sonneteers: This morning, musing while nursing, I was struck by an idea, inspired by all this workshop talk I think, and it won't go away. What do you think of writing a collaborative crown of sonnets? Think of it as a cross between Japanese Linked poetry and the old work horse of the sonnet series. We would each write a sonnet using the last line of the previous sonnet as our first. ('Six Sonneteers Wanted')

This spawned three sonnet collaborations, including two crowns of sonnets, 'Frequencies' (2009) and 'Intertidal' (2007), and a triple crown, of twenty one sonnets, 'What Lips' (2006). A slightly different listing on Formalista – 'each person

(6 others beside me) in the crown will be "assigned" two lines from which to pen two sonnets. We get a month to do it. Then we put it all together and see what happens' (qtd. in Varnes 'Of Crowns and Cakes') – led to the sonnet cycle, 'Maligned' (2008).

The result of these cyber-coteries are sonnet sequences that encapsulate the heteroglossia, vibrancy and ownership of the sonnet by women in the contemporary feminist digital moment. Indeed, each sequence has at least six different contributors, reflecting a variety of ages, locations, backgrounds, classes, experience and knowledge (although, not intentionally, race is somewhat lacking: an issue that is perhaps a sign of the failings of feminism in the digital age) whose sonnets are engaged with each other in a dialogic exploration of the genre and theme. In 'Maligned' the practice of using a single line from Milton's 'Sonnet XII' in each sonnet allows the female poets to speak back to the male, and the inherently prefeminist and misogynistic past, to effectively dismantle the original, translating it into fourteen contemporary feminist poetics. As Varnes explains: 'I wondered what would happen if we took on Big Old Tradition more aggressively, even heroically. What if we took an old chestnut, not one memorized too often, but something recognizable and important in literary history as it comes to us, and used each line as a "seed" line in our own sonnets?' ('Of Crowns').

Your cheek pressed to the kitchen table. So Prague

has left behind an aftertaste of bills.

Don't fret. You got your Cecil B. DeMille

vacation: castles, riding horses, bogs--

as when those hinds that were transformed to frogs

just stood and stared, you gaped hard at her still
that day. We've broken things--commandments. I kill
the birds you bring me; you take it out in jogs,

while I prowl with my accountants. You suck
the marrow from my savings plan and call
it yours. The beach is where you go to maul
the school girls with your horrid Czech. Luck-
ily I didn't take your wrongful name.

I watch you crying through the window pane. (Mishel, 'Maligned: 5')

Here Tatyana Mishel takes Milton's line 'as when those hinds that were transform'd to frogs' and weaves it into a new feminist poetics of the breakdown of contemporary marriage. The result is that Milton's 'seeds', extracted from the plot of Milton's sonnet, redistributed amongst fourteen women, planted in a postfeminist context and nurtured by a modern generation grow into something completely divorced from their origins. As the female writers of the sequence, Marilyn Taylor, Kathrine Varnes, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Charlotte Mandel, Tatyana Mishel and Diane Aranson Svarlien, disassemble, estrange, domesticate, extend (Varnes, 'Of Crowns') and largely distort the Miltonic lines, subsuming them into a poetics of women's lives, the 'Big Old Tradition' is shown to be less definitive and imposing, and ultimately comes crashing down with a new gynocentric poetics asserting its place.

In 'Intertidal' there is no such source text. Rather than the female poetics speaking back to a male tradition they simply speak to each other, completely

divorcing the genre from its masculine history and creating a female tradition in microcosm. 'What Lips' takes this practice even further with its twenty-one interlaced female sonnets. The title, which conjures Millay, reconnects with a female-authored sonnet tradition. Varnes suggests that it also harbours the Irigarayan conceit of 'When Our Lips Speak Together' ('Re: more on sonnets') and in this context it serves to reflect how far women and the female-authored sonnet have come in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Digital technologies have already redefined women's lives and have cultivated new feminist conditions of possibility that offer new directions in the narrative of the female-authored sonnet tradition. Although it is not yet clear if this is the fourth wave, or whether a different feminist movement will take over, the female-authored sonnet tradition will continue to be shaped by contemporary feminist conditions of possibility and it is up to us to ensure that the female sonnet narrative continues to be recognised and explored however it develops. Within the context of a dynamic and progressive feminist movement, through the interventions of Millay, Rich, Hacker, Nelson, Egan and now an emerging generation of fourth wave feminists, the female-authored sonnet across the twentieth and twenty first centuries has emerged out of the shadows of the masculine tradition, becoming a vehicle increasingly accessible to women. Feminism has significantly challenged gender inequalities and restrictions, and this democratisation has been reflected in the sonnet, such that today the sonnet is no longer always and firstly male but is as often and as authoritatively female.

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**Appendix A: Female Sonneteers for a Feminist Narrative of the Twentieth and
Twenty-First Centuries**

Valentine Ackland	Angie Chuang
Kim Addonizio	Jan Clausen
Patience Agbabi	Lucille Clifton
Taylor Jillian Altman	Wanda Coleman
Nell Altizer	Wendy Cope
Julia Alvarez	K R Copeland
Moniza Alvi	Eleanor Cory
Tiel Aisha Ansari	Dessa Crawford
Lisa Barnett	Emily Critchley
Ellen Bass	Lucille Lang Day
Sandra Beasley	Olena Kalytiak Davis
Jen Bervin	Janann Dawkins
Sarah Birnbaum	Amy De'Ath
Lorna Knowles Blake	Diana Der-Hovanessian
Eavan Boland	Dana Delibovi
Shaune Bornholdt	Carol Dorf
Alison Brackenbury	Sharon Dolin
Kim Bridgford	Susan Donnelly
Lucie Brock-Broido	Rita Dove
Carole Bromley	Suzanne Doyle
Gwendolyn Brooks	Ann Drysdale
Julia Budenz	Rachel Blau du Plessis
Anne Carson	Tanya Ubiles Duarte
Grace Cavalieri	Jehanne Dubrow

Carol Ann Duffy

Moira Egan

Rhina P Espaillat

Jill Alexander Essbaum

Nausheen Eusef

Anna Evans

Jenny Factor

Beth Ann Fennelly

Annie Finch

Rebecca Foust

Jane Friedman

Carol Frith

Nicole Caruso Garcia

Louise Gluck

Midge Goldberg

Grace Marie Grafton

Judith Graham

Judy Grahn

Tracey Gratch

Marilyn Hacker

Rachel Hadas

Kimiko Hahn

Barbara Hamby

Sophie Hannah

Chloe Haralmbous

Clarinda Harriss

Gwen Harwood

Dolores Hayden

Lois Elaine Heckman

Amy Helfrich

Kathleen Hill

Juleigh Howard Hobson

Melanie Houle

Carrie Jerrell

Allison Joseph

Elizabeth M. Johnson

Jenny Johnson

Julie Kane

Sylvia Kantaris

Holly Karapetkova

Marcia Karp

Annie Katchinska

Judith Kazantzis

Rose Kelleher

Kathleen Kirk

Mela Kirkpatrick

Jennifer L Knox

Anjie Kokan

Jean L Kreiling

Suzanne K. Lang

Joan Larkin

Amy Lemmon

Kate Light

Diane Lockward

Christina Lovin
Laura Maffei
Laura Marsh
Bernadette Mayer
Sophie Mayer
Katherine McAlpine
Jill McDonough
Susan Mclean
Candace McLelland
Margaret Menamin
Hilary Menos
Mary Meriam
Ann Michael
Edna St Vincent Millay
Tatyana Mishel
Leslie Monsour
Honor Moore
Annabelle Moseley
Marilyn Nelson
Charlotte Newman
Ruth Nolan
Traci O'Dea
Angela Alaimo O'Donnell
Mary O'Donoghue
Alexandra Oliver
Jacqueline Osherow
Alicia Ostriker

Molly Peacock
Joanna Pearson
Wanda Phipps
Jessica Piazza
Sylvia Plath
Marie Ponsot
Meryl Pugh
Jacie Ragan
Chelsea Rathburn
Jennifer Reeser
Adrienne Rich
Sophie Robinson
Muriel Rukeyser
Sonia Sanchez
May Sarton
Maureen Seaton
Rebecca Seiferle
Diane Seuss
Anne Sexton
Patty Seyburn
Warsan Shire
Marion Shore
Hannah Silva
Janice D. Soderling
Dana Sonnenschein
Saradha Soobrayen
Juliana Spahr

A E Stallings
Maura Stanton
Anne Stevenson
B. E. Stock
Julie Stoner
Stephanie Strickland
May Swenson
Marilyn L. Taylor
Emily Tesh
Diane Thiel
Mary Jo Thompson
Meredith Trede
Catherine Tufariello
Edna Worthley Underwood

Jean Valentine
Wendy Vardaman
Kathrine Varnes
Wendy Videlock
Catherine Wagner
Deborah Warren
Maggie Wells
Lesley Wheeler
Gail White
Kelley Jean White
Chrissy Williams
Joyce Wilson
Terri Witek