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RADCLIFFE'S POETIC LEGACY: FEMALE CONFINEMENT IN THE "GOTHIC SONNET"

Radcliffe's sweeping, panoramic scenes of loco-description have often been deemed poetical in style, and previous scholarship has commented on the poetical influences on her prose. But while Radcliffe's novels are often posed as capacious tomes that absorbed the conventions of many other modes of writing, to what extent did her writing influence genres other than the Gothic novel itself? How did Radcliffe's novels and the Gothic tradition impact nineteenth-century poetry? This article traces Gothic themes from novels by Ann Radcliffe, Matthew "Monk" Lewis and Mary Wollstonecraft that came to shape the Romantic and Victorian sonnet tradition. Through close readings of important nineteenth-century metasonnets by William Wordsworth, John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, it shows how the language of trapped female bodies and spatial confinement was incorporated by poets to create a tradition of "Gothic sonnets". Such sonnets utilize the imagery of female bondage as an analogy for the formal limitations of the sonnet's 14 lines, rigid rhyme and strict meter.

Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), in addition to over 600 pages of prose, is also, as its subtitle reminds us, "A Romance; interspersed with some pieces of poetry". It contains sporadic verses passed off as lyric musings of the heroine Emily St. Aubert, who throughout the novel pens poems in moments of solitude, reflection and often imprisonment. Emily composes mostly mundane occasional poems titled "Shipwreck", "The Bat" and "Go, pencil!", which are, according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a 1794 review, "some beautiful, all pleasing, but rather monotonous".¹ It is easy to disregard these poems as middling verses of escapist lyric; they seem to serve as signals of overwrought melancholia in scenes where Emily's verses are elegiac to the point of satire. But while Radcliffe's poems themselves might seem unremarkable or subsumed by the prolific prose that surrounds them, her novels exerted a poetic influence in more major ways than have been previously considered. "Mother Radcliffe" should indeed be recognized as a wellspring for Gothic novelists, inspiring countless imitations in the form of sensation novels, novellas and chapbooks; yet her astonishingly popular works were also generative for a succeeding generation of sonneteers. In this article, I argue that Gothic novels by

Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Mary Wollstonecraft established important clichés that came to shape the Romantic and Victorian sonnet tradition, particularly in its representation of women as imprisoned bodies, as melancholy sonneteers and as beneficiaries rather than victims of their confinement.

The conventions of the Gothic novel frequently include a woman confined within a small space, entrapped inside a castle turret, dungeon or abbey cell. This trope of the Gothic heroine as a damsel in distress takes on poignant significance when it reappears in sonnets of the nineteenth century, particularly metasonnets that offer commentary on the sonnet form itself. Used by major poets of the 1800s, the Gothic trope of female confinement assumes an additional layer of meaning, where the sonnet's form serves as a metaphor for prison itself, and the imagery of female confinement is used to justify or celebrate such prosodic structures. Through close readings of important nineteenth-century sonnets by William Wordsworth, John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, this article shows how the language of trapped female bodies and spatial confinement was incorporated to create a tradition of "Gothic sonnets"—sonnets that utilize imagery of female bondage as an analogy for the structural limitations of the form's 14 lines, rigid rhyme and strict meter. I use as my case examples major metasonnets by poets whose literary careers were very much shaped by writing in the sonnet form, including Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not" (1806), Keats's "If By Dull Rhymes" (1819) and Barrett Browning's "The Soul's Expression" (1844). These poems comprise a subgenre I classify as Gothic sonnets for the ways in which they adopt and formally embody tropes of female confinement popularized in the Gothic novel.

The consequences of recognizing such an influence help to expand Radcliffe studies beyond the realm of the Gothic novel. Radcliffe's sweeping, panoramic scenes of loco-description have often been deemed poetical in style, and scholarship has commented on the poetical influences on her prose. But while Radcliffe's novels are often posed as capacious tomes that absorbed the conventions of many other modes of writing (among them travel writing, landscape-art writing and poetry), to what extent did Radcliffe inform genres other than the Gothic novel itself? More specifically, how did Radcliffe's novels and the Gothic tradition impact nineteenth-century poetry?

Considering Radcliffe's influence outside of the novel tradition invokes a particular mode of cross-genre study that traces how poets reappropriated novelistic *themes* into poetic *form*. The influence I suggest is not one of nineteenth-century poets borrowing from Radcliffe's poems per se, but rather picking up on Gothic novelistic tropes and then using these as a basis for their conceptualizations of the sonnet form. Such an analysis repositions Radcliffe as a source of inspiration beyond the realm of a single genre—the 1790s sensation novel—and recasts her as an innovative force whose influence carried across genres, rather than as an imitator or "absorber" of other subgenres.

Female confinement and the sonnet tradition

Radcliffe's Gothic plots are populated by female victims who are forcibly imprisoned in castles, dungeons and convents. They include Emily St. Aubert, Madame Montoni and Signora Laurentini from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; Ellena de Rosalba and Sister Olivia from *The Italian* (1797); and Adeline from *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). These captive heroines, though solitary in their respective prisons, are in ample literary company with the likes of Agnes from Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Maria from Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798). While the female prisoner as victim is a recurrent and clichéd theme, the novelty of this Gothic trope lies in the contention that although her room might serve as a prison, this prison is actually a safe haven.

When imprisoned damsels appear frequently in Gothic novels of the 1790s, they are taught to seek retreat within their prisons, constantly reassured that the confines of a cell are far preferable to the violence and lust of Italian banditti outdoors. Such plots famously celebrate physical confinement as a safe haven from greater evils in the outside world. This moral of safety in imprisonment becomes particularly meaningful when preached to poet-heroines, who, offered the solace of a private space, no matter how small, gain the opportunity for reflection and elegiac expression, often in the form of music or poetry.

This conservative notion of safety in retreat paints a narrative that is applicable outside of fiction and was used to describe female poets of the 1780s. Our expanded critical view of the Romantic sonnet revival now credits the rebirth of the sonnet to women poets like Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward, Anna Letitia Barbauld and Mary Robinson writing in the 1780s, rather than to male poets like Samuel Bowles or William Wordsworth. Interestingly enough, scholarship often embraces a similar gendered "safety" narrative to that rehearsed in Gothic novels. According to Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson, whose anthology of sonnets showcases the works of such women poets, the choice to participate in an outmoded form was a conscientious attempt at "self-canonization"—a way for women to situate themselves apart from contemporary male poets but still stay within a stable, established subgenre of English literature.² Amy Billone's *Little Songs* (2007) argues that women poets of the long nineteenth century turned to the sonnet form particularly because they were "drawn to the form's structural affinity for reticence".³ Such formulations make sense not just for female poets, but for female *sonneteers* especially. The formally defined features of the sonnet helped to carve out a niche defined by the literal *space* in which women poets could thrive and rule over their own ground, without competing with or threatening the space of male poets. But how do female figures appear within the space of the nineteenth-century sonnet itself? I propose using the lens of the Gothic novel and its themes of

imprisonment as a way to trace a thematics of female entrapment that defines the figure of the female sonneteer in fiction, poetry and literary history.

The Romance of the Forest: the prison as haven

The sonnet, doubling as a prison and a safe haven, is analogous to the space of captivity and isolation inhabited by the young female figures of the 1790s Gothic novel, and paves the way for a new strain of the sonnet that emerged in the early nineteenth century. The idea of sonnet form as formally confining, yet safe and thus liberating, supports the often overwrought moral that prevails at the end of countless Gothic novels: that what often seems like a prison actually serves as a safe haven for young women in a dangerous world. From Wollstonecraft to Lewis to Radcliffe, the abbey, jail cell or castle dungeon often serves as a space for self-reflection, literary creativity, peace and safety, promoting the somewhat reactionary notion that incarceration and imprisonment can be more liberating than they first seem. Such cells or stanzas offer protection from a world without borders, order or beneficent patriarchal rule. In Gothic novels, the Apennines, Alps and Italian forests, rife with banditti and murderers, prove far more disastrous for lone women characters than the castle bedrooms or Catholic convents to which they are banished. At least in their cells, the young women can enjoy a space of privacy and reflection; they can even compose poetry or elegize on their lutes.

As a result, the subgenre of the elegiac sonnet, made famous by Charlotte Smith, becomes a key mode of writing that links women's sonnet writing with the plight of female domesticity. The sonnet form, featuring a prosodic insular space, provides both an outlet and a physical model for the travails of oppressive domestic life. To this extent, the relationship between domestic confinement in both form and content becomes inextricably bound. However, once this domestic space becomes Gothicized and colored by violent imagery of confinement, the *stanza* becomes not only a small room, but a veritable cell.

In *The Romance of the Forest*, Monsieur la Motte, an exile himself, rehearses a persistent Gothic argument. He insists that the cells of confinement in the basement of their ruined abbey in which they are trapped are actually "not so small". In this scene, the La Motte family must downgrade from the upstairs rooms of a deserted abbey and go into yet further hiding within a secret lower level. Adeline and La Motte participate in a mutual defense of confinement, gratefully portraying it in desirable terms:

When they reached the cells, Madame La Motte wept at the necessity which condemned her to a spot so dismal. "Alas", said she, "are we,

indeed, thus reduced! The apartments above, formerly appeared to me a deplorable habitation; but they are a palace compared to these”.

“Let the remembrance of what you once thought them, soothe your discontent now; these cells are also a palace, compared to the Bicêtre, or the Bastille, and to the terrors of farther punishment, which would accompany them: let the apprehension of the greater evil teach you to endure the less: I am contented if we find here the refuge I seek”.

[...]

While her heart was sinking with the misfortunes, which she could not but anticipate, [Adeline] appeared composed, and even cheerful. She attended Madame La Motte with the most watchful solicitude, and felt so thankful that La Motte was now secreted within this recess, that she almost lost her perception of its glooms and inconveniences.⁴

Here, Adeline, as the heroine of the novel, reaffirms the moral of patience and forbearance despite confinement. Although she soon stumbles upon an abandoned manuscript and even the skeleton of one who has been imprisoned and murdered in this very space, the dungeons prove a more palatable option than the potential lust and violence of Monsieur Montalt upstairs.

This message is reinforced in the endings of Gothic novels in particular, when mysterious occurrences are explained by mundane realities: evil tyrants, if not absolved, are at least explained or excused. Radcliffe's formulaic plots are rife with such realizations that promote the patriarchal order and dismiss female fears as hysteria or overthinking. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, we learn that Montoni is not a murderer, but merely a bandit; Monsieur St. Aubert is not an adulterer, but a loyal brother who mourned the portrait of his lost sister. The greatest oppressors of Radcliffe's heroines (Monsieur LaMotte, Montoni, Schedoni) actually prove to be these young maidens' greatest protectors from physical harm. The dungeon is a shelter in the same way that the jail is a haven.

This conservative message, when applied to poetic structure itself, becomes a particularly useful tool for poets of the sonnet revival who found themselves defending the use of such a structured or limiting form. In 1806 and 1819, Wordsworth and Keats composed what would become two landmark poems in Romantic sonnet studies: “Nuns Fret Not” and “If By Dull Rhymes”. In order to promote and defend the sonnet form, the poems' speakers perpetuate the conservative morals of female forbearance in favor of confinement. Indeed, these two celebrated metasonnets of the Romantic period are predicated on an apologetic argument for spatial confinement and the provocative language of Gothic trappings.

As the next section will show, Wordsworth and Keats tend towards two overlapping modes in their defense of the sonnet form. On the one hand, these poems justify confinement through denial. Here, a speaker disavows any discomfort or confinement in the first place, claiming a particular “cell” or “room” to be actually quite spacious and comfortable. This is the very same conceit as that assigned to women characters of the Gothic novel, where the castle turret serves as a site for respite and, often, poetic meditation. On the other hand, these male sonneteers invoke a more extreme mode of justification for the sonnet, in which the speakers of their poems argue for yet further confinement, particularly of a female figure. Drawing on the Gothic machinery of locks, chains and distressed damsels, these poems fetishize formal imprisonment. Here, the physical imagery of casting oneself within chains and bonds evokes a masochistic aesthetic that celebrates pleasure by means of restrictive form.

By the early nineteenth century, associations with the sonnet had changed, taking up themes and tropes of female confinement borrowed from the 1790s Gothic novel. Representations of the sonnet form and its structural confinement acquired a Gothic flavor that was distinct from earlier representations of the sonnet form. In ‘Gothic sonnets’, poets and speakers trope the sonnet as a Gothically bound woman, embracing a tension between portraying the form as a space of safety and treat, or one of dangerous imprisonment.

“Nuns Fret Not”: Gothic confinement as defense of the sonnet form

In Gothic novels, two spaces serve as stock sites of thematic crisis and punitive oppression: the prison and the convent cell. From *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *Maria* (1798), the prison and the abbey cell challenge protagonists’ ability to preserve selfhood and liberty within excruciating confines. Wordsworth’s “Nuns Fret Not” and Keats’s “If By Dull Rhymes” defend the sonnet form by using Gothic imagery of confinement within a convent and a prison, respectively. Each of these sonnets features female imprisonment with a male poet as jailor. In “Nuns Fret Not”, presented as the “Prefatory Sonnet” to his 1807 *Poems*, Wordsworth famously begins by making the case for spiritual liberty despite physical confinement:

Nuns fret not at their Convents’ narrow room;
And Hermits are contented with their Cells;
And Students with their pensive Citadels;
Maids at the Wheel, the Weaver at his Loom,
Sit blithe and happy; Bees that soar for bloom,

High as the highest Peak of Furness Fells,
 Will murmur by the hour in Foxglove bells:
 In truth, the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleas'd if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.⁵

"Nuns Fret Not" reinforces the familiar, conservative lessons perpetuated in the eleventh-hour undoing of Radcliffe's romance plots, where Gothic dangers and insidious suspicious are explained, discounted or swept under the rug.⁶ The sonnet's opening image of nuns in their cells urges readers to recognize safety within confinement. Of course, Wordsworth's "narrow room" or "prison" represents the sonnet form itself, with its circumscribed 14 lines of 5 iambic feet each. However, through the loose parataxis of increasingly expansive imagery, Wordsworth "beguiles" the reader away from the sorrow of confinement, as Smith's elegiac sonnets did. From the calm nuns to the obedient students to the productive weavers and, finally, free-soaring bees, each successive example of confinement becomes diluted in intensity. Wordsworth's examples of confinement transition from "Cells", "Citadels" and an artisan's working chamber to open fields and meadows—from the indoors to nature outdoors. This clever manipulation on the part of the speaker becomes apparent, showing how far we have strayed from his initial example, when we finally detect the rhyme of "Cells" with "Furness Fells" and "Foxglove bells".

But while Wordsworth's poem easily glides from narrow rooms to wide-open spaces, this mode of imaginative expansion can be construed as suspicious manipulation or an overly apologist tone. Leigh Hunt famously responded to "Nuns Fret Not" with a practical reminder that "thousands of nuns, there is no doubt, have fretted horribly, and do fret; and hermitages have proved so little satisfactory, that we no longer hear of their existence in civilized countries".⁷ In Hunt's reading, the danger of insisting on safety and comfort eclipses Wordsworth's intended message of productivity despite confinement. Hunt keys into a Gothic, perhaps frantic suspicion that proclaimed safe havens are often but a step away from prisons or dungeons.

The Gothic is further invoked in the masochistic tendencies of Wordsworth's speaker, where to be bound within the sonnet's strictures is both painful and pleasurable. "[F]or me, / In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground", he claims, as if the feeling of interment or entombment is physically pleasing. Persuading a prisoner to

appreciate the freedom of confinement is particularly fitting to the sonnet, compared to other regularized poetic forms. Formally speaking, the sonnet doubles as a Gothic prison not only because of the technical difficulty and strictness of rules in its composition, but also because of the form's inherent *expectations* for clear change and progress. Whereas a ballad featuring stanzaic repetition looks stifling but actually allows for narrative progress and gradual change, the octave, volta and sestet of the sonnet structure all promise the potential for a sudden turn. Thus, Wordsworth's sonnet poetically performs the confinement that many Gothic novels seem to celebrate: juxtaposing form and content, pitting prosody against imagery, his sonnet convinces a reader that downsizing from the octave to the sestet does not indicate physical enclosure (a diminution from eight lines to six), but poetic expansion (from "Cells" and "scanty plot[s]" to open fields and "liberty").

Wordsworth's overinsistence on enjoying "solace" and freedom in spite of enclosure parallels the dismissive claims of the Gothic tyrants who belittle the cry of pleading damsels: "The sanctuary is prophaned,' said Ellena, mildly, but with dignity: 'it is become a prison'".⁸ The response of the Radcliffean tyrant is simultaneously a threat and a promise of protection:

"I find", said [Montoni], "that you were not in your chamber, last night; where were you?" Emily related to him some circumstances of her alarm, and entreated his protection from a repetition of them. "You know the terms of my protection", said he; "if you really value this, you will secure it". His open declaration, that he would only conditionally protect her, while she remained a prisoner in the castle, shewed Emily the necessity of an immediate compliance with his terms.⁹

This apologetic rationalization for confinement, repeated over and over again in Gothic plots, rehearses narratives of female oppression and recasts them as instances of misunderstanding and overreaction. The messages of female forbearance and an overwhelming dismissal of the victim's experience are in effect the "lesson learned" at the end of Radcliffe's novels and Lewis's *The Monk*.

This revisionist narrative of female confinement yields a useful reminder about scholars' own critical tendencies in evaluating the literary history of 1780s women poets. Such tendencies subscribed to the idea of productivity under duress and applied this narrative to the lives of women writers. On the one hand, one can detect echoes of Ann Radcliffe and her trapped nuns in our own textbook biographies of Charlotte Smith and her laborious yet astoundingly productive literary output. Rumors circulated the suspicion that Smith, who in fact composed much of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) within the confines of a debtor's prison, was eventually driven to death by her dissolute husband and merciless editor, who pressured her to publish at an unrelenting rate until the

end of her life. On the other hand, Smith's success can be cast in a positive light, demonstrating, as Wordsworth writes, that "the prison, unto which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is". In this version, "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground" provided Smith with a pastime and short solace, a path towards fame and an independent living that provided her with the ability to support her family. Thus, this trope of safety within the sonnet's modest space reveals a critical tendency to plant elements of the Gothic in the women's sonnet tradition, both through imagery within the poems themselves and through its surrounding literary history. Ultimately, the revival of the sonnet form and the plight of the Gothic heroine became prominently linked in such a way that the sonnet tradition after the 1790s became increasingly wrought with the Gothic language of justified female imprisonment.

Keats's "pained Loveliness": the sonnet sweet, bound and chained

If Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not" advocates a mode of female forbearance content within the convent cell, Keats's "If By Dull Rhymes" goes even further, promoting the masochistic endurance of a bound figure. Keats not only argues that a narrow cell "no prison is"; he goes so far as to seek out more chains, more fetters and more constraint. He compares the Muse to the mythical Andromeda, whose bondage represents the fate of the English sonnet. His claims of ecstasy despite physical restraint, of creativity despite limitations of form, celebrate a symbiotic relationship between psychic enthrallment and physical thrall. Here, Keats fetishizes a self-inflicted confinement that mixes pleasure with constraint:

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained
 And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet,
 Fettered in spite of pained Loveliness;
 Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
 Sandals more interwoven & complete
 To fit the naked foot of Poesy;
 Let us inspect the Lyre & weigh the stress
 Of every chord & see what may be gained
 By ear industrious & attention meet,
 Misers of sound & syllable no less
 Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath Crown;
 So if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound with Garlands of her own.¹⁰

Keats's imagery builds on Gothic tropes in two ways. On a thematic level, the imagery of a lovely female figure chained helplessly to a rock draws from the ancient Greek myth of Andromeda, as well as more recent reincarnations of female victims from the Gothic novel, especially Ellena of *The Italian*, who is kidnapped and held by the sea, then nearly murdered by her father, Schedoni. Much like in Gothic romances, rather than calling for freedom or delivery, Keats's poem sexualizes the bound heroine, who is all the more alluring when under duress of captivity. Keats's Andromeda resembles Adeline from *The Romance of the Forest*:

[A man] entered, leading, or rather forcibly dragging along, a beautiful girl, who appeared to be about eighteen. Her features were bathed in tears, and she seemed to suffer the utmost distress [...] He now seized the trembling hand of the girl, who shrunk aghast with terror, and hurried her towards La Motte [...] She sunk at his feet, and with supplicating eyes, that streamed with tears, implored him to have pity on her. Notwithstanding his present agitation, he found it impossible to contemplate the beauty and distress of the object before him with indifference [...] Pale and exhausted, [she] leaned for support against the wall. Her features, which were delicately beautiful, had gained from distress an expression of captivating sweetness: she had

“An eye
As when the blue sky trembles thro' a cloud
Of purest white”

[...]

Part of her hair had fallen in disorder, while the light veil hastily thrown on, had, in her confusion, been suffered to fall back. Every moment of farther observation heightened the surprise of La Motte, and interested him more warmly in her favour.¹¹

A prisoner throughout the entirety of the novel, Adeline is an object of desire to countless characters, including Theodore, Louis, Monsieur de Montalt and even Madame La Motte, particularly due to her vulnerability. Likewise, the most graphic love-making scene in Lewis's *The Monk* takes place in the catacombs, where Antonia is imprisoned and then raped: “He longed for the possession of her person; and even the gloom of the vault, the surrounding silence, and the resistance which He expected from her, seemed to give a fresh edge to his fierce and unbridled desires”.¹² Keats's sonnet echoes this fetishizing

language as he sensually details “the naked foot” of the chained Muse and mixes violent and sensual language.

By the end of the sonnet, much like in “Nuns Fret Not”, Keats’s speaker offers the promise of free choice as a consolation for physical imprisonment: “She will be bound with Garlands of her own”. Yet this promise is exactly what the poet seeks to deprive, rather than what he protects. The mixture of erotic and brutal vocabulary creates an “interwoven” crossing of love and captivity; this can be seen in the words “sweet” and “Fettered”, “constrain’d” and “gained”, “Jealous” and “naked”. Most of all, the jarring juxtaposition in “pained Loveliness” mirrors the poem’s central contradiction evident in the problematic conjunction, “Fettered *in spite of* pained Loveliness”. These are not merely opposites that happen to be complementary, but rather necessary partners in a formula of Gothic sadistic sophistry.

For all the measured words in “If By Dull Rhymes” (“inspect the Lyre”; “weigh the stress”; “ear industrious & attention meet”), the poem ends describing the Muse’s total rapture and her physical enwreathing in a crown and garland of dead leaves. This rapture and enrapture, thrall and enthrallment, mirrors the process described in Wordsworth’s 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where measurement and numbers allow for the transformation from a memory of pain into an experience of pleasure.¹³ Such arguments for measurement use rhetoric and rationalization to deflect attention away from the violence of coercion that pervades Keats’s poem. The poet figure in “If By Dull Rhymes” perpetrates oppression but cleverly re-envision this violence as a heroic act of self-restraint.

This violence invokes a particularly gendered revision of imprisonment, especially by the end of the poem, when Keats’s speaker instigates self-inflicted female violence through a powerful use of chains and garland imagery. While Wordsworth’s and Keats’s sonnets feature a male poet’s enthrallment of a female figure, both poems also argue for a female’s confinement of herself. The call in Keats’s final lines for a female to oppress herself can then be interpreted as a move of deflection: “So if we may not let the Muse be free, / She will be bound with Garlands of her own”. Here, a male poet recasts his own subjugation by a female entity (a poet bound by his muse) into a narrative of a female entrapping herself. This insistence on female self-imprisonment serves as a sounding point for the female sonneteers explored in the remainder of this article.

Keats’s final image of self-binding garlands is particularly potent not only because it ensnares female figures, but because it Gothicizes the sign of female poets—the garland. Keats’s speaker proposes that we “be / Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath Crown”, alluding to a male tradition of great sonneteers. But to extend the image of the laurel crown to that of bound

garlands invokes a distinctly female image of entwining and asphyxiation. Garlands and tendrils, recurring images woven throughout *Elegiac Sonnets*, not only connected the elegiac sonnets of Charlotte Smith to one another within her collection, but served as a shared trope among women poets more broadly. Smith's opening sonnet in *Elegiac Sonnets* describes garlands as a guide and path to female-inspired poetry:

The partial muse has, from my earliest hours,
Smiled on the rugged path I'm doomed to tread,
And still with sportive hand has snatched wildflowers
To weave fantastic garlands for my head;¹⁴

Anna Seward similarly invokes the language of nature and garlands in conversation with a female interlocutor in "Sonnet XLIII: To May, in the Year 1783":

Nymph, no more
Is thine to mourn beneath the scanty shade
Of half-blown foliage, shivering to deplore
Thy garlands immature, thy rites unpaid;
Meads dropt with gold again to thee belong,
Soft gales, luxuriant bowers, and wood-land song.¹⁵

The language of laurels, garlands and bands is used by Mary Robinson, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and, later, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Keats renders their legacy in the form of an inanimate symbol, utilizing it as a weapon or tool for the imprisonment of the female figure. The language of being "bound" connects Keats's poem ("She will be bound with Garlands of her own") to Wordsworth's sonnet ("twas pastime to be bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground"), as well as Christina Rossetti's "The Thread of Life" (1881):

Thou too aloof bound with the flawless band
Of inner solitude; we bind not thee;
But who from thy self-chain shall set thee free?¹⁶

While the gender dynamics of this Gothic mode in Wordsworth and Keats most often feature a male enthraler with a female captive, it is interesting to note that Elizabeth Barrett Browning echoes this formulation on her own terms, representing scenes of female self-imprisonment. By the 1840s, Barrett Browning could be considered an established leader of a new female tradition that made emboldened uses of the sonnet form, particularly in more elaborate collections like *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Through a study of the Gothic strains in Barrett Browning's sonnets, we can see that her innovation lies not in

resisting the plight of the imprisoned damsel, but rather in intensifying this premise of oppressive confinement by taking on the role of the imprisoner herself.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Gothic motherhood and the womb as prison

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's metasonnet "The Soul's Expression", the discourse of entrapment and liberation is re-imagined through the theme of Gothic motherhood, while the prison becomes manifest in the essential site of the womb. By drawing repeatedly on the double curse and benediction of motherhood, Barrett Browning develops the sonnet as a confined space of punishment, pain and violence, incarceration and liberation.

"The Soul's Expression" serves as the opening sonnet of Barrett Browning's breakthrough collection, the 1844 *Poems*, and it forcefully embodies the plight of a female poet-speaker who is both an imprisoner and deliverer. By drawing on the trope of Gothic motherhood to represent female lyric creation, Barrett Browning creates a model in which the poet-mother not only generates and entraps her infant (the poem itself), but also serves as the very space or prison from which the offspring is delivered. Within the first two lines of this poem, we hear the voices of both the baby being born and the mother giving birth:

With stammering lips and insufficient sound
I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature, day and night
With dream and thought and feeling interwound,
And inly answering all the senses round
With octaves of a mystic depth and height
Which step out grandly to the infinite
From the dark edges of the sensual ground.
This song of soul I struggle to outbear
Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole,
And utter all myself into the air:
But if I did it, — as the thunder-roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,
Before that dread apocalypse of soul.¹⁷

In this sonnet, poetic creation is construed as the distinctly feminine act of giving birth ("to deliver right"), which is ridden with insecurity and anxiety. The birth of a poem, a child, music or one's "song of soul" becomes a struggle not just to "bear out" a fetus, as one would express it in conventional English, but rather to "outbear" it—an inversion performed to fit the sonnet's rhyme

scheme. This inversion creates the experience of struggle for a reader encountering this word for the first time, and also imitates the backward positioning of a baby that emerges from the womb feet first. The term “outbear”, which means both to carry out and to endure suffering, demonstrates the stammering, striving and struggling of this poem’s difficult birth, as well as the pain it inflicts on the mother-poet.

Through this metaphor, the sonnet itself comes to represent the offspring as well as the space of the mother’s womb. Barrett Browning draws attention to the spatial volume of the sonnet and its form through mention of an “octave”, which alludes to both the poet’s musical range and the first eight-line section of the sonnet. Meanwhile, “depth” and “height” suggest both the metric (horizontal) and 14-line (vertical) requirements of the stanza form. This formal space of the sonnet also figures as the space of the womb. The song or poem itself, the child birthed, is expressed in beautiful, confident language, stepping out grandly into the world in lines 3–7. But this space from which the child emerges, while described positively as “portals of the sense, sublime and whole”, is also negatively and vaguely portrayed, as “the dark edges of the sensual ground”. These descriptions depict the prison, the womb or the mouth from whence lyric is released, all portals of deliverance. With one final cry of labor pains, the poetess “utter[s] all [her]self into the air”. Amidst this vagueness of pronouns, the difficulty of distinguishing the child from the mother soon leads to conflict.

The poem, likening the creation of a poem to the delivery of a child, also conceives of deliverance in terms of liberty and freedom. For the speaker to deliver this baby into the world, the child would be delivered from the confines of a womb; to “deliver *right*” further emphasizes the pride of such justice through liberation, not just the ease of a natural birth with the baby head first. The etymological proximity between “deliverance” and “liberation” vindicates the anguish of pain, all for a higher, just cause, heralded through the language of the “sublime”, “infinite” and grand. Yet, in a surprise of the last three lines, we are made to reconsider these physical experiences as mere hypotheticals: “if I did it [...] my flesh would perish there”. The birthing process, if pursued, would result in a negation of the mother—an incompatibility that is accentuated by the assonance of “flesh” and “perish”. The baby’s delivery is also the deliverance from a tyrant, who could only possibly be the mother herself: just as she must “inly answer all the senses round” and “utter all myself into the air”, she is being asked to eject something housed within her and connected to her, something “interwound”. Birth would somehow result in the mother’s flesh perishing; the birth of the baby results in the speaker’s self-negation or self-harm.

The speaker's need to birth herself and "utter all myself into the air" creates an unnatural paradox which resonates with Barrett Browning's famous statement that she "look[ed] around for grandmothers and s[aw] none".¹⁸ This powerful "utter[ance]" creates an expected union of sound: the birthing pains of the mother overlap with the expected cry of the baby's first breaths. Yet this poignant and potentially beautiful moment is compared to the "birth" of a foreboding storm in nature. Like the thunder roll breaking its own cloud, this birth creates the sounds of a noisy growl and impending danger, not musical lyric. Moreover, the verb "[b]reaks" draws attention to the physical violence of birth and tearing of the mother's flesh.

As a prisoner (of her soul's expression), a deliverer (a mother in labor) and the prison itself (the pregnant body and its womb), the speaker embodies a Gothic trope of the struggle between a mother and her child for voice, air and life. This struggle appears in recurrent images of the suicidal and infanticidal mother, from the "Mad Mother" and the legend of Martha Ray in "The Thorn" from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), to the young Agnes, who gives birth in the catacombs of *The Monk*. As Agnes is led down to her prison vault, the Domina shows no pity for the yet unborn child:

Expect no mercy from me either for yourself, or Brat. Rather pray, that Death may seize you before you produce it; Or if it must see the light, that its eyes may immediately be closed again for ever! No aid shall be given you in your labour; Bring your Offspring into the world yourself, Feed it yourself, Nurse it yourself, Bury it yourself.¹⁹

Agnes's infant, which starves soon after its birth, moves directly from the mother's womb to a prison to a grave. In these stories, mothers are represented as hysterical or suffering figures, intent on murder or suicide as the only options of rest and liberation for their offspring. In many Gothic plots, the location of birth and then infanticide is often the graveyard.

These themes of motherhood, childbirth and confinement converge most politically in Wollstonecraft's Gothic novella *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman*, which begins with its protagonist distracted by phantasmal visions of her infant child while she is immured in a prison cell. In this setting, the womb is but a safe, internal prison housing the baby girl before her deliverance into a life of figurative bondage. Wollstonecraft's language in *Maria* is famously politically charged: "Marriage has bastilled me for life"; "the world is a vast prison, and women born slaves".²⁰ Although *Maria* remained a fragment, Wollstonecraft had planned out the tragic ending in note form: "Pregnancy—Miscarriage—Suicide".²¹ According to these drafts, Maria's suicide is motivated by visions of her dead infant: "She swallowed the laudanum [...] Her murdered child again appeared to her,

mourning for the babe of which she was the tomb".²² Eventually, in the published version, Maria is reunited with her infant child and decides to live; yet her maternal instincts are still tinged with the threat of infanticide:

She caught her to her bosom, and burst into a passion of tears—then, resting the child gently on the bed, as if afraid of killing it,—she put her hands to her eyes, to conceal as it were the agonizing struggle of her soul.²³

As in Barrett Browning's poem, the soul and womb become sites for "agonizing struggle"—sources of reproductive power but more so a prison of suffering. Here, the message of confinement as a productive state is cast in terms of fecundity and reproduction.

Also recruiting the language of motherhood but using it to describe authorial production itself, William Godwin, in the role of editor, justifies the relative simplicity of plot in Wollstonecraft's notes on *Maria*:

In reality, these hints, simple as they are, are pregnant with passion and distress. It is the refuge of barren authors only, to crowd their fictions with so great a number of events, as to suffer no one of them to sink into the reader's mind.²⁴

Speaking of Wollstonecraft's writing in terms of fertility, Godwin casts uninspired writers as sterile mothers. In this comparison, authorship is presented as a female act of creation, where the very model of prolific reproduction is true to the practicalities of physical childbirth; a good author is not pregnant with joy and life, but "with passion and distress".

Wollstonecraft, too, defended her work by resisting the model of the mad mother, driven by hysteria and suffering: "Surely there are a few, who will dare to advance before the improvement of the age, and grant that my sketches are not the abortion of a distempered fancy, or the strong delineations of a wounded heart".²⁵ Following her death from complications in childbirth, Wollstonecraft's capacity for motherhood was notoriously attacked by detractors, who construed her death as punishment from divine will. For Wollstonecraft, whose personal history included two suicide attempts, Maria's progression of "Pregnancy—Miscarriage—Suicide" encapsulates a realistic narrative that spells the collapse of female domestic bliss. The language of abortion, which pervades Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as well, becomes the very basis for Gothic parenthood. In the Gothic tradition, female literary production is heavily associated with grotesque, abortive imagery and the language of miscarriage, often within the context of imprisonment, suicide and infanticide. A poem like Barrett Browning's "The Soul's Expression",

which poetically formalizes the prison unto which all women are born, thus draws more from the Gothic traditions of Wollstonecraft than from the elegiac tradition of Charlotte Smith. The ease of female lyric expression, a cliché established through the staggeringly prolific verse of Charlotte Smith, Hannah More, Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans, becomes recast here not as wistful, elegiac song, but as the groans and painful utterances of a difficult childbirth, where delivery is always colored by the threat of barrenness, abortion or death.

As if answering Keats's call that the Muse "be bound with Garlands of her own", Barrett Browning builds on Wollstonecraft's example of prisons that are not simply created by men, but perpetuated by women themselves. *Maria* casts the womb as a metaphorical cell to represent the oppressive world into which women are born, while Barrett Browning recreates the prison within the space of the sonnet, circumscribing the literary womb as a site from which the music of her soul must deliver itself. The overlap between womb, prison and sonnet yields a locus for competition between productivity and oppression. Here, the confinement of adhering to sonnet form is no longer romanticized or fetishized.

In yet more "Gothic sonnets" of the Victorian era, poets continue to present a similar picture of female imprisonment: in works such as Barrett Browning's "The Prisoner", also from the 1844 collection of *Poems*, and Christina Rossetti's 1881 triptych of sonnets, "The Thread of Life". From Wordsworth to Keats to Barrett Browning and beyond, poets came to draw on the imagery of Gothic female confinement as a natural and effectual way to justify the strictures of the sonnet form. Considering the astounding popularity of gothic novels by Matthew Lewis and Ann Radcliffe, whose novels sold well over 8,000 copies by 1809, such tropes of confinement would have been readily familiar to the reading audience of these Gothic plots.²⁶ The prevalence of such Gothic tropes in these metasonnets demonstrates how Romantic and Victorian poets did not merely borrow novelistic themes, but also found ways to embody and overlap them with poetic form. The incorporation of 1790s novelistic tropes into poems of the early 1800s introduces an intriguing and emboldened example of cross-genre influence, opening up to a new legacy of Radcliffean Gothic that extends beyond the novel and into the realm of poetry.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

- 1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Mysteries of Udolpho, Review", *Critical Review*, (Aug. 1794): 361–72 (370).
- 2 Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson, eds., *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival 1750–1850* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 10.
- 3 Amy Billone, *Little Songs: Silence, Gender and the Sonnet Revival* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2007), 3.
- 4 Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 57.
- 5 William Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not", *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Volume 3: Miscellaneous Sonnets* (London: E. Moxon, 1841), 3.
- 6 A poem that celebrates confinement over liberty, this particular sonnet is one of several associated with Wordsworth's increasingly conservative politics, where his turn away from "too much liberty" towards the sonnet's more restrictive form signals his political retirement and resignation. As Joseph Phelan has argued: "the sonnets are the crucible in which the 'Victorian' Wordsworth is formed, and they were recognized as such by his Victorian admirers and imitators". Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 17.
- 7 Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, ed. S. Adams Lee (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1989), 431.
- 8 Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, ed. Frederick Garber (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 84.
- 9 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 436.
- 10 John Keats, "If By Dull Rhymes", *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (London: Moxon, Son and Co., 1871), 346.
- 11 Radcliffe, *Romance*, 5–7.
- 12 Matthew Lewis, *The Monk: A Romance*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 380.
- 13 William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)", *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 172.
- 14 Charlotte Smith, "Sonnet I", *Elegiac Sonnets*, 3rd ed. (London: Dodsley, Gardner and Bew, 1786), 1 (lines 1–4).
- 15 Anna Seward, "Sonnet XLIII: To May, in the Year 1783", *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (London: G. Sael, 1799), 45 (lines 9–14).
- 16 Christina Rossetti, "The Thread of Life", *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump, vol. 2 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986), 122–23 (lines 5–7).

- 17 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "The Soul's Expression", *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, vol. 2 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1900), 227.
- 18 Frederic G. Kenyon, ed. *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 1: 231.
- 19 Lewis, 410.
- 20 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; and, The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria*, ed. Anne K. Mellor and Noelle Chao (New York: Pearson, 2007), 316–17, 253.
- 21 Wollstonecraft, 202.
- 22 Wollstonecraft, 202.
- 23 Wollstonecraft, 203.
- 24 Wollstonecraft, 204.
- 25 Wollstonecraft, 73.
- 26 William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 631.

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