

## **The Reconstitution of Sisterhood in Augusta Webster's "A Castaway"**

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**English**

In contrast to so many of the prostitutes that emerge in Victorian literature, Eulalie, the "fallen woman" at the center of Augusta Webster's 1870 poem "A Castaway," has been hailed as a woman of remarkable "self-sufficiency" (Mermin 80) who defiantly "claims her right to self-assessment and self-representation" (Brown 92). Indeed, many critical studies have fruitfully discussed the keen strength of Eulalie's voice and the powerful ways she analyzes and condemns the social and economic conditions that drove her, and women in general, to prostitution. Yet such critics have also often overstated the case. In choosing to interpret Eulalie's devastating critique of society as a sign of her independence from it, critics have neglected to reflect substantively on aspects of the poem that suggest that Eulalie may not be so self-sufficient after all.

Eulalie's sense of her own identity is intimately linked to her relations with others – specifically, to the ties that she does or does not have to the different "sisterhoods" that exist in her society. Through Eulalie's narrative, the poem exposes the ways in which the ideology and the language of kinship can be deployed to circumscribe women's identities, and to compel conformity to Victorian standards of gender roles and proper spheres. Previous readings – even those that stress Eulalie's ambivalence and dispute the notion of her "self-sufficiency" – have not yet adequately analyzed such aspects of the poem.<sup>1</sup> However, the poem does not altogether reject the idea of "sisterly" bonds among women. Indeed, the poem helps imagine a new, ideal sisterhood that departs from former models. Beginning with a glimpse at the solidarity that exists among fallen women, "A Castaway" gestures toward the possibility of a new, productive community of women that – rather than demand adherence to a particular, proper identity – makes room for difference precisely – because it acknowledges that identities need not be fixed,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, readings by Angela Leighton and E. Warwick Slinn which provide helpful discussions on the ways in which Eulalie's sense of self is compromised by public discourse, but nonetheless make little mention of kinship ideologies and the language of kinship. An exception is Christine Sutphin's essay. In it, as part of a more general discussion on how Eulalie critiques different kinds of public discourse on prostitution, Sutphin provides analysis on how Eulalie "calls into question even progressive attempts to resolve problems associated with prostitution, particularly the rhetoric of sisterhood and redemption through maternity created by sympathetic women reformers and writers" (516). I refer to her insights later in the essay.

that identities are in fact continually revised and constituted through ongoing relations with others.

Early on in the poem, Eulalie shows herself capable of responding directly and eloquently to the discourse of her many accusers, be they the “virtuous worthy men” (91) of society, the “safely housed” wives with their “shrill carping virtues” (112), or the self-righteous “Tartuffe” (149) with his religious tract. But her tone shifts dramatically when she recalls her brother’s scorn:

Only, I think, my brother – I forgot  
he stopped his brotherhood some years ago –  
but if he had been just so much less good  
as to remember mercy (480-483).

As soon as the memory of her brother enters her thoughts, Eulalie’s defiant, biting irony vanishes. Upon her brother alone Eulalie never casts any direct blame. He “might have” (521) remembered “mercy,” and he might have remembered how much she “priz[ed] him” (484), but she concedes “‘Twas no one’s fault” (502). Indeed, it was her brother’s judgment, his condemnation, that instigated the alteration in Eulalie’s sense of self, her final acceptance of her identity as a fallen woman.

... Oh how his taunts,  
his loathing fierce reproaches, scarred and seared,  
like branding iron hissing in a wound!  
And it was true – *that* killed me: and I felt  
a hideous hopeless shame kill out my heart,  
and knew myself for ever that he said,  
that which I was – Oh it was true, true, true. (517-23)

Her brother’s denunciation – “*that*,” she confesses, “killed” her and “kill[ed]” out her heart “for ever.” From this point in the poem, Eulalie perceptibly turns the blame, as well as the irony, upon herself, recalling the “fine scorn” (592) and “idiot’s pride” (596) with which she brought about her own degradation. Why Eulalie – who so stridently countered the discourse of others – falls so meekly this way before her brother becomes clearer when one considers Victorian ideas about siblinghood, what “being his sister” (604) would have meant to someone like Eulalie.

Though discussions on Victorian domestic ideology have conventionally focused on the wife/mother as the moral anchor of the family, in *Disorderly Sisters* (2001), Leila May argues instead for the centrality of the sister figure in the Victorian family. Even the most ideal wife/mother, as she points out, is a figure always already tainted, implicated by her sexual relation with the husband/father (who is himself tainted by contact with the immoral world outside the home). Only the sister remains as the model of true virginal femininity, the “sanctum

sanctorum of moral virtue” (May 18), and it is up to her to “sustain that most ‘natural’ of all structures, the family” (May 40). Conduct literature emphasized in particular a woman’s “sisterly duties” to her brother:

The young girl learns that she must serve and, through submission, become the locus of tenderness and spirituality in the family. She is taught that she must defer to and minister to her brother ... She begins to learn her role as wife and mother by solicitously deferring to her brother, and thereby become an idealized (future) wife. She must learn to identify the desire of the (br)other, and then come to identify it as her own.” (May 18-9)

In this way, by nurturing a “sibling bond [that] models future families” (19) the sister functions as the moral bulwark of the family, and thereby, as May argues, the bulwark of society itself; for it was after all in the name of protecting and providing for the family that men entered the battlefields of the public sphere to expand industry and empire. Endowed with such a grave moral task, girls were taught that they possessed no viable identity apart from their relation to the family, particularly their brother(s); according to Sarah Ellis, women were “from their own constitution, and from the station they occupy in the world ... relative creatures” (qtd. in May 18).

We see then, in “A Castaway,” that Eulalie played the sister role exceptionally well in her youth. Though she “heard girls lament” (487) at such self-abnegation, Eulalie for her part “saw never ought to murmur at” (489). “Prizing” her brother “as sisters do,” we read that she remained “content to learn for him / the lessons girls with brothers all must learn, / to do without” (484-7) – since it was, presumably, he who would be “launched forth on the rude sea / of this contentious world” (503-4). Thoroughly indoctrinated, Eulalie uncomplainingly accepted her station as a “relative creature” whose identity held value insofar as she performed her role well, upholding the life of her brother as well as her family – and indeed, that of society itself.

Reading Eulalie’s former relationship to her brother against contemporary discourse on sisterhood surfaces the excruciating drama of Eulalie’s situation. In the fall from sister to whore, Eulalie has gone from the model of the pure virgin who prepares men for future marriage to the “larcenous” (130) “other woman” who instead threatens that very institution. She has gone from embodying the moral guardian of society to embodying the “Great Social Evil” – one who threatens to “snare men’s souls” (41) and undo the fabric of society itself. Still more, reading Eulalie’s history with her brother against contemporary discourse helps more adequately explain why it is, as we saw earlier, Eulalie’s self-rejection hinges on her brother’s rejection, why her self-dissolution depends on the dissolution of her tie with him. Having learned from youth to defer in all things to her brother, to define her very identity in relation to him, she has little choice but to submit once he disavows his “brotherhood” and judges her a whore. Eulalie confesses, “I felt a hideous hopeless shame kill out my heart, / and knew myself for ever that he said, that which I was”; far from self-sufficiency and self-assessment, Eulalie here defers to the sufficiency of her brother’s assessment. She feels herself “killed” if she cannot be her brother’s

sister; that former self has died, and she must accept a new self, the new identity that her brother casts upon her as he casts her away.

Painful as this concession is, the loss of her former identity and the internalization of a new one nevertheless provide Eulalie with the opportunity to form new insights. Cast away as a “fallen woman,” an irretraceable distance forced between past and present, she can now, from that very distance, more objectively consider and evaluate that former identity she possessed as Edward’s sister. Indeed, the old self is at this point so foreign, so other, that she feels compelled to refer to it in the third person. “Poor little diary, with its simple thoughts” (1), she begins, personifying her diary and attributing her youthful thoughts to it instead. As Eulalie looks back, her response rings not of nostalgia but instead, wonder and pity. She continues,

. . . Was I this good girl,  
this budding colorless young rose of home?  
did I so live content in such a life,  
seeing no larger scope, nor asking it,  
than this small constant round – old clothes to mend,  
new clothes to make, then go and say my prayers,  
or carry soup, or take a little walk  
and pick the ragged-robins in the hedge? (7-14)

Her life as a “good girl,” as her brother’s good sister, was choreographed around a “small constant round” of domestic tasks and hobbies. If she was a rose, she was a “colorless” one, possessing “no wishes and no cares, almost no hopes” (21-22). With the image of the “constant round” and the repetitious diction (“no... no... no”), the text emphasizes the insular, almost stupefying, nature of confinement within the domestic sphere, a “round” that effectively circumscribed Eulalie’s life.

Indeed May’s study reveals the ways in which “the nineteenth-century bourgeois familial formula required the strict surveillance, disciplining, mediation, and channeling of the sister’s will, of her desire” (24). Now that Eulalie has been forced out of the “familial formula,” as it were, she can “coolly” (135) remark on the ways she too, as a sister, was under strict surveillance – the ways that the truth was “veil[ed]” and the “scope” of her vision severely limited. She can comment on how her “wishes,” “cares,” and “hopes” – the very limits of her “ambition” (15) and “gaiety” (18) – were disciplined, mediated, and channeled into a “small constant round” of feminine virtue. Having transgressed and experienced life out of that private sphere, she can now judge; the “good days” of “quiet” and “innocence” (210) are also, unmistakably, “the dear old stupid days” (209). Though the good sister “saw never ought to murmur at,” Eulalie the fallen one now sees much to “murmur at.”

The history between Eulalie and her brother illustrates that Eulalie painfully experienced firsthand the hard demands of sisterhood (in this case, her sisterhood to her brother): the hard reality that a particular set of behaviors – a particular circumscribed identity – was required for

the privilege of sisterhood. Moreover, she has also tasted the particular dangers of sisterhood. She had lived as a “relative creature,” staking her identity, her very sense of self and self-worth upon her role as “sister” to another. When that sisterhood was revoked, she felt her very self “killed,” dissolved. Eulalie now has the eyes to perceive that the privilege of sisterhood and kinship does not come free; it is a privilege that comes with strict rules and conditions – even when understood metaphorically in non-familial contexts. Scholars like Mary Jean Corbett have analyzed the ways in which the Victorians “decenter[ed] the biological basis for family ties” (xii), employing terms of kinship outside the family to define and construct societal relations at large. As she shows, different forms of “affinity ... ‘inclination or attraction’ among individuals incite[d] the use of family language” (156) and lent great “affective and political power” (xii) to non-familial associations. Yet, while Corbett discusses the benefits of such liberal uses of kinship terms, she also highlights the dark side, citing instances where “proliferating linguistic acts through which ‘others’ appropriate or perform familial standing” also “registers a latent threat in the terminology that makes strangers into ‘cousins,’ ‘sisters,’ or ‘brothers’” (44). In “A Castaway,” Eulalie gestures toward such an insight as well; attuned as she is to the dark side of kinship, she is able to register the risks latent in images of kinship outside the family.

Midway through the poem, Eulalie recalls her time as a governess soon after her mother’s death: “[S]till new in my insipid treadmill life” (329), “I thought then / that I might plod, and plod, and drum the sounds / of useless facts into unwilling ears” (333-5). Again she cannot suppress the estrangement she feels from that former self: “Teach, teach / for years, a lifetime – I!” (340-2). A different “I” now, she can again enter into an evaluation of her former life, and she finds that just as her life as a young girl revolved about a “small constant round,” this life too was one of stultifying, insular circularity. It was a “treadmill life” contained in a “safe dull place” (346) “where all days / jogged on sedately busy” (347-8), “where all seemed measured out, but margins broad” (349). Yet had she “clung on” (345), she reflects, she might have found a second “home” (350), a second family: “I felt my pupils would be dear young sisters soon, / and felt their mother take me to her heart, / motherly to all lonely harmless things” (351-3).

Eulalie highlights how even in such a context, sisterhood – kinship connection with others – come with a price. Kinship here requires that she share with these other women particular “affinities” – that she pledge herself, like them, to a life that allowed “smiles / but never merry-makings” (346-7), a life that required adherence to a “measured” sphere and brooked no deviance into the “broad margins.” Eulalie also resigns this sisterhood when she veers, as it were, out into those margins. She loses her position because she decided, “I must have a conscience, must blurt out / my great discovery of my ignorance!” (354-5). She dared, that is, to admit to her employer that she herself was incapable of teaching her girls as they deserved; she dared to imagine that they deserved substantive knowledge that might be of use in “real grown-up life” (382), outside the margins of the domestic sphere. It was presumably the kind of knowledge to which male students surely would have had access, and knowledge which Eulalie desired for her girls, but could not herself offer as their governess. Only in retrospect does she recognize the futility of her conscientious act; the teacher of “perfection” (363) that replaced her, who “teaches

all / on a patent method never known to fail” (367-8) has served the girls no better. “Well, well, the silly rules this silly world / makes about women! This is one of them” (376-7): girls must be taught

what no one ever cares that they should know  
what, grown out of the schoolroom, they cast off  
like the schoolroom pinafore, no better fit  
for any use of real grown-up life. (379-382)

This is the “rule” she had disobeyed in imagining her girls worthy of a richer education.

Though this last home promised her a family, a sisterhood, Eulalie rejects this “treadmill life” as well – “treadmill” not only because of its incessant tedium and confinement, but “treadmill” also because she must as governess impute to her girls an education that will lead them literally nowhere. Her transgression off the treadmill, then, loses her a family, and constitutes the beginning of her swift fall into prostitution. Yet even after this fall, as we learn, Eulalie encounters one more opportunity to find a “safe” family – a “good” sisterhood – when she enters the Refuge.

Eulalie refers to her week at the Refuge as “doing Magdalene” (202) implying, obviously, that she was following in the footsteps of that Biblical archetype in turning away from prostitution. But records also show the existence of an actual refuge called the Saint Mary Magdalene’s Penitentiary at Highgate, founded in 1855 and run by an Anglican sisterhood as a ministry for fallen women. We cannot be sure from the poem whether “doing Magdalene” ought to be read as implying Eulalie actually entered that particular refuge, but it is nevertheless helpful to consider some of what we know about such institutions in order to contextualize our reading of the poem.

As Susan Mumm shows, Anglican sisterhoods in Victorian Britain were progressive in a number of ways, claiming a place for their “domestic” work outside of the private sphere, as well as dissenting from conventional opinion by insisting that fallen women were redeemable. Yet for all their admirable intentions and radical views, these sisterhoods too, had strict conditions for the privilege of kinship. Behavior and identity were carefully disciplined, and homogenized, within the walls of such refuges:

Like sisters, penitents wore a uniform dress, did not use their surnames, curtsied when passing their seniors or superiors, could be dismissed for bad behavior, observed regular hours of silence, were not permitted to enter others’ rooms without permission, were discouraged from talking about their families or their pasts, and were not permitted to find fault with one another. (Mumm 538)

But more crucially the ultimate goal was of course a permanent change in behavior and identity. The goal, as Mumm writes, was to “manage the morals of women who had transgressed against

sexual or social convention” (528) and produce in place a “respectable woman” (527). The sisters sought to see in their penitents “first, the acquisition of a deferential and respectful demeanor; second, the instilling of middle-class values; and third, the inculcation of religious belief” (537). Indeed, they predictably, if understandably, sought to redeem the penitents right back into the domestic sphere. “After their rehabilitative course in the penitentiary, the sisters sent them out again to [domestic] service” (537), and “most married within a year or two of leaving the penitentiary” (541).<sup>2</sup> To convey their women to this final goal, the idea of kinship was crucial. As Mumm writes, the sisters “attempted to control penitents’ behavior by creating bonds of attachment to individual sisters, creating a sense of guilt over the past, and fostering feelings of obligation and gratitude to the community” (538), a community conceived as “a new ‘family’ for the former fallen woman” (541).

Eulalie, one can surmise, entered such an institution, desiring, as she says, to “change / my new self for my old” (205-6). Yet, she finds nevertheless that she no longer could bear the narrow confinement and the regimenting discipline of such a life. Restricted to a “dreary hideous room, / coarse pittance, prison rules” (239-40) and “so much alone” (241) Eulalie confesses that she “could not bear it” (239). What is more, Eulalie implies that she could not have taken up, even hypothetically speaking, the life to which the sisters in the Refuge sought to return its fallen: “And could I fit me to my former self?” (215). She reflects:

I might again live the grave blameless life  
among such simple pleasures, simple cares:  
but could they be my pleasures, be my cares?  
The blameless life, but never the content –  
never. How could I henceforth be content  
in any life but one that sets the brain  
in a hot merry fever with its stir?  
what would there be in quiet rustic days,  
each like the other, full of time to think,  
to keep one bold enough to live at all? (225-234).

Eulalie can no longer be content, that is, in the life of the “respectable woman.” Notwithstanding the real difficulties of her present life, Eulalie – having tasted the “hot merry fever” and “stir” of life outside the “margins,” outside the domestic sphere – finds she no longer desires to return to such confines.

The Refuge promised a “shelter” (218) from “the whisper and leers” of the “scurrilous world” (220), as well as the shelter of sisterhood. It also offered, by redeeming her, the

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<sup>2</sup> Mumm notes the irony of the former: “The great unresolved contradiction in the philanthropic efforts of the sisters with their penitents is the problem of the nature of women’s work. Most of the penitents had ‘fallen’ while in domestic service, often as a direct consequence of the nature of that occupation. Yet after their rehabilitative course in the penitentiary, the sisters sent them out again to service” (537).

possibility of a permanent shelter down the road if she should marry – a new home, a new family. Yet we see here clearly that the insular “treadmill” life of “quiet rustic days, / each like the other” – whether in the Refuge or in the respectable home thereafter – is no longer a viable prospect for Eulalie. “Well, I came back” (248), Eulalie tells us. The Refuge too represents an (albeit well-meaning) “treadmill” of sorts, taking women who fell from the domestic sphere and circling them right back into it. We also might note here that in rejecting a domestic life as an eventual wife and mother, Eulalie rejects the aid of another “sisterhood.” As Christine Sutphin points out in her study, Eulalie “calls into question . . . the rhetoric of sisterhood and redemption through maternity created by sympathetic women reformers and writers” (516) like Josephine Butler and Mrs. Lewis. A confined life as a “nursery saint” (419) “lived by the rule” (398), one that requires her once again to play the “deferential and respectful” “relative creature” “rul[ing] [her] small sphere” (401) now seem unimaginable for Eulalie.

Eulalie exposes over the course of “A Castaway” the many sisterhoods that require allegiance to Victorian ideologies of gender, ideologies that consign women to the domestic sphere and render them as “glass-case saints, Dianas under lock and key” (128), “summer roses in soft greenhouse air” that never venture “out of doors” (493). Indeed Eulalie’s unwholesome unconventionality – her irrepressible desire for a life outside domesticity and the “trade” (67) to which she must resort to support it – bars her from still other kinds of “sisterhoods.” It renders her a sworn enemy to countless women who might have been considered friends, “sisters,” in another life; “Wives,” she says, are some of her most “spiteful” and “rancorous” (115) revilers, and just as she must remain “dead” (606) to her brother, so must she remain to his wife, her “sister-in-law” (616). In *Sororophobia*, Helena Michie discusses the troubling ways that feminist conceptions of sisterhood have tended to deny differences among women and the individuals that have been marginalized as a result. Eulalie is in this poem one such marginalized figure. As an outcast “fallen woman” harboring unfeminine desires, Eulalie must distance herself from a matrix of sisterhoods open only to those who share the same “affinity” for traditional gender standards. She displays a classic case of “sororophobia” – “both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women” (Michie 9).

We have thus far examined various sisterhoods from which Eulalie has had to “recoil.” The poem does, however, present one more sisterhood that remains available, and invaluable, to Eulalie – the sisterhood she shares with other “fallen women.” Early in the poem, as Eulalie struggles internally to combat her “accusers and judges,” she finds herself tempted to elevate her own station by distinguishing herself from “her likenesses / of the humbler kind” who stand “drunk in the streets” and “ply . . . for hire / at infamous corners” (47-49). She soon reverses course, however, reproaching herself for “play[ing] hypocrite” (59), and proceeds instead to a bold claim of solidarity:

. . . And, for me,  
I say let no one be above her trade;  
I own my kindredship with any drab



who sells herself as I . . . (65-8)

Upon this acknowledgement of solidarity, Eulalie quickly seems revitalized, able immediately to launch a counterattack on the hypocrisy of a world that condemns them while honoring the vices of other (male) trades. The sequence observed here suggests the critical place of kinship, or sisterhood, among fallen woman. Indeed, in many of the defiant avowals that follow – some of them the very passages critics have cited as Eulalie’s strongest moments of agency – Eulalie switches from the singular to the plural, from “me” to “us” and from “I” to “we”: “How dare they hate us so? what have they done, / what borne, to prove them other than we are?” (125-126). There is a marked vigor to Eulalie’s voice when she speaks from the safety of an imagined sisterhood.

Beyond such abstractions, the poem also provides glimpses of the real-life sisterhood that exists among Eulalie and her fellow prostitutes. Amidst her dreary thoughts, Eulalie seeks to rouse herself by recalling the “rare fun” with which she and her cohorts “digested” the Tartuffe’s religious tract. She begins to replicate that scene now on her own:

. . . *‘I prey on souls’* –  
only my men have oftenest none I think:  
*‘I snare the simple ones’* – but in these days  
there seem to be none simple and none snared,  
and most men have their favorite sinnings planned  
to do them civilly and sensibly:  
*‘I braid my hair’* – but braids are out of date:  
*‘I paint my cheeks’* – I always wear them pale. (153-160)

“Digestion” as a metaphor suggests a positive work of active undoing, of taking one substance, disintegrating and transforming it to render something of value to the body. The fallen women, in together “digesting” the tract, likewise actively undo the opponents’ discourse, twisting the words to their own productive purpose. They engage in a “laugh[ing]” labor, the “rare fun” of subversive word-play, neutralizing with wit the tract’s vicious pronouncements. Indeed, the images of food and fun among these women, among these “sisters,” represent an empowering form of nourishing subversion.

Yet Eulalie soon aborts the attempt: “[T]he trash,” she thinks, “is savourless to-day: / one cannot laugh alone” (161-162). “Will no one come?” she asks, “‘Tis dreary work alone” (186-187). With no sister to join her in the “work” of self-defense, Eulalie soon begins to “loathe herself and sicken on her thoughts” (237). Alone, as we saw, she gloomily meditates on the past and the many sisterhoods she has been forced to surrender. Deprived of the “feast” and “merriment” of her “fallen” sisters, her isolation as a societal castaway becomes more magnified, and more unbearable:

“Oh I am wild, am ill, I think, to night:  
will no one come and laugh with me? No feast,  
no merriment to-night. So long alone!  
Will no one come?” (452-454)

As she recalls the alienation between herself and her brother (“Good God! to think that we were what we were / one to the other ... and now!” (607-8)), Eulalie seems close to breakdown, fighting an impulse to “roll on the ground and sob” (620). But just in time, a visitor finally arrives: “Was that the bell? / Some one at last, thank goodness. There’s a voice / and that’s a pleasure” (623-624).

Yet puzzlingly, Eulalie expresses a measure of disappointment when she discerns the visitor’s identity: “Why did she come alone, the cackling goose? / why not have brought her sister? – she tells more / and titters less” (625-627). This might be an odd response in the face of Eulalie’s desperation for company. Yet the reaction becomes clearer if we observe that there is a subtle but not insignificant difference between “laughing” and “tittering” or “cackling.” The latter acts imply trivial frivolity, a lack of seriousness that the former does not necessarily convey. Indeed, Eulalie’s mild disapproval of the “titter[ing]” and “cackling” show that the desire to “laugh with” another sister does not arise from a desire for frivolous diversion. Eulalie has in mind “work” in the act of laughing; in her present state, she would prefer a “sister” who “tells more” – a voice that speaks substantively, rather than dissolve rapidly into titters and cackles. Nevertheless, “no matter,” she thinks, “half a loaf / is better than no bread” (627-628). “Welcome, dear,” she says, welcoming this “sister”; she too represents a sister with whom she might find sustenance.

In her work on Victorian prostitution Judith Walkowitz provides a glimpse into the “strong female subculture” (25) that existed within groups of nineteenth century “fallen women.” Many external observers, as she shows, registered, if hesitantly, the power of such fellowship. Mary Higgs, an “explorer” who entered prostitutes’ homes in disguise in order to report on their plight, writes of one particular girl she attempted to “save”: “On her soul lay the knowledge of the *horror* of respectable society towards what she had become and the *attraction* of the fellowship of those who would receive her freely” (qtd. in Walkowitz 27). Indeed, numerous observers remark on the “generosity” and “group solidarity” (27) among prostitutes. Mayhew, a “narrator” of the London Underworld, testifies, for instance that “one of their most remarkable characteristics is their generosity, which perhaps is unparalleled by the behavior of any others, whether high or low in the social scale. They will not hesitate to lend one another money if they have it, whether they can spare it or not” (16).

Nevertheless – like the sympathetic but limited sisterhoods discussed earlier – a neutral view of the fallen was not to be expected. Walkowitz, for instance, points to a horrified, if clearly fascinated, account by Higgs (herself a would-be “sister” to the prostitutes): “Round the fire was a group of girls far gone in dissipation, ... shameless; smoking cigarettes, boasting of drinks or drinkers, using foul language, singing music-hall songs, or talking vileness. The room grew full

and breakfasts were about” (27). What such reports perhaps hint at, but will not, or cannot acknowledge, is the important merry “work” that might have been occurring in just such scenes. Recall here Eulalie’s comment, “We had rare fun / over that tract digested with champagne.” Could the smoking, drinking, “shameless” girls “talking vileness” and feasting on “breakfasts” in the scene above have been engaged in similar “rare fun”? Consider how Mayhew, for instance, hints at what he considers an improper intimacy among these women: “[Prostitutes] form an acquaintance with the girls who inhabit the same house, and address one another as ‘my dear,’ an *unmeaning*, but very general epithet, an hour or two after their first meeting” (16, my emphasis). When Eulalie greets her visitor at the end of “A Castaway” with a “Welcome, dear,” it shows such a “general epithet” might not have been so “unmeaning” after all. Eulalie’s voice brings to the fore a glimpse of the empowering, subversive possibilities of sisterhood among prostitutes.

To consider in still another light the poem’s image of sisterhood among prostitutes, one might at this juncture turn to Amanda Anderson’s work on the idea of fallenness in Victorian texts. Anderson argues that the figure of the “fallen woman” was frequently employed by Victorian writers to displace anxieties about the nature of agency and selfhood. She argues that literary representations often “reserve more idealist conceptions of the self for their masculine or pure characters, while invoking forms of materialism and determinism when conceiving of fallen women” (18), casting *her* as the Other who lacks autonomy and agency, “subject to a number of threatening determinations – social, economic, cultural – that the author himself wishes to ward off” (11). Thus one finds depictions of “encounters between fallen women and other characters, who often perceive the fallen woman as a text that is already written rather than an agent capable of dialogical interaction” (10). An exception can be found, however, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, according to Anderson. In the poem, by having Aurora identify sympathetically with, and choose to revise her own responses to, the compromised Marian, Barrett Browning registers a “developed notion of reciprocal recognition” – a vision of “sympathetic reciprocity and social indeterminacy” (20). Through the relation between Aurora and Marian, the poem illustrates a positive picture of the “constitutive force of intersubjective practices,” a hopeful vision of “identity ... understood as constituted in and through ongoing relations with others, even as we acknowledge and analyze our places within larger systems” (19).

In “A Castaway,” one witnesses the ways in which Eulalie is determined and “written” by larger [economic and social] systems” and the reifying, othering, discourse of others (her brother’s for instance). Yet through the glimpses the poem gives of Eulalie’s sisterhood – her “ongoing relations” with – other fallen women, one can simultaneously register her (and their) capacity for “dialogical interaction.” That is, one might surmise that because of their shared status, because they can *identify* with each other, these “fallen women” are better able to exert a “sympathetic reciprocity”; they are more likely to approach each other as subjects and less likely to approach each other as “texts” “already written.” They gather together instead to overturn the reifying discourse of their detractors: “*I paint my cheeks*’ – I always wear them pale.” Through such “rare fun,” through such “merry” “work” in their ongoing relations with each other, these

women sketch a powerful picture of what Anderson terms “intersubjective reciprocity and social participation.” They gesture toward an ideal, “intersubjective practice” through which they might work together, as equals, to reconstitute broken identities, and begin to regain, bit by bit, some form of agency. Sisterhood, then, need not always be a circumscribed space in which identities are oppressively policed and reified; they also can provide a safe space that enables the undoing of reification and allows for positive, ongoing reconstitution of identities.

There is, furthermore, a way in which the poem, as a dramatic monologue, can itself be read as an agent, inviting its reader to a positive intersubjective dialogue. E. Warwick Slinn asserts that the speaker of the dramatic monologue always assumes an auditor, or an “interlocutor” – “whether actually present or absent and imagined” – and moreover, that this interlocutor always has an “active, if literally silent, role.” Such qualities, he asserts, points “to the inherently intersubjective” nature of a form that is “otherwise too easily read as a merely intrasubjective drama” (81). In this way, Webster’s dramatic monologue invites its readers (its particular interlocutors) into intersubjective dialogue, dialogue that can help actively forge an array of new identities for the “fallen woman” who has heretofore so often remained reified, “already written” into one particular identity. But an objection immediately arises that perhaps this would not be an ideal “intersubjective” encounter after all; our textual fallen woman here is, unlike her readers, literally “written.” What power does Eulalie, or the poem itself, have to revise and reconstitute the identity of the reader? The advantage seems to lie heavily on one side. Yet, that does not have to be, considering the critical leveling work that this poem accomplishes.

“A Castaway,” by exposing the various sisterhoods’ boundness to oppressive ideologies, points more broadly to the general condition of all women. The poem suggests that all women – from the prostitute to the good sisters – are, to a greater or lesser degree, bound by oppressive ideologies. All women are circumscribed, under some form of “lock and key.” For all the differences between women, then, the poem implies that they have this in common. They are all othered in a male-dominated society, and they are all, to some extent, “written” creatures. If the poem can help the “respectable” female reader grasp this reality – if the reader can come to recognize herself as much a “written” creature as the “fallen woman” of the poem – a space opens up for “sympathetic reciprocity,” some form of positive “intersubjective practice.” Not only can the reader reconstitute, through an array of literary interpretations, the identity of the fallen woman, the poem (or Eulalie) in turn, through that same process, can prod the reader herself to a self-awareness that propels a reconstitution of her own identity. In short, Eulalie can shape the reader as much as the reader can shape Eulalie. Metaphorically speaking, in this way a new ideal “sisterhood” can be forged in the poetic encounter. The “respectable” and “fallen” women can engage in a transformative “intersubjective” practice that leads to new identities – identities that go beyond the ones that have been constructed for them by patriarchal ideologies. This was, after all the age of the New Woman.

Indeed, even as the poem draws attention to the potential dangers of sisterhood, neither does the poem give it up for a lost cause. Midway through the poem, Eulalie reflects on how her life could have turned out differently:

. . . I think indeed  
if some kind hand, a woman's – I hate men –  
had stretched itself to help me to firm ground,  
taken a chance and risked my falling back,  
I could have gone my way not falling back. (256-260)

We could read the “kind hand” between women as a metaphor for the intersubjective reciprocity between women discussed above. But here, Eulalie includes a warning; the woman who would extend a “kind hand” must also “risk[]” her “falling back.” When one extends a hand to another, that is, one always takes the risk that the fallen might fall back and pull the helper down with her. Eulalie’s warning is indeed apt, for there is always a risk in intersubjective relations. To submit to a constitutive, intersubjective practice is ultimately to admit that the notion of complete autonomy, a self-sufficient identity and agency apart from others, is an illusion. It is to admit to indeterminacy and to admit that one’s identity is capable, through intersubjective relations, of being shaped for good or ill.<sup>3</sup> The specter of attenuated autonomy, as Anderson argues, was precisely what so many Victorian writers, from Dickens to D.G. Rossetti, sought to “ward off” by displacing onto the figure of the fallen woman.

Webster’s poem, in contrast, is not interested in warding off; rather, by showing that all women live with attenuated autonomy, she has the fallen woman contaminate other women, as it were. This attenuated autonomy – from the marginalized prostitutes to the wives and sisters under “lock and key” – is in one sense certainly to be condemned and combatted. But in another sense, the admission of attenuated autonomy is also precisely what might permit a new model of sisterhood. It is a sisterhood marked by productive intersubjective relations – a sisterhood that highlights shared bonds, but also acknowledges that identities are fluid and capable of change, that ongoing relations between subjects will continuously refashion identities. It is a sisterhood that necessarily makes space for difference. As a poem that invites the reader to an act of “sisterly” intersubjective dialogue and moreover, a new vision of sisterhood, “A Castaway” might be read as Webster’s “kind hand” stretched to women, both the “fallen” and the upstanding.

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<sup>3</sup> Or indeed, perhaps more obviously, there is the risk that relations that shape identities can easily become anything but intersubjective if one plays subject while the other plays object. We saw that unfold in Eulalie’s relation to her brother; Edward’s overpowering hold over Eulalie fells her, transforms her into a “fallen woman. All this is after all why, as Anderson writes, Habermas insists on the need to be “self-reflexive about the regulative ideals that guide communicative action” (20), and Anderson in addition insists on the necessity of “sympathetic reciprocity.”

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