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Feminist Revisions of the Sonnet in the Works of Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah

Without a doubt, the sonnet is the most well-known and "the longest-lived of all poetic forms" (Spiller 1992, 2). This is certainly true of the Anglophone world, where the sonnet has never completely gone out of fashion since the Shakespearean age and has, for the most part, managed to retain its trademark form of fourteen lines, as well as a few characteristic rhyme schemes and stanzaic arrangements. Yet it has also proven adaptable enough to accommodate rather diverse themes and agendas: The sonnet is often aimed at a desired and unattainable addressee and adopts the viewpoint of an amorous lyrical speaker. In other cases, it has mourned the passing of time and offered witty insight into current world events, lewd proposals, outstanding individuals, or even, in a famous example by Gilbert Keith Chesterton, the enduring quality of Stilton cheese ("Sonnet to a Stilton Cheese," [1912] 1957). So popular and indestructible is the sonnet that it even manages to absorb critique to form the 'anti-sonnet' as a distinct sub-genre. Authors as diverse as John Keats ("If by Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chained," [1819] 2001), Stephen Fry ("I Wrote a Bad Petrarchan Sonnet Once," 2005), or Robert Gernhardt ("Materialien zu einer Kritik der bekanntesten Gedichtform italienischen Ursprungs," 1981) have contributed humorous and memorable sonnets of this variety; Billy Collins's "Sonnet" (1999) simply counts down the lines ("All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now, / and after this next one just a dozen") until the poet can "take off those crazy medieval tights" and "come at last to bed" (Collins [1999] 2001, 277).

But it is not just the very idea of writing sonnets per se or the fact that it is an ancient form that has made it a popular target for critical interventions. Feminist revisions, in particular, have delved more deeply into the history of the form to challenge some of its most common themes and tropes. This article will discuss some of these attempts to reclaim and revise the sonnet tradition. Following a short excursion into the history of the sonnet, I will characterise revision as a literary strategy and discuss the sonnets of Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah, two contemporary poets who have put their own spin on this old and contested form.

A Brief History of the Sonnet

In spite of the oral roots of the sonnet, the most well-known version of its origin story follows the Western paradigm of outstanding individuals who 'make' history. Thus, it is Francesco Petrarca who is usually credited with having 'invented' the sonnet, following his legendary encounter with 'Laura.' According to popular folklore, Petrarca spotted her in a churchyard in Avignon, immediately fell in love with her,
and started writing poetry for her when he realised that he could never be with her. The factuality of this encounter remains controversial, but its near-mythological status would go on to become an integral part of the sonnet's history, at least in the popular imagination: the typical set-up has a speaker long for an unattainable female addressee, who is greatly idealised into personified virtue. The fact that he cannot have her because she is too saintly or already promised to another man is the very condition that enables the production of the poem. If the speaker's love had any chance to be fulfilled, the poem, as a form of sublimation, could not come into being, which makes Laura both "the object of the speaker's love" as well as that "of the writer's aspiration" (Spiller 1992, 61). This is highlighted in Italian, where the name Laura is enticingly ambiguous, suggesting the noun l'aura ('the breeze, the wind'), but also evoking associations of il lauro ('the laurel'), the emblem of the poet's crowning achievement. In portraits, Petrarch often wears the laurels that mark him as the original poeta laureatus.

The fashion of sonnet-writing reached England in the 16th century, where a proper 'sonnet craze' soon developed (Levin 2001b, liv-lvii). Writing sonnets became a kind of customary exercise, almost like a rite of passage for young poets in the making, many of whom modelled themselves on Petrarch's example and wrote about greatly idealised, disembodied young women, who usually only existed on the page. The most famous sonnet sequence before Shakespeare was Sir Philip Sidney's Astophil and Stella (1591), which was still rather indebted to the Petrarcan template, before Spenser and others developed the predominant English sonnet type of three quatrains and a heroic couplet. William Shakespeare, whose own collection (Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1609) actually arrived too late to be part of the Elizabethan era's golden years of sonnet-writing, departs from the Petrarcan convention in a number of aspects. His innovation concerns the level of content more than the level of form (Craik 2010, 165-169). His sonnets put a twist on male-female relations, because what has so far been a spiritual and chaste, almost transcendental form of love is now fleshed out and thus made (corpo-)real. Shakespeare arguably provides the sonnet with a torso, and his writing is brimming with erotic, sometimes even obscene imagery, and lewd proposals. The first seventeen poems in the cycle are widely known as the 'procreation sonnets,' and they address a 'Young Man' who appears to be idle and hedonistic and not at all interested in getting married and settling down. The sonnets provide different arguments to convince the Young Man not to let his beauty and good genes go to waste, but to find a woman, to father as many children as possible, and to secure the future of his bloodline (Schoenfeldt 2010, 72). Sonnet 16, for example, leaves little to the imagination, asking the addressee to plant "your living flowers" into "many maiden gardens" (Shakespeare [1609] 2010, 143, l. 6-7).

Shakespeare's subsequent sonnets are rich in queer subtexts, but their reputation is usually dominated by the themes of the initial cycle, which is clearly part of a patriarchal project with a distinct social dimension. As the sonnets are aimed at the designated heir of the family fortune, trying to talk him into continuing the bloodline, there is only limited use for women in the sonnets. They serve as "the vehicle of [the Young Man's] increase" (Callaghan 2007, 37) and amount to "little more than reproductive machines, useful for incubating more males, but not worthy of the kinds of profound emotional commitment to which the poems are dedicated" (Schoenfeldt...
2010, 73). It is this characteristic more than anything else that makes the sonnets a target for feminist interventions.

**Literary Revisions**

The idea of a feminist intervention in the male-dominated canon of literature grew throughout the 1970s in particular. Approaching literary classics, genres, and paradigms by revising their most problematic aspects is, of course, by no means the sole prerogative of feminist authors. Revisions of that kind occur in all areas of cultural production where the prestige of a canonised classic rests on questionable ideologies, mechanisms of exclusion, and imbalanced power relationships. 20th-century critical theory and post-war movements of political emancipation routinely looked beneath the surface of literary classics to dig up subtexts that had either been overlooked or conveniently forgotten as the text entered cultural memory, the school syllabus, or global fandom. All of these processes of canonisation or adaptation entail a rather selective re-reading.

While only few classics are rewritten in the literal sense of the word – there have been several attempts to remove racial slurs from children's books or young-adult classics in the last decade – it is not rare for contemporary authors to adapt well-known texts in a manner that brings problematic subtexts to the light. Julie Sanders suggests the term 'appropriation' for this procedure: "a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain," often with a critical impetus (Sanders 2016, 35); in a similar vein, Cecile Sandten talks about "transformative act[s] of appropriation" to characterise the postcolonial practice of resistance that writers have used to dismantle European imperial hegemony (Sandten 2015, 8).1 But 'revision' is the more suitable term for this kind of operation when it comes to closer intertextual affiliations: not only does 'appropriation' have a problematic ring to it, as it tends to be associated with the stain of the illegitimate and of copyright infringement, the term 'revision' also draws attention to the fact that an identifiable source text (the existence of which is neither denied nor glossed over) is being altered. The term thus connotes a direly needed correction (revise) as well as the idea of "seeing in another light" and re-evaluating (re-vision), as Peter Widdowson explains (1999, 164). The literary practice of revising formative narratives of the dominant Western culture targets those texts in particular "which have been constructed and owned by another (usually dominant) interest such as cultural, patriarchal, or imperial/colonial power" (ibid., 165).

The postcolonial strategy of 'writing back' features prominently here, particularly when the author resides "helpfully outside copyright law" (Sanders 2016, 60). Jean Rhys fleshed out the history of the original 'madwoman in the attic,' Bertha Mason (from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, 1847), in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966); Margaret Mitchell's Civil War epic, *Gone with the Wind* (1936), was rewritten by Alice Randall from the perspective of one of the slaves (*The Wind Done Gone*, 2001); and the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty was retold in *Maleficent* (dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014), a Disney film that offers 'sympathy for the devil' and creates a background

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1 See also Spengler (2015) and her discussion of "literary spin-offs" which rewrite canonic classics.
story for the character of the evil fairy. A typical pattern runs through all three of these examples, as a supporting character whose perspective is not privileged in the original takes centre stage and is allowed *her* say, to provide an alternative and more balanced account of the events. Villainesses thus turn into tragic heroines, and marginalised or subaltern individuals are finally granted a voice of their own. Bernardine Evaristo goes so far as to rewrite the entire history of the slave trade in *Blonde Roots* (2008), imagining a version of history in which white Europeans are abducted and enslaved by the people of Africa.

The more cultural authority a text enjoys, the more revisions it is likely to invite, which is why appropriations and revisions of Shakespeare always serve as "a cultural barometer of changing tastes, issues and values" (Sanders 2016, 64). Few texts have seen as many critical revisions as the most well-known play in the history of world theatre, *Hamlet* (1609). Tom Stoppard subverts *Hamlet's* strong emphasis on self-determined individualism by retelling its plot from the point-of-view of two minor characters that are lacking in agency (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1967), effectively turning a classic tragedy into Theatre of the Absurd. *Hamlet's* marginalisation of the female characters has invited several revisions, including Margaret Atwood's short-story, "Gertrude Talks Back" (1992), John Updike's novel *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), and Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* (2006), subsequently adapted into a feature film by Claire McCarthy (2018).

In the field of Adaptation Studies, Tom Leitch characterises revision as a mode of adaptation that "seek[s] to rewrite the original, not simply improve its ending or point out its contemporary relevance. [...] Unlike adaptations that aim to be faithful to the spirit rather than the letter of the text, [...] revisions seek to alter the spirit as well" (Leitch 2007, 106-107). The somewhat elusive notion of the textual 'spirit' that Leitch invokes here (not uncommon in Adaptation Studies) appears somewhat problematic, as it assumes a somewhat stable idea of the original that hardly does justice to source-texts as multidimensional and complex as *Hamlet*. But while it is clear that the ideological kernel of a tale and its politics will remain points of contention, revisions frequently act as correctives where structural imbalances, a biased perspective, or lack of diversity are concerned. Their political thrust acts "especially on behalf of those exploited, marginalised and silenced by dominant ideologies" and attempts to restore "a voice, a history or an identity to the erstwhile oppressed" (Widdowson 1999, 166).

This description indicates that revisions are by no means limited to the feminist context, as they have enjoyed a similarly rich history in post-colonial and African-American literature. The latter has seen a rich history of "playful revision[s] of precursor texts" (Müller 2018, 7), with the sonnet being in demand during the Harlem Renaissance and the era of Black Nationalism, as Timo Müller shows in his literary history of the African-American sonnet.

Feminist authors have produced some of the most noteworthy literary revisions since the 1970s, a development that coincides with the publication of one of the landmark texts in feminist criticism: Adrienne Rich's "*When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*" (1971). Her essay was first presented at a meeting of the Modern Language Association, where the author attacked the MLA itself as a bunch of "old-boys' networks" far too focused on "literature of white males" (Rich [1971] 1993, 166). In her thought-provoking text, Rich goes on to argue that any critique of
the literary canon must not stop at attacking classical texts, but should also challenge the institutions that grant them special status to ensure their cultural prestige. She identifies 're-vision' as a key strategy to achieve that overhaul of the canon, defining it as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," and arguing that it amounts to "an act of survival" for women seeking their place in history (Rich [1971] 1993, 167). On a similar note, Lisa Tuttle defines feminist interventions in general as "asking new questions of old texts" (1986, 184), an idea that was to be echoed in another ground-breaking feminist publication of the 1970s: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). By pointing to the example of Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre, the authors argue not just against the corset of tradition, they also formulate a more general argument on the marginalisation and self-imposed exile of female voices, their relegation in literature and reality to the status of outsiders who remain under patriarchal control.

The sonnets that I will discuss in the next section answer this call, even though they tackle, for the most part, the generic tradition more than individual texts.

Revisions of the Sonnet in the Works of Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah

There have been numerous rewritings of the sonnet, particularly of the Shakespearean sonnet and its questionable politics of gender and sexuality. This includes works by female poets, whose poems are now frequently anthologised alongside those of male authors who have dominated the canon for centuries. The Penguin Book of the Sonnet (Levin 2001a), to name but one example, not only includes sonnets authored by well-known writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, but also African-American poets like Margaret Walker, whose sonnet "For Malcolm X" is included in the collection. Stephen Regan, in his comprehensive study of the sonnet (2019), covers not just prominent contemporary sonneteers like Eleanor Brown and Carol Ann Duffy, he also credits Lady Mary Wroth as the first voice in the classical 17th-century sonnet craze "to provide an extended exploration of female subjectivity" (Regan 2019, 69).

Throughout the remainder of this article, I will discuss the sonnets of two contemporary British poets: Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah. Apart from having written sonnets, both writers have little in common, but this makes their cases all the more interesting, as they come from rather different places when they approach the question of how to restore female agency to the sonnet and how to revise a literary tradition. Both authors became household names in the 1990s, in a period that Ines Detmers has characterised as the "post-traditional" phase of female poetry, when female writing had already become institutionalised to a degree. In a new environment of poetry festivals, book tours and magazine spreads, both Hannah and Agbabi were among the most successful new voices in British poetry and soon became household names (Detmers 2007, 123).

Of the two authors, Agbabi is certainly the one who has enjoyed more critical acclaim. She characterises her position as a poet as "somewhere between page and stage" (qtd. in Coppola 2016, 311), as she is both a brilliant spoken-word performer and the author of several published poetry collections, and one of the biggest names in post-millennial cosmopolitan writing in the UK. Her influences as a poet include musical forms like free-style rap and disco, but she is equally well-versed in more
traditional literary forms and regularly experiments with different poetic traditions. Sophie Hannah, by contrast, has cut back on her poetic output in the new millennium, instead concentrating on her work as a prolific writer of genre literature, mainly children's books and crime fiction. Unlike Agbabi, she is not considered an experimental or avant-garde voice in poetry, as she specialises in traditional forms like the cross-rhyme stanza. The fact that there is little academic interest in her poems might hinge on the author's stylistic conservatism, like her heartfelt defence of the rhyme: "The fact that so many contemporary poets just seem to do without rhyme and metre I find odd. I find it as odd as if all chefs suddenly said, 'We're not using garlic anymore, that's it for garlic'" ("A Poetry Night with Sophie Hannah" 2017).

While neither of them has published a collection of sonnets only, both Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah have regularly produced revisionist spins on the sonnet, though with different emphases. In assessing their different responses to the tradition, I am not trying to suggest that there is such a thing as a unified, singular feminist response to the sonnet, and it would be a fallacy to assume that the two authors have a common agenda that binds them together. At the same time, however, their poetic works illustrate what different levels revisions can be situated on.

"Virtue, I found, was not my thing:" Sophie Hannah

Many of Sophie Hannah's poems deal with relationships and 'bad break-ups.' If Shakespeare's great contribution to the sonnet was a grounded attitude to relationships, one that did not rest on the spiritual level alone, then Sophie Hannah's approach is rather Shakespearean, too. Her lyrical speakers often clear up the mess after the end of a relationship or they file their divorce papers, drawing up an emotional balance in the process. The poems thus insist that unconsummated desire or quasi-religious vows of chastity and 'forever after' do not have to be a prerequisite for composing sonnets, quite on the contrary.

The sonnet "Darling Sweetheart" (1996), for instance, consists of various memories of a past boyfriend/lover, and is rather bittersweet in tone. While its use of the simple past and its paratactic syntax make it almost read like an obituary, eulogising a past lover, its use of rather mundane details like the "tub of Stork [margarine], half full" (Hannah 2012, 51) gives it a lighter comic twist and undercuts the speaker's self-proclaimed intention to draw an unflattering portrait of the man — less an elegy then, and more of a diaristic snapshot. This technique of grounding relationships in everyday life is a distinct departure from the Petrarcan tradition, where the reader waits forever for 'Laura' to materialise, which means that she always remains a projection screen more than a real woman. In Hannah, by contrast, the
absent lover is very much fleshed out; in fact, he has already been consummated, devoured, and digested, like the unwrapped gift of the margarine tub that the speaker remembers.

On the formal level, Sophie Hannah's sonnets could not be more Shakespearean if they tried, as they respect the iambic pentameter, as well as the stanzaic set-up of the three quatrains and the concluding rhyming couplet. One tiny exception is the final rhyming couplet in "Darling Sweetheart." While Shakespeare's heroic couplet usually concludes with a syllable stress (with a masculine verse, that is), to give the conclusion more authority and force, "Darling Sweetheart" switches to the falling structure of the feminine verse. This makes the conclusion of the poem read a bit like an afterthought but also underlines the ironic twist, with the speaker relativising her position and admitting that she is biased in condemning her lover's character: "he used to say, / Let's have a kid. If we get skint, we'll sell it. / He wasn't bad. It's just the way I tell it" (Hannah 2012, 51). The final line emphasises that because of the monologal set-up of the speech situation, the ex-boyfriend has no way of defending himself.

By rewriting the traditional role assignation of the sonnet, the speaker also implicitly criticises the male-dominated canon as too much focused on the spirit and the intellect. Hannah has done so more explicitly in another context, when talking about her love for the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, and the epiphany she had when reading something that did not impose its intellect and authority on the reader:

Even though she was old-fashioned in her diction and using a lot of 'thees' and 'thous,' she was basically writing a series of bitchy poems about crap ex-boyfriends. And I thought, 'This is what I want to read about.' If only T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had crap ex-boyfriends, I would read them, too. ("A Poetry Night with Sophie Hannah" 2017)

The 'crappy ex-boyfriend' is indeed a staple element in Hannah's poetry, nowhere more so than in her sonnet, "The Philanderer's Ansaphone Message" (1995). Here, the poet assumes the voice of a man who cannot even keep track of all his lovers but promises to call them back "next time I want a fuck," and to add their names to his 'to do' list so he can get in touch "when I'm pissed" and "keen to get you in the sack" (Hannah 1995, 12).

But most of her poetry, instead of chastising male chauvinist pigs, attempts to actually claim a space for female sexuality – a space that is not feasible in Petrarch and, for the most part, side-lined in favour of male sexuality in Shakespeare. In her introduction to the anthology The Poetry of Sex (2014), Hannah writes about the problem of monopolising sex in the realm of poetry. Because sex, as a dialogic endeavour, ultimately bows to the confines of a literary form that only leaves room for one perspective and voice, erotic poetry, by definition, creates "hapless victims […] who have been exploited and crushed by cads, the emotionally illiterate, the pathologically narcissistic and the infuriatingly married of both sexes" (Hannah 2014, n.p.). Most of her poems, by contrast, paint a liberating, optimistic and rather guilt-free picture of female sexuality, which strongly goes against the traditional canon. Hannah's most programmatic poem to that end is not a sonnet but still worth mentioning here. "Before Sherratt & Hughes Became Waterstone's" (1995) follows a lyrical speaker who meets her sexual acquaintances in bookstores rather than in nightclubs or hotel-rooms.
The poem concludes with a tongue-in-cheek confession that can also be read as a meta-literary comment on her own poetic production: "I've seen a few customers looking dismayed, / Too British to voice their objection, / But how can I help it? I like to get laid / Just in front of the poetry section" (Hannah 1995, 14).

"Wrong Again," one of six sonnets included in The Hero and the Girl Next Door (1995), contains Hannah's most direct response to what kind of femininity is available (or rather, not available) in traditional love poetry. The speaker is torn between moral restraint and a desire to exercise her sexuality ("Virtue, I found, was not my thing"), and she laments that the privilege of promiscuity and inebriation is open not to her but to her male addressee: "I would like another chance / To earn myself a wicked reputation / Equal to yours. I'll match you sin for sin" (Hannah 1995, 11). Is this maybe Petrarca's Laura wondering whether virtue, as attributed to her by the male speaker, really is her thing, after all? The poem's confident conclusion, which uses a masculine rhyme for a change, underlines her willingness to drop the patronising scripts and expectations entailed by tradition: "A single, happy night beneath your quilt / Is all I want. I'll risk post-coital guilt" (ibid.). At the same time, the reader cannot help but conclude that partaking in male privilege will not do away with patriarchy, much like writing Shakespearean sonnets in the 21st century does not diminish their cultural authority. Quite on the contrary, especially when the sonnets embrace the Shakespearean template as emphatically as Hannah's.

"Subverting the sonnet back to its roots:" Patience Agbabi

The question of form is tackled in a more comprehensive way by Patience Agbabi. Her most frequently discussed sonnet undoubtedly is "Transformatrix" (2000), a complex and erotic poem that envisages the lyrical speaker in strongly sexualised diction, and as someone who derives pleasure from the masochistic experience of willingly submitting to a corset: "[madam] trusses up / words, lines, as a corset disciplines flesh" (Agbabi 2000, 78). The poem is artfully composed with a series of half-rhymes and enjambments that suggest desirous impatience, and its erotic narrative serves as a double-edged commentary on the problem of committing to a traditional form that can feel as rigid and as violent as a corset to the poet. The fact that the subject still acts out of her own volition and finds power within these confines has given rise to a frequently voiced critique of Agbabi's work: that she is all "technical virtuosity" but light on subject matter, and that her poetry is "so skillfully managed that it runs the risk of having its technique outshine everything else" (Barry 2016, 233). But this critique neglects to mention how rich in subject matter Agbabi's poems are, and how nuanced her poetic interrogations of received notions of identity and of the literary canon (Coppola 2015). Some of her sonnets are miniature narratives about female emancipation: "The Shift" (2000), for one, tells the story of a woman who is completely dependent on her breadwinning and disparaging husband, until an accident turns him into a nursing case. The eponymous 'shift' in their

4 "Transformatrix" is without a doubt Agbabi's most frequently discussed poem. See Coppola (2015) for a more detailed reading.
relationship coincides with the sonnet's voltù, the turning point of the sonnet after the octet, a stellar integration of content and form (Agbabi 2000, 77).

Agbabi's most comprehensive foray into the realm of the sonnet can be found in her collection Bloodshot Monochrome (2008), which not only tells a noir-ish gangster story in a corona of sonnets ("Vicious Circle") but also features a series of fourteen poems, all of them consisting of fourteen lines, headlined "Problem Pages," wherein Agbabi's speaker, doubling for the traditional 'agony aunt,' offers words of wisdom to her readers (Agbabi 2008, 29-46). The people writing the letters are famous authors from the history of world literature, both male and female, whom Agbabi's speaker gives poetic advice. The idea of conversing with dead white male authors occurs quite often in her work – "The London Eye" (2002) sees the speaker go on a blind date with Wordsworth, in a playful response to his sonnet, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" (1802) --, and she transgresses the borders of space and time in the process. In spite of their rather prosaic set-up and the absence of traditional metre and rhyme schemes, the 'Problem Pages' are carefully composed. All fourteen of the letter/response columns are set alike on the page, with the letter to 'Dear Patience' containing eight lines (the octet) and the poet's response six (the sestet). Like in "Transformatrix," the sonnet is invoked in a rather ambivalent fashion as both a weapon and a cage, quite literally so in Agbabi's letter to Edna St. Vincent Millay, which responds to Millay bragging about "cag[ing]" men "in an octave and sestet." The speaker responds by making a case for an equal-opportunities rigidity of form: "If you want danger, corset your women into / fourteen lines. It's time more sonnets came out" (Agbabi 2008, 44). In "From Africa Singing," Agbabi has the Caribbean-American poet June Jordan write in with the complaint that the struggle of indigenous voices sometimes "shrinks to a clenched fist in a European cage: a sonnet" (ibid., 46). The response, which alludes to Jordan's "Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley" (1986), is one of mutual solidarity, as she offers Jordan a "Hi-5" for "subverting [the sonnet] back to its roots" and points out that the literal meaning of the sonnet ('little song'), is all but forgotten today. Her heartfelt plea to remember the oral roots of the form is an implicit critique of the widely shared assumption that Petrarca must be viewed as the sonnet's point of origin.

Needless to say, Shakespeare also gets a letter, the headline of which ("Two Loves I Have") alludes to Sonnet 144, of the Dark Lady cycle.5 The most well-known reading of this sequence (Sonnets 127-154) sees the lyrical speaker displace his queer desire for the Young Man to a prostitute who belongs to a different ethnicity, and whose sexual allure is diametrically opposed to the angelic beauty of the Young Man himself.6 The Dark Lady sonnets are among the most sexually explicit and misogynistic of all of Shakespeare's work (Wells 2010), they are full of double entendres and lewd puns on penises, erections and sexually transmitted diseases. Where Petrarca's Laura was fair and chaste, the Dark Lady is corrupt and promiscuous in spirit and character (Callaghan 2007, 49). While she is not

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5 The Dark Lady myth has also been brought into critical discussions of "Transformatrix" (Hena 2013, 530).
6 Michael Schoenfeldt (2010, 98-103) offers a concise overview of the major theories regarding the Dark Lady's identity. Feminist criticism of the Dark Lady poems is summarised by Dympna Callaghan (2007, 30).
straightforwardly characterised as 'black' in the racialised sense, there are enough connotations to set up the idea of a prostitute who also embodies the racial Other. The respective dichotomies feature prominently in Sonnet 144: mind vs. body, chastity vs. sexual indulgence, "the better angel [who] is a man right fair" vs. the devilish "worser spirit [who is] a woman coloured ill" (Shakespeare [1609] 2010, 403, l. 3–4), with the interesting twist that the traditional gender connotations are inverted: it is the Young Man who embodies (feminine) angelic chastity, and the Dark Lady who emblematises (masculine) sinful carnality. 7 There have been various attempts to give the Dark Lady a voice and to have her 'write back' to Shakespeare: Anthony Burgess created a fictional history for her in his novel *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964), and he revisited the topic both in his unfilmed screenplay *The Bawdy Bard* (1968) and in his novel *Enderby's Dark Lady* (1984); a 2005 BBC film (*A Waste of Shame*, dir. John McKay) starring Indira Varma pursues a similar narrative (Franssen 2010). More recently, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's play *Emilia*, which premiered at London's Globe Theatre in 2018, fleshed out the history of Emilia Bassano, another contender for the title of the Dark Lady, and cast Shakespeare in the role of the plagiarising parasite who feeds on Emilia's creativity (Malcolm 2019). The history of the Dark Lady is also present in Agbabi's revision. As an author who often – and not necessarily to her liking – has found herself classified as a Black British poet (Thompson 2005, 152–153; Ramey 2007, 94–99), Agbabi certainly acknowledges that her engagement with the Dark Lady would inevitably be read in racialised terms. Because she is sensitive to a tradition of over-sexualising Black women both in literature and in criticism (Huk 2016, 229), she rejects an outright identification with the Dark Lady and rather opts to meet Shakespeare eye-to-eye, on the meta-literary level of poetics and analysis. If her mimicking of the Shakespearean voice already amounts to a tongue-in-cheek attack on the institutionalisation of Shakespeare that is, at the same time, sympathetic to Shakespeare (her version of Shakespeare is worried about being "typecast" and attacks the homophobia and racism of his publishers), her response is intriguingly ambiguous in that it suggests two different things: on the one hand, Shakespeare writes with an essentialist bias and thinks of his own sonnet protagonists as "a white man and black woman," but on the other hand, she concedes that his work is smarter and more inclusive than its widespread, essentialising readings (Agbabi 2008, 34).

In the process of engaging in a dialogue with "the ultimate dead white male" (Hulbert et al. 2006, 150), Agbabi's text provides the speaker with an interesting position of power as one who understands and empathises, but who also gets to patronise Shakespeare and to articulate a heartfelt plea for thinking outside of the kind of binaries that are applied to both of them, like the 'page-stage' continuum. If Shakespeare cannot escape them, she implies, then who can? This meta-poetic experiment goes far beyond the kind of mere formal experimentation that Agbabi is sometimes associated with by her critics. While a case could be made for Agbabi's

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7 See Ilona Bell's reading of the sonnets as a kind of morality play in which the Young Man's "better angel" battles the corrupting spirit of the Dark Lady (2007, 293).

8 In a conversation that took place at the German Anglistentag in Hannover in 2014, Agbabi herself acknowledged that she has no qualms appropriating the voices of sexist characters as part of her literary role-play (Novak and Fischer 2016, 358-359).
approach returning the sonnet to "the markers of orality" that it "originally accommodated" (Tönnies et al. 2016, 306), the 'Problem Pages' achieve something altogether different: they interrogate the sonnet as a highly conventionalised form by using another highly conventionalised and rigid form (the 'agony aunt' column). In a manner that is rather indicative of Agbabi's poetic approach in general, her sonnets use formal experiment "to pattern the prohibitive discourses of racism, sexism, and homophobia" and thus allow her "to write her way out of them through wit and irony" (Hena 2013, 530).

Conclusion

It has been my aim to demonstrate how feminist poetry engages with an age-old tradition in new and meaningful ways, without either fully subscribing to the problematic history of the genre or abandoning it altogether. The two poets I have discussed here differ in their attitude to the form. Patience Agbabi offers a more deconstructive take on the sonnet tradition than Sophie Hannah, exhibiting a more diverse array of poetic techniques, not least with her multilayered, artfully arranged 'Problem Pages.' In this cycle, the poet manages to retain a link to the poetic tradition and to subvert it at the same time. Sophie Hannah's poems, by contrast, never run the risk of cutting ties with the Shakespearean sonnet on the formal level, but they still constitute poignant and critical responses to the male-dominated tradition. Thus, it would be short-sighted to characterise either poet's output as more or less feminist and authentic; in fact, they provide different responses to similar problems.

By the same token, both authors have arguably made a significant impact, though to quite different ends and in different circles. While Agbabi tends to feature more prominently in critical discourse, it was Sophie Hannah who was honoured with a Penguin edition of her Selected Poems in 2006, a form of canonisation that is usually reserved for modern classics like Tony Harrison or Stevie Smith – a clear indicator of Hannah's popular appeal as a poet, not in spite, but because of her respectful treatment of the traditional template. Both women's contributions to the sonnet are indicative of their different ways of tackling tradition, and of revising and/or revisiting the classics in form and content. While Patience Agbabi's latest collection of verse, Telling Tales (2014), is a postcolonial revision of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Sophie Hannah has found international fame with the Hercule Poirot continuation novels that she has been writing for the Agatha Christie estate (starting with The Monogram Murders, 2014), fully emulating the voice of another author. Not that popular fiction is Hannah's exclusive prerogative: Patience Agbabi has recently branched out into the children's and young-adult segment with her 'Leap' cycle (The Infinite, 2020).

If the sonnet is, indeed, a corset, then both poets prove that submitting to it remains a popular choice. Admittedly, the metaphor might be too limiting. After all, texts like "Transformatrix" suggest that a female poet who squeezes rather painfully into the garment may end up deriving pleasure from the experience (Jenkins 2011, 124). Carol Ann Duffy, former Poet Laureate of Great Britain and a prolific sonneteer in her own right, opts for another textile metaphor and characterises the sonnet in intriguingly gendered terms as "the little black dress of poetry," because it is "sleek, smart, [and] compact," and thus never likely to go out of fashion (2004, xii). Duffy's
own poetic production happens to feature a Shakespearean sonnet called "Anne Hathaway" (1999), which revises the dominant narrative surrounding the Bard's wife by giving her a voice and fusing the diction of conjugal love with that of writing: "Some nights I dreamed he'd written me, the bed / A page beneath his writer's hands" (Duffy 2011, 171). The issues that Duffy's text raises add another important aspect to the discussion, for the common narrative of the history of the sonnet – my own brief sketch earlier on in this chapter being no exception from the rule – is dominated by white male authors. The fact that an Elizabethan sonneteer like Anne Locke ([A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner], 1560) is usually overshadowed by her male contemporaries resonates with Gilbert and Gubar's observations on the patriarchal nature of Western culture, where the text's author is always "a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis," and who uses this power "to create a posterity to which he lays claim" (Gilbert and Gubar [1979] 2000, 6).

It is to the immense credit of contemporary poets like Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah that they come up with diverse ways of challenging this established hierarchy, and that they seek to revise the predominant tradition and the heavily contested form of the sonnet. Their efforts go far beyond the controversial label of 'appropriation:' after all, there is no illegitimate takeover here, nor is there an attempt to write the Shakespearean tradition out of existence or to camouflage the tongue-in-cheek intertextual work that goes into the production of the poems. Feminist takes on the sonnet are revisions that not only critically engage with the tradition, inverting some of the genre's most heavily contested premises to put a fresh spin on the tradition, they also invite their readers to see classic texts in a new light.

Works Cited


