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# The Poetics of Unoriginality: The Case of Lucretia Davidson

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“The Poetics of Unoriginality: The Case of Lucretia Davidson”

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Over thirty years ago, Nina Baym demonstrated that long-standing scholarly measures of literary achievement, such as originality and innovativeness, directly enabled the exclusion of women-authored literary texts from classroom study and critical attention. As Baym argued, the frequent conventionality and generic predictability of such texts have long been received as evidence of their lesser literary value and unsuitability for scholarly consideration (125-32). Following this foundational assertion, such critics as Judith Fetterley and Susan K. Harris called for the creation of new modes of literary evaluation suited to the particular features of nineteenth-century US women’s literature and capable of illuminating the contexts that informed this characteristic conventionality. As anyone familiar with the field knows, the last several decades have seen the publication of innumerable important studies that have sought to do this work, attending in particular to nineteenth-century fiction. More recently, this endeavor has turned to the work of women poets from the period, whose formulaic conventionality rendered their work seemingly opaque and resistant to analysis, an opinion voiced by Cheryl Walker in an early study: “The problem,” she wrote, is that “we don’t know how to read their poems” (*Nightingale* 1). Poetic conventionality has thus become the active subject of recent scholarly inquiry, as with Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s analysis of the aesthetics that underlay the “formulaic tropes or tripping rhymes” often characteristic of women’s verse (495). Eliza Richards has likewise argued that the deliberate replication of stock poetic tropes and forms enabled nineteenth-century women poets to secure patronage, networks of circulation, and

readership. Similarly, Angela Sorby has examined the contributions of poetic convention to pedagogic instruction and classroom exercises of recitation.

This essay seeks to contribute to this important disciplinary endeavor by demonstrating the broader scope and uses of poetic conventionality, which these critics have shown to be instrumental in helping nineteenth-century women poets to secure standing in the public sphere of the literary marketplace. Women writers' use of poetic convention, however, enabled more than just advantageous positioning in the market: the deliberate use of poetic convention, this essay aims to show, could also prove beneficial in more personal, domestic matters, specifically by teaching young female poets the conventions and social expectations of adulthood. To be sure, exercises in rhetorical convention were a regular feature of nineteenth-century education, with students commonly required to write in imitation of a particular style, a task designed to help them cultivate literary mastery and discernment.<sup>1</sup> The poetry of Lucretia Davidson, a prolific poet who died of consumption in 1825 at the age of sixteen and who achieved remarkable posthumous renown, suggests that the replication of established poetic models could also enable young women poets to prepare for the familial, domestic responsibilities they would be expected to assume as adults.

An avid amateur poet, Davidson disavowed any desire for publication, declining even to show her work to family, and her poems were thus composed without an eye toward securing readership or public fame. Furthermore, few female poets were as unapologetically, even deliberately, conventional as she, and even the most receptive feminist critic has had to concede that Davidson's poetry is patently "derivative," a circumstance that has likely contributed to Davidson's continuing invisibility even within the field of scholars studying nineteenth-century US women poets.<sup>2</sup> Written when she was between the ages of eleven and sixteen, her poems

often exhibit the imitative qualities of the student copyist who deliberately attempts to reproduce the style, forms, and characteristic phrasings of a mature master, as with her numerous verses in the distinctive Scottish brogue of Robert Burns. Her poems exhibit no visible interest in formal or thematic experimentation, and they seldom diverge from standard poetic phrasings and tropes, describing, for instance, a deceased child as an angel and intoning the moralistic pieties typical of sentimental verse. In this respect Davidson fits neatly within the tradition of the poetess, a figure Virginia Jackson and Richards have described as deliberately reproducing preexisting, recognizable poetic styles and forms. But Davidson's poetry often exceeds the boundaries of mere poetic conventionality and crosses over into the illicit territory of outright literary imitation.<sup>3</sup>

In some poems, "lyric mimicry," to use Richards's term, enabled Davidson to enlarge her developing poetic repertoire, as with her poems in the style of Burns (Richards 25). In other works, however, studied replication of poetic convention enabled the teenaged Davidson to entertain, however briefly, both the public persona and social responsibilities of the adult woman. Although her adolescent forays into such genres as the maternal prayer and the infant elegy often resemble literary enactments of the common childhood activity of dress-up, these poems both enable and document Davidson's private uses of poetry to imagine what it is like to be a woman and to envision the possession and execution of womanly authority. In this respect, recapitulation of standard poetic convention permitted Davidson to rehearse some of the responsibilities of womanhood--such as childrearing and moral stewardship--and to affect, in the limited and circumscribed space of the poem, the moral disposition and public mien of the sage, respectable matron. Literary unoriginality thus served as a useful agent of female adolescent development and socialization.

This use of poetry helps explain why Davidson was so notoriously private about her poems, habitually burning them when she suspected that they had been read, for these poems function like a journal or diary in which she tested multiple alternate personae and adult roles that she would never be able to assume because of her premature death.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Davidson's poems accord with the long-standing perception of poetry as a customary vehicle for the adolescent construction of selfhood, an association recently analyzed by Stephen Burt (4-6).<sup>5</sup> However, despite the twentieth-century understanding of adolescence as a sanctioned period of rebellion, Davidson's poems are marked by a persistent desire to emulate, rather than rebel against, adult authority.<sup>6</sup> Davidson's fidelity to "inherited forms," to use Max Cavitch's term, thus metonymically signaled an allied acceptance of established social authority, and she employed poetic convention both to prepare to assume that authority and to corroborate her fitness for it (149). Lauren Berlant has recently characterized women's literary conventionality as a "way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world," and Davidson's poems enable us to see how established poetic forms and tropes enabled her to envision and prepare a place for herself in the world of female adulthood (3).

In her use of poetry as a training ground for adult womanhood, Davidson's work offers a vital data point in our growing understanding of the import of conventionality for nineteenth-century female poets. In particular, it contests some of our most basic, enduring assumptions about the significance of literary innovation, which critics over the last century have heralded as the supreme marker of distinction. Baym has shown that the promotion of literary originality is rooted in the American celebration of independence, nonconformity, and individualism, traits that underpin the national origin in the American Revolution and that are consequently deemed intrinsic to the national character (131-32). By extension, literary conventionality has long been

associated with the obverse of independence: deference to established custom and a willing self-suppression in the service of conformity. In this view, literary originality connotes a laudable pioneering spirit while unoriginality instead signals an obedient passivity; innovation and originality are aligned with leadership, and conventionality by extension with subordination and submission. It is consequently no accident that these two literary modes have acquired gendered connotations, the former associated with robust masculinity and the latter with docile femininity.

Although Davidson's reputation and standing have been gravely compromised by these interlocking associations, her work nonetheless reveals the insufficiency of these twentieth-century evaluative assumptions in illuminating nineteenth-century women's poetry. In spite of the associations of unoriginality with unassertive servility, compliance with literary convention above all else provided Davidson a route by which she could assume the persona of an adult authority figure who, in the guise of her poems, is not subject to the command of others but who instead executes governance, serving as a decisive arbiter of morality and supervising the well-being of others. In Davidson's work, literary conventionality operates against the grain of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarly presumption by usurping the authorizing powers imputed to literary innovation, which is so often associated with leadership and ascendancy. Davidson's willing embrace of poetic conventionality suggests that we may have been mistaken in our long-standing association of unoriginality with modest ambition and timidity. Instead of undercutting her authority, her highly conventional poems show that she was unsatisfied with the lesser social and domestic role of the obedient daughter and employed poetry as a conduit for social mobility, using poetry to grasp and prepare for greater social authority. Furthermore, it was Davidson's deliberate engagement in established literary convention that enabled her to be publicly hailed as a role model for other American girls, her dutifulness and seeming obedience

making her a revered moral authority figure for later generations of American adolescents. In accord with the findings of Jackson, Richards, and other recent critics of women's poetic conventionality, Davidson's poetry confirms that, for nineteenth-century female poets, unoriginality by no means constituted an impediment to--or a renunciation of--authority but instead facilitated it.

Among the many female poets who achieved renown in the nineteenth century, few writers were as famed as Lucretia Davidson, a prolific child prodigy who, at the time of her death, was known to have authored nearly three hundred poems. A resident of Plattsburgh, New York, Davidson from an early age was an obsessive, relentless writer, and commentators such as Robert Southey claimed that her writing habits had compromised her health and contributed to her early death (301). After Davidson died, her mother, Margaret Miller Davidson, steered her daughter's poems into print. Her first posthumous collection, the 1829 volume *Amir Khan, and Other Poems*, was reissued fifteen times in thirty years and translated into several languages, including Italian and German (Lawlor 111). Davidson's popularity resulted in the 1841 publication of a second collection, *Poetical Remains of Lucretia Davidson*, which included a lengthy biographical sketch by Catharine Sedgwick that helped to consolidate Davidson's reputation as a model of female virtue and diligence.<sup>7</sup> Although Davidson had been shy about sharing her poetry, these collections made her an international literary celebrity to a degree that in 1841 Washington Irving remarked, "The reading world has long set a cherishing value on the name of Lucretia Davidson, a lovely American girl, who, after giving early promise of rare poetic excellence, was snatched from existence in the seventeenth year of her age" (245). In *The Female Poets of America* (1848), Rufus Griswold similarly commented on Davidson's fame, asserting that any "attempt to invest [her life and work] with any new interest would therefore be

in vain. It is doubtful whether the annals of literary composition can show anything, produced at the same age, finer than some of [her] poems” (152).

Davidson’s earliest surviving poems date to 1819, when she was eleven years old, but the historical record suggests that even her first childhood writings were characterized by a studied replication of poetic precedent, designed to help her privately emulate the authoritative conduct of adults. This inclination is evident in a famous anecdote about Davidson that reappeared in innumerable contemporary reviews and that was first circulated in 1829 in the biographical sketch of Davidson, authored by famed inventor Samuel Morse, prefacing her collection *Amir Khan*. Morse employed the anecdote to affirm Davidson’s childhood precocity and lifelong affinity for poetry, and the story was widely received as early evidence of Davidson’s genius. According to Morse, Davidson wrote poetry as a toddler, before other children could even read:

[E]ven at the early age of four years. . . . [Davidson could be found] with her little books, her pen, ink, and paper, in some secluded spot, where she might study undisturbed. All efforts to ascertain what was the nature of her writing, proved unavailing for a long time. . . . Her mother, while searching in a dark and unfrequented closet, found a large quantity of . . . writing-paper folded in the form of little books, and written full of strange, and apparently illegible characters. Upon examining them more closely, however, the characters were found to be printed letters, some formed backwards, some standing sideways, and with no spaces between the words. These, after much difficulty, were decyphered, and found to consist of regular rhymes and metre, having for their subject the explanation of a picture . . . upon the opposite page. (v-vi)

According to Morse, Davidson was mortified to learn that her poems had been read, and she “could not be pacified until she had recovered them; and as soon as they were in her possession again, she secretly committed them all to the flames,” a practice she continued until her premature death a dozen years later (vi).

While Morse designed this story to depict Davidson as a natural-born poet whose gifts for lyric were evident at an early age, the anecdote also contains a wealth of additional information. To be sure, this portrait of a marginally literate Davidson attempting to reproduce the basic features of prosody evokes stereotypes of the nineteenth-century female poet, presumed to be a derivative, artistically immature copyist who unthinkingly parrots poetic convention without staging any original lyric intervention. While the episode establishes that Davidson’s tendency toward poetic convention was evident even in early childhood, it also indicates that, from a very early age, Davidson used poetry as a pretext for the rehearsal of adult behavior. Missing in Morse’s narrative is the acknowledgment that Davidson’s mother, Margaret Miller Davidson, was herself a poet and published author.<sup>8</sup> The suppression of this detail works to depict Davidson as a wunderkind who, seemingly without any prompt or stimulus, begins spontaneously writing poetry as a toddler and exhibits the behavior of the obsessive literary perfectionist who secretes her pages from view and becomes despondent when they are read prematurely and without permission. However, the readmission of this maternal history imparts an entirely different resonance to this anecdote. Within these circumstances, it is improbable that Davidson’s writing practice emerged *sui generis*, as Morse suggests, for she likely began writing either in imitation of or at the behest of her mother. Furthermore, Davidson’s secretive habits suggestively evoke the practices of the harried mother seeking the privacy and space to write: Margaret Davidson in all probability also retreated from household tumult in order to write and

likely concealed her own manuscript pages from the probing eyes and fingers of her children, acts that Davidson herself reproduced. Davidson's childhood writing habits figure less as expressions of her inborn poetic gifts, as Morse and later commentators would suggest, than as an early indicator of her life-long tendency toward literary imitation, both in her preliterate attempts to reproduce standard poetic forms--rhyme and meter, Morse tells us--and in the replication of writing behaviors she likely observed in her mother. In her clandestine poetry writing, Davidson's reproduction of standard prosody provides an opportunity for her to imitate the conduct of her mother and to engage in adult behavior more generally.

That Davidson even as a toddler vested poetic imitation with social and moral authority is evident in the few known details about these early poems. Although they have been lost to history, Samuel Morse describes them as homemade chapbooks containing crude verses and accompanying illustrations, and his description of the "difficulty" of "decypher[ing]" the organizational logic of these texts works to characterize them as curiosities or oddities of childish fancy. However, for scholars of nineteenth-century United States literature, there is no discounting the marked resemblance of Davidson's chapbooks to the conventional features of the primer, the popular children's reader that provided basic literacy instruction through brief snippets of verse and complementary illustrations. As Patricia Crain has shown, the primer was a mainstay of early childhood education in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and the form provided most children with their first exposure to the alphabet, poetry, and book illustration (15). For Davidson at the age of four, the primer was likely a familiar fixture of her developing literacy, and her first forays into authorship, with verse accompanied by attendant illustrations, suggest an attempt to replicate the canonical features of this form. What Morse characterizes as evidence of Davidson's creative originality instead signals her reliance on this paradigmatic

textual precedent and her efforts to reproduce the ur-text of early childhood literacy. The authoritative valences inherent in this effort of imitation are unmistakable, for in these chapbooks Davidson precociously reconstitutes herself from the recipient of the primer's lessons to their purveyor, her poems allowing her to envision herself as a source of other children's instruction. Studied replication of the familiar primer form, that is, allows her imaginatively to shed her childish immaturity and to perform, albeit in private, the demeanor, knowledge, and standing necessary for her to teach other children how to read. Crain has argued that literacy instruction in the early nineteenth century became inextricably associated with the execution of maternal authority, and so Davidson's childish imitations of the primer suggest in particular a concerted effort to occupy, in the imaginative domain of fantasy, the educational, tutelary role of the mother (103-06).

Furthermore, the sternly pious contents of much of Davidson's later poetry, such as her poems "Charity" and "Pleasure," increase the likelihood that the primer Davidson imitated was in the vein of *The New England Primer*, the deeply moralistic orthodox reader that was by far the most widespread work of its kind. *The New England Primer* devised the standard primer template of offering literary instruction through verse and illustration, and it was famed for using alphabetic instruction as an occasion to propound the foundational tenets of orthodoxy, as with the well-known first verse in demonstration of the letter A--"In Adam's Fall, / We sinned all"--which was accompanied by a woodblock print of the Garden of Eden (qtd. in Crain 43). The marked Calvinist contents of much of Davidson's later poetry, which this essay will soon examine, strengthens the probability that Davidson learned to read using a primer in this tradition and that it provided her first exposure to poetry, her lifelong avocation. This context further amplifies the authoritative implications of her childhood poems, for it suggests that Davidson

imagined herself not only as a source of childhood literacy instruction but also as a vehicle of religious and moral tuition, indoctrinating children in the tenets of Protestant orthodoxy and providing the religious wisdom necessary for them to lead an upright Christian life. And in this respect, engagement in established poetic convention thus provided a venue for Davidson to imagine herself in a supervisory adult role of paramount significance. What might at first appear to be the innocuous product of childhood play is in fact evidence of very serious, lofty aspiration.

Davidson's earliest recorded poems similarly suggest that compliance with established generic precedent could advance literary and social ambition. Her poem "An Acrostic," authored when she was eleven, conveys some of the authorizing opportunities afforded by conventionality. In that work, Davidson employed one of the most prescribed and formulaic poetic forms in circulation, in which the first letter of each line vertically spells out the name of a dedicatee. Davidson's acrostic is composed of two iambic pentameter octaves, the first of which describes the path of the "weary" female moon while the second recounts the trajectory of the "glorious" male sun (lines 5, 9). In accord with the conventionality of the poem's acrostic form, its contents likewise capitulate to social and gender norms, her description of the female moon, which yearns for private seclusion amid its arduous public labors, working to affirm the propriety of female domestic enclosure. However, even while comporting with convention in both form and content, the poem nonetheless bears dramatic witness to Davidson's social ambition, for the acrostic vertically spells out her own name rather than that of another person. As intimated by the visual cues of the acrostic structure, this poem suggests that acquiescence to poetic convention contributed directly to Davidson's own prominence, repute, and visibility, for the poem's dutiful replication of standard form ultimately redounds to Davidson herself and her own standing. And although the poem does not directly link the acrostic form to its contents, the

implicit connection between them leaves the distinct impression that the movements of the moon and sun are inherently indebted to the sequence and ordering made possible by Davidson herself, an implication that posits her as a reliable safeguard of order and stability. In this respect, the poem's acrostic form implicitly presents Davidson as a strong, reliable authority figure, and her compliance with both formal and social convention attests to her worthiness for such a position.

The brazenness of Davidson's self-presentation here may derive from the young age at which she wrote this poem, for her later poems more skillfully employ convention itself as a route by which she can both identify herself with mature adulthood and affirm her suitability for it, without resorting so explicitly to the blazing sign-posts of the acrostic structure. Davidson's most explicitly unoriginal poems--such as those composed in the style and voice of Robert Burns--work in precisely this way, despite our long-standing critical associations of unoriginality with servile self-suppression. In numerous poems, Davidson dutifully tried to duplicate Burns's signature Scottish dialect, vernacular orthography, and ballad forms, as with the opening lines of her poem "A Song": "Wha is it that caemeth sae blithe and sae swift, / His bonnet is far frae his flaxen hair lift" (1-2). Davidson's Scottish poems, which undoubtedly comport with the phenomenon of women's "lyric mimicry" analyzed by Richards, resemble the exercises of recitation and impersonation widespread in nineteenth-century education, such as the common assignment requiring students to imitate the rhetorical styles of famous orators. They likewise bear ample witness to Davidson's personal diligence and literary attentiveness, for they evidently result from focused study and resolute efforts of mastery. Lying just beneath the surface of these poems, however, is the implicit context of Burns's own inveterate unoriginality, for his poems are characterized, above all else, by the effort to replicate the antiquated poetic canon and lyric folkways of pre-modern Scotland, in accord with the folkloric enthusiasms of Romanticism.

Davidson's Scottish poems thus place her within an august poetic tradition that by no means denigrated the literary merits of unoriginality and instead confirmed that compliance with established poetic convention could result in authorial renown and eminence. One has only to note the markedly different literary standings of these two poets to observe that unoriginality seems to have figured as a liability only for the female poet; whereas Burns was for generations a mainstay of the Romantic literary canon, Davidson has been largely dismissed and forgotten.

The contents of her Burns poems help to illuminate some of the more personal uses of literary conventionality in Davidson's social development. At the heart of such poems as "A Song" and "The Coquette" is a poetic inquiry into the character of young women. "A Song," for instance, recounts the belated return of a Scottish soldier to his native village, uncertain about the fate of his family and his young fiancée, who has grown into adulthood during his absence. Although many years have passed, his beloved Marion has remained faithful to him, while the "rose had fled far from her cheek," and the poem concludes with their joyful reunion in marriage (27). "The Coquette," by contrast, describes the caprice of a Scottish woman, Ellen, in callously dismissing her lover. While the poems may appear to be mere exercises in stylistic command, the poems' contents suggest otherwise through their repeated consideration of women's faithfulness, a virtue that the poems themselves impute to womanly maturity and to matrimony. Within the poems' own thematics, loyalty is indelibly associated with mature womanhood and suitability for marriage; a proclivity for novelty, by extension, is associated with girlish immaturity and perfidy. The poems' respective explorations into female fidelity stand in complex relation to the poems' own style, which bears utmost witness to the steadfast constancy of Davidson herself in cleaving faithfully to an established poetic idiom and precedent. The poems' examination of women's loyalty consequently helps to showcase Davidson's own unwavering fidelity, and her

faultless simulation of Burns tacitly disassociates her from the fickle Ellen and aligns her with the mature Marion, whose own fidelity results in marriage at the poem's close. It thus becomes clear that the replication of Burns's style permitted Davidson to do more than just expand her poetic skill set. Rather, the poems' contents demonstrate that imitation of Burns also implicitly enabled her to probe and affirm her emotional maturity, showing in particular her capacity for constancy as well as conformity to male directive, with Burns implicitly serving as a poetic proxy for the absent bridegroom. In this way, replication of an exalted poetic precedent also helped Davidson to entertain the emotional register of faithfulness that the poems themselves attribute to mature womanhood, matrimony, and wifely duty. In these particular instances, Davidson used established poetic convention to explore and rehearse some of the emotional and social requirements of female adult life, her literary abilities implicitly vouching for her capacity to meet these demands.

These efforts would only increase over time, and toward the end of Davidson's life she chose to work in several lyric genres explicitly earmarked for the depiction of womanhood and maternal responsibility. In so doing Davidson reconstituted herself from the object of motherly attention to its administrator, using the replication of poetic idiom as an opportunity to assume, in the confined space of the poem, the persona of a pious, wise woman and to perform the tutelary role of the matron. For instance, her poem "On the Birth of a Sister," written when Davidson was fifteen, engages in the poetic genre of the maternal prayer, a gendered form in which a mother implores the divine to protect her child from a harsh, forbidding world. As with such poems as Frances Sargent Osgood's "A Mother's Prayer in Illness" and Mary Baker Eddy's "The Mother's Evening Prayer," the genre typically describes the wishes of a mother for her child, entreating the divine to confer protection and wisdom on her offspring. While the child

may not be the direct audience of the mother's prayer, the poem nonetheless offers moral instruction both to the child and to the reader. Furthermore, the genre also typically suggests that the mother herself has been the beneficiary of intensive moral instruction and that the wisdom she imparts is the product of her own learning experiences. This suggestion is evident in the dissonance between the mother's stated religious wisdom and the poem's allusion to prevailing popular opinion, which the poem often denounces as misleading and even dangerous inducements to sin. The genre is often animated by an anxiety that, without the moral intercession of the mother or the divine, the child is likely to fall prey to these misleading public opinions and mistake vice for virtue. For example, the devout speaker of Lydia Sigourney's poem "The Second Birth-Day" prays that her son receive the gift of "an upright heart" rather than "[b]eauty and fortune," which she claims "often prove / The ruin of the soul"; she prays that her son direct his attention not to worldly achievements but to "joys beyond the grave" (33, 29, 27-28). Implicit in this disconnection between the mother's moral wisdom and prevailing popular opinion is the suggestion that the mother has learned the hard way, through bitter disappointment and disillusionment, the falsity and emptiness of these popular notions, and in the poem she prays that the child will acquire this same knowledge without having to endure the trials that produced her own moral education.

Davidson's "On the Birth of a Sister" faithfully reproduces these generic conventions. Although Davidson herself was still an adolescent girl and had not yet sustained any serious ordeals of her own (other than her mother's illness and some family financial concerns), she affects a world-weary voice that implicitly presents her as the weathered veteran of life's painful vicissitudes, a position of superior enlightenment, if not superior fortune, that justifies her efforts to provide moral instruction. In sharp contrast with the joyful optimism that typically greets the

birth of an infant, the poem's implicit premise is that the speaker has already learned the naïveté of such expectations and come to recognize the inevitability of suffering, as with the poem's morose opening: "Sweet babe, I cannot hope that thou'lt be freed / From woes, to all, since earliest time, decreed" (1-2). In accordance with the form's conventions, the speaker seeks to impart knowledge to the child, and she prays that the divine confer on her sister such traits as "resignation," "Hope," "Benevolence," and "Religion," which will enable her to withstand life's unavoidable trials and ultimately acquire heavenly salvation (3, 5, 7, 9). And in further conformity with generic convention, Davidson urges the adoption of a similarly skeptical attitude toward worldliness and toward grief itself, directing the infant instead to "look beyond this world of wo, [sic] / To Heaven's high fount, whence mercies ever flow" (11-12).

Although literary conventionality has so often been deemed an artistic liability and a disqualification for eminence, Davidson's studied replication of the maternal prayer form demonstrates that it nonetheless could prove highly advantageous for female poets. In this case, adherence to generic convention provides ample evidence of numerous laudable character traits--such as dependability, obedience, and modesty--that inherently justify the acquisition of responsibility. Davidson's use of the maternal prayer form, in and of itself, does some of this work. While Davidson herself was still a child subject to the authority of her own mother, her embrace of this poetic form signals an allied commitment to the conventional womanly duties of domesticity and childrearing. Whereas the writing of an epic, for instance, or a play might indicate public ambitions beyond the confines of the home, Davidson's engagement in the maternal prayer genre suggests a disposition to abide by conventional limits, both lyric and social: in opting to work within a domestic genre earmarked for women writers, Davidson

indicated her agreement to be restricted to the domestic space, including its responsibilities and its associated literary genres.

Just as Davidson's replications of Burns implicitly figure as proof of a commendable constancy suited to adult matrimony, so her faithful execution of the maternal prayer likewise affirms her loyalty to the exemplar established by her female forebears. The poem's filial deference to prior womanly precedent is evident not only in its visible derivation in Davidson's literary predecessors but also in the familial dynamic that frames the poem. Although Davidson's poem was faithful to the form in all other respects, its speaker is not a mother, as was typically the case; instead, the poem's speaker is a sister, a variation that suggestively invokes the conditions of studied emulation that inform Davidson's foray in this literary genre. In assuming the voice of a concerned sister instead of a mother, Davidson's poem tacitly acknowledges that it operates in this genre somewhat at a remove, playing the expected roles and intoning the pieties typical of the form, but it does so in imitation of the expected maternal speaker: like the poem itself, the speaker visibly attempts to copy her womanly predecessor. Even though the sibling role implicitly concedes the poem's origination in juvenile impersonation, the speaker nonetheless demonstrates her full command and absorption of the pieties and moralism typically imputed to the adult matron. Imitation thus enables the speaker to offer full corroboration of her preparedness, competence, and character. And although imitation is often associated with deferential servility, in this instance it allows the poem's speaker to assume some of the supervisory duties and responsibilities of the adult mother. Imitation here enables surrogacy and the seamless replacement of prior adult authority, with the adolescent girl coming to occupy the roles of her adult superiors both in the home and, presumably, in the public sphere of the literary marketplace. To paraphrase a current colloquial expression, Davidson's poem enables us to see

how deliberate literary conventionality might allow the young nineteenth-century female poet to fake it until she makes it--both to insert herself within an established poetic tradition and to simulate a supervisory role in order to assume it.

In addition to influencing both the poem's genre and internal familial dynamics, conventionality also exerted influence on the minutiae of the speaker's advice to her infant sister. By the time of Davidson's writing in the 1820s, the particular religious sentiments expressed in the poem had already fallen out of favor among Davidson's generational cohort and come to be associated primarily with older adults (Cott 15-16). Although the poem's religious sentiments may seem to a modern reader like standard, garden-variety expressions of Christian piety, they were in fact strongly identified with Calvinist orthodoxy in particular. For instance, the poem portrays life as an anguished struggle, as a "vale of tears" that must be endured in order to reach the ultimate destination of heaven, and it similarly characterizes the individual Christian as solitary, powerless, and wretched (13). In addition, the poem enlists the Calvinist conception of grace, which, unlike the corresponding doctrines of Catholicism or other Protestant denominations, maintains both that the divine alone determines who may achieve heavenly salvation and that human conduct or character exert no influence on that decision. Although worldly virtue and character may serve as corroborating evidence attesting to a person's salvation, the individual may not earn a place in heaven through righteous conduct, piety, or goodness. This denominational tenet is evident in the poem's treatment of personal virtue and salvation as entirely separate matters, with the infant's salvation in no way contingent upon her cultivation of the piety and virtue the speaker seeks for her. Instead, in the fourth and final stanza, the speaker suggestively directs her remarks about salvation to the divine itself, her

prayerful entreaty deriving from the orthodox belief that the deity alone may make that final determination.

By the time Davidson was fifteen, such views were rapidly becoming old-fashioned and unpopular due to the exponential growth of Methodism and other new denominations amid the heady climate of the Second Great Awakening. The ascent of Methodism came at the direct expense of Calvinist denominations, which lost scores of members to this upstart new order, which promoted a more optimistic worldview as well as a belief that active striving and self-improvement might enable human beings to facilitate their own salvation.<sup>9</sup> Young women of Davidson's peer group were particularly central to this denominational sea change, for, as Nancy Cott and Mary Ryan have shown, young women of uncertain financial circumstances were more likely than any other demographic to abandon Calvinism and participate in the new developments of the Second Great Awakening (Cott 15-16; Ryan 12, 61).<sup>10</sup> The transfer of young women's denominational affiliation contributed significantly to the growing obsolescence of Calvinism: where Methodism was associated with novelty and youth, Calvinism was coming to be allied with musty senescence.

Davidson likely encountered first-hand the period's ferment of religious change. In all probability young women of her acquaintance were drawn into the era's religious fervor, and New York State, where she resided, was the veritable epicenter of the Second Great Awakening. Although Plattsburgh was far away from the Burnt-Over District, the moniker given to the western counties renowned for their religious zeal, it was nonetheless affected by the period's avid religious enthusiasms. The years of Davidson's adolescence corresponded with the rapid growth of the Plattsburgh Methodist community, which in the space of a decade grew so quickly that by 1826, the year following Davidson's death, it had a designated minister rather than just

itinerant circuit riders. An 1824 letter published in a national evangelical periodical describes a recent revival in Plattsburgh in which “a great concourse of people assembled”; although Plattsburgh was a small and fairly new community, the letter describes an evangelical church membership of about seventy-five people, a number that far exceeded the membership rolls of Plattsburgh’s First Presbyterian Church, which was smaller by a third (Lamb 384).

These contemporary developments left little mark on the religious character of Davidson’s poem, which stands in defiance of current religious trends and cleaves instead to a Calvinist worldview that was both endangered and upstaged by more flamboyant, alluring movements. For instance, her portrait of feminine piety comports more with the standards of Calvinism than with contemporary culture: in contrast with the public nature and sudden, spectacular conversions of Methodism, Davidson depicts feminine piety as characterized by endurance and private faith. While there is no reason to suspect that Davidson’s profession of orthodoxy was a mere performance or pretense of religious sentiment, it nonetheless enabled her to imitate the voice and convictions of an adult, for these beliefs had already become associated with an older generation and thereby provided a convenient shortcut in her efforts to build a mature poetic persona. And as was also the case with her acrostic and her poems in imitation of Burns, this particular expression of her generalized conventionality works to present her in a favorable light, implicitly characterizing her as resolute in her loyalties, resistant to the enticements of current fads, and precocious in the maturity of her beliefs. Furthermore, Davidson’s articulation of outmoded Calvinist doctrine suggestively echoes the anecdote, relayed by Samuel Morse, of her early childhood writings in the style of the primer, which enabled her to provide orthodox religious instruction to a very young readership. Although “On the Birth of a Sister” by no means evokes the primer form, it nonetheless purveys some of the

same Calvinist lessons and was also earmarked for a juvenile audience. In this respect, Davidson's poem visibly fulfills her long-standing desire to assume the maternal duties of childrearing and moralistic instruction, although, because of her premature death, that undertaking would remain confined to the work of imaginative projection staged in her poetry.

Perhaps the culmination of Davidson's conventionality was her engagement in the poetic form of the child elegy, one of the signature literary genres of the nineteenth century and one associated in particular with women writers.<sup>11</sup> Although after death Davidson herself would become the subject of a child elegy (as with William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Prophecy"), she wrote several poems that expressed grief and resignation at the premature death of a child. The poem "On the Death of an Infant," composed when she was fourteen, may have been inspired by the death of a sibling (as was typical, her mother lost several children in infancy) or that of a member of her family's social sphere, for in the poem the speaker describes herself as one of the infant's "friends" (7). The poem diligently replicates the standard conventions of the form, marveling incredulously at the child's death; envisioning the child "clothed in white, / Mingling with saints"; and imagining the child's reassuring words of consolation to its bereaved survivors): "Weep not for me, for I am happy still, / And murmur not at our great Father's will" (5-6,13-14). In the second poem, "The Mother's Lament for Her Infant," authored when Davidson was fifteen, she occupies the voice of a bereaved mother who, over the course of the poem, follows the customary emotional trajectory characteristic of the form. She moves from bitter resistance--she exclaims, "Dread king of the grave, Oh! return me my child!"--to proper submission when in the final stanza, she concedes, using the conventional phrases of female resignation, "'Tis just, and I bow 'neath the mandate of Heaven, / Thy will, oh, my Father! for ever be done!" (9, 25-26).

There is much to be said about Davidson's adolescent attempts at the child elegy, but, to be sure, these poems affirm that the child elegy had already become fully conventional by the time of Davidson's writing in the mid-1820s. These poems also confirm that such poems were not necessarily autobiographical responses to bereavement and that, well before Lydia Sigourney acquired a reputation as an elegist-for-hire, the form has already become expected, even requisite for female poets, regardless of their own marital or maternal status.<sup>12</sup> Davidson's elegies are similar to her Burns poems, for they show that conventionality enabled her to expand her generic repertoire, to try her hand at an established style, and to develop her poetic craft. In light of her repeated use of poetry to practice for adulthood, these poems also communicate Davidson's grim expectation of maternal bereavement as a constituent feature of adult womanhood. This work has an additional and particular poignancy in the context of Davidson's biography, for it anticipates her own looming demise and the emotional trial it will inevitably present to her mother. The poems even evoke the modern cliché of the aggrieved adolescent who fantasizes about the outpouring of grief at his or her own funeral.

At first glance, these poems may seem like a departure from Davidson's typical *modus operandi*, for they narrate an aspect of adult life that no one would ever aspire to experience. Furthermore, whereas conventionality elsewhere contributes to her maturation, the death of a child here signals a decisive, untimely conclusion to the aspirational, developmental yearnings that animate her prior work: the children in these poems will never have the opportunity to grow up by copying childhood primers or replicating the style of a favored poet. While these infant elegies depict the sudden termination of childhood growth, the poems nonetheless register Davidson's own growing maturity and her increasing understanding of adult womanhood. Where her other poems often portray the social execution of female adult authority, these infant elegies

instead explore the failings of this authority, which is unable to protect the infant from harm and which is characterized instead by disappointment and loss. Nor is the adult woman's authority absolute, for the speakers learn over the course of these poems to accept and honor the judgments of a superior authority; even the adult woman, the poems acknowledge, must obey and defer to a higher power. Moreover, these elegies recount the adult speakers' own development and maturation as they learn to adopt a willing resignation to the divine will. In this way, Davidson no longer depicts adulthood as a conclusive end point of maturation, as she had in other poems. These elegies instead acknowledge that learning continues even after childhood: maturation does not end with the attainment of adulthood, the poems concede, and even adult women are not exempt from the struggles of socialization and adaptation that occupy her prior poems. Whereas conventionality enabled Davidson's earlier poems to envision and inhabit adult maturity, the sophistication with which these infant elegies understand the contours of female adulthood suggests that she had indeed begun to acquire that maturity. In this way, her poems implicitly legitimize the effectiveness of literary convention as a mode of female education and socialization, for they corroborate that the deliberate reproduction of poetic precedent is in fact commensurate with the poet's growing wisdom and maturity: replication, recitation, and imitation enable the adolescent Davidson to assimilate and acquire the wisdom of her adult poetic predecessors.

The bitter irony, of course, is that Davidson would fall ill soon after composing these poems, and she died before she could reach full adulthood and acquire the social responsibilities for which she used poetry to prepare. However, her willing compliance with both poetic and social custom enabled her to become, after death, a paragon of moral virtue, piety, and diligence that young female readers were encouraged to emulate. As Mary Loeffelholz has shown, after

her death Davidson's poetry was widely used for the "public as well as domestic education" of American girls, and in this respect her poetry was able to assume the social, supervisory authority that she herself could not (16). For instance, an autobiographical sketch in *Youth's Companion* in 1830 presented Davidson as a role model for young readers. The article described her impeccable reading taste and work habits as an example well worth following: "Before she was twelve years old, she had read almost all the best English books; yet she never neglected any thing she ought to do. She loved books, and she had habits of industry; industrious people can always find time to do what they like to do" ("Lucretia" 178). Likewise, in her brief biography of Davidson, Catharine Sedgwick praised her diligent letter writing in order to encourage young readers to do the same: "With the most delicate health and constant occupation, she found time always to write long letters to her mother and the little children at home, filled with fond expressions. What an example and rebuke to the idle school girl who finds no time for these minor duties!" (84). The tacit thrust of this description is the suggestion that the reader should follow Davidson's example by reading only good quality texts and cultivating similar habits, a point she made explicitly in her later assertion that "all may imitate her in gentleness, humility, industry, and fidelity to her domestic affections" (80). The periodical *Monthly Repository & Library of Entertaining Knowledge* included Davidson in its series "Lives of Celebrated Children" and similarly portrayed her as an exemplar of virtue: "She did not love to do household work, but she always did it with cheerful good will, because she knew it was her duty, and she loved to do her duty" ("Lives" 55). Robert Southey's review of *Amir Khan* in the London *Quarterly Review*, which hailed Davidson as a genius and solidified her international reputation, expressed concern that not only children but also parents would seek to emulate Davidson, and he warned parents about the "perilous" health risks of indulging a child with

similarly consuming literary interests (301). As these examples demonstrate, reviewers and commentators followed the cues in Davidson's poems and characterized her as a moral authority figure capable of providing useful guidance in the instruction and rearing of children. They also endorsed her equation of imitation with maturation, for they suggested that the imitation of Davidson herself was a sure route to the development of virtue and good habits.

Davidson has been credited as the inspiration behind the character of Emmeline Grangerford, the morbid teen elegist in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an attribution that presumes that Davidson influenced a long chain of nineteenth-century amateur female poets (Walker, *Nightingale* 23). However, Davidson's influence is genuinely discernible in the biography of her sister Margaret Miller Davidson. Although Davidson died when her sister was still only a toddler, her pedagogical instruction and example proved tenacious. In her poem "To My Sister," Davidson encouraged Margaret to "sing the song I love," implicitly urging her to follow in her footsteps after her death--"When [I am] sleeping in my grass-grown bed"--and undertake the writing of poetry in her place (1, 11). Margaret would comply by becoming a precocious young poet in her own right, similarly dying from consumption during adolescence and also acquiring posthumous renown and celebration as a role model for girls. In this case and in those of other young readers who followed her example, Davidson succeeded in fashioning herself as an authority figure worthy of emulation, although in imitating Davidson later girls were also imitating Davidson's own unoriginality. In effect, Davidson created a circuit of female poetic conventionality that constituted literary imitation as a form of moral instruction and an expression of personal virtue. And while we have often disregarded conventional, unoriginal texts as necessarily lacking in literary ambition, Davidson's works affirm not only that the private, domestic writing of poetry could figure as an important feature of nineteenth-century

female adolescent development but also that literary conventionality might prove highly advantageous in the acquisition of familial and social authority, both contributing and attesting to the authors' character, loyalty, and reliability. As Davidson's canny engagements in poetic convention suggest, there is clearly more at work in literary unoriginality and imitation than may at first appear.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The most popular and influential rhetorical manual during Davidson's lifetime was Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), which explicitly recommends that students develop technique and skill by imitating exemplary models of successful rhetoric (Johnson 81-83).

<sup>2</sup> This assessment is evident, for instance, in the biographical headnote introducing Davidson in the important 1995 anthology *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, in which editor Walker describes Davidson's long poem "Amir Khan" as a "merely derivative exotic tale"; against the grain of this long-standing appraisal, Walker selected the poems for inclusion in the anthology based on their "original sensibility," and they are, in the main, fairly anomalous works

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in Davidson's corpus (94). In her essay on Davidson, Loeffelholz analyzes the repeated characterization of Davidson's work as derivative, examining in particular Walker's foundational study, *The Nightingale's Burden* (17).

<sup>3</sup> Richards describes the "mimic poetic economy" of nineteenth-century women's verse, which provided poets with networks of circulation and established literary modes (30). Jackson and Richards describe this tradition as "derivative rather than original, conventional rather than individual, interchangeable rather than independently motivated" (2). In her recent case study of the circulation history of the mid-century poem "Rock Me to Sleep" by Elizabeth Akers Allen, Putzi shows that the "indistinct" lines between original authorship and imitation would become characteristic of women's poetry later in the century (770).

<sup>4</sup> Hunter has analyzed the importance of private domestic writing, such as journaling, in nineteenth-century girls' development. Davidson's own writing practice comports with the phenomenon of "self-culture" that Hunter observes in private writing habits in journals and diaries (38).

<sup>5</sup> In her landmark study of John Keats--a poet with whom Davidson is somewhat associated because both died young of tuberculosis within a few years of each other and because both found posthumous renown through the advocacy of Robert Southey--Levinson formulates a similar poetics of adolescence, which she also characterizes by imitativeness and social aspiration (25-26). But where Levinson focuses on the economic and class aspirations inherent in Keats's poetry, this essay instead dwells on the gendered and developmental aspirations of Davidson's poems, as she readied herself for adult life. And although Levinson maintains that literary merit is characterized above all else by originality, this essay derives from the interlocking assumptions that originality is the prerogative of an economic and social elite that excluded

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middle-class girls such as Davidson and that originality may not have been an objective for many writers who, in the tradition of the poetess, instead explicitly sought to replicate convention. For a discussion of Davidson's kinship with Keats, see Lawlor 110-11.

<sup>6</sup> Hall originated this developmental understanding of adolescence--as well as the belief in the instrumentality of poetry-writing to it--in his monumental 1904 study, *Adolescence*, in which he characterized adolescence as a period of conflict, rebellion, and self-construction. Ashworth has considered Davidson's poetry in this context of adolescent rebellion, her writing, for instance, offering Davidson a brief respite from housework (421).

<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick originally wrote the biography of Davidson in 1837 for inclusion in the *Library of American Biography*, edited by Jared Sparks.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson's mother and sister shared the same name, Margaret Miller Davidson, but the publications of the former are usually distinguished by their inclusion of the clarifying honorific "Mrs." to differentiate her work from that of her famous namesake.

<sup>9</sup> Methodism, founded in England by John and Charles Wesley, differed from Calvinism chiefly because of its promotion of Arminianism, a heretical idea that belief and vigilance can exert influence on the individual's religious salvation. Where the Calvinist belief in grace and election affirmed that the deity alone determined the individual's salvation, Methodist Arminianism contended that one need not passively wait for conversion but might instead actively seek salvation through diligence and persistence. The Methodist pursuit of salvation also resulted in their promotion of the revival meeting, which actively sought the conversion of participants and which instigated a new religious culture characterized by collective public fellowship, social interaction, and the belief in the religious authority of common citizens. The Second Great Awakening was likewise characterized by a resurgence of post-millennialist optimism, which

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maintained that the fulfillment of human history was imminent and that this desired end could be instigated by social reform. Methodism grew exponentially during the first half of the nineteenth century so that, by 1850, it was the nation's largest denomination, numbering over a third of American affiliated Christians. By contrast, Calvinist denominations declined precipitously during the same period, as with the decline of Congregationalism from twenty percent of American church members in 1776 to just four percent in 1850 (Finke and Stark 56). For more information about the Second Great Awakening, see Hatch 3-46.

<sup>10</sup> Cott has theorized that the industrialization of textile manufacture in this period caused many young women to lose their traditional household responsibilities and to leave home in search of work. She argues that they consequently gravitated toward Methodist revival meetings and other religious events in an effort to establish communities and affiliations as surrogate families. Methodism also appealed to women because it relaxed the traditional restraints on their participation in religious worship: women habitually spoke in revival meetings, and the Methodists were the first denomination to allow women to become clergy (Cott 17-18, 23).

<sup>11</sup> Roberts has recently contested this association, showing that male writers were also active producers of child elegies and equally included in anthologies of child elegies (141-42).

<sup>12</sup> Cavitch describes many of the letters Sigourney received from bereaved parents requesting that she write elegies for their deceased children (146).