

FABIENNE MOINE

WOMEN POETS
IN THE
VICTORIAN ERA

Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry



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Examining the place of nature in Victorian women's poetry, Fabienne Moine explores the work of canonical and long-neglected women poets to show the myriad connections between women and nature during the period. At the same time, she challenges essentialist discourses that assume innate affinities between women and the natural world. Rather, Moine shows, Victorian women poets mobilised these alliances to defend common interests and express their engagement with social issues. While well-known poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti are well-represented in Moine's study, she pays particular attention to lesser known writers such as Mary Howitt or Eliza Cook who were popular during their lifetimes or Edith Nesbit, whose verse has received scant critical attention so far. She also brings to the fore the poetry of many non-professional poets. Looking to their immediate cultural environments for inspiration, these women reconstructed the natural world in poems that raise questions about the validity and the scope of representations of nature, ultimately questioning or undermining social practices that mould and often fossilise cultural identities.

Fabienne Moine is Senior Lecturer in English at University of Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense, France.

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Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry

FABIENNE MOINE

University of Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense, France

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Introduction

High was the wall,
And the gate was tall –
Beyond was the blossomy garden ground,
Where roses were blowing,
And waters were flowing,
And life rippled by with a joyous sound –
Lark and linnet
Sang loud within it,
And thrush echoed thrush in the trees all around.
Closed was the garden – and hard to win!
But you opened the gate, and you let me in.
You gave me a space
In the flowering place –
You taught me the meaning of sun and dew –
How the first bud breaks,
And the bloom awakes,
And sweet is the toil though the fruits be few –
'Twas you that watched where my seeds were sown,
And you that smiled when they sprang half-grown.
Here are some posies
Of poor little roses,
That grew on my tree and I gathered for you –
They are all I have found
In my garden ground,
Though the wind was south and the sky so blue –
Of, friend of mine! they are scentless and small –
But I have none else – they are all my all. ('To T. Westwood', Probyn 3–4:1–27)

This dedicatory poem, addressed by May Probyn (1856–1909) to her friend, the poet and angler Thomas Westwood (1814–1888), represented the author's first step into the hitherto unknown world of poem writing. Probyn's verse was warmly welcomed by Westwood, a gesture which offered her the opportunity to share in a common passion for the pleasures of the garden in a way which would normally have been inaccessible without a formal invitation from its male owner. Once inside its walls, albeit metaphorically, she was able to sow her poetic seeds and see her flowers grow and flourish in verse, however inexpert she might have considered her efforts. In that self-deprecating tone not uncommon in women poets' dedications and prefaces from this period, Probyn accepts her role as an untutored gardener-poet. For women writers seeking recognition from their male counterparts, the close affinity between flowers and verse, familiar from decades of male-authored nature poetry, offered a valuable opportunity. Their efforts served to close the gap between women and nature as well as between poetry and flora,

thereby both enriching and legitimising women poets' interest in the natural world. The character of that reputedly shared identity is the subject of this book. It will explore how women's poetry in the Victorian period was fertilised and irrigated by cultural discourses which tapped into long-standing beliefs that women shared a particular affinity with the natural world. This will involve examining closely how women's poetry engages with hegemonic discourses on gender and class and how it served to either reinforce or challenge them (or both), depending on the poet's stance with regard to structures and agents of domination. Those structures and agents included restrictive institutions and practices as well as oppressive figures of control such as gardeners. While not all women poets were comfortable writing on the subject, May Probyn clearly relished working in the poetic idiom provided by material drawn from the natural world. In a sense, her poems are hybrids, with discourses on nature grafted onto other themes, which enabled her to challenge certain aspects of traditional constructions of femininity. Thus, the natural world is depicted in terms of alliances and affinities mobilised to defend common interests or in terms of resistance against traditional power structures, whether it be the creeping spread of the towns, vanishing pastures and meadows or issues of male hegemony and economic domination.

The aim of this book is to study Victorian women's poems about the natural world as sites of resistance to the forces of economic, social and cultural domination; to explore how certain elements of the natural world are empowered, and subordinate creatures called upon and given a voice, providing agents with which the reader is encouraged to identify along gender-orientated lines. In this context, poetic production is regarded as a literary *practice* that illustrates the social and cultural identity of the female poet in Victorian Britain. Poems are thus literary devices that reveal strategies against certain forces at work. But they are also *tactics* in Michel de Certeau's terms in the sense that they correspond to the unconscious responses of individuals in ordinary situations faced with the *strategies* of power structures. In the cultural approach to be adopted in this book, poems will be studied as literary tools used by their authors to reinforce, challenge or simply question structures of domination and power, often without the full knowledge of the poets themselves. Consequently, the poem is not only considered as a literary artefact but also as an 'ordinary art' in the *practice of everyday life*, 'a way of operating ... the victories of the weak over the strong' when faced with opportunities that may eventually lead to the confrontation with broader social and political issues (Certeau xix).

It may seem too ambitious to attempt to study nature as a whole. Indeed, it could be argued that there is no such thing as "nature" and that it can only be apprehended through its components. Timothy Clark boldly attempted to define just what nature is in his ecocritical approach to nature writing. He explored the various meanings of the concept, 'the natures of nature' (6) as he calls them, reminding us that what may seem incompatible is in fact interrelated, since 'a radioactive waste dump' can be considered to be 'as "natural" as a snowdrop or a waterfall' (6). In her book about eighteenth-century labouring-class nature poetry, Bridget Keegan

faced a similar challenge when attempting to define “nature”. She organised her study around carefully selected, discrete subject-areas (though very different from the ones picked here), arguing that nature, whatever its definition, was ‘never a socially neutral space’ for the poets whose work she examined (2). As Victorian nature poetry is a very broad genre, the definition of a nature poem will have to be restricted. This study will concentrate on nature as a sum of varied elements rather than as a holistic living agent. This approach limits the risk of essentialism: Nature as a whole is stripped of its female and allegorical connotations as soon as it is apprehended from the point of view of its constituents, be they vegetal or animal. This was also the objective of Keegan’s study, which sought to prove that working-class poets are not closer to nature but certainly respond differently to nature-related issues. Our analysis will thus focus only on certain elements of the natural world: flowers, gardens, parks, pets and birds. They were chosen as subjects for this study for several reasons: first because these elements in particular have often been mobilised for the representations of femininity; second, because they all stand for nature under control, whether legally, geographically or culturally; third, because the poems devoted to them regularly engage with politics, though often in unexpected ways. Their modest size and status, the simplicity of their subjects and the fact that they belong to poetical subgenres all provide key insights to understand women’s specific approach to nature. Finally, while most Victorian nature poems are lyrical, the ones under scrutiny here are solidly anchored in the real world and function as commentaries on everyday life.

This tightly focused approach has certain similarities with that of the botanist or the scientist, combined with the empathy of the nature-lover. More intimate units such as the cottage garden and its immediate rural surroundings, along with its ubiquitous animals, are easily approached both physically and through writing, whereas the wide sweep of the countryside, the ocean, the rivers or the mountain range often favoured by their Romantic precursors proved less accessible subjects for women’s poetry. Women poets felt such a profound interest in the elements of nature that they chose to place them under the microscope and examine them meticulously. The sizeable number of science-oriented poems encouraged me to include women’s science poetry in this study. They represent the culmination of my study of the place of nature in women’s poetry because they illustrate their wish to engage and interact in a tangible way with the natural world.

A wide variety of reasons and cultural contexts prompted Victorian women to concentrate on natural elements and thus follow in the path of their Romantic predecessors. A certain number of them were not London residents and some were not city-dwellers at all. Starved of the literary networks facilitated by salons and social events, they sought inspiration in their immediate surroundings, contrary to their urban counterparts, male or female, who preferred to write about contemporary and urban issues closer at hand. It is not surprising then to learn that Jewish poet Amy Levy (1861–1889) wrote poems about the bustling life of the capital or that Constance Naden (1858–1889) wrote about scientific progress. Both were city-dwellers, and both were involved in urban social and institutional

life.¹ Similarly, verse written by those who lived in the countryside, such as Emily Brontë (1818–1848) or the blind Scottish poet Janet Hamilton (1795–1873), often embraced natural subjects. However, the appeal of nature was not restricted to those living in the countryside. Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) is a good example. Her commitment to social causes (she worked with prostitutes at the Highgate Penitentiary), her devotion to the High Church and her enthusiasm for nature all receive close attention in her poems. Conversely, some country-dwelling poets participated in social and cultural debates on the national stage, for example those concerning the Woman Question. Interestingly, Edith Nesbit (1858–1924), who lived on the outer reaches of south-east London, produced poems reflecting her geographical and cultural liminality. Similarly complex is the case of Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829–1925). Parkes, who led a busy professional and social life in London, wrote ‘Summer Sketches’, a long epistolary poem set in rural Surrey. The long poem, written in 1853, recounts a journey made by three characters through the English countryside. It is punctuated with inquiries made by one of the party to a London-based friend, so that the former can keep in touch with goings-on in the capital. In this case, absence clearly makes the heart grow more curious, and through these queries, the reader learns about the plight of London’s poor children and women’s rights, as well as other themes such as the press, the spread of the rail network and the latest consumer goods:

Some of London’s vigorous blood
Flows along this country road;
Wesley’s tracts perennial flow
In from Paternoster Row;
Tea from China, grapes from Spain,
Travel on this rose-fringed lane; (*Poems* 153)

For Parkes, the aim of her rural poem was to challenge traditionalist views on women’s “natural” role.

Two interrelated factors also contributed to the development of nature poetry among women poets. First, nature offered a wealth of subject matter, easily accessible to a large number of nonprofessional women poets from all over Britain. Second, some male poets willingly left the field relatively clear for the poetic treatment of certain natural subjects. This is not to say that male poets turned their backs on nature subjects – witness the countless natural and animal poems by John Clare (1793–1864), Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) and Thomas Hardy (1840–1928). However, it would appear that male poets left the way clear for the treatment of certain themes that they may have deemed too “feminine”, preferring

¹ Amy Levy went to Newnham College, Cambridge in 1879, then led an active, though brief, life as secretary of the Beaumont Fund, a charitable organisation. Constance Naden was a student at Mason Science College, contributed articles to scientific periodicals and supported the physician and feminist Elizabeth Garrett Anderson’s hospital for women until her untimely death.

to concentrate on other subjects that better matched their own preoccupations. This is precisely the case with some modest natural creatures – weeds, seaweeds, wild flowers, pets, country birds – that abound in women’s poetry, but are largely absent in the poetry of male contributors. True, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) spotted the weed among the grass and admired its three cup-like flowers in ‘The Woodspurge’; yet he only pays special attention to the weed because it mirrors his psychic state and may soothe his own depression, not as a vector of moral, spiritual or ecological themes.

Nature poems by male and female poets often highlight the same motifs and even share the same titles, emphasising a possible dialogue between male and female poets through this very theme; sometimes they even share the same fears, desires or obsessions. Yet the way they address natural topics is generally very different. Thus, while Tennyson and Nesbit express common interest for suburban gardens, the Poet Laureate apparently does not share the Fabian’s concerns about the city sprawl. Similarly, Tennyson’s erotic intentions to imprison Maud in ‘Come into the Garden, Maud’ are at odds with the aims of Christian and evolutionist poet Isabella Southern (dates unknown), eager to release women from their green prisons. Comparing poems by male and female poets in this field may reveal converging ideas but also brings to light considerable differences as far as the relation with the natural world is concerned. Indeed, the confrontation with male poets will help understand just what it meant to be a *female* nature-lover in Victorian England and what significance Victorian women accorded to the different aspects of the natural world, ranging from the well-ordered suburban garden or city centre park on the one hand to the untamed wilderness or barren waste on the other. In other words, this study argues that women’s nature poetry cannot but be studied meaningfully without taking into account the gender perspective.

Most of the themes explored by Victorian women do not vary radically from the main topics addressed by Romantic poets. Indeed, early and mid-Victorians were still devotees to the nature poetry of their predecessors, as proved by the generous presence of Wordsworth’s poems in anthologies and in Victorian gift books and annuals. Women poets wrote their flower and bird poems drawing on a wealth of Romantic nature verse. Evidence for that is provided by the countless allusions to the poems they drew their inspiration from, the daisy poems of Wordsworth (1770–1850), the bird nest poems of Clare or the rose poems of Blake (1757–1827). Most Romantics were still alive when early Victorians started publishing their books of poems. According to Stephen Gill, Mary Howitt (1799–1888) met Wordsworth on several occasions (117). Jonathan Bate notes that, like Eliza Cook (1818–1889), Howitt visited John Clare in the asylum (508). Victorian women poets had several common points of engagement with their male predecessors as far as the natural world and nature poems were concerned. They felt the need for a conversation with nature, convinced that poetry provided a means of channelling moral sensitivity in an era of industrialisation and urbanisation. Both groups also felt drawn towards ‘the incidents of common life’, as Wordsworth had famously put it in the preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (174), and believed

that nature's beauties were best transcribed in simple verse, although the reasons why some Victorian amateurs eschewed highly formal verse forms were as much sociological as aesthetic. Keegan's work demonstrates that what made the poetry of Clare and other labouring-class poets of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century different from that of middle- and upper-class poets of the same period was not the themes they explored so much as the approach they adopted to these themes, because their perspective of the natural world was socially committed. They did not reject poetical conventions but 'transform[ed] them, producing what might be called a hybrid discourse, articulated by speaking subjects who are aware of their cultural marginalization as they turn to nature as a resource to challenge or overcome that marginalization' (7). A similar point can be made with regard to women poets whose marginalisation did not prevent them from confronting either the current poetical conventions or the main poets of their time.

However close key themes may have been, Victorian women's worldview and literary practices were clearly different from those of their Romantic forebears. While Romantic poetry emphasised an intuitive, emotional and imaginary approach to nature, the verse of the Victorian women tended to be grounded in a more rational perspective of the natural world, stemming from close observation and an almost obsessive penchant for categories and details. While those who were inspired by William Paley's *Natural Theology* sometimes redefined the concept of nature as a healing and spiritual force, most Victorian women poets generally had a much more concrete and empirical approach to nature. For the principal Romantics, in contrast, nature poetry was essentially grounded in meditation in order to shape and illuminate the self, as they interpreted the natural world in a subjective way and transformed it through the creative power of imagination. Shelley's (1792–1822) 'To a Skylark', Keats's (1795–1821) 'Ode to a Nightingale', Wordsworth's 'To the Cuckoo' and 'To a Skylark', Charlotte Smith's (1749–1806) 'Sonnet III: To a Nightingale', all consistently present a speaker identifying with a bird, itself a metaphor for artistic freedom, creativity or spiritual attainment. Only John Clare observed nature, and birds in particular, as naturalists did, depicting more than 140 different species with a real eye for detail. He is certainly a major source of inspiration for Howitt's bird poems. For Victorian women, nature poetry stems from the *observation* rather than the contemplation of nature. Flowers and birds in poems remain autonomous individuals, playing no direct role in the construction of the poetic imagination. With a mind, a voice and social practices of their own, they seek to initiate a dialogue with the poet or with society at large, even if it is sometimes limited to duplicating the poet's ideological message.

British women poets of the Victorian era did not all choose to *resacralise* nature in an élan of Romantic anti-industrial disenchantment, nor did they offer a holistic, animistic or pantheistic vision, as did some American nature-writers of the same period or more contemporary environmentally oriented poets. In Victorian women's poetry, it is not so much that the poetic self is enraptured by its proximity to nature, but rather that the morality of the individual is enhanced by the intimate, almost physical, contact with nature. This intimacy, often inclining

towards empathy, is strengthened by better knowledge of natural history and on occasion by engaging with technological progress. Even the early Victorians, such as Howitt or Cook, came to terms with the loss of the pastoral world; however, the message of their nature poems consists in calling on the animals and plants of the natural world to rebel against the forces that dominate them. There is still scope for limiting the forces of destruction and even for moralising their increasingly urban and modern environment. The address to often humble living things and the engagement in favour of their well-being is, as expected, conveyed in simple, unadorned forms of language, through poetic forms like common metres or quatrains in iambic tetrameters. Little formal innovation is expected in these poems that generally present themselves like ballads or hymns.

The approach which involves restricting consideration to isolated natural elements, a tendency linked perhaps to the contemporary craze for scientific observation and classification, functions to destabilise and weaken the traditional cultural link held to bind women to nature. This is precisely why a conscious choice was made for this book to concentrate on how women poets engage with *individualised* features of the natural world. The focus on such elements does not entirely prevent an essentialist feminisation of aspects of the natural world, but in the hands of the poets studied in the pages which follow, this technique is used to underscore a political message inspired by the observation of the politics of nature. The final chapter on poems inspired by science will confirm this shift away from the temptation of essentialism. We will see that women poets placed nature under the microscope and on the dissecting table, investigating what lay under the surface, therefore providing a powerful challenge to those who claimed their poetry lacked depth or sophistication. It was with the eyes, tools and methods of the scientist that they scrutinised the living world and made sense, and even sometimes *political* sense, out of their scientific encounters.

It was decided to exclude certain themes from this study owing to their rarity. Such is the case, for example, with poems about oceans, marine landscapes, natural catastrophes, the universe, the four elements and mountains.² Equally, only very few poems about fruit and vegetables have come to light; a strong contrast with the veritable cornucopia of poems about plants and flowers.³ Some themes suddenly sprout and invade the poetic scene when given the appropriate soil in which to flourish. This is the case for example with tree or wood poems, very commonly penned by labouring-class poets of the nineteenth century, but dropping out of the poetic frame until returning at the close of the century with the work of such writers as Amy Levy or Charlotte Mew (1869–1928). Some bird images cherished by male Romantic poets, such as the kingfisher, the nightingale or the skylark, presented as allegories of the soul or of the poetic imagination, do not find an

² One can find only metaphorical mountains symbolising the arduous upward journey of the Christian.

³ The odd 'Sonnet to the Strawberry' was written in 1795 by the Romantic poet Helen Maria Williams (1761?–1827) and predates all the poems under scrutiny in this study.

echo in our corpus as women poets generally either cherish the pet birds of their domestic or local environment or depict birds with a truly ornithological eye.

It is important to emphasise that the list of poems chosen for this study is not intended to be an exhaustive one, given the vast number of poems published in periodicals, albums, books or anthologies and the quantity of amateur women poets, a large number of whom remain un- or underexplored by literary criticism. Encountering the same themes in the work of unconnected poets makes these poems valuable as signs of cultural exchange. Yet common subject matter does not necessarily signify a common understanding of the meaning of nature. Indeed, representations of the natural world differ significantly from one poet to another, revealing how each poet adopts similar natural images to convey very different messages. Even if a number of common themes can be underlined over the whole period, it will be shown in each chapter of this book that the poems fall into a number of distinctive periods within the Victorian era. There are sometimes very discernible shifts, for example following the development of the animal question or before and after the publication of Darwin's evolutionary theories.

While it may be considered that nature is an "appropriate" topic for women poets in this period, this also raises questions about the cultural power of essentialist conceptions of womanhood, which confined women firmly in the natural sphere. Such views were often shared, in part at least, by women poets themselves, attracted by the opportunity of exploring the byways of nature poetry. Women poets would seize that opportunity and the literary space offered to them, investing themselves emotionally and creatively in the natural world and the flora and fauna which inhabited it. At the same time, as poem-writing became a social activity with a purpose rather than solely the expression of artistic privilege shared by a group of educated upper-class male or female poets, women from all social strata felt empowered to commit themselves to it.

As Kathryn Ledbetter has demonstrated in her study of Victorian periodical poetry, poems written by women in this period had clear utilitarian aims that supplement and sometimes supersede artistic ambition: '[P]oetry has specific moral and political purposes that outreach any display of brilliant technique, celebrated authorities, or sophisticated claims as high literature' (xii). Lorraine Janzen Kooistra confirms this shift from aesthetics to politics once poems were published in gift books: 'a gift book is a "version" of a poetic text that is socially rather than authorially sanctioned' (29). This study will show that what Ledbetter and Janzen Kooistra suggest about periodical and gift book poetry is equally valid with respect to poetry published in other formats. While it is beyond doubt that the publication contexts shape the production as well as the reception of poems, it could be argued that the objective of *all* types of women's poems, whether published in albums, literary annuals, gift books or periodicals, went beyond such aesthetic considerations.

The expression of emotion within nature poems is certainly not inconsistent with poetry's performative function. What is distinctive about women's nature verse, however, as Ledbetter observes, is that it often chooses to call attention

explicitly to its *aims*. Without minimising the central importance of femininity and feminine values to the identity of their work, the women poets to be studied in this book considered their verse to perform a *social* function. It goes without saying that hymns to the beauty of the natural world were still an important theme of work by women poets, leading to reflections on existentialist questions and on the link between nature and art. However, poetry also provided authors with a forum for engaging in a dialogue with wider issues and forces, thereby helping them to construct their own identity. They knew “how to do things with poems”.

Instead of totally embracing the conception of nature as a source of beauty and inspiration, female poets of this era used the medium to elaborate their political, though generally moderate, messages concerning gender roles and identities. The specificities of the poem give a particular focus to the study of the link between women and nature. Sometimes that relationship is strengthened, sometimes it is prised apart, but in either case the poem represents a powerful tool to explore the gender–nature link.

The nature poem in particular will be considered here as a form of *social and cultural discourse*. Whereas paeans to nature continued to feature in the female poetic repertoire, in practice poems on the natural world and its flora and fauna rarely confined themselves to the mere contemplation of the mysteries of nature. The discourse constructing nature with patriotic, womanly or virtuous features or, on the contrary, with liberal or democratic ones, was interwoven with both the codes of poetry composition and the rules of femininity. The poems presented as social practices are evidence of the female poet’s awareness of the political potential of the nature surrounding her. It is easy to envisage gardening poems as conflict zones because gardening has always been part of the social and economic life, from medieval herb gardens to modern community gardens and allotments. It is more problematical perhaps to conceive of flowers and birds as agents of rebellion.

The purpose of this book is to explore the treatment of unassuming, yet most revealing, themes within modest compositions. Most of the poems examined here are short, which is the format of most Victorian women’s nature poems, and not particularly innovative in terms of metre, rhythm, rhyme or stylistic devices. According to Isobel Armstrong, the simplicity, the conventionality and the sentimental nature of the female poem often hide its true ambitions and purposes. For her, the doubleness of the poem occurs when women poets have to wear a mask that causes ‘a travesty of femininity’ (*Victorian Poetry* 326) necessary for women poets. The mask of simplicity was certainly worn by the professional poets who singled out very simple flowers or animals and tended toward the formulaic for ideological reasons, sometimes turning the poem into a kind of tract, while casting aside more ambitious subject matters and forms. For the less-educated or amateur poets, birds, pets and flowers of their local environment were an accessible source of inspiration. Ordinary themes, explored through unchallenging poetic forms, may also reveal a double message. For both the professionals and the

amateurs, ‘the simpler the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it’ (324).

The period over which this study ranges also requires some explanation. The greatest concentration of female nature poetry belongs to the period between the 1850s and the 1890s, though there are earlier examples, like poet and editor Mary Howitt or Chartist poet Eliza Cook who used downtrodden animals and plants in her poetry to make political points. However, it was not until the mid-Victorian period that gender-related questions came to occupy centre stage in women’s naturalist poetry, as appeals to the love – or awe-inspiring muses of Romantic nature or Arcadia – began to give way to a more realistic, pragmatic and at times scientific concern about nature. There are even what might be termed proto-ecological poems from this period, though the numbers involved are small. The representation of nature in the Victorian era gradually acquired a more practical and political dimension precisely because it began to draw on wider social and cultural themes. It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the potentially subversive gender implications of nature poetry were explored with particular vigour by women poets, whereas at the end of the century and in the Edwardian period, aesthetic trends encouraged a return to a more conventional reading of the gender–nature link, with women commonly represented as flowers, and poems as a form of floral arrangement.

Could the disappearance of politically committed nature poetry be linked to the appearance of professional women gardeners from 1895 onwards? It is certainly a possibility. During the International Congress of Women held in London in 1899, the members of the committee discussed the importance of female professionalisation. Horticulture was chosen as one of the most appropriate occupations for women: according to one of the participants, Mrs Shafter Howard, it was a healthy outdoor activity requiring ‘careful and intelligent management and close attention to details’ (155); women were presented as particularly gifted when it came to pruning. All the correspondents contributed enthusiastic comments about their successful businesses as professional gardeners. As long as the ordering of nature was in the hands of male nurserymen and landscape architects, women poets were more likely to present their own independent vision of the natural world. With the opening of gardening schools for girls and the advent of prominent female gardeners such as Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932), Ellen Willmott (1858–1934), Frances Wolseley (1872–1936) or later Beatrix Havergal (1901–1980), writing on gardening was increasingly left to female “professional experts”. That being said, some women writers continued to write simultaneously politically motivated and nature-oriented poems, such as the late-Victorian poet Edith Nesbit, who wrote most of her socialist and nature poems in the 1890s and early 1900s, including those questioning the meaning of suburban natural spaces. Her gender- and class-conscious verse drew attention to the exploitation of the natural world by those in positions of power, for example focusing on the topic of rampant urbanisation.

A few decades later, Vita Sackville-West's (1892–1962) award-winning Georgic poem *The Land* (1926) would revive the tradition of women's nature poetry writing. While this long and unique poem extols country living in Kent, its main purpose consists in instructing readers about how to cultivate the land through the seasons. Sackville-West wanted to praise nature in a very practical way as her predecessors did, insisting on the traditional work of local farmers, while denouncing the modern threats, land encroachment and war which she considered were menacing her beloved countryside. Nesbit and Sackville-West expressed their deep emotional commitment to nature through a very physical approach, insisting on horticultural and agricultural practices.

The combination of female gender and nature in this study raises the difficult issue of *selection*. The corpus used here is extensive, including a substantial body of women's nature poems that have largely escaped critical attention. Exploration of this terra incognita required the examination of the largest possible number of nature poems. Because there were so many poets, both professional and amateur, it was decided to concentrate on the most representative ones. As a result, many worthy of attention had – unfortunately – to be excluded. However, over 250 works by more than 100 women poets are examined here. Dates of birth and death are noted on the first occasion when the poet is mentioned.⁴ While well-known poets are well represented here, emphasis is placed on the production of lesser-known writers. Discourses of nature and gender are constructed from the margins of power too and indeed are often particularly interesting when approached from such a subordinate position. Major or minor women poets belonging to all social classes joined forces to shore up or challenge the discourse of domination.

Covering the whole Victorian period, this study highlights certain forgotten, yet most significant, popular poets such as Mary Howitt and working-class poet Eliza Cook belonging to the early Victorian period, and also examines, again often for the first time, the works of nonprofessional poets. A significant number of these amateur women poets are Scottish, which testifies to the enduring tradition of nature poetry in that country. Florence Boos makes a comparable remark in the introduction to her anthology of Victorian working-class women poets. She wonders why so much poetry has been preserved in Scotland compared to Wales or Cornwall (16). According to Catherine Kerrigan, the massive female representation in Scottish verse may be accounted for two factors, which in turn explains why so many women north of the border wrote nature poetry. First, Scotland's Calvinist doctrine encouraged women to write hymns and religious poems, whose symbols and images were very often drawn from nature; second, the folk tradition, still vivid until the end of the nineteenth century, was rooted in the contemplation of nature's beauties (6–7).

⁴ Most biographical indications (dates of birth and death in particular) of some lesser-known poets have been gathered from Reilly's *biobibliographies*, *Mid-Victorian Poetry 1860–1879: An Annotated Biobibliography* and *Late-Victorian Poetry 1880–1899: An Annotated Biobibliography*.

Given that these poets belong to all social strata, the study of their poetical response to cultural trends indicates that poetry was a common practice when it came to challenging social constructs. Thus, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861), Christina Rossetti and Adelaide Procter (1825–1864) to name but a few of the more well-known contributors, rub shoulders with minor poets; the sporadic, but still very valuable, contributors like middle-class poets Louisa Campbell (dates unknown) and Scottish poet Jeanie Morison (dates unknown) or a certain ‘Violet’ (dates unknown), the penname of Mrs D.H. Gordon, a late-Victorian factory worker from Dumferline, join forces with the better-known poets of the 1890s: the socialist Edith Nesbit, the aesthete poets Violet Fane (1843–1905) and A. Mary F. Robinson (1857–1944) or the Fabian May Kendall (1861–1943?). Both major and minor poets engage in rudimentary or elaborate poems with figures of power, whether in a spirit of conformity or opposition. The study of such works is not therefore intended only to celebrate its artistic value, but also its capacity to question, and in some cases subvert, the hegemonic forces that sustain gender ideologies. Indeed, we shall see that the nature poems examined here offered a valuable and valued space to non-elite voices.

The poems to be examined in the forthcoming chapters come from a variety of sources. Anthologies of Victorian women’s poetry have proved invaluable in our search for openly political and cultural poems about nature, bringing to light works by little-known as well as eminent authors. In *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (1995), Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds introduce readers to different late-Victorian poets engaged in science-related poetry such as Mathilde Blind (1841–1896), A. Mary F. Robinson and Constance Naden. Some of the prominent nature poems of Eliza Cook are also present. Similarly, *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets* (1996) edited by Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow and Cath Sharrock, presents us with key poems on ecological and political themes, including Edith Nesbit’s ‘The Despot’ or ‘The Daisies’. Some of May Kendall’s comic and pessimistic poems that challenge the prominent figure of the Victorian scientist can be discovered in Virginia Blain’s *Victorian Women Poets: A New Anthology* (2001).

The rediscovery of Victorian women poets made possible by the publication of anthologies of poetry since the 1990s has made dozens of women poets visible again. It has raised the level of awareness regarding the magnitude of the poetical writings of those who have always belonged to the elite circle of eminent and legitimate poets, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Christina Rossetti, but also of those who had been rubbed out of the cultural landscape, Adelaide Procter, Dinah Craik (1826–1887) or Emily Pfeiffer (1841–1890) to name but a few. Armstrong, Bristow and Chattock, Leighton and Reynolds, and Blain were among the first to reintroduce these forgotten poets to modern readers. This rediscovered appreciation paved the way for a vast number of studies of forgotten women poets, including books on individual poets such as Gill Gregory’s study of Procter

or Linda K. Hugues's of Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860–1911).⁵ Christina Rossetti's poetry, and in particular her Tractarian poems, has been the subject of numerous studies. Women's Christian poetry has also been the privileged focus of several studies: for example Emma Mason's book on Procter and Dora Greenwell (1821–1882) or F. Elizabeth Gray's monograph on women's devotional poetry. Not only were large number of poems by upper- and middle-class poets made available again, a raft of working-class poets have also been rediscovered, thanks to the pioneering researches of Florence Boos. There is unfortunately no convenient anthology of nature poetry by Victorian women poets. One of the aims of this present study, therefore, is to indicate the wealth and variety of verse on this theme in order to bring out the cultural and political dimensions of the myriad connections between women and nature in Victorian Britain. It will be seen that despite that variety, the theme of nature also constituted a major unifying force, capable of creating a dialogue between women poets drawn from very different social and artistic backgrounds.

Modern anthologies of women's poetry have managed to some extent to avoid the mistakes of their Victorian predecessors. A case in point in the latter case is one of the first nineteenth-century anthologies of female poetry, *The British Female Poets* (1848). According to its editor George Washington Bethune, the aim of the collection was to have 'furnished the string which binds the flowers together' (quoted in Day 68). Incidentally, an anthology is literally a posy of flowers. Poems and poets presented and arranged as flowers are very likely to belittle the importance of each artist. As for today's nature anthologies, they often end up reinforcing the pseudo-natural link, for example by constructing a gender-oriented readership and in supporting essentialist choices. For example, the 1990s series of Penhaligon-scented books of verse by fashion designer-turned-editor Sheila Pickles, provided a new take on the Victorian tradition of interweaving verse and the description of flowers. The number of male poets greatly exceeds the number of female ones in the series, which have titles like *A Victorian Posy* (1982), *The Language of Flowers* (1989) or *Forest's Robe* (1992). The cover of each title in the series is illustrated with a colourful depiction of a Victorian woman, dressed in white in a reclining chair in her garden, beautifully dressed and holding a bunch of white flowers or even clad in black and passing furtively among the branches. The use of Penhaligon scent, a traditional floral fragrance for women, removes any lingering doubts as to the intended readership for the series. Whereas men are presented as creators, women are considered to be idle and frivolous readers as well as inveterate consumers.

A few further examples extracted from the long list of anthologies and books of nature writing and verse will suffice to illustrate the very limited political scope of the editors' choices. For example, *The Language of Flowers: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (1999) or *The Language of Flowers: An Anthology of Poetry, Prose and Paintings* (2005) are interesting collections, but, like any popular and

⁵ See Gregory; Hugues; Roe; F.E. Gray.

lucrative anthology, they only present well-known and frequently reproduced works, and pay little attention to the specificity of female nature poetry. The 2005 cover of *A Celebration of Roses: An Illustrated Anthology of Verse & Prose* edited by Helen Sudell, represents a sensuous woman, draped in a vaporous dress holding a bunch of pink roses, who welcomes the reader with a wide but innocent smile. The image illustrates the double meaning of the imagery that is expected to be present in the poems: reserve and passion.

Among the countless anthologies of nature poetry, Gerry Cotter's 1988 *Natural History Verse*, deserves special attention as it covers the whole spectrum of nature poetry – domestic and wild animals, birds, insects, flowers and plants, trees, seasons and landscapes – and celebrates the work of popular or less well-known poets. As this anthology was published before the recent rediscovery of female poets from the medieval period onwards, it is not surprising perhaps that so little space is devoted to women poets. The collection does contain a few poems by Alice Meynell (1847–1922), Christina Rossetti, Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) and Mary Coleridge (1861–1907), but these cannot compete with the massed battalions of male authors. However, Cotter's inclusion of little-known poems and his concern to see the elements of the natural world represented in all their diversity does reveal how deeply rooted nature poetry is in the British poetic tradition, as his introduction underlines.

Germaine Greer's collection of poems, *Poems for Gardeners* (2003) may surprise readers expecting more poems by Victorian women. Greer explains in her introduction that the book is intended first and foremost for gardeners and that she selected poems 'in which gardens stand for themselves and are not analogues or allegories of something else' (6). Among the forty or so poets chosen, the only women who really belong to the Victorian age are the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Olive Custance (1874–1944), who married Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde's friend and lover, in 1902. While this anthology promisingly denaturalises the link between women and nature, it also reinforces the idea that only male poets can be engaged in the rational organisation of nature through the focus on gardening activities.

Reading *Garden Poems* (1996) edited by John Hollander leaves a similar impression. Extracts from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Deserted Garden' and from Christina Rossetti's 'An October Garden' are the only Victorian specimens, which tends to misrepresent the reality of this literary genre. The same remark can be made regarding two other nature anthologies also published in Everyman's collection of Pocket Poets: *Animal Poems* (1994) and *On Wings of Song: Poems about Birds* (2000). Neither book contains any work by Victorian women apart from Emily Dickinson (present in the two books) and one token poem by Christina Rossetti in the anthology of bird poetry, 'Pain or Joy', not being the best choice since it sounds rather like a reflection on love's duplicity. The ambition of this study is to change perceptions of female verse on nature, first by underlining the very large number of existing poems and second by exploring the diversity and richness of their content.

The anthologies of nature poetry referred to above fail to notice both that women were frequent contributors to the genre, and that their work reveals the personal and political involvement of poets in their own environment. The 2003 book of essays on twentieth-century female poets edited by Vicky Bertram is wittily, yet ambiguously, entitled *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*. Does it incite readers to engage in antisocial behaviour and to trample over innocent flowers like their suffragette forebears, or does it empower Wordsworth's favourite flower to start giving kicks to the male tradition of English poetry? If a mixed metaphor may be forgiven, flower power is a double-edged sword, as anthologies of nature poetry prove only too well. Does the natural connection facilitate or hinder women's access to poetry? Does it encourage a larger production of verse to the detriment of quality?

In addition to drawing on material from those invaluable anthologies of women's poetry, the vast majority of the corpus to be used in this book comes from poetry collections in book form. The study of whole poetry books made it possible to delve more into the poems of minor poets. Indeed, some of these poets would probably have been excluded from periodicals or newspapers because they did not meet the expectations of the editor or simply because it was not an option to publish several contributions by the same minor poet. Furthermore, women contributed fewer poems to journals than their male counterparts because they were often discriminated against by male editors and when they succeeded, they often used pseudonyms that makes their identification much more difficult. And the task is rendered even more complex as a very large part of periodical poetry was anonymous.⁶ Furthermore, a certain number of poems published in periodicals were reprints from books. This is not to suggest that nature poems published in gift book or periodical form are not as worthy of analysis. For example, some of Eliza Cook's poems, like those of countless other female poets, were published in distinct formats. Cook's verse was found in her own weekly miscellany for women, *Eliza Cook's Journal*, in the Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star*, in the *Literary Gazette*, in the *Weekly Dispatch* and in many other periodicals and magazines as well as in her books of poems. The reader may have been influenced into interpreting the poem in a more conventional or a more radical way according to the context and the placement on the page or the use of illustrations, since form, theme and format perfectly coalesce in these cases; however, the choice of publishing format would not radically alter the sense of Cook's message, which was to highlight the contradictions of class and gender ideologies. Thus, the political dimension of Cook's poetry does not spring from its presence in a political periodical as it is also reflected in the poems published in women's periodicals or in more elegant and bourgeois book forms. While Ledbetter is correct to emphasise the subversive power of periodical poetry to strike at the very heart of female domestic ideology, it should be remembered that poems can serve a radical purpose *whatever the publishing format*, even in the most conventional form of the

⁶ See Hobbs and Januszewski 77–8.

book of poems. That being said, the current exploration of the impressive wealth of poetry published in periodicals will undoubtedly bring to the fore invaluable poems by non-professional and local women poets.⁷

A number of valuable studies have explored the imaginative treatment of nature. *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (1977), edited by U.C. Knoepfelmacher and G.B. Tennyson, represents a comprehensive and very stimulating collection on the Victorian perception and construction of the natural world and includes a number of articles on Victorian male nature poetry. However, once again, women poets are absent, probably because the book was written more than a decade before the major rediscovery of Victorian female poets in the 1990s. Similarly in *Gardens and Grim Ravines: The Language of Landscape in Victorian Poetry* (1983), Pauline Fletcher only tackles male nature poetry of the Victorian era in the poems and novels of Alfred Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1809), Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), Robert Browning (1812–1889) and William Morris (1834–1896). Nature may seem a more difficult concept to grasp and to define than that of landscape. This may help explain why intertwining gender and landscape has been the subject of several recent books on Victorian women novelists. For example, Eithne Henson's *Landscape and Gender in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy: The Body of Nature* (2011) analyses the construction of a gender-informed imaginary landscape. Similarly, *Women, Literature and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora 1780–1870* (2011) by Judith W. Page and Elise Lawton Smith concentrates on gardens in fiction, from Hannah More and Margaret Oliphant to the Taylor sisters, among many others. The female domesticated landscape mirrors traditional social and family structures but also represents a space for self-assertion. It challenges the androcentric gaze that charts other types of (male) landscapes. Works on the relevance of feminist geography, for example Gillian Rose's *Feminism and Geography* (1993) or Pamela Moss's *Feminisms in Geography: Rethinking Space, Place, and Knowledges* (2007) have also contributed to raising awareness about women's perceptions and representations of territories.

A growing body of academic work by literary critics concerns green themes. However, these ecocritical studies tend to concentrate on modern fiction and contemporary poetry, and devote little space to the portrayal of Victorian nature in literature and even less to women's literary works. Nicholas Frankel regrets

⁷ According to Hobbs and Januszewski, between four and five million poems were published in local papers during the Victorian era and 'between a third and a half of them were original and locally produced' (65). Poetry published in other formats than the poetry books has recently raised some well-deserved attention. See Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron; Fraser, Green and Johnston; Ledbetter; Janzen Kooistra. See also the recent special issue of *Victorian Poetry* on Victorian periodical poetry (Spring 2014, 52:1). Thanks to indexes and databases and mostly to digitisation, tens of thousands of poems by local poets are currently being rediscovered, bringing fascinating new challenges and opportunities to scholars of Victorian poetry (Chapman and Ehnes 15–17).

the scarcity of literary studies on British nature poetry (630). He identifies only two major scholarly treatments of Victorian nature poetry⁸ and suggests academics should explore lesser-known Victorian poets such as George Meredith or William Morris and should also reconsider some poets from an environmental perspective. His wish to see Gerald Manley Hopkins's nature poetry analysed from an environmental angle has since been granted with the publication of an ecocritical study of his poems, John Parham's *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (2010). Another exception can be found in Bridget Keegan's excellent study, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837*, referred to earlier, that explores the ways in which poems about the environment and ecosystems – farms, gardens, hills, rivers, seas and wetlands – allowed eighteenth-century labouring-class poets to address social and aesthetic issues. It is unfortunate in this context that British ecocritical literary work has confined its interest mainly to a small number of male poets like William Wordsworth and most of all John Clare, often praised as the 'peasant poet' of nature, but has left out their female contemporaries like Mary Howitt who has not received comparable attention.

The number of studies concerning the place of nature in Victorian women's poetry is negligible, with the exception of a small number of books targeting particular poets, the most famous ones unsurprisingly being the best represented. However, very few women poets in fact would have made it into green literary studies without the groundbreaking work of Barbara T. Gates. Her research has done much to denaturalise the female discourse on nature thus opening up new vistas for the cultural analysis of poetry. Her anthology of women's nature-writing draws attention not only to unfamiliar nature poems by the greatest women poets, but also rediscovers works by poets who were well known during their lifetimes but are little read today, like working-class writer Eliza Cook or the late Victorian poet Mary Coleridge, as well as verse by minor or amateur poets, such as war correspondent and feminist Florence Dixie (1857–1905) or the Irish hymn writer Cecil Frances Alexander (1818–1895). Gates's previous book on Victorian women and nature, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (1998), provides very few examples of poems by Victorian women but does legitimise the female voice in this domain, whether scientific, horticultural or conservationist. Moreover the book offers the perfect cultural background against which to explore the political messages of nature poems.

Renewed interest in gender-oriented gardens as social constructions and sites of conflict has stimulated recent research into the novel, leading for example to the rediscovery of the late nineteenth-century garden memoirs of Elizabeth Von Arnim (1866–1941), *Elizabeth in her German Garden* (1898) and *The Solitary Summer* (1899). Even today, gardens and women continue to lead interconnected

⁸ The first of these is Richard Bevis, *The Road to Egdon Heath*, a work that only engages with major male Victorian poets. The second is Barbara T. Gates's remarkable book, *In Nature's Name*.

lives on the TV screen, for example in the form of two women gardener-sleuths who feature in the ITV series *Rosemary and Thyme*, who investigate murder cases in the shrubbery and among the herbaceous borders. A new twist on the detective story which delights in leading readers (or viewers) up the garden path. Indeed, gardens are such a flexible subject that they can incorporate any contemporary issue and interest. The existence of poetry exploring the social implications of the garden and the natural world is perfectly consistent with this adaptability.

Turning now to studies of the animal world, here again the field has expanded rapidly over the last decade, seeking to unravel the complexities and nuances of human–animal relations, and the efforts made (or not made) to secure the latter’s welfare. Greg Garrard’s chapter on animals in *Ecocriticism* discusses the major critical contributions to animal studies. As for cultural studies of Victorian literary texts, they have explored the range of anthropomorphic representations of animals in order to better understand their social and cultural backgrounds. This body of research tends to concentrate on Victorian fiction. Harriett Ritvo’s *The Animal Estate* (1989) was one of the first major books to analyse the anthropomorphic use of animals as metaphors for nineteenth-century aspirations and conflicts. Pets, for example in Kathleen Kete’s *The Beast in the Boudoir* (1994) or in Erica Fudge’s *Pets* (2008) have surprisingly drawn much less attention than more exotic and ferocious beasts, in the jungle or behind the bars of zoos.

Two major contributions to the study of animal stories that have fuelled this research are Tess Cosslett’s *Talking Animals in British Children’s Fiction 1786–1914* (2006) and Deborah D. Morse and Martin A. Danahay’s *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2007), a collection of cultural essays on various figures of domination over animals, both domestic or wild. While Morse and Danahay’s collection offers a wealth of information about the representation of animals in fiction, Cosslett’s innovative study chooses to focus on talking animals only, a particularly useful way of understanding the Victorian taste for animal autobiographies. Cosslett’s book also includes some stimulating analyses of poetry. While a large number of animal studies concern the representation of wild animals as metaphors of the Other, too few works are devoted to the role played by pets in the lives of their poet mistresses. One of the exceptions to the rule is *Shaggy Muses* (2007) by Maureen Adams, which concentrates on the four-legged companions of three Victorian poets: Emily Brontë’s Keeper, Emily Dickinson’s Carlo and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Flush. Although writing animal poetry was a common practice among Victorian women poets, no comprehensive study has ever been produced and there is still much room for studies of Victorian pets, birds and wild animals. Adams’ book is useful but confines itself to a biographical treatment of the subject. Of greater relevance to the purposes of the present study is David Banash’s contribution to the collection edited by Mary S. Pollock and Catherine Rainwater, *Figuring Animals* (2004). Banash’s chapter discusses *Whymchow: Flame of Love*, a book of poems dedicated to the beloved chow dog of the poets Katherine Bradley

(1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), a literary couple better known as ‘Michael Field’ (195–205).

Another key theme in this book is the complex and fascinating relationship between Victorian women and natural science. This is explored in *Natural Eloquence: Women Reinscribe Science* (1997), a collection of essays edited by Barbara T. Gates and Ann B. Shteir. Indeed, investigating the links between scientific discourse (including popular science) and Victorian literature is a thriving field, starting with *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983) by Gillian Beer or the excellent collection of essays, *Victorian Science in Context* (1997) edited by Bernard Lightman. His *Victorian Popularizers of Science* presenting major Victorian female popularisers such as Eliza Brightwen (1830–1906), Margaret Gatty (1809–1873) and Arabella Buckley (1840–1929), Laurence Talairach’s edition of *Science in the Nursery: The Popularisation of Science in Britain and France, 1761–1901* and a 2011 special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, ‘Women Write the Natural World’, edited by Lizzie Harris McCormick explore how women adapted existing literary formats to make science accessible to a wider audience.

Too few studies, however, have been published on Victorian women’s science poetry. The chapter on science by Daniel Brown in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (2000) provides a useful introduction to the influence of science on Victorian poetry, but the study only concerns major male poets. He has also published recently *The Poetry of Victorian Scientists: Style, Science and Nonsense*, a study of scientific poems by “proper” scientists such as James Clerk Maxwell or John Tyndall but could not include women who had been excluded from scientific circles and were therefore very unlikely to write science poems. With the impact of Darwin’s scientific observations on late nineteenth-century representations, the 1890s saw women poets enter the debate on evolution in significant numbers. The scholarly interest in the field of the literary representations of evolution is considerable, with a rather large number of very recent publications testifying to today’s discovery of their rich contribution to the genre of scientific poetry and to the discussions surrounding the theory of evolution. Helen Groth’s chapter in *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian* (1999), ‘Victorian Women Poets and Scientific Narratives’, provides a remarkable reading of Mathilde Blind’s evolutionist verse epic ‘The Ascent of Man’. Laura Otis’s wide-ranging anthology, *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (2002), presents a substantial number of valuable scientific poems by the late-Victorian poets, Constance Naden, Emily Pfeiffer and May Kendall. A 2003 special issue of *Victorian Poetry* devoted to science poetry constitutes a thorough presentation of scientific exploration in verse, but only one article by Marion Thain is devoted to women’s poetry, ‘“Scientific Wooing”: Constance Naden’s Marriage of Science and Poetry’. John Holmes’s thought-provoking *Darwin’s Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* presents how poets over the last 150 years have addressed the question of Darwinism. Among many poets who have engaged with evolution or Darwinism, three late Victorian women, Naden, Blind and Robinson occupy a key

place in his wide-ranging study.⁹ Finally, Catherine Birch's admirable doctoral thesis (2011) on evolutionary feminism in late Victorian women's poems confirms the current preoccupation for women's scientific poetry.

Each chapter of this book explores a different theme examined by Victorian women nature poets to apprehend the power struggle at play behind poetic conventions. It is not just a question of sketching in the cultural background to particular poems. It is vital for the approach being followed here to conceive of the act of poetry writing as a cultural and social practice in itself. Starting from this premise, Chapter 1 considers how women were conceived to relate to the flowers and the gardens and to the inhabitants of the natural world. This relationship was interpreted by women themselves in many different ways, and any discussion of their poetry must begin with an appreciation of how this nature–gender link is constructed. Whether individual poets choose or not to distance themselves from conventional essentialist views on gender, gender roles and perspectives on society, all viewed natural affinity as the basis for the construction of their political message. But the link they create with nature is particularly strong with small and apparently worthless plants and animals. Most women poets over the whole period seem to share a common interest in humble and unassuming flowers and animals, considered as best representing their own social and literary status. But signs of cultural resistance start being perceived behind the references to harmless plants and animals and behind the conventional construction of gender through natural affinities.

Chapter 2 will focus on poems *as* flowers and poems *on* flowers, examining just how floral images supported the dominant Victorian construction of womanhood. By unravelling the celebrated language of flowers, this chapter will first aim to determine the extent to which the works of Victorian women poets served to legitimise or challenge that dominant social construction. Flower poems might support the commonly shared view of woman as a delicate specimen speaking the traditional language of flowers. Indeed, most flower poems often conform to conventional ideals of femininity, reinforcing the virtues that also help legitimise their existence and the authority of their authors. The focus on smallness as a device to discuss value is a key to understanding floral poems and also what lies 'underneath the bough' to refer to the title of one of Michael Field's books of poems. Resistance to various dominant cultural features is also a characteristic of some flower poems, indicating the polymorphic character of floral imagery, capable of carrying a variety of religious, moral, social or sexual messages. Flower poems of this type confer new significations on *floral signs*, thus de-familiarising the association between women, flowers, smallness and beauty. Blooming in the midst of Victorian gentility, the flowers cultivated in women's poetry are sometimes meant to prick the stability of social constructs.

⁹ Much has been written recently on Naden's philosophy and poetry as well as her feminist commitment to science. See for example, Murphy; Thain, 'Scientific Wooing' and 'Birmingham's Women Poets'; Kaston Tange.

The scope is wider in Chapter 3 as the whole garden is examined in poems that negotiate the space given over to privacy and femininity. The garden is constructed as women's own private space by means of a whole set of imaginary connections from simple emotional affinity to physical ties, all perceived as an extension of the self. The garden, bearing a strong resemblance to a revisited *hortus conclusus*, is frequently seen, at least at the outset, as a refuge but soon turns into a source of unexpected and at times unorthodox opportunity. Rural and urban gardens question long-standing representations. Indeed, the depiction of private rural gardens as imaginary pastoral representations of a golden age will often be a matter of controversy. Similarly, their urban equivalents will confirm that the city/country divide is not a valid dichotomy any more, at least in the eyes of late-Victorian poets. The poems engaging with nature in urban or suburban gardens probe the power struggle emerging from the disconcerting confrontation of town and countryside. These well-organised pockets of green sometimes reinforce the power of the city, capable of reining in the expansion of nature, but at the same time they challenge the social order by weakening such pillars of Victorian society as private property and law and order. This survey of garden poems intends to shift perceptions of this body of work by indicating the existence of poems that challenge gender expectations instead of merely conforming to them. The concept of "horti-counterculture" coined by George McKay, is a key to understanding some poems that present side-by-side two cultures, diametrically opposed on the surface: the respectable activity of flower arranging and support for social unrest. Gardens may also host colonies of guests, uninvited or not, that destabilise cultural practices and conventions. Do fairies and gardeners, both in their way "natural" creatures in the garden, safeguard the environment or do they threaten its fragile atmosphere of serenity? Finally, all sorts of gardening activities are contained in women's poems, but that of *weeding* stands out as a recurrent theme over the whole period. Whether one should get rid of noxious or useless plants for reasons of morality or, on the contrary, consider that vegetal misfits deserve to survive or even thrive, are questions addressed in weed poems that interrogate the meaning of worth, value and legitimacy, core subject matters in Victorian women's poetry.

Often siding with society's underdogs in their social poetry, women poets could not but write about the lot of their feathered or furry companions. Chapter 4 will consider animal poetry, a subgenre particularly favoured by Victorian women poets. The representation of the woman poet petting her lapdog with one hand and composing her poems with the other is a cultural construction that tends to trivialise female creativity. However, it is striking that a substantial number of women poets did indeed have animal companions and wrote about them. As women poets and animals are seen as having common interests, they often speak with a common voice. Women poets speak the language of suffering animals they consider as allies in the face of domination. In animal poems, the creature becomes the poet's double, a friend or rather an ally: an emotional prop for the bereaved, a love substitute for the despondent or even a sexual surrogate for the frustrated. In this chapter, a special section is dedicated to bird poems, by far

the largest category of animal poetry from the period, with particular attention devoted to those works that emerged from the ongoing debate on bird protection from the 1860s. Whether by confirming animal commodification and their use to serve women's needs or by exposing their exploitation, through the construction of animal identity and the exploration of humanitarian discourses – two trends that coexist ambivalently in the Victorian period (Mangum, 'Animal Angst' 18) – women poets transformed their cultural proximity with pets and local animals into a powerful force against those structures of oppression seeking to subjugate all sorts of vulnerable creatures. That support for subordinate creatures could hardly be achieved without the creation of an anthropomorphic voice. Paradoxically, in seeking to break the bonds of affinity and convention, there was the danger that such anthropomorphism could lead to *more* rather than less control over animals.

The final chapter is devoted to the analysis of a substantial number of science-related poems. Among those contributing poetry on this theme were – as might be expected – female scientific professionals, but this group also included women sympathetic to the aims and ideals of science, and indeed others simply interested in exploring its place in modern society and its implications in other fields of study, such as religion. Science popularised in poems for a younger or a female audience had a strong cultural impact in broadening their readers' worldview. Science poems of the mid-period certainly supported the arguments of natural theology by enhancing the mysteries and treasures of a nature seen as serving the purposes of God. But women poets did not solely address science from a conceptual or metaphorical perspective since, as we noted earlier, they had a penchant and a talent for scientific experimentation and empirical observation too. It was in the fossils of the long-gone Behemoth, in the very heart of the plant and even in the molecular structure of the cell that they looked for the meaning of life. The late-Victorian poetry was stimulated by the controversial scientific disputes of their day, notably after the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* in 1871. The notion of evolution is at the heart of many poems of the period, whether they support or deny its validity. The malleability of the Darwinian theory provided ample food for thought and creative reflection, feeding into female perspectives on social and political issues grounded in the notion of a possible unachieved evolution. Some women denounced the social repercussions or restrictions resulting from scientific progress. As they integrate scientific codes in their poetry, women poets elaborated a female response to scientific discourse, thus challenging the very foundations of scientific debate and restoring elements of morality in the scientific discourse as they entered, through the back door of science poetry as it were, into the political debate fuelled by the evolution controversy. Their science poetry provides conclusive scientific evidence, showing that they did not content themselves with contemplating nature's beauties or seeking confirmation for their "natural affinities". They really wanted to understand natural mechanisms through a new methodical approach to nature and draw their own conclusions which often contradicted the cultural constructs that had made them unsuitable practitioners.

Posies of violets, weeds, worms, canaries, fossilised ichthyosaurs and stuffed dogs, cottage gardens and Victoria Park – here are some examples of the wide range of nature-related representations encountered in Victorian women’s poetry. Looking for inspiration in their immediate environment, they reconstructed the natural world in poems that raise fundamental questions concerning the validity and the scope of cultural representations of nature from a female perspective, whether they ultimately confirm or undermine them. It may seem paradoxical to consider that viewing social issues through such a narrow field of vision and even sometimes through a microscope could be an empowering, even liberating experience. However, concentrating on the most vulnerable or insecure inhabitants of the natural world or on popular natural spaces was often Victorian women’s only possibility of participating in the broader debates of their day. Through their poems about the ordinary, the unostentatious and the unassuming – unlikely candidates perhaps for resistance and rebellion – women were able to engage with issues generally reserved to those in positions of power. The analysis of the cultural implications and resonances of this verse in the following chapters will, it is hoped, allow the modern reader to appreciate the variety and depth of Victorian women poets’ perspectives on nature, perspectives which have all too often been underrated, misunderstood or simply ignored.

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