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Poetry of the New Woman

Public Concerns, Private Matters

Patricia Murphy

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Many Voices, Many Issues	1
2	The Vagaries of Marriage	37
3	The Workings of Desire	71
4	Social Responsibility for the Destitute	109
5	Grim Stories of the ‘Fallen Woman’	147
6	Poets on Poetry	179
7	The Promise of London	217
8	Conclusion: Speculating on the Future	251
	Works Cited	257
	Index	271



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Many Voices, Many Issues

Immersed in a tumultuous culture at the *fin de siècle*, New Woman poets advanced significant, opportune, and compelling perspectives in addressing public matters and articulating personal concerns, with the boundary between them often blurred.¹ In so doing, these writers contested the intellectual and behavioral constraints that plagued Victorian women, exposing the many ways in which they were deprived of fulfilling lives. Moreover, the poets sought to raise awareness of injustices that hindered society at large by fostering inequality and misery among the many disadvantaged Victorians. As Aurora Leigh argues in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's seminal verse-narrative about the eponymous protagonist, poets need to "[e]xert a double vision" that enables them to see "near things" and "distant things" by concentrating on the contemporary world (Book V, ll. 184, 185, 186). "Their sole work is to represent the age," Aurora asserted, "this live, throbbing age" and "[n]ever flinch" from creating "living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life" (Book V, ll. 202, 203, 221–22). New Woman poetry irrefutably evidences that such advice was deeply inculcated, cultivated, and heeded.

The important issues probed by New Woman poets certainly were not unique to their work, since an array of novels also explored such contemporary conditions. Critical commentary has carefully probed many New Woman novels to provide enlightening assessments of these once-ignored texts, and the subgenre has been receiving well-deserved attention. New

Woman poetry as a complementary subgenre has not experienced such widespread interest, however, though occasionally verses have surfaced in anthologies and perspicacious authors have been studied. Yet this late-century poetry merits far more consideration. In part, this book seeks to bring the often-neglected poetry to the fore, much of which languishes in archival collections. Feminist scholars have labored to rescue such work from obscurity, and their efforts have been invaluable. Nevertheless, many fine poems have not received the intensive interventions accorded to the novels, and Victorian scholarship suffers from the omissions.

A SKETCH OF THE NEW WOMAN

The literary and cultural figure of the New Woman generated both vociferous condemnation and ardent approbation in the *fin de siècle*, bringing the Woman Question that had preoccupied Victorians for multiple decades into glaring attention. The unconventional individual emerged at a significant moment in cultural history when gender roles received intensive scrutiny as marriage, motherhood, education, professions, and other issues came to the fore. To opponents, the New Woman threatened the family, social stability, and even the viability of the human species. To proponents, she augured crucial improvements in social mores, female independence, and personal growth as well as human advancement. Whether vilified or applauded, the New Woman was certainly not ignored, as indicated by numerous periodical essays and other texts discussed below.

Detractors launched attacks in general terms to underscore the New Woman's ostensible perfidy. Charles G. Harper grouched in *Revolted Woman: Past, Present, and to Come* that “[s]ociety has been ringing lately with the writings and doings of the pioneers of the New Woman, who forget that Woman’s Mission is Submission.” Venomous and incessant critic Eliza Lynn Linton called the New Woman “a social insurgent [who] preaches the ‘lesson of liberty’ broadened into lawlessness and license,” seeking “absolute personal independence coupled with supreme power over men.”² Among their supposed characteristics, Linton maintained that New Women were “[a]ggressive, disturbing, officious, unquiet, rebellious to authority and tyrannous.”³ Sexologist Havelock Ellis warned of “nothing less than a new irruption of barbarians.” Physical traits also came under assault. *Cornhill Magazine* sniffed that the New Woman was a “sallow” individual who “has a long face, with a discontented mouth, and a nose indicative of intelligence, and too large for feminine beauty as

understood by men.” As Sally Ledger observes, caustic remarks about the New Woman sought “to ridicule and to control renegade women.”⁴

Supporters pointed to the New Woman’s role in bettering society and the human condition. Nat Arling asserted that characterizing the New Woman as “a monstrosity,” “an absurdity,” and “an interloper” came from “the bigoted and the superficial.” M. Eastwood considered the New Woman as an advanced example of evolution and noted that “she is adapting herself with marvellous rapidity” as the world changes. Similarly, to A. Amy Bulley, the New Woman “can rightly be viewed only as the advance of a wing of the great human army, and therefore intimately related to the movement of the other sections”; moreover, “it is only clear that with the development of society is bound up henceforward the more complete and perfect evolution of women.” H. E. Harvey contended that New Women were unjustly condemned for their efforts to improve institutions when accused of a “wish to overthrow morality and order, and introduce a state of chaos.” At century’s end, Herbert Jamieson foresaw widespread acceptance of modern women and said that “prejudice is dying.” The iconoclastic figure “has only ... to be understood properly, and her admirers will be legion,” he predicted.⁵

Certainly other advanced women had appeared in literature during previous decades and could be considered forebears. In fiction, for instance, Charlotte Brontë’s famed *Jane Eyre* (1847) brought an independent protagonist to the Victorian public. Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) sought to grow intellectually rather than be shunted into ignorance. Dorothea Brooke similarly yearned for cognitive stimulation in *Middlemarch* (1872). In poetry, for example, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) featured a strong, compelling individual from childhood to adulthood. Augusta Webster challenged the constrictive cultural alliance between women and nature in several works featured in *Portraits* (1870). Yet the *fin de siècle* witnessed an explosion of literary accounts of advanced individuals characterized as New Women.

No one definition epitomizes the multivalent New Women, for they differed in perspectives and priorities. Nonetheless, all New Women sought a more fulfilling life and greater control over their own destinies. The multitude of terms designating the controversial individual seemingly attests to complexity, for the New Woman was called *Novissima*, a wild woman, an odd woman, a third sex, an unsexed anomaly, and a shrieking sister, among other unflattering sobriquets. Although the idea of the New Woman arose in the early 1880s, likely because of the unconventional

female protagonist in *The Story of an African Farm*, the appellation appeared in 1894 in dueling essays by Sarah Grand and Ouida. The “Bawling Brotherhood,” wrote Grand, which was familiar with the “cow-woman,” did not understand “the new woman,” who “proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy.”⁶ Grand assailed men who had denied educational advancement and then “jeered at us because we had no knowledge”; restricted “our outlook on life so that our view of it should be all distorted” and then ridiculed women as “senseless creatures”; and “cramped our minds,” sneering at their supposed illogicality. Ouida, applying capital letters to the New Woman, lambasted her for failing to “surrender her present privileges” but seeking “the lion’s share of power.” Such an “overweening and unreasonable grasping at both positions,” Ouida claimed, ultimately would “end in making her odious to man.” Ouida castigated the New Woman’s desire for higher education and public life as well as a supposed distaste of motherhood. The same year as the essays appeared, Sydney Grundy’s mocking play titled *The New Woman* made numerous assaults on the figure. The play derided educational aspirations because they produce “a Frankenstein”; argued that a man seeks a woman—and “that’s all,” rather than “brains, accomplishments,” and other “vanities”; and insisted that traditional gender roles should be upheld rather than believe that a woman should become “a beastly man,” thus creating “a new gender.”⁷

The latter point was frequently adopted as the New Woman was vilified for being manly or a member of a third sex. Linton, for instance, complained that “Wild Women ... are neither man nor woman.” *Cornhill Magazine* denounced the New Woman’s dress as “always manly.” *Saturday Review* advised in the unambiguously titled “Manly Women” that “the rage now is for women to appear manly and to copy men in all things; and a great mistake it is.” *Punch* proclaimed that New Women were “[e]qually ‘manly’ in dress, work or play.” Among defenders, Emma Churchman Hewitt insisted that “[t]he masculine woman is no more common than the effeminate man”; working for her living “no more makes woman masculine than” a husband assisting in child care makes him effeminate.⁸

Curiously, the New Woman was also accused of being an oversexed, uncontrolled predator who was undermining the social fabric, even though many individuals favored celibacy. Fiction writers were censured for, as Hugh E. M. Stutfield averred in “The Psychology of Feminism,” “literary scavaging” in “refuse-heaps.” In “Tommyrotics,” this vitriolic adversary

decried “all the prating of passion, animalism, ‘the natural workings of sex,’ and so forth, with which we are nauseated” and accused writers of observing life “through sex-maniacal glasses.” James Ashcroft Noble commented that such fiction merely sought to present “an appeal to the sensual instincts of the baser or vulgarer portion of the reading public.” Margaret Oliphant blasted “[t]his inclination towards the treatment of subjects hitherto considered immoral or contrary to good manners,” while Edmund Gosse called the works “tiresome and ugly” and, “in short, they err grievously against taste.”⁹

Among the major concerns of opponents was the New Woman’s perceived menace to reproduction and healthy offspring. Since women had been slowly gaining in opportunities for higher education, critics backed away from contentions that females lacked the necessary cognitive ability to succeed in universities and instead blamed intellectual advancement for jeopardizing humanity’s future. Such brain stress, foes opined, would draw from the body’s limited supply of energy that was needed for maternity. As physician T. S. Clouston averred, “Why should we spoil a good mother by making an ordinary grammarian?” Biologist Grant Allen warned that numerous women “acquired a distaste, an unnatural distaste, for the functions which nature intended them to perform.” Eugenicist Karl Pearson cited women’s “prerogative function of child-bearing,” and he feared that higher education could bring “a physical degradation of the race, owing to prolonged study having ill effects on woman’s childbearing efficiency.” Harper sputtered that “nature, which never contemplated the production of a learned or a muscular woman, will be revenged upon her offspring”; such women could “peopl[e] the world with stunted and hydrocephalic children,” bringing forth “the degradation and ultimate extinction of the race.”¹⁰

In contrast, educational proponents held that intellectual stimulation would produce more effective mothers and improve generations. An unsigned contribution in *Westminster Review*, though cautioning about “serious injury to the health of women from overexercise of brain,” noted the “beneficial effect” of advanced study for “children borne by such cultured women.” Helen McKerlie countered suppositions that education would damage women’s reproductive functions and instead argued that hampering intellectual growth would “reduce women to one dead level of unintellectual pursuit.” Hewitt argued that “[t]he ‘new’ woman with her independence, her clearly defined ideas of right and wrong, her knowledge of the world, and her superior education, is far better fitted to be the

mother of noble men” than an “‘old’ woman with her narrow environments and her knowledge, which went little beyond household lore.”¹¹

Marriage, like education and reproduction, brought intense debate. New Woman adversaries maintained that she despised the institution. Pearson claimed that marriage would be “questioned and remoulded by the woman’s movement,” and “there can be little doubt that the cultivated woman of the future will find herself compelled to reject its doctrines.” In a defense of marriage, Walter Besant noted that “Modern Society is based upon the unit of the family,” and “[t]he family tie means, absolutely, that the man and the woman are indissolubly united.” In attacks on fiction, Stutfield argued that “the horrors of matrimony from the feminine point of view are so much insisted upon nowadays” along with “the ‘choked up, seething pit’ of matrimony.” Janet E. Hogarth reproached writers for considering marriage “the head and front of society’s offending” behavior. Oliphant assailed fiction that insistently demeaned the institution and decried “the crusade against marriage now officially organised and raging around us.”¹²

New Woman adherents did not overtly reject marriage but sought crucial improvements. Grand believed that “it is upon the perfecting of the marriage relation that the upward progress of mankind depends.” Harvey noted that the “necessity for meeting the demands of the marriage market has given to the sex an artificial character of subservience and servility.” Mona Caird wrote extensively on the flawed institution in essays as well as fiction, contending that Victorian marriage enslaved wives. Julia M. A. Hawksley said that girls needed to be apprised of the nature of marriage rather than being nudged into it without comprehending its ramifications and being “sacrificed in ignorance.” As Arling put it, the New Woman “wishes to make marriage no longer an auction of sale to the highest bidder, or an exercise of tyranny on one side and subjection on the other, but a covenant of mutual help and service.”¹³

With all of the complexities associated with the New Woman, it is not surprising that scholars have devoted attention to the figure in recent decades. Although much work has centered on fiction, poetry certainly has been an interest. In the latter twentieth century, anthologies such as *Victorian Women Poets* (1995), edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, features numerous New Woman poems, helping to bring neglected writers to the fore. Appearing the next decade, Linda K. Hughes’ anthology, *New Woman Poets* (2001), provides a broad selection of writers

and key verses. Also published that year was Virginia Blain's *Victorian Women Poets: A New Annotated Anthology*, which offers several works by New Women.

Additional important texts include Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992), which discussed work by several late-Victorian writers, such as Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper). *Victorian Sappho* (1999) by Yopie Prins examines the complex literary constructions involving the ancient poet and also features Field in the analysis. Among significant studies appearing in the twenty-first century are *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000) by Talia Schaffer, which explores pioneering texts by Rosamund Marriott Watson and Alice Meynell, among others; *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (2005), edited by Joseph Bristow and including essays on several New Woman writers; and *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (2005) by Ana Parejo Vadillo, which details representations of London by Amy Levy and other poets. Numerous single-author monographs of New Woman poets have emerged as well, investigating the writings of such figures as Levy, Mathilde Blind, and Watson. Of course, many essays also have appeared in recent decades on many New Woman poets. Although the above compilation of significant texts cannot be exhaustive, it does convey the breadth and depth of the subjects addressed in anthologies and scholarship.

My study primarily explores noncanonical work from a host of noteworthy writers, some of whom are slowly finding greater recognition and receiving extended discussion.¹⁴ Certain issues in particular engrossed New Woman poets, and six of those concerns are examined in this book. Although many vital topics appear in the *fin-de-siècle* poetry, the six subjects chosen are especially meaningful to consider: marriage, desire, poverty, "fallen women," metapoetry, and city life. Because this analysis is necessarily limited in scope, other issues cannot receive elaborate treatment, but nevertheless deserve notice. Therefore, this introduction reviews several of those matters in appraising the vagaries of love, purported inferiority, unrealistic expectations, supposed passivity, Eve's legacy, ecclesiastic misperceptions, maternal thoughts, and cultural shortcomings. The poems chosen to delineate these topics are extremely worthwhile to analyze.

DYING LOVE

The loss of love in its various manifestations became a frequent and insistent focus of New Woman poetry. For example, three pieces by Augusta Webster in *A Book of Rhyme* (1881) poignantly describe the demise of love in varied states. “Once” presents a sad progression of three stages delineating the speaker’s life, deploying floral imagery to mark each response to the prospect of love. The first of three eight-line *abbbccaca* stanzas recounts a state of innocence, emblemized by a lily, during which the speaker trusts that the experience of love would be lasting. Only the initial three lines, mellifluously presented in iambic tetrameter, convey the optimistic thought, however, succeeded by the disturbing realization that love is ephemeral.

I set a lily long ago;
 I watched it whiten in the sun;
 I loved it well, I had but one.
 Then summer-time was done,
 The wind came and the rain,
 My lily bent, lay low.
 Only the night-time sees my pain—
 Alas, my lily long ago!

The burgeoning whiteness of the lily contributes to the aura of innocence, underscoring the floral linkages to purity and modesty while foreshadowing other connotations of grief and death.¹⁵ With the sun serving as a signifier of masculinity, the speaker’s ardor swells with the lover’s ongoing and expanding presence. In accordance with the floral image, the end of summer provides an apt moment for the lover to leave, and the unpleasant change in climate intimates the grave effect upon the speaker. Unable to express or display her sadness, she can only suffer in solitude.

The next stanza follows a similar format, with the first three lines gently detailing another incidence of love, followed by its painful cessation when summer has given way to severe weather. A rose provides the floral connection with its resonances to passion and sexuality. The stanza indicates that the attraction commenced in spring, a time of growth, and the speaker’s new relationship also blossomed. The rose’s color intensifies as time passes, suggesting that the passion has reached its apex and sexuality has ensued. Yet the lovers’ connection dissolves.

I had a rose-tree born in May;
 I watched it burgeon and grow red,
 I breathed the perfume that it shed.
 Then summer-time had sped,
 The frost came with its sleep,
 My rose-tree died away.
 Only the silence hears me weep—
 Alas, lost rose-tree! lost, lost May!

This second relationship takes an even harsher toll on the speaker. Not only has summer concluded, but its rapid abeyance reveals an even more transitory enjoyment of love than in the first stanza. Rather than rain and wind, wintry cold arrives; unlike the lily, which merely leaned when the climate altered, the rose ceases to exist altogether, eliminating any hope that the flower will revive. Through the excruciating loss, the speaker can only sob, with the ambient silence accentuating her disconnection from life. The final line further relates that this relationship has produced greater misery than the first, for the word “lost” is emphatically and thrice uttered.

The final stanza again presents a positive outlook in its beginning. Spring has returned, and the literal lily and rose will reappear, with no regard to the unpleasant weather that will again succeed the summer. In contrast, the speaker does not enjoy such a renaissance. The collapsed relationships she has endured have caused such serious damage that she no longer even seeks to search for love again.

The garden’s lily blows once more;
 The buried rose will wake and climb;
 There is no thought of rain and rime
 After next summer-time.
 But the heart’s blooms are weak;
 Once dead for ever o’er.
 Not night, not silence knows me seek
 My joy that waned and blooms no more.

The poem’s title augured this resolution of the speaker’s defeats in stressing that these events transpired “once,” never to be repeated. Emotionally deadened, the speaker cannot undergo more agony wrought by a faithless lover.

Webster's "Farewell" presents a searing portrait of a couple irretrievably estranged but not physically separated. The opening line evidences the disjunction, when "we" immediately separates into "two."

Farewell: we two shall still meet day by day,
 Live side by side;
 But never more shall heart respond to heart.
 Two stranger boats can drift adown one tide,
 Two branches on one stem grow green apart.
 Farewell, I say.

The stanza is filled with divisions and dualities to mirror the pair's broken connection: day/day, side/side, and heart/heart, as well as separate "stranger boats" wandering aimlessly and branches sharing a stem but abiding "apart." Melodic iambic meter belies the discordant state of the couple's relationship. The opening "farewell" and its repetition in the final line reinforce that the bond between the individuals will never be restored, a pattern repeated in each of the other two *abcbca* stanzas.

Continuing the thematic approach of the first stanza, the second one characterizes the pair as no more joined than random individuals flung together simply by circumstance. The interactions between the couple resemble those of fleeting acquaintances who converse but pursue no further intimacy.

Farewell: chance travellers, as the path they tread,
 Change words and smile,
 And share their travellers' fortunes, friend with friend,
 And yet are foreign in their thoughts the while,
 Several, alone, save that one way they wend.
 Farewell; 'tis said.

Like the couple, these strangers share no emotional connection but instead remain alienated, as emphasized by their being "several, alone" and their subsequent parting.

In the closing stanza, funereal images stress that no positive resolution awaits the couple.

Farewell: ever the bitter asphodel
 Outlives love's rose;
 The fruit and blossom of the dead for us.
 Ah, answer me, should this have been the close,
 To be together and be sundered thus?
 But yet, farewell.

The asphodel provides an especially apt image as a lily associated with the grave and with memory lasting beyond death. Similarly, the couple are doomed to remember their once-promising bond, now eternally dead. A Homeric link to the asphodel accentuates the inescapable demise, for the flower appears at gravesites in the underworld. In *The Odyssey*, “breath-souls” of the dead abound in a dreary asphodel meadow but retain their memories (Book 24:14). The ghost of Achilles ominously advises his fellow wayfarer Agamemnon that “it was your fate that death would claim you / Prematurely, before your time, the fate that no one born can escape” (24:26–27). The asphodel of “Farewell,” not the rose of passion, will prevail, the speaker laments, unable to understand the causative chain leading to the couple’s wretched state.

The history between the two former lovers and the reason they stay together remains obscure. Possibilities abound: a spinster grasping onto a marital prospect to avoid censure, an engagement that cannot be broken without scandal, spouses who have emotionally or intellectually drifted apart, a philandering husband who cravenly visits other women, or an illegitimate pregnancy concealed through a hasty marriage. In each case, fear of crippling disapprobation provides the sole rationale for the pairing to continue. In leaving the cause of the emotional separation unknown, the poem carries a chilling suggestion of universality whereby any couple could descend into such misery unawares.

Perhaps the “Farewell” pair never truly loved but were driven together by their youth, proximity, and illusions. Such is the scenario of Webster’s “In After Years,” which also features a speaker cognizant of the bitter loss of affection, accentuated by a plethora of trochees. The poem’s fluctuations among the trochees, anapests, and iambs suggest an unsettling disharmony. Adopting a brutal tone, the speaker urges her partner to recognize in the first of four *abcbcaa* stanzas that their relationship cannot be sustained.

Love is dying. Why then, let it die.
 Trample it down, that it die more fast.
 What is a rose that has lost its bloom?
 What is a fruit with its freshness past?
 And where is the worth of the twilight gloom?
 Let the night come when the day has gone by:
 Let the dying die.

Multiple iterations of death, both in noun and predicate forms, infuse the poem. The first and last lines of the stanza refer not only to the end of life but do so twice, leaving no prospect of ardor ever reappearing. The violence intimated in the second line reflects the speaker's irrepressible impatience to accept an inevitable outcome and proceed forward. As in Webster's "Once" and "Farewell," this poem deploys floral imagery to represent the bitter course of passion but intensifies the impression through the reference to fruit with its deterioration. In questioning the value of maintaining a relationship in a state preceding death—its "twilight gloom"—the speaker is admonishing the partner to reject a delusional hope.

Nothing can restore the amorous feelings, the speaker chides her lover: "Leave your useless smiles and your tears, / Weepings and wooings are, oh, so vain!" Moreover, love never even existed, she contends: "Nay, but say 'It was always so; / Love was not love in the other years, / There is nought for tears.'" The language becomes harsher in the third stanza when the speaker insists that her partner confront the dismal truth.

Say "We lose what was never ours,
 Lo, we were fooled by a fond deceit;
 Because we chanced to be side by side,
 Because we were young and love is sweet,
 Love seemed there: but could love have died?
 When has decay touched immortal hours?
 Love was never ours."

In the final stanza, the speaker retreats from the scathing tone and instead questions if the relationship truly had no substantive foundation. Regret surfaces as she poses a series of queries and wonders if all was only illusory.

Ah, my heart, is it true? is it true?
 Did all longings and fears mean no more?
 Whispers and vows and the gladness mean this?
 What, we grow wiser when years are o'er,
 And weary in soul of a mimic bliss?
 Did we but dream, hand in hand, we two?
 Must it needs be true?

In effect, the speaker is uttering sentiments that her partner would likely express. In an odd way, the pair come together only in ruing loss, not in sharing affection.

VAGARIES OF LOVE

The element of chance that the speaker credits for the relationship also surfaces in E. (Edith) Nesbit's "Vies Manquées" albeit in a different configuration. Disjunctive timing undermines reciprocal affection, and no gratifying result appears in the seven-quatrain *abab* poem, which was included in *Lays and Legends* (1886). The speaker recalls the situation a year previously when the pair had wandered "the happy woodland ways" replete with nature's spring bounties. The initial stanzas recount the setting in detail: a blackbird tends to her nest, a thrush warbles amid expanding foliage, a dusky sky transforms branches from winter to spring coloration, and masses of flowers flourish. The portrait of the woods conveys harmony, peace, and promise. Yet the companions do not fully absorb the scene and reflect upon its beauty but instead react to their surroundings from very diverse perspectives. She does not reciprocate his deep affection and therefore "missed the meaning of the world / From lack of love for you." In contrast, he feels too overwhelmed by his emotions, both positive and negative, to attend to the idyllic setting, the speaker states.

You missed the beauty of the year,
 And failed its self to see,
 Through too much doubt and too much fear,
 And too much love of me.

Yet the situation sharply reverses in the next year when they again walk through the springtime forest with its attractions revived. The speaker regrets that the pair will never experience the same feelings simultaneously for a reason that "we shall never find." Again the woodland beauties receive little notice from the pair as they grapple with their antipodal emotions.

Our drifted spirits are not free
 Spring's secret springs to touch,
 For now you do not care for me,
 And I love you too much.

As in the Webster poems, no satisfactory resolution appears possible, with no hint that the situation will alter and the pair's emotional timing become synchronized.

Mathilde Blind's "The Forest Pool," which appeared in *Birds of Passage: Songs of the Orient and Occident* (1885), offers an even darker picture of unsuccessful love. Composed of four *aabb* stanzas, the poem depicts a woodland setting in a depressing manner rather than present the pastoral attractions of Nesbit's verse. The atmosphere is established as the poem opens, with the titular pool so "[l]ost amid gloom and solitude" that it is concealed, and flowers are not praised for their blooms but are characterized by their shadows. The next stanza heightens the impression of dreariness in the lifeless environment.

Bare as a beggar's board, the trees
Stand in the water to their knees;
The birds are mute, but far away
I hear a bloodhound's sullen bay.

The third stanza augurs a shift in tone, but the impression endures only momentarily. The speaker describes a bucolic scene of flowers "[k]issed by a little laughing brook" as well as by her partner. Yet the quatrain's last line ruthlessly undercuts the promising scenario, for the forget-me-nots "[f]loat in the water drowned and dead." In the closing quatrain, the relationship of the speaker and her lover is even more excruciating.

And dead and drowned 'mid leaves that rot,
Our angel-eyed Forget-me-not,
The love of unforgotten years,
Floats corpse-like in a pool of tears.

A death of a different sort caused by love defines May Probyn's "Ballade of Lovers: Double Refrain," which was published in *A Ballad of the Road, and Other Poems* (1883). The poem consists of an *ababbaba* rhyme scheme, a concluding envoi, and disturbing dual refrains; the first indicates that the woman holds scant importance and the second relates that through extreme dependency upon her partner, she loses any sense of her own subjectivity. The initial stanza elucidates that she represents little more than a decorative object to him. "For the man she was made by the Eden tree," the poem begins, "[t]o be decked in soft raiment, and worn

on his sleeve.” Underlining her status as an object, the first refrain refers to her as “[a] thing to take, or a thing to leave.” She becomes so immersed in him that she devolves into a cipher, never to regain status as a subject; through his presence, “her soul will escape her beyond reprieve.” The second refrain reinforces her self-effacement: “And, alas! the whole of her world is he.”

The next stanza reiterates that she holds no consequence for him, and his seeming shows of affection are disingenuous since other women are readily available. Despite her knowledge of his disloyalty, she cannot wrest herself from his influence and grovels before him.

To-morrow brings plenty as lovesome, maybe—
 If she break when he handles her, why should he grieve?
 She is only one pearl in a pearl-crowded sea,
 A thing to take, or a thing to leave.
 But she, though she knows he has kissed to deceive
 And forsakes her, still only clings on at his knee—
 When life has gone, what further loss can bereave?
 And, alas! the whole of her world is he.

The third stanza repeats the point made in the poem’s opening line that “[f]or the man was she made.” Like the paradigmatic self-sacrificing Victorian woman, she apparently exists only to serve the male who has laid claim to her, becoming his “helpmeet what time there is burden to heave.” She can merely follow his lead and conform herself to his wants and needs, “to interweave / Her woof with his warp.” Such behavior will continue until he tires of her and seeks to shed the clutching spider by “clear[ing] his way out through her web.”

Even if a woman avoids such an all-encompassing loss of subjectivity, another manifestation of self-effacement occurs when her driving ambition is to marry, despite the deficiencies and disparagements of a prospective mate. The scenario reflects a cultural supposition that she ignore such flaws and accept an unworthy lover nonetheless. Constance Naden’s 1881 “Love *versus* Learning” entails a troubling portrait of an intelligent woman whose dominant concern from girlhood is to find a wise husband and become “a philosopher’s bride.” In her musings, she envisioned him as “learned and witty, / The sage and the lover combined.” Yet in actuality she succumbs to an unworthy Oxford graduate with an advanced degree, despite her uncertainty about the match; “fate overtook me at last,” she realizes, and her “freedom was past.”

She later comprehends that she had sorely misjudged him and her “visions are fatally marred.” Asserting that he resembles “neither a sage nor a bard,” she learns that he has become entrenched in ideas absorbed as a student and recognizes no necessity to expand his thoughts. Then begin his patronizing denigrations of his companion’s intellectual talents.

My logic he sets at defiance,
 Declares that my Latin’s no use,
 And when I begin to talk Science
 He calls me a dear little goose.

He says that my lips are too rosy
 To speak in a language that’s dead,
 And all that is dismal and prosy
 Should fly from so sunny a head.

The realization of her lover’s unfitness frequently leads her to consider abandoning him, but he spews forth quasi-scientific compliments that she accepts nevertheless. Even though she finds “[t]his conflict of love and of lore” quite bewildering, she unfortunately decides that “I must cease from my musing, / For that is his knock at the door!”

If a woman wishes to forge her own path, unlike the protagonist of “Love *versus* Learning,” and pursue a substantive life not dependent on a male’s selfish interests, she faces the prospect that a loving relationship cannot occur. Another Naden poem, “The Lady Doctor,” makes the problem abundantly clear. As an adolescent, the protagonist possessed “[t]he golden hair, the blooming face, / And all a maiden’s tender grace.” She was enamored with a youth but lost her affection through an unknown cause, possibly because of his opinions or aggressiveness. Deserting her stricken lover, she turns to medicine and earns her degree, still “young and fair, / With rosy cheeks and golden hair, / Learning with beauty blended.”¹⁶ Yet the exigencies of her profession transform her into a careworn, rapidly aging woman whose “roses all were faded.” She has deteriorated into a “spinster gaunt and grey, / Whose aspect stern might well dismay / A bombardier stout-hearted.” To an observer, she seems unsexed, a frequent criticism hurled at New Women, and appears like “a man in woman’s clothes, / All female graces slighting.” The toll her profession has taken is exemplified by “[t]he woe of living all alone, / In friendless, dreary sadness,” and she thinks longingly of affectionate companionship. The poem concludes with a dispiriting moral that a

Victorian woman can choose either a rewarding profession or a mate, but not both.

Fair maid, if thine unfettered heart
 Yearn for some busy, toilsome part,
 Let that engross thee only;
 But oh! if bound by love's light chain,
 Leave not thy fond and faithful swain
 Disconsolate and lonely.

Although New Woman poems, like the preceding examples, tend to present love in disheartening terms, an occasional exception arises. Even in that more optimistic situation, however, obstacles materialize. Rosamund Marriott Watson's "Hic Jacet" from *Vespertilia and Other Voices* (1895) provides a case in point, as the funereal title indicates with its translation of "here lies." The speaker is confounded that a deep, shared love will become meaningless and disintegrate through death.

And is it possible?—and must it be—
 At last, indifference 'twixt you and me?
 We who have loved so well,
 Must we indeed fall under that strange spell,
 The tyranny of the grave?

The protagonist continues to question the inevitability of death dividing the lovers and causing them to forget each other. She finds it difficult to accept that the intense emotions they reciprocate will simply cease to exist.

Shall not my pulses leap if you be near?
 Shall these endure, the sun, the wind, the rain,
 And naught of all our tenderness remain,
 Our joy—our hope—our fear? ...

Ultimately, the speaker realizes that to "rail or weep, / Plead or defy, take counsel as we may, / It shall not profit us." Instead, she places her hopes on chance, "the blind powers," that the pair will live and love for as long as possible. Rather than despair completely of the situation, the speaker urges that the couple value their love in the limited time ahead. Nevertheless, the prospect of death, whenever it may occur, looms over the poem and generates an unavoidable tension.

UNSETTLING MISCONCEPTIONS

Not only the vagaries of love trouble New Women, of course, but also the myths readily accepted by a Victorian culture shaped by an essentialist perspective. M. E. Coleridge's 1899 "In Dispraise of the Moon" from her *Poems* adopts the lunar image to illustrate the disparagement of women as inferior beings. Composed of three *aabb* stanzas, the poem begins with a demeaning portrait of the moon, the conventional symbol of women in contrast to the masculine sun. Presumably spoken by a male, the initial stanza carries an unpleasant tone. The moon is depicted as a witch-like presence with its ability to attract predatory birds and vampiric creatures. Contrasted to the weak moon is the exalted sun, whose stellar quality the moon besmirches through its debilitating influence.

I would not be the Moon, the sickly thing,
To summon owls and bats upon the wing;
For when the noble Sun is gone away,
She turns his night into a pallid day.¹⁷

Pernicious and parasitic, the moon relies upon the sun's luminescence for its subsistence like a traditional Victorian female dependent on a male for guidance and sustenance. The woman represented by the moon only amounts to a distasteful specter of the culturally powerful male.

She hath no air, no radiance of her own,
That world unmusical of earth and stone.
She wakes her dim, uncoloured, voiceless hosts,
Ghost of the Sun, herself the sun of ghosts.

Building upon suppositions about the moon's destruction of sanity, the final stanza cautions against lengthy observation. Otherwise, "[m]ortal eyes that gaze too long on her / Of Reason's piercing ray defrauded are." Unlike the vitalizing powers of the sun, the moonlight brings harm. Though sunlight "doth feed the living brain," the stanza concludes, "[t]hat light, reflected, but makes darkness plain."

Dora Sigerson's "The Awakening," published in *Verses* (1893), demonstrates the absurdity of tenets propounding female inferiority. The speaker regrets that her dearth of sufficient erudition precludes her as a suitable partner for the man she loves, and she pleads for enhanced learning.

“Knowledge, be my master,” she beseeches before demanding, “Turn brain, O faster. / Grind the seeds of wisdom fine, / Till no mind be wise as mine.” Subsequently, however, she realizes that she had misjudged her love, who was just a fool with “[m]uch the chaff and little wheat.” His assertions of an advanced mind prove groundless, since “[a]ll his thoughts [were] a borrowed store.”

This false light that made my day
 Was the sun’s reflected ray,
 Dancing broken on the wave
 Of ignorance, nor can I save
 One tossing spark of foolish light
 To make a beacon for my night.
 Blind for love’s sweet sake to be,
 Seeing is a misery.

Just as unnerving as the denigration accorded women for their supposed intellectual mediocrity is the misguided idealization that typified much Victorian thought. Naden’s 1887 “Love’s Mirror” chronicles a man’s unrealistic assessment of a woman as a goddess figure resembling the valorized and widely accepted impression of the Virgin Mary.¹⁸ The poem also advises that such a cultural appraisal harms women by convincing them of the validity of the impossible standard. In the first two of five stanzas, the speaker recognizes both that her partner appraises her as an exemplar of the ideal and realizes the enormity of his misjudgment.

I live with love encompassed round,
 And glowing light that is not mine,
 And yet am sad; for, truth to tell,
 It is not I you love so well;
 Some fair Immortal, robed and crowned,
 You hold within your heart’s dear shrine.

As the longest in the poem, this stanza assumes the greatest weight in asserting the ideal as a faulty norm. The next stanza prods the lover to dismiss his erroneous belief, accept the flawed speaker, and understand that perfection cannot be attained. The two words introducing the stanza can be read as a spondee that underscores the forceful message.

Cast out the Goddess! let me in;
 Faulty I am, yet all your own,
 But this bright phantom you enthrone
 Is such as mortal may not win.

The poem begins a daunting turn, however, as the woman expresses a wish to embody the idealized paradigm. She urges her lover to retain the perfect image in memory, and she will endeavor to transform herself. At first, her intention appears admirable as she seeks to emulate the goddess figure so that “all my meaner self departs.” Yet that desire indicates not simply the wish to become a better person, albeit a human who cannot correct every shortcoming. Instead, she imagines herself attaining the ideal.

And, while I love you more and more,
 My spirit, gazing on the light,
 Becomes, in loveliness and might,
 The glorious Vision you adore.

Word choice reinforces the speaker’s absorption of an unattainable objective promoted by her culture. Rather than rejecting the unrealistic imperative and reiterating that she must be accepted as an imperfect being, the speaker etherealizes herself as a “spirit” reaching the heights of beauty and strength to become the image her lover worships.

The inadvisability of cultural expectations governing appropriate female conduct becomes abundantly apparent with May Kendall’s “In the Toy Shop,” included in *Songs from Dreamland* (1894). The three-stanza *ababcdcd* verse juxtaposes two approaches to gender expectations in featuring a living girl and a wooden doll speculating on their situations.¹⁹ The first stanza depicts the actual girl as rebellious and assertive, facing pressure to meet validated standards of behavior. If read as an emphatic trochee, the “she” introducing multiple lines highlights the girl’s forceful personality. The child epitomizes a nascent New Woman who understands that a girl with inclinations considered unseemly cannot accommodate societal dictates.

The child had longings all unspoken—
 She was a naughty child.
 She had “a will that must be broken”;
 Her brothers drove her wild.
 She read the tale, but skipped the moral.