MARIANNE VAN REMOORTEL

LIVES OF THE SONNET 1787-1895: GENRE, GENDER AND CRITICISM
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Reviewed by Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor

This book is a cogent, well-written, and valuable addition to sonnet studies. Its stated intention is “to ‘alienate’ the sonnet ‘from a holistic sense of self’ by abandoning ‘passive mimesis’ in favour of ‘creative transposition’” (173). In fulfilling this intention, Van Remoortel carefully constructs a history of the sonnet that recontextualizes its gender dynamics. Contemporary histories of the sonnet, she argues, are hobbled by a “gender apartheid” (5) that treats it from either a masculine or a feminist perspective. Along with studies by Stuart Curran and many other prominent critics, my own book on the nineteenth-century English sonnet is (rightly) criticized as an example of the first. Feminist histories of the sonnet, while corrective in some respects, are faulted for perpetuating rather than dismantling the masculine perspective traditionally identified with the form. A middle way might make more sense of contradictory attitudes toward and uses of this resilient form during the long nineteenth century. The “lives” of the sonnet here designate the various ways in which male and female poets gendered the sonnet for their own poetical, political, and personal ends.

According to Van Remoortel, we have not yet grasped the complexity of this gendering. While feminist poetry criticism has greatly enhanced our understanding of how the sonnet came to be feminized, it has not, the author argues, explained how nineteenth-century poets exploited the traditional association of the sonnet with the trials of (heterosexual) love. In histories of the sonnet, she contends, nineteenth-century sonnet writing has been has been polarized: either it
taps into long-standing tropes (from Petrarch on) endorsing male poetical genius and the mastery of complex structural demands, or it serves to express the frustration of female poets as they seek to appropriate poetic authority. But according to Van Remoortel, the “gendered polarities” assumed by these sonnet histories do not explain what happens within the sonnets themselves, whether written by men or women. Nor do such histories explain contemporaneous critical responses, which sometimes perplexed the poets themselves. Given the inconsistency with which nineteenth-century sonnets have been received in their own time as well as in ours, Van Remoortel argues that we have insufficiently theorized what was done with the form by male and female poets alike.

One of the book’s most provocative arguments is that histories of the nineteenth century sonnet typically envision separate-but-equal journeys of male and female poets toward a strong poetic authority—a kind of “gender apartheid.” In its place, Van Remoortel argues that gendered polarities set up “fields” exerting their own forces of attraction and resistance. The central blind spot in histories of the sonnet, the author suggests, is that in our preoccupation with poets, we overlook the “material bedding” of sonnet writing and publishing—and more specifically the economics of the sonnet’s revival in the nineteenth-century. She therefore proposes a “socio-textual approach,” making visible “the instability of interpretation, the political mechanics of genre, the instrumental role of gender and, most importantly, the shaping impact of literary criticism itself on all these issues” (6).

This interest in “economics” persists and deepens over the course of this study. By the second half of the book, the author is no longer stressing what the market does but rather how the poets develop an “economy of the soul” to define their status in the marketplace of literature.
By means of some original scholarship and archival research, Van Remoortel shows how this kind of economy shaped the gendered economics of sonneteering.

Given her focus on the economics of sonnet writing, Van Remoortel could have said more about tropes of desire and exchange in the early history of the sonnet, which includes Petrarch’s verses to Laura’s “waving hair of unmixed gold” (sonnet 292, trans. Anthony Mortimer). This “gold standard,” however, catalyzes the one-way giving of poems in exchange for what is no more than an image, the presencing (and never the presence) of the loved one. Perhaps the “inflationary” nature of language and emotion can be traced to these speculative investments, these “promissory notes,” never cashed, in an exchange of love for love. Shakespeare of course spins these tropes and others in his usual spectacular way, playing with the saving and “spending” of bodies, ideal and real—as well as with the gendering of production (literary) and (re)production (sexual). Wordsworth’s attack on “getting and spending” in his own increasingly crass mercantile culture is an intermediate step.

The early chapters of this book, while examining some individual poems, chiefly study the “material bedding” (35) that lay the ground for the so-called “sonnettomania” of the nineteenth century. It is driven not so much by poets as by the publishers and critics who shape the access to and reception of poems in an emerging mass market. In this alternative history little-regarded figures suddenly play important roles. The entrepreneurial publisher John Bell, for instance, is “among the first to turn poetry into a genuine commodity, an article of commerce available in various shapes, sizes and designs, to fit everyone’s taste and budget” (19). In Bell’s popular daily, the World, the typography and “framing” of poems by advertisements, gossip items, news of the day and “other ephemeralities” did much more than clarify the poems’ “subject[ion] … to the economic imperatives and material singularities of newspaper
publications” (16). This subjection destabilizes the sonnet. In blurring the boundaries between art and economics, icon and ephemera, it tends to dissolve the body of a poem as an expression of desire into visual representations of the body of a woman (as object of desire). Flanked by advertisements for cosmetics and fashions, as well for abortion and treatments for venereal disease, sonnets addressed to women must also contend “with the demystification of women’s bodies” promoted by nineteenth-century science and pseudo-science. The “ideal” woman of the poem and the “real” woman of “extratextual reality” (16) are thus “confound[ed] and disrupt[ed].”

This instability affected not just poetry and poets but also critics, who did their best to keep traditional tropes of male poetical authority in place. In linking sonnets with bad poetry (52), Van Remoortel argues, critics such as William Gifford injured the reception of sonnets by “the poetesses” and by ideologically challenging sonnet-writers. For Gifford, who derided the sonnet form as emotional, poorly controlled, effeminate, and thus rightly marginal, it epitomized the poetry he detested. The Della Cruscans, with their extravagant stylistics and “rococo emotionality” (Stuart Curran, qtd. 52), were the target of Gifford’s smear campaign to “picture [them] and their poems as blemishes on the face of literature” (49). The real sting of Gifford’s attack is his conversion of the traditional sonnet-claim into a mark of emasculation. No wonder a young Coleridge so misjudged the likely reception of his parodic “Nehemiah Higginbottom” sonnets, which have gained little critical attention. Given the unstable status of the sonnet form at the turn of the eighteenth century, however, Remoortel can explain the unexpectedly offensive reviews of his work—and the offended responses of friends who, inexplicably to Coleridge, thought they were the targets of the parodies.
Having thus examined the economics of sonnet writing, Van Remoortel turns in the second half of the book to the deepening of tropes of market and exchange. By the time Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes her Sonnets from the Portuguese, the unstable gendering of the sonnet which threw Coleridge off balance plays into her hand. Challenging feminist views of her Sonnets as a “gender busting experiment” or of Browning herself as “an inveterate transgressor of gender norms” (89), Van Remoortel credits her success to her recognition of “the clash between literal and metaphorical meaning that took place as [she] translated the gendered themes and conventions of Petrarchism to a distinctly mid-nineteenth century setting” (92). That is, the poet may deliberately have chosen the sonnet form precisely because of its ambiguous status. Though it singularly exemplified the “gendered themes and conventions” of Petrarchanism and a masculine(ist) poetic, its “most salient features had already been feminized” (90). Manipulating the sonnet’s ambiguous resonances, Barrett Browning no longer pursues figures of objectification and commodification, but of another kind of exchange: of gifts, words, emotions. This “economy of love,” the poetizing of two-way emotional exchange, strongly endorses and is itself endorsed by Victorian ideologies of romance and marriage. By means of what Van Remoortel calls this “economy of the soul” (97), a powerful trope with “exceptional interpretative elasticity” (96), Barrett Browning can simultaneously embrace and overturn traditional figurations. For Van Remoortel, therefore, Barrett Browning’s unique accomplishment is the “transcendence of feminist allegiances by incorporating masculine as well as feminine literary traditions” (emphasis added).

The following chapter argues for a similar elasticity in George Meredith’s Modern Love. Though Van Remoortel calls this sequence “a radical step away” from the sonnets of Barrett Browning, she also finds it unmatched in its own (grim) probing of “the economy of the soul.”
Reversing what Browning does, Meredith’s sequence--we could say--transcends masculinist allegiances by incorporating feminine as well as masculine literary traditions. This is why critics of Meredith’s time could barely recognize this brutal and self-incriminating work as poetry, much less as a sonnet sequence. They could not tolerate what seemed to be an emasculation of the poet figure through the writing of poetry itself. Meredith’s sequence, then, was hardly the model for the ongoing “generation” of robust poetry and assertive poetic authority.

In tracing “infertility” through Meredith’s work, Van Remoortel sets the stage for her final chapter and its insightful “undoing” of the male figure as poetic authority. Comparing the major sequences of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his contemporary, Augusta Webster, the author sharpens the “contours of an alternative history of the sonnet that cuts across standard notions of patrilineal transmission and literary periodization” (90). Whereas Rossetti’s The House of Life obsessively mines (through a “narcissistic substrate” [145]) the figurations of the male-poet’s creative powers as a form of maternity and generation, Webster “repudiates the male appropriation of maternity.” Disclaiming the gendered metaphors that effectively silence women’s voices and idealize away the real flesh and blood of the maternal body, she gives priority instead to women’s (pro)creative and embodied capabilities. In her sensitive close reading of Mother and Daughter, Van Remoortel shows how Webster reverses the Narcissus trope to signal the “completely self-sufficient union” (157) of mother and daughter, in opposition to the union of man and woman. This prior and more fundamental relationship preempts the very need for language in order to express love. The one-way investment of sexual yearning (of man for unavailable woman) that characterizes the traditional sonnet is thus undone by both Browning’s and Webster’s vision of an economy of love and soul characterized by an “even exchange” of emotion that challenges the very raison d’être of the sonnet enterprise as defined in
the last 300 years. Pointing us in new directions, the book’s conclusion provocatively describes new forms of poetic (re)production and interpretation available in the twenty-first century, as the advent of hypertext continues to redefine the sonnet’s form and function alike.

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