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INTRODUCTION
FIN-DE-SIÈCLE RENAISSANCE: DIVERSITY, HISTORY, MODERNITY

By Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo

> Professor Goodwin has been most good to me, tells me what books to read, argues my "modernisms" of thought away as much as he can.
>
> — A. Mary F. Robinson (1879)

> The command of words and felicity of phrase are as remarkable as the decorative, yet unconventional, qualities of form and colour, so unusual a merit in the handling of motives chosen from the antique. Throughout, the *technique* is large and modern.
>
> — Graham R. Tomson's review of Amy Levy's *A Minor Poet* (1891)

> Her verse is . . . modern, clever.
>
> — Review of Graham R. Tomson's *A Summer Night* (1891)

> . . . it is for us, England's living and yet unspent poets to make all things new. We are for the morning – the nineteenth century thinks it has no poets – nothing to lose – verily it has nothing: for we are not of it – we shake the dust of our feet from it, and pass on into the twentieth century.
>
> — Michael Field, *Journal* (1892)

> I don't know what I am or what I shall become. *The Modern*.
>
> — Michael Field, *Journal* (1894)

I

The term "Victorian Women's Poetry" has been a rallying cry for the rediscovery of a neglected body of work for the past ten or so years. Under this heading we have seen a new debate enter the discipline, a whole new body of literature come before us. Yet, as these re-discoveries and new ideas become more integrated within the field to which they were brought, perhaps it is time to interrogate this field of designation. There is no doubt that examining women's poetry under the term "Victorian" has successfully facilitated – and

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continues to facilitate – the study and teaching of late-nineteenth-century women's poetry. (Indeed if we were to take *fin-de-siècle* or modernist accounts of the period, by contrast, we might even have to conclude that late-nineteenth-century women poets had no share in the literary developments of the final decades of the century.) Yet it is also true that 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. Thus though the present collection of essays is indebted to and depends upon the pioneering work of scholars of "Victorian women's poetry," it departs from its frame of reference in crucial ways that we hope will highlight the particularity, as well as breadth, of the work of this era.

Moreover, the term "Victorian" has begun to be scrutinised for its usefulness by critics such as Amanda Anderson, Joseph Bristow, Sharon Marcus, and Kate Flint because of its limitations when discussing issues such as transnational cultures, bourgeois and aesthetic modernities, philosophy, psychology, science, political history (including liberalism, feminism, and socialism), and market economy among others – issues that, as the essays of this volume suggest, *are* at the very heart of *fin-de-siècle* poetics. How are we to read, for example, the poetic modernities of A. Mary F. Robinson, Michael Field, or Amy Levy; or the political critique of aestheticist poetry by socialist poets Dollie Radford and Edith Nesbit? How do we account for the sexual transgression of poetic form by Michael Field and the women poets of the Celtic Renaissance; the New Woman poetics of Levy, Nesbit, Dora Sigerson Shorter, and Graham R. Tomson; the decadent Darwinism of Mathilde Blind; or the religious symbolism of Alice Meynell's poetic innovations? How do we examine the cosmopolitan work of Laurence Hope, Nora Hopper, Robinson, Sarojini Naidu, or Toru Dutt? (The transnational poetics of the latter cover the geographies, politics, languages, and histories of Bengal, France, and England.) Indeed it is only when one questions the comprehensiveness of the term "Victorian" that one is able to account for the uneasiness with which *fin-de-siècle* poets such as Blind or Dollie Radford engaged intellectually with, yet simultaneously observed their distance from, the figure of the "Victorian" poetess.

It is because we feel that this Victorian agenda for a rediscovery that was long overdue does not fully illuminate the work of *fin-de-siècle* women poets, that we have refocused the usual narrative for late-nineteenth-century women's poetry in order to foreground different issues – issues more distinctively characteristic of these end-of-the-century years.

But as commentators of the period have noted, the poetry of the *fin-de-siècle* years has been persistently misrepresented in another way too. As Joseph Bristow writes, critics have viewed this period as a "transitional era located between two altogether more momentous epochs" and, as a result, *fin-de-siècle* poetry "tends to be valued not so much for its artistic eminence or technical prowess as for the liminal position in which it bears witness to the attenuation of what had been one monumental age (The Victorian) and the consequent need for cultural revitalization by another (modernism)" (*Fin-de-Siècle Poem* 1). Certainly, when not considered Victorian, *fin de siècle* poetry is sometimes portrayed as somehow aspiring to be modernist but not quite making the grade. This is not the alternative identity we choose. The relationship between the Victorian and the modernist posited by this line of thought seems historically untenable as well as ideologically suspect. And yet there is no doubt that this is a period defined by modernity and a desire to be "modern," as it is often termed (the quotations given as epigraphs to this introduction are entirely representative). In this context, to be modern, while in no easy sense equating with what we know under the label "modernism," can be characterized as a self-conscious questioning of the writer's affiliation

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with the Victorian and an equally conscious (and often anxious) search for a new note in poetry. In the rather playful words of the two women who wrote as Michael Field, quoted from their journal for 1892, "[w]e have heard of a new god whose sole command is '*Be contemporaneous*'" (*Journal* 46780. f. 132).

As the essays in this volume document, *fin-de-siècle* women poets engaged with modernity in a variety of ways. On the one hand, women poets turned to history to argue that a broader historical consciousness is intrinsic to the conception of modern verse. Take, for instance, Alice Meynell's return to metaphysical poetry; Michael Field's and A. Mary F. Robinson's engagement with classical metrics and the Italian Renaissance; Blind's and Naden's return to the religious elements of the poetess tradition; or Graham R. Tomson's use of the ballade. On the other hand, they also found in the present social conditions new poetic possibilities. Think, for example, of the impressionistic urban renderings of Amy Levy, Edith Nesbit's new woman lyrics, or Dollie Radford's socialist poetics. Some looked into cosmopolitanism (Dutt), others into science (Blind and Naden). Some turned to atheism (Blind and Naden), others to a newly visible British Roman Catholicism (Meynell and Field). And whilst some found modernity in the exploration of a sensorial, experiential epistemology based on reactions to external impressions (Michael Field's *Sight and Song*), and others drew on Pater's subjective turn to emphasise individual expression (Meynell, Robinson), poets such as Naden and Levy experimented with a cultivation of detachment and alienation (witness Naden's *A Modern Apostle* and Levy's *A Minor Poet*).

Focusing therefore on the specificity of the end-of-the-century years, what we hope this special issue will do is to further research on women's poetry in the late nineteenth century as well as re-envision those years by including these writers in relation to its major themes. Such a methodology will not only allow us 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, but it will also allow us to lay foundations for inquiries into both how their poetics can be traced to the twentieth century (Mary E. Coleridge, Edith Nesbit, Dora Sigerson Shorter, Katharine Tynan, Michael Field, Alice Meynell, Olive Custance, Dollie Radford, and A. Mary F. Robinson continued to publish well into the twentieth century) and, what is just as important, how the previous generation of Victorian women poets reacted to the challenges of the *fin de siècle* years.

It is interesting, in this respect, to briefly consider Christina Rossetti, a poet we do not tend to think of as *fin de siècle*. Yet, her *A Pageant and Other Poems* was published in 1881, as was A. Mary F. Robinson's *The Crowned Hippolytus* and Amy Levy's *Xantippe and Other Verse*. It is worth remembering here *A Pageant*'s introductory poem, "The Key-Note":

> Where are the songs I used to know,
> Where are the notes I used to sing?
> I have forgotten everything
> I used to know so long ago; (1–4).

Isobel Armstrong has importantly argued that this poem "signals that the dominant note of these 1881 poems, the poems of [Rossetti's] maturity, will be different from past work." "In 1881," she continues, [Rossetti's] "language is put to different uses. It throws out a challenge to *fin de siècle* culture and creates a new philosophical lyric." 1881 marked, in effect, a change in Rossetti's poetry, a change that, as Armstrong notes, was a response to the

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philosophical, political, and historical specificity of the *fin de siècle* and which culminated in the creation of a new lyric. In Armstrong's own words, "*A Pageant* was directed to the issues of the *fin de siècle* and to a secular or at least more general readership that did not presuppose the revolutionary sacramentalism of her poems" ("Christina Rossettti" 21–22 and *passim*).[1] What is particularly interesting about Armstrong's essay is her new approach to the period: she reads *A Pageant* by asking "how Rossetti seemed to her younger contemporaries, and how she responded to them" and examines how poets such as Katharine Tynan, Amy Levy, and Alice Meynell reviewed her work ("Christina Rossettti" 23). What her piece clearly demonstrates is that using such methodology affects our understanding of both the history and the poetry of the *fin de siècle*.

However, in our current consideration of the critical category "Victorian women's poetry," it is not just the "Victorian" that we question. The other compound term, the designation of which is so often taken for granted, is "women's poetry." The naturalness of grouping women poets together is still largely accepted. The coherence of this grouping tends to rely on an exploration of a shared womanly poetic identity, and much valuable research has restored to us a women's tradition of verse. Yet, perhaps the focus on issues of gender within women's poetry, having necessarily been established, is now beginning to grow into a recognition of the plethora of themes and concerns – mainstream and marginal – that command attention within this body of work. In this collection we aim to show this key development in the study of the work of women poets, when "women's poetry" ceases to signify a grouping tacitly, or explicitly, organised by a central focus on gender. What we see in these essays is how gender is, while not ignored, portrayed as richly enmeshed in other concerns, any one of which might be drawn to the fore. Because of this, the work of women poets can now be studied under a set of headings gleaned from a sense of the period as a whole, rather than under those specific to a gender-defined remit. In this issue, women poets are set alongside their male, as well as female, contemporaries, reflecting the newly expanded remit beginning to be recognised in their work.

It may seem something of a contradiction in terms to offer a set of essays about the work of women poets which has the explicit agenda of representing a move away from the usual understanding of how "women's poetry," as a category defined primarily by its concerns with gender issues, might be understood. Yet, while women poets are increasingly integrated into mainstream discussion of nineteenth-century literature and culture, it is also necessary simultaneously to continue to chart the fortunes of this group of writers, as a group, for two reasons. The first is to plot the developments within this field, continuing to recognise it as a critical field with an important history since the 1990s. We can observe the massive changes in the way critics write about these poets by sticking with the same grouping and showing how the area of study has developed by adopting the sheer diversity of contexts for this work that you will see in this issue. But also, we must remember, when thinking about the category "*fin-de-siècle* women poets," that this is not just a category which was created in the later twentieth century for the recuperation of a body of "minor" texts which had been unjustly side-lined, and which can therefore be discarded when that act of recuperation is deemed to be over: it is not only the product of the concerns and aims of our own times, but also a historical category which existed to shape poetic identity and a framework for reading in the later nineteenth century. Witness, for instance, Alfred H. Miles's ten volumes of nineteenth-century poetry, compiled in the 1890s, which devotes a separate volume to "women's poetry" as a "characteristic feature" of the age (Miles 7: iii), or Elizabeth Amelia

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Sharp's two extraordinary edited-anthologies of women poets, *Women Voices* (1887) and, especially, *Women Poets of the Victorian Era* (1890). Sharp's second volume was dedicated to her "friend Mona Caird, the most loyal and devoted advocate of the cause of woman" (Caird's controversial essay on "Marriage" in the August 1888 *Westminster Review* led the *Daily Telegraph* to ask, "Is Marriage a Failure?"); a fact that highlights the importance of gender in the formation of late-nineteenth-century poetry (Sharp, *Women Poets*). More significantly, it was during these years that the term "woman poet" began to be used instead of "poetess" as a sign of respect for the work of women poets.[2] It is therefore important for us to continue to explore this category in order to ask of those late-nineteenth-century editors what they meant by it as well as to question the role it has played in more recent critical thinking. It is this interrogation of the term "Victorian women's poetry" – which can no longer be taken for granted – that is at the root of the configuration of this special issue.

II

The essays in this issue demonstrate both that women's poetry has a breadth not recognised by a focus on gender-related issues, and that recognising the scope of women's poetry in the final decades of the nineteenth century, particularly, will have powerful implications for a new understanding of the *fin-de-siècle* period.

This special issue engages with women's poetic diversity by operating in two dimensions: both spatial and temporal. On the one hand, our collection aims to integrate these writers within the broader geographical, social, thematic context of the *fin de siècle*. In this respect, these essays are concerned with questions raised during this period about location and nation, Ireland, the empire, metropolitan and cosmopolitan spaces, the public and private sphere, and transatlantic transactions, whilst also scrutinizing ways in which women poets responded to conflicts of race, science, evolutionary thought, professionalisation of the writer, the market place, publicity and the press, periodical literature, religion, and sexual politics, among other issues. On the other hand, we aim to recognise these writers as belonging to a time of self-conscious renewal, rejecting or reinvigorating the Victorian and embracing "the modern." Tracing the legacies of High Victorian poetics, this volume demonstrates how late-Victorian women's poetry moved in a variety of formal and theoretical directions, laying the basis for a radically different understanding of poetics and the aesthetic.

This collection, thus, suggests a model in which women poets were active participants in the renewal of poetry, and the proliferation of poetries, at the *fin de siècle*. It not only offers a new interpretative framework for understanding the dynamics of late-Victorian poetics, but it also provides new readings of the work of both better-known women poets such as Alice Meynell and recently rediscovered ones such as Toru Dutt, to assess their poetic and cultural achievement in the *fin de siècle*. Yet, this volume cannot claim to offer a comprehensive survey of the period. There will inevitably be trajectories not followed in these essays, and newer agendas that inform the work presented here but which are not themselves the central concern of any one essay. The emerging critical discourse on working-class poetry, for example, is one such. A small group of dedicated critics has begun to open up this area, but even recent research has uncovered very few working-class women poets publishing at the end of the century, perhaps because, as Florence Boos puts it, by the end of the century "conscious cultivation of working-class poetry as a category had begun to fade"

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(225). Nonetheless some of the figures featured in this issue, such as Nora Hopper and Katharine Tynan, wrote to support a family, and their struggle marks important distinctions within the predominantly middle-class setting we offer. Class itself is a recurrent theme in this collection, from the analysis of bourgeois aestheticism and the use of ballads and folk meters, to Jane Barlow's dedication to the causes of the Irish peasant and Dollie Radford's very class-conscious socialist politics.

But before writing further about the aims of this issue and its desire to mark a new milestone that we are reaching in critical reception of this body of text, it is necessary to offer not only a genealogy of the category "Victorian women's poetry" in the recent scholarly revival, but also an examination of recent developments in the study of literature of the *fin de siècle*. Indeed, recent scholarship on New Woman literature, cultural history, and British aestheticism has revitalized scholarship on *fin-de-siècle* literature, advancing considerably our knowledge of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. But, although a massive re-consideration of *fin-de-siècle* women writers, *fin-de-siècle* culture, and prose genres in general is well underway, research on *fin-de-siècle* poetry has been slow in examining the relations between women poets and late-Victorian aesthetics, poetics, politics, and culture. Only by tracing these two trajectories can our positioning of the essays in this issue be pulled into focus.

There is no doubt that the current revival of interest in women's poetry of the *fin de siècle* (culminating in the recent publications of the biographies of Amy Levy and Graham R. Tomson) is due to the painstaking work of critics who since the 1990s have been valuably concerned with the restoration of a lost tradition of nineteenth-century women poets. Some impressive anthologies in particular – Jennifer Breen's 1994 edition of *Victorian Women Poets 1830–1901,* Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds's 1995 edition of *Victorian Women Poets*, Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow's 1996 edition of *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, and the two Longman collections (*Victorian Women Poets* by Tess Cosslett in 1996; and *Victorian Women Poets: A New Annotated Anthology* by Virginia Blain in 2000) – deserve special mention because they radically challenged the poetic landscape of the nineteenth century by re-introducing and recuperating the work of nineteenth-century women poets. Critical studies which investigated and reinforced this female lineage include, for example, Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992); Linda K. Hughes, ed., *Victorian Poetry* Special Issue: Women Poets, 1830–1894 (1995); Angela Leighton, ed., *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader* (1996); Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, eds., *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre* (1999); Cynthia Scheinberg, *Victorian Women Poets and Religion* (2002); and Alison Chapman, ed., *Victorian Women Poets* (2003).

At the same time, however, a slow process of integration of women's poetry into our more general picture of the Victorian period has, of course, been taking place gradually since those first anthologies of women's poetry were published ten years ago. For example, Valentine Cunningham's re-assessment of Victorian poetry in his 1999 edition of *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* makes a point of featuring a large body of nineteenth-century women poets; *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry,* edited by Joseph Bristow, also in 2000, contains a broad representation of women poets throughout; and the same is true of Blackwell's *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, edited by Herbert F. Tucker (1999) and of the substantial *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (2002), co-edited by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison, which has no particular

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section devoted to women's writing, but integrates it within other specifically themed sections.

While writing about *fin-de-siècle* women's poetry has usually meant writing with reference to an all encompassing women's poetic tradition in the long nineteenth century, there have been some publications over the past few years that have focussed specifically on the *fin de siècle*, and have been particularly instrumental in changing the way we conceptualise women's writing of the period. The overall impact of these works can be seen most clearly through an identification of three separate trends. First was the identification of a specifically female aestheticism. Published in 2000, Talia Schaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* and most notably, Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades's 1999 co-edited collection of essays *Women and British Aestheticism* marked an important milestone in this area. By looking at the work of female aesthetes, the essays in the latter volume challenged aestheticism's traditional histories, which were based exclusively in masculine traditions, forcing us to pay greater attention to prose genres (novels, essays, journalistic writings) and more importantly, for our purposes, to aestheticist poetry by Rosamund Marriott Watson, Christina Rossetti, and Sarojini Naidu. They argued that "women produced aestheticism according to a slightly different set of rules from their male counterparts" (Schaffer and Psomiades 1). Indeed the essays in this volume explored:

> how women writers constructed a very inclusive form of aestheticism that endorsed nature as well as art . . . , bourgeois culture along with cosmopolitan bohemianism . . . and alternative sexualities in the context of historical or scientific study. That these women advocated apparently incompatible positions indicates just how useful aestheticism could be for women with mixed emotions about contemporary cultural and political movements and for women who found the strong political stance of the New Women novels foreign to their feelings. Aestheticism's inclusivity helps explain why aesthetic style was so popular, across virtually every genre, among late-Victorian women writers. (1–2)

Schaffer, Psomiades, and others (see, for example, Ardis and Lewis) also give voice to the second trend when they point out "much of our thinking about aestheticism has to do with its relation to modernism," because "aestheticism signals" on the one hand "the moment at which art begins to contemplate its separation from everyday life" whilst, on the other, it is also the moment "which signals art's increasing involvement with commodity culture and consumerism." As they argue, if "the aesthetes were the doomed but necessary precursors of the avant-garde," they were also "the ultimately all too successful precursors of mass culture and the culture industry" (Shaffer and Psomiades 6, *passim*). Ana Parejo Vadillo's more recent book, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism* (2005), introduces new scholarship on this subject by focusing on women's poetry and re-casts aestheticism by linking *fin-de-siècle* London women poets to the formation of a specifically urban aesthetic modernity. In this context, critics such as Bonnie J. Robinson have considered *fin de siècle* women poets as forerunners of the modernist canon. In her introduction as guest editor to the special issue for *Victorian Poetry,* "Women Writers, 1890–1918," the first journal edition to be dedicated to the last decade of the nineteenth century and first two decades of the twentieth, Robinson called women's poetry of these years "the poetry of incorporation," because:

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> [w]orking within a time of change and opportunity, these women incorporated into their lives and work changes wrought by legal reforms regarding marriage, through such laws as the Infants' Custody Act and the Matrimonial Causes Act; opportunities in higher education . . . the push toward political activism, with suffrage bills brought before Parliament, and the formation of the Anti-Vivisection League; reform in labor laws and education for job skills like typewriting, nursing, and accounting. (2)

Focusing on Michael Field, Alice Meynell, Ethel Carnie, A. Mary F. Robinson, Dollie Radford, Charlotte Mew, Amy Lowell, and H. D., the essays of this special edition used gender as a tool to negotiate the divide between Modernism and Edwardianism, experimentalism and realism, high culture and mass culture.

This emphasis on the gender politics of the period has also marked the third trend in examining *fin-de-siècle* women poets. Since the 1990s the work of Ann Ardis, Anne Heilmann, Sally Ledger, Angelique Richardson, and Chris Willis among others has brought attention to a large body of women writers, all of whom reacted to the New Woman phenomenon in their fiction, journalism, and prose genres in general. This large body of scholarship, however, left out any discussion of New Woman poets. In 2001, Linda K. Hughes responded to this scholarship in her *New Woman Poets: An Anthology*. Her purpose was twofold: to recover "the work of several gifted women poets of the 1890s whose work remains difficult to access," and to encourage "the inclusion of poetry in studies of 'New Woman writing'" (1). In her astute introduction she linked the work of poets such as Mary E. Coleridge, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Louisa Sarah Bevington, Mathilde Blind, Olive Custance, Michael Field, Mary C. Gillington, Eva Gore-Booth, Nora Hopper, May Kendall, Amy Levy, Dollie Radford, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Katharine Tynan among others to "a broad array of issues that are also featured in the works by New Woman novelists and essayists."

Yet, while capturing the specificity of the period historically, these approaches all still focus on gender as a key theme and determinant in women's poetry of the *fin de siècle*. In the last few months, the appearance of Joseph Bristow's collection of essays *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem* (2005) represents one of the first full-length critical studies both to focus specifically on the *fin de siècle* and to integrate women's poetry into a broader vision of the period, refusing to map it around specifically gendered concerns. The present issue shares many of the aims of such work, and differs mainly in wanting to retain women's poetry as a grouping in order to keep in sight its particular critical trajectory, and to highlight the sheer range within this body of work. It shows that a focus on writing by women does not have to be organised around a thematics of gender. Covering such figures as Alice Meynell, Toru Dutt, A. Mary F. Robinson, Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), Constance Naden, and Mathilde Blind, as well as Katharine Tynan, Jane Barlow, George Egerton, and Michael Field, among many others, these essays offer new modes of understanding the final decades of the nineteenth century by identifying a set of sophisticated lyrical writings ranging from non-expressive poetry to ballads in prose and lyric spasms; poetic schools ranging from aestheticism, decadence and the Celtic Revival, to scientific and journalistic writings; with subject matters including the ethics of consumption, "the new woman," the tradition of the poetess, "alien homelands," the "modern," post-Darwinian theories, mass culture, the "secular" and the "sacred," and the economy of the literary and the aesthetic. Most importantly, however, this collection aims to avoid the strict distinction,

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or pigeon-holing, between such schools and themes, often describing areas of intersection between two or more of them. In those "many-coloured energetic years" women's poetry shone not only more brightly than has previously been acknowledged, it also illuminated a more diverse range of issues than is commonly supposed (Le Gallienne, *Romantic '90s* 95)

In this way we are pursuing, critically, what was attempted within one of the few anthologies of poetry devoted specifically to the period: R. K. R. Thornton's *Poetry of the 'Nineties* (1970). This work mapped *fin-de-siècle* poetry in relation to movements such as impressionism, symbolism, decadence, aestheticism, Catholicism, and new meters, by way of a detailed engagement with turn-of-the-century definitions of the period. Thornton's engagement with the documentary writings of Arthur Symons, Richard Le Gallienne, Max Beerbohm, Holbrook Jackson, and others, allowed him to delineate a very precise historical moment. Yet this anthology focused mostly on male poets, featuring the work of only four women poets (Olive Custance, Michael Field, Alice Meynell, and Dollie Radford). By 1998, however, R. K. R. Thornton and Marion Thain's second edition of the anthology – *Poetry of the 1890s* – included twelve women poets integrated under the existing headings that structured the anthology, as well as under two new headings highlighting New Woman poetry and the woman poet's distinctive relationship with her art. Such a radical change was both a consequence of the publication of anthologies of nineteenth-century women poets, and a direct, but much needed, response to new research on British aestheticism, modernity, and New Woman fiction. We follow this desire to recognise that gender has a significance in *fin-de-siècle* poetics, while setting this theme amongst the many others that concerned women poets.

Scholars tend to read the works of poets such as Arthur Symons, Richard Le Gallienne, Lionel Johnson, Oscar Wilde, William B. Yeats, Francis Thomson, Thomas Davidson, Herbert Horne, or W. E. Henley as part of a "coherent" (if poetically diverse) period of the 1890s, as R. K. R. Thornton puts it (15). This special issue argues that the work of Amy Levy, A. Mary F. Robinson, Michael Field, Alice Meynell, Toru Dutt, Mathilde Blind, Nora Hooper, Katharine Tynan, Olive Custance, Dollie Radford, Graham R. Tomson, and the late Christina Rossetti, among many others, belonged to the same period. By reintegrating women poets into a *fin-de-siècle* literary culture that is self-consciously diverse, complex, and exciting, the present collection of essays delineates a specifically *fin-de-siècle* historical period, which we insist is neither Victorian nor merely a transition to modernism, and examines the centrality of women's poetry to its make-up.

III

The large collection of essays we present here offers a new, and more precise, narrative for late-Victorian poetry. To be sure, all the familiar themes of "Victorian poetry" study are necessarily and productively represented within these pieces – science, religion, education, empire, identity, and aesthetics – yet we have chosen not to structure this edition around that comforting mantra because in fact it would distort these essays to present them in this way. Each of these essays captures something much more distinctively and urgently *fin de siècle*, and out of the whole collection arises an agenda for a rather more specific understanding of this historical and literary moment.

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It is this historical period that Le Gallienne identifies as one of "an immense and multifarious renaissance" (*Romantic '90s* 78). The narrative we plot charts a moment of simultaneous death and rebirth: a simultaneous looking forwards and backwards. Here the "Victorian" is, inevitably, a primary point of reference, but one whose terms are inflected in radically different ways by authors who frequently measure their distance from it. It is no accident that this collection of essays begins by identifying the *fin de siècle* as an era of new possibilities, and ends by looking back to the more distant literary past (classical and metaphysical) in terms which, however embedded in a discourse of nostalgia, actually foreshadow literary trajectories more commonly associated with the modernism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

This collection begins, with a prelude, by posing the question about the future of poetry in 1875 ("Alice Meynell's *Preludes* or Preludes to What Future Poetry?"). In this paper, Linda H. Peterson examines Meynell's first volume of poetry by questioning what kind of "prelude" to what kind of "future verse" this 1875 volume represented. She begins by examining Meynell's relationship with, on the one hand, the nineteenth-century Romantic nature tradition and the Romantic lyric and, on the other, with the nineteenth-century Sapphic tradition. Identifying Meynell's ambivalent relationship with both masculine and feminine literary traditions, Peterson goes on to discuss that for young Meynell the possibility of a negotiation between the two meant an opening up of a variety of new lyric possibilities and lyric identities for the woman poet. The two frameworks provided here – one elegiac, one full of potential – encapsulate the paradox of the *fin de siècle* and must run concurrently through this collection.

The next two essays establish a dialogue between *fin-de-siècle* poets and their Victorian literary parents which consciously informs the poetry of the period. Here we find an implicit awareness of the poets' own post-Victorian status well before Victoria left the throne. In "Atheist Prophecy: Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, and the Victorian Poetess," Charles LaPorte roots his discussion in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. Yet, at the end of the century, Blind and Naden emerge from this lineage as figures who combine the poetess's piety with new intellectual alternatives that displace the implicitly Christian poetic of their forebears. The resulting brand of "Atheist prophecy" shows how *fin-de-siècle* verse forms depend upon the paradigms established by earlier women writers to undermine the Victorian sentimental tradition. In "Rapturous Forms: Mathilde Blind's Darwinian Poetics," Jason R. Rudy also traces a Victorian heritage, this time in the form of the ballad, but offers a new account of meter and the radical politics accruing around it in Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man* (1889) and *Dramas in Miniatures* (1891). Rudy examines the "complex ideal of rapturous communion from the perspective of evolutionary theory" by showing Blind's manipulation of the lyric voice and poetic form to give voice to a radical evolutionary poetics. Most notably, Blind's radical "rapturous form" is an attempt at fusing "individual spasm and universal, formal structure."

By contrast, the next cluster of three essays focuses on contexts for poetic production that were distinctively of the modern world and its political and urban environment. Alex Goody takes London at the time of the Ripper murders as emblematising a nexus of *fin-de-siècle* concerns with the ethics of the New Woman, female sexuality, the role of Jews in contemporaneous society, and the sensationally dangerous city-space that was depicted – and to some extent created – by the New Journalism. (Mile End becomes "a metonym for the space of modernity: potentially liberating, potentially murderous, always already made

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intelligible and incorporated into a comprehensive narrative of Western culture.") All of these elements also define, Goody argues, Levy's contested poetic identity that was formed through a negotiation of, and between, these fixed points. Reading Levy's later poetry, Goody shows why the East End murders were so relevant to Levy poetically.

Linda K. Hughes also takes as her focus the politics of the New Woman, rightly insisting that this phenomenon created as distinctive a poetics as it did prose style. Identifying a poetic discourse around marriage, Hughes traces the political engagement of New Woman poetry, and finds responses to it also in contemporaneous criticism. In the context of the narrative of the lyric collection, Hughes notes that New Woman poems were often dispersed and often challenge (or sometimes are contained by) more traditional poetic sentiments. This heterogeneity is indeed one of the challenges of reading such collections, and it is also highly indicative of the fusion of modern urban politics and poetry that proliferated in this new era of experimentation in which women's poetry played such a substantial role.

Within the work of Dollie Radford, the relationship between politics and aesthetics continues and is grounded by Ruth Livesey in a particular moment of late-nineteenth-century socialist radicalisation. In her essay Livesey presents not an alternation of poetic and political language, but a verse that "combines conventional feminised lyrical affect with a new secular ethical subjectivity." Although a collectivist socialist aesthetic – and a productivist ethic – may seem at odds with Radford's individuated lyric identity, Livesey traces an ingenious refusal to let the two be parted. Writing at the point at which Adorno sees the divergence of economics and aesthetics, Radford's poetic determination to combine socialism and "affect" is definitive of tensions of the period not usually recognised as concerns within poetry by women.

The next pair of sections deal with an expansive aesthetic which is characteristic of the *fin de siècle*. The idea of exchange between artistic media, and the relationship between art forms, is, as we know from Pater, a fascination of writers of this period. New print contexts for poetry, as well as a particular interest in the relationship between literature and the visual arts, were instrumental in ensuring that the boundaries of the poem were more permeable and expandable than before. The two essays appearing under the heading "Expansive Poetry" both discuss the relationship between poetry and the visual arts at the *fin de siècle*, and find two very different, but equally definitive, interpretations of its significance. Joseph Bristow's essay – "'The Armytage-Tomson-Watson Sequence': Poetic Illustrations in the Periodical Press, 1886–96" – continues to chart the effects of the modern contexts for poetic production examined in the previous section. Bristow examines the largely neglected relationship between poetry and visual art "in both popular and coterie journals, including those that employed photomechanical processes (collotype, half-tone, line-block, and photogravure) in order to reproduce contemporary paintings." Using the work of "Armytage-Tomson-Watson," Bristow looks into the "divergent modes in which *fin-de-siècle* poetry could interact with modern art," to note that Armytage-Tomson-Watson's range of forms (lyrics, ballads, and monologues) allowed her to "assimilate, address and on occasion criticise" the visual preoccupations of the celebrated American and British periodicals. Hilary Fraser, on the other hand, looks at the ekphrastic impetus that was so central to Pater's aesthetic, and traces its manipulation in the hands of "Michael Field." This late-century revival of a much older technique develops a specifically aestheticist understanding of the permeable boundaries of *fin-de-siècle* poetry, and alternative ways of looking at art. For Fraser, Michael Field, in an intellectual environment shared with other collaborating couples of the period (Bernard

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Berenson and Mary Costelloe, and Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Tomson), figures a way of seeing based on collaboration and desire.

A more specifically literary version of this expansive poetics comes in the form of "translation": a word which itself holds a particular role in the aesthetics of the period. A set of issues – generic, linguistic, national, and textual – define the next section under this heading. Tricia Lootens identifies Toru Dutt as posing challenging questions about a nexus of Indian, French, and British literary and national identity through her translations. Examining the complex linguistic worlds of *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), Lootens argues that "Dutt needed neither the British Empire nor the English language in order to claim her place in an increasingly global culture. If anything, *Sheaf* seems to suggest, English-speaking audiences needed her, the Indian woman critic, scholar, and translator, in order to keep abreast with French poetic developments." Yopie Prins's work on women poets and Classical learning connects the cultural politics of translation with a more precise focus on the politics of meter. In her "'Lady's Greek' (with the Accents): A Metrical Translation of Euripides by A. Mary F. Robinson", Prins demonstrates how Robinson used "Greek accents" in her 1881 collection of poems *The Crowned Hippolytus* (a translation from the Greek of Euripides's play) to perform decadent aestheticism.

If any one term defines this period in the popular imagination it is "Decadence." The penultimate section sees an exploration of the decay and degeneracy so associated with Decadence (but not usually associated particularly with women poets). Margaret D. Stetz, in her "Ballads in Prose" connects formal features with the politics of national identity, thus bringing together some of the key themes of this collection, and taking up threads sewn by Prins, Lootens, and Rudy particularly. Here, Stetz argues for politicised transactions between poetry and prose in the prose poem, a form taken up notably by Irish women writers. Yet this nexus of themes takes on a newly decadent colour when, at the trials of Oscar Wilde, the prose poem is intimately linked with the ensuing sexual panic, and therefore becomes economically no longer viable to publishers after 1895. This essay shows the woman poet's central involvement in a set of themes definitive of the period, but usually brought into critical focus primarily around male writers. Yet if Decadence is usually associated with the end of an era and aesthetic closure, James Diedrick proposes that a fuller integration of women poets into our conception of it can reveal progressive tendencies within it. Diedrick reads Mathilde Blind's encounter with positivist science into her poetry in order to identify her own strain of eroticised dissolution. Nature, in particular, has an unusual place in Blind's system, in which decay can be productive, and which combines with progressive gender politics.

Continuing this identification of a moment at which decay and retrospection is matched by an emerging, and forward-looking aesthetic, the final two essays both look at *fin-de-siècle* poetry's engagement with rather distant literary precursors (Sappho and the metaphysicals, respectively), but in doing so they begin, deceptively, to reveal the agenda of the early twentieth century. Francis O'Gorman's analysis of themes of memory and history explores the importance of the fragment and its particular resonance at the turn of the century. Engaging with Michael Field's Sapphic project in the volume entitled *Long Ago*, he furthers our understanding of the poetic archaeology that was finding a route to a less rhetorical and more compact modernist aesthetic through its return to a Classical tradition. Tracy Seeley's exploration of the woefully under-examined revival of metaphysical poets finds a

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similarly historical route to a new pared-down aesthetic, but in a rather different location. This deceptively quaint-seeming, but widespread, interest in seventeenth-century poetry is, Seeley convincingly argues, a hugely important current in *fin-de-siècle* poetry and poetics. It allowed poets, male and female, to look both forwards and backwards at the same time. However much T. S. Eliot proclaimed a rejection of the literature of the previous century and a desire to make things new, there is no doubt that the revolution in poetic style had already begun a good thirty to forty years earlier.

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NOTES

We thank all those people who have, in various different ways, been a part of the process that has created this special issue. Most of all, however, we want to thank our contributors, for their enthusiastic involvement with this project and for their excellent work.

1. One can read Rossetti's *A Pageant* as a sacramental reply to the atheist lyrics of Louisa Sarah Bevington (see *Key-notes* [London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879]). It would also be interesting to see if George Egerton knew of this poem and adopted it for the Bodley Head series of that title.
2. Le Gallienne, "Women-Poets"; "Some Women Poets," *Living Age* 221 (April, May, June 1899): 26–34, 123–33. An interesting example of how new terminology was entering the field is William Watson's review of Graham R. Tomson's 1891 volume of verse, *A Summer Night*. He writes about the term "poetess": "this, I am assured, is a vile word, and perhaps it is, but 'woman-poets' is worse, and 'women who have written poetry' takes too much time" (*Academy* 41 [9 January 1892]: 32).

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