



*Among the Victorians and Modernists*

# **FORM AND MODERNITY IN WOMEN'S POETRY, 1895–1922**

**A LINE OF HER OWN**

Sarah Parker



ROUTLEDGE



# Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895–1922

While W. B. Yeats's influential account of the 'Tragic Generation' claims that most fin-de-siècle poets died, or at least stopped writing, shortly after 1900, this book explodes this narrative by attending to the twentieth-century poetry produced by women poets Alice Meynell, Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Dollie Radford, and Katharine Tynan. While primarily associated with the late nineteenth century, these poets were active in the twentieth century, but their later writing is overlooked in modernist-dominated studies, partly due to this poetry's adherence to traditional form. This book reveals that these poets, far from being irrelevant to modernity, used these established forms to address contemporary concerns, including suffrage, sexuality, motherhood, and the First World War. The chapters focus on Meynell's manipulations of metre to contemplate temporality and literary tradition; Michael Field's use of blank verse to portray the conflicted modern woman; Radford's adaptation of the aesthetic song-like lyric to tackle the experience of the city, urban crime, and suffrage; and Tynan's employment of the ballad to soothe bereaved mothers during the First World War. This book ultimately shows that traditional forms played a vital role in shaping mature women poets' responses to modernity, illuminating debates about form, tradition, and gender in twentieth-century poetry.

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**Among the Victorians and Modernists**  
Edited by Dennis Denisoff

This series publishes monographs and essay collections on literature, art, and culture in the context of the diverse aesthetic, political, social, technological, and scientific innovations that arose among the Victorians and Modernists. Viable topics include, but are not limited to, artistic and cultural debates and movements; influential figures and communities; and agitations and developments regarding subjects such as animals, commodification, decadence, degeneracy, democracy, desire, ecology, gender, nationalism, the paranormal, performance, public art, sex, socialism, spiritualities, transnationalism, and the urban. Studies that address continuities between the Victorians and Modernists are welcome. Work on recent responses to the periods such as Neo-Victorian novels, graphic novels, and film will also be considered.

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# Introduction

## Introduction: “Poetical Reputations”

The traits of a current literary fashion are difficult to note, yet after ten, twenty, or one hundred years they become obvious to every fool. Young minds, as well as those ageing, are subject to this form of illusion. No man commences with vital worth, freed from local or temporary irrelevancies, save by training himself to question generally accepted judgements.

Thomas Sturge Moore, “Michael Field,” *Poetry and Drama* 2,  
no. 5 (March 1914), 6.

Poetical reputations, of women especially, have a way of growing dowdy and going out of fashion, to return, it may be, like other fashions, to a day which shall find them new.

Katharine Tynan, “The Serious Muse,” *The Observer*  
(16 September 1917), 4.

In the aforementioned quotations, two prolific poet-critics, Thomas Sturge Moore and Katharine Tynan, reflect on the vicissitudes of literary history and the vagaries of “poetical reputations,” particularly for women. Both are writing in the early twentieth century, in the service of poets they deeply admired, whose work they felt worthy of enduring appreciation. Sturge Moore’s essay appeared in Harold Monro’s *Poetry and Drama*, in response to the death of Edith Cooper in December 1913. Cooper was one half of Michael Field, a pseudonymous collaborative partnership with Katharine Bradley, her aunt and romantic partner. Following this passage, Sturge Moore reminisces about the early success of Michael Field’s verse dramas, hailed as “the strikingly virile and mature work of some unknown young man” until the reality of their gender and collaboration was revealed.<sup>1</sup> In spite of their subsequent critical neglect, Sturge Moore praises the richness of Michael Field’s plays, quoting passages from *Fair Rosamund* (1884)

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as evidence. While noting the “minds of great distinction” with whom Michael Field conversed, including John Ruskin and Robert Browning, Sturge Moore brings these connections up-to-date, observing that Bradley and Cooper “kept pace with time” by corresponding with younger poets including Gordon Bottomley, Lascelles Abercrombie, and W. H. Davies.<sup>2</sup> By name-checking these members of the Georgian movement, a group with whom Sturge Moore himself was connected, he signals Michael Field’s relevance to a younger generation of writers who were at that particular historical moment engaged in reviving poetic drama for the twentieth century.

Written three years later, Katharine Tynan’s words appear in a review of a volume by her friend Alice Meynell, titled *A Father of Women and Other Poems* (1917). Meynell established her reputation in the nineteenth century, finding fame with her debut volume *Preludes* (1875) and becoming renowned for her aesthetic prose essays during the 1890s. However, as a poet, Meynell was most productive in the twentieth century, publishing the majority of her poems during the 1910s and 1920s. While her previous volumes were largely reprints of her early poems with a few additions, *A Father of Women* contained sixteen new poems, some of them reflecting on the First World War. In her review, Tynan qualifies her statement about the vicissitudes of literary fashion by asserting that, unlike other women poets, Meynell’s work will endure, because “she does not belong to the day and the hour, but to Time and Eternity.”<sup>3</sup> However, Tynan’s comparison of women’s poetry to shifting fashion lingers, hinting that Meynell’s reputation—and perhaps her own—may not be as secure as she hopes.

In championing their favoured poets, Tynan and Sturge Moore convey a mixture of assurance and anxiety concerning the durability of women’s literary reputations. Sturge Moore asserts his belief that “vital worth” will shine through the mists of “literary fashion,” but perhaps only with the clarity of hindsight. His essay expresses his eagerness that Michael Field should be remembered, and his anxiety lest they be forgotten. Tynan’s use of a sartorial metaphor betrays her fear, amidst her praise of Meynell, that such work is likely to fall out of favour, especially if the poet is a woman. Both writers are prescient in their concerns, as Michael Field and Meynell’s poetry was largely neglected by the mid-twentieth century, a fate that awaited the majority of women poets publishing across the turn of the century. However, Sturge Moore and Tynan are also defiant in their belief that these poets would be appreciated in the future, even if one had to wait a long time for that moment to come.

*Form and Modernity in Women’s Poetry* seeks to fulfil that hope. This book sets out an alternative poetic history for the period 1895–1922, focusing on the twentieth-century careers of women poets who continue to be primarily associated with the late nineteenth century: Alice Meynell (1847–1922), Michael Field (Katharine Bradley, 1846–1914, and Edith

Cooper, 1862–1913), Dollie Radford (1858–1920), and Katharine Tynan (1859–1931). Although the majority of existing scholarship on these poets concentrates on their 1890s verse and situates them primarily in the late-Victorian context in which their careers began, this book reveals that these poets continued to be productive in the early decades of the twentieth century. By bringing to light the post-1900 work of ‘fin-de-siècle’ women poets, the chapters in this book enhance our current understanding of modern poetry, by illuminating the complex relationship between form, modernity, and gender. To this end, my book addresses the following questions: what poetry did mature women poets produce during 1895–1922 and why has this work been overlooked in accounts of the period? How did these poets react to and help shape the poetic debates of the twentieth century, particularly those concerning the relationship between form and theme? How do these women poets contemplate modernity through their use of poetic form, and in what ways is their relationship to form inflected by gender? Finally, how does taking account of the poetry produced by mature women poets change and enrich our understanding of twentieth-century poetry more generally?

*Form and Modernity in Women’s Poetry* emphasises continuities in poetic practice across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As each chapter in this book shows, paying attention to the mature work of women poets both extends and revises our grasp of fin-de-siècle verse, by revealing how the poetic forms, modes, and genres associated with the 1890s (including those aligned with aestheticism and decadence) adapted to respond to the conditions of modernity. Reassessing the work of mature poets also enables us to comprehend the diversity of early twentieth-century poetry, by setting the work of younger poets—including but not limited to those associated with modernism—in an enriched context. In this sense, this book aims to bridge the gulf between the ‘fin de siècle’ and ‘modernism’ by offering a richer, more complicated narrative; of young, up-and-coming writers occupying the same pages as older, established poets; of intersecting networks; and of poetic forms, modes, and aesthetics that cannot be easily housed on either side of the 1900 divide. To this end, my chapters attend to connections between poets of the older and younger generations in both their personal and professional networks, whether this means appearing in the same periodicals, reviewing one another’s work, adopting the same publishers, or corresponding with each other. Some instructive examples include the publication of Meynell’s poem “Maternity” in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in 1913 alongside F. S. Flint’s “Imagisme” and Ezra Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”; D. H. Lawrence’s correspondence praising Radford’s play *The Ransom*, following its publication in *The English Review* in 1915; and Tynan’s review of H.D.’s debut volume *Sea Garden* in *The Bookman* in 1917. This handful of instances

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signals that mature women poets played a more active role in early twentieth-century literary culture than accounts of the period lead us to believe.

Indeed, surveying the existing criticism, one would be forgiven for assuming that the majority of women poets writing during the *fin de siècle* died, or at least stopped producing poetry, shortly after 1900. While researchers specialising in the nineteenth century usually concentrate on their works of the 1890s, those interested in early twentieth-century poetry tend to focus on women poets of the younger generation associated with modernism, such as H.D., Mina Loy, and Marianne Moore.<sup>4</sup> On the relatively rare occasions when women poets of the older and younger generations are considered together, as in Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle's *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (2005), the older generation tends to be positioned as 'rear-guard' in comparison to their younger peers, who supposedly developed their experiments into new, more progressive realms. For example, Dowson and Entwistle observe that while poets such as Meynell, Michael Field, Tynan, Mary E. Coleridge, and Eva Gore-Booth published poems in the twentieth century, their "conventional formalism . . . places them in a line of women's poetry which evades gendered authorship."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, poets of the younger generation (including Vita Sackville-West, Frances Cornford and Elizabeth Daryush) "can be distinguished from the former group by their reliance on psychological insights and a more contemporary diction," paving the way for more radical modernists such as Mina Loy and Edith Sitwell.<sup>6</sup>

This tendency to position the older generation as 'rear-guard' or less radical than their younger peers reflects the assumption (discussed in detail later in this introduction) that poetic innovation, especially free verse, aligns with progressive politics, while established poetic forms are aligned with conservative ideologies. The enduring critical neglect of mature women poets in accounts of modern poetry is therefore partly due to their continued use of traditional poetic forms in the twentieth century; forms which are assumed to be at odds with modernity. If readers turn to these poets looking for evidence of 'making it new,' they are likely to be sorely disappointed. The poets addressed in this book remained committed to established poetic forms, even as these forms were deemed outmoded by modernist commentators. Scholarship (including feminist revisionist criticism) struggles to know what to do with poetry that appears conservative or reactionary in its formal conventionality. But *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry* challenges the assumption that there is a straightforward relationship between poetic form and ideology; that the use of conventional forms aligns with conservative politics, whereas breaking form encodes a radical desire for liberation. For it is certainly the case that the women poets featured in this book had diverse political views, and yet they all favoured established poetic forms—including ballads, blank verse,

and rhymed lyrics—over free verse. Moreover, they often used these ‘old-fashioned’ poetic forms to tackle controversial subject matter with contemporary relevance, such as transgressive sexual desire, reproductive rights, pacifism, child loss, adultery, and the fight for suffrage.<sup>7</sup> By suggesting that these poets respond to modernity in their poetry, though, I do not mean to imply a consistent attitude towards modernity or a particular ideological position. In other words, responding to modernity does not automatically mean they are progressive in their politics, or that they always respond to it in a positive way. Rather, these poets are all immersed in the changes of twentieth-century modernity, and they respond to these contexts in differing, complex, and shifting ways. Crucially, they all respond through poetic form. Poetic form provides them with a tool for processing modernity.

It is my contention then that these poets engage with modernity *through* form, rather than in spite of form. Far from signalling their irrelevance to the twentieth century, *Form and Modernity in Women’s Poetry* proposes that these poets’ use of form—the reason they have been forgotten—provides the key to why their work should be remembered. Rather than dismissing their use of poetic form as old-fashioned, I draw on the concept of affordances to ask what such established forms enable them to *do*. As Caroline Levine has proposed, we can consider poetic forms in terms of their capabilities, identifying “the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford.”<sup>8</sup> Following Levine’s approach, when analysing mature women’s poetry, I ask: how do the affordances of certain poetic forms help to facilitate their contemplation of modernity? In what ways do they adapt their favoured poetic forms, established in the late nineteenth century, to the conditions of twentieth-century modernity? Rather than squeezing these poets into a modernist-dominated set of values or regarding them as a belated extension of the *fin de siècle*, I use their work as a test case to consider how we might read twentieth-century poetry that is *not* modernist. Can we consider this poetry on its own terms and how might doing so alter the value systems that we apply to twentieth-century poetry? The need to place these poets back in the frame extends beyond the motivations of feminist revisionism. It is only by reassessing the work of these overlooked women poets that we can fully comprehend and appreciate developments in twentieth-century poetry more broadly.

Before further detailing the core arguments and the structure of this book, it is first necessary to outline the wider contexts for women’s poetry in the period 1895–1922. This will enable us to understand the historical factors that led mature women poets to be overlooked in later influential accounts of the era. In particular, the distorting narrative of decline in the years following Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment in 1895 played a major role in diminishing women’s later contributions. According to commentators such as Ford Madox Ford and C. K. Stead, the downfall of 1890s

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decadence led to a period of backlash, in which poetry was characterised by jingoistic chauvinism, epitomised by the verse of Henry Newbolt, Alfred Noyes, and Rudyard Kipling. But while there is little space for women's poetry in this overly generalised narrative of masculine retrenchment, the turn of the century was, we will see, a particularly rich period for women poets, in which they published in greater numbers than ever before. In fact, Edwardian commentators identified this era as a rich epoch of diverse *poetries*, written in a variety of styles and forms, singling out developments in women's poetry for special praise. Among these writers were poets such as Meynell, Michael Field, Radford, and Tynan; those who had launched their careers in the 1890s and who continued to publish work in the 1900s and through the First World War. But when, in the 1910s and 1920s, memoirs of the '1890s generation' began to appear, these women poets were overlooked in comparison to their male counterparts, in terms of both their previous achievements and their enduring presence. This neglect was worsened by ageism combined with misogyny which positioned mature women as the antithesis of youth and modernity, meaning their accomplished mature poetry was further undervalued. This made it easier for younger poets to dismiss their contributions to twentieth-century poetry, resulting in the distorted narratives that continue to dominate today.

### Women's Poetry, 1895 and After

The *fin de siècle* has often been understood to end with Wilde's imprisonment in 1895. As Ford Madox Ford recounts, after Wilde's incarceration: "Poets died or fled to other climes, publishers also fled, prosateurs were fished out of the Seine or reformed and the great public said 'Thank heavens, we need not read any more poetry.'"<sup>9</sup> W. B. Yeats constructed his own version of this spurious narrative: "in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic Church; or if they did I have forgotten."<sup>10</sup> Whether 1895 or 1900, the conclusion is the same; the spirit of the *fin de siècle* was irrevocably dead by the early twentieth century, as were many of its writers. In recent years, critics have re-examined these narratives, unmasking them as strategic mythologies rather than historical facts.<sup>11</sup> The *fin de siècle* is now acknowledged as a time of vibrant creativity and new beginnings, rather than exhaustion and endings. While these narratives are clearly reductive for literature in general, they are patently untrue for women poets, many of whom continued publishing their work with sustained vigour in the early twentieth century. As we will see, the supposed decline of decadence following Wilde's imprisonment actually precipitated a more active role

for women poets, contradicting Ford and Yeats' narratives of failure and enervation.

In line with this broader reconsideration of the *fin de siècle* that gained traction in the late twentieth century, critics began to identify the 1890s as a rich decade for women's poetry. For example, in a 2006 special issue, Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo argue that women poets were "active participants in the renewal of poetry, and the proliferation of poetries, at the *fin de siècle*."<sup>12</sup> The strength of women's poetry was acknowledged during the period itself. In an 1888 review essay on "English Poetesses," Wilde observed that:

[N]o country has ever had so many poetesses at once. Indeed, when one remembers that the Greeks had only nine muses, one is apt to fancy that we have too many. And yet the work done by women in the sphere of poetry is really of a very high standard of excellence.<sup>13</sup>

Wilde's words betray his anxiety that women are threatening to dominate the market in poetry, but, despite these reservations, he concedes the quality of their work. Elizabeth Sharp expressed similar sentiments in her introduction to *Women's Voices: An Anthology of the Most Characteristic Poems by English, Scotch and Irish Women* (1887), arguing that:

[T]here is a greater wealth of really fine poetic writing at present appearing in more or less obscure quarters than has ever appeared at any other period in literary history. [. . . A]mong the minor poets of this generation women have written more that is worthy to endure than men have done.<sup>14</sup>

The death of Tennyson in 1892 increased opportunities for women's poetry. Thain notes that the loss of this "figure-head icon" was beneficial for women poets, who were publishing "with such vigour by the end of the century that there is no longer a polarity between a 'woman's tradition' and a mainstream."<sup>15</sup> This explosion in production was facilitated by the periodical market, in which women could find multiple venues to place their work, including *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *The English Illustrated Magazine*, *The Sketch*, and *The Savoy*, to name just a few. Columns such as "The Wares of Autolycus" in *The Pall Mall Gazette* were shared between women, including Meynell, Tynan, Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), and E. Nesbit. Professional networks were cultivated through initiatives such as the Women Writer's Dinner, established in 1889.<sup>16</sup> *The Yellow Book*, published by John Lane and Elkin Mathews, played an important role in bringing women poets to the foreground in the period; according to Margaret D. Stetz and Mark



Samuels Lasner: “no other journal of the day devoted to ‘high’ or avant-garde culture allowed women so great a voice in defining themselves and one another.”<sup>17</sup> Just as the *Keynotes* series (titled after George Egerton’s controversial collection of 1893) was crucial to promoting work by New Woman prose writers, the Bodley Head imprint played a vital part in publishing new poetry by women. Indeed, Linda H. Peterson notes that the Bodley Head promoted itself primarily through its women poets following Wilde’s imprisonment, with Lane boasting in an interview in December 1895: “I count myself fortunate . . . to have published the work of five great women poets of the day—Mrs. Meynell, Mrs. Marriott Watson, Miss E. Nesbit, Mrs. Tynan Hinkson, and Mrs. Dollie Radford.”<sup>18</sup>

Lane was not the only person to feel that women’s poetry deserved recognition. The previous year, Richard Le Gallienne had written an essay on “Woman-Poets of the Day” (1894), arguing that women poets appeared to be developing more rapidly than men. Le Gallienne, the main reader for the Bodley Head, highlights “the praiseworthy fact of women’s evolution,” arguing that: “Man, for the present, seems to be at a stand-still, if not actually retrograde; and the onward movement of the world to be embodied in woman.”<sup>19</sup> Continuing the evolutionary metaphor, Le Gallienne considers the “chasm of growth dividing” the work of the poets he singles out—among them Meynell, Tynan, Radford, and Nesbit—from earlier celebrated women poets, such as Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The true “woman-poet” (as opposed to the “poetess”) is, for Le Gallienne, “an invention of the present century” and “still in process of formation.”<sup>20</sup> In observing this, he echoes a point that Sharp made seven years earlier. In her introduction to *Women’s Voices*, Sharp observes that her collection signals a “steady development of intellectual power, certainly not unaccompanied by artistic faculty—a fact which gives further sanction to the belief that still finer work will be produced in the future by women-poets.”<sup>21</sup>

As we have seen, the year following Le Gallienne’s article, 1895, was pivotal for both *The Yellow Book* and its poets. Wilde’s downfall had dire implications for the journal, even though he never actually published in it. Reflecting on this period in 1931, Ford claims that Wilde’s ruin put an end to the dynamic literary culture of the 1890s:

The Bodley Head group did not survive. They succumbed in London’s Soho haunts—to absinthe, to tuberculosis, to starvation, to reformers or to suicide. But in their day they were brilliantly before the public and London was more of a literary centre then than it has ever been before or since. . . . But all that went with the trial of Wilde.<sup>22</sup>

Ford blames Wilde and his followers for “succumbing” to various decadent temptations, resulting in the fall of these halcyon days of letters.

According to Ford, the backlash caused by Wilde's sexual transgressions and eventual imprisonment caused the "political pendulum . . . to swing violently towards the right."<sup>23</sup> In terms of poetry, according to Ford, this resulted in the popularity of the "physical force schools of Henley or Mr. Rudyard Kipling"—poetry representing a strident masculine energy and jingoism that was, for Ford, the disastrous antithesis of the "delicacy and refinement" of decadence.<sup>24</sup>

Although Wilde's downfall impacted differently on different constituencies (having, for example, less impact on poets distant from *Yellow Book* decadence, such as Thomas Hardy, compared to, say, a poet like Lionel Johnson), Ford's account is frequently invoked as evidence that early twentieth-century poetry was barren until modernism came along. For example, in his influential study *The New Poetic* (1964), C. K. Stead concurs with Ford's narrative, arguing that the experimental poets of the fin de siècle who valued "art for art's sake" were replaced during the 1900s by "a poetry of political retrenchment, committed to conserve political and social ideas and institutions doomed to collapse."<sup>25</sup> Stead cites Kipling, W. E. Henley, Noyes, Newbolt, William Watson, and Alfred Austin as the dominant poets of the Edwardian period, roundly dismissing them as "not those who offered the complex qualities usually associated with good poetry, but those whose minds ran at the level of public expectation."<sup>26</sup> To make matters worse, as Kenneth Millard notes (in one of the few existing studies devoted to Edwardian poetry), the Edwardian era is seldom associated with poetry at all, but rather with prose works directly engaged in addressing social problems, such as the novels of Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy.<sup>27</sup>

But what of the work of women poets, so highly praised for their rapid development in Le Gallienne's essay of 1894? Ford, Stead, and Millard are silent about the work produced by women in the post-1895 climate.<sup>28</sup> How might considering women's poetry of this period complicate the male-dominated narrative of the collapse of aesthetic values, and the rise of a macho, conservative poetics? If we bring women into the picture, Ford's assertion that "all that went with the trial of Wilde" begins to look even more questionable. In fact, far from aesthetic and decadent poetics dying off in this period, Linda K. Hughes argues that women poets sustained *The Yellow Book's* "links to decadence in the wake of the trial."<sup>29</sup> While male poets writing homoerotic verse risked increased censorship in a hostile literary climate, Hughes claims that "women, already marginal, could more safely articulate thoughts that had become dangerous for men."<sup>30</sup> Thus, as Hughes shows through her bibliographic study of poems in *The Yellow Book*, more women poets were published in the journal after Wilde's trials than before, and several of their poems expressed sexually transgressive themes.<sup>31</sup> While the possibilities for

men's poetry may have narrowed during this period, women's poems published between 1895 and 1897 sustained *The Yellow Book's* "ties to the avant-garde," providing, according to Hughes, "an outlet by which women writers could challenge social convention or misogynist contributions by men."<sup>32</sup>

As with Tennyson's demise in 1892, Wilde's downfall in 1895 therefore provided more space and opportunity for women's poetry to flourish. The supposedly declining years described in Ford and Yeats's influential accounts witnessed further significant developments in women's poetry. While the Bodley Head had published important works by women poets before the split of Mathews and Lane in September 1894, including Radford's *A Light Load* (1891), Michael Field's *Sight and Song* (1892), and Meynell's *Poems* (1892), the years following their split confirmed their commitment to supporting women's poetry, with Mathews publishing around three volumes by women poets a year, including Michael Field's *Attila, My Attila!* (1895), Tynan's *A Lover's Breast-Knot* (1896), Margaret L. Woods' *Aeromancy and Other Poems* (1896), and Mary E. Coleridge's *Fancy's Guerdon* (1897, under the pseudonym 'Anodos'). As we have seen, Lane also continued to promote the women poets on his list, publishing volumes by Radford and Nesbit (*Songs and Other Verses* and *A Pomander of Verse*, both 1895) and *Opals* by Olive Custance (1897)—an especially risqué, decadent-inflected volume to be published in a post-Wildean climate. As a perusal of these volumes makes clear, aestheticism, decadence, and the poetry of "delicacy and refinement" did not die off in 1895, as Ford asserts.<sup>33</sup> Rather, women poets carried such work forward into the Edwardian era. Thus, a truly representative history tracing British poetry after 1895 should include women poets, as a corrective to the influential yet highly distorted narratives of masculine retrenchment associated with the Edwardian period.

### **The 1900s: A Barren Period?**

Along with individual poetic volumes, anthologies published in the 1900s attest to the continuing prominence of women's poetry in the Edwardian era. For instance, in 1902, William Archer published *Poets of the Younger Generation*, featuring extracts from thirty-three poets alongside critical commentaries and woodcut portraits.<sup>34</sup> Archer includes nine women poets in his volume: Meynell, Tynan, and Radford, along with Alice Brown, Nora Hopper, E. Nesbit, Dora Sigerson Shorter, Graham R. Tomson, and Margaret L. Woods. Although there is evidently still a lack of gender parity across the volume as a whole, Archer clearly saw women poets as making a significant contribution to the poetry of the day. He emphasises that his chosen poets (from Britain, North America,

and Canada) reflect the diversity and vitality of poetry at the turn of the century:

If the reader will bear in mind that by far the greater number of the poems here quoted have been written within the past ten years, I think he will admit that the last decade of the nineteenth century has been anything but a barren period.<sup>35</sup>

The volume thus reflects the nineteenth-century's considerable achievements and raises questions about the status of poetry in the new century, with Archer aiming to "enhance the reader's estimate of the value of contemporary poetry as a whole."<sup>36</sup>

Several of the poets in Archer's anthology continued to publish in the twentieth century, exerting an important influence on the younger generation. For example, Laurence Binyon coined the phrase 'make it new' long before Pound; Madison Cawein's "Waste Land" (1913) provided inspiration for Eliot's more famous poem, and Yeats continued to be an influential poet within both the Symbolist and modernist movements.<sup>37</sup> The women poets included in Archer's anthology also produced significant works as the new century dawned. For example, the notoriously reticent Meynell published three poetic volumes before 1900 and five volumes after; the more prolific Tynan published six volumes in the late nineteenth century and seventeen volumes in the twentieth century, so both significantly enlarged their output in the twentieth century. Women poets became increasingly conspicuous in publishers' lists during the decade 1901–1911; for example, their presence in Mathews' lists increases to around five volumes a year, from approximately three prior to this. 1911 was a particularly rich year, in which Mathews published twelve volumes by women poets.<sup>38</sup> This reflects a general trend towards publishing more women's poetry in this period. By 1910, Margaret Sackville could confidently state in her introduction to *A Book of Verse by Living Women* (an anthology itself indicative of the interest in women's poetry at this time) that women's poetry had experienced a sea change:

[S]ince the crumbling of so many false ideals and the infinitely truer attitude of human beings towards life and towards each other, women's poetry of late years has reflected the change—has become a far firmer, more individual, more valuable thing.<sup>39</sup>

Sackville's anthology comprises twenty-five poets, including all the focal poets of this book.<sup>40</sup>

The first decade of the twentieth century is often characterised as an era of 'minor' poetry, wedged between the Victorian and modernist greats.

## 12 Introduction

However, far from being a barren period, this diverse, democratic aspect enabled women poets to flourish, fostered by an encouraging environment dominated by no single poetic voice or style. This enabling multiplicity was observed by contemporary anthologists. Naomi Gwladys Royde-Smith, for instance, in the introduction to her anthology *Poets of Our Day* (1908) emphasises the diversity of contemporary poetry:

For there is a great deal of modern poetry. The poems included, therefore, are sufficiently various in character to illustrate the history of poetry during the period, showing how it has been frivolous, sensuous, patriotic, simple; and, quite lately, very serious, which is by some people taken for a sign that a great poet is at hand. But we have no need to long over much for a great poet with so many real poets among us, nor to sigh for a new one when we remember how young some of those poets are.<sup>41</sup>

One can sense the nostalgia for an equivalent figure to Tennyson, who will speak to this “serious” age. But instead, according to Royde-Smith, the era has several young “real poets” producing different kinds of verse. In this respect, the Edwardian era continued the trends of the fin de siècle, producing numerous, expansive *poetries*—a dispersion that, while it provoked anxiety in some readers and critics, also fostered a sense of opportunity that was particularly empowering for women poets.

Reviewing Royde-Smith’s volume in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Percy Lubbock also acknowledged the lively state of poetry in 1908:

[W]e may say boldly that poetry is being cultivated at the present day with an energy, a varied range of emotion, and a technical skill of which we may be proud. Year after year new writers come forward with new verse. Year after year there are new aims, new developments, or (what may be just as original) new reactions. No one can move exactly on old lines. No one finds that what he wishes has been said in exactly the way he wishes to say it. There is no universal model, no acclaimed or accredited school. Everyone is free to use the manner that suits him, with nothing to fear from academic criticism. And in this favouring atmosphere fresh experiments succeed one another so rapidly that it is hardly possible at one moment to say what the dominant note of the moment will be.<sup>42</sup>

Observe the upbeat tone and enabling vision of freedom proffered in this review. This is far from the portrait of the era found in modernist accounts. This optimistic assessment could not be more different, for example, from the picture later painted by T. S. Eliot: “The situation of poetry in 1909 or 1910 was stagnant to a degree difficult for any young poet today to imagine.”<sup>43</sup>

T. E. Hulme expressed a similar view in his “Lecture on Modern Poetry” delivered in 1908 (the same year as Royde-Smith’s anthology and Lubbock’s review):

The carcass is dead, and the flies are upon it. Imitative poetry springs up like weeds and women whimper and whine of you and I alas, and roses, roses all the way. It becomes an expression of sentimentality rather than virile thought.<sup>44</sup>

While Vincent Sherry interprets this statement as a homophobic rejection of “the effeminacy routinely attributed to decadence in the attitudinized case of Wilde,” we can also read it as an expression of misogyny, conveying Hulme’s condemnation of the dominance of women poets in the post-Wildean period.<sup>45</sup> If viewed in this way, Hulme’s statement can be seen as a denunciation not only of a decadent past but of women’s poetry in the present, both in terms of its continued proliferation (springing up ‘like weeds’), its ‘Victorian’ and feminine sentimentalism (symbolised as cloying ‘roses’), and its enduring adherence to aesthetic and decadent modes (the rotting ‘carcass’). Hulme’s condemnation taps into long-held pejorative beliefs regarding women’s poetry, frequently charged with being sentimental, derivative, and technically unskilled. These traits intersect with the faults that modernists identified in Victorian verse; Pound, for example, described the nineteenth century as a “blurry, messy . . . rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period,” producing poetry full of “perdamnable rhetoric” and “emotional slither.”<sup>46</sup> In contrast, the new poetry he champions will be “harder and saner, . . . as much like granite as it can be.”<sup>47</sup> As several critics have observed, Pound, Eliot, and Hulme’s preference for the ‘dry and hard’ aesthetic is clearly gendered, rejecting the soft, wet, floppiness they associated with femininity in favour of a granite-hard, pared-back modernist masculinity.<sup>48</sup>

### **“A Live Tradition”: Decadent Reverberations and Intergenerational Gatherings**

In his lecture, Hulme condemns traits associated with Victorianism, decadence, and femininity; all elements that certain modernists desired to purge from their poetry. It is therefore little surprise that women poets of the older generation, still going strong in 1908, were foremost among those that Hulme, Pound, and Eliot denigrated, as they forged the tenets of poetic modernism. But this does not mean that younger poets entirely rejected the work of the older generation. As Cassandra Laity, Ronald Bush, and Vincent Sherry have shown, modernist poets were highly conscious of their

predecessors, even as they sought to conceal their influence.<sup>49</sup> For example, on arriving in London in 1908, Pound actively pursued poets associated with the 1890s, writing in 1913 that he regarded such contact as a “sort of Apostolic Succession . . . for people whose minds have been enriched by contact with men of genius retain the effects of it.”<sup>50</sup> As part of his mission to connect with ‘men of the nineties,’ particularly members of the Rhymers’ Club, Pound published his first volumes with Elkin Mathews and befriended Yeats in 1909.<sup>51</sup> The two grew close, staying together at Stone Cottage, Sussex during 1913–1916.<sup>52</sup> During one of these trips, Pound and Yeats attended the Peacock dinner in January 1914, arranged in honour of the poet Wilfrid Scanwen Blunt. Other attendees included Victor Plarr and Thomas Sturge Moore, poets of the older generation, and Richard Aldington and F. S. Flint, members of the fledgling Imagist movement.<sup>53</sup> As Lucy McDiarmid observes in her account of the meal, the gathering was symbolic, representing the “transmission of poetic culture” across generations.<sup>54</sup> Pound certainly regarded the event in these terms, reflecting later in his Canto LXXXI that by meeting with Blunt, he “gathered from the air a live tradition.”<sup>55</sup>

The Peacock dinner signals the intimate connections forged between young modernist poets and members of the older generation. However, such bonds did not deter them from disparaging these writers elsewhere. For example, in his preface to *The Poetical Works of Lionel Johnson* (published a year after the Peacock dinner), Pound roundly condemned both Johnson and the “nineties” as irrelevant to “younger poets who scoff at most things of his time”: “The ‘nineties’ have chiefly gone out because of their muzziness. . . . They riot with half decayed fruit.”<sup>56</sup> Eliot dismissed decadence in similar terms, describing Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance* as having “impressed itself upon a number of writers in the ‘nineties, and propagated some confusion between life and art which is not wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives.”<sup>57</sup> Pound depicted these “untidy lives” in darkly comic terms in his autobiographical poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), in which “Monsieur Verog,” based on Plarr, recounts stories of his contemporaries:

For two hours he talked of Gallifet;  
Of Dowson; of the Rhymers’ Club;  
Told me how Johnson (Lionel) died  
By falling from a high stool in a pub . . .<sup>58</sup>

Pound portrays the older generation as both doomed and ridiculous, anticipating Yeats’s portrait of the “tragic generation” in his autobiography.<sup>59</sup> As we have seen, this distorted narrative had damaging implications for writers associated with the *fin de siècle*, lasting until the critical reassessment

of the era in the late twentieth century. But it would be inaccurate to characterise Pound and Eliot's relationship with the older generation as one of outright dismissal. As Sherry's work reveals, for all their disavowal, traces of fin-de-siècle influence continued to haunt their work, although these allusions are often repackaged as 'Symbolism' in order to expunge the taint of decadence.<sup>60</sup> Thain suggests that rather than a hostile denunciation, we should regard such allusions as a form of ambivalent "homage," in which modernist authors acknowledge past achievements but "in a way that is tinged with irony or some other indication of the threat these writers pose."<sup>61</sup>

While these portraits of the older generation are undoubtedly distorted, the 'men of the nineties' live on through this ambivalent practice of modernist homage. But where, if anywhere, do the 'women of the nineties' fit into this picture? As the chapters in this book reveal, male modernists had a comparably complex relationship with the women poets of the older generation—but these women have been erased in accounts of twentieth-century literature. Older women poets provided much-needed support for these young writers launching their careers. For example, in 1909, the same year that Pound met Yeats, he also befriended Meynell, who subsequently introduced him to Tynan. As Meynell wrote to Tynan in July 1909:

Among those who *do* know that you are a poet, is the American, Ezra Pound, who is creating an interest which he has not yet quite justified. . . . He greatly admires you and I should like to bring him to see you, when a day can be found to suit you and him.<sup>62</sup>

Though the meeting did not go smoothly—with Meynell apologising to Tynan: "Ezra Pound was horrid that day I have rebuked him since"—this evidently did not prevent Pound from using Tynan's writings as the basis for his unflattering description of Johnson's death in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.<sup>63</sup> While Meynell's letters suggest that she felt Pound was overhyped, she helped him gain access to influential circles at a crucial moment in his career. Her family home at Greatham, situated near Scanwen Blunt's house (the location of the peacock dinner), functioned as an equivalent space for intergenerational gatherings.<sup>64</sup> As well as hosting Pound, D. H. Lawrence was a regular visitor, staying for six months during 1915.<sup>65</sup> During his sojourn, Lawrence corresponded with Dollie Radford, visiting her in nearby Littlehampton. Lawrence's letters, from 1915 until Radford's death in 1920, praise her work and detail their mutual acquaintances, including the Imagist poet H.D., who met Radford in 1916.<sup>66</sup> H.D. also met Meynell shortly after her arrival in London in 1911, and her volume *Sea Garden* (1916) was later reviewed by Tynan in *The Bookman*.<sup>67</sup> Meynell encountered H.D.'s husband, Richard Aldington, another peacock



dinner participant, while both were holidaying in Italy in 1913.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, at their home in Richmond, Michael Field hosted their own inter-generational gatherings, dining with the likes of Yeats, Sturge Moore, and Gordon Bottomley. As this series of anecdotes illustrates, the women of the older generation were well connected to younger poets in the early twentieth century. Even the peacock dinner itself is haunted by their absent presence.<sup>69</sup> But despite this, these women writers are still missing in accounts of twentieth-century literature; a strategic forgetting abetted by the memoirs of the *fin de siècle* published in the early decades of the century.

### **“Men of the Nineties”: Forgetting Women Poets in the Twentieth Century**

The neglect of mature women poets was facilitated by those who recounted the *fin de siècle* in the early twentieth century. The 1910s–1930s witnessed a boom in studies reflecting on the ‘nineties’ era. The phrase ‘Men of the Nineties’ resounds through these volumes, in titles such as Bernard Muddiman’s *The Men of the Nineties* (1920) or Joseph Pennell’s *Aubrey Beardsley and the Other Men of the Nineties* (1924). Like Pennell’s, many of these volumes are organised around a central male figure who represents the age. These works seldom devote space to the contributions of women poets, even when considerable room is made for individual male poets. For example, Holbrook Jackson’s *The Eighteen-Nineties* (1913) briefly mentions women poets in a chapter on “The Minor Poet,” clustering their names into a single paragraph, while whole chapters are dedicated to poets Francis Thompson, John Davidson, and Rudyard Kipling.<sup>70</sup> Following a similar pattern, in *John Lane and the Nineties* (1936), James Lewis May expands several paragraphs on individual critiques of William Watson, John Davidson, Norman Gale, Arthur Symons, Stephen Phillips, and Francis Thompson, among mentions of other male poets. Towards the end of his chapter, he states:

Merely to enumerate all the poets—men and women—would be a long task—long, tedious and a little sad, for many of them are now forgotten. Yet some sang prettily enough in their day. There was Dollie Radford, for example, whom as a girl—Dollie Maitland was her maiden name—I used to meet at a friend’s house in Devonshire. She married a schoolmaster called Ernest Radford, himself a poet and a member of “The Rhymers’ Club.” Mrs. Rosamund Marriott-Watson, who used to write under the name “Graham R. Tomson,” was a true poet and tuned a sweet, if slender, reed.<sup>71</sup>