

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE  
DELLA CRUSCAN SONNET:  
WILLIAM GIFFORD'S *BAVIAD* AND *MAEVIAD*

Recent feminist and gender-oriented scholarship about the Victorian sonnet has attributed a pioneering role to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in the nineteenth-century revival of the genre. Eminent literary critics such as Angela Leighton, Alison Chapman, and Dorothy Mermin agree that the *Sonnets*, in Chapman's words, 'translate the amatory discourse of Petrarchanism into a vehicle for a female poet speaking from an active subject position'.<sup>1</sup> Since Barrett Browning scholars themselves have played a pioneering role in reviving critical interest in the Victorian sonnet genre at the close of the twentieth century, the conviction that, as sonneteers, Victorian women poets were essentially trespassing on an exclusively masculine domain is now widely spread and has remained almost uncontested. Natalie Houston stands virtually alone with her assertion that it is 'because the sonnet form was relatively free of gendered associations, that women poets took it up'.<sup>2</sup> I would want to argue against both assumptions. By the nineteenth century, the sonnet choice was no longer straightforwardly masculine, nor was it gender-free. Rather, it had become a very complex one, coloured by old traditions, recent innovations, and intricate gendered connotations. In an attempt to overcome the psychological barrier between Victorian literary studies and the eighteenth century, this essay traces the androgynous status of the Victorian amatory sonnet back to the feminization that the predominantly masculine sonnet genre underwent from the 1780s onwards. Focusing on one group of poets in particular, the Della Cruscan, and on their primary critic William Gifford, I shall argue that it is impossible to outline the position of the sonnet genre within the late eighteenth-century literary landscape and fully to grasp its legacy for nineteenth-century poets if the sonnet genre's strictest formalities alone are taken into consideration. As *The Baviad* (1791) and *The Maeviad* (1795), Gifford's satires on Della Cruscanism, demonstrate, the sonnet in the late eighteenth century led a 'secret' life outside the genre's traditional masculine fourteen-line boundaries. Newly charged with feminine overtones, it provided Gifford with a powerful metaphor of marginalization that would prove indispensable in his crusade against the Della Cruscan.

<sup>1</sup> Alison Chapman, 'Sonnet and Sonnet Sequence', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (London: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 99–119 (p. 106); Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 95–113; Dorothy Mermin, 'The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*', *ELH*, 48 (1981), 351–67.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Houston, 'Towards a New History: Fin-de-Siècle Women Poets and the Sonnet', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Alison Chapman, *Essays and Studies*, 56 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), pp. 145–64.

The Della Cruscan school of poetry was a short-lived but intense literary phenomenon in the 1780s and 1790s that mesmerized a large readership with its manneristic diction, sensuous style, and unabashedly sentimental subject-matter. The vogue began with the publication of *The Florence Miscellany* (1785) by a handful of expatriate English poets, and landed in Britain in 1787. The Della Cruscans owe their name to one of the main contributors, Robert Merry. On 29 June 1787 Merry published 'The Adieu and Recall to Love' in *The World* and signed it 'Della Crusca'. The poem begins as a dismissal of the thorns and pangs of love, but ends as an ardent plea to Cupid to return 'with all thy torments': 'O rend my heart with ev'ry pain! | But let me, let me love again.' Less than two weeks later, Della Crusca's invocation of love was applauded by 'Anna Matilda' (Hannah Cowley), who encouraged him in 'The Pen' to 'seize again thy golden quill, | And with its point my bosom thrill'.<sup>3</sup> This poetic as much as erotic request meant the beginning of the passionate literary love affair between Della Crusca and Anna Matilda, who on a monthly, if not weekly, basis dedicated poems to one another in *The World*, *The Oracle*, and *The European Magazine*. Soon two rivals, 'Reuben' (Bertie Greatheed) and 'Laura Maria' (Mary Robinson), joined the conversation, followed by a battery of pen-named imitators. The poems were collected by publisher John Bell in the gilt-edged volumes of *The Poetry of the World* (1788) and *The British Album* (1790). In the years subsequent to their publication, two fatal blows were delivered to the movement in the shape of *The Baviad* and *The Maeviad*, William Gifford's biting satires on the Della Cruscans.

That the Della Cruscans still need introduction a decade after Jerome McGann's *Poetics of Sensibility* put their poetry back on the agenda of literary criticism is largely Gifford's doing. As Jacqueline Labbe has explained in *The Romantic Paradox*, 'Gifford's intemperate responses to English Della Cruscanism [. . .] have influenced readers of this poetry ever since—or, rather, non-readers, since Gifford's jeremiad has taken the place of the original for most.'<sup>4</sup> Writing in the implacable tradition of Persius, Juvenal, and Pope, Gifford fulminates against the degenerate state of contemporary letters, relentlessly exposing Della Cruscan poetry as a conglomerate of 'abortive thoughts', 'incongruous images', and 'noise and nonsense' (*Baviad*, p. 3). His eagerness utterly to eradicate the Della Cruscans may seem somewhat out of place in view of the unassuming poetics of smallness, transience, and dilettantism that these poets promoted. The Della Cruscan experience is instant, intense, and extremely sensuous, like 'the waters of a mineral spring which sparkle in the glass, and exhilarate the spirits of those who drink them on the spot', but 'grow rapid and tasteless by carriage and keeping'. 'Why we wrote the verses may be easily explain'd; we wrote them to divert ourselves and say kind things of each other', Hester Thrale Piozzi comments in her programmatic preface to

<sup>3</sup> *British Satire 1785–1840*, ed. by John Strachan and Steven E. Jones, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), iv: *Gifford and the Della Cruscans*, pp. 155–56. All quotations from Della Cruscan poetry and from Gifford's satires are taken from this edition, and parenthetical references are to title and page-number there.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 74–93; Jacqueline Labbe, *The Romantic Paradox: Love, Violence, and the Uses of Romance, 1760–1830* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 39.

the *Florence Miscellany*, adding that the poetry ‘can scarcely be less important to Readers of a distant Age and Nation than we ourselves are ready to acknowledge’ (‘Preface’, p. 142). Della Cruscanism is notorious for the material immediacy of its publications, for the sloppiness of the privately printed *Miscellanies*, for the quick succession of ardent love poems, ushered into the world on the cheap, thin paper of daily newspapers. Even the lavish and ornate editions of *The Poetry of the World* and *The British Album* breathe earthliness and temporal beauty.<sup>5</sup> Such poetry, Piozzi realized early on, could not bear the weight of too much theorizing in lengthy prefaces: ‘If the book is but a feather tying a stone to it can be no good policy, though it were a precious one; the lighter body would not make the heavy one swim, but the heavy body would inevitably make the light one sink’ (‘Preface’, p. 142).

Her comment would prove prophetic when Gifford did tie the proverbial stone to the movement in the shape of *The Baviad* and *Maeviad* and sank the Della Cruscans. To justify his harshness, Gifford writes in the introduction to *The Maeviad*: ‘I hear that I am now breaking butterflies upon wheels’, but ‘there was a time [. . .] that these butterflies were Eagles’ (*Maeviad*, pp. xiv–xv). Clearly, for Gifford, there was something very unsettling about the invasion of the literary scene by a quaint party of dilettante poets, men and women, who changed sobriquets as easily as hats and who were wooing each other publicly in highly imaginative and erotic verse. Following in McGann’s footsteps, critics of Della Cruscan poetry have recently added new pieces to the puzzle. A brief survey of their findings may help to create a more complete image of the impact of the Della Cruscans on the late eighteenth-century literary landscape, and hence of the annoyance they caused. Refining the notion of Della Cruscan eroticism introduced by McGann, Jacqueline Labbe has argued that Della Cruscan poetry invoked hostile reactions because it ‘charts a romance in terminology that offends the sensibilities of sensibility: it is too physical, too open, too desiring, too expressive’. ‘Gifford’s horror’, she continues, ‘arises as much from the lasting spectacle of men and women openly declaring love and physical desire as it does from aesthetic concerns: poetry itself was being violated, its classical purity put in the service of pornographic emphasis on the passions’ (p. 39). Critical approaches that focus on what McGann terms the ‘erotic formalities’ (p. 81) of Della Cruscanism have recently been challenged by Michael Gamer, who, in his own words, ‘seeks to historicize Gifford’s response to [the Della Cruscans] as more than merely an aesthetic rejection of a supposedly corrupt poetical style’ (p. 33). According to Gamer, it was not so much the Della Cruscans’ licentiousness as their unscrupulous claim to canonization implied in the transition from *The World* to *The British Album*, ‘from improvisation to permanence, from newsprint to codex’ (ibid.), that most enraged Gifford. By moulding *The Baviad* after the classical examples of Persius and Juvenal, Gifford imposed an elitist model of authorship that sought ‘to banish all writers from the domain of authorship but a small group of learned gentlemen’ (p. 42). Favouring educated male writers only, this model was a fun-

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gamer, ‘“Bell’s Poetics”: *The Baviad*, the Della Cruscans, and the Book of *The World*’, in *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Steven E. Jones (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 31–53 (p. 47).

damentally gendered one, aimed directly against the numerous women writers who sustained Della Cruscanism. Gifford's hostility towards these women has led Judith Pascoe to conclude that his 'critique of Della Cruscan poetry is really a critique of the feminization of poetry'.<sup>6</sup>

Although I agree with Gamer and Pascoe that Gifford promoted a male-dominated literary production, I believe that *The Baviad* and *Maeviad* do not simply target the feminization of poetry. They also actively deploy the feminization of poetry as a means to marginalize the Della Cruscans. As Stuart Curran notes in his influential *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, the rebirth of the sonnet in the 1780s and 1790s 'coincides with the rise of a definable woman's literary movement'.<sup>7</sup> Poetry, the self-reflexive sonnet in particular, 'becomes allowable for women in the late eighteenth century because', according to Marlon Ross, 'it becomes allied to the realm of private feeling. Like the decorativeness of verse, the ephemera of "mere" private feeling imply an association with women's experience'.<sup>8</sup> The main instigators of the sonnet revival were women: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Anna Seward, followed by numerous female poets whose sonnets are now forgotten because they appeared in magazines and newspapers and were never published in book form. By the time Gifford wrote *The Baviad*, the sonnet had become, in Philip Cox's words, 'a genre which could be seen as directly related to the productions of women poets and also implicitly feminised as regards its salient generic features'.<sup>9</sup> While the urge to retrieve these poets from oblivion has recently led a number of scholars to consider the sonnet as a tool for female empowerment, as 'a form that women writers deliberately claimed in order to legitimize themselves as poets', it has largely gone unnoted that, at the same time, the sonnet was also claimed by late eighteenth-century satirists and critics of the feminization of literature as a tool for marginalization.<sup>10</sup>

Feminization is a very effective technique to degrade individuals or groups, and to curtail the social or literary range of their voices. In the language of Julia Kristeva and Toril Moi: 'If "femininity" has a definition, it is simply [. . .] as "that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order"' and, consequently, 'men can also be constructed as marginal'.<sup>11</sup> By continually referring to Merry and his colleagues in terms of madness, disease, and invalidity, and to their work in terms of chaos, hypersentimentality, decorativeness, and other qualities that are traditionally gendered feminine, Gifford effectively puts Della Cruscanism on the fringes of literature. The sonnet, or rather the associations of femininity aroused by the sonnet genre, also plays a major role in this pro-

<sup>6</sup> Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Cox, *Gender, Genre and the Romantic Poets: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Robinson, 'Reviving the Sonnet: Women Romantic Poets and the Sonnet Claim', *European Romantic Review*, 6 (1995), 98–127 (p. 99).

<sup>11</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 166.

cess. When Gifford writes that the Della Cruscan vogue exploded when ‘Della Crusca came over, and immediately announced himself by a sonnet to Love’ (*Baviad*, p. 4), there is more at stake than a brief introductory account of the birth of Della Cruscanism. Gifford is setting the grounds upon which he will subsequently try to overthrow the Della Cruscans.

As a footnote in John Strachan’s recent edition of *The Baviad* rightly points out, the ‘sonnet to Love’ refers to ‘The Adieu and Recall to Love’, Robert Merry’s first ‘Della Crusca’ poem in *The World* (p. 336 n. 26). What this edition and other recent studies of Della Cruscan poetry fail to notice, however, is that, with its forty-four lines of rhyming couplets, the poem can hardly be said to fit ‘the sonnet’s scanty plot of ground’. This curious misnomer is the first of quite a few instances in which Gifford associates the genre with the Della Cruscans. In view of their Italian roots and manifest preference for ‘small’ genres, this does not come as a surprise. Yet, when formal parameters alone are considered, when only lines are counted and rhyme-schemes analysed, the Della Cruscan sonnet can hardly be called a genre on its own, deserving a place next to the Petrarchan, Elizabethan, or Romantic sonnet. While thirteen of the eighty-three poems contained in the *British Album* bear the mark of *sonnet*, only eleven can be formally classified as sonnets. Apart from these and a handful of odes and elegies, most poems consist of a fluctuating number of quatrains or irregular stanzas and have varying rhyme-schemes. The sonnets were written by ‘Benedict’ (Edward Jerningham), and all but one pay tribute to the fair but cruel Melissa.<sup>12</sup> Their appearance as a group in the second volume makes the sonnet in *The British Album* an insular phenomenon, completely detached from the book’s main centre of attention, the literary liaison between Della Crusca and Anna Matilda. *The Baviad* calls Merry ‘first poet of the age’, a title earned through ‘Innumerable Odes, Sonnets, &c.’, and *The Maeviad* also suggests that he and his colleagues were prolific sonneteers in its description of the decline of the vogue: ‘Della Crusca appeared no more in the Oracle, and if any of his followers ventured to treat the town with a soft sonnet, it was not, as before, introduced by a pompous preface’ (*Baviad*, p. 12; *Maeviad*, p. 32). Yet, there are no sonnets by Della Crusca or Anna Matilda in *The British Album*, and Mary Robinson’s amatory sequence *Sappho and Phaon* (1796) was yet to be published. *The Florence Miscellany*, admittedly, does contain a fair number of poems that are labelled *sonnets* by Merry, Piozzi, Parsons, and Greatheed, but most of them are translations accompanying Italian originals, and if we may believe Gifford, he had written both satires before finding out ‘that there was such a treasure [as the *Miscellany*] in existence’ (*Baviad*, p. 4).

The fact that, from its inception, the sonnet has always retained the secondary meaning of ‘any kind of small poem’ alone does not satisfactorily account for Gifford’s choice of words, since resistance to looser definitions increased with the codification of the sonnet’s strict formalities and came to a climax in the

<sup>12</sup> Two of the thirteen poems that are labelled *sonnets* do not conform to the classic fourteen-line structure: ‘Love Renew’d, A Sonnet’ by ‘Arley’ (Miles Andrews) consists of nine quatrains of rhyming couplets; ‘Sonnet: Written for a Young Lady on her First Passion’, also by Arley, consists of one octave, with a clear volta between the two quatrains. See Labbe, pp. 48–50, for a discussion of the sonnets by Benedict.

decades around the publication of *The Baviad*. George Gascoigne's 'Certayne notes of Instruction, concerning the making of verse or ryme in English' (1575) contains the first known attempt at prescription in the English language:

some think that all Poemes (being short) may be called Sonets, as in deede it is a diminutive worde derived of Sonare, but yet I can beste allowe to call those Sonets whiche are of fouretene lynes, every line coneteyning tenne syllables.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of formalist pamphlets such as Gascoigne's, the term *sonnet* kept being applied to various kinds of short poems. According to the *OED*, 'in many instances between 1580 and 1650 it is not clear which sense is intended', and Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) also lists both meanings. From the 1780s onwards, however, the resurgence of the strict, fourteen-line sonnet refuelled the need for clarity. For Coleridge, observance of the rules was entirely arbitrary: the sonnet 'is confined to fourteen lines, because as some particular number is necessary, and that particular number must be a small one, it may as well be fourteen as any other number', and as far as rhyme and metre were concerned, 'the Writer should consult his own convenience'.<sup>14</sup> But most of his colleagues were less sympathetic. Mary Robinson, one of the main protagonists of the revival and a Della Cruscan, broached the subject in her preface to *Sappho and Phaon*:

Sophisticated sonnets are so common, for every rhapsody of rhyme, from six lines to sixty comes under that denomination, that the eye frequently turns from this species of poem with disgust. Every school-boy, every romantic scribbler, thinks a sonnet a task of little difficulty. From this ignorance in some, and vanity in others, we see the monthly and diurnal publications abounding with ballads, odes, elegies, epitaphs, and allegories, the non-descript ephemera from the heated brains of self-important poetasters, all ushered into notice under the appellation of SONNET!<sup>15</sup>

Her colleague Anna Seward even denied legitimacy to all sonnets that failed to observe the Petrarchan–Miltonic octave and sestet division. She found support in a 1786 *Gentleman's Magazine* article by a Mr White, whom she quotes extensively. Like Seward, White considered the Elizabethan sonnet structure anomalous: 'Little Elegies, consisting of four stanzas and a couplet, are no more Sonnets than they are epic poems.' Both castigate Charlotte Smith for assuming that the legitimate sonnet is 'ill calculated for our language'. Other critics, by contrast, found the 'recurrence of rhyme which, in conformity to the Italian model, some writers so scrupulously observe, [. . .] by no means essential to this species of composition', and 'do not object to the author's having neglected these rigid rules'.<sup>16</sup> Paradoxically, continual reference to the

<sup>13</sup> George Gascoigne, 'Certayne notes of Instruction, concerning the making of verse or ryme in English', in *The Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire* (London: Richard Smith, 1575), in *EEBO* (<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>) [accessed 10 January 2006] (image 267 of 268).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems, by S. T. Coleridge, Second Edition. To Which are Now Added Poems by Charles Lamb, and Charles Lloyd* (Bristol: Cottle, 1797), pp. 71–73, in *ECCO* (<http://infotrac.galegroup.com>) [accessed 16 January 2006].

<sup>15</sup> Mary Robinson, 'Preface', in *Sappho and Phaon in a Series of Legitimate Sonnets* (London, 1796), in Electronic Text Center (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>) [accessed 2 December 2005].

<sup>16</sup> Anna Seward, 'Preface', in *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Homer*, 2nd edn (London, 1799), pp. iv–v, in *ECCO* [accessed 2 December 2005]; Charlotte Smith, 'Preface to the First Editions', in *Elegiac Sonnets*, 3rd edn (London, [1786]), n. pag., in *ECCO*; reviews of *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Essays*, in *Monthly Review*, 71 (1784), p. 368, and *Critical Review*, 61 (1786), p. 467, both quoted in Robinson, pp. 107–08.

existence of such rules consolidated these rules as indispensable benchmarks for good sonnet-writing. Thus, the difficulty of defining the sonnet at the end of the eighteenth century lay not so much in fixing the number of lines as in assessing the legitimacy of the numerous variations within the fourteen-line structure.

Against this background of codification and prescription, it may seem strange that Gifford, whose satire aims at exposing Della Cruscan verse as a conglomerate of 'abortive thoughts', 'incongruous images', 'noise and nonsense', would want to identify the Della Cruscans with such a formally demanding genre as the sonnet (*Baviad*, p. 13). Stacked with long explanatory notes, *The Baviad* and *Maeviad* thrive on exposing all the minute mistakes and titillating details of the Della Cruscans. For the sake of satire, Gifford is even prepared to admit his own errors. He mocks Merry for having addressed passionate lines to *Olauda*, the author of a 'soft sonnet', before *Olauda* turned out to be *Olaudo*, and apologizes to Thomas Adney, whom he had by mistake called Thimoty, 'happy' to be 'in an opportunity of doing justice to so correct a gentleman', and encouraging him to 'continue his valuable lucubrations'.<sup>17</sup> He also takes the trouble to inform his readers in a note that 'On looking again' he finds the 'OWL' in one of Cesario's poems 'to be a Nightingale' (*Baviad*, pp. 20, 25–26). Calling a forty-four-line poem a sonnet, however, was apparently not the kind of mistake that Gifford wished to correct. The feminized reputation of the sonnet ingrained late eighteenth-century literature and criticism to the extent that, in whatever context the word was inserted or, to use a Derridean shibboleth, reiterated, it would always leave indelible marks of femininity, even when not referring to an actual fourteen-line poem. Thus stripped of its formal idiosyncrasies, it developed into a genuine satirical tool that not only served as a broad metaphor for the kind of poetry that Gifford wished to attack, but also helped to construct that poetry as marginal at the same time.

In using the sonnet as a satirical tool and metaphor, Gifford joins a tradition that, put aphoristically, was born when the Renaissance sonnet died. After Milton had 'caught the sonnet from the dainty hand | Of love', practically no sonnets were written for nearly a century.<sup>18</sup> Stuart Curran calls the disappearance of the sonnet 'a symptom of the cultural distance the eighteenth century imposed between itself and the Elizabethans, who were commonly understood to have been barbaric' (p. 29), and Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson explain that 'the sonnet seemed hackneyed to early eighteenth-century readers who were hungry for satire, reason and clarity rather than for eroticism, emotion and conceits of Renaissance sonnets'.<sup>19</sup> Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) uses the sonnet's ill repute to attack contemporary critics who judge a literary work by

<sup>17</sup> Olaudah Equiano (1745–97) is best known for his abolitionist autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789). Gifford comments: 'Mr Merry fell so desperately in love with him, and "yelled out such syllables of dolour" in consequence of it, that the "pitiful-hearted" Negro was frightened at the mischief he had done, and transmitted in all haste the following correction to the editor—"For *Olauda*, please to read *Olaudo*, the black 'MAN'.'" (*Baviad*, p. 25).

<sup>18</sup> Walter Savage Landor, *The Last Fruit off an Old Tree* (London: Moxon, 1853), p. 473.

<sup>19</sup> Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson, 'Introduction', in *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival, 1750–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 3–19 (p. 8).

the status of its author. As Alistair Fowler observes in his essay on 'Genre and the Literary Canon', *sonneteer* had become 'a term of disparagement for minor poets':

What woful stuff this madrigal would be,  
In some starved hackney sonneteer, or me!  
But let a lord once own the happy lines,  
How the wit brightens! how the style refines!

Swift's introduction to 'A Description of the Morning' (1709) singles out the love sonnet as typifying the work of the 'easy writers' who flood the town and are 'justly laughed at for their sonnets on Phillis and Chloris, and fantastical descriptions in them'. Like the Della Cruscan, who dazzle the 'native grubs' (*Baviad*, p. 4) with their sheep, crooks, and rose-tree groves, these 'jaunty scribblers' imagine 'fields, or nymphs, or groves, where they are not'.<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, both Pope and Swift use words that suggest profusion and even infestation when referring to the sonnet (Pope's sonneteer is 'hackney' and Swift equates the 'easy writers' with 'insects'), while their age has famously gone down in history as virtually sonnetless. A century after the Elizabethan vogue, the sonnet had apparently become a powerful synecdoche for hypersentimental or even 'bad' poetry. If an author wanted to give a character a sensitive touch, he would simply picture him as a sonneteer. Lovelace, the proto-Romantic rake in Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748), is a gifted sonnet-writer. In a letter to his friend John Belford he complains that his quest for a Cynthia, Stella, or Sacharissa often fails when his 'new-created goddess' turns out to be 'kinder than it was proper for [his] plaintive sonnet she should be'. Mr Dabler in *The Witlings* (1779), a satirical play on the bluestockings by Fanny Burney, is the prototype of Swift's 'jaunty scribbler'. Disparaging his talent for poetry as 'some little facility in stringing rhymes', he nevertheless spends half the second act fruitlessly trying to find an audience for his latest sonnet.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas Pope and Swift associate the sonnet exclusively with the work of male poets, Gifford takes advantage of the recent feminization of the genre to reinforce its marginalizing function in his satires. In the phraseology of French feminism, he inserts the sonnet as a secondary or opposing term into the hierarchical system of binary oppositions (active/passive, public/private, culture/nature, etc.) that governs Western thinking, and that is ultimately modelled upon the phallogocentric equation of femininity and marginality. There, together with concepts such as madness, infestation, decorativeness, and pettiness, it comes to represent everything that, according to Gifford, good poets and poetry should not be. Della Cruscanism makes 'bed-ridden old women and girls at their samplers [. . .] rave' (*Baviad*, p. 5), he writes in the introduction to *The Baviad*, reducing the vogue to its female followers. Likewise, he turns

<sup>20</sup> Alistair Fowler, 'Genre and the Literary Canon', *New Literary History*, 11 (1979), 97–119 (p. 100); Pope: *Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 76 (ll. 418–21); Jonathan Swift, 'Will's Coffee-House', *The Tatler*, 28 April 1709, in *Project Gutenberg* ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)) [accessed 2 December 2005].

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 143; *The Complete Plays of Fanny Burney*, ed. by Peter Sabor (London: Pickering, 1995), p. 26.



the assemblies at Hester Piozzi's house into tea parties rather than literary gatherings:

Her house the generous Piozzi lends,  
And thither summons her blue stocking friends;  
The summons her blue-stockings friends obey,  
Lured by the love of poetry—and Tea.

(*Baviad*, pp. 13–14)

As Michael Gamer notes, 'both the political and the masculine heft of the Continental salon are systematically denied here' (p. 39). Gifford also sneers at critics who detect 'boundless genius, and unrivall'd skill' in 'every page, song, sonnet', written by the Della Cruscans, and sets an example by breaking off his quotation from a sonnet 'On a Lady's Portrait' by 'Carlos' prematurely because he considers it 'ineffably stupid' and 'incomprehensible trash' (*Baviad*, p. 19; *Maeviad*, p. 45). Gifford's amputated version of the sonnet upsets the thematic coherence and formal balance of the original, and ultimately deprives the poem of its self-containment by subjecting it to the mordant context of *The Maeviad*. If readers of the satire agree with Gifford that the sonnet is 'incomprehensible trash', it is mainly because the omission of the sestet obscures its meaning and forces readers to rely on Gifford's judgement. When confronted with the prohibition 'to censure what the great approve', Gifford appeals to colleague satirists Joseph Hall and John Oldham, who did not mince words denouncing what they considered the degenerate state of the poetry of their age. 'Yet Hall', he writes, 'could lash with noble rage, | The purblind patron of a former age', and Oldham 'Could hiss the clamorous, and deride the vain, | Who bawl'd their rhymes incessant thro' the town' (*Baviad*, p. 27).<sup>22</sup> Then why would he, Gifford, not set himself up as the crusader against bad taste of his own age? Like Oldham, he describes the latest poetical fads in terms of madness and disease. The 'epidemic malady' and 'pernicious pest' called Della Cruscanism is 'raging from fool to fool' through the 'besotted town' (*Baviad*, pp. 4, 9, 27). In Oldham's satire Spenser rises from the grave to warn the author against the ongoing plague of foolish sonneteers and other scribblers:

The foul disease is so prevailing grown  
So much the Fashion of the Court and Town,  
That scarce a man is well-bred, in either's deem'd;  
But who has kill'd, been clapt, and often rhim'd:  
The fools are troubled with the Flux of Brains,  
And each, on Paper, squirts his filthy sense:  
A leash of Sonnets, and of dull Lampoon  
Set up an author, who forthwith is grown  
A Man of Parts, of Rhiming and Renown.<sup>23</sup>

Gifford's 'eternal sonneteer | Who made goose-pinions and white rags so dear' (*Baviad*, p. 27) is a close paraphrase from *Virgidemiarum sixe bookes* (1597), a

<sup>22</sup> 'The purblind patron of a former age' refers to Shakespeare, whom Hall satirizes as 'Labeo' in his *Virgidemiae* (see n. 24 below).

<sup>23</sup> John Oldham, 'A Satire. The Person of Spenser is brought in, Dissuading the Author from the Study of Poetry, and shewing how little it is esteem'd and encouraged in this present Age', in *The Works of Mr. John Oldham, together with his Remains* (London: Hindmarsh, 1684), p. 167, in *EEBO* [accessed 12 January 2006] (image 237 of 338).

satire by Joseph Hall. Wondering ‘what it is that makes white rags so deare’ and ‘goose wings so scant’, Hall scoffs at the ‘patched Sonettings’ of love-sick poetasters, who call their ‘durtie ill-fac’d Bride Ladie and Queene’ and eulogize her fair skin, ‘be shee all sootie-blacke, or berie browne’, at the overuse of hyphenated compounds as epithets and the ‘big But Ohs’ at the beginning of each stanza.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Gifford mocks the Della Cruscan style, the ‘unmeaning’ dashes, the ‘Ahs! and Ohs!’, and the far-fetched alliterations—the ‘radiant rivers’, ‘cooling cataracts’, ‘dewy vapours damp that sweep the silent swamp’, and the ‘lazy Loires’, of which, he adds drily, ‘by the bye, there are none’ (*Maeviad*, p. 38; *Baviad*, pp. 13, 17). With one cursory remark, Gifford brushes the Della Cruscan style aside as so heavily ornamented and decadent that all contact with reality is lost. Della Cruscanism has yielded to the temptation of the chimera of language: ‘Truth [is] sacrificed to letters, sense to sound’ (*Baviad*, p. 13).

Perhaps most curiously, Gifford inserts a reference to the sonnet into the epigraph to the second edition of *The Baviad*. The epigraph to the first edition is a literal quotation from the opening lines of Juvenal’s first Satire:

Semper ego auditor tantum, numquamne reponam  
 Vexatus toties rauci Theseide Codri  
 Impunè ergo mihi recitaverit ille togatas,  
 Hic elegos?  
 (OH! heavens—while THUS hoarse Codrus perseveres  
 To force his Theseid on my tortured ears,  
 Shall I not once attempt ‘to quit the score,’  
 ALWAYS an auditor, and nothing more!  
 For ever at my side, shall this rehearse  
 this elegiac, that his comic verse,  
 Unpunished?)<sup>25</sup>

The second edition presents the motto in a slightly modified version. The first two lines have been omitted, and *togatas* has been replaced by *sonettas*: ‘Impune ergo mihi recitaverit ille SONETTAS, | Hic ELEGOS!’ (*Baviad*, p. 7). The belatedness of this adaptation is a first indication of the added value that *sonettas* brings to the epigraph, and a brief taxonomy of Roman drama may help to elucidate the ramifications of Gifford’s intervention. According to the fourth-century grammarian Diomedes, *togatae* initially referred to all types of Roman drama, as opposed to the *fabulae palliatae*, which were translated from the Greek. The term was then narrowed down to denote comedies only; tragedies were called *praetextae*. Performed in Roman costume, the *fabulae togatae* typically dealt with the lives of ordinary men and women in small towns. Stock characters were the philandering husband, the squandering wife, the effeminate suitor, the wealthy girl, and a small army of rival lovers and prostitutes. Eighteenth-century encyclopaedists and editors of Juvenal amplified the nega-

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum sixe bookes. First three bookes. Of tooth-lesse satyres. 1. Poeticall. 2. Academicall. 3. Morall* (London: Braddocke, 1598), p. 15, in EEBO [accessed 2 December 2005] (image 16 of 96). Paper was made from rags, usually linen.

<sup>25</sup> *The Satires of Juvenal, Persius, Sulpicia, and Lucilius, Literally Tr. with Notes &c. by L. Evans. To Which is Added the Metrical Version of Juvenal and Persius, by W. Gifford* (London: Bohn, 1852), p. 369.

tive overtones associated with the *fabulae togatae* by linking their definitions to disparaging comments from other classical authors. A 1789 translation of the *Satires* by Martin Madan defines *togata* as 'low comedy', portraying 'the actions of the lower sort', and Alexander Adams's *Roman Antiquities* refers both to Juvenal's complaint about the surfeit of Roman comedies and to a passage from Horace. In the *Art of Poetry* Horace asserts that none of the poets 'who dared to forsake the footsteps of the Greeks, and celebrate domestic facts; whether they have instructed us in tragedy or comedy' ('vel qui praetextas vel qui docuere togatas') has 'merited the least honour', and that, if writers only treated their subjects with more care and diligence, Rome would certainly excel as much in literature as in warfare. Quintilian singles Afranius out as the best writer of domestic comedies, but regrets the obscene character of his plays, which, he believes, betray the depraved character of their author.<sup>26</sup> Both accusations—of carelessness and immorality—are also uttered against the Della Cruscan poets. Tired of Merry's 'wild waste of words', of 'the mad jangle of Matilda's lyre', of 'Laura's tinkling trash', and of 'Anna's bedlam rant', Gifford has but one recommendation: 'let your style be brief, your meaning clear' (*Baviad*, p. 28; *Maeviad*, pp. 39–40). In *The Baviad* Robert Merry is presented as the licentious leader of a Bacchanalian horde (Gamer, p. 39). When, 'in birth-day splendour drest', he starts reciting one of his poems,

A wild delirium round the assembly flies;  
Unusual lustre shoots from Emma's eyes,  
Luxurious Arno drivels as he stands,  
And Anna frisks, and Laura claps her hands.  
(*Baviad*, p. 14)

The idea of immorality lies also embedded in the secondary meaning of the word *togata*, of which Gifford and his contemporaries were well aware. Roman prostitutes and adulterous women were forced to wear togas instead of the usual *stola*, and were hence called *togatatae*. A male garment, the toga signalled their lack of propriety and exclusion from the circle of virtuous, married women.<sup>27</sup>

The replacement of *togatas* with *sonettas* in the epigraph to *The Baviad* indirectly invites comparison between the two words. Just as the toga indexed low comedy and female impropriety in ancient Rome, the sonnet was the signpost of inferior poetry and of Della Cruscan licentiousness in Gifford's satires. Hierarchically, the *togatatae fabulae* were at a double disadvantage: as comedies they were ranked below the serious *praetextae*, and as *Roman* comedies they would always come second to the Greek *palliatae*. A small, relatively young, intro-

<sup>26</sup> *A New and Literal Translation of Juvenal and Persius; with Copious Explanatory Notes. In two volumes. By the Rev. M. Madan* (London: Lewis, 1789), II, 4; Alexander Adam, *Roman Antiquities: or, An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Romans. Designed Chiefly to Illustrate the Latin Classics*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Creech, 1792), p. 412; *The Works of Horace, Translated Literally into English Prose: by C. Smart* (London: Tonson and Draper, 1783), p. 372; Quintilian's 'Institute of the Orators'. In *Twelve Books*, trans. by J. Patsal, 2 vols (London: Law and Wilkie, 1774), II, 207 (x. 1), all in ECCO [accessed 18 November 2005].

<sup>27</sup> *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. by Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 50. See e.g. Horace, *Satires*, I. 2. 63 and 82; Martial, *Epigrams*, II. 39 and VI. 64. 4; Juvenal, *Satires*, II. 70. Alexander Adam records this meaning of the word in *Roman Antiquities* (p. 412), as do Martin Madan and others in their editions of Horace and Juvenal.

spective genre, the sonnet too was generically handicapped. It did not have any classical forefathers, nor could it boast the grand scale of the epic, speak with the universal voice of the heroic tragedy, or exude the moral authority of the satire. Placed at the bottom of the hierarchy together with other small genres such as the pastoral, the ode, and the epigram, it ideally functioned as a mere finger exercise for the poet on his Virgilian career path up to the epic, or provided the author with a welcome pause from more ambitious projects. In the early nineteenth century, Wordsworth's sonnet turn kept him from labouring on his epic poem *The Recluse*. He confessed to Walter Savage Landor: 'from want of resolution to take up anything of length, I have filled up many a moment in writing Sonnets, which, if I had never fallen into the practice, might easily have been better employed'.<sup>28</sup> 'I should not think of devoting less than twenty years to an epic poem', Coleridge wrote to publisher Joseph Cottle in 1796:

Ten years to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable Mathematician. I would thoroughly understand Mechanics; Hydrostatics; Optics, and Astronomy; Botany; Metallurgy; Fossilism; Chemistry; Geology; Anatomy; Medicine; then the mind of man; then the minds of men, in all Travels, Voyages, and Histories. So I would spend ten years; the next five in the composition of the poem, and the five last in the correction of it. So would I write, haply not unhearing of that divine and nightly-whispering voice, which speaks to mighty minds, of predestinated garlands, starry and unwithering.<sup>29</sup>

Around the same time, he defined the sonnet as 'a small poem, in which some lonely feeling is developed', which nourishes 'delicacy of character' and 'domesticates with the heart' (Coleridge, *Poems*, pp. 71–72). As Philip Cox notes, Coleridge's vocabulary 'implicitly establishes the domain of the sonnet as feminised, a domestic, private and "natural" environment opposed to the more "masculine" world of public affairs and loftier literary genres' (p. 44). Gifford's satires utilize this feminization to picture the Della Cruscans and their poems as blemishes on the face of literature. Whereas the respectable male poets discussed by Coleridge can adopt the genre with dignity, the sonnet turns into a derogatory label as soon as Gifford attaches it to the unmanly Della Cruscans. Likewise, the toga, hallmark of Roman manliness, became a stigma when assumed by wanton women.

The degrading effect of the modified Juvenal quotation is augmented by the fact that the epigraph, while feminizing the Della Cruscans, also emphatically inscribes Gifford's satires in an exclusive, male tradition of literary censorship. Juvenal is, in Michael Gamer's words, 'a *name with a name*—a name with recognizable and largely unassailable authority' serving as a bulwark against the 'nameless names' and decadent ephemera of Della Cruscanism (Gamer, p. 42). Written in Latin, the epigraph moreover invokes what Carolyn Williams calls

<sup>28</sup> William Wordsworth, letter to Walter Savage Landor (1822), in Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, letter to Joseph Cottle (1796), in Joseph Cottle, *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (London: Houston and Stoneman, 1848), in *Project Gutenberg* [accessed 12 January 2006].

‘an atmosphere of wholesome masculinity’.<sup>30</sup> A thorough understanding of the original context of the epigraph, of Gifford’s adaptation, and of its function within the satire requires a profound classical training to which only an elect segment of society had access. Although none of the Della Cruscans could boast Gifford’s exquisite Oxford education, most of them were familiar with the classics through public or private tuition. Gifford none the less goes to great lengths to obscure their intellectual capacities, and to strengthen his construction of Della Cruscan insanity and illiteracy with proof of their educational shortcomings. Hester Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* (1784) displays ‘just as much Latin from a child’s Syntax, as sufficed to expose the ignorance which she so anxiously labours to conceal’, Gifford sneers in an introductory footnote to *The Baviad* (p. 3), and if Robert Merry may call himself learned, then ‘Alas, for learning! She is sped’ (*Baviad*, p. 15). In *The Maeviad* he mocks a sonnet ‘to the Execrable Baviad’ by John Bell, in which Bell refers to the Trojan Horse as ‘the Grecian mare’ to fit the rhyme-scheme. The Grecian mare ‘has been *hitherto*, inaccurately enough, named the Trojan HORSE; and indeed, I myself had nearly fallen into the unscholarlike error’, Gifford admits, but fortunately his ‘learned friend’ Bertie Greatheed pointed out to him that the animal was, in truth, ‘armed with a foetus’, a rather unsound translation of Virgil’s ‘foeta armis’ (‘pregnant with arms’) (*Maeviad*, p. 57).

The Della Cruscans’ alleged poor knowledge of Latin contrasts sharply with Gifford’s parade of his own proficiency. The numerous quotations from classical authors and the authorial comments in Latin and Greek, in short the ‘elaborate classical buttressing’ (Gamer, p. 38), presuppose years of hard work and intellectual as well as physical suffering at school and university. Going through this hardship was considered a necessary and masculating experience:

Many men look back on their schooldays with pride; the fact that learning has been beaten into them confirms their right to this badge of masculinity, which attests not only mental capacity but physical endurance. This may partly explain the general reluctance to believe that women who study Latin or Greek at home can learn them properly [. . .]. A minority of pupils would proceed to university still subject (in theory, at least) to strict surveillance and discipline from conscientious tutors, in an environment from which women were largely excluded. (Williams, p. 40)

Through his competence in ancient languages, Gifford, who according to the *DNB* had a ‘diminutive stature and physical infirmities’, pictures himself as manly, not only as far as intellect is concerned, but also physically. As Michael Gamer notes, later criticism would reinforce this image: ‘Repeatedly we see the sickly and partially disabled Gifford represented as “manly,” “robustly virtuous,” “vigorous,” and “masculine”’ (p. 42). *The Baviad*, by contrast, takes endless pleasure in Merry’s discovery that his ‘tenth muse’, Hannah Cowley, was in fact a middle-aged woman, and is merciless in its depiction of fifty-year-old ‘snivelling Jerningham’ weeping ‘o’er love-lorn oxen and deserted sheep’, of Hester Piozzi as ‘Thrale’s grey widow’, and of Mary Robinson staggering ‘on crutches tow’rds the grave’ (*Baviad*, p. 10).

The sonnet was the perfect attribute to complete this devastating picture of

<sup>30</sup> Carolyn D. Williams, *Pope, Homer, and Manliness: Some Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Classical Learning* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 38.

the Della Cruscans. The recent feminization of the genre provided Gifford with a set of negative associations that helped to consolidate the link between Della Cruscanism and bad poetry, a link that persists until well into the twentieth century. *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1949) calls the Della Cruscans 'the nadir of the art', and is convinced that 'even the widest reading of English verse could hardly enable anyone to collect from the accumulated poetry of the last three centuries an anthology of folly and bad taste surpassing the two volumes of *The British Album*'. Apart from poems of all the major Della Cruscans, *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* (1930) also contains a poem by editor Charles Lee, which features an invocation of 'the Muddle-headed Muse' of bad poetry, followed by 'a horde of DELLA CRUSCANS, chanting, panting, | Thrilling and shrilling, canting and re-canting'.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, to this day critics interpret the metaphorical bond between the Della Cruscan poets and the sonnet literally, readily assuming on the basis of Gifford's satires that the Della Cruscans were very productive sonneteers. Shakeeh S. Agajanian's unpublished doctoral dissertation 'The Victorian Sonnet of Love and the Tradition' (1963) lists the Della Cruscan sonnet of love and the Romantic sonnet as the principal forerunners of the Victorian amatory sonnet. George Sanderlin discusses the Della Cruscan distinction between amatory, descriptive, and elegiac sonnets in his 1938 essay on 'The Influence of Milton and Wordsworth on the Early Victorian Sonnet'. Natalie Houston mentions 'a handful of sonnet sequences written by the Della Cruscans in the late 1780s and 1790s',<sup>32</sup> and Stuart Curran comments on the pre-Wordsworthian impasse of the late eighteenth-century sonnet: 'In a relatively short time the revitalized form had lost intellectual and poetic vigor, more and more prey to the decadence—in diction, preciosity of thought, and inanity of subject—that marked the contemporary school of rococo emotionality called Della-Cruscan' (p. 38). Jacqueline Labbe's remark that the larger part of the Della Cruscans' readership consists of non-readers apparently also applies to literary criticism.

A reassessment of the relationship between the sonnet genre and the Della Cruscan poets is necessary, not only as a contribution to the study of Della Cruscanism itself, but also with regard to the recently revived interest in the sonnet genre. The case of the Della Cruscan sonnet underscores the need for critics of the Victorian sonnet in particular to take not only the Petrarchan and Elizabethan predecessors into account, but also the much more obvious and yet largely neglected eighteenth-century precursors. The feminization of the sonnet genre in the last decades of the eighteenth century is a crucial factor in the run-up to the Victorian sonnet, and one often disregarded by feminist and gender critics who persevere in representing the sonnet as a stronghold

<sup>31</sup> *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. by A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, 15 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949), xi, 176–77; Charles Lee, 'Proem', in *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*, ed. by D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), pp. xxi–xxiv (p. xxi). For other examples, see Gamer, p. 48 n. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Shakeeh S. Agajanian, 'The Victorian Sonnet of Love and the Tradition: A Study in Aesthetic Morphology' (unpublished doctoral thesis, New York University, 1963), p. 2; George Sanderlin, 'The Influence of Milton and Wordsworth on the Early Victorian Sonnet', *ELH*, 5 (1938), 225–51 (p. 229); Natalie Houston, 'Affecting Authenticity: Sonnets from the Portuguese and Modern Love', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 35.2 (2002), 99–121 (p. 101).

of masculinity. As women entered the literary market, tensions of old inherent to the sonnet (small form/poet's large aspirations, confinement/freedom, subject/object) were remapped onto the complex gender relations of the age. As a result, when Victorian poets took up the sonnet, they found themselves confronted with the challenges of a genre that was considered fit for both ambitious male poets and modest poetesses, a genre that was fraught with powerful masculine metaphors, while simultaneously evoking associations with hypersentimentality, femininity, and even effeminacy. Finally, Gifford's appropriation of the sonnet as a metaphor for bad poetry also calls for an expansion of the definition of the sonnet beyond the rigid fourteen-line boundary. *The Baviad* and *Maeviad* are exemplary not only of the feminization of the sonnet genre, but also of its effectiveness as a tool for marginalization. Each time the word is uttered, the sonnet re-enacts its gender and genre, creating and reproducing the phallogocentric system of which it is part. As shorthand for an entire poetics that distressed Gifford, the sonnet persistently constructs the Della Cruscan as feminine, as the negative 'other', and thus very effectively disarms the movement.

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