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NaturallyRadical: The Subversive Poetics of Dollie Radford

LEEANNE MARIE RICHARDSON

WHY IS IT THAT DOLLIE RADFORD'S NAME IS AN UNFAMILIAR ONE TO READERS of *Victorian Poetry*? From 1891 to 1912, her poems appeared in such magazines as *The Athenaeum*, *The Nation*, *McClure's Magazine*, and *The Yellow Book*; she wrote well-reviewed books of poetry for both adults and children; and she was a vital participant in the vibrant political life of fin-de-siècle London. Her circle included some of the most celebrated names in turn-of-the-century literature and radical politics: William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, W. B. Yeats, H.D., Olive Schreiner, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, Constance and Edward Garnett, John Galsworthy, D. H. Lawrence.¹ Yet her name is all but absent from contemporary literary history.² This essay seeks to intervene in this history by demonstrating that Radford's poetry has been unjustly neglected and locating one of the sources of that neglect in the reactionary gender politics of fin-de-siècle England.

For most of her career Radford wrote short Romantic lyrics that bring together Romantic nature imagery with the feminist ideas circulated by the "New Woman" writers of the 1880s and 1890s. Yet contemporaries often patronizingly praised her poetry as merely "charming," often willfully obscuring its radical implications. While Radford's poems do display an undeniable charm,³ this quality often serves subversive rather than sentimental ends. To the critics of her day, however, her nature imagery indicated "feminine" poems—short lyrics addressing domestic thoughts in sweet tones.

This reception history is especially surprising given the fact that Radford's first poems were published in a "radical magazine of advanced thought" titled *Progress*. Between May and October 1883, Radford published nine poems under her maiden name Caroline Maitland (she became Dollie Radford in October 1883 when she married fellow poet Ernest Radford⁴). Edited by G. W. Foote and later Edward Aveling (who took over after Foote was imprisoned on blasphemy charges), *Progress* was anti-monarchy, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-religious, and generally anti-establishment. (The front cover featured portraits, in each corner, of Shelley, J. S. Mill, Darwin, and Voltaire.) The politics of the journal are important

because they reveal the degree to which Radford's politics were radical rather than merely progressive, and it indicates that these ideas were developed early in her life, before her marriage. Radford's lifelong involvement in radical causes informs and enriches all of her poetry—a fact that is elided in contemporary reviews of her work.

The following year, Bernard Shaw set one of Radford's lyrics to music. Writing to her on March 31, 1884, Shaw identifies what he sees as the strengths and the defects of her lyrics: "You will find, on examining the song as it stands, that it is inconclusive—leaves a 'Is that all?' feeling behind it. You seem to have an extraordinary kaleidoscopic talent for stringing all manner of beautiful images and associations harmoniously together, and these, when combined with the pithiness and conclusiveness of an epigram, form perfect songs. But you are neither pithy nor conclusive." His criticism came with encouragement, however. Although he says, "I am not altogether satisfied," it is because "I believe you can do better. A large part of the charm of your verses is their prettiness, and that seems to come so naturally to you that I do not give you much credit for it."⁵

Shaw was not the only critic who did not "give much credit" to women poets, not the only one to read Radford's poems in terms that belie the possibility of feminine rigor, intelligence, revision, or conscious artistry. He was unable to imagine that Radford, in the words Isobel Armstrong applies to Romantic women poets in general, "used the customary 'feminine' forms and languages, but turned them to *analytical* account and used them to *think* with."⁶

Arthur Symons, in introducing Radford's poems for Alfred Miles's edition of *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, holds up as exceptional these four lines which form the epigraph of *A Light Load*, her first volume of poetry:

The love within my heart for thee
Before the world was had its birth,
It is the part God gives to me
Of the great wisdom of the earth.

Symons writes: "These four lines seem to have something final about them—seem to say concerning the supreme devotion, the sacrament and worship of love, all that needs to be said."⁷

But Symons, despite his praise of Radford's substance, also implicitly judges her in terms similar to Shaw. Like Shaw, he sees her poetic gifts as purely "natural." *A Light Load*, he writes, "is a book of songs, and the songs are full of *instinctive* music, which soars *naturally*. They have the choice, *unsought felicity* of a *nature essentially lyrical*. Always finished in style, with the distinction which can never be acquired, they have almost an air of

impromptu, and one might imagine the writer to be little conscious of the process by which they have come to be so finished" (p. 609, emphasis added). It is unlikely that her considerable poetic talents came quite as "naturally" as reviewers assume. Clearly, Symons thoroughly appreciates Radford's poems—even while he unconsciously effaces the poetic labor that produced them.

W. B. Yeats, in his *Letters to Katharine Tynan*, wrote in late June 1891 that Radford had given him a copy of *A Light Load*. He picks out the lines that Symons also chose as the best in the book. But what Yeats gives with one hand he takes away with the other. "Are they not fine? They have a largeness of thought and feeling, above mere prettiness," he writes, but then adds that they are "all trifling."⁸

Part of the reaction to this volume probably stems from its title: *A Light Load* suggests poems that are undemanding, easy, gentle. And this is true in the sense that these poems, for the most part, express an irrepressible faith in the purity and truth of nature. The poems are centered in a gentle nature—flowers, trees, calm seas—not nature "red in tooth and claw." Loneliness is a theme, and many poems address a "you" who could either be a lover or a Christ figure. The exact valence of the symbol remains unspecified, but the images of a final glorious meeting—and a hopeful waiting for a redeeming figure—allow both interpretations. In her later poetry, it becomes clear that Radford's religion is the religion of Love, not conventional Christianity—but by making these early poems ambiguous, she escapes official censure and courts wider appeal. But at a cost: she gains the reputation of being an unthreatening domestic ladies' writer.

A Light Load addresses more than simple nature and the beauty of the earth. "In the Woods" ("Are your grave eyes graver growing?") reveals that she takes as her model the Romantic poets who were schooled by nature:

Long ago the poet lingered;
Sun and pale star-beam
Touched his lips, while there he wandered
Summer-time and Spring,
And the mighty woods and river
Taught him how to sing. (ll. 19-24)

Symons writes that Radford's lyrics "have not a little of Wordsworth's 'natural magic' of feeling and style—the perfect communion with Nature brings with it the perfect expression." But even so, her style is completely her own. As Symons says, Radford's lyrics—like those of Tennyson and Heine—have "the originality of a single temperament" (pp. 610, 611).

Radford expresses anxiety, however, over the problem of being derivative—of being a latter-day Romantic—in "My Songs": "There is no unawakened string, / No untried note for me to ring / No new-found song

for me to sing" (ll. 1-3). Her sense of belatedness, of coming too late to contribute something new, accords with fin-de-siècle concerns that British culture had reached its apex. Historians had recorded and celebrated the rise of the British Empire; now cultural critics worried that the fall was immanent.⁹ In the third stanza, Radford parodies the style and subject of a Romantic poem—"My love is young, her face is fair, / The sun-light never leaves her hair, / Her beauty fills me with a prayer" (ll. 7-9)—as if to prove that she knows intimately the form and the style. This parodic rendering only reinforces her sense that this has all been said before, that she must find her own way.

Her poem "What Song Shall I Sing" addresses another meta-poetic concern: the difficulty of combining the work of a poet with the work of a mother. The poem asks "What song shall I sing to you / Now the wee ones are in bed" (ll. 1-2)? It recounts the new songs and new books by new poets, and notes that, because of her time spent with children, "I can sing, these evening times, / Only the children's songs and rhymes" (ll. 11-12). The proper subject of her own poetry is a continued concern.

She seems to have found the solution to this problem in the final two poems in the volume, which address issues circulating around New Woman fiction: woman's independent emotional life and her position in a changing society. In "A Modern Polypheme," the speaker compares herself to the cyclops Polypheme, but "foreswear[s] / Thy black emotions" (ll. 33-34) and refuses to be jealous of any Acis who may come along. In this way, the poem rewrites the myth and, consequently, conventional modes of sexual relationships. Might this "tender and submissive" poetess—as *The Bookman* reviewer calls her—be advocating free love?¹⁰ Instead of jealousy and violence as the outcome of sexual conflict, she engenders contentment, joy in the moment, and the measure of self-fulfillment she can attain by refusing violence.

"A Dream of 'Dreams': To Olive Schreiner" is the final poem in *A Light Load*. Schreiner's first book after her acclaimed feminist novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), *Dreams* (1891) is a series of short allegorical and experimental writings on women's emancipation from, and cooperation with, men. While deploring the conditions that kept women from sharing life—and love—with men, *Dreams* continually holds out the promise of a future equality. Radford's poem begins "All day I read your book; at Eve / Your dreams into my dark sleep stole" and then describes how Schreiner's vision has entered the dreamer's soul. Like Schreiner's collection, the poem expresses hope and joy and a sense of something grand waiting just ahead. But in the years following the publication of *A Light Load*, Radford's poetic dreams were deferred, or at least diverted into another channel. "What Song Shall I Sing" narrates Radford's absorption in the

duties of motherhood; her next two books, *Songs for Somebody* (1893) and *Good Night* (1895), are children's books.

Radford's second book of poems for adults, *Songs and Other Verses* (1895), marks a departure from *A Light Load*. This volume is a more mature and realistic vision of a world once idealized. It represents an awakening of the dreamer, but not a loss of optimism or spirit. Rather, the poems give the impression of an older wisdom looking at youth and describing the differences. Radford portrays the hardships of her age, recognizes the struggles, and faces each with continued spirit. This volume includes many of Radford's best poems—strong, original, and moving.

John Lane, notorious as the publisher of the New Woman "Keynotes" Series, published this volume. Reviewers, however, strove to deny Radford's affinity with the New Woman and the "unnatural" emotions to which this "strange creature" laid claim. Love and nature remain strong themes in *Songs and Other Verses*, and this allowed reviewers to read them as reassuringly conventional. *The Athenaeum* goes further, employing a dual review of *Songs and Other Verses* and Ernest Radford's *Old and New* to reinforce a separate spheres ideology. The review characterizes Ernest's book as "distinctively manly," while Dollie's is "very feminine" and "distinctively womanly."¹¹ *The Bookman* writes that "there is never an inordinate touch of passion in these little lyrics. . . . The genius is domestic." But the criticism implicit in this characterization is evident as we read on: "The air and attitude are that of a child, or that of a woman, if you like" (p. 440). In *Sexual/Textual Politics* Toril Moi writes that "male reviewers just cannot attach the same degree of authority to a voice they know to be female. Even when they do give a good review to a woman they automatically select adjectives and phrases that tend to make the woman's poetry charming and sweet (as women should be), as opposed to serious and significant (as men are supposed to be)."¹²

Three different reviewers single out "Because I built my nest so high" as the best example of the "pacific house of dolls" (*Bookman*, p. 440) Radford supposedly inhabits. This is quite strange, for the poem, far from representing "guileless" aspirations and "innocent" desire, changes the negative valence of ambition as it applies to women, and through its nature imagery makes drive and desire natural to women:

Because I built my nest so high,
Must I despair
If a fierce wind, with bitter cry,
Passes the lower branches by,
And mine makes bare?

Because I hung it, in my pride

So near the skies,
Higher than other nests abide,
Must I lament if far and wide
It scattered lies?

Up to this point, we might agree with the reviewers; perhaps the over-reaching poet has learned her lesson about what happens to ambitious women. These may, indeed, be “sweet, unpretentious lyrics,” as William Morton Payne asserts.¹³ But here is the final stanza:

I shall but build, and build my best,
Till, safety won,
I hang aloft my new-made nest,
High as of old, and see it rest
As near the sun.¹⁴

The speaker insists that she will not be beaten down. If she fails, she will rebuild, and not any lower than before. Must we assume, then, that conservative nineteenth-century reviewers believe that “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” is “distinctively feminine”?

Again, the final poems in this volume represent her greatest departures from the traditional female sphere. “A Novice” brings the domestic realm into intimate contact with the bohemian realm of the New Woman: “What is it, in these latter days, / Transfigures my domestic ways, / And round me, as a halo, plays? / My cigarette” (ll. 1-4). Here Radford transforms the subversive connotation of the cigarette (smoking as one of the hallmarks of the rebellious woman) into a heavenly one: the smoke becomes her halo. This angel in the house is a transgressive one: the sign of her virtue is her unashamed subversion of traditional notions of middle-class domesticity.

For several stanzas she describes domestic toils: when children misbehave, when servants quit, when the accounts will not balance, when the dinner is burned. But the cigarette beckons her beyond the domestic realm:

Ah yes, the cook may spoil the broth,
The cream of life resolve to froth,
I cannot now, though very wroth,
Distracted be;
For as the smoke curls blue and thin
From my own lips, I first begin
To bathe my tired spirit in
Philosophy. (ll. 25-32)

This transgression provides her with an outlet from domestic cares and allows her into the male world of personal privilege and independence. By appropriating the male device—both the right to smoke and the right to think without domestic distractions—she can imagine “The promised

epoch, like a star" (l. 41) shining in the distant future:

If I, in vain, must sit and wait,
To realize our future state,
I shall not be disconsolate,
My cigarette! (ll. 45-48)

This poem has a truly subversive charm: it makes its point—that wives and mothers who dutifully manage all domestic cares still seek the day when women's rights will be recognized—and does so with a light touch. Employing whimsy and an unerringly iambic, strictly rhyming stanza, she seduces the reader into consent. Here, her "sweetness" and her "sweet content"—the qualities male reviewers so admire in her "pretty versicles" (*The Bookman*)—serve radical ends.¹⁵

"From Our Emancipated Aunt in Town" expresses a similar wish for a new status for women but adds the more complicated question of an older woman's relation to feminism. In the form of a letter to her nieces, the emancipated aunt writes of the "old ideals blown away" (l. 16) and asks what is to come next. The aunt, who recognizes that she still "cling[s] / To many a worn out tottering thing / Of a convention" (ll. 43-45), herself experiments with the new ideas of modern life through her writing: "I, meanwhile, shall still pursue / All that is weird and wild and new, / In song and ballet, / In lecture, drama, verse, and prose" (ll. 55-58). She closes with this admonition not to judge her thus too harshly for not being in the midst of the fray: "Remember she prepares your way, / With many another Aunt to-day" (ll. 70-71).¹⁶

None of the reviewers of *Songs and Other Verses* choose to mention either "A Novice" or "From Our Emancipated Aunt in Town." These poems directly challenge the *Athenaeum* reviewer's surety that women like Radford (women who do not write the "heated and hysterical productions of the modern woman") find success in "the direct expression of the more distinctively feminine emotions" in a "simple, natural way."¹⁷ To characterize Radford in this way, however, necessitates ignoring her more experimental poems.¹⁸ Moreover, adherence to this ideal of the woman poet blinds reviewers to her radical ideas, as with "Because I built my nest so high." It is as if reviewers recognize in nest-building an appropriate metaphor for feminine and domestic tasks and so ignore the import of Radford's feminist-inflected characterization of her nest.

This is the dilemma most women poets faced in the nineteenth century. Like Radford, Christina Rossetti was praised for her lyricism, spontaneity, simplicity, artlessness, and naturalness.¹⁹ All of this is high praise for a male poet, but pejorative when applied to women. Because these qualities are assumed to come naturally to women, critics "don't give [them]

much credit for it" (in Shaw's words). As Dorothy Mermin points out in her study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's problematic relation to a male poetic tradition, the nineteenth century's feminization of poetry ironically worked against the woman poet:

The female figures onto whom the men projected their artistic selves . . . represent an intensification of only a part of the [male] poet, not his full consciousness: a part, furthermore, which is defined as separate from and ignorant of the public world and the great range of human experience in society. Such figures could not write their own poems; the male poet, who stands outside the private world of art, has to do that for them.²⁰

According to this conception, it is "natural" for a male poet to write "masculine," intellectually rigorous poetry engaged with the public sphere. To write lyric poems requires an act of artistic will. A woman, however, is defined by her subjectivity. So when her poems seem like a spontaneous overflow of feeling, the critic assumes that they represent the whole of her world—a world of nature, artlessness, and intuition. Richard Garnett exemplifies this attitude, when, after giving the highest praise to Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, he writes, "Everywhere else she is, like most poetesses, purely subjective, and in no respect creative."²¹

Radford's final volume of poems was largely ignored by the critical establishment—possibly because *Poems*²² leaves the "pacific house of dolls" far behind. *Poems* contains most of her previously published lyrics, and twenty new works. Whereas *Songs and Other Verses* was characterized by *The Athenaeum* as expressing moods "generally touching, often exquisite, certainly not too intense" (p. 378), the new poems in *Poems* are passionate, powerful, and sometimes violent. Love and nature are themes, as always; but here, nature can be violent, and the heart of love is despair and pain. The poems are longer, more mature, and much less affirmative. Unlike previous volumes, the hope she finds is mixed not with loneliness and yearning but with fear and betrayal. "At Night," a sonnet sequence, pictures a very different aspect of nature than has appeared in previous works. Love here is represented as naturally savage: violent storms, raging thunder, destructive lightening. Radford focuses on those who long for love but do not have it, who experience the "great unchannelled floods of misery" (I.14) of long nights spent without "any word / To save my hope whose wings grow cold and numb" (I.7-8). The rebellious anger of the unloved is like the violent actions of the storms when they "drop their torrents down, and leave the scars / Of their fierce passion on the unborn noon" (IV.7-8). But the night and the world are indifferent; they are moved by neither lightening's strike nor lover's cry.

"Your Gift" is the demonic double of "Ah, bring it not so grudgingly / The gift thou bringest me" (ll. 1-2) from *Songs and Other Verses*, in which

she exhorts an unknown someone to “come, and coming do not ask / The answering gift of mine” (ll. 19-20) for the reward of giving is the “joy divine” (l. 22) and the reaction of the one to whom you have given the gift:

thy rich gift upon my breast
Will make me fair to see;
And beautiful, through all the years,
In joys and tears. (ll. 15-18)

In “Your Gift,” on the other hand, the giver presents her with coldness and cruelty:

You turn your face away,
Whose light would shine
On the flower of my spirit that pales,
That is sick for the comfort that fails,
Whose petals pine
And wither day by day.

Your heart so cold in sleep,
I may not wake,
And I wander and slip from your sight
To the measureless caves of the night,
And for your sake
My flower of passion keep. (ll. 1-12)

“You give me to the night” (l. 13) when she feels anguished and alone; “you give me to the wind” (l. 19) which leaves her a “castaway / Unloved and left behind” (ll. 23-24); “You give me to my grief” (l. 25) that has not even comfort in Heaven because of her “great unbelief” (l. 30). The final two stanzas are worth quoting in full, as they demonstrate her subtle power, the way she adds to images until they are full to bursting, the way she draws the reader into an extremely intimate and private emotional realm:

Oh you whose heart is cold,
If I should show
All the waste of my life at your side,
All the flower of my soul that has died,
You would not know
The gift of gifts you hold.

Oh you whose sleep is dear,
And long to take,
Should you dream how they sicken and die,
Who are cast from the earth and the sky,
You would awake
And keep your gift for fear. (ll. 31-42)

The barely suppressed violence of these lines, the coldness and rationality of their measures, is chilling. It is a remarkable achievement of affect.

But the poem's intimate affective qualities are wedded to its political content. It does not merely reflect a personal conflict—although it is quite possible that personal experience has made Radford more sensitive to the politics of marital rights and social expectations.²³ The restrictive gender system of late Victorian England is clearly a major subtext in "Your Gift," but when political or social content is not manifest (as it is, for instance, in Yeats's "Easter 1916") many readers resist an ideological interpretation. It is undeniable, however, that part of Radford's achievement in "Your Gift" is to make her readers feel, as well as intellectually understand, the ramifications for women of what may otherwise seem like abstract ideological debates. The sentiments of a woman in a cold and loveless marriage register inequitable legal and social codes: divorce laws, the sexual double standard, restrictions on women's employment, social sanction of spousal abuse, social ignorance of women's desires.

Radford's final published work, *The Ransom* (performed 1912, published 1915)²⁴ illuminates the subtextual politics of "Your Gift." A play in verse, *The Ransom* takes up the themes of nature, passion and love. The narrative profiles a woman, Lady Margery, who is married to a man who "gives her all she needs" (p. 119) materially, but who fails to satisfy her emotionally. Margery, disregarding social censure, is friendly with all classes and types of people, including Carol, a fallen woman, Robin, a rake, and Martin, a young and wealthy man with whom she has fallen in love. Martin, too, declares his passion for Margery but, engaged to another, deems it necessary to honor the previous commitment. Desperate, and unwilling to live without passion, Margery sacrifices herself on the altar of Love. Meanwhile, Martin, realizing his mistake, has waited all night for Margery to pass by so that he can tell her he will honor their passion over sterile commitment. But Margery has already drunk poison in the wood, so never passes by his house.

As this summary indicates, the plot is sentimental in the extreme. But the stress on a woman's need for passion is both radical and thoroughly naturalized. It is impossible not to link David Garnett's description of Dollie's husband Ernest ("As he lay extended on the sofa, he sometimes actually went to sleep. . . . Occasionally, he exerted himself to write lectures on architecture or poetry") with the description one of the girls gives of Margery's husband: "Her man is old, and his grey life is lived / Deep in his scholar books; he seldom speaks" (p. 119). Margery says that "A wife was held more captive by her loneliness / Than any prisoned creature in the world" (p. 119). But the world deems her husband a good husband because he provides for her, and he is not cruel. They cannot understand that "one, as rich as she, should seem / to be so striving still for something new!" (p. 119). But again and again, Margery insists that her passionless marriage is

not enough. It makes her useless and miserable and empty. This emotional response gives the lie to the domestic ideology that deems a woman's needs thoroughly fulfilled by a stable home and someone to care for.²⁵

In the final act of the play a sort of dual Greek chorus enters in a dream sequence induced by Margery's drugged state. In the moments before she dies, Margery hears the voice of Love and the complementary choruses made up of prostitutes on one side and lonely unloved women on the other. They both "are wasted alike in the end" because "Love turns us away from his sight / And we anguish and grope for his light, / Through the wandering prayers of our night" (p. 148). Radford recuperates society's most cast-out creatures into a company of sisters, and integrates them into a larger alliance which includes virtuous married women. That these two groups would entertain a dialogue is itself transgressive; that they find they have much in common is truly subversive:

Prostitutes: You have peace and the pride of your living.
Unloved Women: We are robbed of life's tenderest due,
Prostitutes: You are free for your having or giving,
Unloved Women: We are prisoned more surely than you.
Prostitutes: We are dead ere the dawn of our dying,
Unloved Women: We are ghosts growing sick for our life
Both: Oh, Love, hear the sound of the crying
 That breaks through the waste of our strife. (p. 149)

Ironically, each group envies the relative advantages of the other. Prostitutes, who are metaphorically dead (in the world of respectable society) long before their physical death comes, learn that unloved women, even though protected by the patriarchy and its material/social comforts, live a ghost-like existence, half-alive because they must numb their senses and ignore their emotional starvation. Lonely, unloved women find that their words echo the unhappy chorus of the prostitutes.

In a letter of April 9, 1915, D. H. Lawrence praises this last act: "There is to me something rather terrible in the idea of the chorus of unloved women chanting against the chorus of prostitutes—something really Great in the conception. That is the most splendid part of the play." However, Lawrence wishes "you could have made the Margery a sterner, more aloof, more completely abstract or generalized figure—as Antigone in a Greek play—so that she is a figure of vengeance as well as love . . . those who know how to love must know how to slay."²⁶ But Radford, as she demonstrated in "A Modern Polypheme," wants to challenge ancient ideas about human sexual behavior, not reproduce them. By eschewing violence, *The Ransom* seems to embrace political quiescence; the force of Radford's ideological critique is thus diminished. Once again, critics are licensed to

disregard her characterizations of women's emotional and physical needs, men's instrumental use of women, and the pressures of conventional societal expectations.²⁷

Highly controversial premises, however, undergird the sentimental surface of womanly self-sacrifice for Love. A married woman who longs for a relationship outside of her marriage is the heroine, and the audience is meant to admire her. Moreover, her passion is for a younger man, whom she tries to seduce away from a socially legitimized—but emotionally fraudulent—relationship with his fiancée. His clinging to convention is, in fact, shown to be destructive, misguided, and narrow. Moreover, the sort of physical and emotional passion that Margery not only displays but embraces as the truth of woman's nature is itself subversive. And by setting this play in a forest glade and stressing the pastoral, Radford is naturalizing what Victorian sexology deemed “unnatural” in women of her class—a strong, consuming, physical passion. The most radical device, however, is putting lonely, unloved women (among whose number Lady Margery counts herself) on the same plane with prostitutes. Like the feminists of the 1890s, Radford faults men for the existence of prostitutes, and recovers the victims of male lust (as opposed to female passion) into a sisterhood of ill-used women, women who do not find fulfillment in life.

The *Bookman* reviewer charged with writing about *Songs and Other Verses* said with authority that “for anything but sweetness you may search Mrs. Radford's verses in vain” (p. 440). But to the careful reader of her poetry, their politics and power also shine through. Even at the age of fifty-four, when *The Ransom* was first performed, Dollie Radford continued to challenge conventional notions of what women could and should do. Moreover, she subtly co-opted conventional notions of women's roles to make her feminist points, to naturalize previously unacceptable behavior by women, and to re-envision—through the power of song and the power of nature—the relations between men and women.

Her use of nature imagery, which made her work acceptable to mainstream critics and allowed her to make feminist statements in the guise of a natural observation, has long obscured her importance. She has been dismissed as a domestic, “merely feminine,” “ladies' writer.” Thus her poetry has been deemed unworthy of recovering. But this judgment does justice to neither Radford's powerful prosody nor her subtly subversive social vision. Dollie Radford's poetry replaces the “pacific house of dolls” so many reviewers sought to find with a less comforting, more complicated structure.

Notes

I would like to thank Ann MacEwan, granddaughter of Dollie Radford, for reading an earlier draft of this essay and providing valuable commentary.

- 1 Memoirs and diaries by George Bernard Shaw, William Morris, H. G. Wells, Olive Schreiner, and Edith Lees (wife of Havelock Ellis) all refer to the Radfords, and D. H. Lawrence's *Collected Letters* records his side of his five-year long correspondence with Dollie. The following sources give further information about Radford and her wide circle of associates: Ruth Brandon, *The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex, and the Woman Question* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990); David Garnett, *The Golden Echo* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954); Katherine Lyon Mix, *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1960); Maitland Radford, *Poems by Maitland Radford: With a Memoir by Some of his Friends* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1945); and Ernest Rhys, *Everyman Remembers* (London: J. M. Dent, 1931).

More important, however, than confirming that they knew famous people is establishing what these acquaintances reveal about the Radfords personally and politically. Their actions, singly and as a couple, reveal their liberal views on class issues, on religion, on vegetarianism, on sexuality, on literature, and on the ultra-nationalist sentiment inspired by World War I. Douglas Goldring, in *South Lodge* (London: Constable, 1943), writes that "Dollie and Ernest Radford, a couple of nice vegetarian poets . . . were leading spirits" in "the New Reform Club, the premises of which were in Adelphi Terrace under the flat occupied by Bernard Shaw." Friendly with Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, and later Olive Schreiner, Dollie must have had advanced views on women's political and sexual emancipation, because she refused to shun a couple whose union did not involve marriage and she embraced Schreiner's feminist writings. In addition, both Radfords continued to support Wells after the uproar caused by the publication of *Ann Veronica*, when he was "cut" by fellow socialists who were afraid the taint of "free love" would be attached to the party. Olive Schreiner reports in a December 14, 1914 letter to Havelock Ellis that "dear Dollie Radford" was one of the few friends who would visit during the war, not only because her name was German, but also because her pacifism was well-known (*The Letters of Olive Schreiner, 1876-1920*, ed. S. C. Cronwright Schreiner [London: Fisher Unwin, 1924], p. 344). Dollie also remained close to D. H. Lawrence throughout the controversies surrounding his novels—even interceding with Wells to mobilize support against the censorship of *The Rainbow*. (See the letters of November 6, 1915 and November 18, 1915 in *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, October 1916-June 1921, Vol. 3, ed. James T. Boulton and Andrew Robertson [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984]).

- 2 Perry Willett at Indiana University has done a great service to under-read women writers with the Victorian Women Writer's Project, an academic web site of his creation. This web page, located at <http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp>, makes nearly all of Radford's work easily available; it includes electronic transcriptions of Radford's *A Light Load*, *Songs and Other Verses*, *A Ballad of Victory*, *Poems, In Summer Time*, *A Little Boy's Dream*, and *The Young Gardener's Kalendar*. In addition, new works are always being added to the site.
- 3 Because her work is so little known, here is an example. This poem's excess of

emotion—its intensity—is signaled by an excess of both internal and end rhyme, as well as an excess of alliterative ‘s’ sounds. In the hands of a lesser poet the effect would be mawkish or even insipid, but this achieves poetic perfection:

Love my heart is aching, aching,
While the soft sea wind is making
Music in the aspens, breaking
 Silence in my soul.
With its sad voiced singing blending
With my sighs, while stars befriending,
Beams to mid night seas are sending
 As they eastward roll.

“Song” from *A Light Load* (London, 1891), p. 15.

- 4 Ernest Radford, though a less-skilled poet, is often more remembered than his wife. He was a member of the “Rhymers Club,” a group of young poets which included Ernest Rhys, W. B. Yeats, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, and Richard Le Gallienne. Ernest’s poems appear in both *The Book of the Rhymers Club* (1892) and *The Second Book of the Rhymers Club* (1894).
- 5 George Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965), pp. 80-81.
- 6 Isobel Armstrong, “The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women’s Poetry of the Romantic Period?” in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1995), p. 15.
- 7 Arthur Symons, “Mrs. Ernest Radford” in *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, Vol. 8: “Robert Bridges and Contemporary Poets,” ed. Alfred H. Miles (London, 1892), p. 610.
- 8 W. B. Yeats, *Letters to Katharine Tynan*, ed. Roger McHugh (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1953), p. 125.
- 9 The popularity of Max Nordeau’s *Degeneration*—first published in English in 1895—attests to this.
- 10 Review of *Songs and Other Verses* by Dollie Radford, *The Bookman* 2 (January 1896), p. 440.
- 11 Review of *Songs and Other Verses* by Dollie Radford and *Old and New* by Ernest Radford, *The Athenaeum* (September 1895), p. 378.
- 12 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 35.
- 13 William Morton Payne, “Recent Books of English Poetry,” *The Dial* 20 (April 1896): 209.
- 14 This is the full text of “Because I built my nest so high” which appears in *Songs and Other Verses* (London, 1895), pp. 14-15.
- 15 Some may argue that her willingness to defer her feminist aims reveals that she is not, in fact, a New Woman. But typical of New Woman novels is a sense of a future world in which equality is attained. From Grant Allen’s *Woman Who Did* to Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *Story of a Modern Woman* to Gissing’s *The Odd Women* to Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage*, New Woman authors did not write “happy endings” to their novels. More often than not, their characters have moral victories that allow

them self-respect and independence, but these strong women remain socially and financially alienated from the social relations they were striving to reform.

- 16 This is the one poem Jennifer Breen chooses to represent Radford in her *Victorian Women Poets 1830-1901: An Anthology* (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), pp. 138-140.
- 17 Isobel Armstrong defends women poets against the type of characterization that sees their poetry only in terms of stereotypically feminine sentiment. She writes, "I contend that what we think of as the gush of the feminine can be misinterpreted. Both now and in the past it can be treated either as a special feminine discourse or censured as nonrational, or both. . . . However, I believe that many women poets neither consented to the idea of a special feminine discourse nor accepted an account of themselves as belonging to the realm of the nonrational" (p. 15). Armstrong concludes that reviewers need to respect the analytical use of affective language and women poets' intellectual content.
- 18 Joseph Aimone writes that Edna St. Vincent Millay has been characterized as a retrograde poet by most critics, who consequently begin discussions of her poems with "Renaissance," because its "tetrameter rhyming, its easy optimism, and its straining idealism exemplify the stereotyped thoroughly unmodern Millay" (p. 4). But, according to Aimone, more representative of Millay's style is the free-verse "Spring" from *Second April*. Moreover, as is true of Radford, "even Millay's most simple verses, her most obviously traditional in form and diction, take on interesting resonance against the background of the wars of the sexes" (p. 5). Joseph Aimone, "Millay's Big Book, or the Feminist Formalist as Modern," in *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997).
- 19 Joseph Bristow quotes a review Richard Le Gallienne wrote of Christina Rossetti which is couched in remarkably similar terms to Symons' review of Radford (p. 11). Both reviewers, in praising the naturalness and spontaneity of a woman poet, implicitly denigrate her poetic talents in the process. Joseph Bristow, "Introduction," in *Victorian Women Poets: Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti*, ed. Joseph Bristow (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
- 20 Dorothy Mermin, "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet," in *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 67.
- 21 Richard Garnett, "Christina Rossetti," in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 17, ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), p. 283. Richard Garnett wrote thirty of the entries on women poets for the DNB.
- 22 Dollie Radford, *Poems* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1910).
- 23 Radford would probably object to current critics trying to read her biography directly into her poetry. In her "Introduction" to *Granny's Wonderful Chair and Its Tales of Fairy Times* by Frances Browne (London: J. M. Dent, 1908), Radford writes that it is a poetic indulgence to let the subjective enter into one's art. Having registered Radford's potential objections, however, it seems necessary to observe that this new note in her poetry is sounded at the same time her husband's mental health is failing. We do not know the precise diagnosis, but we do have this description from David Garnett of the still-functional Ernest's behavior at home in the years just before 1910: "Ernest was a great contrast to [Dollie]. . . . Usually he seemed only half-awake, and most visitors must have thought him unconscious of the sparkling conversation and bursts of laughter going on all around him. As he lay extended on the sofa, he sometimes actually went to sleep, but more often his eyes, like a cat's,

were only half closed, and a faint sardonic smile curled his lip." Ernest would continue to decline and withdraw until his death in 1919, after having been institutionalized several times. Just two years older than Radford, Ernest's universally acknowledged brilliance in youth had turned into a confused and indifferent middle age. See David Garnett, *The Golden Echo* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), p. 124.

- 24 "The Ransom" was published in the *Poetry Review* 6 (1915): 117-153. I will cite page numbers for quotations from this play in verse, because this publication does not include line numbers. A notice of its performance by the Hampstead Play Society at The Little Theatre appeared in *The (London) Times* (June 10, 1912, p. 12, col. 4).
- 25 See Ann Oakley's *Subject Women* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981) for elaboration of this. Chapter One, "Emancipation" and Chapter Two, "Liberation?" addresses the relationship of nineteenth and twentieth century feminisms, the various legal reforms made in each era, and asks how much progress women have made. Chapter Eight, "Domestic Work," directly addresses the question of a woman's relation to her home, both as the larger society tends to see it and as feminists have revised it.
- 26 *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, p. 316.
- 27 Although the *Times*' review was generally positive, the criticism of Lady Margery's characterization was particularly apt: "we were wondering . . . whether those who are strong enough to kill themselves for love are not too strong to kill themselves for anything" (p. 12, col. 4).