

**Ecofeminist Whispers:**

**The Interrogation of “Feminine Nature” in Mathilde Blind’s Short Poetry**

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<1>Prominent poet and women’s rights advocate Mathilde Blind remarked in 1891 upon “feminine nature, of which as yet we know so little,” averring that “most of our knowledge comes to us second-hand, through the medium of men with their cut-and-dried theories as to what women are or ought to be” (*The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff* 695). Blind’s initial phrase citing “feminine nature” can be read as doubly significant from our vantage point more than a century later, for a segment of her work questions through a prescient ecofeminist lens the problematic treatment of both women and nature within Victorian patriarchal culture.<sup>(1)</sup> Nature “had always been an inspiration” for Blind, a memoirist maintained, and provided “exquisite delight” (Garnett 38). In an 1886 essay, however, Blind noted the societal construction of nature in asserting that “representative poems of the world seem to body forth the view of Nature, which is essentially the product of their age and nation” (“Shelley’s View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin’s”). Also the product of an era and locale, of course, are perceptions of women, which Blind found in her own time to be utterly stultifying. Blind commented about “the present social conditions” that “the wish to live, of letting whatever energies you possess have their full play in action, is continually thwarted by the impediments and restrictions of sex” (*The Journal* 695). As the memoirist recalled, Blind reviled “the apparent consecration by law of the principle of woman’s inferiority to man” (Garnett 18). Through several short poems, Blind eloquently speaks about the oppression of both nature and women in subtle yet convincing fashion, building from the cultural binding of the two concepts that the term “feminine nature” inadvertently foregrounds. Blind’s work takes on distinct importance not only for explicating these views in a compelling manner and also for serving as a precursory ecofeminist voice, but also because her stunning verse emerges during a vital cultural moment.

<2>A glance at Victorian views of nature and women prevalent in that particular moment provides an instructive prelude to an analysis of Blind’s short poetry. First, in regard to

appraisals of nature specifically, the Victorian age was witnessing early signs of ecological sensitivity in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, a response that has garnered increasing critical attention in our own environmentally challenged age. As Barri J. Gold states, “Scholars have done considerable work to locate the roots of modern environmentalism among the Victorians” (216), with John Parham, for instance, “propos[ing] a ‘Victorian ecology’ that ... offers a rich mine of sources” (Parham 156). Literary figures were no exception in entering the ecological conversation.<sup>(2)</sup> Among the most prominent through multiple writings, John Ruskin asserted in *Fors Clavigera* that his myopic contemporaries “have shut the sun out with smoke” and converted a landscape painted “in green, and blue, and all imaginable colours” into a bleak brown terrain (86). Indeed, “the horrible nests, which you call towns, are little more than laboratories for the distillation into heaven of venomous smokes and smells” (91). Instead of “planting in all soils the trees which cleanse and invigorate earth and atmosphere,” Victorians have caused harm “by ravage of woods”; instead of English waters teeming with life and beauty, self-serving Philistines have created “a common sewer” (92). Suggesting environmental respect, Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* asks of nature, “Art not thou the ‘Living Garment of God’?” (150). In noting “the Volume of Nature,” the text asserts that its “Author and Writer is God” and wonders, “Dost thou, does man, so much as well know the Alphabet thereof?” (205). Later in the century, Gerard Manley Hopkins laments in “Binsey Poplars” the destruction of aspen trees, “All felled, felled, are all felled” with none “spared, not one.” Hopkins adds, “O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew- / Hack and rack the growing green!” The regrettable result becomes evident when “[a]fter-comers cannot guess the beauty been.” William Morris’ utopian *News from Nowhere* poses the question, “[D]on’t you find it difficult to imagine the times when this little pretty country was treated by its folk as if it had been an ugly characterless waste, with no delicate beauty to be guarded?” The speaker wonders, “How could people be so cruel to themselves?” (162).

<3>Second, in regard to Victorian views of women specifically, Blind’s work appeared during the stirrings of female resistance to constraints on opinions, conduct, and opportunities that would soon erupt in the controversy over the New Woman. Blind’s poetic efforts continued during the tumultuous period in which this cultural and literary figure argued for reforms in education, the professions, and marital laws that would broaden the limited scope facing a *fin de siècle* female. As Blind’s memoirist observed, the poet would “meditate upon [the female condition] and discuss it by speech and writing” (Garnett 18). Reinforcing Blind’s dedication to women’s issues, the *Athenaeum* contended in her eulogy that “the chains with which women are loaded by convention irritated her, and no wonder” (“Miss Blind”). Although claiming with false optimism that the “period when the old idea of woman’s submissiveness to man is fled,” the *Athenaeum* regretted that it was “hardly the period in which a woman like Mathilde Blind—a woman of genius—daring of thought, and independent of attitude—can find herself at ease.” Blind would add a crucial dimension to the churning debate over the Woman Question by

addressing the damaging linkage of women and nature evidenced by stifled subjectivity and immutable existence.

<4>Modern ecofeminism echoes such concerns about nature and women, although the theory has received sharp attacks since its initiation decades ago.<sup>(3)</sup> Negative reaction has centered on one thread of ecofeminism that is deeply essentialist; that version affirms the longstanding belief of women having a special relationship with nature, with its conventional designation as female, that men cannot achieve, in part through the cyclical rhythms of the reproduction process. Yet ecofeminism is composed of many strands, and a very different trajectory that discards essentialism offers highly productive insights into literary endeavors penned long before the term “ecofeminism” was ever coined.<sup>(4)</sup> A major advantage of ecofeminism is that it recognizes important similarities in the oppression of both nature and women stemming from their supposed unique relationship conferred upon them by a male-dominated society.<sup>(5)</sup> As Carolyn Merchant asserts, “[w]omen and nature have an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history” (*Death of Nature* xv). The supposed connection leads to the gendered dualism traditionally drawn to align men with culture in a privileged relationship that relegates the nature/women pairing to inferiority and otherness. Culture devalues nature in the binarism, notes Sherry B. Ortner (40), for “the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes” (41). Rosemarie Tong points out that “because women have been ‘naturalized’ and nature has been ‘feminized,’ it is difficult to know where the oppression of one ends and the other begins.” In effect, “[w]hatever man may do to nature, he may also do to woman” (238).

<5>Blind’s short poetry interrogates the problematic coupling of nature and women on several fronts, anticipating ecofeminist arguments in such ways as the following. Nature suffers egregious harm, the poetry contends, through the prevalent perception of human superiority and the enthusiastic acceptance of a rigid logic validating masculine domination. Nature is therefore consigned to a passive, vulnerable, and marginalized role deemed an appropriate positioning. Women are damaged by these deleterious assumptions as well, for they justify subjugation, repressed subjectivity, and diminishment through an ostensible female essence. This essay will explore four of Blind’s brief poems in depth to assess these ecofeminist notions and their ramifications. My discussion begins with the domination of feminized nature revealed in a trio of poems and proceeds to a verse that provides unsettling appraisals of the Victorian woman’s disabling bond with nature. These works are cautionary tales that offer few prospects for optimism unless cultural attitudes are drastically altered.

<6>The earliest of the verses, the 1867 “Entangled,” examines, rejects, and overturns the masculine assumption of rightful human dominance over nature while urging a genuine respect

for and recognition of the natural world's own integrity.<sup>(6)</sup> "Entangled" opens with the speaker assuming a definitive stance as the superior element in a human/nature dichotomy with the privileging of a robust "I" as initial word and grammatical subject of the stanza-long sentence:

I stood as one enchanted,  
All in the forest deep:  
As one that wond'ring wanders,  
Dream-bound within his sleep.

The speaker's syntactical positioning—coupled with an authoritative upright physical stance—assumes an unquestioned command over nature. This presumption also takes on a gendered valence, in that the speaker invokes a masculine pronoun in a self-reflexive metaphorical comparison to provide another approbation of the culture's ubiquitous belief in nature's marginalized status. Yet these textual presumptions become destabilized even as they are inscribed, for the stanza's final lines presage that a very different response to nature will unfold through a diminishment of the speaker's power along with the corollary augmentation of the natural world's potency. The reference to enchantment presupposes an entity with the capability to overwhelm human presence in a manner that escapes rational understanding or effectual resistance. The final two lines of the stanza continue to reveal nature's puissance in that this nonhuman world has already begun transforming the speaker beyond a rigid logic of masculinized thought to an uncertain and impressionable liminality of sleep in which rationality ebbs and otherwise unimagined ideas can quietly emerge.

<7>As the second stanza unfolds, human authority has seemingly been restored, in that indications of human agency—footsteps and voices—occupy the subject position:

A thousand rustling footsteps  
Pattered upon the ground;  
A thousand whisp'ring voices  
Made the wide silence, sound.

The movement of the footsteps mimics the sounds of an army on the march, with soldiers conversing in low tones among themselves. The impression that human dominance has been regained through these militaristic images seems to extend into the following stanza as the voices sustain their communication. The impression of reinstated authority is breaking down in both stanzas, however, with the second stanza gaining its meaning retrospectively through a teleological reading of the third:

Some murmured deep and deeper,  
Like waves in solemn seas;

Some breathèd sweet and sweeter,  
Like elves on moon-lit leas.

The third stanza evinces an ongoing breakdown of linguistic capacity, a hallmark of ostensible human superiority over the natural world, in that whispers deteriorate into murmurs before speech dissolves into the nonlinguistic act of respiration. Instead of human authority, the stanzas reveal that nature is the agent here.<sup>(7)</sup> The pattering footsteps elicit the movements of woodland creatures, the whispering voices mimic the sounds of breezes, and the resultant sound emanating from the silence reveals the workings of nature. Furthermore, the poem has moved considerably from the upright posture of the speaker in the opening phrase (“I stood”) to the debased level of the leas. The customary designation of nature as female emanates from the stanza as well through the moonlight being cast on the land, and coupled with the simile referring to fanciful elves, contributes to a slippage of dominance from the socially accepted masculine discourse on nature to a startlingly different perception. Nature, not “Man,” has taken on the subject position in each syntactical unit of the two stanzas. The transformation is not one to be feared, the soft alliteration of the abundant /s/ and /l/ sounds assures, and the triple similes in the first three stanzas create a symbiotic harmony between humanity and nature rather than a threatening scenario.

<8>As the poem progresses to the next stanza and the beginning of the fifth, the intermingling of human traits with natural elements intensifies while foliage assumes the subject position:

Tall ferns, washed down in sunlight,  
    Beckoned with fingers green;  
Tall flowers nodded strangely,  
    With white and glimm’ring sheen;  
  
They sighed, they sang so softly,  
    They stretched their arms to me;

. . . . .

Intriguingly, the “tall” ferns and flowers adopt the standing posture of the speaker in the first stanza, yet an ominous note appears with the sunlight’s effect. As a traditional masculine image, sunlight seems to counter the influence of the moonlight in stanza three in that the descending movement implied by the “wash[ing] down” of the ferns suggests an overwhelming force. Feminized nature seems resilient to the masculine domination, however, in that personifying predicates and nouns reveal that the ferns summon the speaker with their vegetative digits, like a gestural command; the flowers appear to be making a judgment with their nods; and the plants continue to exert agency, again imitating human behavior, as they “stretched their arms.” Contributing to nature’s agency in the poem are the varied predicates

suggestive of a precursory human speech—the whispering and murmuring noted earlier, joined by sighing and singing—which present a form of language, one that by implication needs to be heeded since nature’s utterances are not only foregrounded but the sole form of speech acts traced in the poem. In conferring this linguistic capability, the poem complicates the human/nature binary whereby only the former part of the oppositional relationship is accorded the ability to speak. Though the two forms of “speech” are certainly distinct, nevertheless the poem calls attention to nature’s own unique voice and in so doing signals its consequence. Again the poem builds upon the traditional designation of nature as feminine in invoking predicates often associated in literary contexts with female speech: deprived of words or deemed incapable of independent thought, the female is distanced from language and the authority it confers. One is reminded of Keats’ unmerciful belle dame with her “sweet moan,” “fairy’s song,” “language strange,” and “sigh[ing]” but never given access to substantive language. She ultimately triumphs, however, by vanquishing and virtually destroying the knight. In “Entangled,” a similar capacity for underlying control exists along with the message to recognize nature’s latent power.

<9>The final pair of lines in stanza five indirectly conveys such force in its treatment of the speaker, who has devolved from the standing entity and syntactical subject “I” of the poem’s first line to simply a body part, the heart. The effect is to drain the speaker of any sense of unified subjectivity, for the heart signals further depersonalization in that the noun is reduced to the pronoun “it” immediately thereafter and subsequently the speaker is reduced to merely a prepositional object as the plants extended their arms. Although the initial line of stanza six reinstates the speaker’s “I” as the grammatical subject, the next part of the phrase replicates the deprivation of agency, in that the speaker “staggered” before being returned to the object position and becoming “drag[ged] down.” Again nature has exerted control, for the lurching movements the speaker experiences are caused by entrapping mosses, which in turn impelled the persona into more vegetation:

I staggered in the mosses,  
It seemed to drag me down  
Into the gleaming bushes;  
To fall, to sink, to drown.

Also imparting the influence of nature is a deterioration, albeit slight, in the speaker’s own linguistic ability, for the plural mosses are referenced improperly with a singular pronoun. By the final line of the stanza, the speaker is fully immersed in nature and is situated at the lowest level of the land. The speaker’s placement connotes marginality, in that a literal and figurative high ground is conventionally deemed the site of authority. A reader senses the speaker’s

resistance to the placement as a sign of vanquishment, as if plummeted to an unexpected nadir.

<10>As the poem moves to the penultimate stanza, a shift in tone augurs the speaker's metamorphosis to a reconfigured attitude toward the natural world in opening with a fervid "When lo!" The stanza is tracing the movements of a "lovely bird," which occupies the subject position and superior location as it flies above the speaker, who is again reduced to a prepositional object:

When lo! thro' scared foliage,  
A lovely bird did fly;  
And looked at me so knowing,  
With bright and curious eye;

Curiously, the bird seems to be a holder of the gaze with the latter's own implications of power and suggests in the process a human activity that further destabilizes the humanity/nature antithesis. Moreover, the homonymic resonance of the bird's orb suggests nature's own "I" and the reverse in authority that the poem has mapped. Appropriately, the bird serves as the subject of the first line of the final stanza and issues forth with nature's voice in two iterations:

It broke out into warbles,  
And singing sped away;  
But I, like one awakened,  
Fled down the mossy way.

The use of the pronoun to reference the bird provides another example of the speaker's imperfect linguistic ability, in that the antecedent is actually the eye. The departure from paradigmatic language structures suggests a breakdown of rigid thought, thereby opening a space for new conceptions.

<11>Although the speaker returns to the subject position in the final stanza's third line, the "I" is an altered form compared to its importance at the poem's commencement. The line resonates with the speaker's slumber-like state in the first stanza as the persona awakens through a newfound realization of nature not as other but as necessarily integral to and in symbiotic accord with human experience. The point is bolstered in the poem's closing line, which draws upon earlier revelations to leave the reader with such a critical message. The predicate "fled" illuminates nature's agency in generating the speaker's rapid movement as well as the persona's own newly discovered compulsion; the speaker heads "down," becoming even more a part of the marginalized low ground; and the path taken proceeds through "the mossy way," which indicates both the power of this exemplum of nature that had caused the speaker to stagger and to become unwillingly immersed in what now has become the chosen

space. Subsumed within nature, voluntarily rather than unexpectedly, a wiser speaker has come to value instead of diminish it. The speaker no longer dominates the natural world but exists in communion with it, recognizing the false cultural dualism between humanity and nature.

<12>The poem's thematic elements are reinforced formally as the structure elucidates nature's authority, in part by incorporating the traditional feminization of nature. The lines of the ballad stanzas alternate in syllable count and rhyme sequence, privileging a feminine presence. Each stanza consists of seven syllables in the *a*- and *c*- lines along with six syllables in the *b*- and *d*-lines; the *a*- and *c*- lines feature feminine endings, as if imprisoning the *b*- and *d*- lines with their masculine endings. Adding to the control of the feminized *a*- and *c*- lines is the indentation of the masculinized *b*- and *d*- lines, as if the latter lines carry less significance in being subjugated beneath the feminine lines in a kind of literal as well as figurative marginalization. The rhyme pattern also builds upon a gendered dichotomy; the lines with feminine endings do not rhyme, suggesting an openness in contrast to the rigidity of the rhyming masculine endings with their reminder of inflexible masculinist perceptions about nature's purported inferiority. The choice of the ballad stanza itself, with the form's connection to song, resonates with and foregrounds nature's own singing voices as well as its exquisite harmony.

<13>The valuation of nature embedded in "Entangled" takes a quite different path in "On a Forsaken Lark's Nest," included in the "Poems of the Open Air" section of an 1889 collection, with the titular *The Ascent of Man*.<sup>(8)</sup> While "Entangled" carries a primary argument that nature should not be perceived as an inferior other, the lark poem warns of the dangers that human presence poses to the natural world. The poem seems to respond to agricultural developments and human disregard that bring environmental ruin. Beginning with a rather funereal tone, the poem employs harsh vocabulary to trace the movement of a harvesting machine:

Lo, where left 'mid the sheaves, cut down by the iron-fanged reaper,  
Eating its way as it clangs fast through the wavering wheat,  
Lies the nest of a lark, whose little brown eggs could not keep her  
As she, affrighted and scared, fled from the harvester's feet.

Jarring consonants and devouring images underscore the perils that the machine poses to nature. Guttural and other forceful consonants in "cut," "fanged," "fast," "clangs," and "feet" create an agitating cacophony, while the ravenous machine's appetite propels it relentlessly through the crop in which the lark's nest insecurely rests. In contrast, the consonants associated with nature are gently liquid, with an abundance of /l/ and /w/ sounds. Not until the third line of the introductory stanza comes the reference to the lark's nest; the delayed

placement of the nest amplifies the domineering effect of the reaper as it consumes everything in its path. The use of the weak verb “lies” in conjunction with the nest emphasizes its fragility, as does the adjectival “little” to describe the endangered eggs, while the linguistically violent “f” of not only “feet” but also “fled” provides the alarming contrast of human devastation. Additionally, the foregrounding of the noun “feet” in reference to the harvester suggests pounding force as the human, like the machine, unyieldingly advances upon the bird and her nest. Indeed, the human and the machine are conflated in the stanza’s first line through the noun “reaper,” making the two destructive entities indistinguishable and suggesting a frightening conjunction of decimating conquerors. The vulnerability of the lark is further accentuated through physical positioning; the upright human soars above the creature, and she occupies the marginal space of the ground. As in “Entangled,” a gendered binary prevails; nature is feminized, with the lark as thwarted mother, in contrast to the masculine figure of the harvester. The binary suggests, as in “Entangled,” a prevalent masculine discourse that situates humanity above nature in an assumed hierarchical arrangement that justifies suppression.

<14>The second stanza proceeds to focus on loss, which will dominate the rest of the poem as well. Human activity is equated with the coldness of death in opposition to the warmth of fostering nature:

Ah, what a heartfelt of song that now will never awaken,  
Closely packed in the shell, awaited love’s fostering,  
That should have quickened to life what, now a-cold and forsaken,  
Never, enamoured of light, will meet the dawn on the wing.

Positive images counterpoise nature with its destroyer: “heartful,” “love’s fostering,” “quickened to life,” “enamoured of light,” and “the dawn on the wing” provide a sharp contrast to the human agency associated with “never awaken[ing],” “a-cold and forsaken,” and the “never” of birth. The stanza further suggests that the ruination of the bird’s nest violates a natural law, in that the eggs “*should have* quickened to life.” Humanity is out of step with the rhythms of the physical world and thereby also poses a monstrous menace to its own well-being, as the poem ultimately will argue.

<15>If such a violation of natural law does not provide a convincing enough reason for humanity to cease its destructive behavior, the next stanza builds upon cultural religiosity—despite Blind’s own atheistic outlook—to advise Victorians that divine law is also being transgressed:

Ah, what paeans of joy, what raptures no mortal can measure,  
Sweet as honey that’s sealed in the cells of the honey-comb,

Would have ascended on high in jets of mellifluous pleasure,  
Would have dropped from the clouds to nest in its gold-curtained home.

The “ah” initiating the second stanza is repeated here, but the tone is somewhat different in that a reading of the rest of the line infuses the word with a feeling of awe reminiscent of a devout supplicant. Subsequent vocabulary choices within the line invoke other religious associations among their definitions: “paeans” denote hymns of praise; “raptures” involve a mystically transcendent experience that provides a connection to divine understanding; and the “mortal” unable to measure such rapturous moments is implicitly contrasted with the immortality of the celestial entity. The phrase “mellifluous pleasure” is itself melodious in pronunciation to underscore the harmonic and majestic picture presented. The final line, with its focus on descent from the celestial realm, hints at Christ’s presence in reminding of his own descent to earth. Divinity and nature are combined as the being that “dropped from the clouds” then “nest[s]” in the tabernacle-like “gold-curtained home” of the bee’s honeycomb.

<16>It is in the poem’s final stanza that the harm that humans cause to themselves through devastation of nature becomes especially evident:

Poor, pathetic brown eggs! Oh, pulses that will never quicken!  
Music mute in the shell that hath been turned to a tomb!  
Many a sweet human singer, chilled and adversity-stricken,  
Withers benumbed in a world his joy might have helped to illumine.

The /p/ alliteration of the first line echoes the syncopation of a healthy beating heart with the pairing of “poor, pathetic,” but the throbbing slows through the three words preceding the next /p/ iteration of “pulses” before stopping abruptly as the consonant disappears in the line’s continuation. Evident as well is a severance between creature and human. The term “pulses” is generally a reference to the measurement of human life, and in the line’s usage develops a connection to the nonhuman life that also carries a pulse; in death, a bird cannot quicken the pulses of a human who otherwise would hear its song. The coupled words that open the second line, with their harmonic similarity in initial consonant and vowel, turn an initial impression of a paused song into an eternal silencing within a grave-like enclosure, a startling realization imparted aurally through the harsh /t/ sounds in “turned to a tomb.” The third line’s reference to “a sweet human singer” reflexively invokes the “sweet” hymns that the dead birds will never sing and in so doing reminds of the broken connection between humanity and nature, a point immediately reinforced by the chill that the human, like the lost birds, endures. The final line brings together all three primary entities in the poem in an ironic juxtaposition that reminds of human discordance with the natural and divine worlds through the word “his,” which lacks an antecedent and could refer to the human singer, a dead avian counterpart, or Christ’s presence. Clearly, the poem argues, to destroy nature brings disaster

to humankind as well. The male pronoun also drives forth the notion that the ruination is not simply a gendered matter of a male oppressor violating a female nature but an annihilative act conducted by a male upon other males, too, and humanity in its totality.

<17>A prosodic examination helps to articulate the poem's thematic concerns. The *abab* scheme sounds like a stomping military march, creating the same type of dismaying effect found through the procession of unstoppable footsteps in "Entangled." Moreover, the *abab* format, by virtue of its commonality, insinuates that the wreckage depicted in "On a Forsaken Lark's Nest" is not limited to the unfortunate lark's eternally silent brood but is enacted on a broad scale, in diverse ways, to the detriment of the natural world. The *a*- and *c*- tail rhymes follow a somewhat discordant pattern that reflects the disharmonious relationship humanity has forged with nature, especially since the rhymes appear in feminine endings that remind of feminized nature. Syllabic count adds to the poem's overall sense of dissonance, for there is consistency only in the lines with feminine endings (fifteen syllables). Even though the *a*- and *c*- lines with their feminine endings share identical syllabic counts, the stress pattern in the lines varies between them; the *a*-lines follow a consistent stress pattern, but the *c*- lines do not, suggesting that humanity's appalling effects upon nature threaten its very core.

<18>A similar message of human destruction over nature emerges in "The Sower," another offering from the 1889 "Poems of the Open Air" collection in *The Ascent of Man*, but this verse imparts a measure of hope in that nature is revealed as a resilient entity that may be able to counteract the devastation if attitudes justifying its subjugation are altered. "The Sower" adopts several components that characterized "On a Forsaken Lark's Nest," most notably the domination over the land that agricultural incursions have wrought. Composed of nine *abab* quatrain stanzas, with the familiar rhyming pattern again evoking the commonality of the agricultural invasion, "The Sower" brings forth numerous references to mastery in its opening stanzas. The poem moves from elevation to lowland as it traces through a sweeping panorama the crushing submission of nature that human interference entails, as if no part of the natural realm escapes its reach:

The winds had hushed at last as by command;  
The quiet sky above,  
With its grey clouds spread o'er the fallow land,  
Sat brooding like a dove.

The voice of nature, emblemized in the hushed winds and quiet sky, has been stifled and silenced, turned into a passive entity by the overbearing force of human behavior. The oppression is accentuated through the grey clouds, so extensive that they entirely cover the landscape below and allow no escape; the land occupies a passive position through the

prepositional phrase preceding it, and the adjectival “fallow” conveys through one of its denotations inactivity and dormancy as does the weak verb form “sat.” Contributing to the oppressive atmosphere is the gloominess evoked by the “brooding” bird, a modifier that ironically reminds of the life-giving incubation of this gentle creature that in this case appears moribund.

<19>The silencing effect of the “command” resulting in a “quiet sky” reemerges in the second stanza to depict a death-like stillness, which is amplified by the sole connection to sound as signifying death when a lifeless leaf drops:

There was no motion in the air, no sound  
    Within the tree-tops stirred,  
Save when some last leaf, fluttering to the ground,  
    Dropped like a wounded bird:

The final line continues the image of death, for an injured bird that falls to the soil is almost certainly destined to die from predators if not from the wound itself. Nature demonstrates no agency except in a poor imitation thereof as the leaf aimlessly descends to its earthen grave. The poem continues to play with the states of sound in the third stanza, in this case noting the unpleasant shrieks of crows. The contrast between height and depth that characterized the first two stanzas appears in the third stanza also as the crows sweep down from their high perches to the land; the descending movement continues to convey subjugation, with its effect emphasized through the fourth line’s opening “down.”

Or when the swart rooks in a gathering crowd  
    With clamorous noises wheeled,  
Hovering awhile, then swooped with wranglings loud  
    Down on the stubbly field.

The avian imagery is additionally telling, in that the predatory rooks are vastly different from the peaceful dove or the wounded bird of the previous stanzas; indeed, the deafening rooks appear to represent human harvesters with their discordant machinery that invades the land and upsets its harmony (“clamorous noises,” “wranglings loud”).

<20>The three stanzas create a momentum of sorts, in that the next stanza’s opening of “For now” provides a shift to the agricultural work itself to which the poem has been leading. Nature is literally being harnessed as restrained horses prepare the land for planting:

For now the big-thewed horses, toiling slow  
    In straining couples yoked,

Patiently dragged the ploughshare to and fro  
    Till their wet haunches smoked:

Diction emphasizes the suffering wrought by subjugation as the horses laboriously pull the plow (“toiling low,” “straining,” “dragged” and “smoked,” with the latter term’s archaic denotation emphasizing punishment). The ploughshare provides a violent image, for it is the part of a plow that cuts through the soil. Moreover, the word “[t]ill,” substituting for “until” in the final line, stresses that the misery comes from the “tilling” of the land. That connection is repeated with the opening of the fifth stanza, along with the tone of violence:

    Till the stiff acre, broken into clods,  
    Bruised by the harrow’s tooth,  
    Lay lightly shaken, with its humid sods  
    Ranged into furrows smooth.

Nature can be only passively resistant, as a “stiff” piece of land contesting the plow’s power, but that small measure of opposition is doomed to fail when the land is “broken” both literally and figuratively. In the second line, nature’s pain provides the tone, in that it has been “[b]ruised” by the marauding “tooth” of the harrow, with the latter’s archaic meaning of pulverizing, tormenting, and plundering adding to the horrendous picture. The stanza conveys a raping of the land with the harsh predicates bringing pain, along with the terrain’s “shaken” state, “humid sods,” and forced positioning into a submissive state (“into furrows smooth”).

<21>The sower makes his appearance in the sixth stanza as an omnipotent and omnipresent figure moving incessantly through the land:

    There looming lone, from rise to set of sun,  
    Without or pause or speed,  
    Solemnly striding by the furrows dun,  
    The sower sows the seed.

The /l/ and /s/ alliteration that in other contexts imparts graceful motion in this case creates a dirge-like, sinister cadence that resonates with the unthinking momentum of a mighty agricultural machine. That impression of invulnerability and unremittingness gains weight with the repetition of the stanza’s final line in the first line of the seventh stanza:

    The sower sows the seed, which mouldering,  
    Deep coffined in the earth,  
    Is buried now, but with the future spring  
    Will quicken into birth.

Death and decay become the overriding motifs in the stanza, with the “mouldering,” “deep coffined,” and “buried” seeds, inserting a disconcerting note into the sowing process and an accompanying impression that male agency brings destruction. Moreover, the rape imagery of the fifth stanza continues here in the idea of the plunderer depositing his seed in the violated earth. Nevertheless, a rare hint of optimism surfaces in the reference to life developing in a later time, a concept that will be revisited in the closing stanza. At this moment, however, the sower’s domination of nature prevails and extends into the penultimate stanza:

Oh, poles of birth and death! Controlling Powers  
Of human toil and need!  
On this fair earth all men are surely sowers,  
Surely all life is seed!

With the phallic initial noun providing accentuation, the “poles of birth and death” are governed by the “Controlling Powers,” suggestive of the masculine power structure that shapes Victorian perceptions about the relationship between humanity and nature, as well as other human behavior (“human toil and need”). The fact that “all men” fit the category of sowers highlights their master status, as seen by the sole sower’s actions in the poem thus far. Women are absent from this equation, in that their role in the process of creating life is excised; it is the men’s seeds that generate life. In a corollary way, the poem implies that women are marginalized in determining human activity relative to nature as well. If, as the final line remarks, “all life is seed,” then the presumption exists that masculine control is monolithic and permanent.

<22>In the concluding stanza, however, the prospect for eventual change comes forth, reminding of the Foucauldian tenet of circulating power and the fissures in authority that allow the marginalized to gain a foothold that eventually leads to the end of their subjugation:

All life is seed, dropped in Time’s yawning furrow,  
Which with slow sprout and shoot,  
In the revolving world’s unfathomed morrow,  
Will blossom and bear fruit.

Although the stanza starts by repeating the notion that “[a]ll life is seed,” stressing the apparent seamlessness of masculine authority, the stanza immediately opens up the possibility of transformation. An evolutionary element is posited in the stanza’s reference to the vast spans of Time through its “yawning furrow” that can lead to a “slow” development of new life. With evolution comes change, of course, and the new plant may be considerably altered from its predecessors in the “unfathomed morrow” that is being shaped by the passage of time inherent in a “revolving world” experiencing its own alterations; the idea gains credence by the

hint of revolution contained in the adjective, which counters the impression of consistency that otherwise might be associated with the endless revolutions of the earth itself as well as around the traditionally masculine sun. The seed planted by a tyrannous force not simply may but “*will blossom and bear fruit*” to generate a different world. Female influence in the process is predicted in the first line with the “yawning furrow,” a representation of the land subjugated by the sower, into which the seed is deposited in the womb-like cavernous space. Even though the prevalent discourse on evolution posited an ongoing male superiority—Darwin’s *Descent of Man* made that idea clear to contemporary readers—a handful of dissenting views expected that advances to the human species would be led by women. The /s/ alliteration that earlier conveyed an unyielding male power shifts in the final stanza to a smooth cadence in detailing the gradual growth of an evolved form of plant, and the vigorous /b/ sounds of the final line resemble a rallying call to victory. Considering the existence of male authority that pervades the bulk of “The Sower,” the almost unvarying presence of masculine endings provides an expected emphasis. Nonetheless, the last two stanzas break the pattern as each incorporates a pair of feminine endings, appearing at the point where the poem augurs the hope of change. Also making the connection is the fact that the feminine endings appear in the *a*- and *c*- lines, which are substantially longer and thus more dominant with their eleven syllables than the *b*- and *d*-lines with masculine endings that carry only six syllables.

<23>The feminization of nature characterizing all three of the poems discussed thus far is addressed in different ecofeminist terms in another Blind poem to interrogate the gendered designation itself and the repercussions for women inextricably linked to nature in Victorian thought. The link between the two subjugated entities binds them in such a way that the subjugation of one can serve as a metaphor of and justification for the subjugation of the other. Aptly named “A Parable” and included in the 1895 *Birds of Passage: Songs of the Orient and Occident*, the poem calls attention to the dangerous effects that women’s identification with nature creates, pessimistically suggesting a veritable death of subjectivity through the cultural association that apparently cannot be severed.

<24>The four-stanza poem immediately situates its female character, a young girl, literally and linguistically positioned within nature:

Between the sandhills and the sea  
A narrow strip of silver sand  
Whereon a little maid doth stand,  
Who picks up shells continually  
Between the sandhills and the sea.

With the repetition of the first line in the stanza’s final line comes a sense of imprisonment, as if the identical lines were constraining bars within which the girl is subsumed within nature,

which the opening preposition “between” reinforces. Though the girl seemingly has an element of agency in that she occupies a standing position, the supposition is merely an illusion. The bar-like stanzaic lines, along with the narrowness of the sand upon which she is located, added to the instability of sand itself as a shifting foundation, limit her so substantially that no escape from the supposed female connection to nature seems feasible; indeed, she is perpetually gathering a representation of that linkage through her incessant collection of the shells. Accentuating her trapped status are the stanza’s *b*- and *c*- lines in which her position is described, for those indented lines are themselves entrapped by the longer lines that surround them.

<25>The inescapability from the nature-female linkage becomes even more established in the second stanza through the introduction of an element of the sublime and the masculine connotations carried therein:

Far as her wondering eyes can reach  
A Vastness, heaving grey in grey  
To the frayed edges where the day  
Furls his red standard on the breach,  
Between the skyline and the beach.

Not only does the sublime component of vastness appear, but its capitalization emphasizes its might, a notion underlined by the fact that its depressing grey contours seem to extend infinitely, as the first line indicates. Although the third line reveals that the grey sameness is actually limited by signs of daylight, inserting itself within the “breach,” the girl’s entrapment does not cease in that the sun supposedly heralding relief is yet another masculine image. With this masculine force setting up its militaristic standard signifying conquest, and the flag’s redness proclaiming a sense of invulnerability through the blaring visibility of the color, entrapment of the girl by her association with nature is stressed and shown to be even more complete through the stanza’s final line in that the ground-level sandhills of the first stanza have been replaced by the infinite boundary of the sky.

<26>The asphyxiating effect that inheres in being trapped between the sky and the beach becomes even more pronounced in the third line, as the ocean forms another suffocating barrier that prevents escape from the nature-female bond:

The waters of the flowing tide  
Cast up the seapink shells and weed;  
She toys with shells, and doth not heed  
The ocean, which on every side  
Is closing round her vast and wide.

The girl's obliviousness to the physical danger of her situation replicates a Victorian female's inability to recognize the threat presented by the nature-female bond that limits her own potentiality and possibilities. That the maid ineffectually "toys with shells" and "doth not heed" the creeping ocean points to a lack of recognition that imperils her very existence. Her toying serves as the only verb in the stanza connoting any form of agency, but it signals impotence. As in the previous stanza, the magnitude of the threat is transmitted through the sublime with the vastness of the menace posed and the ocean's presence "on every side," leaving no avenue for escape.

<27>The final stanza is especially unnerving, in that the girl's innocent toying with the shells is contrasted with a sinister ocean that maliciously "creeps" to end her life:

It creeps her way as if in play,  
Pink shells at her pink feet to cast;  
But now the wild waves hold her fast  
And bear her off and melt away  
A Vastness heaving grey in grey.

In implying a malignant intent on the part of the ocean, the poem insinuates that the masculine linkage of nature and female is itself disingenuous, a cunning maneuver that helps to hold women in a position of weakness and inferiority, since both supposedly are endlessly destined for subjugation. The pinkness of the shells and the feet reminds of that equation, and the girl's grim fate in effect is couched as natural; indeed, the pink coloration is an attenuation of the red hue characterizing the masculinist flag. By the final stanza the maid has lost any sense of agency, for only the ocean—that is, the latest representation of her close link to nature—prevails. In fact, the poem's predicates have charted a switch in agency, beginning with the maid's standing posture in the first stanza but altering in the second stanza to reflect her lack of power. Although the second stanza indicates that the maid's eyes "can reach," the sense of agency is negated by the fact that her vision is wholly constrained by the impenetrable haze before her. Thereafter, the predicates all relate to forces that act upon her. In the final stanza, the repetition of vastness and greyness introduced in the second stanza stresses the might of the nature-female linkage and the difficulty in comprehending the danger that it poses to a nineteenth-century woman. Indeed, the sequence of verbs in the final stanza creates a crescendo of sorts exhibiting the maid's vulnerability; the ocean first "creeps," then becomes increasingly active in constraining and ultimately carrying the girl to her death. Line endings contribute to the effect of control, in that they are masculine and present an overriding masculine authority.

<28>In reflecting upon "A Parable" along with the three poems explored previously, it becomes readily apparent that *Blind* contributed a compelling feminist and ecological perspective to the

cultural pairing of nature and women. Blind's voice exists as an especially significant one to enter the Victorian conversation on nature, for the poetry illuminates the disturbing implications that the gendered alignment posed in a complex mixture of subtlety and forcefulness. Although Blind is recognized particularly for the poetical rewriting of Darwin in the lengthy *The Ascent of Man*, her work in the ecofeminist arena provides a crucial window into Victorian debates on the assessment and treatment of nature as well as the gender upheaval of the *fin de siècle*. Blind's contributions in this regard are not limited to the verses studied in this analysis, for the urgent messages thread through other short poems in her oeuvre. Rarely the focus of scholarly or pedagogical endeavors, with *The Ascent* gaining most attention, Blind's richly woven poetry deserves far greater emphasis as critical interest in Victorian ecology continues to grow alongside the ongoing fascination with the Woman Question. Terming Blind an ecofeminist prophet would not be a hyperbolic attribution.

<29>Blind certainly is not alone among her female counterparts in articulating conceptions of nature, of course. Even a cursory review of late-century poetry would reveal substantial engrossment in the subject, and critical commentary has evidenced an important recognition of this enlightening work over the decades. These poets range from the highly recognizable to the virtually obscure, and each provides a distinctive approach worthy of study. Yet Blind is particularly noteworthy through the incisive cultural insights she imparts in such an evocative, distinct, and sophisticated style.

<30>As the four poems investigated in this essay have demonstrated, Mathilde Blind issued weighty admonitions to her contemporaries. If the illusion that humanity can indiscriminately dominate nature is not recognized as such, the oppression of nature will ultimately bring disaster to humanity itself for the failure to accept the necessity of a companionate, not hierarchal, relationship. Additionally, the view that nature and women are inextricably linked provides an avenue for the continued subjugation of Victorian females. In the final analysis, Blind warns, an unproblematic acceptance of the supposed truths of "feminine nature" can lead only to devastating consequences. It is a message that carries crucial significance not only for understanding the vexing issues characterizing the Victorian *fin de siècle*, but also in providing a vital warning to our own era.

#### Endnotes

(1)Although relatively little scholarship on Blind's short poetry exists, Paula Alexandra Guimarães has identified ecofeminist elements in Blind's poetic approach. See "'Over My Boundless Waste of Soul': Echoes of the Natural World, or a Feminine *Naturphilosophie*, in the Poetry of Emily Brontë and Mathilde Blind." ([^](#))

(2)See, for example, Nicholas Frankel's "The Ecology of Victorian Poetry." As Parham observes, "Victorian literature offers a diversity of ecological perspectives" (169). Gold remarks that "recently, scholars have begun to argue for the environment or ecological concerns in what may seem unlikely places," citing the work of Ruskin, Hopkins, and Morris (214). The writers and their observations that I include here are among those mentioned in critical commentary.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3)For background on the origins of the movement, see, for instance, Greta Gaard's "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism."<sup>(^)</sup>

(4)See, for example, Gretchen T. Legler, "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism." Also see Naomi Guttman, "Ecofeminism in Literary Studies."<sup>(^)</sup>

(5)For a discussion of primary approaches in ecofeminism, see Noël Sturgeon's *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action* (28-30).<sup>(^)</sup>

(6)"Entangled" appeared in *Poems* under the pseudonym of Claude Lake.<sup>(^)</sup>

(7)See Legler ("Ecofeminist Literary Criticism") for views on nature as active rather than passive (229-30).<sup>(^)</sup>

(8)This poem and the others analyzed in the remainder of the essay can be found in *The Poetical Works of Mathilde Blind*.<sup>(^)</sup>

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