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SNAPSHOTS OF MARRIAGE, SNARES OF MIMICRY, SNARLS OF MOTHERHOOD:
MARIANNE MOORE AND ADRIENNE RICH

Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich are undoubtedly an odd couple; the modern “writing master” seems to have little in common with the political activist (Moore, Poems 119). Whereas Moore’s poetry, as Geoffrey Hartman puts it, is marked with “an extreme reverence for created things coupled with an extreme distrust of the self” (III), Rich’s texts came to distrust poetic distance and modernist aesthetics, attempting to close the gaps between life and language, between writing self and speaking subject instead. While Rich’s early volumes earned a fair amount of applause from some of Moore’s contemporaries, Moore herself never mentioned the young poet in her writing. Rich, on the other hand, acknowledges Moore, though merely as a role model not to be followed. In Rich’s critical essays of the 1970s, Moore primarily functions as an example of tokenism; she represents the commonly respected poet-critic within an “old boys’ network” who “was maidenly, elegant, intellectual, discreet,” “kept sexuality at a measured and chiseled distance in her poems,” and “fled into a universe of forms” (On Lies 39, 36; "Voices," 3)²—“Two minds, two messages,” so it seems (Rich, Snapshots 34).

1. Despite their different poetics and politics, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams could indeed agree on the impact of Moore’s poetic and personal achievements, thus recognizing Moore’s craft and strength, yet also acknowledging the ‘issue Marianne’ as a safe, and certainly less political matter: “Everyone loved her” (Williams, Autobiography 146).
2. Suzanne Jurss’ essay “Felicitous Phenomenon: The Poetry of Marianne Moore” (Fiery Forms) represents another unfavorable “feminist” reading of Moore’s work. Barbara Charlesworth Geljž dismisses Moore’s poems, commenting that “a captive prince might have written them in prison to keep himself sane” (Shakespeare’s Sisters 272). In another place, Geljž and Geljž place Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Bogan, and Moore into the “category” of women poets who “suspiciously deflect... and repress... their emotional and sexual nature in the name of intellectual clarity and discursive crispness” (Rich’s Poetry x1).
Put in terms of family structure, Rich's repudiation of modernist poetics becomes the rejection of the predominant male parent, of the father as much as his figures. In this dismissal, Rich, of course, did not stand alone. Modernism had given American poetry new forms and functions; its "fiddle" with forms (Moore, Poems 266), however, seemed to limit its very functions and had turned into a burden, when the "personal," the "political" and the "feminist" became part of the poetic project. Rich's neglect of Moore, however, marks the relationship among women writers of these succeeding generations as an especially troublesome affiliation. While recovering Emily Dickinson as "source" and "foremother," Rich discarded Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop and Moore as obedient daughters who adapted to the dominant literary discourse and whose address was first and foremost to a male audience (On Lies 136, 36-37). Such critique seems to constitute a missing link between modern and postmodern women's poetry; its very tones, however, at the same time identify that link as a matter of voice. And while there may indeed be no "common voice" in women's verse there is yet, I want to suggest, a common problem which is voice.

MARRIAGE AND MIMICRY

The following is an attempt to retrace this ambiguous affiliation—-at least partially, starting with a reading of Moore's poem "Marriage" (1923; 62-70) and Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" (1963; 21-25). Both poems foreground the speaker's position and voice as a primary textual concern. Interestingly enough, this shared concern is also situated in a similar semantic scenario: within the confinements of marriage. Both poems portray matrimony--woman's declaration of legal dependence--as modern paradise lost, and both highlight the absence of communication in an institution which supposedly marshals interaction and dialogue between the sexes. Giving voice to

3. Other parallels between "Marriage" and "Snapshots" exist, one of which is worth mentioning here. Like Moore's poem, Rich's text had been a "work-in-process" for several years during its author's early "formative" period; and like the publication of "Marriage" one year after Eliot's Waste Land, the appearance of Snapshots succeeded another controversial and influential text in American poetry, Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959). This commonness in chronology and relation to/"reproduction," reaction, revision or rejection of a major text by a male author suggests further resemblances between Moore and Rich.
a variety of other texts from which they quote, both poems become verbal patchworks that replace intersubjectivity with intertextuality and thus claim—or disclaim—voice through literary reference, quotation, and allusion. In this way, Moore’s “Marriage” and Rich’s “Snapshots” similarly enact and associate the impossibilities of conjugal union and unified voice. Suggesting, as Moore’s text does, that marriage “require[s] all one’s criminal ingenuity to avoid” (62) or, as Rich does, that it provokes the desire to “smash the mould straight off” (24), both poems at the same time display a disloyal desire for a significant space “outside” the law.

For poststructuralist and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, however, woman as speaking subject cannot be but a daughter-in-law. Based on the repression of the maternal, the constitution of the (male and female) subject is preceded by language, the symbolic order in which the name of the Father (le nom du père), his laws and his prohibitions (le non du père), and thereby all rules that structure human relations are always already inscribed. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the most basic social norms and necessities within this symbolic order are the incest taboo, “the supreme rule of the gift” which, “universal like language,” imposes the exchange of women, and the institutionalization of marriage, this “dramatic encounter between nature and culture, between alliance and kinship.” Marriage thus operates as a communication device between groups, in which woman takes the double function of being both sign and value (478-97). However, as object of exchange woman is, so Jacques Lacan maintains, “excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words” (144), her position as speaking subject is characterized by lack, absence, and silence.

All that considered, we may wonder if there is a speaker or just a “spoken” in women’s texts, in this text or in the poetry of Moore and Rich, for instance. We also want to remember, though, that this denial of woman’s speaking position presupposes a notion of man’s entrance into the symbolic order which has not yet been able to account for

4. For a discussion of kinship and woman’s position in the social, political, and economic system which is particularly concerned with the overlap and complementarity of Engels’, Freud’s, and Levi-Strauss’ work, and with Lacan’s return to and re-reading of the latter two, see Rubin.
5. This theoretical excursus is indebted to Evelyne Keitel’s excellent forthcoming essay “Weiblichkeit und Strukturalismus—Perspektiven einer feministischen Literaturwissenschaft” and to Nelly Furman’s “The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?” As an indeed valuable and helpful introduction to Lacan, Keitel recommends Benvenuto and Kennedy.
what is specific for the female subject in that process. Consequently the question how and from which position woman speaks, writes, and creates remains a central—and extremely problematic—issue for feminist criticism and theory. This question will also be at issue here.

The French psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray offers a preliminary answer. She sees woman, caught in the linguistics and logic of patriarchy, facing two alternatives: woman can either choose to remain silent or, as an interim strategy, mime, parody, paraphrase, and quote male discourse. Deliberately acting out the role that is historically assigned to women—reproduction—the female writer exposes what she mimics, undermines and thus subverts the symbolic order and its ways of representing women.

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—in as much as she is on the other side of the “perceptible,” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in part by masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means “to unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply absorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of “matter,” but also of “sexual pleasure.” (Irigaray, This Sex 76)

Moore’s and Rich’s poems, I want to argue, can be read as such rehearsals of other texts, as recitals that challenge the privileged position of their originals while at the same time effecting a division and multiplication of voice. Reading the poems, however, we also note that they vary considerably in degree of playfulness, that there is a “difference within” such mimetic practices and split utterances (Johnson, Critical Difference x). As Barbara Johnson puts it in a different, though related context: “The female voice may be universally described as divided, but it must be recognized as divided in multiple ways” (World of Difference 170). Let us then take Irigaray’s assumptions as a preliminary reading position, a position which we may have to reconsider after the reading is done. And we may also have to acknowledge that the theorist’s stance is not necessarily as stable as we would like it to be, but that it
Snapshots of Marriage, Snares of Mimicry, Snarls of Motherhood

may in return allow a glance into the "elsewhere" in which woman supposedly remains.⁶

MIMICRY AS "PLAYFUL REPETITION"

The poem "Marriage" is Moore's longest, if not her long
poem and contains more quotations and references than
most of her work. In fact, it is "made up almost entirely of
quotations" (Costello 184). Moore herself once described
"Marriage" as "a little anthology of statements that took my
fancy--phrasings that I liked" (Reader xv). A similar phrase
also introduces the poem's notes in the (rather incomplete)
"complete" edition of her work; there, however, the word
anthology is elided, and in this way rendered a particularly
significant term, a term also that is challenged and
redefined by the very text it refers to.⁷

If seen as an anthology, Moore's poem in fact
shows little resemblance to its conventional model, the
collection of major works by major authors, but instead
represents a loose connection of "phrases from the most
unlikely sources" (Stapleton 39), often chosen as much for
their "raw" materiality as for their meaning (Poems 267).
The poem neither shuns citation from the non-canonical,
like the Scientific American and a French magazine called
Femina, nor is its reference necessarily to a printed text.
Identifying the source of a quotation as the inscription on
Daniel Webster's statue in Central Park, Moore connects the
historical figure with his rhetorical figures, but also gives
"body" to rhetoric and its postures. Such idiosyncratic
treatment of borrowed discourse may be, as Hugh Kenner
suggests, an effective way to "democratize "tradition " (III);
it certainly highlights the ambivalence of the female talent
vis-à-vis tradition. And moreover, it challenges tradition
and canonicity as such--some time before literary criticism
did.

After all, Moore's "Marriage" is a re-reading of
John Milton's Paradise Lost, "the canonical text par
excellence of English literature" (Froula 326) written by
"English literature's paradigmatic patriarch" and "patron

⁶. Irigaray's positions indeed tend toward contradiction, yet--not unlike Whitman's
"Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain
multitudes)" (Leaves, "Song of Myself" 1324-26)--they do so happily. For an early
critique of Irigaray's multiple attitudes and her inconsistent speaking positions, see
Felman.
⁷. "Statements that took my fancy which I tried to arrange plausibly" (271).
saint of companionate marriage" (Nyquist 101, 99). Moore secularizes Milton’s version of the Biblical myth; she revises Eve’s conversion to orthodoxy and at the same time recalls emphatic notions and illusions of conjugal love and marital equality, reminding the reader that the Renaissance--like Milton’s epic--celebrated marriage as an institution that supposedly unites two incomplete halves. Moore’s poem, on the other hand, glances at the flip side of the coin: in early capitalist times, matrimony also became a contract, a “match,” as Moore herself calls it in “Spencer’s Ireland” (112), an economic necessity and exclusive social norm, which left hardly any other alternative to women’s lives. For Moore, marriage means shared loneliness, pure convention or pompous ritual, a mixture of “servitude and flutter” (194) --in short, temptation, but certainly entrapment. And whereas in Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Milton strongly argues for legal separation of the sexes in case of “indisposition, unfitness, or contrariety of mind” (705), this poet does not blame the indisposed individual but rather the institution itself--a “strange paradise,” a “crystal-fine experiment,” an “amalgamation which can never be more / than an interesting impossibility” (63).

Moore’s poem itself appears like an amalgamation, a combination of different things. But even more than that, lacking connectives--which Moore “despises” (Williams in Tomlinson 54)--the poem becomes a collage, a “dance of broken things” (Tomlinson 16), an assembly of fragments which always function in a way that is particular for Moore’s texts. Unlike some of her contemporaries, Moore uses quotation neither to reconstruct or change the content of the canon, nor as mere allusion to literary authority, but rather as an alternative speaking position. Whereas Eliot’s and Pound’s historical and literary fragments re-collect and often preserve “past states” (Moore, Poems 64), Moore is attracted to statements that “took [her]

8. Moore’s reading of FL, however, not only entails a revision of Milton’s idealization of the marital bond, but also of Milton’s own way of re-reading and myth-making from which such idealization arises. For an excellent analysis of Milton’s exegetical practice as “the product of an ideologically over-determined desire to unify the two different creative accounts in Genesis,” see Nyquist (102).
9. Haller and Haller’s essay “The Puritan Art of Love” is by now a somewhat dated, yet “classic” account of Puritan notions of love and marriage, particularly in their sentimental and idealistic aspects and in regard to their influence on Milton’s work.
10. For a brief but illuminating analysis of the bias in Renaissance middle-class marriage theory and attitudes toward women, an investigation that also questions the legitimacy of social and literary historians’ attempt to recover the English Renaissance as proto-feminist period and origin of Anglo-American feminisms, see Fitz.
11. For a more intricate discussion of the collage technique in Moore’s poetry with particular reference to “Marriage,” see Costello (212-13).
fancy” and thus makes her readers see significance not in the programmatic but in the accidental. “Mimic Fancy,” as fanciful Eve is told by Adam in Book V of Paradise Lost, is one among the lesser Faculties that serve / Reason.” “[Of all external things,” Eve learns, “... She forms Imagination, Aery shapes,” and in reason’s absence “wakes / To imitate her, but misjoining shapes / Wild work produces oft” (101-112). Moore’s poem rephrases this association of fancy and female, claiming that “there is in woman / a quality of mind / which as an instinctive manifestation / is unsafe” (68). Just this fanciful unreliability, however, is a significant part of Moore’s poetic practice and the position, positions, or even “non-positions” from which many of her poems speak. Her alterations of citation, erratic manner of annotation and other idiosyncratic inconsistencies have provoked various, often “contradictory objections.” Refusing to turn her work “into a donkey that finally found itself being carried by its masters” (262), Moore nonetheless continued to playfully parody the textual apparatus of poetic authority as much as to exploit it as speaking position and subtext to the dazzling surfaces of her poems.

Consequently, fancy and inconsistency in Moore’s poetic practice may not be mistaken as randomness. Her choice of quoted material, for instance, is highly selective and operates both on the surface and in the subtext of her poems. When Moore’s modern Eve relies not on Adam’s order, but on the authority of Martha Carey Thomas’ speech, various intertextual threads are woven between Moore’s poem, the issues and bias of liberal feminism, and Milton’s epic. 12 In the context of Moore’s poem, which depicts and distinguishes its main figures by rhetoric, these threads are foregrounded and converge in the issue of dominant versus

12. Let me briefly follow some of the threads that intertextually connect Moore, Carey Thomas, Milton, and liberal feminism: it has been claimed that “Marriage”... was written by a convinced feminist” and readers have also noted Moore’s commitment to the woman’s suffrage movement (Stapleton 38, 4). It cannot be denied, however, that the poet shares the double standards of “women’s lib” in the 1920s, as well. Although she subtly objected that “women are regarded as belonging necessarily to either of two classes--that of the intellective freelance or that of the eternal sleeping beauty” (Prose 82), Moore herself seems to have held similar notions. Her claim that woman, on the one hand, is “no longer debarred from the professions that are open to men” while, on the other, if she “cares to be femininely lazy, traditions of the past still afford shelter” (61) resonates well with Martha Carey Thomas’ boast: “Our failures only marry” (quoted in Schneider 401). Carey Thomas was strongly opposed to marriage as a limitation to women’s intellectual “growth” and remembered “weeping over [Milton’s] account of Adam and Eve because it seemed to me that the curse pronounced on Eve might impair girls’ going to college” (quoted in Schneider 427). And indeed, for unfallen Eve there was no need for higher education, since Adam was it all—in educator, guide, and voice: “God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman’s only knowledge and her praise” (4, 637-38). Moore’s Eve chooses Carey Thomas as teacher and preacher instead.
subordinate discourse and voice. Reciting—with some poetic license—Carey Thomas’ rhetoric, Moore’s Eve claims that “m’jen are monopolists / of ‘stars, garters, buttons / and other shining baubles’” (67), but she also knows Adam as the monopolist of oration and debate. The poem, in fact, identifies Adam with (Milton’s) Eve’s apostrophe to her “Guide and Head” (4. 440-43), her “Author and Disposer” (4. 635). Adam becomes the embodiment of this rhetorical device, “the O thou / to whom from whom / without whom nothing” (63); synonymous with presence and univocality, full of prophecy and void of uncertainty, he speaks “in a formal [customary] strain, / of ‘past states, the present state, seals, promises / the evil one suffered, the good one enjoys / hell, heaven / everything convenient / to promote one’s joy’” (64). Eve’s multiple voices, her ability to write in three languages and talk in the meantime align woman, on the other hand, with the poem’s fragmented structure, its shifting tones and dissonances (62). Due to these opposed rhetorical strategies, the couple’s attempt at dialogue remains a collage of clashing materials; their marriage is hardly a privileged place for interaction, neither a “blissful coming together of equal voices speaking in unison” nor an “ongoing dialogue between individuals affirming in turn their difference” (Furman 59), connection nor communication, but a “striking grasp of opposites / opposed to each other, not to unity” (69). As in Milton’s epic, we find in Moore’s poem a shared responsibility for the Fall. For marriage, however, there is no redemption; it is finally dismissed with irony, but without an offer of alternative. As William Carlos Williams put it: “Of marriage there is no solution in the poem and no attempt at a solution” (Tomlinson 57).

During all this, the poem’s speaker gradually gives up the center stage and instead claims multiple, indeterminate positions, positions which are present in their very absence. “Robbed of speech by speech that has delighted” (91), she transforms from indefinite “one” and universal “I” into the masterful manipulator of her model discourses; she juxtaposes ironies and illusions, appearances, stereotypes and myths, indeed “playfully repeating” and thus undermining and deconstructing the conventional structures of poetic authority and voice as well as of marriage. Making mimicry and the multiplication of voice go hand in hand, Moore’s poem, in some strange way, also enacts the very paradox in Irigaray’s notion of the parler femme, her two seemingly contradictory claims that women’s language
cannot be metaspoken, that woman escapes signification, "remain[s] elsewhere" and that, nonetheless, her voice is unlimited, indefinite and multiple.\textsuperscript{13}

**MIMICRY AS "IMPASSIVE TRAVESTY"**

Like Moore's text, Rich's poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" quotes, repeats and raises not just one but many voices. It does, on the other hand, and unlike Moore's poem, attempt both a solution to marriage and a position for voice. Filtering its focus on marriage through the relation of mother and daughter, the poem paints a bleak picture of woman's past and present, but seeks to project a promising vision of her future. More important than this particular intention, however, is the poem's special focus on woman-to-woman relations which, according to Irigaray, "ha[ve] been singularly neglected, barely touched on, in the theory of the un-conscious" (124).

"Snapshots" is the title poem of a volume written during the years 1954 and 1962, a time when Rich was "reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments" (On Lies 44). The volume's reception changed with the times and the revisions to which the poet subjected both her own work and life. Early readers heavily criticized the poems' "woman-oriented" material, making the poet feel "slapped over the wrist," assured, however, "that these were important themes" (quoted in Bennett 197).\textsuperscript{14} By 1971, though, Rich had grown uncomfortable with the volume and what retrospectively seemed to be its proto-feminist attitudes and ambiguities. She rejected the title poem as "too literary, too dependent on allusion," objecting that she "hadn't found the courage yet to do without authorities" (45). Eventually the collection itself was seen as a snapshot, an impression, a view of something brief and transitory, "less forceful," as Wendy Martin puts it, than Rich's later work, a "beginning," though, "of a personal and political pilgrimage" (181).

Unlike Moore's text, Rich's poem quite literally depends on allusions and authorities. It rehearses not minor but monumental voices of cultural heritage, giving male principles presence, less in person or persona than in

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. "Women's Exile," an interview with Irigaray (65), versus her essay "This Sex Which Is Not One" (This Sex 23-33).

\textsuperscript{14} Quoted from Elly Bulkin, "An Interview With Adrienne Rich," *Conditions* 1 (April 1977), 50-51.
perspective: there is parody of Horace and paraphrase of Baudelaire; we hear echoes of Yeats and Eliot and find quotes from Cortot, Diderot, and Samuel Johnson. Throughout a continuous dislocation and splitting of voice the poem's speaker moves from omniscient third person and universal "I" to communal "we" and strives to take her position in opposition, countering the misrepresentation of woman by cynical commentary and occasional citation from the exceptional woman. Seduced by the subtleties of sexual bias, however, the speaker manages to mime the very misconceptions she sets out to undo, and thus exposes rather than opposes the ways in which partialities and polarities blend into the work of language. Torn in her loyalties, the speaker turns daughter-in-law—"[the beak that grips her, she becomes" (22)—while the daughter-in-law becomes both victim and accused. Thus enacting and performing the law, the poem turns indeed into a "recovery of] the place of woman's] exploitation by discourse."

As anticipated, there are diverse forms of mimicry and more than one speaking position for woman's rehearsals. In fact, when Irigaray explores the precarious relation of mother-to-daughter and woman-to-woman, she herself sees mimicry in a shade of difference. In this particular context, that is in the context of her essays "When Our Lips Speak Together" and "The One Doesn't Stir Without the Other," mimicry appears as a much less joyful and subversive, yet much more self-destructive force. In the former text, the daughter confronts the mother as follows:

Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything you meet. You imitate whatever comes close. You become whatever touches you. In your eagerness to find yourself again, you move indefinitely far from yourself. From me. Taking one model after another, passing from master to master, changing face, form, and language with each new power that dominates you. You/we are sundered; as you allow yourself to be abused, you become an impasse travesty. (This Sex 210)

"Playful repetition" turned "impassive travesty." Confronting an "other," Irigaray deplores woman's dedication to reproduction, "the ebb and flow of our lives spent in the exhausting labor of copying, miming" (207) and thus indirectly turns against her own labor, the skillful manipulation of quotation and deconstruction of "master discourse" in her earlier Speculum of the Other Woman. Oscillating between resentment and practice of mimicry, Rich's text shares Irigaray's ambivalence, an ambivalence apparently closely linked to the affiliation with an "other"
who is both different and indifferent. Her poem moves from the rejection of the mother figure as mime of conventional female representation through an ironic imitation of male voices to the projection of future woman as reflection of her male model, "taking the light upon her / at least as beautiful as any boy" (24). In this way, Rich exposes the very "sameness" to which Irigaray's essays on woman's affiliation object: the uniformity and apparent universality of a language that "reproduc[es] the same history," the "same attractions and separations," the "same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections" (205).

SNARLS OF MOTHERHOOD

As suggested by our reading, mimicry, woman's interim strategy and preliminary speaking position may at best be a subversive force, but ultimately fails to construct a "different" voice and to "make connections." While Lacanian psychoanalysis assumes that only the cut of these pre-Oedipal connections, the "separation from a presumed state of nature . . . may constitute meaning" and voice (Kristeva 23), feminist theory has questioned this version of the Oedipal drama which assigns woman and the maternal a secondary role. Newer feminisms instead shift the initial interest in woman's reappropriation of power and power of voice toward a concern with the link of woman's voice to what is prior to power structures, laws, and signification. From various positions, feminist theory attempts to reclaim the female body, the pre-Oedipal and the maternal as a realm of an "other" economy of discourse and voice.

This move toward the maternal is not a mere theoretical enterprise, but also opens spaces for poetic exploration and imagination. Interestingly enough, in both Rich's and Moore's poetry, maternity plays a significant, yet nonetheless also a significantly dissimilar role. And not unlike the rather diverse theoretical "models," the literary texts resonate the potential as well as the problems involved in a discourse on body and maternity, in a poetics that may--like Irigaray's "body politic"--create "an unusually suggestive tension about the referent" (Gallop 82-83), but which also moves at the edge of a "regression" to plain referentiality and thus, indeed, to destiny.

For Rich, who experienced both marriage and motherhood, the attempt "to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way" came into "direct conflict
with the subversive function of the imagination” (On Lies 43). In her poetry, Rich continued to negotiate issues of motherhood, but as she aligned maternity, like obligatory heterosexuality, with marriage in its function to institutionalize women’s oppression, motherhood gradually “call[ed] forth a desire to avoid fictions,” to write, as Margaret Homans points out, “in non-fiction prose rather than in verse, explaining, analyzing, and arguing, rather than inventing” (223-24).

Rich’s prose excursus into motherhood, her analysis Of Woman Born (1976), was followed, however, by a collection of poetry, the volume The Dream of a Common Language (1978), which explicitly searches for new affiliations and a “whole new poetry” (76). Its final poem “Transcendental Etude” (72-77), in particular, closely associates the maternal, material and physical with an “other” poetics and attempts to recover both the maternal and a “different” voice through what we might want to call a poetics of experience. Rejecting “performance” principles and “theatricality,” “competitiveness” and “mastery,” old “oratory, formulas,” and “choruses,” the poem instead suggests silence, the rehearsal of the body and the “cutting away of an old force” to regain this lost maternal “groundnote,” this birthright to female intimacy and to a “feminine” language (74-75). A poetry that strongly relies on the “reality outside” or beyond itself may turn—as it happens near the end of the poem--the “homesickness” for the mother, “for a woman, for ourselves,” and the “limitless desire” of lesbian love, into the origin of “a whole new poetry beginning here” (75-76). And yet, this (en-)closural gesture toward an identity of female body and voice, this strong faith in immediate reference is undercut when the poem re-opens for its final extended metaphor.

Vision begins to happen in such a life
as if a woman quietly walked away
from the argument and jargon in a room
and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap
bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards
in the lamplight, with small rainbow-colored shells
sent in cotton-wool from somewhere far away,
and skeins of milkweed from the nearest meadow--
original domestic silk, the finest findings--
and the darkblue petal of the petunia,
and the dry darkbrown lace of seaweed;
not forgotten either, the shed silver
whisker of the cat,
the spiral of paper-wasp-nest curling
beside the finch’s yellow feather. (76-77)

Woman’s return to the kitchen, her “care for the
many-lived forms” (77), and her creative use of materials
and textures that might have been “stolen” from one or the
other of Moore’s poems come as a surprise. Presenting the
collage, “dark against bright, silk against roughness” (77) as
an image of woman’s speaking position, Rich, not unlike
Moore, trades unity and univocality for plurality,
multiplicity and fragmentation, and thus in fact reclaims
principles of modernist aesthetics—though “here and now”
not for a universal, but for a gendered voice.¹⁵

Moore, on the other hand, separates the spheres of
marriage and motherhood. While in “Marriage” Eve’s
maternal role is of slight relevance, Moore in return
celebrates maternity in poems that move away from
“familiar scenes” (Irigaray 206). Among these texts, her
“Paper Nautilus” is a central statement (121-22), a text that
offers the maternal as a kind of reproduction different from
mimicry, as a version of both creation and procreation with
reference not to woman’s body but to diverse forms of
spatial representation.¹⁶ “The Paper Nautilus” is a poem
that closely joins motherhood and poetic power, but a poem
also that has repeatedly been considered a non-
representative exception in Moore’s work and whose
treatment of birth, body and maternal love—in fact the very
use of this word—has made many a reader extremely
uncomfortable. The critique of the poem’s “depend[ence] on
intuition more than observation” (Stapleton 121), its
“hauntingly emotional” quality (Taffy Martin 99), and its
“sentimental treatment of maternity” (Slatin 256), however,
testifies less to the text’s deficiency than to its disruptive
force.

The poem begins with a distinction of
economies.

For authorities whose hopes
are shaped by mercenaries?
Writers entrapped by
teatime fame and by
commuters’ comforts? (121)

¹⁵. For an analysis of woman and/or modernity, particularly of the problems involved in
the poststructuralist “identification” of modernist aesthetics and woman and the
association of multiplicity, indefiniteness, fluidity, etc and femininity, see Jardine.
¹⁶. “The Paper Nautilus” is the final poem in Moore’s volume What Are Years (1941), a
collection that contains two other texts which focus on maternity, “He Digesteth
Harde Yron” and “Bird-Witted.” An earlier example of “maternal heroism” can be
found in Moore’s poem “The Hero.”
“Not for these,” we read on, but for a “perishable souvenir of hope” the animal’s/poet’s efforts are invested here. The maternal affection depicted in the following lines is far from the suffocating introjection and imprisoning overprotection which Irigaray’s and Rich’s texts reject as just another instance of a “universal” desire for the same.17 Moore’s kind of care instead condenses power, restraint, and detachment into a genuine liking, into a love that is “not a trap,” as Schulman points out, “but a process of reciprocal protection and freedom” (67).

Buried eightfold in her eight arms, for she is in a sense a devil-
fish, her glass ram’s horn-cradled freight is hid but is not crushed;
as Hercules, bitten by the crab loyal to the hydra,
was hindered to succeed, the intensively watched eggs coming from the shell free it when they are freed,-- leaving its wasp-nest flaws of white on white, and close-
laid Ionic chiton-folds like the lines in the mane of a Parthenon horse, round which the arms had wound themselves as if they knew love is the only fortress strong enough to trust to.

The word love--like the loaded metaphor that accompanies it--is indeed peculiar but “important,” and especially “useful” here not for its meaning but for its previous loss, thus lack of meaning (Poems 266-67). Re-contextualized, this affection contrasts both Adam’s and Eve’s narcissistic attraction to an “other self” and the self-centeredness of “entrapped” writers. At the same time and by means of images, such love also modifies the economy of voice that goes along with narcissism--the complicity of silence and echo. “Marriage,” as we remember, portrays Eve as “loving herself so much, / she cannot see herself enough -- / a statuette of ivory on ivory,” caught and immobilized in the process of mirroring, desire and loss of the self.18 In

17. See, for example, Rich’s poem “A Woman Mourned By Daughters” (Snapshots 35) and Irigaray’s essay “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other.”
18. Whereas Milton’s text distinguishes between Eve’s “immature” self-infatuation and Adam’s true--since transferred--object love for his “other self,” Moore’s poem
“The Paper Nautilus,” the marks left by the nautilus’ eggs, those “wasp-nest flaws / of white on white,” instead become signs of difference within sameness, signs of a simultaneity of separation and connection that inscribe a slight but significant difference into the economy of gain for loss.

Although “The Paper Nautilus” lacks citation and thus a marked acceptance of unoriginality, the poem’s dismissal of narcissism does not displace Narcissus’ mate Echo completely. “We cannot ever be wholly original,” Moore claims in “Archaically New” (1935), a comment on three of Elizabeth Bishop’s poems. “Nevertheless,” she adds, “an indebted thing does not interest us unless there is originality underneath it” (Poetry 328). And while her poem’s reference to Greek mythology and architecture, its comparison of maternal nurturance (and “devil[fl]ishness”) to Hercules’ labors reflect the difficulties of imagining an “original” link between motherhood and the power of discourse, the text also (re-)creates this link from within conventional representation and reference.

Such linkage, which strives to signify an “other” economy of desire, discourse, and voice, enfolds near the end of the poem. In the last two stanzas, reference becomes unstable and syntactic linearity is disrupted by spatial images; image and simile, the “close- / laid Ionic chiton-folds / like the lines in the mane / of a Parthenon horse,” give prominence to visual and tactile over temporal allusion; and the term “chiton,” denoting both an ancient Greek garment and an order of marine mollusks like and unlike the nautilus, repeats the “redundancy” of the preceding “white on white” by semantically embodying a “difference within.” Since the nautilus is “in / a sense a devil- / fish”—devilfish being both a term for a group of rays and for the octopus or any other large eight-armed cephalopod like and unlike the nautilus—we have already been prepared for this redundant, yet remarkable doubleness, this indifferent difference of meaning. Like the re-metaphorization of maternity, the destabilization of referentiality advances the poem’s attempt to represent difference within indifference or, if you like, indifference within difference. In this way, “The Paper Nautilus” indeed leaves its “flaws of white on white”; it carves “original” birthmarks onto the ordinary economy of discourse and voice, an economy that tends to know white because it depicts both Eve and Adam as narcissistic and self-absorbed, and thus, once again, modifies—Milton’s as much as Freud’s—“original” meanings.
knows black and that accounts for separation as difference, not as indifference to connection.

NOT A CONCLUSION

Re-considering this paper’s turn from marriage, mimicry and difference within the mimic voice to motherhood, I want to emphasize again that the move from contract and law to the body as basis of this law, from one form of reproduction to an/other bears with it extreme problems which may easily turn such gestures into dangerously regressive endeavors. But we have only just begun to think of Moore in conjunction with the maternal¹⁹ and thus to re-think motherhood, perceiving it not as a purely physical experience only but also as concept and space that does not resist, but may in fact resound the poetic voice.

There are apparently diverse answers to “the question how and from which position woman speaks, writes, and creates.” Whereas Moore’s mimicry deconstructs the conventional poetic utterance, her poems on maternity metaphorically explore an “other” form of reproduction and its potential for a different economy of desire, discourse, and voice. And while Rich in her early feminist poems ambivalently resents, though does not resist, mimicry, and therein desires but fails to reconstruct voice, her later claims for a gendered voice indeed recover both maternity and modernism. Finding, on the one hand, the desire to separate spheres, on the other “the drive / to connect” (Dream 7), we note differences in time and intention. Yet we also acknowledge that for Moore as much as for Rich the maternal/material has been one answer to “a common problem which is voice.” And thus the poets’ affiliation, which I initially situated in a shared intertextual practice, itself takes the shape of an intertextual net--connected, re-connected and parallel at some, disconnected and divergent at other points.

I want to close with a quotation from the final paragraph of Bishop’s essay “Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore.”

I find it impossible to draw a conclusion or even to summarize. When I try to, I become foolishly bemused: I have a sort of subliminal glimpse of the capital letter M multiplying. I am turning the pages of an illuminated manuscript and seeing that initial letter again and again: Marianne's monogram; mother, manners; morals; and I catch myself murmuring, "Manners and morals; manners as morals? Or morals as manners?" (156)

In her musings on Moore, between monogram and manners, Bishop includes "mother" only to exclude her once again from her final murmurings on morals and manners. This reader, on the other hand, elided morals and manners from her musings on marriage, mimicry and motherhood. And as we all know well: "Omissions are not accidents."20

WORKS CITED


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Snapshots of Marriage, Snares of Mimicry, Snarls of Motherhood
