

LINDA K. HUGHES

Introduction

On July 20, 1995, the world changed – or did for me, to borrow Virginia Woolf's words – when I walked into the three-day “Rethinking Women Poets Conference” at Birkbeck College, London. I was then working on a biography of the 1890s poet Graham R. Tomson (later Rosamund Marriott Watson [1860–1911]) and assumed I was doing something quirky, at the margins of scholarship, since few scholars had heard of her.¹ Besides, the novel then dominated studies of Victorian women's writing. At the conference, I suddenly plunged into animated conversations among international scholars who were researching eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's poetry and discovering compelling work that demanded sophisticated textual, philosophical, and theoretical analysis. The conference was swiftly followed by publication of two generously inclusive anthologies of women's poetry, Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds's *Victorian Women Poets* (1995) and Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow's *Nineteenth-century Women Poets* (1996).² Together, the conference and the anthologies instigated new scholarship on women's poetry that continues to this day.

Much has changed in studies of Victorian women's poetry since the mid-1990s, however. The anthologies, often still cited (as this volume attests), are out of print. Yet Victorian women's poetry is more available than ever to scholars, teachers, and students thanks to digitized out-of-copyright books by women and digital databases of nineteenth-century literary annuals and periodicals. Attitudes toward annuals and periodicals have likewise evolved. Once dismissed as ephemeral literary trash, they have become important sites of research on women's poetry and women's agency as editors, writers, and readers. Poetry dominated the letter press of illustrated annuals, which first appeared in 1823 and flourished through the 1840s.³ Their female editors included poets Letitia Landon (L.E.L., 1802–38) and Mary Howitt (1799–1888), who like other editors recruited poems from women, often to accompany engravings. Verse written “to order” was one factor in critical

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dismissals of annuals. Yet a poem like “The Romaunt of the Page” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB, 1806–61) in *Finden's Tableaux* (1839), the annual edited by EBB's good friend Mary Russell Mitford (1787–1856), also a sometime poet, became one of EBB's most popular ballads and continues to be studied by scholars of women's poetry and the nineteenth-century ballad revival. After annuals died out at mid-century, they were succeeded by an outpouring of illustrated gift books; these, too, included many women's poems.

Poets might publish a volume of poems every few years, perhaps only once in a lifetime, especially those with scant access to editors or sponsors, such as many working-class women. Annuals or seasonal gift books appeared once a year. But Victorian periodicals appeared monthly or weekly, and newspapers even daily, and they too published poems.⁴ Once dismissed as uninteresting, often anonymous filler in untold magazines and newspapers, periodical poetry has reemerged as a key archive of verse by women poets ranging from Felicia Hemans (1793–1835) to Janet Hamilton (1795–1873), George Eliot (1819–80), Christina Rossetti (1830–94), and countless authors of unsigned or initialed poems.⁵ Anonymity remains a challenge to scholars, as does the uneven quality of periodical poems (as in signed volumes). Still, periodicals geometrically increased the readership of Victorian women's poetry while augmenting poets' income: cheap, mass-produced print serials could sell as many as 20,000, 60,000, or more than 100,000 copies per issue. From the beginning of the Victorian era – whether dated from the first Reform Bill (1832) or Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne (1837) – women's poetry circulated regularly in periodicals through the 1880s and remained a significant presence in little magazines like the *Yellow Book* into the 1890s and the twentieth century. The millions of periodical pages now digitized further enable twenty-first-century readers to discover women's poetry and read it in its remediated print environment, although commercial databases are not universally available and represent only a portion of the original Victorian print archive. Much remains to be done, accordingly, whether by scholars working with print periodicals not yet digitized or by creating new ways to search and conceptualize digitized women's poetry.

Such massive numbers of texts, however, exert pressure on this *Cambridge Companion's* object of study. Should “Victorian women's poetry” be approached en masse as a by-product of the Victorian publishing industry or envisioned through its high points exemplified by canonical poets such as EBB, Rossetti, and Emily Brontë (1818–48), with sidelights from distinctive poems such as “The Last Sark” by Ellen Johnston (1835–74) or “The Witch” by Mary Coleridge (1861–1907)? Classroom anthologies stage encounters

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with pre-selected “high points.” The enormous scale of poems that Victorian women actually produced is an empirical fact that also demands attention.

This *Cambridge Companion* steers a middle course between poetry viewed on a large scale from a distance and poetry examined through historically contextualized close readings that reveal the complex techniques and voicings that make so many women's poems memorable. It thus locates “Victorian women's poetry” both in its breadth and in its depths of individual poems. Rejecting an “anthology” approach, I have invited contributions that unfold not as a chronological presentation of exemplary figures but as a series of topics that cut across a wide array of poets and allow for comparative analysis of poets and their cultural positions. Some poets, of course, are referenced more often than others, most prominently EBB and Rossetti, with frequent appearances by Hemans, Alice Meynell (1847–1922), Michael Field (Katharine Bradley, 1846–1914, and Edith Cooper, 1862–1913). More than a hundred poets are examined altogether, however, including obscure poets like Sarah Parker (1824–80) and Alice Gillington (1863–1934) or the understudied Frances Brown, (1816–79).

Since form is inseparable from any literary work, Part I (Chapters 1 through 5) addresses form and the senses – appropriately so, since printed poetry is an inherently multimedia genre that appeals simultaneously to the ear, eye, pulses, and intellect, sometimes to touch as well if readers are turning or touching pages.⁶ Influenced by cultural, material, and gender studies as well as older interpretive methods, twenty-first-century scholarship has documented the cultural, physiological, and political underpinnings of form, whether in its meters, rhyming, and sonic patterns; accompanying illustrations; formats; or other cues that solicit responses from embodied readers.

Victorian women poets could choose from among a broad array of poetic genres. As Monique Morgan argues in Chapter 1 (“Genres”), women often approached genres as flexible forms that they treated experimentally. Hence, when women's practices are factored into the study of sonnets, dramatic monologues, narrative poetry and ballads, satiric and political protest poems, or epic and verse novels, genres expand beyond narrow definitions. The point is less that women's practice was often anomalous than that women could experimentally reconfigure a genre in ways intrinsic to their poetic subject and expressive aim, whether they protested artificial limits imposed on women or satirized masculine power (and ego) in terms drawn from evolutionary science.

In “Prosody” (Chapter 2), Meredith Martin extends her prior work on the cultural politics of Victorian meters to the critical reception of women poets by a largely male body of critics. Male critics repeatedly emphasized

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women's "naturally" poetic, song-like "melodiousness," which predisposed reviewers to approve brief lyrics more than other verse. Indeed, women poets were most often censured when they seemed to approximate prose and its capacity for argument, as with EBB's *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Such critics often ignored or underestimated learned women poets who knew Greek and experimented with classical meters, as Martin shows in discussing "The Snow Waste" (1866) by Augusta Webster (1837–94), a 371-line poem that refuses alignment of the female poet's voice with "natural" song. Referencing George Eliot's anonymous review of *Aurora Leigh* in the *Westminster Review*, Martin also reveals the difference that a learned female reviewer could make in responding to a woman poet's innovations.

In the succeeding chapter, "Haunted by Voice" (Chapter 3), Elizabeth Helsinger presents the important use that women poets could make of brief lyrics, not in conventional "melodiousness" but in Rossetti's, Meynell's, and Michael Field's artful counterpointing of voices and silence. As Helsinger observes, voice is intrinsically "ec-static," outside the self, which enables it to be heard and to create multiple voicings within a single poem, as in Rossetti's "Up-Hill." But Helsinger especially notes poets' voicings across the silences of pauses, page breaks, intervals between clinching rhymes, or the final pause of death. By foregrounding the print status, hence silence, of their lyrics, the poets examined by Helsinger offered a riposte to reductive concepts of voices confined in female bodies. These women underscored their complex artifice rather than lightsome singing.

"Floating Worlds" by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (Chapter 4) examines appeals to eye and touch rather than ear. Kooistra approaches wood engravings that accompanied poems in books and periodicals as technologies of vision that shaped ways of seeing and knowing for women poets and their readers. After analyzing Rossetti's first book of poems, *Goblin Market* (1862) illustrated by Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel, Kooistra turns to the mass-produced wood engravings accompanying Louisa Stewart's narrative poem "Bradmore Pool" in the periodical columns of *Once a Week* (October 22, 1859). In addition to demonstrating how an illustration constructs an interpretive frame that might alternatively contest or complement a poem's content, Kooistra models close reading of a popular illustration, which in some cases (like "Bradmore Pool") may offer more rewards than the printed poem. She also emphasizes editors' roles in selecting poems based on their picturability.

Touch receives extended attention in Jason Rudy's chapter "Embodiment and Touch" (Chapter 5); in a poem like EBB's "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," touch became an important poetic trope that intensified political protest. But Rudy especially considers the modes of embodiment in

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Victorian women's poetry. As Victorian physiological studies of sensation were increasingly revealing, sensory perception depended on an interactive mind-body relationship that enabled both cognition and arousal of emotion. In *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), for example, George Eliot represents how Fedalma's embodied act of dancing leads her outward in thought and feeling. Poetry itself could likewise lead readers out of themselves into imagined embodiments, even vicarious alterity, in vivid representations of embodied enslaved or indigenous women, as in "The Aboriginal Woman" (1838) by Eliza Hamilton Dunlop (1796–1880). In a poem like *The Ascent of Man* (1889) by Mathilde Blind (1841–96), in contrast, throbbing rhythms could evoke the throbbing pulsations of the Earth at the moment of its formation.

If the pleasures of reading poetry could lead women – and men – outward in thought and sensibility, poetry's publication in mass-distributed periodicals and newspapers alongside or in between international news, parliamentary debates, scientific discoveries, and opinion pieces meant that poems themselves did not remain bounded on a page. Rather, women's poetry spilled out into the realm of public discourse by poets' design as well as material production. Part II appropriately begins with poets' entrée to that publishing world. Alexis Easley, in "Publishing and Reception" (Chapter 6), takes a less-traveled approach to the topic by examining two poets tied closely to the laboring classes, Eliza Cook and Frances Brown, and assessing the relation between their poetry and the public personae they crafted to promote it. Easley's chapter also provides an overview of many issues recurring throughout this *Companion*. To the commentaries on reception and gendered critical reviews by Meredith Martin and Kirstie Blair, Easley adds women's agency in shaping their own receptions. Easley also, like Blair, demonstrates the importance of including working-class poets in studies of women's poetry. And she underscores the centrality of Victorian periodicals to recovering and studying women's poetry sounded earlier by Martin, Kooistra, and this Introduction as well as by Blair, Laurie Langbauer, and Beverly Taylor. Reproducing the portraits of Cooke and Brown, Easley also extends Kooistra's discussion of Victorian visuality and women's poetry. The ambiguous gendering of the portrait that Cook favored in her self-presentation, as well as the blindness of Brown, also dovetails with the attention to embodiment by Rudy and sexuality by Jill Ehnenn. As she begins her chapter, so Easley ends with intersecting differences in women's poetry and careers, and the need for all who study women's poetry to remain aware of difference as a historical fact and interpretive tool.

Chapters 7 through 10 enlarge upon women's poetry "in the world," literally so in "Transatlanticism, Transnationality, and Cosmopolitanism" by Alison Chapman (Chapter 7), who demonstrates the relevance of

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Victorian women's poetry to the global turn of literary study in the twenty-first century. After noting the enabling precedent of Madame de Staël's fictional Corinne (1807), an Anglo-Italian "improvisatrice" who publicly performs her poetry, Chapman turns to three pairs of poets networked across spaces and in print: L.E.L. (London, Ghana) and Emma Roberts (1794–1840) (London, Bengal), whose work, sometimes illustrated, appeared in literary annuals and books; Toru Dutt (1856–77) (India, Hastings) and Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) (London, India), whose hybrid identities unfolded amid cosmopolitan travel or the Indian independence movement; and EBB (London, Florence, Boston) and A. Mary F. Robinson (1857–1944) (London, Florence, Paris), whose shifting locales registered shifting marital, political, and domestic partnerships. Hybrid national affiliations of all these poets thwart customary attempts to study literature within national literary traditions.

Within Britain, too, different localities, dialects, and work experiences propelled distinctive voices and perspectives, as in the laboring women's poetry most often published in cheap periodicals at Britain's peripheries. This poetry also unsettles traditions of "national" literary culture, since women poets' allegiance to localities often superseded their British identities. In "Dialect, Region, Class, Work" (Chapter 8), Kirstie Blair examines poems that emerged from Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and English contexts. If as poets, women faced more barriers than working-class men, they were not artless singers. Prosody and diction were as important to these women poets as to their male counterparts. Choosing Scots dialect or adopting meters associated with Robert Burns could assert regional pride and politics. Whether dealing with Janet Hamilton, currently best known among working-class woman poets, or Isabella Forrest (c. 1867–1937), Blair illuminates their self-aware choices as they "code-switched" between dialect and standard English based on their complex poetics and politics.

Women poets across all classes keenly followed local, national, and international politics and participated in reform movements. Denied the vote or parliamentary representation by reason of their sex, many poets affirmed their right to speak out and adopted poetry's pithiness, memorable rhymes, rhythms, and resources of pathos to articulate their own perspectives, engage readers' sympathies, alert them to injustices, and urge activist response. In "Politics, Protest, Interventions: Beyond a Poetess Tradition" (Chapter 9), Marjorie Stone maps women poets' simultaneous involvement in multiple political movements across the decades, from child labor and the Irish famine (1840s), to the woman question, Italian Risorgimento (the movement for independence and a unified Italy), and the Crimean Wars (1850s and 1860s), to causes such as socialism, suffrage, and anti-

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vivisection at century's end. A complex network of international poets, reformers, and publications ensued, often involving cross-gender and cross-class activism. Aesthetically, women's political poetry frequently took experimental hybrid form, as in Caroline Norton's "A Voice from the Factories." Stone additionally details the diverse formal and political strategies of poets ranging from Cook, "Speranza" (Jane Francesca Wilde, 1821–96) or EBB and Blind to Mary Macdonald Macpherson (c. 1821–98), touching on Anglocentrism and race politics in the process.

Victorian reforms could be underwritten by religious as well as political convictions, and it seems no coincidence that both Stone and Charles LaPorte, in "Religion and Spirituality" (Chapter 10), cite "The Hebrew's Appeal" (1844) by Grace Aguilar (1816–47). LaPorte demonstrates how deeply religious conviction permeated Victorian society and its poetry and how much we miss if we ignore religion, even when religious expression, as in "The Missionary" (1846) by Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), is likely to repel twenty-first-century sensibilities. Religious convictions were far from uniform, of course, which led to competing theologies and widely variant devotional practices. His cases in point include EBB's theologically sophisticated "The Cry of the Human" (1842) and Rossetti's "Good Friday" (1864). LaPorte also looks beyond English shores to Toru Dutt – not to the poems examined by Chapman but to *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), which drew deeply from Hindu religion yet also affirmed Dutt's Christian belief. English reception of her volume attempted to reimpose a "pure Hindu" identity on Dutt. Yet her hybrid allegiances resisted easy categorization and troubled cultural boundaries.

Part III of this book addresses two topics that Victorian commentators often considered women poets' "natural" domain: children and domesticity. If the poems women actually wrote resisted reductive formulation, so did the open secret of women's sexuality. A further challenge to domestic ideology and "natural" expression was posed by sophisticated women poets' embrace of artifice at the century's end.

"Children's Poetry" (Chapter 11) by Laurie Langbauer and Beverly Taylor attends both to the breadth of Victorian women's poetry for children and its high points. Starting with Lynn Vallone's premise that the history of children's literature is also the history of women's writing, Langbauer and Taylor document the ongoing recovery of women's poetry for children, for which Victorian periodicals are again an indispensable source.⁷ After surveying poets from Jean Ingelow (1820–97) to Agnes Strickland (1796–1874), they turn to an illuminating analysis of Rossetti's *Sing-Song* (1874), noting her willingness to introduce death into a children's book, her poems' diverse aims from consoling children to teaching them to count, and the role of

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Arthur Hughes's illustrations – an extension of Kooistra's discussion in Chapter 4. They end with a new generation of children's periodicals and editors such as *Atalanta*, edited from 1887 to 1896 by L. T. Meade (1844–1914). Meade's magazine reoriented children's poetry at the fin de siècle by suggesting that girls might become poets themselves and so acquire intellectual and economic agency.

Middle-class conduct books extolled marriage and motherhood as the desirable destiny of women, as did much of the age's fiction. Yet Emily Harrington reveals in "Marriage, Motherhood, and Domesticity" (Chapter 12) that women poets wrote few poems depicting happy marriages. Despite invocations of women's roles as wives and mothers in public debates over women's education, military readiness, or the franchise, marriage, motherhood, and domesticity formed only an "uneasy alliance" in the poems Harrington examines. In "The Moat House" (1886) by E. Nesbit (1858–1924), motherhood fails to coincide with marriage; even in a gift book titled *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* (1864), mothers are most often offstage in the volume's domestic settings. Similarly, Laura and Lizzie occupy happy homes along with their children at the end of Rossetti's "Goblin Market," but no husbands are present. Altogether, Harrington's chapter offers a corrective to assumed patterns of women's poetry. The poetry may register the pressure of domestic ideology but seldom realizes domestic ideals in individual poems. And some poems actively resist them.

To fulfill the duties of marriage and motherhood, Victorian women were necessarily sexually active. In "Sexuality" (Chapter 13), Jill Ehnenn notes the challenge to Victorian female poets of representing women as sexual beings. Their formal strategies now pose challenges themselves, and Ehnenn cautions readers against projecting twenty-first-century sexual categories onto past expressions. Bringing theoretical and methodological issues into sharp relief, Ehnenn also maps diverse sexualities and their representation by Victorian women poets, from the little-known "Lines on Reading with Difficulty some of Schiller's Early Love Poems" (1883) by Fanny Kemble (1809–93) to the fallen women in poems by EBB, Rossetti, and Augusta Webster and queer sexualities that resist categorization, as in Mathilde Blind's passionately erotic nun abed in "The Mystic's Vision" (1891). Ehnenn's nuanced brief readings additionally offer methods of reading and interpreting sexuality in a wide range of verse.

Part III concludes with "Poets of Style: Poetries of Asceticism and Excess" by Ana Vadillo (Chapter 14). Keenly aware of the long history of poetic style (inherently crafted rather than natural), Vadillo focuses her discussion on two fin-de-siècle women poets who fashioned alternative styles. If Meynell was known for her lyrics' ascetic minimalism, Vadillo unexpectedly reveals

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links between such stylistic “purity” and literary decadence. In contrast, the poetic dramas of Michael Field, notably *The World at Auction* (1898), exhibit what Vadillo terms an aesthetic of excess, which summons artificial worlds composed from historical artifacts such as ancient coins, jewels, and garments. Michael Field's material excess deliberately counterpointed the crass vulgarity of late-century mass production of furnishings and other consumer goods. Vadillo concludes by tracing the links between these women poets' cultivation of style and Modernist poets who followed.

Two final contributions in Part IV address how we can and should read Victorian women's poetry today. In “Distant Reading and Victorian Women's Poetry” (Chapter 15), Natalie Houston models what computational analysis of a large set of texts (versus traditional “close reading”) can tell us about gendered patterns in women's poetry relative to men's. Situating computational methods in relation to Annette Kolodny's feminist critical paradigm, Houston offers a “distant” reading of *A Victorian Anthology 1837–1895* (1895), edited by American critic E. C. Stedman (who gave “Victorian poetry” its name), to indicate what computational analysis can “see” that a sequence of close readings, no matter how subtle, cannot. Stedman's pattern of critical response to women's poetry parallels what Martin identifies in male critics in Chapter 2, yet Houston's analysis works with the large dataset possible only in a digital environment.

Two factors linked all the women poets examined by contributors: they were reviewed *as* women who wrote poetry, and in their daily lives and interactions within literary networks, none escaped visible embodiment as females. EBB vividly represented the effects in Book V of *Aurora Leigh*. From the heights of articulating her artistic credo, Aurora descends to her less triumphant experience as a woman at a London reception: “It always makes me sad to go abroad, / And now I'm sadder that I went to-night / Among the lights and talkers at Lord Howe's,” where she wishes the host could speak to her “man to man” – which he cannot do, of course.⁸

Should Victorian women's poetry be considered apart from men's, however? To consider this, in the Afterword, Isobel Armstrong, the scholar cited more often than any other in this volume, returns to the precipitating motive behind archival breakthroughs in the 1990s – new theoretical frameworks emerging from second-wave feminism. Poststructuralist theory provided enabling heuristics to identify systemic gender differences not merely in the reception of women's poetry but also its production. Moving from this inspiring moment through Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and into the present, Armstrong finds reasons to resist as well as engage the study of women's poetry unto itself.⁹ She emerges more skeptical about its feasibility than she once was and offers important alternative strategies.

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I welcome the “gender trouble” she sets in motion at the close of this book, not as a final word but as an opening onto further study and conversations about women’s poetry that this volume as a whole is designed to invite.

Notes

1. Linda K. Hughes, *Graham R.: Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005). N.B.: Dates of women poets are indicated on their first mention in this collection but not thereafter.
2. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); and Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow with Cath Sharrock (eds.) *Nineteenth-century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
3. Jill Rappoport, “Annual and Gift Book,” in *Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*, 4 vols., ed. Dino Felluga, assoc. eds. Pamela Gilbert and Linda K. Hughes (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); and *The Poetess Archive* (open-access, fully searchable website), ed. Laura Mandell.
4. Natalie M. Houston, “Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere,” *Victorian Studies* 50 (2008), 233–42.
5. Linda K. Hughes, “What the *Wellesley Index* Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 40 (2007), 91–125.
6. Marion Thain, “Victorian Lyric Pathology and Phenomenology,” in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 166–70.
7. Lynne Vallone, “Women Writing for Children,” in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800–1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 276.
8. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 5.579–81, 811.
9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).