

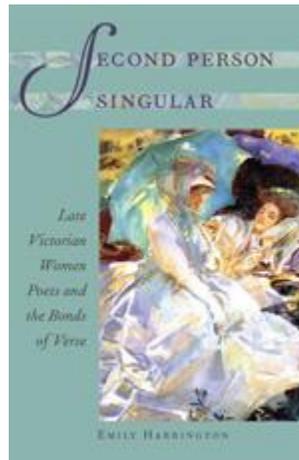
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Gender and Lyric Intimacy at the Fin de Siècle

[*Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse*](#). Emily Harrington. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014. 231 pp.

Reviewed by [Veronica Alfano](#), University of Oregon

Emily Harrington's keen and engaging first book, *Second Person Singular*, both thoughtfully accounts for and boldly intervenes in recent scholarship on lyric poetry, nineteenth-century women's writing, and issues surrounding gender and sexuality at the fin de siècle. She opens with an insightful description of poetry as "an explicitly relational genre, one that enacts a dynamic between 'I' and 'thou' (1); this literary intimacy, it turns out, relies on a certain degree of distance or detachment between speaker and addressee. And she immediately raises the stakes of her chief contention by adding that this same balance between connection and constraint underlies women poets' frequent devotion to compact lyricism. For female writers, in fact, "unifying bonds are often enabled by the restraints of poetic form" (2). This argument allows Harrington to align herself with critics such as Angela Leighton and Yopie Prins who challenge the linked ideas that women's writing is sentimental and confessional and that lyric is a transcript of an individualized speaker's voice. But in so doing, she also revises the model of the isolated and reserved lyric "I" by showing how these poems try (and sometimes deliberately fail) to establish connections with myriad others. Thus their versions of intimacy, as Harrington points out, tend to be

impersonal. She uses formal and biographical approaches to interactivity and relationality to supplement critical accounts (by Ana Parejo Vaidillo, Marion Thain, and others) of late-century women poets' complex engagements with literary communities and with their rapidly changing culture. In Harrington's words, her study "investigates the numerous types of bonds that women in the late nineteenth century write about: between mother and child, between poet and predecessor, in collaborative partnerships, in friendships, in erotic relationships, even in connection with God" (3).

<2>The work of Christina Rossetti, in particular her signature brand of lyricism that (rather counterintuitively) derives much of its power and force from the feminized qualities of passive patience and receptive silence, is a touchstone for Harrington throughout *Second Person Singular*. Fittingly, then, her first chapter examines Rossetti's treatment of divine and erotic intimacy. More specifically, she uses Rossetti's poems "Twice" (1866) and "Monna Innominata" (1881) to trace the ways in which a triangulated set of relationships among an underdetermined poetic "I," a human lover, and the deity ultimately elevates sacred bonds over sexual ones. It seems that Rossetti's lyric impersonality, which permits her to move from apparent submission to radically mutual devotion, is founded almost entirely in religious feeling. Yet Harrington also makes a case for the intransitive nature of love; for Rossetti, "love itself is more significant than its object" (20). Many Rossetti scholars address her stance on piety and eroticism, and many are interested in her lyric style, but few tie the two topics together so elegantly. Harrington then turns to Rossetti's prose work *Time Flies* (1884), ingeniously using its description of a recorded voice to provide a fresh perspective on the poet's much-discussed "death lyrics" (which feature disembodied and repetitive voices). Her close readings in this chapter, particularly of meter and of Rossetti's uses of the sonnet form, are consistently convincing and acute.

<3>Influential Rossettian concepts of "silence, thought, and waiting become important thematic and formal ideas, essential for alternate relational dynamics" (45), in the sections that follow. Augusta Webster, the subject of Harrington's second chapter, is more concerned with parental than with devotional love; her 1894 sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*, maintains Harrington, is fixated on the painful possibility that a mother's affection is measurable and exhaustible rather than infinite and eternally renewable. Harrington links the anxiety-inducing quantifiability of mother-love (and the necessary failure of a poem to capture or eternize a human voice) to the "conditions and contradictions of the sonnet form, which is at once expansive in thought and economical in expression" and which showcases a "compulsion to count the stresses, sounds, and rhythms of maternal feeling" (48). Webster's version of lyric intimacy is shaped by the metrical effects that result from this obsessive counting and that point to experiences and emotions that will re-emerge across generations. As she makes these provocative and persuasive claims, Harrington also uses late-Victorian advice literature to interrogate relevant commonplaces and clichés about motherhood, touches on Webster's role both as a parent and as a champion of women's rights, scrutinizes the poet's meditations on love in several dramatic monologues, and turns to the work of other nineteenth-century female sonnet-writers to establish a vital context for Webster's anti-sentimental verse. Thus she illustrates her admirable talent for locating close reading at the heart of her arguments without detaching it from cultural or biographical frameworks. She ably demonstrates that form-based analysis can deepen and enrich – can, in fact, establish crucial parameters for – historical and political criticism.

<4>Harrington's third chapter considers the intimacy, both private and public, between close friends A. Mary F. Robinson and Vernon Lee. The subject of one of their ongoing debates echoes a central concern of *Second Person Singular*; they ask whether lyric poetry (and aesthetic experience more generally) is narcissistic or relational, based in interaction or isolation, concerned solely with beauty or capable of functioning as an ethical instrument. Chiefly through readings of Lee's "Dialogue on Poetic Morality" (1880) and Robinson's volume *The New Arcadia and Other Poems* (1884), Harrington asks whether and how verse can create sympathy for the impoverished. What sorts of imaginative intimacy is poetry capable of producing? What kinds of relationships with its readers should it generate? Her belief that Robinson cultivates "jarring, discordant prosodic and lyric techniques [...] in order to jolt her readers out of their complacency and to stimulate sympathy for the sufferings of rural poverty" (78) – though, ironically, such discord in fact threatened to shut down readerly sympathy – is one of the most thought-provoking aspects of an especially effective chapter. Harrington taps into a longstanding controversy about aesthetic utility, one that has raged since well before Oscar Wilde declared art to be quite useless, without either overlooking or merely recapitulating well-worn claims. She weaves contemporary critical concerns with the political resonances of aestheticism, with late-century sexuality, and with the role of the homosocial into a strikingly original set of arguments.

<5>The unsentimental lyric intimacy that springs from silence, self-less restraint, and distance, first discussed in Chapter One, returns in Harrington's analysis of Alice Meynell's poetry and prose. Indeed, while this chapter might seem at times to circle back to ground that Harrington has already covered (she revisits the links between speaker and God, poet and reader, parent and child), for the most part it does so with a difference. For example, here the discussion of maternity touches on its creative and generative (and therefore quasi-poetic) nature. Harrington also meditates on Meynell's connections to her poetic predecessors, showing that she praises Rossetti over Barrett Browning due to the former poet's disciplined style, which allows her to "write profound emotion without being overly emphatic or forceful" (120). All in all, though it is perhaps less compellingly original than the sections that precede it, this is a valuable chapter that contests the too-common "view of Meynell that fails to take into account her deep concern with personal, literary, and imaginative relations" (110). And once again, Harrington's metrical analyses are subtle and sophisticated; she contends, for instance, that Meynell uses adjacent stressed syllables to create pauses and so to illustrate both connection and its opposite.

<6>In her fifth and final chapter, Harrington complicates her claims by exploring the deliberate failures of intimacy in Dollie Radford's lyric verse – particularly *A Light Load* (1891). Even when Radford's poems are set to music and performed, says Harrington, she continues to privilege absence and waiting over presence and immediacy. What's more, Radford defies conventional artistic standards by embracing her own "minor" status, treasuring the littleness and unoriginality of her lyrics. As her investment in waiting gestures at "the necessity of patience for social progress" (141) – a position she emphasizes in her responses to William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and Olive Schreiner's collection *Dreams* (1890)– it also suggests that literary innovation is only possible when song functions as a space for anticipation and openness and "attentiveness that welcomes change" (149) without demanding or impatiently pursuing it. Intimacy, it turns out, can be achieved after all when purposely trite poems dwell on familiar experiences that unite people across time and space. As they seek to

restore prestige to feminized and devalued qualities and to underscore the limitations of lyric, “Radford’s poetics clarify how fin de siècle women poets helped to pave the way for the modern” (12). *Second Person Singular* concludes with a brief assessment of the work of Mary E. Coleridge, who not only “reject[ed] intimacy” in her poetry but also “wrote outside the literary and social world of urban aestheticism” (177). Harrington’s adroit use of limit cases and counterexamples in these closing sections helps define the contours of her central arguments; her proposal that women’s poetry can be hackneyed and even unintellectual yet still worth taking seriously is an especially intriguing and suggestive one.

<7>One wishes at times that Harrington would do a bit more to account for recent interrogations of “lyric” as a generic category (relatedly, more pains could perhaps be taken to *define* this notoriously elusive term), or that her always-excellent close readings extended more consistently to aspects of versification apart from meter. But these are minor points. All things considered, hers is a beautifully written, meticulously researched, and brilliantly argued piece of scholarship that will prove of value to critics of late-century verse, gender, lyric poetry, and Victorian literature more generally.