

**Marianne Van Remoortel, *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787 -1895: Genre, Gender and Criticism*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. 204. £49.50. ISBN 9780754669340.**

The introduction to *Lives of the Sonnet* presents the sonnet as an unstable entity, the paradoxically precise formal qualities of which fail to preserve it from an onslaught of critical approaches and poetic practices that threaten to reduce it to incoherence. The problem of the sonnet, as Van Remoortel identifies it, is the type of discourse the form produces, ranging from the highest reaches of poetic achievement to a banality let loose by its closeness to questions of personal feeling and display. One of the most significant aspects of her approach is the extent to which she convincingly argues that it is precisely the less than perfect manifestations of the genre that constitute the most culturally significant; far from being peripheral, for Van Remoortel, the sonnet is more central to the recognition and acceptance of women's writing than the 'pubescent novel' (11).

The critique of the short-lived newspaper *The World* (1787-1794), with its innovations regarding script and typesetting, presents the turgid sonnet 'To the Countess of S—y' as 'a flamboyant exhibition of cutting-edge typography, a spectacle of form rather than content' (20). The conceit (borrowed from Genette) of the empty margins of Elizabethan poetry manuscripts replaced with the crammed text of a newspaper, with its heated immediacy of fact and reportage, is telling. But this fascinating contextualizing, while it uncovers the multifarious ways in which the sonnet makes meaning by being embedded in a dense cloud of gossip and social events, eclipses its status *as* sonnet. For Van Remoortel this is the point. The punning main title of Chapter 1, 'Invaluable Commodities,' points to the ways in which seeing the sonnet solely as a commercial entity is both liberating and depressing. In densely detailed analysis *Lives of the Sonnets* establishes how the sonnet becomes a battleground for competing ideas of prestige and artistic value. The conflicting nature of the claims made for the sonnet can become confusing: it works for the empowerment of women, forms part of new modes of publication, and becomes a tool for the marginalization of both. Gifford's attacks on the Della Cruscan, Van Remoortel argues, invoke a world where increasingly nasty turf wars propel the literary into a kind of cultural gutter. The sonnet's appeal to outsiders becomes the sign of its toxic nature as fatally easy form (easy because its form is so often breached) that dupes the incompetent into thinking they have "mastered" it. The chapter on Coleridge is typical of Van Remoortel's approach. Coleridge's negotiation of the minefield of commentary on the sonnet is presented as more definitive of his way of writing sonnets than either content or form. This procedure is identified as a matter of 'contemporariness,' a cultural immediacy that morphs into a determination that the sonnet is 'an activity shared among men' (69) even as the form of the sonnet itself is becoming feminized and subject, therefore, to ferocious parody. The overwhelming sense conveyed of jostling egos, combined with a relentlessly vicious triviality in 'Coleridge and his Circle,' opens up some unedifying ways to conceptualize a rather shop-worn Romanticism, a process enacted over the battered carcass of the sonnet.

The lack of the 'commercial paratext' characteristic of earlier publication allows for some suggestive readings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, most notably the collapse in the distinction between the metaphoric and literal in the deployment of images of sickness and submission. Her brief account of the 'poetess' allows Van Remoortel to suggest a different literary history unfolding between the sonnet revival and Barrett Browning's sequence. In the case of Meredith's *Modern Love* the generic constituents of the sonnet have become subsumed within the multitude of ways to circumvent them: the sonnet has become 'the sonnet label.' Some of the most illuminating analysis in the volume

resides in Van Remoortel's comparison of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'metaphorization of maternity' in *House of Life* and Augusta Webster's reclamation of birth and maternity from their metaphoric status in male writing in *Mother and Daughter*.

Van Remoortel's deployment of the trope of disease, 'sonnetomania,' is instructive. If formalism elides contexts, then contextual criticism consumes, as it displaces, text. *Lives of the Sonnet* is a fascinating exposition that proposes a new literary history. Nevertheless, in spite of consistently informative and stimulating readings, it leaves various methodological and aesthetic questions unanswered. As a reader of this volume I still find myself wondering about the sonnet. What on earth it is that stimulates such a passion for analyzing what is not reducible to the context that produces it? Van Remoortel provides a rich cultural field for such speculations.

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