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# *Rispetti* and Sonnets: the Anglo-Italian Context of Augusta Webster's Later Poetry (1881–1893)

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Images and pictures, thoughts and dreams of Italy rise everywhere from the pages of the nineteenth century. A renewed interest in Italy developed through the greater part of the Victorian period, and many major English poets and novelists of the time wrote at least one important work with an Italian subject or setting. George Eliot's *Romola* (1863) and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868) are prominent examples, but there are legions of less famous works with Italian themes and settings. Many of these works focused specifically on political issues and fervently supported Italy's republican and nationalist ideals which were striving to free the country from the oppression of a foreign power – ironically, since Britain was at the time at the height of its own powers as a colonizing nation. Yet the British government supported Italy's move towards Unification and welcomed a large number of political refugees who were in favour of the nationalist cause, such as Giuseppe Mazzini, Ugo Foscolo and Gabriele Rossetti. Arthur Hugh Clough's "Amours de Voyages" (1849), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Casa Guidi Windows" (1851) and A. C. Swinburne's "A Song for Italy" (1867) all involve themselves in the Italian cause.[1]

1. See G.M. Trevelyan, *English Songs of Italian Freedom* (London, 1911) for more examples of poetry supporting Italian unification.

Although this special interest in Italy gradually began to recede after the Unification in 1870, it continued, in various forms and guises, well into the twentieth century. In 1911, the historian G.M. Trevelyan, while remarking that the English interest in Italy had lessened in recent years, confirmed that this interest was still remarkably strong after the turn of the century:

> Sixty years ago, Italy dominated men's thoughts, through the world of art and letters, even more than she does today. The opera was Italian, not German. Italian, not German was learnt as the second foreign language. English ladies read modern and medieval Italian literature. English gentlemen were brought up even more exclusively than to-day on the classics; and classical scholars, as compared to those of our own time, were more interested in Rome, and less in Greece; [. . .] If foreign travel was less common than to-day, it was more concentrated upon Italy, and the charm of her landscapes and cities became associated in sympathetic English minds with the cause of the inhabitants of the country.[2]

The Italian influence which had been so strong in the early part of the century continued to flourish even though there was no longer any cause to write passionately about nationalistic ideals or the oppression of the Italian nation by foreign rulers. In this essay I focus on some verse of the poet Augusta Webster, which provides an example of the way in which the Italian influence was absorbed and then converted into something belonging specifically to Victorian England. Writers who employ the image of Italy in their works can be broadly divided into two categories – those who are interested in the "Englishman in Italy" and who use Italy as a backdrop to explore their own English identity, and those who are interested in Italy itself and who attempt to imitate or translate Italian forms or characteristics in their work.[3] The poems by Webster that I have chosen to analyse can be placed into the second category.

In 1881, Webster published a volume of poetry entitled *A Book of Rhyme* which was her first major collection in eleven years. This volume includes a sequence of poems entitled *Marjory,* which she

2. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
3. Reed Way Dasenbrock, *Imitating the Italians: Wyatt, Spenser, Synge, Pound, Joyce* (John Hopkins, Baltimore & c.: 1991), p. 2.

here described as "English *stornelli*". This sequence consists of thirty eight-line poems divided under the four subtitles "Spring", "Summer", "Autumn" and "Winter", which deal with the different stages in the life of two lovers in terms of the four seasons. These poems are deceptively simple. Webster was attempting to translate a Tuscan form of rural poetry into English verse.

In her later volume *Selections from the Poetry of Augusta Webster* (1893), Webster reproduced these poems under the description of *rispetti* rather than the earlier term *stornelli*. A review of *A Book of Rhyme* which appeard in the *Athenaeum*[4], written by her good friend Theodore Watts-Dunton, may have played a part in this change of terminology.

The review rightly points out that the eight-line stanza that Webster is using is far closer to the Italian *rispetto* than the *stornello*. Traditionally, the *stornello* consists of a short poem with an epigrammatic nature, usually beginning with a descriptive phrase related to some aspect of nature, such the name of a flower, and continuing with one thought in a line or two. These poems began as the improvisations of illiterate peasants, sung as they worked in the fields or meadows. In his poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), Robert Browning had included some humourous *stornelli* in English, such as "Flower of the broom. / Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!", and "Flower of the quince, / I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?", or "Flower o' the rose, / If I've been merry, what matter who knows?", all written in a light-hearted vein in keeping with Fra Lippo Lippi's character and his drunken state. The structure of the poems, however, is indeed based on the traditional *stornello*, with the flower evoked in the first line of the poem being rhymed with in the final line. This simple structure is reflected in the diverse names with which the *stornello* is referred to in different parts of Italy, such as *ritornello*, *fiore*, and *cuire*, the latter being a word for "flower" in Sicilian dialect. The poems which Webster called *stornelli* in her volume of 1881 have nothing of this epigrammatic nature. They are all eight lines long, following the rhyme scheme ababccdd, and are much closer to the *rispetto* than the *stornello*.

The Italian *rispetto* was originally a Tuscan eight-line poem

4. *Athenaeum* 72 (1881), pp. 229–230.

sung by peasants, and is identical to the poems called *strambotti*, which strictly speaking refer to literary imitations of the popular rispetti. Similar poems are also found in the northern Italian states, where they are called *villotte*, and in Sicily another form is referred to as *canzune*. The areas of Italy in which these rural poems have the strongest traditions are Sicily, where they are said to have originated, and Tuscany. The structure of the traditional Tuscan *rispetto* is based on the principle of the octave stanza, and consists of four lines following the rhyme scheme abab and another two or four lines following the rhyme scheme ccdd, these last four lines being referred to as the *ripresa*. The following is an example from one version of a *rispetto* called "The Jessamine Window":

IL GELSUMINO ALLA FINESTRA

La casa del mio amor sta in un bel piano
Rimpietto alla mia par un giardino.
Appie dell'uscio c'e un bel melagrano
Alla finestra ci ha un gelsumino.
Piglia quel gelsumin, mettilo al fresco;
Canta pur su, che ti rispondo a questo.
Piglia quel gelsumin, mettilo al sole;
Canta pur su, che ti rispondo, amore.[5]

In 1886 the poet William Sharp edited an anthology of nineteenth-century English sonnets, which included Augusta Webster's sonnet "The Brook Rhine".[6] In the introduction to the volume, Sharp traces the history of the sonnet and finds that its origins lie in the Italian

5. There on the plain a little house I see,
And in that house my lady lives herself;
Beside the door a green pomegranate tree,
A jessamine blooming on the window shelf.
Come, love, and set thy jessamine in the air:
Sing, I can hear thee at thy window there.
Come, love, and set thy jessamine in the sun,
Sing, I will answer when the song is done.

I have taken both the Italian version of the *rispetto* and its English translation from John Ruskin's *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* (1884–1885), in *The Works of Ruskin*, eds. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London, 1907), Vol. 32, pp. 142–43.

6. William Sharp, *Sonnets of this Century* (London, 1886).

*rispetto*. He describes the sonnet as being originally recited with sound, "that is, with a musical accompaniment, probably a short poem of the *rispetto* kind, sung to the strains of lute or mandolin", and also postulates the theory that the sonnet may be derived from the Greek epigram, with the *stornello* being its Italian equivalent, "that fleeting bar of verbal melody, which in its narrow compass of two lines stands in perhaps even closer relationship to the ancient epigram than the *rispetto* to the modern sonnet". He finally traces the ancestry of the sonnet by saying that "most likely [. . .] it was either of Provencal or Sicilian birth, gradually forming or being moulded into a certain recongized type, very probably not uninfluenced by the Greek epigrams with which the more cultivated of the poet-musicians ("sonnetteers") were probably in some degree acquainted, and by the *stornelli* which every contadino sang as he pruned his olive trees or tended his vines". Sharp's interest in the form and lineage of poetry forms part of a larger wave of interest in poetic form which flourished in the nineteenth century.

Given that a clear link exists between the *rispetto*, the *stornello*, and the *sonnetto* or sonnet, it is interesting that shortly after completing her sequence of *stornelli* or *rispetti*, Webster, who was also very interested in poetic form, began writing the sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*. Sonnet sequences, or cycles, had become very popular by the time Webster began hers in the 1880s. Well-known sequences were Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* (1870; 1881) and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* (1881). This renewed interest in the sonnet was at least partly due to the fashionable interest in the Italian Renaissance: which flourished in Victorian period, as the sonnet is the form of poetry most closely associated with that era of Italian history in the English perception of it. The sonnet sequences now being written were not exact replicas of their Italian models, but instead offered new interpretations and adaptations of the form.

One important deviation from the original Petrarchan sonnet was in subject matter. Traditionally, the sonnet was used to express a particular kind of love, a yearning and often unfulfilled desire for the beloved. During the nineteenth century, the sonnet came to embrace a variety of different themes, among them the disintegration of a

marriage as in the poems of George Meredith, the viewpoint of a courted medieval woman as in in those of Christina Rossetti, general observations on life and love as in the case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and, to return to Augusta Webster's sequence, the different shades of the love of a mother for her daughter.

There is a clear line of influence stretching down from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, through to Christina Rossetti, and on to Augusta Webster. The influence of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* on Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* sequence has often been pointed out. Barrett Browning partly followed the tradition of the sonnet sequence by writing about love, but subverted the usual gender roles by writing from the point of view of a woman. Here the woman is still the object of a man's desire, but is herself also desiring, thereby assuming a double role. As Dorothy Mermin has pointed out, this "is not a reversal of roles, but a doubling of them. There are *two* poets in the poem, and *two* poets' beloveds, and its project is the utopian one of replacing hierarchy by equality".[7] Similarly, Christina Rossetti also has a woman as speaker in her sonnet sequence, this time expressing the woman's point of view within the framework of the courtly tradition of unfulfilled love. Both Barrett Browning and Rossetti use the formal conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet to place a very personal experience within a wide poetic framework, using the genre to give weight and authority to their experiences and thereby allowing them to stand beside the work of male poets rather than marginalising them into a purely feminine sphere. Both sequences contain a significant number of literary allusions, mainly invoking Petrarch and Dante. By placing their poems squarely within the tradition of the sonnet, they are however also emphasizing the differences between their sequences and those of their male forebears.

After Rossetti had completed and published her sonnets in July 1881, Webster sent her a copy of *A Book of Rhyme*, which had appeared a few months earlier. Rossetti duly sent Webster a copy of *A Pageant and Other Poems* in return, which included not only *Monna Innominata* but also the less well-known sonnet sequences *Later Life*, *The Thread of Life*, and *Behold a Shaking*.[8] While wintering in Italy with her

7. Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago, 1989), p. 130.
8. William Michael Rossetti (ed.), *The Family Letters of Christina Rossetti* (London, 1908), p. 97.

daughter later that year, Webster began her own sequence of sonnets. Yet although this move clearly tied in well with the interest she had already developed in her adaptation of the *rispetto*, Webster was dissatisfied with her work in this genre and never completed or published it during her own lifetime.

Webster's sonnet sequence follows the example of Barrett Browning and Rossetti by having a woman as the speaker in her poems. Her theme is that of the love between a mother and her daughter, and although a father is also marginally present his role is relegated to the periphery of the sphere of action, appearing only twice in the twenty-seven sonnets. Webster moves beyond the conventional love sonnet by focusing on maternal love, showing that there are different kinds of love apart from romantic love which are important in a woman's life. It could be argued that Christina Rossetti had already opened the pathway for this shift by exploring the complex shades of a very personal religious love in her poetry. One important difference between the sequences of Barrett Browning and Rossetti and that of Webster is that *Mother and Daughter* is not sprinkled with literary allusions. It may be that Webster no longer felt the same need to give a sense of weight to her work as she was now not breaking new ground by writing a sonnet sequence, but instead following on in what could already be regarded as a tradition of women sonnetteers. Webster did, however, make extensive use of classical allusions in other aspects of her work in which she was pioneering a female foothold in a male tradition, such as in her plays. Poetry dealing with maternal love was already commonplace and had been widely written by many female poets of Webster's generation and the one preceding it, including Barrett Browning herself who wrote several poems dealing with the theme of motherhood.[9] Christina Rossetti, who was herself never a mother, deals with the theme of motherhood from a different angle; her volume *A Pageant and Other Poems*, for example, is dedicated to her own mother in a prefacing sonnet.

Webster's thirty rispetti are clearly modelled on a sonnet sequence. Like the sonnet, the traditional *rispetto* was written or sung as a sign of the devotion of a lover to his lady. The aim was not only to declare love, but also to entice the woman to love, with

9. Sandra M. Donaldson, "Motherhood's Advent in Power: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poems about Motherhood", *Victorian Poetry* 18 (1980), pp. 51–60.

the ultimate aim being happiness found in a matrimonial union and not a form of illicit love.[10] Webster's poems do not follow the traditional pattern of being supplications to a lover, but they do carry on in the general spirit of the poetry by writing about the joining of two lives in marriage. The literary historian J.A. Symonds described this "spirit" in Tuscan rural poetry as "the elevation of feeling and perfect breeding which Manzoni has so well delineated in the loves of Renzo and Lucia" and which he claimed is "traditional among Italian country folk". Webster herself would almost certainly have been familiar with Manzoni's famous *Promessi Sposi* (1842)[11], and the title of the novel itself indicates a sanctification of marriage. In his collection of Tuscan poetry, Giuseppe Tigri made the same point, stating that the lover writing *rispetti* writes:

> perche la scelta delle proprie affezioni gli deriva unicamente dal cuore, per l'ordinario e bramoso, con l'unione santificata dal matrimonio, di continuarle per tutta la vita. Di qui quelli entusiastici e gentili concetti de giovani innamorati verso le elette donne, che vorrebbero pure esaltare, sopra tutto cio che di bello si offre loro d'intorno. Di qui e che da lunge le salutano con lettere le piu poetiche; presenti poi, onorano con espansioni di gioia pura e modesta, e d'un affetto capace dei piu gran sacrifizi; in fine con quella bonarieta, con quel core aperto e nobile a un tempo, com'e del far loro, e che il Manzoni ha saputo tanto bene ritrarre in Renzo e Lucia, i poveri montanini di Lecco.[12]

Both *rispetti* and *stornelli* use images from nature to describe love,

10. J.A. Symonds, "The Popular Songs of Tuscany", *The Fortnightly Review* 14 (1873), p. 600–601.
11. The protagonist of Webster's "Sister Annunciata" (1866) is probably based on the character of "Signora" Gertrude in Manzoni's novel.
12. . . . because he chooses his emotions only from the heart, whether the desire is strong or not, and aims towards the sanctified union of marriage, to be continued for the rest of his life. This is the source of all those enraptured and tender poems by young men for their chosen loves, which only aim to enhance their feelings, especially their beautiful aspects. This is the source of the most poetic letters which they send from a distance; and once they are themselves present, they honour their loves with pure and modest joy, and an affection capable of the greatest sacrifice; and finally with that good and simple nature, with that open and noble heart of times gone by, which Manzoni depicted so well in his rendering of Renzo and Lucia, the poor mountain-folk of Lecco. (My translation).
Giuseppe Tigri, *Canti Popolari Toscani* (Firenze, 1856), p. xi.

and the mood of the poems is that of the spontaneity and sincerity typically associated with the countryside. Webster follows this pattern by first describing the lives of two lovers in terms of the four seasons, and then further dividing each stage according to different events of nature happening at each period.

One of Webster's favourite images in the sequence is that of a river, and this also recurs in many other of her poems. She begins with a little rivulet which makes its way down into a bubbling brook, and which moves on to become a fully grown river, joining up with another river. During the winter the river is frozen over, and eventually it flows out into the sea. This image recurs frequently in Webster's poetry, and is particularly well represented in her sonnet "The Brook Rhine".

This example from Webster's *rispetti* will serve to show the structure and general mood of the poems:

THE FLOWING TIDE

The slow green wave comes curling from the bay
  And leaps in spray along the sunny marge,
And steals a little more and more away,
  And drowns the dulse,[13] and lifts the stranded barge.
Leave me, strong tide, my smooth and yellow shore;
But the clear waters deepen more and more:
  Leave me my pathway of the sands, strong tide;
  Yet are the waves more fair than all they hide.

In her play *The Sentence* (1887), Webster included two further *rispetti*. The play is set in classical Rome and here the poems are sung by fisher folk mending their nets on the beach. These songs are imbued with significantly more of the traditional character of the *rispetto* than Webster's *Marjory* sequence which was evidently composed as a literary piece to be read rather than sung to music in a spontaneous way in the manner of traditional Tuscan rural poetry. As they sit on the beach, the fishermen use the images of the sun above and the torn nets in their hands, composing two love poems which are a homage from a lover to his lady. The *ripresa*, or four concluding lines of the poems, indicate how close indeed the structure of the *rispetto* is to that of the Petrarchan sonnet, which is made up of two parts, an octave and a sestet. This was

13. Dulse – an edible seaweed, having bright red, deeply divided fronds (OED).

precisely the type of sonnet which was being revived in the nineteenth century, as opposed to the Shakespearian or Miltonic sonnet which had been so popular in the preceding centuries. In 1881, Theodore Watts Dunton wrote his very influential sonnet "The Sonnet's Voice (a metrical lesson by the sea shore)",[14] which presented the idea of the sonnet as being made up of two parts which are linked together like the flow and ebb of a wave. According to this model, the octave of the sonnet presents a thought and the sestet goes on to make a comment upon some aspect of this thought. Thus the relationship between the octave and the sestet results in a structural tension which is essential to the nature of this kind of sonnet. This model following a "flow and ebb" of thought was strictly observed by many of the nineteenth-century sonneteers such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti.[15] In an article on poetry which Watts Dunton wrote for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*,[16] he confirmed that Rossetti had "accepted the wave theory".

In her sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*, Webster also followed the model described by her friend Watts Dunton. She makes a clear distinction between octave and sestet, following an abbaabba rhyme scheme in the octave, and various rhyme schemes such as ccdeed, cddece, or cdeced, in the sestet.

Although Webster's work was only known to a limited audience, among those who knew her work her attempt to adapt the *rispetto* to English verse proved very successful, and the poems were given generous praise by their reviewers. The *Westminster Review* described them as "a series of wonderful picture verses, *huitains*, containing each a little study, carved like a gem by a skilful master hand".[17] Soon other poets who were familiar with Webster's work were following her example. Mary Robinson published some *rispetti*, *stornelli*, and *strambotti*[18] and in 1882 William Sharp also tried his hand at Italian

14. Originally printed in *The Athenaeum* 72 (1881), and reprinted in many subsequent collections of poetry.
15. Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 163–64.
16. This article first featured in the 1884 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and was then reprinted in the two subsequent editions. Watts Dunton also wrote an article on the sonnet for *Chamber's Encyclopedia* in 1891.
17. *Westminster Review* 60 (1881), pp. 563–64.
18. See, for example, *Athenaeum* 73 (1882), pp. 229–30, and Robinson's *The New Arcadia and Other Poems* (London, 1884).

rural poetry, calling his poems "Transcripts from Nature".[19] The critic J.A. Symonds was also writing extensively about all forms of Italian rural poetry[20], and a few years later John Ruskin included several *rispetti* in his *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* (1884–1885). Another collection of rural poetry was published by Alma Strettel in 1887,[21] and this also included some musical scores to show how the poetry should be sung. Interest in this kind of poetry had progressed so far by then that Strettel felt compelled to apologize for once again explaining what the different forms of Italian rural poetry were in the introduction to the volume, saying "The Italian folk-songs [. . .] have so often been written about, that little remains to be said of them". Clearly, a pattern of mutual influences was at work here, which was developing independently from the interest being shown in the sonnet at the time.

Indeed while the short vogue which the *rispetto* enjoyed between the 1860s and 1880s might partly stem from its structural relationship to the sonnet, the history of the *rispetto* also has its own separate link to the Renaissance, through the work of the poet Angelo Poliziano.

A series of Tuscan *rispetti* was first written down formally by the eminent Tuscan Renaissance poet Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494), who was attached to the court of Lorenzo de Medici ("il Magnifico"). Although most of Poliziano's verse was written in Latin, he composed several series of *rispetti* in the vernacular, some of them as single poems (*rispetti spicciolati*) and others as sequences (*rispetti continuati*). These poems all dealt with a theme of love, each exploring one thought or image, and written in eight lines following the same rhyme scheme ababccdd used by Augusta Webster. These vernacular poems by Poliziano were generally not given much attention until in 1863 the well-known scholar Giosue Carducci, who was then still only twenty-eight, published an edition of Poliziano's rural poems together with an introduction which was so well-received that it established his reputation as a critic.[22] Augusta Webster travelled to

19. William Sharp, *The Human Inheritance and Other Poems* (London, 1882), pp. 134–49.
20. J.A. Symonds, *The Renaissance in Italy* (London, 1881), pp. 263–73.
21. Alma Strettel, *Spanish and Italian Folk Songs* (London, 1887).
22. Giosue Carducci, *Angelo Poliziano: Le Stanze, L'Orfeo e le Rime* (Firenze, 1863). See Orlo Williams, *Giosue Carducci* (London, 1914).

Italy in 1864 following her marriage in December 1863, and it may be that she came across Carducci's volume during this trip, as it is known that her interest in Italian rural poetry developed while in Italy.

Very little of Poliziano's verse was then available in English. At the turn of the nineteenth century a critical work partly dealing with Poliziano's poetry had been published in England by William P. Greswell,[23] however it only concentrated on the then far more respected and better-known poems of Poliziano composed in Latin and his traslations from the classical languages, and completely ignored his vernacular poetry. However several Italian critics were at the time writing about Italian rural poetry and it may be that Webster was also familiar with some of these works.[24] A collection of rural verse had already been published by Niccolo Tommaseo in 1841, and was later followed by similar works edited by Giuseppe Tigri in 1869 and Giuseppe Pitre in 1870.

All of these works were known in England. J.A. Symonds, for example, who was a great admirer of Poliziano and translated several of his *rispetti* into English, certainly relied heavily on both Carducci's edition of Poliziano's vernacular verse, and also on Tigri's 1869 collection of poems, which contains examples of over 1,000 rispetti and almost 500 *stornelli*. Ruskin was also familiar with Tigri's volume and mentions it in his *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*. And Giuseppe Pitre's *Canti Popolari Siciliani* was reviewed and highly praised in the *Saturday Review*.[25]

In October 1872, Symonds wrote to his friend Henry Sidgwick and said "I am at present translating specimens of Poliziano's Italian poetry which seems to me most exquisite – of a wonderful quality, blending the antique and romantic; pure outline with sensual fullness."[26] In August of the following year, Symonds published an

23. Rev. W. Parr Greswell, *Memoirs of Angelus Politianus, Actius Sincerus Sannazarius, Petrus Bembus, Hieronymus Fracastorius, Marcus Antonius Flaminius and The Amattheti: Translations from their Poetical Works: and Notes and Observations* (Manchester, 1801).

24. Niccolo Tommaseo, *Canti Popolari Toscani* (Venezia, 1841), Giuseppe Tigri, *Canti Popolari Toscani* (Firenze, 1869); Giuseppe Pitre, *Canti Popolari Siciliani* and *Studi di Poesia Popolare* (Palermo, 1870–1872).

25. *Saturday Review* 3 (1872), pp. 610–11.

26. John Addington Symonds, *Letters and Papers*, ed. by Horatio F. Brown (London, 1923), pp. 51–52.

essay entitled "Poliziano's Italian Poetry" in the same journal in November.[27] Webster may have been familiar with the work of Symonds, and the fact that they had a common friend in Henry Sidgwick would seem to encourage this idea. Symonds was a great admirer of Poliziano, and thought he was one of the most learned and eminent Italian poets of the Renaissance. He translated several of his works, including at least one long *rispetto continuato* and several detached ones (*spicciolati*).

Webster's *rispetti* not only follow a rhyme scheme identical to that of Poliziano, but also make use of very similar imagery. In many of his vernacular poems, Poliziano often made use of the seasons in order to describe the different phases of life. J.A. Symonds notices this point and describes Poliziano's main refrain as "Gather y rose-buds while ye may! It is spring-time now and youth. Winter and old age are coming."[28] But while for Webster old age also has its beauty and consolations, Poliziano constantly urges that one should make the most of spring and youth, and later all is bleak. I quote the following example from one of his *canzune* translated by Symonds:

Now art thou in thy beauty's blooming hour;
  Thy youth is yet in pure perfection's prime:
Make it thy pride to yield thy fragile flower,
  Or look to find it paled by envious time:
For none to stay the flight of years hath power
  And who culls roses caught by frosty rime?
Give therefore to thy lover, give, for they
Too late repent who act not while they may.

Time flies: and lo! thou let'st it idly fly:
  There is not in the world a thing more dear:
And if thou wait to see sweet May pass by,
  Where find'st thou roses in the latter year?
He never can, who lets occasion die:
But by the forelock take the flying hour,
Ere change begins, and clouds above thee lower.

27. J.A. Symonds, "Poliziano's Italian Poetry", *Fortnightly Review* 14 (1873), pp. 163–188; and Symonds, "Popular Songs of Tuscany", *Fortnightly Review* 14 (1873), pp. 596–613.
28. Symonds, "Poliziano's Italian Poetry", p. 186.

Compare this *rispetto* by Webster, in which she attempts to recognize the beauty of old age:

THE FROZEN RIVER

Dead stream beneath the icy silent blocks
That motionless stand soddening into grime,
Thy fretted falls hang numb, frost pens the locks;
Dead river, when shall be thy waking time?
"Not dead;" the river spoke and answered me,
"My burdened current, hidden, finds the sea."
"Not dead, not dead;" my heart replied at length,
"The frozen river holds a hidden strength."

Although some of Poliziano's *rispetti* were written as a series (*rispetti continuati*), they did not form a complete cycle in the manner of Webster's *Marjory* sequence. As mentioned above, she seems to have modelled how own sequence on the traditional sonnet cycle, and it is a "cycle" in the literal sense as it deals with the four seasons which at the end of the poem begin again with spring at the end of winter, emphasizing the cyclical aspect of nature. Although the two lovers in the poem die and therefore cannot be part of nature's spring any longer, yet they also find a "new spring in God". This emphasis on the cyclical aspect of nature recurs frequently in nineteenth century poetry, as can be seen in the popularity of the Demeter and Persephone myth which depicts the regeneration of nature each year.

The question remains as to why Webster first chose to describe her poems as *stornelli* and then changed their title to *rispetti*. In fact her poems lie between the two forms. While following the structure of the *rispetto*, the content of the poems seems to lie closer to that of the traditional *stornello*, which evokes images from nature and then makes an observation on life or love. As we have seen, *rispetti* – like sonnets – traditionally acted as supplications to a lover, and the closely related *strambotto* even took on the form of a letter to the lover.

Webster's flexibility in her choice of terminology is however not unusual to this type of poetry and can be seen, for example, in the verse of the Italian poet Francesco Dall'Ongaro (1808–1873) who at that time had begun composing a series of poems which he called *stornelli* and which were in truth imitations of Tuscan *rispetti*. In these poems he did not follow the epigrammatic form of the traditional

*stornello*, instead making them longer and often following the same eight or ten line rhyme scheme of the *rispetto*. One important innovative aspect of Dall'Ongaro's poems was that he gave his verse a political content, whereas both the traditional *stornello* and *rispetto* always dealt with a theme of love. Although rare, it must be noted that he was not the first to use such verse politically, as at least one other group of *canzune* dealing with a political theme was also well-known, one which dealt with the so-called "Sicilian Vespers". It is possible that these *canzune* gave Dall'Ongaro the idea to deal with political themes in his *stornelli*.

Dall'Ongaro began his *stornelli* in the 1840s, eventually writing a sequence which traced the events leading to the Italian Risorgimento between 1847 and 1870. These poems were extremely popular at the time, especially one called "*Il Brigidino*" which was reputed to have been quoted by Garibaldi himself at Montevideo before leaving for Italy, and was later also set to music by Giuseppe Verdi.[29] Another famous *stornello* by Dall'Ongaro is that beginning "*Chi dice che il Mazzini e in Alemagna*", which shows the great veneration that Dall'Ongaro felt for Giuseppe Mazzini, especially in the closing lines "*Mazzini e in ogni luogo ove si trema/ che giunga al traditor l'ora suprema,/ Mazzini e in ogni luogo ove si spera/ versare il sangue per l'Italia intera*", lines which also demonstrate his use of the rhyme scheme ccdd in the final two couplets of the poem, or the *ripresa*. These *stornelli* in imitation of the traditional *rispetti* may have provded an example for Webster to extend her use of the term *stornelli* to her own eight-line poems.

Dall'Ongaro was innovative and aggressive, fired by his patriotic feelings and his love and admiration for Mazzini and Garibaldi. His decision to use rural forms of poetry was itself a political decision, adopting the poetry of the countryside was a way of identifying himself and the movement for a united Italy as one of the Italian

29. Verdi wrote this song, entitled "*Il Brigidin*" (The Rosette) in 1863. Charles Osborne in *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (London, 1969; 1997), pp. 460–61, gives the information that Verdi wrote this song "for the soprano Isabella Galetti-Gianoli to sing at a concert in Parma, but the lady quarrelled with her impresario and did not appear at the concert. The song appeared in an Italian magazine *Scenario* (Rome) in February, 1941". Osborne also lists a *stornello* which Verdi set to music in 1869, entitled "*Tu dici che non m'ami*".

*popolo*.[30] The importance of language and literature was of course also recognised and given due weight by Giuseppe Mazzini. In the words of his biographer Bolton King, "when he came to language and literature [he] recognised what potent factors they had been in the making of nations. The importance of language was sufficiently obvious. Literature had sometimes, as in the case of his own Italy, remained the one surviving sign of nationality, when all else was lost."[31] When in England, Mazzini read Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* and was impressed, which resulted in him urging the collection of Italian folk songs, as described by Denis Mack Smith, "before they disappeared, because they were a vital part of the national heritage".[32]

Augusta Webster and the other British authors who participated in the vogue for Italian rural poetry between the 1860s and 1880s did not have an overt political content or even underlying agenda in their adaptations. Yet the close and often passionate interest which the Italian Risorgimento inspired in England makes it unsurprising that a few English writers strayed down the same paths being followed by Italian writers who were politically motivated.

Yet it is significant that this wave of interest in England began after the fervour of Unification had subsided, at a time when English writers needed to find new points on which to focus their interest in Italy. The interest shown in rural poetry is indeed also linked to other trends and beliefs which were current during this period. For example, the Victorian obsession with the past made Italy seem particularly fascinating to English travellers, who liked to interpret what J.A. Symonds termed "the permanence of rustic manners"[33] in Italy as a symbol that Italy was still very much in touch with its historical past. This was contrasted to England, which was seen as having been dislocated from its past by nineteenth-century industrialisation. Travellers to Italy frequently commented upon the quaint manners and dress of rustic Italians, and also Ruskin thought that not only Italy but the whole European continent was more in touch with its

30. Margherita Trabaudi Foscarini, *Francesco Dall'Ongaro* (Firenze, 1925) pp. 167–68 and 181–82; for more background, also see Piero de Tommaso, *Il Racconto Campagnolo dell'Ottocento Italiano* (Ravenna, 1973).
31. Bolton King, *Mazzini* (London, 1902), p. 299.
32. Denis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (London, 1994), p. 26.
33. J.A. Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, ii (London, 1902), pp. 254–55.

past than England, declaring that "on the Continent, the lines are unbroken between the past and the present".[34]

It is also important to remember that although a journey to Italy had formed part of the English cultural education for a very long time, travel abroad first began to be reasonably comfortable and less dangerous in the late eighteenth century, and only became truly widespread during the nineteenth. Although Italy had always held an important place in English literature prior to 1800, this often filtered down through literary influences rather than through direct experience of the country. Consequently, Italy usually featured either as a stereotyped backdrop, as in the Gothic novel or the Elizabethan play, or served to provide a literary form to follow or reject methodically. It was only during the nineteenth century that poets and novelists began to take a serious interest in the customs, geography, and rual way of life of the Italian peninsula, which previously had been limited to general remarks on the beauty of the architecture or the landscape. The interest in rural poetry shown by Webster and others is thus a combination of this new trend to focus on Italy itself, combined with the more traditional attention to Italian literary forms which had been a part of English literature for so long. Adding this to the current interest in the Renaissance, Augusta Webster's focus on the rural poetry of an Italian Renaissance poet such as Angelo Poliziano can be seen as doubly fitting into the mood and thought of Victorian England.

There is no real English equivalent for the type of Italian rural poetry of the *rispetto* and the *stornello*. Theodore Watts-Dunton speculated that the Welsh *triban* may be the closest thing, but this was in any case not a form which reached the breadth of popularity enjoyed by the Italian poems in their own country. J.A. Symonds, who had tried his hand at translating *rispetti*, believed that it was impossible to do even that, as a translator of this kind of verse is faced with the difficulty of rendering "the freshness of the phrases, the spontaneity of their sentiments, and the melody of their unstudied cadences".[35] While perhaps not quite catching the spontaneity and

34. John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ii, eds. E.T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1903–12), pp. 11–12.
35. J.A. Symonds, "Popular Songs of Tuscany", pp. 602–03

freshness of their Italian counterparts, yet the poems by Webster and others showed that it *was* possible to adapt these Italian rural poems into English and develop them in an original and successful way.