# MOTHERING THE SONNET OR THE DELICACY OF HANDLING SMALL, FRAGILE THINGS

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Recently I attempted to intervene in the Western patriarchal tradition of the love-poem by writing a sonnet sequence for my daughter. Had I first read Jan Montefiore's *Feminism & Poetry: Language, Identity in Woman's Writing* (1994), I might not have done so. Montefiore claims that the nature of the sonnet presents numerous difficulties for women who set out to write them. The sonnet, she explains, "as it appears in the Western tradition of poetry represented by Petrarch and Sidney is characteristically spoken by a male poet celebrating the beauty and virtue of an unattainable woman who is at once the object of his desire, the cause of his poetry, and the mirror which defines his identity" (98).

This figure of an unattainable woman likened to a mirror prevails as one of the *central tropes of the sonnet tradition.* As Frederick Goldin explains in his *The Mirror of Narcissus* (1967), the popularity of this mirror image stems from the widespread, medieval belief in Neoplatonism, an admixture of Platonic thought and that of such Christian fathers as Origin and St. Augustine. This world view subscribed to the theory that "reality," as we know it, was but an imperfect imitation of a divine archetype. "When all existence is understood as a relation between paragon and image, between one Reality and its innumerable reflections," writes Goldin, "the use of the mirror figure is inevitable" (4).

In this medieval Provençal lyric by Guirant de Calanso, his Lady reflects such divine beauty:

> You should well be named "Beautiful Diamond," for just as a beautiful resplendent day is the light of the world, so Lady, are you the honour of other ladies; wherefore one ought to remember your deeds, which are noble to see and hear about. And just as in the mirror the eyes see many a beautiful colour, so can one discern in you every other good; wherefore it pleases me much to praise you and spread your fame. (Quoted in Goldin, 1967, 73)

The Lady embodies the ideals of nobility, goodness and beauty to remind us of St. Gregory of Nyssa's words: "the pure soul is a mirror of God" (Quoted in Goldin, 1967, 5). As such, this mirror, or diamondlike Lady resolves the surrounding flux of impressions into the stable order of "many a beautiful colour." Such a Lady, explains Goldin, "becomes the standard by which all things are judged, the ideal light by which they are known" (78).

The mirrorlike beauty of the Lady continues to shine resplendently in the Renaissance work of Dante Alighieri and Guido Clavalcanti. Here, Dante depicts his *donna angelicata* (angelic lady), as festively surrounded by her handmaidens:

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Last All Saints's holy day, as did betide,
I met a gathering of damozels:
She that came first, as one doth who excels,
had Love with her, upon her right hand side.
A light shone forward, through her steadfast eye,
as when in living fire a spirit dwells:
so gazing with the boldness which prevails
o're doubt, I knew an angel visibly.
As she passed on, she bowed her mild approof
and salutation to all men of worth,
lifting the soul to solemn thoughts aloof.
In Heaven itself that Lady had her birth,
Blessed are they who meet her on earth.
(Translated by D.G.Rossetti, 1874, 134)

Dante, in this sonnet, transforms an actual event-a group of women gathered to celebrate All Saints's Day-into an epiphanic encouter (Spiller, 1992). The poet and his Lady do not exchange words, and as she and the other "damozels" recede, he gazes not upon a flesh and blood woman, but at the fiery, angelic spirit of Love. In so doing, the sonnet tells us nothing about his beloved, and much about his own intense fantasy life.

The following prose translation of a sonnet by Francis Petrarch goes even farther to erase the woman's presence. Rendered without any telling details whatsoever, the Lady simply mirrors the poet's own anguished self-contemplation:

> I am already tired thinking of how my thinking is not tired of you and how I do not yet give up life to escape so heavy a weight of sighs: and how, in speaking of your face, your hair, your eyes, of which I always speak, as yet my tongue and voice have not failed, night and day, calling your name; and that my feet are not feeble and tired of following your traces every where, taking so many steps in vain; and of the source of ink, of the paper I fill with you (if I am wrong in that, the fault is with Love, not with any lack of art). (Translated by Spiller, 1992, 59)

When I started producing sonnets and babies, I had not read Montefiore, or even thought about the problem of establishing a female identity in this genre. Afloat on a sea of sore nipples, dirty diapers and baby burp, I was sleep-deprived and sensorily-deranged enough to envision writing some sonnets for my daughter. She was the central fact of my existence, so why not?

Totally lacking in Shakespearean virtuosity, or Petrarchan self-confidence, I indulged in the comfort of unabashedly low expectations. "Look," I thought, "you're not going to get any 'serious' writing done during the first five, or so years of your daughter's life, so why not just dabble with the sonnet. It's a compact little genre you can pick-up and put down as easily as a rhyming dictionary, or a piece of knitting." And so I undertook sonnet writing rather like a dilettante pianist does arpeggio practice, just something to keep my hand in it while my daughter napped.

This early attempt evidences my unconscious resistance to the tradition of the poet addressing an absent beloved:

My meddling forefinger rummages your cheek
pocket, slips along your bony gum
and into that soft, wet crease where, sneak,
you squirrel your finds. It's troublesome
how you cache them there, shreds of twine,
inky bits of paper, chunks of carrot,
lace torn off your first valentine,
chewy popped balloon, battery bought
for the calculator, and now it's a slippery dime.
You suck it away, candy on your tongue,
from my giant, thieving finger's well-timed
trespass-plunging past your two young,
unabetted, bottom incisors, it flips
the coin out over gums, defiant lips.

Gone is the courtly lover who eloquently likens his distant beloved to a mirror. Two physical presences-a mother who is cataloguing the dangerous items one can extract from an infant's mouth and her own daughter-replace them.

Montefiore (1994) reminds us that problems arise for women attempting to write sonnets because of "the complex process of self-definition at work in the classical love-poems." In the great tradition of Petrarch and Shakespeare, she points out, "the lover-poet is principally concerned with defining his own self through his desire either for the image of his beloved, or for his own image mediated through her response to him" (98).

Although the sonnet's brevity makes it difficult to express multiple points of view, I did strive in my poem to include both my own and my daughter's perspectives, something we do not see the men attempting in the texts quoted earlier. For example, the adjective, "meddling," speaks for how my child is feeling about my finger being in her mouth. The next 8, or so lines reflect my sentiments, as I refer to my "beloved" as a "sneak" and a "squirrel." But the last 5 lines return the poem to my daughter, who has gained ground, sucking the slippery coin away from that "giant, thieving finger," her mother's invasive appendage. In my child's eyes, my forefinger looms like a fairytale monster. The "two young, unabetted, bottom incisors" symbolize her vulnerability, and the "defiant lips," her resistance. Thus my sonnet would redefine the identities of the love-poem. Rather than evoking an idealized male fantasy that negates, not only the beloved's physical presence, but her subjectivity as well, my text attempts to enact a drama involving the subjectivities of both myself and my daughter that is being waged in and around our very bodies.

In other of my poems, the Lady does inadvertently make an appearance. Here she is an anti-*donna angelicata*:

I dream the first night we are apart
that a bag lady lies on a bed in our house
and in spite of gentle coaxing, refuses to depart.
Dressed in dirt-encrusted leggings and gray blouse,
reeking of alcohol, she stubbornly remains

flat on her husky back. Her red nose
drips, or are there hot tear stains
on the cotton pillow case? Look how it snows,
and she's oblivious, gathering up her strengths:
collapsing cardboard box, coffee pot,
as I awake at dawn wrapped in a flimsy length
of blanket, in a student's room, on a borrowed cot.
Rough hewn bunks and cupboards painted green,
towering over my like confessionals, or a latrine.

This dream-inspired sonnet recalls many in the tradition where a Lady, often distant or preferably dead, casts her enchantments on a lover by way of a waking vision, or night dream. My visitant, no otherworldly angel, is a bag lady, the antithesis of the perfect medieval ideal. As such, she embodies what the ideal excludes, and what other cultures define as characteristic of "bad" mothering-dirt, substance abuse, vagrancy, emotional instability, and poverty. Yet my bag lady does mirror, in the Petrarchan sense, my own anguish and guilt occasioned by my having to leave my daughter for the first time to attend an academic conference. As absent mother, I am replaced by this shadowy, dubious Lady, who could well harm my child. The angel in the house is no more.

In my next sonnet, the Renaissance moon-goddess reincarnates as a much more forthright, Mother Goose-like presence:

Your father was reading you a bedtime story,
but Madame Moon in the Sky said, "No!
Bedtime is for the mother. Her repertory
is counts and cradle songs *comme il faut.*"
Your father resigned himself to washing dishes.
Madame returned to her croissant and *café au lait,*
and the tail of her jumping cow went swish,
spilling a pail of galactic curds and whey.
Seated securely between my legs, you listened:
"Once upon a time when the Night was giving
and the star-milk raining from her breasts still glistened,
she arched above the Earth sheltering all things,
cow-headed goddess with toes and fingertips
touching the ground: there was no hardship."

No longer the silenced muse, Madame Moon speaks out boldly, sending the father away. She does so to defend what has been traditionally one of the few literary prerogatives open to a mother-the reading of bedtime stories to her children. This oral recitation of tales, rhymes, riddles, and lullabies invokes, not absence, but the presence of a woman sitting on a bed in the near dark comforting and lulling a child to sleep.

In my sonnet, I surround my daughter with my own body, and the fit is as sung as that little night song, the sonnet itself. She listens to a story about Hathor, the Egyptian cow goddess, described as encircling the earth with her own starry body. If John Donne was correct in likening the sonnet to a pretty room, then this text secures a safe place for a sleepy child, protected by both her mother and the starry Lady of the Night. Certainly details like "star-milk," or glistening breasts, and the cow-like head draw a fuller portrait of our Lady than the patriarchy has done. But, as in many of their sonnets, she is still the longed for, absent one. Her absence though is not due to her being a foil for male desire, but to the repression of her matriarchal power.

Spiller (1992) mentions that in Renaissance poetics, a sonnet was "an acting out of a ceremony, a rite which...we also take to be a right or due of the beloved-he, or she is entitled to be spoken to in a certain prescribed way" (Spiller, 167). This may explain Madame Moon's reactionary dismissal of the father, who she feels is not entitled to read to the beloved child during this bedtime ritual. (I was not conscious of any of this as I drafted and redrafted this piece, nor as I worked with the following, somewhat more disturbing text):

The concierge falls to his knees in the grimy lobby-
black worsted suit tailored to his thinness.
Drinking in your three-year old body,
he offers a dime for a hug, quarter for a kiss.
In his cupped palm, they're lustrous as the flask,
gleaming from his picket in winter's early darkness.
Puzzled you turn to me as if to ask,
"Is it alright?," your face, its fullness,
breaking free of his shadow like a low moon.
Hovering, my speechlessness near to forsaking you,
I'd spit in his eyes, call down misfortune
on his head, hex him and cross him, work him with voodoo-
but can only pull you away alarmingly urbane,
our steps against marble, making small gains.

Here, the concierge (Quebecois for janitor) drops to his knees to worship my daughter, whose face shines with the idealized radiance of the moon. In this dark parody of a ritualized courtly salutation, our seedy troubadour would pay for my child's kiss. A vigilant mother, I am nevertheless rendered nearly speechless. I wish to curse and rage against this man's demeaning treatment of my child, and of women in general, but cannot bring myself to swear in front of my daughter, or to offend this unpredictable concierge. Instead I retreat hoping, ironically, to absence myself from this discomfort. But, entrapped by the inherent politeness of the sonnet form, I can only hope to write with a certain eloquence about my own stammering ineloquence, in a genre what would "control the chaos of passion, and draw it to civil behaviour" (Spiller, 1992, 136).

As problematic as this sonnet tradition may be for women, I have attempted to re-adapt it to my needs as a twentieth century mother. Until I wrote this paper, I was unconscious for the most part of how I was re-visioning vestiges of this patriarchal tradition. For example, in the following two sonnets, I rework the central trope of the mirror which, in medieval thought, often symbolized the Bible, God's Logos incarnate:

You go feet first into your books-
it started with **Horns to Toes**, a story about
a monster's body parts. First you took

to biting your fists, sticking them in-and-out
of your mouth, as you considered his snaggled bite.
Curious, you placed your hands over his paws-

stubby thumb and fingers-the size was right!
You grabbed your nose and hummed quite in awe
of his blue, ferreting snout. His feet-
slip yours over his chubby, flat prints
on the laminated cardboard page-squeak!
You love that slippery, cool feel, the glint
of words. Sound and sheen, a book can be
a ground on which to stand and see.

As in medieval times, the mirror in this poem is a book. Here, this early childhood reader, **Horns to Toes**, abets my daughter's discovery of her own body as it is reflected to her by its glossy illustrations. Unlike the Bible, her picture book depicts the image of a rambunctious baby monster, not that of an ideal child. Physically engrossed, my daughter stands on her opened book, squeaking her feet against its laminated pages. My poem , then, emphasizes the sensuousness of the child and her book, whose reflecting surfaces offer a multitude of possible perspectives, rather than absolute Logos.

This final sonnet describes a real bathroom mirror:
Caught bleary-eyed between glasses and my contacts,
I try to focus on myself in the foggy mirror-
pale oval with its margins inexact
like another vague face drawing nearer:
yours dripping blood. "Cut Mommy cut!,"
you say brandishing a razor. The flash
of its punishing blade, the drawer supposedly shut,
whose contents you've strewn about slapdash,
releases a panic into the likelihood of my face.
The make-up of the mirage comes undone.
Crouching to tend the cut on your cheek, I trace
a slender crimson line that could run
deep. Daubing tears and blood, I'm frightened
of a scar: will it grow tough and whiten?

Momentarily blinded, I am trying to create an image of myself, but misplaced contact lenses and a foggy mirror hamper me. At this point, St Gregory of Nyssa's words ring in my ears: "From a soiled mirror you cannot get images," he warns. "Nor can the soul that is filled with worldly cares and over which the flesh spreads darkness received the illumination of the Holy Spirit" (Quoted in Goldin, 1967, 5). Guess the good saint was never a mother at 7 am!

"Pale oval with its margins inexact/like another vague face drawing nearer" echoes the courtly, moonlike face of the Love goddess. In reality, this image describes myself and my daughter, as our slightly out of focus perspectives merge momentarily, before I realize her face drips blood. Fogged over and obscure, my mirror is not that of the ideal. It can not help me construct a social mask, or literary persona. It is empty, but the surrounding room teams with chaotic life. My daughter's cut compels me towards her, and in so doing destroys the reflected "likelihood of my face" even further. I am drawn away from "the mirage" of idealized beauty to tend my child's scarred body. This sonnet ends somewhat ironically: do I fear that the scar might prevent my daughter from growing up to become a beautiful women, object, beloved other?

Whatever the answer, Montefiore might be surprised by the extent to which a sonnet can be subverted to express presence not absence, the multiple subjectivities of an I-Thou relationship, and the voices of women as well as of men. No longer relegated to the passive role of a mirrorlike muse, the Lady is learning to speak up for herself. Still vestiges of the tradition remain: my sonnets, like most in this some 800 year old genre, serve to stabilize the surrounding flux of impressions into an aesthetically pleasing order. In so doing, they acted for me as a lens through which to focus and make sense of the often overwhelming experience of being a first-time mother.

As Spiller (1992) explains, the sonnet "is superbly fitted to be a point of momentary lucidity for the self in turmoil" (51), such as that of a desperate mother trying to extract dangerous objects from her obstinate baby's mouth, etc. To rescue a small child, one can not act in a blunt, or overly aggressive way. The sonnet then, in spite of Montefiore's apprehensions, is an apt form of expression for anyone caring for young children, because as the 16th century writer, Francesco Broccoilini once noted, to write sonnets one "must learn delicacy, as if handling small and fragile things" (Translated by Spiller, 9).

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