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# Looking “Past Wordsworth and the Rest”: Pretexts for Revision in Alice Meynell’s “The Shepherdess”

SHARON SMULDERS

IN AN ESSAY ON ARABELLA STUART, ALICE MEYNELL WRITES, “THE CRUEL PLACES of history are for ever emptied of their suffering tenants, and it is only to our inappeasable sympathies that the lifelong prisoners seem to be recaptured, sent back to their intolerable hours and places, long after they have once for all, unchallenged, passed the guard.”<sup>1</sup> Meynell’s “inappeasable sympathies” inspired her to rescue from the “long hollow spaces of time, perfectly dark and indescribed” (*Prose and Poetry*, p. 182), women of letters such as Arabella Stuart and Lucy Hutchinson; to reconsider the work of better known writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and the Brontës; and to defend Prue Steele and Tetty Johnson, the wives of literary men, against the disparagement of their husbands’ critics and commentators.<sup>2</sup> In “The Lady of the Lyrics,” moreover, these sympathies compelled her to indict, albeit playfully, the male-authored image of women pervading poetry. Within the essays of the 1890s, Meynell returns again and again to the place of women, both as individuals and as cultural icons, in literature. These exercises develop the critical premises for a poetry that attempts to see “past Wordsworth and the rest.”<sup>3</sup> In this endeavor, she tries to resolve the conflict between inherited structures—both formal and conceptual—and the woman poet.

“The Shepherdess,” privately printed in *Other Poems* (1896) and published in *Later Poems* (1902), serves as a case in point. Examination of the lyric, however, isolates a central difficulty in coming to terms with Meynell’s revisionist retrospection. By turns revered and reviled by critics, the poem represents a creative response to the problem of gender and genre explored in “The Lady of the Lyrics.” Attempting to accommodate a distinctly feminine perspective, “The Shepherdess” parodically engages the conventions of lyric verse as exemplified in Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty” and

Wordsworth's "She Was a Phantom of Delight."<sup>4</sup> But inasmuch as the superficial similarity between "The Shepherdess" and such precursory texts dissembles Meynell's departure from the conceptual values that inform her predecessors' work, the poem vacillates ambiguously between overt collusion with and covert criticism of conventional representations of femininity. In short, "The Shepherdess" illuminates the peculiar tensions generated by a turn-of-the-century poet's effort to turn conservative aesthetic practices to modern feminist use.

Sadly, despite the challenges posed in her writing, Meynell has herself all but disappeared into the "dark and indcribed" spaces of literary history. Except for reflections prompted by her death in 1922 and the centenary of her birth in 1947, critical notice has been rare.<sup>5</sup> During the early twentieth century, she nonetheless enjoyed the praise, sometimes fulsome, of a select readership sympathetic to her as a woman and a Roman Catholic. Of her lyrics, the most popular was "The Shepherdess." In fact, the poem was so popular that an assistant in a London bookstore, discovering that her client was the poet's husband, quoted the first line and declared, "Ten thousand shop girls in England bless Alice Meynell for having written that."<sup>6</sup> No less fervid in his admiration, Rev. William C. Hall placed "the delicate precision of diction and the haunting syllables or the rarely woven words of the lyric" above anything written by Christina Rossetti or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, thus putting Meynell herself firmly in the pantheon of Victorian women poets.<sup>7</sup> But other critics, while commending the "fastidious technique" responsible for such formal perfection, found "The Shepherdess" "over-precious."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, some feared its popularity as an anthology piece would damage Meynell's reputation as a modern poet. Agnes Repplier, for example, "regretted that the poem by which this felicitous writer bids fair to be best remembered is the familiar and perpetually quoted 'Shepherdess.'"<sup>9</sup> Citing "Parentage" and "Saint Catherine of Siena," she applauded instead those lyrics in which the poet "brought every subject up to date" and addressed such issues as pacifism and suffragism (p. 723). Yet "The Shepherdess," by modernizing the lady of the lyrics, also brings its "subject up to date" and so negotiates unnoticed a divide between received form and reformed content.

Recently, critics such as Angela Leighton and John S. Anson have reiterated Repplier's complaint. For Leighton, Meynell is "remembered only for one, and that probably the worst, of all her poems: 'The Shepherdess.'"<sup>10</sup> By way of correction, she dismisses the poem's "mincing sickliness" (p. 263) in favor of the "unobtrusively suggestive scepticism" of those "unsentimental poems about mothers and children" (p. 257). Anson, on the other hand, asserts that "The Shepherdess" not only illustrates the limitations that account for Meynell's current status as "an unread poet," but sincerely emu-

lates a “ladylike ideal” that “seems almost a parody of everything we would disparagingly describe as ‘Victorian.’”<sup>11</sup> But what if the poem, for all the seriousness accorded by contemporary and modern readers, is expressly parodic? Given such a possibility, it is perhaps questionable “whether the joke is,” as Ezra Pound once wrote, “on the parodied or the parodist”: either “the parody exposes a real defect, or [it] merely makes use of an author’s mechanism to expose a more trivial content.”<sup>12</sup> The “real defect” Meynell seeks to expose, however, may well be the conventional mechanisms used to represent the feminine. In so doing, she engages not so much in parody as in what Luce Irigaray calls “*mimicry*.” Embracing the restrictions imposed by inherited form, she seems “to assume the feminine role deliberately” and “to resubmit herself . . . to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible.”<sup>13</sup> This strategy allows Meynell to advance, as Beverly Ann Schlack says, “the primacy of the female vision by reversing our stereotypic expectations of male lyric poets who address shepherdesses as the ladies of their delight.”<sup>14</sup> But in addition to disclosing the essential limitations of conventional representations of women, the poem’s “mincing sickliness,” its “priggish inanity or diminutive coyness” (Anson, pp. 39-40), also reveals the inimical attractions of a traditional poetics for the woman poet.

Meynell’s consciousness of the ideological assumptions engrained within a poetics inherited from “Wordsworth and the rest” is apparent from “The Lady of the Lyrics.” Although this short, lightsome essay treats the generic imperatives governing Elizabethan amatory verse, Meynell’s teasing reluctance to identify specific poets and poems suggests that she actually aims “to make ‘visible’” ideas about women generally operative in men’s verse. “The Lady of the Lyrics,” she declares, “is eclipsed, or gone, or in hiding” in the present age (*Prose and Poetry*, p. 49). Even in the Renaissance lyric, however, she appears elusive. A construct of the male poet, this lady—whether she be Stella or Phillis, Delia or Diana—has “no more of what later times call individuality than has the rose, her rival, her foil when she was kinder, her superior when she was cruel, her ever fresh and ever conventional paragon” (p. 49).<sup>15</sup> Except “as the almost unanimous conception of the lyrist” (p. 50), she never lived. Indeed, “the lady of the lyrics . . . might be called the lady of the stanzas, so strictly does she go by measure” (p. 50). Cautious in her criticism of tired generic conventions, Meynell ascribes the poet’s limitations to the lady of the lyrics who “never really intended—much as she was urged—to be a shepherdess; she was never persuaded to mitigate her dress” (pp. 50-51). As a result, she disappeared from verse.

Nevertheless, poems like Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty” and

Wordsworth's "She Was a Phantom of Delight" are exemplary of the way the lady of the lyrics survives vestigially in the work of later poets. For the Romantics as for the Elizabethans, the lady of the lyrics is "the object of song" (*Prose and Poetry*, p. 49).<sup>16</sup> Voiceless, she cannot explain her convention nor appeal her misrepresentation. "The lover's convention is," as Meynell says, "explicit enough, but it might puzzle a reader to account for the lady's" (p. 50).<sup>17</sup> In "The Shepherdess," she reinvents the Romantic (as well as the Elizabethan) lyric to dispute the legitimacy of this convention and redress the portrayal of the lady of the lyrics. Rendering the lady's convention, Meynell displaces the lyric from its position in the amatory tradition. The moral authorities of Christianity and maternity license her defiance of the authority invested in her precursors. But while the shepherdess, a maternal guide modelled on the Good Shepherd, redeems the female tenant of lyric verse as a type for the woman poet who strives to locate herself both within and against the dominant poetic tradition, the poem's very resemblance to its precursory texts jeopardizes its achievement.

Meynell invites comparison between herself and Byron by echoing "She Walks in Beauty" in her opening line: "She walks—the lady of my delight— / A shepherdess of sheep" (*Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 21). During the course of the poem, these lines become a refrain that superimposes upon the tripartite division suggested by three stanzas a bipartite design. Even as this refrain also recalls such sixteenth-century analogues as Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love" and William Smith's *Chloris, or The Complaint of the passionate despised Shepherd*, the interjected phrase ("the lady of my delight") becomes increasingly a measure of the difference Meynell seeks to establish between herself and her antecedents, both Renaissance and Romantic. Keyed to the possessive pronoun "my," this difference becomes more emphatic with each repetition:

She walks—the lady of my delight—  
     A shepherdess of sheep.  
 Her flocks are thoughts. She keeps them white;  
     She guards them from the steep;  
 She feeds them on the fragrant height,  
     And folds them in for sleep.

She roams maternal hills and bright,  
     Dark valleys safe and deep.  
 Into that tender breast at night  
     The chastest stars may peep.  
 She walks—the lady of my delight—  
     A shepherdess of sheep.

She holds her little thoughts in sight,  
     Though gay they run and leap.

She is so circumspect and right;  
 She has her soul to keep.  
 She walks—the lady of my delight—  
 A shepherdess of sheep. (Poems of Alice Meynell, p. 21)

Although Meynell adapts from Byron the pattern of three sestet and alternating rhyme, the rhymes (“bright,” “night,” “delight”) in her second stanza derive equally, it would seem, from the first stanza of “She Walks in Beauty” and the couplets that frame “She Was a Phantom of Delight.” Also in this stanza, Meynell revisits Byron’s ideal of beauty, likened to “the night / Of ... starry skies” (ll. 1-2) and “mellowed to that tender light” (l. 5), in her description of “The chastest *stars*” that peer “Into *that tender* breast at *night*.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, she recapitulates and inverts “all that’s best of dark and bright” (l. 3) in the “*bright*, / *Dark* valleys safe and deep.” She deviates from her model not only by reversing “dark and bright” and displacing these terms from the woman to the landscape, but by varying the meter. Eschewing the uniformity of Byron’s chosen meter in favor of alternating tetrameters and trimeters, she gradually lengthens the clauses in the final lines of the initial stanza. In the third line, a strong caesural pause splits the tetrameter to give the effect of two dimeters; the next clause occupies a whole trimeter line; the force of the coordinating conjunction “And” carries the next longer, four-foot line into the concluding trimeter. Arguably, “The Shepherdess” goes more “strictly . . . by measure” than do its models, but the subtle manipulation of rhythm lends variety to the poem, otherwise rigidly circumscribed by the poet’s restraint in her choice of diction, in her use of rhyme, and in her repetition of the two opening lines as a closing refrain in the second and third stanzas.

While “The Shepherdess” may initially seem a charming, but inconsequential piece, a mere technical exercise transforming “She Walks in Beauty” into a species of nursery rhyme, Meynell’s poem does offer important insight into the assumptions informing Byron’s lyric. The Byronic lady of delight, become a conscientious Bo-Peep in “The Shepherdess,” incarnates a feminine ideal. She, like the shepherdess, is pure, innocent, good. But whereas Meynell’s repetition of the pronoun “She” ensures that the whole woman retains the reader’s attention, Byron concentrates upon a catalog of parts. The innocence of his maid manifests itself in physical attributes: the “best of dark and bright / Meet in her aspect and her eyes” (ll. 3-4), “in every raven tress” (l. 9), “o’er her face” (l. 10), “on that cheek, and o’er that brow” (l. 13). Likewise, Wordsworth’s phantom possesses “A countenance in which did meet / Sweet records, promises as sweet” (ll. 15-16).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, she too is a creature of antithesis reconciled, of dusk and dawn combined. Although Wordsworth attempts to temper ideality with

reality—in, for instance, the emphasis on her breathing humanity, her capacity both to mourn and to rejoice—he only succeeds in supplanting the shadowy ideal of the “lovely Apparition” (l. 3) with another similarly evasive. Reading “She Walks in Beauty” and “She Was a Phantom of Delight” together, Bernard Blackstone shrewdly observes that Wordsworth’s ultimate failure to reconcile the opposition between the phantom and the “Being breathing” (l. 23) in the formidable “perfect Woman” (l. 27) results in the falling off of the poem from about the middle of the second stanza. The tension between the two terms, “perfect” and “Woman,” militates against the realization of such an inhuman paragon. By contrast, “She Walks in Beauty” is much more satisfying aesthetically because, in Blackstone’s view, the woman “becomes a symbol, a focus,” that allows Byron to maintain throughout “the unity of the experience and of the poem.”<sup>20</sup>

The poem’s aesthetic integrity aside, it still exalts an ideal of femininity that focuses on physical attractiveness. So while “She Walks in Beauty” may, as Jenni Calder argues, “transcend the stereotype,” the poet yet articulates in it conventional male attitudes toward the female.<sup>21</sup> Even though the lyric “I” is absent from the poem, the privileged consciousness is that of a male viewer. The woman’s face, “Where thoughts serenely sweet express, / How pure, how dear their dwelling-place” (ll. 11-12), becomes his text. Byron’s verse technique—the finely wrought sibilance, the beautifully modulated long and short vowels of, for example, “thoughts serenely sweet express”—heightens the poem’s melodious splendor. Doubling the intensifying adverbs “how” and later “so” (l. 14), he administers to his lady’s features a lingering verbal caress. Wordless, she is “yet eloquent” (l. 14), for her smiles “tell of days in goodness spent, / A mind at peace with all below, / A heart whose love is innocent” (ll. 16-18). Interestingly, the verbs “express” and “tell” contradict her actual silence. Another kind of eloquence, amply evident in the poem’s incantatory charm, belongs to the active intelligence that has imposed its reading upon the woman’s passive form. Indeed, after the opening line, Byron restricts physical action to the play of light and dark—the speaker’s thought—on and over her. In “The Shepherdess,” on the other hand, Meynell depends on numerous verbs to guarantee that the shepherdess remains an active subject rather than a passive object of thought. Running variations on Byron’s “She walks,” Meynell develops an extended metaphor to impart the process of feminine intellection. The shepherdess “keeps,” “guards,” “feeds,” “folds,” and “holds” her thoughts. Furthermore, the poet’s relentless use of parallel phrasing, accenting the shepherdess’s physical mobility, conveys not only her intellectual discipline, but her autonomous self-possession.

The simplicity of Meynell’s language belies both the originality and the suggestiveness of her work. Relying predominantly on monosyllabic

words, she has recourse, like Byron, to words of more than two syllables in only three cases. Whereas his lady's "eloquent" beauty "serenely" proclaims her to be "innocent" of heart, she creates a "shepherdess" who, ranging the "maternal" landscape, is "circumspect" of thought. Providing a key to meaning in the poem, Meynell's three trisyllabic words anticipate the focus for her late lyrics: Christianity, maternity (often tacit in connection with paternity), and solicitude in matters of poetic and social concern. Oddly enough, Schlack, while she isolates "the key noun, *shepherdess*," as significant (p. 114), glosses over the two descriptive terms, "maternal" and "circumspect," that help to give further shape to Meynell's "vision of the tripartite creativity of woman, nature, poet" (p. 116). Arguing that the "shepherdess is not a love object but a protector-figure of symbolic dimension," she points out, however, the poet's reliance on Christian symbols—the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd—to subvert expectations typical of amatory lyricism (p. 114). Indeed, the poem, at its richest intertextually in the central stanza, clearly echoes Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. . . . He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Uniting "dark and bright" in its reference to "the valley of the shadow of death" and "that tender light" of "She Walks in Beauty," "The Shepherdess" conceals therefore a surprising complexity of thought beneath its seemingly simple, even puerile surface. By renovating and feminizing traditional Christian images, Meynell implicitly criticizes the valuation of physical beauty and feminine passivity in Romantic poetry.

Because the shepherdess, for all her silence, thus acts as a figure for feminine emulation rather than an object of masculine desire, she differs from the Romantic beauties of Wordsworth and Byron. Yet, like her male precursors, Meynell eroticizes her version of the lady of the lyrics. The use of "folds" and then "holds" in the lines preceding and succeeding her central stanza frames its restrained sensuality. Furthermore, "folds" looks forward to the images in the intervening passage. Here, the "maternal hills," those "valleys safe and deep," "that tender breast" convey a topography of the female body. To a degree, this feminine Arcadia recalls the maternal nature found, for instance, in Wordsworth's Lucy poems. In "Three years she grew in sun and shower," nature confers upon Lucy "vital feelings of delight" (l. 31) and calls her "A Lady of my own" (l. 6). While "The chastest stars may peep" into the shepherdess' "tender breast at night," nature decrees that "The stars of midnight shall be dear" to Lucy (l. 25). But Lucy, finally identified in death with "This heath, this calm and quiet scene" (l. 40), becomes absolutely one with "mute insensate things" (l. 18). Although the shepherdess is another dweller of "th' untrodden ways" ("Song," l. 1), she does not surrender "motion" and "force" as Lucy does ("A slumber did



my spirit seal," l. 5). In fact, Lucy's absorption within the pastoral landscape makes her one of the most notable of those female figures who are "eclipsed, or gone, or in hiding" in the Romantic lyric. Attempting to release her lady from such "fond and wayward thoughts" ("Strange fits of passion I have known," l. 25), Meynell returns to nature to find a maternal presence whose "tender breast" enfolds but does not efface feminine consciousness.

In its second and final movement, the lyric retreats from this ambiguously suggestive "bright, / Dark" landscape. Keeping to the paths of righteousness, the shepherdess—not "So soft, so calm" ("She Walks in Beauty," l. 14), but "so circumspect"—becomes once again, despite her independence, a kind of Dresden figurine. The poem undergoes a contraction, shifting from the relatively expansive vista of hills and valleys the shepherdess traverses to the inhibiting portrait of the cautious maid, holding "her little thoughts in sight." In her circumspection, she of course follows Paul's advice to the Ephesians: "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise" (Ephesians 5.15). Yet the effort to maintain such rigid circumspection argues the precariousness of Meynell's project, for it leads to another kind of folly. If, as an early admirer suggests, the poem concerns "the theme of the responsibility of man for his thoughts," the very littleness of these thoughts diminishes the thematic significance of "The Shepherdess."<sup>22</sup> While Meynell seeks to dispute the Romantic equation of physical and essential beauty, her evocation of the shepherdess' intellectual poverty hints at the inevitable limits of her effort to appropriate the male poet's muse for her own.

Looking around, synthesizing and playfully repeating the ideas adumbrated in the masculine discourse of desire, the shepherdess exhausts her models, but suffers by virtue of her own modest accomplishment. In her writing, however, Meynell prizes the richness of poverty and the largesse of littleness. In "The Little Language," for example, she contends that the vernacular or "patois" of everyday offers a "refuge from the heavy and multitudinous experiences of a literary tongue" (*Prose and Poetry*, p. 165). Akin to "the language of children" (p. 167), dialect cultivates the advantage not of mere words, but "of tones, of allusions, and of references and inferences of the voice" (p. 166). Deploying a little language allied to nursery rhyme, "The Shepherdess" relies also on tone and inference. Insofar as Meynell's "little thoughts" gaily "run and leap" like bounding sheep, a quiet humor relieves the shepherdess somewhat of her narrowness. The same is true of the poem as a whole. Since the shepherdess is an oblique self-apostrophe, Meynell seems to be commenting on her method—her simplicity, her control and precision, her scrupulous attention to formal matters in gentle, delightful burlesque of such lyrics as "She Walks in Beauty."

Appearing at the end of the century, twenty years after her first volume, *Preludes* (1875), and twenty years before *A Father of Women, and Other Poems* (1917), "The Shepherdess" is a transitional poem in Meynell's oeuvre. Because of its gaiety, it contrasts vividly with the work produced in her earliest manner. As she wrote in "A Poet of One Mood," "sweet monotonous meanings" (*Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 145) pervade her juvenile pieces. Even at eighteen, she recognized and regretted the limited range open to the woman poet: "Whatever I write will be melancholy and self-conscious, as are all women's poems."<sup>23</sup> In "The Shepherdess," however, she avoids the melancholic self-consciousness she prophesied for herself as a girl partly because the pronoun "She" overwrites the conventional lyric "I" and partly because the poem verges toward parody. Moreover, as the poem's controlling metaphor ("Her flocks are thoughts") implies, the shepherdess is a figure for the woman poet, for Meynell herself. Indeed, the metaphors of the flock and the fold emerge as leitmotifs in her work. A verb in "The Shepherdess" and "To a Daisy," the word "fold" acts as a noun in "The Fold" and "The Poet and his Book." The fold becomes an image for the embracing lover in the first poem, for the poet's book in the second. Meynell's deployment of "fold" thus demonstrates the richness of a restricted vocabulary and the generative power of the poet's "little thoughts." Pointing out her frequent use of this "word of composure," an early critic uses it to describe the poet herself: "Her emotion was of an intellect folded in a rigorous discipline" (Hall, p. 19). Notwithstanding such composure, Meynell's mature lyrics show her capable of a wide variety of moods, ranging from the rapturous urgency of "The Fold" and the mischievous complacency of "The Shepherdess" to the decorous gravity of "The Poet and his Book."

In "The Shepherdess" as in "The Poet and his Book," Meynell articulates her aesthetic preoccupations under the cover of metaphor. Constructing in the shepherdess a model that deviates from the ideal of feminine excellence conveyed in the lyric, she also departs from accepted notions of the woman poet and so follows, albeit in a greatly attenuated fashion, a precedent established by Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the aesthetic ideal of "ladyhood" proposed in "The Shepherdess" perhaps has no more a place "among modern kinds of men" than the ascetic ideal described in another of Meynell's poems:

The Lady Poverty was fair:  
But she has lost her looks of late,  
With change of times and change of air.  
Ah slattern! she neglects her hair,  
Her gown, her shoes; she keeps no state  
As once when her pure feet were bare.

Or—almost worse, if worse can be—  
 She scolds in parlours, dusts and trims,  
 Watches and counts. Oh, is this she  
 Whom Francis met, whose step was free,  
 Who with Obedience carolled hymns,  
 In Umbria walked with Chastity?

("The Lady Poverty," *Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 25)

In "The Lady Poverty," the straitened economies of the Victorian parlour travesty the concept of holy poverty which, degraded to an anachronism, exists apart from the sister virtues of obedience and chastity. Moving from the crowded precincts of the urban cloister to the open sparseness of rural fields, Meynell relocates her ideal within an ahistorical present of "delicate spare soil and fen, / And slender landscape and austere" (p. 25). Although this spatial movement allows the poet to enact a temporal recovery of holy poverty, she nonetheless examines candidly the erosion of traditional typologies under modernity. Possessed of a wry and ironic astringency, "The Lady Poverty" thus succeeds where "The Shepherdess" fails.

Although "The Shepherdess" offers only an interim solution for the woman poet, its revisionary impetus derives from one of Meynell's central concerns. "The overriding theme of all her poetry," argues Dolores Rosenblum, "is that which is *not*, absent or silent: a future that has not yet come, an experience that is unarticulated, 'sealed in silence,' or articulated differently, in some *unvoiced* way."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Meynell uses her poetry to fill the "dark and indescribed" spaces left to her by her predecessors. Guessing at "what musical flocks of words" will eventually "give a voice to the day and night," she thus contemplates the poet's future in "Singers to Come":

I wonder, like the maid who found,  
 And knelt to lift, the lyre supreme  
 Of Orpheus from the Thracian stream.  
 She dreams on its sealed past profound;  
 On a deep future sealed I dream. (*Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 14)

For Rosenblum, Meynell writes here as elsewhere about "the death of one tradition and the birth of another" (p. 219). However, while she exploits these "long hollow spaces" for her own figuration, she also insists upon establishing a continuity between the new and the old. Dreaming "On a deep future" and depending, like the Orphean maid, on the "past profound," she makes her verse the site of a variety of temporal intersessions and textual intercessions. Although "their immortality" weighs "Heavily on this little heart," she habitually defines herself against "the past poets of the earth" to whom she owes her own "immortality" ("A Song of Derivations," *Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 18): Dante in "The Question"; Dryden in "A

Father of Women"; Milton in "The Wind is Blind"; Wordsworth in "Intimations of Mortality"; and D. G. Rossetti in "In Honour of America, 1917." To overcome the threat of lyric suppression, she not only opens up ellipses in her predecessors' work, but imposes her voice and vision over fragments of phrases and ideas therefrom derived.

By appropriating the poems of her antecedents as pretexts for her own, Meynell writes herself into the established tradition and so mitigates women's exclusion as poets from the canon. In so doing, she ventures, as she says in "Time's Reversals: A Daughter's Paradox," one of those "Impossible things that Nature suffers not— / A daughter's riper mind, a child's seniority" (*Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 89). A persistent theme in her verse, such reversals convert the woman's disadvantage into the poet's advantage. Just as the accident of time grants her "a child's seniority" over her dead father in "Time's Reversals," it allows her to compass Shakespeare's age, and consequently his accomplishment, within the admittedly "all-vain embrace" of her own "lean enclosure" in "The Two Shakespeare Tercentenaries" (p. 83). Likewise, in "To Antiquity," the daughter's paradox permits the woman poet to assume a mother's role with respect to her "young ancestor," a mere "boy in Letters" (*Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 108). Indeed, beginning with a deviously irreverent epigram ("*Reverence for our fathers, with their stores of experiences': An author whose name I did not note*"), the poem ends in ironic praise of the literary father who is also a son: "Your poems are not wearied yet, not dead. / Must I bow low? or, with an envious kiss, / Put you to bed?" (p. 108). Thus, age, while it dims the Romantic poet's intimations of immortality, confers an unaccustomed authority upon the post-Romantic woman poet who sees "past Wordsworth and the rest."<sup>26</sup> For, as Meynell writes in "Time's Reversals," "on this my head / Time yet will force at last the longer years, / Claiming some strange respect for me from you, the dead" (p. 89). "The Shepherdess," written when Meynell was in her late forties and in a position to achieve a naturally impossible seniority, similarly attempts to exact "some strange respect" from her poetic precursors. Unlike her later work, however, it fails to achieve that taut balance between the claims of the past and those of a present projected into "the longer years" of futurity.

Although Meynell's desire for the metaleptic approval of her forbearers compromises her effort to recover the lady of the lyrics from the generic deficiencies of inherited form, she yet poses challenges in her work to the very authorities she invokes. As a result, her lyrics, richly allusive for all their austerity, repay careful attention for the intellectual power and combative playfulness they conceal. In "The Shepherdess," then, Meynell sets herself in antithesis to the tradition she seems to espouse. She controverts the "almost unanimous conception of the lyricist" and reengenders generic

conventions to suit the purposes of the woman poet. At the same time, the poem's faults are plainly apparent. But while its sentimentality may prove disagreeable, its mannered modesty not only exposes the less obvious faults of the traditional lyric, but puts into relief the more obvious strengths of her later verse. Written in mimic parody of "Wordsworth and the rest," "The Shepherdess" demonstrates one way Meynell—the modern lady of the lyrics—sought to liberate herself from enslavement to the rigors of genre and thus to transcend the limitations of received form.

## Notes

- 1 Alice Meynell, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. Frederick Page, Viola Meynell, Olivia Sowerby, and Francis Meynell (1947; Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 181.
- 2 Like "Arabella Stuart," the other essays alluded to here—"The Seventeenth Century," "Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters," "The Brontës," "Prue," "Mrs. Johnson"—can be found in Meynell's *Prose and Poetry*.
- 3 Alice Meynell, "'The Return to Nature' in Poetry," *The Poems of Alice Meynell 1847-1923*, ed. Francis Meynell (New York: Scribner, 1947), p. 101.
- 4 In this respect, Meynell resembles other nineteenth-century poets who, as Antony H. Harrison argues, "reinscribed specific texts that had assumed clearly defined significance for their culture in order to subvert the accepted interpretation of those texts, restore to them some earlier and 'purer' significance, or set the accepted understanding of such a precursory literary work in new and unexpected contexts so as to present a critique of values held by Victorian readers" (*Victorian Poets and Romantic Poets: Intertextuality and Ideology* [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990], p. 2). I would like to thank Joan McEwen for drawing my attention to the resemblance between "The Shepherdess" and "She Walks in Beauty."
- 5 As Celeste M. Schenck points out, Meynell is not the only one to have suffered this fate. For Schenck, the consignment to critical exile of a whole generation of genteel women poets is the result of the masculinist and modernist identification of "radical form and radical politics" ("Exiled by Genre: Modernism, Canonicity, and the Politics of Exclusion," *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989], p. 231). Postulating that the "conservative poetics of women poets ... might pitch a more radical politics than we had considered possible" (p. 231), she advocates a "radical comparativism" (p. 244) to examine in concert the "feminized mythologies" of, for example, Meynell and H.D. (p. 243).
- 6 Quoted in Sister Mary Madeleva, "Alice Meynell, Poet of My Delight," *Alice Meynell: Centenary Tribute*, ed. Terence L. Connolly, S.J. (Boston: B. Humphries, 1948), p. 25.
- 7 Rev. William C. Hall, "Alice Meynell," *Manchester Literary Club Papers* 56 (1930), p. 2.
- 8 M.S. P[rice], Review of *Selected Poems of Alice Meynell*, *The Dublin Magazine* ns 6.2

- (April-June 1931), p. 74.
- 9 Agnes Repplier, "Alice Meynell," *The Catholic World* 116 (March 1923): 724.
  - 10 Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 255.
  - 11 John S. Anson, "'The Wind is Blind': Power and Constraint in the Poetry of Alice Meynell," *SMY* 9 (Spring 1986): 37 (my emphasis).
  - 12 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 69.
  - 13 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 76.
  - 14 Beverly Ann Schlack, "The 'Poetess of Poets': Alice Meynell Rediscovered," *WS* 7 (1980): 114.
  - 15 In the headnote to "Monna Innominata," Christina Rossetti seems to be making much the same point about Beatrice and Laura who "have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but ... scant of attractiveness" (*The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R.W. Crump [Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 1979-90], 2:86). Published in 1881, this sonnet sequence reveals Rossetti engaged in the recovery of her own lady of the lyrics. This sequence represents a marked advance over the unpublished juvenile poem, "The Faithless Shepherdess," another analogue for Meynell's "The Shepherdess."
  - 16 Examining the obstacles to female poethood posed by woman's "association with nature and her exclusion from a traditional identification of the speaking subject as male," Margaret Homans has shown that the tradition that defines "the other and the object" as feminine reaches its apotheosis under Romanticism (*Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980], p. 12).
  - 17 Meynell's sensitivity to the stereotyping and idealizing of women in poetry may arise out of her own experience at the hands of modern troubadours. Both Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson adulated her. She inspired Thompson's "Love in Dian's Lap" (which her husband reviewed for *Merry England*) and Patmore's poems to "Alicia." See Brigid M. Boardman's account of the sometimes uncourtly aspects of their love for her (*Between Heaven and Charing Cross: The Life of Francis Thompson* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988], pp. 234-236).
  - 18 Quotations from Byron's verse derive from the third volume of *The Complete Poetical Works*, 7 vols., ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-91).
  - 19 Quotations from Wordsworth's verse derive from *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984).
  - 20 Bernard Blackstone, *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman, 1975), pp. 155, 156.
  - 21 Jenni Calder, "The Hero as Lover: Byron and Women," *Byron: Wrath and Rhyme*, ed. Alan Bold (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 109.
  - 22 Patrick Braybrooke, *Some Victorian and Georgian Catholics: Their Art and Outlook* (1932; Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 52.
  - 23 Quoted in Viola Meynell, *Alice Meynell: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 1929), p. 39.
  - 24 Of course, while Meynell's female antecedents had already extended the range of

women's poetic expression in works like *Goblin Market* and *Aurora Leigh*, their contemporary reputation also rested on such doleful pieces as "Remember" ("Remember me when I am gone away"), "Song" ("When I am dead, my dearest"), "Past and Future" ("My future will not copy fair my past"), and "Grief" ("I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless").

- 25 Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1986), p. 219.
- 26 Barrett Browning is another post-Romantic woman poet who, debarred from the Romantic cult of youthful genius, mythologizes the privileges of age. Pondering the relation between age and sex in *Aurora Leigh*, she attacks the cultural constraints depriving women of experience: "A woman's always younger than a man / At equal years, because she is disallowed / Maturing by the outdoor sun and air / And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk" (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1992], 2.329-332).