

Mother and Daughter

Augusta Webster

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Mother and Daughter

Augusta Webster

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"She" [Lady Charlotte Elliot] "was, by cultivation of mind and by sympathy of heart, affined closely to a kind of women those sweet singers never dreamed of women who, loving art much and romance much, 'love men and women more' the noble band represented by George Eliot, Mrs. Webster, and Miss Cobbe, who, in virtue of lofty purpose, purity of soul, and deep sympathy with suffering humanity, are just now far ahead of the men bending their genius, like the rainbow, as a covenant of love over 'all flesh that is upon the earth.'" *THEODORE WATTS. ATHENÆUM, January 24, 1880.*

Augusta Webster died September 5, 1894.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

IT is my privilege to have been invited to say a few words by way of introduction to this little book of Sonnets. Augusta Webster as admirable and attaching in private life as she was preëminent as a poetess stands indeed far above the level at which I ought to be held entitled to write anything about her; none the less I avail myself of the invitation with alacrity, and with a full sense of the honour which is hereby conceded to me.

Nothing certainly could be more genuine than these Sonnets. A Mother is expressing her love for a Daughter her reminiscences, anxieties, and hopeful anticipations. The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select, uniting, in the warm clasp of the domestic affections, something of those olden favourites, *The Pleasures of Memory* and *The Pleasures of Hope*. It seems a little surprising that Mrs. Webster had not been forestalled and to the best of my knowledge she never **was** forestalled in such a treatment. But some of the poetesses have not been Mothers.

Mrs. Webster's reputation rests securely upon several volumes of verse highly remarkable verse, at once feminine and in a right sense masculine including four Dramas. *The Auspicious Day* was published in 1872; *Disguises* in 1879; *In a Day* in 1882; *The Sentence* in 1887. *The Auspicious Day* is in a marked degree a capable and bold performance. The other three dramas are all so excellent that it might almost count as a matter of individual preference to choose between them *In a Day* being the most compactly poetical, *Disguises* the most romantic, and full of high perception and sympathy in character and incident. But to me *The Sentence* appears the one supreme thing.

There are two British poetesses to one or other of whom the palm is now generally awarded; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Georgina Rossetti: I speak of the latter not in the suspicious character of a brother, but according to the testimony which has been generously, and indeed lavishly, given to her by the public voice since her death in December 1894. The testimony may be correct or incorrect Time will show; but it is for the present open and manifest, and not to be denied by any one, be he a brother or not.

In calling *The Sentence* the one supreme thing I was speaking of its position in Augusta Webster's own work: but I must in candour go beyond this, and express my conviction (I have done so once before in print) that it is the supreme thing amid the work of **all** British poetesses. Taking into account its importance in scale and subject, and its magnificence in handling, it beats everything else. The theme of the drama a three-act tragedy in verse is thrilling and stupendous: a vengeance of the Emperor Caligula, who, for the purposes of the tragedian, is conceived as equally righteous, ruthless, and insane an awful, and yet a perfectly human, dramatic figure. The general treatment, and the adaptation to the demands of the drama and even of the stage, seem to me just as consummately fine as the initial conception. Mrs. Browning had to show such splendid work as *The Drama of Exile* and *Aurora Leigh*: but she could never have done *The Sentence*, or anything like it. As for Christina Rossetti though it may easily be supposed that I should be the last to undervalue her noble work in other fields of poetry the very suggestion of her writing any tragedy, much more any such tragedy as *The Sentence*, would be preposterous. Let me have the pleasure of here adding that she was fully alive to the unmatched claims of this great work of Mrs. Webster's, and eager in asserting them.

Mrs. Webster had many and discerning admirers throughout her literary career; but it may safely be asserted that her true rank will only be fixed when *The Sentence* comes to be generally recognized and this can scarcely fail to come as one of the masterpieces of European drama.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

An Uncompleted Sonnet–Sequence

I

Young laughters, and my music! Aye till now
The voice can reach no blending minors near;
'Tis the bird's trill because the spring is here
And spring means trilling on a blossomy bough;
'Tis the spring joy that has no why or how,
But sees the sun and hopes not nor can fear
Spring is so sweet and spring seems all the year.
Dear voice, the first–come birds but trill as thou.

Oh music of my heart, be thus for long:
Too soon the spring bird learns the later song;
Too soon a sadder sweetness slays content
Too soon! There comes new light on onward day,
There comes new perfume o'er a rosier way:
Comes not again the young spring joy that went. *ROME, November 1881.*

II

That she is beautiful is not delight,
As some think mothers joy, by pride of her,
To witness questing eyes caught prisoner
And hear her praised the livelong dancing night;
But the glad impulse that makes painters sight
Bids me note her and grow the happier;
And love that finds me as her worshipper
Reveals me each best loveliness aright.

Oh goddess head! Oh innocent brave eyes!
Oh curved and parted lips where smiles are rare
And sweetness ever! Oh smooth shadowy hair

Mother and Daughter

Gathered around the silence of her brow!
Child, I'd needs love thy beauty stranger-wise:
And oh the beauty of it, being thou!

III

I watch the sweet grave face in timorous thought
Lest I should see it dawn to some unrest
And read that in her heart is youth's ill guest,
The querulous young sadness, born of nought,
That wearies of the strife it has not fought,
And finds the life it has not had unblest,
And asks it knows not what that should be best,
And till Love come has never what it sought.

But she is still. A full and crystal lake
So gives it skies their passage to its deeps
In an unruffled morn where no winds wake,
And, strong and fretless, 'stirs not, nor yet sleeps.
My darling smiles and 'tis for gladness' sake;
She hears a woe, 'tis simple tears she weeps.

IV

'Tis but a child. The quiet Juno gaze
Breaks at a trifle into mirth and glow,
Changed as a folded bud bursts into blow,
And she springs, buoyant, on some busy craze,
Or, in the rhythm of her girlish plays,
Like light upon swift waves floats to and fro,
And, whatso'er's her mirth, needs me to know,
And keeps me young by her young innocent ways.

Just now she and her kitten raced and sprang
To catch the daisy ball she tossed about;
Then they grew grave, and found a shady tree,
And kitty tried to see the notes she sang:
Now she flies hitherward "Mother! Quick! Come see!
Two hyacinths in my garden almost out!"

Mother and Daughter

V

Last night the broad blue lightnings flamed the sky;
We watched, our breaths caught as each burst its way,
And through its fire out-leaped the sharp white ray,
And sudden dark re-closed when it went by:
But she, that where we are will needs be nigh,
Had tired with hunting orchids half the day.
Her father thought she called us; he and I,
Half anxious, reached the bedroom where she lay.

Oh lily face upon the whiteness blent!
How calm she lay in her unconscious grace!
A peal crashed on the silence ere we went;
She stirred in sleep, a little changed her place,
"Mother," she breathed, a smile grew on her face:
"Mother," my darling breathed, and slept content.

VI

Sometimes, as young things will, she vexes me,
Wayward, or too unheeding, or too blind.
Like aimless birds that, flying on a wind,
Strike slant against their own familiar tree;
Like venturous children pacing with the sea,
That turn but when the breaker spurts behind
Outreaching them with spray: she in such kind
Is borne against some fault, or does not flee.

And so, may be, I blame her for her wrong,
And she will frown and lightly plead her part,
And then I bid her go. But 'tis not long:
Then comes she lip to ear and heart to heart.
And thus forgiven her love seems newly strong,
And, oh my penitent, how dear thou art!

VII

Her father lessons me I at times am hard,
Chiding a moment's fault as too grave ill,
And let some little blot my vision fill,
Scanning her with a narrow near regard.
True. Love's unresting gaze is self-debarred

Mother and Daughter

From all sweet ignorance, and learns a skill,
Not painless, of such signs as hurt love's will,
That would not have its prize one tittle marred.

Alas! Who rears and loves a dawning rose
Starts at a speck upon one petal's rim:
Who sees a dusk creep in the shrined pearl's glows,
Is ruined at once: "My jewel growing dim!"
I watch one bud that on my bosom blows,
I watch one treasured pearl for me and him.

VIII

A little child she, half defiant came
Reasoning her case 'twas not so long ago
"I cannot mind your scolding, for I know
However bad I were you'd love the same."
And I, what countering answer could I frame?
'Twas true, and true, and God's self told her so.
One does but ask one's child to smile and grow,
And each rebuke has love for its right name.

And yet, methinks, sad mothers who for years,
Watching the child pass forth that was their boast,
Have counted all the footsteps by new fears
Till even lost fears seem hopes whereof they're reft
And of all mother's good love sole is left
Is their Love, Love, or some remembered ghost?

IX

Oh weary hearts! Poor mothers that look back!
So outcasts from the vale where they were born
Turn on their road and, with a joy forlorn,
See the far roofs below their arid track:
So in chill buffets while the sea grows black
And windy skies, once blue, are tost and torn,
We are not yet forgetful of the morn,
And praise anew the sunshine that we lack.

Oh, sadder than pale sufferers by a tomb
That say "My dead is happier, and is more"
Are they who dare no "is" but tell what's o'er

Mother and Daughter

Thus the frank childhood, those the lovable ways
Stirring the ashes of remembered days
For yet some sparks to warm the livelong gloom.

X

Love's Counterfeit.

Not Love, not Love, that worn and footsore thrall
Who, crowned with withered buds and leaves gone dry,
Plods in his chains to follow one passed by,
Guerdoned with only tears himself lets fall.
Love is asleep and smiling in his pall,
And this that wears his shape and will not die
Was once his comrade shadow, Memory
His shadow that now stands for him in all.

And there are those who, hurrying on past reach,
See the dim follower and laugh, content,
"Lo, Love pursues me, go where'er I will!"
Yet, longer gazing, some may half beseech,
"This **must** be Love that wears his features still:
Or else when was the moment that Love went?"

XI

Love's Mourner.

'Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain
The woman's love, wife's, mother's, still will hold,
And breathes the sweeter and will more unfold
For winds that tear it, and the sorrowful rain.
So in a thousand voices has the strain
Of this dear patient madness been retold,
That men call woman's love. Ah! they are bold,
Naming for love that grief which **does** remain.

Love faints that looks on baseness face to face:
Love pardons all; but by the pardonings dies,
With a fresh wound of each pierced through the breast.

Mother and Daughter

And there stand pityingly in Love's void place
Kindness of household wont familiar-wise,
And faith to Love faith to our dead at rest.

XII

She has made me wayside posies: here they stand,
Bringing fresh memories of where they grew.
As new-come travellers from a world we knew
Wake every while some image of their land,
So these whose buds our woodland breezes fanned
Bring to my room the meadow where they blew,
The brook-side cliff, the elms where wood-doves coo
And every flower is dearer for her hand.

Oh blossoms of the paths she loves to tread,
Some grace of her is in all thoughts you bear:
For in my memories of your homes that were
The old sweet loneliness they kept is fled,
And would I think it back I find instead
A presence of my darling mingling there.

XIII

My darling scarce thinks music sweet save mine:
'Tis that she does but love me more than hear.
She'll not believe my voice to stranger ear
Is merely measure to the note and line;
"Not so," she says; "Thou hast a secret thine:
The others' singing's only rich, or clear,
But something in thy tones brings music near;
As though thy song could search me and divine."

Oh voice of mine that in some day not far
Time, the strong creditor, will call his debt,
Will dull and even to her will rasp and mar,
Sing Time asleep because of her regret,
Be twice thy life the thing her fancies are,
Thou echo to the self she knows not yet. *CASERTA, April, 1882.*

Mother and Daughter

XIV

To love her as to-day is so great bliss
I needs must think of morrows almost loth,
Morrows wherein the flower's unclosing growth
Shall make my darling other than she is.
The breathing rose excels the bud I wis,
Yet bud that will be rose is sweet for both;
And by-and-by seems like some later troth
Named in the moment of a lover's kiss.

Yes, I am jealous, as of one now strange
That shall instead of her possess my thought,
Of her own self made new by any change,
Of her to be by ripening morrows brought.
My rose of women under later skies!
Yet, ah! my child with the child's trustful eyes! *CERNOBBIO.*

XV

That some day Death who has us all for jest
Shall hide me in the dark and voiceless mould,
And him whose living hand has mine in hold,
Where loving comes not nor the looks that rest,
Shall make us nought where we are known the best,
Forgotten things that leave their track untold
As in the August night the sky's dropped gold
This seems no strangeness, but Death's natural hest.

But looking on the dawn that is her face
To know she too is Death's seems mis-belief;
She should not find decay, but, as the sun
Moves mightier from the veil that hides his place,
Keep ceaseless radiance. Life is Death begun:
But Death and her! That's strangeness passing grief.

XVI

She will not have it that my day wanes low,
Poor of the fire its drooping sun denies,
That on my brow the thin lines write good-byes
Which soon may be read plain for all to know,
Telling that I have done with youth's brave show;

Mother and Daughter

Alas! and done with youth in heart and eyes,
With wonder and with far expectancies,
Save but to say "I knew such long ago."

She will not have it. Loverlike to me,
She with her happy gaze finds all that's best,
She sees this fair and that unfretted still,
And her own sunshine over all the rest:
So she half keeps me as she'd have me be,
And I forget to age, through her sweet will.

XVII

And how could I grow old while she's so young?
Methinks her heart sets tune for mine to beat,
We are so near; her new thoughts, incomplete,
Find their shaped wording happen on my tongue;
Like bloom on last year's winterings newly sprung
My youth upflowers with hers, and must repeat
Old joyaunces in me nigh obsolete.
Could I grow older while my child's so young?

And there are tales how youthful blood instilled
Thawing froze Age's veins gave life new course,
And quavering limbs and eyes made indolent
Grew freshly eager with beginning force:
She so breathes impulse. Were my years twice spent,
Not burdening Age, with her, could make me chilled.

XVIII

'Tis hard that the full summer of our round
Is but the turn where winter's sign-post's writ;
That to have reached the best is leaving it;
That final loss bears date from having found.
So some proud vessel in a narrow sound
Sails at high water with the fair wind fit,
And lo! the ebb along the sandy spit,
Lower and lower till she jars, aground.

'Tis hard. We are young still but more content;
'Tis our ripe flush, the heyday of our prime;
We learn full breath, how rich of the air we are!

Mother and Daughter

But suddenly we note a touch of time,
A little fleck that scarcely seems to mar;
And we know then that some time since youth went.

XIX

Life on the wane: yes, sudden that news breaks.
And yet I would 'twere suddenly and less soon;
Since no forewarning makes loss opportune.
And now I watch that slow advance Time makes:
Watch as, while silent flow spreads broad the lakes
Mid the land levels of a smooth lagoon,
One waiting, pitiful, on a tidal dune,
Aware too long before it overtakes.

Ah! there's so quick a joy in hues and sun,
And will my eyes see dim? Will vacant sense
Forget the lark, the surges on the beach?
Shall I step wearily and wish 'twere done?
Well, if it be love will not too go hence,
Love will have new glad secrets yet to teach.

XX

There's one I miss. A little questioning maid
That held my finger, trotting by my side,
And smiled out of her pleased eyes open wide,
Wondering and wiser at each word I said.
And I must help her frolics if she played,
And I must feel her trouble if she cried;
My lap was hers past right to be denied;
She did my bidding, but I more obeyed.

Dearer she is to-day, dearer and more;
Closer to me, since sister womanhoods meet;
Yet, like poor mothers some long while bereft,
I dwell on toward ways, quaint memories left,
I miss the approaching sound of pit-pat feet,
The eager baby voice outside my door.

Mother and Daughter

XXI

Hardly in any common tender wise,
With petting talk, light lips on her dear cheek,
The love I mean my child will bear to speak,
Loth of its own less image for disguise;
But liefer will it floutingly devise,
Using a favourite jester's mimic pique,
Prompt, idle, by-names with their sense to seek,
And takes for language laughing ironies.

But she, as when some foreign tongue is heard,
Familiar on our lips and closely known,
We feel the every purport of each word
When ignorant ears reach empty sound alone,
So knows the core within each merry gird,
So gives back such a meaning in her own.

XXII

The brook leaps riotous with its life just found,
That freshets from the mountain rains have fed,
Beats at the boulders in its hindered bed,
And fills the valley with its triumphing sound.
The strong unthirsty tarn sunk in deep ground
Has never a sigh wherewith its wealth is said,
Has no more ripples than the May-flies tread:
Silence of waters is where they abound.

And love, whatever love, sure, makes small boast:
'Tis the new lovers tell, in wonder yet.
Oh happy need! Enriched stream's jubilant gush!
But who being spouses well have learned love's most,
Being child and mother learned not nor forget,
These in their joyfulness feel the tarn's strong hush.

XXIII

Birds sing "I love you, love" the whole day through,
And not another song can they sing right;
But, singing done with, loving's done with quite,
The autumn sunders every twittering two.
And I'd not have love make too much ado

Mother and Daughter

With sweet parades of fondness and delight,
Lest iterant wont should make caresses trite,
Love—names mere cuckoo ousters of the true.

Oh heart can hear heart's sense in senseless nought,
And heart that's sure of heart has little speech.
What shall it tell? The other knows its thought.
What shall one doubt or question or beseech
Who is assured and knows and, unbesought,
Possesses the dear trust that each gives each.

XXIV

"You scarcely are a mother, at that rate.
Only one child!" The blithe soul pitied loud.
And doubtless she, amid her household crowd,
When one brings care in another's fortunate;
When one fares forth another's at her gate.
Yea, were her first—born folded in his shroud,
Not with a whole despair would she be bowed,
She has more sons to make her heart elate.

Many to love her singly, mother theirs,
To give her the dear love of being their need,
To storm her lap by turns and claim their kiss,
To kneel around her at their bed—time prayers;
Many to grow her comrades! Some have this.
Yet I, I do not envy them indeed. *RAMSGATE, 1886.*

XXV

You think that you love each as much as one,
Mothers with many nestlings 'neath your wings.
Nay, but you know not. Love's most priceless things
Have unity that cannot be undone.
You give the rays, I the englobed full sun;
I give the river, you the separate springs:
My motherhood's all my child's with all it brings
None takes the strong entireness from her: none.

You know not. You love yours with various stress;
This with a graver trust, this with more pride;

Mother and Daughter

This maybe with more needed tenderness:
I by each uttermost passion of my soul
Am turned to mine; she is one, she has the whole:
How should you know who appraise love and divide?

XXVI

Of my one pearl so much more joy I gain
As he that to his sole desire is sworn,
Indifferent what women more were born,
And if she loved him not all love were vain,
Gains more, because of her yea, through all pain,
All love and sorrows, were they two forlorn
Than whoso happiest in the lands of morn
Mingles his heart amid a wifely train.

Oh! Child and mother, darling! Mother and child!
And who but we? We, darling, paired alone?
Thou hast all thy mother; thou art all my own.
That passion of maternity which sweeps
Tideless 'neath where the heaven of thee hath smiled
Has but one channel, therefore infinite deeps.

XXVII

Since first my little one lay on my breast
I never needed such a second good,
Nor felt a void left in my motherhood
She filled not always to the utterest.
The summer linnet, by glad yearnings pressed,
Builds room enough to house a callow brood:
I prayed not for another child nor could;
My solitary bird had my heart's nest.

But she is cause that any baby thing
If it but smile, is one of mine in truth,
And every child becomes my natural joy:
And, if my heart gives all youth fostering,
Her sister, brother, seems the girl or boy:
My darling makes me mother to their youth.

* * * * *

SEVEN OTHER SONNETS

THE OLD LOVE

I

You love me, only me. Do I not know?
If I were gone your life would be no more
Than his who, hungering on a rocky shore,
Shipwrecked, alone, observes the ebb and flow
Of hopeless ocean widening forth below,
And is remembering all that was before.
Dear, I believe it, at your strong heart's core
I am the life; no need to tell me so.
And yet Ah, husband, though I be more fair,
More worth your love, and though you loved her not,
(Else must you have some different, deeper name
For loving me), dimly I seem aware,
As though you conned old stories long forgot,
Those days are with you hers before I came.

THE OLD LOVE

II

The mountain traveller, joyous on his way,
Looks on the vale he left and calls it fair,
Then counts with pride how far he is from there,
And still ascends. And, when my fancies stray,
Pleased with light memories of a bygone day,
I would not have again the things that were.
I take their thought like fragrance in the air
Of flowers I gathered in my childish play.
And thou, my very soul, can it touch thee
If I remember her or I forget?
Does the sun ask if the white stars be set?
Yes, I recall, shall many times, maybe,
Recall the dear old boyish days again,
The dear old boyish passion. Love, what then?

THE BROOK RHINE

Small current of the wilds afar from men,

Mother and Daughter

Changing and sudden as a baby's mood;
Now a green babbling rivulet in the wood,
Now loitering broad and shallow through the glen,
Or threading 'mid the naked shoals, and then
Brattling against the stones, half mist, half flood,
Between the mountains where the storm-clouds brood;
And each change but to wake or sleep again;
Pass on, young stream, the world has need of thee:
Far hence a mighty river on its breast
Bears the deep-laden vessels to the sea;
Far hence wide waters feed the vines and corn:
Pass on, small stream, to so great purpose born,
On to the distant toil, the distant rest. *THE SPLÜGEN PASS, 1873.*

CHOOSING

The thrush that, yet alone, pipes for his mate
Knows she will come in time to build the nest,
Knows she'll be she his tiny soul loves best;
'Tis love-time at the hawthorn blossom's date:
And the new flower-cups bare their hearts and wait
While careless breezes bring them love for guest;
And Youth laughs ready for the glad unrest;
But Love that chooses lingers desolate.

And I, who seek, and yearn for love to stir,
And I, who seek, and cannot love but one
And have not known her being, nor can find,
I take my homeless way for sake of her;
And love-time's here, and love-time will be done:
Birds end all singing in the autumn wind. *1881.*

POULAIN THE PRISONER

I

Beyond his silent vault green springs went by,
The river flashed along its open way,
Blithe swallows flitted in their billowy play,
And the sweet lark went quivering up the sky.
With him was stillness and his heart's dumb cry
And darkness of the tomb through hopeless day,
Save that along the wall one single ray
Shifted, through jealous loopholes, westerly.

Mother and Daughter

One single ray: and where its light could fall
Its rusty nail carved saints and angels there,
And warriors, and slim girls with braided hair,
And blossomy boughs and birds athwart the air.
Rude work, but yet a world. And light for all
Was one slant ray upon a prison wall.

POULAIN THE PRISONER

II

One ray, and in its track he lived and wrought,
And in free wideness of the world, I know,
One said "Fair sunshine, yet it serves not so,
It needs a tenderer when I shape my thought;"
And, "'Tis too brown and molten in the drought;"
And "'Tis too wan a greyness in this snow;"
And would have toiled, but wearied and was woe,
While days stole past and had bequeathed him nought.

Maybe in Gisors, round the fortress mead
Gisors where now, when fair-time brings its press,
They seek the prisoner's tower to gaze and guess
And love the work he made in loneliness
One cursed the gloom, and died without a deed,
The while he carved where his one ray could lead.

POULAIN THE PRISONER

III

"Oh loneliness! oh darkness!" So we wail,
Crying to life to give we know not what,
The hope not come, the ecstasy forgot,
The things we should have had and, needing, fail,
Nor know what thing it was for which we ail,
And, like tired travellers to an unknown spot,
Pass listless, noting only "Yet 'tis not,"
And count the ended day an empty tale.

Ah me! to linger on in dim repose

Mother and Daughter

And feel the numbness over hand and thought,
And feel the silence in the heart, that grows.
Ah me! to have forgot the hope we sought.
One ray of light, and a soul lived and wrought,
And on the prison walls a message rose. *GISORS, 1881.*