PART ONE:
WHAT SEEMS IS NOT ALWAYS WHAT IT SEEMS:
THE MEANING OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S MONNA INNOMINATA

PART TWO:
INTRODUCTION TO EMILY PFEIFFER'S SONNETS AND SONGS

A Senior Thesis
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Group: Humanities
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Out of the Shadows: Rediscovering Women Sonneteers and their Sonnet Sequences

Part One: “What seems is not always as It seems:” The Meaning of Christina Rossetti’s Monna Innominata

Part Two: The Introduction to Emily Pfeiffer’s Sonnets and Songs

The problem researched in this project was the fading into obscurity of certain sonnet sequences by women writers. The project took on a two tiered format. The first tier of research was an in depth study of Christina Rossetti’s sonnet sequence entitled Monna Innominata. By studying previous essays and research on Rossetti, and analyzing the text itself, the sequence proved to be a complex and highly intellectual endeavor as opposed to a mere effusion of sentiment, as suggested by previous studies on the sequence. The second tier of research was to obtain, on microfilm, a copy of Emily Pfeiffer’s sonnet sequence Sonnets and Songs from the UCLA Library. Biographical research on Pfeiffer was combined with critique of some of the sonnets from this sequence and other bibliographical research to form an introduction that was submitted to the publisher (Scholars’ Facsimiles). If accepted by the publisher, it will be the first edition of Pfeiffer’s Sonnets and Songs to be published since 1888.
Part One: “What seems is not always as it seems:” The Meaning of Christina Rossetti’s Monna Innominata

Christina Rossetti wrote a sonnet sequence over the years from 1866 to 1881 dealing with the theme of unfulfilled love and entitled Monna Innominata. According to Christina’s brother William Michael Rossetti, Monna Innominata is an “intensely personal” series of sonnets in which Christina Rossetti is the “unnamed lady” writing about her unfulfilled love for Charles Cayley (Whitla 91). In light of the preface Rossetti wrote for the sequence, the epigraphs by Dante and Petrarch, the allusions and references to the Bible, and previous works by the author that develop similar themes of imagination and dreams versus reality, the validity of this view is questionable. William Michael Rossetti calls the preface a “blind interposed to draw off attention from the writer in her proper person” for the purpose of “giving expression to her love for Charles Cayley” (Marsh 474). Fredegond Shove ties the sequence to a thick thread of personal sentiment as well: “These sonnets, called after some imaginary and forgotten Italian lady, bear really, of course, the impress of Christina Rossetti’s own heart” (48). While the sonnets do appear to be personal in the subject of unfulfilled love with religion being the barrier to fulfillment, the historical literary content and intellectual thought and mastery of the sonnet contradict a view of the sequence as being merely a sentimental love poem. 1

Monna Innominata was meant for publication and contains a depth and texture that exceeds the one-dimensional view of its subject that characterizes Rossetti as expressing her personal sentiment (Marsh 475). The sequence explores the relationship between religion and love, the Italian sonnets of
Petrarch and Dante, and, as Rossetti asserts in her preface, the unsung heroines of the poetic troubadour tradition (Marsh 471).

Each sonnet is prefaced by an epigraph from the writings of Dante and Petrarch. "O shades, unreal save outward show!" and "An imagined guide conducts her," are epigraphs for sonnet three. These epigraphs refer to one of the themes that runs throughout the third sonnet as well as the whole sequence: imagination. In sonnet three the speaker prefers the imagined, in this case in the form of a dream, to reality. The speaker wishes to sleep in order to dream of her beloved: "I dream of you to wake: would that I might/Dream of you and not wake but slumber on." The word "dream" is repeated in the sonnet seven times, and twice the phrase "happy dreams" is repeated. The dream is preferred to being awake because the speaker states in lines nine and ten that it is "only in a dream we are at one," and "only in a dream we give and take." Dreaming and waking are paralleled to life and death. Alluding to the famous soliloquy in Hamlet, lines twelve and thirteen read, "If thus to sleep is sweeter that to wake,/To die were surely sweeter than to live." The death and life image of line thirteen is followed by the final line, "Though there be nothing new beneath the sun," which is a clear reference to Ecclesiastes 1:9. This line works to bring forth a theme of the cycles of life, love, death, rebirth and the idea of recycling (to apply a twentieth- century metaphor). This theme is also presented in the imagery of the changing seasons in sonnets two and three.

Time, represented by seasons, is a continued theme from sonnet two. Lines three and four from sonnet two read, "If bright or dim the season, it might be/ Summer or winter for aught I can say." The theme of the seasons is
carried into sonnet three in line four, "As summer ended summer birds take flight." The seasons represent the cycle of life, growth, death, and renewal. The cyclical nature of the seasons clarifies the last line of sonnet three, which otherwise seems obscure. Line fourteen, "Though there be nothing new under the sun," refers to Ecclesiastes -- "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us" (1:9-10). This reference strengthens the theme of the seasonal cycle of life, and supports the speaker's view of love functioning as an "old" theme in the literary tradition of writing sonnets. Love is a recycled subject in sonnets (Dante, Petrarch, Sidney, Spenser, Elizabeth Barrett Browning), and the troubadour tradition is being recycled by Rossetti. Perhaps this is a comment on the historical perspective of the sonnet sequence as Rossetti, through the writing of Monna Innominata, is participating in the troubador tradition. The epigraphs by Dante and Petrarch and the preface for Monna Innominata further show that Rossetti is aware that she is drawing from an older literary tradition of poets. So, perhaps line fourteen is also a self-conscious comment on her own writing, which draws inspiration from writers of the poetic troubador tradition as well as from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese, Petrarch’s monument to Laura, and Dante’s monument to Beatrice.

In the preface to the poem Rossetti refers to the literary tradition in which poets wrote about unnamed ladies: “Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn by a devoted friend.” By the very act of writing the sonnet sequence with a woman’s voice, she is reversing the conventional troubadour tradition and
giving voice to the unnamed lady (Marsh 471). In Rossetti's preface to Monna Innominata, she mentions Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850). If Browning had been unhappy instead of happy, Rossetti writes, "her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the 'Portuguese Sonnets,' an inimitable 'donna innominata' drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to accept a niche beside Beatrice and Laura" (Whitla 87). This sentence implies that Rossetti drew from "fancy" or imagination in creating her sequence. Since Rossetti had no happy love to chronicle, she relied upon fiction to create a "semi-historical" sequence (Whitla 87). Whitla shows in his essay how Rossetti deconstructs the convention of sonnets written by male sonneteers, beginning with the fact that the lady is the active poet and thus the active voice as opposed to her traditional passive role as the object being written about (87).

While sonnets one through four carry the theme of love, imagination, and the recycling of life and ideas, sonnet five shifts to a religious theme. Sonnet five introduces a quatrain on the master text Rossetti is using, which is the Bible. Just as she draws inspiration from the texts of Dante and Petrarch, Rossetti's writing is greatly influenced by the Bible. The Bible is treated as the master text from which to draw ideas and illustrations and is the main influence on Rossetti's treatment of the subjects of life, death and love as conveyed in Monna Innominata. The Bible in Rossetti's poems works together with the texts of Petrarch and Dante to produce a new literary text which draws from older literary texts. Rossetti's use of the Bible in Monna Innominata continues the cycle of literary tradition as Rossetti recycles older texts in forming a new text, Monna Innominata.
Lines one and two of sonnet five convey the biblical idea of "oneness," and in line three the speaker directs the attention of the beloved to God, using numerous biblical concepts. Obedience and devotion of the speaker to God would seem to act as the barrier that keeps the speaker from obtaining the fulfillment of her love and are the strongest themes that run through the quatrain. Line four, "To Him whose noble service setteth free," refers to Galatians 5:1, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." This statement begins a passage in Galatians whose main point is summed up in Galatians 5:6: "faith which worketh by love" (AV).

"Faith expressing itself through love" is one of the major themes of the quatrain. The speaker cannot separate the two, as can be seen in sonnet six, lines twelve through fourteen: "Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such/ I cannot love you if I love not Him,/ I cannot love Him if I love not you." The speaker's devotion is first to God, and only secondly to the beloved, but she says she cannot love him if she does not love God. This concept separates Rossetti's sequence from the traditional troubadour tradition and courtly love poetry. The love Rossetti's speaker expresses is one in which there must be a triangle between God, the speaker and the beloved in order for it to exist. The difference lies in the fact that the speaker of these sonnets is not obsessed with the idea of the beloved as much as she is with God. The speaker clearly states that she loves God more than the beloved and if one of the two must be lost it would be the beloved and not God. The speaker is not pledging her complete devotion to one man, but instead her love is split. These same lines also function as a link with the idea of "oneness" found in sonnet five as well.
as the biblical concept of unity in marriage, whereby “a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

Line eight of the fifth sonnet is a quotation from the text of the Bible and continues the theme of reality and imagination, as the imagined perfection of the beloved is anticipated. The line voices an expectation of perfection that is yet unfulfilled in reality. The sentence, “Yea, perfect you as He would have you be,” refers to Matthew 5:48, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” Line nine and line fourteen reflect upon Genesis 2:18: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” Line nine is performing its structural function, as the volta, in that there is asymmetry between the first eight lines of loyal obedience to God and strong adherence to the text of the Bible and then a shift in line nine to a tone that questions the previous lines. Line nine asks a literal question: “So much for you; but what for me, dear friend?” Perhaps line nine is directing the question to the verse in Genesis. The verse is gendered in that it is one-sided. It is not good for man to be alone, but perhaps line nine of the sonnet addresses this issue of the woman by implying that it is not good for woman to be alone either.

Analysis of this type would contradict Frederika DeWilde’s statement in Christina Rossetti, Poet and Woman: “perhaps she was not intellectual and philosophical enough to reason about these matters,” referring to her lack of interest in Biblical criticism (93). While Rossetti’s life and work, including Monna Innominata, do confirm the statement by the same author that “she fully believed in the religion as revealed in the Bible,” these lines from sonnet five reveal that Rossetti did think intellectually and critically about the text of
the Bible (93). Perhaps this is why sonnet six begins with the anticipation of the speaker in facing a "rebuke": "Trust me, I have not earn'd your dear rebuke, / I love, as you would have me, God the most." The speaker reaffirms her devotion to God at the outset of the sonnet, as if she anticipated to be rebuked for her questioning in the previous sonnet.6

Sonnet six refers to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where Lot's wife will "cast back a faithless look" to illustrate the speaker's assuredness that she will not hesitate or falter in her "forsaking" her lover for her devotion to God. This passage also echoes the theme from the earlier sonnets of imagination and reality as the allusion to Lot's wife creates the image of one looking away from the presence of reality and casting "back a faithless look" towards an idea.

The importance of this kind of analysis of Monna Innominata can best be illustrated by referring to a recent book on the nineteenth-century sonnet by Jennifer Ann Wagner, A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet, in which not one chapter on any women sonneteers is included. In his review of the book, Terence Hoagwood writes that the author's brief explanation for the exclusion of women sonneteers is that "women sonneteers have been interpreted in terms of personal sentimentality" (58). Apparently the effect of this gendered interpretation leads to the exclusion of women sonneteers in serious scholarly publications. Women's sonnets are associated with "sentimentality" because the writer is female. The works, this statement implies, were written with the intent of merely expressing personal feeling and therefore hold no real literary value worth exploring in depth. When Monna Innominata is understood to be
A sonnet sequence that is literary and intellectual as opposed to what is personal and erotic, the achievement of the poetess is visible.

A number of books written about Christina Rossetti which make reference to Monna Innominata interpret the sequence as an autobiographical piece in which Rossetti is expressing her love for Charles Cayley. Zaturenska devotes a chapter of her book to Monna Innominata, yet it is closely linked with the Cayley relationship. The chapter, "Monna Innominata and Charles Bagot Cayley -- the Hushed Life," tells of the nature of their relationship, linking the significance of the sequence to Cayley: “The monument to this love was built by Christina in her ‘Monna Innominata’ sonnets” (155). Zaturenska praises Rossetti’s work as “one of the greatest sonnet sequences in the English language,” but she insists that Rossetti is talking to Cayley with a “living voice” (159). Considering the preface, referring to the “fancy” Rossetti created in writing the sequence, the epigraphs and her diligent study of the poetry of Dante and Petrarch,7 the reference in the preface to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the deliberate crafting of the work and the manner in which she would have it presented, it seems reasonable to assert that the sequence is more of a monument built to the love sonnet itself and to the women who, for so long, remained voiceless as the silent object of the poet’s affection.

The format and contents of the book in which Monna Innominata was published diminish the degree of personal sentiment that is reasonably attributable to the sequence. The poems preceding and following the sonnet sequence contain similar themes and ideas: seasonal cycles, life and death, anticipation and hope, dreams and love. Monna Innominata is one of a series of poems that address such themes. When viewed in relation to the original
Rossetti was very specific in her instructions as to how the sequence was to be published. She insisted that the sonnets would be printed together, with none of the sonnets being left out. The sequence contains fourteen sonnets, and each sonnet is to function as a line of the "sonnet of sonnets". To leave one "line" out of the sonnet would be to disrupt the continuity of the piece. The sonnet sequence was included in the 1881 publication of Rossetti's work entitled "A Pageant" and other Poems. The poem for which the book is entitled portrays the months of the year and the changing seasons. "Mirrors of Life and Death" reflects the cyclical nature of life: "Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter/ Winter which lays its dead all out of sight,/ All clothed in white,/ All waiting for the long awaited light." Dreams, an important theme in Monna Innominata, are also present in other poems in the book. "A Ballad of Boding" echoes the same waking/sleeping relationship: "There are sleeping dreams and waking dreams;/ What seems is not always as it seems." "Yet a Little While" also echoes the theme of dreams: "I dreamed and did not seek: today I seek/ Who can no longer dream." The idea of perception versus reality is conveyed in this poem: "And dazed amid so many things that gleam/ Yet are not what they seem." The poem immediately preceding Monna Innominata is entitled "He and She" a poem about waiting and expectation. Immediately following Monna Innominata is the poem "Luscious and Sorrowful," which likewise carries the themes of hope, beauty and death. In "Passing and Glassing," there is an echo of sonnet three from Monna Innominata: "For there is nothing new beneath the sun;/ Our doings have been done, / And that which shall be
was.”

“A Pageant” and Other Poems further illustrates the artful structure of not only *Monna Innominata* but the publication of her poems as a whole unit. The poems are placed together in such a manner as to accentuate their common themes and ideas. The eponymous work is a play which depicts the different months of the year and personifies the seasons. This poem would indeed seem to serve as an appropriate title for Rossetti’s book, as a number of the poems deal with the subject of time and the cycles of the seasons, of life, and of the overriding theme of the sonnets, love. Beyond the internal relations among the poems in this book, Rossetti constructs important external relations between her book and others in the poetic tradition that she knowingly joins. Specifically, Rossetti’s use of the seasons as a symbol for the process of life, growth, death and rebirth can be found in other famous sonnet sequences. Shakespeare’s sonnets, Spenser’s *Amoretti*, Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, and Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* are all poetic precursors to *Monna Innominata* and its similar themes.

In sonnet 97, Shakespeare uses the seasons to portray the feelings of his speaker’s being absent from his lover: “How like a winter hath my absence been/ From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!/ What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!” Sonnet 104 is another example of the many Shakespearean sonnets that speak of the seasonal cycles: “Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold/ Have from the forests shook three summer’s pride, / Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turn’d.” Rossetti follows in the steps of this tradition by using these images of the seasons to convey ideas in *Monna Innominata*. She describes the waking from her dream of her beloved as the ending of summer: “As summer ended summer birds take
flight."

The theme of time is also linked with the imagery of seasons in Spenser’s *Amoretti* (1595). In sonnet four, spring is the metaphor for youth and love, while “sad winter” represents aging, night and sleep. Spring awakens love: “And calling forth out of sad Winters night,/ fresh love, that hath long slept in cheerless bower:/ wils him awake.” Spring brings newness and hope. Sonnet 70 also links love with the imagery of spring. Spring is told to go to love, who is asleep in her “winters bowre,” and awaken her. Sonnet 62 also carries the theme of time and the seasons, but the focus is on the new year. The changing of the seasons brings about a change of perspective or a desire for an internal change in the heart of man to coincide with the seasonal change: “So let us, which this change of weather view,/ change each our minds and former lives amend.” The new year brings hope of fresh joy as the old is cleared away and rebirth takes place. The final couplet evokes love to join in the change and to awaken to “new delight.”

In Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*, published in 1789, Smith echoes the theme of time represented by the imagery of Spring. In the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Spring “calls forth” and awakens as it does in Spenser’s *Amoretti*: “Till Spring again shall call forth every bell.” For example, in sonnet two, the sestet turns from the fading of spring to the fading that frail and fair humanity experiences with the passing of time. As the spring fades, losing its bright color, so does humanity “fade” with age.

*Monna Innominata* relates the seasons to love, although the conventional reference to spring awakening love is somewhat overturned in sonnet 2. The speaker says that she cannot remember when it was that she first met her love, as the meeting was not written down: “I wish I could
remember that first day./ First hour, first moment of your meeting me,/ If bright or dim the season, it might be/Summer or winter for aught I can say;/ So unrecorded did it slip away." In this case, the importance of the seasonal calling forth of love is dismissed: "So blind was I to see and to foresee,/ So dull to mark the budding of my tree/ That would not blossom yet for many a May." Though the poem mentions seasons, that imagery plays a less important role in Monna Innominita in the process of awakening love. The relationship of spring, blossoming and budding are used unconventionally. Winter is used to symbolize the passing of the opportunity to record the moment of the first meeting of the speaker and her love: "I let it come and go/ As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow." The main importance of the reference to the seasons is that it blends a conventional sonnet theme with an unconventional treatment of the theme. Instead of heralding spring as the usher of love into the heart of the lover and the world, the speaker in Monna Innominita cannot even remember the season of the first meeting. The season of the first meeting and awakening of love are not as important to the speaker as the regret that the meeting was not recorded. In this way, the sonnet becomes a poem about the act of writing to preserve the inevitable passing of a moment in time.

Sonnet 2 and sonnet 4 include references to the act of writing. Sonnet 2 is especially of interest when compared to the conventional sonnet sequence written by a lover to his beloved. Spenser writes of how he will immortalize the beloved through the writing of his verse. He will spread her fame through his writing. Sonnet 75 from Spenser's Amoretti is about the act of writing in order to immortalize the beloved. The lover writes the beloved's name in the sand only to have it washed away time and again by the tide. The poet vows to
"eternize" the beloved’s virtues in his verse. Sonnet 104 in Petrarch’s Canzoniere (1341) speaks about the act of writing to exalt and immortalize the beloved: “So my heart tells me now to write on paper/ some things to make your name far greater still,/ for in no way can sculpture be so solid/ as to give life to someone out of stone” (159). Shakespeare’s sonnets also speak self-consciously of the act of writing to preserve or eternize the beloved: “Yet do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,/ My love shall in my verse ever live young” (1493). This traditional convention of the sonnet, the attempt to “eternize” the beloved, marks a difference between the sonnets of Shakespeare, Sidney and Spenser and Monna Innominata. Rossetti follows the convention of a self-conscious writing about the act of writing, yet her purpose in writing does not include immortalizing the beloved on paper. There is anticipation about seeing the beloved, but there is no description of or actual presence of him in the sequence. The only way in which to immortalize anything in Monna Innominata is through death which leads to eternal life: “Let us go fall asleep, dear friend, in peace:/ A little while and age and sorrow cease; / A little while, and life reborn annuls/ Loss and decay and death, and all is love” (Sonnet 10).

As in Petrarch’s sonnets, life and death are themes in Monna Innominata that take on conventional significance. Rossetti’s view of life and death stems from what DeWilde defined as the two “principal motives” behind her work: “In the poetry of Christina Rossetti there are two principal motives: Love and Religion” (87). DeWilde noted the recurring theme in Rossetti’s devotional poems which conveyed the idea that death is better than life as it would mean being in heaven. Rossetti’s poem “Life and Death” illustrates this treatment in many of her texts of the topic of death: “Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet/ to shut our eyes and die” (87).
While Petrarch's writing is a definite subtext in Monna Innominata, the two poets approach the topic of death from very different angles. For Rossetti, death brings a new life that is better than life on earth: "Her great sonnet series, Monna Innominata, tells the story of love foregone. Only in dreams are she and her friend at one, and youth and beauty having passed away. Only a life reborn will annul loss and the grief of separation" (Thomas 163). In Canzoniere, death is a thief who steals life: "Ah, wicked Death, how quick you are to spoil the fruit of many years in so few hours" (317).

The significance in these differences is that it demonstrates Rossetti following in the tradition of the troubador poets while at the same time breaking from their conventional treatment of themes and ideas. One of the most obvious separations from convention is the fact that the poet of Monna Innominata is a female poet writing to a male beloved. Also, there is no attempt in Monna Innominata to immortalize the lover in verse (Whitla 130). The speaker begins the sequence with hope and anticipation of seeing the beloved, and it is only in the dreams of the poetess that she sees him. As I have suggested, this is why the speaker prefers sleeping and dreaming to the reality of being awake and without her beloved: the imagined is preferred over reality. This idea parallels the idea in many of Rossetti's works of death, which is a "sleeping," being preferred over life, being awake.

Whitla points out that there is very little critical work on Monna Innominata and that studies on the poem are "obsessed with reading her work as veiled autobiography" (83). Monna Innominata is the most widely known of Rossetti's six sequences, and yet it has still not been written about very much: "In recent years it has been the subject of a few articles, two chapters in theses, and one full-length study. "Victoria Sackville West writes of a
"distinguished man of letters" that he dismissed Christina Rossetti's work on the grounds that it was purely subjective and sentimental. The anonymous distinguished man wrote disparagingly of Rossetti that she was "like most poetesses, purely subjective and in no respect creative" (120). Although she does not agree on the point about Christina Rossetti in particular, West writes that she "wondered how much truth was in it, not as applied to Christina, but to the women poets as a general principle" (120).

Like Rossetti, Charlotte Smith wrote a sonnet sequence in which she drew heavily upon the tradition of Petrarch and other sonneteers. In an appendix to the 1789 edition of Elegiac Sonnets, Smith cites the sources from which she drew inspiration, including Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Milton. Her poems draw from her knowledge of the poetry of other writers as well as from mythology. Smith's awareness and use of other literary texts adds a depth of intertextuality; Smith's poetry, like Rossetti's, is clearly more than an effusion of personal sentimentality. The intertextuality, pointing to a learnedness of the poet, shows a highly intellectual endeavor as opposed to a purely sentimental act of writing. Smith's notes to the reader demonstrate how clearly aware she is that she is drawing from a literary tradition of poets. For example, in her notes concerning sonnets 13 through 16, Smith includes the specific quotes from Petrarch's sonnets from which she drew inspiration. It would be equally wrong to suppose that the poet would not at all draw from one's personal life or experience. The more reasonable assertion would be to say that it is possible that the poet combines personal sentiment and experience with a learned, highly intellectual awareness of the deliberate art of sonnet writing to create a work that is by no means purely sentimental.

The importance of differentiating these critical assumptions lies in the
tendency of the work of women sonneteers to be taken less seriously; too often, their work is disqualified from serious critical attention. This neglect is now undergoing correction. Carrol Fry’s 1996 publication on Charlotte Smith, for example, clearly states the importance of her work: “After nearly two hundred years of obscurity, the poetry and fiction of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1807) has gradually come to be recognized as some of the most important literature of the late 18th century” (vii).

Like Christina Rossetti, other women sonneteers such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Pfeiffer carried on a tradition of responding not only to the Elizabethan and Renaissance poetic tradition but of responding to each other’s work as well. In this way, these women form a distinctively female literary tradition of sonnet writing. For example, Emily Pfeiffer’s sonnet sequence *Sonnets and Songs* includes two sonnets written to George Eliot. Christina Rossetti and her sonnet sequence *Monna Innominata* are a part of a long tradition, and her preface to the sonnets clearly shows the influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on her sequence. The larger importance of *Monna Innominata* is that it contributes to and follows in the tradition of female sonneteers who are aware of and respond to each other in their work.
End Notes

1. Katherine Mayberry comments on the biographical interpretations of Rossetti’s love poetry, pointing out the complexity of her work (55-83): “To assume that Christina Rossetti’s love poetry can be reduced to a simple and single biographical correlative is a sadly reductive approach to a poet whose work, despite (or possibly because of) her own discomfort with ambiguity, is such a masterly expression of the conflicts and ambiguities of the human condition” (55). William Whitla also points to the lack of acknowledgement as to the complexity of Rossetti’s sequence: “No one has even made the conventional formalist appeal to complexity to demonstrate excellence, nor has the sequence been subjected to any kind of syntactic, New Critical, linguistic, or poststructural analysis” (85).

2. Rossetti’s artistic use of imagination and dreams in her poetry as a re-shaping of her reality is discussed by Mayberry (38).

3. Whitla analyzes the meaning of the reference to Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the preface to Monna Innominata showing that Rossetti must use her imagination to create a world of “fancy” or a “fictive world” (90-91).

4. Jimenez has compiled an extensive listing of Biblical references in the works of Christina Rossetti. She introduces the references with a brief essay on the importance of the awareness of the Bible in the interpretation of her work: “Even the most cursory reading of her poems shows clearly that Holy Scripture is the principal textual influence upon her work and that Scripture imprints a formative mark upon it” (vii). The length of this work attests to the accuracy of such a statement.

5. Harrison in Swinburne’s Medievalism describes a picture of the treatment of love in the poetic troubador tradition: “for the original troubadors
and their successors, love became an obsession to which everything else in life was, at least in theory, subordinate. It encompassed spiritual passions and physical lusts, both of which depended for their perpetuation upon the art that expressed them" (27). In Rossetti's sequence, everything (even her love for her beloved) is subordinate to God.


7. Marsh gives background information on Rossetti's interest in and study of the writing of Dante and Petrarch. Charles Cayley was translating Petrarch’s Songs and Sonnets, and Rossetti was influenced by them as she followed his progression. Christina Rossetti attended lectures at University College on the Purgatorio and Paradiso (Ch. 34).

8. Whitla explains the functioning of the fourteen sonnets as fourteen lines in a “sonnet of sonnets.” He discusses the specific instructions given by Rossetti to her publishers about Monna Innominata (93-96).
Works Cited


Note on the Collaboration for the Introduction to Emily Pfeiffer's *Sonnets and Songs* by Cody Fife and Terence Hoagwood

Cody Fife wrote the first draft of the biographical portion of the essay, and contributed some of the bibliographical and literary-critical writing as well. Terence Hoagwood wrote the first draft of the bibliographical and literary-critical portions of the essay, and contributed some of the biographical writing as well. Each writer submitted the whole for revision and editing by the other.

Terence Hoagwood
Introduction to Emily Pfeiffer’s *Sonnets and Songs*

By 1888, this collection of sonnets had “already acquired a reputation wherever the English language is spoken”; contemporary critics placed Emily Pfeiffer among “the very first rank of living poets.”¹ The sonnets earned high praise: the *Spectator*, for example, announced that “Mrs. Pfeiffer’s sonnets are, to our mind, among the finest in the language.” Those who wrote of Pfeiffer’s works in comparably enthusiastic terms included Mark Pattison, Theodore Watts, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Lady Eastlake, A. R. Church, Sir Henry Taylor, Anna Swanwick, Edward Dowden, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Somehow—in a mystery of major proportions—not only Pfeiffer’s fame but also her books seem to have disappeared from England and nearly vanished, too, from the United States. The first edition of Pfeiffer’s *Sonnets* is not, apparently, extant. Neither the *National Union Catalogue*, the *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books*, nor the *Nineteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue* records a single copy of the first edition. According to the front matter of the “new and enlarged edition” (n.d.; conjecturally dated 1888, and subsequently cited as 1888) a “new edition” of 1880 “perished, together with several other of her works, in the fire at Messrs. Kegan Paul, Trench & Co.’s establishment in 1882.” The *Nineteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue* also records no copy of the “new edition” (1880) or of the “new and enlarged edition” (1888)—not in the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the Library of Trinity College (Dublin),
the National Library of Scotland, the University Libraries of Cambridge and Newcastle, the
Library of Congress, or Harvard University Library. The book is (obviously) quite rare: from the
Phillips Fund (endowed by John Phillips, d. 1860), the Boston Public Library acquired a copy of
the 1880 volume, and the bibliographical evidence surrounding that copy unfolds one small part of
the mystery--how this copy escaped the otherwise total destruction of the book’s first issue. In
the same collection in Boston, there is a copy of Pfeiffer’s Under the Aspens (1882), whose
presentation plate indicates that it was given to the Library by Oliver Wendell Holmes (who
signed it) on 3 February 1891. On the half-title page of this copy of Under the Aspens appears an
autograph letter, signed: “Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes / With the cordial regards of Edward and
Emily Pfeiffer / Sheffield Feb: 1882.” Holmes is not one of the reviewers whose praise of
Pfeiffer’s poems is quoted in the back-matter of Under the Aspens, but he had already written of
Pfeiffer’s Sonnets and Songs (1880) that “a rare poetic beauty belongs to these noble poems; they
are full of the highest and noblest inspiration”; and J. Edward Pfeiffer reproduced that statement
of Holmes’s in the back-matter of the 1888 volume. Thus, apparently one copy of Songs and
Sonnets (1880) made its way to Boston prior to the conflagration that destroyed all other copies,
and despite whatever it was that has deleted these sonnets, “among the finest in the language,”
almost entirely from literary history together with their author, though she had been, in her
lifetime, among “the very first rank of living poets.”

The present volume is, then, the first reprinting since 1888 of the sonnets of Emily Pfeiffer. Wherever possible, we have chosen the text of 1880, because (though Pfeiffer was still alive in
1888) the “new and enlarged” edition of 1888 was prepared not by the poet but by her husband, J. Edward Pfeiffer, whose preface reports that (after the fire at Kegan Paul’s establishment) the poet lacked both health and time to assemble the volume (again) herself. The first edition (1880) includes 54 sonnets; the “new and enlarged edition” of 1888 includes 105 sonnets, 53 of which had appeared in 1880. “A Protest” from 1880 is not in 1888, but three entirely different sonnets appear in 1888 under the collective title “A Protest”: apparently the editor of 1888 mistook the series of three sonnets entitled “A Protest” for the different poem of that title which had appeared in 1880. J. Edward Pfeiffer’s preface indicates that he includes all the sonnets of 1880 plus “a selection from other sources and from those since written.” Twenty of the sonnets in 1888 did not appear in 1880 but did appear in Under the Aspens (1882); some of these (including the two sonnets on George Eliot and the two sonnets on Percy Bysshe Shelley) are so important for the understanding of Pfeiffer in her literary context that we have chosen to reproduce, in an appendix, the 52 sonnets that appear in the 1888 volume (edited by J. Edward Pfeiffer) which do not appear in 1880. The volume of 1888 includes some misspellings as well as changes in wording, punctuation and format which, with the error concerning “A Protest,” prevent confidence in the edited version of 1888; but as that volume is the only surviving source of some of the most important poems, we resort to that text but relegate those sonnets to the appendix.

Emily Jane Pfeiffer (1841-1890) would have seemed an unlikely candidate for poetic greatness, as her father’s financial losses in banking prevented her from attaining any formal
education, and brought about an unhappy childhood. Pfeiffer was, however, encouraged to study poetry and the visual arts by her father, himself a lover of art. In 1853 she married Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer, a wealthy German merchant living in London, and this marriage allowed her the means to continue writing and further educating herself. Her early work in verse includes The Holly Branch (written at a “very youthful age,” according to DNB) and Valisneria in 1857. In 1861 she published Margaret; or, the Motherless, but after that volume Pfeiffer was keenly aware of her need for further education; she took the next twelve years to accomplish this task before she again tried her hand at publication. It was not until 1873, with her poem “Gerard’s Monument,” that Pfeiffer published again. Frequent publication (thirteen books in all, plus substantively changed editions of many of her books) followed: Poems in 1876; Gian Alarch: His Silence and Song, 1877; “Quarterman’s Grace” and Other Poems, 1879 (including translations of 25 poems by Heinrich Heine); Sonnets, not located and apparently not extant; Sonnets and Songs, New Edition, 1880; Under the Aspens: Lyrical and Dramatic, 1882 (including The Wynnes of Wynhavod, A Drama of Modern Life. In Five Acts, which, as Pfeiffer says in her preface, was written in the hope that it would be suitable for the stage, but the first attempt at stage production was so disappointing that she withdrew it from the theater, deciding to publish it as a literary work and accordingly making additions to “the purely subjective parts of the play”); The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, 1884; Flying Leaves From East and West, (a narrative of her travels in America, Greece, and Turkey), 1885; Women and Work (a set of polemical essays), 1885; and Flowers of the Night (translations from Heine), 1889.

J. Edward Pfeiffer died in January 1889, and Emily, whose health had been failing for years,
"never recovered from the blow" (DNB). She died on 23 January, 1890, one year and a day after her husband's death. She bequeathed funds for a project to build a school for women to study drama and likewise funds for higher education of women which went to build the first dormitory for women students at the University College in Cardiff, South Wales.

One of the issues developed often in Pfeiffer's poems as in her prose is the social position of women. In Women and Work, she writes of the sentimental view of "the man going forth to his work and to his labour, and the woman waiting at home to welcome him back and lend her ear to his doing or suffering" (here Pfeiffer is quoting a Dr. Richardson, "September number of Longman's Magazine"); Pfeiffer replies, "If this picture was ever largely taken from life, it has certainly now little worth as a truthful representation of the condition of the toiling masses. That which we look back upon as the age of chivalry, to a partial view of which it would seem originally to owe its existence, has long passed, and in the palmiest hour the queens of beauty, those who, sitting on high above the heat and dust of the conflict graced victory with a wreath or a smile, were few, while the hard-handed Joans and Jills were many" (9-10). But Pfeiffer is critical not only of the chivalric myths (which already in 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had criticized forcefully and eloquently*); she is critical, too, of the means by which middle-class women most frequently sought escape from outright destitution--marriage: "there is a feeling arising among young women, that they will no longer be forced upon marriage as the only means and end of existence" (27-28). Women and Work assimilates its feminist arguments (about women’s
capacity as well as right to work productively) with a more total progressive vision which is another frequent theme in her poetry as well. From the French philosophes of the eighteenth century (Condorcet, for example, for whom "perfectibility" meant perpetual improvement), from William Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and from Goethe in the First Part of Faust, Pfeiffer develops a naturalistic theory of progress through Strebung, perceived as valuable in itself: "Human beings are so constituted as to be unable to put forth their best strength unless in reaching towards some ideal point" (53).

In her short biographical essay on Pfeiffer, Kathleen Hickok notes briefly a characteristic theme of Pfeiffer's writing, represented in the image of "The Winged Soul" (see p. 16, below): "The Winged Soul'--an image to which [Pfeiffer] returns throughout her career--portrays the pain and frustration of the creative human spirit born into the captivity of class or gender" (535). This image reappears in the sequence (included in Sonnets and Songs) entitled "Aspiration" (pp. 3-6, below): "Thou art a callow eagle, O my soul! / Forth driven from the home of thy content."

In the wonderful title of a four-sonnet sequence, Pfeiffer states another of the recurrent issues in her sonnets: "To Nature, In Her Ascribed Character of Unmeaning and All-Performing Force." Like Louisa S. Bevington, among other women poets of the period, Pfeiffer articulates with great eloquence and trenchant metaphors the specifically nineteenth-century struggle to endow the naturalistic world that science had discovered with humane values so profound that they deserve to be considered in spiritual terms. Nature is a "Dread force, in whom of old we loved to see / A nursing mother, clothing with her life / The seeds of Love divine" (8); now among too many thinkers nature is a "loathed abstraction" (7) or, worse, "Blind Cyclops, hurling stones of destiny,
And not in fury!—working bootless ill, / In mere vacuity of mind and will” (9). (That passage anticipates by almost twenty years the publication of the remarkably similar final verse paragraph of Thomas Hardy’s “Hap” [Wessex Poems, 1898, though that poem was apparently written in 1866].) In the nightmare version of naturalism, human beings are “Slaves, by mad chance befooled to think them free” (9). Pfeiffer concludes another sonnet (which again has a marvelous and expressive title, “To the Blind Architect of the City of Life”) with a question from Ludwig Feuerbach, whose Essence of Christianity (1841) had appeared in English translation by George Eliot in 1854: Feuerbach had observed that “Temples in honour of religion are in truth temples in honour of architecture."¹⁰ A human being (and no theology, no institution, no “lying altar”) is “a temple for a God’s indwelling” (13).

The important sonnet “Evolution” expresses these themes clearly—the naturalistic Strebung of a world seen in progressive terms, and the displacement of religious belief with a sciential and humane engagement with the natural world (including human beings) such as that world is and may become. Less clearly—only because its eponymous figure is less widely known now than he was in 1880—“To Dr. Wilhelm Jordan, the Great German Poet and Apostle of the New Faith” (49) develops the same set of ideas. The “new faith” is the truth of science and the existential vision of a world, post-superstitious religion, in which human beings are responsible for making moral lives and a moral civilization. Jordan (1819-1904) was a German writer, a proponent of political liberalism and Young Hegelian philosophy. His poems include Earthly Fantasies (1842), the epic Demiurgos (3 vols., 1852-54), verse plays, and translations of Homer, Sophocles, and Shakespeare. In 1846, Jordan was accused of atheism — presumably on the basis of his humane
and naturalistic themes of the earthly and social character of human values, and the (welcome) death of the old superstitions and their imaginary deities. For this supposed atheism Jordan was banished from Saxony. Pfeiffer’s entitling her poem in that way -- calling Jordan “Apostle of the New Faith” -- and her concluding her poem with a redefinition of the “promised land” in intellectual (rather than religious) terms are acts of defiance: what she defies are the anxious vestiges of orthodoxy, and what she celebrates (in that poem as elsewhere) are the recent and possible victories of freedom and justice in more real (more human) terms. Pfeiffer’s excellent sonnets on Shelley (who was of course also charged, in his lifetime, as an atheist), like the closely related sonnets on the struggle for freedom in Greece, and the poems mourning the loss of George Eliot, voice these themes, all under the optimism of her progressive and intellectual view of history, as well as those sonnets to which we are able to point, albeit briefly, here in this introduction. A reviewer in Nonconformist justly called Pfeiffer “an intent and subtle thinker,” and another in Westminster Review agreed: “Her sonnets show her strength and attitude of a deeply poetic mind towards modern science” (quoted in the back-matter of Under the Aspens, 1882). Pfeiffer’s feminism, her political thought, and her positive humanistic response to science, in large historical terms, distinguish her sonnets, and so does her skill in this form: in coherent sequences of sonnets (e.g., “Nature”), in separate poems that are nonetheless connected thematically (e.g., “Evolution” and “Nature,” “Shelley” and “Hellas”) and even in the “Six 14-line Poems” that appear in the 1888 volume, segregated from the sonnets without explanation, Pfeiffer shows an artistry as well as an intellectual seriousness that earned her stature in her lifetime and which deserves renewal after more than a century of strange neglect.
Notes

1. Citations from the critical reception of Pfeiffer’s poems appear in the “Extracts from private and press notices on Mrs. Pfeiffer’s Sonnets” prefixed to Pfeiffer, Sonnets, rev. and enl. ed. (London: Field and Tuer, 1888) and in the back-matter of Pfeiffer, Under the Aspens (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co.), 1882.

2. In her essay “The Women Poets of the Seventies,” Vita Sackville-West discredits the work of women poets, including Emily Pfeiffer. She writes that the (male) reviewers who praised the poetesses did so precisely because their work was not comparable to the work of male poets. “The men were generous,” she writes, “and they could afford to be” (Sackville-West, “The Women Poets of the Seventies,” in The Eighteen-Seventies: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature of the U.K., ed. Harley Granville-Barker [New York: Macmillan, 1929], 119). The women poets, according to Sackville-West, “could produce nothing better than ponderous texts or verses worthy of a keepsake album” (119). Sackville-West mentions Pfeiffer among poetesses whose work lacks artistic value. Perhaps this type of criticism of Pfeiffer (as well as other women poets) would explain in part why Sonnets and Songs faded from eminence to obscurity.

West expresses a more general view that amounts to a persisting ideological conviction and which extends the implications of her assertions far beyond the eighteen-seventies. She quotes an unnamed but “distinguished man of letters” who dismissed the work of another poetess, Christina Rossetti, claiming that she was, “like most poetesses, purely subjective and in no respect creative” (120). This view of women poets’ work as “purely subjective” disqualifies it from serious consideration. It is possible that it is partly from this ideological conviction that the neglect of Pfeiffer’s work (and that of other important poets of the period) has arisen.


4. The following are examples of the numerous textual differences between the different printings of the sonnets: in “On Hearing the Introduction to ‘Lohengrin,’” “The infant joy” (1880)
becomes "The careless joy"; "We know and we foreknow" becomes "We know and would foreknow." In "A Plea," the name of Swedenborg is misspelled in the epigraph to sonnet iv; in Under the Aspens (1882) it is spelled correctly.


6. Pfeiffer, Margaret; or, the Motherless (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1861).


