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Augusta Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* and the only child debate

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**ABSTRACT**

The enduring debate about family size has roots in Victorian England, most notably in literary works addressing the issue of balancing motherhood and a writing career. One Victorian writer and activist, Augusta Webster (1837–1894), directly addressed the issue of family size in her uncompleted sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter* (1895), which she began when her only child was a newborn. In this posthumous series of 14-line poems, Webster defends her decision to have one child and, in doing so, challenges popular assumptions that only women with multiple children could be considered ‘complete’, socially-acceptable mothers. Despite her efforts, however, and despite the rising popularity of one-child families, the results of numerous scientific studies and the lingering critiques of mommy blogs make it clear that challenges to mothers of ‘onlies’ remain.

**Essay**

1. **Introduction**

In the twenty-first century, debates about the ideal family size are perhaps most visible in scientific studies and mommy blogs concerning the legitimacy of motherhood for women who choose to have one child. Discussions of women’s reproductive rights have been rife at least since the introduction of reliable birth control, but this particular aspect of a woman’s right to choose seems peculiarly contemporary. Yet the debate about family size has roots in Victorian England, most notably in literary works addressing the issue of balancing motherhood and a writing career. One writer and activist, Augusta Webster (1837–1894), directly addressed the issue of family size in her uncompleted sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter* (1895), which she began when her only child was a newborn. In this posthumous series of 14-line poems, Webster defends her decision to have one child and, in doing so, challenges popular assumptions that only women with multiple children could be considered ‘complete’, socially-acceptable mothers. In *Mother and Daughter*, Webster offers descriptions of mothering one child that contradict these assumptions, even as she celebrates the unique relationship between a mother and her only child. Despite her efforts, however, and despite the rising popularity of one-child families, numerous scientific studies and the lingering critiques in mommy blogs make it clear that challenges to mothers of ‘onlies’ remain.

2. **Recent studies of the single-child family**

Single-child families are now the fastest growing family type in the USA. A 2014 Census Bureau poll reported that 23% of American families had one child; in New York City, it was 30% (Graham, 2014, p. 1). Between 1970 and 2012, the average number of people per household declined from 3.1 to 2.6; and...
since 2010, the one-child family has grown steadily nationwide. Despite the increasing presence of the single-child family, perceptions about ideal family size have changed very little. A 2010 Pew Center Research study confirmed 46% of Americans believe the ideal family size is two children while only 6% said that one or zero children was ideal. This number is only slightly higher than studies conducted in the 1970s of one-child families in the United States and Australia in which researchers found that only 1–3% regarded the single-child family as an ideal family type (Callan, 1985, p. 155). These studies show that perceptions about family size do not accurately reflect the growing number of single-child households in the US today.

One reason for this disconnect is that the only child is often described in scientific studies and in literature about parenting as an anomaly or a difficulty to overcome. Many scientific studies of only children are based on an implicit belief that only children will be less effective in adulthood than those who grew up with siblings. Early in the twentieth century, single children were often labelled as ‘selfish’, ‘lonely’ and ‘maladjusted’. Such labels reveal the lingering effects of late-Victorian belief about only children and ‘sibling deprivation’, most famously G. Stanley Hall’s 1896 study, ‘Of Peculiar and Exceptional Children’. Hall’s research, which perceived only children and immigrants as permanent misfits, memorably described the only child as ‘a disease in itself’. Moreover, Hall implicated the educated New Woman as a prime cause of this social problem, joining the only child and her mother in a debate that persists today (Hall & Bohannon, 1896). Ultimately, these studies of only children fail to show a correlation or likelihood that they will become any more selfish, lonely or maladjusted than those who grew up with siblings (Falbo & Poston, 1993). Yet despite the lack of scientific evidence to support this connection, these stereotypes have survived, perhaps best seen in critiques of mothers who are asked to validate their choice to have ‘only’ one child. Recent books on the topic of having or being an only child are often marketed as self-help manuals with titles like The Seven Common Sins of Parenting an Only Child (White, 2004), The Future of Your Only Child: How to Guide Your Child to a Happy and Successful Life (Pickhardt, 2008) and The Only Child: How to Survive Being One (Emerson, 2011). The majority of such books highlight critiques directed at only children and their parents, implying that families with one child are deficient and in need of support to assuage their guilt.

Susan Newman, author of The Case for One Child, articulates the larger debate that fuels the negative tone of this ‘support’ literature. Newman summarizes the only child debate in an interview with Psychology Today:

If you have one child, you are made to feel guilty for not having another. Your mother, your friends, even strangers tell you that ‘You can’t have just one. How can you do that to your child?’ It’s become a numbers war among parents that has exposed one of the best-kept family secrets: One child is quietly becoming the new traditional family. (Haupt, 2011, p. 1)

Newman attributes this misconception to the idea that as a society we are ‘brainwashed into believing that siblings are socially or intellectually advantageous – or both. Necessary. As a means of insuring positive development and happiness, they are not mandatory’ (Haupt, 2011, p. 4). At a time when infant mortality is no longer a considerable threat and the costs of raising a child are higher than ever, it is important to ask why these perceptions have endured, despite the reality of the increasing number of single-child families. Returning briefly to some Victorian assumptions of motherhood and domesticity provides an effective starting point for understanding the single-child family as it is perceived today.

3. Victorian legacies of the only child debate

Women expressed strong beliefs about family size long before they had access to reliable birth control and decades before they had the right to vote. The Victorian woman writer in particular actively negotiated how to have both a career and a family long before Virginia Woolf told her she must first kill the Angel in the House (Woolf, 1942, pp. 236, 237). Three factors that led most directly to decisions of Victorian mothers to have fewer children were (1) a decrease in infant mortality throughout England, (2) an increase in female interests and professional pursuits outside the home, and (3) a desire actively to reduce the physical and emotional risks of childbirth and childrearing. The decline in infant mortality
rates in the second half of the nineteenth century decreased pressure on mothers to have more children simply to increase the chances that one child would survive. This pressure was dramatically reduced in larger cities and more affluent areas. The ‘demographic transition’ in England from high infant mortality rates to low death rates among children gave women unprecedented freedom over their bodies, with more women trying to have fewer children than ever before. And women writers in particular were envisioning the possibility of ‘having it all’ by caring for fewer children while pursuing work outside the home. Moreover, medical and scientific advancements meant that these women could continue working and raising children for longer periods of time and with fewer threats to their physical and emotional health (Wilson, Kiser, & Whelpton, 1973, p. 387).

Securing one's status as a Victorian Angel in the House was at least a two-step process. Lynn Abrams explains this process concisely in ‘Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain’. Here, she demonstrates how marriage and motherhood are inseparable feminine ideals that women today still struggle to evade:

Marriage signified a woman's maturity and respectability, but motherhood was confirmation that she had entered the world of womanly virtue and female fulfillment. For a woman not to become a mother meant she was liable to be labelled inadequate, a failure or in some way abnormal. Motherhood was expected of a married woman and the childless single woman was a figure to be pitied. (Abrams, 2016, p. 6)

The pitied figure of the redundant woman helped such ideals of marriage and motherhood to prevail despite high infant mortality rates, which were often believed to be caused by poor living conditions in industrialized cities. The duty of educating poor women about the social responsibility of motherhood often fell to more affluent women who could teach those with fewer resources the best ways to care for and feed their babies. Their message, for the most part, was clear for all these groups of women: the best mothers were available for their children at all times; they did not divide their attention with worldly concerns or work of their own (Abrams, 2016, p. 7). If a woman should choose to limit her family size to pursue non-domestic interests, she was labelled selfish or egotistical for putting her needs before those of her family and her social responsibility as a Victorian mother.

A mother's decision to limit her family size had a direct impact on her own physical health. In ‘Infant Mortality in Victorian Britain: Mother as Medium’, Robert Millward and Frances Bell investigate the relationships between and among family size, financial status, infant survival and mothers’ health. This study makes a direct link among family size, mothers’ health and the well being of children:

[A] crucial factor in the domestic environment was family size. First, it affected the time available for the mother to spend on the care of each child. Second, claims on household food were higher in direct proportion to family size. This may have been especially important in months seven to 12 as the child was weaned on to solid foods and may explain the pattern for these months, sometimes observed in Third World countries, of breast feeding being clearly inadequate as the sole source of nutrition. The third effect of family size links to the role of the domestic environment. (Millward & Bell, 2001, p. 710)

Certainly, the health of mothers continues to be a crucial part of conversations about motherhood and specifically the best ways to behave while pregnant, birthing and raising small children. And while we no longer face the same threats of infant mortality, our reactions to mothers of only children have not changed so radically as one might expect. For example, a common assumption in the Victorian period was that mothers of single children were not able to have more children for health reasons. And yet, asking a mother of one child when she plans to have another child still takes for granted the fact that she is physically capable of having another. Such questions assume that having multiple children is always a choice, that the health of the mother may no longer be so relevant to this choice as it may once have been. In other words, the assumption that having a child is always a conscious choice reveals some misconceptions that connect Webster's world with our own: namely, that all mothers must necessarily want more than one child and that asking them about this choice is appropriate behaviour among mothers, regardless of how well or little they may know each other.

In addition to declining infant mortality rates, mothers’ pursuits outside the home, and their physical health, feminist and birth control movements in the latter part of the nineteenth century were making it easier for women to limit their family size by choice. Scientific theories supported their decisions as well. The establishment of the Malthusian League in 1877, for example, greatly changed the way Victorians
thought about birth control and family size. This league was based on Thomas Malthus’s 1778 *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, in which the author distinguishes between *positive* (increasing birth rate) and *protective* (decreasing birth rate) methods for controlling the population. Malthus was one of the first to name factors such as delaying marriage and birth control as protective measures that could directly improve personal and economic stability (Malthus, 1798). In the 1880s, birth rates began to drop as Victorian women became better educated, married later and chose to have fewer children. This trend was especially prominent in urban areas within the United Kingdom (most prominently in London, where Webster lived while raising her daughter), where birthrates decreased from 35.5 births per 1000 in the 1870s to about 29 per 1000 by 1900. While the actual causes of this decrease are uncertain, the numbers do suggest that even the most rudimentary birth control was visibly changing presumptions about motherhood and family size (Draznin, 2001, pp. 98–100).

During the Victorian period, women were emboldened by early feminists to assert greater control over their bodies and their future. Kate Bolick explores this marked psychological and demographic shift in her recent book *Spinster*. Here, Bolick clearly differentiates between the choices women make today to remain single and the choices Victorian women faced at a time when female independence was much more difficult to attain: ‘Being a wife and mother wasn’t just plan A; it was the only plan. To live otherwise meant to live without a template, consigned to the margins, discouraged from seeking a new and different happiness’ (Bolick, 2015, p. 126). At a time when birth control was unreliable and potentially dangerous, many women were choosing sexual abstinence to gain such control. In ‘Victorian Women and Domestic Life’, Kathryn Kish Sklar explores three examples of Victorian women who represent various kinds of female control as wives and mothers:

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s strategy could be called that of ‘female domestic control’; Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s strategy that of ‘feminist domestic reform’, and Mary Todd Lincoln’s strategy that of ‘total commitment to husband and children’. These three strategies represent the options most often pursued by Victorian women, and the contexts within which much of Victorian domestic life reverberated. (p. 21)

Stowe offers the best example of the Victorian woman writer who actively chose to have fewer children to prolong her career and avoid the fate of her overburdened mother, who had nine children and died at the age of 37.

The ‘controller’ and overseer of her household, Harriet Beecher left her teaching career of nearly a decade to marry Calvin Stowe in 1836 at the age of twenty-six. After having five children together, Harriet initiated long periods of forced separation from Calvin. This decision allowed her to avoid having any children between 1843 and 1849. Not only did she avoid the fate of her mother, but she also secured the ‘full possession of mind and body’ to produce her most famous novel the same year her last child was born: ‘Adopting a typical Victorian perspective, Beecher viewed motherhood as a qualitative rather than a quantitative activity, useful to society for the kind of child rather than the number of children it produced’ (Sklar, 1979, p. 28). Webster adopts Stowe’s perspective in some important ways, demonstrating what ‘qualitative rather than quantitative’ motherhood actually looked like. *Mother and Daughter* chronicles the vacillating emotions of a mother seeking ways to be physically strong and mentally present for her only child as she grows up. She also gives us glimpses of a community of mothers that criticizes her decision, claiming she was incomplete by making a choice that differed from their own.

### 4. How Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* anticipates today’s only child debate

Augusta Webster, born Julia Augusta Davies in 1837, the year Queen Victoria took the throne, published her first volume of poetry in 1860 under the pen name Cecil Home. Spending years of her childhood aboard her father’s ship, the HMS *Griper*, Webster received her formal education all over Europe, learning Greek, Italian, Spanish and French while living in Paris and Geneva (Willson, 2006, ‘Introduction’). Webster was the first female writer to be elected to a public office; she was elected to serve on the London School board twice, in 1879 and 1885. She was also a humanitarian and a strong supporter of women’s suffrage and education for women and the poor (Blain, 2009, p. 145). In 1863, she married Thomas Webster, a soon-to-be law lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge. Just eleven months later,
Webster gave birth to their only daughter, Margaret. Contrary to what her prolific career suggests, Webster suffered from chronic illness most of her life. She also expressed frustration that her domestic duties intruded continually upon her writing time, but she consistently excluded her daughter from these limitations and frustrations.

Webster’s intensely personal sonnet sequence expresses the belief that motherhood could offer a welcome respite from social criticism, her responsibilities as a wife and woman writer, and her own deteriorating health. *Mother and Daughter* was published posthumously by William Michael Rossetti in 1895, one year after Webster died of cancer at the age of 53. *Mother and Daughter* employs the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form of octave and sestet as well as its tropes of romantic love to describe the intense love between a mother and child. Marianne Van Remoortel calls this sonnet sequence ‘a triumph of the maternal over heterosexual love’ (Van Remoortel, 2008, p. 483). Unlike many of her female contemporaries, Webster chose the sonnet form to express more fully the passionate and evolving yet nevertheless constant attachment she feels toward her only daughter as she matures. The traditional sonnet, composed of 14 standard iambic pentameter lines, conforms to a single theme. While women writers frequently wrote sonnets to express sentimental ideas about romantic love, Webster transforms the sonnet into a form that could also express familiar love in a realistic rather than a maudlin way.

In his introduction to the sequence, Rossetti describes *Mother and Daughter* favourably and Webster as superior among the best-known female poets of her time:

Nothing certainly could be more genuine than these Sonnets. A Mother is expressing her love for a Daughter – her reminiscences, anxieties, and hopeful anticipations. The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select, uniting, in the warm clasp of the domestic affections, something of those olden favourites, *The Pleasures of Memory* and *The Pleasures of Hope*. (Rossetti, 1895, pp. 11, 12)

Webster’s sonnet sequence does not idealize maternal love. Rather, it alternates between joy and pain and progresses from passionate descriptions of mothering a young child to more logical theories regarding motherhood as a specific and distinct experience. These sonnets also reflect upon such larger themes as mortality and spiritual transcendence. The speaker’s child, in contrast with her mundane duties, represents an intense and prolonged kind of love that was unrivalled by the more typical subject of Petrarchan love sonnets: romantic, heterosexual love (Rigg, 2009, p. 172). Patricia Rigg describes the transcendence of this love as illustrating that ‘there could not possibly be an end to this state of bliss other than death’ (Rigg, 2009, p. 259). The speaker’s awareness of her own mortality and the transitory nature of what she describes further intensifies her poetic descriptions of isolated moments in her child’s life.

While Webster’s sonnets certainly capture these intimate ‘domestic affections’ with remarkable frankness, Rossetti does not consider these sonnets representative of Webster’s legacy. Rather, he dismisses them quickly, naming Webster’s drama, *The Sentence*, ‘one of the masterpieces of European drama’ (Rossetti, 1895, p. 14), ‘the supreme thing amid the work of all British poetesses’ (p. 13). Rossetti even places this drama above the poetry of Mrs. Browning and his own sister, Christina Rossetti. Somewhat out of place is Rossetti’s admission of surprise that Webster was not hindered professionally by her decision to become a mother: ‘Mrs. Webster had not been forestalled – and to the best of my knowledge she never was forestalled – in such a treatment. But some of the poetesses have not been Mothers’ (p. 12). While he appears reluctant to tackle the substance of these sonnets directly, Rossetti does allude briefly to the likelihood that Webster’s motherly ‘affections’ could threaten the survival of her work over time.

But Webster was intensely aware of the tensions her often-competing roles as mother, wife and poet could create. She addresses these tensions straightforwardly in much of her writing. For example, in *Portraits*, poetic monologs including ‘Faded’ and ‘Tired’ feature ageing, unmarried women who question their passive roles as respectable Victorian women and, in particular, the limitations of marriage for lower-class women. *Portraits* was praised in the *Westminster Review*, which predicted that Webster would – ‘if she only remains true to herself … most assuredly take a higher rank as a poet than any woman has ever done’ (Rigg, 2009, p. 283). Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* is similarly aware of such pressures to remain true to her art without sacrificing her desires to have a family. Indeed, as Christine Sutphin demonstrates, many of Webster’s poetic speakers make an effort to ‘conceal their inner feelings
of conflict, making the reader the confidante they lack’ (Sutphin, 2000, p. 12). In this way, we become the audience Webster may have lacked in her own lifetime but one that understands the relevance of her work to contemporary debates about gender roles and parenting.

In *Mother and Daughter*, Webster demonstrates most fully how motherhood and poetic creation need not be mutually exclusive or at odds with one another. Rather, the roles of mother and poet frequently overlap and even enrich each other. In *Mother and Daughter*, they allow Webster to produce a complex, ongoing poetic reflection upon the topic of motherhood that she was unable to complete while continuing to be a mother. Rejecting the cultural ambivalence surrounding the Victorian mother, the poetess and the status of the only child, her sonnets confront the singleness of the mother-daughter bond. Here, she demonstrates a preference for giving all her attention to one child rather than dividing her affections among multiple offspring. Sonnet 24 of this sequence best expresses – and then goes on to challenge – the not uncommon critique that mothers of only children are less worthy of the name of ‘mother’ than those with more than one child. Webster wrote this sonnet at a seaside resort in 1886 when her daughter was nearly 23. In it, she articulates a prejudice against mothers of single children that still survives today.

Sonnet 24 begins forcibly with a familiar critique of mothers of one child. Its opening lines capture the feigned sympathy that mothers of a ‘household crowd’ (Webster, 1895, 24.3) extend in condescension toward mothers of only one:

‘You scarcely are a mother, at that rate. Only one child!’ The blithe soul pitied loud. (Sonnet 24.1–2)

This critique, the sonnet illustrates, is laden with self-righteousness and condescension that is ultimately damaging for all mothers. After exposing this critique, Webster raises and immediately dismisses a second familiar claim: namely, that having multiple children could negate the pain of a grieving mother for her deceased child:

Yea, were her first-born folded in his shroud,
Not with a whole despair would she be bowed,
She has more sons to make her heart elate.
Many to love her singly, mother theirs … (24.6–9)

While the speaker concedes that ‘[s]ome have this’ (line 13) – the comfort of being surrounded by a multitude – she rejects the idea that more children could ever make up for the loss of one. With the closing line – ‘Yet I, I do not envy them indeed’ (line 14) – the speaker reaffirms her decision to savour her one child, shifting her attention instead to watching steadily as she grows. By exposing the illogical arguments that mothers of multiples make to defend their choices and lifestyles, Webster reveals deeper insecurities in these choices, made visible in critiques made by mothers who have made different choices.

Among the most innovative features of *Mother and Daughter* is its deep awareness of the contradictions the speaker faces as a mother and a woman writer, specifically a mother who must confront her own limits and failing health. Nowhere in the sequence is the complex relationship between motherhood and mortality more clearly expressed than in Sonnet 20. Here, the speaker confesses her growing consciousness of the passing of time, made visible in the growing form of her daughter:

There’s one I miss. A little questioning maid
That held my finger, trotting by my side. (Sonnet 20.1–2)

But the speaker does not remain in a state of nostalgic reverie. Rather, this recollection is followed immediately with her unique ability to savour and focus completely on her only child as she grows into adulthood.

Sutphin supports the idea that this sequence matures with the child: ‘The daughter in the poems does not remain a child: her development allows the mother persona the scope to analyze her changing relationship with her daughter, her own aging, the anxieties associated with love, and (in Sonnet XI) the way in which men construct women’s love’ (Sutphin, 2000, p. 25). This is a mother clearly devoted to being empathetic to the needs of her child:
And I must feel her trouble if she cried;  
My lap was hers past right to be denied;  
She did my bidding, but I more obeyed. (Sonnet 20.6–8)

This realization is an important one: although the speaker values her deepened relationship with her adult daughter, she still misses ‘the approaching sound of pit-pat feet, / The eager baby voice outside my door’ (Sonnet 20.13–14). Yet such nostalgia, Webster reminds us, does not require that she recreate this memory by having another child. This sonnet is also a reminder to mothers not given the choice to cure nostalgia by having another child that they are not deficient as mothers. As she reminds us here, having one child allows the speaker to focus more fully on her daughter, to appreciate and reflect wholly upon who she was at specific moments in time and on who she will one day become.

In Sonnet 25, Webster describes the wholeness of mothering one child this way: ‘Love’s most price-less things / Have unity that cannot be undone’ (Sonnet 25.3–4). The mother of only one shines ‘the englobed full sun’ on her child while the mother of many can only shine individual, divisive ‘rays’ (line 5). This metaphor contrasts sharply with the harsh criticism she receives from other mothers. She does not necessarily condemn other mothers who share neither her choices nor her perspective of raising one child. Rather, she refuses to accept their criticism of her without some of her own in return. In the sonnet’s final lines, the speaker asserts:

I by each uttermost passion of my soul  
Am turned to mine; she is one, she has the whole:  
How should you know who appraise love and divide? (25.12–14)

This direct address to the mother of multiples is non-apologetic but remarkably more accusatory than the more accepting speaker of earlier sonnets. Perhaps the persistent request to defend decisions about her family had become inseparable from the speaker’s evolving understanding of herself as a mother.

While the speaker stands firmly by her decision to have one child, she recognizes the criticism she received because of this decision. Emily Harrington is one of the few scholars to address directly Webster’s treatment of the subject of a mother’s love as something quantifiable. In “Appraise Love and Divide”: Measuring Love in Augusta Webster’s Mother and Daughter’, Harrington argues that this sonnet sequence ‘defends having an only child on the principle that love is, like a river’s water or the sun’s light, vast but nonetheless divisible’ (Harrington, 2012, p. 262). Moreover, she explains, the speaker’s anxiety about a mother’s love as measurable is further emphasized in the poetic ‘footsteps’ of the sonnets themselves (8.11): ‘Although the sonnets insist that mothers of only children need not measure out their love the way mothers of siblings must, they simultaneously express an anxiety about needing to quantify the strength and duration of this mother’s love’ (Harrington, 2012, p. 260). Harrington’s skepticism about reading these sonnets as purely biographical is significant as it expands the personal reflections of these sonnets into the larger political realm. More importantly, it draws attention to the fact that a mother must necessarily ‘divide’ her love when she has more than one child or even a vocation that takes her away from this child physically or mentally. Harrington’s reading of love’s ‘divisibility’ also brings Webster’s reflections on Victorian motherhood into current debates about how to ‘quantify’ or accurately chronicle the experience of raising an only child, a question that Mother and Daughter endeavours to address.

These are not the only assumptions about motherhood that Webster’s sonnets challenge. She also confronts – without ever appearing the least bit defensive or self-congratulatory – the question that she is incomplete as a woman writer and a mother of one. In Sonnet 27, the speaker contradicts the assumption that mothers of only children experience a void that only another child can fill. Rather, she reverses this position by explaining:

Since first my little one lay on my breast  
I never needed such a second good,  
Nor felt a void left in my motherhood  
She filled not always to the utterest. (27.1–4)

While not critiquing another’s choice directly, the speaker is proclaiming the decision to stop at one as a valid decision that a loving and reasonable mother can make. The speaker goes on to describe another
false assumption that mothers of one are selfish. Rather, the speaker explains, the mother of one has the ability to extend her maternal love to all children without needing to claim them as hers biologically:

And every child becomes my natural joy:  
And, if my heart gives all youth fostering,  
Her sister, brother, seems the girl or boy:  
My darling makes me mother to their youth. (27.11–14)

Because her ‘solitary bird had [her] heart’s nest’, the speaker shows herself more capable and selfless in her willingness to embrace children she has not mothered by birth.

Though it took her at least thirteen years to write these twenty-seven sonnets, Webster was still reluctant to complete them, perhaps due to what Florence Boos called her ‘cautious feminism’ (Boos, 1985, p. 282). While our knowledge of the actual mother-daughter relationship that inspired these sonnets is necessarily limited, Mother and Daughter provides considerable wisdom that feeds the evolving only child debate. Unfortunately, we do not get to hear from Webster’s daughter, Margaret, about her own experience being raised as an only child. Though she had a fairly successful acting career after her mother’s death – playing the heroine in her mother’s play, In a Day, staged in 1890 at Terry’s Theater in London – Margaret never married and much of her personal correspondence is lost. She was buried with her mother in the unmarked family grave at Highgate Cemetery.

5. Mother and Daughter, mommy blogs and the lingering guilt over having one child

The assumptions and criticisms expressed throughout Mother and Daughter are remarkably similar in style and sentiment to those justifications found in contemporary mommy blogs. These blogs relocate Webster’s introspections on the intimate experience of motherhood into an intensely combative arena of public scrutiny among mothers today. Broadly, mommy blogs are online chronicles that offer a diverse and surprisingly accurate account of the volatile ‘mommy wars’, an umbrella term that ineffectively combines debates about an ideal or ‘correct’ way to be a mother. At the core of such contemporary debates about motherhood is the need for mothers to justify the choices they make for their families and children. Justifications of ‘correctness’ and exclusivity have become an integral part of the mommy wars, despite assumptions that we have moved beyond these debates. Yet critiques of mothers of only children today are not far removed from critiques of the Victorian ideal of motherhood as essential to femaleness. Indeed, Victorian mothers were the most vigilant critics of a woman’s decision to limit the size of her family. And Webster’s Mother and Daughter anticipates arguments from twenty-first century mommy blogs aimed specifically at only children and their parents.

Webster’s steadfast rejection of critiques made by mothers of multiple children is surprisingly relevant to current mommy blogs tackling similar issues. Kelly Rose Bradford, in her Parentdish U.K. blog, describes her experience handling some of the assumptions of mothers of single children that Webster dismantles in Mother and Daughter, most notably in Sonnet 24. Bradford writes: ‘I feel that I have constantly been viewed by mums with more than one child as an inexperienced, ill-qualified, mummy-lite’ (emphasis mine) (Bradford, 2013). Webster’s sonnets, however, directly contradict the assumption Bradford is describing here, namely that mothers of single children are only partial or pseudo-mothers. More specifically, she asserts repeatedly that mothers of one child achieve a tangible wholeness in loving their child.

Yet having one child was not always simply a matter of choice. Since the health of mothers is inextricable from childbearing and childrearing, the more children a woman has, the more direct this link becomes. The false conclusion that women necessarily have control at all times over the size of their families is perhaps made more frequently today by well-meaning mothers than it was in the Victorian period. But the largely unspoken assumption that women necessarily want more than one child is rooted in the negative rhetoric surrounding only children and their parents over the past century. Scientific studies have even disproven such stereotypes that only children are disadvantaged compared with non-only children. For example, in their 1986 article, ‘Quantitative Review of the Only Child Literature: Research Evidence and Theory Development’, Toni Falbo and Denise Polit concluded that onlies actually benefited from the additional attention they received from their parents in terms of development of
achievement, intellectual ability and character’ (Falbo & Polit, 1986, p. 185). Similarly, in her study ‘The Only Child in America: Prejudice versus Performance’, Judith Blake concludes that the advantages for only children will only continue to grow: ‘not only have the rewards to parents for having many children largely disappeared in urban, mobile, technological societies but the rewards to siblings from having strong brothers and well-married sisters have also faded. Remaining are the disadvantages of large families – particularly competition for parental resources during the growing up period’ (Blake, 1981, p. 53).

Though negative assumptions about only children continue to prevail in the media and psychological diagnoses, the rhetoric surrounding the only child is slowly changing as more voices challenge the assumption that there is a right or wrong way to raise children. The sentiments throughout Mother and Daughter express a reluctance to apologize for being deliberate about childcare and responsible about taking care of oneself in addition to taking care of one's children. Webster's sentiments on this topic share striking similarities with those expressed in recent motherhood blogs and essays about the only child. Yolanda Machado, in her 2013 blog post, ‘Yes I have an Only Child, and I’m Not Selfish for It’, responds to nearly the identical criticism that Webster faced: ‘I believe recognizing that you only have the strength to raise one child, and raise that child to the best of your ability, is actually something to be admired. As parents, we should support each other, not tear each other down for our decisions on what works for our own families’ (Machado, 2013, p. 2). Machado is certainly not alone in her efforts to reverse the belief that there is one ‘right’ way to be a family.

Nor is Machado alone in her defence of raising only children. In the past decade, Lauren Sandler has been one of the most prominent advocates for the only child. In her 2011 book, One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, and the Joy of Being One, Sandler demystifies negative constructions of the only child. Sandler focuses on the decision to raise one child in spite of these prevailing perceptions, insisting:

Instead of making a choice to enlarge our families based on stereotypes or cultural pressure, we can instead make that most profound choice our most purely independent one. It might even feel like something people rarely associate with parenting: it might feel like freedom. (Sandler, 2014, p. 13)

In her 2013 essay, Sandler makes the point that having one child may actually give parents more rather than making them less: ‘It seems the more of a parent you are, the less you are of anything else’ (Sandler, 2013, p. 1). While Sandler's argument is still the less common one, it draws from the ideas that Webster supports in her sonnet sequence, namely, the idea that having an only child could make a woman more rather than less fulfilled.

The online comments to Sandler's essay include nearly all of these now familiar critiques that Webster identified over a century earlier. One only child, now a mother, describes how she was forced to cope with tragedy alone when she lost both of her parents in a car accident. Another mother recalls losing her only son when he was seventeen, a tragedy that Webster names in Sonnet 24, where she questions how such tragic loss could be exclusive to parents of only children. Finally, in the comments section of Sandler’s ‘Having it All …’, one woman clearly describes moments of self-doubt that inevitably occur, even as she stands by her choice to have one child:

Although there is no way I would do it again, I keep seeing most of the other mothers I know having more and I feel like they are more ‘motherly’ than me. My rational brain knows I am a great mom and simply having more children (and less sleep) doesn't make you a better, or more dedicated, parent … What is important is how I parent, not how many people I parent. (Sandler, ‘Having it All’, 2013, ‘Comments’)

In response to Sandler's essay, this commenter corroborates Webster's assertion in Sonnet 24 that having more children does not increase one's success or status as a mother.

All of these comments point to a larger problem that has persisted at least since the Victorian period: namely, the most vocal and harmful critics of motherhood continue to be women and other mothers. Despite the individualized experience of motherhood, the desire to defend one's choices as the 'right' ones remains. The easiest way to do this is to criticize those who do not or cannot make the same choices. The assumption that having a child automatically makes one an expert on how others should have children has not yet been adequately dispelled as false, presumptuous and harmful to all parents.
6. *Mother and Daughter and the single-child family today*

The ‘mommy wars’ may indeed reflect concerns of our own cultural moment, yet the defensiveness that feeds these debates has changed little since the Victorian period. The language, questions and criticisms described in *Mother and Daughter* are nearly identical with those we find circulating among mothers in popular mommy blogs. What is promising about this connection between Webster and these twenty-first century colloquies is the current shift toward a more accepting and diverse vision of motherhood. Samira Kawash in ‘New Directions in Motherhood Studies’ describes how, initially, ‘mothering memoirs in the 2000s have shifted the weight from finely tuned sensibilities to fiercely wrought expressions of anger, shock and resilience, often organized as brief essays that more frequently than not saw first light as blog posts’ (Kawash, 2011, p. 985). These sentiments suggest a backward glance to the Victorian rigidity that placed women securely in the position of domestic overseers whose self-worth and self-identification were inextricable from their decisions about home and family. Fortunately, as Kawash is quick to point out, these memoirs have begun to shift away from motherly vitriol and critique:

> In the 2000s, mothers found their voice … Much of this is powerful stuff: women, lots of them, are making a lot of noise, talking and writing about mothering in ways that resist guilt for those supposedly non-maternal feelings, that refuse to pathologize their own frustration and rage, and that seek broader contexts and communities in which to understand their experiences of motherhood, both the good and the bad. (Kawash, 2011, p. 985)

Contemporary circumstances such as the decline in marriage, the increasing number of single women having babies, the unprecedented number of women in the workforce, and the difficulties and expense of adoption and infertility technology all point to the continued rise of one-child families. Today, the more volatile debate about whether mothers should stay at home and/or work – and the newly emerging debate about single motherhood – may overshadow lingering dissent about the number of children a married woman should have. Yet these decisions ultimately inform each other.

Assumptions that married women want children and, in turn, that they want more than one child persist beyond the United States. In her *Sydney Morning Herald* piece, ‘The Problem with Having an Only Child’, Katherine Feeney calls attention to the fact that the reality – women working, having smaller families, the celebration of individuality and diversity – does not reflect the negative responses she herself heard when she and her husband chose to stop at one child: ‘the glowing mantle of goodly motherhood still hangs heavy around the waists of Australian women. rejecting it, even for very good reasons, is still a rockier road to walk than that traditional trip through the fertile fields of beautiful, bountiful, breeding’ (Feeney, 2015, p. 1). Her reaction to the critiques about having one child reveal a surprising retreat to an Angel in the House model of motherhood perpetuated in blogs that falsify an image of motherly perfection and the possibility of ‘having it all’ as an attainable ideal. Those who criticize the choice to have fewer children reject factors such as economic stability in favour of decisions of the heart that should more ‘naturally’ inform one’s role as a mother.

This ‘second demographic transition’ is crucial to the family size of the next decade. As more women postpone marriage and having children, the more single-child families are likely to appear. Currently, 27% of all women (30% of white non-Hispanic women) in the US in their early thirties have not had a child (‘Shrinking Families’, 2000, p. 1). Already, England is being called ‘a one-child nation’ with over 45% of English families having one child. If parenting expert Susan Newman is correct that the US will imitate this trend, the one-child family will only continue to grow. In her interview in *Psychology Today*, Newman affirms that: ‘Yes, the only child family is here to stay. Given the many pressures on parents today, more and more feel that they can be better parents to one. For them, one child is the desired, happy choice and fast becoming The New Traditional Family’ (Haupt, 2011, p. 4). Though all evidence may point to a future in which the one-child family is the most common and socially-conscious choice, the climate does not appear ready for such a shift.

A large part of this new traditional family continues to be the working mother. Augusta Webster, though in the minority as a prolific writer with one child, thought deeply about the relationship between her domestic work and her aspirations as a writer. In *A Housewife’s Opinions*, she describes how the ‘invention’ of ‘light literature’ or novel writing directly affected female labour. Before women began
writing novels, the act of writing was deemed ‘less than feminine’, and mothers were expected to
discourage this activity in their daughters: ‘sagacious parents … discouraged all literary aspirations
as indiscretions calculated to lower them in esteem of the society they frequented’ (Webster, 1879, p.
188). Yet once writing became a respectable female occupation, more and more women, regardless
of class, began doing it. Though most of these women would never become the next Jane Austen or
George Eliot, their work, Webster reminds us, was valid in its own right:

[But]...women must live. And instead of saying one word intended to injure a trade which affords a maintenance to
so many industrious persons who would otherwise have at best the opportunity of earning the barest pittance,
every conscientious man should make it his duty to read, or at all events to get from his circulating library, not less
than one three-volume novel a week. (Webster, 1879, p. 192)

The writing of novels may indeed have afforded women some financial independence, but Webster
also saw writing as freedom from domestic duties, a way to engage the female ‘mind, less busy than the
fingers’ with more mentally ‘engrossing themes’ (Webster, 1879, pp. 190, 191). Today, the more volatile
debate about whether mothers should stay at home and/or work may overshadow lingering dissent
about the number of children a woman should have. Yet these decisions ultimately inform each other.

Controversies and assumptions surrounding the only child are at least a century old and continue
to prevail, even in the wake of studies that reveal only children to be happy and adjusted adults. But
the rhetoric about the only child is changing as more voices ‘debunk’ myths that onlies are lacking and
their parents are selfish. Replacing such critiques are those that argue that the value of motherhood
should not be based on the number of children one has or require proof of suffering and self-sacrifice
on the part of devoted mothers. Nonetheless, Webster’s sonnet sequence reminds us of the lasting
effects of this criticism, even as it offers a way to continue the dialog. Indeed, although over a century
old, *Mother and Daughter* provides a model for a more inclusive conception of parenting that embraces
self-care and personal pursuits beyond the family. Contrary to Victorian ideals of female devotion, sub-
missiveness and self-renunciation, Webster rejected the idea that women should suffer and sacrifice
themselves for the sake of their husbands and children. Calling attention to the impossibility of such
logic and the harmful effects on her own health and career, Webster reconceives the decision to have
one child as a strength rather than a limitation.

Perhaps the most persuasive reason Webster’s sonnets should endure at a time of intense debates
about motherhood and family size is her reluctance to proclaim her choices as morally superior or as
an antidote to marital distress or larger social problems (Sutphin, 2000, p. 20). Rather, Webster offers
something more relevant and necessary for mothers today: the reminder that one’s decisions about
motherhood are deeply personal and unknowable by those making these critiques. Having one child
provided Webster the focus and energy she needed to be a devoted mother and a prolific writer;
however, nowhere does she suggest her choice is the right one for anyone but herself. In this way,
Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* overturns accepted wisdom of her time – and our own – that idealizes
one mother’s choices over those of other mothers. In the coming decades, we will hopefully hear more
voices echoing and affirming Webster’s views about mothering an only child.

Notes

1. For more detailed statistics about perceptions of ideal family size, see ‘What is the Ideal Number of Children for
   a Family?’
2. In 2006, Deborah Siegel and Daphne Uviller published *Only Child: Writers on the Singular Joys and Solitary Sorrows
   of Growing Up Solo*. In ‘A Letter to My Second Child’, writer and comedian John Hodgman describes his only child
   experience as remarkably positive and nurturing: ‘The family of three is as stable as a triangle, unlikely to collapse,
each point strengthening and relying on the other’ (Hodgman, 2006, p. 158). He continues: ‘The only child in a
   family without want is the apex of Western civilization’ (p. 159). Hodgman attributes a great deal of his success to
   the freedom he had as an only child to be his own person: ‘Assured of love and sustenance and space and time,
   the only child is free to cultivate idiosyncrasy’ (158).
3. Although Webster’s daughter is referred to as Davies Webster in some letters, this name is confirmed by Florence
   Boos’s copy of *Mother and Daughter*, which is inscribed to Margaret Davies Webster (see Sutphin, note 3).
4. In ‘Signs of Truce in the Mommy Wars’, Claire Cane Miller considers changes in perceptions about mothers in the workplace. Despite the fact that 70% of American mothers and 93% of American fathers work, a 2007 Pew Research Center study found that 41 percent of people thought it was bad for society when mothers worked, while 22 percent said it was good. While these numbers may suggest increased acceptance of families making choices based on their individual situations, it also shows that the increase of working mothers is not reflected in perceptions of the ‘correct’ way to be a successful mother (Miller, 2015, pp. 2, 3).

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