

**Turn of the Century Women's Poetry:  
Skirting the Problems of Periodization**

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<1>This essay proposes a paradigm shift in the way we analyze late-nineteenth century women's poetry. The ongoing recovery of late-Victorian women poets has both enabled and invigorated the study of women's poetry, and to accommodate and understand these new voices, scholars have offered two major conceptual categories: "female aesthetes" and "new woman poets." These models have proved useful but the more scholars have worked with them, the more they have seen the need for additional or alternate descriptive categories. Addressing periodization and arguing that it is especially problematic in regard to late-century women poets, this essay proposes a new period category—turn of the century women's poetry—wedded to a new formalist approach. This reconceptualization has multiple benefits: an alternative for theorizing women's poetry that does not depend on the domestic/poetess model; a non-deterministic period category that does not smooth over contradictions and oppositions; a frame for the recovered voices of women poets that accommodates their differences while accounting for their coherence; and a vision that looks both to the past and toward the future for a clearer picture of women's poetic production.<sup>(1)</sup> In order to establish the value of looking toward the Edwardian era when interpreting the social and institutional forms represented in turn of the century women's poetry, the essay outlines some post-1900 forms and contexts that both emerge from and provide critical frames of reference for poems of the earlier period. The essay offers readings of poems by Dollie Radford and Edith Nesbit to illustrate the ways in which current critical categories fail many women's poems, and closes with a discussion of works by Alice Meynell, May Kendall, and A. Mary F. Robinson that demonstrate the value of looking both forward and back when interpreting turn of the century women's poetry.

<2>Recent re-examinations of Victorian poetry—in *Victorian Poetry* special issues titled "Whither Victorian Poetry?" and elsewhere—have highlighted the failure of current critical categories to account for late-century poetic production, and more specifically late-century women's poetry.<sup>(2)</sup> This problem is compounded by the fact that many studies of "Victorianism" end around 1880, echoing Isobel Armstrong's judgment that "the history of the 1890s and *fin-de-siècle* poetry seems to belong rather to the history of modernism than to that of Victorian poetry" (479).<sup>(3)</sup> Many Modernist writers, however, distanced themselves from late-nineteenth century writers (even though some model Modernists like Yeats, Pound, and

Conrad began their careers in the 1890s), rejecting the literary aesthetic that had preceded as well as shaped their own. Thus, turn of the century poets occupy a literary no-man's land—or, rather, a no-woman's land. The fact that late-Victorian poets belong neither with earlier Victorians nor with Modernists is of course further complicated by gender. Labels like the "Naughty Nineties" or the "Yellow Nineties" figure forth a subversive male club-land: the aesthetes and decadents of the Rhymers' Club and the imperialists and jingoists of Henley's Regatta.(4) These historically determined and determining categorizations have artificially constrained our understanding of "Victorian Women's Poetry." Because the field developed its theoretical models in a line starting from Elizabeth Barrett Browning and then extending back to L. E. L. and Felicia Hemans, it has not yet developed this line forward in ways that fully encompass women's poetry of the *fin de siècle*.(5)

<3>In order to address the concerns and contributions of late-Victorian women poets as distinct from both masculine models and the poetess tradition, I want to skirt the problem of literary periodization, both literally and figuratively. To some degree, the problem of periodization can never be solved, only skirted. As Ted Underwood notes in analyzing the longevity of period designations in English studies, periodization rests on a "broader premise . . . bound up with broader assumptions about literature's power to mediate historical change and transmute it into community" (3). Here he is agreeing with David Perkins that literary periods are "necessary fictions" (Perkins 64), if only to give scholars something to push against in order to elucidate ways in which the period defies the definition. In these terms periodization can be both useful and appealing. But because period markers have so often been informed by masculine models of literary production, I want literally to skirt the late-century period: to dress it in women's clothing, to understand it as informed by women and their gender-specific concerns. Thus I will not entirely dispense with period markers, but advocate for the category "turn of the century women's poetry," a designation cut from a cloth specifically tailored to women poets."(6) This more fitting form will generate a clearer understanding of its contents.

<4>We need a way and a category to address the fertile ground women poets tilled at the end of the nineteenth century, and this category should be as broad as possible because, as Talia Shaffer notes, "Though today we may see the late-Victorian period as consisting of separate clumps of aesthetes, naturalists, New Women, decadents, canonical authors, popular writers, and so forth, it is vital to remember that during this period these writers enjoyed multiple, flexible, social, and professional networks" (16).(7) Recognizing the multiple modes of women's poetry, we need a new model that more adequately accounts for them. To be sure, the development of "female aesthetes" and "New Woman poets" as categories of analysis has been enormously helpful in identifying new forms and themes. But in her own anthology of New Woman poets, Linda Hughes concedes that "seeing poets like A. Mary F. Robinson or Dollie Radford principally as New Woman poets would distort their aims and work," even though their poems are included in the anthology (1). Like W. E. Henley—the leader of "Henley's Regatta" who is also claimed by Arthur Symons as an exemplar of "The Decadent Movement in Literature"—too many women poets are imperfectly represented by any single current critical category. Dollie Radford's "A Novice," to take just one representative example,

can be regarded as a New Woman poem, a neo-domestic poem, a decadent poem, or a comic poem. Any single category, however, fails to account for its layered implications.

<5>A periodizing category like turn of the century women's poetry, wedded to a new formalist methodology, can address this problem. Many recent scholars of late-century women writers implicitly employ this methodology, as when Marion Thain and Ana Vadillo note that recent work on woman poets has portrayed gender "as highly enmeshed in other concerns, any one of which might be drawn to the fore" (392). Noting that the late nineteenth century saw a shift from "poetess" to woman poet, they suggest considering women's poetry as a historical category—or a "form," to adopt Caroline Levine's terminology in *Forms*—that is both literary and social.<sup>(8)</sup> Moreover, because Victorian poems "offer ideas about art and its relation to society that are emphatically connected to larger bodies of thought, a bounty that includes liberalism, nationalism, utilitarianism, economics, physics, geology, linguistics, Spenserian social science, physiology, and theology," Stephanie Kudek claims that "Victorian poems contain a record of how ideas about art—and also about art as a vehicle for ideas about politics, people, and society—percolated through the Victorian world" (516). While not using the language of formalism, Kudek, Thain and Parejo Vadillo are all employing new formalist methods.

<6>It might seem paradoxical, in this context, to offer a unitary category as a mode of redressing the false unity of current period designations, but by using a new formalist methodology I propose rather "to articulate links between literary forms and social formations" (Levine, "Strategic Formalism," 625) and thereby use this new category to examine the interactions among competing forms; to allow multiple poetic personas to speak; to place different categories of women's poetry in conversation; to understand the place of social-political-economic forms that shape and are shaped by literary ones; and to recognize the women's poetic tradition as a fully-fledged form that is in conversation with—but still separate from—male poetic production.<sup>(9)</sup> As Thain and Parejo Vadillo assert, "issues such as transnational cultures, bourgeois and aesthetic modernities, philosophy, psychology, science, political history (including liberalism, feminism, and socialism), and market economy. . . . *are* at the very heart of *fin de siècle* poetics" (390). Attention to historical, scientific, economic and social forms is as necessary as attention to literary form.

<7>Radford's "A Novice" provides an illustration of the value of this approach. Indeed, I would argue that Radford is dialogically employing multiple late-century forms to create meaning in this poem. As Marion Thain suggests, "poetic personas might entail distinctive literary conventions (of form and style as well as content) which distinguish them from purely social types and which might enable us to identify through them distinctive poetic alternatives to the poetess tradition" ("What Kind of Critical Category" 576). Radford's title alone suggests several possible personas. A reader coming to the poem in its original context, the volume *Songs and Other Verses* (1895), might expect the poem's "Novice" to be a newly-married woman, just learning how to manage a household. (And because of this context, a reader would not anticipate encountering a religious novice.) But neither definition of "novice" seems appropriate to the world-weary tone of this speaker:

What is it, in these latter days,  
Transfigures my domestic ways,  
And round me, as a halo, plays?  
My cigarette. (1-4)

Significantly, the speaker's world is not transfigured by her God or her husband but by her cigarette. Thus she exists in a different sort of probationary space—not domestic, not religious, but philosophical. Indeed, she seems to be exploring the ethics of New Womanism.

Nonetheless, these other possibilities—of religious or domestic devotion—linger on the margins of the poem; moreover, it is essential to the poem's system of significations that the speaker could equally be seen to be entering into a period of rebellion, of accommodating gender norms, or of dedication to a higher power. Because the poem encompasses ideas and images from a variety of late-century forms, the reader who ignores the interplay of these forms will misconstrue the text.

<8>The poem is also positively decadent in the way it puts religious imagery to secular uses: cigarette smoke plays around the speaker's head like a halo. The emptiness of this symbol turns convention on its head, dissolves traditional associations, and is thus classically decadent. As in John Gray's poem "A Crucifix" (dedicated to Ernest Dowson), the religious symbol sheds its specifically Christian meanings and becomes an emblem of something else. For Gray, the crucifix signifies beauty and friendship; for Radford, there is an even more radical shift: the halo denotes merely a woman who smokes. Yet the poem is equally a neo-domestic poem, featuring a woman who sacrifices her personal desires to the needs of her household. What, except for her cigarette, could soothe her

When the great family affairs  
Demand the most gigantic cares,  
And one is very ill upstairs,  
With poultices? (13-16)

This is comic—to be sure—but it nonetheless represents a neo-domestic sacrifice for the good of the household: the speaker puts the needs of her husband and children before her own. Even so, the speaker is not a domestic angel who finds contentment in mundane domestic duties. It is not the happy faces of her well-tended children or contented husband that cheer her. Only her cigarette does that:

What else could lighten times of woe,  
When some one says 'I told you so,'  
When all the servants, in a row,  
Give notices? (9-12)

Hence, the novice New Woman smoking without shame and expressing dissatisfaction with domestic life, the decadent women appropriating religious symbols for secular ends, and the domestic woman fulfilling her feminine duty as wife and mother exist in the same body. Indeed,

the fact that the speaker is “so daintily prepared, / No modern skill, or perfume, spared” (5-6) suggests that she willingly participates in many conventions of womanhood and relishes an admiring male gaze. The poem also bolsters the idea that she represents a conventional woman by demonstrating her struggle to balance her checkbook, in accord with stereotypical assessments of women’s meager rational and numerical abilities. She goes “over [her accounts] like anything” (22), yet still finds “them ever varying, / In their amounts!” (23-4).

<9>The poem’s comic mode serves several purposes, the most important of which is forestalling the anger and defensiveness that characterized so many late-century responses to women’s changing roles. Written 4-line stanzas, the first three iambic tetrameter lines end with the same rhyme. These triplets are followed in each stanza by a dimeter line with a separate rhyme, delivered like a punch line. The surprise of its foreshortened length is increased when the reader discovers that the final line is rhymed with the final line of the following stanza. Formally, the poem delivers a one-two punch. The comic mode enables these different ideological forms to co-exist and to create meaning by appropriating and re-representing characteristic domestic tropes, decadent images, and New Woman dissidence. The “punch-line” rhymes of the first two stanzas—“cigarette” (4) and “yet” (8)—are repeated but reversed in the final two stanzas—“yet” (40) and “cigarette” (44, the final word of the poem). The poem comes full circle, and stresses the subversive symbol (the cigarette) as well as the “yet.” In this way, the two opposite meanings of “yet”—continuing to exist and expected but not currently existing—are fully in play, allowing Radford to comment on both the modern woman who understands that real progress lies in the future, and her somewhat hysterical critics, who fear smoking women as the harbingers of apocalyptic change.

<10>Thus Radford does more than provide a counter to the anti-new woman narrative; she stylistically argues against New Woman critiques by writing in a comic vein. Just as its speaker’s display of traditionally feminine characteristics undermines the charge of mannishness and over-education, the poem’s comic form embodies and expresses a comic spirit. (10) Years of *Punch* caricatures had lampooned the New Woman—but here the New Woman is not only eliciting intentional (rather than rueful or knowing) laughter, she is inseparable from the domestic angel, the harried parent, the decadent rule-breaker, and the stereotypically math-challenged woman. One could argue that the meaning of Radford’s poem inheres in this fact; many anti-New Woman texts posited that a change in social relations led to a topsy-turvy world where men took on women’s roles and women’s took on men’s. This poem demonstrates that women do not have just one role, so changing their positions in society will not overturn the social order: it will enact yet another adjustment in it. Since women already inhabit various personae, the fixed categories are outmoded.

<11>This observation—that late-century women occupied numerous personae—is instructive to critics both then and now. One reason current scholars need clear alternatives to the poetess tradition is that male critics of the late-nineteenth century tried so hard to keep female poets in it, even when such efforts did not adequately address the “poetess’s” work. Consider Richard LeGallienne’s 1895 review of Radford’s *Songs and Other Verses*:

Mrs. Radford resembles Sappho in that she is a woman and a poet of the simple emotions. Her verses, too, are full of passion, but it is the passion of love that is at peace, at home day by day with its loved one. Mrs. Radford's muse is married, with three charming children, and the household cares inevitably resulting. She sings in the intervals of cooking and darning or maybe while she is cooking and darning. If she cooks and darns as well as she sings, it is well. We all know her sweet bird note. (232-3)

Looking to the poetess tradition allows the critic to see one aspect of Radford's poetry, but this tradition blinds LeGallienne to other equally important qualities in Radford's verse. He asserts that "her sweet bird note" is familiar, but ignores that she is singing quite a new tune. For example, "Because I Built my Nest So High," which opens the volume, is metaphorically a bird's song, but it also naturalizes and validates women's worldly ambition and persistence in the face of opposition.(11)

<12>In addition to increasing our understanding of individual poets, considering turn of the century women poets as a category allows for a more nuanced sense of poetic categories themselves. In the tradition of early-Victorian domestic poets, turn of the century women poets often represent women's family life, and thus were deemed "instinctive and natural," "trifling," and "inconclusive"—adjectives used by Symons, Yeats, and Shaw, respectively, to praise Dollie Radford's "pretty little verses" (Symons 610; Yeats, *Letters* 124; Shaw 80-81). But these women poets may well argue that children and the daily round of work and the concerns of domestic life are as significant as "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or "Fuzzy Wuzzy" or even "My Last Duchess." Moreover, the ways that women poets defy the dictates of the domestic category into which they are placed demonstrate that these categories are culturally constructed and imposed, not purely descriptive.(12)

<13>For Edith Nesbit, "The Things that Matter" are what the world often dismisses as "mere" women's wisdom: cooking beans and peas well, knowing the feel of good cloth, understanding when to scold and when to encourage. The speaker of this poem is an uneducated woman nearing the end of her life who looks upon her wealth of knowledge and regrets how much of it will be lost because her world does not value it. However, among the things this woman knows is how to tell the weather by looking at the sky, how to find healing plants and herbs, how to use them to cure the sick—in other words, things that would be characterized as "science" if practiced by men. While she is well-informed on subjects that "folks write and talk about" (10), she most regrets the loss of her specialized knowledge and prays that God will prevent the probability that "My knowing things and how they're done / Will all be lost and thrown away" (7-8) at her death. Current critical categories fail this poem. Analyzing "The Things that Matter" in the context of New Woman poetry is difficult: there is no outward rebellion against women's roles here, and while the speaker clearly revels in her knowledge, she does not chafe at all against the confines of her domestic realm. It would be distorting to view of this poem through the lens of decadence or aestheticism. And looking back to the traditions of women's domestic poetry is useful only insofar as the root is the same: poets locate value in the domestic sphere. While the rustic speech of poem's speaker perhaps expresses nostalgia for times past, this poem branches off in a new direction from early-Victorian domestic poetry.

<14>Indeed, a comparison with domestic poetry highlights its distance from “The Things that Matter.” In Nesbit’s poem, the speaker is utterly ordinary; she expresses no mother-love, she engages in no heroic action to save her home or rescue her children. Nesbit does not present a woman bound to her home by natural affections or inborn inclination; she is not an angel in her home. In short, she is entirely unlike any of the various women represented by Felicia Hemans in her *Records of Women* (1828), often cited as a touchstone of domestic poetry. Nesbit’s speaker is not heroic like Hemans’s “Joan of Arc, in Rheims,” not full of the emotion of parting like “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” not willing to risk all for husband and son like “The Switzer’s Wife,” not full of God-given eternal fidelity like “Gertrude.” Rather, Nesbit’s speaker is steadily working to acquire knowledge. She is amazed “About what lots of things I know” (4); indeed, she knows “things as some folks never learn” (28). The poem’s colloquial language prevents the speaker from emerging as the intellectual in the house, but at the same time, she is not a domestic angel.

<15>The category turn of the century women’s poetry can also assist with the latest stage in the reclamation of women’s poetic voices. This period of recovery has provided scholars with a critical mass of poems by female authors. For the most part, however, these poets have been addressed singly. Now that a wide variety of female poetic voices can be heard and assessed on their own terms, we need a frame through which to view them as a group. If, as Stephanie Kudek claims, Victorian poets “helped create their age” (513) and Victorian poetry was “central to the life of the Victorians” (513), then we need to embark on a “discussion of the woman poet as a generic category,” as Thain recommends (“What Kind of Critical Category” 576). This formal designation is even more important, she claims, as “we have moved farther away from the importance of the term as a recuperative one” (576). What is at stake in this process is whether or not scholars can read, discuss, and teach particular authors. Periodization shapes what we know and understand about the named era as a whole as well as the complex interactions of poetic forms and ideas. To address questions of canon and period, Geoffrey Tillotson opened his 1945 lecture entitled “English Poetry in the Nineteenth Century” with an allusion to Henry James’s story “The Figure in the Carpet,” in which a “blunt-minded critic” searches for the pattern hidden in the novels of a writer who died before helping him to perceive it (3). The problem in this story is that the critic looks and looks at the carpet, but cannot discern the pattern it figures forth. The problem is even more intractable for the critic of nineteenth century poetry, Tillotson claims, because “the carpet of nineteenth-century poetry exists only in the mind of the Muse of History” (3). The critic has “merely a square yard here and there” (4). His audience, too, has limited knowledge, but—frustratingly—a *different* limited knowledge. These square yards are analogous to studies of individual woman poets: absolutely essential to the whole, yet fully understood only in relation the other parts that constitute the whole. Hence the need to provide a framework and create a new lens through which to view, understand, appreciate and teach these poets.(13)

<16>One objection to various attempts at categorizing Victorian poets is that they are both deterministic and generalizing.(14) A new formalist approach can help scholars avoid flattening and homogenizing complex formulations by attending to what has gone into producing forms, conventions, and style. Lascelles Ambercrombie’s 1933 literary-historical definition of

Edwardian literature offers insight into this question of how cultural narratives influence intellectual and poetic production. He initially objects to “Spirit of the Age” periodization but then sees this trend as merely the false application of an accurate observation.

For some reason or other we pick out a certain term of years and call it a *period*. Naturally, into this period there run all sorts of tendencies, forces, movements from the preceding years, some of which—currents perhaps which have long been flowing and growing underground—now first come to the surface. These emergings we call, quite rightly, characteristic of the period—these, rather than the well-known streams that run into it plainly and openly in the light of day; for it is these new-appearing springs that differentiate the period. We generalize the nature of the forces that thus now reveal themselves, and rhetoric calls our generalization the Spirit of the Age. Charmed by this figure of speech, we then proceed to hypostatize our generalization, and to invoke the Spirit of the Age as the power which *causes* this or that particular event, whereas it is nothing but a summary formula of the tendencies these particular events exemplify. (189)

Ambercrombie’s “tendencies, forces, movements” might be productively translated as forms. Long-existing, they assume different significance relative to other forms and norms, depending on social and cultural shifts. Here Ambercrombie seems to anticipate Joseph Bristow’s dissatisfaction with “a larger pattern in which the term ‘Victorian poetry’ assumes that poetic forms occupy a period in which they either reflect or enact the age” (“Whether ‘Victorian’ Poetry” 97) and offer a solution: retrospective observations may indeed glimpse patterns and tendencies in a period’s work, even if the period itself didn’t “cause” that poetic formation. Indeed, this understanding limns Levine’s own answer to those who present literary form as “epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes” (*Forms* 12). As she notes, this approach ignores “one of forms’ affordances: the capacity to endure across time and space. From the gender binary to rhyme and from prison cells to narrative prose, aesthetic and social forms outlive the specific conditions that gave birth to them . . . . None of these forms spring up anew in response to particular social facts but instead hang around, available for reuse. In this sense, forms are not outgrowths of social conditions; they do not belong to certain times and places” (12). In short, a scholar cannot safely ignore the matrix of cultural influences and historical events that help shape past sensibilities and aesthetic production, although she must exercise caution in attributing cause and effect. It is how forms obscure or alter what is seen, and how each interacts with other forms, that matters.

<17>But if everything is always a matrix of competing forms, what value does form as a periodizing term offer? For one, when we posit forms as “makeshift, contingent wholes in order to study cultural events and patterns” (Levine, “Strategic” 634), we can take the positive value of periodizing concepts—the necessary (even if provisional) definition of an object of study—without the pitfalls that accompany reifying the period.<sup>(15)</sup> Every period of history is a mix of competing forms and, as Levine notes, both periods and institutions are “ways of organizing heterogeneous materials” (*Forms* 56). What turn of the century women’s poetry allows for is a way to recognize the “currents” and “new-appearing springs” that Ambercrombie proposes are

always flowing in the literary-historical stream. Levine notes that forms do not belong to a certain time and place but persist and shift relative positions with literary-historical fashions; as Ambercrombie notes, certain currents “run plainly and openly in the light of day” while others are submerged and still others are coming to the surface. Ordering structures continually shift and neo-formalist approaches—including approaches to period—give scholars a way to both recognize and organize them. One might even argue that the truth or correctness of period isn’t really the issue; “periods exist for and in relation to us,” as Marshall Brown notes (316). Like Ambercrombie’s description of how “spirit of the age” designations are formed, these categories are contingent and useful only insofar as they enable a viable critical agenda.

<18>Perhaps the reason that so many scholars and commentators have lamented the fragmented, transitional, or formless nature of late-Victorian literature is that the defining Victorian forms were becoming less dominant and new forms were emerging. Already a period of aesthetic experimentation as well as social-political agitation, the late-nineteenth century is sufficiently fragmented that “the Victorian” label became ever more transparently an effort to paper over competing ideas, forms, and structures. In conceptualizing the period from 1830-1880, Philip Davis seizes upon one clear determinant: “As a result of manifold contemporary upheavals, social and religious, ‘the Victorian’ in its deepest literary and cultural manifestations characteristically has to do with questionings rather than certainties, with serious debates and painfully registered problems located at the very foundations of the modern world.” I propose that part of what makes the late-century period distinctive is the extent to which major questions asked in the mid-century were established, *known*—if only as questions important to consider—so that the end of the century reveals a more coherent sense of the range of answers available. Writers knew that the Woman Question was important, that problem of poverty needed to be addressed, that realism was no longer the only or the ideal way of representing the world. Nonetheless, as Bristow rightly notes, the term Victorian does come freighted with meanings and associations that are not amenable to late-century mores. That is why I suggest that scholars look forward—without embracing a teleological view—as well as backward. Post-1900 events can illumine late-century poetics as well as Victorian associations do. Indeed, it can alert us to *what* in turn of the century women’s poetry is distinctive. Examining the specific concerns of the post-1900 period via the events that marked the Edwardian period (rather than responding to stereotyped representations of Edwardianism) alerts us to some of the ways late-century women poets were vitally involved in poetic innovation, in producing new themes and topics, in political changes. I do not want to replicate the problems of periodization by reifying the Edwardian period or suggesting that women poets anticipated what was to come in the Edwardian years, but to note that—following the suggestion offered by Ambercrombie—after the turn of the century, the things they were doing were categorized, labeled, and taken up by mainstream male prose writers, and therefore more readily seen by literary observers.

<19>Turn of the century women’s poetry recognizes how many women poets cross current categorical lines. Late-Victorian women’s own commentary on poetry often works to establish a continuous history of women poets that will establish a female tradition while also recognizing how forgotten female voices enrich and complicate that tradition. Elizabeth A. Sharp, in her

preface to *Women Poets of the Victorian Era* (c. 1890), creates a women's tradition whose depth and richness convinces her "that our women-poets had never been collectively represented with anything like adequate justice; that the works of many are not so widely known as they deserved to be; and that at least some fine fugitive poetry could thus be rescued from oblivion" (xxx). She insists, however, that there is more than mere continuity in women's poetry—more than the poetess tradition can account for—because where this tradition leads is unknowable: "who shall predict what women will do in the future?" (xxxii). Contemporary scholarship not only needs to make explicit the ways in which Victorian women's writing can be traced back to poets like Hemans and L.E.L.; it also needs to account for the ways that writers revise, challenge and transmute that tradition in ways that help us understand the poets' contemporary moment and points us toward the future. Thus, the category turn of the century women poets allows critics to see beyond the poetess tradition; equally, it enables critics look forward to the "poetics of symbol and ambiguity" that Isobel Armstrong identifies as the special province of post-1880s literature (480). As Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo note, exploring "fin de siècle women's poetry only as part of this Victorian literary legacy occludes some of women poets' most deeply felt concerns about the challenges and promises of the period" (390); they call for critics to "reconsider the work of women poets who published exclusively within those years and their position within aestheticism, decadence, impressionism, symbolism, and other literary movements" as well as "to lay foundations for inquiries into both how their poetics can be traced to the twentieth century" (391). In short, critics must encompass what is behind and what lies ahead.

<20>Like the impact and influence of women poets at the turn of the century, significant historical events and the formal shifts that accompanied them are forgotten, elided, re-written in our collective memories by the great writers who came after them. George Orwell's essays and Vita Sackville-West's 1930 novel *The Edwardians* have done much to shape our perceptions of the era. Much like the characters in Sackville-West's novel, Orwell remembers the early days of the twentieth century as breathing forth "a smell a brilliantine and *crème-de-menthe* and soft-centered chocolates—an atmosphere, as it were, of eating everlasting strawberry ices on green lawns to the tune of the Eton Boating Song" (357). It was the era of the country house and of conspicuous consumption, led by fun- and food-loving Edward VII. These descriptions are utopic, idyllic, and almost entirely inaccurate—at least for the vast majority of the population. They also utterly elide the complex historical context: of militant suffrage crusades, of the Liberal landslide of 1905, of anti-British activism in Ireland, of a nascent Labour party, of taxes on inherited wealth. Similarly, the best-known document assessing Edwardian writers, Virginia Woolf's "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," defines the period's literary techniques merely to dismiss them.

<21>Just as turn of the century women poets need a wider compass of understanding, the Edwardian period requires other voices and contexts if it is to emerge from pre-conceived notions. John Osborne, in *Look Back in Anger*, evokes the Edwardian stereotype in order immediately to complicate it: "The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the

smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes" (17). Even Orwell admits that "if you happened not to belong to the world of champagne and hot-house strawberries, life before 1914 had serious disadvantages" (445). And of course the vast majority did not belong to the "champagne and strawberries" world. As L. G. Chiozza Money's *Riches and Poverty* (1906) demonstrates, one-third of the wealth of England belonged to less than one-thirtieth of the population. Indeed, as William Scovell Adams points out in his *Edwardian Portraits*, the years 1901-1911 were not purely an age of optimism, as many have claimed: rather, the British populace confronted the Anglo-Boer War, trade competition, diminution of imperial power, general unrest in Ireland, and unrest in England among women and working people (32). Rather than spending leisure time eating "everlasting strawberry ices," women were increasingly at work. Adams reports that in the arena of women's employment, the only category that reduced its numbers of women was domestic service (31). Between 1901-11, the number of female law clerks went from 367 to 2159; the number of women authors increased by 40.6% (compared with the number of male authors, which went up by 22.6%); and the number of female commercial clerks nearly doubled, as did the number of women in banking. Adams describes a political situation where the Liberals and Labor temporarily allied themselves against Conservatives to achieve unemployment benefits, meals for schoolchildren, and a continued push for women's suffrage (44). These historical disruptions of convention limn the literary disruptions enacted by many turn of the century women poets and highlights thematic similarities: an interest in the rights of the oppressed, in expanding participation in public life, in expressing alternative points of vision, in looking to past models as well as planning a new future, in making visible those generally unseen.

<22>Critics agree that literary culture and poetic production changed significantly at the *fin de siècle*. I further claim that women writers at the turn of the century were central to the disruption of literary convention because they subverted masculine codes of art. This included their irruptions of traditional forms and subjects (the ballads of Graham R. Thomson/Rosamund Marriott Watson, Augusta Webster's "Mother and Daughter" sonnet sequence, closet dramas by Michael Field, Augusta Webster, and Dollie Radford); their insistence on rights and recognition (primarily a prose phenomenon, but present also in poems from Mary E Coleridge's "A Clever Woman" to Amy Levy's "Ballad of Religion and Marriage," to May Kendall's "Woman's Future"); their participation in typically masculine endeavors (as in May Kendall's, Mathilde Blind's and Constance Naden's poems on science); their marriage of art-for-art's sake with art-for-women's sake (as in the work of Michael Field). As Marion Thain notes, the *fin de siècle* is "when the condition of modernism was recognized, but its consequences had not yet restricted art's ability to function in the world" ("Modernist 'Homage'" 39). Understanding the forces of disintegration and disunity, late-century writers nonetheless embraced a "belief that art could command elaborate conceits to appear to mend those rifts" (39). Most literary accounts skip over Edward VII's reign altogether, deeming the years 1901-1911 (or, more commonly, 1914 and the outbreak of World War I) the end of a long Victorian era or the beginning of the Modernist one. This occlusion of Edwardian forms has prevented critics from identifying salient formal qualities of women's turn of the century poetry. Indeed, many studies that focus on women's writing at the *fin de siècle* often locate its value in its incipient Modernism. Or, in the less sanguine view that Thain and Parejo Vadillo articulate, "when not considered Victorian, *fin*

*de siècle* poetry is sometimes portrayed as somehow aspiring to be modernist but not quite making the grade” (390).

<23>The importance of looking both forward and back when interpreting turn of the century women’s poetry is exemplified by Alice Meynell’s sonnet “Renouncement.” Meynell’s first line, “I must not think of thee,” echoes but revises Barrett Browning’s opening to the twenty-ninth of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: “I think of thee!” The contrast is striking: Barrett Browning’s speaker is certain, strong, exclamatory, yet is it the speaker’s lover who will take action; the rest of the sonnet asks the lover to be strong enough to shake free of the speaker’s strangling love. Meynell’s speaker, while seeming to embrace a traditionally feminine self-renunciation, actually begins an internal debate about the conflict between waking control and sleeping freedom. Awake and aware, the speaker must renounce the lover. But the turn of the sonnet embodies the turn of her resolve: “when sleep comes” (9), she “Must doff my will as raiment laid away, -- / With the first dream that comes with the first sleep / I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart” (12-14). In this way, Meynell’s speaker unexpectedly changes the terms of her interaction with Barrett Browning’s poem. Instead of inverting Barrett Browning’s call for a lover with strong will by representing a strong-willed woman, Meynell imagines a dream-world in which feminine self-control is not enforced.

<24>In so doing, Meynell is also looking forward to the horizons of her own era, as she engages questions of the unconscious mind and repressed desire. W.H. Auden’s introduction to *Victorian and Edwardian Poets* posits that increasing evidence of the power of unconscious motivations was at the heart of twentieth-century changes of perspective. He does not credit the usual suspects with undermining the confidence of humanists (geologists and archeologists whose research displaced humans from the center of the natural world) because the hard sciences are “based on the presupposition that, whatever his origin, whatever the relation of his mind to matter, man was capable of a disinterested search for an objective truth which was universally valid” (xx). Rather, Auden claims, “The dangerous assault came later from the half-sciences, like sociology, anthropology, and psychology” because of “Their exhibition of the mind’s capacity for self-deception, of the unconscious effect upon its thinking of social status and sex” (xx-xxi). In representing the power of the unconscious, Meynell joins the ranks of late-century women whose poems acknowledge limits to their reason and their self-control, not because women are naturally less reasonable but because science has revealed the extent to which such control eludes all humans.<sup>(16)</sup> The unconscious is represented most often in dream worlds, where the sleeping self acts as handmaiden to desires and gives expression to what A. Mary F. Robinson calls women’s “unconscious long unrest” (“Darwinism” 3). As such, they may represent first steps toward outward, material changes.

<25>H. G. Wells’s scientific romances are another index of the different forms assumed by ideas surrounding progress, evolution, and science at the end of the century. His treatment of these subjects, for instance, is radically different from Tennyson’s approach in *In Memoriam*. Late century prose suggests less anxiety over the religious implications of evolutionary science and more concern with the political implications of scientific considerations. *The Time Machine* (1895) is clearly anxious about evolution, but the source of

the text's anxiety is social and economic, not religious. Representations of progress in late-century women's poetry is very often gendered and very often clothed in the language of science. Science in these poems is allied with experiments with prosody as well as imagining new forms specifically adapted to new political realities. These women poets seek to use scientific forms to express in poetry the lived experiences of women, including discontent with traditional roles and expectations, and to imaginatively occupy a future that is brighter. May Kendall's "A Pure Hypothesis" is subtitled *A Lover, in Four-dimensional space, describes a Dream*. It is a nightmare, though, in the speaker's mind, for she is living in four dimensions, and the three-dimensional world she dreams of is "so unutterably wrong" (28) that it terrifies her. She describes the world familiar to those living in three dimensions thus:

Where Present, Past, and Future all  
Appeared at sixes and at sevens,  
Where Capital and Labour fought,  
And, in the nightmare of the mind,  
No contradictories were thought  
As truthfully combined! (35-40)

Indeed, the speaker living in a world of four dimensions cannot begin to imagine the three-dimensional conditions that Kendall's readers live in every day. In the fourth dimension, there is no word for "askew," so the speaker is left to stutter when asked what the word means: "I cannot answer, can't portray; / The sense of Everything awry / No language can convey" (46-8). Of course, the joke is that the speaker's dreamed terror is the reader's reality. Despite the disturbing assessment, the implications are positive: our reality is somehow less fixed, less intractable if we can view it from a different perspective. If our world could be seen differently—from a standpoint that combines humanistic and scientific forms, say—then it is possible to truthfully combine "contradictories" and for Labor and Capital to come to agreement. More importantly, readers are presented with an imaginative vision of a world where nothing is "askew," where an even, upright, balanced world is possible, and the imbalances caused by patriarchy, racial inequity, and class status are no longer naturalized. Contemporary strife is not thus lessened, but it can be faced with a sense of hope and imagined alternatives.

<26>Scientific subject matter is often presented comically in these poems, as in "A Pure Hypothesis." But not always. Science offered many women writers a positive model of progress and many embraced Darwinian theory, believing that if evolution were true, then change for women is inevitable. A. Mary F. Robinson's "Darwinism" is one model, which traces life from fern fronds to jungle forests to birds to apes to humans. What each era in the Earth's history has in common is a culmination in "A vague unconscious long unrest" (3) that results in evolutionary change. In this view, "old, unchanged, remote distress" (14) and "divine unhappiness" (16) are forces of progress. As part of a long history of unrest, current strife is reimagined as a step toward future improvement, for each unhappy phase of human history has evolved into a new era of organic complexity and—for a time—perfect happiness. The present, painful era, then, will surely lead to positive—although unknown—outcomes: "And

now the same unrest / Goads to the same invisible goal, / Till some new gift, undreamed, unguessed, / End the new travail of the soul" (21-4). Robinson's "Darwinism" does not signify a deity's indifference (as in *In Memoriam*), but inevitable historical and social progress. Thus, science in these poems provides one way to confront economic and social wrongs: different perspectives—be they from the fourth dimension or from an evolutionary long view—allow individuals to understand their plight differently and to imagine different futures.

<27>Interest in "our future state" (46), as Radford puts it in "From Our Emancipated Aunt in Town," inheres in much of women's poetry (as it does in many of Wells's novels, or in the plays of George Bernard Shaw) because these writers believed in their ability to influence it. Advancing beyond the women writers who carefully constructed a women's literary tradition to follow, Meynell constructed a tradition she could lead. In the poems subtitled "The Poet Speaks to Her Poet," Meynell addresses future lyricists. "The Song of the Spring to the Summer" addresses the "poet of the time to be, / My conqueror" (1-2). Although the future poet "conquers" the present speaker, the speaker retains a large measure of power, a measure that grows with each stanza. The second stanza asks the inheritor of her lyre to "hear my call" (6) and "keep the promise of my lays" (7). In this stanza, though, she must merely "trust" (10) that her request will be heeded. The third stanza makes large claims, but they are in the conditional tense: "If thy thoughts unfold from me . . ." (11). It is in the last stanza that the speaker asserts her power over poets to come: "I have set thy paths" (16), which means that the current poet shares in the later poet's success: "I led thy feet before I died" (20). This final line establishes a social and a poetic legacy: the speaker led the future poet's feet literally, by forging a path for the professional woman writer to succeed as a critic, editor, poet, suffrage activist, wife and mother; and poetically, by providing a model for new poetic modes and forms (indicated by her pun on "feet," the units that make up a poetic line). Her poem "The Day to the Night," subtitled "The Poet Sings to His Poet," provides a gendered contrast. The male poet is represented as Day and although he and Night "are sundered always" (2), he focuses on "dusk," "dawn," and "twilight" when they are one. Meynell's female poet has a different vision: she is emphatically not the same as "her poet"; rather, she leads her poet's feet without requiring sameness and unity. Her poet is given room to grow and evolve and become something new, in much the same way that Meynell in "Renunciation" is led by Barrett Browning but also free to walk her own path.

<28>Social forms engendered different reactions to historical conditions, and women poets of the late century often utilize forms that males writers commonly employed later. C.E. Andrews and M.O. Percival, in their Introduction to *Poetry of the Nineties* (1926), focus their discussion of the social changes of the 1890s on women and their revolt against previous constraints and restrictions. Because of women's increased mobility, their freedom from chaperones, their presence in the workplace and institutions of higher education, their service in rescue homes, their advanced discussions of literature and politics, they inhabited new attitudes and new roles. The sons of the era, already privy to these freedoms, had fewer opportunities to rebel, "but they turned Bohemian not only with the readiness that youth always grants to fashion, but with the joyousness of school boys entering upon a holiday" (3-4). In short, the turn of the century man's revolt against his forebears involved dice, cards, gambling, music halls, fashion,

and dining out; he became decadent. While men rebelled against the Victorian dictate to be earnest and upright, women fought for the right to be taken seriously and work for their livings. Perhaps this is why women did not tend to “drink absinthe with their black coffee” or walk “on stilts” (as Yeats famously had the Nineties generation doing)—and therefore were already attuned to forms that would more fully emerge after the turn of the century (Introduction xi).

<29>Women’s experience of historical forms—because they lived under more limited expectations and in more straitened circumstances than men—requires an approach different from the one scholars have taken with male poets of the turn of the century. Recognizing this, and considering women’s poetry both as a product of the poetess tradition and as a central contribution to Modernist aesthetics, allows literary scholars to give turn of the century women’s poetry the context it needs to be appreciated, understood, and valued. Writing about Michael Field, Joseph Bristow asks rhetorically, “Does their extensive oeuvre help us pinpoint some of the exclusionary mechanisms that traditionally served to marginalize from the canon many talented English women poets. . . . whose careers developed during the fin-de-siècle and early twentieth century?” (“Michael Field in Their Time” 159-60). Yes. But the extensive body of poetry by women writers at the turn of the twentieth century also helps us better analyze the major currents of social thought, political action, and literary innovation that would become apparent in Edwardian times. As Levine notes, “it is literary forms, read in their rich complexity as struggles among conflicting sign systems, that bear witness to a dialectical social agon, offer our best access to both existent and emergent systems of social relations” (“Strategic Formalism” 625). Turn of the century women’s poetry corrects the male-dominated picture of *fin de siècle* literary production and demonstrates how these women poets participated in and shaped their literary-historical world.

#### Endnotes

(1)Tricia Lootens’s *Political Poetess* addresses this problem by demonstrating how the poetess tradition works only as a fantasy of innocence and separate spheres, whereas the poetry itself is raced and politicized from the outset. In doing so, Lootens draws our “attention to forms and forces moving not only through, but beyond the realm of ‘nineteenth-century femininity’”

(2).[\(▲\)](#)

(2)*Victorian Poetry* volumes 41.4 (2003) and 42.1 (2004), edited by Linda Hughes, provide various ways of answering the question “Whither Victorian Poetry?” In addition, see Joseph Bristow’s introduction to *The Fin de Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, as well as the essays in that volume.[\(▲\)](#)

(3)Many seminal books on Victorianism follow this sense of period, either explicitly or implicitly. Note, for instance, that Dorothy Mermin’s *Godiva’s Ride* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) is subtitled, in part, “1830-1880.” Or witness Philip Davis’s *The Oxford English Literary History. Volume 8: 1830-1880: The Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Indeed, there is a long history of shifting the dates of “Victorianism” out of accord with the reign of the Queen’s ascension and death: in 1956, William York Tindall dated the beginning of Modernism in 1880,

claiming that “almost everything in current literature is implicit in the literature of the 1880s” (v).<sup>(^)</sup>

(4) Joseph Bristow's introduction to *The Fin de Siècle Poem* explodes this narrow conception of 1890s poetic production, noting, moreover, that this period has “been subject to considerable misrepresentation” (1), most especially in “the persistent tendency within the most widely touted myths of aestheticism and Decadence to occlude, almost to the point of invisibility, the remarkably strong presence of women writers in the thriving literary culture of the time” (4). This occlusion is implicitly addressed by the essays in the critical anthology he introduces: of its eleven essays, seven focus on women poets, while two others put decadent male poets into conversation with their female counterparts.<sup>(^)</sup>

(5) Review articles by both Linda Shires (“Victorian Woman’s Poetry,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 27, 1999) and Glennis Stephenson (“Connections and Traditions in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 22, 1994) emphasize that current anthologies of Victorian women’s poetry look back to Barrett Browning, L. E. L., and Hemans.<sup>(^)</sup>

(6) The founding of the journal *Turn of the Century Women* (5 vols., 1984-1990), edited by Margaret Stetz, further evinces the appeal of this frame of reference, focus, and locution. The journal featured articles on “contributions of women to literature, art, politics, and social history” in the years 1880-1920. I specifically chose “turn of the century” rather than “*fin de siècle*” because the Victorian *fin de siècle* has been so strongly associated with masculine decadence.<sup>(^)</sup>

(7) Marion Thain makes a similar observation about women poets in particular: describing the variety of “poetic personas” available to women writers at the end of the nineteenth century, she claims that a “challenge to the unity implied by the term ‘women’s poetry’ is an important part of appreciating the diversity of opportunity available for the woman writer at the end of the century, and a way of peopling the literary critical scene with a number of personas which mark a broader sense of the importance of ‘women’s poetry’” (“What Kind of Critical Category” 576-7).<sup>(^)</sup>

(8) As Levine defines them, forms are “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (*Forms* 3), whether literary, social, institutional, or ideological. Defined this way, a literary period is also a form: it is a container that functions as “a structure for thinking about historical time” (56).<sup>(^)</sup>

(9) The new formalism associated with critics like Heather Dubrow, Herbert Tucker, and Susan Wolfson views formal patterns as an analogue to cultural-ideological patterns; as a representation of reality, a poem’s form reveals how the physical world becomes conceptual words. A primary distinction between Levine’s theory and these practitioners is Levine’s insistence on the value of keeping multiple forms in play. She writes that most new formalists “were reading aesthetic forms as responses to given social realities. I wanted to know, instead,

how both aesthetic and social forms acted in the world, and how they interacted and overlapped with each other" (*Forms* xi). Thus Levine insists on the need to view multiple forms in conjunction, whereas other critics may examine a binary or a single context in relation to a literary work. All these new formalist critics would, however, agree with Kudek that "the capacity of literature to act in the world cannot be separated from the formal nature of its meaning-making" (516).<sup>(^)</sup>

(10)As Sally Ledger notes, "New Women and feminists in general were often constructed in the periodical press as mannish, over-educated, humourless bores" (96). It is useful to consider this poem in relation to a comic drama like Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895). Peter Raby argues that "The juxtaposition of the comic and the serious is one of Wilde's most successful dramatic techniques; once the absurd and the patently false have been established, the serious emotions and ideals which are explored have been given a context which prevents them from ever seeming too solemn" (147). Thus he can skewer conventional assumptions concerning numerous subjects—women's roles, marriage, romance, family, wealth—that establish the identity of the play's primary audience. As Jerusha McCormack notes, Wilde makes his audience laugh at itself, and this laughter represents the audience's complicity with Wilde's subversive ideas. In "a kind of ritual provocation" (93), Wilde creates scenes that make the audience laugh, thus "betray[ing] recognition" of the underlying truth he represents (93). Radford is doing the same with "A Novice."<sup>(^)</sup>

(11)See my "Naturally Radical: The Subversive Poetics of Dollie Radford" (*Victorian Poetry*, vol. 38, 2000) for an elaboration of this claim. Ruth Livesey elaborates yet another of Radford's poetic personae when she analyzes the socialism inhering in Radford's poetry in "Dollie Radford and the Ethical Aesthetics of *Fin-de-Siècle* Poetry" (*Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 34, 2006).<sup>(^)</sup>

(12)Lootensexplodes the myth of the Poetess and of non-political domestic poetry, writing, "I speak of 'the Poetess'; but, in fact, I have come to believe there is no such thing" (3), stressing instead that the role was entirely performative.<sup>(^)</sup>

(13)The example of Virago's 1970s publication of nineteenth-century feminist literature—especially of New Woman novels—is instructive. Many were reprinted in the 1970s but most went out of print again by the 1980s. Quite simply, the critical apparatus needed to support these texts was not there: the 1970s did see a few critical studies of New Women novels, but they focused on the male practitioners of the genre (Hardy, Meredith, Gissing) and generally deprecated the women writers (see especially Lloyd Fernando, *'New Women' in the Late Victorian Novel* [Pennsylvania State UP, 1977] and Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* [Barnes and Noble, 1978]). Then, Ann Ardis, in *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (Rutgers UP, 1990), demonstrated the centrality of New Woman novels to late-century culture. Other critics followed. Now New Woman novels are back in print, and, most importantly, being read and studied.<sup>(^)</sup>

(14) Joseph Bristow, for instance, dismisses as clumsy and mechanistic Hugh Walker's 1895 claim that what Tennyson and Browning "thought and wrote were in large measure determined for them by the circumstances and ideas of the time in which they lived" ("Whether 'Victorian' Poetry" 95). While Bristow's evaluation is undoubtedly accurate, it is possible to nuance the language of determination and instead see the interaction of multiple cultural forms.(^)

(15) Marshall Brown suggests the use of this approach when he observes that "Much vexation could be avoided if we recognized that every period is also a terrain, in more or less proximate relationship to other terrains" (314).(^)

(16) Other examples include Michael Field's "And on my Eyes Dark Sleep by Night" and Dollie Radford's "To a Stranger." Field's speaker, like the speaker of "Renouncement," finds freedom in sleep. Although dreams of freedom are "lies" (2), Field's speaker wants these dreams to lead her to "The pleasure day denies" (4). The restrictions and confinements of day-to-day living, on the right to love and to act freely, are lifted—if only for a while—in sleep. Radford's "To a Stranger" opens with her admission that "Last night I lay and dreamed of you" (1) even though the stranger is "Remote from all my waking thought" (21). Clearly the stranger isn't entirely unknown, for the speaker says that "you draw me with a spell / I have no power to break" (25-6) and reveals that her dream work is to express what she cannot admit in her waking life: "I pray you do not pass to-day, / Till I have dreamed my dream away!" (29-30). The speaker must "toil and tire / With prayer and pilgrimage and tears" (10-11) in the day; but at night she is free to dream.(^)

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