

Emily Pfeiffer

and

Victorian Women's Religious Poetry

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## Declaration of Authorship

This is a statement to declare that the work presented in this thesis  
is my own.

Signed:.....

Date: .....

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Dr. Anne Varty for her patience, support and scholarly expertise. I would also like to thank Dr. Vicky Greenaway for her valuable advice and support.

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To my husband, Adam, I owe a huge debt of gratitude. Without his encouragement, and the support of my family, my research would not have been possible.

## Style and Punctuation

Throughout my thesis I adhere to the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) style for my footnote and bibliography references, with two exceptions: I use the abbreviated Latin terms *ibid* and *op. cit.* when referencing works previously cited, and I omit the abbreviations ‘p./pp.’ prior to page numbers in footnote references.

In citations of poetry, numbers in parentheses refer to page references, while numbers in brackets refer to line references.

There is no MHRA guidance for long poems without line numbers. In the final chapter of my thesis I therefore use an initial Roman numeral to denote the section of the poem, followed by the page number and a forward slash, and conclude with the line number counting down from the top of that page.

## Abstract

As a Christian, Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890) saw women's fight for emancipation as a crusade that transcends the earthly state. Yet, although her poetry was well-received during her life-time, Pfeiffer remains obscure. In order to challenge values that may have helped to perpetuate Pfeiffer's non-canonical status, I examine Pfeiffer's poetry against a broader definition of religious practice and worship than was traditionally applied to Victorian women's poetry. Responding to a recent re-evaluation of the criteria for what constitutes nineteenth-century religious literature, I demonstrate that Pfeiffer's poetry occupies a unique position in the canon of Victorian women's religious poetry.

To determine what made Pfeiffer such an original thinker, my research considers childhood experiences from which the psychological imprint never faded. In order to compensate for losses and disappointments, Pfeiffer learned to channel her frustrations into her poetry early in life. A Central Anglican, Pfeiffer belonged to a declining strand of the Established Church during a period when other branches of Christianity were expanding. Defending Christianity against elements of science and secularism, Pfeiffer repeatedly presented Victorian women as able to

overcome physical and spiritual gender discrimination. Attempts to compare her with other women poets underline the originality of her contribution to nineteenth-century religious poetry.

Pfeiffer's ability to reconcile her feminism with her Christianity became increasingly problematic for her as she grew older, driving her to re-imagine Christianity in ways that seem prescient. In her efforts to counteract the misogyny she saw as endemic to the Western tradition, Pfeiffer anticipated important religious trends and paved the way for key elements of radical feminist theology.

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## Introduction

Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890) was a late-Victorian poet who saw women's fight for emancipation as a mission extending beyond the temporal state. Yet, during the final years of her life, her ability to reconcile her Christian faith with her allegiance to the fast-growing women's movement became increasingly problematic. Driven to re-imagine aspects of her faith in ways compatible with her feminist values, Pfeiffer wrote a number of unconventional, unorthodox and prescient poems. In my evaluation of poems published by Pfeiffer between 1873 and 1884, and following an overall progression from conventional to less conventional genres, I assess Pfeiffer's poetry against a backdrop of religious poems published by selected female contemporaries. My objective is to demonstrate that Pfeiffer has a place in the canon of late-Victorian women's religious poetry.

In her day, Pfeiffer was known to be a prolific and versatile poet. Her lyric poems, ballads, dramatic monologues and blank verse novels were highly regarded. Her sonnets were particularly well-received. Yet, today, while many other Victorian women poets have gained places in the canon of women poets, Pfeiffer remains an outsider. Even previously neglected poets such as Amy Levy, Constance Naden and Michael Field now have places in the canon, while Pfeiffer has no place. Several attempts have been made to champion Pfeiffer's poetry but, although the touch-paper has been lit, the expected explosion of critical interest has failed to ensue.

In trying to account for Pfeiffer's non-canoncity, I first consider anthologies of Victorian poetry published in recent years. In *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*

(1995), edited by Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton, a small, but representative, range of Pfeiffer's poems is favourably received. Pfeiffer's interest in gender issues and merit as a poet are recognised.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, in *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (1997), only one short poem by Pfeiffer is included.<sup>2</sup> Only two female contributors – Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Brontë – are included in Bernard Richards's anthology, *English Verse 1830-1890* (1999), so that Pfeiffer's absence from this publication is unremarkable. Much more conspicuous is the total absence of Pfeiffer's poetry from Valentine Cunningham's comprehensive anthology, *The Victorians* (2000).<sup>3</sup> Cunningham's omission of Pfeiffer's poetry is ameliorated to some extent by Virginia Blain's inclusion of twenty poems by Pfeiffer in her revised anthology, *Victorian Women Poets* (2009). Referring to Pfeiffer's sense of humour, her love of nature, her interest in Darwinism and gender issues, Blain also takes Pfeiffer to task over her poem entitled 'The Fight at Rorke's Drift'. Blain writes: 'It is perhaps not unlikely that for a woman of her social position, denied access to a life of physical adventure or heroism, a certain vicarious pleasure could be obtained by revelling in bloodthirsty scenes of battle set in exotic locations'.<sup>4</sup> Blain's evaluation fails to pay due attention to Pfeiffer's political interests which will be elucidated in the course of my research.

More recently, T. D. Olverson's scholarly research in 'Worlds without Women, Emily Pfeiffer's Political Hellenism' (2010) acknowledges Pfeiffer as a highly accomplished

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Leighton & Margaret Reynolds, eds., *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 338-343.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Karlin, ed., *Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Valentine Cunningham, ed., *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry & Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Blain, ed., *Victorian Women Poets: New Annotated Anthology*, rev. edn (London: Pearson Longman, 2009), 87. Taken out of the context of Pfeiffer's life and times, Blain's comments regarding Pfeiffer's 'racist imperialism' and 'jingoistic' support of 'British (and particularly Welsh) valour in an imperialistic war' seem unfair. Pfeiffer supported the Welsh against British imperialism. Familiar with financial hardship, she fought for women's education, proper employment, and trades unions.

Victorian sonneteer.<sup>5</sup> Earlier efforts to champion Pfeiffer as a poet of high standing, however, include Kathleen Hickok's article entitled: 'Why is this Woman Still Missing? Emily Pfeiffer, Victorian Poet' (1999) in which Hickok emphasises Pfeiffer's versatility, comparing her poetry to that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and other well-known nineteenth-century poets.<sup>6</sup> Hickok also observes religious elements in Pfeiffer's poetry, commenting: '[Pfeiffer] attempts to reconcile mythological and scientific, religious and sceptical perspectives on contemporary life'.<sup>7</sup> In 2003 Catherine Brennan, in her research into nineteenth-century Welsh women's poetry, also notices the religious tone of certain poems, writing: '[Pfeiffer] assert[s] the [...] spiritual integrity of the Welsh Christian tradition'.<sup>8</sup> While Hickok links Pfeiffer to eminent Victorian poets, and Brennan links Pfeiffer to Welsh women poets subject to British imperialism, both are critically aware of religious elements in Pfeiffer's poetry. Yet to find religious elements in Victorian poetry is the rule rather than the exception because religious ideas penetrated all aspects of life at that time. The ubiquity of religious elements in poetry written during the Victorian period makes it more difficult, yet more imperative, to understand Pfeiffer's uniquely inflected and developing faith.

While research has tended to concentrate on Pfeiffer's poetic merit and interest in gender issues, attempts to assign her poetry to a generalised canon of Victorian women poets have so far failed. Perhaps Pfeiffer's versatility has made her poetry hard to

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<sup>5</sup> T. D. Olverson, 'Worlds without Women: Emily Pfeiffer's Political Hellenism', *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Hickok, 'Why is this Woman Still Missing? Emily Pfeiffer, Victorian Poet', *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian, Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 373-392.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Brennan, 'Emily Jane Pfeiffer and the Dilemma of Progress', *Angers, Fantasies and Ghostly Fears: Nineteenth-Century Women from Wales and English-language Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 143-169 (163)

categorize and this, coupled with the ubiquity of religious allusions and references in Victorian literature as a whole, has diverted critical attention away from Pfeiffer's unique contribution to Victorian women's religious poetry. Or, more probably, Pfeiffer's religious poetry has been overlooked because it fails to conform to the criteria that, until only very recently, were necessary for admission to the canon of Victorian women's religious poetry. When Hickok and Brennan published their research in 1999 and 2003 respectively, definitions for what constituted religious poetry were relatively conservative and narrow. Today the conventions that formerly excluded *avant-garde* religious poets such as Pfeiffer are changing.<sup>9</sup> In the light of new criteria for what constitutes religious poetry, and through the evidence that my research is supplying, I put forward my case that Pfeiffer is a late-Victorian contributor to the canon of women's religious poetry.

In order to present Pfeiffer as a religious poet, I seek a critical approach that will allow Pfeiffer's poetry to operate as the springboard for any critical discussion that might ensue. Pfeiffer makes her considerable knowledge widely available through a range of articles, treatises, prose works and poetry. She raises issues that became topics of interest only after her death. For these reasons, the superimposition of twenty-first century critical opinion upon Pfeiffer's nineteenth-century perspective could infuse her well-articulated views with anachronistic twenty-first century values. Surely more important, and more interesting, is the challenge of trying to evaluate Pfeiffer's poetry from her own perspective and in the context of her own life and times. Thus I concentrate my attention upon Pfeiffer's own views, and only compare these with modern critical theory where relevant. References to psychoanalysts and feminist

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

theologians born in the Victorian period arise naturally out of Pfeiffer's poetry. In order to shed a more precise light on Pfeiffer's poetry, I evaluate it in the context of her biographical and historical background.

In Chapter 1, I consider Pfeiffer's *oeuvre* within the context of her life and times.

Raised just outside Newtown, Montgomeryshire, during a period of political discontent and rioting, Emily Davis was a Central Anglican at a time when Nonconformity was growing rapidly.<sup>10</sup> During this turbulent period banks failed causing financial ruin for members of Davis's maternal family and, during her childhood, Davis's own father lost his fortune. Although during her childhood her local church may not yet have made the change from psalmody to hymnody, it seems likely that both influenced Davis's poetry. Her first volume, published when she was fifteen years old, demonstrates her exceptional poetic potential. Eight years later, marriage to a German merchant provided Emily Davis, now Pfeiffer, with the financial means to further her education and, living in London, she became involved with the Woman's Suffrage Bill and supported Caroline Norton's campaign for reform of the divorce laws. In 1857, Pfeiffer published a prose work and, in 1861, a verse-novel inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856). No children were born to Emily and Edward Pfeiffer. In the sixteen years between 1873 and 1889, Pfeiffer published eleven works and established herself as a poet of high standing.

T. D. Olverson draws attention to the fact that, moving in intellectual circles, Pfeiffer formed friendships with feminists such as Frances Power Cobbe and Anna Swanwick.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> J. R. Watson, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36, 2, *Victorian Literature* (2006), 4. Watson applies the term 'central' to 'middle-of-the-road' Anglicans who are neither High nor Low Church. I confer the capital C on Central Anglican.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, 84-5.

Moving to Putney, Pfeiffer's poetry reflects growing conflict between her allegiance to the cause of women's emancipation and her allegiance to the Christian religion. Contrasting religious bigotry unfavourably with common humanity, Pfeiffer sometimes represents the fight for women's rights as a crusade with Christ on the side of women. While supporting Darwinian views on sexual selection, Pfeiffer exploits popular topics pertaining to women's issues while defending Christianity against science and secularism. After visiting Scotland, Greece, Turkey, Canada and America, Pfeiffer made political capital from her travels. In articles such as 'The Suffrage for Women' in *Contemporary Review* (1885), Pfeiffer describes an 'unseen hand' lifting mankind to a 'higher plane' of existence. A close friend of the Anglo-Irish poet Emily Hickey, Pfeiffer was now part of a coterie of late-Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* poets which included A. Mary F. Robinson, Michael Field, Augusta Webster, and others.<sup>12</sup> When Pfeiffer died in 1890, she bequeathed large sums of money to women's educational institutions in England and Wales.

In the first part of Chapter 2, in an appraisal of Pfeiffer's lyric poetry, I refer to a lyric tradition established by Laetitia Landon, Felicia Hemans and other women poets. Demonstrating Pfeiffer's adherence to 'the poetics of expression' in her poem 'Gerard's Monument', I provide two interpretations of Pfeiffer's love-lyric 'Everild' to demonstrate that whilst appearing to conform to a lyric tradition established by poets such as Anne and Emily Brontë, Adelaide Procter and Dora Greenwell, an alternative reading shows her subverting this tradition.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Immaterial Poetics: A. Mary F. Robinson and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Poem', *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem, English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 240.

<sup>13</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry, Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 332-3.

In terms of the three lyric poems I evaluate in this chapter, I first consider what yardstick I should use to evaluate Pfeiffer's poetry now that the conventional criteria for women's religious poetry are changing. In terms of definitions for what constitutes religious poetry, the recent shift towards '[destabilizing] the categories of the sacred and secular' offers me the opportunity to apply more flexible criteria to Pfeiffer's religious poetry.<sup>14</sup> But before offering new criteria for interpreting Pfeiffer's poetry, I first evaluate Pfeiffer's lyric poems in terms of their conformity (or lack of conformity) to conventions that have traditionally defined Victorian women's religious poetry. The lyric poems I evaluate in this chapter are all thematically and stylistically different from one another. In drawing parallels between Pfeiffer's and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's deployment of sage discourse, I draw on research by Karen Dieleman and Thaïs Morgan in order to compare the positions of Barrett Browning, raised as a Congregationalist, and Pfeiffer, raised a Central Anglican.<sup>15</sup> Commenting on A. H. Page's review of poems in Dora Greenwell's work *Carmina Crucis*, Frances Havergal's work, *The Ministry of Song*, and in Anna Letitia Waring's hymn 'My heart is resting, O my God', I also consider the reception of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) in the years following its publication.<sup>16</sup> In order to discover if and, possibly, where Pfeiffer's lyrics fit into a conventional canon of religious women's poetry, I compare Pfeiffer's lyric poems with those of other Victorian women poets.

In considering the sonnet form, for which Pfeiffer was best known during her life-time, I first follow the footsteps of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's amatory sonnet-sequence,

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<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., 3.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Dieleman, *Victorian Poetry*, 45 (2007), 135; Dieleman quotes from: Thaïs Morgan, *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourses: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. Thaïs Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990)

<sup>16</sup> H. A. Page, *Contemporary Review*, 12 (1869), 115-127.

See also Lowther Clarke, *Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient & Modern*, ed. Maurice Frost, 120.

*Sonnets of the Portuguese*, tracing Barrett Browning's influence to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet-sequence, *The House of Life*, and to Christina Rossetti's sonnet-sequence *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets*. Whilst agreeing with G. B. Tennyson and Joseph Phelan on certain issues, I question their views on others.<sup>17</sup> Several of Pfeiffer's female contemporaries wrote sonnets: one such was Constance Naden, a poet who has recently received critical attention from both Marion Thain and Andrea Kaston Tange.<sup>18</sup> Coming from a social background similar to Pfeiffer's, Naden attended a Unitarian school before becoming a disciple of Herbert Spencer and a devotee of Dr. Robert Lewins, promulgator of 'Hylo-Idealism'.<sup>19</sup> Against a broader definition of what constitutes religious poetry, I evaluate double sonnet-sequences by Pfeiffer and Naden observing similarities and differences before presenting my conclusions.<sup>20</sup> Commenting on attitudes of Victorians scientists and clergymen to Darwin's theories, I draw attention to Gillian Beer and Kathleen Hickok in my interpretation of Pfeiffer's sonnets.<sup>21</sup>

In Chapter 3, I first draw upon themes popular with women poets during the Victorian period, themes relating to women and Mother Nature, to women and the Virgin Mary, and to fallen women. In this part, I consider women's procreative role and how the Church promulgated doctrines linking sex to sin and death in ways that marginalised Christian women. Deploying a variety of genres and poetic styles over a five-year period, Pfeiffer seems to be trying to find new ways to imagine her Christian faith. In a

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: Tractarian Mode* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981)

<sup>18</sup> Marion Thain, *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), 151-169; Andrea Kaston Tange, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 61 (2006), 200-240.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Lewins, *Tracts 1877-79* (London: Free Thought Publishing Company, 1887), 5-20.

<sup>20</sup> Constance Naden, *Complete Poetical Works* (London: Bickers, 1894)

<sup>21</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots, Evolutionary Narratives in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Kathleen Hickok, *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), 13-30.



short elegy, Pfeiffer links the stigma of the gorse flower to Christ's stigmata, crucifixion and resurrection. In a less conventional poem, I draw on Kimberly VanEsveld Adams's comments about Anna Jameson in order to compare Jameson's '[Protestant] freedom to appropriate or reject the religious past' with Pfeiffer's appropriation of the iconography of the Virgin and Child.<sup>22</sup> In this poem Pfeiffer subverts traditional representations of women in order to present Christian women as able to transcend their male-inscribed limitations. Finally, in a poem about a fallen woman, Pfeiffer deals with the subject of suicide showing insights into suicidal behaviour decades before the subject was formally studied by psychoanalysts such as Wilhelm Stekel.<sup>23</sup> I briefly compare Pfeiffer's treatment of the fallen woman theme with that of Dora Greenwell, Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Procter, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Amy Levy, Augusta Webster and Sarah Greenough in order to find where Pfeiffer's poems fit, if they fit at all, into a continuum of Victorian 'falls'.

In the second part of Chapter 3, I evaluate Pfeiffer's Welsh blank-verse novel, *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (1877), an *avant-garde* poem for which there appears to be no equivalent amongst Pfeiffer's female contemporaries. In this extensive work, and in an attempt to reconcile her religious and feminist ideals, Pfeiffer is now starting to re-imagine her faith in ways more compatible with the kind of Gnosticism described in *The Gospel of Mary* than with the eschatological canon espoused by the Western tradition.<sup>24</sup> In *Glân-Alarch*, Pfeiffer uses history, myth and legend to superimpose sixth-century imagery on to a contemporary Victorian template. Describing her heroine's

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<sup>22</sup> Kimberly VanEsveld Adams, 'The Madonna and Anna Jameson', *Woman's Theology in Nineteenth Century Britain, Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, ed. Julie Melnyk (London: Garland, 1998), 77.

<sup>23</sup> Edwin Shneidman, *Voices of Death* (London: Bantam, 1982), 42 and 44. Shneidman outlines studies of suicide by psychoanalysts born in the Victorian period, including Stekel.

<sup>24</sup> Karen L. King, *Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003), 3 and 628. This was rediscovered in 1955.

suicidal fall off a mountainside, Pfeiffer separates events into ‘before’ and ‘after’ the ‘fall’. Unaware of the leadership of women like Mary of Magdala, Pfeiffer creates a mythology centred upon Mona, an iconic woman leader with supernatural gifts. Re-articulating legend and folk-tale in a manner consistent with a time in history when the real and fantastical and the past and present all intertwined, Pfeiffer can be considered an early exponent of ‘mythopoeia’. Mona provides two explanations for her post-fall existence, one natural and one supernatural. The supernatural explanation provides the opportunity for *Glân-Alarch* to be interpreted as a feminist proto-allegory of the Christian myth.

In Chapter 4, I evaluate *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, And How it Grew* (1884), a unique experimental mixed-genre work that operates on several different levels.

Although Pfeiffer provides both a natural and a supernatural explanation for events in this work, I concentrate on a supernatural reading in the light of her treatment of the supernatural in works such as ‘Madonna Dūnya’ and *Glân-Alarch*. Drawing parallels between the transmission of the authorised version of the Scottish ballad culture and the transmission of the authorised version of the Bible, I consider the significance of Pfeiffer’s feminist re-construction of the authorised version of the legend of Lady’s Rock made public by Joanna Baillie in 1810. Eleven years in advance of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s publication, *The Woman’s Bible* (1895), Pfeiffer’s allegory seems to support a feminist re-construction of the Bible, but I deploy a typology of feminist hermeneutics in order to decide whether or not Pfeiffer (through her poet speaker) shows signs of being an early feminist theologian.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Claudia V. Camp, ‘Feminist Theological Hermeneutics: Canon and Christian Identity’, *Searching the Scriptures: Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 2 vols (London: SCM Press, 1994), 1, 156-158.

Elizabeth Gray suggests that Victorian women poets sometimes ‘present and invite new views of the [biblical] canon [...]’.<sup>26</sup> If this is so how, if at all, does Pfeiffer accomplish this in the context of new criteria for what constitutes religious poetry? Today, in the twenty-first century, the Christian religion is generally more eclectic than it was in the years following Pfeiffer’s death. The Established Church now tolerates a greater range of diversity in terms of Christian practice and worship. Taking these and other factors into consideration, I set out my case and draw my conclusions in order to decide whether or not, based on the poetic works evaluated in my research, Emily Pfeiffer has a place in the canon of late-Victorian women’s religious poetry.

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<sup>26</sup> F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women’s Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2010), 40.

# CHAPTER 1: EMILY PFEIFFER IN HER SETTING

## BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Jane Pfeiffer (1827-1890) was a late-Victorian poet whose mission in life was the emancipation of women. Almost all her poems, essays, articles, travelogues and prose works were directed towards this cause. As a Christian, Pfeiffer saw women's fight for emancipation as a crusade, a religious quest which transcends the temporal state. In order to accommodate her Christian beliefs and her feminism Pfeiffer developed her own poetic agenda, but what was it, and how was it formulated? In this chapter I locate events in Pfeiffer's life that predisposed her to take up the cause of women's emancipation; I present examples of her literary works in the context of her personal history; I search for biographical and literary patterns in preparation for my evaluation of Pfeiffer as a religious poet; and I provide a context against which to interpret poetic works where her attempts to reconcile her feminism and her faith led her to imagine the divine in ways that presage modern-day Christian trends.

In order to describe the extraordinary burst of creative energy that characterises Pfeiffer's latter years without excluding her earlier publications, I divide this chapter into three sections. The first section researches the years leading to Pfeiffer's marriage; the second explores the first decades of her marriage; and the third section covers the final, but most productive, sixteen years of her life.

## Emily Davis – 1827-1850

Emily Jane Davis was born on 26 November, 1827. Her father Thomas Richard Davis was an Oxfordshire landowner, while her mother, Emily Tilsley, was the daughter of a family of landowners in the Parish of Aberhafesp, Montgomeryshire.<sup>1</sup> Emily Davis was born at the home of her maternal grandparents at Milford Hall, an imposing white house overlooking the River Severn at Milford, close to Newtown, Montgomeryshire.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is no documentary evidence to establish exactly when the Davis family moved to Wales, it is known that at some stage during Davis's childhood her father lost the family fortune – a disaster which necessitated a move from Oxfordshire to the Tilsley family home at Milford. Even if, when Emily Davis was a young child, Thomas Richard Davis had not yet lost his wealth, the journey from the Davis family home in Oxfordshire to Montgomeryshire would have been sufficiently arduous to preclude anything other than protracted visits (the railway only came to Newtown in the late 1860s). Certainly much of Davis's prose and poetry demonstrates a close affinity with the Welsh landscape and people, suggesting an early, intimate, connection with her mother-country. It seems probable therefore that Emily Davis spent a significant part of her formative years in Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> *Collections Historical and Archaeological relating to Montgomeryshire and its borders*, 46 (1940), 114: Regarding the Tilsleys of Llwydgoed in the Parish of Aberhafesp: 'The Tilsleys were connected with the banking firm of Blayney & Tilsley in Newtown'. *Collections*: 49 (1940), 258: Anne Lloyd (1774-1855), 'married at St. Mary Woolnoth's, London, to Valentine Tilsley of the Llwydgoed (Aberhafesp) family, son of William and Jane Tilsley of Milford, Newtown, and a partner in the bank firm of Blayney, Tilsley & Blayney of that town. By him, who died by his own hand, as a result, it is said, of a failure of the firm, she left one daughter Jane Anne, who married the Rev. John Lloyd Jones, grandson of the Rev. Simon Lloyd of Bala, co-founder with Thomas Charles of Bala of the Sunday School movement in Wales [...]'. In her Preface to *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* (1873), Pfeiffer claims her 'right' to set her poem 'Gerard's Monument' around the Tyldesley family of Tyldesley in Lancashire. Perhaps the Welsh 'Tilsley' is a corruption of 'Tyldesley'.

<sup>2</sup> The 1851 Census cites Pfeiffer's birthplace as Oxford (H.O.107/1578). The 1851 Census situates her Welsh mother's birthplace as Middlesex, and her sister Caroline's birthplace as Gloucestershire (H.O.107/1728). But most researchers cite Pfeiffer's birthplace as Milford Hall, Montgomeryshire.

During Davis's childhood a growing number of Welsh people were challenging aspects of English domination in ways she may have internalised, for a hallmark of her adult literature is her outspokenness in expressing support for minority groups. In 1836, when Davis was nine years old, a law was passed stating that tithes paid to support Anglican parish churches, hitherto paid in kind, must now be paid in cash. This payment, fixed by landlords or Anglican vicars, was resented by Welsh tenant farmers, the majority of whom were Nonconformist.<sup>3</sup> Tenant farmers already faced the risk of being squeezed out of their homes by unscrupulous landowners who could, by increasing the size of their smallholdings, demand ever higher rents. The substitution of poor relief with workhouses in 1834 increased the suffering of rural communities, especially after the failure of the harvests in 1837 and 1838. During this period, Turnpike Trusts were set up by landowners and businessmen in order to exact tolls from farmers who often had no alternative but to use toll-roads in order to take produce to and from market. The fuse was lit, the farmers had had enough, and the Rebecca Riots (1839-1843) broke out in pockets of rural Wales. Disguised as women and calling themselves 'Rebecca and her daughters' the rioters attacked turnpikes (and workhouses) and, by communicating with each other in Welsh which their English-speaking pursuers could not understand, many rioters successfully evaded transportation.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time the Chartist movement was gaining momentum in Wales.

The age-old woollen industry of mid-Wales, traditionally a cottage industry manned mostly by labourers and by tenant farmers and their families during the winter months,

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<sup>3</sup> Welsh Nonconformists felt disconnected from the Established Church where clergymen were often English and associated with the English Crown. They wanted to worship in their own language. During the nineteenth century, support of the Church of England in Wales declined drastically.

<sup>4</sup> This may be related to the part in the Bible in which Rebecca speaks of needing to 'possess the gates of those who hate them', *Genesis* 24: 60.

was threatened when technological advances led to ever greater competition and ever lower wages. In Newtown, the major centre of handloom weaving in mid-Wales, the establishment of mills on the River Severn caused rapid expansion of the town as the population quadrupled in the forty years between 1801 and 1841. By 1830, technological innovation in the form of the carding engine and spinning jenny changed handloom weaving irrevocably. Newtown was forced to compete with larger towns like Rochdale and workers' wages were driven down even further. This led to the town becoming a centre of discontent. In 1831, when Davis was four years old, a member of her own family, William Tilsley of Aberhafesp, the owner of several mills which he rented out to flannel manufacturers, was forced to sell his mills to pay his creditors when his bank collapsed.<sup>5</sup> Newtown, the centre of the Welsh flannel industry, became such a hub of discontent that, in 1838, it became the venue for the first Chartist meeting in Wales. The industrialisation of great swathes of Wales, from Merthyr Tydfil to Neath and Swansea – the construction of great ironworks, and coal mines in the Rhondda valley – all led to a rapid increase of population. During this period of low pay and appalling social conditions the Welsh workers were at loggerheads with their English factory owners. The Rebecca Riots and other uprisings in the 1830s can be seen as part of a general picture of growing discontent which, in 1839, culminated in the first Chartist uprising in Newport, South Wales.

Although the formation of Trades Unions had been legalised in 1824, a year later parliament had replaced it with a more limited statute. In 1834 English and Welsh workers attempted to enforce their demand for a general eight-hour working day, but this was met with threats of military intervention by the government. In 1837, at a

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<sup>5</sup> *Collections Historical*, op. cit., 64: 64. 'William Tilsley of Aberhafesp built several mills renting them out to flannel manufacturers and became partner in the bank of William Pugh, Colley & Company. When it failed in 1831, he had to sell his mills to pay his creditors'.

conference of radical members of parliament and leaders of the workingmen, the 'People's Charter' was drawn up. This was a declaration in favour of six points of further reform, which included universal suffrage for men. Women played a significant role in the Chartist movement (the Birmingham Charter Association alone had more than 2000 female members). Activists such as Jane Smeal, Elizabeth Pease and Anne Knight, were Quakers who joined the Chartist movement to demand a living wage for working men and their families. In the 1830s and 1840's female unions, first formed in 1819, were mainly involved in campaigning for men's political rights rather than for women's. The National Female Charter Association, for example, voiced its anger at the sweated labour of women in factories while husbands were forced to remain at home, reliant on income earned by their wives. The Chartists kept up their agitation until 1848.

In England, the large manufacturing towns had seen their populations rise rapidly during the late eighteenth century. By 1800 the population of Manchester, for example, had grown to 100,000 and, by 1850, to 500,000. On this issue, Don Cupitt writes: 'The government recognised that in the new manufacturing towns a population was developing which was quite without religion [...]'.<sup>6</sup> Cupitt quotes from a letter by the Oxford High Churchman and historian, the Vicar of Leeds, W. F. Hook, writing in 1843: 'The working classes consider themselves to be oppressed people [...]. They place Party in the stead of the Church'.<sup>7</sup> Cupitt points out that, unlike the 'folk' churches of some European countries where, historically, congregations struggled to retain their church against foreign domination, in England the domination came from its own bishops and abbots, its own kings and courts:

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<sup>6</sup> Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984), 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



Religious change always began with the King and the Court, who then simply imposed the new order on the country [...]. As a result the English have a long tradition of resenting, or at least being mildly sceptical about, a religious order imposed upon them from above by grandees.<sup>8</sup>

For the Welsh the imposition of a religious order mainly by English grandees was bitterly resented but, in nineteenth-century Wales, the dual forces of Nonconformism and secularism combined to corrode the privileges of the Established Church.<sup>9</sup> As representatives of the ‘grantee’ English ruling classes historically linked with the imposition of the Established Church upon the Welsh people, the Tilsley and Davis families may have experienced uneasiness when they witnessed the congregations of their local churches dwindling.

Welsh resentment was fuelled even more when, as an outcome of the disruption in Wales, a government inspection was set up to look into the state of Welsh education. In 1847, when Davis was twenty years old, three non-Welsh speaking English commissioners published *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*. This report concluded that Welsh women were immoral and that, in general, the Welsh were an unruly and feckless people. There were two causes for this, the report said, the Welsh language and Nonconformity. Recommendations, therefore, included the adoption of the English system of education to be run under the purview of the Anglican Church. But, as the 1851 Census later indicated, there were now nearly three thousand Nonconformist chapels in Wales and Nonconformity was by far the dominant Christian group. The Welsh, subjugated by an English educational system, by the English language, and by the Anglican Church, received the 1847 report with

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29. Cupitt states that the 1851 Census showed that only around 50% of Britain’s Christians still supported the Anglican Church.

hostility. Now a mainly Nonconformist region of the British Isles, the majority of Welsh Christians wanted independence from the Established Church. In 1914 the Welsh Church Act was passed, but only in 1920 was disestablishment operational.

As a ‘middle-of-the-road’ or Central Anglican, Davis may not have sung hymns at her local church of St. Gwynog, Aberhafesp, or even at the large Anglican Church, St. David’s, in the centre of Newtown. For, as Susan Drain observes, ‘the adoption of hymns by the Church of England was a late development’.<sup>10</sup> Drain adds that ‘hymn-singing was initially and primarily a local phenomenon, determined by the talents and prejudices of both clergyman and congregation’.<sup>11</sup> If the Tilsley and Davis families did sing hymns, they would most likely have been from John Rippon’s *Selection of Hymns from the best authors, intended to be an Appendix to Dr. Watt’s Psalms and Hymns* (1787), a collection of nearly six hundred hymns which ‘became a standard book everywhere’.<sup>12</sup> Other hymnals adopted by parishes include *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707-9) by Isaac Watts, and *Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Church Service of the Year* (1827) by Bishop Heber ‘the creator of the modern church hymn-book’.<sup>13</sup> Evangelical Anglicans may have sung hymns from John Newton’s hymnal, *The Olney Hymns* (1825) although, as Drain explains, the hymnal was originally ‘intended for use in weekly study class, not in his Sunday services’.<sup>14</sup> But whether rural or urban, old or young, Anglican or Nonconformist, the overwhelming majority of Christians in England and Wales would have read, and even perhaps committed to memory, passages

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Drain, *Anglican Church in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Hymns Ancient & Modern (1860-1875)* (Lampeter: Texts and Studies in Religion/ Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 78. The Wesleyans formed the distinctive character of English hymnody in the eighteenth century.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> W. K. Lowther Clarke, *Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient & Modern*, ed. Maurice Frost (London: William Clowes, 1962), introduction, 110.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, 78.

of devotional poems from John Keble's famous publication *The Christian Year* (1827). Written in the year of Davis's birth, the growth of modern hymnody owes much to the immense success of Keble's publication with its focus on '[the Anglican Calendar] as an organizing principle of the Church's worship'.<sup>15</sup> Popular throughout the country, Drain states that stanzas of Keble's poems were 'ransacked' for their singing potential.<sup>16</sup> Yet the move from psalmody to hymnody had had its critics. In 1775, William Romaine, Rector of St. Anne's, Blackfriars, had written:

My concern is to see Christian congregations shut out divinely inspired psalms, and take in Dr. Watt's flights of fancy [...]. Why should Dr. Watts, or any hymn-maker, not only take precedence of the Holy Ghost, but also thrust him entirely out of the church?<sup>17</sup>

In a treatise published in 1843, the Rev. Robert Wilson Evans, late Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, comments prudishly:

Verse has been so monopolised by the world [...]. By placing, therefore, our heavenly conceptions into such a vehicle, we introduce them at one into a sphere, which, whatever else it may contain, does at the same time contain [...] all the apparatus of sensualism. A large class of poetical phrases have been born and bred in the service of sinful pleasure [...].

No sincere Christian is qualified by profession to write a hymn; nor will all his good intentions procure an end which has not been appointed to him.

Evans contrasts an extract from Psalm 104 with its poetic counterpart 'From Keble's Psalter':

*Psalm 104:*

He sendeth the springs into the rivers: which run among the hills.  
All beasts of the field drink thereof: and the wild asses quench their thirst.  
Beside them shall the fowls of the air have their habitation: and sing among the branches.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>17</sup> Lowther Clarke, *op. cit.*, 103.

He watereth the hills from above: the earth is filled with the fruits of thy works.

*Keble's version:*

He unchains the gushing rills,  
And the foaming torrent fills,  
Leads the rivers on their way  
Round each darksome mountain bay  
Which their cool clear beverage yield  
To weary herds from wood or field;  
Thither speeds the wild ass strong,  
There he laves his parchèd tongue  
O'er them fleet the birds of air,  
There they build, and nestle there,  
There untir'd their warblings pour,  
Each from his own leafy bower [...].<sup>18</sup>

Both the Psalms and Keble's devotional poetry were available to the young Davis while she was growing up, and it seems likely that both inspired her and influenced her poetry.

The eighteenth-century Methodist Revivals created an upsurge of hymn-singing in Wales which continued into the first half of the nineteenth century. As Lowther Clarke comments: 'Independents and Methodists were enthusiastic for it'.<sup>19</sup> Two well-known Welsh Methodist hymn-writers are Ann Griffiths (1776-1805) and William Williams Pantycelyn (1717-1791). It was Williams who, famously, wrote *Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch* which translated became 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer', sung to *Cwm Rhondda*.<sup>20</sup> This hymn can be found in hymnals representing all the different shades of Christianity that were, at that time, part of the Established Church. Drain

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<sup>18</sup> Rev. Robert Wilson Evans, *A Day in the Sanctuary: with an Introductory Treatise on Hymnology* (London: Rivington, 1843), 9, 47, 18, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Ann Griffiths, *Hymns of Ann Griffiths*, trans. George Pughe (Blackburn: Exchange Works, 1900). William Williams's hymn, 'Guide me, O thou Great Redeemer', was sung at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, April, 2011.

notes that the impetus for hymn-singing was reflected by ‘popular demand influenced by the practice of the Dissenter and accepted by Evangelical clergy [...]’.<sup>21</sup> For the Welsh, steeped in the bardic tradition, there was a natural impulse towards hymn singing. J. R. Watson explains that the structure and tone of Nonconformist hymns was primarily concerned with what ‘John Wesley described [in] his Large Hymn Book [1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*] [as] a little body of experimental and practical divinity’.<sup>22</sup> Watson suggests that ‘the emphasis on experience and practical religion was common in Nonconformist books’.<sup>23</sup>

In nineteenth-century Wales, while the Nonconformists were trying to disengage themselves from the influence of the Established Church, ‘central Anglicanism [...] fac[ed] both ways, or at least in many directions [...]’ in its desire to retain control over all its various groups.<sup>24</sup> The aim to keep all the different Christian groups under a single ‘Anglican’ umbrella is reflected in the later publication, *Hymns Ancient & Modern* (1861). Watson writes:

[To satisfy] its various groups, Anglo-Catholic, Protestant, sacramentalist, evangelical, ritualistic, sermon-preaching, High Church, Low Church, Broad Church, liberal, was a tall order. The compilers were advised by no less a figure than John Keble to ‘make it comprehensive’, an aim which was fine in theory but less easy in practice’.<sup>25</sup>

The spread of Nonconformity, secession by groups such as the Plymouth Brethren in the 1820s, the Evangelical revival and the revival of Anglo-Catholicism, all threatened

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>22</sup> J. R. Watson, ‘“Ancient and Modern”: The Victorian Hymn and the Nineteenth Century’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36. 2, *Victorian Literature* (2006), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 4.

to reduce the ‘power and reach’ of the Established Church.<sup>26</sup> While Christianity thrived during the nineteenth century, the central body of the Anglican Church struggled to retain its power-base.

During her childhood Davis (with her sisters) was taught by her father, Thomas Davis, who describes himself in the 1851 Census as an ‘artist’. Living with his wife’s family having lost (or mismanaged) the fortune that he had inherited from his family, it is possible that he was not held in the highest regard. Though from a military background, he was a cultured man who took pains to develop the artistic and literary potential of his talented daughter. When Davis was fifteen, Thomas Davis funded the publication of her first literary work - a volume entitled *The Holly-Branch: an Album for 1843*.<sup>27</sup> It was not uncommon at the time for parents to advertise their daughters’ accomplishments in published works, sometimes in preparation for the marriage market.<sup>28</sup> Today works such as *The Holly-Branch* tend to be seen as examples of the limited education received by girls during the Victorian period. Certainly very few girls received the breadth and depth of education enjoyed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, tutored in the Classics alongside her brother. The education of most middle-class female Victorian girls was restricted to subjects such as Bible study, French, music, history, botany, art, and improving literature. Yet Davis’s publication discloses a wide array of literary and artistic accomplishments, all of an unusually high standard. Davis’s talents encompass lyric poetry (including a poem set to her own piano composition), ballads and narrative poems, as well as romantic works accompanied by historically accurate

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7. Knight and Mason write that the ‘so-called secularization of religion in the latter part of the nineteenth century’ relates to the Established Church and not to Christianity as a whole.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Davis, *The Holly-Branch, An Album for 1843* (London: John Ollivier, 1843)

<sup>28</sup> Christina Rossetti wrote *Maude* (1850) at the age of nineteen. This was not published.

and highly proficient illustrations.<sup>29</sup> For a teenager of the 1840s Emily Davis had received a sound education, reflecting the influence of her father's careful tutelage.

Kathleen Hickok writes that 'family financial problems prevented Emily [Davis] from receiving a thorough education' – a moot point considering the high artistic and literary standard of *The Holly-Branch*.<sup>30</sup> In her Preface to *The Holly-Branch*, Davis refers to a 'severe family affliction' that prevented her from giving the manuscript her full attention. This excuse for her oversights gives the impression that the Davis fortune had only just been lost, conflicting with the more generally held view that the money had been lost when Davis was a young child.<sup>31</sup> It is also possible, however, that the fifteen-year-old Davis was in the habit of using her father as a scapegoat for her own deficiencies.<sup>32</sup> In her Preface, Davis writes:

The Authoress, in submitting her 'Holly-Branch', with its varied berries of Tales, Legends, Melodies and Illustrations, to the Public, feels, perhaps, even a greater portion of diffidence, than is usual to the young aspirant for fame, - as a severe family affliction has prevented her bestowing, on the revisal of her manuscript, the time and attention she could have wished to dedicate to her first literary publication. Should any errors or anachronisms, then, be observed, the Authoress trusts, this consideration may render less pointed the dreaded shafts of criticism.

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<sup>29</sup> T. D. Olverson, 'Worlds without Women: Emily Pfeiffer's Political Hellenism', *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 91-100 (84). Olverson writes that the adult Pfeiffer exhibited paintings at the Royal Academy (according to Basil Herbertson's unpublished article 'The Pfeiffer Bequest and the Education of Women: Centenary Review', Hughes Hall, Cambridge, 5).

<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Hickok, 'Why is this Woman Still Missing? Emily Pfeiffer', *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian, 1830-1900*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 374.

<sup>31</sup> If the Davis family fortune was lost during Emily Davis's early childhood it would certainly explain the need for the Davis family to move in with the Tilsleys of Milford. It would also explain why Davis and her sisters were taught by their father and not by a paid governess or teacher.

<sup>32</sup> J. Jacobi, *Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 126. From a Jungian point of view, if there was conflict between the Tilsley family and Thomas Davis (because loss of wealth meant a drop in the family's social status) this could have had psychological implications for Emily Davis as she grew up. While identifying with both her father (her teacher) and her mother (her role-model) Emily Davis may have experienced conflicting loyalties to her parents.

Through an inaccuracy in the original Norman MS, whence the tradition, 'Le Roy de la Forêt', was taken, a masculine article is inadvertently substituted in these pages for the feminine.

*The Holly-Branch* comprises historical romances such as 'The Tradition of Glyneira', a long prose work about Owain Glyndwr, anglicised by Davis to Owen Glendour.<sup>33</sup> The swashbuckling romance, which contains poems and illustrations, concludes with these words:

In vain did King Henry command his vassals to make search for the Mistress of Ravensmead. With a quick step she had passed the antechamber, where his attendants waited, and hurrying, with a disordered air through the outer court, she placed a purse of gold in the hand of the aged porter, and without uttering a word, disappeared. Isabella of Ravensmead was heard of no more: - and thus ends the TRADITION OF GLYNEIRA.<sup>34</sup>

The dominant themes of this and other prose works in *The Holly-Branch* are romance and adventure – elements redolent of both Walter Scott and Ann Radcliffe. In her narrative poem, 'Sabrina – A Legend of the Severn', Davis (whose Welsh home overlooked the River Severn) tells the tragic tale of a man who goes off to fight in the Crusades leaving his lady-love to mourn his loss. Eventually she throws herself off a tower in despair. Again there is the same mixture of romance and derring-do, but then she writes her poem 'Sleep, O Sleep' and sets it to music.

The lyrics for 'Sleep, O Sleep' are quite complicated considering that they have to fit a piano score suitable for singing. Generally poems written to be sung adopt a regular stanza, or hymn, metre, but here David follows her first two conventional stanzas in Long Metre (quatrains in iambic tetrameters) with a six-line stanza followed by a five-

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<sup>33</sup> Owain Glyndwr (c.1350-c.1416) was born in Montgomeryshire. Descended from Llywelyn ap Gruffudd he became self-proclaimed King of Wales in 1402.

<sup>34</sup> Op. cit., 79.



line stanza. On closer inspection, however, these latter stanzas are in Long Metre but with refrain-like additions: in stanza three Davis adds the refrain-like ‘Sleep, O Sleep! Sleep, O Sleep!’ at the beginning and end of the stanza, and in stanza four she adds her concluding line, ‘Sleep, O Sleep! Fare thee well!’ The first and last stanzas of four are cited here:

Wake! Wake! And hear my vows,  
Plighted ‘neath the stars of heav’n;  
Sure they ne’er could prove but true,  
When before such witness given [...].

Sleep perchance some secret sorrow  
Wait thy soul’s returning sense;  
Sleep tonight, and let tomorrow,  
All its joys, and cares dispense.  
Sleep, O Sleep! Fare thee well!<sup>35</sup>

For a fifteen-year-old of any era this is a well-constructed poem that conveys a romantic mood of repose and optimism. The ‘Wake! Wake!’ at the beginning, the ‘Sleep, O Sleep!’ in the middle, and the ‘Fare thee well!’ at the end of the last stanza, help to convey the emotional stages of a Serenade in which the male speaker plights his troth to his sleeping lover under the stars. Another poem, ‘The Flowers of Spring’, though more straightforward in structure is more sophisticated in terms of content.

‘The Flowers of Spring’ consists of ten quatrains, each with the rhyme scheme abab. The poem is composed of the four-line iambic tetrameters, or Long Metre, beloved of hymnists. But here the quatrains remain fixed throughout. The speaker expresses her preference for spring flowers although summer flowers are statelier, brighter, and more scented. Spring flowers are unspoilt by the dead leaves that mar plants growing later in

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<sup>35</sup> Op. cit., 29.

the year. For side by side with summer flowers are the dead relics of flowers that only recently had been as fresh and gay as they. Summer flowers are like the dreams of more mature years – as bright as those of the past, but now barren and dead. Stanzas 1, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10 are included here:

It is not that the morning dews  
More lightly fall – more brightly shine –  
When Spring its early blossoms shews,  
Than in the merry year's decline, [...]

But to the first-born of the year,  
*First* tribute I must ever pay,  
For no stray leaves, all dead and sear,  
Mar the young buds of joyous May.

They speak to me of hopes now dead –  
Such as I felt in earliest youth,  
Ere yet the dear delusion fled –  
Ere time had taught his sadd'ning truth –

For side by side with Summer flowers  
Dead, sapless relics may be seen  
Of those, which, some few by-gone hours,  
As fresh and gay as they had been. [...]

*Thus* bloom the dreams of riper years –  
Bright as those past, - but chequer'd o'er  
Each barren hope of youth appears –  
And bids us never *trust* them more.<sup>36</sup>

The subject-matter of this poem supports the possibility that Davis resented having her personal ambitions thwarted by her family's reduced circumstances and even blamed her father personally. Certainly this is an interesting poem, which warns that youthful dreams and hopes are ephemeral. Very much in the accepted style of the 1840s, Davis's poem is in some ways similar to that of Anne Beale (1816-1900) who became governess to the family of an Anglican clergyman near Llandeilo, in Wales.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

In 'The Dog Violet' published in *Poems* (1842), a year before publication of Davis's *The Holly-Branch*, Anne Beale uses the dog violet as the subject for a short homily on hypocrisy. Of the eight stanzas, stanzas 3 and 6 are included here. The first stanza describes the dog violet as a deceitful flower. Then Beale continues:

Like thee, deceitful violet,  
The world's false friends are fair;  
We view them and awhile forget  
That perfume dwells not there [...].

So round the lips set smiles may dwell,  
The eye, as thine, be blue;  
But softest smiles can scarcely tell  
If the deep heart be true [...].<sup>37</sup>

This poem, published when Beale was about thirty-six years old, is less subtle than the fifteen-year-old Davis's poem. Davis speaks of hopes that are blighted without resorting to the didactic conventions of her day, while Beale hammers home her moralistic point. In another flower poem of the period, 'The Bluebell' (1840) by Anne Brontë, banks of bluebells remind the speaker of her happy childhood - a time when she was loved and cared for. Yet the sight (and imagined words) of one lone trembling bluebell makes Brontë's speaker grieve. Composed in Common Metre, I cite the final two of twelve stanzas:

I had not then mid heartless crowds  
To spend a thankless life,  
In seeking after others' weal  
With anxious toil and strife.

'Sad wanderer, weep those blissful times  
That never may return!'  
The lovely floweret seemed to say,  
And thus it made me mourn.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Anne Beale, 'The Dog Violet' [1842], *Welsh Women's Poetry, 1460-2001*, eds. Katie Gramich and Catherine Brennan (Dinas Powys, South Glamorgan: Honno Classics, 2003), 110-111.

<sup>38</sup> Emily Brontë, 'The Bluebell' [1840], *The Brontës*, ed. Pamela Norris (London: J. M. Dent, 1997), 74-5

Anne Brontë's poem conforms to the conventions her the day and yet, as Isobel Armstrong suggests of her poetry, she sometimes withholds from the reader 'a deceptive perceptual and psychological experience' which, in this case, occurs when Brontë concludes the poem with the (personified) bluebell's bleak premonition.<sup>39</sup>

Emily Davis's lyric poem 'The Flowers of Spring' stands up well against these two contemporary Victorian flower poems. Davis manages to avoid what Daphne Du Maurier calls the 'dispirited hymn-book jingle' as well as the sanctimonious moralising so characteristic of the period.<sup>40</sup> Davis's speaker loves spring flowers yet seems blind to truths that they conceal. For it is the *spring*, not summer, flowers that die and decay. By wrongly associating the *summer* flowers with 'barren hope', the speaker is *herself* contaminating her adult years with the dead relics of her youth – her metaphor reflecting her own psychological problem. In this sense, Davis uses a 'perceptual trick' similar to that used by Anne Brontë. For a fifteen-year-old facing an uncertain future 'The Flowers of Spring' is a very promising poem. Yet, despite her obvious talent, it would be thirty-one years before she would publish her first volume of poems. By then she had been married for twenty-three years.

Although Thomas Davis concerned himself with the education of his daughters, the girls had plenty of opportunities to run wild in the Welsh countryside and, perhaps, Pfeiffer's extraordinary imaginative powers reflect this physical freedom. Pfeiffer's

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<sup>39</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry, Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 333. Referring to Anne Brontë's poem 'The Arbour' Armstrong refers to 'a perceptual trick of misprision [...]'; what has seemed 'summer's very breath' occurs when 'snow is on the ground'. In 'The Bluebell', a degree of 'misprision' occurs when a mood of happiness amongst 'smiling flowers' is turned around when a solitary, trembling, bluebell tells the speaker the truth she subconsciously knows but cannot face.

<sup>40</sup> Daphne Du Maurier, *Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 150.

later predilection for myths, legends and fairytales may also go back to her Welsh childhood. Yet growing up close to Newtown, a centre of rapid industrialisation, demographic upheaval and political militancy, Davis was exposed to the harsh realities of working-class life at an impressionable age. She would have seen large numbers of women, mill-girls and factory workers, working for miserable wages; she would have heard of the formation of the British Women's Movement, then in its embryonic stages; she would have known about the women, especially abolitionist women Quakers, who supported the Chartists in their fight for human rights. All these, set against the loss of her family's wealth and the rapid rise of Methodism to the detriment of the Established Church in Wales, made an indelible impression on Emily Davis.

### Emily Pfeiffer – 1850-1873

Before he lost his fortune Emily Davis's father had owned estates in Oxfordshire. Without financial backing, however, the future looked bleak for Davis as she entered maturity. But a friend invited her to join her on holiday in Europe, and subsequently Davis spent time in London where she met her future husband, Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer.<sup>41</sup> Unlike the Davis and Tilsley families who as landowners were 'gentry', Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer, a rich merchant from Holstein, was 'trade'. Married on 26 January, 1850, the wedding was held at Fyfield Parish Church, near Oxford, which begs the question – why Fyfield Church when the more prestigious St. Ebbe's Church was

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<sup>41</sup> Olverson, op. cit., 84. (Referring to Basil Herbertson's article, Hughes Hall, Cambridge, 5). 'The trip up the Rhine valley greatly expanded Emily's experience of the world and soon afterwards she spent a season in London where she met her husband and travel companion-to-be, Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer [...]'.

adjacent to their house at Littlegate?<sup>42</sup> Perhaps Fyfield Church had been the Davis parish church before they lost their estates; or, perhaps the Davis parents were against the marriage; or, perhaps, they wanted to conserve their money by having a small, winter wedding.<sup>43</sup> What *is* known, however, is that the couple were married by licence because Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer, a German, was not yet a subject of Queen Victoria.<sup>44</sup>

Emily Pfeiffer was now married to Edward (as she called him), a successful German chinaware merchant fourteen years older than her. If, as a child, she ever yearned for a rich father-figure she now had one in the form of her husband. A year after their marriage, the couple was living comfortably in a villa situated halfway between Clapham Common and Wandsworth Road in London.<sup>45</sup> According to census records no children were born to the couple. Significantly, Pfeiffer's literary career only blossomed after her fertile years were over.

During these early years of her marriage Edward provided Pfeiffer with the money she needed to further her education. T. D. Olverson, writing of Pfeiffer's 'Political Hellenism', notes that she was a 'keen student of Greek, philosophy, sculpture, architecture and drama [...]', subjects that informed her sonnets 'Hellas' and 'Studies from the Antique'.<sup>46</sup> But Olverson writes that Pfeiffer also received 'intellectual

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<sup>42</sup> Marriage Certificate MXD325397 (Application Number COL294809) in the Registration District of Abingdon. Thomas Richard Davis calls himself 'Gentleman' (not 'Artist', as on the 1851 Census form), while Pfeiffer and his father call themselves 'Merchants'.

<sup>43</sup> 1851 Census: (Reference HO.107/1728)

<sup>44</sup> The marriage was solemnized by Licence because Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer was German. In the 1871 Census Edward Pfeiffer is listed as a British subject.

<sup>45</sup> 1851 Census: (HO.107/1578) shows Emily and Edward Pfeiffer living at 1, North Street, Wandsworth, London, with two live-in servants. Today only four of these villas (now subdivided) are still standing. Pfeiffer's villa extends back to the rear, with a separate servants entrance on Lydon Road. Close to Clapham Common and the church of Holy Trinity Church Clapham, the house was situated in a fashionable middle-class area.

<sup>46</sup> Op. cit., 84.

encouragement from Professor John Stuart Blackie and Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College.<sup>47</sup> It seems that Pfeiffer's intellectual pursuits were wide-ranging.

In 1857, in the seventh year of her marriage, Pfeiffer published a prose work entitled *Valisneria, or A Midsummer Day's Dream*.<sup>48</sup> The frame narrative tells of a newly married woman dissatisfied with her marriage. She falls asleep and enters into a world of fairies. In this inner narrative, events end in tragedy as two fairy lovers – Valis and Nëria – drown. The young wife in the frame narrative wakes from the dream and has some kind of sickness, or physical breakdown, after which she uses what she has learned from her dream to rescue her marriage. The speaker, the daughter of a clergyman of the 'Established Church', tells her husband to change his ways:

You are too gifted, I too young, to make it just to others that we should pass our lives in a tedious ease, living for ourselves alone in the world, and for a love which is destroyed by the sacrifices which are made for its indulgence [...]. I would have you employ your energies and talents, in a way which might be acceptable to your Creator, and bring you the applause of your own conscience, and of all good men [...]. In order that you might love *me*, I would have you love *mankind* [...].<sup>49</sup>

The husband, Sydney, replies:

True guardian spirit and prophetess that you are, the wisdom that shall serve us both has been revealed to you. It was I, your husband, who should have been the guide for your youth; I was not worthy, and my failure has been mercifully atoned for. I have humbly learnt what I should have gently taught [...].<sup>50</sup>

The frame narrative concludes on Christmas Eve, 1799 – a Christmas, the wife tells her readers, remembered for its severity: 'Sydney had departed the day before on a self-

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Valisneria, or A Midsummer Day's Dream: A Tale in Prose* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1857), 1-304.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 301.

imposed mission [...]. He had gone [...] to kindle a genial blaze, on many a hearth which but for him had been desolate; and my heart swelled with joyful pride [...].<sup>51</sup>

The frame speaker helps her husband to find purpose in his life: ‘My Sydney, once fully awake to truths which it had been my blind good fortune to unveil to him, had launched upon a career of usefulness, and found his resolution to persevere [...]’.<sup>52</sup> As a ‘true guardian spirit and prophetess’ the ‘wise’ wife teaches her husband the Christian message of sacrifice and service to mankind. The subtext is that only a practicing Christian could be worthy of her love. Pfeiffer ascribes to her fictional wife the moral right to direct her husband to that end.<sup>53</sup>

A year prior to the publication of *Valisneria*, Barbara Leigh Smith (Bodichon) (1827-91) and Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925), made 19 Langham Place the headquarters from which ‘the ladies of Langham Place’ launched *The Englishwoman’s Journal* published by Emily Faithful, the founder of the Victoria Press in 1860. In the mid-1850s, ‘the ladies’ supported Caroline Norton’s campaign for reform of the marriage and divorce laws and also supported the right of Elizabeth Blackwell and Elizabeth Garrett to practice as doctors. In 1865, the group organized petitions for the Woman’s Suffrage Bill to be presented to Parliament by John Stuart Mill (1806-73). In 1869, John Mill (supported by Harriet Taylor before her death in 1858) published *The Subjection of Women*, promoting women’s right to equality in work, education, property and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>53</sup> The early years of her marriage may have proved difficult for Pfeiffer. She was now married to a rich, authoritative, father-substitute who may have tried to dominate her – a situation she would not have liked. Perhaps she set about ‘taming’ her husband on the basis of her moral authority as a Christian woman – like the wife in *Valisneria*.



suffrage.<sup>54</sup> At this time Pfeiffer was still living at North Street, near Clapham Common, and worshipping at Holy Trinity Clapham, of William Wilberforce fame, a church known for its humanitarian activism.<sup>55</sup> In 1861, the hymnal *Hymns Ancient & Modern* was published - a hymn-book described by J. R. Watson as ‘very much a Church of England book [...] [and an] extraordinary act of survival in the maelstrom of conflicting currents, hymnological, theological and ecclesiastical’.<sup>56</sup> In his introduction to the *Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient & Modern*, Lowther Clarke sums up the contents of *A&M*’s 1861 edition: ‘[It consisted of] Latin hymns [...], traditional English hymns from Watts onward [...]; the German translations of Miss Winkworth and the German tunes from *The Chorale Book* and elsewhere, with others now newly adapted [...]’.<sup>57</sup> Translations from the Latin by Edward Caswall, Isaac Williams, John Keble and John Mason Neale (who also translated from the Greek), and translations from the German by Catherine Winkworth, Jane Borthwick, Jane Montgomery and Frances Cox, were augmented by English hymns written by Edward Cowper, Charles Wesley, Isaac Watts, John Newman, John Keble, Isaac Williams, Bishop How, Bishop Wordsworth, Bishop Ken, Bishop Heber, Bishop Bickersteth, and a whole range of male Victorian (mostly ecclesiastical) hymn-writers.

In the years following publication of *A&M*, Protestant clerics became aware of its Tractarian bias. In 1875, the Rev. James Ormiston accused *A&M* of ‘undo[ing] the grand work of the Reformation [...] [and being] a Jesuitical stratagem of the Ritualists

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<sup>54</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Subjection of Women* [1869], ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin, 2006)

<sup>55</sup> The walk from Pfeiffer’s villa to Holy Trinity Clapham takes two minutes. Outside the church, which is situated right on Clapham Common, a notice reads: ‘William Wilberforce and members of the congregation worshipped and campaigned against the slave trade up to and beyond its abolition in 1807’. Pfeiffer would have been attracted to a church which was a centre for humanitarian activism which is why I believe this to be the church she attended.

<sup>56</sup> *Op. cit.*, 4. I adopt Watson’s shorthand *A&M* for *Hymns Ancient & Modern*.

<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.*, 120.

[...] for Romanizing the Church [...].<sup>58</sup> Even Lowther Clarke acknowledges this bias, writing: ‘The book was avowedly Tractarian’.<sup>59</sup> The fact that only four Victorian women - Emma Toke (1812-1878), Sarah Flower Adams (1805-1848), Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895) and Mary Fawler Maude (1819-1913) - were represented in *A&M*’s 1861 edition was apparently of less concern to Victorian churchmen than its High Anglican flavour. Later editions of *A&M* featured more contributions by women hymn-writers, but they remained a minority. Holy Trinity Clapham, a catalyst for political and humanitarian reform, may have retained its traditional hymnody but, by 1861, Pfeiffer had published her first poetic work.

Pfeiffer’s blank-verse novel, *Margaret; or, The Motherless* (1861) is dedicated to the memory of her mother.<sup>60</sup> This poem is more assertive in character than her two previous publications, reflecting the influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s blank-verse novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856).<sup>61</sup> The orphaned Margaret is raised by an unsatisfactory mother-substitute and later travels abroad with Julia, her guardian. One evening she confronts the marble face of the German, Albert Albrecht. Impressed by his age and intellect, Margaret marries him and lives with him in an ancient German castle - gloomy, turreted and cold. The marriage is not happy, and Albrecht belittles her in front of his guests:

‘Thou, wife,  
Standest alone there, cold and still,  
Without the circle of my life [...];  
A woman in her lord should trust,  
Knowing no joy but when he wins,

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<sup>58</sup> Drain, op. cit., 383-4.

<sup>59</sup> Op. cit., 120.

<sup>60</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Margaret; or, The Motherless* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1861). By then both Pfeiffer’s parents had died (her father in 1853).

<sup>61</sup> *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson and others, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 3, 3-266.

No sorrow but when on his face  
Her tenderness can find its trace’.

Then Albrecht criticises Britain’s role in the Crimean War, and Margaret bravely stands up for England:

‘England has ever stood alone’,  
I said; ‘she is the topmost stone  
The social Pyramid which crowns;  
Ye know it by your envious hate,  
I by the pride which will not bate  
A breath for all your taunts and frowns [...]’.<sup>62</sup>

The upshot of this marital disharmony is that Albrecht ‘banishes’ Margaret from his castle and she returns to England a divorced woman.<sup>63</sup> Later she meets a young doctor and they fall in love, but Margaret fears that the taint of her divorce may sully his good name and ruin his career. Fortunately, all ends well.

Margaret, adopting a social role normally adopted by men, boldly condemns Albrecht and his German guests and defends Britain’s position in the Crimean War. The anti-German, pro-British, feeling expressed by Pfeiffer in this work raises the possibility that in real life her visits to her German relations may not have been entirely harmonious.<sup>64</sup> While in Germany, Pfeiffer herself may well have been privy to anti-British sentiment after the Crimean War. Later, in her ‘Ode to the Teuton Woman’, Pfeiffer depicts the archetypal German wife as a ‘pining Cinderella’ – a careworn slave carrying out the bidding of her husband.<sup>65</sup> Yet she deployed her mastery of the German language in translating the poems of the Jewish Christian convert, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856),

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>63</sup> Divorce was a subject that Pfeiffer took very seriously. See ‘Outlawed’ later in this chapter.

<sup>64</sup> The Pfeiffers did not complete the 1861 Census which suggests they were at Germany at that time.

<sup>65</sup> See page 52.

which she later published in *Quarterman's Grace and Other Poems* (1879) thereby boosting her literary status. The time she spent in Germany had been put to good use.

In April, 1871, a letter to Charles Darwin (1809-82) on the subject of sexual selection shows Pfeiffer grappling with evolutionary issues. In sonnets such as 'The Chrysalis' and 'The Coming Day' (discussed in Chapter 2, II), Pfeiffer seems to link Darwin's theory of sexual selection to some kind of spiritual evolution for women. For this reason, I quote her letter to Darwin (and his response) *verbatim*:

I have been reading your work on the 'Descent of Man' with absorbing interest. Forgive me if as a stranger I offer a remark on that part of it which relates to the decoration of birds. I think I do not err in imagining that you yourself feel some diffidence in crediting these creatures with the high aesthetic instincts needful to account for ornamentation such as that found on the wings of the Argus pheasant, if the sense of beauty is assumed to be the sole worker towards this end. Could it not be that beauty, when of a nature thus recondite, has been only an incidental result, while the end towards which sexual selection has directly tended has been the perfecting of characters calculated simply to fascinate or allure [...]? That the lower animals are pre-eminently liable to fascination in this restricted sense is shown in the paralysing effect of the eyes of snakes. Might not the plumage of the male Argus pheasant, with its balls trembling in their dusky sockets, exercise upon the female bird when cunningly exhibited before her, a sort of glamour akin to this? Fascination inviting in the one case to death, in the other to love & life, may be supposed to be painful or pleasurable according to its object [...].<sup>66</sup>

The letter was answered by Darwin on 26 April, 1871:

I am much obliged for your kindness in writing to me. I think it would have been an advantage if I had used the word fascination, but I intended to express some such idea when I join to charm admire etc. the word excite.

I fear that it would be very rash to use the illustration of the snake, as very few naturalists believe in snakes having any such power; though I myself am inclined to be a believer.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, (Letter 7411, vol. 19), *Correspondence of Charles Darwin* (Darwin Correspondence Project, University of Cambridge, 2007)

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, (Letter 7719f, vol. 19)

Pfeiffer's letter to Darwin was sent from Mayfield, a house that she and Edward had had built for themselves at West Hill, Putney.<sup>68</sup> A large house near London, Emily and Edward Pfeiffer employed three live-in servants - proof that Edward's chinaware business was flourishing.

The first decades following her marriage mark a challenging period in Pfeiffer's life. During these childless years both her parents died and her mother, in particular, was keenly mourned. In a later dramatic monologue, Pfeiffer's speaker grieves for her mother, expressing the hope of a post-death reunion. Yet Pfeiffer also used her poetry to exploit the subject of motherhood in support of her feminist values. As Pfeiffer grew in age, so her commitment to women's causes also grew. In 1859, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women had been founded and, living near Holy Trinity Clapham at that time, Pfeiffer had become involved in feminist issues relating to education, work, legal rights and suffrage for women. She was in her forty-sixth year when, in 1873, she published her first volume of poems.

### 'Mrs. Pfeiffer' - 1873-1890

In the years between 1873 and her death in 1890, Emily Pfeiffer published eight volumes of poetry, two travel books (one of them a mixed-genre work), a treatise on

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<sup>68</sup> See 1871 Census (R. G./ 10 703). Situated on West Hill (now the A3) diagonally opposite Amerland Road, Mayfield has been replaced by a large, twentieth-century block of flats called 'Mayfields'. But the large Victorian houses downhill from 'Mayfields' show that the Pfeiffers' house had had all the accoutrements of the affluent Victorian middle-classes. At the bottom of West Hill, in Wandsworth High Street, All Saints Church was close to the Pfeiffer house, as was Holy Trinity, Wandsworth, further up West Hill towards Wimbledon Common.

higher education for women, and a number of essays and articles. During these years a growing number of women were challenging the social, political, sexual, legal and spiritual conditions that kept Victorian women subject to male domination. Emily Pfeiffer was one of these women.

As Pfeiffer gradually established herself as a poet of high standing she was able to enjoy the society of other like-minded intellectuals of the period. Found amongst William Gladstone's correspondence, a letter from Edward Pfeiffer indicates that the Pfeiffers threw large parties at their new house on West Hill. These, Olverson observes, were attended by 'influential scholars, commentators and political figures of the day'.<sup>69</sup> Referring to Pfeiffer's interest in Ancient Greece, Olverson records that 'upwards of fifty ladies apparently responded to the call [to come in ancient Greek dress], including the feminist writer Frances Power Cobbe and the Greek scholar Anna Swanwick [...]'.<sup>70</sup> Now Pfeiffer was able to enjoy her success – a success, however, that was not entirely without pain.

### The Eighteen Seventies

In 1873, Pfeiffer dedicated her first main volume of poems, *Gerard's Monument, and Other Poems*, to Edward as 'one in whose eyes [...] [her poems] will be seen as precious [...]', and from now on it becomes increasingly evident that Edward Pfeiffer has become the prop and mainstay of Pfeiffer's career. Her steadfast companion, the love of her life, Edward was now helping to promote Pfeiffer's work, as a letter sent by Matthew Arnold to 'Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer' on 16 November, 1874, shows:

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<sup>69</sup> Op. cit., 84-5. Olverson cites a 'Letter held as part of the Gladstone Correspondence, British Library, authored by J. Edward Pfeiffer and dated 25 March, 1878'. See f.194.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 84-5.

Dear Sir,

I have to thank you for sending me Mrs. Pfeiffer's poems which I have from time to time noticed in the *Spectator* and always with pleasure. Believe me.

Faithfully yours,

Matthew Arnold.<sup>71</sup>

Edward had sent Arnold a copy of *Gerard's Monument, and Other Poems*, the title poem of which tells of a woman whose love is split between her crippled brother and her husband. Eventually she dies of a broken heart, and her guilt-ridden husband's attempts to build a monument to her repeatedly fail. Arising from this successful volume came a second, revised, edition (1878) boasting ten complimentary notices from the earlier edition. Typical of these is the review from the *Daily Telegraph*:

It is refreshing to come on a volume of pure and simple poetry, such as 'Gerard's Monument [...]', by Emily Pfeiffer, which has undoubted claims to high praise in these 'degenerate days' of poetic inspiration. Mrs. Pfeiffer is really a poetess [...]. The volume is full of beauty; one sure to be delightedly perused by those who can appreciate true poetic feeling and genuine unrestrained expression.<sup>72</sup>

Yet Pfeiffer was also the subject of a long sexist article (occupying a whole column) from the reviewer for *The Times*:

*Gerard's Monument* [...] is a metrical romance, full of fancy and feeling. Mrs. Pfeiffer has caught something of the plaintiveness and simplicity of the old ballads, but her verse has also a distinct impress of its author's own individuality [...]. Poetry is the conflict of the elements of our being. When Shakespeare, or Milton, or Byron, or Wordsworth writes this conflict seems as much in the order of nature as a storm at sea, whereas female poetry [...] is too apt to give us the idea of a desperate attempt to stir a storm in a teacup [...]. Whatever is said, the

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<sup>71</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 4, 234.

<sup>72</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, Notices of the Press, *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* [1873], 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), 1.

fact remains that the female mind has seldom or never produced poetry of the first order [...]. [Women] have tried and they have failed – because it was not in them. No disabilities of education have intervened [...]. Ploughmen and apothecaries' boys may thrill mankind, but it is thousand to one that the most cultivated woman in the world will set us yawning if she takes to writing verse. It is women who inspire the best poetry in the world; how, then, can it be expected that they should write it [...]?<sup>73</sup>

Pfeiffer retaliated strongly against the article, writing:

[As] a woman I cannot but lift up a protesting voice against any attempt to close 'our case', while every day is bringing fresh witnesses into the action [...]. That we can be speculated about now in this advanced stage of the world's history more as if we were some extinct species than beings who have stood side by side with man from the beginning, is in itself a striking result of that tyranny of circumstances which has retarded female development [...]. Every authoritative announcement of woman's inherent disqualification for the highest labours of the mind retards the issue which time has still to resolve.<sup>74</sup>

This vicious review was an attack not just on her verse but also her right, as a woman, to write it.

Several poems published in *Gerard's Monument, and Other Poems* are evaluated in later chapters. Here, however, Pfeiffer's dramatic monologue, 'Nathaniel to Ruth', provides insights into her attitude to religious faith. In this poem the monologist, Nathaniel, blames his wife for the lust he feels for her, thereby revealing more about himself than he realizes. Stanzas 1, 7, 8, 13 and 14 (of 17 stanzas) are included here:

I know not how, dear heart, I came to love you as I do, -  
Too much, I fear, for one who feels the value of his soul;  
And mother's choice, you know was set on Hannah, not on you, -  
And mother had a calm, wise way of judging, on the whole [...].

And now I'm on the subject, Ruth, I'll speak out all my mind:  
Two months ago, when Janet Byrne lay dying on her bed,

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<sup>73</sup> 'Female Poets', *Times*, 27894 (1874), 4.

<sup>74</sup> Emily Pfeiffer's letter to *The Times*, quoted in *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, Armstrong, I., Bristow J., Sharrock, C., eds., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 494-5.



And Hannah (such a gift of prayer as hers where shall you find?)  
Improved on the occasion till the dying child was dead.

Then in the midst, - when Hannah urged that each one should put up  
A cry that in this death his soul should hear a special call, -  
I saw you rise and steal towards Jane (not dead yet) with a cup,  
Her feeble call for water you had heard above it all [...].

Her words so gracious when in prayer, are only gracious then,  
And faith in her is strong enough without a prop to stand;  
She owns no carnal bonds, and only loves the souls of men; -  
Such shining lights as Hannah are the saving of the land!

It is not safe for Christian folk to be too good or fair;  
A spirit like a blood-stained sword, just hidden by a sheath –  
A sheath like that you wot of – is less like to be a snare;  
The thoughts must still be humbled by the filthiness beneath [...].<sup>75</sup>

Nathaniel unwittingly reveals his belief that sex, even within marriage, is sinful – and that inward-looking piety is more holy than an outward-looking humanity. While virtuous Hannah leads the prayers and cries to God for a dying child, Ruth hears the little girl's cry and gives her water. Hannah's faith is strong and free of carnality – but Ruth is voluptuous and tempts Nathaniel to 'filthiness'. For these reasons she cannot be as good as Hannah. In this monologue self-righteous bigotry (the kind of male hypocrisy that blamed women for the prostitution that was rife in London at the time) is contrasted with physical beauty, carnal love and humanity – the latter position (exemplified by Ruth) being the most Christ-like. This poem provides insight into Pfeiffer's own religious views as her speaker pits common humanity against piety, to the detriment of the latter.

In 1876, Pfeiffer published *Poems* and here again she received excellent reviews. *The Daily Telegraph* wrote: 'Mrs. Pfeiffer's 'Poems' are worthy of that name [...]. Those

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<sup>75</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. revd. edn (London: Strahan, 1876), 161-7.

readers who have dreaded the disappearance of the Sonnet from English poetry may welcome with an especial gratitude this graceful book'.<sup>76</sup> Yet an unnamed reviewer writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote:

Her love lyrics are, with one or two exceptions, sentimental and feeble, unmusical in form and sickly in thought. The volume opens with two poems of this description. The first contains some good lines, and is only occasionally ridiculous; but the second, called 'Everild', belongs to the 'Laura Matilda' school of poetry [...]. Mrs. Pfeiffer is by no means strong in the lyric. Her ear plays her false, and she lacks the sense of fitness which imperceptibly but surely guides the lyric poet on the right way [...].<sup>77</sup>

This review is at best inaccurate and at worst biased. Although 'Everild' is not amongst her best love-lyrics, the volume contains highly regarded works, such as 'The Crown of Song', 'Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874', and her sonnet 'The Chrysalis'.<sup>78</sup> Other well-received sonnets include 'Aspiration', 'The Blind Architect of Life', 'To Nature', 'The Gospel of Dread Tidings', 'The Prisoner in the House of Life' and 'The Sting of Death' - tightly constructed and thought-provoking works that grapple with scientific and religious issues of the day. The reviewer for *The Spectator* described Pfeiffer's sonnets as 'among the finest in the language'.<sup>79</sup> In her sonnet, 'The Winged Soul', Pfeiffer deploys the physical metaphor of a caged bird to depict the spiritual plight of women. Linking women's lowly status with spiritual doom, the speaker addresses her soul and pleads with it never to be broken by her earthly plight:

My soul is like some cage-born bird, that hath  
A restless prescience – howsoever won –  
Of a broad pathway leading to the sun,  
With promptings of an oft-reprovéd faith  
In sun-ward yearnings. Stricken through her breast,  
And faint her wing, with beating at the bars

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<sup>76</sup> *Spectator*, 2581 (1877), 1597.

<sup>77</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3427 (1876), 12.

<sup>78</sup> Evaluated in Chapter 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Spectator*, 2581 (1877), 1597.

Of sense, she looks beyond outlying stars,  
And only in the Infinite sees rest.  
Sad soul! If ever they desire be bent  
Or broken to thy doom, and made to share  
The ruminant's beatitude, - content, -  
Chewing the cud of knowledge, with no care  
For germs of life within; *then* will I say,  
Thou are not caged, but fitly *stall'd* in clay!<sup>80</sup>

The speaker links the spiritual ambitions of her soul with her restricted temporal state, using the 'caged bird' metaphor deployed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and other women poets to denote the narrowness of women's physical and spiritual aspirations.<sup>81</sup> She begs her soul never to stop yearning for the Infinite however much it is reproved for doing so. In the sestet, Pfeiffer suggests that without spiritual aspiration, without the hope of eternal life, the female soul will remain eternally earthbound.

For Pfeiffer, to give up the spiritual struggle is to be less than human, and to be less than human is to be soulless like the Red Ladye (a witch who fakes vulnerability to try to ensnare a knight) in her Pre-Raphaelite ballad 'Childe Rupert, the White Ermingarde and the Red Ladye'.<sup>82</sup> If the reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* believed Pfeiffer's 'ear plays her false', he had only to look at this ballad to know that he was mistaken. This work is concise and lyrical, reflecting the influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, *Christabel*. In Pfeiffer's ballad, the Childe Rupert obeys White Ermingarde's request that, should he hear the Angelus ringing, he should kneel, and speak her name in prayer. In this way, the White Ermingarde saves the knight from spiritual death.

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<sup>80</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Poems* (London: Strahan, 1876), 130.

<sup>81</sup> *Op. cit.*, 3, 10.

<sup>82</sup> *Poems*, *op. cit.*, 91-118.

In *Poems*, Pfeiffer deploys ‘Ode to the Teuton Woman’ (referred to earlier in this chapter) to highlight the passivity of German wives thereby promoting the cause of women’s rights. Of the thirty-six stanzas, stanzas 5, 16, 17 and 33 are included here:

I see the Bridegroom, He, the Lord, the Son,  
Step forth and lead ye forward one by one,  
I see Him take each weary, toil-worn hand,  
And guide ye shrinking to the higher stand [...].

It is that by the hearth the woman’s share  
In man is but a partnership of care,  
Which leaves her standing, with her pinions furl’d,  
Upon the threshold of his higher world;

It is that by her lord she still is thrust,  
A pining Cinderella, in the dust  
Of household toil, while on his spirits fall  
The magic and the music of the ball.

Rise, Teuton woman! Claim your right denied  
To nobler labour; show your strength defied,  
And on Germania’s mighty forehead place  
The absent touch of glory and of grace!<sup>83</sup>

Pfeiffer was well placed to compare German wives with their English counterparts. Yet instead of envisaging the bridegroom as a German, she sees him as Christ - the Bridegroom who intervenes on behalf of all downtrodden wives facing spiritual death, their ‘pinions furl’d’. Taking each weary bride by the hand Christ raises her up to a higher plane. In this poem Pfeiffer represents the fight for women’s rights as a crusade with Jesus on the side of women. By depicting German wives as Cinderellas, Pfeiffer is able to make her feminist and religious points without antagonising her English readership. Likewise Pfeiffer, by making the heroine of her blank-verse novel, *Glân-*

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<sup>83</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, ‘Ode to the Teuton Woman’, *Poems* (London: Strahan, 1876), 60-68. This poem has already been referred to in relation to Pfeiffer’s visits to Germany. See page 43.

*Alarch, His Silence and Song*, an Irishwoman living in Wales, keeps the extraordinary events that occur at a safe distance from the London literati.<sup>84</sup>

The historic setting for *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (1877) is sixth-century Wales before, during and after Saxon invasion. The bard, Glân-Alarch, tells the story of Mona, an Irish orphan betrothed to a Welsh prince. As the mystery unfolds Pfeiffer demonstrates poetic ‘sleight-of-hand’ as her heroine provides both a natural and a supernatural explanation for the strange events that followed her suicidal fall from a mountain. This blurring of the natural and supernatural is repeated by Pfeiffer in other works published around this time.

Pfeiffer’s ballad ‘Madonna Dūnya’ was printed by *Contemporary Review* (1877-8) in its entirety prior to its publication in *Quarterman’s Grace and Other Poems* (1879).<sup>85</sup> Apart from the title poem, ‘Madonna Dūnya’ is the longest poem in the volume.<sup>86</sup> In this poem Pfeiffer again manipulates the perception of her readers as she connects Dūnya, a peasant woman, and her baby son, with an icon of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus.

Another work in *Quarterman’s Grace*, relevant to Pfeiffer’s developing concerns regarding women and Christianity, is a concise lyric poem entitled ‘A Song of Winter’ in which Pfeiffer’s speaker identifies the suffering of women with that of the gorse

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<sup>84</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (London: Henry King, 1877). This work is evaluated in Chapter 3, II.

<sup>85</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, ‘Madonna Dūnya’, *Contemporary Review*, 31 (1877-8), 597-627. The last part of *Quarterman’s Grace* is devoted to Pfeiffer’s translation of the poems of Heinrich Heine.

<sup>86</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Quarterman’s Grace and Other Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879). The title poem and ‘Madonna Dūnya’ are evaluated in Chapter 3, I.

flower.<sup>87</sup> Using a botanical metaphor that links the gorse flower with Christ, Pfeiffer suggests that women will also survive death.

By the end of the 1870s, Pfeiffer's technique of introducing perceptual tricks to add mystery to her poetry (first glimpsed in 1843 in the fifteen-year-old Emily Davis's poem 'The Flowers of Spring') had become a recurring pattern. Pfeiffer's technical mastery of her craft enabled her to use poetic 'slippage' to confuse, intrigue and entrance her readers. This can be discerned in 'A Song of Winter', but seen more clearly in 'Madonna Dūnya' and *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song*. All three poems focus on the themes relating to motherhood that were important parts of the feminist agenda during the 1870s. Yet, signs of another agenda are starting to emerge from Pfeiffer's literary works; an agenda that seems to relate to, or derive from, Pfeiffer's personal experiences. The loss of her family fortune, childlessness, the deaths of her parents, her allegiance to the woman's movement, her frustration with Christian doctrine – all these were the catalysts that drove her to express her Christianity in unorthodox ways – in the 1880s.

### The Eighteen Eighties

Although several new sonnets and lyrics are featured in *Sonnets and Songs* (1880), the volume also contains poems from previous publications.<sup>88</sup> Repeated sonnets include 'Studies from the Antique' (comprising two double sonnets, 'Kassandra' and 'Klytemnestra'), 'A Chrysalis', 'Aspiration' and 'The Winged Soul' while repeated

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<sup>87</sup> See Chapter 3, I.

<sup>88</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Sonnets and Songs* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1880)

lyrics include 'A Song of Winter'. But *Sonnets and Songs* was swiftly followed by the publication of another volume of poems entitled *Under the Aspens, Lyrical and Dramatic* (1882) which includes the only portrait of Emily Pfeiffer - a lithograph of the poet reclining in a hammock.<sup>89</sup> Pfeiffer is portrayed as a shapely young woman with dark, wavy hair. The stylish dress, the tasselled cushions, and the mood of leisure suggested by the hammock, denote opulence. Yet the image of Pfeiffer herself suggests that she is not in repose. Her head is inclined forward, her small features set in an attitude of intense contemplation. Everything about her suggests mental tension, in contrast to the leisurely setting.

In her publication *Under the Aspens*, Pfeiffer's poems include 'From Out of the Night' and 'A Lost Eden', both of which relate to fallen women but in different ways. The volume also features Pfeiffer's blank-verse play, *The Wynnes of Wynhavod: A Drama of Modern Life*, a melodrama in five acts strangely reminiscent of *The Tradition of Gleyira* written when Pfeiffer was fifteen years old. The narrative concerns Winifred Wynne and her brother, Mostyn, heirs of the Wynhavod Estate who have been cheated out of their lands by an English cad called Sir Pierce Thorne.<sup>90</sup> Winifred is kidnapped by a wicked English banker, and everything is complicated by Winifred's love for Norman, Sir Pierce's son, who has been disinherited by his father. The story ends on a happy note, with the marriage of Norman and Winifred and the restoration of the Wynhavod estate to its rightful, Welsh, owners. There is, of course, no way of knowing to what extent this work reflects deeply held feelings of betrayal that Pfeiffer may have nursed

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<sup>89</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Under the Aspens, Lyrical and Dramatic* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882)

<sup>90</sup> Parallels between elements of this drama and the loss of the Davis estates by Pfeiffer's father (alias Sir Pierce Thorne?) support my argument that Pfeiffer had a complex relationship with her English father. Pfeiffer's support for her 'mother-country' over her 'father-country' is evident in this work.

after the loss of her family estates when she was young; but if there were wounds, she compensates for them by creating heroes and heroines who triumph over adversity.

By 1882, *Contemporary Review* had already published 'The Pillar of Praise' in full.

This long poem contains verse of high quality:

Her gown was all of baudekyn, the weft  
Of golden and the woof of silken thread,  
And sewn it was with pearls wherever cleft.  
And diapered with roses white and red;  
The golden sun played with her hair outspread,  
A golden chaplet bound her golden head,  
And if in heraldry this triple use  
Be counted false, here beauty made excuse [...].<sup>91</sup>

Poetry as fine as this is rare, which makes the tragedy that occurred in 1882 particularly distressing. A fire at the premises of Pfeiffer's publishers, Messrs. Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., destroyed the plates of *Gerard's Monument*, *Glân-Alarch*, *Poems and Sonnets and Songs*, although the plates of *Under the Aspens* seem to have survived the fire.<sup>92</sup> Pfeiffer must have been devastated by the destruction of her plates, a disaster which prevented new editions of these publications from being printed for posterity. Edward rallied to her aid and, probably taking the advice of Pfeiffer's new publishers Field and Tuer, wrote the Preface to a new compilation of Pfeiffer's sonnets in a publication entitled *Sonnets* (1886). In the Preface Edward explains the situation to Pfeiffer's readers:

On the destruction by fire, in 1882, at Messrs. Kegan Paul, Trench & Co.'s establishment, of the six volumes of Mrs. Pfeiffer's poems which had then

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<sup>91</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, 'The Pillar of Praise', *Contemporary Review*, 37 (1880), 392-414. Pfeiffer also contributed to *Cornhill Magazine*.

<sup>92</sup> At the back of Pfeiffer's volume *Women and Work* (1888) the four volumes burned in the fire are listed with a footnote stating that 'they will be republished whenever time and the health of the author are found equal to their revision'.



appeared, a third and uniform edition would have been forthwith prepared, had other engagements, coupled with the state of the writer's health, permitted her to undertake the labour of revision which she deemed necessary [...].

I have taken the somewhat unusual course of printing (with full permission of those of the writers still living) some private notices of the Sonnets, because I have felt in many of them so intimate a reflection of the author's meaning, varied and individualized by the minds which gave it back, as would be likely to stimulate the interest of readers to whom the sonnet form presents difficulties.

If some idea that the estimate expressed by these eminent persons of Mrs. Pfeiffer's work will be useful in opening a way for it in regions where it is not known, or less so than in her own country, I may be pardoned for all allowing it some weight [...].<sup>93</sup>

The loss of her plates was the fourth major disaster of Pfeiffer's life and, as previously, Pfeiffer sought solace through her work. Supported by her husband, her Christian faith, and her work for women's causes, Pfeiffer published *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew* (1884) and *Flying Leaves from East and West* (1885) in the four-year interim between the fire and the publication of *Sonnets* (1886). Yet there is a feeling of *déjà vu* when, in his Preface to *Sonnets*, Edward writes that Pfeiffer's third edition would have been prepared 'had other engagements, coupled with the state of the writer's health, permitted her to undertake the labour of revision which she deemed necessary'. These words seem to echo those of the fifteen-year-old Emily Davis who blamed a 'family affliction' for preventing her from 'bestowing, on the revisal of her manuscript, the time and attention she could have wished to dedicate to [*The Holly-Branch*]'. In both instances Pfeiffer's pain can be felt behind the words.

In order to promote *Sonnets*, Field & Tuer took the unusual step of inserting the complimentary reviews of Pfeiffer's sonnets right at the front of the volume. The first

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<sup>93</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Sonnets* (London: Field & Tuer, 1886), Preface, xi-xiii.

eminent Victorian to review Pfeiffer's sonnets was her dear friend and adviser, Mark Pattison (1813-84) – his words printed posthumously. A Tractarian, strongly influenced by John Newman, Pattison had stopped short of converting to Roman Catholicism. Believed to be the subject upon which George Eliot based the character of Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, A. N. Wilson writes of him: 'Pattison lost his faith [...] [and ended up as] the crabby old Rector of Lincoln College [...] [yet he was] one of the most eminent of the reforming dons in [Oxford] University'.<sup>94</sup> Pattison's words speak directly to Pfeiffer:

I think the most striking and original of your sonnets are those which are inspired by the evolutional idea – an idea or form of universal apprehension, which, like a boa, has infolded all in this generation in its inexorable coil [...]. The sonnet in series is exactly the vehicle which fits the subject [...]. I have been quite struck with the power and depth of your thought [...].<sup>95</sup>

Another reviewer is Theodore Watts (-Dunton) (1832-1914), the lawyer who, as a friend of Algernon Swinburne (whose favourable review of *Sonnets* is also included here), gave advice to William Morris when the meteoric success of Morris & Co caused legal difficulties. A friend of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne and Alfred Tennyson, Watts was respected not only for his literary discernment but also for his own poetic talents. Living in Putney, he would also have been a personal friend of Pfeiffer:

I am, as you know, one of those who believe in the mission of women, especially (if I may say so) of Englishwomen, in bringing about that emancipation of humanity which we hope for – that final emancipation, I mean, from the tyranny of ignorance and wrong [...]. I believe that Mrs. Pfeiffer's part in the good work the women are doing is to write just such verses as these.<sup>96</sup>

The comment of John Bright (1811-1889), the Quaker son of a Rochdale cotton mill owner who became a Liberal statesman renowned for his oratory, is cryptic: 'The world

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<sup>94</sup> A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: John Murray, 1999), 114.

<sup>95</sup> Op. cit., Notices, iii.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., iii, iv.

owes much to those who can teach, as Mrs. Pfeiffer does, what is good in poetry that is good'.<sup>97</sup>

Pfeiffer's friend, Anna Swanwick (1813-1899), was a feminist who had signed John Stuart Mill's petition to Parliament for the political enfranchisement of women. Earlier, in Berlin, she had studied German, Hebrew and Greek and was well known for her translations, such as *Æschylus* (1873). Involved in the founding of Girton College and Somerville Hall, Cambridge, Swanwick had published books in her own name. Of Pfeiffer's *Sonnets* she wrote:

Your 'Sonnets' awaken in me so many thoughts [...]: they are an eloquent protest against the desolating doctrines propounded by modern science, in reply to which the human soul responds with your passionate question, 'What means a temple where there is no God?'<sup>98</sup>

The prestigious author of many literary works, the Irishman, Edward Dowden (1843-1913) writes:

When faiths are undergoing rude (and needful) tests, I think the response of united intellect, imagination, and pure and high feeling to the appeals of the creeds, old and new, must count for much [...]. Such poetry as Mrs. Pfeiffer's helps to keep one from the dimness and lowness of worldly life, and so, even if it solve nothing, it puts one's spirit in the right tone and temper for making spiritual discovery, or for accepting rightly things not understood [...].<sup>99</sup>

It is interesting to note that a majority of the fifteen eminent Victorians whose comments Field & Tuer used to promote *Sonnets* saw Pfeiffer's sonnets as essentially religious. The Anglican cleric, the Rev. Edward White, writes that he successfully used and repeated Pfeiffer's sonnet 'Dread Force' in sermons. Oliver Wendell Holmes likens 'Learn of the Dog' to a 'Scriptural parable'. The Dean of St. Paul notes that her sonnets

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., vi.

inspire 'pure and high thought'. Lady Eastlake respects Pfeiffer for grappling with issues relating to religion and modern science. George D'Oyley Snow, described as the author of '*A Theologico-Political Treatise*', sees Pfeiffer's sonnets as additions to his Bible. Theodore Watts-Dunton is in a minority in his reference to women's emancipation. Perhaps he had read Pfeiffer's earlier article 'Woman's Claim' in *Contemporary Review* (1881).<sup>100</sup> Written prior to the fire, these excerpts provide insight into Pfeiffer's feminist preoccupations:

Women are still sometimes roundly told that they have no grievances [...] there is little to be gained by going over that ground of old wrongs [...]. I will not even more than point in passing at the burning injustice which can wrest from the woman's grasp the child who, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, is the fruit of her labour and sorrow. It is, or ought to be, sufficient that women are awakening to a consciousness that their interests are unrepresented [...].

Women are demanding a fair field wherein to labour [...].

The march of civilization is one sure, if slow, progression from the rule of the strongest to the equal right divine, and it will not stop short of its legitimate end [...]. Our progress is step by step, our only guide the awakening conscience of humanity [...].

These extracts show Pfeiffer using the argument of mothers deprived their children after divorce, to push the cause of female suffrage. She demands a fair field in terms of female employment, seeing women's issues as a progression, a march, from an uncivilised state to the *equal right divine*. These last three words sum up her crusade – the divine right of women to equality in all spheres of life – political, social and spiritual.

After the fire in 1882 Pfeiffer was ill, according to Edward's Preface in *Sonnets* (1886). Yet between 1882 and 1885 (when she published her travelogue, *Flying Leaves from*

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<sup>100</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, 'Woman's Claim', *Contemporary Review*, 39 (1881), 265-277.

*East and West*), Pfeiffer is supposed to have toured Scotland, Turkey, Greece, America and Canada, publishing her 'Scottish' volume in 1884, and her travelogue 1885. The exact sequence of these events is hard to set out chronologically because Pfeiffer's Scottish work, *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew* (1884), was published by Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., the publishers at whose premises the plates of her previous publications had been lost. Although Pfeiffer toured Turkey and Greece in 1883, it seems likely that her trip to Scotland preceded this even though it was published a year later, in 1884. After Pfeiffer's return from America and Canada in 1884, the two halves of *Flying Leaves (East and West)* were published together by Field and Tuer in 1885.

In *The Times*, in 1885, a pronouncement is made: 'The *Academy* learns that Mrs. Emily Pfeiffer is revising the notes of her recent American tour, and will publish them, together with those of her visits to the east, under the title of 'Fly-leaves from East and West''.<sup>101</sup> The actual title of Pfeiffer's travelogue turned out to be *Flying Leaves from East and West* (1885).<sup>102</sup> The first part of this prose work pertains to the East and includes a visit (with her niece) to the harem of the Turkish ex-governor, Midhat Pasha, in Smyrna. Pfeiffer writes:

There is small doubt that the pressure of this domestic incubus has been the chief agent in bringing about that atrophy, that loss of will and working power, which is the present condition of the Turks. It is their perverted womankind, grown feeble and corrupt in the close atmosphere of the harem, who are dragging and holding them down. Come what may, these useless, these even mischievous mouths have to be fed; and it is not out of character when they are maintained upon rapine and murder.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Times*, 31351 (1885), 7.

<sup>102</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Flying Leaves from East and West* (London: Field & Tuer, 1885)

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

In part, Pfeiffer blames the low political status of Turkey on a system that allows women to be enslaved, yet she sees the women of the harem themselves as perverted, feeble and corrupt. Maintained by evil practices, Pfeiffer sees these corrupted women as little more than mouths to be fed. Pfeiffer's feminist ideals do not embrace women who are not, in her view, worthy of respect.

In Greece, Pfeiffer was unpleasantly surprised to find the Parthenon a 'pathetic ruin'.

She protests vehemently:

If Time has its revenges, History has its bitter irony. The reason which thought scorn of the human affections, imagining to build itself a ladder by which, unaided by subtler emotion, it could reach to heaven, after having left this chiefest of its seats to the Greek confession, probably the least reasonable cultus of Christendom, was succeeded in due course by the followers of Mahomet, who, not content with making a powder magazine of the Parthenon, cast the mire of deadliest insult upon the Erectheum, the holy of holies of their pagan predecessors, wherein dwelt the most venerated of the statues of Athene and flourished the sacred olive. In these precincts, consecrated to the purest worship known to the Athenian world, the Turk installed his harem, and fouled the wholesome spring enshrined within it by fœtid droppings from the sullen pool which gathers about the stagnant life of slaves. It might seem that the womanhood which [...] had no accredited place in the Athenian polity, had avenged itself by coming to life among these ruins in some lower serpent form.<sup>104</sup>

Pfeiffer protests against the Moslem Turk whose slavery of women polluted the venerated shrine of Athene. Pfeiffer is disillusioned by the Greece that, having been such an inspiration to her poetry, has turned out to be so disappointing in reality.

She protests against the fifth book of Plato's 'Republic':

Poetry is not history, but it is more; it is the informing spirit, which guides us through the shapeless detritus out of which history is constructed [...]. Poetry is, in sooth, the most essential form of truth, a faint adumbration of the mind of the Highest [...]. In the great trinity of dramatists, Æschylus, Sophocles, and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 43-4.

Euripedes, poetry and womanhood, love and truth were justified as against philosophy [...].

How instructive is the whole of that fifth book of the 'Republic' which treats of the 'Education of Women!' [...]. It is the masculine spirit working alone that we trace in this portion of the wonderful Utopia – the Babel Tower whose malarious ruins are still to be found in Constantinople and elsewhere under the rule of the Turk. Was ever an outrage so callous perpetrated on the human affections as that advocated in this book of the divine Plato [...].?

I turn from the wisdom of Greece; it has become to me foolishness. I turn from the Acropolis, where stands the golden Parthenon [...]. I seek a wisdom higher and more fruitful than the unmated Reason [...]. I aspire to equal justice, I look for unbounded liberty [...]. Here, then, for the first time the mighty bronze image of the Zeus-born Athene [...] was confronted with the herald of Jesus of Nazareth, a name around which the love and faith of unlettered disciples had already woven the pregnant myth, if no more than myth it be, which was to supplant that other.<sup>105</sup>

Pfeiffer concludes her 'Flying Leaves from the East' with an extract from a letter that she herself wrote to Mark Pattison before his death. It includes these words (the italics are Pfeiffer's):<sup>106</sup>

Of all that is purest in this emotion, of all that is distinctively human in the relation even of the sexes, *mother-love* is the primal source. This was recognized by Christianity [...]. Witness the earnestness and readiness of the female followers of Christ [...]. The Attic love of beauty and sympathy with all that is gracious in life stirs me [...], and yet leaves me plenty of scorn for the shallow, dilettante Hellenism which would set up again the fossil remains, the mere empty shell, of ideas which [...] have all 'suffered a sea-change', and passed into things 'new and strange' of our many-sided modern existence.

Pfeiffer's feminist religious beliefs are infused into her mixed-genre work *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew* (1884), a story recounting events that occur to a Victorian poet and her German husband during their tour of Scotland.<sup>107</sup> The frame

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 62-6. In *The Republic of Plato*, trans. F. M. Cornford (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1955), 451, Plato writes: 'Which do we think right for watch-dogs: should the females guard the flock and hunt with the males [...] or should they be kept within doors as fit for no more than bearing and feeding their puppies [...].?'

<sup>106</sup> See p.58 for Mark Pattison's comments regarding Pfeiffer's *Sonnets*.

<sup>107</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1884). This work is the subject of Chapter 4.

narrative and the inner narrative are set in different time-frames and different circumstances, and yet the Victorian poet and the heroine of her medieval ballad seem strangely bound together. This work can be read as a straightforward travel book but, being familiar with the textual trickery Pfeiffer employs in other publications, it can also be interpreted as one in which Pfeiffer uses her literary skills to fuse her feminist and religious interests in novel ways.

In the second half of *Flying Leaves from East to West* Pfeiffer describes a tour which takes her to New York, Canada, San Francisco, the Rocky Mountains, Salt Lake City, the Yosemite Valley, and back to Boston via St. Louis and Philadelphia and Washington. During this four-month tour, Pfeiffer's reflections are often light-hearted and amusing although the going is often extremely rough. Her all-too-close encounter with a skunk is recollected with relish.<sup>108</sup> Yet Pfeiffer devotes a substantial part of her travelogue on her visit to a Mormon community, openly expressing her disapproval of polygamy:

All that is distinctive in the Mormon cult rests upon the authority of Joseph Smith. Doubt the good faith of the Prophet, or the reality of his mission, and the whole edifice crumbles to the ground [...]. He it was who, all unlearned as he was [...] translated [the] record of the ancient dwellers in the American continent; and he it was also [...] [who accepted] the command to practice and to diffuse the doctrine of polygamy [...]; the stumbling-block and stone of offence in that it must bring this people sooner or later into bloody collision with the American Government and is in itself a retrograde movement [...].<sup>109</sup>

After several interviews with Mormons, especially Mormon wives, participating in polygamous marriages, Pfeiffer expresses her distain for men who, because of their

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<sup>108</sup> Op. cit., 114. 'The skunk [...] will come dancing up delicately, its tail in the air, foot over foot almost crossing each other in their dainty steps, and with what you might swear was a smile on its little cat face [...] [will] rub itself against your legs, when – poof! You fall, felled like a tree, strangled with the breath that does not dare to come out of your nostrils, and like to die of the infernal stench'.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 147-8.



professed sexual needs, feel justified in keeping several wives. Although she was told that prostitution does not exist in Mormon communities, Pfeiffer was nevertheless suspicious of the motives of Joseph Smith who introduced the doctrine of polygamy to the cult. It becomes clear in reading this travelogue that the underlying motive for Pfeiffer's visit to both East (the harem in Smyrna) and West (the Mormon community at Salt Lake City) is to expose her British readers to what she viewed as man's inhumanity to woman. This Pfeiffer does by drawing parallels between what she describes as the 'slavery' of women in the harems of the East and the illegal 'stone of offence' against wives in polygamous marriages in the West.

In her travels across great swathes of America Pfeiffer is not always impressed by the white Americans she meets. In Colorado, however, she is captivated by 'an engaging little damsel of barely three [who] was my neighbour at table', and is particularly impressed by Charles, a 'coloured gentleman [...] who has appointed himself the special guardian of our interests. He is a young African of four and twenty, good-looking and alert [...]'.<sup>110</sup> Also in *Flying Leaves from the West*, Pfeiffer writes of Edward's anxiety when she succumbs to illness, just as in *Flying Leaves from the East* she writes of her near panic when Edward is taken ill in Turkey. Intrepid and courageous travellers though they were, they were both well past their prime by Victorian standards. Edward had only five more years to live and Pfeiffer, six.

Back in London, in 1884, the subject of divorce was causing furious debate in the House of Commons and Pfeiffer, with an even greater degree of confidence than hitherto revealed, joined the fray. Now a respected traveller whose publication

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 131.

(recounting at first hand visits to a Turkish harem and a Mormon community) was awaited by readers of the *Times* and the *Academy* (and probably other newspapers), Pfeiffer felt fully qualified to attack the men whose unjust laws, she felt, led to the maltreatment of wives and children. Pfeiffer's poem, 'Outlawed: A Rhyme for the Time', was published in full in *Contemporary Review* (1884), and later in *Flowers of the Night* (1889) her final volume of poetry published a year before her death. In this latter publication, Pfeiffer adds a footnote, dated 27 March, 1884, referring to Mr. Bryce's Infants' Bill.

Debate on Mr. Bryce's Infants' Bill, in the course of which it was made clear that the House generally regarded children as having but one parent; that one, not the woman to whose guardianship children are primarily committed by nature, but the man who frames this law by which the case between the parents, when it arises, is adjudged.

Pfeiffer does not mince her words as she spells out her opinion about the feminist and religious implications of unjust divorce laws and their effects on mothers and children. In the final lines of 'Outlawed', Pfeiffer likens politicians who make the divorce laws to slave owners and the children they beget (by the passive women who submit to their cruel laws) as slaves. Once again, Pfeiffer separates feminists fighting for emancipation from women who conform to male domination:

With what slight creatures will you wive  
In coming days, O men of pride,  
When those of us who greatly strive  
Are driven homeless from your side?  
You do not well to make the gate  
Of entrance to your halls so strait,  
That access to the heaven within  
The highest hearts no more may win;  
You are not wise to rest your hope  
On natures of a narrower scope,  
And leave the souls which like your own  
Aspire, to find their way alone,  
And go down childless to their graves,

The while you get your sons of slaves.<sup>111</sup>

These final lines of her poem reiterate Pfeiffer's perception of the fight for women's rights as a religious crusade. Right from the start of her poetic career, in *Margaret: or, the Motherless* (1861), Pfeiffer railed against the inhumane divorce laws that deprived mothers of their children and, even more cruelly, children of their mothers. During her lifetime, three women poets that she knew – Caroline Norton, Rosamund Marriott Watson and Frances Anne Kemble – had themselves, upon divorce, had small children taken from them by their husbands. Pfeiffer's footnote correctly states that at that time, in terms of the law, Victorian children had but 'one parent' – the father.

By now Pfeiffer seems almost reckless in her fight for women's emancipation. In her final contribution to *Contemporary Review* (1885) under the title 'The Suffrage for Women' she devotes almost eighteen pages to this end:<sup>112</sup>

The gradual emancipation of the non-combatant half of the human family, by which the degree of civilization attained by any people may be gauged, is in effect the slow triumph of the spiritual nature over the brute (419).

The whole process of evolution, after the building up of the human body, is a history of the gradual transformation of the brain. The line of progress having come to an end on the lower plane, has been lifted by an unseen hand to a higher (419).

In England [...] the cruelty of the law in relation to women has made us a by-word among the nations [...]. Even the amelioration of the laws concerning the property of wives, which has been conceded within the last twenty years, has barely brought the statue in this country up to the level of that which protects the female subject of the Czar of Russia (420).

We are no longer satisfied with these crumbs of justice that fall from the rich man's table, and all the less that they are given, not as of right, but in charity (421).

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<sup>111</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, 'A Rhyme for a Time', *Contemporary Review*, 45 (1884), 828-835. See also as 'Outlawed' in *Flowers of the Night* (London: Trübner, 1889), 72-89.

<sup>112</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Contemporary Review*, 47 (1885), 418-435.

These extracts show Pfeiffer introducing the concept of spiritual intervention, an ‘unseen hand’ that (via evolutionary processes) lifts mankind from the brute to a higher spiritual plane of existence. England, she says, is a backward country because of the ways its laws treat women. Women are no longer going to accept petty concessions, ‘crumbs of justice’, instead of the justice that is theirs by right. This is the kind of suffragist talk that, in the decades after Pfeiffer’s death, inspired women to take the radical action that eventually changed the law in women’s favour. As it was, Pfeiffer was already working on her essay, *Women and Work*, in which she puts forward her case for higher education for girls.

*Women and Work* (1888), published two years before Pfeiffer’s death, consists of one-hundred-and-eight pages of text as well as an extensive appendix consisting of the results of surveys by the Principals of two academic institutions for women – one in Ireland and one in the United States.<sup>113</sup> Pfeiffer sums up the first chapter of her treatise with these words:

As I have endeavoured to show, it is highly probable that education, in taking the fetters from the soul and supplying a higher ideal of wifely duty, will add to, rather than diminish, the pliancy of woman in her external relations to man as his companion and helpmate.<sup>114</sup>

In subsequent chapters, Pfeiffer looks at all the usual reasons put forward by men to explain why advanced education for women could prove harmful, and then she debunks them one by one, providing statistical data to support her facts. She strives to reassure men, husbands in particular, that they can benefit from having educated wives. Her

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<sup>113</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Women and Work: An Essay treating on the Relation to Health and Physical Development, of the Higher Education of Girls, and the Intellectual or More-Systematised Effort of Women* (London: Trübner, 1888)

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

chapter on the economic problems associated with women's education champions the working woman:

The woman worker, standing alone and unaided, is beset on every side with difficulty, if not with injustice and exaction. In certain callings, that, for instance, of the milliner, a money deposit is claimed for work executed at home, and that often in excess of the value of the materials. In a meeting held at Bristol against this and other abuses, it was ascertained that a single manufacturer had obtained of his hands, deposits to the value of £3000. Not only is the unfortunate woman compelled [...] to work at home, ground down to famine wages, but the middleman [...] requires that she shall take out the miserable pittance of her labour in articles of food and clothing, on which his profits are often exorbitant [...].<sup>115</sup>

Pfeiffer goes on to discuss the organisation of trades unions set up to protect women from abuse, and here the influence of her Welsh childhood (living only a mile from Newtown's flannel industry during the years of the Rebecca riots and the Chartist uprisings) is apparent. Pfeiffer quotes statistics to support her points: 'The workwomen of New York [...] [in a single year] had to institute proceedings against 160 employers, who, under false pretexts, had reduced or altogether held back the already pitiful pay of their work women'.<sup>116</sup> Again, she quotes statistics:

At the recent turn-out of the cotton-spinners of Belfast, men and women, to the number of many thousands, protested by the cessation of work against the diminution of their wages. The men, thanks to their union, succeeded in decreasing by one-half the reduction proposed, while the women, who had no such union, were compelled to accept it entire.<sup>117</sup>

Pfeiffer has clearly taken great pains to survey all aspects of the complex issues relating to women and work. She pleads for 'added protection to children of the weaker and more burthened sex thrown out by the way', writing of the 'perils that beset the path of women' and asking that 'a juster distribution of property between sons and daughters'

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 47.

should be made. Again and again Pfeiffer links women's employment and education to spirituality, stating that 'the faith in the Unseen Power that works for righteousness, assures us that heavy reprisals would be exacted for cruelty [...]'.<sup>118</sup>

It is the emancipation of women, then, from the absolutism, the leading, and from what is too often the tyranny of man, which is the meaning of the new activity that is everywhere at work [...]. The woman, ceasing to be a mere queen-consort, as in the old ideal, will become a queen-regnant, bound to no taskwork, but acting in accordance with a rule from within – the true helper and complement of man, reigning no longer solely by his grace, but by the grace of God.<sup>119</sup>

In later chapters, Pfeiffer publishes statistics pertaining to the physical and medical effects of academic work on female students. To provide these statistics Pfeiffer draws on 'leading educationists' in favour of higher education for women, these include: Miss Welsh, Principal of Girton; Miss Clough of Newnham College; Miss Wordsworth of Lady Margaret Hall; Miss Buss, Principal of the North London Collegiate School (where her friend the poet Emily Hickey lectured); and, finally, the redoubtable Miss Beale of Cheltenham College. All these female academics provide facts and figures that prove that advanced education is of benefit to women in mind, body and spirit. Pfeiffer leaves the lion's share of her survey to the Miss Beale, stating: 'Every word of this veteran educationist is weighty, and my only regret is that I am unable in this place to avail myself of it more largely'.<sup>120</sup>

The suffragist, Dorothea Beale (1831-1906), was the famous pioneer of women's education who, apart from being the Principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College for more than thirty years, was the founder of the first women's teacher-training college, St. Hilda's College, Cheltenham, in 1885. In 1893, three years after Pfeiffer's death, Beale

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 119.

was to sponsor St. Hilda's Hall, Oxford. In Pfeiffer's treatise, Beale explains that in the early years of her career examinations were considered dangerous for schoolgirls and university-level examinations were unheard of. An all-male Enquiry Commission monitored activities at Cheltenham Ladies' College and attempted, without success, to persuade Beale to place the girls' religious education into the hands of the clergy. This interference shows how difficult it was for female educators to avoid patriarchal control. Beale compiled her own supplementary hymn-book for school worship which included several hymns paying tribute to women such as the Virgin Mary, St. Hilda, Ruth, Deborah and other saintly females. A hymn entitled 'Work in Heaven' (possibly written by Beale herself) describes heaven as a place where feminine souls continue the humanitarian work they started whilst alive on earth. Of four verses, verses 3 and 4 are included here:

Surely there must be work to do in heaven,  
Since work is the best thing on earth we know;  
Life were but tasteless bread without this leaven –  
A draught from some dead river's overflow.

Would this content us now? How then forever?  
By seraph and by saint God's will is done;  
There is no Heaven save in the soul's endeavour  
To do His will, while endless ages run.<sup>121</sup>

For women like Beale and Pfeiffer women's humanitarian work, started on a temporal plane, continues on a spiritual plane after death. The work started in this life is merely a preparation for the next. This hymn is very different in character from those written by women when Pfeiffer was a child. By the time *Women and Work* was published, editors of hymn-books were publishing more hymns by women than previously when the first edition of *A&M* was published in 1861. The 1889 edition of *A&M*, for example,

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<sup>121</sup> Dorothea Beale, ed., *School Hymns, Supplementary to Church Hymns* [1892] (London: Bell, [n.d.], #102.

included hymns by women such as Cecil Frances Alexander, Frances Ridley Havergal, Caroline Noel, Jane Leeson, Jane Taylor and others, but of the 638 hymns even now only 45 were written by women.

The struggle for the political, social and spiritual emancipation of women was a slow process. Suffragettes would have to chain themselves to railings, go to prison, suffer forced-feeding, and work long hours for poor wages in World War One, before the emancipation that Pfeiffer worked for would become a reality.

As the nineteenth century moved towards its final decade, Pfeiffer became part of a London coterie of ‘well-established poets, writers, novelists and dramatists’.<sup>122</sup> A late-Victorian poet, Pfeiffer’s friendship group included *fin-de siècle* women poets such as A. Mary F. Robinson, as well as Katharine Tynan Hinkson (whose poems, like Pfeiffer’s, were regularly published in the *Spectator*), Mathilde Blind, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Louisa Bevington, Michael Field and Augusta Webster. Emily Hickey was an especially close friend of Pfeiffer’s.<sup>123</sup> These and other poets, such as Constance Naden, were living in and around London at a time when improvements in transport were making the capital more accessible, but by now Edward had become very frail and Pfeiffer stayed at home to nurse him during his final months. Her life-long companion, who lovingly supported her in good times and bad, Edward died in 1889 leaving Pfeiffer to mourn alone. In the year of Edward’s death, *Flowers of the Night* (1889) was published. As usual Pfeiffer included well-received lyrics and sonnets from previous publications as well as new poems. The title, *Flowers of the Night*, refers to the

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<sup>122</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, ‘Immaterial Poetics: A. Mary F. Robinson and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Poem’, *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem, English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 240.

<sup>123</sup> Some of these poets are mentioned in later chapters.



poems Pfeiffer composed in her head during the hours she lay awake at night, unable to sleep.

*Flowers of the Night* includes ‘Any Husband to Many a Wife’, a ‘mirror’ poem in which Pfeiffer’s deployment of dramatic irony demonstrates her insight into the human condition.<sup>124</sup> Other poems in this volume include ‘The Witch’s Last Ride’ and ‘The Sonly Milkmaid’ – two light-hearted poems which use humour to depict aspects of feminine power.<sup>125</sup> But, more seriously, in her Preface, Pfeiffer confesses to finding the idea of death increasingly attractive, as her ‘Hymn in Praise of Death’ demonstrates:<sup>126</sup>

Beautiful Death! I sing thee as one has sung  
Whose song like mine from the depths of his being was wrung [...];

Love, that has laboured and suffered, the mother mature  
Of all that is highest in hope and has claim to endure;  
Love, that has quickened in darkness and grown to its height,  
Leapt into fullness of life in the womb of the night [...].

I sing not of Love but of Death, the strong nurse of the soul [...].

Thine the soft breast we reclined on when done was the day,  
Thine the strong hand, O dread Death! The upbearing our dead,  
Lifted’st the veil o’er the face of the infinite spread [...];

Aid us, O Father, for none may now serve us but Thee [...]; -

This we up-raise Thee for, praise Thee for, Angel of death!

Pfeiffer’s speaker portrays the angel of death as a mother, a strong nurse of the soul, upon whose soft breast the dying can recline in the dark as love quickens in her womb. Juxtaposing the pangs of death with those of a mother’s labour from which the spark of

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<sup>124</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Flowers of the Night* (London: Trübner, 1889), 55.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-17., 68-9.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-116.

life leaps, Pfeiffer brings an almost erotic quality into that moment when love and death quicken. Finally she asks for God's help as she praises His Angel of death.

Emily Pfeiffer died on 3 January, 1890, and on Tuesday, 28 January, 1890, her death was announced in *The Times*: 'Many readers will regret to hear of the death of Mrs. Emily Pfeiffer [...]. Mrs. Pfeiffer, who had for some time been of delicate health, survived her husband, Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer, by just one year, and died at her residence at Mayfield, West-Hill, Putney [...]' Pfeiffer's property, left to her by Edward, was valued at over £63,000, and this vast fortune was to be distributed according to her late husband's wishes, as follows:

The bulk of his property is to be distributed among charitable and educational institutions for women only [...]. [Mrs. Pfeiffer] also, by her codicil, leaves the whole of the property of her late husband invested in securities to be applied in the establishment and endowment of cottage homes for destitute girls (preferably orphans), to be called "Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer's Homes".<sup>127</sup>

Educational institutions in particular benefited from the Pfeiffer fortune. Facilities for female students were built at Aberdare Hall, University of Wales, Cardiff. Money was also given to Newnham College, Cambridge, where the Pfeiffer arch and gate, completed in 1893, can still be seen today. Pfeiffer also contributed £3000 to Hughes Hall, the oldest Graduate College in Cambridge, unique for specialising in the admission of women graduates at a time when the University itself still did not confer degrees on women. This institute first came into being in 1885 and the first Principal, Miss Elizabeth Hughes (1851-1925), championed the cause of co-education and freedom of worship. A Welsh scholar (with the bardic name 'Merch Myrddin') Hughes taught at Cheltenham Ladies College and was the only woman on the committee that

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<sup>127</sup> *Times*, Friday, March 21, 32965 (1890), 10.

drafted the charter of the University of Wales where, in 1920, she received an honorary degree. Pfeiffer no doubt orchestrated these, and other, bequests. If there existed 'Jürgen Edward Pfeiffer Homes', they are no longer in existence.

As an adult, Emily Pfeiffer concentrated her exceptional literary talents upon the promotion of her Christian faith and her feminism. For Pfeiffer, the political struggle for gender equality and the spiritual struggle to uphold the Christian faith were interlinked and interdependent. If Pfeiffer's religious beliefs fluctuated or changed in the years between maturity and old age, this can be discerned only through study of her literary works. I therefore trace the course of Pfeiffer's feminist crusade by examining poems taken from volumes published during her most prolific years - the twelve years between 1873 and 1884. In evaluating these poems, my objective is to justify my contention that Pfeiffer has a place in the canon of late-Victorian women's religious poetry.

## CHAPTER 2: EMILY PFEIFFER, RELIGIOUS POET

### I LYRIC POETRY

In 1873 and 1876 Emily Pfeiffer, already in her forties, published her first two volumes of poems. In this chapter, and from these two publications, I evaluate three lyric poems in order to raise the question: is this a religious poem? In confronting this question within the context of the Victorian period another, more fundamental, question arises: what is a religious poem? Unusually for the women who published their poetry around the mid-1870s Pfeiffer was raised a Central Anglican, and this fact poses another question: where do Pfeiffer's lyric poems fit, if they fit at all, into the canon of Victorian women's religious poetry? In evaluating Pfeiffer's treatment of issues relating to faith, gender and identity, as well as her deployment of biblical references and archetypes, I justify my reasons for selecting these three poems for discussion. Firstly, however, I position Pfeiffer's poetry within the more general context of the lyric genre.

In her lyric poetry Pfeiffer appears to be a proponent of what Isobel Armstrong calls 'the poetics of expression', as this extract from her title poem 'Gerard's Monument' in *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* (1873) demonstrates:<sup>1</sup>

And sometimes when his sister came  
    Bringing the morning in her hair,  
And in her eyes the pure soft flame  
    Of human love, and cleared the air  
Of thick night-fancies with her breath,  
    And with her hands' cool pressure chased  
    The vagrant thoughts which burn to waste, -  
So with quick life abashing death,-  
Those tears of lonely anguish yet  
On Gerard's wasted cheek were wet.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry, Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 332-3.

In expressing the pure soft flame of human love, the cool pressure of hands, the vagrant thoughts, the tears of anguish, and the wasted cheek, Pfeiffer is all gush and feeling. Conforming to, or confined to, a women's tradition set in train by Laetitia Landon (L.E.L.) (1802-38), Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), and other women poets, 'Gerard's Monument' is redolent of those qualities that has tended to make Victorian women's lyric poetry the butt of adverse scholarly criticism both in Victorian and modern, twenty-first century, times. William Rossetti's 'Prefatory Notice' for a posthumous edition of Felicia Hemans's poetry, probably published in 1873 (the year of the publication of *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems*) typifies this kind of criticism:

Her skill, however, hardly rises into the loftier region of art [...]. Her sources of inspiration being genuine, and tone of her mind feminine in an intense degree, the product has no lack of sincerity: and yet it leaves a certain artificial impression, rather perhaps through a cloying flow of 'right-minded' perceptions of moral and material beauty [...]. One might sum up the weak points in Mrs. Hemans's poetry by saying that it is not only 'feminine' poetry [...] but also 'female' poetry: besides exhibiting the fineness and charm of womanhood, it has the monotone of mere sex.<sup>3</sup>

The 'feminine mind', the 'cloying flow' of 'female' poetry, 'the monotone of mere sex' – these kinds of words, Armstrong suggests, reveal 'uneasiness' towards women's lyric poetry.<sup>4</sup> This same kind of uneasiness is also apparent in the terms used by the reviewer of *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* writing for *The Times*, and also by the reviewer of *Poems* writing for *The Pall Mall Gazette*.<sup>5</sup> This latter reviewer uses the terms 'sentimental', 'feeble', 'unmusical' 'sickly' and 'ridiculous' in his critique of

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, 'Gerard's Monument', *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1873), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., 333. See William Michael Rossetti, ed., *Poetical Works of Mrs. Felicia Hemans* [1873] (London: William Collins, n.d.), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Op., cit., 320.

<sup>5</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3427 (1876), 12. For details of unfavourable reviews see Chapter 1 (*The Times* pp.47-8 and *Pall Mall Gazette*, p.50). The unfavourable *Pall Mall Gazette* review pre-dates the 1880s and 1890s when Alice Meynell (1847-1922) and other women poets such as Katharine Tynan Hinkson and Rosamund Marriott Watson wrote for the paper.

Pfeiffer's love-lyrics. Pfeiffer's poem, 'Everild', a love-lyric consisting of four stanzas, is singled out as being especially ridiculous. In the first three stanzas the speaker addresses a rose, while the final stanza reveals that the 'rose' is Everild, the speaker's wife. The last two stanzas are included here:

O symbol Rose with fragrant heart!  
It was not thus in halcyon days  
You had not these sweet hidden ways,  
Your single beauty open'd wide,  
It had not learnt this tender pride,  
Nor knew from an exhaustless mine  
To make each yielded gift divine!

My blushing, close-lipped Everild!  
Your heart is secret as the rose,  
Whose guarded treasure still o'er flows  
Upon the air, and makes a sphere  
Precious to all who linger near.  
For me that heart, my sphinx, my wife,  
Holds revelation deep as life!<sup>6</sup>

In this poem, a husband expresses his love for his wife and, superficially at least, Pfeiffer's love-lyric conforms to the conventions of the genre. Yet Pfeiffer uses a husband to make inferences about his wife in ways that the reviewer of the *Pall Mall Gazette* either objected to, or missed completely. The first point that Pfeiffer makes through the husband speaker is that the wife, Everild, has secrets - 'nectar' and 'covert bliss' - which she hides within herself. Secondly, Pfeiffer's male speaker suggests that Everild's 'nectar' and 'bliss' pertain to 'mystic wealth' locked deep within her heart. No boastful male invader can ravish Everild in order to obtain the sacred riches she conceals. Holding within herself 'revelations deep as life' Everild has learned to guard her treasure, her 'gift divine'. Beneath this outpouring of romantic love a subtext emerges. The love-object, Everild, who in more halcyon days had been open and

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Poems* (London: Strahan, 1876), 13-4.

trusting, has now learned to be silent. Yet the ‘gift’ of secrecy makes her ever more mysterious, mystical, desirable and precious to her husband. Because of *her* silence *he* can more fully express his feelings. The darker side of this poem, relating to what Isobel Armstrong describes as ‘the aesthetics of the secret’, suggests that what the husband sees as ‘mystic wealth’ and ‘covert bliss’ is not the case.<sup>7</sup> Marriage for Everild has been a slow process of repression. What Everild’s husband sees as sexual, spiritual and sphinx-like could in fact be symptoms of depression, or *neurasthenia* – a neurotic condition characterised by languor, numbness and feelings of hopelessness. Far from being ridiculous, Pfeiffer’s poem can be seen as a mid-to-late-Victorian version of a lyric tradition established by poets such as Anne and Emily Brontë, Adelaide Procter, Dora Greenwell and others. While outwardly conforming to the conventions of the genre, there is that inner voice which for Greenwell is ‘so sad, so truthful, so earnest, that we have felt as if some intimate secret were at once communicated and withheld [...]’.<sup>8</sup>

There is, of course, another way of reading this poem, a way which ties in with a prose work published by Pfeiffer in the early years of her marriage. In *Valisneria, or A Midsummer Day’s Dream* (1857), a wife takes the moral high-ground when she teaches her husband to practise the Christian message of charity.<sup>9</sup> Conforming to his wife’s expectations of him the husband calls his wife ‘true guardian spirit and prophetess’ and readily acknowledges her right, even her prerogative as a wife, to guide him towards a virtuous lifestyle. In ‘Everild’ the husband makes similar points as he addresses his

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., 339-340. Armstrong writes that ‘Victorian expressive theory is affective and of the emotions. It is concerned with feeling. It psychologised, subjectivised and often moralised the firm epistemological base of Romantic theory, though its warrant was in Wordsworth’s spontaneous *overflow* of feeling’, 340.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 342. Armstrong quotes from Dora Greenwell’s *Essays*, London: 1866.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Valisneria, or A Midsummer Day’s Dream: A Tale in Prose* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1857), 301. See Chapter 1, pp.39-40.

wife. Referring to secret treasures – ‘hoarded gifts’ and ‘mystic wealth’ - the husband acknowledges the sacred knowledge and wisdom his wife has acquired and stored up within herself during their marriage. Although Everild’s spirituality, her ‘guarded treasure’, is held deep within her heart, ‘all who linger near’ find themselves in a sphere made precious by her divine gifts. In this interpretation of ‘Everild’ Pfeiffer, a poet writing later in the century, inverts ‘the aesthetics of the secret’. Far from being a sad, silent and repressed sexual object, Everild is a ‘revelation’, a power-house of spirituality. Pfeiffer conforms to ‘the aesthetics of the secret’ in order to subvert it by portraying Everild, a wife, as the strong, spiritually dominant, silent, sphinx-like partner in her marriage. All the feminine ‘gush’ is manifested by the husband – the gender roles reversed.

That the reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* was mistaken in his opinion of Pfeiffer’s love-lyrics, and that he failed to recognise the subtlety of her work, is the starting point for my exploration of Pfeiffer’s poetry. Yet, in presenting my argument that Pfeiffer is an important poet who deserves a place in the canon of Victorian religious women poets, a problem immediately presents itself. For, apart from Pfeiffer, who were the Central Anglican women poet members of the Established Church writing religious poetry around the mid-1870s? Although Pfeiffer’s late-Victorian female poetic contemporaries include Atheists, Theists, Baptists, Methodists, Wesleyans, Congregationalists, Tractarians, Quakers, Unitarians, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Swedenborgians, ‘Hylo-Idealists’ and others – where, apart from a small number of hymn-writers, are the Central Anglican Victorian women religious poets?<sup>10</sup> The influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) on Pfeiffer’s blank-

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<sup>10</sup> I define Atheism as a religion. Emanuel Swedenborg’s visionary writings interested Elizabeth Barrett Browning and others. ‘Hylo-idealism’ was practiced by Constance Naden, see part II of this chapter, pp. 123-132.



verse novel *Margaret: or, The Motherless* (1861) is striking, especially as there is a gap of only four years between the two publications.<sup>11</sup> Yet, when *Poems* was published, Elizabeth Barrett Browning had been dead for fifteen years. In addition, the two poets had been raised in different religious environments, Barrett Browning as a Congregationalist and Pfeiffer as a Central Anglican. Even if during the overall course of Barrett Browning's and Pfeiffer's lives their religious experience changed, or even converged, their early religious conditioning would tend to separate them on essential matters of doctrine; besides which, Barrett Browning published her verse earlier in the century. Bearing these problems in mind, I evaluate Pfeiffer's lyric poem, 'The Crown of Song' (1876).

### 'The Crown of Song' (1876)

In 'The Crown of Song' Pfeiffer depicts a woman poet as having qualities that God recognises as especially sacred.<sup>12</sup> Unlike male poets, Pfeiffer's words infer, the woman poet may go unnamed and unrewarded on earth, but it is for this very reason that God and His Angels particularly recognise and value *her* sacrifices which are on a par with those of saints and martyrs. These unique feminine spiritual gifts are abundantly rewarded in heaven. In 'The Crown of Song', Pfeiffer makes the point that Christian women poets are the *vates* – visionaries, sages and prophets. In this she is directly opposing the traditional idea of the *vates* as being a man, a view generally held in Western culture and emphasised by Thomas Carlyle in 1840: 'The *Vates* [...] is a man

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 1, pp.42-44.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Poems* (London: Strahan, 1876), 41-2.

sent hither to make [divine mystery] more impressively known to us [...].<sup>13</sup> As Karen Dieleman says:

According to this configuration, only male poets and prose writers could claim the visionary authority of an Old Testament prophet to critique Victorian culture and offer alternative world views. The ideological configurations of respectable femininity also discouraged women writers from participating in such public and authoritative discourse.<sup>14</sup>

Yet Dieleman draws attention to Thais Morgan's view that Victorian women writers often critiqued and subverted the patriarchal model of sage discourse by boldly entering 'the masculine world of socio-economic conflict, theological polemic, and sexual politics' despite the risks associated with 'adopting a 'masculine' tone of authority'.<sup>15</sup> Referring to those who see *Aurora Leigh* as an example of sage discourse, or Victorian Nonconformist sage discourse, Dieleman argues that 'the poet-as-prophet paradigm was actually a conflicted one for Barrett Browning [...]'.<sup>16</sup> Firstly, Dieleman argues, 'the figure of a cultural prophet imbued with authoritative vision revealed to him alone [...] did not ultimately accord with Barrett Browning's democratic attitude as to how [religious] knowledge or wisdom is gained'.<sup>17</sup> Dieleman explains that in the Congregationalist Declaration of Faith: 'Human traditions, fathers and councils, canons and creeds, possess no authority of the faith and practice of Christians'.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Congregationalist preachers had to earn the respect of both sexes, 'preachers and priests in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church were seen as the inheritors of

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* [1840] (London: George Routledge, n.d.), 108. These words were first delivered as part of Carlyle's third (of six) lectures given on 12 May, 1840,

<sup>14</sup> Karen Dieleman, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Religious Poetics: Congregationalist Models of Hymnist and Preacher', *Victorian Poetry*, 45 (2007), 135.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 135. Dieleman quotes from Thais Morgan's 'Victorian Sage Discourse and the Feminine: An Introduction', *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourses: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. Thais Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

apostolic authority [...]’.<sup>19</sup> Dieleman goes on to suggest that only late in her career, in *Aurora Leigh*, was Barrett Browning able to represent a woman as a poet-preacher and overcome her egalitarian Congregationalist principles. Not so Pfeiffer. As a Central Anglican, she had no difficulties in representing her female narrator in ‘The Crown of Song’ as ‘the figure of a cultural prophet imbued with authoritative vision revealed to [her] alone’ in order to make religious statements that are almost blatant in their directness.<sup>20</sup> To become the *vates* in order to set out her authoritative vision for women poets was, to Pfeiffer, perfectly in keeping with her Anglican principles.<sup>21</sup> A year after the publication of *Aurora Leigh* (1856) (when Barrett Browning reversed the Victorian domestic *status quo* by depicting Romney as caring for the poor while Aurora wrote poetry) Pfeiffer had published *Valisneria* in which a wife states of her husband: ‘My Sydney, once fully awake to truths which it had been my blind good fortune to unveil to him, has launched upon a career of usefulness [...]’.<sup>22</sup> What Barrett Browning achieved with difficulty in her last years inspired Pfeiffer in her early years, and there was no doctrinal or ideological barrier holding Pfeiffer back from sage discourse. If, late in life, Barrett Browning came to feel that her classical education, her translations, and her renown as a poet, justified her characterisation of Aurora as the *vates*, Pfeiffer had no such scruples - as demonstrated by ‘The Crown of Song’.

‘The Crown of Song’ consists of thirty-three four-line stanzas. The poem starts with three stanzas that are important to the narrative as a whole:

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 17.

<sup>21</sup> The ‘apostolic’ authority of priests in the Church of England is believed to be derived from the apostles who were imbued with the Holy Spirit, while Congregationalist priests are ordinary, albeit learned, individuals trained to preach and give guidance to their fellows.

<sup>22</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Valisneria, or A Midsummer Day’s Dream: A Tale in Prose* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1857), 303.

I heard a sigh, and I turn'd me where  
I thought that breath of a sorrow came;  
O the world is full of sighing and care,  
But sorrow is sorrow all the same.

I heard the sigh, and my tuneful heart  
Beat out the melody underneath,  
For the sigh was a sigh of itself, apart,  
As a wayward bud that has slipt its sheath.

I closed mine eyes the better to hear, -  
The better to hear – the truer to see, -  
And out of the darkness a dream rose clear,  
For shape and sound were as one to me [...]. (40-1)<sup>23</sup>

The narrator is some kind of visionary able to access the spirit world and, in Pfeiffer's use of sensory allusions in these stanzas, a trace of Barrett Browning's influence can be discerned. In her lyric poem 'Human Life's Misery', for example, Barrett Browning refers to 'the senses folding thick and dark / About the stifled soul within' in a way not dissimilar to Pfeiffer's 'I closed mine eyes the better to hear, - / The better to hear – the truer to see-' in the sense that in both instances the aim of shutting down, or folding back, sensory receptors is to engage the *inner* eye.<sup>24</sup> Pfeiffer's narrator shuts down her visual senses in order to perceive more truly a dream rising out of the darkness. She does this as a result of hearing, at a subliminal level, a *sigh* that speaks of sorrow – a sigh set apart like 'a wayward bud that has slipt its sheath'. This metaphor suggests some kind of fragmentation, for a bud that slips its sheath will fall unopened to the ground and die. In psychoanalytic terms, Pfeiffer's metaphor is an allusion to some form of dissociation, a condition in which the unity of the individual's identity is

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<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., 40-1. As from now, page references in this poem are given at the end of each group of stanzas cited.

<sup>24</sup> *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed., Sandra Donaldson and others, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 2, 295.

fractured.<sup>25</sup> In just three stanzas, Pfeiffer is able to convey the idea of a speaker who is able, perhaps through entering into a trance-like state, to tune into the psychic pain of an individual in the spirit world. By inferring that the poem relates to a dream, Pfeiffer is able to distance herself from the narrative to come. In stanzas 4 and 5, the narrator describes her dream:

I came to know that a gate of pearl  
Open'd and shut with a golden key,  
And to feel a glory which, whorl on whorl  
As a shell, was o'erflowing with psalmody.

And a murmurous company reach'd the door,  
Led to the place by an unseen hand;  
Faint with the passage from shore to shore,  
But bright with the hope of the promised land (41).

That the narrator *came* to know that the gate of pearl was opened and shut with a golden key and *came* to 'feel' the glory that flowed from the psalmody, suggests that she experiences more than one dream. Pfeiffer has constructed her narrative as a dream-sequence, her narrator being a woman (a male visionary would not suit her feminist purposes) and now the dream-sequence starts to take shape. One by one, the female visionary perceives, members of the company are led to the gate by an 'unseen hand'. At the shout of a Seraph each human soul is called by name and is then lovingly crowned, according to his or her earthly attributes, with bay leaves, the vine, ivy, myrtle, flowering stars and sun-kissed rainbow bars. There are others: the poor, the slaves who have become dispirited from grovelling in the unyielding soil - and the narrator wonders if, because of their Christ-like suffering, they too will be crowned with thorns. But now as the angel calls members of the company in turn, even the nameless

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<sup>25</sup> Jerome Blackman, *101 Defenses: How the Mind Shields Itself* (Hove, Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 76-77. Blackman describes the symptoms of dissociation as being 'unaware of whole aspects of yourself, such as elements of identity [...]'. Blackman also quotes Whitmer's definition: 'In dissociation, the subject constructs his or her own experience through the meaning that another gives to the subject's own perception'.

ones and the poor find that they have a name and a place in heaven. As each soul is called brightness replaces darkness. As each soul approaches the heavenly door, God's smile can be glimpsed beaming through. Yet one name called by the angel remains unclaimed, as the narrator observes in stanza 14:

Only one name of the muster roll  
Dropt from the angel's lips unclaim'd,  
Only one shrinking, beautiful soul  
Turn'd away when her name was named (43).

One 'beautiful soul' turns away when her name is called. This, the narrator intuitively, is where the sighing has come from. This is the 'wayward bud that has burst its sheath'. The next stanzas (15, 17 and 18) tell the story:

Hers was the sign which had tuned my heart  
To the sweet sad melody underneath;  
A music beyond the reach of art,  
As a wayward bud that has burst its sheath [...];

Then the angel call'd her name again, -  
A name from the shadow of death to win!  
But thrice that name was repeated in vain  
To the shout of the seraph-throng within;

Till at the last her passion broke,  
Cleaving her lips with a tongue like flame;  
'My work', she wail'd, is evanish'd as smoke,  
My crown deperish'd, I *have* no name!' (44)

The narrator recognises this 'fair and stately' individual as the soul that has become dissociated from its self, the fractured soul that has lost its identity. Doomed to die, as predicted by the crown of dead roses she holds in her hand, the cause of her psychic pain is at last expressed. Her work has evaporated like smoke, her God-given 'crown'

has perished, and this is why she has no name.<sup>26</sup> *This* is the tragedy that has broken her spirit – her poetry has come to nought; and without poetry she has no name, no identity. Without an identity, she cannot enter heaven.

Paraphrasing the following stanzas, members of the spirit band recognise the broken spirit that has no name, no identity, and one by one they step forward. One man is moved to tears when he hears the lyrical tone of the sorrowful Singer. He recognises the woman poet's voice, the voice that saved him from falling into depression. Another soul, overwhelmed by the spiritual beauty emanating from outside the gate, tells how he was spiritually inspired by the sad woman Singer. The narrator describes how, one by one, members of the heavenly band praise the woman poet for helping them to attain their own heavenly status. Through her narrator, Pfeiffer depicts the woman poet as some kind of archetype – a composite of Seer, Teacher, and Angel (with 'heaven-blue eyes'). The woman poet is portrayed as having gifts of spiritual power and insight that can set doubting Christians back on the right spiritual path. The woman poet (whose self-identity has been fractured) has spiritual wisdom against which the discoveries and innovations of intellectual men are as nought. Then the People ask that other voices of Song (other *women* poets) be sent to those that have lost their way in the dark depths of crime and evil. Thus women poets can help their *brothers* by leading them to 'a larger hope'.

Finally, one of the male spirits (whose soul the woman poet liberated) carries the Singer through the gates of heaven and deposits her at the foot of God's throne. But she cries out that she is not Priestess but a victim who must be destroyed:

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<sup>26</sup> This reference to a poet's work going up in smoke seems strangely prophetic considering that seven years later, in 1882, plates of Pfeiffer's poetry would be burned in a fire at Kegan Paul & Co.

But her voice flew up as a bird, still higher,  
‘No calm, cold Priestess of Art, was I,  
But a victim, slain in its sacred fire,  
And all – to my very name – shall die!’ (47)

The narrator comes to the end of her mystical dream as the Singer’s heart understands what her future is to be:

There was silence. It thrill’d through the Singer’s heart:  
‘Sink earthly fame in the earthly sod,  
Take thou with the martyr and saint thy part;  
Who dies to himself, best lives to God.’

Kneeling, she dropt the faded flowers,  
And they crown’d her there, at the foot of the throne,  
Where, as light of love fell in quickening showers  
About her head, they arose new-blown.

Was it breath of perfume or breath of sound  
That thrill’d through the roses sweet and strong?  
I know but this: that I saw her crown’d  
In the eye of heaven; and crown’d with Song. (48)

At the foot of God’s throne the Singer learns sacred truths. Firstly, she learns that fame belongs to the temporal world and plays no part in heaven; secondly, she learns that because she is a poet with a fractured spirit and no earthly identity she joins the ranks of the martyr and saint. Thirdly, she learns that those who sacrifice their lives for God will attain everlasting life. Finally the narrator sees her poet crowned in front of the heavenly host – and crowned with ‘Song’.

Through her visionary narrator in ‘The Crown of Song’ Pfeiffer openly sets out her feminist Christian credo: the more men try to hold women poets back, the greater will be women’s reward in heaven; the more broken and dissociated women poets become when their work is derided or criticised on earth, the greater will be their reward in



heaven; the more women poets inspire and assist other women in the temporal world the greater will be their reward in heaven. Unlike male poets, Pfeiffer's words infer, the woman poet may go unnamed and unrewarded on earth, but it is for this very reason that God and His Angels particularly recognise and value *her* sacrifices which are on a par with those of saints and martyrs. These unique feminine spiritual gifts are abundantly rewarded in heaven.

### 'Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874'

'Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874' is selected here because it differs from 'The Crown of Song' in almost every way.<sup>27</sup> Whereas the metre of 'The Crown of Song' is rhythmical, the metre of 'Dark Christmas' is laboured and elegiac in mood; where 'The Crown of Song' is straightforward, 'Dark Christmas' is obscure of meaning; whereas 'The Crown of Song' is expressive, 'Dark Christmas' is intense and complex. This long lyric poem, the four sections of which take up twenty pages of Emily Pfeiffer's volume *Poems* (1876), was written in response to a railway accident that occurred near Oxford on Christmas Eve, 1874.<sup>28</sup>

Accounts of the accident are provided by the national papers. An extract from *The Times* is included here.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Poems*, op. cit., 70-90. From now on, I call the poem 'Dark Christmas'.

<sup>28</sup> The wrecking of the ship, *The Deutschland*, on December 6<sup>th</sup> 1875 (almost exactly a year later after the Shipton railway accident) was the inspiration of Gerard Manley Hopkins's famous poem of that name.

<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 28195 (1874), 3.

A dreadful railway accident in which 31 persons were killed and upwards of 70 wounded, occurred yesterday morning on the Great Western Railway line, a few hundred yards from the village of Hampton Gay, and close to Shipton-on-Cherwell, near Oxford [...]. The train was travelling at the rate of 40 miles an hour, and the impetus given to the carriages as they left the rails carried them with terrible force for a long distance until they were finally dashed to pieces in the meadows below [...]. One carriage carried away one of the stone abutments of the bridges and fell in splinters into the water. The fragments of two carriages, turned wheels upwards, were literally strewn about the embankment [...]. The overturned carriages, the heartrending shrieks of the injured, the dead bodies seen in all directions [...] combined to render the spectacle horrible in the extreme [...]. At the earliest opportunity telegrams were dispatched to Oxford and other places for medical assistance; but here, again, there was considerable delay, and it was about an hour and a half before a doctor appeared [...].

Pfeiffer, her father an Oxfordshire man, was clearly upset by this train crash, as her epigraph shows:

[Few who dwelt under it are likely to have forgotten the cloud which hung over our English world during the late Christmas of 1874, when, in addition to prevalent sickness and manifold causes of gloom, a railway accident involving loss of life under peculiar and pathetic circumstances occurred on the eve of the festival].

My evaluation of ‘Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874’ corresponds with the four sections of Pfeiffer’s poem.

### Section One

The first section of ‘Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874’ starts:

Lift up the hymn once more in this sad Yule-tide,  
Lift up the hymn!  
The day it is darker than any since Jesus died,  
And as cold as dim.

Lift up the heavy hymn with the failing breath  
From the groaning earth;  
We are weary with wailing of want, of sin, and of death,  
Let us sing of birth.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Op. cit., 70-1.

In her opening stanzas, Pfeiffer adopts the didactic tones of the hymn-writer as readers are instructed to lift up the hymn to ‘the old triumphant tune’; to ‘sing and forget’; to ‘sing of the manger’; to ‘sing to the shepherds’; to ‘sing to the Magians’; to ‘sing with the star and the angels’ – Pfeiffer sets out the Christmas story, the story of hope – as *song*.<sup>31</sup> Yet these lines do not readily lend themselves to singing. The first line of the first stanza consists of an opening spondee followed by two iambs, an anapaest, a spondee (or iamb) followed by a trochee and an iamb in the next line. Even if the five feet of the first line are divided differently, say, dactyl, amphimacer, anapaest, spondee, these and the many metrical variants in subsequent stanzas make the poem unsuitable for singing. Knowing Pfeiffer to be a technically skilled versifier and musician who, at fifteen years of age, could set her verse to her own piano score, I suggest that she purposely chose to make ‘Dark Christmas’ unsuited to singing. The railway disaster was too appalling and destructive of life to warrant a simpler rhythm which, for those experiencing trauma, bereavement or disablement from the accident, might have seemed unfeeling or even trite. Pfeiffer wanted her lyric poem to reflect the ‘manifold causes of gloom’ darkening that specific Christmas season, and wrote accordingly. Hymns, defined here as lyrical expressions of feeling towards some sacred subject, do not have to be sung.<sup>32</sup> Even so, the lines of Pfeiffer’s first two stanzas (with their 11, 4, 12, 5 syllables in the first stanza, and their 11, 5, 14, 5 syllables in the second stanza) are unconventional. Added to which, Pfeiffer seems at times purposely to make the content of her hymn obscure when she is capable of expressing ideas succinctly. This presents not only a challenge in terms of interpretation but also raises questions as to her motives.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 71-3.

<sup>32</sup> In the Western Tradition, hymn-writing started with Homer around the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, B.C.

Although 'Dark Christmas' starts with the conventional Christmas story, a less conventional subtext gradually emerges. This first section, for example, stresses the value of play for young children.<sup>33</sup> This notion seems rather progressive for the Victorian period until it is remembered that the German educationalist and founder of the kindergarten system, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) 'whose aim [was] to help the child's mind to grow naturally', was still alive during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Play, the 'hymn-writer' avers, stretches children's imaginations and develops their sense of wonderment. Adults must foster the child's innate sense of mystery, the child's belief that there must be 'a meaning, the trace of some mind, / Or many; who knows' behind what their senses reveal about the world.<sup>35</sup> Children are simple and think there must be some mystery, some meaning, behind life.

As the hymn proceeds, the tone becomes increasingly didactic. To children, states the voice of authority, the Christmas story is just another 'fable' or 'old-wife's tale. But it does not matter how 'shifty' a tale may be as long as it helps teach children to appreciate and accept the Christmas story before they learn to think logically and lose their sense of wonderment:

To the child, unlearn'd as simple, the leap into life  
Of the infant year,  
Is a marvel as great as the fables of any 'old wife',  
Prophet, or seer;

So it welcomes the shiftiest tale if it only profess

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<sup>33</sup> A. Sperling, *Psychology* (London: Reed International, 1982), 136-7. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) carried out research into children's stages of mental development. During the developmental stage of pre-conceptual (or pre-operational) thought the child starts to use symbols. Around school age the child starts to deploy intuitive thought. Around the age of seven years, reasoning and logical thinking starts to evolve. In stanza 12, Pfeiffer (stressing the importance of telling children stories of giants, gnomes, knights, ghosts or fays) seems to predict these developmental stages and link them to *spiritual* development.

<sup>34</sup> *Chambers Biographical Dictionary (CBD)*. Married to a German and a regular visitor to Germany Pfeiffer may have been familiar with Froebel's ideas on the importance of play for young children.

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, 75.

To account for a part  
Of the wonder which weighs down the world, and begins now to press  
On its innocent heart.<sup>36</sup>

This emphasis on early initiation of children into Christianity (tantamount to indoctrination), is followed by reference to the ‘wonder which weighs down the world, and begins now to press / On its innocent heart’. The implication here is that the innocent hearts of children are starting to be oppressed by *something* that is weighing down the world. The ‘hymn-writer’ elucidates:

Let him think he may catch behind Nature a shadowy Cause,  
Tell him not all *we* know!  
Lest, closed in a fortress of fact and mechanical laws,  
He should leave off to grow.<sup>37</sup>

The meaning is clearer now. Adults are instructed not to deprive children of the Christmas story, not to feed them on a diet of scientific fact and mechanical laws. Allow children to grow up believing that there is a ‘Cause’, however shadowy it may be. The Christmas story is mothers’ milk to ‘babies’ who cannot as yet digest ‘the dead’ with ‘grown men and flies’. This rather unpleasant metaphor is used to support the argument that the Christmas story provides the nourishment children need in order to grow in spirit - as opposed to a diet of facts and mechanical laws that, it is implied, will make children grow up spiritually stunted. The point is reiterated: children must be allowed to let their imaginations to run free before they are trapped and taught facts, their spiritual wings clipped:

Then leave to the children whose spirits have wings to spread,  
Sweet joy and surprise,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 76.

‘Tis the milk of babes, yet unable to feed on the dead,  
With grown men and flies.<sup>38</sup>

Leave, leave to the children the symbol, - the living Word  
For the growing Thought, -  
Let fancy disport in the sky, ere a blinded bird,  
It is captured and taught;<sup>39</sup>

In the concluding stanzas of this first section, the ‘hymnist’ advises parents to save controversial discussions on scientific issues until after the children have gone to bed. Only then should parents ‘build up the fragments of science’ and ‘tell of a Universe having nor centre nor soul, / Drifting no whither, / Making and moving itself without purpose or goal - / Hither and thither’.<sup>40</sup> When their children are asleep is the time for parents to silence the cry of the heart and pretend to rejoice in the ‘Fatherless Dread’ of scientific progress.

In response to Thaïs Morgan’s argument that Victorian women sometimes subverted the patriarchal model of sage discourse by entering the ‘masculine’ world, it seems that in this lyric poem Pfeiffer not only enters this masculine world, she seldom leaves it.<sup>41</sup> In this first section of ‘Dark Christmas’ Pfeiffer confers upon herself the authority not only to raise the contentious subject of the relationship between science and religion in a hymn, but also to use her hymn to lecture Christian parents on how they should bring up their children. Pfeiffer further subverts the patriarchal genre of hymnody by adopting the expansive mannerisms of a vicar giving a sermon. Like a clergyman, she sets out

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<sup>38</sup> *Psalms* 78:44-5. In these verses, God vents His wrath against the incredulous and disobedient. ‘He turned their rivers into blood; and sent divers sorts of flies among them, which devoured them [...]’. *Exodus* 8: 24-32. Moses is told by God to ask Pharaoh to let his people go, but once more Pharaoh hardens his heart: ‘And there came a grievous swarm of *flies* into the house of Pharaoh, and into his servants’ houses, and into all the land of Egypt: the land was corrupted by reason of the swarm of *flies*’. Pfeiffer seems to suggest that ‘grown men and *flies*’ feed on the *carrion* of lost faith - and God’s wrath is implicit in this metaphor.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, 77-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-9.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, 6.

her theme and then repeats it several times, embellishing it as she goes along. Emulating the pedantic discourse of the sage, the preacher and sermonizer, Pfeiffer's poem seems strangely discordant, the words tumbling over each other in a strangely oppressive way. The speaker seems unstoppable, like an express train steaming along the track, caught up in power of its own momentum.

## Section Two

The five stanzas in this short section can be seen as a transition between the priestly sermonizing of Section One to the scientific discourse of Section Three. The 'hymn-writer' addresses 'jubilant Thought! In the morning light of the world / How high you rose! / Now you moult and pine, and men mock at your pinions furl'd / Through the bars of prose [...].'<sup>42</sup> 'Thought' is locked fast by the logic of fact; 'Thought' gropes in the earth; 'Thought' works in the mines of science, seeking no earthly or heavenly reward. Brave men leave their work to posterity, for future generations to mould and build. What these heroes started to 'ferment' is the *must* which 'our children' will drink 'as ethereal wine'.

## Section Three

Although Pfeiffer's 'Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874' was published in 1876 it was probably written early in 1875, soon after the train crash. At that time Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) had only been

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<sup>42</sup> Op. cit., 79.

published for three years. In 1871, Pfeiffer had written to Darwin presenting him with her own ideas on sexual selection with reference to the ornamentation of the wings of the Argus pheasant. Darwin had replied to her letter personally, and taken her suggestion seriously.<sup>43</sup> Pfeiffer's letter shows her to be both knowledgeable on the subject of sexual selection and yet respectful of Darwin's genius. In this section of 'Dark Christmas', Pfeiffer uses evolutionary metaphors and, again, assumes the masculine persona of the sage imbued with authoritative vision revealed to him alone. On and on her poem careens – and it is at this point that it becomes apparent that this whole hymn, the whole of 'Dark Christmas', is *itself* a metaphor.

The Shipton rail crash occurred when a steam locomotive (the brain-child of scientists) became a juggernaut speeding out of control.<sup>44</sup> Blindly charging forward it left the tracks and hurtled over an embankment into a meadow below taking part of a stone bridge with it. When it hit the ground it was upside down and smashed to smithereens. Many passengers died in agony awaiting help that arrived too late. That being so, Pfeiffer seems to be using the Shipton train crash as a metaphor for another 'juggernaut', *another* large machine gathering momentum and blindly speeding along man-made tracks, carrying human cargo. As this juggernaut lurches forward, faster and faster, it slips off the tracks and *falls* with appalling momentum, resulting in suffering and death. Juxtaposing these two crashes, Pfeiffer seems to be saying that whereas the victims of Shipton died a *physical* death, the victims of the scientific 'juggernaut' will die a *spiritual* death. Pfeiffer, a Central Anglican, appears to be using scientific discourse to confront issues she believes threaten the Christian faith - and yet she seems

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 44-5.

<sup>44</sup> Pfeiffer may be referring to scientists like Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who had at one time been a railway engineer. Spencer, the agnostic, social evolutionist and liberal utilitarian, is also mentioned in relation to Constance Naden. See part II of this chapter, p.123.



to have no problem in assimilating Darwinism into her Christian belief system. So what is this blind juggernaut she fears will destroy Christianity? In Section Three, Pfeiffer goes some way towards answering this question.

The section starts with reference to two kinds of animals – owls and moles. Each animal, the ‘scientific scholar’ explains, is perfectly adapted to its environment, the owl for hunting, the mole for digging. The owl’s wing is shaped for skimming through the trees, not for rising high in the sky. Likewise the mole is blind, for eyes are of no use under ground.<sup>45</sup> ‘He’ who would hunt the plains of Mammon with the owl (worshipping the *unrighteous* idol of wealth) will enjoy his quest whether he gains a little or a lot. Those who are adapted to work blindly in dark rubble like moles also enjoy the objects their natures fit them to find. We can only live and work according to our natures, so whatever we create in our work is treasure to us: we can make it our idol, or set it to serve others. Here Pfeiffer makes a key point:

But forbear, blind prophet, to bury the brother who sees  
Neath your fragments of stone!

*You* may delight in telling others that there is no Christmas story, that the hunting of material wealth (the owl) or the digging up of empty cockles of thought (the mole) is all there is to existence. *You* may think that what you know is all there is to know - but you are a *blind* prophet! Just because you cannot see what your brother can does not give you the right to shut out *his* light. You have no right to deprive your brother of hope. If

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<sup>45</sup> Biblical references to these animals are few. In *Leviticus* 11:16-17, the owl is listed as an ‘unclean’ animal whose flesh is an abomination and must not be eaten. In the *Psalms* 102: 6, the owl is represented as the worst kind of scavenger. The prophet pours out his complaint before the Lord: ‘I am like a vulture of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert [...]’. All day my enemies taunt me [...]. Biblical references to moles however are less forthcoming, but *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 244:19, quotes George Herbert (1593-1633) in *A Priest in the Temple*: ‘Death is still working like a mole, / And digs my grave at each remove’.

you were men capable of thinking with human hearts, and were not spiritually blind, you would hide from the face of the world's sorrow what you think you know. You think you can cheat the poor by replacing hope with 'want-begotten' pleasure and blind prophecies. Can these 'blind prophets' complacently tell those victims of the Shipton railway disaster that the Christmas story is a man-made fantasy; that death is *death*? This is the juggernaut to which Pfeiffer is referring. I quote all ten stanzas from Section Three here because they only make sense as a single unit:

He who would hunt with the owl needs a down-wadded wing,  
To skim, not to rise;  
He who would grub as the mole in the fir-fangled spring,  
Is but cumber'd with eyes.

Hunt the plains of Mammon, smooth owls, when the sun is at rest,  
And with velvet clutch  
Seize on the prey, - there is joy in the midnight quest,  
Gain ye little or much.

Work, dark moiler, or under the earth or above,  
And the thing ye find,  
How poor soever to us, will be apt to your love,  
As made to your mind;

Be it rubble of fact, or but empty cockle of thought  
Be it formless or fair,  
The treasure is yours, hard hands that have delved and have brought  
It to upper air;

Make it your idol, or set it to serve, as you please,  
Work your will with your own,  
But forbear, blind prophet, to bury the brother who sees  
'Neath your fragments of stone!

You love them for they are yours, and you bear to behold,  
As you pile them on high,  
The light shut out; you stand fast in the darkness and cold,  
Without protest or sigh.

Ye are rich, dim owls and moles, with your hunting and finding,  
And take no heed,  
No thought for the poor in the harsh mill of destiny grinding,  
Who dies in his need;

Ye forget the sorrowful poor, those whose hunger and thirst  
Is still cheated by faith,  
Who, weeping lost love, can believe that great love at the worst,  
Is exalted by death.

If ye were as men, human-hearted, not burrowing brains,  
Ye would hide from the face  
Of the world's vast sorrow, the sum of those terrible gains,  
Which its hope would displace.

Yet exult as you may in your 'want-begotten' delight,  
Would ye coldly dare  
To carry to Shipton to-day that look-out on the night,  
Which ye warrant so fair?<sup>46</sup>

So far, joining these first three sections of the hymn together, it is apparent that Pfeiffer is trying to draw attention to, and prevent, what she sees as a catastrophe in the making. She emphasizes the importance of telling the Christmas story to children so that the spirit of love in the form of the immanent Christ-child is firstly enjoyed as a fairytale, then internalised as a symbol, and then believed as spiritual truth. It is vital, she insists, that the head of steam built up from the worship of material 'idols' and 'empty cockles' of thought as promulgated by myopic despoilers of faith, is dissipated. A new generation of Christians must be raised to break the momentum of the dread machine before it gathers speed and crashes into darkness.

#### Section Four

This section follows the long ascent of 'our' sorrow, love and loss. The higher 'we' climb the mountain of life the greater becomes the burden, yet love always grows as it rises and, ultimately, takes wing. Pfeiffer only once, later in this section, allows the personal pronoun to take the place of the inclusive 'we' as the hymn sings out the

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<sup>46</sup> Op. cit., 81-4.

Christmas message. Raised in consecutive stanzas, two symbols - one of love (as a serpent) and one of death (as rebirth) – are germane to my interpretation of this fourth section of the hymn. The first symbol of love, the serpent, Pfeiffer describes as rising from dust to a loftier plane to heal our soul-sickness, to re-affirm trust and sustain faith.

Although there are four references to serpents in the Bible, in this stanza Pfeiffer is referring to St. John's Gospel in which Jesus Himself refers to the story of Moses and the serpent in Numbers 21:5-9. The Old Testament verses tell of the Israelites who, discouraged on their long trek through the wilderness, speak against God. So, as punishment, God sends fiery serpents to bite and kill them. Then the people acknowledge their sin and repent, and Moses prays to God to take the serpents away:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.  
And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

Jesus refers to this Old Testament account in His conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, as recorded in St. John's Gospel 3:1-21. Nicodemus wonders how a man can be reborn when he is old. Jesus explains that he is referring to spiritual, not physical, rebirth:

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit [...].  
And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.  
And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.

Pfeiffer sees love, like the serpent of old that Moses raised aloft on a pole, rising from the dust to heal ‘soul-sickness’ – sorrow and despair – and to sustain and increase our faith in rebirth:

Thus love which of old as a serpent was fed on the dust,  
To a loftier plane  
Uplifted, shall heal our soul-sickness, build higher our trust,  
Our new being sustain.<sup>47</sup>

Well versed in the Bible, Victorians reading these stanzas would realise that Pfeiffer is referring to God’s power to heal sinners. Christ explains to Nicodemus the difference between physical and spiritual rebirth – and again Pfeiffer is juxtaposing two kinds of rebirth in order to make the point that the immanent Christ is Himself a symbol of spiritual healing and rebirth. In the subsequent stanza, Pfeiffer suggests that even if the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth ceases to be a symbol to mankind, it will always be there. It cannot die. Just as Jesus died and was reborn, so the symbol of Jesus’ birth may seem dead, but is not dead. It will live on in perpetuity because it is immortal:

Spread the ceremonies over the symbol of Jesus’ birth,  
As over a corse,  
Still the soul of the symbol, immortal, will walk the earth  
Without hindrance or loss.<sup>48</sup>

The spirit is divine, ‘nor flesh nor bones’, it has no need of our bread or our wine. It can even pass through stone. But can we really say that no loss incurred when the spirit is ‘unhoused’, when the ‘bodiless Word’ wanders the earth forlorn? These questions are so important to Pfeiffer that she momentarily jettisons her formal discourse in order to answer her question herself:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 87. A snake coiled around a pole is the symbol of healing adopted by the medical profession.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 87.

I know not, but know: when a world is baptised into youth,  
Pass'd through fire or gore,  
A 'body' is always 'prepared', and the spirit of truth  
Made incarnate once more.<sup>49</sup>

The Christian story may seem forgotten, but there will be another day when the world is once more ready to receive the spirit of Truth-made-Man. For as long as the world endures, one truth will stand sure – 'We are made for the light' – and for ever, love will redeem us.<sup>50</sup>

The closing stanzas repeat the Yule-tide message of joy. It may be night now, but the new day is breaking:

Sing with the child and the bard in his measureless youth,  
He who, caught in the throes  
Of his passion, becomes as a Delphian mouth-piece of truth,  
Speaking more than he knows.<sup>51</sup>

In this penultimate stanza the 'hymn-writer' sings of the child who, as the bard of the future, is destined to become a mouthpiece of truth. The small child who believes the Christmas story today becomes both oracle and seer of the future, following the pattern of the immanent Christ-Child. The carol is raised on high. Forget sorrow, sin and death – sing of birth!

As a hymn, 'Dark Christmas' is unconventional because Pfeiffer uses the Shipton railway accident as a metaphor for what she presents as a spiritual catastrophe in the making. If Mammon-worshipping 'owls' and scientific 'moles' are undermining faith,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 90.

new generations of Christians must be prepared to break the momentum of this destroyer of spirits - this juggernaut - before human souls perish. As a Central Anglican growing up in Montgomeryshire Pfeiffer had witnessed the decline of 'Church' in favour of 'Chapel' and in England Nonconformists were also setting up their own places of worship. High Church Anglicans, though they remained under the same roof as the Anglican Church, adhered to doctrinal practices and rituals which separated them from the mainstream and caused a steady haemorrhage of Christians from the Anglican to the Roman Catholic Church. Secularism and biblical and scientific criticism were also taking their toll.<sup>52</sup> While Christianity was thriving, the central core of the Anglican Church to which Pfeiffer belonged was losing its power-base. In 1861, *Hymns Ancient & Modern (A&M)* was published, and the compilers of the hymnal strived to ensure that it represented the full spectrum of Protestantism. John Keble himself took an active part in *A&M's* construction in the years before his death in 1866.

John Keble (1792-1866), whose book of devotional poetry, *The Christian Year* (1827), had had such an immense influence on Christians during Pfeiffer's life-time had, in 1833, founded the Oxford movement with John Newman (1801-90) and Edward Pusey (1800-82). Intending to breathe new life into the Anglican Church by reviving the authority of the Church's Founding Fathers, these and other Oxford clergymen published a series of Tracts between 1833 and 1841 setting out the tenets of the movement. 'Tract 90', written by Newman in 1841, suggested that the thirty-nine articles of religion in *The Book of Common Prayer* were to some extent compatible with Roman Catholic doctrine. Four years later, Newman converted to the Roman Catholic Church and the movement came to a close. Yet the influence of 'Tractarianism' was far-

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<sup>52</sup> Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), reviewed in *Victorian Studies*, 53, 1 (2010), 123-124, writes about a tendency of Victorian Christians to flirt with secularism for a while but then to revert back to Christianity.

reaching. Four years after publishing *The Christian Year*, Keble was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1831) and became an authority on poetry which he saw as ‘a kind of medicine divinely bestowed upon man, which gives healing relief to mental emotion, yet without detriment to modest reserve [...]’.<sup>53</sup> Thus Keble endorsed the idea of the poet as the *vates* in the sense that, like Thomas Carlyle, he saw poetry as ‘divinely bestowed upon man’ and, in addition, saw poetry as a kind of controlled safety-valve for the emotions of the Christian *vates* himself. In her essay ‘Her Silence Speaks’: Keble’s Female Heirs’, Emma Mason draws attention to the way Keble’s views on poetry became important to a group of nineteenth-century women poets:

[Keble’s] shaping of an at once restrained and intensely emotional poetics is nevertheless fundamentally central to the poetry of several nineteenth-century women poets – Dora Greenwell, Cecil Frances Alexander, Caroline Leakey, Bessie Parkes, Adelaide Anne Procter – wary of their assumed proclivity to extreme sentimentalism.<sup>54</sup>

Yet A. H. Page, a reviewer writing for *Contemporary Review* in 1869, is critical of ‘the ascetic order of religious literature’ which he describes as ‘self-conscious’ and ‘reactionary’.<sup>55</sup> After criticising Frances Havergal’s publication *The Ministry of Song* (1862), Page lambastes Dora Greenwell’s poetic work, *Carmina Crucis* (1869), using her poem ‘Schola Crucis, Schola Lucis’ to drive home his points:

There is an atmosphere of selectness, if we may name it so, about their poetry. They each seem to feel that they are singing for a Christian people broken up into sections, and not for an undivided spiritual community. There is an esoteric and an exoteric teaching wrapped up in their song. Mr. Matthew Arnold has given most polished and philosophical expression to the feeling in those brilliant articles where he disposed so dexterously of Bishop Colenso. But other poets feel the burden as keenly as he feels it [...]. The gist of the whole matter seems

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<sup>53</sup> John Keble, *Lectures on Poetry* (1832-41), 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 1, 22. The Tractarian theory of reserve is also associated with Isaac Williams (Tracts 80 and 87), and not just with Keble.

<sup>54</sup> Emma Mason, ‘Her Silence Speaks’: Keble’s Female Heirs’, *John Keble in Context*, ed. Kirstie Blair (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 125.

<sup>55</sup> H. A. Page, ‘Religious Poetry and Scientific Criticism’, *Contemporary Review*, 12 (1869), 115-127 (118). As a regular contributor to *Contemporary Review*, Pfeiffer would probably have read this article.



to be this: that so long as earnest religious convictions are covertly assailed by science and criticism, we shall have plenty of true religious poetry, but little of the very highest kind, because this is only possible where the poet sings spontaneously and in the full consciousness of giving utterance to homogeneous, unimpaired beliefs, or at all events, beliefs which have either not yet been cast into the alembic of science, or have fully emerged from it, clearer, brighter, and more firmly established than ever. We have full hope that the truths of Christianity, so far as they have been imperilled by science, will triumphantly emerge, and therefore we wait expectantly.<sup>56</sup>

Dora Greenwell (1821-1882), a supporter of women's emancipation, was not a sectarian Christian and it is thought that she may even have joined the Society of Friends after the death of her mother.<sup>57</sup> Her devotional poetry, however, is generally High Anglican in tone and the deeply religious poems in *Carmina Crucis* express intense compassion. I quote the first two of the seven stanzas of 'Schola Crucis, Schola Lucis' quoted by Page in his article:

Beneath thy cross I stand,  
Jesus, my Saviour, turn and look on me;  
Oh! Who are these that, one on either hand,  
Are crucified with Thee?

The one that turns away,  
With sullen, scoffing life, - and one whose eyes  
Close o'er the words, 'Yet shalt thou be this day  
With me in paradise' [...].<sup>58</sup>

Of these stanzas Page writes: 'We have here a simplicity quite out of harmony with the subtlety of feeling and idea which the poem seeks to express, and the result will inevitably be that where the idea is caught, a sense of dissatisfaction with the form [...] will be felt'. Yet he praises the hymns of the hymn-writer, Anna Letitia Waring, writing:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 117. Page is referring to Dora Greenwell, *Carmina Crucis* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1869) and F. R. Havergal, *Ministry of Song* (London: Christian Book Society, 1872)

<sup>57</sup> Dora Greenwell, *The Victorians: An Anthology*, ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 519.

<sup>58</sup> Dora Greenwell, *Carmina Crucis* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1869)

Miss Waring stands almost at the opposite pole from Miss Greenwell. She is one of the few hymn writers who maintain, amid the criticism and doubt of our day, much of the sweet unconsciousness and subdued warmth of earlier singers. There is a quiet, self-sufficient fervour about her poems, and a pellucid flow of verse, which is the result neither of art nor polish, but seems to flow, like a spring, crystal-clear [...].<sup>59</sup>

Page then quotes Waring's hymn 'My heart is resting, O my God', the first stanza of which I include here:

Sometimes I long for promised bliss,  
But it will not come too late –  
And the songs of patient spirits rise  
From the place wherein I wait;  
*While in the faith that makes no haste  
My soul has time to see  
A kneeling host of Thy redeemed,  
In fellowship with me [...].*<sup>60</sup>

Page then conflates what he sees as the two poets' religious and poetic stances: whereas Dora Greenwell's poetry is 'Catholic and conventional', Waring's hymns are 'open air and Protestant'. Then, near the end of his article, he overtly denigrates Keble and his religious convictions:

It is only to be expected that the work of restoring and confirming a too sorely-tried faith by hymns and psalms and spiritual songs should be most successfully done by women or by feminine natures. John Keble had a dash of the feminine temperament [...] [and] was most decided – strong-headed even – in his opposition to anything that in the least threatened his own cherished convictions; but his firmness was not that of well-reasoned, tolerant, masculine assurance, but partook rather of the querulous, exclusive self-sufficiency of a delicate feminine organization.<sup>61</sup>

Page sees Keble and his 'female heirs' as too delicate, too reactionary, and too self-conscious to take on the challenges of secularism and scientific criticism. What he

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 123. Page refers to A. L. Waring, *Hymns and Meditations* [1850], 10<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Strahan, 1870)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 126-7.

wants, he writes, is strong, *manly* religious poetry – poetry that speaks to all Christians, not just to ‘feminine’ Tractarians:

While the knights rode out, redressing human wrongs, and punishing those who had done cruelly or dishonestly, the maidens sang songs, embroidered emblems, or executed sacred illuminations; so now, while the stronger members are doing battle with the enemy on his own ground, investigating the scientific bulwarks, and counter-working underground, the gentler ones are re-beautifying the sanctuary and raising new songs of hope and exultation as they go through the glorious work [...].<sup>62</sup>

In 1869 when Page’s article was published, *A&M* (which Lowther Clarke admits was ‘avowedly Tractarian’) had been in circulation for eight years.<sup>63</sup> By then Keble was dead, but nevertheless poems by High Anglican women poets such as Christina Rossetti, Frances Havergal and Cecil Alexander and the Roman Catholic convert, Adelaide Procter, were already coming to represent religious and devotional poetry as a whole.<sup>64</sup> As G. B. Tennyson states:

The close connection between devotional poetry and hymnody is made clear by the extent to which Tractarian devotional poetry stimulated a whole new development in hymnody and modified even the well-established Evangelical tradition.<sup>65</sup>

Page would no doubt have approved of ‘Hymn to the Dark Christmas of 1874’, for in her poetics Pfeiffer cannot be accused of sitting around embroidering emblems or singing maidenly songs. But then neither does she emulate the ‘subdued warmth’ of Waring’s Protestant hymnody. If anything Pfeiffer is out there with the knights, redressing human wrongs, ‘doing battle with the enemy on his own ground, investigating the scientific bulwarks, and counter-working underground’. An expression

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>63</sup> Lowther Clarke, *Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient & Modern*, ed. Maurice Frost, introduction, 120. See Chapter 1.

<sup>64</sup> A. A. Procter converted from High Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism.

<sup>65</sup> G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: Tractarian Mode* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5

of faith that is at once elegiac and obscure, ‘Dark Christmas’ may differ in tone and character from both the ‘conventional’ Tractarian mode of Greenwell and Havergal and the ‘open air’ Protestant mode of Waring, and yet, I argue, it is a profoundly Christian hymn.

‘He that is washed needs but to wash his feet’ (1873)

‘He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit’ – John 13:10.

This lyric poem consists of just three six-line stanzas. The poem refers to the verse in St. John’s Gospel in the New Testament where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.<sup>66</sup> With the feast of the Passover imminent, Jesus knows that He will soon die. Already Judas Iscariot is plotting to betray him. Jesus takes off his clothes, wraps himself with a towel, and pours water into a basin. Then He washes His disciples’ feet, drying them on the towel wrapped around his body. When he comes to wash the feet of Simon Peter, the disciple is distressed to see his Lord demean himself in this way, and says so to Jesus. Jesus replies: ‘If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me’.<sup>67</sup> Simon Peter then says to Jesus: ‘Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head’:<sup>68</sup>

Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit [...].<sup>69</sup>

In the first stanza of her poem Pfeiffer poses her question: ‘What words are these?’

He that is washed needs but to wash his feet,  
And he is wholly clean. What words are these?

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<sup>66</sup> The poem has no title, so I have used the first line as a title here. For short, however, I refer to it as: ‘He that is washed’. The epigraph is copied verbatim from p.189, except that Pfeiffer uses Roman numerals (John xiii.10) which I have altered to 13:10.

<sup>67</sup> John, 13.8.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 13.8.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 13.10.

So hard, so dark, they warn us from the heat  
Of outward sense, and bid us rise to seize  
Some ray of light flashed downwards from the sun  
Of truth, eternal as the truthful One.<sup>70</sup>

Pfeiffer's question 'What words are these?' seems strangely redundant because Jesus Himself explains why He is washing the disciples' feet:

Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.  
If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash  
one another's feet.  
For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.  
Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord; neither is  
he that is sent greater than he that sent him.  
If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.  
I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be  
fulfilled [...].<sup>71</sup>

Jesus explains to the disciples the spiritual symbolism involved in his washing their feet, knowing that soon *they* will be the lords and masters serving God and mankind after He is dead. But Pfeiffer ignores this aspect of the gospel, concentrating wholly on the one verse, John, 13.10, where Jesus states that he who is bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, for he is clean all over. Her second stanza grapples with this concept:

He that is washed needs but to wash his feet;  
His comings and his goings must be clean,  
His path still pure adown life's crowded street,  
His track upon its mire and slime unseen.  
Few are too weak or vile to purge their walk;  
Our Master did not mock us in His talk.

The concept of cleanliness is an interesting one, one that works on different levels. Outward cleanliness of the body is one thing: inner spiritual cleanliness is another.

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<sup>70</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), 189.

<sup>71</sup> Op. cit., 13:13-18.

Those who are spiritually clean because they have been cleansed by the Holy Spirit remain pure, leaving no track of sinfulness upon the crowded, slimy and muddy path of life. If the spirit is pure then only the feet need to be washed:

He bade us do the thing we *could* – no more;  
Be heedful of our outward ways and deeds.  
Watch well our feet – that so He might outpour  
His spirit for our spirits' inward needs:  
Till we in Sabbath rest and peace should sit,  
And hear His words, 'Clean are ye every whit'.

We do not have to worry about the things we cannot do, all we have to do is to worry about what we *can* do – the external, physical things. Our inner spiritual needs are looked after by God who pours His spirit into us; thus when in worshipful repose and meditation, we hear His words of comfort: 'Clean are ye every whit'.

This poem is different from 'The Crown of Song' and 'The Dark Christmas of 1874' firstly because it is short and, secondly, because it lacks a feminist subtext. In this respect it conforms more closely to generally accepted criteria for what constitutes religious poetry. In this lyric poem Pfeiffer is simply exploring Jesus' words in the Gospel and giving her interpretation of the text to her readers. But having investigated all three poems the question remains: where does Pfeiffer's poetry fit, if it fits at all, into the canon of Victorian women's religious poetry? In order to consider this question, having evaluated Pfeiffer's lyric poetry within the context of the 1870s, I turn to F. Elizabeth Gray, whose comments on obscure Victorian women religious poets are relevant here:

My aim [...] is to suggest new ways of reading religious women poets that interrogate the obscurity masking or dismissing their contribution to social, cultural, and Christian narratives, and to contend that the work that these women

did, in the form of religious poetry, made a significant contribution to Christian discourse, to lyric tradition, and to contemporary views of womanhood.<sup>72</sup>

In order to illustrate her point Gray turns to a poem called 'Women' by Elizabeth Ayton Godwin whose 'pious poetry' Gray sees as 'entirely characteristic of the religious verses penned by Victorian women: they seem so unoriginal, so quotidian, so *ordinary*, that they seem barely differentiated from each other'.<sup>73</sup> Although Gray quotes all eight of Godwin's six-line stanzas, I include just the first stanza here:

'We women have so many cares  
Clustering round our way,  
And though they may be trifles small,  
They shade the summer day,  
And keep the soul from wandering free  
In the sweet land of phantasy [...]'.

Gray emphasizes the importance of poetry such as this, even though it may not comply with 'assumptions underlying our 'modern taste' which has led us on occasion to overlook literary works that may have played a significant role in their own culture and time [...]'.<sup>74</sup> While agreeing with Gray's comments regarding Godwin, Pfeiffer's religious poetry cannot be equated with 'unoriginal', 'quotidian', 'ordinary' verse. But then neither can it be equated with that of the Protestant hymn-writer, A. L. Waring, *or* the High Anglican and Roman Catholic Victorian women religious poets Christina Rossetti, Dora Greenwell and Adelaide Procter. If indeed there are traces of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's influence in Pfeiffer's religious poetry, these are faint. So I turn to another obscure woman poet, a close friend of Pfeiffer's – a woman poet who started

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<sup>72</sup> F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Gray is referring to Elizabeth Ayton Godwin, *Songs for the Weary: The School of Sorrow and Other Poems* (1873) and *Songs Amidst Daily Life* (1878). Godwin's poem, 'Women', is quoted by Gray, introduction, 1-2.

<sup>74</sup> *Op. cit.*, 3.

out as a Protestant in Ireland and later returned to ‘the servants’ church’ of her childhood.<sup>75</sup>

Emily Hickey (1845-1924) was born in Macmine Castle, Co. Wexford, the daughter of an Anglican Rector. She was strictly educated at a Protestant school and was, as Pfeiffer herself had been, inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning poetry, especially *Aurora Leigh*. Hickey settled in London and attended lectures at University College, becoming (like Pfeiffer) a keen supporter of higher education for women. For eighteen years she lectured in English Literature at the North London Collegiate School for Girls, founded by Miss Buss in 1850.<sup>76</sup> Hickey and Pfeiffer were firm friends until Pfeiffer’s death in 1890 after which Hickey became increasingly isolated and lonely. Hickey went through various spiritual phases on her path to High Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism; Angela Leighton writes of her: ‘As with so many poets of the time, an early free-thinking or agnostic spirit was liable to give way to a reaction of extreme self-censure’.<sup>77</sup> Hickey and Pfeiffer came from similar social backgrounds and shared a similarly Protestant upbringing. Hickey’s first work, *A Sculptor and Other Poems* (1881) was published five years after Pfeiffer’s *Poems* (1876).

Hickey’s poems, ‘A Sculptor’, ‘Told in the Firelight’, ‘Margaret, A Martyr’ and ‘The Story of Argalus and Parthenia’, are too long to include here. A short religious poem, entitled ‘Lois the Healer’, is cited here in full:<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Angela Leighton, ed., *Victorian Women Poets: Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 481-2.

<sup>76</sup> Miss Buss: ref. Chapter 1, p.70.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>78</sup> It is interesting to note that Kegan Paul, Trench, (Emily Pfeiffer’s publisher at that time) published ‘A Sculptor’ a year before the fire at their premises. It is possible that plates of this first volume of Hickey’s poetry were also destroyed, as well as Pfeiffer’s. The two women poets – Pfeiffer and Hickey – may have consulted each other about aspects of their poetry.



‘Lois the Healer’  
(‘Gifts of Healing’)

Lois the Healer pray’d  
With soul uplift,  
‘O Love the Beautiful,  
Give me this gift:  
Comfort and help to be  
Where’er I go,  
Cool in the summer time,  
Warmth in the snow’.

So, on her tender lips,  
Brow, cheek, and breast,  
Love shed a baptism  
Of strength and rest.  
Thus on her way she goes,  
Blessing and blest,  
Till her life-day shall come  
Into its west.

Men say, ‘She groweth old’  
See how her hair  
Wearth the silver threads  
Of time and care’.  
We, whom she healeth, know  
Light through THE GATE,  
Shines on her gracious head  
While she doth wait.<sup>79</sup>

Hickey’s description of the light shining through ‘the gate’ is reminiscent of Pfeiffer’s description of the beaming light of God shining through the gates of heaven in ‘The Crown of Song’, but otherwise there is little similarity between Hickey’s rarefied and Pfeiffer’s more polemical poetry. There is that translucent beauty in ‘Lois the Healer’ that is more akin to High Anglican poems by Procter or Rossetti than to Pfeiffer’s verse. An extract from another religious poem by Hickey called ‘Why?’ may prove to be in some way similar to one or other of the three poems by Pfeiffer evaluated in the section:

I said ‘I will serve my God and man’.  
So I took my life and wrencht it away

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<sup>79</sup> Emily Hickey, *Sculptor and Other Poems* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1881), 121-2.

From things it clung to, as life so can,  
The beautiful things of dawn and day  
And scent and music; and in the gray  
Dim twilight kept it. But lo, it began  
To cry for its beautiful reds and blues,  
And moan'd and sobb'd as the moments ran  
Into hours and days, and I would not choose  
Aught else but the sad and sober hues [...].<sup>80</sup>

The speaker struggles to conform to the exactions of her faith and here, yet again, Hickey's poem is Tractarian in tone.

Although they differ from each another, the first two of the three lyric poems by Pfeiffer evaluated in this chapter do not fit into any recognisable category of Victorian women's religious poetry. They do not fit into the Tractarian mode that, as G. B. Tennyson observes, changed hymnody and modified the Evangelical tradition during the Victorian period. They do not conform to 'ordinary' religious poems and hymns written by pious women such as Elizabeth Godwin and A. L. Waring. They do not even fit into the ethereal yet troubled spiritual lyrics of Pfeiffer's friend, Emily Hickey. Yet I maintain that all three of Pfeiffer's poems are, in their different ways, religious. In attempting to answer my initial questions I turn to *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature* in which Mark Knight and Emma Mason write about the Victorians:

Theological debate was almost inseparable from philosophical, scientific, medical, historical and political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To insist on rigid boundaries between the sacred and secular [...] is to demarcate religious space in a narrow and misleading manner [...]. Tensions between religion and other cultural forces are evident throughout the nineteenth century, as between different religious belief systems: to ignore this and argue for an all-purpose definition of religion risks homogenizing and caricaturing beliefs.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>81</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

In presenting her lyric poems I demonstrate that Pfeiffer saw herself as a poet-prophet with a mission to set out her own authoritative spiritual vision, as the *vates*. As self-appointed defender of the faith, Pfeiffer adopted sage discourse and entered into the ‘masculine’ world to fight science on its own ground while, at the same time, putting forward her own feminist agenda. Having started to apply a broader, more flexible, definition of what constitutes ‘the sacred and secular’ to Pfeiffer’s lyric poetry, I continue to put forward my case that Pfeiffer has a place in the canon of Victorian women’s religious poets in my evaluation of her sonnets.



## II SONNETS

After the plates of *Sonnets and Songs* (1880) were destroyed by fire, Emily Pfeiffer published an enlarged edition called *Sonnets* (1886). This edition included sonnets from *Sonnets and Songs*, but also sonnets from *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* (1873), *Poems* (1876), *Quarterman's Grace and Other Poems* (1879) and *Under the Aspens, Lyrical and Dramatic* (1882). Implicit in the comments of the eminent Victorian men and women used to promote *Sonnets* is the assumption that Pfeiffer wrote her sonnets from a Christian standpoint. While Lady Eastlake lauded 'the high instincts of a poetic mind to grapple with the speculations of modern science', the Anglican clergyman, Edward White, saw Pfeiffer's sonnet 'Dread Force' as suitable material for his sermons.<sup>1</sup> White wrote: '[I] introduced and repeated in a sermon your sonnet [...]; the effect was marvellous, and the lightning went into their hearts'.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I show that, despite her Christian stance, Pfeiffer exploited the religion-*versus*-science debate in order to create a niche for Christian emancipationists at a point where religion and science intersect. To support my argument, I compare a double sonnet-sequence written by Pfeiffer with a double sonnet-sequence written by Constance Naden, the late-Victorian disciple of Herbert Spencer and purveyor of Dr. Robert Lewin's ideology of 'Hylo-Idealism'. My objective in juxtaposing sonnet-sequences written by two feminist women poets with divergent ideological perspectives is to locate Pfeiffer's feminist Christian niche, should it exist, in the interstices between the two sides of the debate. But before evaluating these sonnet-sequences, and other sonnets where Pfeiffer exploits the science-*versus*-religion for feminist reasons, I first consider

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Sonnets* (London: Field & Tuer, 1886), Private and Press Notices, iv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

the place of Victorian women poets within the sonnet tradition before focusing attention upon Pfeiffer's particular contribution to the canon of late-Victorian women's religious sonnets.

Acknowledging that the sonnet form derives from a masculine tradition, T. D. Olverson's research into late-Victorian Hellenism includes Pfeiffer's sonnets 'Kassandra' and 'Klytemnestra' (1879), and 'Hellas' (1882).<sup>3</sup> Olverson writes: 'The Petrarchan sonnet has been seen as a male-dominated form in that the medium frequently features a male speaker who addresses an idealized, though absent or unobtainable, female beloved'.<sup>4</sup> Warwick Slinn writes: 'While self-sacrificing purity was expected of women, the ideological and scriptural authority of masculine redemption and creation was not'.<sup>5</sup> Thus Victorian women poets faced difficulty in positioning themselves within a tradition that silenced and disempowered them. Yet, as Olverson comments: 'In the nineteenth century, some of the greatest proponents of the sonnet were women writers, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Michael Field'.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61), as Joseph Phelan recounts, determined 'to recover or rather create a distinctively female tradition' when she published her sonnet-sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850).<sup>7</sup> This sonnet-

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<sup>3</sup> The sonnet genre was introduced into England in the sixteenth century, and was consolidated by the sonnets of John Donne (1573-1631) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Shakespeare's sonnet 24 which begins: 'Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath stell'd / Thy beauty's form in table of my heart [...]', shows the speaker wanting to preserve the idealised object of his love so that, by gazing on her image *in situ*, he can continually re-affirm his masculine self-identity without having to engage with a live woman. Gaining momentum, the sonnet form persisted from Shakespeare through a lineage of male poets including John Milton (1608-74), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), and John Keats (1795-1821) and the Victorian sonneteers - William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89).

<sup>4</sup> T. D. Olverson, 'Worlds without Women: Emily Pfeiffer's Political Hellenism', *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 86-7.

<sup>5</sup> Warwick Slinn, 'Poetry', *Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 317.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-7.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 55

sequence, consisting of forty-four sonnets, represents a turning point in Victorian poetry.<sup>8</sup>

In her chapter entitled ‘Canonization through Dispossession: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the “Pythian Shriek”’, Tricia Lootens describes how deeply committed Barrett Browning was to the issue of feminine canonicity:

Surely few women poets can have been more deeply and explicitly concerned with issues of feminine canonicity than Elizabeth Barrett Browning – or more challenging, during their lifetimes, as subjects for critical attempts at stabilizing the poet-heroine’s role. E.B.B. worked actively to enter and shape that role [...]. [Her] career could be read as one long succession of attempts to accommodate – and to alter – the shape of feminine literary canonicity.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Lootens suggests that Barrett Browning’s sonnet-sequence, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, nearly lost its canonical status in the years following its popular reception: ‘Like their author, they [*Sonnets from the Portuguese*] have come close to being simultaneously canonized and lost’.<sup>10</sup> Accounting for this strange phenomenon, Lootens suggests that sonnet 43, which starts: ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways’, entered the popular culture in a way that obscured the sacred nature of the sonnet-sequence as a whole. Referring to a strange heaviness in parts of the *Sonnets*, Lootens adds: ‘Although the *Sonnets* have long defined E.B.B.’s fame, they themselves have not been defined as suitable objects for critical attention’.<sup>11</sup> Reversing the tradition of the amatory sonnet by expressing romantic desire in a woman’s voice in the *Sonnets*, Barrett Browning’s ‘saintly’ reputation was also critically devalued after publication of later, contentious, works such as *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Lootens writes: ‘Thus, by the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson and others, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 2, 442-479.

<sup>9</sup> Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender and Victorian Literary Canonization* (London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 121.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

time Barrett Browning died, her significance as a poet and a national, cultural, and political figure was deeply controversial'.<sup>12</sup> Yet *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was hugely influential to sonneteers writing later in the nineteenth century; and, as Phelan points out, when Barrett Browning 'domesticated' the amatory sonnet tradition by overlaying it with Victorian morality, she was breaking new ground:

This superimposition of nineteenth-century life and morals onto the early Renaissance template of the amatory sonnet sequence provided Barrett's successor [...] with a powerful and resonant model for the exploration of contemporary beliefs and illusions about love and marriage.<sup>13</sup>

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) can be considered Barrett Browning's successor because he too superimposed nineteenth-century moral values upon the corporeal and sacred dynamics of married love in his amatory sonnet-sequence, *The House of Life* (1870, 1881).<sup>14</sup> Christina Rossetti (1830-94) responded to her brother's sonnet-sequence writing *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets* (1881), an amatory sonnet-sequence steeped in biblical and scriptural references - a religious work almost devoid of secular issues. In introducing *Monna Innominata*, however, Christina Rossetti acknowledged her debt to Barrett Browning, referring directly to the 'Portuguese Sonnets' and the heroines of Francesco Petrarca (1304-74) and Dante Alighiere (1265-1321) in whose sonnets body and soul are integral parts:

Had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the 'Portuguese Sonnets', an inimitable 'donna innominata' drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., 59.

<sup>14</sup> Another successor of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was George Meredith, friend of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose sonnet-sequence *Modern Love* (1862) reflects upon the domestic difficulties that may have contributed to his wife's death.

<sup>15</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Complete Works*, ed. R. W. Crump (London: Penguin, 2005), 294.



Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet-sequence, *The House of Life*, and Christina Rossetti's sonnet-sequence *Monna Innominata* are, essentially, religious works. Yet it seems that the sonnet-sequences of Barrett Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti have been critically regarded as somehow less religious than Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*. It is as if Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways [...]' (sonnet 43) and Rossetti's 'fleshly' sonnet 'Nuptial Sleep' (sonnet 5) have somehow obscured the all-important religious content of the works as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Neither sonneteer is represented in Phelan's chapter entitled 'The Devotional Poet' – a chapter which draws a direct line from the Elizabethans (via William Wordsworth and, briefly, Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*) straight to John Keble and the High Anglican sonneteers, Christina Rossetti and Isaac Williams, and the Roman Catholic convert, Gerard Manley Hopkins.<sup>17</sup> Quoting G. B. Tennyson, Phelan describes Christina Rossetti as 'the true inheritor of the Tractarian devotional mode in poetry', while he himself adds:

In [Christina Rossetti's] work the well-established tradition of seeing the sonnet as a privileged vehicle for autobiographical utterance meets the Tractarian doctrine of reserve to produce poetry which is both deeply personal and carefully depersonalised.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst agreeing with both Tennyson and Phelan that Christina Rossetti is the true inheritor of the Tractarian devotional mode in poetry, I wonder why the canon of the

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Buchanan, 'Thomas Maitland', 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti', *Contemporary Review*, 18 (1871), 334-350 (339). Of Rossetti's sonnet 'Nuptial Sleep' (v) Buchanan writes: 'It must not be supposed that all Mr. Rossetti's poems are made up of trash like this [...]. But the fleshly feeling is everywhere [...]'. Buchanan ignores the religious dimension of the sonnet-sequence as a whole.

<sup>17</sup> Dora Greenwell's sonnets are also included in Phelan's chapter on the devotional sonnet. These sonnets are Tractarian in flavour although her denominational allegiances varied during her lifetime. Gerard Manley Hopkins converted from High Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism (1872-4).

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, 94.

nineteenth-century religious or devotional sonnet has become almost synonymous with High Anglicanism.<sup>19</sup> The domination of the nineteenth-century religious or devotional sonnet by High Anglicans and Roman Catholics bodes ill for poets of other Christian persuasions, especially for Central Anglican sonneteers such as Emily Pfeiffer who, as I discuss later in this chapter, used her sonnets to promote women's emancipation while striving to retain her Christian values in the face of scientific discovery. Like the amatory sonnet-sequences of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, where the all-encompassing religious dimension has been (to some extent) critically neglected, it seems that Pfeiffer's reputation as a writer of religious sonnets may not have been served by her inclusion of contentious scientific and emancipationist material. As alloys, Pfeiffer's sonnets failed to conform to prevailing critical definitions for what constitutes a religious sonnet; yet, for many Victorians, scientific discovery and women's rights were religious issues of the utmost importance. Fortunately, today, in the twenty-first century, definitions that until very recently confined the 'devotional' or 'religious' sonnet to the pure, unalloyed, unadulterated poetics of High Anglican sonneteers such as Christina Rossetti, Isaac Williams and Roman Catholics, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, are dissolving. More flexible definitions provide greater opportunities for Pfeiffer's religious sonnets to regain the recognition they enjoyed during her lifetime. I reiterate the words of Mark Knight and Emma Mason: 'To insist on rigid boundaries between the sacred and secular [...] is to demarcate religious space in a narrow and misleading manner [...].'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: Tractarian Mode* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981)

<sup>20</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

The revival of the sonnet form that followed in the wake of Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* (1870, 1881), and Christina Rossetti's *Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets* (1881) and *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets* (1881), inspired a number of late-Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* women poets to direct their talents towards the sonnet form. Some of these Victorian women were still writing poetry in World War 1, as a twentieth-century anthology of 'war poems' including poems written by Katharine Tynan Hinkson, Alice Meynell, Edith Nesbit and Charlotte Mew, demonstrates.<sup>21</sup> Other nineteenth-century contemporaries of Pfeiffer still writing in the twentieth century were A. Mary F. Robinson who died in 1944, Rosamund Marriott Watson who died in 1912, Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Cooper ('Michael Field') who died in 1914 and 1913 respectively. Even Pfeiffer's friend, Emily Hickey, lived until 1924. Yet not all these women can be labelled '*fin-de-siècle*' poets. The dividing line between late-Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* poetry does not depend so much upon when the poet lived, wrote and died as on the content and tone of the poems themselves. Augusta Webster's incomplete sonnet-sequence *Mother and Daughter* (1895), for example, in which a mother-daughter love relationship replaces the traditional man-woman amatory formula, can be said to belong more to the *fin-de-siècle* than to late-Victorian poetry, whereas A. Mary F. Robinson's sonnet 'Neurasthenia' (1886) is typical of the *fin-de-siècle*. According to Phelan this is because it '[uses the] incipiently psychoanalytical language of surface and depth, concealment and revelation'.<sup>22</sup> To illustrate Phelan's point, the second quatrain of 'Neurasthenia' is quoted here:

I watch them glide, like skaters on a stream,  
Across the brilliant surface of the world.

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<sup>21</sup> Catherine Reilly, ed., *Scars Upon My Heart, Women's Poetry & Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1981)

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-9.

But I am underneath: they do not dream  
How deep below the eddying flood is whirl'd [...].<sup>23</sup>

Augusta Webster and Mary Robinson, as well as *fin-de-siècle* sonneteers such as Michael Field, Amy Levy and Louisa Bevington, were part of a London coterie of women poets to which Pfeiffer belonged.<sup>24</sup> This fact is interesting because it shows that Pfeiffer was familiar with - and possibly influenced by - *fin-de-siècle* sonnets written by friends and associates in the years before her death in 1890. In addition, Pfeiffer's friendship with Emily Hickey, Irish Home-Ruler and fellow champion of women's education, may have thrown her into the path of Constance Naden, another Irish Home-Ruler, who moved to London in the late 1880s.<sup>25</sup> Tragically Naden died prematurely in 1889. Yet even though Pfeiffer may not have met Naden in person she would have known her by reputation, for Naden's published works, her poetry, essays, tracts and pamphlets, were well-known by the London literati. The two women shared several interests: both were activists fighting for women's suffrage; both could afford to live in comfort and travel widely; both followed intellectual pursuits and were equally at ease in the society of women and men; and both spoke German. Pfeiffer would have known Naden to be a follower of scientists Herbert Spencer and Dr. Robert Lewins – and an avid supporter of 'Hylo-Idealism'.

### Emily Pfeiffer versus Constance Naden

Constance Naden (1858-89) has received recent critical attention from Marion Thain in 'Scientific Wooing': Constance Naden's Marriage of Science and Poetry' (2003), and

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<sup>23</sup> Phelan, op. cit., 148. This sonnet is taken from *An Italian Garden and Other Lyrics* (1886).

<sup>24</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Immaterial Poetics: A. Mary F. Robinson and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Poem', *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem, English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 240. See also Chapter 1, p.72.

<sup>25</sup> The Irish and Welsh felt themselves to be subjugated by British imperialism.

from Andrea Kaston Tange in ‘Constance Naden and the Erotics of Evolution: Mating the Woman of Letters with the Man of Science’ (2006). Both Thain and Tange examine Naden’s poetry and discuss aspects of ‘the dialogue between Victorian poetry and the sciences [that] are emerging’.<sup>26</sup> Naden, Thain explains, published scientific theories based on Lewins’s Hylozoistic system under the ‘[pseudonym C. Arden] or ‘C.A.’, or occasionally, Constance Arden, or even ‘C.N’’, in order to separate these works from her literary publications which she published in her own name.<sup>27</sup> Thain adds: ‘Naden avidly pursued the feminization of nature which Robert Lewins gestured towards when he traced the word ‘matter’ to the Latin *materia*, which is the same root as ‘mater’ or ‘mother’’.<sup>28</sup> Tange writes of Naden:

[She] uses her poetry to model the necessary fluidity of disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, in merging the ‘male’ scientific mind with a feminist poetics, Naden is a writer – and, by implication, posits a *reader* – whose facility with both science and poetics indicates an evolutionary step toward respecting women’s intellect.<sup>29</sup>

Born in 1858, and brought up in the Midlands by her Baptist grandparents (her mother died a few days after she was born), Naden attended a Unitarian school and took classes in Botany and German. In 1881, she became a student at Mason Science College in Birmingham. After her death, chapter titles in a volume entitled ‘Further Reliques of Constance Naden’ demonstrate the wide range of Naden’s intellectual pursuits: ‘What is Religion? A Vindication of New-Materialism’; ‘Pig Philosophy’; ‘Hylo-Zoism *versus* Animism’; ‘Geology of the Birmingham District’ [Panton Prize Essay; Mason College, 1885], are just some of the titles. A follower of the ex-railway engineer, Herbert

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<sup>26</sup> Marion Thain, ‘“Scientific Wooing”: Naden’s Marriage of Science and Poetry’, *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), 151-169 (151).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 154. See Lewins, *Humanism versus Theism*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Andrea Kaston Tange, ‘Constance Naden and the Erotics of Evolution: Mating the Woman of Letters with the Man of Science’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 61 (2006), 200-240 (Abstract, 240).

Spencer (1820-1903), the author, teacher, and advocate of social Darwinism, Naden was also a devoted disciple of Dr. Robert Lewins. Under the sub-heading, ‘Hylo-Idealism: the Creed of the Coming Day’, Lewins writes:

I cannot deny that there may be behind nature this ‘cause of causes’, but if so it is a God who hides himself, or itself, from mortal thought. Nature is at all events vice-generent plenipotentiary, and with ‘her’ thought has alone to deal. In transcending ‘her’ we transcend to proper conditions of thought [...]. The Sabbath of the mind is pure reason, where there is a natural solution of everything [...]. Mental satisfaction – unity between microcosm and macrocosm, not the search after ‘First Causes’, i.e. deity-glorification, as in the Catechism – is the true chief end of man [...]. (15)

My thesis is that our motions and emotions are effected by the play of the very same infinite cosmical forces that we see active through the boundless realms of infinitude and space and time. Grasp clearly the idea that body and mind, of which motion and emotion are the manifestations, are really one with each other and with the illimitable Cosmos, and you become aware [...] that the whole mystery of religious, prophetic, poetic and all other mental exultation, is clear on natural principles. Scientists are really [...] under a radical delusion; for all research and so-called discovery is a mere state of change in their own internal perceptions – a subjective phenomenon [...]. (17)<sup>30</sup>

Tange summarises Naden’s ‘Creed’:

Naden’s sense of multi-disciplinarity took the form of Hylo-Idealism, a theory arguing that all disciplines are interrelated and that there is no significant distinction between the physical and spiritual realms [...]. Hylo-Idealism contends that all knowledge is relative and that things are unknowable except through our own experience or sensation of them. Her sonnet ‘Undiscerned Perfection’ provides perhaps the most explicit example of how Naden uses poetry to exemplify her philosophical position and challenge the cultural assumption of discrete disciplines.<sup>31</sup>

Tange uses the octave of Naden’s sonnet to illustrate her point, emphasising the third line where Naden writes of ‘The land where Poetry and Science meet’:

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Lewins, *Humanism versus Theism, or, Solipsism (Egoism) = Atheism*, ed. C[onstance N[aden]in a Series of Letters by Robert Lewins’, *Tracts 1877-79* (London: Free thought Publishing Company, 1887), 5-20 (15, 17).

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., 207-8.

### ‘Undiscerned Perfection’

Beyond the realm of dull and slumberous Night  
I long have wandered with unwearied feet;  
The land where Poetry and Science meet  
Streaks the far distance with a magic light:  
Fair visions glide before my dazzled sight,  
And Shine, and Change, and pass with motion fleet,  
But never clear, and steadfast, and complete  
In one transcendent brilliancy unite.<sup>32</sup>

The gender stereotypes that Naden attempts to dismantle in ‘Undiscerned Perfection’ relate to the assumption that science is the province of the masculine mind and poetry is the province of the feminine mind. Yet, as Tange explains, even as early as 1860, Herbert Spencer argued ‘against the assumption that poetry and science were naturally at odds, calling the notion that the two were incompatible ‘a delusion’’.<sup>33</sup> But, apart from the gender stereotypes relating to science and poetry tackled by Naden in ‘Undiscerned Perfection’, two key aspects of Hylo-Idealism (that there is no essential distinction between physical and spiritual realms and that scientific ‘discovery’ is merely an alteration of the scientist’s own internal perception) remain subjects for discussion. These may, or may not, bear reference to sonnets by Emily Pfeiffer.

In comparing Naden’s Hylo-idealism with Pfeiffer’s Christianity in order to locate a Christian feminist niche in the interstices between science and religion, I select Naden’s double sonnet-sequence entitled ‘Starlight, I and II’ and pit it against Pfeiffer’s double sonnet-sequence, ‘The Soul’s Prayer’, I, and ‘The Soul’s Pride’, II. Here, straightaway, the titles of the two double sonnet-sequences provide clues to each work: for what is *soul* to Pfeiffer is *starlight* to Naden – the one *spirit*, the other *matter*.<sup>34</sup> Another

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<sup>32</sup> Constance Naden, *Complete Poetical Works*, with an explanatory fore-word by Robert Lewins, M.D. (London: Bickers & Son, 1894), 129.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, 209.

<sup>34</sup> Constance Naden, *op. cit.*, 142-3. Emily Pfeiffer, *Sonnets*, *op. cit.*, 97-8.

difference between the sonnet-sequences that soon becomes apparent is that Naden makes her points clearly, thereby reducing chances of misinterpretation, while Pfeiffer's mode of expression is obscure, paving the way for diverse interpretations. In interpreting these two double sonnet-sequences I present passages from Naden's double sonnet-sequence (*in italics*) with passages from the equivalent parts of Pfeiffer's double sonnet-sequence (not in italics):

‘Starlight, I’. (Naden)

*Night works like Time: hushed is the busy street;  
 Grey are the walls, whose yet untarnished red  
 Glared in the sun; for shadows overspread  
 All hues of earth, that wearied eyes may meet  
 The restful heavens; that mortal hearts may greet  
 Eternal truth: while darksome paths I tread,  
 The light of other worlds is round me shed,  
 The glow of distance æons guides my feet.*

‘The Soul’s Prayer, I’. (Pfeiffer)

Our souls are natives of the Infinite,  
 And learn with toil to breathe the air of Time;  
 Our early loves and sorrows are sublime  
 In sense of durance and unfettered might.  
 Kind Nature take us, weary ere the night  
 As children are, and from this alien clime  
 Shelter, and let us dream its morning prime  
 Fans our worn spirits with its fresh delight.

In these opening lines, both poets use a capital T for Time (perhaps for emphasis), and both depict ‘night’ as a metaphor for ‘Time’. Both poets suggest that living in night, or Time, is not natural to ‘*mortal hearts*’ (‘souls’) that are used to the ‘*light of other worlds*’ (‘the Infinite’). Both poets agree that living within a human Time frame is an unnatural state, tantamount to living in permanent darkness (Naden) or struggling to breathe air for the first time (Pfeiffer). But Naden’s speaker deploys the Hylo-idealistic



view that just because we live in the shadows of night, or Time, and cannot see the brightness all around us does not mean that it does not exist. The darkness is there so that weary eyes can gaze on the restful heavens and mortal hearts can greet the Eternal truth. Pfeiffer, however, having said that human souls are natives of the Infinite and that they have to learn to adapt to Time seems to suggest that the human soul (native of the Infinite but trapped in a human Time-frame) can still remember the Infinite which is why our *early* loves and sorrows seem so ‘sublime’. And here, true to the title of this sonnet, Pfeiffer’s speaker prays to ‘kind Nature’ asking (her) to protect and shelter ‘us’ while in this alien clime (and in this context Nature is ‘mother’ because ‘we’ are referred to as ‘children’). Kind *Mother* Nature, ‘we’ pray, let us dream dreams that refresh our spirits because, like children, we are frightened of the darkness of night-Time.

In the second tercet of the sestet of ‘Starlight 1’, Naden’s speaker rejoices in the soul’s transition from Space to Infinity, from Time to Eternity:

*From sun to sun, from age to age I climb,  
Until for Space I see Infinitude,  
And feel Eternity, where was but Time.*

Pfeiffer’s sestet seems more pessimistic:

But if the scorner Time that makes our woe  
Prove very lord of us, then on thy breast  
Quell once for this feverish thirst to know,  
This hungry love, the traitor’s bitterest jest;  
End on thy mother’s heart these pangs too slow  
To kill; let sleep be death since that is best.

While Naden makes the Hylo-Idealistic point that there is no distinction between physical and spiritual realms and that the human soul is at one with the Cosmos, Pfeiffer's speaker worries that if earthly Time is all there is, and that when our bodies die we also die spiritually, then our hunger for eternal life is futile and best stifled early (as a mother might kill her own offspring to put it out of its misery). Without the hope of heaven, let sleep be *death*.

What is strange about Pfeiffer's first sonnet is that the soul's prayer is not directed to God, or Christ, or the Holy Spirit. Pfeiffer makes no mention the soul's prayer for spiritual enlightenment or spiritual intervention. The soul's prayer is directed solely to Nature asking her to provide shelter and protection against a clime that is so alien. If there is no hope of escaping the power of the scornful, *masculine* lord, Time, Nature's *feminine*, maternal, instincts must intervene to destroy our yearning souls.

In the first quatrain of the octave of her second sonnet, Naden echoes the words of Lewins in his Tract (1877-79): 'Mental satisfaction - [...] not the search after 'First Causes, i.e. deity-glorification [...] - is the true chief end of man'. Hylo-Idealism sees no need for an immanent Saviour God:

*'Starlight, II'.*

*Man needs no dread unwonted Avatar  
The secrets of the heavenly host to show;  
From waves of light, their lustrous founts we know,  
For every gleaming band and shadowed bar  
Is fraught with homelike tidings from afar;  
Each ripple, starting long decades ago,  
Pulsing to earth its blue or golden glow,  
Beats with the life of some immortal star.*

‘The Soul’s Pride, II’.

And, mother, if nor sleep nor death may be  
Till, slaves of Time, we drain his poisoned cup,  
Still let no lifeless images set up  
Perturb our sinking soul’s long agony.  
Gods without hearing, gods that cannot see,  
Are idols all; how to the reckless troop  
Of Science and its forces should we stoop  
To worship who can suffer and be free?

Pfeiffer’s speaker, addressing ‘mother’ (presumably still mother as in *Mother Nature*), avers that if we cannot escape the ravages of Time we need not further distress our souls by worshipping false images.<sup>35</sup> Gods that cannot see us, or hear us, are *idols*. Here, like Naden, Pfeiffer seems to refer directly to the part in Lewins’s Tract where he writes: ‘There may be behind nature this ‘cause of causes’, but if so it is a God who hides himself, or itself, from mortal thought’. While, in ‘Starlight, II’, Naden writes: ‘Man needs no dread unwonted Avatar’, Pfeiffer’s sonnet suggests that ‘[it is the] reckless troop / Of science and its forces’ that is the dread, unwonted, Avatar.

Naden ends ‘Starlight, II’, eloquently seeing ‘a life’ in each atom, regardless of Man’s ability to perceive it as such. Thus the Earth, made up of atoms, is a living, *feminine*, entity that knows herself to be a part of heaven.<sup>36</sup>

*A life to each minutest atom given –  
Whether it find in Man’s own heart a place,  
Or past the suns, in unimagined space -  
That Earth may know herself a part of Heaven,  
And see, wherever sun or spark is lit,  
One Law, one Life, one Substance infinite.*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In referring to Mother, or Mother Nature, Pfeiffer is, wittingly or unwittingly, supporting Lewins’s ‘Creed’ which sees ‘matter’ - *materia*, mater, mother, Mother Nature – as ‘vice-generent plenipotentiary [...] [ and that] in transcending ‘her’ [matter/Nature] we transcend to proper conditions of thought [...]’ (15).

<sup>36</sup> The World, conceptualized as a living organism, is known as ‘Gaia’.

Needless cold altars plead against these new  
Unheeding Baals for Him quick hearts approve  
With answering fire; the soul that knows her due  
Holds herself lifted high as heaven above  
All heartless postulates, if only through  
The power to feel one pang of dying love.

At last Pfeiffer refers to Christianity as her speaker regards as needless attempts to plead the cause of Christ's passion against the unheeding Baals of science. The feminine soul, even if *she* has only the power to suffer one pang of dying love, knows her selfhood to be lifted as high as heaven – high above heartless scientific postulates. Quick feminine hearts respond to 'His' love with love - and it is *her* capacity for love that makes the soul so proud. Although Pfeiffer imbues the human soul with the feminine qualities Naden attributes to Matter, the Hylo-idealist altar is cold whereas, for Pfeiffer, feminine Christian hearts answer 'Him' with fire.

Naden and Pfeiffer are in rough agreement that 'we' are natives of the infinite and that, living in a human time-frame, we cannot see our surroundings clearly. Yet just because we cannot see in the dark, Naden suggests, does not mean that the things we cannot see do not exist. Both Naden's and Pfeiffer's sonnet-sequences refer to some form of heaven, some kind of transition from Space to Infinity, from Time to Eternity – but for Naden this relates to the unity of the Cosmos and, for Pfeiffer, to the adaptability and evolution of the Christian soul. Naden's sonnet-sequence demonstrates her Hylo-Idealistic 'Creed' - that there is no need for a God because the Cosmos already knows all the answers. Living in darkness, all scientists can do is cast light on things that are already there. 'Discovery' is merely a shift of the scientist's internal perception. As

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<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 143.

‘matter’ (gendered female), we are of one substance with the ‘mother Cosmos’. While Naden genders the Earth and the Cosmos feminine, Pfeiffer plays on the concept ‘mother’ or ‘Mother Nature’ to make the point that nature (like mothers) may have to be cruel to be kind. If slavery to Time is all there is, then it would be better if ‘kind mother nature’ smothered our questing souls early, to spare them the agony of hope. Yet we believe that, through loving Him, the soul can finally quit the world of Time and attain Eternity in heaven.

In ‘The Soul’s Prayer’ and ‘The Soul’s Pride’, Pfeiffer defends Christianity against science, a position she adopts again and again in her sonnets. While Naden sees no need for an Avatar to reveal the secrets of heavenly host shining all around her in a feminine Cosmos, Pfeiffer genders the soul feminine in order to make her all-important emancipationist points. Although now a prisoner of Time and Space, the soul knows her due and holds her self as high as heaven; the soul is exalted above all heartless postulates; the soul responds to Christ with a fiery love that raises her heavenwards. While Naden sees the soul as an entity fixed in an unchanging Cosmos, Pfeiffer sees the soul’s destiny as a fluid and dynamic process of change and progress. While defending Christianity against science, Pfeiffer presents a Darwinian picture of a feminine soul *adapting* to her earthly servitude in order to *evolve* to a higher plane of existence. This concept she repeats in other sonnets, such as ‘A Wind from Off the Sea’ (1882), in which the speaker, mourning her dead love, suddenly knows that *her* soul will survive death. The final tercet is cited here:

To know it living by a bleeding sign,  
And, in the hungry, shaping tooth thereof,

Feel it at work to make my soul divine.<sup>38</sup>

In the final four lines of her sestet of 'Dreaming' (1880), however, Pfeiffer's dreaming speaker describes herself 'waiting on the shore of Time', listening to the ebbs and flows of the ocean. Her heart bounds with love as she yearns for the swift feet of Hermes:

that I might –  
A chartered messenger – spurn back the ground  
And through the reeling world be charged to fly,  
With but one word to help Him in the fight.<sup>39</sup>

It seems that Pfeiffer, witnessing the declining power of her particular strand of the Established Church, saw aspects of science as a real threat to the Christian faith. Yet her view that Christians must fight to preserve their faith needs to be set into the context of the late-Victorian period as a whole. In his article 'Science & Religion', Frank James suggests that the assimilation of scientific 'discoveries' into Christian precepts was not a particular problem for Victorians until the 1870s when 'some scientific figures sought to develop the idea that there had always existed a 'conflict' between science and religion, going to back to the Galileo affair if not before'.<sup>40</sup> James refers to John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), observing that in the same year John Tyndall, the Irish physicist, asserted that science would 'wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory'.<sup>41</sup> Yet James observes that Michael Faraday, a Christian, believed 'that God had written the laws of nature into the universe at the time of the Creation, in such a way that they could be

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<sup>38</sup> Op. cit., 28. Also, Emily Pfeiffer, *Under the Aspens, Lyrical and Dramatic* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882), 124.

<sup>39</sup> Op. cit., 40. Also, *Sonnets & Songs* (1980), 56.

<sup>40</sup> Frank James, *London Library Magazine*, 12 (2011), 16-18 (16).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

discovered'.<sup>42</sup> Even G. H. Lewes (1817-1878), reluctantly acknowledged that theology and science could co-exist. Writing in *Fortnightly Review*, Lewes commented:

We have too many conspicuous examples of men eminent in Science and sincere in their theological professions, not to admit that the mind *can* follow two Logics, and can accept both the natural and the supernatural explanations. Whether the mind ought to do so, is another question.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly, as far as Pfeiffer was concerned, Charles Darwin's publications of *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1858) and *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) presented no serious problems to her as a Christian, as her 1871 correspondence with Darwin regarding sexual selection shows.<sup>44</sup> A. N. Wilson even suggests that some Victorians thought Darwin's theory to be 'infinitely more Christian than the theory of special creation because it [...] implies the omnipresence of [God's] creative power'.<sup>45</sup> One such Victorian who, according to Gillian Beer, was able to assimilate Darwin's theories of natural selection and evolution into his Christian belief system was the Reverend Charles Kingsley (1819-75). Gillian Beer writes:

Kingsley, seeking for a way of preserving religious meaning in a world saturated with cruelty and beauty, found it through the idea of transformation implicit in and newly authenticated by evolutionary theory [...]. His involvement with Darwin's theories in their first reception created the disturbance out of which *The Water Babies* came with extraordinary spontaneity.<sup>46</sup>

Notions of transformation, or metamorphosis, captured the imagination of late-Victorians who endeavoured to integrate new scientific theories into a Christian framework. Beer, stating that 'many Victorians were fascinated by transformation and the limits of metamorphosis', draws attention to Margaret Gatty's story about a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>43</sup> G. H. Lewes, 'On the Dread and Dislike of Science', *Fortnightly Review*, 23 (1878), 318.

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter 1, p.44.

<sup>45</sup> Op. cit., 191.

<sup>46</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots, Evolutionary Narratives in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127.

caterpillar that cannot believe that it will one day become a butterfly.<sup>47</sup> The deployment of metamorphosis as a metaphor for spiritual evolution is the subject of Pfeiffer's sonnet, 'The Chrysalis' (1876).<sup>48</sup>

### 'The Chrysalis' (1876)

The form of 'The Chrysalis' is structured around 'sonnet-wave', a melodic convention which, according to Thomas Hall Caine, 'embraces the flow and ebb of thought or sentiment, and flow and ebb of music'.<sup>49</sup> In the Preface to his anthology, Hall Caine observes: 'It was Mr. [Theodore] Watts who first explained [...] the [...] law that is manifested in the inflowing wave solidly gathering into curving volume, culminating in one great pause, and then sweeping out again from the shore'.<sup>50</sup> Although Pfeiffer omits the Petrarchan 'pause' between the 'in-flowing' octave and the 'outflowing' sestet of 'The Chrysalis', she nevertheless uses 'sonnet-wave' as part of a spiritual metaphor in her sonnet. Through her use of 'sonnet-wave', Pfeiffer's sonnet operates both as a formal convention *to* Time and as a metaphor *for* Time, Change, and Progress. The octave describes the building wave:

When gathering shells cast upwards by the waves  
Of Progress, they who note its ebb and flow,  
Its flux and re-flux, surely come to know  
That the sea-level rises; that dark caves  
Of ignorance are flooded, and foul graves  
Of sin are cleansed; albeit the work is slow;

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>48</sup> Kathleen Hickok, 'Intimate Egoism': Reading and Evaluating Noncanonical Poetry by Women', *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), 13-30 (17-19). In her interpretation of 'The Chrysalis', Hickok refers to the religious element in Pfeiffer's words: 'that dark caves / Of ignorance are flooded'. Hickok interprets this as meaning 'that ignorance will inevitably be flooded with truth, and, in a baptismal image, that sin will inevitably (and consequently) be cleansed'. Hickok adds: 'Thus Pfeiffer claims for herself a sanctified role as poet-prophet: her mission is to reconcile and to inspire'.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas H. Hall Caine, ed., *Sonnets of Three Centuries: Selection* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 22.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22.



Till, seeing great from less for ever grow,  
Law comes to mean for them the Love that saves!

The shells ‘cast upwards’ by waves of Progress in ‘The Chrysalis’ are part of an inevitable evolutionary process of flux and re-flux, flow and ebb. Flow is followed by ebb, flux by re-flux – Pfeiffer’s tidal imagery suggesting a state of flux as the waves of Progress continuously fall back to their previous state. Yet, in the first quatrain, the speaker states that shell gatherers, who ‘note’ the flow and ebb of tides, know that flux is stronger than re-flux. They know this, not through superstition or belief, but through observation. Scientific method proves that sea-levels always rise. And as, in Hall Caine’s words, the ‘inflowing wave solidly gather[s] into curving volume’ as the sonnet-wave reaches its crescendo near the end of the octave, so the metaphorical flood-waves also reach their peak – the two ‘fluxes’ (formal and metaphorical) converging to cleanse the caves of ignorance and the graves of sin.

Pfeiffer’s metaphors of ‘dark caves’ and ‘foul graves’ are of particular interest in this context. As Sigmund Freud later pointed out, a cave is a womb-like enclosure, a female place, earthy, secret and sacred, the cave symbolises the plight of woman in patriarchal cultures, the woman whose cave-shaped womb is her destiny. And yet, for a childless woman like Pfeiffer, this metaphor is more than a question of destiny – it strikes at the fundamental core of a woman’s self-identity.<sup>51</sup> In spite of this, Pfeiffer’s speaker knows that the time will come when the dark caves of ignorance will be flooded and washed

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<sup>51</sup> Myra J. Hird, ‘Vacant Wombs: Feminist Challenges to Psychoanalytic Theories of Childless Women’, *Feminist Review*, 75 (2003), 15-19 (15-16). Hird is concerned that childless women are excluded (and therefore deprived of power). She quotes Judith Butler who suggests that ‘childless women deviate from the dominant constitution of ‘woman’, not only because the requisite child is missing, but also [because] their gender identity is no longer in opposition to that of ‘man’. In other words, if male gender identity is founded on the negation of a female gender identity (that of woman-mother) then childless women threaten the stability of male gender identity’. Butler’s theory emphasizes the disciplines of civilization that regulate identity, as well as the ability of the individual psyche to resist them. See J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.

clean. One day women will be set free from the man-made fetters that hold them captive because of their procreative role. True to the science of evolutionary progress from simple to complex forms so, over time, the ‘graves’ of women made ‘foul’ by patriarchal Law will be cleansed. Then the shell-gatherers shall come to understand that it is matriarchal Love, and not patriarchal Law, that saves.

In the sestet, the speaker leans down the ages, listening:

And leaning down the ages, my dull ear,  
Catching their slow-ascending harmonies,  
I am uplift of them, and borne more near,  
I feel within my flesh – laid pupa-wise –  
A soul of worship, tho’ of vision dim,  
Which links me with wing-folded cherubim.

Conforming to the theory of sonnet-wave, the tide is ebbing and the progress made by the cleansing flow of the previous tide seems lost. Yet during this period of re-flux, the speaker nevertheless describes herself as ‘uplift’ of ‘slow-ascending harmonies’ – harmonies which intimate to her soul that the overall trend is upward. She is aware that although the feminine soul is still at an early stage of evolution, buffeted by the ebbs and flows of Progress like shells on the seashore, it is nevertheless undergoing transformation. Deep within her ‘flesh’ the speaker knows that, over time, her soul will evolve into a more perfect form and that this form will bring her closer to ‘wing-folded cherubim’.

Although Pfeiffer conforms to the male-inscribed *letter* of the sonnet form she does not conform to the male-inscribed *spirit* of the sonnet tradition. Transforming the Law (the patriarchal letter) of sonnet-wave into a metaphor for the evolution of Love (the matriarchal spirit) Pfeiffer’s sonnet spells out the evolutionary potential of the feminine

soul. I reiterate Pfeiffer's words from the Preface of her publication *Flowers of the Night* (1889) written shortly before her death: 'In the course of evolution a track which connects the life of Time with the life Eternal is ever widening'.

### The Coming Day (1880)

In this chapter I suggest that Pfeiffer, by using the sonnet form to defend Christianity against science, found a niche for her feminism at an intersection where science and religion meet. While repudiating science as anti-Christian on the one hand, on the other hand she exploited and promoted evolutionary science by marrying the moral and religious superiority of Christian women to the evolutionary concept of adaptation, change, and progress. By presenting women as having unique potential for physical and spiritual transformation through evolution, Pfeiffer was essentially playing both sides to the middle in order to elevate women's power both in this life and the next. Pfeiffer's sonnet, 'The Coming Day' (1880), supports my position:

In dream I saw a vision of the world  
Caught in mid-space, a heavy-laden ship  
Panting and bounding in a squall's fierce grip,  
Her hatches battened and her canvas furled,  
Reeling on slippery crests of waves which swirled  
From under her, and let her blindly dip  
Into their clamorous caves beneath the whip  
Of winds which on her hope defiance hurled.

But lo, when that swift squall had swept ahead,  
I marvelled at the way the ship had won,  
How, straight in doubt and darkness she had sped,  
Borne by the storm-winged messenger of One  
Unnameable; and last, I saw her spread  
All sail, and signal back the rising sun.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Sonnets*, rev. edn (London: Field & Tuer, 1886), 96.

Pfeiffer uses the metaphor of a ship in a storm to present a picture of the world ploughing forward in time and space, its destiny unknown. The ship is female, and Pfeiffer uses evolutionary imagery to describe 'her' battening down her hatches - *adapting* to the adverse environmental conditions. Thus with sails tightly furled, like a tightly-corseted woman, she pants and reels and dips blindly into 'clamorous caves' under the whip of winds from above. Caught between the dark depths below her (the pull of instinctual drives and the drag of her procreative role) and the whipping winds above her (scientific discovery and patriarchal domination) – her hopes are defied. Yet, after the storm, the speaker marvels at the straight course she has steered borne by a storm-winged Angel sent from God. The ship speeds on in full sail, signalling the rising 'Son'. Christ is Risen; the Christian world is safe; the Christian world is *woman*.



## CHAPTER 3: EMILY PFEIFFER'S SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

### I WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY

With the growth of the Woman's Movement and the decline of her particular branch of the Anglican Church, Emily Pfeiffer's allegiance to both feminism and Christianity became increasingly problematic for her from the 1870s onwards. The poems discussed in this chapter are chosen with the aim of disclosing some of the ways Pfeiffer tried to reconcile her Christian faith with her feminism by using themes popular with women poets during the Victorian period. These themes are, firstly, the representation of women as close to, or personified as, Mother Nature; secondly, women's identification with the Virgin Mary; and, thirdly, the 'fallen woman' theme linked to the biblical 'fallen' women, Eve and Mary Magdalene. Themes relating to fallen women inspired several Victorian women to write poems on the subject, and these are briefly compared with poems by Pfeiffer who, I contend, exploited the 'fallen woman' theme in order to re-imagine her Christian faith in ways that she believed best promoted women's temporal and spiritual power.

#### Women and Mother Nature

In the late 1870s, Pfeiffer used her poetry to subvert the male-inscribed image of womanhood as being close to the natural world. Throughout history, because of their procreative role, women have been regarded as closer to nature than men. The first fallen woman and mother, Eve, was reviled and cursed by God (Genesis 3:16) and

women's reproductive functions were deemed impure. Menstruation, for example, was regarded as 'unclean' (Leviticus 15:19). In the Victorian period, childbirth was a life-threatening ordeal and, when midwifery was appropriated by doctors, 'concerns about women's modesty and physical well-being intersected with anxieties about the doctor's reputation [...] and the power of his tools'.<sup>1</sup> In 1876, an unnamed medical man writing for the *Lancet* blamed the 49,107 infant deaths of the previous year on illegitimacy and women 'clamouring for work'. He wrote that the high infant mortality was 'essentially a woman's question, and in a great measure we must look to women for its solution'.<sup>2</sup> In 1893, the *British Medical Journal* published an article proving that men and women contributed equally to the creation of each new individual (whereas previously it was believed that men were the sole progenitors of the human race).<sup>3</sup> Yet the spiritual and cultural implications riding on the back of this discovery remained dormant until well into the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> The Church continued to treat Victorian women as an inferior order of existence, and fathers continued to remain the sole legal parent. When marriages broke down husbands had the legal right to take their children away from their mothers.<sup>5</sup> The Infant Custody Bill (1884), promoting co-equal parental rights was rejected on the grounds that Protestants might interfere in the upbringing of Catholic children.<sup>6</sup> That women were subject to patriarchy in every area of their lives is endorsed

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Poovey, 'Scenes of an Indelicate Character': The Medical 'Treatment' of Victorian Women', *Representations* 14 (1986), 18.

<sup>2</sup> James G. Wakely, ed., 'Excess of Infant Mortality in England', *Lancet*, 108 (1876), 847-884 (873).

<sup>3</sup> 'Professor Weismann's Germ-Plasm: Theory of Heredity', *British Medical Journal*, Review Section (1893), 592-3 (592). The review makes no mention of women's equal reproductive status.

<sup>4</sup> August Weismann, *Germ-Plasm: Theory of Heredity* (London: Walter Scott, 1893). Weismann (1834-1914) brought to British Medical attention the epoch-making discoveries of Herman Fol and Edouard Van Beneden in 1879. Dedicated to Charles Darwin, Weismann's publication spells out the facts: 'In reproduction between individuals of the same species, the same number of paternal and maternal ids [chromosomes] take part in the process'. Weismann makes it clear that both sexes contribute equally to human inheritance (294).

<sup>5</sup> Pfeiffer's friends Caroline Norton, Frances Kemble and Rosamund Marriott Watson (Tomson) had their children taken from them upon divorce. Countless other women suffered the same fate.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England 1850-1895* (London: Tauris, 1989), 136. Shanley also acknowledges the important contribution of Caroline Norton to changes in the Custody law, especially the Custody of Infants Act of 1839. '[Norton] turned to powerful political

by the publication of *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill. Harriet Taylor (1807-58) was the inspiration, if not the author, of these words:

The wife is the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so [...] than slaves [...]. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all through her life by law [...]. If she leaves her husband, she can take nothing with her, neither her children nor anything which is rightfully her own. If he chooses, he can compel her to return, by law, or by physical force; or he may content himself with seizing for his own use anything which she may earn, or which may be given to her by her relations.<sup>7</sup>

Scriptural doctrine promulgated patriarchal notions which linked sex and procreation to sin and death in ways that demeaned women, and marginalised them within the Established Church. Victorian girls inculcated into the Christian faith unconsciously absorbed and internalised negative attitudes relating to female biological functions, and so it is not surprising to find a number of poems where Victorian women identify themselves with the natural world. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft (1750-97) described housewives as caged birds and, during the nineteenth century, the caged bird metaphor was appropriated by women wishing to draw attention to their plight. Pfeiffer, like Jean Ingelow, Caroline Lindsay and others, uses the caged-bird metaphor to link nature to physical and spiritual oppression.<sup>8</sup>

In her elegy, 'A Song of Winter' (1879), Pfeiffer uses the lyric mode to subvert the misogyny that kept women spiritually subject because of their procreative role. While conforming to the ideological association of women with the natural world, Pfeiffer links the 'barbed blossom of the guarded gorse' with female identity, crucifixion and

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friends, particularly Serjeant-at-Law Thomas Talfour, and Lord Lyndhurst, to sponsor legislation giving mothers the right to apply to Chancery for custody of their minor children [...]', 136.

<sup>7</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Subjection of Women* [1869] (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 165-6.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Ingelow, 'Beyond', *Great Thoughts from Master Minds*, 183 (1892), 609. Caroline Lindsay, 'From a Window', *Lyrics and Other Poems* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899), 3.



resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Consisting of eight four-line stanzas the gender of the speaker, though not directly specified, is feminine. In the first stanza the speaker addresses the gorse directly, acknowledging her love for its blossoms which brighten wintry days when other flowers are dead. In the second stanza, the speaker reveals her primary interest – that gorse is ‘undying’:

Flower of the gorse, the rose is dead,  
Thou art undying, O be mine!  
Be mine with all thy thorns, and prest  
Close on a heart that asks not rest. [5-8]

The speaker begs the gorse flower, emblematic of everlasting life, to be hers – thorns and all:

I pluck thee and thy stigma set  
Upon my breast and on my brow,  
Blow, buds, and plenish so my wreath  
That none may know the wounds beneath. [9-12]

The speaker plucks the gorse blossom and sets its ‘stigma’ on her breast and brow, the blossoms forming a wreath to hide her wounds. By using the word ‘stigma’ Pfeiffer verbally links the ‘stigma’, the female sexual apparatus of the gorse flower, with the stigmata on Christ’s body, clearly linking women’s sexual stigmatisation with Christ’s wounds and crucifixion. Women and Christ share the ‘stigma’ of pain and suffering with the ‘guarded gorse’ whose thorns the speaker presses against herself to symbolise and enact women’s pain and suffering.

In the fourth stanza, Pfeiffer uses the lines ‘Thy honeyed blossoms are but hives / That guard the growth of wingéd lives’ to emphasise gorse’s spiritual symbolism. In the fifth stanza, she reinforces this symbolism by describing gorse bushes as ‘burning bushes all

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<sup>9</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Quarterman’s Grace and Other Poems* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879), 97.

ablaze' referring to the burning bush (Exodus 3:2). In the penultimate stanza, the golden gorse shines out like a beacon on the hill as winter approaches:

And yet thy lamp upon the hill  
Feeds on the autumn's dying sigh,  
And from thy midst comes murmuring  
A music sweeter than in spring. [25-28]<sup>10</sup>

As gorse bushes blossom on the hill from winter to spring so Christ, crucified on a hill called Golgotha, survives death. Gorse and Christ are undying – and because the speaker shares their stigmata she too is undying. Pfeiffer puts women right alongside Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Because of their suffering and sacrifice, women too will survive death.

In this elegy, Pfeiffer uses a flower metaphor to place women as fellow sufferers with Christ. Stigmatised because of their procreative role, women suffer. But this suffering, which is a crucifixion, is the very condition that ensures women's place in heaven. Gorse blossom is female suffering is Christ – not in the past, not in the future, but *now*. By using the botanical term 'stigma' as an inclusive metaphor for gorse, women and Christ, Pfeiffer is able to make the illusory connection between each component part a temporal and spiritual reality.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2, 344-345. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who published two poems on the subject of the gorse flower, may have influenced Pfeiffer in her choice of gorse for her poem. In 'Lessons from the Gorse' (1841) Barrett Browning uses gorse to teach 'us' to be strong, glad and humble. In the second stanza her words 'Set as lights upon a hill, / Tokens to the wintry earth that Beauty liveth still!' are similar to those used by Pfeiffer in her 7<sup>th</sup> stanza. Growing up in Wales, however, Pfeiffer would have seen the banks of yellow gorse flowers brightening the winter landscape.

## Women and the Virgin Mary

The process of constructing gynocentric religious images involves betraying, to some extent, the male-inscribed biblical tenets of the Christian faith. Yet Pfeiffer, because she was a Central Anglican, was better placed to operate both inside and outside patriarchal orthodoxy than women poets who conformed to High Anglican and Roman Catholic dogmatism. In this respect Pfeiffer can be compared with Anna Jameson (1794-1860) who wrote *Legends of the Madonna* (1852). Kimberly VanEsveld Adams writes of Jameson:

Jameson's feminist Mariology qualifies the assumption of many feminist scholars in the fields of religion, history, and literature - for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, Elizabeth Johnson, Barbara Pope, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Margaret Homans - that the Virgin Mary is so closely linked to the misogynistic practices and oppressive politics of the patriarchal Church and male-dominated societies that historically she has served *only* as a distorted and repressive ideal for women. Jameson is able to see the Madonna in new ways because of her Protestantism and her profession. This Victorian writer balances her reverence for what previous generations considered holy and precious with a Protestant's freedom to appropriate or reject the religious past. And like Grimké and Stanton she has a Protestant's confidence that she may interpret the ancient legends, liturgies, and sacred images for herself, and find what she calls their living spirit. Jameson reveals herself as a worshipper of the feminine divine [...]: and she brings the Virgin Mother down to earth, using this powerful image to advance the causes of progressive religion and sexual equality.<sup>11</sup>

Adams makes several important points here. Like the scholars she cites, she is aware that the Virgin Mary is linked to misogynistic practices and serves as a 'distorted and repressive' role-model for women. Adams suggests that Jameson has a 'Protestant's freedom to appropriate or reject the religious past'. Jameson, Adams writes, feels free to interpret ancient legends, images and liturgies herself in order to find 'their living spirit'. Jameson worships the feminine divine yet uses images of the 'Virgin Mother' to

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<sup>11</sup> Kimberly VanEsveld Adams, 'The Madonna and Anna Jameson', *Woman's Theology in Nineteenth Century Britain, Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, ed. Julie Melnyk (London: Garland, 1998), 77.

advance the causes of ‘progressive religion and sexual equality’. Jameson’s reverence for the Virgin Mother is coupled with a desire to bring her down to earth – to eliminate what she describes as ‘the relics of many an ancient faith’.<sup>12</sup> In *Legends of the Madonna*, for example, Jameson draws attention to the amalgamation of the Madonna with Diana of Ephesus (the pagan Goddess of both Chastity and Fertility) in early art forms:

[The Madonna] became [...] the impersonation of motherhood [...] and at the same time, by virtue of her perpetual virginity, the patroness of single and ascetic life – the example and the excuse for many of the wildest of the early monkish theories [...]. Christ, as they assure us, was born of a woman only, and had no earthly father [...]. Therefore we are to suppose that, for the exaltation of the male sex, Christ appeared on earth as a man; and, for the consolation of womankind, he was born of a woman only [...]. But also with Christianity came the want of a new type of womanly perfection, combining all the attributes of the ancient female divinities with others altogether new. Christ, as the model-man, united the virtues of the two sexes, till the idea that there are essentially masculine and feminine virtues intruded itself on the higher Christian conception, and seems to have necessitated the female type.<sup>13</sup>

St. Justin the Martyr (c.100-165 A.D.) and St. Irenaeus (c.130- c.200 A.D.) were among the Fathers of the Church whose ideas about feminine virtues ‘intruded’ themselves on Christianity. In order to create a ‘model-woman’, a virtuous ‘female type’, Mary was elevated as the great exception among women. Uncontaminated by Eve’s sin and untainted by the bodily functions normally associated with female sexuality - menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth - Mary was raised still higher when the Church insisted that she was a virgin not only *before* but also *after* Jesus’ birth. Honouring Mary with perpetual virginity was apparently not enough, for in the fifth century it was proclaimed ‘that Mary’s unique virgin-motherhood made her ‘God-bearer’ [...]. Symbolically [this] presented Mary not only as the mother of the human Jesus but also

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<sup>12</sup> Anna Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna, as Represented in the Fine Arts* [1852] (London: Unit Library, 1903), Introduction, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 4-5.

as the Mother of God'.<sup>14</sup> Under the caption 'Mary the Mother of God' in the Roman Catholic treatise, *Mariology*, Joseph Pohle and Arthur Preuss use the scriptures to prove 'Mary's Divine Motherhood':

The Bible does not employ the formal term 'Mother of God', but refers to the Blessed Virgin merely as [...] 'mother of the Lord'; however, since Jesus Christ is [the] true God, all texts that refer to Mary as His mother are so many proofs of her divine maternity [...]. [In] Luke 1:3[5] [...] the heavenly messenger expressly [said to Mary]: 'Therefore the Holy [thing] which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God'. Since Mary gave birth to the Son of God, she is really and truly the mother of God'.<sup>15</sup>

In her essay 'Stabat Mater', however, Julia Kristeva draws attention to translation errors and the imposition of pagan-rooted beliefs on, and against, Church dogma:

It would seem that the 'virgin' attribute for Mary is a translation error, the translator having substituted for the Semitic term that indicates the socio-legal status of a young unmarried woman the Greek work *parthenos*, which on the other hand specifies a physiological and psychological condition: virginity [...]. The fact remains that Western Christianity has organized that 'translation error, projected its own fantasies into it and produced one of the most powerful imaginary constructs known in the history of civilizations. The story of the virginal cult in Christianity amounts in fact to the imposition of pagan-rooted beliefs on, and often against, dogmas of the official Church [...]. [The Gospels] suggest only very discreetly the immaculate conception of Christ's mother, they say nothing concerning Mary's own background and speak of her only seldom at the side of her son or during the crucifixion [...]. In the rare instances when the Mother of Jesus appears in the Gospels, she is informed that filial relationship rests not with the flesh but with the name or, in other words, that any possible matrilinearism is to be repudiated and the symbolic link alone is to last.<sup>16</sup>

Kristeva suggests that the cult of the Virgin Mary originates from pagan-based beliefs combined with a crucial translation error of the word *parthenos*, both of which were imposed upon the dogmatism of the Church. Marina Warner, writing of the cult surrounding Mary, also draws attention to the dearth of information about her birth, life and death. Warner criticises the way Roman Catholic educators imposed 'nearly two

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (New York: Orbis, 2001), 187.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Pohle, Arthur Preuss, *Mariology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: B. Herder, 1916), 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 161-162.

thousand years of sexual chastity' on children as a result of their interpretation of what they saw as Mary's 'purity':<sup>17</sup>

That the mother of God should be a virgin was a matter of such importance to the men of the early Church that it overrode all other considerations [...]. Sexuality represented to them the gravest danger and the fatal flaw [...]. It is almost impossible to overestimate the effect that the characteristic Christian association of sex and sin and death has had on the attitudes of our civilization.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, in spite of the fact that the Virgin Mary serves as a repressive and distorted feminine ideal, Pfeiffer exploits the cult of the Virgin Mary to advance a feminist reconstruction of the Christian religion.

In 'Madonna Dūnya' (1879), a ballad that Pfeiffer assures her readers is only very loosely based on a Russian saga, she exploits the concept of motherhood not merely to place women in heaven but also to confer upon women the spiritual status of the Madonna herself.<sup>19</sup> Although Pfeiffer had no children, she accords to motherhood iconic status by fusing images of the Virgin and Child with images of a peasant mother and her baby. By conflating images of the Virgin Mary with the peasant labourer, Pfeiffer validates the earthly mother as a spiritually transcendent being. In this way Pfeiffer elevates 'motherhood' from the lowlier functions associated with female reproduction to a celestial state. The peasant who, Pfeiffer hints, miraculously retains her virginity *post partum*, is raised to the highest pinnacle of heaven.

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<sup>17</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex: Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, 1976), Prologue, 23.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, 'Madonna Dūnya', *Quarterman's Grace and Other Poems* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879), 59-75.

The ballad consists of sixty-eight four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameters, a measure commonly adopted by hymnists and ballad-writers. But in ‘Madonna Dūnya’ Pfeiffer avoids lapsing into the hymn-like ‘sing-song’ of Long Metre by interspersing dactyls, pyrrhics and anapaests amongst the iambs thereby varying the line-length. In this way line-lengths consist of eight to ten, or even eleven, syllables. The first stanza exemplifies the ballad’s irregular rhythm and line-lengths:

Three long days o’er the barren steppe  
Where the earth lay dead in her winding sheet  
She measured the hours from dawn to down,  
And trod out the seconds with ceaseless feet. [1-4]

The extensive length of this ballad requires that only stanzas relating directly to Pfeiffer’s transgressive construction of Dūnya as a supernatural mother (a double, perhaps, of the icon of the Virgin Mary) are selected for discussion. The first of four *motifs* singled out for comment exemplifies the way Pfeiffer mixes illusion and reality to infer a two-way relationship between the peasant labourer, Dūnya, and an icon of the Virgin Mother and Child. Arriving at the house, Dūnya kneels before the icon. Under her sheepskin Dūnya is sheltering her baby:

Fair to her greeting the Icon smiled,  
Holding her babe to her mother’s breast,  
Smiled in the flickering light of her lamp,  
Telling of comfort, and eke of rest [...] [40-43]

A three-month’s child in its rosy sleep,  
A child as the Christ of the Icon fair,  
Was the load which had lain on the wanderer’s heart  
And stood revealed to the woman there [...] [52-55]

When the other two women came home i’ the dusk,  
They saw, ‘neath the Virgin in gold and sheen,  
A tattered pilgrim who bore a child  
As fair as the living Christ had been [...] [88-91]

The icon of the Virgin Mother *smiles* at Dūnya. The Virgin's smile denotes the camaraderie of two women who share the bond of motherhood. But, of course, the whole idea of an inanimate icon smiling is an illusion, a device Pfeiffer uses to distort reality and make the unreal appear real. The icon smiles – and immediately the reader visualises the Virgin and Child in a relationship with Dūnya and her child. Later, the other women observe that Dūnya's child is as fair as Christ had been *when he was alive*. Again Pfeiffer distorts time and space by depicting the adult, crucified, Christ as a real baby alongside Dūnya's baby 'here' in present-day Russia. The women could not know (other than from the man-made icon) whether or not Christ had been fair as a child; nor could they know from Dūnya's tattered appearance and prayerful attitude whether or not she was a pilgrim. Pfeiffer manipulates her account of the women's perception of events to draw her readers into her narrative and, as she drives home Dūnya's Madonna-like qualities, she continues to blur the division between illusion and reality. Then Pfeiffer goes farther into the realms of the mystery by steering Dūnya away from the usual man-woman relationship. Did she dream of a man? *'I tell you no'*:

I tell you no, - that not Mary's self,  
The Virgin Mother, the vestal soul,  
That of mortal passion had known no throb,  
Had a heart for her first-born son more whole; [104-11]

Dūnya is not grieving for a lost lover: the baby's father is not in the picture at all. For not even the Virgin Mother, who never knew the throb of 'mortal passion', loved Her Son more wholly than Dūnya loved her baby boy. This stanza can be interpreted on two levels: that Dūnya is sexually innocent and that her love for her son is pure; or that Dūnya, like the Virgin Mary, is the recipient of the God-given gift of perpetual virginity and that her baby is the living equivalent of Christ. Pfeiffer drops into her lyric the



suggestion that the peasant mother and her child are on a spiritual par with the Virgin Mother and Child.

A third group of stanzas presents another aspect of Dūnya's relationship with the Virgin mother. Here Pfeiffer depicts her peasant labourer in a way that anticipates a later poem, 'La Mujer Fuerte' (1922), by the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957). In 'La Mujer Fuerte' the strong mother labours in the fields sowing wheat. Margaret Bruzelius notes how 'the woman [has taken] the traditional male role as cultivator of the earth (not the female one, which is to be the earth itself) [...]'.<sup>20</sup> Bruzelius observes: '[Mistral] overlay[s] the image of the peasant woman with that of the Virgin [...]'. In this way the peasant woman [...] becomes sacralized by the evocation of the Virgin's attributes [...]'.<sup>21</sup> Mistral's poem echoes stanzas written by Pfeiffer half a century earlier. Pfeiffer depicts a mother desperate for work as, in the first two stanzas of the three cited here, Dūnya takes over the narrative:

'I will beat your hemp, I will hew your wood,  
I will do your bidding both high and low,  
And then in the spring, if you need me not,  
On St. George's day I will rise and go;

'And you bid me stay, I will drive your plough,  
Drive or draw, if your beasts are spare;  
My heart is stout as my hands are strong,  
And my face – it is nothing now too fair' [...]. [76-83]

So she stayed and wrought; she ploughed their ground,  
And sowed the seed in their plot of the Mîr,  
Till, sweet in the shade of the flowering rye,  
She laid the flower of all the year. [140-143]

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret Bruzelius, 'Mother's Pain, Mother's Voice: Gabriela Mistral, Julia Kristeva, and the Mater Dolorosa' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 18.2 (1999) 220.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

The rhythmical energy of these stanzas conveys images of Dūnya working in the fields. Although she has lost her looks, her hands and heart are strong. She can drive a plough and work as well as any man. Dūnya uses her strength to plough and shape the earth, sow seeds and reap the harvest – not in the traditional female role as the earth that is cultivated by men, but as the cultivator herself. Yet, at the same time, because Pfeiffer has superimposed the image of the Virgin Mary upon the image of Dūnya, Dūnya and her labours are rendered sacred. Conversely, the image of the Virgin Mary, aligned with that of a peasant labourer performing a traditionally masculine occupation, elevates the Virgin Mary as an equal with God the Creator and Christ while putting her on the side of women who want to take on masculine roles in the labour market.<sup>22</sup> These stanzas suggest that Pfeiffer may be using the sacred image of the Virgin Mary to validate Victorian women - mothers in particular - seeking employment.

Finally, Pfeiffer plays another perceptual trick with the poem's historic time-frame when she depicts Dūnya contracting the Black Death. Readers now have to reassess the preceding story in the light of a medieval setting. Added to this, Pfeiffer overlays Christ's crucifixion with an image of Dūnya sacrificing her own life as she, symbolically, leaves her son at a wayside *cross* and dies alone. The baby is found and the Bolshuka believes that the icon of the Virgin Mary is suckling Dūnya's baby; but her comment: 'The wandering woman came back again [...]', hints at the possibility that Dūnya herself has miraculously returned from the dead to feed her baby. The women keep vigil, and when they hear the baby gurgle in the dark and uncover the lamp

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<sup>22</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Women and Work* (London: 1888), 173-4. 'It would be invidious to mention [...] women who have been working [for the Suffrage League] [...] for more than thirty years. [They] have laboured through the toil and heat of the day; they have braved ridicule, and even disgust. They have done [...] as best they were able [...]'.

it appears that the icon of the Virgin Mary has come alive and is miraculously feeding Dūnya's baby.

Breast milk has great symbolic significance. Julia Kristeva, for example, sees breast milk as an important symbol of non-verbal communication.<sup>23</sup> For Marina Warner milk is a metaphor for spirituality. In her study of the cult of the Virgin Mary, she describes mother's milk as 'a crucial metaphor of the gift of life [...]'.<sup>24</sup> Warner also refers to a fifteenth century Florentine painting where Mary begs Jesus to intercede on the behalf of sinners. The inscription reads: 'Dearest son, because of the milk I gave you, have mercy on them'.<sup>25</sup> Anna Jameson writes:

A very common subject [...] is Mary in the act of feeding her Child from her bosom. I have already observed that, when first adopted, this was a theological theme [...]. Then, and for at least 500 years afterwards, the simple maternal action involved a religious dogma, and was the visible exponent of a controverted article of faith.<sup>26</sup>

Jameson points out that the 'simple maternal action' of breast-feeding was exploited by church patriarchs to promote religious dogmatism. In 'Madonna Dūnya', however, Pfeiffer exploits breast-feeding to promote the spirituality of women. Pfeiffer hints that the Virgin Mary intercedes in order to give a peasant woman's baby 'the milk of Paradise' [253], but then it transpires that it is not the icon come to life but Dūnya who, in spirit form, has returned to feed her baby. The idea of a ghost producing milk is extraordinary, but then the whole narrative is extraordinary right up to, and including, the final stanza. In the morning the women find the baby dead:

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<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., 160.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., 194.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit., 366-7.

Then they saw the flash of Elijah's steeds,  
And they heard the wheels of his chariot roll, -  
And within was a babe in his mother's arms  
Made safe for the night in her golden stole. [262-5]

The women witness a miracle. Apparitions of both the dead peasant mother (wearing the Virgin Mary's golden stole) and her dead child are transported to Heaven by the great prophet, Elijah. It seems that, through the intervention of the Virgin Mary, Dūnya has overcome death and, with her beloved son, has been transported to the highest echelons of heaven. Like the Virgin Mary, Dūnya gives birth, labours and suffers the loss of her son. She is, therefore, spiritually *at one* with the Virgin Mary. Pfeiffer is saying that all women who work, bear children and suffer death and loss also share in the Virgin's suffering at Christ's crucifixion. They, like the Virgin Mary, suffer their own crucifixion and, because of this, are worthy candidates for heaven.

Pfeiffer uses a saga, a medieval prose narrative, as camouflage for the transgressive content of her ballad. She exploits the traditional folk-tale fantasy of an inanimate object becoming animate (like the talking mirror in Snow White) to depict an icon of the Virgin Mother coming alive to intervene on behalf of Dūnya and her child. Because of the Virgin Mary, Dūnya and her child are magically rescued from their earthly travails and accorded everlasting life in heaven. In this transformation from death to life, from inanimate to animate, both women are able to overcome their inanimate states - the Virgin as icon, Dūnya as corpse. In this way both women resist patriarchal objectification and deanimation, the Virgin Mary by eschewing her exalted position as icon to become the living flesh-and-blood mother that Christian dogmatism denied her, and the peasant woman by overcoming death and attaining an exalted after-life despite of her lowly feminine status. Both the icon of the Virgin Mother and the dead Dūnya

become reanimated because of motherly love. The Virgin changes from an icon to a living, smiling, human being and Dūnya, though she transcends death, remains earth-bound in order to feed her baby. In this ballad Pfeiffer seems to be saying that if the Virgin Mother can intercede on behalf of a peasant labourer like Dūnya, *all* mothers can rely on the intervention of the Virgin Mother. The intervention of the Virgin Mary can help *all* women to transcend their subject status and overcome death. Though clearly pushing a feminist agenda, Pfeiffer subverts patriarchal religious convention by presenting divine aspects of the feminine as equivalent to feminine aspects of the divine.

### Fallen Women and Other Falls

In her fifty-page epic romance 'From Out of the Night' (1882), Pfeiffer details the tragic events that lead to a young girl's suicide. As she prepares to drown herself, the working-class girl recalls the time when she first met her lover at a regatta. Although from different social backgrounds the couple had fallen passionately in love and, having exchanged vows in anticipation of marriage, had become lovers. But later the young man, an undergraduate, had broken off the engagement. Apparently his father was sick and, because the family fortune had been lost, the young man felt duty-bound to marry a rich woman in order to save his father's life and to restore the family's social position. In the form of a soliloquy, the girl expresses her sense of betrayal when, rather than telling her in person, she receives a letter from her lover rescinding the vow he had made to her. Now a fallen woman and the object of derision and scorn the girl prepares to die, conscious that by sacrificing her life for her lover's father she can propitiate her sin and, redeemed, be able to participate with 'Him' in heaven:

Well, a life for a life; if, when counting my treasure for loss,  
Yielding days that were priceless with love, I had seen but the eyes  
Of the Christ who once suffered for men, as was said on the Cross,  
And been lifted in heart and in hope to high paradise.

I had died not so hard; they in asking my life to redeem  
The life of another, had made me partaker with Him [...].<sup>27</sup>

In her poem, Pfeiffer's portrayal of the fallen girl's suicide as a crucifixion is endorsed by Margaret Reynolds who draws attention to her Christ-like self-sacrifice:

The poem elevates the fallen woman to a saintly status, even going to far as to compare her with Christ given that she, in effect, gives her life, so that the life of her lover's father can be saved by his son's marrying a girl of a high class.<sup>28</sup>

Although my brief summary of the narrative sets out the bare facts of the tragic events of 'From Out of the Night', the narrative is just the tip of the iceberg. Underneath lies a subtext which, from a psychoanalytical perspective, demonstrates a depth of knowledge of suicide well in advance of the scant studies on the subject made prior to the 1880s.<sup>29</sup> Features of suicide that only came to be understood late in the twentieth century are described by Pfeiffer's suicidal speaker in 'From Out of the Night'.<sup>30</sup> The profound psychological insights exhibited by Pfeiffer in this poem are hard to explain. Are they serendipitous, or are they the result of personal experience? In this stanza the young girl justifies her suicide:

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<sup>27</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Under the Aspens: Lyrical and Dramatic* (London: Kegan Paul, Tranch, 1882), 1-50 (41).

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton, eds., *Victorian Women Poets: Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 339.

<sup>29</sup> Edwin Shneidman, *Voices of Death* (London: Bantam Books, 1982), 42 and 44. Shneidmann, a suicidologist, lists the findings of investigations made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first study of suicide was carried out in France by Brierre de Boismont in 1856. In Vienna, 1910, Sigmund Freud, and others, met for what turned out to be the only meeting of psychoanalysts on the subject of suicide ever convened. At this meeting, Wilhelm Stekel outlined what was, until around the 1980s, considered to be the orthodox psychoanalytical position on suicide - that suicide is the result of hostility directed toward the love object: 'No one kills himself except as he wishes the death of another'. On the love-hate theme, Shneidmann refers to Paul Friedman, ed., *On Suicide* (New York: International Universities Press, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Shneidmann includes the following features of suicide (described by Pfeiffer's speaker in her soliloquy): Love-Hate, 42-3, 45; Dichotomous logic, 42-3; Self-mourning, 139.

Yes, my life for the life of your father, who, sick, would have died  
At the fall of his fortunes, if lacking a son who would wed  
With the wealth which should build them again, only setting aside  
The claim of a girl who could urge it no more, being dead.<sup>31</sup>

In this stanza Pfeiffer seems to be projecting on to a fictional male undergraduate a situation similar to that which occurred in her own youth - a situation relating to her *own* father's loss of the family fortune. Yet if this part is based on personal experience, to what extent are other parts of 'From Out of the Night' autobiographical? While living at home with her family in Oxford did the young Emily Davis have an unsuitable love affair with an undergraduate - an affair that was cruelly terminated; and did she contemplate suicide on the banks of the river at night? Was it family pressure (real or imagined) that caused Emily Davis to marry a rich merchant much older than herself? Even if these conjectures are only partially valid, they go some way towards explaining Pfeiffer's perceptive descriptions of the stages leading to suicide.<sup>32</sup>

At the 1910 psychoanalytic conference on suicide, Wilhelm Stekel put forward his opinion that nobody commits suicide unless they wish the death of *another* person – a view that persisted until the 1980s. Today psychoanalysts add shame, guilt, fear, loss of autonomy and feelings of hopelessness to the suicidal cocktail, although love and hate still remain the main ingredients. In 'From Out of the Night', love and hate are the main emotions expressed by the young girl towards her lover as she moves towards suicide:

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<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., 41.

<sup>32</sup> Suicide is the underlying theme of Pfeiffer's Welsh verse-novel *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (1877). See part II of this chapter, pp.171-199.

For I died by your hand in that letter; it did not require  
Such urgency of proof that the blow was decreed and must fall;  
Ten pages – and written so fairly, and written with fire!  
Was that well when a word of your lips had sufficed to it all?

I had never contested your will, if your will was to part,  
Neither battled nor yielded with tears as a deer brought to bay,  
I had laid all my life in your hand, had made over my heart;  
It was easy to win me – more easy to cast me away [...].<sup>33</sup>

Conflicting feelings characterise the young girl's gradual journey towards death. But the mutually exclusive category - love and hate - forms the focus of her thoughts. This dichotomous logic, which can only perceive stark alternatives such as love and hate, joy or misery, life and death, is another characteristic of the suicidal process.<sup>34</sup> It is as if the young girl's thoughts are running along pre-ordained tracks towards one certain destination. All other thoughts are blotted out. Under the spell of this restricted logic, the young girl can see no way out of her dilemma, and gradually even this dichotomous logic shuts down, constricting her vision more and more. Ultimately only tunnel vision remains, a tunnel that leads directly into the river:

So the river – yes, the river; I have come to that at last;  
The river is my only friend, though changed with all the rest,  
Dark and sullen, it has known me in the glory of my past  
And has asmiled upon me then; for very shame it could not cast  
Me forth if I should seek the barren haven of its breast [...].<sup>35</sup>

Let me look upon you, river – soh, how deep and still you are!  
You will hide me well, for you are dark and secret as the night;  
I can see your bosom heave in the reflection of a star,  
And it does not show so hard in you, and does not seem so far;  
As I drop into the darkness, I shall feel the kiss of light.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., 36.

<sup>34</sup> Edwin Shneidmann, op. cit., 42-3.

<sup>35</sup> Op. cit., 43.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 50.



In her mental maunderings the fallen girl speaks as if she is already dead and, ghost-like, able to haunt the living. From her position as a spectral spectator, she witnesses her lover's marriage to a rich, upper-class woman. This is the most persuasive part of the poem because *self-mourning* is such an important characteristic of suicidal behaviour. Shneidmann describes the process:

In self-mourning it is perfectly natural, then, to grieve at the losses that make one less than one used to be [...]. Freud said that we cannot truly imagine our own death because, even in the imagining, we always remain as spectators. But that is not the whole story. As we imagine our own death – the world without us – we can be spectral spectators (like unseen ghosts), legitimately mourning because the world will be somehow less by virtue of our death.<sup>37</sup>

In 'From Out of the Night' the young girl attends the wedding of her lover to a rich woman unseen by all, except her lover. She expresses envy of her female rival who, growing in 'power and potency' over the 'treacherous years', will replace her in her lover's affections. After a prayer that at first seems to be addressed to the Virgin Mary but is apparently addressed to the bride who is replacing her, the fallen woman begs her lover's wife to leave her husband a little space for *her* 'in the silence of his thoughts'. She agonizes over the marriage service:

It was she [his mother] who kissed the bride, he dared not touch her in my sight,  
For he felt my ghostly presence and my shadow rise between;  
But they past me by together, and she has him day and night,  
With my shadow growing less and less until it dwindles quite,  
Or is swallowed of her substance, and abides with him unseen.

And she will be a growing power and potency, the years –  
The treacherous years will take her part and ravish him from me,  
And she will make a title out of daily smiles and tears,  
And will pass to fuller blessedness through weakness which endears,  
And I shall be as one forbid before I cease to be.

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<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 139.

O thou blessed among women more than all of woman born!  
Be my sister, be my comforter; nay, wherefore cold and proud?  
We are bound as in one web of Fate, the garland that was worn  
Of thee to-day, but yestereen from off my brows was torn,  
And that costly bridal robe of thine must serve me for a shroud.<sup>38</sup>

In these three consecutive stanzas, the young girl expresses her inability to imagine herself dead. Mourning her own death, she imagines herself still able to participate with events in the living world like a ghostly voyeur, able to prey upon her lover's marriage, to steal upon his dreams. She cannot bear the thought that he might forget her. Yet, all along, right from the very start of her affair, she had had a premonition that it would end in disaster. The 'bad fairy' of their liaison was a horrible old crone who had intruded on their love-making one day and cursed them, tainting their happiness:

'Twas a voice that awakened us rudely and scattered our dream,  
The voice and low laugh of a crone that had power to fling  
Defiance in face of our youth, and to chill with the gleam  
Of her dull wintry eyes all the sap in the veins of the spring [...].

Now they muttered but curses, which each to my ear was a cry,  
While her cheek was the map of a country where cross-roads of care  
Had been ploughed through a highways of tears ere their fountain was dry,  
And the pity of all was their ways seemed to lead to nowhere!<sup>39</sup>

The young girl observes the wrinkles on the old woman's cheek, wrinkles like a death-map leading nowhere.

In 'From Out of the Night', Pfeiffer uses the theme of suicide to draw attention to the treatment of women by society. As a Christian, the fallen girl fears God's judgement and condemnation because she has had sex outside marriage. The young woman and

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<sup>38</sup> Op. cit., 47.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 26.

her lover cannot marry because they come from different social classes. They cannot marry because she is not rich and he needs money. She is mocked and marginalised by society because she has had sex before marriage, while he can be married in a Christian church - his reputation untarnished. Pfeiffer is drawing attention to social rules so severe that the fallen girl sees death as her only option and surrenders her life to the 'River-God' – her pagan friend.

In 'From Out of the Night', Pfeiffer links events relating to a fallen woman's suicide to Christ's crucifixion. Yet Pfeiffer was just one of a number of Victorian women to write poems on the fallen woman theme. For this reason, I briefly summarise some of the main contributors to the subject in order to locate Pfeiffer's particular place within a continuum of Victorian fallen woman poems.

Dora Greenwell (1821-82), anti-vivisectionist and supporter of women's education, was an admirer of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and friend of Josephine Butler. In her dramatic monologue entitled 'Christina' (1851) - one of the first dramatic monologues on the fallen woman theme - the fallen woman speaker, although she has to die for her sins, is given a place in purgatory where, during 'soul sleep', she can be spiritually prepared for the Last Judgement.<sup>40</sup>

'Goblin Market' (1862), written by Christina Rossetti (1830-94) more than a decade later, is the focus of on-going critical interest. In her interpretation of 'Goblin Market', Diane D'Amico points out that Rossetti's 'sensuous descriptions immediately signal a

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<sup>40</sup> *Victorian Women Poets*, op. cit., 277-285.

spiritual warning'.<sup>41</sup> The warning is that 'the goblins are not primarily interested in Laura's body. Rather, through the seduction of the body, they hope to destroy her soul'.<sup>42</sup> D'Amico suggests: '[Rossetti] replaced the expected masculine voice with a feminine one and, moreover, a feminine voice that speaks of sisterhood and female friendship in the elevated terms used in the Bible to speak of masculine friendship'.<sup>43</sup>

D'Amico adds:

I am claiming, however, that in the Lizzie and Laura relationship, Rossetti offers her audience two lessons pertaining to women and the life of the soul, which for Victorian England in the 1860s might well be seen as subversive. First, through Lizzie, Rossetti indicates that the self-sacrificing love Victorian women were to embody should not be seen as angelic but as Christ-like [...]. Second, by celebrating sisterhood, Rossetti reminds her readers that the religious concept of brotherly love spoken of in the Bible should be seen to encompass sisterly love as well.<sup>44</sup>

D'Amico draws attention to the fact that temporal gender equality did not concern Rossetti whose interests were rooted in spirituality. Pfeiffer's interests, on the other hand, were rooted in a feminist agenda that encompassed women's spiritual and temporal emancipation.

In 'A Legend of Provence' (1866), Adelaide Procter (1825-64) writes of a fallen nun who runs away with a soldier. Years later, she returns to the convent only to be greeted by her double – an unblemished, virginal, version of herself. The Virgin Mary has taken her place at the convent so that upon her return she can resume her position as if she has never been away.

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<sup>41</sup> Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti, Faith, gender and Time* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 70.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-3.

For Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61) the fallen woman in *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Marian Erle, is a working-class woman who is drugged and raped. Barrett Browning presents Marian's fall as a social, rather than as a moral, problem. Angela Leighton makes the point that for Barrett Browning 'the woman poet must meet her raped sister, and the love story must meet the other story of sexual brutality and violation' – without these facts the woman's story cannot be told.<sup>45</sup>

In her dramatic monologue 'A Castaway' (1870) August Webster (1837-94) breaks away from tradition by separating the fallen woman motif from religion altogether, comparing prostitution with male-oriented, 'immoral', markets. Subsequently fallen women are linked with prostitution in 'Magdalen' (1884) by Amy Levy - and in 'The Message' (1891) by Mathilde Blind, after Pfeiffer's death. In writing of Mary Magdalene, F. Elizabeth Gray comments:

Arguably more than any other biblical character, the figure of Mary Magdalene provided Victorian women poets with a huge scope for creative and critical license [...]. Women poets seized the opportunity to thematise the creative and fictional aspect of all historical facts, including those of the biblical record'.<sup>46</sup>

In her blank verse poem 'Mary Magdalene, A Poem' (1880), Sarah Dana Greenough joins other nineteenth-century contemporaries when she conflates Mary Magdalene with

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<sup>45</sup> *Victorian Women Poets*, op. cit., 65.

<sup>46</sup> F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2010), 107.

the prostitute who dried Jesus' feet with her hair in St. Luke's gospel.<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Gray explains:

It was this identification [with prostitution], rather than that of her ministry and leadership roles, that was retained, expanded, and handed down in Church commentary, so that 'Mary Magdalen, chief female disciple, first apostle and beloved friend of Christ, would become transformed into a penitent whore'.<sup>48</sup>

Gray, in her evaluation of Greenough's poem, draws attention to the fact that Greenough 'transforms the Magdalene into a fully contextualised, deeply sympathetic heroine. Her sexual sin, while acknowledged, is rendered less offensive by the mitigating circumstances of her youth and lack of understanding'.<sup>49</sup> In many ways Greenough's treatment of Mary Magdalene is more sympathetic than that of Amélie Rives who, in a later poem, 'The Wonderful Child' (1922), also describes Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Rives, like Greenough, conflates two separate biblical stories and re-tells them against a fictionalised, quasi-historical, backdrop – but then both poems pre-date the re-discovery of *The Gospel of Mary* and the *Pistis Sophia*.<sup>50</sup>

When presenting 'From Out of the Night' (1882) as a religious poem, it seems hard to see where Pfeiffer's story of suicide fits into this continuum of Victorian fallen woman poems. Whereas the poems written earlier in the century by Dora Greenwell, Christina Rossetti and Adelaide Procter are directly (or allegorically) linked to biblical characters and themes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning sees the fallen woman as primarily a social, rather than moral or religious, issue. But the poets writing around the 1880s, when

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<sup>47</sup> We know now that she was not a prostitute, but rather a disciple of Christ who seems to have supported a Gnostic view of the Christian religion. This she set down in *The Gospel of Mary* and the *Pistis Sophia* (see part II of this chapter, pp. 171-2)

<sup>48</sup> Op. cit., 108. Gray quotes Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 15.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>50</sup> Amélie Rives, *As the Wind Blew: Poems* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1933), 73-85.

'From Out of the Night' was published, tended to link fallen women with prostitution which, in the case of Augusta Webster, was seen as female response to the demands of male sexuality. Amy Levy and Mathilde Blind also depict fallen women in terms of prostitution. In 'From Out of the Night', Pfeiffer critiques society's treatment of fallen women, while drawing attention to the deleterious effects that lack of material wealth and social position can have on human happiness. In these respects she leans towards Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel, *Aurora Leigh*. Yet Pfeiffer raises other, albeit transgressive, religious issues in 'From Out of the Night': firstly, that at the point of suicide the fallen girl's only friend is a *pagan* god (because the Christian church considers suicide a sin); and, secondly, by linking the girl's suicide with Christ's crucifixion, Pfeiffer seems to infer that Christ's death was also a form of suicide – an extremely transgressive, but thought-provoking, idea.

In contrast to the fallen woman poems so far mentioned in this chapter, Pfeiffer sometimes uses 'falls' as poetic devices in order to separate events in narratives into *before* and *after*. Before the fall, one set of events: after the fall, another set of events. Although the verb 'to fall' seems innocent enough, it is a trope laden with biblical significance relating to the myth of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Paradise. According to church doctrine, after 'the Fall' heaven was no longer accessible to Christians other than through Christ's death and resurrection. From Eve's 'sin' came the euphemism 'fallen' women for women who had sex outside wedlock; but people 'fall' in love, 'fall' pregnant, 'fall down', 'fall out' with friends, 'fall' into bad company, and so on. Whether falls are changes for better or worse (most falls are changes for the worst) they are changes. Thus, whether used literally, figuratively, as euphemisms or puns, in the deft hands of a poet like Pfeiffer 'fall' has abundant

potential for subversion in the quest for temporal and spiritual equality. In charting Pfeiffer's spiritual odyssey, I cite three additional examples of 'falls'.

In 'A Lost Eden [As it was Told to Me]' (1882), an epic poem interspersed with elements of the dramatic monologue, Pfeiffer alternates from the first to the third person singular.<sup>51</sup> A woman recalls her 'fall' from innocence in the 'Eden' of her childhood. One day she is in a beautiful garden about to sink her teeth into a perfect apple when the sun is blotted out by a shadow:

No snake with cunning wile,  
With subtle strength and beauty to beguile,  
Had put within her grasp the longed-for prize,  
The fruit whereof in tasting she grew wise  
And sad for evermore;  
Only a worn, uncomely face of eld  
By those young eyes too suddenly beheld [...];  
Only the broken voice, the toothless smile  
Of her who was the owner of the tree,  
Bending to offer hospitality,  
Had shown the child the door  
Of that first paradise, wherefrom expelled,  
Nothing that had its root upon this shore  
Of time, could be as it had been before [...]:<sup>52</sup>

In lines bursting with symbolic meaning Pfeiffer re-imagines the biblical myth about the Fall from Paradise. An innocent child eats fruit belonging to the 'owner of the tree' and at the moment of discovery becomes aware of death. Just as Eve's thirst for knowledge led her to discover the truth about her mortality, the little girl, upon seeing the age-ravaged woman, realises that her adored mother must one day age and die. Expelled from the paradise of her innocence, the 'fallen' child grieves and weeps all night. The

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<sup>51</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Under the Aspens, Lyrical and Dramatic* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1992), 80-97.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



next day: 'A love that was a mother's in me stirred / That morning as I stood beside her chair, / Stroking with tender touch my mother's hair / [...]'.<sup>53</sup> The child, even though she is only five years old, fears for her mother; and this fear awakens in her an appreciation of the power of mother-love to transcend sorrow, and the power of mother-love to reclaim Eden. It is mother-love that provides the child with her first inklings of heaven, and Pfeiffer exploits the biblical myth to raise the spiritual status of mothers and thereby women in general.

In Pfeiffer's poetic romance, 'Quarterman's Grace' (1879), 'Grace' is a lace-maker with a beautiful singing voice.<sup>54</sup> Listening to her singing in Church, the choir-master realises that 'She was a God-made instrument / Of compass rare'.<sup>55</sup> Using the metaphor of a caged bird to denote repression, Pfeiffer depicts Grace's frustration as she '[beats] the bars of her narrow life' while her 'untamed breast' unleashes a passionate song that touches the hearts of the congregation.<sup>56</sup> But, afterwards, as she drowsily listens to the organ music, she 'falls' into a daydream. In her dream Saint Cécilia, crowned with heavenly roses, beckons Grace and starts to lead her up a mountain. The saint quickly ascends to heavenly heights, but Grace cannot keep up with her. Soon Grace finds herself all alone as she clammers up the increasingly thorny and perilous mountainside. Suddenly, she 'falls' off the mountain – and wakes up. An 'angel' with silver-white hair and a gentle face is holding her hand:

A Doctor of musical degree,  
Eager and pure as a child is he,  
With a heart to will, and a will that can, -

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>54</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Quarterman's Grace and Other Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879), 1-56.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 39.

The will of a woman and the ways of a man, -  
And the hand that is holding her hand will guide  
Her unused feet on the mountain side.

From this true song of Grace it well may seem  
That there is hope for maids that fall in dream.<sup>57</sup>

The choir-master, whose organ playing induced Grace's dream of St. Cécilia, has taken responsibility for her musical education.

Before Grace's 'fall' she is an impoverished labourer with no future: after her 'fall', a real-life music teacher, symbolised by St. Cécilia in her dream, takes control of her career. From now on her feet will be guided on the upward path to self-fulfilment. Grace's 'fall' heralds the start of a new life as a professional singer. In this poem Pfeiffers seems to be using Grace's 'fall' to promulgate views on education and careers for women, views she later publicised in the prose work, *Women and Work* (1888). Yet, by connecting a working-class girl's musical gift to the spirituality of a female saint, Pfeiffer promotes women's spirituality while simultaneously publicising the need for education for girls – especially girls like Grace who were deprived of education and exploited by the work-force.

In her introduction to her romantic epic 'Martha Mary Melville' (1873), Pfeiffer reminds her readers that 'in the literature and art of the middle ages, Martha and Mary are taken as representative – the one of the practical, the other of the contemplative life'.<sup>58</sup> The narrative concerns three Scottish friends: fun-loving heiress Martha Mary Melville, Mary's impoverished friend Cissy, and Mary's cousin, Walter. It is expected

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>58</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* [1873], 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), 111.

by the families of both Mary and Walter that they will marry, and Mary is passionately in love with Walter. But there is a boating accident and Walter ‘falls’ into the river. Bending over Walter on the bank Mary hears him murmur ‘Cissie’ and realises that he loves Cissie, and not her. Later, when Walter dutifully proposes marriage, Mary turns him down. Because she wants Walter and Cissie to be happy together, she persuades her father to give Cissie her dowry. From now on her father calls her Martha: ‘Since you, like her / Of Bethany, are cumbered with the weight / Of ‘many things’ and to your peace prefer / This noise and stir’.<sup>59</sup> Martha grieves alone, and never marries; instead she devotes her life to contemplation and charitable works: ‘Her heaven waxed full the while her earth grew bare’.<sup>60</sup>

Pfeiffer uses Walter’s fall as the catalyst for events leading to the conversion of a worldly heiress into a saint-like martyr. By forfeiting her chances of earthly happiness Mary becomes Martha, sure of her reward in heaven. In this poem Pfeiffer depicts a woman who purposely sacrifices her own earthly happiness for that of her friends and, as in ‘From Out of the Night’, she assumes a Christ-like persona.

Pfeiffer exploits the fallen woman theme, directly or indirectly, in order to promote women’s temporal and spiritual emancipation. Her fallen woman poems, all written within a few years of each other, share *motifs* which can be detected in various guises in ‘From Out of the Night’. These include ‘falls’ from grace; ‘falls’ requiring Christ-like self-sacrifice; ‘falls’ (suicidal or accidental) into rivers; ‘falls’ which result in the transformation of women’s marital or educational expectations. But Pfeiffer’s exploitation of the fallen woman theme in ‘Quarterman’s Grace’ (when Grace dreams of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 132.

falling off a mountain) was one she had already deployed successfully two years earlier in her verse-novel, *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song*. In this poem, however, it is a sixth-century Irish noblewoman called Mona whose suicidal ‘fall’ off a Welsh mountain sets into motion a whole train of strange events. This is the subject of the second part of Chapter 3.

## II GLÂN-ALARCH, HIS SILENCE AND SONG (1877)

As a religious work, the blank-verse novel *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (1877) marks a turning point in Emily Pfeiffer's attempts to resolve the conflict between her adherence to a patriarchal religion and her support for the women's movement. In this work, and using blank verse to draw together history, myth and legend, Pfeiffer starts to reconcile the two ideologies using a strategy that had the potential to provide her with greater psychological stability.<sup>1</sup>

### Gnosticism and *The Gospel of Mary*

In her attempts to re-imagine the Christian faith along gynocentric lines, Pfeiffer lacked a ready-made blueprint. The Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, acquired by Dr. Carl Reinhardt in Cairo in 1896, which contains fragments of *The Gospel of Mary*, attributed to Mary Magdalene, was not re-discovered until 1955. Had she had access to a translation of it, Pfeiffer would have observed that Mary Magdalene's vision of heaven (which *The Gospel of Mary* claims was taught to Mary Magdalene by Christ Himself) is poles apart from the patristic, eschatological orthodoxy which the Church adopted in the third century A.D.<sup>2</sup> *The Gospel of Mary* states: 'Each soul will discover its true nature, its

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin S. Hall, *Freudian Psychology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1959), 27-35. 'The superego is made up of two subsystems, the *ego-ideal* and the *conscience*. The *ego-ideal* corresponds to the child's conceptions of what his parents consider to be morally good [...]. Conscience, on the other hand, corresponds to the child's conceptions of what his parents feel is morally bad [...]' In Freudian terms, Pfeiffer's allegiance to the patristic Established Church relates to the 'super-ego' formed as a child. But her support for women's emancipation also involves the 'super-ego' in ways that clash with her faith and pull at her conscience, hence the *ego conflict*.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., 'Transgressing Canonical Boundaries', *Searching the Scriptures: Feminist Commentary*, 2 vols (New York: Herder & Herder, 1994), 2, introduction. Fiorenza writes: '[The] New Testament [...] [contributed to] the historical silencing and textual marginalization of women [...]. The political goal of establishing the unified church as the consolidating power of the Roman

‘root’ in the Good, and return to the place of rest beyond the constraints of time and matter and false morality’.<sup>3</sup> The belief that the soul’s quest is to discover its own true identity is a characteristic of ‘Gnosticism’ where, according to Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, the spiritual goal is ‘Gnosis’, or knowledge of Truth. Whereas literalists are prepared to silence those who dissent from their belief that the scriptures are the literal word of God, Gnostics ‘interpret the stories and teaching of their spiritual tradition as signposts pointing [...] [to] the ineffable Mystery’.<sup>4</sup> Gnostics are ‘free spirits [who] follow their heart, not the herd [...]’.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Freke and Gandy point out that ‘the ancients regarded [myths] as profound allegories encoding mystical readings [...]’. Reworking old myths and syncretizing them to create new ones was a major preoccupation of the Gnostics’.<sup>6</sup> I mention this point here because it connects the Gnostic quest for self-knowledge as the pathway to heaven to the language of myth and metaphor. The importance of this is explained in four excerpts from Northrop Frye’s essays on *Myth and Metaphor*:<sup>7</sup>

In Western culture the biblical myths formed an inner core of sacrosanct legend, where, in contrast to classical or other non-biblical stories, the assertion ‘this happened precisely as described’ was maintained for centuries by brute force [...]. (116)

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Empire drove the exclusionary selection and canonization process [...]. The tandem notion of orthodoxy-heresy was developed in the second and third centuries. This drive for the ‘orthodox’ self-identity of the ‘patristic’ churches was motivated by political factors and had as an attendant outcome the identification of women’s Ecclesi[iastic]al leadership as heresy’.

<sup>3</sup> Karen L. King, *Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003), 628. Mary Magdalene is the disciple wrongly conflated with the prostitute who anointed Jesus feet (Luke 7: 37-48). In 1896, *The Gospel of Mary* was taken to Berlin. Only recently re-discovered, Karen King writes of it: ‘[The work provides] an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost fifteen hundred years [...]. [It] presents a radical interpretation of Jesus’ teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life [...]. [It] presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women’s leadership; it offers a [...] utopian vision of spiritual perfection [...]; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority’, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess: the Secret Teachings of the Original Christians* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), 13.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham (London: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 116, 118, 226, 254.

But our ordinary experience in time has to struggle with three unrealities: a past which is no longer, a future which is not yet, a present which is never quite. The myth is presented to us now, a present moment where [...] the past and future are gathered. Similarly, in metaphors of the type 'A is B', the 'is' is not really a predicate at all. The real function of the 'is' in 'Joseph is a fruitful bough' is to annihilate the space between the 'Joseph' [...] and the 'bough' [...] and place them in a world where everything is 'here' [...]. (118)

Metaphor [...] is a primary language: every type of language can be reduced to metaphor [...]. (226)

What the metaphor does to space, the myth does to time [...]. Myth does not, like history, present a past even as past: it presents it as 'present' [...]. [Its present is where] past and future are gathered: the present of Jesus' aphorism 'Before Abraham was, I am'. (254)

Frye draws attention to the fact that Biblical myths formed the core of legends which were forcefully maintained to be the literal truth; that all types of language can be reduced to metaphor; that metaphors can annihilate *space* by placing past and future in a world where everything is 'here'; that myth operates outside *time* by presenting the past as present. In addition, Frye stresses the importance of metaphor and myth to poetry stating that 'reality is in the world we make and not in the world we stare at'.<sup>8</sup> Frye's views on metaphor and myth, space and time, seem to support 'Gnosis', where the re-working of old myths and the creation of new myths are seen as signposts to ineffable Truth. On the same theme, Karen Armstrong observes that 'in an important sense God was the product of the creative imagination, like [...] poetry and music [...]'.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the great mysteries of creation she adds: 'Since nobody had been present at these unimaginable events [...] myth and symbol were thus the only suitable way of describing them'.<sup>10</sup> Regarding Time and Eternity, Pfeiffer herself wrote a year before her death:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 122. Frye refers to 'Giambattista Vico's principle of *verum factum*'.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Armstrong, *History of God from Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God* (London: Heinemann, 1993), introduction, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 13-4.

‘Love grows as it rises’, and the burthen of it in loss and sorrow would be too heavy for the heart of man, were it not that in the course of evolution a track which connects the life of Time with the life Eternal is ever widening.<sup>11</sup>

*Glân-Alarch* contains elements that have more in common with the *Gospel of Mary* than the eschatological canon espoused by the Western tradition. It seems that Pfeiffer, in her attempt to integrate her Christian and feminist allegiances, has started to re-construct Christianity along Gnostic lines.

### History, Myth and Legend

In her verse-novel *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (1877) Pfeiffer uses history, myth and legend to transpose kaleidoscopic images of the past into contemporary Victorian life.<sup>12</sup> The narrative revolves around events that occur when Pfeiffer’s heroine, Mona, falls off a mountain. Using Mona’s fall as a subversive device to separate events into ‘before’ and ‘after’, Pfeiffer’s structure of *Glân-Alarch* allows her to imagine a feminized form of Christianity.

In the Preface of *Glân-Alarch*, Pfeiffer states that her intention is to ‘revivify a typical moment of that past which lies at the root of the present through which we are living, and the future to which we aspire’. Using Saxon invaders to represent the crisis of faith sweeping over Victorian England, and the Welsh to represent the last bastions of faith in contemporary Victorian life, Pfeiffer creates a female spiritual leader sent by God to save the day. This female saviour is not a nun or saint, but a full-blooded woman who

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<sup>11</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Flowers of the Night* (London: Trübner, 1889), Preface.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 7-8. I call this poem *Glân-Alarch* for short.



eventually marries a Welsh prince. Emblematic of mysteries central to the early Christian Church until they were outlawed, Pfeiffer's heroine takes charge of events. Pfeiffer, omitting all direct references to Christ in her poem, makes the sub-textual point that the patriarchal stewardship of the Christian myth has failed. Thus the underlying implication is that by forbidding expression of the intrinsic spiritual gifts upon which the Christian myth was founded, and by concentrating on an eschatological, judgmental orthodoxy, churchmen have failed to carry out God's will. Pfeiffer, by creating a sixth-century saviour heroine with immense spiritual gifts, reaffirms feminine power in the nineteenth century. With faith in Christianity diminishing, *now* is the time for Victorian women to take the lead. By emulating the spiritual values and leadership of a mythical sixth-century woman, Victorian women can attain earthly power and ensure their own spiritual survival in heaven.

Pfeiffer's poetry shows that she never forgot her Welsh roots and *Glân-Alarch*, which re-constructs that 'moment' when the Welsh Celts stood alone against the Saxon hordes, was bound to elicit fervent responses from Welsh reviewers. The reviewer for the *Carnarvon Herald* writes: 'Every Welshman who loves his race and its history is bound to read the Poem'.<sup>13</sup> The *Carmarthen Journal* states that it would like 'to quote every line of this noble poem, for which Wales is so deeply indebted to Mrs. Pfeiffer'.<sup>14</sup> Even the English reviewer for the *Contemporary Review* is fulsome in his praise: 'There is true originality in the detailed execution on every page'.<sup>15</sup> Yet a more perceptive reviewer writing for *Academy* observes: 'The story is less concerned with external

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<sup>13</sup> Notices of the Press, *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems* [1873], 2<sup>nd</sup>. edn (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> *Contemporary Review*, Notices of the Press, Emily Pfeiffer, *Quarterman's Grace and Other Poems*, (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1882), 4.

movement than with spiritual motives [...].<sup>16</sup> The heroine of *Glân-Alarch*, however, is not a Welshwoman but an *Irishwoman* and, in this respect, Pfeiffer's motives for writing the poem could have been political.<sup>17</sup> As Catherine Brennan writes:

[In 1877] Irish nationalist agitation was a thorn in the side of the English government [...]. Any suggestion that the Welsh might be incited to emulate the rebellious Irish would have been perceived as threatening to the middle-class English establishment of the time.<sup>18</sup>

The English reviewers, however, seem oblivious of the possibility of a political motive for Pfeiffer's verse-novel, perhaps because it is clear from reading the poem that the overriding theme in *Glân-Alarch* is religious, albeit not in the conventional sense. Pfeiffer accommodates the unconventionality of her religious theme by choosing blank verse - a genre free from many conventional restrictions - for her Welsh tale of love and treachery. Though the term 'blank verse' refers to all unrhymed verse, it is generally limited to the iambic pentameter although, unlike other genres, it is improved by the insertion of five or more different kinds of feet. Thus an almost infinite variety of rhythmic permutations is possible with the result that, like musical composers, each poet develops his or her own individual style. Although Pfeiffer conforms to the intrinsic measure of five iambs per line as a basic requirement of the genre, and never rides rough-shod over this structure, she nevertheless inserts different kinds of feet with good dramatic effect. She also adds unstressed hyperbeats at the ends of certain lines, extending the ten syllables of the iambic pentameter to eleven, thereby creating the effect of an anapaest when merged with the first unstressed syllable of the next line.

This combination gives a lilting, Welsh, quality to the verse: 'You marvel not / That he

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<sup>16</sup> *Academy* (1877), *Gerard's Monument*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Pfeiffer's Irish friend Emily Hickey and her contemporary, the poet Constance Naden, were both free-thinking Irish Home-Rulers who may have encouraged her pro-Celtic disposition.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Brennan, *Angers Fantasies and Ghostly Fears: Nineteenth-Century Women from Wales and English-Language Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2003), 164.

should sit beside you at the *ingle*, - / A saint who having nought to do but pray, / Forgets to tell his beads'. Joined together the words give the poem greater musicality and metrical variety. Pfeiffer, like all accomplished exponents of blank verse, uses every licence available to her to enhance the dramatic effect of her narrative.

Questing for a period of history when women were venerated as spiritual leaders Pfeiffer, unaware of the leadership of women like Mary of Magdala, exploits the male-inscribed Victorian preoccupation with nostalgia in order to create a new mythology centred upon Mona, an iconic woman leader endowed with supernatural gifts. This Pfeiffer accomplishes by drawing on three interlinked strands – history, myth and legend.

The first strand, *history*, links *Glân-Alarch* to events believed to have occurred around 577 A.D. when the Saxons invaded West Wales from the Severn Valley.<sup>19</sup> Historians record that: 'Teudric the ex-King of Glamorgan had been recalled from [...] retirement in order to drive back the foreigner from the banks of the Wye, [where] he was mortally wounded [...] near Tintern'.<sup>20</sup> Reputed to be a descendant of King Arthur, Teudric's army successfully routed the Saxons. But the events in *Glân-Alarch* occur before this great victory. Faced with what looks like almost certain annihilation, Pfeiffer depicts a

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<sup>19</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, ed. by Rev. Joseph Stevenson (London: Seeleys, 1853), 34. The Welsh Britons (Brythonic Celts) occupied nearly all post-Roman Britain prior to 550 A.D. But from 477 A.D., for a century and a half, successions of Saxon invaders tried to conquer Britain against fierce resistance led, in the fifth century, by Arthur Pendragon. Between 550 and 577 A.D., the Saxons pushed the Brythonic Celts westward to Strathclyde and Wales (North Wales) and Cornwall and Devon (West Wales). But in 577 A.D., the Saxons broke the resistance of the Welsh and occupied the Severn valley, successfully splitting North from West Wales. Later, in 616 A.D., the Angles, under Ælfrith, attacked the Welsh of Strathclyde, splitting North Wales in half. Thus pagan Anglo-Saxons would come to occupy the whole of 'England', while the surviving Christian Brythonic Celts would be driven back to Wales and parts of Cornwall, the only British regions able to resist Saxon invasion.

<sup>20</sup> J.H. and G.W. Wade, *History of Monmouthshire* (London: Methuen, 1909), 42.

sixth-century Welsh prince looking back with nostalgia to the halcyon days around 550-577 A.D. when King Arthur had led the Welsh to victory against Saxon invaders. In order to imbue the present emergency with the successes of the past, the prince reconstructs an Arthurian tourney hoping to rekindle among his men memories of Arthur. By portraying a sixth-century prince nostalgic for the days of King Arthur, Pfeiffer characterises him as similar to those Victorian poets similarly preoccupied with reconstructing nostalgic images of the past as compensation for present-day feelings of loss. Pfeiffer knows that her prince's nostalgia for the days of King Arthur will strike a chord with readers steeped in nostalgic poems written by male poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson.

In *Glân-Alarch*, the prince says: 'Think you in truth that he, - our great Pendragon, - / Arthur, still lives in some high land of Faëry / Whence he may win to us [...]?' Pfeiffer depicts a prince, a royal leader of men, stymied in the face of almost certain defeat.<sup>21</sup> The new circumstances he faces seem insurmountable and he yearns for King Arthur to return from some magical land to save the day. This description echoes the part in the 'Morte D'Arthur' (1842), by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-92), where Sir Bedivere looks back with nostalgia to the days when the Round Table represented a world that he understood. Sir Bedivere expresses his anxiety at the loss of the Round Table to the dying Arthur:

But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved  
Which was an image of the mighty world,  
And I go forth companionless  
And the days darken round me, and the years,  
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson 1830-1858, 'Morte D'Arthur' (1842), *Poems* (London: Grant Richards, 1903), 122.

Sir Bedivere, feeling alone in an alien world, comments on ‘new men, strange faces, other minds’. Tennyson’s words can be interpreted as nostalgia for the days before the breakdown of accepted values during the Victorian period or, perhaps, for the days when his great love and mentor, Arthur Hallam, was alive. Like the prince in *Glân-Alarch*, Tennyson needs to create illusory images of the past to compensate for real feelings of loss in the present. Yet Pfeiffer exploits the masculine preoccupation of looking nostalgically back to the past by replacing King Arthur with a much more powerful leader. This sixth-century leader of the Welsh nation – this paragon who is instrumental in sending the Saxons packing and thereby changing the course of history – is Mona.

The second strand of *Glân-Alarch – myth* - relates to the Christian myth. Again Pfeiffer exploits the male-inscribed Victorian preoccupation with nostalgia to re-imagine the days before her branch of the Anglican Church was in decline. In the nineteenth century the fear of returning to paganism exercised the minds of Christians who seemed to forget that in the early days of Christianity pagan elements were absorbed into the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup> Her Church in decline, Pfeiffer appears to compensate for her loss by replacing the Christian myth with a new myth in which Mona, a sixth-century Irish heroine, is sent by God to save the Christian faith.

The third strand – *legend* – is a much less tangible area to describe because Pfeiffer subverts the legends associated with *Glân-Alarch* by distorting time and space, fact and

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<sup>23</sup> Pagan symbols – such as carvings of the Green Man – can still be found in some of Britain’s churches.

fiction, paganism and Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Yet Pfeiffer's treatment of legend accurately fits that 'moment' in sixth-century Britain when, according to Geoffrey Ashe, 'the Celtic tribes of both [Britain] and of Ireland [...] were dominated in all religious affairs by the Druids [...]'.<sup>25</sup> Ashe writes:

A [...] specific druidical legacy was [...] concerned with the wanderings and destiny of the soul [...]. They taught some form of transmigration [...]. Everybody, however, was immortal, and each soul had a future in other modes of existence [...]. The familiar world and the various Otherworlds interpenetrated each other, with ghostly areas of overlap and transition.<sup>26</sup>

Christianity prevailed and Celtic paganism crumbled into mythology [...]. Unseen realms intersected the visible, and there were secret means of communication and access [...]. The fairies and the heroes, the ex-gods and the demi-gods, jostled the spirits of the dead in kaleidoscopic confusion. There were glass castles where a hero might lie an age entranced [...] [and] theme by theme the Celtic imagination articulated itself in story.<sup>27</sup>

But Ashe admits that without adequate written records of the period 'the most that can be affirmed is that by the close of the sixth century Arthur's fame [...] must have been secure [...]'.<sup>28</sup>

Pfeiffer re-imagines and re-articulates legend and folk-tale in a fantastical manner consistent with the Celtic imagination of sixth-century A.D. when the seen and unseen, the real and fantastic, the past and present all intersected one another in a mysterious way. Yet these kinds of re-imaginings and re-inventions were also the source of great public interest in the Victorian period. Fairies, ghosts and mysterious 'happenings' were all grist to the Victorian literary mill. Charles Dodgson (1832-98), pseudonym

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<sup>24</sup> OED: Legend, '[A] collection of lives of saints or similar stories [...]. Traditional story popularly regarded as historical, myth [...]'.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *From Caesar to Arthur* (London: Collins, 1960), 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

‘Lewis Carroll’, added to his famous nonsensical books for children - such as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) - the poem ‘Phantasmagoria’ (1869) in which ‘a ghost can punningly fill up a ‘vacancy’, take a job, and occupy a void [...]’.<sup>29</sup> Another literary Victorian, the clergyman, novelist and poet, George MacDonald (1824-1905), also transposed images of the past into contemporary Victorian life. Published around the time Pfeiffer was writing *Glân-Alarch*, MacDonald’s stories, *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1888), feature imaginary women who are at once very, very young and very, very old. These women are guardian spirits who can appear and disappear suddenly and are only visible to good people. In the fight between the powers of good and evil, good always wins. In his introduction to a twentieth-century edition of MacDonald’s allegorical work, *Phantastes* (1858), C.S. Lewis wrote of MacDonald: ‘The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic reality in which we all live’.<sup>30</sup> In some ways MacDonald’s fairytales compensated for loss of religious faith, but they also inspired the Inklings, a group of twentieth-century Oxford Scholars (which included J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis), whose interests included reincarnation and theosophy. Following MacDonald’s lead, a new genre (which Tolkien later coined ‘mythopoeia’) came into being. Since then ‘mythopoeia’, a genre which integrates real-world mythologies and archetypes into fiction, has become so popular that works as diverse as T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (written between 1949 and 1954), J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5), and George

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<sup>29</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds, Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 289. Armstrong refers to Charles Dodgson’s *Phantasmagoria and other Poems* [1869].

<sup>30</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes, A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* [1858] (London: Azure, 2002), introduction, xi.

Lucas' novel which became the film, *Star Wars* (c.2005) are considered to be examples of the genre.

Emily Pfeiffer, an early exponent of 'mythopoeia', re-constructs history, myth and legend in order to create a mythic woman-saviour of the Welsh people. The Welsh are Christians therefore the mythic saviour of the Welsh must also be a Christian. Yet Mona does not seem to adhere to Christianity as practiced in the Western tradition. In order to explore this long and complex verse-novel, only those parts of the poem directly relating to Mona are evaluated. These five sections, however, are seen through the eyes of three different protagonists – the bard, Glân-Alarch; Eurien, Prince of Garth; and Mona herself.

### Mona's Fall

A critical incident, early in the narrative, occurs when Mona falls off a mountain.<sup>31</sup> Before her fall she can look forward to a rosy future: after her fall everything is turned upside-down as she changes into *somebody*, or *something*, different. An Irish orphan, betrothed to Prince Eurien, Mona is followed up a mountain by the beautiful but power-hungry widow, Bronwen. Pretending to be Mona's friend, Bronwen tells Mona a series of lies. Firstly she says that Mona has been banished from the court at Garth. Then she tells Mona that Prince Eurien does not love her. Finally she informs Mona that she and Eurien are in love with each other, and that Eurien's attentions to Mona are merely acts of duty and courtesy on his part. Trustingly Mona believes all Bronwen's lies, and decides to sacrifice her own life so that Eurien can marry the woman she thinks he

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<sup>31</sup> The name, Mona, derived from Môn, means 'mother of Wales'. Linked with fertility, the name first appeared in Gwynedd during the Roman era.



loves.<sup>32</sup> The bard, Glân-Alarch, intuiting Mona's suicide, describes the anguish she feels at the moment when 'her soul past forth / Over the golden bridge which crossed the sea':<sup>33</sup>

And a new revelation rose with her:  
The Psalm of Life was opened to her ear;  
She knew the mystery of the tuneful spring,  
The deep, full pulsing of the summer eve [...].<sup>34</sup>

Even before she sacrifices her life by throwing herself off the mountainside Mona is aware of 'a new revelation' as the 'Psalm of life' tells her that she is not going to die. She *knows* the mystery of ever-lasting life. This suggests an inner awareness of her own immortality which, just before her death, is revealed to her:

'He shall not lose his life for me,  
God give me strength to die and leave them so, - <sup>35</sup>

She loves Eurien so much she wants him to be happy with Bronwen. She asks God for the strength to die so that Bronwen and Eurien can marry and live their lives together.

And first to fly, - but whither?' Then her eyes  
Swept the horizon's verge, and felt the world  
A desert of all howling miseries,  
And with her hands she warned it off from her, -  
The weird, wild world, and bright calm woman there  
Who mocked her with the beauty that he loved, -  
She pushed it from her, and her steps recoiled -  
A shriek! - It was not Mona, - she was gone [...].<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pfeiffer re-iterates the theme of suicide, as in 'From Out of the Night' in *Under the Aspens: Lyrical and Dramatic* (1882) and 'Hymn in Praise of Death' in *Flowers of the Night* (1889).

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 72. Like Mary Martha Melville, Mona sacrifices her own happiness for that of others.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 73.

Like Jesus bearing the sins of the world at His crucifixion, Mona feels alienated from the ‘howling miseries’ of the world and, as she looks at Bronwen’s beauty, she pushes the world away from her. Mona, retreating from her earthly state, is tuning in to the spirit world as her soul prepares to cross the golden bridge into a bright new world that has been revealed to her. Mona’s fall is reminiscent of the fallen woman’s suicide in ‘From Out of the Night’ because in both instances ‘fall’ acts as a demarcation line between betrothed happiness and self-imposed loss of life, both metaphorically and literally. In *Glân-Alarch*, Mona’s fall appears to mark the end of one life and the beginning of another - the end of life as Mona the betrothed sweetheart of Eurien, Prince of Garth, but the start of a new life as an extraordinary spiritual leader sent by God to save the Welsh people. In her new life, Mona seems able to operate both with and without corporeality.

### Mona as Bard

After Mona’s death the bard Glân-Alarch finds he can no longer sing. He bemoans the fact that his ‘eyes see too far /The griefs that march on us through every pass, / Armed companies to ring us round, and crush us / Here in our mountain cage’.<sup>37</sup> In their North Wales stronghold a small band of Welshmen wait in trepidation for a massive overthrow by Saxon barbarians. Believing Mona to be dead, and taken in by Bronwen’s propaganda, Eurien marries the evil widow. But even at the wedding feast Bronwen asserts her newly-acquired power by making negative comments to Eurien about Glân-Alarch’s silence:

‘It seems, my lord,  
As if your house of Garth, where for you win

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<sup>37</sup> *Glân-Alarch*, op. cit., 83.

This day a mistress, is not very tuneful,  
That it should lack a bard to laud the feast'.<sup>38</sup>

Glân-Alarch defends himself, drawing attention to Mona's death:

'There have been harpers twain  
Here in this house of Garth, whom every breath  
Of Eurien stirred to music. One is dead, -  
Since when the other hath left off to sing'.<sup>39</sup>

Glân-Alarch reminds Bronwen and Eurien that Mona, his fellow harpist, is also silent.

Thus *two* bards of Garth are now silent. But if, as Pfeiffer states in her Preface, the events at Garth are meant to inform the nineteenth century, Pfeiffer may be using the idea of bardic silence to make feminist points. Traditionally only men like Glân-Alarch would have been revered as the *vates* - intermediaries between man and God. Yet, by depicting Mona as a bard sharing equal status with Glân-Alarch, Pfeiffer elevates Victorian women poets to the status of 'Prophet and Poet' – a position held only by men in the Western tradition. Thus by referring to the silencing of both Glân-Alarch *and* Mona, Pfeiffer seems to be making points similar to those she makes in 'A Crown of Song' when she endows a woman poet with spiritual gifts.<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that, as Daniel Brown states: 'Poetry enters the Victorian era endowed by Romanticism with a metaphysical and cultural authority that it struggles to preserve in the face of [...] scientism [...]',<sup>41</sup> Pfeiffer, who would have imbibed the bardic culture as a child living in Wales, clearly saw the poet as a kind of prophet sent to reveal 'divine mysteries' to other mortals.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 90-1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>40</sup> See Emily Pfeiffer, 'Crown of Song', *Poems* (London: Strahan, 1876), 40. (See Chapter 2, p.81)

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Brown, 'Victorian Poetry and Science', *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 137.

While depicting Mona, a woman, as a bard of equal standing with Glân-Alarch, Pfeiffer also points out that it is Bronwen, a woman, who has silenced them. This silencing of the sixth-century bards could be a reference to the silencing of poets as the *vates* in the nineteenth century. Bronwen's decision to replace the bard, Glân-Alarch, with Dafyth, a coarse, populist, harpist who 'harped and scared / Shy music from the blatant strings' - may also be analogous to the threat to poetry presented by the sensation novel – a populist genre favoured by women.<sup>42</sup> But, at a later feast, while Dafyth is engaged in his 'demon' harping, Glân-Alarch enters what seems to be a trance state and, in this mood, is amazed to see an apparition of Mona standing amongst the guests:

Then knew I she was come  
God-sent to speed the battle for a soul  
Against the powers of Cythraul, and my heart  
Grew pure of hate and fear in looking on her –  
God's minister, free of the gate of death,  
God's maiden soldier, who was panoplied  
In purity alone, bearing no weapon  
Saving her tempered sword of virgin love.<sup>43</sup>

Mona has been sent from God to save the Celts in their last-ditch stand against the Saxons. She has survived death and is now able to return to earth as God's minister, acting between heaven and earth. Mona has become a kind of *Jeanne d'Arc* – but one who wears no armour and bears no weapon. The only weapons *this* warrior bears are purity and virgin love. Glân-Alarch ceases to be afraid of the future because he now knows that God is on their side.

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<sup>42</sup> Op. cit., 93.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 169-70.

In the Western tradition it is believed that Christ is the *only* immanent, resurrected Saviour of mankind, yet in *Glân-Alarch* Pfeiffer creates a heroine who seems to be equivalent to Christ - a saviour-goddess of the Celts. It now seems possible that the revived 'moment' from the past is a blue-print for the construction of a gynocentric form of Christianity in contemporary, Victorian, Britain. On this point, Melissa Raphael refers to the views of atheist and *theologian*, Naomi Goldenberg:

The Goddess need not be 'real' to be politically and psychologically necessary to the liberation of women. For Goldenberg, women gain freedom and maturity by leaving Judaism and Christianity behind; a departure that requires 'growing out of' dependence on 'real' external divinities, and accepting that all gods and goddesses, including the Goddess, are psychological forces or stereotypes, but are not, on that account, any less real and powerful in their effects'.<sup>44</sup>

Is Pfeiffer's saviour-goddess any less 'real' than the thirty or more known saviour-gods and goddesses of mythology? Certainly the kind of mythological stereotype that Mona personifies has the potential to have a powerful psychological affect on the poor self-image of many Victorian women.

#### Mona and the Legend of Melangell

In this part of *Glân-Alarch*, Pfeiffer exploits the Welsh legend of Melangell in order to characterize her heroine, Mona, as protector of the natural world. Adding another layer to a myth in which a woman leader is the central agent, Pfeiffer sets her poem within a real historical time-frame to give it authenticity. Building upon Victorian nostalgia, Pfeiffer uses poetic licence to reclaim and revivify a Welsh legend in order to reconstruct the Christian myth with a woman saviour at its heart.

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<sup>44</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 55.

The description of Mona saving a hare from hounds in *Glân-Alarch* supports my contention that Pfeiffer based the character of Mona on St. Melangell. Melangell was a sixth-century Irish contemplative, the daughter of an Irish King, who came to Wales from Ireland and lived as a hermit in the Tanant Valley in Montgomeryshire, sleeping on the bare rock. The legend of Melangell is that one day while pursuing a hare, Brochwel (or Brochfael Ysgythrog), Prince of Montgomeryshire, pushed through a thicket of thorns to find Melangell lying on a rock, lost in contemplation. The hare was lying under the hem of her garment. The hounds were instantly pacified, leaving the hare untouched. Moved by Melangell's saintliness Brochwel gave her the valley as a place of sanctuary. Later Melangell became Abbess of a small religious community at Pennant Melangell which became a place of pilgrimage. Records suggest that Melangell could have died as early as 590 A.D. which puts her in the correct time-frame for *Glân-Alarch*. Today the hare is still a protected animal in Cwm Pennant and in the ancient Church of St. Malangell carvings of hares can be seen above the rood beam.<sup>45</sup> Celtic patron of animals and natural environments, St. Melangell represents reverence for all living things in opposition to the violence and cruelty that mars the relationship between man and beast. Raised in Montgomeryshire, Pfeiffer would have been familiar with both the legend and the Church of St. Melangell. Moving in the same intellectual milieu as the antivivisectionists, Pfeiffer would have found Melangell a compelling template for the characterisation of Mona. In addition, the hare – a pagan emblem – has suitably mystical associations.

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<sup>45</sup> Sources include information from Richard Suggett, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, and <http://www.st-melangell.org.uk/English/Churchstmelangellchurch.htm>.

In *Glân-Alarch*, Pfeiffer exploits the legend of St. Melangell in order to make contemporary emancipationist points. Turning the narrative back to Garth, Prince Eurien is depicted as a man psychologically dependant on his two bards for support and guidance. Awaiting Saxon invasion, with Mona dead and Glân-Alarch silent, Eurien seems to be in a state of mental paralysis. Unable to decide a clear course of action, unable to formulate a battle plan, all Eurien can do is busy himself and his courtiers with time-wasting activities. One of the ways he seeks to distract himself from the pressing emergency facing him is to go hunting – and this he and his huntsmen do with horse and hound across the Welsh countryside. But upon returning from one of these hunting expeditions, Eurien confides to Glân-Alarch about a strange incident that occurred while they were coursing a hare. Eurien says:

‘There came a cloud, -  
A tall, white cloud, which spread itself in mist,  
Over the path we followed through the vale [...]’.

At first Eurien and his huntsmen notice nothing strange about the tall, white cloud as they pursue a hare for hours as it tracks back and forth pursued by hounds:

‘We gained upon the hare; again she broke [...],  
She lay down spent; she yielded, poor dumb wretch,  
But yielded to fierce foes who gave no quarter [...].  
But lo, within the mist whereof we neared  
The skirts, there stood revealed now to view  
A maiden, draped, and veiled in spotless white, -  
A maid of stature tall and vast of limb,  
Beyond the wont of mortals; and she seemed  
Of the white mist to be the whiter core’.<sup>46</sup>

Eventually, exhausted, the hare lies down ready to die but the tall white cloud becomes the apparition of a vast maiden. Then Prince Eurien recounts:

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 128.

‘Ah then, Glân-Alarch mine, a weird, a wonder,  
Grew up before my eyes; this stately virgin,  
This maiden of the mist, spread her fair arms,  
And into them, half dead, our victim sprang, -  
Sprung with an impulse of expiring nature, -  
And panting on a heart that seemed the home  
Of all the charities, closed her faint eyes,  
And drooped her head in sweet abandonment,  
And utter joy of safety, and of rest [...].

‘At the foot  
Of that strange presence white and cold, they fell, -  
The savage yelping beasts with fiery eyes,  
They fell, - their tongues subdued to tremulous sounds,  
Tamed in a moment, [...]’.<sup>47</sup>

This maiden ‘tall and vast of limb, beyond the wont of mortals’ is Mona. Though exhausted, the hare instinctively recognises her as a safe haven and leaps into her arms, and the hounds, in full chase, are immediately tamed. Eurien falls to the ground, deeply ashamed, and vows that no hares will ever be hunted on his lands again:

‘I fell,  
I too, upon my knees, and could have buried  
My shamëd manhood in the dust with them’.<sup>48</sup>

Strangely, instead of being amazed to see this vast apparition of Mona, Eurien falls to the ground in abject shame vowing never to hunt hares again. This reaction to seeing a vast apparition of the dead Irish orphan to whom he had been betrothed since his youth is unconvincing. Pfeiffer is clearly making some other point here. It seems most likely that Pfeiffer purposely retold the Welsh legend about the hare in order to contrast the masculine hunter and destroyer of nature with the feminine protector and promoter of nature. Around 1877, when *Glân-Alarch* was published, a number of Pfeiffer’s friends were intellectuals who strongly opposed any human activity that inflicted pain on

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 128-9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 129.



animals. Pfeiffer's friend, the theist Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), was a member of a group who saw the antivivisection campaign as symbolic of two opposing visions of human progress: masculine power and intellect on one side, feminine love and nurturing on the other. The former, patriarchal, vision of human progress promulgated by the Judeo-Christian religions accords mankind 'dominion [...] over every living thing that moveth upon the earth' (Genesis 1:28). The opposing vision, which women such as Cobbe supported, is based on love and reverence for life. But humane precepts also are Gnostic precepts which, though considered heretical after the third century, relate to the quest for esoteric self-knowledge espoused by Mary Magdalene in *The Gospel of Mary*. In order to demonstrate the traditional involvement of the Church in savage acts against animals, Arthur Findlay describes the French Feast of Saint Hubert, patron saint of hunting. Before the hunt there is a religious service and the priest blesses the hounds. Then they are 'set loose on a defenceless stag in a park from which it is unable to escape [...]'.<sup>49</sup> Findlay adds:

The mentality which sees nothing wrong in making animals suffer is on a similar level to the mentality that believes in orthodox Christianity, and, just as the belief in Christian creeds and doctrines declines, so does humanitarianism increase [...]. There has been a [...] decided quickening of the human conscience as to its duty towards the human and animal kingdoms. We have not yet begun to carry through the abolition of all needless cruelty to animals [...].<sup>50</sup>

Findlay connects the increase of humanitarian attitudes to the natural world with the decrease of dogmatic faith, suggesting that cruelty to animals is damaging not only to the victim but also to the humanity of the perpetrator. From a Gnostic viewpoint it follows that cruelty to animals must have a destabilising effect on an individual's spiritual outcome. By inflicting pain on animals the perpetrator 'fits' his soul for a lower

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<sup>49</sup> Arthur Findlay, *Psychic Stream: Source and Growth of the Christian Faith* (London: Psychic Press, 1939), 769.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 769.

plane of existence. The similarity of antivivisectionist, humanist, and Gnostic, ideologies regarding the treatment of animals suggests that Pfeiffer saw women as spearheading attitudes towards the natural world that not only supported an antivivisectionist agenda, but also supported attitudes to the natural world that opposed the biblical precept that mankind has dominion over all living things. Mona – who seems to personify both the immanent Christ and St. Melangell – is concerned for the welfare of all living things. If Mona has the power to return from the dead as a spirit in order to save the life of one hunted hare, she also has the power to intervene in spirit form to save the lives of the Welsh Celts facing the imminent threat from Saxon invaders. Deploying the legend of Melangell to present women as supporters of the natural world, Pfeiffer characterises Mona as a spiritual leader sent from heaven to safeguard Celtic spiritual interests from foreign contamination. But if the Saxon invaders represent masculine aggression and Mona's leadership represents feminine resistance to this, Pfeiffer seems also to be constructing a feminine religious ideology to replace the failing patriarchy of the Central Anglican Church in Victorian Britain.

Later Eurien, at a feast to celebrate the birth of his son, experiences another vision of Mona. This time he rushes off in search of Mona and, upon his return, tells Glân-Alarch that while questing for Mona, he had found himself on treacherous Crib-y-dysgull blinded by a thick, black mist. He feared falling to his death until he heard Mona's voice call: 'Follow, Eurien, Follow!'<sup>51</sup> He followed the sound of her voice until

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<sup>51</sup> *Glân-Alarch*, op. cit., 180.

he was safe, but then she changed her words to ‘Teudric and Tintern’.<sup>52</sup> With these words and the lifting of the black mist, Eurien’s mental paralysis miraculously lifted. He could now see clearly what he must do. With news that the Saxons are advancing on the Severn valley, Eurien decides to seek advice from ‘Teudric the Holy’, the royal hermit of the Wye.

Freed of fear, Eurien tells Glân-Alarch that Mona has returned to save Wales:

‘She lives, Glân-Alarch; I have looked on her,  
Have heard her voice; she lives for Wales and me;  
Love will not let her spirit free of us, -  
Death cannot hold her, - love has conquered it!’<sup>53</sup>

It is Mona who has lifted Eurien out of his black despair and mental paralysis. It is Mona who has reinforced Eurien’s tentative plan to ask Teudric, ex-king of Glamorgan, to be their leader. It is Mona who has returned from heaven as God’s minister to help the Celts in their fight to against the Saxons. Eurien, disguised as a palmer, sets out alone on his journey to the Wye valley.

### Mona’s explanations

Glân-Alarch, while seeking military support in another valley, comes across Mona living like a hermit. This Mona is not an apparition. This Mona is the Mona he had known before her fall off the mountainside. In this encounter Pfeiffer’s heroine appears to have changed back from a heaven-sent spiritual emissary to an Irish girl living alone in the Welsh countryside, a contemplative very much like Melangell. Then Mona tells

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 177.

Glân-Alarch two completely different versions of what really happened to her when she fell off the mountain. The first version supports the idea that she was sent by God as a disembodied spirit to save the Welsh people:

‘I was saved, Glân-Alarch, -  
Made free of the unlovely flesh, which still  
Had been to him a bond or a reproach,  
And set to do him service as a spirit,  
And as a disembodied soul, to grow  
Dearer, more lovely in the light of thought,  
Yet dwell with him on the same place of being,  
And breathe with him the sweet air of the world;-  
Saved as by a miracle, for the base joy  
Of living as a beggar on his bounty, [...].  
My spirit, poorly housed, was sent by God [...].’<sup>54</sup>

There is no doubt from this passage that Mona has returned to earth as a disembodied spirit having been separated from her physical body. Sent by God to help Eurien to save Wales, her spirit has been earthbound. But then Mona flatly contradicts this idea when she recounts how her fall was broken by branches, which saved her life:

I fell,  
And falling grasped unknowingly, the sapling  
Which grows from out the rock where it breaks off [...],  
In rising, as an arrow from a bow, -  
Shot clear of danger from the jutting crags,  
And dropped into the tallest of those trees  
That rise from out the stunted grove [...].  
I lay within the pliant, leafy branches,  
Which swayed upon the stem as sways a cradle,  
And thought I was new-born; I had no mother [...].<sup>55</sup>

Mona’s fall was broken by trees, she landed unscathed. Here Glân-Alarch’s narrative seems to split into two opposing strands - Mona as a disembodied spirit on a God-given mission to lead Wales to victory and Mona as a flesh-and-blood woman living alone as

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<sup>54</sup> *Glân-Alarch*, op. cit., 194-5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

a hermit in the Welsh countryside. Mona cannot be both at the same time, and the suggestion that she can raises the question of Pfeiffer's motivation. But, as Glân-Alarch's narrative proceeds, Mona's role becomes even more puzzling.

Eurien and the men of Wales march south to fight the Saxons alongside Teudric. Glân-Alarch is too old to fight, yet he is able to follow events through a series of visions one of which shows the Saxons burning down the house where Bronwen has fled with her baby. Seeing a vision of Bronwen's murder, Glân-Alarch fears for the safety of Eurien's son. Then, in a vision, he hears a sound:

I heard the step,  
I saw the shape, I felt the seraph wings,  
And knew the babe was saved; safe, too, that maid  
Whom nature loved and feared; - I saw no more.<sup>56</sup>

Glân-Alarch sees Mona save the baby, and the vision fades. But the description of Mona as a seraph is again cancelled out by the description of Mona as a maid, loved and feared by nature. Mona seems to be both a heavenly messenger from God *and* an earth-bound contemplative closely identifying with, and saviour of, the natural world.

#### Mona as a 'virgin mother'

The Saxons are defeated and Eurien returns home only to learn that Bronwen has left Garth with their baby. The house she has fled to has been burned down. Eurien rushes to save Bronwen only to find that she has been raped by a Saxon whom he kills, but too

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 227.

late to save Bronwen whose 'crooked race was run'.<sup>57</sup> Eurien, stricken with anxiety for his baby's safety, hears his name spoken:

And Eurien in that moment  
Knows that his infant's head is safely shrined  
Upon that heart whereto the harried hare  
Had fled for refuge, as to some known altar  
Reared in a chosen temple of high God.  
And more than this: he knows that that white maid  
Who loomed so largely through the mist, and this  
On whose frail limbs the smell and smoke of fire  
Still linger, is the same brave, earth-clad soul,  
No fleshless spirit unassailable,  
But Mona as she was, - the highest dweller  
Upon the earth, but still on earth a dweller [...].<sup>58</sup>

When he hears Mona speak his name, Eurien is immediately confident that his baby is safe. Because the hare found refuge as if at 'some known altar' in a 'chosen temple of high God', he knows that this girl standing there - still smoky and redolent of the fire she braved to rescue his baby - is one and the same being as the 'white maid who loomed so largely through the mist'. Yet although he has seen her as an apparition, he knows that she is an 'earth-clad soul' and, as such, he now recognises her as 'the highest dweller on earth, but still on earth a dweller'. Pfeiffer is purposely sending out conflicting messages to her readers. Is Mona a female saviour-goddess? Is she an emissary from God? Is she a religious leader in the Welsh fight against the Saxon invaders? Or is she just a girl like Melangell living alone like a hermit? In the next lines Pfeiffer first hints that Mona has risen from the dead in a Christ-like manner but, once again, she falls back from this position:

Mourned for dead, then risen  
As rise the dead within the hearts that love them,  
And leading him still living, as the dead

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 241-2.

Will lead, for ever lead, the hearts that love them,  
The way of heaven, of glory, and of God.<sup>59</sup>

Pfeiffer softens the transgressive impact of her suggestion that, like Christ, Mona has 'risen / As rise the dead' by insinuating that Mona's reappearance is more in the mind of the beholder than a reality. But then, returning to the subject of Mona's fall from the mountain, Pfeiffer characterises Mona as a symbol of fertility and rebirth. Using gynocentric language to describe how Mona's fall is broken by the natural world she so reveres, these words reframe Mona's persona as a female nature goddess similar to the ancient pagan archetype, the Green Man:

O spreading arms, -  
Strong, supple arms, fruited, and many-fingered  
With autumn leafage, - ye that were upraised  
To Clogwyn Cromlech on that direful eve, [...] [even I] [...]  
Shall watch you when the season's change is swelling  
The sheaths of coming blossoms, to surprise  
Some sign of joy beyond your yearly wont,  
Some flowers that are as flowers of paradise,  
Some fruit that bursts with the promise all divine,  
To credit you the ministers of heaven.<sup>60</sup>

Gynocentric images of ripe fruitfulness, swelling sheaths, coming blossoms, annual joys (as well as bursting fruits full of divine promise of heaven) seem to blend Mona into the natural world. Mona's love of the natural world and her close bonds with the Welsh countryside makes her beloved of the 'ministers of heaven'. The natural world saved Mona, and Mona now saves the natural world. By saving Eurien's son Mona has become not only a divine symbol of fertility and heavenly rebirth, she has also become a 'virgin mother'. Glân-Alarch is overjoyed:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 242-3.

Mona the dead has waked to blessed life,  
Mona the wandering ghost has found a home,  
Mona the waif now lies in the joyful prison  
Of Eurien's arms. She, as an outcast lonely,  
Has grown to be a virgin mother, loved  
Of him who owns the service of all hearts;  
She who went forth unknown has been revealed;  
She for whose gentle life a pit was digged  
Has come again with, on her mortal face,  
The lingering glory of the blessed dead!<sup>61</sup>

Mona has been dead, a wandering ghost, a waif, a spiritual outcast – but now she has become a beloved ‘virgin mother’. Eurien is proud to take her back into his heart and home. Excluded and unknown, Mona has returned as a mortal carrying signs of death on her face, yet there is a lingering glory about Mona as she lies in Eurien’s arms. Glân-Alarch joyfully seizes his harp and sings for the first time since her ‘death’.

In the narrative, Christian and pagan images are fused together in the creation of a heroine who seems able to operate both in human and spirit form. Depicted as some kind of heavenly messenger - a seraph - exalted and glorious, she returns to earth to save Wales. Yet Pfeiffer also portrays Mona as a female nature goddess and the highest dweller on earth. Combining both Christian and pagan elements to form one supreme spiritual being, Pfeiffer portrays Mona as a fertility symbol and a virgin mother. By creating a new mythology with a woman at its heart, Pfeiffer uses every poetic means at her disposal to reconnect women to a matrilineal religion.

Exploiting the Victorian preoccupation with nostalgia, Pfeiffer interweaves historical fact with myth and legend to give her verse-novel realism and mystery. Providing alternative explanations for Mona’s fall (one natural and one supernatural) Pfeiffer

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 246.



juxtaposes the notion that Mona survived her fall and became a hermit with the notion that Mona died but returned as a saviour-goddess of the Welsh people. By manipulating conventional and transgressive narratives, and by blurring and blending together pagan and Christian imagery, Pfeiffer seems to have found new ways to imagine Christianity – ways inclusive of women. Yet in her attempt to re-imagine Christianity as an inclusive religion, Pfeiffer puts forward ideas that seem to represent a more Gnostic version of Christianity – a version of Christianity more in keeping with words in *The Gospel of Mary*, believed to have been written by Mary Magdalene. Seven years later Pfeiffer was to take ideas from this prototype of a Christian allegory and re-apply them to her mixed-genre publication, *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew*.

## CHAPTER 4: EMILY PFEIFFER'S CHRISTIAN HEROINES

### THE RHYME OF THE LADY OF THE ROCK, AND HOW IT GREW (1884)

Emily Pfeiffer's experimental mixed-genre work *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, And How it Grew* (1884) is based on a Scottish legend dating from medieval times, the legend of Lady's Rock.<sup>1</sup> In Pfeiffer's version of the legend she creates the character of a medieval heroine who, after a series of calamitous events, seems able to operate both in the physical and spiritual worlds. The verity of this last statement, however, depends on the interpretation given to particular parts of the inner narrative, the ballad, that pertain to events surrounding the drowning of Pfeiffer's heroine, Elizabeth. Is it murder, or attempted murder? Is Elizabeth dead or alive when she is rescued? Before considering these questions, I reiterate the words of G. H. Lewes published in *Fortnightly Review* (1878):

We have too many conspicuous examples of men eminent in Science and sincere in their theological professions, not to admit that the mind *can* follow two Logics, and can accept both the natural and the supernatural explanations [...].<sup>2</sup>

Lewes concedes that the human mind can follow two 'Logics': they can accept both a natural and a supernatural explanation of events. I therefore suggest that Pfeiffer provided her readers with a choice of three possible interpretations: one natural, one supernatural, and one that accepts both a natural and a supernatural explanation. Bearing in mind Pfeiffer's treatment of the supernatural in 'Madonna Dūnya' (1879) and *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (1877), and recognising the hallmarks of transgression in

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How it Grew* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1884)

<sup>2</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Fortnightly Review*, 23 (1878), 318. See Chapter 2, II, p.134.

the well-orchestrated confusion surrounding the narrative of the young woman's 'drowning', I support both a natural and a supernatural explanation of events.

The 'natural' explanation (that Elizabeth Campbell did not drown) is self-evident and needs no interpretation. The 'supernatural' reading (that Elizabeth Campbell drowned but survived her death) is well supported by clues set out by Pfeiffer's poet speaker in both the frame narrative and the ballad. These clues include intervention by the Virgin Mary; the miraculous recovery of the Elizabeth Campbell's virginity; her rescue by a henchman who 'had sighted her soul when it rose'; and the time-lag between her heroine's rescue and her first gasping breath on the mainland. The young woman then returns to her ancestral home 'like a chartered ghost' and 'glides to her place' to meet her clansmen who have been 'told of her death' (172-4). In addition, at the end of the volume, Pfeiffer's 'poet' speaker admits that she wrote her ballad 'with the spirit of a votary' obeying 'the impulse to plough, not the fields of the earth, but the air [...]'. It may be hoped that the Lord of all harvests will not deem the work to which He has been thought to summon, to have merited rebuke [...] (183-4). In the light of Pfeiffer's treatment of religious themes in poems discussed in previous chapters, I consider the possibility that Pfeiffer's motivation in writing *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew* was based on her need to create a heroine able to transcend the temporal world and attain eternal glory with the saints and martyrs in heaven. In this chapter, I show that Pfeiffer bases her ballad on the ancient Scottish ballad tradition in order to re-imagine her faith in ways consistent with her feminist values.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew* is shortened to *The Lady of the Rock*. I refer to the inner narrative as the ballad, or the 'rhyme'. The Victorian poet speaker in the prose frame narrative is differentiated from Pfeiffer by inverted commas – the 'poet' is the frame narrative speaker, the poet is Pfeiffer.

## The Scottish Ballad Tradition

The Scottish folk-ballad is derived from an ancient oral tradition. When ballads were first put into print, they naturally reflected the diversity of the original songs and stories told, or sung, to tribal groups. Messages woven into the narrative had different meanings for members of different clans, and variations were accepted as intrinsic features of a living tradition. Matthew Campbell explains that in the eighteenth century the poet, James Macpherson (1736-96), tried to create a Scottish national identity by ironing out cultural and historical variations in ballads. This resulted in his own 'authorised' version of what he deemed to be 'authentic' ballads. Standardisation led to the creation of a false, romanticised, 'synthetic' Scots which was incorporated into Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803). Scott, as self-appointed bard, transferred cultural authority from the tribal, oral tradition to the 'educated' literary reader. When the Scottish ballad became 'authorised' and taken up by the educated, male, Saxon 'bard' it ceased to be a living genre. Instead it became a vehicle for nineteenth-century nostalgia and 'Celticism', as exemplified by 'bards' such as Scott. Campbell writes: 'Much English Victorian poetry and criticism borrows wholesale from the writing of the Celtic fringes of the UK. [...]'.<sup>4</sup> The synthetic Celtic mode, or 'Celticism', was subsequently adopted by Alfred Lord Tennyson who, as poet laureate, wrote Romantic and post-Romantic poems about King Arthur and other mythical Celts who dwelt in transitory Celtic outposts, far removed from reality. He evoked a Celtic past that never really existed using a language that was never actually spoken and, like

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Campbell, 'Poetry in the Four Nations', *Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Anthony Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 442.

Keats before him and William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others after him, he glorified chivalry.

Campbell draws attention to the fact that Matthew Arnold, in his lecture *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (Oxford lectures of 1865-6, published in 1867) felt that an understanding of Celtic culture would help fusion of the Union. Arnold felt that Macpherson's work, however inauthentic, added 'the stormy west to the romantic and Victorian vogue for sublime locations'.<sup>5</sup> Later, in his essay 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), Arnold, in a bid to rate poetry higher than history, sidelined 'provincial' accents in favour of the English accents of the south-east – the accents of power, law and administration - refusing even to recognise Chaucer and Robert Burns as classic authors, as they lacked 'high style'. Not surprisingly, in this literary hot-house, Celtic poetry struggled for recognition while hybridity became a hallmark of Victorian Romantic poetry. For Arnold, a culturally complete and centralizing modern United Kingdom was dependent on 'an intermarriage of the feminine Celt and the masculine Saxon'.<sup>6</sup>

The assignment of masculinity to a dominant ethnic group and femininity to a marginalised ethnic group epitomises patriarchal ascendancy - male over female, Saxon over Celt, received English over Gaelic brogue. Yet apart from gender, ethnicity and language patriarchal power also controlled religious and economic factors, for the contemporary masculine, Saxon, *Protestant* held political sway over the Celtic, feminine, Catholic. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, there developed a viewpoint 'which associated the feminine, the Catholic, and the Celtic in opposition to what

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 446.

were characterized as the English, Protestant, ‘male’ assumptions of political economy’.<sup>7</sup> The association of economically and spiritually marginalised groups with women, and economically and spiritually dominant groups with men, therefore, saw patriarchal power ascendant over gender, language, ethnicity, economic power and religion. Thus men dominated all aspects of life with the result that in marginalised Scotland the ‘feminine’, often Catholic, Gaelic culture, having been ‘authorised’ and ‘authenticated’, became rich pickings for male, Saxon, Protestant plunderers.

Like the Scottish Ballad tradition, the Judeo-Christian religion gave rise to variants which were reflected in the rich diversity of early textual records. Later, from a miscellany of textual records, came the ‘authorised’ version of the Bible, the Revealed Word of God.<sup>8</sup> The exclusive canon of the New Testament of the Bible became ‘authorised’ around the third century A.D., thereby becoming a static vehicle for patriarchal authority.<sup>9</sup> Even in the nineteenth century, to challenge the Bible was to be charged with heresy, as Bishop Colenso of Natal (1814-1883) discovered when he let it be known that the facts of the Pentateuch did not tally.<sup>10</sup> Other nineteenth-century men to challenge the Bible as the Revealed Word of God were Ernest Renan in his *Vie de Jesus* (1863) and David Friedrich Strauss in his *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), translated from the German by Marian Evans (George Eliot) as *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1846) and by the poet, Mathilde Blind, in her *The Old Faith and the New: A*

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<sup>7</sup> Colin Matthew, ed., *Nineteenth Century: British Isles; 1815-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 197.

<sup>8</sup> This excluded *The Gospel of Mary*, believed to have been written by Mary Magdalene.

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., ‘Transgressing Canonical Boundaries’, *Searching the Scriptures: Feminist Commentary*, 2 vols (New York: Herder & Herder, 1994), 2, 5-6: ‘The political goal of establishing the unified church as the consolidating power of the Roman Empire drove the exclusionary selection and canonization process [...]. This [...] [resulted in] the identification of women’s ecclesiastical leadership with heresy [...] [and] [...] [contributed to] the historical silencing and textual marginalization of women [...]’ See also Chapter 3.II, 171-2.

<sup>10</sup> A. N. Wilson, *God’s Funeral* (London: John Murray, 1999), 108-9.

*Confession* (1873).<sup>11</sup> Renan, a French Catholic Hebrew scholar, came to believe that although the Gospels may be true in essence, they are embellished with miraculous folk-tales which are not. The possibility that the Bible was a human construct and not a divine creation also haunted Edward Pusey (1800-82), a founder member of the Oxford movement.<sup>12</sup> In terms of transmission and ‘authorisation’, therefore, parallels exist between the New Testament of the Bible and the Scottish ballad culture.

### Transforming Legends

The ‘authentic’ version of events that took place at ‘Lady’s Rock’ in medieval times was made public by Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) in her play, *The Family Legend: A Tragedy* (1810).<sup>13</sup> In her play, Baillie faithfully adheres to the definitive version of the legend told to her by the Hon. Mrs. Damer in 1805 as ‘a legend long preserved in the family of her maternal ancestors’.<sup>14</sup> Baillie claims Damer’s version to be ‘authentic as delivered from age to age in ancient Gaelic songs; and it is likewise a tradition from generation to generation in the family of Argyll [...]’.<sup>15</sup> In Baillie’s version the crime occurs in the fifteenth century, and the victim is called Helen. The girl’s father, a Campbell, sells Helen in marriage to Lachlan Maclean, the Chieftain of Mull, by whom she has a child. Maclean’s kinsmen, however, reject the idea of a Campbell heir and leave Helen to drown on the rock. Fortunately Helen’s cries are heard by fishermen and she is rescued.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 135-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>13</sup> Joanna Baillie, *Family Legend: Tragedy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Edinburgh: John Ballentine, 1810), preface.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6.

Emily Pfeiffer's 'poet' speaker in the prose frame narrative of *The Lady of the Rock*, while acknowledging Baillie's version, distances herself from it, saying:

The 'Family Legend' of Joanna Baillie I had never read [...], it was among the many things which had left no trace in memory. I preferred going to the source [...] dealing with the original material for myself (43).

The 'poet's' failure to recall Baillie's definitive version of the legend is interesting, for Pfeiffer must have known the legend well after visiting Mull. But there was more scope for Pfeiffer in publishing her own unconventional, feminist, version of the 'original material'. Pfeiffer's 'poet's' re-construction of the legend (in the form of a sixteenth-century folk-ballad) tells the story of Elizabeth Campbell who, although betrothed to a man she loves, is bartered to Lachlan Maclean, the brutish chieftain of a rival clan. The marriage is brokered by Elizabeth's brother in order to bring peace to their warring clans. Elizabeth is taken across the sea from the Scottish mainland to Duart Castle on the island of Mull. On her wedding night, loyal to her true-love, Elizabeth tells Maclean that sex is not part of the marriage contract and that if he touches her she will kill herself. Maclean knows that the Argyles would exact bloody retribution were Elizabeth to die at his hands. Elizabeth, outwardly a perfect wife and chatelaine, brings order and harmony to Duart Castle, yet Maclean never consummates the marriage and slakes his lust in despotic acts. He even brings his lover to the castle hoping, unsuccessfully, to humiliate Elizabeth. Envious of Elizabeth's status and popularity as chatelaine, Maclean's lover makes a life-size wax effigy of Elizabeth which she and Maclean plan to use to make Elizabeth's murder appear to be a natural death. Maclean and his henchmen row Elizabeth out to the rock where Maclean rapes her and leaves her to drown as the spring tide comes in, submerging the rock. The dying Elizabeth, now a fallen woman, cries to the Virgin Mary: 'Who will tell my lover my heart was true, /



Who will right me in love's eyes?' (V.166/9-10)<sup>16</sup> Miraculously, Shamesh, one of Maclean's murderous henchmen, braves the storm again in order to rescue Elizabeth. Putting her body into his shallop, Shamesh rows to the shore of the Scottish mainland where Elizabeth returns to life. Infused with spiritual power, Elizabeth returns to her ancestral home, her virginity miraculously restored. Soon afterwards a funeral cortège headed by the weeping Maclean arrives bringing the corpse-like wax effigy of Elizabeth. But to Maclean's horror, Elizabeth appears, challenges Maclean and burns the wax effigy. Elizabeth asks that Maclean's life be spared. Maclean and his lover flee the castle, and Elizabeth marries the man she loves.

Sacrificed to save her clan, sent away from her home, betrayed, raped and murdered, Elizabeth survives death and returns to her home in spirit form. These events - analogous to Christ's earthly mission, betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection and return to heaven - support my contention that the ballad in *The Lady of the Rock* can be interpreted as an allegory of the Christian myth. Pfeiffer's 'poet' author of the ballad rejects the 'authorised' version of the legend of Lady's Rock in favour of her own re-constructed version. In allegoric terms, this suggests a rejection of the 'authorised' version of the Christian myth, as recorded in the Bible, in favour of a Christian myth disengaged from patriarchal ecclesiastical institutions and doctrines. By creating an allegory in which a Christian woman 'poet' re-constructs the Bible story in order to provide a spiritual homeland for her emancipated heroine, Pfeiffer seems to be anticipating elements of what was to become feminist theology. Eleven years before Elizabeth Cady Stanton published her work supporting a feminist re-construction of the

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<sup>16</sup> In the absence of guidance for long poems without line numbers, I adopt the following procedure. The initial Roman numeral refers to the Fite (or Section), the following number is the page number, and the number after the slash is the line number counting down from the top of that page. The reference here is: Fite the Fifth, p.166, lines 9-10 from the top of p.166. See 'Style and Punctuation', p.4.

Bible in *The Woman's Bible* (1895), Pfeiffer had allegorically rejected the misogyny of the Christian myth and re-constructed a new version of it in accordance with her own Gnostic, gynocentric, vision. In her allegorized re-construction of the Christian myth, Pfeiffer may have anticipated Stanton and her followers.

## Feminist Theology

Twenty-first century feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, readily acknowledge their debt to Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) who they see as the 'foremother' of feminist theology. Dedicating her feminist commentary *Searching the Scriptures* (1994) to Stanton, Fiorenza writes:

[Stanton] argued that it is important for women to interpret the Bible, because scripture and its authority have been and continue to be used against women struggling for emancipation. Moreover, women as well as men have internalized scripture's misogynist teachings as the Word of God. Hence [Stanton] and her collaborators utilized historical-critical scholarship to argue that the Bible is the word of men who have projected their own selfish interests into it [...]. Since men have also been the Bible's authoritative interpreters throughout the centuries, she argued, women must now claim their right to biblical interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Woman's Bible* in order to draw attention to ways the Bible contributed to the subordination of women. Stanton and her team of female scholars wanted to reinterpret and reconstruct texts that they believed had been construed by men in a way that misrepresented or excluded women and, in this respect, Stanton's publication, *The Women's Bible*, can be considered to be a key precursor of modern-day feminist re-constructionist theology.

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<sup>17</sup> Fiorenza, op. cit., introduction, 1.

The driving force behind the first American woman's rights convention in New York (1848) and founder of the National Woman's Suffrage Movement, Stanton believed a feminist reinterpretation of the Bible to be vital for emancipation. In her introduction to *The Woman's Bible*, Stanton sets out her arguments:

The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage [...] and in silence and subjection she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty [...].<sup>18</sup>

Stanton draws attention to the hypocrisy of a Church which allows woman to be its chief supporter but uses its power to keep her subject to patriarchal power. She wrote: 'I do not believe that God [...] told the historians what they say he did about woman, for all the religions on the face of the earth degrade her, and so long as woman accepts the position that they assign her, her emancipation is impossible'.<sup>19</sup> Canon law, creeds, scriptures and religions, Stanton believed, bear the hallmarks of 'fallible man' and not the 'Spirit of all Good' around which everything in the universe rotates.

From her many articles, treatises and poems on the subject of the emancipation of women, and her support for women's suffrage and women's trade unions, there is no doubt that Pfeiffer held feminist values similar to those of Stanton. In terms of religious doctrine Pfeiffer, like Stanton, seems also to have realised that in order to attain emancipation women must question patriarchal biblical creeds and doctrines. Yet, unlike Stanton and her team of theologians who studied biblical texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic, Pfeiffer had not studied these languages nor was she a theologian.

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, ed., *Woman's Bible: Pentateuch*, 2 vols (New York: European Publishing Co. 1895), 1, introduction, 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

F. Elizabeth Gray points out the dangers of trying to impose a twenty-first century

‘feminist theology’ model on to Victorian women’s poetry:

In drawing on feminist theology to offer an explanatory model for what Victorian women poets are doing, I aim to remain clear about what they are *not* doing, and not to attempt to infuse their writings with an anachronistic [...] twenty-first century feminism.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the religious poets of her study, Gray suggests that ‘it would be misleading to identify the majority of women poets [...] as either feminists or theologians – most would reject both labels’.<sup>21</sup> Pfeiffer, however, would not reject the label ‘emancipationist’ – in fact she would embrace it. Far from being afraid to acknowledge her feminism in public, Pfeiffer overtly advertised her support for women’s emancipation and suffrage. Unlike Stanton and her team Pfeiffer was not a theologian although, like Stanton, she saw temporal and spiritual emancipation as interdependent. Yet it is interesting to note that in *The Lady of the Rock* Pfeiffer creates the character of a Victorian woman ‘poet’ who allegorizes a feminist re-construction of the authorised, biblical, record of the Christian myth *as if she was a feminist theologian*.

In *The Lady of the Rock* Pfeiffer creates the character of a woman ‘poet’ who re-constructs the ‘authorised’ version of a legend in order to incorporate into it a Christian heroine of her own creation. Although this does not make Pfeiffer a feminist theologian, it does suggest that Pfeiffer was aware of the important role the Bible plays in maintaining women’s subjection. In order to gauge Pfeiffer’s reaction to what she may have seen as a biblical stranglehold preventing women from becoming emancipated, I refer to an essay by Claudia Camp in which she presents a five-part

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<sup>20</sup> F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women’s Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2010), 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

typology of feminist hermeneutics posed by Carolyn Osiek in 1985.<sup>22</sup> The question Osiek poses is relevant to feminist Christian members of religious institutions in the Western tradition, irrespective of the historic period in which they worshipped:

When women [...] in Christian communities become aware of their situation within a patriarchal religious institution and, moreover, when they recognize that the Bible is a major implement for maintaining the oppression of patriarchal structure, what are the ways in which they respond and adjust to that situation?<sup>23</sup>

In justifying my attempt to match Osiek's typology of 1985 to Pfeiffer's *The Lady of the Rock* written a century earlier, I draw attention to the fact that the key variable, the Bible, was virtually the same in both periods.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Pfeiffer's earlier religious poems show that she was aware of the patriarchy of religious institutions. She did not need to be a theologian to appreciate this fact and to respond accordingly.

In her essay, Claudia Camp lists the five possible responses to the Bible in Osiek's typology. Osiek calls these: rejectionist, loyalist, revisionist, sublimationist, and liberationist. In spite of, or because of, the fact that Osiek's typology is not new, her categories provide a useful yardstick against which to gauge Pfeiffer's motivation for writing a Christian allegory. Firstly I rule out the Rejectionist model because the fact that Pfeiffer wrote her allegory at all indicates that she considered the Judeo-Christian tradition redeemable. That she was a Loyalist who believed the Bible to be the Word of God does not hold water either because if Pfeiffer really believed this she would not

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<sup>22</sup> Claudia V. Camp, 'Feminist Theological Hermeneutics: Canon and Christian Identity', *Searching the Scriptures: Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 1, (London: SCM Press, 1994), 156-158.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> In the modern version of the King James Bible although words such as 'Thee' and 'Thou' have been replaced by 'you', etc., the content of the Bible remains unchanged. There is a recent version of the Bible, adopted by some churches, in which 'his' is sometimes replaced by 'their' in an attempt to make the text seem less patriarchal. Osiek's typology of 1985 pre-dates this latter version and therefore refers to a Bible virtually the same as that used in the Victorian period.

have created the character of a woman ‘poet’ who, in the form of allegory, replaces the Word of God as set down in the Bible with her own version. The Revisionist response to biblical patriarchy is rooted in theological scholarship whereas in Pfeiffer’s allegory the ‘poet’ is neither a theologian nor a scholar: rather, she is a daydreamer who intuits her feminist revision of the Christian story while in a trance-like state. The Sublimationist hermeneutic, however, seems more in keeping with Pfeiffer’s allegorical version of *The Lady of the Rock*. I reiterate Camp’s comments relating to this part of Osiek’s typology:

[The sublimationist hermeneutic posits] an essential distinction between the masculine and the feminine. Rather than denigrating the feminine, however, as androcentric interpretation would do, it exalts what it takes to be female traits as equal to or higher than the male. This mode tends to focus on the world of symbols, and is not typical of biblical scholars: even feminist biblical scholars usually maintain some allegiance to their textual and historical training.<sup>25</sup>

This definition of the sublimationist hermeneutic, with its emphasis on symbolism, allows for a positive feminist response to feelings of alienation and estrangement experienced by women marginalised by patriarchal religious institutions such as the Established Church.<sup>26</sup> Applying this typology to Pfeiffer, I put forward the suggestion that the discomfort caused by her conflicting Christian and feminist allegiances was ameliorated when she started to fuse the two ideologies together in her allegory. In *The Lady of the Rock*, Pfeiffer creates the character of her ‘poet’ speaker and focuses on the world of symbols and spiritual archetypes. Seeing herself as a poet-prophet, or *vates*, Pfeiffer compensates for her marginalised position within the patriarchal Church of England by adopting sage discourse and by conferring upon herself the apostolic authority of a priest in order to imagine a feminist version of the Christian myth where

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>26</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis sees sublimation as a way to unblock blocked psychic energy.

female traits are spiritually equal to, or better than, male traits. Pfeiffer, predisposed to using sublimation as a defence mechanism, uses poetic representation in the form of a Christian allegory in order to present women as spiritually all-powerful beings.

In discussing sublimation in terms of the symbolism of *The Lady of the Rock*, I refer to Julie Melnyk who writes that during the Victorian period the emphasis on Christ's suffering and passivity (virtues associated with women according to the 'separate-spheres' gender ideology) led to a general tendency to feminise Christ's image. Melnyk writes:

[This image was unhelpful to women because it] undercut any attempt to turn spiritual authority into secular power. In extreme cases, their identification with the suffering Savior committed [women] to political quiescence, made psychologically more sustainable perhaps by the fantasy of power in the afterlife.<sup>27</sup>

Melnyk points out that if women's suffering is to be rewarded in heaven, political quiescence results. If, however, divine criteria are meant to be met in this world, then women are empowered being morally better examples of this standard. Pfeiffer gets around this problem creating an allegory in which the spiritual archetype that constitutes the 'divine standard of value' is a woman who is empowered in this world *and the next*.

Osiek's final model, Liberationist feminism, only partially applies to *The Lady of the Rock* because liberationists define salvation as liberation in this world only, using the struggle of women against oppression as the key to the transformation of the social

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<sup>27</sup> Julie Melnyk, 'Mighty Victims': Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 131-157 (131).

order. Two women, Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) and Josephine Butler (1828-1906) epitomize this feminist type. Melnyk writes:

Florence Nightingale's individual identification with the (slightly) feminized Christ helped empower her in her battles against the closed and jealous male medical establishment [...]. Nightingale's relative success in achieving empowerment through this identification depended upon her unorthodox Christology, including her denial of the resurrection. This denial allowed her to evade the problem of where to locate Christ's power and authority: all power must be temporal [...].<sup>28</sup>

Like Nightingale, when Josephine Butler confronted the medical establishment, she exploited the identification of women with Christ-like suffering in order to gain the psychological and ideological upper hand. Unlike Nightingale, she saw the female Christ not as an individual woman but as a community of all women united in the same cause. Again, Melnyk writes:

By collectivizing women's identification with the feminized Christ and by calling for apocalypse, Butler made the equivocal ideology of the suffering, Christ-like woman into a more empowering one, no longer requiring individual suffering [...]. Butler prophesied a Christ-like narrative, culminating in an earthly millennium [...].<sup>29</sup>

Melnyk describes the feminist tactics adopted by the visionaries Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler as the most successful in terms of women's empowerment but, in terms of Osiek's typology, liberationists define salvation as liberation only in this world. Using the struggle of women against oppression as key concept, group identification with Christ is valued over individual identification with Christ, and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 151.



suffering in one part of the group is seen as grounds for renewing the struggle to seek salvation for all Christian women through a transformation of society.

As a feminist, Pfeiffer fully understood the correlation between earthly and heavenly power. Thus, in her allegory, she blurs and mirrors two different sets of events, two different time-frames, and two different narratives that impact upon two heroines in order to make her religious and feminist points. The bartered bride of the medieval ballad is the Christ-like heroine Elizabeth Campbell, and the Victorian 'poet' who bravely risks her reputation by re-constructing and broadcasting her version of the legend is a mirror-image, or double, of the Christ-like Elizabeth Campbell herself. The medieval heroine survives death because of her divine qualities; the Victorian heroine (who tells her story) is similarly imbued with divine qualities. The allegory is a Victorian feminist poet's attempt to reclaim for women the temporal and spiritual power that patriarchy denied them. For both heroines, however, there would be a price to pay for refusing to submit to patriarchal power.

### The Mixed-Genre Structure of *The Lady of the Rock*

After the fire in 1882 which destroyed a large proportion of Pfeiffer's work, the publishers Kegan Paul seem to have economised in their production of *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew*. Perhaps Pfeiffer made them publish her mixed-genre work free of charge as compensation for the destruction of her work. Certainly the volume, dated 1884, small crown 8vo, priced at 3s.6d., falls below Kegan Paul's usual high standard of presentation. Upon opening the small, non-descript volume, tiny clusters of verse can be seen squashed, like pressed flowers, amongst the yellowing

leaves of prose. These clusters comprise the one hundred and eighty-eight stanzas of the folk-ballad, ostensibly composed by the ‘poet’ of the prose frame narrative. The ballad consists of six Fittes, each Fitte framed by a corresponding section of contemporary Victorian prose – each genre mirroring and informing the other. By juxtaposing two genres and two different worlds of experience in her quest for a specifically female spiritual tradition, Pfeiffer emphasises the intersecting oppressions of ethnicity, gender and spirituality in nineteenth-century Britain. Throughout the work, the frame narrative operates as a sounding-board, constantly questioning the ideological basis for a spiritual tradition for women.

Pfeiffer was one of several Victorian poets to use a contemporary frame narrative for a medieval ballad. Alfred Tennyson’s ‘The Epic’ (1838) was used to frame the ‘Morte d’Arthur (1842), and his ‘Prologue’ framed *The Princess: A Medley* (1847). Frame narratives are devices used to draw readers into the inner narrative, creating an air of mystery or distance in time. In *The Lady of the Rock*, however, the prose narrative not only frames the beginning and end of the ballad, it also frames the beginning and end of each Fitte. After each Fitte has been read aloud, the auditors in the frame narrative respond to the subject matter they have just heard. Thus Pfeiffer uses feedback to advance her own agenda and, in this respect, the ballad is similar to serial publications by Charles Dickens, where monthly issues were anticipated with excitement and subsequently discussed by the British public. Pfeiffer uses the mixed-genre structure to exploit this trend but, unlike Dickens’ publications, the whole ‘serialisation’ is condensed into a single recitation.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, (c. 1387), the interplay between each tale and the character of each pilgrim narrator is similar to the interplay between *The Lady of the Rock's* medieval ballad and the characters in the Victorian frame narrative. While Chaucer's storytellers compete to tell the best story and discuss the relative merits of each story's subject-matter, Chaucer is able to hold a mirror up to their characters while simultaneously reflecting the England of his day. Similarly, in *The Lady of the Rock*, Pfeiffer conflates her twin narratives, using conflict between the characters in the frame narrative to raise controversial issues of *her* day.

By exploiting the persona of her Victorian 'poet', Pfeiffer also inflects *The Lady of the Rock* with a Biblical quality. Jesus' parables in the Gospels, for example, were also commented upon by His auditors, as exemplified by the parable of the marriage of the king's son. After hearing the parable, the Pharisees and Sadducees try to trap Jesus, asking: 'Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?' Jesus, aware of their treachery, gave His famous answer, but His refusal to conform to the orthodoxy of the priesthood set the seal on His ultimate betrayal, torture and death (Matthew 22:15-46). Similarly, the 'poet' risks literary death when her ballad is read to the islanders, the 'Pharisee' being a Swiss pedlar who purposely misinterprets her work in order to try to damage her reputation. In her ballad, the 'poet' describes how Elizabeth's refusal to consummate her 'arranged' marriage sets into motion destructive forces which lead to her betrayal, rape and murder. Yet by constructing an allegory of the Christian myth in which the role of Christ is enacted by a woman, Pfeiffer puts her own reputation on the line.

Each of the two narratives, prose and poetry, is a complete story in its own right; yet, by orchestrating every aspect of the ballad, the 'poet' shields Pfeiffer, taking responsibility

for the ballad's heretical subtext. The 'poet's' conciliatory, self-deprecating manner, her wariness, her concern about what she has dared to express in her ballad, would perhaps seem exaggerated were it not for the fact that the ballad is an allegory of the Christian myth. In the frame narrative Pfeiffer hides behind the 'poet' speaker. She makes sure that it is the 'poet' who expresses the controversial ideas and receives criticism, not her. She emphasises the presence of a supportive husband to give her 'poet', and herself, married respectability - a male voice of reason against which to juxtapose dissenting patriarchal voices. She deploys the character of the offensive Swiss pedlar to divert critical attention away from her encoded subtext. Pfeiffer further protects herself from censure by couching her verse within formal ballad structures, camouflaging her transgressive subtext against a backdrop of chivalry.

Although Pfeiffer's 'poet' is presented as the epitome of feminine gentility, interested in all things domestic (including dogs, cats, children and even pigs), she is in many ways similar to Pfeiffer herself. Like Pfeiffer, the 'poet' is part Celt and, like Mr. and Mrs. Pfeiffer, the 'poet' and her husband are tourists visiting the Highlands. Clearly Pfeiffer wants to be identified with her compliant 'poet' narrator who, anxious to please, acts out socially acceptable roles, her naiveté protecting Pfeiffer from direct association with her transgressive allegory. Yet, at the same time, Pfeiffer uses her 'poet's' voice to comment on *real*, controversial, issues relating to both temporal and spiritual emancipation for women. The 'poet's' narrative voice therefore combines elements of conformity and non-conformity, artificiality and reality, naiveté and authority, and compliance and obstinacy. These contradictory facets of the 'poet's' persona, revealed in the narrative and echoed in the ballad, blur autobiographical and fictional elements to produce a sense of ambiguity. Pfeiffer constructs a pseudo-autobiographical outer

framework to provide a sense of respectability, authenticity and credibility that she hopes will, by association, rub off on her allegory. Pfeiffer clearly wants her female readers to identify with Elizabeth's suffering. Yet it is not just Elizabeth who suffers to save her clan: Pfeiffer's 'poet' speaker also suffers to save *her* 'clan' (a 'clan' composed of feminist Central Anglicans such as Pfeiffer herself) and uses the phallic power of her pen to re-imagine the Christian myth, just as her heroine, Elizabeth, uses her phallic dagger to retain her independence and integrity. Both women must suffer for their audacity – one by literary, and the other by physical, rape. Perhaps Pfeiffer, hiding behind her 'poet' *doppelganger*, intends to share in Elizabeth's martyrdom, crucifixion, resurrection, and heavenly reward.

### Elizabeth Campbell's Wedding Night

On her wedding night, Elizabeth Campbell bows to the roistering men at the wedding feast and passes out of the hall with her bower-maidens: "She is white as a widow's callant", they said, / "Who should whet a maiden-sword" (II. 117/15-16). Elizabeth reaches her turret bower and dismisses her maidens, asking them to pray for her:

She cast her garments one by one,  
Alone as she stood there;  
She was to sight no summer flower  
But a woman deadly fair,  
When forth she drew the golden comb  
And loosed the golden hair  
Which sheathed her body to her knee, -  
A ringed and burnished panoply.

Then, as a swimmer, with her arms  
The amber flood she spurned  
To either side, and in her hand  
She took a gem that burned –  
That rose and fell upon her heart  
As a thing that bore in its life a part. (II. 118/7-20)

In Tennyson's 'Godiva', Lady Godiva flees to her inmost bower: 'Anon she shook her head, / And shower'd the rippled ringlets to her knee; / Unclad herself in haste' before riding naked through the streets of Coventry (46-8).<sup>30</sup> In Keats' poem 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Madeline also frees her glorious hair and casts her garment: 'Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees; / Unclasps her fragrant boddice; by degrees / Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees' (228-30).<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Campbell, Lady Godiva and Madeline all cast off their clothes and unloose their hair, and both Lady Godiva and Elizabeth have hair down to their knees. Madeline, with hair like an angel, looks like a mermaid; Elizabeth, a woman 'deadly fair', stands naked before spurning the 'amber' flood to either side like a swimmer. These three women, with their abundant tresses, exemplify a Western preoccupation with long hair which, Elisabeth Gitter contends: 'For the Victorians [...] became an obsession':<sup>32</sup>

If the woman was benign, her hair might be a nest, warm and sheltering, but if she was a treacherous mermaid, it could be an alluring but deadly snare [...]. The golden-haired woman developed in Victorian literature into a complex but powerful figure whose magnificent hair had multiple meanings and uses [...]. Her gleaming hair was a weapon, web, or trap, a glittering symbolic fusion of the sexual lust and the lust for power that she embodied.<sup>33</sup>

Pfeiffer's description of Elizabeth's hair as a burnished panoply - a shining suit of armour - runs counter to the idea of her as a passive beauty. She *spurns* her hair, suggesting that she does not see it as a blessing (and a few decades later women chose to cut their hair short). She parts it like a swimmer - a treacherous mermaid or siren -

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<sup>30</sup> Lord Tennyson, *Poems 1830-1858* (London: Grant Richards, 1903), 180.

<sup>31</sup> John Keats, *Poems* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), 122.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 936.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 943.

and reveals a concealed weapon to symbolise embodied power. Clearly Elizabeth's golden hair serves only to hide the fact that she is a woman of deadly allure.

Gitter observes: 'The alchemizing of hair [...] coincided with a literary vogue of fairy tales, many of which involve golden-haired heroines [...]'.<sup>34</sup> She refers to nineteenth-century anthologies containing tales such as 'Rapunzel', a story about a maiden whose golden hair reaches from her tower to the ground. In William Morris's poem of the same title, Rapunzel yearns for a 'true knight [...] with a steel sword, bright, / Broad, and trenchant; yea, and seven / Spans from hilt to point' (168-171).<sup>35</sup> The Prince says:

And every morning do I whet my sword,  
Yet Rapunzel still weeps within the tower,  
And still God ties me down to the green sward,  
Because I cannot see the gold stair floating lower. (152-55)

The sexually suggestive words: 'I do whet my sword', are similar to those used by the roistering men at Elizabeth's wedding feast: 'Who should whet a maiden-sword'. The sword has masculine connotations of power, so that to 'whet a maiden-sword' seems a contradiction in terms; but Morris's poem, 'Rapunzel', epitomizes the sexual symbolism implicit in poems about towers, swords, and long golden hair. The archetypal medieval lady, weak but beautiful, with long hair, yearns to be carried away by a powerful, chivalrous, defender.

Aurora, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), finds poets who write about chivalry untrustworthy:

I do distrust the poet who discerns

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 943.

<sup>35</sup> William Morris, 'Rapunzel', *Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1858), 60-62.

No character of glory in his times,  
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,  
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court. (V.188-91)<sup>36</sup>

Yet Pfeiffer has seemingly done exactly what Aurora eschews. Her 'poet' narrator, who is a woman, has trundled her soul back into a medieval castle-court where Elizabeth, a nobleman's daughter, stands naked in her turret bedroom, her tresses shimmering around her knees, waiting to be ravished by the evil Maclean to whom she has been bartered. How could Pfeiffer portray such brutality, she who had prefaced her verse-novel, *Glân-Alarch*, with the words: 'I have tried to penetrate the veil of chivalry?' (p.vii). While male poets like Keats, Morris, and Tennyson might enjoy writing poems about heroic knights in armour and naked, long-haired women, the reality is that medieval women were treated as mere chattels. And yet Pfeiffer seems directly or indirectly to endorse a chauvinistic genre which emphasizes masculine power and feminine weakness.

As Elizabeth Campbell stands alone in her bower she is the very image of vulnerability, her body exposed and proffered. All Maclean has to do is take her, and she cannot resist his power. As a man he is physically stronger than her but, as she prepares herself for the onslaught, she reveals a gem lying against her heart:

'Twas a golden dragon in jewelled mail  
That lay betwixt breast and breast  
Over that gentle lady's heart,  
Couched as a lance in rest;  
And that cunning sample of goldsmith's work,  
It was the handle of a dirk. (II. 118-9/21-26)

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<sup>36</sup> *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson and others, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 3, 3-266.



At this point Pfeiffer's ballad seems to diverge from the pattern established by poems such as 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and 'Rapunzel':

She drew it forth of its leathern sheath,  
And she felt its steely edge,  
Then gave some drops of her quick young blood  
To its point, as if in pledge,  
Ere she wound her hair in a silken thong,  
And the dirk in that golden chain and strong. (II.119/3-8)

There are several interesting aspects to the way Pfeiffer represents this phallic appendage to Elizabeth's otherwise naked body. The handle of the dirk is couched between Elizabeth's breasts like 'a lance in rest' (not raised like a male weapon). The dragon in jewelled mail evokes an image of a knight in armour, perhaps St. George killing the dragon, that ancient symbol of evil. The word 'mail', like 'male', suggests invulnerability. In Morris's poem, 'The Wind', for example, the speaker describes himself holding Margaret, who is naked, by the arms: 'And still I held to her arms till her shoulder touch'd my mail' (43).<sup>37</sup> Frederick Kirchoff suggests that this encounter juxtaposes the invulnerability of the 'self encased in a metal carapace with a self vulnerable to touch'.<sup>38</sup> So, although Elizabeth is naked and unprotected, her possession of the dragon in jewelled mail suggests that she has hidden *within herself* some kind of defensive device. It seems she has her own 'maiden-sword' and, as she whets and sheds her own blood, she pledges to defend her honour with her very life. Then she appends her symbol of phallic power, the dagger in its protective sheath, to her own body with her hair to symbolise her inviolacy.

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<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 126-130.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Kirchoff, *William Morris: The Construction of the Male Self, 1856-1872* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1990), 66.

At this point it is apparent that Elizabeth Campbell does not conform to the usual 'damsel-in-distress' stereotype. Although young and long-haired, soft and naked, she is taking arms in preparation for battle and possible death. She falls on her knees and prays to the Virgin Mary:

She muttered many an Ave then,  
And told off many a bead,  
Till her passion sealed her lips, for words  
But mocked so sore a need;  
Then she stopped and listened beside the breeze,  
And only waited upon her knees. (II.119/15-20)

Then, re-clothed in her night (or 'knight') attire, she stands up, 'white in her snowy pall, / A breathing image of death' (II.120/9-10) and, as she hears Maclean's footfall on the stair, she prays: 'As I am a child of the deep Argyle, / Souls of my fathers! Teach me wile' (II. 120/15-16). She is not praying for a knight to come and rescue her, she is not passively accepting her fate: she is praying for *wile*. She knows that Maclean is physically stronger than she is, so she intends to outwit him.

There is something intriguing about the way Pfeiffer's 'poet' presents this part of the ballad. She has portrayed Elizabeth Campbell as long-haired, naked and beautiful, thus adhering to the prevailing male idealisation of women. Like the archetypal 'damsel' Elizabeth is depicted as weak and vulnerable, a bartered victim of male power. In this powerless position, and because she is powerless, she can be the object of male adoration: but this is a false image. Even in *Fitte the First* Elizabeth fails to fit this false, man-made stereotype of maidenhood when she tells her true-love: 'It has not been laid upon any man, / But on me to suffer and save the clan' (I.104/1-2). If there is any statement that should fill Maclean with forebodings of doom, this is it: Elizabeth

Campbell, proud to suffer for her clan in a way that no man could, sees her plight as a challenge.

The 'poet', by making her depiction of Elizabeth outwardly conform to the archetypal male portrayal of womanhood as demonstrated by Morris's 'Rapunzel' and other male-oriented verse, gives herself a free reign to use her own inimitable style to subvert this passive stereotype of a medieval damsel in order to create the persona of an iconic heroine. Instead of simply waiting for Maclean to ravish her, Elizabeth plans her defensive strategy. She will die rather than capitulate. In her chamber, when Elizabeth kneels alone praying to the Virgin Mary, her white, shroud-like robe symbolises her virginal purity and her willingness to die defending it. Like a true knight Elizabeth is praying for victory – not a victory in terms of the aggressive and masculine strength of the body, but a victory in terms of the subtle, feminine strength of the mind and spirit.

Maclean enters the bower and, as he moves towards her, Elizabeth immediately starts to put forward her case. Their marriage is a political one brought about to bring peace between their two warring clans. Because of this the marriage should remain a marriage in name only, but Maclean laughs and dismisses her argument out of hand. Elizabeth puts forward her argument again:

“You asked for a gage of my feudal chief,  
But of me nor word nor smile;  
You sought but to better the strength you had  
With the strength of the deep Argyle;  
You shall have your due and no more of me  
Than a contract's seal and warantry.” (II.122/5-10)

Maclean:

He laughed in his beard: “Ay, many have tried,

But all have tried in vain,  
To mete with a measure that was not his  
The due of the red Maclean;  
Still with iron hand he has held his right,  
But never so close as he will this night.” (II. 122/11-16)

Elizabeth stands braced with her back to the wall as Maclean adds: ““By limb and life, /  
I’ll use you as my wedded wife”” (II.137-8). Proudly she replies:

“I am an earl’s daughter”, she said,  
“And my oath is worth a knight’s,  
And I swear by the health of my mother’s soul,  
That the kiss which first alights  
On me as we two lie in bed,  
Shall have the force to strike me dead.” (II.122-3/23-28)

Maclean replies that in his castle he will do as he pleases, her oath is without substance;  
and Elizabeth shrinks against the granite wall as he tries to embrace her, but her ‘flame-  
blue eyes’ are clear. She brings out her dirk to kill herself, and even though Maclean is  
drunk he can see that she will carry out her threat:

Her hand bore hard on her heaving breast,  
And he knew whereto it clung,  
And saw how her eyes on the turn of his,  
Two deadly warders, hung;  
Then his caitiff soul succumbed to hers,  
He let her go, and sprung  
Back with the cry of a ravening beast  
Balked on the eve of a gory feast. (II.124/1-8)

Maclean realises that if she kills herself the political advantage he has devised for  
himself will be lost and the Argyles will avenge themselves of Elizabeth’s death. He  
decides to play a more crafty game: he will postpone his pleasures for one night and  
will take her tomorrow instead. Elizabeth sheaths the dagger saying: ‘Now lay your  
sword betwixt us two’; and they both lie down on the bed, one on each side of the sword

(II.125/7). Maclean falls into a drunken sleep, but Elizabeth keeps a lonely vigil, lying 'still and white'. But when the sun comes up, she steals out of the bridal chamber: 'And alone in face of the risen sun / She dared to weep; the day was won' (II.126/3-4).

Elizabeth has put Maclean in a double bind. Firstly she has argued that sexual intimacy is not part of the marriage contract and, secondly, she has promised to kill herself if he forces himself on her. At first, Pfeiffer's 'poet' depicts Elizabeth as passive, weak and subject to male domination in line with the accepted male portrayal of womanhood of her day, and then she reverses the roles. The weak and vulnerable Elizabeth has a secret weapon and becomes chivalrous and powerful as she turns the tables on Maclean by refusing to let him have sex with her. Elizabeth's wile proves to be the undoing of Maclean and, as he become ever more frustrated and confused, the balance of power within their marriage reverses. Maclean's continued failure to consummate the marriage strikes at the very heart of his self-esteem, upsetting the delicate edifice upon which his masculine pride rests. But every day that Elizabeth remains a virgin is a day of victory for her, and this gives her confidence and poise as she proves ever more attentive as Maclean's wife and beloved as chatelaine. Aurora Leigh may consider chivalrous men an outmoded subject for poetry, but she is happy for women to take over that mantle, as Aurora avers: 'The world's male chivalry has perished out, / But women are knights-errant to the last' (VII.224-5).<sup>39</sup> Like Saint George swooping down to kill the dragon, so Elizabeth swoops down to destroy male chauvinism with all the charisma of a knight-errant. Fighting for justice and freedom Elizabeth risks her own life and spills her own blood to symbolise the great sacrifice she is ready to make to save her honour and her clan. This makes her not only a role-model but also an icon.

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<sup>39</sup> Op. cit., 216.

Through her courage and wile, Elizabeth manages to stave off Maclean's advances not only on her wedding night but right up to the day he rapes her and leaves her to drown on the ocean rock.

### The Prose Narrative

Early in the prose narrative Pfeiffer's 'poet' and her German husband, Helmuth, find their Scottish tour hindered by stormy weather, logistical problems, and embarrassing misunderstandings. Eventually, however, they find themselves comfortably ensconced in Miss Macorquodale's guesthouse at Duart Farm, overlooking Duart Castle. The 'poet' describes Miss Macorquodale's fairy-like qualities:

[Miss Macorquodale's kitchen] was like one in a fairy-tale, the old woman in its midst being the fairy [...]. A cat stretched before the fire would hardly budge for any one; a keen-eyed hen came fluttering in from time to time [...]; a speculative pig regarded the windfalls on the floor as his proper perquisites [...] (82).

These fairy-tale overtones are augmented by the 'poet's' description of Miss Macorquodale's nephew, Archie Cumming, a man with mystical gifts who, like the 'poet', is able to hear the ghostly noises exuding from the walls of Duart Castle:

[The man] was of the middle height, lightly and slenderly made, with a small head, steep brow, well-finished ears and nostrils, and eyes which, brown and clear as a mountain brook, had a touch of sadness in their lingering gaze [...]. I found that [...] [the ghosts] spoke to this man as they had done to me [...] (58-59).

There is an affinity between Archie Cumming and the 'poet' based on the suggestion that both have the ability to access the spirit world. Pfeiffer clearly intends her 'poet's' mystical insights to be considered normal by these decent Scottish country-folk in order,

perhaps, to make the supernatural events to come more accessible, and acceptable, to her readers.

Pfeiffer's 'poet' makes the fairy-like Miss Macorquodale the owner of a selection of books that, taken together, provide telling insights into Pfeiffer's motivation. The selection comprises both Gaelic and English versions of the Bible; Drelincourt's *Consolations against the Fears of Death*; chivalry and the 'Celtic mode' in the works of Walter Scott; supernatural adventures in Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (a Christian allegory depicting attainment of the Celestial City); the 'poet' herself, perhaps, in the title role of a bird book entitled *The Little Warbler*; a hymn-book, and an assortment of periodicals. The 'poet' states: 'I fastened upon an account of the miraculous building [...] of the Great Pyramid, and was lost for a time – the Celtic part of me at least – in the enjoyment of the supernatural' (75). The theme of Miss Macorquodale's book selection seems to encapsulate Pfeiffer's mixed-genre work as a whole.

As self-appointed ballad-collector, the 'poet' scours the island of Mull in search of the last surviving exponent of the ancient Gaelic ballad tradition. Having distanced herself from Joanna Baillie's version of the legend of Lady's Rock, the 'poet' nevertheless manages to find the island's last living repository of this ancient tradition in the form of old Susan MacArthur who says to the other seven individuals assembled in Miss Macorquodale's kitchen: 'It's a pity to be sure that ye'll no hae the Gaelic; it's in the Gaelic that the pick o' the songs is to be found' (86). The old woman straightens herself upon her chair:

And there arose in the place a thin thread of quavering sound, high and shrill in parts, at times utterly mournful, but not without variety of expression [...]. To the surprise of my ignorance, old Susan was not reciting but singing [...] (86-7).

The 'poet' describes the scene as the old woman finishes her song:

The Sibylline expression had departed from the old woman's countenance, and the rigidity from her frame; her mouth resumed its aimless working, and her figure its attitude of feeble maundering [...] (87).

But the scene itself was full of poetic elements; we were such a strange company brought together from different parts [...]. There was the kindly old Sibyl who was the centre of the group, crooning out the songs of other days; there was the woman-singer [the 'poet' herself] trying to select some accordant notes from among the discords which smote her heart in these, a little removed [...] stood the peasant girl, the daughter of a race more tensely strung than ours. Slightly in advance of her sat the man from the German Fatherland, who, loving his country with an unalterable love, had yet struck the roots of a prosperous life deep down in the England of his adoption, and near him was that other man from the Alps, dwelling in bitterness of spirit on the scenes of his youth, while passing his days as a homeless wanderer in a land that continued to be alien. Last, but not least, there stood [...] the old maid with the mother's heart [...] (88-9).

Pfeiffer's 'poet' searches Mull and finds an old Sibyl – an ancient relic of the island's dying folk-ballad culture. Invited to Duart Farm, the ancient Sibyl sings snatches of long-forgotten ballads. Sung in the Gaelic, the 'poet' cannot understand the old woman's language and has difficulty in trying to 'select some accordant notes from among the discords'. Yet, after piecing together the remnants of the Scottish ballad tradition, the 'poet' feels sufficiently empowered to carry on the matrilineal tradition herself. In the footsteps of the old Sibyl (so named by Pfeiffer after the pagan women vouchsafed gifts of prophecy by the gods) Pfeiffer's 'poet' translates the Sibyls' songs not merely into a *vision* of an utopian land, but into a real *place* where women could be authentic spiritual beings.



Pfeiffer uses the 'poet's' difficulty in finding accordant notes from the old Sibyl's rendering of the Scottish ballad tradition as a metaphor for women's place in the Christian tradition. There had been a time when the spiritual gifts of women, like the pagan Sibyls of mythology, had been valued: now, marginalised by a patriarchal religion, it was hard to remember their own language. The 'poet' decides to take over the Scottish ballad tradition from the old Sibyl – an action which, from an allegorical perspective suggests that, like a feminist theologian, she intends to delete the discordant, patriarchal, parts of the Bible 'which smote her heart' and replace them with language reflecting a feminine religious tradition going back to pagan times.

In the discussion following Susan MacArthur's passionate rendering of traditional Gaelic ballads, the 'foreign element' in the person of the Swiss pedlar, rudely interrupts:

The Gaelic-speaking Scotch are as children who will never be grown; if they find themselves more at ease in the Gaelic, it is because that is a narrow and poor plot of speech [...] (90-1).

With these offensive words the hawker, or 'gaberlunzie' man, displays his ignorance. The Gaelic ballad tradition was in fact so rich than much of it had been appropriated by lowland Scots and 'Sassenachs' and incorporated into English culture. This is why genuine exponents of the tradition, 'Sibyls' like Susan MacArthur, were a dying breed. Again, interpreted as a Christian allegory, the patriarchal pedlar's resentment of the ancient woman's rendering of what appears to be a matrilineal tradition ties in with the views of feminist theologians who believe that men misappropriated parts of the biblical record of the Christian tradition and used it to reinforce women's temporal and spiritual suppression. But events take a turn for the worse when the 'poet's' ballad is read to the assembled group.

When asked to read some of her own verse to the assembled group – a group consisting of Helmuth, Miss Macorquodale, Archie Cumming, Maisie the maid, old Susan

MacArthur and the Swiss pedlar - the ‘poet’ finds herself in a quandary:<sup>40</sup>

The request was embarrassing, and it grieved me that it should be so. Feeling so happy and at one with these simple people, it was a matter of regret that so little of what I had been able to deliver myself of appeared likely to come within the range of their sympathy’ (96).

But to the poet’s relief, Miss Macorquodale suggests that she might wish read her ballad about the island’s legend of Lady’s Rock, and because the islanders are familiar with the story and because it lends itself to recitation, she agrees to let her husband read it to the assembled group.

After Helmuth’s recital of *Fitte the First*, the Swiss pedlar intervenes:

[Sticking out a soiled left hand] and telling off the beats of the verse upon its thumb and fingers with the index of his right; [...] [he says:] ‘Rose-red for the banner of love [...] opens with a spondee, trips off into anapests; confusion of anapests and iambs in the third line; iambs pure in the fourth; confusion worse confounded, as you say, in the fifth and sixth!’ And the learned itinerant merchant, having spread his two arms abroad and shrugged his shoulders without taking them down again, turned an accusing look upon me as the author of all this anarchy (114).

The pedlar is correct in noting that the stanzas (which consist mainly of sestets with occasional seven-line stanzas and octets interspersed at critical moments) consist mainly of iambs. Yet he shows his ignorance of the Scottish folk-ballad genre when he

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<sup>40</sup> Kathleen Hickok, ‘Why is this Woman Still Missing? Emily Pfeiffer, *Woman’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (London: Palgrave, 1999), 385. Hickok makes reference to the presence in Macorquodale’s kitchen of ‘a German hiker in self exile’. Virginia Blain, ed., ‘Emily Pfeiffer’, *Victorian Women Poets: Anthology*, rev. edn (London: Longman, 2009), 85. Blain refers to ‘a diverse group of holiday-makers and locals to whom the poem is read by the poet during its composition’. The Swiss hawker, the ‘poet’ and her husband, however, are the only non-islanders at the recitation of the ballad which is composed by the ‘poet’ while sitting alone in the ruin of Duart Castle.

criticises the ‘poet’ for the ballad’s irregular metre; for although ballad metre is composed mainly of iambs, Pfeiffer’s ‘poet’ is correct when she inserts anapaests in order to suggest increased action or pace. The overall effect should be one of irregularity, and the ‘poet’ politely explains this fact to the pedlar, saying: ‘The author of these lines [...] has taken for Pegasus a Highland sheltie, believing its paces better suited to the rough ground to be gone over, than those of a higher bred courser’ (114-5). In *The Ballad in Scottish History*, Edward Cowan emphasises irregularity of metre, textual variety and creative originality as important components of the ballad form.<sup>41</sup> But ignorance does not deter the pedlar from criticising every aspect of the ballad - and the ‘poet’ who wrote it.

Initially too modest to acknowledge herself the author of the ballad, the ‘poet’s’ cover is soon blown by the Swiss pedlar’s criticism. After *Fitte the Second*, in which the events of Elizabeth Campbell’s wedding night unfold, the Swiss pedlar turns to address Helmuth: ‘Your lady has set her pen to work on a perilous subject as addressed to your ‘Philister’ English public’ (127). Horrified, the ‘poet’ sees her ballad through his crude perspective:

My visions were scattered in a moment; like a jewelled window through which a bullet has passed, the hues of fancy grew dark and dull with the inlet of common day (127).

The ‘poet’s’ husband rushes to her defence: ‘The danger you speak of is beneath contempt [...] there is no work here for the literary scavenger but such as he may make for himself’ (128). But the pedlar exclaims:

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<sup>41</sup> Edward Cowan, ed., *Ballad in Scottish History* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000), 21.

I can make me a picture [...] of paragraphs in certain of your public prints wherein the critics will exalt themselves upon moral stilts, and will come down on [her] [...] (128). The ladies who choose to forsake the covered ways and to 'walk in the sun', must take the chances that will befall them (130-131).

The 'poet' considers the pedlar's words:

I had written of what, as a woman, I could feel as possibly no man could; if there was toll to pay in taking that path, I would pay it, bring this small sacrifice to the cause of freedom, as many a woman in this generation has brought a greater. I looked up clear, ashamed of my momentary cowardice (131).

Clear parallels exist between the 'poet's' statement highlighting her willingness to suffer for freedom of expression and Elizabeth Campbell's statement: 'It has not been laid upon a man / But on me to suffer and save the clan' (I.104/1-2). Both women are prepared to pay the toll for refusing to comply with patriarchal convention. Yet Pfeiffer makes sure that it is Helmuth, the 'poet's' German husband, who directly opposes the pedlar's criticism against women poets:

[Women] have voices of different quality from ours – voices for singing no less than for speaking [...]. Are there no notes, think you, that are beyond [man's] reach? In the ultimate harmony we want some sounds that are delicate and acute, and we want them not manly but womanly; it has been found that such voices will 'carry' far [...]. Critics [could] do knightly service in the cause of music; but they follow each other with no more variety in their cry than the howling of wolves in a pack (148).

Pfeiffer's depiction of the pedlar as self-appointed critic, grandiloquent, ignorant - a howling wolf in a wolf-pack - is a direct attack against 'un-knightly' nineteenth-century male reviewers of women's poetry. Pfeiffer herself had good reason for fearing this misogynistic breed - the ignorant and offensive reviews by men working for both *The*

*Times* (1873) and *Pall Mall Gazette* (1876) had made her wary of their destructive power.<sup>42</sup>

In 1884, after publication of *The Rhyme of the Lady of the Rock, and How It Grew*, an unnamed reviewer for *Westminster Review* compared Pfeiffer's narrative unfavourably with that of the male writer of the critic's previous review:

Even Mr. [H] does not subjoin to his passionate effusions a prose narrative of how he felt when he began to write, or what he had for dinner the day before; nor does he present us with a model audience consisting of several admirers and only one dissentient critic.<sup>43</sup>

For women poets, 'one dissentient critic' might seem more than enough if they are as destructive as the critic cited here; but the reviewer goes on to criticise Pfeiffer's deployment of two genres: 'Against this unnatural union of poetry and prose we protest altogether'.<sup>44</sup> Then, verbally wagging his finger, he adds: 'Mrs. Pfeiffer should not have deprecated criticism [...]'.<sup>45</sup> This last sentence raises the possibility that the reviewer recognised himself in Pfeiffer's 'poet's' caricature of the pseudo-literary pedant in the person of the Swiss pedlar. The reviewer's criticism of the 'poet' for apparently deprecating the *pedlar's* criticism suggests a meeting of minds, a kind of patriarchal solidarity between the two men, real and fictional, based on the mutual assumption that women poets should accept the negative criticism meted out to them.

The Swiss pedlar, his patriarchal persona analogous to the critics whose unfavourable reviews had soured Pfeiffer's otherwise successful literary career, is purposely coupled

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 1, pp.47-8 and 50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

with the medieval despot, Lachlan Maclean.<sup>46</sup> As the recitation continues, the pedlar's interjections punctuate the proceedings, his angry voice rising above the gathering storm. As the ballad's narrative and the storm reach fever-pitch, the pedlar takes to shouting and Helmuth has difficulty making his voice heard.

In *Fitte the Fourth*, Maclean takes his lover back to Castle Duart where, envious of Elizabeth's virtue, she makes a life-size effigy of Elizabeth. Using witchcraft to turn the effigy into a fetish, Maclean and his lover stab it demonically. Yet, curiously, the pedlar ignores all this. What upsets him is Elizabeth's acceptance of Maclean's lover at Duart Castle:

The lawful wife [...] in this story that has no hero [...] is no model of Christian charity when she welcomes, and as you may say invites to sin, a maiden [...] in the hope to spare her own daintiness (152).

The pedlar is concerned that the story has no *hero*. The fact that the story has instead a chivalrous heroine and has been written by a woman poet is upsetting to him. The pedlar is especially upset by Elizabeth's refusal to comply with the Christian model of marriage that legitimises sexual intercourse even in an arranged marriage. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869) John Stuart Mill, in collaboration with Harriet Taylor, compares marriage with slavery:

Above all, a female slave has (in Christian countries) an admitted right [...] to refuse the last familiarity. Not so the wife: however brutal a tyrant she may unfortunately be chained to [...] he can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pfeiffer likens these patriarchs to the 'Pharisees' in the Gospels who tried to destroy Jesus.

<sup>47</sup> J. S. Mill, *Subjection of Women* (London: Penguin, 2006), 166.

The pedlar, like Maclean, believes that a wife should submit to her husband's sexual demands whatever the circumstances, and sees Elizabeth's coldness as justification for Maclean's adultery. Hostile to the ballad, the pedlar scorns women's emancipation, yet his choice of words suggests some level of awareness of a spiritual subtext:

This metrical story [...] [is] laid out [...] like the [...] child who builds his palace with toy bricks [...] (147).

The ladies – it is the same with them all – are tied down to time, to time and to space; their sphere is *here* and *now*; let them try to emancipate themselves from us others as they will, they may cast themselves from a height, but they will never follow us into the clouds [...] (147).

In his critical treatment of the ballad the pedlar makes three quasi-biblical allusions in his sneering attack against women's emancipation. None of these allusions refers directly to the Bible, but taken together they create a 'biblical' impression. When he compares the ballad's metre with a child's toy palace, the metaphor seems contrived because children do not usually build *palaces* with their building bricks. But because 'palace' is a common biblical metaphor for heaven, it is possible that the pedlar is inferring that women are too childish to attain heaven. His subsequent remark, about women casting themselves from a height, is reminiscent of the devil's temptation of Jesus in *Matthew* 4.6 when the devil tells Jesus to cast himself down from the temple to prove he is the Son of God. Could Pfeiffer be equating the critical pedlar (and Maclean) with the devil, thereby implying that emancipationists such as the 'poet' (and her heroine, Elizabeth) are *daughters* of God? The pedlar's third comment, that women will never follow men 'into the clouds', again uses words similar to those in the Bible. In Acts 1:9, Christ 'was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight'. Pfeiffer herself uses 'clouds' as spiritual metaphors in her poetry, as exemplified by her sonnet,

‘The Sting of Death’, when she expresses fear of ever attaining a Heaven obscured by clouds:

O Thou whom men affirm we cannot know,  
It may be we may never see Thee nearer  
Than ‘in the clouds’ [...]. [1-3]

We may not reach Thee through the void immense  
Measured by sons [...]. [9-10]<sup>48</sup>

The frame narrative, with its anxious ‘poet’ and patriarchal pedlar, and the ballad, with its virtuous Elizabeth and despotic Maclean, draws attention away from the recognisable Christian tropes which punctuate the work. Yet, at the same time, the ‘poet’ pleads for freedom of literary expression:

Whoever aspires to wings must be free, free of the air, free of the sun [...]. I had written of what, as a woman, I could feel as possibly no man could; if there was toll to pay in taking that path, I would pay it, bring this small sacrifice to the cause of freedom [...] (131).

Wings are metaphors for spirituality, but after Elizabeth Barrett Browning described Aurora Leigh’s aunt as living ‘A sort of cage-bird life’ nineteenth-century women poets tended to conflate the two images to represent women as spiritually caged – their spirituality (or wings) weakened from captivity. But here Pfeiffer’s ‘poet’s’ words suggest that she has left the safety of the cage and is risking her reputation by expressing her spirituality freely *as a woman*. The nineteenth-century ‘poet’ and medieval Elizabeth Campbell are united by their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their ‘clans’.

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<sup>48</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Poems* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1876), 142.



## Lachlan Maclean and the Swiss Pedlar

Although he marries her for political reasons, Maclean expects Elizabeth to become his property. Elizabeth may be an earl's daughter but she is *his* chattel. Finding himself sexually thwarted, he calls on his tribesmen to accompany him on a series of bloody raids hoping to make Elizabeth warm to him:

And he thought: 'To this frost-bound maid of mine  
When I come red-handed in,  
Will the ice of her virgin pride break up [...] (III.137/13-15)

Maclean thinks that his marauds will excite Elizabeth, and this shows the crudeness of his mindset. Alfred Adler (1870-1937), the first psychoanalyst to use the term 'inferiority complex', classified men like Maclean as members of a 'ruling type [whose] striving for personal superiority and power is so intense they typically exploit or harm others to accomplish their goals'.<sup>49</sup> Maclean's cowardly assertion that Elizabeth is 'frost-bound' – or frigid – just because she does not want *him* is a response typical of men who feel compelled to boost their faltering pride by denigrating the women who reject them. He thinks of her as 'mine' even though she is patently not 'his', no doubt boasting about nights spent in marital ecstasy when, in reality, he has not even touched Elizabeth. He is consumed with hurt pride, crazed with unrequited lust, and black-hearted with secret anger.

At first his frustration takes the form of love-sickness: 'Then he fell in longing by day and night / As the sick man longs for health; / [...] (III.137/19-20). But as he becomes ever more frustrated, Elizabeth becomes ever more confident. He cannot even humiliate

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Ryckman, *Theories of Personality* (Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole, 1989), 108.

Elizabeth by bringing his lover back to the castle, and so his destructive urges take a more sinister turn:

And he who noted her morning face  
Grow clearer and yet more clear,  
Beheld her the only untamed thing  
Of all that came him near [...]; (IV.142/15-18)

The real problem for Maclean is that Elizabeth's spiritual gifts lie outside his lowly orbit. Bringing her superior qualities to bear on her role as chatelaine Elizabeth has earned the respect and affection of all, and this makes her powerful. He fears her superiority: 'He dreamed of tortures of rare device / As to give his passion ease' (III.138/7-8). Like a spoiled child, he creates fantasies of hurting Elizabeth because, although he is ruthlessly able to bend everyone else to his will, she cannot be 'tamed'.

The description 'untamed thing' brings two other 'untamed' women to mind - Pompilia and Porphyria. Like Elizabeth, both of these women in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, possess qualities that put them beyond the spiritual reach of Browning's famous murderers, Guido Franceschini and Porphyria's lover.<sup>50</sup> These men murder the women they cannot 'tame' because, like Maclean, their narcissism and despotic love of power is compensation for profound feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. The woman who cracks the defensive façade and exposes the narcissistic psychopath inside puts her life at risk.

While Maclean is the personification of evil in the medieval folk-ballad, Pfeiffer clearly intends the pedlar to be Maclean's nineteenth-century equivalent in the frame narrative.

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Browning, *Ring and the Book* [1868-9] (London: J. M. Dent, 1911); 'Porphyria's Lover' [c.1835], *Selected Poetry*, ed. Daniel Karlin (London: Penguin, 1989), 25, 17.

Depicted as a misogynist and self-opinionated bigot the 'poet's' description of the pedlar's appearance is correspondingly unattractive:

[The stranger] was about forty-five [...] [with] iron-grey locks sparsely covering a large head very flat at the summit and wide at the sides; his eye [...] [which] seemed to invite the knocks of fate while it promised a sharp retort to them, gave me the fantastic notion in regard to him that he resembled a nail out of service [...] (83-4).

The 'poet' describes the pedlar's deprived upbringing:

Driven from home by the tyranny of his father, a masterful, prosperous man [...] [who] wanted to bend or to break all who fell under his hand to his own conditions [...] his violent cruelty had so wrought upon a more tender-spirited brother that the youth had put an end to his existence [...]. As we listened [...] it was clear that this one at least of the tyrant's sons had inherited some of the stormy passions of the father [...] (84-5).

The 'poet' describes Lachlan Maclean's formative years as similarly dysfunctional:

[Maclean] was sent at an early age out of reach of the men of his own clan [...] to learn discipline and practise knightly exercises among his mother's people [...]. That he failed to command the blind fidelity of service that was common in these clans even towards chiefs who were perhaps as lawless as himself, gives proof of his want of personal influence [...] (45).

The 'poet' ascribes the shortcomings of both the pedlar and Maclean to their deprived backgrounds rather than to any innate propensity for evil. The 'poet' says of Maclean:

'[He] himself was a man, and not a monster, and must have felt or fancied some ground of offence before he constituted himself his wife's executioner [...]' (43). Later, she repeats this point when she says: 'At once turbulent, cruel, and dull [...], be it remembered that [Maclean] was human [...]' (45-6). That the 'poet' sees both the pedlar and Maclean as victims of their early environments suggests a change in Victorian attitudes. Actions judged sinful and worthy of everlasting damnation by a

punitive God are now excused as the tragic bi-products of early trauma. Ekbert Faas, describing the rise of psychiatry and its influence on Victorian poetry, writes:

One can hardly exaggerate the impact of early mental science, once it established itself as an accredited discipline, exerted on literature and most other cultural domains. We wrongly credit Freud and Jung with being the first to propose psychiatry as a new metaphysics [...]. The claim is as old as mental science itself.<sup>51</sup>

Faas makes the point that during the nineteenth century ‘the psychologist was to step in for the theologian [...]’.<sup>52</sup> Conditions that had previously been seen as spiritual in origin were now diagnosed as mental illness and treated accordingly. Faas quotes the psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) who, in the *Journal of Mental Science*, makes the jocular remark that the morbid metaphysician would benefit from the ‘regular discipline of an asylum’.<sup>53</sup> It is clear that Pfeiffer’s ‘poet’ adopts a psychological approach with regard to the moral and spiritual short-comings of her two villains, seeing each as the product of poor nurturing. Both men lack the kind of mothering that, earlier in the nineteenth century, Sarah Stickney Ellis suggested boys need in order to combat the violent behaviour to which their superior physical strength predisposes them:

Such a propensity inherent in [boys’] nature [...] [should claim] the mother’s most earnest attention, [...] which, if properly impressed upon the mind of youth, would help very much to bring about a new and better order of things amongst the affairs of mankind [...]. It may seem but a trifle that a boy should abuse [an animal] because he can [...]. It may seem but a trifle that he should torment and ill-treat his sisters, because they have not the strength to defend themselves: but when we think to what all this may grow, it ought to be regarded as one of the surest symptoms of a [...] tyrannical disposition, which a youth can exhibit [...]. In all such cases, I am aware it is to the mother alone that we can appeal, for men, with some few admirable exceptions, are not quick-sighted or particularly scrupulous on these points.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), Introduction, 7.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 8; Henry Maudsley, *Journal of Mental Science* 11 (1865-66), 538.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *Mothers of England, their Influence and Responsibility* (London: Fisher & Son, 1843), 298.

Maclean is a tyrant who rapes and murders without remorse and yet Pfeiffer's 'poet' depicts the pedlar as similarly brutal, albeit on a smaller scale. A telling insight into the pedlar's character occurs at the end of the recitation of *Fitte the First*, when he boasts about strangling a land-rail whose amorous call had kept him from sleep one night on the moor. Clearly the pedlar had no mother of the Stickney Ellis persuasion to train him not to abuse small animals. The pedlar brags:

The land-rail is a weak, tricky bird; it will feign to be dead, thinking in that way to escape your malice; but it is eas[il]y taken in with its own coin, for, like to deceivers in general, it is not less but more to be bamboozled than others. I laid myself flat like a dead weasel, and held in my breath, when the fellow whose call had been the sharpest came brushing my ear. If his summons was heard of a bride, it did not get him a wife; I put out my hand and took him – a bundle of feathers with a little limp body inside – but warm, and with a heart that you might count the beats of; but for that, he was a better actor than I. Anyway he kept me not from sleep the last half of that night (111-2).

The pedlar scoffs at the land-rail's act of playing possum – a survival strategy the pedlar seems to take as a personal affront. Interpreting the bird's desperate attempt to save its skin as trickery, the pedlar flatters himself on being able to see through the bird's deception. The power differential between the pedlar and the bird is vast, and yet the pedlar still feels the need to exercise power over a small creature he feels is purposely out to trick him – and so he throttles it. The story has implications for those women who, like the land-rail, adopt 'weak and tricky' strategies in order to survive in Victorian Britain. 'Tricky' women (like the 'poet') who try to bamboozle men by pretending to be weak and helpless do not fool the pedlar. He is able to see right through their cunning. The pedlar, like the dead weasel he pretends to be in order to outmanoeuvre a land-rail, unwittingly becomes a bamboozler himself. As such he fails to realise that he too 'like to deceivers in general [...] is more to be bamboozled than

others'. For in terms of Pfeiffer's 'weak and tricky' woman 'poet', it is the pedlar who is bamboozled. The 'poet', whose persona seems strangely linked to Miss Macorquodale's anthology entitled the *Little Warbler*, continues to broadcast her song loud and long, Fitte after Fitte, hour after hour - until the pedlar cannot bear to listen to it any more and walks out into the storm. Yet, as in the Christian myth, it is a 'weak and tricky' member of her own sex – a female 'Judas' - who betrays Elizabeth in the end.

### Betrayal: Black Magic and a Wax-Work Fetish

In her treatise, *Women and Work*, 1888, Pfeiffer criticises 'women who live to please [men]', seeing their pandering to the male ego an impediment to emancipation.<sup>55</sup> Such women, seeming to be one thing when really another, are depicted by Pfeiffer as two-faced sycophants and a danger to virtuous women. In the octave of the first of a two-sonnet sequence Pfeiffer disdains artificial, ignorant and decorative women:

Peace to the odalisque, the facile slave,  
Whose unrespective love rewards the brave,  
Or cherishes the coward; She who yields  
Her lord the fief of waste, uncultur'd fields  
To fester in non-using; she whose hour  
Is measured by her beauties' transient flower;  
Who lives in man, as he in God, and dies  
His parasite, who shuts her from the skies [...].<sup>56</sup>

'Artificial' women who kowtow to men are parasites, shut out from heaven. These 'odalisques' resent the women who refuse to submit to male domination, and may go to great lengths in order to overthrow independent women in order to usurp their power. If such a woman is forced to please an inferior despot like Maclean, the temptation to evil

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<sup>55</sup> Op. cit., 51.

<sup>56</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Gerards' Monument and Other Poems* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), 192.

is far greater. Elaine Showalter draws attention to examples in literature where would-be murderesses are portrayed as domesticated ‘angels’. She writes: ‘The dangerous woman is not the rebel or the bluestocking, but the ‘pretty little girl’ whose indoctrination in the female role has taught her secrecy and deceitfulness [...]’.<sup>57</sup>

Pfeiffer’s ‘poet’ uses the metaphor of a climbing rose ‘with an open eye’ to describe Maclean’s lover (IV.140/5). But this rose has a ‘double heart’, and it coils, constricts, creeps and winds up the turret stairs right up to the door of Elizabeth’s bower. In this way the rose’s serpentine growth, which describes Maclean’s lover’s stealthy encroachment into Elizabeth’s territory, has a distinct flavour of Geraldine’s snake-like character in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, ‘Christabel’.<sup>58</sup> Geraldine, a disturbingly ambiguous figure, not only insinuates herself into Christabel’s home but also, under the guise of vulnerability, manages to worm her way into Sir Leoline’s affections.

Coleridge writes of Geraldine’s bad side: ‘Behold! Her bosom, and half her side - / Are lean and old and foul of hue’, and uses the metaphor of a snake throttling a dove to describe Geraldine’s usurpation of Christabel’s position at the castle.<sup>59</sup> Geraldine’s eyes are snake-like: ‘A snake’s small eye blinks dull and shy; / And the lady’s eyes they shrunk in her head.’<sup>60</sup> Like Geraldine, Maclean’s lover spreads her venom everywhere she goes. Motivated by envy, her poisonous tendrils insinuate themselves into every crevice of Duart Castle and, in this respect, she is similar to Bronwen for whom power-envy became a ‘venomed sting which cankered peace’ in Pfeiffer’s poem *Glân-Alarch*

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<sup>57</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1984), 165.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poetry*, ed. William Empson and David Pirie (Manchester: Carcanet, 1972), 146-165.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

(1877).<sup>61</sup> As with the Red Ladye in Pfeiffer's Pre-Raphaelite ballad 'Childe Rupert, the White Ermingarde, and the Red Ladye' (1876), her 'serpent gaze' worked 'a good man's dole'.<sup>62</sup> All four false-hearted women – Maclean's lover, Bronwen, the Red Ladye and Geraldine - appear to be envious of virtuous women. Virtue, it seems, has a power of its own and in *The Lady of the Rock* Maclean's lover is sick with envy at Elizabeth's abundant possession of it. She is prepared to do anything to depose Elizabeth who, as chatelaine, is revered for her goodness. That Elizabeth is not threatened by the lover's presence gives the ambitious lover the opportunity to advance her predatory plans. So the climbing rose

it wound and wound,  
So lithe as the green shoots felt their way,  
But they hardened where they clung [...] (IV.141/13-15)

And [the] limmer, striking deeper root,  
Still darkly wound her way,  
For she hated, who only reigned at night,  
The woman who ruled by day [...]. (IV.144/7-10)

Pfeiffer shows how Maclean's sexually dominated lover is doubly envious of the power which, as chatelaine, Elizabeth wields by day, for *her* power extends only over Maclean at night. But she thinks: 'He will set me by his side' (IV.143/18), and this Maclean does - but because this manoeuvre does nothing to dampen Elizabeth's spirits she becomes desperate and resorts to black magic. Gradually, with Maclean's power to support it, the climbing rose becomes a parasite, squeezing the very life out of 'our flower of ladies, Elizabeth' (I.99/6):

Dwindle and dwine in shade and shine,  
Till all be mine that now is thine. (IV.144/23-4)

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<sup>61</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Glân-Alarch, His Silence and Song* (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 20-21.

<sup>62</sup> Emily Pfeiffer, *Poems* (London: Strahan, 1876), 110.



This is the incantation of a woman consumed with envy of one more powerful than she. Having fashioned a life-size wax effigy of Elizabeth, Maclean's lover 'crooned the curse / As a troubled soul might pray' (IV.144/20-1). The curse and subsequent stabbing of the effigy by the 'double-hearted' lover are the outward manifestations of an inner compulsion to murder Elizabeth.

Living near London, Pfeiffer's characterisation of a woman so jealous of her rival that she feels compelled to construct a life-sized wax-work of her may have been inspired by publicity leading up to the relocation of the London wax-work museum, Madame Tussaud's, to new premises in the Marylebone Road in the early 1880s. The move culminated in an inaugural exhibition in 1884, the year *The Lady of the Rock* was published. But the wax-work of Elizabeth was no ordinary representation; for when the 'climbing rose' crooned incantations over it, it ceased to be just a wax-work and became a fetish - an instrument of evil. The psychologist Arthur Rebus explains:

Fetishism [...] connotes a kind of religious activity that emphasizes the worship of inanimate objects believed to have magical or transcendent powers [...]. [Fetishism is] often found in connection with *paraphilia* [which is] characterised by obtaining sexual arousal and satisfaction with some object, or some part of the body not directly erogenous [...].<sup>63</sup>

From a religious perspective, Eugene Bewkes explains that 'a made object may by some appropriate rite be [...] endowed with indefinite power'.<sup>64</sup> Professor Lowie describes the religious significance of the fetish, or fetich. 'What confers upon the object its supernatural potency is solely the mysterious spell sung over it [...]. Any object can

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<sup>63</sup> Arthur S. Rebus, *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (London: Penguin, 1988), 273.

<sup>64</sup> Eugene Garrett Bewkes, *Experience, Reason and Faith: A survey in Philosophy and Religion* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940), 12.

become a ‘fetich’ if only it has been ritualistically consecrated’.<sup>65</sup> By crooning spells and curses over it, the effigy has become consecrated, and can now actively harm Elizabeth.

Subject to interpretation, several examples of paraphilia can be found in nineteenth-century poetry. The nose in ‘The Dong with a Luminous Nose’ by Edward Lear (1877); bones in William Morris’s poem ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’ (1858); arms and hands in Arthur Munby’s poem ‘The Serving Maid’ (1865). A particular interpretation of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ (1876) also supports the possibility that the close identification of the male speaker with the tall, androgynous, nun who commingles with the disembodied Christ at the moment of her death is an example of both paraphilia and fetishism.<sup>66</sup> In *The Lady of the Rock*, Maclean’s lover’s incantations turn the wax effigy into a fetish with the power to destroy Elizabeth. The ‘climbing rose’ stabs it through the heart while Maclean scrutinises the waxen face:

‘My lady’s face as she lives – not so;  
My lady’s face’, he said,  
‘Not as she lives to flout us two,  
But as – *she might lie dead*,  
Then each glanced up as in vague surprise,  
And shrunk at the light in the other’s eyes. (IV.145/7-12)

Consumed with lust for the inanimate image of Elizabeth, Maclean frenziedly stabs the effigy with his weapon. Simulating the rape and murder to come, Maclean unconsciously acts out his fetishistic fantasies on the wax-work effigy, now an object of paraphilia.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>66</sup> Edward Lear, *Victorians: Anthology*, ed. V. Cunningham (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 379-381; Arthur Munby, *ibid.*, 641-2; Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Oxford World World’s Classics*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 110-119; Morris, *op. cit.*, 222.

The wax image looks like Elizabeth, but it is only a facsimile – a man-made object that can be moulded, manipulated and abused. This image can be seen as a symbol of Elizabeth's false self – inanimate and powerless - emblematic of the kind of wife Maclean wanted to marry. The fetish looks real, but this is an illusion: it looks alive, but it is not. Inanimate, objectified and fetishised the image of Elizabeth symbolises spiritual death. Elisabeth Bronfen, referring to the popularity of wax cadavers in eighteenth-century Florentine anatomical museums, writes:

The fascination engendered when the wax cast depicts a feminine body has to do with the fact that the two enigmas of western culture, death and female sexuality, are here 'contained' in a way that exposes these two conditions to a sustained and indefinite view, but does so in such a way that the real threat of both [...] has been put under erasure.<sup>67</sup>

Maclean can now examine Elizabeth at leisure knowing that both her sexuality and her existence are 'contained' and that she is no longer a threat to him. The effigy pre-figures the fate of the real Elizabeth who, 'under erasure', is as good as dead.

The duality of two Elizabeth's – one that is inanimate and fetishised and one that is animated and virtuous – symbolizes the double standards of chivalry but in subversive reversal, like a mirror image of the traditional stereotype. The real Elizabeth has all the valour of a true knight, but the wax image symbolises the old male stereotype of womanhood, the fetishised and idealised maiden, passive, victimised and 'contained'. The fetishised Elizabeth and the real Elizabeth are situated at opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum – one representing eternal death and the other, eternal life.

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<sup>67</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 99.

## Elizabeth Campbell is Raped and Murdered

In Fytte the Fifth, Pfeiffer uses the dramatic form of *The Lady of the Rock* to explore the issue of marital rape, a subject of concern to nineteenth-century feminists. Mediating her ballad through intertextual codes imparted to readers in lines reminiscent of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Pfeiffer advances her religious allegory:

She left her wheel, she left her bower,  
She followed the false Maclean,  
The piper piped them to the shore,  
He piped a doleful strain:  
The pibroch of Macrimmon Mor:  
“The way you go you’ll come no more”. (V.157/7-12)

The opening line of the stanza sounds familiar: ‘She left her wheel, she left her bower’ – the words seem to echo Tennyson’s line (III.29) in ‘The Lady of Shalott’: ‘She left the web, she left the loom’. The audience at the recitation hearing these familiar words would perhaps - subliminally - fear the worst for Elizabeth. The Lady of Shalott dies, does Elizabeth die too? The alliteration of ‘piper’, ‘piped’ and ‘pibroch’ give the lines a plaintive quality, adding to the feeling that something terrible is about to happen. The words of the pibroch spell out Elizabeth’s fate: she will never return.

Analysis of this sestet shows that whereas the first line is an iambic tetrameter, the second line has a more irregular, trimetric beat – iamb, anapaest, iamb; the third and fourth lines are formed of an iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter respectively. These four lines on their own could form the typical ballad stanza used in hymns, but Pfeiffer adds two more lines which, because they rhyme, seem like a refrain. These lines, five

and six, are both tetrameters but the sixth line contains the quoted words of a song with the word 'will' elided with 'you', to form 'you'll'. The rhyme scheme in this sestet is abcbbc, although most of the sestets in *The Rhyme* have rhyme schemes of abcbbd - and the rhyming second and fourth lines are indented. Each line ends with a stressed hyperbeat.

Pfeiffer builds up tension by opening the stanza with words familiar to her auditors, thus adhering to the ethos of the traditional ballad while subtly manipulating the mood of her audience. Anapaests are used to increase the pace of the stanza, and the irregular beats heighten the drama relating to the blood-stained hands of Maclean and his 'grisly' crew in the following sestet. The lilting refrain-like musicality of the enjambed last two lines, describe how the wind and sea, personified, are in tune with Elizabeth's spirit as they sing and dance together:

The helm was ta'n of the red Maclean,  
The oars by Donald Dhu,  
And Shamesh, he of the bloody hands –  
And they were a grisly crew;  
But my lady's spirit rose bold and free  
'Twixt the singing wind and the dancing sea. (V.157/21-26)

Here Pfeiffer paints a gruesome picture by describing Maclean and his henchmen as 'a grisly crew', a description similar to the 'gaunt' crew' of crocodiles in Christina Rossetti's lyric poem 'My Dream' (1855).<sup>68</sup> The words 'we were a ghastly crew' (V.376) are also used by Coleridge in his ballad, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798).<sup>69</sup> The words 'grisly crew' heighten the sense of foreboding as Elizabeth is rowed out to sea. The 'poet's' 'grisly crew' consists of 'red' Maclean at the shallop's

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<sup>68</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Complete Poems*, ed. R. W. Crump (London: Penguin, 2005), 33-4.

<sup>69</sup> Op. cit., 119-146.

helm, with the bloody-handed Shamesh and Donald Dhu rowing.<sup>70</sup> The metaphor ‘bloody’ hands usually implies that they are red with blood from past or present killings, but the metaphor is used here to warn listeners of impending murder as these evil men row Elizabeth out towards the sinister black rock.

White is the colour that Pfeiffer uses to depict Elizabeth, a passive victim trapped within a ‘white’ marriage. The audience would already be familiar with the fate of white Pompilia, the child-bride murdered by her husband in Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*. Images of Elizabeth’s purity and allusions to the Virgin Mary in ‘my lady’s spirit’, all add weight to Richard Cronin’s observation that ‘white may figure purity, but it may also figure death’.<sup>71</sup> Metaphors of whiteness and spiritual purity in this context cast the shadow of death over a scenario made even more dark by Elizabeth’s innocent exhilaration at the storm, between the ‘singing wind and the dancing sea’, oblivious of the evil coming her way.

For as much as Elizabeth is ‘white’, so is Maclean ‘red’ throughout the ballad – red-bearded, red-handed and ‘drunk with blood’ (IV. 119), and the importance of this colour as a metaphor is again emphasised by Cronin when he shows how Keats uses the colour red in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’. When Porphyro looks at Madeline’s beauty ‘his pained heart / Made purple riot [...]’ (137-8); Cronin says: ‘Porphyro’s redness is the colour of his lust [...]’.<sup>72</sup> In similar vein, Maclean is also red with lust – blood-lust, power-lust, lust for Elizabeth. But, at last, after months of humiliation and frustration, Maclean is

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Scott, ‘Gathering Song of Donald Dhu’ [1796] in *Poems Every Child Should Know*, ed. Mary Burt (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1904), 126-127. Donald Dhu, imprisoned for forty years by his Campbell grandfather, would surely relish the chance to harm Elizabeth.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Cronin, *Colour and Experience in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988), 39.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

about to slake his lust and justify his 'red' image by tearing down Elizabeth's virginal defences:

The red Maclean! None other than he,  
He has her in hand at last,  
And oh, ye smouldering fires of hell!  
This time he holds her fast;  
The teeth of the dragon beneath her vest  
Are buried deep in her bleeding breast. (V.161-2/23-28)

The boat has been hauled ashore and Maclean has dragged Elizabeth on to the rock. He has her 'in hand' at last, and he holds her so roughly 'The teeth of the dragon beneath her vest / Are buried deep in her bleeding breast' (V. 162/3-4). This is the concealed dragon in jewelled mail, the device containing Elizabeth's dagger, her guarantee of safety from Maclean's lust. But now the deep penetration of the dragon's teeth into her flesh is a metaphorical portent of the rape to come. The device that is supposed to safeguard her virginity has turned against her, and the bleeding it inflicts on her breast symbolises the imminent loss of her maidenhead. The dragon, emblematic of evil, is the personification of duplicity for, at the moment when she most needs its help, her own 'knightly' appendage becomes a weapon of patriarchy. The dragon has reverted to type and has risen up to take Maclean's part. Nothing can protect her now and this is the 'red' Maclean's moment of triumph.

The next stanza concerning Elizabeth's rape is a key part of the ballad; for this Pfeiffer uses an octet to convey what the audience fears are Elizabeth's last moments. The rhyme scheme is abcdbbee, and the second, third and fifth indented lines rhyme to emphasise the words 'alone', 'his own' and 'stone'. An abundance of anapaests conveys Elizabeth's futile struggle against Maclean's superior strength, and the metaphors that

most closely allude to Elizabeth's violation are 'on that trampled shore', 'kisses he pressed', 'shuddering lips', 'then he cast her down', and here the anapaests suggest the action of the rape itself – the rhythmical pulses in 'kisses he pressed and pressed' being particularly suggestive and dramatic. Hyphens and enjambment help to emphasize Elizabeth's rape as a continuous process, not just a moment in time, but a sustained and prolonged ordeal:

He stood with his bride on that trampled shore –  
They two, and they alone –  
With brackish kisses he pressed and pressed  
As one who would make his own  
Her shuddering lips; then he cast her down  
As a man might cast a stone,  
And the rock that was all that was left of the world  
Seemed sinking with that light weight so hurled. (V.162/5-12)

The phrase 'trampled shore' is a transferred epithet for Elizabeth's rape. Once the shore is 'trampled' it is spoiled; once a girl's virginity is taken she too is spoiled, her value degraded in the eyes of men. The same word is used by Pompilia when she thinks of her mother, a prostitute, who 'every beast' was wont to 'trample', and readers realize that Pompilia herself has been similarly 'trampled' by her husband. Elizabeth has risked her very life to retain her virginity in this political marriage, and now she has lost it after all.

Pfeiffer describes Maclean, pressing brackish kisses on Elizabeth as one who would make her shuddering lips his own, and she uses the words 'kisses' and 'lips' as euphemisms for parts too private to mention in the Victorian period. Maclean presses and presses his brackish 'kisses' against her, and Elizabeth's 'lips' shudder with revulsion. The word 'brackish' used to describe Maclean's kisses, refers to water that is part salt and part fresh, but it can also mean water that is stagnant and foul, and so



Pfeiffer presents a metaphorically explicit description of a rape that is both repulsive and brutal. Then he cast her down as a man might cast a stone.

Adhering to her usual alternating tetrametric and trimetric metre, except in the last two lines which are tetrameters, Pfeiffer uses her profound technical ability to create the horror of a rape without actually mentioning it directly. The caesura in line five, 'Her shuddering lips; then he cast her down / As a man might cast a stone', separates the rape from the aftermath, like the calm after the storm, as Maclean disposes of her abused body. The contrast between 'shuddering lips' and 'cast a stone' makes a greater impact because it is so understated, and Pfeiffer's reference to Maclean as 'a man' casting a stone shows how casual is his casting of Elizabeth to the ground. Although some other octets in *The Lady of the Rock* end with only three feet, here the last line is a tetrameter although the four beats are irregular, the broken rhythm seeming to emphasize Elizabeth's broken condition: 'Seemed sink/ing with that / light weight / so hurled'. The irregular rhythm – iamb (or spondee), tribrach, spondee, iamb – and the break between the contradictory metaphors 'light' and 'weight' highlight the paradoxical nature of a crime that means so much to the victim and so little to the perpetrator. With irony Pfeiffer contrasts the lightness with which Maclean takes Elizabeth's virginity – her most treasured possession.

She means no more to him than that – a stone to be cast down. Here is a man who has been obsessing about Elizabeth for months, but the moment he has finished raping her she means nothing to him. Pfeiffer shows that the act of rape itself is like a dominance ritual which, once performed, ceases to be an issue for the rapist. Elizabeth, an innocent victim of rape, has been defiled and cast down; for although Elizabeth is the victim she

is still a 'fallen' woman and to be a fallen woman is to 'fall short', to be an outcast – cast away. Hell awaits the fallen Eve cast out of Paradise by God, for there is no distinction between prostitution, rape or marital rape: the victim is tainted with Eve's sin and cast down. In fact, men like the pedlar would feel sympathy towards Maclean for, although he is himself an adulterer, he is married to a 'cold' woman who, in their view, deserves to be raped. Pfeiffer's words 'then he cast her down / As a man might cast a stone' would be recognised by the poet's auditors as words similar to those in St. John's Gospel where a woman taken in adultery is about to be stoned to death by a mob of men. Jesus says: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her' (8:7). The men, ashamed as they confront their guilty consciences, leave one by one. When Jesus is alone with the woman he tells her that he does not condemn her, but says: 'Go, and sin no more' (8:11). In spite of this enlightened teaching, the same double standards that existed between men and women in Jesus' day still held sway in medieval Scotland, and in Victorian Britain. Elizabeth is no adulterer, she is innocent; but because she is a woman she is guilty even in the eyes of her rapist, and cast down like a stone.

Elizabeth, now powerless in Maclean's eyes, realizes what her fate is to be. The rock personifies a mental and physical state so laden with woe that it seems to be sinking under the weight of her fall. Maclean and his henchmen fight the surging waves to put to sea again but there is something white hanging on to the boat preventing it from getting afloat. It is Elizabeth crying out that she is not ready to die, but Maclean cruelly pushes her off. The fallen Elizabeth is left alone on the rock while the tide continues to rise:

My lady rose in the strength of her pride,  
She saw herself there alone –  
She rose and blest the sundering sea,  
The islet was all her own;  
She rose and rose to its topmost ledge –  
She made thereof a throne; -  
She cried: ‘Maclean of Duart, farewell!  
We’re parted now as heaven and hell!’ (V.163/21-164/6)

In this stanza, once again Elizabeth is referred to as ‘my lady’ and as she sits regally enthroned on the rock the spiritual innuendo is clear: Elizabeth is more than an earl’s daughter – she is a religious icon, a saviour heroine whose virtue, virginity and very life have been sacrificed. She is aware that the gulf between her virtue and Maclean’s evil is as wide as Heaven and hell, but Elizabeth’s greatest distress comes from breaking the vow she made to remain pure for her lover:

The she wept for ruth of her maiden truth;  
‘O Love, have I waked for thee  
By day and night, but to face thee now  
With this lothèd stain on me?  
Come, ocean, and with your bitter brine  
Sweeten these ravished lips of mine!’ (V.164/13-18)

Elizabeth asks the waves to repair the damage caused by her lost virginity and the heads of the westerly waves combine and turn south to form ‘one vast, foaming mouth / That hungered for her evermore [...]’ (V.164/22-23). Then Elizabeth berates Love, calling it false for driving her trusting soul to such a wild death; and the waves continue to rise so that the rock is ‘Scarce bigger now than a maiden’s pall’ (V.165/6). Then she cries and clings to the rock and asks the sea to take her life quickly, and the sea returns and ‘kissed her clinging hands’ (V.165/18). Elizabeth is now about to be engulfed and she feels the current dragging her hair, but her hands cease to cling to the rock - ‘She has shaken her spirit free’ (V.166/2):

And still the breakers lift their crests,  
‘O maiden Mary’, she cries,  
‘Who will tell my lover my heart was true,  
Who will right me in love’s eyes?’  
But the hydra heads have come and gone,  
And in the face of death she still lives on. (V.166/7-12)

The waves that had started to drag Elizabeth out to sea are like ‘Fierce monsters, but held in thrall, / Tamed in their very pride’s excess / To this turbulent show of humbleness’ (V. 166/16-18). As the waves churned and writhed about her, ‘one white wave came back and surged / About her – and her lips were purged’ (V.166/23-24). Like the ancient mariner who blesses the water-snakes and is redeemed of his sin as the albatross falls from him, Elizabeth’s body is cleansed to symbolise her spiritual redemption:

And she lay there washed as for the grave  
And purer than virgin snow,  
Her beauty seemed as a conquering power  
In this its overthrow;  
Her eyes were blinded, choked her breath,  
Her ears were open gates of death. (V. 167/1-6)

Elizabeth has been miraculously restored to her virginal condition; she is now more virginal and more beautiful than ever before. But she is dying, and her death also marks the end of Fytte the Fifth. Elizabeth’s death comes at the end of a series of trials which started with her bartering and ended with her rape and murder when, in desperation, she tries to cling to the departing shallop. But all alone on the rock, and *in extremis*, Elizabeth undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis. She blesses the sea and asks it to cleanse and purify her battered ‘lips’ which, obligingly, the sea does. Then she asks the sea to take her life quickly, and ‘The mad sea melted at her commands, / Came back and kissed her clinging hands’ (V.165/17-18). Finally, having ceased to cling to the rock, and ‘shaken her spirit free’ (V.166/2) she asks the Virgin Mary to make her right in her

lover's eyes, and the waves stop climbing up the rock, the 'Fierce monsters, but held in thrall [...] (V.166/16). It seems that Elizabeth, like Christ, is able to control the waves, which not only respond to her 'commands' but surge around her body to purify her. Then Elizabeth asks the Virgin Mary to intercede on her behalf and immediately the tide reaches its peak, the waves start to turn back down the rock that would normally be submerged, with the exception of one final white wave which returns to purge Elizabeth's 'lips' once more.

As Elizabeth lies dying, one of the two blood-thirsty men who had helped Maclean to row Elizabeth to the rock finds himself drawn back to the scene of the crime by some strange compulsion. The man has the Old Testament name, 'Shamesh', a name synonymous with 'light' for, when celebrating the Chanukah Festival of Lights, Jewish children light 'Shamesh' candles as part of their celebrations. 'Shamesh' is the biblical name Pfeiffer chooses for the 'red-handed' Highland accomplice to Elizabeth's murder who, having rowed Elizabeth out to her death and then rowed all the way back again, feels compelled to set out in the storm once more because he has seen Elizabeth's soul rise up:

He had sighted her soul when it rose and sued  
To his chief at her wild wide eyes;  
And the sea and the shore through the live-long night  
Had been ringing as with her cries;  
And they drew him whether he would or no  
With the cords of a man, and he had to go. (VI.173/11-16)

When Shamesh reaches the rock he finds Elizabeth

where the sea had laid  
And left her, but no a sound  
There breathed from her body, as mournfully  
The waves fell sobbing round;

Then a stainless lily, alive or dead,  
He gathered her up in his hands, and fled' (VI.173/17-22).

Shamesh rows Elizabeth back to the mainland, whereupon he lays 'that white lady' on the sand. Pfeiffer uses two metaphors to convey Elizabeth's physical and spiritual status – 'white' and 'stainless lily'. White is the colour that Pfeiffer uses earlier in the ballad to depict Elizabeth as a virgin trapped in a 'white' marriage, spiritually pure and physically unsullied, but in this instance Richard Cronin's interpretation of the metaphor seems most appropriate - that whiteness figures death. The metaphor 'lily' is also used to create a funereal mood, the lily being a white, funeral flower, but Pfeiffer uses 'stainless' and 'lily' tautologically, firstly to stress the importance of Elizabeth's miraculously restored virginity and secondly, to ensure that Elizabeth's virgin state is seen as analogous to that of the Virginity of Mary, the Mother of God, whose epithet is 'Lily'. Roman Catholic authorities on Mariology state: '[The Virgin Mary] is undoubtedly the loveliest flower that ever bloomed on the tree of humanity, and we are perfectly justified in addressing her as [...] 'Spiritual Lily' [...]'.<sup>73</sup> Thus Pfeiffer seems to be implying that her saviour heroine, the virgin Elizabeth Campbell, is on a spiritual par with the Virgin Mary – her *mother*.

The 'poet' describes two shapes passing over the sobbing sea to the mainland at Dunolly Bay; 'the first was a work of God undone; / The second, a devil's but ill begun' (VI.172/5-6). The first shape is the boat in which Shamesh – like Charon crossing the Styx - is carrying Elizabeth's lifeless body back to her spiritual home. The second shape is devilish Maclean 'putting to sea / With the waxen shape that in hate of hell /

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<sup>73</sup> Joseph Pohle and Arther Preuss, *Mariology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God* (London: B. Herder, 1916), 21.

His limmer had molten and made so well (VI.174/4-6). But although Elizabeth is as white and lifeless as her wax effigy, as she lies on the warm sands at Dunolly Bay, she takes her first gasping breath.

Reunited with her true-love, Elizabeth is taken home to the Campbell stronghold. The Virgin Mary has answered Elizabeth's prayer and made her right in her lover's eyes and, like a 'chartered ghost', Elizabeth 'glides' into her place in her brother's fortress and faces her kinsmen, 'for a wandering breath that told of her death / Had called them together in hall' (VI.174.21-22). There her kinsmen listen to her tale with mounting anger, and the women weep as they bear her away.

Maclean and his mourners duly arrive with the wax effigy of Elizabeth. Crying crocodile tears Maclean tells Elizabeth's brother and clansmen that Elizabeth has died from natural causes. But, dramatically, Elizabeth appears with her brother and lover and confronts Maclean and his grieving entourage:

His lieges are thronging in hall and court,  
And many bold men and true,  
But in view of that lady who dazzles their eyes  
They cower and tremble too:  
'Tis an unkennd sight, and a weird, to see  
A spirit stand clear of its own bodie. (VI.178/7-12)

The abject terror of Maclean's kinsmen when they see Elizabeth alive in front of them but also lying dead in her casket is justified, for no doubt they are ignorant of Maclean's duplicity. But this stanza juxtaposes two 'Elizabeths' – the dead Elizabeth, symbolised by the wax effigy, and the living Elizabeth, a dazzling spirit standing clear of its body and shining with power:

She seized the brand, and tossed it alive  
On the waxen shape where it lay,  
And the light full-fed leaped up to the roof,  
And the night was a brighter day.  
Then the red Maclean, who, dabbled with gore,  
And abject with terror, fled out of the door,  
To his whilom lady became no more. (VI.179/1-7)

The wax effigy symbolises spiritual death so by destroying it Elizabeth destroys the image of women as ‘tamed’, fetishised objects of patriarchal power. The burning of the false image, therefore, symbolises spiritual transcendence over death. Elizabeth has overcome evil. She has lost earthly life but regained her spiritual life in heaven. Yet as a saviour goddess who has died to save her clan, Elizabeth’s great sacrifice means that from now on *all* women are saved. *All* women now have the spiritual potential to attain Heaven through the intercession of the Virgin Mary’s *daughter*. No longer seen as sinful objects of male lust, women are free to live and love unrestrained by patriarchal law.

Reunited with her true-love, her virginity restored, the embraces that were so repugnant to Elizabeth with Maclean are now sheer delight:

But her brother has taken and joined their hands,  
And so soothfast was the kiss –  
So dear love’s due to her lips so true –  
She had like to have died of bliss;  
Then over her cheek as she drooped her head,  
Love’s banner at last rose red, rose red. (VI.179/22-23, 80/1-4)

The sexuality of this final stanza is almost explicit and far removed from nineteenth-century convention. Pfeiffer has ensured that her heroine, Elizabeth, having survived her bartering, betrayal, rape and death, is welcomed back by her ‘clan’ and rewarded for her many sacrifices with true love. Elizabeth is not rewarded for her ‘white’ marriage to



Maclean with an eternity of hymn-singing and piety. Instead, Pfeiffer's 'poet' rewards her virginal heroine with an eternity of love and carnal passion.

After the recitation, the 'poet' observes that the 'pedant had gone his ways [...], accounting of the work but as a text for the display of his superior knowledge' (183).

The old Sibyl, Susan MacArthur, has fallen asleep and Miss Macorquodale, suddenly remembering that she has a meal to cook, ejaculates: 'The potatoes iss boiled to just one smash [...] they will be no but good for the pigs'. The shy Highlanders Maisie and Archie Cumming seem to waken as from a dream, but say nothing to the 'poet'. Yet the 'poet' is happy:

I had had my moment of joy when on the window-seat in the old Castle the thoughts were seething within me; and yet a vocation upon which you have entered with the spirit of a votary means the sacrifice, the dedication at least, of your best energies to a single end, - the forsaking of all other objects and cleaving wholly to that one, - and where the inward impulse lacks the outward seal of success, the faith in a such a call must inevitable be wavering [...]. But the impulse to plough, not the fields of earth, but the air, has been obeyed, and however unyielding it has proved, it were fatal to fall back (184).

The 'poet' describes herself as a visionary prepared to sacrifice all in the service of her vocation, even if her efforts fail to meet with success. With the spirit of a *votary* the 'poet' sees her re-construction of the legend of Lady's Rock as a spiritual mission that requires courage, dedication and single-mindedness. The 'poet' is obeying a 'call' to plough not earthly, but *spiritual*, fields – an enterprise which, though unyielding, she must pursue. To fall back now would prove fatal, and here Pfeiffer's 'poet' comes very close to admitting that her 'vocation' is the spiritual emancipation of women. But there is a proviso:

It may be hoped that the Lord of all harvests will not deem the work to which He has been thought to summon, to have merited rebuke (184).

At first, these words seem puzzling. In her allegory of the Christian myth Pfeiffer has, through her 'poet' *alter ego*, created a female saviour goddess, a *daughter* of the Virgin Mary. Although the dying Elizabeth cries out: 'O Christ, must the whole dead world go down, / Entombed in the charnel deep?' (V.165/21-2), it is not Christ's but the Virgin Mary's and Elizabeth's own spiritual power that saves Elizabeth, restores her virginity and brings about her safe return to Heaven. Yet now Pfeiffer's 'poet' is suggesting that she wrote the ballad, broadcast it at great personal risk and suffered the pedlar's destructive criticism on behalf of a *masculine* deity who might 'rebuke' her for misinterpreting 'his' message. Pfeiffer's misquotation, 'Lord of *all* harvests', is derived from Matthew 9:37-8, where Jesus says to his disciples: 'The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest' (Matthew 9:37-8). Pfeiffer's replacement of 'the' with 'all' could be an encoded message to her female readership. Because 'harvest' has gynocentric connotations relating to harvest moons, seasonal cycles, fruitfulness and pagan fertility rites, Pfeiffer's reference to a 'Lord of *all* harvests' could be an exhortation for female readers to disseminate the good news about Elizabeth's resurrection and 'homecoming'. Pfeiffer may be asking *women* 'labourers' to help bring in a spiritual harvest for *all* virtuous souls, regardless of gender.

At the end of *The Lady of the Rock*, the 'poet' admits that 'there will be moments of unutterable discouragement when the singer [will hear] no answer to [her] own voice' (184); yet the 'poet' is encouraged when the young Celt, Maisie, shyly presses a sprig of

white heather into her hand. The ‘poet’ realises that she may not change the attitudes of older members of Victorian society, but it is with the young that the future lies.

### Aftermath

Although Elizabeth Gray’s comment that ‘Victorian women poets do not discard the biblical canon [...] [but] rather they present and invite new views of the canon [...]’ remains valid, in *The Lady of the Rock* Pfeiffer presents a view of Christianity in which the Virgin Mary and her ‘daughter’, Elizabeth, are depicted as analogous to God and His Son, Jesus.<sup>74</sup> Thus, rather than rejecting the Christian myth outright, Pfeiffer seems to duplicate it by constructing a feminine mirror image with Elizabeth Campbell as a Christ equivalent. Yet Pfeiffer pushes her allegory further away from the traditional biblical canon by adding supernatural pagan elements to it. Clearly Pfeiffer’s utopian heaven excludes men destructive of women’s temporal and spiritual power – men like the Swiss pedlar and Maclean who represent misogynistic Victorian literary critics analogous to the ‘Pharisees and Sadducees’ of the Judeo-Christian religion. Pfeiffer’s heaven also excludes women who kowtow to patriarchs at the expense of virtuous women who want to attain temporal and spiritual emancipation. Only men and women who support women’s emancipation are included in Pfeiffer’s heaven – a heaven where Elizabeth Campbell transcends death and becomes an all-powerful saviour goddess. Regenerating the world through her own feminine creative authority, Pfeiffer becomes the alpha and omega of her own religion, her own spiritual power and her own heaven.

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<sup>74</sup> F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women’s Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2010), 40.

Elaine Showalter writes that in the 1880s and 1890s women ‘played a central role in the formulation and popularization of feminist ideology’.<sup>75</sup> Referring to a sense of exhilaration and camaraderie that existed amongst feminine novelists, Showalter’s comment, that ‘the chivalrous vision of the sacred influence of women’ became transposed into ‘an activist key, making the ideal of true womanhood the basis of the politics of the female subculture’, is relevant to Pfeiffer’s mixed-genre work.<sup>76</sup> Thus, although she does not discard the biblical canon completely, Pfeiffer does incorporate magical and supernatural elements into both the frame narrative and the inner narrative of *The Lady of the Rock*. Pfeiffer’s inclusion of the supernatural may reflect the nineteenth-century revival of interest in the occult when many artists and intellectuals of the Romantic era turned to the occult for spiritual fulfilment. Loss of faith by some members of the Established Church paved the way for a ‘magic revival’ which became focused in *The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, an order founded in 1888. Aspects of this order, thought to be the single greatest influence of twentieth-century occultism, formed the core of neo-pagan religions which grew in popularity during World War 1 and proliferated after the Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1951. Women who felt excluded by the patriarchy of the Established Church gradually looked elsewhere, and a recent article in the *Daily Telegraph* reports a Church Census statistic that shows that more than a million women left the Established Church between 1989 and 2008. Martin Beckford of the *Daily Telegraph* also reports that more than 50,000 British women are leaving the Church annually because they do not ‘feel as included in the Church as men do’.<sup>77</sup> In the same article, Beckford quotes Kristin Aune whose studies show that many disaffected Christian women are joining neo-pagan religions where they can exert

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<sup>75</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brönte to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1977), 182.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Beckford, Religious Affairs, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 (2008), 13.

power. Published with Aune's research in *Women and Religion in the West* (2008), Giselle Vincett publishes the results of her research under the heading 'The Fusers: New Forms of Spiritualized Christianity'. Vincett draws attention to a 'significant segment of participants who [see] themselves as incorporating elements of both Christianity and neo-paganism into their personal spiritualities'.<sup>78</sup> Vincett goes on to say:

In the research [...] I examine how feminist women in the UK deconstruct pre-given notions of God and the Sacred, and re-imagine the divine for themselves (133).<sup>79</sup>

Fusers [...] question authority and hierarchy [and] are disaffected by the Church [...]. [Fusers] are further united by their feminism, which drives their spirituality in their need to find ways of imagining the divine that are consistent with their feminine values (136).<sup>80</sup>

In her mixed-genre allegory, Pfeiffer presents a view of Christianity disengaged from patriarchal ecclesiastical institutions and doctrines. Instead she incorporates pagan elements into her feminised version of the Christian myth. In retrospect, and in the context of *The Lady of the Rock*, it seems possible that Pfeiffer's representations of the feminine and religious make her an early 'fuser' – a Christian who inserts elements of paganism into the biblical canon. In this respect, and in the context of the exodus of twenty-first century women from the Established Church in favour of pagan religions where they can attain spiritual empowerment, *The Lady of the Rock* can be seen as a ground-breaking work. As a poet, Pfeiffer is prepared to sacrifice her own personal reputation and risk charges of heresy in order to broadcast her spiritual message. Pfeiffer confers upon herself (though her 'poet') the status of *vates*, mediating between women and goddesses; Pfeiffer then picks up the threads of a matrilineal heritage and

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<sup>78</sup> Giselle Vincett, ed., *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 133.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

creates a poetic 'Sibyl' - the author and progenitor of a pagan-Christian heaven in which women's spirits are powerful and free. Recognising the need for positive feminine spiritual role-models in Victorian Britain, Pfeiffer's mixed-genre work boasts several goddesses – the Virgin Mary, Elizabeth Campbell and, by inference, the 'poet' myth-maker - Pfeiffer, herself. Offering women a blueprint for resolving the problem of being both feminists and Christians Pfeiffer successfully integrates gynocentric pagan, and androcentric Christian, elements together into a *single* ideology.

## CONCLUSION

Victorian women's religious poetry is generally recognised by its adherence to conventional Christian ideals. These ideals are represented in religious works such as Dora Greenwell's *Carmina Crucis* and Frances Havergal's *The Ministry of Song*. They are represented in hymns such as Anna Letitia Waring's 'My heart is resting, O my God', and in devotional poems such as Emily Hickey's 'Lois the Healer' and Elizabeth Ayton Godwin's 'We women have so many cares'. They are even represented in Emily Pfeiffer's poem, 'He that is washed needs but to wash his feet'. But my research concludes that, in general, Emily Pfeiffer's religious poems do not adhere to conventional Christian ideals. Some of her poems include secular material, often with polemical and emancipationist subtexts. Some of her poems reflect aspects of different belief systems, such as 'hylo-idealism' and paganism. Thus, although I press my case that Emily Pfeiffer's poetry has a place in the canon of Victorian women's religious poetry it is clear, from the religious poems I evaluated, that the majority of these poems do not conform to norms hitherto considered to represent the canon.

Emily Pfeiffer cajoled, preached, adopted sage discourse, appropriated the role of *vates*, entered the masculine world, and put her reputation at risk - *all* with the express purpose of promulgating her emancipationist vision as widely as possible. It was of vital importance to her that her voice should be heard, because she had embarked on a quest to defend women from patriarchal power – power that she felt deprived women of equality in education, employment, marriage, and religion. Each of these inequalities, separately and added

together, she saw as ‘fettters’ binding women’s souls. As she grew older, Pfeiffer became ever more forthright in promoting her feminist cause, doggedly pursuing her mission to combat ecclesiastical misogyny, her aim being to re-instate women to their rightful place within the Christian religion.

A versatile and prolific poet, Pfeiffer bent her exceptional talents to the task of disseminating her controversial agenda in an outspoken (yet often nuanced, encoded, and subversive) manner. Defending Christianity against secularism, Pfeiffer deployed secular ideas to make her feminist points. Defending Christianity against science, Pfeiffer adopted a scientific argument to present women as better able than men to evolve spiritually.

Linking women with Christ because they share with Him the stigma of pain and suffering, women will likewise be resurrected and will join Christ in Heaven. Linking the desperation of a fallen woman’s suicide to Christ’s crucifixion, Pfeiffer depicts the young woman as spirituality superior to her lover who, after deceiving her, is free to marry in a misogynistic Church.

Between 1877 and 1884 Pfeiffer created three works featuring three heroines: Dūnya, Mona and Elizabeth. To varying degrees, I conclude, these women share supernatural qualities with those of Christ as recorded in the Christian myth. The story of Christ’s immanence as a Saviour God, the supernatural occurrences that were witnessed after His death, and the mysteries surrounding His ascension into Heaven, are all mirrored by Pfeiffer in a variety of ways, sometimes in the form of allegory, but always portraying her heroines as Christians. It is important to note, however, that Pfeiffer is not trying to replace



Christ with a female deity but rather to complement, or counterbalance, the patriarchy of the Christian religion by inserting Christ-like heroines into the Christian myth. Pfeiffer's gynocentric poems are designed to counteract, not to eradicate, the androcentricity of ecclesiastical institutions.

Pushing herself to imagine a form of Christianity where women are recognised as spiritually equal to men both on earth and in heaven, Pfeiffer attempted to marry patriarchal creeds with an older, matrilineal, tradition. She infused pagan elements into her verse in a bid to imagine a heaven where feminine souls could flourish free from the misogyny of the Western tradition. She anticipated aspects of feminist theology and Gnosticism. She created a blue-print for Christian worship that is currently being adopted by feminist Christians in increasing numbers. Today, the criteria for what constitutes religious poetry are becoming more flexible. Now, in the twenty-first century, it is coming to be understood that, during the Victorian period, conflict between the demands of religion and the demands of secular forces and ideologies was rife, as was debate between disparate religious belief systems, and that this fact should be properly reflected in twenty-first century evaluations of Victorian religious poetry. Using her poetry to depict Christian women as equal to, or even superior to, Christian men (both on a natural and a supernatural level) Emily Pfeiffer can be recognised as an original, prescient, *avant garde*, Christian pioneer and spiritual emancipationist who has a unique place in the canon of Victorian women's religious poetry.

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