

**Augusta Webster's Poetic Challenge:
Unsettling the Problematic Link between Women and Nature**

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The substance of the plant, like that of any (female) being, cannot move, or move beyond, the ontological status assigned to it. Once and for all. It is not capable of any less or any more.

--Luce Irigaray

<1>In this response to Aristotle's perception of women as part of nature, Luce Irigaray alludes to the vexing issue of essentialism that plagued Victorian women as well as their ancestral counterparts (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 163). Being positioned within nature relegates women to an unprivileged status as primarily reproductive bodies marked by inferiority in multiple regards, with such an assessment justifying subjugation and precluding advancements in the female condition that would initiate substantive reform. The ramifications of this traditional assimilation become especially troubling when considering the purported distinction between nature and culture that has characterized western thought for centuries. The delimiting bifurcation adheres to the faulty logic that equates women/nature with emotion, materiality, and literalness as opposed to the rationality, intellectualism, and imagination allied to the civilizing projects of male-directed culture. Intervening in this societal verity, however, Augusta Webster provides an iconoclastic perspective in four poems from the 1881 *A Book of Rhyme* whereby essentialist presumptions become unsettled through complex strategies that sever the supposed ontological linkage between women and nature, instead illuminating difference and undermining commonality. Webster adopts a seemingly contradictory approach for pursuing such an agenda in that nature imagery *itself* is deployed, in multifaceted and mutable permutations, to accentuate the repression of Victorian women experiencing stifled potentiality and thwarted development. In the process, Webster provides a crucial cognitive field for reimagining Victorian women's condition and prospects, accomplishing as well a revision of the cultural construction of nature.

<2>A published poet beginning with her early pseudonymous *Blanche Lisle* collection in 1860, Webster's "'arrival' as a lyric poet" came with the 1881 *A Book of Rhyme*, asserts Patricia Rigg (217). *A Book of Rhyme* appeared during a particularly tumultuous time in terms of gender roles, with the early stirrings of the New Woman movement, struggles over female participation in higher education, supposedly scientific pronouncements attesting to women's

mental inferiority, and continued injustice in marital and custodial legalities. Although Webster wrote numerous nature poems that follow a more conventional trajectory,⁽¹⁾ the four poems investigated in this essay illustrate difference by pointing to the unique aspects of women's experience and allowing the oppression of conventional Victorian women to stand apart from the workings of nature. During a period when the propriety of topics chosen by women writers raised debate,⁽²⁾ Webster elides criticism of her forceful stance by situating it within the customarily noncontroversial contours of the nature poem. Isobel Armstrong remarks generally on a "doubleness of women's poetry," which can be seen with Webster's work. Armstrong comments on the "doubleness" whereby "conventions are subjected to investigation, questioned, or used for unexpected purposes"; additionally, "[t]he simpler the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it" (*Victorian Poetry* 324). In a related vein, Marysa Demoor sees a Modernist component threading through Webster's verse, "that of her elaborating the worn, cliché images of Victorian poets and novelists only so as to subvert them" and "especially targets those stilted images that have been used in connection with women" (274).

<3>The coupling of women and nature involves a long and disturbing history, as the Aristotelian reference suggests, and a brief look at key moments provides an important context for Webster's poetic attempts to break the connection. Biblical references in Genesis provide an apt originating point, in that the Fall precipitated the alignment of Eve with nature, in contrast to Adam's affiliation with the movement of civilization. In Genesis 1:12, Eve's link to the elements signifies her bond to nature, since Eve rather than Adam turns to the earthen creations initially.⁽³⁾ As Carolyn Merchant comments, "fallen Eve becomes the nature that must be tamed into submission," a concept that shapes perceptions through the centuries (*Reinventing Eden* 22). Merchant remarks that Chaucerian, Elizabethan, and Arcadian imaginations adhered to the concept of a maternal earth, a nurturing female who could also be considered passive matter, and such appraisals carried widespread influence. Additionally, of course, nature evoked destruction and chaos, and those aspects extended to women as well through assumed similitude. Nevertheless, an organic view of nature as predominantly a kindly entity held sway during these early eras, but this judgment shifted dramatically with the Scientific Revolution as interest in human domination of nature, an idea that had lurked in earlier times, took strong hold (1-15).⁽⁴⁾ Francis Bacon, for example, averred that "nature takes orders from man and works under his authority," and he announced that through "'art and the hand of man,' nature can be 'forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded'" (Merchant, *Death of Nature* 171). Domination of women would be subsumed through the traditional equation of women and nature, with Genesis serving as precedent. The divine command to Adam and Eve that they "replenish the earth, and subdue it" (1:28) is accompanied by the dictum to nature-associated Eve that her spouse "shall rule over thee" (3:16).⁽⁵⁾ Giovanni Boccaccio succeeded in using nature to condemn women, for he opined that "in general Nature has given men proud and high spirits, while it has made women humble in character and submissive" (qtd. in Griffin 20).

<4>In contrast to such views, the four poems investigated in this essay follow diverse trajectories for delineating the dissimilarities between nature and women.⁽⁶⁾ In the first poem,

“The Swallows,” nature breaks away from essentialist cultural truths to become reimagined in liberatory ways, which are contrasted startlingly against Victorian women who instead are left constrained by those ostensible verities. If nature can be reconceived without essentialist truisms, the poem thereby suggests, Victorian women could be reimagined as well. In the next two verses, both centered on springtime—“The First Spring Day” and “A Song of a Spring-Time”—supposed reproductive similarities are negated to illustrate difference instead. Finally, “The Old Dream” depicts the damaging effects of a woman’s conflation with nature through a disconcerting generational transmission of essentialist perceptions.

<5>In “The Swallows,” Webster advances multiple techniques to challenge the conflation of women and nature by depicting them as dramatically distinct entities, primarily by conferring agency and purpose on nature, in sharp contrast to the passive situation of a traditional Victorian female ensnared within the strictures of intellectual and behavioral expectations. Nature is depicted not in conventional terms as a homogenous, readily definable other through an identifiable essence, but as a heterogeneous mixture of discrete and distinguishable elements, exemplified by the fitting choice of the seemingly anomalous swallows. Nature is further shown providing a lesson that biological sex need not determine destiny, for the eponymous creatures significantly participate in identical activities as figuratively opposed to the gender-specific pursuits indicative of nineteenth-century culture. At first consideration, the poem may seem to present nature in conventional feminine images, but such depictions are reserved for demarcating the deathlike condition of essentialized Victorian women, not the life of the energetic swallows. Narrated by a speaker with a marginalized presence, “The Swallows” serves as a lament of sorts, in that the stanzas trace the free movements of the avian travelers embarking on their migratory pathway to emphasize the antithetical experience of a moribund Victorian woman.

<6>Opening with a plaintive question posed to the swallows, the poem reveals the speaker’s naiveté about her dismal condition and her underlying but unattainable hope that a desired change in Victorian society’s version of natural law could occur, thereby enabling the speaker’s own version of a dying summer to be revived.

Ah! swallows, is it so?
Did loving lingering summer, whose slow pace
Tarried among late blossoms, loth to go,
Gather the darkening cloud-wraps round her face
And weep herself away in last week’s rain?
Can no new sunlight waken her again?
“Yes,” one pale rose-a-blow
Has answered from the trellised lane;
The flickering swallows answer “No.”

Identified with feminine pronouns in the stanza, summer assumes stereotypical gendered traits through extended sobbing and vitiated movement in her reluctance to depart under another entity’s volition, effacing herself in the shadowy celestial mantle; indeed, the diffident motion is

mimicked by the ponderous phrasing and necessarily protracted enunciation of the second and third lines. The other feminine entity of the pallid rose, a paradigmatic floral emblem of womanhood,⁽⁷⁾ conveys the attenuated condition of an unfortunate Victorian female through its wan demeanor and a sense of irreversible deterioration, for a blown rose has flowered and decayed; moreover, this rose rests in a “trellised lane,” suggestive of a carceral space with the lattice of restraining bands situated within a narrow passageway. The rose’s expectant response that the summer—and by implication, the rose itself—can be revived through solar ministrations is rapidly negated by the answering swallows. With the sun’s traditional literary designation as a masculine power,⁽⁸⁾ the vocal exchange provides an allegory of the female condition; no options for a metaphorical flowering to expand the contours of a Victorian woman’s life exist in a debilitating male-controlled environment through which a female is essentialized.

<7>The selection of the swallows not only as the carriers of the demoralizing denial but as the major characters in the poem provides an incisive commentary on and illuminating counterpoint to nineteenth-century gender roles. As articulated by Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds*, the authoritative tome on avian behavior embraced by a youthful *Jane Eyre*, male and female swallows are nearly indistinguishable in their plumage, which even a casual observer would recognize as a rather unique trait among feathered creatures. This virtual androgyny extends into conduct, in that both sexes of this highly social species participate in vigorous activity, “almost continually upon the wing” (xxvi). The poem’s swallows are never discerned by biological sex, but all thrive in a disencumbered and active atmosphere, with their “flickering” movement indicating constant animation and robust agency, as the subsequent stanzas demonstrate. Webster’s conference of agency upon the swallows anticipates, in a way, Donna Haraway’s view that there needs to be an interest in “granting the status of agent/actor to the ‘objects’ of the world” (593).

<8>Unlike the poem’s feminine summer concealing herself in the murky clouds evocative of a burial shroud, the swallows burst through the suffocating confines and begin their southward trek:

From out the dim grey sky
The arrowy swarm breaks forth and specks the air,
While, one by one, birds wheel and float and fly,
And now are gone, then suddenly are there;
Till lo, the heavens are empty of them all.
Oh, fly, fly south, from leaves that fade and fall,
From shivering flowers that die;
Free swallows, fly from winter’s thrall,
Ye who can give the gloom good-bye.

In initially occupying the same obscured space as does the cloaked summer, the swallows at this moment apparently emblemize feminine nature as well. The spatial placement carries a presumption of nature as homogenous—whereby any entity aligned with nature, including

women, can be unproblematically aggregated within an undifferentiated category, like “the dim grey sky”—but the supposition is simultaneously dissipated. With its prepositional beginning, the stanza’s first line quickly signals departure from the enveloping environs, and a profound sense of movement ensues. As an “arrowy swarm,” the swallows replicate the definitive launching entailed in the unusual modifier that invokes the noun form of an arrow, and the phrase’s subsequent actual noun of “swarm” subsumes the predicate version as well. The language takes on a slippery quality here, in that adjective slides into noun while another noun slips into a predicate, creating a sensation of incessant activity that provides a marked deviation from the sluggish summer. Moreover, the arrow’s shape duplicates the straightforward linear time “readily labeled masculine,” as Julia Kristeva observes (18), opposed to the cyclical temporality often linked to the female and nature (16). The ensuing phrase of “breaks forth” establishes the impression of both irrepressible force and confident advancement as the swarm makes its own mark upon the sky when it “specks the air,” as if writing its story rather than having a narrative imposed upon it.

<9>Also undermining the sense of feminine nature as a homogenous essence is the individualistic wording of the next line, whereby the birds proceed “one by one”; thus, although part of the larger body of the swarm, each bird constitutes an individual being as well. Tennyson’s “The Princess” provides an illuminating connection here, for one character chides another that in perceiving women, “you clash them all in one, / That have as many differences as we. / The violet varies from the lily as far / As oak from elm” (ll. 172-75).⁽⁹⁾ Vigorous verbs, such as “wheel” and “fly,” maintain the effect of ongoing motion in Webster’s stanza, as do the swallows’ sudden presence and absence. Successful in their escape from the negative associations that have been allied with the overcast sky, the swallows entirely vanish from this space (“the heavens are empty of them all”). At this point, the poem ceases its particularized references to the sky, clouds, and heavens, shifting the focus from a virtually inert setting to the motion of flight, importantly occurring, as a later stanza reveals, in the companionable masculine sunlight that will not nurture the feminine rose.

<10>In the second stanza, the poem begins to build upon a gendered dichotomy between a masculine height and feminine ground that quietly emerged in the first stanza when the summer was positioned on the earth as it “[t]arried among the blossoms” and the pallid rose was dying in the lane. As Karen J. Warren comments about the shared oppression of women and nature, the “‘up-down’ thinking” characteristic of male-dominated culture “places higher value, status, or prestige on what is ‘up’ rather than on what is ‘down’” (20); under the prevalent “conceptual framework” indicative of such a society, “[w]hatever is identified with nature and the realm of the physical”—i.e., women—“is inferior to (‘below’) whatever is identified with the ‘human’ and the realm of the mental”—i.e., men (22). The poem’s sky appears to have changed its gender identity from the opening stanza, in which the feminine summer is tied to the somber clouds; however, the identical gender distinction inheres in both stanzas through the contrast between the clouds’ darkness, reminiscent of the night with its traditionally designated feminine moon,⁽¹⁰⁾ and the sunlight. Moreover, the “last week’s rain” associated with the clouds in the first stanza entails a descent to the feminine ground. The second stanza reinforces the gendered opposition between height and ground, with the fifth

line signaling the pattern through its punning “lo” metonymically and obversely attached to “the heavens.” Helping to form the alternating pattern is the alliterative /f/ play, which, for example, refers in the sixth line both to the soaring swallows that “fly, fly” and the dying leaves that “fade and fall.”

<11>The poem shifts in the third stanza to include the speaker’s first direct indication of self-referentiality, extending the import of the second stanza’s closing line whereby the birds, by their implicit variance, “can give the gloom good-bye.” The refocused attention points more directly to the plight of Victorian women considered in essentialist terms, in part by explicating the numbing effects of winter upon the earth. Without the propitious sunlight that the southbound swallows will eventually encounter, the earthbound Victorian female is entrapped within winter, associated with masculinity as both the counterpart to the feminine summer of the first stanza and an emblem of male authority marching “towards his throne.”

But what for us who stay
To hear the winds and watch the boughs grow black,
And in the soddened mornings, day by day,
Count what lost sweets bestrew the nightly track
Of frost-foot winter trampling towards his throne?
Swallows, who have the sunlight for your own,
Fly on your sunward way;
For you has January buds new blown,
For us the snows and gloom and grey.

Although the speaker has inserted herself into the poem, the appearance of “us” extends her situation to women in general while effacing the speaker as an individual, an appropriate maneuver in terms of the prevalent nineteenth-century presumption of an amorphous female essence. Furthermore, “us” exists as merely a prepositional object rather than as the subject of its own sentence and figurative destiny. Predicates associated with the Victorian female are sharply differentiated from the vigorous verbs indicative of the swallows, in that the former almost entirely designate inertia: the women will “stay,” “hear,” and “watch,” with their activity limited to an unassertive counting of the victims destroyed by winter’s inhospitable cold, themselves made passive since the winter “bestrew” them upon the ground. Conversely, the masculine winter is attached to muscular verbs as well as alliterative puissance through the /f/ and /t/ wording in the fifth line, which in enunciation iterates the “trampling” sound the line describes. The swallows’ connection to the sun expands through two references in the stanza, for the birds both possess the sunlight—it is “your own,” the speaker informs them—and continue to fly on their “sunward way.” The counterpunal contrast between the swallows and a repressed Victorian woman is starkly drawn in the stanza’s final two lines with their parallel prepositional beginnings stressing the very different fates that meet them. The masculine sunlight portends opportunity; the lack of winter sunlight brings paralysis.

<12>The height motif proceeds into the final stanza, bringing with it a sense of an unbridgeable gap between the unrestrained swallows and the earthbound speaker along with her female counterparts, as indicated by the first line's phrase attesting to the distance.

On, on, beyond our reach,
Swallows, with but your longing for a guide:
Let the hills rise, let the waves tear the beach,
Ye will not balk your course nor turn aside,
But find the palms and twitter in the sun.
And well for them whose eager wings have won
The longed for goal of flight;
But what of them in twilights dun
Who long, but have no wings for flight?

Marginalized subjectivity additionally inheres in the phrase "our reach," for the speaker's reference to herself and others sharing her condition simply rests in an adjectival form, a far less potent pronoun than one placed in the subject position. The birds, however, will ultimately succeed in their quest, despite obstacles that may be flung in their path, for they have left the material world associated with the bleak images of femininity (e.g., black boughs, "soddened mornings") to escape and triumph even if the earthbound hills could rise or the sea could ravage. For Victorian females trapped by essentialist perceptions, however, the future is foreclosed; even though the speaker poses the question as to the destiny of those "[w]ho long," the answer implicitly resides in the continuation of the final line and the impossibility of their own flight. The pronoun alteration from "our" to the penultimate line's "them," coupled with the latter's placement as a prepositional object, adds to the dismal fate in that the syntactic change suggests detachment and a lost sense of being, as if any prospect of vibrant subjectivity is chimeric. As in earlier stanzas, the world that entraps the traditional female is characterized by greyness and an accompanying gloom, which in the final stanza is manifested in the doubly emphatic "twilights dun."

<13>In its contextualization within the natural world, the poem seemingly imparts the dreary message that the prospect of a Victorian woman breaking away from the restrictive life that her culture has designated for her is as unlikely as the overturning of natural law; for the speaker, Victorian culture virtually exists as irrevocable law. Fittingly, masculine rhyme blankets the poem, as if to demonstrate the apparently unbreakable restraints upon a woman in an androcentric realm. A sense of rigidity ensues as well in the poem's stanza structure, in that each nine-line component follows the identical rhyme scheme, as if to announce an immutable future.

<14>Yet in individualizing elements of nature, as with the swallows and the topographical inhabitants they leave behind, the poem provides a shred of hope, albeit not realized within the confines of the poem. In thereby suggesting that perceptions of nature as a homogenous mass are faulty, the poem by analogy implies that an unproblematic equation of women with nature, relegating them to a shared otherness within that amorphous concretion, is equally flawed. As

Gretchen T. Legler observes, “reimagining what nature is ... is part of the elimination of institutionalized oppression” that informs gender relationships (228). With the lack of overt gender differentiation as an identifying trait, the swallows, regardless of biological sex, participate in the same endeavors without arbitrary exclusion to achieve their driving objective. For a suppressed Victorian female, the poem hints, an analogous attainment of her own form of freedom should be achievable as well.

<15>In some respects, “The First Spring Day” invokes techniques characteristic of “The Swallows” but creates a picture of unrelenting grimness and depressing comparison, as if presenting an elegy to the irredeemably ruined hopes of a constricted Victorian woman. Like Thomas Gray’s famed verse situated in the churchyard, wherein the fading day “leaves the world to darkness and to me” (l. 4), the Victorian woman speaker implicit in the Webster poem is doomed to her own version of opacity through the impossibility of her aspirations being reborn and realized. The fact that the voice is not personalized by pronoun adds to the marginalization wrought by the effacing effect of essentialism; the distanced third-person perspective provides additional evidence of inhibited subjectivity. The notion that women and nature are aligned as equivalent entities defined by their ostensible essence is undermined not by demonstrating individualism as in “The Swallows” but by disrupting the traditional perception of similarity obtaining through analogous cycles in the reproductive process. As Sherry B. Ortner reminds, the binding of women and nature “begins of course with the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone”; a woman’s bodily operations, “more involved more of the time with ‘species life,’ seem to place her closer to nature, in contrast to man’s physiology” (42). To some, “woman’s body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life” (43). In the poem, however, the connection between women and nature through reproduction is metaphorically detached; the rebirth experienced in nature does not hold true for the speaker, in that the prospects for improving women’s conditions are utterly foreclosed.

<16>Solar imagery permeates the poem to accentuate the substantive difference between women and the natural world they supposedly mirror, serving as the initial contextualizing and subsequent controlling image.

The sunshine died long ago,
Stifled out long ago,
And the waste of the world was grey,
And night was the best to know,
For night was to doze and forget the day,
To be warm and forgetting and still,
And need not the sun and know not the chill:
But oh, for the day that was darkened so!

Through the traditional designations that confer gender identity upon it, the sun functions not only as a masculine presence in the poem, but more pertinently can be extended to serve as an emblem of the masculine world that promises stimulating opportunity and fulfilled

potential. With the sun's death in the first two lines, the speaker's sad plight is both announced and reiterated. Isobel Armstrong speaks of repetition in one of its functions as "always contemplating redefining, a prior form of itself" (*Language* 35), which in Webster's poem can be seen as insinuating through its second utterance a kind of tolling that pronounces lifelessness. In fact, such two-line repetition at the beginning of the stanza creates a pattern in the poem, as if signaling an immutable permanency that the reiterated word is enacting. In the first stanza, repetition of "long ago" augurs a kind of eternal present that ushers in an unbearable world marked by the enduring "waste" that remains of a woman whose dreams have been destroyed. The predicate "stifled" provides an apt choice that encapsulates as well the repression of women's possibility and a smothering of subjectivity. One could read the metaphorical annihilation of the sunshine as delineating the diachronic fate of women from centuries past or from the poem's specific historical moment, the latter of which provides a particularly haunting picture through its immediacy.

<17>As in "The Swallows," greyness pervades the environment, but in incorporating the night, "The First Spring Day" taps a readily identifiable feminine image through the association with the moon. Night, in "The First Spring Day," represents a desired state of living death in which numbness, unconsciousness, and forgetfulness become vehicles for survival. The nocturnal image brings to mind Charlotte Smith's sonnet "To Night" of a century earlier, wherein "the exhausted heart / Is calm, tho' wretched; hopeless, yet resign'd" within the "quiet gloom" (ll. 11-12). Through the tethering to Smith's verse, "The First Spring Day" provides as well a commentary on the immutability of women's condition over the centuries while accentuating the poem's sense of an eternal present. Turning to Webster's own era, the unchanging oblivion of her poem positions an essentialized woman as a kind of desolate Lotus Eater undergoing a live burial, "warm and forgetting and still," that enables her to dull the mind and endure rather than be plagued by thoughts of what cannot be. In expressing no need for the sun and no sensation of cold, the speaker realizes that the pain of shattered dreams can be borne only by pushing away any remembrance of them. Yet in the final line, regret cannot be entirely negated.

<18>In the next stanza, the distinction between height and ground reinforces the distance from the speaker's dreams and incipient opportunities, portrayed insistently by the repetition contained in the first two lines.

Why gaze on a barren heaven,
Void and unchanging heaven,
On a barren earth in the grime,
And not a poor blossom given,
No thing that was thinking of sunshine time,
For a promise, a praise of the past?
And so one forgot the sunshine at last;
And sleep could avail, but what to have striven?

The subsequent reference to the “barren earth” provides an ironic moment, in that the line seems to be citing the supposed commonality of reproductive patterns among women and nature, but the presence of the “barren heaven” retrospectively dissolves the connection in reminding of a very different type of infertility, that of unrealized expectations. Recognizing the futility of revived desires, the lamenting speaker remains submersed in a dulling torpidity to ease the unbearable pain. With no prospect of recuperating vanished aspirations—no evidence of even “a poor blossom” that could revive the ephemeral “sunshine time”—the speaker again counsels herself not to dwell on impossibility. Indeed, the /p/ alliteration of the sixth line punctuates the self-given advice with its forceful enunciation. The stanza’s final phrase questions the value of even having sought a more stimulating life, as if intertextually nullifying the positive perspective of Robert Browning’s Andrea del Sarto when he famously muses that “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what’s a heaven for?” (ll. 97-98). Webster’s speaker seemingly is responding that such an optimistic viewpoint is reserved only in regard to “a *man’s* reach,” for a woman encounters merely a correspondingly sterile firmament.

<19>A thematic shift occurs with the third stanza through a juxtaposition, in that the poem’s preoccupation with the speaker’s plight recedes into the background to focus instead on nature in a more literal manner. This move, as with Webster’s other verse according agency to nature and problematizing its supposed homogeneity and essence, alters a cultural construction whereby nature is relegated to the background in favor of human activity being highlighted in the foreground. As Val Plumwood explains the conventional schematization, nature is positioned “as the ‘environment’ or invisible background conditions against which the ‘foreground’ achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place”; that is, nature comes “to be defined as a *terra nullius*” lacking “its own purposes or meanings” (4).

<20>The recurrent image of the sun loses its figurative focus in the poem’s third stanza, for the poem at this moment is bracketing off the solar connection to a masculine world of possibility. Instead, the sun assumes its customary role as the force physiologically essential for the renewal of life with spring’s arrival.

The sunshine wakes once anew,
Wakes and is born anew,
And the Age of the earth grows young,
And heaven has its youth for hue,
And hope is the tune of the spring-bird’s tongue,
And the leaves in their prisons all hark,
And blossoms will know there is end of the dark:
One hour of the sun, and the spring-time grew!

The predicate associated with sunshine in this stanza’s opening line provides a telling deviation from the verb of the poem’s initial line, in which the sun expired rather than merely slept. The distinction points to the unbridgeable distance between an essentialized Victorian woman and

actual nature in indicating that the notion of rebirth does not apply to her destroyed ambitions that have no prospect of revitalization in a constrictive culture. With the echo of “wakes” in the next line, the divergence between women and nature is reiterated, a notion that is furthered through a temporal contrast, with the sunshine being “born anew” instead of having “died long ago” as in the poem’s first line, and subsequently fostering spring growth in merely an hour’s passage. Other earlier images are similarly reworked to emphasize the very disparate conditions of women and nature. No blossom existed in the second stanza, attesting to the lack of life experienced by the speaker, yet in the penultimate stanza the literal blossoms are preparing for the “end of the dark”; for the speaker, however, darkness represents a perpetual condition. For the sole moment in the poem, a distinctive voice emerges, as an avian song conveys “hope” that the persona can never more know; unlike this example of tuneful nature, a constricted Victorian female is effectually deprived of a voice within a culture that instead values her silence. Replete with references to nature’s awakening, growth, and expectation, the stanza bears no resemblance to the situation of the speaker adumbrated in the previous lines.

<21>The effect continues in the final stanza through persistent images of light and renewal, with the contrast to the darkness of the first pair of stanzas dispelled, along with the barrenness that characterized the speaker’s heaven.

The sunshine new on the earth,
Heaven to brighten the earth,
And the deathful dimness gone by,
The barren and winter dearth!
And to-day is the best till the next is nigh,
And to-night is to-morrow begun,
To-morrow, when blossoms remember the sun!
Dead hopes, are ye born with the blossoms birth?

Resembling the previous stanza, temporal progression prevails, as today, tonight, and tomorrow attest to advancement and optimism along with a sense of agency. In the process, the temporal movement suggests the realm of masculine linear time from which the speaker is barred. The contrasting image of “deathful dimness” portends the final stanza’s dismal message by reminding of the lifelessness charted in the opening pair of stanzas to identify the speaker’s condition. By reasserting the decided distinctions between nature and womanhood, the poem allows no answer but a negative one to the final question posed. “Dead hopes,” most certainly, will not be reborn in accordance with nature’s cycles.

<22>The poem’s prosodic elements convey the arrhythmic condition in that no pattern in either stresses or syllabic count occurs. The eight-line stanzas represent the only consistent aspect, as if mimicking the presumed commonality of women and nature before demonstrating through disjunction that the comparison cannot be maintained. Although the stanzas on first consideration seamlessly conform to an *aababcca* scheme, the rhyming is occasionally strained through inconsistent shifts between single and double syllabic pairings, as in “ago” and

“know.” No two stanzas follow the same sequence of syllable counts or stresses but instead suggest a lack of unity. In effect, the consistent pattern of stanza length and rhyme scheme replicates the rhythms of nature; conversely, the disharmonic syllabic and stress aspects intimate that Victorian females cannot be unproblematically assumed within nature and deemed an immutable essence. Instead, like those highly individualistic prosodic components, women need to be recognized as discrete entities entitled to their own subjectivities rather than enervating roles imposed upon them. Pertinent here is Luce Irigaray’s remark that “individuation in the feminine must start again,” especially “consider[ing] all the aspects of feminine identity in its complexity and discover[ing] a way to cultivate them” (“No Democracy” 201).

<23>Another poem addressing the ostensible period of rebirth, “A Song of a Spring-Time,” takes a broader perspective than does “The First Spring Day” by not only creating a separation between an essentialized Victorian female and the reproductive rhythms of nature but also by distancing women from the movements and patterns of nature altogether. “A Song of a Spring-Time” criticizes the season’s avian harbingers for premature reaction to the titular moment and subsequently suggests that spring with its positive associations is unattainable for the speaker, again implicit as she addresses the poem’s avian singers. The title’s usage of indefinite rather than definite articles signals an atypical response to spring, one that elides the revitalization supposedly heralded by the season in indicating that merely the time, not the promise of renewal itself, has arrived. The title’s opening noun inserts an ironic tone through the customary connection of women with the sounds of the natural world as well as with mimicry, which recital of a song entails, rather than the capacity for the originality of language.⁽¹¹⁾ Composed of a pair of eight-line stanzas, the poem replicates through its brevity the ephemeral prospects of the speaker’s version of spring and the marked difference between nature and women in their response to the season. For the birds, the spring is a false one because it comes too early; for the speaker, spring will never arrive. Underscoring the lack of commonality between women and nature, the speaker does not engage in a symbiotic conversation but instead chastises nature for its preferable situation.

<24>Images of violence, destruction, and death pervade the first stanza to demonstrate the misidentification of spring.

Too rash, sweet birds, spring is not spring;
Sharp winds are fell in east and north;
Late blossoms die for peeping forth;
Rains numb, frost blights;
Days are unsunned, storms tear the nights;
The tree-buds wilt before they swell.
Frosts in the buds, and frost-winds fell;
And you, you sing.

A note of wistfulness appears in the first line’s address to the “sweet birds,” as if gently chiding them for their error and incomprehension of a rather apocalyptic moment while wishing that

the creatures were correct in their assessment. In portraying the birds as being premature, the poem is illustrating the situation of the speaker herself, a Victorian woman who effectually is ahead of her time in her own situation of a false spring and thus unable to attain the life for which she longs; the dark images permeating the stanza thus can be read to replicate the position of the unconventional woman in a society hostile to her desires. Like the arboreal buds that cannot develop, the speaker's hopes "wilt before they swell," annihilated by the harsh environment that the speaker must inhabit. Sadly appropriate for her situation, the days are devoid of sun, suggesting as in the poems discussed earlier that the speaker cannot participate in a masculine world in which she could develop her own capabilities beyond the narrow confines proscribed for nineteenth-century women. The final line of the stanza seems almost contemptuous, reproaching the birds for their lack of understanding.

<25>In the second stanza, the false spring is retrospectively presented as the speaker's fledgling hopes that were wholly crushed.

But let no song be sweet in spring;
Spring is but hope for after-time,
And what is hope but spring-tide rime?
But blights, but rain?
Spring wanes unsunned, and sunless wane
The hopes false spring-tide bore to die.
Spring's answer is the March wind's sigh:
And you, you sing.

From the speaker's perspective, nature's true spring is false also, as is the prospect of a change in her position. A kind of syllogism develops in the stanza's first quatrain, in which the concept of hope is revealed to be no more promising than the rime that will eventually dissolve, the blights that through deterioration bring death, and the rain that will carry all aspirations away. Perhaps "rime" is even being presented as a pun on "rhyme" to accentuate impermanence when verse is spoken but not preserved. The stanza becomes unremittingly bleak in the second quatrain, wherein spring seems to move backward in time as it declines without the sun's presence, like an advanced woman who receives only discouragement for seeking a more satisfying life outside the reactionary parameters demarcated for her. The speaker's repeated remark to the birds at the stanza's ending seems to assume an even harsher tone than the first iteration, now that her situation has been more fully drawn.

<26>Structurally, the poem follows a consistent syllabic and rhythmic pattern, as if creating an unrelenting framework that allows no deviation from the order it has imposed. With the *abbccdda* scheme, each stanza ends where it begins, replicating the lack of growth and forward movement that characterizes the speaker's plight. The diction consists almost entirely of only one or two syllables, creating an emphatic and authoritative sound as if brooking no alteration to the structure; the sole three-syllable word, "after-time," offers merely limited variance, since simply the tie of the hyphen creates the extra syllable. The aberration at first glance implies that an "after-time" portends a different actuality for future women, yet an optimistic reading

readily falls apart through analogies in the two subsequent lines that reveal the prospect to be as unsustainable as the rime.

<27>The final poem, “The Old Dream,” presents a divergent approach from the verse investigated earlier to problematize the conflation of women and nature, in this case using natural images to focus on the unhealthy transmission of this traditional perception through the conventional mother; the reproductive process creating the Victorian daughter carries not the sense of renewal seen in the natural world but instead the perpetuation of outworn and damaging ideas in a generational heritage. The conventional Victorian mother thus is portrayed as a destructive rather than a nurturing figure to her hapless daughter. The underlying concept of “Mother Nature” assumes two meanings here, neither of which carries positive associations because of the repression fostered by linkage to the natural world and the Victorian mother’s role in perpetuating harmful perceptions. Although the three-stanza poem could be read as a lament for lost love, “The Old Dream” more compellingly assails a mother’s indoctrination of a daughter into a culturally appropriate life and the shattering of a dream holding forth an alternative path.(12)

<28> “The Old Dream” brings to mind Webster’s sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*, penned over several years but beginning the same year as *A Book of Rhyme* was published. Yet the approaches are quite different. *Mother and Daughter* presents a complex tracing of an intense maternal bond, touching upon a range of emotions as the speaking mother ponders the daughter’s path from childhood to adulthood. This exploration of mother-love reveals not only the depths of feeling to the child, but also the lessons imparted, the discipline accorded, and the concerns attendant upon the daughter’s maturation. As Emily Harrington describes the sequence, “[t]he mother’s nurturing presence is meant to prepare the daughter to be separate from her” and “emphasizes the mother’s anxieties about the passage of time and inevitable changes and developments in the relationship between mother and daughter” (268). Melissa Valiska Gregory speaks of the mother’s determined scrutiny and discipline of her child, in some cases so marked that “the monitoring and correcting of her child’s behavior” takes on the appearance of “voyeuristic absorption, an unhealthy form of parental surveillance that leads to an almost fanatical watchfulness” (41-42).(13) It is the disciplinary component of the mother-child relationship from which “The Old Dream” builds, depicting a daughter’s resentment for being molded within the traditional parameters of female behavior as well as a painful understanding of the process.

<29>As the speaker in “The Old Dream,” the daughter initially condemns the mother and refuses to recognize that her parent unquestioningly followed what she perceived as her maternal duty and therefore should not be judged so harshly.

Nay, tell me not. I will not know.
Because of her my life is bare,
A waste where blow-seeds spring and grow
Then die because the soil is spent,
And leave no token they were there;

A soddened mere where marsh-lights gleam,
But no star sees the ray it lent
Because of her despoiled and bare.
What then? she did a wrong unmeant.
Leave me my dream.

The knowledge that the daughter will not accept in the first line discloses an angry refusal to forgive the mother for conforming to traditional responsibilities and in the subsequent line places all blame on maternal misdirection. Nature imagery is deployed to illustrate the concomitant harm, inverting the customary perception of both nature and mother as cultivating entities and reproductive forces that bring fresh life. Instead, the imagery depicts a sterile environment in which the daughter's fate is one of waste and barrenness as well. The spent soil on which the seeds cannot thrive intimates a worn-out tradition unable to sustain a present generation, whereby even small steps toward progress are doomed to oblivion, "leav[ing] no token they were there." The redundant image of the "soddened mere" evokes not only a place of unhealthy and insubstantial torpidity, but also connects an analogous intellectual sluggishness with the noun that in a French context identifies the mother. In noting the presence of marsh-lights, the speaker stresses both the lack of a substantial foundation upon which traditional gender practices have been established as well as their illusoriness and deception in that such lights form a mirage of sorts, unassociated with any star, and thus hold forth a false promise. Because of the mother's adherence to tradition, her daughter is left "despoiled and bare" in another inversion of reproductive allusions. In the stanza's penultimate line, the daughter pauses to reconsider her ire, recognizing at least momentarily that the mother in a way represents a victim also in following tradition that caused her to initiate "a wrong unmeant." Nevertheless, as in the two subsequent stanza endings, the daughter pleads for the memory of her dream that portended a fulfilling existence, knowing that such remembrance offers the only possibility of attainability.

<30>In the opening of the second stanza, the speaker can no longer bear even momentary forgiveness and blames the mother for the gentle demeanor that belied the harmful message of conformity being transmitted.

Tell me no more. I will not know.
My life, if she had harsher eyes,
Did her sweet voice not deepen so,
Had maybe missed this bitterness;
Maybe I should have been more wise
If she were sterner, or could seem,
If she could have been pitiless.
Too sweet low voice! too trustful eyes!
What then? she could not judge their stress.
Leave me my dream.

With her soft eyes, quiet voice, and tranquil behavior, the mother smoothly accords with the ideal of Victorian womanhood. In demonstrating valued maternal traits, the mother conveys no warning through her apparently perfect conduct that her message should be rejected. Instead, the daughter is unwittingly drawn to accept the motherly instruction. Again a fleeting moment of forgiveness emerges, signaled by the same phrase of “What then?” in the penultimate line that also arose in the first stanza, as the daughter realizes that her mother lacked awareness of the effect her behavior and indoctrination would cause.

<31>The final stanza charts an unmistakable alteration in attitude toward the mother, in that the speaker not only mourns her lost dream of fulfillment but also realizes that the loss of affection for the mother would compound the sense of deprivation. One is reminded of Margaret Homans’ comment about nineteenth-century women that “[i]t is the mother’s cultural powerlessness that the daughter is rejecting, not the mother herself” (16), and Angela Leighton’s remark about the “tempt[ation] to detect ... matrilineal yearning in the many poems about mothers, mourned or celebrated, by Victorian women” (xxxviii).

I will not know. Rob not my heart;
It is too poor to lose yet more.
Leave the old dream where she was part;
Are all smiles ill, all sweetness lies?
One blossom once my life-time bore
It wakened at her April beam,
Then froze; yet dead 'tis still some prize
It shows mine blossoms were of yore.
Let be: I need some memories:
Leave me my dream.

The speaker’s ironic adoption of nature imagery equates her dream to a transient blossom, now forever gone. The knowledge that the speaker refuses to accept in this stanza indicates a rejection of the notion that the mother cruelly betrayed her daughter’s dream. One surmises that the mother initially encouraged the daughter in her aspiration—“It wakened at her April beam”—only to recognize that the dream was inappropriate for a Victorian female and stifled its realization. The speaker assumes a rather rueful tone in comprehending that a lesson has been learned, for the dream can never be restored. In effect, the speaker experiences an odd gratitude in the “prize” of being forced to recognize the severe realities of the culture in which she endures and the impossibility of her aspirations. All that can be retained is to capture the vanished moment of hope in the eternal present of memory and the belief that her mother unwittingly erred.

<32>The agitation experienced by the speaker is duplicated in a sense through the poem’s recurrent rhyme scheme, for the *abacbdcbcd* structure seems ragged and disharmonious. The rhythmic repetition through the three stanzas creates a sense of dullness, as if the loss of the dream has resulted in an unpleasant sameness marked by the lack of hope for change. In fact, each line, barring the last one of a stanza, follows an eight-syllable format to mimic the notion

of immutability. The same closing line of each stanza carries only four syllables, as if to demonstrate that the memory of the dream holds only marginal comfort, lacking the fullness of an aspiration that had actually been realized.

<33>With all four poems traced in the preceding pages, then, Augusta Webster strives in divergent ways to break apart the connection to nature that for centuries has held women back. Victorian women, the poetry demonstrates, do not in actuality conform to the stereotypes associated with nature but instead are inherently different. In a period when the bond between women and nature was so broadly assumed to be a cultural verity, Webster takes the Victorian reader to alternative and enlightening possibilities. Although Webster's work has increasingly attained attention from modern scholars, and deservedly so with her complex and intricate verse, the unsettling of the woman/nature bond has not received the coverage it deserves nor unveiled the insights it provides for assessing *fin de siècle* gender configurations. The ramifications for a Victorian audience of an altered appraisal of the relationship between women and nature undoubtedly would have been substantial for those readers attuned to the powerful messages that the poems in *A Book of Rhyme* embody. In severing the woman/nature connection, Webster opens up a space whereby the female condition can be reassessed and regenerated. To return to the epigraph that began this essay, then, "the ontological status" conferred on women, as on nature, need not be immutable.

Endnotes

(1) Dorothy Mermin comments that Webster "began publishing with ballads and romances in apparent imitation of Barrett Browning's early works, and also with explorations of women's traditional location within nature, identifying with a dandelion, a flock of birds, and a serpent imprisoned in a chest at the bottom of a lake" (79). Christine Sutphin states that "[r]eviewers of Webster's poetry noted the influence of Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and typically invoked Robert Browning in discussing her monologues" (16).^(△)

(2) As Sutphin says, "Of course, during Webster's time controversy raged concerning fit subjects and appropriate forms for poetry" (35).^(△)

(3) Carolyn Merchant states that Eve "communicates with nature in the form of the serpent" and "is the first to ingest the fruit produced by nature on the tree of knowledge" (117-18). Thus, Eve "becomes one with nature and knows nature" (*Reinventing Eden* 118).^(△)

(4) Of course, Romantic poetry echoed the positive perceptions of nature and demonstrated the correspondingly respectful attitude that predated the mechanistic and controlling approach devolving from the Scientific Revolution, which instead largely considered the nonhuman world as a commodity to be exploited and assaulted.^(△)

(5) Rosemarie Tong remarks that "critics of human-centered environmentalism" assail an "'arrogant anthropomorphism'" that adheres to the dictum in Genesis calling for "men to 'subdue' the earth and 'have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and

every living thing that moves upon the earth' as promoting the view that nature has instrumental value only" (239).^(^)

(6)All quotes from the poems come from *A Book of Rhyme*.^(^)

(7)Multiple longstanding associations characterize the rose as female. In mythology, for instance, Venus considered the rose to be sacred (43). In contrast to this sexualized figure, the Virgin Mary also was linked to the rose and named the *Rosa mystica*. In processions held for her, rose petals adorned the walkways (Tergit 46). Shakespeare's Ophelia was called "O rose of May" in *Hamlet* (4.5.157). The *OED* includes among its various definitions of the rose "a woman of great beauty, excellence, or virtue."^(^)

(8)The sun's gender identity as masculine has an extensive history. In the Bible, for example, Isaiah includes the statement that "the sun shall be darkened in his going forth" (13:10), and Judges refers to "the sun when he goeth forth in his might" (5:31). To Copernicus, who designated the powerful force of the sun as masculine, "earth conceives by the Sun, and becomes pregnant with an annual rebirth" (qtd. in Griffin 9). Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* says, "When the sun shines, let foolish gnats make sport, / But creep in crannies when he hides his beams" (2.2.30-31). *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* notes, "The Sun came up upon the left, / Out of the sea came he!" (1: 25-26).^(^)

(9)Said H. Buxton Forman in *Our Living Poets*, some of Webster's poems "derive from Tennyson and Mrs. Browning, and in a lesser degree from Browning and Miss Rossetti" (173).^(^)

(10)The moon has been associated with women for centuries, in part through the monthly cycles both undergo. Various goddesses, such as Diana, have been linked to the moon in mythology. In Christianity, the Bible comments that "the moon shall not cause her light to shine" (Isa. 13:10). *Paradise Lost* says, "Nor doth the Moon no nourishment exhale / From her moist continent to higher orbs" (5:422). Tennyson's "Love and Duty" gives gender identities to the moon as well as the sun: "The Sun will run his orbit, and the Moon / Her Circle" (ll. 22-23).^(^)

(11)Luce Irigaray has commented on the "one 'path,' the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*" (*Irigaray Reader* 124).^(^)

(12)In a sense, Webster anticipates later-century women's poetry in which "mothers and lovers are ambiguously confused," as Angela Leighton observes of the confused pairings (xxxviii).^(^)

(13)*Mother and Daughter* has received extensive critical attention, with scholars noting such aspects as the sonnet sequence's Petrarchan echoes, the mother's spectrum of responses to the daughter as she matures, and the innovative nature of the verses.^(^)

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