

# Prayers for Canadian Daughters: Gender Specificity and the Parental Advice Poem

Lorraine M. York  
McMaster University

## ABSTRACT

There are a number of recent Canadian poems which offer advice to daughters, and all of them revise the best-known twentieth-century example of this sub-genre: William Butler Yeats's "Prayer for My Daughter" (1921). Most of these are by women poets such as Margaret Atwood, Mary di Michele, and Jan Conn, who write Yeats by turning his patriarchal advice upside-down; their strategy is one of contradiction and correction. The case of Michael Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter" complicates this dynamic of corrective challenge, however, since, as a male poet whose subject position is inevitably gendered "male," Ondaatje must struggle with the Yeatsian authority within himself before he can proceed to revise his poetic Father. In this paper, then, the author suggests that the process of revising the advice poem is subtly informed by the gender of the poetic revisor.

## RÉSUMÉ

Un grand nombre de récents poèmes canadiens comprennent les conseils d'une mère ou d'un père à sa fille. Tous ces poèmes sont des adaptations de l'exemple le plus connu de ce sous-genre au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, soit le poème «Prayer for My Daughter» par William Yeats (1921). La plupart de ceux-ci sont écrits par des femmes telles que Margaret Atwood, Mary di Michele et Jan Conn, qui font leur adaptation en tournant à l'envers les conseils patriarcaux de Yeats et en utilisant une stratégie de contradiction et de correction. Cependant, le poème «To a Sad Daughter» par Michael Ondaatje rend plus compliquée cette dynamique de mise en question et de correction parce qu'en tant qu'homme ayant écrit un poème dont le point de vue est forcément celui d'un homme, Ondaatje doit lutter contre l'autorité «yeatsienne» à l'intérieur de lui-même avant qu'il puisse procéder à réviser les conseils du Père poétique. Dans l'article suivant, l'auteure suggère que le sexe du/de la réviseur-e poétique influence subtilement la révision d'un poème.

*For us the point is not to take possession in order  
to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash  
through and to "fly." [to steal]*

— *Hélène Cixous*  
*"The Laugh of the Medusa"*

**A**DRIENNE RICH ONCE NOTED THAT “male poets of my generation did write poems about their children — especially their daughters” (*Of Woman Born* 12). Rich did not proceed to illustrate or comment further on her male contemporaries’ penchant for addressing female children in poetry. In *Of Woman Born*, her concern was obviously with the maternal rather than the paternal figure. In this brief aside, however, Rich was alluding to a long tradition of paternal poetry, a tradition of which she, as a young poet-mother, felt locked out, since, for a woman of the 1950s, to write of the “domestic” was a sure-fire recipe for not being taken seriously as a poet. Better to echo the public-mannish tones of Eliot and Pound and leave the nursery poems to those who could write them without trepidation: men. However, today, if the works of Rich’s inheritors in this country are any indication, women poets are reoccupying that off-limits literary terrain. They are writing poems to their children without fear of trivialization because, in their hands, the nursery poem has become newly revolutionary in its gender dynamics.

The most striking example of this feminist reclamation of parental poetry is the contemporary advice-to-a-daughter poem. The canonical exemplar of this type of poem in our century is William Butler Yeats’s “Prayer for My Daughter,” published in 1921, but it, itself, is a revision of a much older father-to-son advice poem tradition. The prior intertext reaches back to the Renaissance — the advice which the doddering courtier Polonius’s gives to his son Laertes in *Hamlet*:

There — my blessing with thee, / And these few precepts in thy memory / Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act. / Be thou familiar, but by no

means vulgar. / Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, / Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel, / But do not dull thy palm with entertainment / Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. Beware / Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in, / Bear’t that th’opposed may beware of thee. / Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice; / Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment. / ... / Neither a borrower nor a lender be, / For loan oft loses both itself and friend, / And borrowing dulleth edge of husbandry. / This above all, to thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man.

(I,iii, 57-69,75-80)

Here, the patriarch virtually constructs masculinity for his son: be strong, silent, thrifty, and a choosy but aggressive fighter. More than a century later, Lord Chesterfield, ambassador and cabinet minister, in a series of letters, exhorts his son Philip to become a proper gentleman:

Be, and be reckoned a man of pleasure, as well as a man of business. Enjoy this happy and giddy time of your life; shine in the pleasures, and in the company of people of your own age. This is all to be done, and indeed only can be done, without the least taint to the purity of your moral character.... (640)

True to the spirit of the eighteenth century, the world and its pleasures are given more of their due than in Polonius’s solemn injunctions, but the construction of the son’s masculinity is strikingly similar: have your amusements but, above all, have a care for your reputation.

Clearly, both Chesterfield and Shakespeare’s Polonius are speaking as self-styled “public” men, and their advice mainly focuses on the conduct of their sons in the public

realm. When William Butler Yeats added his voice to this tradition, he did so in order to question this privileging of public acts and public discourses. In his "Prayer for My Daughter," written out of the turmoil of Ireland's Civil War, the poet-speaker uses the tradition in order to counsel retreat from the public stage of political acrimony and strife into a shaded, personal, domestic space. So Yeats signalled that retreat by revising the gender of the child — away from the public son and toward the private, domestic daughter. (A few years later, in the lesser-known "A Prayer for My Son," Yeats would revert to the language of public action; praying for a protective angel for his infant son, Yeats requests one equipped with a sword, for there are some who would contemplate the murder of the infant, did "They know / Of some most haughty deed or thought / That waits upon his future days" [209.12-14].) For that matter, the public position of Yeats's speaker in "A Prayer for My Daughter" disrupts the very agenda of the poem; speaking very much as a weary man of the world (recalling Yeats's self-characterization in "Among School Children" as "A sixty-year-old smiling public man" [213.8]), he is granted the very authority to speak, to counsel, by the fact that he has not followed his own advice.

Small wonder that women poets felt they had no space in this tradition of advice poetry, and so many of them avoided a poetry which would inevitably style them as "mother" and, therefore, powerless/private rather than powerful/public. A young Adrienne Rich, for example, felt that she had to cordon off poetry from mothering: "poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (12).

Recent Canadian poets have challenged this reductive opposition between motherhood and poetic mothering. As Margaret Atwood

writes in her 1978 poem, "Spelling," "A child is not a poem, / a poem is not a child. / There is no either/or. / However..." (*True Stories* 63.12-15). However (to snatch the word from Atwood's pen), the old binary relationship between "my mother / my self" clings stubbornly; for contemporary female poets, one way out of this "either/or" conundrum is to superimpose the mother and the poet. One especially effective way to do this is to steal the parent-child advice poem out of the hands of the patriarchs.

However, female poets are not the only ones doing this. Michael Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter," from *Secular Love*, reminds us that a male poet, too, may have a stake in revising Yeats's gender politics. These poets' engagement with Father Yeats's text is, in certain important respects, influenced by their gender; what Mary di Michele, Jan Conn, and Margaret Atwood do with the advice-to-a-daughter poem can differ strikingly at times with Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter." The advice-to-a-daughter poem, as it is being written currently in Canada, may afford us insight not only into women poets' revisionist strategies, but into that hotly debated issue of gender specificity in writing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Another reason why the parental advice poem is an ideal site for revisionist gender strategies is its historical erasure of the mother-daughter link, for it has typically featured the father-son or the father-daughter tie. Women poets who are reinscribing the mother-daughter poetic relationship work within a larger project of feminist theory. Recent theory, especially that of the continental variety, has also highlighted the mother-daughter link; it has done so as a means of subverting the Freudian paradigm which has not inspired and irritated European

feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Their theories, growing out of psychoanalysis, search for a way of accounting for woman's estate which does not rely on masculine norms. As Hélène Cixous writes in the "The Laugh of the Medusa":

By virtue of affirming the primacy of the phallus and of bringing it into play, phallogocratic ideology has claimed more than one victim. As a woman, I've been clouded over by the great shadow of the scepter and been told: idolize it, that which you cannot brandish...

...A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor — once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction — will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. (884, 885)

Making the mother-daughter bond paradigmatic allows these theorists to escape the definition of woman as phallic absence. Cixous, for example, suggests that "There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other — in particular, the other woman. *In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter*" (881). In *La Jeune Née*, Cixous claims that woman, in writing, taps into the "Voice" of the Mother which reigns supreme in the pre-Oedipal child's world; every writing woman is, therefore, a figurative daughter (Moi 114-15).

This renewed interest in the mother-daughter link bridges what I call the intercontinental divide between European and North American feminist theories, a divide drawn so starkly (and perhaps misleadingly) by Toril Moi in her *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Nancy Chodorow's psychological theory has women

re-creating the bond they had with their own mothers in their relations with *their* daughters; female development, for her, is decidedly matrilineal. As Chodorow writes in *The Reproduction of Mothering*:

The early experience of being cared for by a woman produces a fundamental structure of expectations in women and men concerning mothers' lack of separate interests from their infants and total concern for their infants' welfare. Daughters grow up identifying with these mothers, about whom they have such expectations.... Women mother daughters who, when they become women, mother. (208-9)

A number of North American lesbian thinkers see the mother-daughter romance writ large in lesbian personal dynamics. Adrienne Rich, like the French feminists, makes the mother-daughter bond paradigmatic — the basis, in fact, for her concept of the "lesbian continuum" which embraces all women:

If women are the earliest sources of emotional caring and physical nurture for both female and male children, it would seem logical, from a feminist perspective at least, to pose the following questions: whether the search for love and tenderness in both sexes does not originally lead toward women; *why in fact women would ever redirect that search....* ("Compulsory Heterosexuality" 637)

\*\*\*\*\*

Like these theorists, several contemporary Canadian poets are turning the tables on the Freudian family romance, and the particular table onto which they grasp is Yeats's "Prayer for My Daughter." However, one Yeatsian feature of the parental advice poem which all of these poets — Margaret Atwood, Jan Conn,

Mary di Michele, and Michael Ondaatje — preserve is the identification of the daughter as a writer figure. In “Poem for My Daughter,” Mary di Michele’s speaker foresees her infant daughter becoming a wise scribe of heterosexual tragedy: “Only the lead in you pencil / as you note these things / need poison your reflection” (50.21-23), she assures her. Ondaatje’s speaker writes his poem on his daughter’s desk, and that daughter occasionally retreats into “purple moods,” near cousins to the “purple world” in which the poet-father sometimes loses himself (95.16, 49). The young girl of Jan Conn’s “Instructions to a Daughter” is, like the poet, a speaker in tongues:

make the words  
form themselves in the bones  
of the skull and clatter against  
the tongue’s roof. then send them out  
letter by letter with a bow  
made from the tendons of the heart  
(59.5-10)

Atwood’s “Solstice Poem IV” begins, “My daughter crackles paper” — Christmas paper, to be sure, but as artful in its implications as the silver tinsel with which she “festoons / herself” (*Two-Headed Poems* 84.1, 2-3). This decorative paper returns and graces the drawing-table of the daughter in Atwood’s “You Begin” — an advice poem in the guise of a drawing lesson. So it is in Yeats’s “Prayer”; the sleeping infant daughter, imaginatively constructed as a grown woman, is associated with the poetic. She is a “green laurel,” the embodiment of those ultimate Yeatsian poetic virtues, “ceremony” and “custom” (159-60. 47, 77). Yet her poetic genius is confined to the domestic sphere, in a manner reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay from *To the Lighthouse*. For the later twentieth-century Canadian poets who return to the poetic daughter, this separation of spheres has been collapsed; their poetic daughters operate

on a creative plane which is contiguous with that of the text’s controlling public, poetic voice. Wielder of acerbic pencil, desk- and purple mood-sharer, bow-stringer of words, paper crinkler, sketcher — this daughter *is* the poet.

She had better be a tough poet, too, according to the female poets who are revising this sub-genre. Since women poets have themselves transgressed woman’s traditional role as domestic agent by speaking in public tongues, they are witnesses to the rough winds which attend that transgression. Not surprisingly, they exhort their poetic daughters to “Keep what you feel underground” (di Michele 20), “burn the heart like a wick in oil. / pluck it out: ... disguise it as a fist” (Conn 18-19, 22), “Be / ruthless when you have to” (Atwood “Solstice Poem IV,” *Two-Headed Poems* 17-18). These same poets cloak their tough-girl, heads-up advice in Tartarean imagery of fire and iron: “I advise you to steel yourself,” puns Mary di Michele; “although there’s no escape from pain / you can burnish with it / like an iron in the fire” (51.34-37); “hold nothing in the hands / that cannot be fused itself,” advises Conn, “molten metal...” (1-3). “You are right” to draw the sun by smudging the colours red and orange,” Atwood tells her poetic daughter in “You Begin,” “the world burns” (*Two-Headed Poems* 110-111.18, 20). She ends her fourth “Solstice Poem” by calling her tough nuggets of crone’s advice “Iron talismans and ugly, but / more loyal than mirrors” (*Two-Headed Poems* 84.21-22). All of these women poets are reacting against the paternal protectiveness of Yeats’s “Prayer.” We first see the child “half-hid / Under this cradle-hood,” (1-2), protected against the howling storm (1) of Ireland’s public strife and acrimony. Yeats even glances briefly at the fires and forges of Tartarus; he wonders at Venus’s choice of a “bandy-legged smith for man” (29). Vulcan

embodies the underworld of public folly to which woman's beauty, given free reign, can condemn them; how appropriate that, for these contemporary Canadian women poets, the imagery of forge and fire is "transformed utterly"; it is now a positive signal of women's tough, independent choices.

Venus's beauty — and that of Helen of Troy — function as cautionary tales in Yeats's poem, and yet his first wish for his daughter is for a moderate degree of beauty: "May she be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught" (17-18). The first wish of Mary di Michele's "Poem for My Daughter" also concerns beauty, but she reverses Yeats's ordering by giving intellect pride of place:

Try to live intelligently and be happy  
as you are  
as your mother read too many books  
thinking she could not be pretty.  
(50.15-18)

Di Michele's mother-speaker is, in effect, the daughter of Yeats's "Prayer" grown up and newly forged in the feminist fires of the later twentieth century. The injunction to "be pretty" has lost its efficacy, and so it figures here as a piece of well-worn — but still potentially dangerous — advice.

"So far," says Atwood's speaker of her daughter in "Solstice Poem IV," "she has no use for gifts," for adornments apart from the Christmas tinsel in which she drapes herself (*Two-Headed Poems* 84.4-5). So this poetic mother, too, offers a gift of intellectual sight for her daughter in which to bedeck herself — a far cry from Paris's gift of a golden apple to the most fair: "tell / the truth when you can, / when you can see it" (18-20). The new filial advisees are tough-talking, truth-telling seers because their poet-mothers disagree with

Yeats's belief that "radical innocence" is recoverable only when "all hatred" is "driven hence" (66, 65). "Hence," the world of domesticity is, to quote the title of a Canadian study of violence against women, "no safe place" (Guberman and Wolfe). Safety is only to be found in a critical intelligence which ranges freely over the private and public realms. So, these poems by Atwood and di Michele bear witness to the crumbling of Yeats's thundering proclamation: "let her think opinions are accursed" (58).

\*\*\*\*\*

I have set out the relationship between Yeats and some contemporary Canadian women poets as an essentially binary one because there is a good deal of the adversarial in Atwood's, Conn's and di Michele's revised texts. However, as Alicia Ostriker points out in her work on revisionist mythmaking, "revisionist poems do not necessarily confine themselves to defiance and reversal strategies" (319). Indeed, the case gets more complicated when I consider Michael Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter." How does a male poet revise the Yeatsian strain? The anxiety of paternal influence is clearly at work here; along with Wallace Stevens, Yeats is a dominant figure in the poetic landscape for Ondaatje. The speaker of the woozily surreal drunk poem from *Secular Love*, "Claude Glass," breaks away from his wild party, takes a Lawrencean plunge into the dank nighttime vegetation, only to realize that another poet has been here before him; as he drunkenly phrases it, "it's all / fucking Yeats and moonlight" (14.51-52).

In "To a Sad Daughter," the poet can no longer get away with cursing his powerful male predecessor; he must engage the Yeatsian advice poem and write both with and against it. Of course, Atwood, Conn, and di Michele

are “with” the Yeatsian tradition in that they choose to rewrite it, to respond to its agendas, but Ondaatje’s “with”-ness is a much more pronounced and problematic complicity by reason of gender. For example, Ondaatje’s speaker is both repelled and attracted by the protective role of the paternal advisor, and so he veers toward and away from it and the attendant Yeatsian rhetoric:

I’m not good at advice  
you know that, but ride  
the ceremonies  
until they grow dark.  
(96.40-43)

This male speaker’s break with paternal protectiveness is bound to be problematic; his subject position is inevitably gendered “male,” and he can no more escape the power dynamics of the father-to-daughter conversation than he can escape his gender. Indeed, the poem gains much of its peculiar poignancy from this dilemma.

Whether or not the male speaker is, to some extent, determined by his gender, he shares with the speakers of Atwood’s, Conn’s and di Michele’s poems a preference for limitlessness. “Want everything,” he urges his daughter, “If you break / break going out not in” (97.67-68). By contrast, Yeats’s reaction to the breakage of “mad Ireland” is to counsel a withdrawal into safe limits:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a  
house / Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious;  
/ For arrogance and hatred are the wares  
/ Peddled in the thoroughfares. (73-76)

“[I]n the thoroughfares,” in the eye of the global storm, is precisely where Jan Conn’s speaker squarely places her daughter:

let no one watch you as you offer  
it [your heart] to the hawk from the east,  
the egret to the west, the parrot  
of the south, the pigeon from  
the north. they will each take  
one chamber and fly for three days  
to the four edges of the world.  
(24-30)

Although Margaret Atwood’s poem “You Begin” begins, like the young daughter, with a limited vocabulary (“this is your hand, / this is your eye, / that is a fish,” [*Two-Headed Poems* 110.2-4]), it soon veers into an awaiting world of linguistic possibility:

Once you have learned these words  
you will learn that there are more  
words than you can ever learn.  
(111.21-23)

For Atwood, as for the French feminist theorists, language is the place where woman breaks “going out not in.” No wonder that Hélène Cixous situates woman’s desire to write/speak in a “limitless space” within the female body (qtd. *Moi* 118). In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she uses a similar term, “that other limitless country,” to describe women’s subversive unconscious — “the place where the repressed manage to survive” (880). The female body/psyche/text is no longer to be limited its expression to ceremonious custom, sanctioned by the law of the “bridegroom”; instead, the daughter’s creativity is a limitless discourse.

Yeats’s marriage wish graces the final stanza of his poem for his daughter, and it offers one of the oldest forms of patriarchal closure. Those poets who have questioned the norms of female limitation and protection implied in Yeats’s poem have also wrestled with the form of sexual/textual closure which he

offers. Jan Conn's speaker advises her daughter to find the pieces of her heart which have been scattered to the four corners of the earth, and "sew them together with string / made of straw" (59.39-40). This closure is an act of re-integration rather than one of severance; the public realm is not one to be disdained, but one to be worked into the troubling, joyful quilt. This daughter is encouraged to patch together the piece-work of her life story, not to receive it ready-made from the patriarchal factories.

As the title of Margaret Atwood's "You Begin" intimates, Atwood offers a closure which is cyclical rather than linear (from childhood to womanhood). "[T]his is what you will / come back to," she concludes her poem, metapoetically "coming back to" her own opening lines: "this is your hand" (*Two-Headed Poems* 111.34-35). Though she says of the crazy-quilt which we call "the world," "It begins, it has an end" (33), the return of the child-woman to her own body and to her childhood delight in language counterpoints the linear history of this world. Woman is the cyclical principle, struggling against a remorselessly linear world and its closures.

Michael Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter" draws to a close by invoking that ultimate closure, death, only to pry it open a crack. The last stanza begins:

If I speak of death,  
which you fear now, greatly,  
it is without answers,  
except that each  
one we know is  
in our blood.

(97.72-77)

The tentativeness of the opening "If," amplified by the denial of "answers" which follows, sends this particular stanza off on an anti-

authoritative trajectory, but Ondaatje's "except" abruptly shifts gears and sets the stanza back on a Yeatsian course. Even here, confronting the ultimate frustrator of human advice, Ondaatje veers toward and away from "answers."

These poets' faith in or deconstruction of "answers" is reflected in their rhetoric. Ondaatje shifts from asides and qualifications ("I ache with a loss / — but that is greed" [96.46-47]) to imperatives ("Just / don't be fooled by anyone but yourself"; "Don't recall graves" [96.36; 97.78]), a movement which suits his nervous dance of attraction and repulsion. In his "Prayer," Yeats favours the optative mode (what I call the invitational imperative): "May she ... I'd have her ... let her ... May her bridegroom ..." (17, 33, 58, 73). In one of her other poems from the *Two-Headed Poems*, "A Red Shirt," Margaret Atwood associates a similarly prescriptive grammatical language with men's advice to females: "Children should not wear red, / a man once told me. / Young girls should not wear red" (102.5-7). No wonder that the women poets prefer the questioning rather than the imperative mode: "baby woman," asks Mary di Michele, "what can I tell you to try to be / without being wrong?" (50.13-14). Even the awkward verb cluster sounds tentative ("tell you to *try* to be"). Five years earlier, in 1978, the speaker of Margaret Atwood's "Solstice Poems" multiplies questions:

What can I give her, / what armour,  
invincible / sword or magic trick,  
when that year comes? / / How can I  
teach her / some way of being human /  
that won't destroy her?

(*Two-Headed Poems* 84.6-11)

The double question effectively deconstructs any belief in the panacean "sword" or "magic trick" — the easy answer.



What has arrived in these late twentieth-century revisitations of Yeats is the corrosive instability of authority which has echoed throughout much of the art and world view called the postmodern. Several of these poets, for instance, initially set themselves up as teachers: “This is the first lecture I’ve given you” (96.37), Ondaatje’s speaker wryly reflects; the word “teach” appears prominently in Conn’s scholastic-sounding “Instructions for a Daughter”; and Atwood’s tone in “You Begin” is teacherly throughout. However, only Conn stands by her lecture-tone consistently, though she undercuts it by using unconventional teaching “materials”: wind, flowers, animals. The other poets are more explicitly self-ironic: di Michele, as I’ve already noted, questions her own authority as a provider of answers, and Atwood in “You Begin” gently corrects herself — or is gently corrected by her supposed pupil:

This is the world, which is fuller / and  
more difficult to learn than I have said. /  
You are right to smudge it that way /  
with the red and then / the orange: the  
world burns

(*Two-Headed Poems* 110-111.16-20)

The most explicit self-indictment, however, comes from Ondaatje, who must struggle with the Yeatsian mantle of paternal authority because it implicates him. Therefore, the teacherly role sits uncomfortably on his speaker’s shoulders: “I’d rather be your closest friend / than your father” (96.39-40), he confesses.

\*\*\*\*\*

This comparison of how several contemporary Canadian poets have encountered and conversed with Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter” suggests one possible model for dealing with the issue of gender specificity in writing

— perhaps the most vexed question which has dogged feminist theory and criticism on both sides of the Atlantic. The British critic Jan Montefiore has written that seeking specificity of image, subject matter, or style is probably a fool’s errand; there will always be a textual exception waiting in the wings. She concludes, therefore, that the specificity of women’s writing lies precisely in its oppositional engagement with dominant modes of writing (178-79). However, since I have just outlined how Ondaatje’s text engages Yeats and does not exactly cave into its ideological assumptions, this would seem to put Montefiore’s point in doubt. Not just the simple fact of confrontation, then, but the particular *dynamics* — oppositional, friendly, or both — of a writer’s engagement with the power politics of a genre or sub-genre may be correlated with the writer’s gender. Ondaatje cannot simply confront, oppose and reverse Yeats’s poem as the women poets do; that dynamic of contradiction is closed to him as a male writer because he must struggle with the Yeatsian authority within him. First he must engage the poetic Father, by enacting the attraction-repulsion drives which I have discerned in his rhetoric, before he may proceed to any act of dethroning. Therefore, only late in the poem does Ondaatje utter his cheeky insubordination of the tradition in and against which he is writing. In an advice-to-a-daughter poem, he has the courage — or perhaps the nerve — to declare: “How you live your life I don’t care” (97.69).

\*\*\*\*\*

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich meditates on this act of directing the next generation of daughters. Like di Michele and Atwood, she does this by asking questions: “What do we mean by the nurture of daughters? What is it we wish we had, or could have, as daughters;

could give as, mothers?" (249). She comes up with the concept of "courageous mothering" (250), which is to be distinguished from the old self-sacrificing mother love. This "courageous mothering" is, instead, an act of "illuminat[ing] and expand[ing]" a daughter's "sense of actual possibilities" because, she argues,

"The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits" (250). This is also the most valuable gift a poet can make to readers: to expand our sense of the radical possibilities of the genre — to mother a text courageously — instead of sacrificing her/himself to the tradition.

## REFERENCES

- Atwood, Margaret. *True Stories*. Toronto: Oxford, 1981.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Two-Headed Poems*. Toronto: Oxford, 1978.
- Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of. "Letters to His Son." 1774. *Eighteenth-Century Prose*. Ed. Louis I. Bredvold, Robert K. Root, and George Sherburn. New York: The Ronald Press, 1932. 628-45.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California, 1978.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1 (1976): 875-93.
- Conn, Jan. "Instructions to a Daughter." *Anything is Possible: A Selection of Eleven Women Poets*. 1984. Ed. Mary di Michele. Oakville: Mosaic, 1988, 59.
- di Michele, Mary. *Necessary Sugar*. Kingston: Oberon, 1983.
- Guberman, Connie and Margie Wolfe. *No Safe Place: Violence Against Women and Children*. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Montefiore, Jan. *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*. London: Pandora, 1987.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Secular Love*. Toronto: Coach House, 1984.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5 (1980): 631-60.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976. New York: Bantam, 1977.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet. William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. 1969. general ed. Alfred Harbage. New York: The Viking Press, 1977. 933-74.
- Yeats, W.B. "A Prayer for My Daughter," "A Prayer for My Son." *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. 1956. New York: Macmillan, 1958. 185-7, 209-10.