

Varieties of the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet

Lives of the Sonnet, 1787-1895: Genre, Gender and Criticism. Marianne Van Remoortel. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 204 pp.

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<1>Marianne Van Remoortel's detailed and convincing *Lives of the Sonnet* reveals its major insight in the plural of its title. The great merit of this study lies in its demonstration that the nineteenth-century sonnet occupied many cultural spaces. It was at once "the most demanding and rewarding, and yet also the most hackneyed and ridiculed of all poetic genres" (1). It lived off the cultural capital generated from previous generations of major male sonneteers such as Milton, even as it quickly became known, as Van Remoortel persuasively demonstrates, as an infamous example of the "feminization of literature" (39). The sonnet became a "chosen vehicle for the expression of a vast array of conflicting interests and viewpoints" (1): conventional Petrarchan love, bitter cynicism, insistently maternal affection, and more. Rather than focusing its analysis on a single type of sonnet and claiming that it represents the whole, *Lives of the Sonnet* presents the genre in all its possible variations. To its great credit, this study shows the flexibility of the sonnet and the complexity of the nineteenth-century literary field.

<2>*Lives of the Sonnet* matches the sonnet's diversity with an impressive range of its own. Since the sonnet "spanned the full gamut of contemporary poetic production" (59), from accomplished poets to mediocrities and worse, *Lives of the Sonnet* accounts for the genre's activity at all levels of success: from lasting achievements to the marginally canonical and even long-forgotten examples of the form. Van Remoortel's analysis incorporates familiar and unfamiliar texts, moving with ease from canonical landmarks like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) to more obscure sonnets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's early parodies (under the pseudonym of Nehemiah Higginbottom) and the poetry of the Della Cruscan school. Even the ephemeral sonnets published in newspapers get a chapter all their own, in which Van Remoortel mixes shrewd value judgments and subtle analysis of cultural significance. It is a sign of this book's range and power that it can comfortably move from landmarks of the genre like *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* (1870-81) to the "stilted rhetoric and bad spelling" (13) of newspaper sonnets. The breadth of texts analyzed in *Lives of the Sonnet* demonstrates the strength of its major claim: nineteenth-century sonnets were idealistic and materialistic, topical and classicist, masculine and feminine, accomplished and hackneyed. Van Remoortel's wide range of sonnets, and her comfort in interpreting major literary

works alongside forgotten and neglected texts, gives us a much richer sense of the genre and its varied place in nineteenth-century literature.

<3>Moreover, *Lives of the Sonnet* is as comfortable in the archive as it is with close reading. The book makes the assumption that the sonnets it examines cannot properly be understood without both historical context and careful literary analysis, and this approach proves a shrewd one. Here as elsewhere, the expansive scope of *Lives of the Sonnet* plays in its favor. Van Remoortel treats all the sonnets discussed here, from the most acclaimed and canonical to the most obscure and derivative, as though they merit both sustained reading and careful historical contextualization. As a result, both familiar and unfamiliar works become richer and more interesting. In fact, some of the most surprising discoveries of *Lives of the Sonnet* come when Van Remoortel shows the reader how familiar sonnets become strange in their historical contexts and how neglected works merit careful interpretation. The discussion of Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, for instance, reveals how the work develops motifs established in the Petrarchan literary tradition at the same time as it engages with "nineteenth-century commodity culture" (111); the sonnet sequence responds both to Shakespeare and Milton and to the cosmetic and medical industries of Victorian England. Meanwhile, *Lives of the Sonnet* gives sonnets published in popular newspapers such as the *World* the same careful attention, noting both its rhetorical maneuvers and its engagement with its own paratextual elements, such as margins and even misprints. Van Remoortel shows both that the most literary of sonnets could respond to the grubby realities of the marketplace, and that the most ephemeral publications could nevertheless draw on surprising poetic resources.

<4>And while the diversity of these poems might seem to threaten the coherence of the project, *Lives of the Sonnet* shows how the varied possibilities of the sonnet are best understood in relation to one another. Sonnets were not simply a capacious form, able to incorporate a range of perspectives; instead, they were in constant conversation with rival versions of the genre, battling over its contours and affiliations. The sonnet was not simply used for different ends; instead, different versions of the genre drew strength from the versions it opposed or fought against. Perhaps no chapter illustrates this point more effectively than Van Remoortel's analysis of Coleridge's early parodies, published as Nehemiah Higginbottom. Here *Lives of the Sonnet* demonstrates that the two prominent forms of sonnets written in the 1790s – "the manly, dignified simplicity espoused by Bowles and the ornamental excess of Della Cruscan sentiment" (68) – were competitors on the same literary field, not separate literary kingdoms peacefully coexisting though governed in different ways. William Lisle Bowles's sonnets, Van Remoortel demonstrates, were in part motivated by dismay at the success of the overwrought Della Cruscan poems. In this quiet war between opposing camps, Coleridge's parodies show the mannerisms and concerns that unite both parties, indicating how "the distinction between Bowlesian simplicity and Della Cruscan affectation was a fallacy, since it was precisely the pursuit of simplicity that had led to stylistic excess" (86). The chapter on Coleridge shows clearly what *Lives of the Sonnet* demonstrates throughout: how actions in one segment of the genre create reactions (if not equal and opposite reactions) elsewhere.

<5>*Lives of the Sonnet* is at its strongest, perhaps, when showing how the genre's "mixed-gender affiliations" (89) formed a major point of contention. The genre was, as Van Remoortel

demonstrates, “fraught with masculine metaphors of power and control while simultaneously constituting a feminized space of sensibility and private utterance” (89). As such, the sonnet’s growing affiliation with femininity became a fact that Victorian poets needed to address, whether to accept or reject the trend. Against this background of the genre’s feminization and a satirical masculine reaction, exemplified by the William Gifford parodies of the Della Cruscan school, poets considered what the genre had to say about gender and creativity. *Lives of the Sonnet* shows how Victorian poets respond to this problem in varied and often surprising ways. Barrett Browning’s poetry becomes more conventional and even conservative than is commonly assumed, matching its bold use of Petrarchan *topoi* to “a paradigm of Victorian courtship ritual and female authorship” (89). *The House of Life* transforms languages of birth and maternity into a metaphor for poetic creativity, while Augusta Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* (1895) sequence insists on literal discussions of the maternal bond, reminding the reader of the “vestiges of actual experience upon which Rossetti’s tropes are built” (142). The nineteenth-century sonnet’s feminine associations become a crucial element of the genre, one that poets consciously adopted, resisted, or even transformed.

<6>Only when *Lives of the Sonnet* makes the occasional detour from its characteristically excellent historical analysis and close reading does the book’s argument seem less convincing. A long discussion of the twentieth-century critical history of George Meredith’s *Modern Love* (1862), for instance, does little to expand on Van Remoortel’s own convincing claim that the poem is a “daring exercise in elasticity” (138). Likewise, a brief and tentative discussion of hypertext editions in relation to Rossetti and Webster adds little to the chapter’s persuasive analysis of femininity and metaphor in *The House of Life* and *Mother and Daughter*. In both these cases, the clarity and precision of each chapter momentarily fades away.

<7>But if these sections are less impressive detours, it is only because the main route that *Lives of the Sonnet* takes through the genre proves so rewarding. Van Remoortel demonstrates, again and again, that the most coherent view of the nineteenth-century sonnet emerges only by accounting for the genre’s tremendous diversity. Sentimentality and satire, elite readerships and the popular press, artistic excellence and mere hackwork, masculinity and femininity: the nineteenth-century sonnet assimilated all these elements and more, and its many practitioners consciously wrote to define their work against their rivals and adversaries. The sonnet, as Van Remoortel convincingly shows, is a genre that was, and still is, “always defining and transcending its own boundaries” (177). *Lives of the Sonnet* emerges as a judicious and thoughtful guide, showing the reader how nineteenth-century sonneteers navigated this complex landscape.