

Women Poets in the Victorian Era
Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry

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garden too, where, as authoritarian figures, they abide by cultural codes that retain them behind bars, albeit ones of a different kind. Women poets graft controversial commentaries onto the branches of respectable Victorian representations that have locked them up for centuries, thus transforming garden poems into hybridised forms of creativity.

The next chapter leaves the garden plot to alight in the parlour, in order to consider the poetic treatment of domesticated animals. Often pictured with their lapdogs and seeking inspiration from their own caged birds, women poets transmit mixed messages in their animal poems. Politicising the domestic bourgeois interior and the role of pets in particular, we shall see that Victorian women poets can challenge gender and power relations and take a stand against suffering and domination, issues that contribute to narrowing the gap between women poets and their favourite pets. Yet, at the same time, working or loving animals are given a life, an identity and often a voice of their own in poems that constantly renegotiate power structures and create new forces of resistance where they are least expected.

Chapter 4

Manipulating the Animal

Poets and Pets

This dog watched beside a bed
 Day and night unwearied, –
 Watched within a curtained room,
 Where no sunbeam broke the gloom
 Round the sick and dreary. (*The Works of Elizabeth Barrett
 Browning* 257:38–42)

In her 1844 poem 'To Flush, My Dog', Elizabeth Barrett Browning paid tribute to her cocker spaniel, making the animal no doubt one of the most famous dogs in literary history. A present from friend Mrs Mitford to the invalid poet, Flush is depicted in the poem as a guardian angel to the poet who became identified as 'the Andromeda of Wimpole Street'. This gentle, faithful and loving little dog, as portrayed in Barrett Browning's poems, letters and drawings, helped construct the cultural image of the solitary, ailing female poet and her faithful companion, one that has since become a staple of literary history. Barrett Browning and her pet share not only physical traits – 'a lady's ringlets brown' – but also an intense relationship based on shared affection, making the poem a genuine epithalamium, a poem in honour of a bridegroom, anticipating the soon-to-be-published sequence of amatory verse, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), addressed to her future husband:

And because he loves me so,
 Better than his kind will do
 Often, man or woman,
 Give I back more love again
 Than dogs often take of men,
 Learning from my Human. (*The Works of Elizabeth Barrett
 Browning* 258:85–90)

Whether Maureen Adams is correct to read Flush as 'a symbolic go-between' (34) during the courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning – a point of view shared by Virginia Woolf in her 1933 novella, *Flush: A Biography* – what is certain is that the lovers' fantasised fusion, carefully reproduced in the poem, contributed to the poet's canonisation. There is also little doubt that the relationship between Barrett Browning and her lap dog, portrayed both in 'To Flush, My Dog' and in its later companion sonnet, 'Flush, or Faunus' (1850), was based on genuine

affection. However, these works have tended to reinforce an oversimplified and stultified image of the invalid and isolated female poet, one that would come to constitute an iconic representation of the female artist. The constant presence of the faithful hound contributed to the formation of the literary legend that grants canonicity to the woman poet, while at the same time undermining her status as a serious artist. Women poets thus unwittingly contribute to fixing in aspic their own images as recluses or misanthropic spinsters, shying away from human relationships while lavishing attention on their faithful pets.¹ Tricia Lootens has shown this process at work; how literary history canonised Barrett Browning as a saintly literary monument and, by doing so, altered her identity and made her feminist writings seem irrelevant.²

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Michael Field, Virginia Woolf and Colette all had lifelong animal partners, alternately morale-boosting and inspiring, according to Maureen Adams, who borrowed the title of her book, *Shaggy Muses*, from a letter by another dog-lover and poet, Emily Dickinson. In a letter dated February 1863, Dickinson wrote to her friend T.W. Higginson that her Newfoundland Carlo was her 'shaggy ally'.³ In a recent article arguing that Barrett Browning's attitude to animals – dogs and doves – anticipated Charles Darwin's views on the universality of expressions in *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Jennifer McDonell explains that dogs are 'boundary crossers' that threaten the 'binary structures' of the traditional human/animal divide (19). The mutual affection shared by the poet and her dog thus complicates the bourgeois practice of pet-keeping that links dog-lovers and their pets. However, while pet-keeping may be considered to reduce the distance between the human and nonhuman, Yi-Fu Tuan argued in a groundbreaking book written three decades ago that on the contrary such relationships *always* reinforce structures of domination, whether based on force or on love: 'Dominance may be cruel and with no hint of affection in it. What it produces is the victim. On the other hand, dominance may be combined with affection, and what it produces is the pet' (2). If one follows this argument, it is far from clear whether the emotional proximity evident in women's poetry challenges the relationship between humans and animals beyond the freedom/dominance polarity or simply reinforces the ideological bond between women and animals. Victorian women poets and pet-owners were fully aware of the ambivalence of such relationships, whether they understood them in terms of "natural attraction" or "inherent similarity". This chapter will argue that writing about their affections in this way helped them break down the rigid boundaries between species and construct the poetry of affinity as a political discourse.

¹ In *David Copperfield*, Dora and her little dog Jip are engaged in a strong relationship grounded in physical and morbid intimacy: they share the invalid bed and die on the same night.

² See Lootens 116–57.

³ Cited by M. Adams 131.

Related to the elaboration of a sentimental discourse around their relationships with pets is the question of whether the animal poem helps create *animal* identity. Do pet poems escape dominant constructions representing humans as superior to the passive, docile and silent members of the animal kingdom? Reinforcing alterity between women and pets may lead to naturalising animals again, therefore denying the existence of a biological and cultural continuum previously recognised by women poets. Could the negotiation of cross-species intimacy in poems function to preserve the divide while reinforcing alterity and identity? Or are Victorian women poets engaged in a different pursuit: an attempt to preserve the human/animal continuum and to construct animal identity?⁴

The large number of animal poems written by Victorian women might suggest that animal poetry is a predominantly female preoccupation. However, current anthologies of animal poetry seem to downplay women's interest in this poetical subgenre – just as they minimise women's presence in the poetical sphere in general – including only a few women among a long list of male poets.⁵ The objective in the following discussion is not to seek to minimise male poetic interest in the animal kingdom – a phenomenon attested, for example, by the large number of bird poems penned by men, during both the Romantic and Victorian periods. However, it is contended here that male poets were less likely to address the issue of animal welfare than their female counterparts. They were also less drawn to pet poetry, possibly because of its status as a minor poetic genre. Women, on the other hand, may have considered it more legitimate to write about the subject because of their alleged affinity with the natural world.

Harriett Ritvo argues that pets are useless 'except for emotional and rhetorical purposes' (*Animal Estate* 121), because they have a merely symbolic existence for their owners. It might be thought that pet poems deserve to be dismissed in the same way, with their rhetoric of domesticity, grounded in the expression of sometimes cloying sentiment. However, it is important to recognise that such works are also capable of challenging the hegemonic voice of the male poet when women authors identify with the interests – and often the identity – of subordinate creatures, choosing the animal voice as a discursive strategy to double their own and to bolster their status as poets. In the following analysis it will be argued that poets' four-legged companions are constructed as *allies* rather than as *musés*, for the latter term has too often downgraded the role of women to that of silent and docile instruments in the hands of mesmerising male artists. Furthermore, treating pets as animal 'musés' would counteract the poets' attempts to establish their identity and treat them as individualised creatures. Considering them as allies, they side

⁴ Laura Brown argues that the first female intimate relationships with pet dogs in the eighteenth century belonged to a new experience of alterity that stemmed from the encounter with different territories, races and species associated with British imperial expansion. See L. Brown 31–45.

⁵ See for example Hollander's *Animal Poems* which contains only 16 poems by female poets and 120 by male ones.

and join forces with the dogs and the underdogs – whether canine or otherwise – in order to voice shared claims and to challenge their common status as submissive creatures. After studying the language of flowers, this chapter will explore how Victorian women poets integrate, interpret and modify the sentimental and moral discourse surrounding other low-status inhabitants of the natural world, to engage more directly with hegemonic forces and discourses. Renegotiating the place of the animal, both inside and outside their familiar environment, they endow their poetic production with an effective political content, constructing in the process a series of “political animals”. In the case of the poems studied here, it is not that ‘Small is Beautiful’, but rather that ‘Small is Powerful’.

From Petkeeping to Pet-Writing

In *The Animal Estate* (1987), one of the first works of cultural criticism and history about human–animal interactions in the Victorian era, Harriet Ritvo explored the discursive and visual use of animals able to embody human claims, fears and ambitions and support the structures of domination and exploitation required to reinforce the ideological pillars of mid-Victorian society: ‘As material animals were at the complete disposal of human beings, so rhetorical animals offered unusual opportunities for manipulation, their positions in the physical world and in the universe of discourse were mutually reinforcing’ (*Animal Estate* 5). In other words, animals become discursive signs that are regularly interpreted politically to reinforce Victorian values and attitudes.

Following the groundbreaking books by Asa Briggs and Thad Logan on the Victorian obsession with material belongings, it is impossible to deny that ‘Victorian things’, including commodified animals and pets serving as decorative objects, express the preoccupations of Victorians, communicate patterns of thought and reinforce ideological discourses. The pet in the parlour, in particular, is owned and regarded as an artefact or commodity that expresses the image of the perfect bourgeois family. Kathleen Kete has shown that pets in nineteenth-century Paris helped construct bourgeois discourse. As she puts it, pet-keeping was ‘a means of communication: it was the way bourgeois talked about themselves’ (*The Beast in the Boudoir* 40). Therefore petkeeping reveals its meta-textual function as it ‘relates to the syntax of the home, to the omnipresent arrangement of the imaginary in ordinary life’ (75).

Pets’ presence in the household serves to moralise the bourgeois family. As an integral part of the family environment, pets help to reinforce the image of a community that has managed to drive out the antagonistic forces of individualistic market-driven society from the Victorian home: ‘As participants of domestic life, pets were supposed to help civilize people, but many of these animals were also themselves incorporated into this allegedly civilized society, especially those that became closely associated with bourgeois society’ (Brantz 77). Even if lapdogs and canaries remained instruments in the hands of bored middle-class ladies, veritable

‘machines à aimer’ (*The Beast in the Boudoir* 55) according to Kete, they were nevertheless endowed with moral qualities and virtues often felt to be lacking in their feather- and furless masters and mistresses. The obsession with animals incarcerated in the Victorian household will be linked in the following discussion to a question that would be widely debated in the late twentieth century: are pets to be considered animals or not? First addressed in John Berger’s radical 1980 essay that has since become a classic on animal rights, ‘Why Look at Animals?’, the issue also featured prominently in Steve Baker’s *Picturing the Beast* (1993). Sharing Berger’s views on the existence of an urban gaze that denaturalises the beast, Baker qualifies Berger’s unequivocal statement about the lesser value of urban animals. However, both argue that animals raised in urban environments are embedded in family structures or are turned into spectacles in an effort to reduce or even eliminate ‘the distance between “us” and “the animal”’ (14). However, in their view, this hoped-for encounter is an illusion. Paraphrasing Berger, Baker advances the radical opinion that ‘the modern urban pet is not an animal’ (13). Pet-keeping, however humanely intended, never succeeds in establishing genuine interaction between species, since pets lose their animal identity and are transformed into pseudo-members of the family. Kathleen Kete goes as far as considering that ‘the pet who is a child is a de-animalized animal’ (‘Animals and Ideology’ 15).

The focus on morality serves to bridge that gap between humans and animals, thereby affirming the existence of animal identity and alterity and stressing the existence of an interspecies continuum of moral values. However, as Philip Armstrong points out, the notion of such moral connections represented in fact a double-edged sword in an age of capitalism and the bourgeois nuclear family, since keeping and writing about pets associates two contradictory tendencies, sympathetic interspecies identification with the animal and commodification of the pet (39). It is precisely this combination that lies behind the construction of animal identity in nineteenth-century fiction and poetry. Proceeding from the mid-Victorian ‘cult of pets’ (Ritvo, *The Animal Estate* 86) that resulted from the compulsion to love and dominate animals, pet writing of the period reveals a growing awareness that animals had specific identities, and thus could not go on mimicking humans as the dogs, monkeys or parrots of the eighteenth century had been expected to do. Victorian animals were seen to possess inherently moral features, without ever having acquired them by way of imitation or through education: ‘These exemplary animals did not display all human traits, only the most admirable. Victorians wanted from animals reinforcement of their own moral and ethical standards’ (Turner 74). Compassion and kindness towards animals were considered true signs of civilised behaviour. And yet this natural closeness between human and nonhuman does not preclude questionable social and economic practices that illustrate the Victorians’ inclination for possession, commodification and domination.

Women novelists and poets who write about the animals that belong to their immediate surroundings participate in the construction of this urban bourgeois way of life by producing literary works that testify to the appeal of domesticity.

For example, Bessie Rayner Parkes's *The History of Our Cat, Aspasia* (1856), Ouida's range of publications about animals including *A Dog of Flanders* (1872), a sentimental encomium of dog love, together with Eleanor Atkinson's *Greyfriars Bobby* (1912) eulogise pets that are seen as models for an improved and improving middle-class. Kathleen Kete has explored how animal protection societies, as well as other charitable organisations, contributed to the construction of bourgeois capitalism by reforming the labouring class – kindness to animals being a sign of civilisation while violence was the means of action used by allegedly subordinate and inferior populations ('Animals and Ideology' 19–34). This view was echoed in animal fiction by women writers and poets. When they chose to raise the question of animal rights it was usually from this standpoint, arguing in favour of legal rights and a moral treatment of animals, considered as victims of a brutal society.

In their attempt to defend the idea that animals are individuals with rights, pet fiction and poems often reproduce nonverbal means of interspecies communication by exploring unconventional literary forms. Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography* (1933) may be considered as a hybrid attempt to convey a nonhuman perspective. The dog's stream of consciousness grounded in its olfactory faculties was certainly an innovative way to approach issues as serious as the status of the woman artist or the class system.⁶ Yet, although it can be praised for the complexity of its formal manipulations, it is not as politically committed as other pet novels of the previous period, the main objective of which was to construct pets as animal individuals, not as shrewd emanations of their creator's consciousness. Less well-known and certainly less ambitious than Woolf's antibiography, other Victorian pet narratives and pet poems share the same interest in formal innovations. Teresa Mangum emphasises the development of the canine point of view when fiction shifted from the dog narrative to fiction in the voice of dogs during the nineteenth century: '[D]ogs in Victorian Britain came to be saturated in subjectivity' ('Dog Years' 36). The formation of the pet's identity and subjectivity led writers to undertake new formal experiments, giving what Mangum describes as a 'ventriloquistic' quality (41) to canine narrators when the voice of the narrator frames the dog's voice. However bold such formal experiments may have seemed to their authors, some readers (and other writers) felt a sense of frustration that the animal stories and poems they were faced with always relied on human language and therefore always reflected, albeit indirectly, human interests.⁷

Animal autobiographies in particular, a persistent genre in the nineteenth century, according to Cosslett, go even further as they aim to construct animals as individuals with thoughts, values and feelings in accord with Victorian morality,

⁶ According to Pamela Caughie, speaking from the geographical and social margins, '*Flush* may stand as a testimony to the lives that have never been narrated, the inscrutable and therefore unrepresentable, the discarded and therefore wasted' (61).

⁷ For Hilda Kean, the sentimental story of the Skye terrier that refused to abandon his master's tomb for 14 years cannot but intersect with the larger history of the celebration of Protestant Scotland; hence the importance of dog representation in the construction of national heritage. See Kean 25–46.

culture and ideology. When written by women novelists, pet autobiographies are shaped like antislavery narratives such as Anna Sewell's hugely successful *Black Beauty* (1877) or antivivisection stories like Frances Power Cobbe's *The Confessions of a Lost Dog* (1867), and are enmeshed within a broader discussion of contemporary issues.⁸ For example, in the hands of animal protectionists, they were used to call for a change in the way animals were treated by scientists and the general public. Poetic autobiographies of animals aim at giving a voice to subordinate creatures too. The purpose of such works is, at least in some cases, to mirror animal life, experience and thoughts in a more realistic way. Therefore this chapter will consider whether poetry, by making use of specific literary devices, can escape from this epistemological cage, and succeed in limiting reification, commodification and manipulation and offer animals a subjective status and even a voice of their own. It will ask if animal poems ultimately succeed in challenging the traditional representations of middle-class values as well as those imposed on the woman poet. In short, does poetry really have the capacity to "unpet" pets?

This was certainly already one of the objectives of eighteenth-century pet poems since, as Ingrid Tague points out, they had a satirical function and were used to denounce human shortcomings and satirise women and dandies (294). In this way, pets were turned into models or counter-models depending on the qualities or weaknesses poets chose to depict.⁹ As eighteenth-century satire was replaced by the Victorian morality tale, they still had the aim to hold a mirror up to society but also helped create a literary space for the modest contributions of women poets.

Our study so far has shown that Victorian women's poetry was shaped by their physical and cultural proximity to their familiar environment, leading them to write poems about flowers rather than botany and about cottage gardens rather than wild spaces. Similarly, they populate their animal poems with the animals with which they interact in their immediate environment, whether domestic – the parlour or the bedroom – or cultural – in Britain's countryside. The three animal species that commonly appear in women's domestic environment – dogs, cats and birds – all appear with relative frequency in verse form. Bird poems constitute – if the expression may be forgiven – the lion's share of animal poems; dog poems appear in a smaller number of collections, while cat poems are even more unusual. Rarer still is poetry featuring horses. Equine subjects were apparently considered more suited to a visual treatment than a poetic one.¹⁰ Other types of animals, whether native to Britain or more exotic, make a very brief and occasional appearance,

⁸ See Cosslett for a comprehensive list of Victorian animal autobiographies.

⁹ Laura Brown, who concentrates her study on canine/female intimacy in nineteenth and twentieth century literary works, suggests that lapdogs contributed to denouncing women's indecency in a satirical way. Pet allusions explored the 'transgression of the boundaries both of kin and kind' (39).

¹⁰ It is remarkable that the most prolific nineteenth-century horse painter was a woman, the French artist, Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899). Animal painting was instrumental in Bonheur's feminist engagement.

generally in natural history poetry books, such as the work of late-Romantic poet Catherine Ann Dorset (1750–1817), Charlotte Smith's sister.¹¹ As for Victorian women poets, they were very unlikely to depict, say, lemurs, bush pigs or giant anteaters, animals they never encountered except in encyclopaedias or in the illustrated pages of popular science books and magazines.¹² Unlike the largely symbolic animal poetry of their Romantic predecessors, the verse composed by Victorian women represented a truly physical, even somatic, encounter with animals. Contrary to antislavery or antivivisection narratives that mainly concentrate on human cruelty and domination, animal verse explores life both inside and outside human interaction, because it often has a strong ethological perspective that is missing in fiction.

Animal poems fall into three major categories whose limits are rather porous: those that shore up the representations of the traditional Victorian household; those that destabilise the bourgeois domestic environment by offering visions of domesticity from its margins; and finally those that seek to distance themselves from the bourgeois environment, return animals to their natural environment and aim to study their behaviour from a quasi-ethological point of view. In each of these three forms, the question of the construction of the animal identity is central; whether it is, in Philip Armstrong's terms, 'anthropophoric', creating more anthropomorphic links, or 'anthropolectic', providing animals with more "natural" or feral features that make them less prone to fall victims to human attempts to 'civilise' them (11). This study will examine to what extent pet poems were able to endow the poetry of domesticity with a political force that had implications beyond the limits of the parlour. First, we shall consider what pet poems tell us about women's perception of their domestic environment.

Gender and Social Norms

Literary critics often consider the genre of pet fiction to be unrelated to the issue of gender. Following what Marjorie Garber writes about real dogs that 'occupy an emotional place that is not determined by sex, or gender' (129), Teresa Mangum, for example, writes that fictional dogs serve primarily as a conduit of emotion, relegating the question of gender to the back burner ('Dog Years' 43). Tess Cosslett has different views as, for her, there are clear-cut gender differences in Victorian pet fiction; yet, sexuality constantly remains hidden (77). While this may be true of pet fiction, the questions of gender identification and sexuality turn out to be central in pet poetry that imitates – or sometimes parodies – gender roles.

¹¹ The list of Dorset's wild animal poetry books compiled by Cosslett includes *The Lion's Masquerade*, *The Elephant's Ball* and *The Lioness's Rout*.

¹² Only very few poems depict exotic animals, for example a crocodile and a wombat in Christina Rossetti's 'My Dream' and 'O Uommibatto' and extinct giant mammals in Mary Howitt's 'The Elephant'.

First of all, cats and dogs are often given a name that unambiguously evidences their sex and bears witness to a range of social and moral character and behaviour traits, closely linked to contemporary gender discourses. Cosslett notes that most fictional dogs, generally roamers or travellers looking for their former masters, tend to be male whereas most fictional cats, clearly displaying maternal feelings, are female. The distribution of gender and roles is not so sharply outlined in poetry. What is characteristic of the latter, however, is that cats and dogs with female names tend not to venture far from the domestic sphere. Margaret Theresa Wightman's 'Minnie, Daisy and Tasmania' (1876), for example, depicts three generations of terriers along with their favourite activities. Minnie, the frolicsome young she-terrier, spends her days gnawing at domestic objects, mats, rugs and slippers, playing tricks on household members, and being scolded by her own mother. Daisy's habitat limits itself to the parlour and her role is restricted to greeting visitors and regretting their departure, as the perfect furry double of the lady of the house. The oldest dog's name, Tasmania, or Tass, is rather gender neutral. But the territory it was named after being a British colony, Tass becomes the male four-legged ambassador of British culture, since, as 'prince of pets', he travels backwards and forwards between his master and the visitors in the house as well as between representatives of different social classes: 'in favour rare / With baron and with lady fair' or 'with chubby cottage boy – / or girl through woodland, vale or park' (120:119–21).

In one of the poems of Claribel (1830–69), dogs with female names are first allowed out of the house in order to explore the streets of London; but like Lilly in the following example, are soon warned that it is time to return to the inner, domestic realm: 'Time enough for trouble, say you, when I'm led about the square!' ('To My Dog' 185:8). On the contrary, dogs with male names are permitted to engage in social interactions both inside and outside the house, or are placed in charge of keeping the home safe from unwanted intrusions. That is precisely the mission of Dorothea Ogilvy's Ned that 'Within the house at night good watch he keeps' ('On "Ned", a Favourite Dog' 208:10).

The shortened, or hypocoristic, version of the name, Ned for Edward or Minnie for Mary or Minerva, certainly undervalues the pet or denies it a fully fledged existence with a human name. Elizabeth Gaskell Holland, the novelist's sister-in-law, wrote 'Talk between Min and Me', a poem that illustrates the poet's attempt at constructing the bird's pet as a legitimate conversation partner, which is symbolised by the bird's name, 'Minnie' or 'Min', while other birds are generally referred to generically as "birdies". The poem presents itself as a dialogue between two theatrical characters, 'I' and 'M', with both participants engaged in a casual conversation about the real definition of imprisonment.¹³ The hypocorism literally and almost physically belittles the pet so as to make it into a double or a kind of "mini me" with whom it is possible to engage in conversation and even debate.

¹³ See Gaskell Holland 53–5.

However, the reader is intended to infer from the use of the diminutive that the human participant in the dialogue will retain the upper hand.

The gendered presentation of animals is not circumscribed to the limits of the house. Indeed, the portrayal of farm and wild animals confirms that the order of the Victorian household is a model for the rest of the world and that gendered social practices can also be observed, and therefore legitimised, in the natural environment. Anthropomorphism, supported by a varnish of natural science, helps some poets find in nature a reinforcement of social roles. Louisa Campbell's *One Hundred Voices from Nature* (1861) is a collection of poems for children that depict animals and plants in a natural, though romanticised, environment, portraying them in an anthropomorphic, yet scientific, way. These poems are often presented as conversations, underlining a specific feature in order to teach young readers a moral lesson and to instruct them in the social practices with which they will be confronted as adults.

Campbell's animal poems often explain that gender roles are not a social construct since they can be found in nature. In 'The Ostrich, or *Siruthio Camelus*', the speaker asks the African bird why it left its eggs unattended. According to the bird, it acted thus so that 'your party might see / What would happen to man with a mother like me' (53:19–20). Likewise, in 'The Guinea Fowl, or *Numidia Meleagris*', the bird's plumage is depicted as a perfectly fitting woman's garment:

But know that never shall skill of yours design
A dress with qualities equal to mine;
Embroider as much, and as long as you please,
No attire shall ever be worn with such ease,
Waterproof, yet so light, and so warm all the while
Your clumsy inventions provoke but a smile. (44:5–10)

In both poems the two birds, caregiver and clothes horse par excellence, proclaim their feminine traits, in accordance with what might be expected of a Victorian lady.

Rather than insisting on sartorial choices, Mary Howitt concentrates in her avian poetry on the motherly traits birds display in their natural environment. *Sketches of Natural History, or Songs of Animal Life* is intended for young nature-lovers wishing to learn more about the beauties of the natural environment. One of Howitt's favourite birds is the humming-bird. Unlike Darwin, who concentrates on the male individual whose plumage is so remarkable that it attracts several females at the same time and makes it a polygamous bird, Mary Howitt represents a conventional female individual. This matches Jennifer Price's observation concerning preservationist tracts against bird mutilation that they only consider female egrets because what really matters is the protection of femininity:

Why save the birds? For their beauty, economic value, potential as role models, and status as God's creatures – but mostly, for womanhood. In fact, and doubly suggestive, few people ever mentioned the male egrets. One might conclude from this passionate debate that the father birds, like their human counterparts, had gone off to work. (90)

Similarly removing the male individual, Howitt cannot insist on the exquisite beauty of the humming-bird's feathers and chooses instead to concentrate on its natural environment, which she depicts at length as an exceptional, paradise-like place, keeping only one stanza for the portrayal of the bird itself.

The humming-bird's anthropomorphised nesting practices are emphasised, showing that even the magical habitat does not make it lose its head and forget its role as a nurturing mother when the bird prepares 'Her nest of silky cotton-down, – / And rears her tiny brood' (*Sketches of Natural History, or Songs of Animal Life* 'The Humming-Bird' 80:23–4). Mating is removed from the scene in favour of rearing the young. For example, the poet never explains why the bird of paradise arouses such enthusiasm among birdwatchers, since she has obscured the existence of its bright caudal plumes, the secondary sexual characteristics necessary for reproduction:

We know the nest it buildeth
Within the forest green;
And many and many a traveller
Its very eggs hath seen. (*Sketches of Natural History, or Songs of Animal Life* 'The Bird of Paradise' 189:37–40)

The colourful feathers that have disappeared from the poem are on display in the elaborate drawings contributed by French water-colourist and illustrator Hector Giacomelli for the 1873 edition.¹⁴ But illustrations of feathers and appendages serve an aesthetic purpose only, unlike the scientific images provided by German naturalist Alfred Edmund Brehm for the first edition of *The Descent of Man*. However, even Darwin's illustrators, John Gould in particular, toned down the illustrations of sexual selection, for example by depicting nesting scenes instead of courtship ones or by choosing the question of male display instead of that of selecting a mate, a subject which would have been considered wholly inappropriate for Darwin's Victorian readers.¹⁵

Back within the confines of the Victorian household, cats are the subjects of some poems too. Female poets regularly highlight the cat's independent and haughty character, with both male and female felines depicted as largely undisturbed by the daily routine of the household and reluctant to interact with others, whether human or nonhuman. Gender identification is thus less apparent because of the cat's limited social interactions and its 'anti-pet' nature.¹⁶ Some cat poems nevertheless portray anthropomorphised and gendered tabbies, but they also highlight gender-related psychological features rather than gender roles. For example, the two cats depicted by Alice E. Argent (dates unknown), named Prima Donna and Sims, possess names stating their gender without equivocation, at least for Victorian opera-lovers. 'Sims' and 'Prima Donna' highlight the two

¹⁴ As a bird artist, he also illustrated Jules Michelet's *L'Oiseau* (1867).

¹⁵ See J. Smith, *Charles Darwin* 124.

¹⁶ See Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir* 56, 115.

cats' operatic talents, which do not limit themselves to vocal prowess, but are also displayed in the care they take to exhibit their furry costumes. However, the male cat, named after the oratorio tenor Sims Reeves, is comically represented as a would-be aristocrat, whose pointless arrogance only hides his cowardice, his failure at catching rats and most of all his lack of pedigree:

In truth he is a dainty cat,
He scorns a plump and well-fed rat,
And walks aside with nose in air,
As if he mocked at such low fare; ('Sims' 61:19–22)

Bearing only the name of a talented artist but having none of his qualities, Sims stands as a downgraded version of Prima Donna, the female pedigree Persian cat – Sims being only a tabby cat with a Persian ancestry.¹⁷ On the contrary, Prima Donna is 'the cat of cats' ('Prima Donna' 53:37) and 'The Empress' (53:38). In the first five stanzas, the reader is left unaware of the identity of this mysterious diva, whose talents exceed that of Sim Reeves, the mezzo-soprano Mary Davies, the opera singer Charles Santley, the Canadian soprano Emma Albani and the German-born opera singer Thérèse Titiens:

Then can you wonder what my heart
Should fondly note upon her,
And that within my world she stands
The only Prima Donna!
But you would like to know her name,
If she be young and pretty?
I think her both, but you don't know
My dainty Persian Kitty! (52:13–20)

The revelation of the singer's identity certainly alters the perception of the poetic style, the lyricism of the poem suddenly taking a humorous turn. 'Prima Donna' is no less ironical than 'Sims' as Argent continuously magnifies her cat's unrivalled physical and musical qualities, but the poem never mocks the cat's royal bearing, possibly out of deference to Victoria's own position as the Empress of India. And Prima Donna's imperial title is literally more fitting for a Persian cat due to her geographical origins. She knows how to maintain her rank and please her audience with her purring recital, unlike Sims, whose false airs and dandyish manners are signs of the decadence of aristocratic Britain. Unlike Prima Donna, the true diva who offers herself body and soul to the public, Sims 'cares not for society; / Of strangers he is very shy' (62:45–6). While gender identification makes characterisation easier through the gendered construction of animals, it is

¹⁷ Siamese cats started to be extremely popular in the 1890s: '[A]mong the Siamese's most powerful attractions was its very distinctness, which made it incontestably a breed apart'. See Ritvo, *Animal Estate* 119.

also a means for the poet to publicly express her views about the flaws of the class system of her day.

It is no doubt in avian poetry that women poets make the most radical use of gender identification. Canaries, the favourite winged companions of many a woman poet, are literally made for pleasure, as shown by Nigel Rothfels's study of animals used as entertainment for the Victorian public.¹⁸ Bright-yellow canaries were developed from duller ones, in turn crossed with European finches. Laying eggs several times a year, living longer lives, and able to learn new songs while appearing to bear with apparent equanimity their caged existence, they reinforced perfectly the idea of Victorian happiness, grounded in the values of domesticity and economic expansion. Moreover, canaries' merely decorative function could be seen to reproduce their mistresses' idle and unproductive lifestyle.

The construction of common characteristics and a shared destiny made canaries or other caged birds the perfect companions, often acquiring the privileged status of a soulmate in a way that cats and dogs could not. As doubles of their mistresses, it comes as no surprise to discover that they were taken to share the same concerns, with romantic preoccupations placed at the top of the list. A large number of pet bird poems follow a dialogue form, engaging partners in an emotional relationship and constructing a discourse of romance in which the two partners' sexual identity and orientation occupy a central position. What often lies below the surface of the unsophisticated canary poem is a complex construction of identity, since the human and avian protagonists often assume in turn the positions of the dominant and the dominated in the love relationship. The canary poem illustrates the theme of unequal gender-based power structures through interspecies relationships and through the exploration of romance, thereby exploring the issues of dominance and resistance to cultural models.

The canary in its cage provided inspiration for numerous poems by Victorian female poets, but apparently the bird did not have the same effect on their male counterparts. It is interesting to note moreover that despite the popularity of this subgenre among women poets, anthologies of animal poetry contain virtually no poems about pet birds, a very significant omission since the result is to sideline a lot of female poets and conceal the specificity of their approach to nature. Typically, women poets explored the notion of affinity, making emotional comparisons between their own condition and that of the powerless, incarcerated bird. The multifaceted representations of the feathered prisoner tend to be used to construct models of female selflessness, depression and imprisonment. In 'To My Canary' (1831) by Mary Maria Colling (1804–1854), for example, the bird's mournful song is taken as a sign of depressed spirits. The 'sweet little captive' (156:1) is advised to be patient and content with its own fate: 'For daily, thou knowest, thy wants are supplied' (156:4). In the poem known as 'The Caged Bird'

¹⁸ Rothfels writes about the entertaining role of animals in the Victorian period. The canaries in the parlour, like the bears in their pits, 'were part of a contentious and still unresolved debate about the Nature of the human relationship to animals' (111).

(1341) by Emily Brontë (1818–1848), both the bird, rescued from an abandoned nest, and the speaker, yearn for an impossible flight. The poet identifies with the bird in captivity: ‘And like myself it makes its moan / In exhausted woe’ (129:34). The neglected bird in the poem ‘The Captive Dove’ by her sister, Anne Brontë (1820–1849) displays all the signs of depression too, producing a ‘moan’ in place of the usual song, as it waits for a potential suitor:

But thou, poor solitary dove,
Must make, unheard, thy joyless moan;
The heart, that nature formed to love,
Must pine, neglected, and alone. (Leighton and Reynolds 254:25–8)

Any companion, even imprisoned in the same cage, would give solace to the lovesome canary:

Thy little drooping heart to cheer,
And share with thee thy captive state,
Thou couldst be happy even there. (254:18–20)

Generally, however, Victorian pets, whether of the feathered variety or not, were expected to be happy with their lot. Thus, Margaret Russell Dow’s canary demonstrates no sign of melancholy, but no sign of possessing a will of its own either. Constant satisfaction is its lot, ‘For ever happy in thy sphere, / And singing on, and on’ (‘To a Pet Canary’ 217:5–6). Refusing ‘a cage-bird life’ like her aunt’s is precisely the target of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘wild bird’ (I, 310), Aurora Leigh:

... She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.
Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live
In thickets, and eat berries! (I, 304–9).

While canaries are apparently content to be imprisoned in cages, women are immured in canary poems.

Every type of sentimental attachment and form of romantic behaviour is on display in such works: from the jealousy and covetousness of the love triangle to the teasing practices and sadistic love games of the coquette; from the evocation of a chaste marriage to the use of sexual substitutes. With the canary cast as what Martin Danahay calls ‘a signifier’ (117), fulfilling different social functions, the flexibility of the canary poem allows less musical sounds to be heard alongside the melodious chirrups. ‘To My Old Canary’ (1836), by early Victorian Caroline Bowles Southey (1786–1854), Robert Southey’s second wife, perfectly illustrates Rothfels’s point about the popularity of canaries in the Victorian household.

Bowles Southey’s ‘birdie’ is long-lived and brightly coloured; sings merrily, and readily adds new songs to its repertoire. The poet addresses her pet, recalling the circumstances when it had sung for the first time, seven years earlier. Poor health, solitude and most of all a marked penchant for self-pity induces the speaker to compare herself with subordinate animals and plants – an old stray dog and ‘a trampled passion-flower’ (230:33) – and to turn for comfort to the only living thing in her domestic environment: her canary.

Bowles Southey’s poem serves as a striking example of how the construction of affinities – in the sense of similarity and attraction – conceals the poet’s real intentions. Woman and bird share a common feeling of despair and an inability to communicate with the outside world; the poet being engaged in her solitary needlework and barred from social interaction and the bird remaining ‘moping and mute’ (230:16) in its ‘gilded prison’ (234:96), apparently unable or unwilling to sing. But as the poet reached the heights of despair and started voicing her misery in poetical terms to the only listening ear, the bird suddenly produced its first notes. From then on, they developed their respective arts in harmony with each other, thus casting off their solitude and depression. Birds, unlike cats and dogs, being endowed with vocal possibilities, are regularly compared with women who are also expected to show their musical accomplishments. In this example, the singing canary acquires a more useful and noble function, that of spiritual guide:

My Comforter I call thee –
My Teacher thou shouldst be;
For sure some lesson holy,
Of wisdom meek and lowly,
May reason learn from thee.
Debar’d from choicest blessings,
Inferior good to prize –
Thou hymn’st the light of Heaven,
Though not to thee ’tis given
To soar into the skies. (236:136–45)

However fulfilling its new mission is in boosting its mistress’s morale, the bird is barred from heaven and, on a more mundane level, denied economic value. Neither is it rewarded for its success: ‘Thou renderest good for evil, / For sad captivity / Sweet music – all thy treasure’ (236:151–3). The bird is poorly recompensed for nurturing the poet’s creativity and providing her with moral succour, and is seen above all as a tool for personal fulfilment, stimulating the poet to tap into her poetical creativity. Bowles Southey’s poem looks like a mock version of Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark’, sharing the five-line stanzas but none of its spiritual dimension and liberating experience. Unlike male Romantic poets who drew lyrical inspiration from the bird’s unimpeded freedom, here a caged bird stimulates the woman poet’s creative juices, as if imprisonment is a condition for success, both personal and artistic.

What the woman poet requires is the exchange of one's freedom for another's captivity. The notion of natural affinity is maintained to a certain point because creativity and poetical value depend on the subjugation of the powerless. The value of the poet is built upon the mirrored degradation or reification of the canary. 'The Singers' (1831) by C.C. Fraser-Tytler (dates unknown) features another mute canary: the bird finds its voice and thus its true nature when it stops envying the skylark and accepts its lot. On hearing the 'trill and warble from the throbbing throat' (114:15) of its mistress, literally and metaphorically a bird herself, 'The little canary's heart waxed strong / To sing as a bird' (114:30–31). Bird and woman eventually play the role they are assigned by society, each one remaining in a subordinate position to the other.

In Elizabeth Gaskell Holland's 'Talk between Min and Me' (1837), referred to earlier, the poet confirms the need to maintain the pet bird in a subaltern position as a condition for her own reassuring sense of control. As shown previously with the use of the 'pet name' Min, the bird represents a reduced version of the poet, as if the conversation was less an exchange between two interlocutors than the poet's struggle with her own conscience. The poet opposes each of the bird's arguments in favour of its liberation: its wings are too frail, it is not suited to a warmer climate, it should follow the example of its servile father that was a wonderful singer and did not complain, and finally it is well cared for by its loving mistress. The final argument is uncompromising and brings the dialogue and thus the poem to an abrupt end: unlike the constant poet, the charming, loitering robin which is competing for the caged bird's attentions, is fickle and not to be trusted:

M. Yes, lady, you are very kind,
 And I should stay contentedly;
 But robin often loiters near
 And warbles notes of love to me.
 I. Ah, Minnie! Heed them not – too soon
 Those notes will breathe inconstancy
 But I shall ever love thee, sweet,
 So stay contentedly with me. (55:37–44)

The selfish woman clips the bird's wings and desire, casting away the menace of rivalry present in the love triangle by downgrading, even desexualising the bird. The poet demonstrates the need for captivity because she wants to preserve her sentimental involvement with, and power over, her own tractable object of desire. Birds are often engaged in a love triangle, here as the third party in Gaskell Holland's 'Talk between Min and Me' or as go-betweens in Cowden-Clarke's 'The Little Bird', but in all cases they are instrumentalised to serve the objectives and needs of their mistresses.

Late-Victorian women poets use the canary poem as a subgenre of the love poem. Indeed, the subject of the canary poem is generally less about the *feeling*

of love than about its *practice*. While interspecies love is the apparent theme of the poems, it is precisely the gulf between species that enables the anatomy of love to be explored and less respectable practices to be discussed. Danahay has written that pets are vehicles enabling the ideological codes of femininity and domesticity to be contradicted. They are used 'to pantomime troubling gender and class conflicts in Victorian culture that betray an eruption of violence into domestic relations' (103). The presence of the pet creates a space for the intrusion of shameful desires, as will be demonstrated in the three following poems.

Cowden-Clarke's 'My Bonnie Birdie!' (1831) is a cross-gendered love poem addressed to an unidentified bird that is another of Kete's '*machines à aimer*'. Contrary to the lark, the blackbird or thrush of the first stanza, clearly portrayed in traditional lyrical style as free and independent birds, 'bonnie birdie' belongs to the domestic environment of the poet but is also the poet's possession, 'my own sweet bird'. Stanza two makes it clear that the question of gender is central to the poem with the italicisation of the possessive determiner '*her*'. The bird loses its avian characteristics, being deprived of the possibility to take flight, and becomes the poet's object, in other words the embodiment of the perfect little wife: 'an *earthly* angel is my bird' (245:9). The third and final stanza evokes the organisation of their future married life:

Then come, my bird, and with me rest,
 And stray no farther than my breast,
 But make this heart thy home, thy nest,
 My mate, my wife, my own sweet bird! (245:11–14)

Once married, the speaker's bride will find her due place in his heart, literally embedded in his obsessive sense of appropriation. Home is depicted here as the bird's natural territory, since the bird turns into the perfect angel in the house, at the mercy of the speaker's craving for possession. The awkward combination of the pet bird poem with the male speaker's voice – canary poems being almost nonexistent among male poets – exposes the falsity of the love relationship. As the object of desire is only a bird, the speaker feels free to keep it in his power; but the erotic anthropomorphisation leaves no doubt about the speaker's oppressive desire for emotional control. The bird poem certainly sanctions the production of the erotic discourse, but it also highlights love practices that are grounded in relations of domination.

'My Canary' (1896) by Alicia Donne (dates unknown) can be read as a companion poem to Cowden-Clarke's 'My Bonnie Birdie', with a female speaker who turns her canary into the most submissive of male lovers. The female voice enhances the physical qualities of her little bird that testify to its remarkable secondary sexual characteristics, consistent with Darwin's own classifications: in the fierce sexual competition at play, it proudly displays its more remarkable ornaments, 'wonderfully white' (10:10) feathers with 'a ring / In softest shades of grey' (10:7–8); it sings in an unequalled voice, 'the song you so often sing to

me' (12:72); and it performs antics, 'flapping his wings' (11:18).¹⁹ Another jealous male lover, whose derogatory intervention is carefully checked by the speaker, is no match for the hypersexualised canary, at the same time personalised and reified by its admirer who makes it the object of her desire. It is given pet names such as *Wee-a-Wee*, *Dick*, *Dickey* or *Dicksey*, disclosing the sexual fantasies barely concealed behind diminutive linguistic forms.²⁰ More than a 'perfect pet' that one can 'fondle and cherish and keep' (12:56), the canary, welcomed into the bride's room at night and 'beside [her] bed' (12:66) becomes a transitional object and a substitute for a (sexual) plaything. Marjorie Garber wonders in *Dog Love* whether 'caninophilia [is] an erotics of dominance' (125). The same interrogation is surely raised in Donne's ornithophilic poem. To those engaged in animal welfare, Carol J. Adams suggests replacing the term 'pet' by 'companion animal' because 'the term *pet* also connotes sexual activity, specifically fondling and caressing' (145).²¹

Exemplifying Darwin's theories on natural and sexual selection, Donne's canary came to her by instinct and vanquished its competitors: 'Among my friends' canaries / My Dick is quite the King' (10:15–16). Its struggle for existence and its natural instincts make the bird even more sexually attractive for the choosing female.²² The engaged male bird with its implicit purpose to satisfy its mistress's sexual longing challenges the scientific emphasis on female passivity and coyness as well as the Victorian ideology regarding women's virtues. Bird poems empower women to talk about sexuality, albeit in an indirect way. Beggars can sometimes be choosers!

¹⁹ C.C. Fraser-Tyler's canary in 'The Singers' mentioned earlier also displays all the sexual characteristics necessary to seduce its mistress: 'Loud and shrill, and louder he piped, / And his small breast swelled 'neath his feathered coat' (115:32–3).

²⁰ 'Dick' or 'Dickie' are recurrent bird names in fiction and reality. The birds of Louisa Campbell are called Dicky in 'The Goldfinch' or 'Dick' in 'Alice and the Robin'. Dick was also the name of President Jefferson's pet mockingbird.

²¹ Garber adds the word 'puppy' comes from the French 'poupée', substantiating the idea that pets are made to play with (131).

²² 'Captive' (1851) by the American poet Rose Terry Cooke (1827–1892) is similarly charged with erotic energy stemming from death drive, the bird being held prisoner 'in a gilded cage' decorated with 'tropic flowers'. The fight for freedom and sexual desire are described in similar terms:

I beat my wings against the wire,
I pant my trammelled heart away;
The fever of one mad desire
Burns and consumes me all day.

...

I die for one free flight above,
One rapture of the wilderness!

Quoted by Gould Axelrod, Roman and Travisano 505.

The subversive discourse about the pet bird reaches its peak in Violet Fane's 'The Coquette' (1892),²³ a poem that condemns the destructive power of love. The budding romance is seen through the narrator's relationship with a dove. Rather than recognising her feelings of love for the bird, the speaker prefers to play at bullying and teasing the object of her affections, with the result that the bird escapes:

I fondled it, I tortured and caress'd,
Till wearied of my teasing and caressing,
It flew away, and yet I never guess'd! (*Poems* 17:6–8)

As she watches the dove fly away, the speaker never realises she has mistaken love for possession:

I stretch'd my arms towards it, wildly crying
'Return! And be again my captive dove!'
But from its gentle voice came no replying,
In vain to lure it back to me I strove. (17:11–14)

By insisting on the softness of its feathers or on the warmth of its body held in the palm of one's hand or pressed against one's breast, the poet shows how deeply relevant the presence of the animal's body is to the construction of natural affinities. The bird nesting in the poet's breast is an unwilling prisoner lured by the speaker who desperately clings to the alleged and culturally constructed bond. How many male artists have capitalised on that physical, moral and social proximity with their subjects?²⁴ According to Victorian women poets, such relationships certainly do not question the purity of love as an ideal, but they do cast doubt over its existence in the real world, and above all the possibility of its manifestation in a context of restrictive social codes. Thus the tragic fate of lovers, a common feature of the Victorian women's poetic tradition, is seen more as a reflection of the frustrations

²³ The coquette is regularly portrayed in Victorian poems that denounce those who mistake seduction for love. See for example the cross-gendered poem 'The Coquette' by the American poet Lucretia Davidson (1808–1825) or 'The Coquette' by the sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835–1915) who denounces the falsity of those who hide their true face behind cosmetics.

²⁴ While the natural bond is exalted by countless European artists such as the Belgian painter Gustave Léonard de Jonghe in *Woman at the Piano with Cockatoo* (c.1870), the British painter John Brett in *Lady with a Dove* (1864) or the French painter Joseph Désiré Court in *Rigolette Seeks to Distract Herself During the Absence of Germain* (1844), William Holman Hunt and Walter Howell Deverell seek to show how comparable their lot is too. Deverell's *A Pet* (1853), although subject to controversial interpretation, shows a caged bird symbolising the woman's acceptance of her position and Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) recalls the status of the kept woman through the image of the cat toying with a bird.

and misunderstandings resulting from the social rituals surrounding matters of the heart than a desire to condemn love, happiness and self-fulfilment as such.

Like faces in the corner of the domestic picture,²⁵ pets produce a discourse from the margins of domesticity that pantomime the official discourse. As both legitimate creatures welcomed into the Victorian parlour and illegitimate speakers, even dumber than their lady companions, they perform a dumb show that mimics what is acted out on the official stage of domesticity or on a wider social scene.

Skinning the Cat

Animal literature and animal poems in particular fabricate other discourses that often originally stem from emotions, the sentimental discourse being considered women's prerogative. Yet the position being advanced here is that the poetical construction of animal identity does not limit itself to the emotional bond. Indeed, some poems go as far as to question the quality or even existence of this sentimental attachment, and focus instead on other issues, less appropriate to the women's sphere. The construction of the value of the animal is at the core of several poems, which shows that there are several possible meanings to the words 'value' or 'capital', just as there is more than one way to skin a cat.

'Histories of animals and petkeeping explained that the dog was an artefact that changed as people did' (*The Beast in the Boudoir* 40). This is how Kete highlights the utility of pets, flexible enough to fit any new social or family environment. Turned into commodities produced *by* and *for* humans, they serve as tools or ornaments. Even if they are characterised by their lack of productivity, they acquire a certain usefulness that adds economic worth and a specific market price to their sentimental value. Ritvo has shown that the emotional qualities of pets are not enough to justify 'the maintenance of idle animals' (*Animal Estate* 87). Dogs in particular participated in the construction of their owners' status: '[P]edigreed pet dogs were being marginalized as mere objects of their owners' indulgence and symbols of their aspirations' (121). In the 1830s and 1840s, dog breeders started to improve dog breeds by modifying and crossing them in order to make them more appropriate to individual tastes and more competitive and successful during dog shows.²⁶ However bankable pets were made, 'utility no longer differed from affect' (*The Beast in the Boudoir* 48). Indeed, the relationships of Victorians with their pets interweave their economic value and their sentimental worth. Similarly, when women poets investigate the nature of the human/animal bond, they do not merely depict the pet's domestic surroundings but also shift the issue to other places outside the home, reintegrating the domestic animal into a broader social and economic environment.

²⁵ This is an allusion to Robin Gibson's book *The Face in the Corner: Animals in Portraits from the Collections of the National Portrait Gallery*. For Gibson, animals have a meaningful, yet literally marginal, presence in the portraits of their owners.

²⁶ The first dog show was held in 1859, followed by the first cat show in 1871.

In the first part of the following discussion, it will be suggested that some class-conscious women poets used the pet, or more particularly its *skin*, to address the sensitive question of value, first in the marketplace, then on a sentimental level. Class and status are indeed the targets of two poets otherwise opposed in every way: Mary Howitt, an early Victorian poet who grew up in a working-class Quaker family, and Violet Fane, a late Victorian poet born into privilege and social rank. And yet, both wrote class-conscious social poetry and expressed their doubts about the value of material belongings through the medium of a pet. In the second part of this section, some of Eliza Cook's dog and horse poems will be studied in order to analyse how she debunks and denounces the notion of *pedigree*, a tool to assess one's spotless line of ancestry and consequent economic value, and offers in its stead alternative values, more in keeping with her Chartist commitment.

Howitt's 'Mrs Fortescue and Her Cat' from *Tales in Verse* (1836), a book addressed to young readers, serves as the perfect poetic example of the fluctuating identity of pets, from '*machine à aimer*' to commodity. The poem opens with Mrs Fortescue, literally blending into her overdecorated Victorian interior. The minute description of the rich parlour – with its Turkish carpet, its perfectly set table and its antique furniture – emphasises the lady's comfortable means:

One can see in a moment,
That she is very rich indeed;
With nothing to do, all day long,
But sit in the chair and read. (10–11:25–8)

The eyes of the narrator move around the room and come to rest on the tortoise-shell cat that has almost disappeared into the background with its mottled fur and is described in terms that reinforce the identification with the old lady and their comparable fortune and idleness:

The tortoise-shell cat, which our motto says
"Now lives in clover."
Meaning she has nothing to do,
All the long year through,
But sleep and take her meals
With good Madam Fortescue. (11–12:39–40)

When the scene moves to the dressing room, the colourful items are replaced by clear signs of impending death. The peacock's feathers have now lost their elegance and 'look like great mourning plumes / Waving at a funeral' (15:111–12). Following Mrs Fortescue's death, the envious old maid, Mrs Crabthorn, breaks the promise she made to take care of the old cat, neglects the pet and eventually asks henchman Scroggin to hang it and keep its skin for a hat. In the final scene, the relatives are assembled in the dining-hall for the reading of the will. Mrs Crabthorn, who was to receive money to look after the cat, ends up penniless and

betrayed by Scroggin. Perhaps if a different way had been found to skin the cat, the outcome in this case might have been different.

This is not Howitt's point of course. Her poem concludes rather with a moral lesson addressed to Howitt's young readers, warning them that those who do not behave with kindness to all will face punishment one day. But readers know that what lies below the cat's skin is class struggle: without financial means, there is no sympathy towards animals. 'That's no signification' (18:168), complains Mrs Crabthorn, who is aware that the death of her mistress leads to a change in the natural order of things. Historian Keith Thomas has defined the pet as possessing three key features: a pet is allowed in the house; a pet is given a name; and a pet is never eaten (112–15). Mrs Fortescue's cat remains nameless but is so fully integrated in the house that it has turned into a veritable member of the family and is soon to be a ward, placed under the protection of its guardian. Mrs Crabthorn's decision breaks the three rules at one go: by killing the cat and turning its skin into a hat, she makes it into a commodity, therefore destroying its identity as a pet and as an animal. Appearances, or the surface of things like the cat's skin or the house's decoration, are deceptive however, because what Howitt really wishes to underline is the hypocrisy of the class system that values an idle, spoilt cat over a hardworking maid. The class discourse is embedded within a discourse of domesticity through the figure of the pet cat that functions as the representation of bourgeois individualistic values; once skinned, denatured and commodified, it is stripped of its symbolic value. Howitt, as an early Victorian poet, uses animal figures to show the flaws in the rigid class system but also to express her fears at the slow but inexorable shift from symbolic value to material value. According to her, kindness and respect towards animals and recognition of their identity will be in evidence only once social barriers are removed. The presence of pets confirms the maintenance of power structures, as rigid and useless as Mrs Fortescue's cat.

A later poem by Violet Fane, "Somebody's Darling" (1900), similarly places a skinned animal at the centre of an idle lady's preoccupations. The dispirited and bored speaker is paying one of her regular visits to the old Jewish owner of an antique shop where she hopes to chance upon 'Some truly historical work of art, / Or even some worthless, inferior things / To do with a hero or favourite king' (*Under Cross and Crescent* 16:28–30). Although she is well aware that the shopkeeper systematically inflates the value of his treasures, she is also incapable of judging which objects have true value. She has a collection of what she calls her royal treasures, a cake fork, a torture device, a cup and a pillow, all supposedly having belonged to medieval kings and queens, but whose authenticity is highly dubious. And today she has only found trifles:

Just a shred from the Field of the Cloth of Gold,
And a wisp of the young Pretender's hair,
And a portrait of Charles the First (when old),
And a scrap of the great Napoleon's heart. (16:44–7)

Though related to major historical characters or events, they are fragmentary artefacts whose authenticity and value are clearly highly debatable. They are moreover all signs of historical failure: the sumptuous meeting of Henry VIII and French King Francis I had few tangible results; Bonnie Prince Charlie lost the Jacobite cause; Charles I never had the chance to have his portrait painted as an old man; and Napoleon ended his life in disgrace. With his honed commercial skills, the old shopkeeper manages to sell a stuffed dog in a cracked Wardian case for an extra 18 pence. 'Spot' is presented as the perfect pet; 'as good as new' (17:56), with 'sense in his head and his face' (17:65). The seller is in no position to promote the dog's character so he invents instead a series of distinctions to elevate its status. All the qualities invoked are illusory or fake; mere sales techniques used to add value to what he has to sell, cannily giving the items a bogus *provenance* in accordance with Victorian taste. The fire in its eyes only comes from the material they were made of; the dog is 'fit to belong to a lord' (18:72) though the identity of its master is unknown; it is preserved under a cracked glass supposedly prepared by Dr Ward, the inventor of the Wardian case, though it was never made to contain stuffed animals but designed for keeping plants. Moreover, it does not seem to be a pedigree dog; any information on its breed is surprisingly missing from its otherwise impressive list of attributes. With no clear indication that the animal had possessed any canine blue blood, the only argument left to the salesman is to make the stuffed dog into an ornament for a middle-class family, suggesting that pets are no more than inert playthings: 'But just you take him and comb him through, / And pat him, and pet him, and give him a kiss' (18:75–6). Needlessly protected under its glass dome, the dead dog is transformed into a mere ornament, and not a very exotic one at that. Even if the animal has no aristocratic lineage, it surely was 'somebody's darling', indicating that its value should be located in its love capital. Its affordable price is the decisive selling point: a dead dog was not subject to tax unlike a living one, a theme ironically explored in Thomas Hardy's tragic poem about a drowned dog, 'The Mongrel'.²⁷ Moreover, a dead dog needs no feeding, and is a snip at 18 pennies, 'as cheap as dirt' (18:81):

So I bought that dog, and I brought him here,
As a capital cure for the sin of pride,
I shall brush and pepper him twice a year,
Whilst I muse on the ups and downs that may
Come to somebody's darling every day. (19:92–6)

Violet Fane's pet poem questions the value with which objects are endowed; the stuffed dog being no more than an empty signifier filled with its fickle owner's

²⁷ A tax on dogs was levied in Paris from the late eighteenth century. In the second half of the nineteenth century, legislation became stricter but also more confused, since it was difficult to make out the distinction between useful dogs (working ones) and useless dogs (pets), as the notion of *usefulness* was subject to debate. See Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir* 40–48.

fantasies. While the dog becomes 'a capital cure' for the inveterate consumer who has to make atonement for her onomania, or compulsive buying, the expression may also be taken literally: the worthless stuffed dog becomes a symbolic good for those wishing to take any opportunity to elevate their social and cultural status. All forms of capital are then called into question; with cultural, economic and emotional capital no more than chimera, figments of our imagination. Anticipating the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Fane shows that taste is socially determined and distinction established through aesthetic preferences that construct *habitus*. Highly class-conscious, Fane mistrusts the construction of this set of practices, rules and constraints stemming from her social milieu and determined by what others expect of her. Indeed the very notion of *capital* seems worthless when money does not bring happiness. Being left with the skin of a dead animal signifies the loss of any type of capital, and certainly the most important one, the emotional kind. While they reveal different views on the class system, Howitt's denunciation of social injustice and Fane's exposure of the falsity of social constructs both express a belief that the commodification of every object and animal, even the most innocent ones, is a sign of the breakdown of social ties.

Capitalising on the economic value of pets seems doomed to failure and to lead to estrangement and isolation. The meaning of 'value' was thus defined in a broader sense so as to include moral worth, a controversial question for Victorians. For Emma Townshend, who has examined Darwin's life from a canine point of view, 'it was generally believed that animals were guided by instinct, and humans acted through choice' (109). Darwin strove to prove that dogs clearly made moral choices when they were faced with alternatives between self-protection and the safekeeping of others.²⁸ But well before it was clearly stated in Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), women poets perceived that pets had a sense of morality, even though they were still reluctant to accord them a conscience. Pet poems emphasised the moral sense of those animals, attributing to them the *values* of compassion, loyalty, courage, hard work, even love.

The question of constructing animal alterity was still controversial among women poets, even for those who engaged in pet poetry after Darwin's theories had become well known. The first step towards giving pets an identity of their own was to grant them moral values, based on – and sometimes exceeding – human ones. To do this, poets promoted a different image of pets; not that of useless

²⁸ In the chapter dedicated to morality in *The Descent of Man*, he wrote: 'Many animals, however, certainly sympathise with each other's distress or danger'. He then takes the example of one of his own dogs 'who never passed a cat who lay sick in a basket, and was a great friend of his, without giving her a few licks with his tongue, the surest sign of kind feeling in a dog' (163). Darwin also believed that morality in humans was guided by instinct and emotion. I would like to thank Neil Davie for pointing out that there is a mirror image in Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876), where his discussion of "criminal" animals includes the case of a sheep-dog which commits "premeditated murder" by slipping off its chain (unbeknown to its owner) at night to go and kill sheep...

loving machines but rather as icons of morality. Women poets downplayed references to their economic and social value in order to enhance the moral signs that made them more humane. By doing so, they certainly distanced themselves from Darwin's interspecies continuum because what they were really seeking to prove was the presence of traces of humanity in animal behaviour. The economic and sentimental capital pets represented for the bourgeois family was thus often blotted out in women's poetry in order to justify their moral usefulness; with moral worth seen in terms of a contribution to the greater good. In other words, women poets branded pets differently, imposing moral labels instead of price tags or markers of social status.

Eliza Cook's poems are good illustrations of how moral discourse attached to animal poems intertwines with political discourse and questions the notion of value, a central theme in women's poetry. Cook's animals always possess a social function, much less futile than middle-class pets, and indeed a lot of them are working animals. The beauty of nature and its creatures is depicted as functioning to serve human needs, but only in order to improve morality and reduce social inequalities. In 'The Dog of the Alps', for example, Cook makes no reference to the dog's breed, even if her readers would have had no difficulty identifying the St Bernard behind the laudatory description of the brave dog. Stories as well as images of life-saving St Bernard dogs (complete with their apocryphal miniature brandy barrel) were commonplace in this period, and the existence of several poems about these heroic dogs in our corpus indicates the appeal for Victorian women poets of narratives of rescue dogs and their tales of devotion and courage.²⁹

For example, a dog with the rather unlikely name of Barry worked as a mountain rescue dog. Legend has it that he saved 40 lives but was killed by a rescuer who mistook him for a wolf. His body was preserved and displayed at the Natural History Museum in Switzerland and a monument commemorating his courage was built in 1900 at the entrance to the French pet cemetery in Asnières. It seems unlikely that the story was true, since Barry was probably used for breeding at the end of his life rather than for rescuing lost mountaineers (Walker 7). Nevertheless, the story of Barry, however romanticised, shows that the perfect dog was not always an ornament – indeed such a notion was anathema to those seeking to emphasise its moral attributes – but a working animal, whose heroic acts revealed the traits of selflessness and courage.

Cook's silence on the dog's breed is significant, because she refuses to support the idea that noble acts can only be performed by the more dignified caste of dogs. She compares unfavourably Man's eagerness to commemorate his moments of glory and to promote his own deeds in the history books and on monuments with the dog's modest silence:

²⁹ See for example the laudatory description of the Christ-like dog figure that holds 'the power / To succour the distress' in Rose E. Thackeray's 'A Dark Night Before a Storm' (16:50–51).

It is not ambition that leads him to danger,
 He toils for no trophy, he seeks for no fame,
 He faced all peril and succours the stranger,
 But asks not the wide world to blazon his name. (317:25-8)

The dog has no need for hollow man-made trophies and prizes, or the ostentatious display of its qualities. Rather, it is the natural environment that reflects its inherent nobleness: 'the field of his valour, the ice-covered scalps' (317:30). The Scots dialect use of 'scalp' for 'rock' cannot but be intentionally done here to refer to a trophy of victory. The unwritten story of the heroic dog is thus revealed through natural signs, accessible to all able to read them.

Another poem by Cook, "'To Bran'", introduces us to the canine subject of the title, this time a pedigree dog, probably a Scottish deerhound, with 'a blazoned descent' (547:5). However noble its ancient race, it is not without its shortcomings; the purity of its pedigree being tainted by its natural inclination for bacon. Each of the animal's physical or character traits is associated with the revelation of a new, elaborate strategy to steal. The force of its fangs and jaws are used to steal butter; the dog's natural grace proves useful to raid the pantry; it 'steal[s] glances' (547:47) at the dinner table with its beautiful eyes and 'gives tongue' to a cutlet (548:51). Cook's satire turns upside down all the conventional features of the pedigree dog, because the bloodline here suggests anything but noble conduct: 'But like many with pedigree rare, and brave, / You've a taint of something base' (547:9-10). Cook pokes fun at those who rely on the marketable value of living creatures and condone moral flaws: 'And so I suppose while "high blood" is in vogue, / We must patiently wink at a well-bred rogue' (548:56-7). Cook's satire in mock heroic verse on the questionable value of pedigree is reinforced by an awareness of the literary hybrid genre in which the speaker is engaged with this dog poem. The poem is shot through with a sense of degeneration, since the pedigree dog does not deserve a pedigree literary form: 'And as I've no "Memoir" nor "Sonnet" to do, / I'll just tell in few words what I think of you' (546:3-4). The rhyming scheme has been reduced to its most simple form with rhyming couplets, as if to show that a poem about a creature with a morally blameworthy character does not deserve an elaborate style.

The undeserving Bran appears only once in Cook's poetical works, whereas Pincher the dog and Dobbin the pony are recurrent figures in her autobiographical poetry. 'Old Pincher' and 'Old Dobbin' intertwine the life of the speaker with the lives of her two companions, both praised for their loyalty, affection, selflessness and indispensability. Unlike Bran, neither animal comes from a noble canine or equine lineage – the pony appeared one day from the wilds and the dog was saved, Moses-like, from drowning. Thus while some may label Pincher a 'cur' and Dobbin 'a colt of the waste' (42:23), their true value to their working-class masters comes from their actions and uses: 'Tis deeds and not blood make the man and the steed' ('Old Dobbin' 42:4).

Although Pincher is depicted as a pet and Dobbin as a working animal, the frontier between a loving and a working machine and between the social classes is easily crossed. The dog's affection for its owner is as strong as any bond uniting master and servant: Pincher is 'Unkenneled and chainless, yet truly he served; / No serfdom was known, yet his faith never swerved' ('Old Pincher' 102:32-3). As for Dobbin, though clearly identified as a slave, 'proud of the thralldom he bore' (42:30), and eventually 'enfranchised' (43:70), the pony is treated like a pet: 'He was fond as a spaniel, and soon became / The pride of the herd-boy, the pet of the dame' (42:17-18). Cook has no interest in beauty, symmetry and blood, the three criteria necessary for the selection of pedigree or thoroughbred animals and for their legitimate entry in the poetical canon. That is why Dobbin becomes a powerful metaphor for working-class poetry in the 1846 preface to the New York edition:

[S]o in conclusion, allow me to say that I am conscious many faults mar my Pegasus, which careful training might have cured; but extend your mercy, gentle reader, and take him as he is, with the roughcoat, and honest though unpretending qualities of an 'Old Dobbin'. (xiv)

If 'Homer immortalized Ilion and – mice' ('Old Pincher' 101:8), Cook sees no restriction in turning her childhood friends into the heroes of modest epic tales. She does not make occasional references to Greek mythology or Ancient Rome to give canonical status to her poetry, but rather to show that history and myth evolve from personal experience and are built by modest creatures. Money and rank do not buy fame and success. The latter only come when hardworking individuals endear themselves to the members of the small community through their own personal value and acts. In her poems, the heroes are silent creatures that never rebel against their tyrannical masters but gain fame and honour through acts of mercy and self-abnegation:

I fondled, I fed him, I coaxed or I cuffed –
 I drove or I led him, I soothed or I huffed:
 He had beatings in anger, and huggings in love;
 But which were most cruel, 'twere a puzzle to prove.
 If he dares to rebel, I might battle and wage
 The fierce war of a tyrant with petulant rage;
 I might ply him with kicks, or belabour with blows,
 But Pincher was never once known to oppose. (102:45-52)

Cook's animal poetry reinforces her Chartist commitment because the theme of working animals serving the community or the nation fosters the poet's democratic ideals. There is no need for a title or a pedigree to participate in the work of social improvement. These animals' simple devotion and selflessness, in other words their innate and intrinsic value, throw the class system out of kilter because the life

and history of simple animals illustrates how those at the very bottom of the social and natural hierarchy have a valuable role to play in the community's social fabric.

Working animals, unlike pets, are seen to have managed to keep a strong connection with nature, one that preserves the innate nobleness of their characters against the corruption of human transactions. They possess untainted moral values, serve as models and provide a valuable poetical paradigm for communicating a moral message. Each animal represents one moral trait, for example obedience and 'a willingness in duty' (*Sketches of Natural History, or Song of Animal Life* 'The Dog' 161:71) for Mary Howitt's dog, selflessness for Scottish poet Free Lance's self-sacrificing and 'self-forgetful' collie ('The Collie Dog' 181:18) and patience and selflessness for the 'sagacious, patient, docile' horse in 'The Horse' (381:13) by Charlotte Oates (1856–1900). National pride is also a recurrent feature in horse poems in particular since horses can carry out a large number of functions that serve the country's interests, 'Whatever his place, the yoke, the chase, / The War-field, road, or course' (Cook, 'The Horse' 96:33–4). And the glory of England is enhanced by the chivalric value of those 'gallant steeds' that feature in the horse poems of many women poets such as Mrs Henry R. Sandbach, Caroline Bowles Southey or Charlotte Oates.³⁰ The revival of the chivalric values of medieval England compensates for an alienating urban bourgeois world dominated by relationships seen only in terms of mercantile value and exploitation.

Abusing Animals

According to James Turner, the Victorian public chose to give animals a heart and a mind, 'an image so appealing that it not only quelled the fears of man's bestial past but served as an emblem of the heart and an example to the human race' (73). They still found it difficult to accept Darwin's argument that animals should be viewed as their cousins. The spectacle of suffering animals enhanced the Victorians' growing sense of compassion: 'The animal becomes newly defined as a being possessing "wants", "desires", and even rights, and the suffering or torture of animals become privileged occasions for the display of powerful affect – particularly sympathy – within narrative' (Kreilkamp 94). The Victorians were ready to welcome animals into their social sphere and women were in the vanguard of this process. Portraying working or suffering animals, rather than pets, poets showed that animal morality seemed to flow directly from an unmediated sense of duty.

The exploitation of animal, industrial and child labour is the target of many Victorian novels and poems. According to Lisa Surrige who has analysed narratives of violence in Victorian fiction, '[the beating of an animal] first implicitly suggests a connection between animal abuse and human violence. Secondly, it

³⁰ See Mrs Henry R. Sandbach's 'To My Horse' (1850), Caroline Bowles Southey's memories of Juba, her 'gallant' horse in 'The Birthday' and Charlotte Oates's 'The Horse' (1898).

draws a traditional (and misogynistic) connection between the subservient and fawning behavior of certain dog breeds and similar behavior in women' (4). While, for the animal rights advocate Carol J. Adams, 'women saw symbols of their own suffering in animal victims' (49), and therefore engaged in movements for a more humane treatment of animals, women poets did not depict animal suffering to denounce violence against women in particular but sought instead to condemn larger forces of domination at work in Victorian society.

Animal poems contributed to this discourse by striking a sentimental and moral chord, such as in their treatment of the subject of draught animals, where they called for these beasts of burden to be valued as more than mere bundles of muscle and sinew. A plea to respect these animals was a favourite subject for Victorian poets, as can be seen in the dialogical poem 'The Dog and the Ox' (1829) by early Victorian Scottish poet Susanna Hawkins (dates unknown) and in Mary Howitt's 'The Cry of the Suffering Creatures', a poem added to the 1873 edition of her collection *Sketches of Natural History*. In Hawkins's poem, probably hinting at the meeting between Alexander and Diogenes, the encounter that inspired Edwin Landseer's eponymous painting of 1848, the two animals gradually learn to respect each other after the sheepdog learns that it has been made into a carnivorous animal by those who have taught it to herd sheep – and therefore control and victimise them – by nipping at their heels. According to the envious dog, oxen are well fed, but this is only to fatten them up for the market, where their body parts will be traded and turned into food. The wise ox helps the brainwashed dog realise that they are both victims of selfish human calculation and commercial objectives. Humans, we are told, persist in instrumentalising animals when they should be seeking moral inspiration from them:

Some wicked men mischief invent,
On lower animals to resent,
Although that every beast was sent
For a wise end;
If cruel men do not repent,
They'll not amend. ('The Dog and the Ox' 39:163–8)

It was commonly accepted that 'subordination to human purposes transfigured and elevated the animal itself' (Ritvo, *Animal Estate* 17). Here, not only does Hawkins reject this statement, but she also goes further in the denunciation of animal exploitation, calling for their liberation.

Mary Howitt felt deeply for the fate reserved to beasts of burden. 'The Cry of the Suffering Creatures' does not address the question of vivisection – though it was a recurrent and hotly debated issue that would eventually lead to the 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act – but seeks rather to give a voice to those animals which toil in the field like unpaid servants, and thus deserve our respect. The subtitle 'Song of Animal Life' appended to the title of the book of poems in the 1873 edition supports the idea that animals have a life and a voice of their own. Howitt

sides with and speaks out for those animals under the yoke (in some cases literally), considering them to be worthy advocates in the denunciation of exploitation. In her verse, beasts of burden like horses, cows and oxen are willing to submit to Man's rule as long as they are treated with the respect due to all living creatures. They are no rebels, but in her eyes they have the right to claim moral justice from their masters. They refuse to have their identity defined purely in terms of submission but in terms of work, though they receive no recompense for it. Therefore they reject human cruelty and those who would brand beasts with the marks of their property reducing them to mere marketable commodities:

They brand us, and they beat us; they spill our blood like water;
 We die that they may live, ten thousand a day
 Oh! That they had mercy! In their dens of slaughter
 They afflict us and affright us, and do far worse than slay!
 (*Sketches* 13–14:5–3)

According to Howitt, God has placed the beasts in a lower position in the hierarchy of species so that they may fulfil their role as willing servants of Man. In her verse, they do not deny the divine order of things but denounce cruelty from their masters as well as from children who have learnt to abuse animals by imitating their elders. She opposes Man's capacity for reason to the unsullied moral qualities possessed by beasts of burden:

We have a sense they know not, or else have dulled by learning,
 They call it instinct only, a thing of rule and plan;
 But oft when reason fails them, our clear, direct discerning,
 And the love that is within us, have saved the life of man. (14:21–4)

Howitt's task is not, however, limited to the teaching of a moral code of conduct to the young. Lexical choices and rhetorical devices indicate that she compares the ill-treatment to animals to the physical abuse meted out to slaves. She does not, for all that, choose to simply replicate slave narratives by making animals rebel against their masters and pose a threat to the established commercial order, but prefers to give them a subdued voice that seems more appropriate to her religious message. With living creatures loving and respecting each other, there would be hope for a second paradise on Earth: 'And a second day of Eden would on the earth begin!' (15:32). The tone of the poem matches Howitt's commitment to the cause of women too. Beasts of burden endure their condition, made 'for the purposes of service' (15:18), because their animal qualities are comparable to traditional female virtues. Their identity is constructed as that of patient and devoted wives with 'softness of our eyes' (15:28) and with 'meekness' (15:30), behaving 'as humble friends' (15:32), begging for sympathy and tenderness from their masters. There is thus more to Howitt's poem than is at first apparent, addressing simultaneously a number of major issues, while the poetical codes used

serve to consolidate the identity of the woman poet as a privileged spokesperson for humankind's higher moral feelings.

In addition to children's poetry books, nursery rhymes could also be enrolled in the cause of animal welfare, drawing on the experiences of hardworking beasts of burden or the would-be carefree inhabitants of the English countryside and town gardens, to bring home their authors' message to young readers. For example, Christina Rossetti's nursery rhyme 'Hurt No Living Thing' from *Sing Song* (1872) plays with generic devices that undermine stock assumptions and elaborate her conservationist message. In her book *Poetics en Passant*, Anne Jamison shows convincingly how Rossetti's *Goblin Market* acts out the struggle between the two sisters and the goblins as well as different forms of transgression, deliberately employing poem metres with 'semantic potential' (143). Similarly, within the frame of this seven-line poem, Rossetti plays with all the poetical resources of the nursery rhyme to underscore her ecological message:

Hurt no living thing:
 Ladybird, nor butterfly,
 Nor moth with dusty wing,
 Nor cricket chirping cheerily,
 Nor grasshopper so light of leap,
 Nor dancing gnat, nor beetle fat,
 Nor harmless worms that creep. (*The Complete Works* 251–2:1–7)

She starts by offering her moral lesson in a peremptory trimeter, leaving no room for debate. The anaphors of the following lines hammer out that no small creature should be excluded from this moral ban. Verbs have been removed from the stanza to leave all the poetic space to natural creatures. The worm, generally despised due to its association with the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, is given pride of place in the closing line as if the poet wished to invert the chain of evolution to insist on the value of every living thing, even the lowliest.

A decade before the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Worms* (1831), Rossetti had already acknowledged the importance of the enterprising toil of creatures at the very bottom of the evolutionary ladder. She does not claim that they play a major role in the ecosystem, but does insist on the fact that their humble status does not give human beings the right to kill or to mutilate them. The anthropomorphism which considers particular creatures as "belonging" in the attic, garden or field seemed to give children the right to interfere with them during their outdoor games. Through the generic codes of children's fiction and nursery rhymes, often associated with a "feminine" stance, Rossetti delivers a holistic message that links all natural creatures together. Indeed, her verse intimates that animals should be respected because they behave like playful children with whom they have much in common. In 'Hopping frog, hop here and be seen', she advises young readers to leave frogs and toads alone while spreading a moral message of mutual respect: 'Hopping frog, hop here and be seen, / I'll not pelt you with stick or stone' (240:1–2). She

addresses animals, not children, as if she were endowed with linguistic skills that enable her to communicate Doolittle-like with the animals around her. The outcome should thus be mutual respect: to the frog, she says 'Good bye, we'll let each other alone' (240:4) and to the toad 'You won't hurt me, and I won't hurt you' (240:8); a chiasmus that perfectly illustrates mutual understanding.

In 'Brown and furry', the narrator addresses another invertebrate, the caterpillar, to warn it about the impending dangers of nature but also to acknowledge that there is no threat from other animals, thus enhancing the sense of global harmony among the inhabitants of the natural world:

No toad spy you,
 Hovering bird of prey pass by you;
 Spin and die,
 To live again a butterfly. (236:7–10)

Rossetti distances herself even further from her contemporaries in the antivivisection movement by choosing uncouth and almost invisible creatures of the garden, siding with the underdog or "underworm" of the animal world as she does in *Speaking Likenesses*. It is indeed among such inhabitants of the wood that Edith looks for 'friendly assistance'.³¹ However sympathetic and cooperative they may be, they are unable 'to boil the kettle' (*Poems and Prose* 345), simply because they are not meant to. A sense of compassion and cooperation does not lead to condoning domination by one creature over another.

As we noted earlier, wild animals only make their way very occasionally into women's poetry of the period. Unlike Christina Rossetti's monstrous crocodile in 'My Dream' that incarnates the 'primitivism and racial inferiority' of the colonised Other (Leighton and Surridge 250), Mary Howitt's wild animals, the lion, the camel, the monkey and the elephant, are peaceful creatures inhabiting an unspoilt paradise, preserved from national or colonial greed. Their southern territories are represented as the birthplace of life. Once brought to Britain, however, exotic animals acquire a hybridised and therefore complex form of identity, since they are both cared for and dominated by their owners.³²

Poems on exotic birds were a popular choice among women authors of the period. A common theme running through this body of work is that of outrage in the face of the imperatives, cultural and commercial, that have led to these birds being

³¹ See Knoepfelmacher 322. In *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, Elizabeth also chooses to side with lowly inhabitants of her garden, for example slugs and dandelions.

³² Christina Rossetti's poem about Dante Gabriel's adopted wombat 'O Uommibatto' is the perfect example of the hybridised exotic animal on British soil. As the Italian name for a wombat is 'vombato', Rossetti simply Italianised the word and kept an English-sounding pronunciation, representing the wombat as a kind of linguistic chimera. In the poem, she begs the Australian mammal not to dig too deep in her brother's garden in case it may emerge in the Antipodes – and recover its physical and linguistic integrity. On Australian animals transported to British zoos or private menageries, see Simons.

uprooted from their natural habitat and transported thousands of miles to a British drawing room. In 'My Doves' (1856), for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses her pet birds from India to voice her resistance to the forces of domination symbolically present in the microcosm of the parlour. The birds were captured in India, a land of plenty, where they used to sing divinely inspired melodies, and were subsequently engaged in a prison analogous to a series of concentric circles: the narrow cage, the stifling room, the bustling street, the mercantile city and the alienating foreign country. Yet, even in this hostile, Babel-like environment, the birds sing pastoral melodies which inspire the poet, who is now confident her poetry will reach similarly divine heights. Barrett Browning, who is soon to forsake her invalid's room on Wimpole Street, finds hope and solace in her doves' lot. While the glory and success stemming from the transcendence of confinement might first appear as the triumph of selfless domesticity, the atavistic memories of paradise bring poetical and spiritual liberation to the poet: 'My spirit and my God shall be / My seaward hill, my boundless sea' (260:83–4).³³

Barrett Browning's doves, certainly very significant in her eyes for their biblical symbolism, were not however to be seen very often in the Victorian domestic interior, where pride of place went to the parrot. Parrots feature often in fact in women's poetry of the period, while they are only an exceptional presence in the work of their male counterparts. Where parrots do occur in the latter case, it tends to be in stuffed form, a reflection perhaps of the contemporary craze for taxidermy.³⁴ Women's parrot poems, on the other hand, are constructed differently. They never celebrate simply the beauty of the parrot's plumage or its vocal dexterity, since the poetic function of the bird is not to appear as a mere ornament in the Victorian drawing room. Instead, the presence of this innocent captive regularly gives rise to reflections on, and denunciations of, various forms of imperialist oppression: slavery, the extermination of the Native American tribes or Britain's colonial policy.

The stuffed parrots that multiply when the plot thickens in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) draw on this symbolism, hindering the resolution of the mystery surrounding the identity of the real parrot that inspired the portrayal of Félicité's only friend in Flaubert's novella *A Simple Soul* (1877). Similarly, the exotic birds that illustrate books of natural history and adorn the pages of poetry escape the fossilised discourse of domesticity. For Barnes, the presence of multiplying stuffed birds indicates that it is impossible to pin down the literary imagination, since the latter refracts reality into a multitude of subjective perspectives: 'Just because [Flaubert] borrowed a parrot, why should he describe it as it was? Why shouldn't he change the colours round if it sounded better?' (183),

³³ 'The Sea-Mew' similarly underlines the unnaturalness of the bird's new environment that surprisingly inspires the bird and the poet once they succeed in accepting their lot and making the most of their memories.

³⁴ George Crabbe's *The Parish Register* (1807) provides a good example of this subgenre.

explains Monsieur Andrieu, the expert who is called in to identify the original bird for the retired doctor obsessed with the French writer.

For committed Victorian women poets, the parrot, as the archetype of the subordinate creature, reveals that there is no parrot-like speech to be repeated but a multiplicity of discourses of resistance to be opposed to the monolithic forces of hegemonic domination. Not fully incarcerated in the parlour and yet unable to fly back to their land of origin, the parrots of these works never say what they are taught to say, but deliver a subversive discourse from the margins of power. As subordinate and uprooted creatures, they broaden the question of animal dominion to other types of hegemonic domination, but at the same time they never totally renounce their presence in the comfortable British domestic environment.

The two versions of Mary Howitt's 'The Carolina Parrot' give an account of how the Scottish-American ornithologist Alexander Wilson captured Poll, one of the last Carolina parrots. In the 1838 edition of *Birds and Flowers*, the poem takes the form of a burlesque play set in a Victorian drawing room with a hysterical bird telling its mistress the story of the massacre of its companions. The description of its capture scene is interspersed with guffaws of laughter, pathological signs of its trauma:

Do you remember crossing the Cedar Swamp one particular day,
When I got out of your pocket and flew away?
Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! How it makes me laugh!
You'd a pretty chase after me! – ha! ha! a pretty chase!
And I sat in the hickory trees, laughing in your face!
Ha! ha! ha! How I did laugh! (*Birds and Flowers* 1839 48:44–9)

The slaughter scene is reduced to the minimum of four lines, but is complemented by asides that depict the bird's psychological state. As no metric pattern emerges from the parrot's lines, one may deduce that it is overwhelmed by emotion. By the time of the 1873 version, however, published in *Sketches of Natural History*, the parrot has learnt self-restraint and produces a much more elaborate and convincing denunciation of bird-killing. Refusing to be identified with a magical creature, it sides with all the birds of the world, 'The little Love-bird or Macaw, / The Cockatoo or Popinjay'³⁵ (152:34–5), in fact all those that might be captured too. It presents a darker vision of the capture, with the ornithologist described as a hunter rather than as a scientist. The massacre scene resembles a battlefield where no quarter is given:

Folks do not understand parrots,
Nor the love they have for each other;

³⁵ According to Boehrer, parrots were called popinjays until the sixteenth century when they were transported from the East to the New World (60). The alliance of the parrot with the popinjays of yore underscores the necessary communion of all birds to fight against human oppression.

And there you shot us by dozens:
You shot my father and my mother.
You shot us, brothers and sisters,
Uncles, and aunts, and cousins,
And loving and friendly neighbours, –
You shot them down by dozens.
What a time of terror it was!
What wailing was heard, and what crying,
What circling round in distress,
What settling down by the dying! (*Sketches* 155:89–100)

The anthropomorphic reactions of the birds in distress, helping the wounded and mourning their dead, depicts a much more tragic version of the slaughter compared with the histrionic parrot's outpouring of emotion in the earlier version. The focus on family ties, genuine ethological practices among Carolina parakeets, tends to associate birds with humans living in tribes, a bond which is reinforced by the presence of the Choctaws, a Native American people who had already established close links with the local bird, calling it the 'kelinky'.³⁶ The birds were slaughtered at Big Bone Lick (Kentucky), brought there by the salt-rich deposits, a place already known since 1807 as the birthplace of American palaeontology. For Howitt, however, the place has a more sinister connotation; since the concentration of the hungry birds, 'like a carpet of feathers / All green and scarlet and yellow' (153:67–8) already portends their forthcoming destruction and commodification. By 1873, the tragic fate of the country's Native American tribes had long been familiar to British audiences, and was a frequent subject for both written and visual treatment. By this period, Howitt had become a committed defender of the Indian cause (like Eliza Cook and Harriett Martineau). The later version of her poem reflects the strength of her feelings on the subject, with her parrot speaking out passionately against the massacre of hundreds of birds; an event deliberately chosen to echo the oppression of native tribes. According to Kate Flint, Victorian women writers, an influential force in the campaign to denounce US policy in this area, expressed their anger in sentimental terms, but their commitment was no less strong for all that. Indeed, she points out they were much more vocal than male writers in their condemnation of US policies that displaced and destroyed Native Americans.³⁷ Depicting animals in pain to illustrate human suffering was thus a deliberate use of sentiment to achieve political ends.

Britain's colonial policy was one of Mary Howitt's other political targets. 'The Indian Bird' (1836), written more than two decades before the Indian

³⁶ It may have been a well-known fact, even for Mary Howitt, that this bird always flew back to the place where some individuals had been killed. It may have contributed to their extinction since hunters could rapidly exterminate the whole flock.

³⁷ See 'Sentiment and Anger: British Women Writers and Native Americans', the chapter about the support of women writers in England to the American Indian cause in Flint 86–111.

Mutiny of 1857, already testifies to the poet's commitment to the victims of colonial oppression. The poem follows a pattern similar to that of the previous poem: speaking from the heart of English domesticity, a parrot tells the story of its life in its country of origin, until its capture, transportation and domestication in England. Rescued by a Brahmin and his daughter after the slaughter of all its family members, killed by predators with deadly names like 'the wolf-cat' (*Tales in Verse* 136:30), 'the basilisk-snake' (188:55) and 'the dragon-bird' (189:86), it felt fully protected by the virgin daughter of a holy man and vegetarian. The parrot is simply referred to as 'an Indian bird', escaping the taxonomic identification of Eurocentric natural history, since 'In the English tongue it had no name' (185:7), but adopted the romantic denomination of "'soul's delight," / In that land's speech a loving name' (191:119-20). The misery of one animal mirrors the sufferings of all those whose identity and peace are threatened by the intervention of deadly hegemonic forces. It did not take long for the Indian paradise to be desecrated by colonial warfare:

But bloody war was in the land;
The old man and the maid were slain;
The precious things were borne away –
A ruined heap the temple lay,
And I among the spoil was ta'en. (192:123-7)

Named 'an idol bird' by merchants to give it more financial value (a case of sharp practice analogous to that of Fane's stuffed dog salesman), the parrot is artificially rebranded to conform to the clichéd portrayal of the mystery of the Orient. Turned into a commodity, it is traded and offered to another maiden, this time the daughter of a profit-maker, to whom the poem is addressed. The discourse of resistance is ambivalent for Howitt, since what really matters in the end is to be cared for by a sweet mistress in India or in England: 'With thee, sweet maiden, all are glad!' (192:138).

Unlike Howitt, who sentimentalises domestication, Isabella F. Darling (1861-1903), a Scottish poet, highlights the bird's sense of cultural fragmentation and dislocation from a class perspective in her poem, 'The Parrot's Lament' (1839). The conceited bird has escaped from its cage and grudgingly finds refuge among the birds of the English woodland that have generously welcomed it as a member of their own community. But the bright-feathered and well-behaved though pedantic parrot refuses to mix with the birds of a purportedly lower status and starts to regret its cage and challenge the true meaning of freedom. For the parrot, its caged status is synonymous with distinction, which also brings a sense of superiority. The bird misinterprets the children and visitors teasing and bullying it as a homage paid to its aristocratic status and the nobility of its race. Being a prisoner in a cage is no disgrace for a bird that considers commercial trade as the only offence committed against its noble character. Yet, like Howitt's parrot, it is

unaware of its incarceration in a bourgeois environment, the fake authenticity of which it has contributed to constructing:

... a quaint little town, mid heather-hills brown,
Oft bleak and bedrizzled with rain:
There snug was my home, whence I'd no need to roam,
Ah! fool that I was to complain! (82:25-8)

Darling ridicules the bird's stupidity by making it choose imprisonment in 'a palace of wire' (82:39) and solitude and despair rather than freedom in the democratic environment of the wood. Estranged from its natural habitat, devoid of social status, and deprived of any intrinsic value with its 'Time, talents, and beauty misspent' (83:44), it can only find consolation in self-indulgent complaint, conceitedly called its 'lament'. But it forgets that, by naming it 'Polly's Lament', it erases all traces of personal distinction, all parrots being traditionally called 'Polly'. It pretends to defend the uniqueness of its character, but mechanically repeats in a "parrot-like way" the worn-out discourse of a decadent aristocratic class that is losing its privileges. The bird mistakes the effects of slavery and imperialism for signs of its exceptional character. Blinded by the desire to raise its own profile, it cannot realise that its status has been downgraded to that of a simple middle-class pet. Darling wittingly distances herself from her female precursors who sentimentalise the anticolonial discourse. It is through comedy, like Howitt's 1838 version of 'The Carolina Parrot', that she advances her political views, since the target of her anticolonial and anti-imperialistic poem are those with an unshakeable belief in the merits of their actions, who, as a result, make shameful mistakes.

In their discourse against various forms of oppression and domination, however ambivalent it often turned out to be, Victorian women poets aimed to construct animal identity through physical pain and moral torture. Stressing the loss of identity of uprooted animals, poets strove to question the Euro- and anthropocentric perspective that had alienated and subjugated animals for centuries. While very few male poets used the animal poem to address the issue of colonialism in animal poems (with the notable exception of Kipling, who used the genre to justify imperialism's "natural" character), the animal poem was a popular choice among women poets. It provided them with an effective means of entering the political debate, using the twin techniques of anthropomorphism and sentimentality. They also adopted a distinctive stance in their poems which portrayed the locally bred working animal or domestic pet to speak against domination and exploitation. In both cases, artistic form and sentimental tone combined to make the animal poem a powerful vehicle for demanding greater social justice.

As Heavy as a Feather

Victorian bird poems are explored further in this section, though from a different perspective than in the last. While cat and dog poems have already been investigated as a means of exploring representations of consensual middle-class behaviour, we shall see in the following discussion that certain bird poems function to cast a *negative* light on some of these practices. As birds are less close to humans than cats or dogs, the relative distance creates a space for debate. While the construction of human/bird bond is a common feature of Victorian representations, it is not the natural similarities that are highlighted but the *social* ones. This is precisely how women poets use the genre, presenting birds for what they can *do* rather than for what they are.

David Allen has shown that Victorian women did not play a major role in the observation of birds. Unlike men, women in this period were rarely involved in birdwatching, ornithology or the scientific societies devoted to the subject. Allen observes that

they were deliberately kept out, because science was a man's business and the club a kind of intellectual stag-party where a male rattled his antlers: a place reserved apart for him, like his study, where women should never be allowed to intrude. (*The Naturalist* 167)

Birder, historian and producer Stephen Moss lists all the good reasons put forward to exclude women from birding, penned by correspondents to ornithology journals:

[They] suggested a number of reasons for the lack of women in birding, including the supposedly more competitive instinct of men, their evolutionary past as hunters, women's fears for personal safety, and most of all, society's expectations that they should stay at home. (323)

Excluded by those who believed their unpractical garments and equally unpractical minds would undermine the seriousness of the operations, they migrated to another territory where their presence was acceptable: the bird poem.

Birds have always been a favourite subject for poets, featuring in mainstream Romantic poetry as symbols of spiritual elevation, the quest for transcendence and poetic genius. Unlike their male counterparts, however, women poets rarely depicted birds in this way, choosing to bring the bird back to earth and drawing it into social relations with its human neighbours. The first birdwatchers' literary successes, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) and Thomas Bewick's *A History of British Birds* (1797), had a lasting influence on amateur birders and nature-lovers and particularly on Victorian women poets who found in the plates and the detailed accounts of birds the necessary scientific observations to fuel their inspiration for avian poetry.³⁸ From the 1830s onwards, innumerable

³⁸ The young Jane Eyre enjoys reading Thomas Bewick's *History*, but she is particularly fond of the vignettes, the ornaments added by the author to help popularise

bird books were published in various formats, often illustrated with splendid lithographs. Even more books, aimed at a broader readership, were published in the second half of the century.³⁹ Overcoming the hurdles that made detailed scientific examination in the field or laboratory problematic, women poets placed birds under their own literary microscope, inviting them into their own domestic and social world.

Once placed in a cage or their feathers plucked to adorn the hats of the fashionable, birds acquired a very pragmatic value that made them ideal representations of freedom and confinement, both physical and emotional. Unlike their male counterparts, women poets were much more interested in the physical attributes and behaviour of birds than in their symbolic value when it came to denouncing social injustice or practices of domination. Even if they made birds fellow victims of pain and injustice, reinforcing their special bond with women, the poems unambiguously compare their *conditions*, not their *natures*. The anthropomorphic fallacy which treats animals as if they had human-like emotions and thoughts, seemed to allow their voices to be heard by the women poets, who paid particular attention to those living creatures who appeared to share if not features, at least interests with them.

Women poets often talk *on behalf* of animals, and birds in particular to underline their shared experience of suffering. Barbara Gates has shown how the discourses concerning the protection of animals from vivisection or feather fashion empowered women throughout the nineteenth century: '[A]buses towards animals and the environment proliferated, and the chorus of women's voices raised in protest swelled as the century progressed' (*In Nature's Name* 34). Gates chooses A.C.H. Luxmoore's picture for the *Illustrated London News* entitled *Sympathy* (1873) to illustrate the mobilising power of compassion, inspiring thousands of women to empathise with the suffering of 'murdered' birds. Similarly, George Frederic Watts' *A Dedication* (1898) represents a female-looking angel shedding tears over the mangled remains of a slaughtered bird. The bird's mutilated wings deliberately evoke the angel's larger ones. Both illustrations underline the perceived bond between women and birds, with seemingly shared physical or behavioural traits leading to a deeper moral and philosophical understanding.

The primary objective of women's bird poetry from this period is the denunciation of the commodification of living creatures, at the mercy of fickle human trends in leisure or fashion. Women poets pursued a relentless campaign against both the widespread practice of bird-nesting and the voracious appetite of the feather industry. The depiction of animal suffering helps defend a double cause. First, it serves as an illustration of human oppression and cruelty over other living creatures, animals and people, and questions various discourses of domination.

science. The novel's metaphorical use of ornithological imagery, for example, to allude to Victorian restrictions placed upon women's ambitions and desires, has often been underlined.

³⁹ See Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* 93.

Second, by giving animals a voice to defend themselves, it acknowledges the existence of a form of animal identity. Bird-nesting by egg-collectors or simply for the gratuitous pleasure of damaging nests inspired a large number of poems, many of them published in educational poetry collections for children. The first poems were early versions of the later protectionist poems against the feather industry. Arguing that educating children would turn them into responsible adults, women poets addressed the ecological issue from a moral point of view. Their claims would certainly have remained unheard, had they sought to target male adult readers. Although such works were ostensibly aimed at young girls as well as boys, it was above all the latter's behaviour that was denounced. As mini-tyrants, egg-collecting boys were presented as throwing the balance of nature out of kilter by threatening its most fragile creatures.

Lydia Maria Child's (1802–1880) often-anthologised poem 'Who Stole the Bird's Nest?' denounces bird-nesting. It portrays a desperate bird pleading with the other animals of the countryside to help her find her stolen nest and eggs. As they have all participated in the construction of the family nest, giving wool, feathers, hairs or hay, the culprit has to be sought elsewhere. The preservation of the species or, as Child puts it, the sanctity of maternity, is the true message voiced here. Indeed, little girls join in the condemnation, this time using a more anthropocentric form of denunciation, considering such an immoral theft as a 'cruel' and 'mean' deed (61–2:76–7). The last stanza reveals the true identity of the culprit:

A little boy hung down his head,
And went and hid behind the bed,
For he stole that pretty nest
From poor little yellow-breast;
And he felt so full of shame,
He didn't like to tell his name. (*The Posy Ring* 62:81–6)

Child's response to maternal transgression is to make shame the ultimate sign of moral responsibility. The moral argument alone would not have been an effective way of denouncing the plundering of natural resources; however, it gains in power when nature is seen to mirror the domestic environment.

Alicia Donne's *Peeps into Bird Life* (1896) is a very conservative book of bird poems, presenting a selection of British birds with a poetic description of their behaviour in their natural habitat. Her anthropomorphic view of ornithology transfers avian natural behaviour onto human social practice. That is why bird-nesting is considered as equivalent to ransacking homes:

Little boys, who go bird nesting,
Stop and think a moment pray,
How you'd feel if savage strangers
Came and took your home away.
Smashed the roof and all the windows,

Pulled the walls down, broke the door,
Tossed your little baby brothers
Frightened, screaming on the floor. ('Bird Nesting' 89–90:13–20)

For Donne, bird-nesting is not only an immoral act but also a real threat to the safety of the bourgeois family home as boys 'Break up such a loving household, / Cause the parent bird such pain' (94:173–4). The second part of the poem, about bird-nesting in a literal sense, is composed of a long list of British birds' nests that shows how the restored natural and family order brings peace and happiness to the whole natural kingdom:

Oh! how busily in spring time
Does the sweet bird make its nest,
With its chosen mate beside it,
Working each its very best.
Searching out the fittest places,
Bush and bank and tree among,
Weaving perfect little dwellings,
Where to rear and tend their young. (93:117–24)

Eliza Cook's poem 'On Seeing a Bird-Catcher' steps outside the domestic household and considers the broader picture, arguing that stealing nests or catching birds is comparable to making slaves out of human beings. Snuffing out freedom is even more despicable when it is carried out for personal entertainment:

Health in his rags, Content upon his face,
He goes th'enslaver of a feathered race:
And cunning snares, warm hearts, like warblers, take;
The one to sing for sport, the other, break. (126:1–4)

In contrast, 'A Bird's Eye-View' (1869) by Menella Bute-Smedley (1820–1877), one of the most accomplished poems on bird-nesting, is certainly inspired by other discourses that do not consider moral condemnation the appropriate response to all social evils. Written two decades before women took the lead in animal protection, Bute-Smedley's poem highlights the contemporary question of animal feeling and suffering by using a gender-oriented argument. The meaning of the title is made clear as the conversational poem unfolds: girls side with birds because they share their views, understand their emotions and have a holistic vision of nature, realising their common interests in the face of overweening male oppression:

"What a world," [the Robin] cried, "of bliss,
Full of birds and girls, were this!
Blithe we'd answer to their call;
But a great mistake it is
Boys were ever made at all". (64:32–6)

The sadistic but brainless little boy of the poem wrings the necks of birds for mere pleasure, unaware they have other feelings than pain. He similarly refuses to admit that girls are wise. As for the shrewd little girl, she never gives in to moral or ungrounded judgement. Starting with the legal term 'I will not see / Little birds defrauded so' (62:3-4), she proceeds to condemn the boy's cowardice, and points out that birds are certainly sensitive to other feelings than pain.

The poem rejects the idea of little girls as fragile creatures, as it does that of birds as feminine objects of decoration, both in need of preservation. The girl's bird-eye's view sees beyond such essentialist perspectives and engages with the issue of gender equality. Bute-Smedley never binds the identity of girls and birds in her gender-based argument, unlike American preservationists who saw the feather question and femininity as cross-fertilising elements, with bird hats simply making women unwomanly:

As with most arguments against bird hats, the societies called wearing a bird hat an unwomanly thing to do. And since failures of womanhood would spell the inevitable moral downfall of the rest of society, this was easily the most serious social transgression a woman could make. (Price 80)

For Bute-Smedley, the desire to kill birds derives from an erroneous association of birds with girls, both presented as fragile creatures. Moreover, it is not the defence of birds that empowers girls, it is because they are strong-willed that they can defend endangered animals.

Charles Darwin was certainly not the only Victorian to associate women and birds, but he was the one who brought apparently incontrovertible scientific evidence to support the existence of common traits. Chapter XIII in *The Descent of Man* is entirely devoted to the study of the secondary sexual characteristics of birds and offers the perfect cultural background for the social construction of gender among Darwin's contemporaries:

Women are everywhere conscious of the value of their beauty; and when they have the means, they take more delight in decorating themselves with all sorts of ornaments than do men. They borrow the plumes of male birds, with which nature decked this sex in order to charm the females. (313)

The fickleness of mating female birds was evoked to explain women's frequent change of dress:

In his discussion of sexual selection among birds, Darwin signalled the volatility of mate choice by females of the species, depending as it did, on 'capriciousness' and inexplicable fluctuations of taste. Among humans, this pronounced taste for novelty was nowhere more apparent than in changing fashions in dress, which in all races of man was characterised by a 'desire to carry every point to an extreme.' (Munro 278)

In fact, the arguments that defended the idea of a natural affinity between women and birds were a source of ambivalence among women poets. It helped them fight against figures and structures of domination, but it also contributed to reinforcing the unwelcome parallel made by Darwin. Some women ascribed to this conception, but others manipulated it to make their claims heard or to denounce the common fate reserved to birds and women – being put into a cage, cherished as a pet, valued as a useless decorative object, and so on.

Unlike male poets who worshipped skylarks, sea-mews, nightingales and albatrosses as metaphors for poetic genius (generally their own), Victorian women poets shared with Darwin a particular fascination for exotic birds, focusing on those colourful species whose feathers were used to make fashionable hats. Herons, egrets, ostriches and gulls were all slaughtered in their thousands for their feathers. Indeed, a number of species were threatened with extinction as a result, and were only saved thanks to the timely intervention of the Society for the Protection of Birds, founded in 1889, and acquiring the Royal prefix in 1904.⁴⁰

Eliza Cook's 'Song of the Ostrich' (1845), written before the birth of the first movements in favour of bird protection, sounds a discordant note among all the feather poems as it expresses no regret that birds are killed merely to celebrate nationalistic values. Cook has the African bird praise itself for the symbolic value its feathers represent in the eyes of all Englishmen. Unlike the European warblers whose feathers were considered appropriate for specific occasions only, ostrich feathers ornamented English homes and graced English bodies from cradle to grave, adorning the baby's brow, the soldier's headgear,⁴¹ the princely head and finally the dead man's coffin. Written in the 1840s, Cook's poem advocates neither the mass destruction of ostriches for personal prestige nor the development of the profit-making feather industry, but it does honour the selfless creature that parts with its feathers for the sake of national unity and pride. As an animal representation of the colonised Other, it willingly sacrifices its feathers – and its life – for British glory.

While later poets would speak out openly against the feather trade in their bird poems, like Cook they also sought to defend what they saw as national values. Thus, with or without their feathers, birds were consistently linked to British national identity. However, this usually involved drawing parallels between women and birds; dangerous territory for while it helped preserve both suffering species, it also functioned to reinforce the common features they shared: beauty, fragility and uselessness. All the feather poems to be discussed here were written in the last decades of the nineteenth century. When Margaretta Lemon (1860–1953), secretary of the Society for the Protection of Birds, addressed the International Congress of Women in 1899, she drew on such parallels to argue that the role of women was to nurture, not to kill. The law of the market, grounded in

⁴⁰ For more details on the feather fashion industry, see Doughty.

⁴¹ In 1899 Queen Victoria ordered that regiments in the armed forces should stop wearing plumes as part of their uniforms.

the fickleness of fashion that helped increase productivity and consumption, had placed women in the role of unwitting accomplices in crime: 'Unfortunately it is through women and their weak submission to the dictates of what is known as Fashion that much of the wholesale and disastrous slaughter of bird life has taken place' (quoted in Gates, *In Nature's Name* 171). In different ways, then, both birds and women were victims of the commercial imperatives of the fashion trade.

Lemon concluded her speech with an eloquent poem borrowed from *Punch*, though making some significant alterations of her own. Changing '*Punch*' to '*Angels*', she sought to give credit to women's compassionate feelings for animals, as symbolised in George Watts's painting *A Dedication*:

Feathers deck the hat and bonnet;
Though the plumage seemeth fair,
Angels as they look upon it
See but slaughter in the air.
Many a fashion gives employment,
Unto thousands needing bread;
This to add to your enjoyment,
Means the dying and the dead.
Wear the hat without the feather,
All ye women, kind and true,
Birds enjoy the summer weather
And the sea as much as you. (quoted in Gates, *Kindred Nature* 122)

Lemon deftly adapted the poem to her own purpose, making women victims of male-dominated industry, by omitting the stanza that gave women full responsibility for the slaughter:

... English ladies
Send those men, to gain each day
What for matron and for maid is
All the Fashion, so folks say.⁴²

Killing birds to feed a collecting hobby or follow the whim of fashion could be a powerful source of narcissistic pleasure. Even Darwin shared with his contemporaries a fascination for killing as strong as women's passion for feather ornaments: 'During the first two years [of the voyage of the *Beagle*]', he noted, 'my old passion for shooting survived in nearly full force, & I shot myself all the birds and animals for my collection' (*Evolutionary Writings* 338). In 'The King-Fisher', Alicia Donne denounced cruelty towards animals and the vanity of the fashion industry. She was keenly aware that the bird of the title (also known as the halcyon) was a member a species threatened with extinction:

Oh brave hearted boys! Dear England's sons,
If you wish for a Halcyon day,
Don't shoot down the birds that bear thy name
You'll deserve neither laurel nor bay.
Oh! Maidens sweet, never deck yourselves
With a plume from the kingfisher's breast,
Or its radiant wings; she who wears such things
Can never have heart at rest. (4:93-100)

Birds, the poem says, should be protected because they symbolise the pastoral grandeur of rural Britain. That is why Alicia Donne stigmatises the use of feathers that bring only egotistical pleasure but do not increase national grandeur. Since kingfishers brought peace in the halcyon days of Britain's past, English boys can only recover that former prestige for their country if they refrain from killing birds. As for English girls, they may keep a pure virginal heart only if they refuse to wear feathers. The living birds of England thus contribute to the restoration of the natural and social order and reinforce national pride.

Donne's 'The Sparrow's Complaint' is a longer and more elaborate version of the feather poem. The subject concerns young Dickie's frustration at being an unremarkable and very common urban sparrow, compared to those rare birds of the countryside, whose colourful feathers had made them the favourites of artists, milliners, scientists, Christmas card designers and bourgeois housewives. The feather theme in the poem draws on class discourse, with those birds killed for the fashion industry ranked higher in the sparrow's mind:

A lady crossed the street just now, she wore a satin bonnet,
All pink and creamy lace and with the loveliest bird upon it;
It made my heart with envy beat to see the topaz gleaming
From its small head, and then its breast like rays from ruby streaming.
Woodpeckers, Kingfishers and Jays, when folks of them make mention,
They talk of hues, blue, green, red, gold, it can't be pure invention;
They have such lovely homes and then they show themselves so rarely,
Perhaps were I less often seen I should be judged more fairly. (21:65-72)

Donne's condemnation of the feather industry is pursued through the naive narrative of the bitter bird which wrongly interprets social practices, mistaking fashion for status or physical location for social position: '[The rooks] sit in parliament all day and think they're mighty clever, / They haven't asked me for my vote or made me M.P. never!' (19:39-40). With long iambic heptameters, the bird can describe at length its experience of injustice. The fourteenner, or iambic heptameter, mirrors the bird's monotonous slog through life, burdened with an overwhelming sense of frustration at its own ordinariness. Moreover, the fourteenner, a line which flourished in the later Middle Ages and in Tudor times, can be considered as a typically British metre. It is therefore used to enhance the pride of the little bird as well as its sense that today's England has been corrupted. A parallel is drawn

⁴² 'A Plea for the Birds' published in *Punch* on 17 September 1887.

between the rural birds on their estates and the chosen few with their peerage. Both perpetuate the injustices of the class system, and neither seems to realise that the price set on their heads and plumes threatens the survival of their own noble race. The working-class sparrow in contrast is finally preserved because it chooses to embrace the simple Victorian values of hearth, home, tea and 'fat and thriving' children (29:90). Donne's bird poems thus denounce the upper and middle-class display of prestige through the elite birds hiding behind the unfair voting system or the 'gilded wires' (13:24) of their canary cages.

After this analysis of the meanings of animal suffering, we turn to suffering of a different kind: the poetic exploration of the pet-owner's pain when faced with the loss of a favourite pet. Though not born with the Victorians, the pet elegy was a popular genre among Victorian women poets. While the importance of such elegies as an outlet for the expression of genuine grief and despair should not be underestimated, their significance does not stop there. The elegy form had hitherto been a largely male preserve in British literary tradition. The pet elegy would help to change that, giving women poets access to what George Eliot called 'provinces of masculine knowledge' in *Middlemarch* (59).

Death and the Animal

Teresa Mangum's illuminating research on the memorialisation of the animal in nineteenth-century Britain⁴³ shows that the mourning process, itself a combination of feelings and social practices, expresses grief for the pet through a series of powerful representations: pet portraits, tombstones, epitaphs or stories. Memorialising pets is about mobilising memory, bridging the distance between owner and pet in both material and sentimental terms. Studying pet elegies and epitaphs during the eighteenth century, Ingrid H. Tague notes a change in their purpose, as emotion and morality gradually replaced satire at the turn of the century (293–5). Indeed, the most often-anthologised eighteenth-century elegies deride men through their pets in conspicuous anti-elegies and anti-epitaphs, such as Oliver Goldsmith's 'An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog' (1766) or Thomas Gray's 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes' (1748). But another shift observable is that of the *feminisation* of the elegy, with Victorian women poets contributing largely to the reinvigorated genre.

Just as the sentimental discourse held sacred by middle-class women played a vital role in the construction of the Victorian bourgeois family, so pet elegies naturally passed into the hands of women poets. When the family pet died, it was the whole family structure that was undermined. But the memorialisation of pets helped restore family unity. For Mangum, the making of animal shrines served to clear the Victorian conscience by masking what really happened to animals: 'By literally or metaphorically burying animals, pet owners joined this social ambition to hide animals and their suffering from public view and hence,

⁴³ See Mangum, 'Animal Angst' 15–34.

from public responsibility' ('Animal Angst' 31). Philip Howell identifies various interrelated reasons to explain the Victorian taste for memorialisation and the development of pet cemeteries at the end of the Victorian era (5–22). Burying pets rather than getting rid of the carcasses was certainly a sanitary priority. But the prominence of dead pet memorabilia is also explained by less mundane factors. The sentimentality and morality on which the identity of the middle-class family was grounded led Victorians to believe that the human/animal bond was preserved after death. They could not contemplate the termination of pet loyalty and love. Indeed, for Mangum, the fabrication of pet shrines helped 'memorialize objects of affection' ('Animal Angst' 16).

The strong bonds of affection between master and pet could not simply vanish after death for those who believed in the persistence of the animal's spiritual existence. Indeed, some of those who fought against the cruelty of vivisection and the blind materialism of science supported the idea of an afterlife for animals. But for Howell, the most important reason for Victorian pet memorialisation was the preservation of the bourgeois family unit after death. While the death of a pet broke up the family unit, pet cemeteries and pet elegies could function to help recreate its sentimental and family bonds. Therefore, Victorians domesticated death by recreating heaven as a family home where humans and dogs would be reunited again because 'pets were undeniably a part of this newly domesticated heaven' (17). The Victorian family model was so overpowering that Victorians sought to mould heaven in line with the contours of the Victorian household. Howell concludes his fascinating demonstration by placing the pet at the gates of heaven. '[A] messenger or intermediary between this world and the next' (19), the pet, like a psychopomp, is waiting for the return of its masters, just as it was faithfully waiting for them on the threshold of the family home.

The denaturalisation and domestication of pets and heaven according to the middle-class worldview remade them as consumer products or aesthetic artefacts, or both. Building on Howell's analysis of pet cemeteries, the following exploration of pet elegies will confirm that the death practices associated with this loss contributed to reinforcing the image of the bourgeois family. It is certainly true that many Victorian women poets believed heaven to be peopled (if that is the right word) by their domestic companions. Most elegies concern dogs, which supports Kete's argument that they are machines, made to be loved and mourned. However, there are also a substantial number of elegies about cats, horses and even birds,⁴⁴ found in similar proportion to the number of graves allocated to non-canine pets in animal cemeteries. While the nature of the human/animal love bond is regularly addressed – the mourning discourse being expressed in highly sentimental and even sometimes bathetic terms – what differs is the way in which animal identity is constructed in each case. Elegised animals are more or less comparable to humans

⁴⁴ However, no eccentric animal has been discovered in this corpus, unlike those that captured the eighteenth-century literary imagination like William Cowper's hare or Thomas Heyrick's monkey.

in various degrees and some, especially dogs, are depicted as surpassing them in terms of their moral worth. In line with Howell's analysis, elegies unquestionably portray pets as legitimate members of the Victorian household, sometimes as family members but more often as friends or companions.

Some elegies fit perfectly what Mangum describes as a strategy of memorialisation that consolidates the 'humanimal family' ('Animal Angst' 18) and what Howell describes as 'the distinctively modern, urban and bourgeois cultural order' (20). For example the poem 'In Memoriam', by the elderly Scottish poet Catherine Macleod (dates unknown), is addressed to Pinn, her faithful dog. The album from which this piece is drawn, entitled *A Memorial for Her Friends*, is characterised by the combination of two salient features: the obsessive presence of death pervading all the poems, from the elegies to the memories of deceased ones and the artefacts they left, and the survival of the family model. Printed for private circulation, this small-format album aimed at memorialising the home and its members and, in turn, became itself a monument peopled with ghosts and stocked with the artefacts of death. 'In Memoriam' fits both categories, as it insists on all the signs of the dog's bodily absence while enhancing its sentimental attachment to the family. Expressions of emotion suffuse the first part of the poem: 'My Doggie! Thou'rt indeed no more!' (30:1-2), 'No more canst thou the signal give' (30:5), 'I deplore / Thine absence from the carriage gate' (30:13-4). Loss is thus made almost visible. While the dead animal is physically absent from all its usual haunts, it returns in the sentimental and religious discourse that supports family values, 'Thou bonnie gem of my sweet home!' (30:26), 'Yes! 'twas of the Heavenly plan, / This race shall be the friend of man' (31:36-7) and in material memorialisation:

Now in deep grave my dog is laid,
On bed of leaves by Bella made;
And as we towards the greenhouse go,
A little boulder-stone we'll show,
And say, 'Poor Pinn lies here below!' (31:38-42)

Dead and buried, the dog returns and continues to be part of family life.

The decent burial, the epitaph and the elegy reincorporate pets into British life, an affirmation that they deserved to be cared for as humans were. The Edinburgh poet Anna Knox (1823-?) goes further in the exploration of the human/animal bond by raising the question of the existence of the animal spiritual world in 'Silence in the Cage', addressed to her bird, Hughie. Speculation concerning a possible afterlife stems from the author's observations that her bird had always interacted with its social environment. Not born in captivity, but rescued after falling from its nest, it was well cared for by its mistress, lost contact with its origins and became a caged bird. Staying indoors with humans, it learnt to share their lot, their hopes, fears and even – almost – their powers to reason: 'They love, they hate, they joy, they grieve – they're hopeful and they fear, / And if they have no reason, they've

something to it near' (22:19-20). Having given her pet a proper burial, the speaker refuses to admit that Hughie is now reduced to 'a very pinch of grey soil' (22:14). In case this is not proof enough, the speaker draws on the Bible to indicate that the natural world is part of God's perfect plan for heaven (Romans 8.18-25): 'May not some sphere of happiness be the dumb creatures' home' (23:27). Moreover, Knox points out, there is no mention in the Bible of animals being barred from Heaven: 'But is it written in the Word, and is the statement plain, / That no creature save the human, from death shall rise again?' (23:31-2).⁴⁵

While Macleod's and Knox's elegies illustrate Howell's thesis about the parallel domestication of pets and death, other works celebrate neither the consolidation of middle-class values nor the overbearing presence of death. Alice Clare Mac Donell (1854-1938)'s and Eliza Cook's elegies are linked as much with those written by their eighteenth-century forebears as with the themes generally favoured by their contemporaries. The presence of the term 'favourite' in the title of their poems draws a parallel with earlier elegies and certainly with Thomas Gray (1716-1771)'s mock elegy 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes'. But this time, the poets cannot exclaim 'A Fav'rite has no friend!', because their pets are not conceited and false like Gray's cat. They would certainly have agreed with the famous French proverb that 'the best thing about Man is his dog', since the term 'favourite' acquires an additional meaning here: it defines the exceptional loyalty of Man's Best Friend rather than the superior status of a self-conscious animal. The two dogs, placed on the same footing as the speakers, are described as a 'friend', 'companion' and 'constant mate' by Cook and as a 'truer friend' and 'trusted comrade' by MacDonell. Friendship is not born by sharing boredom in the parlour but by shared experience out of doors, as illustrated by MacDonell:

You were bent on chasing rabbits,
I on chasing thoughts as wild;
... Well, we had our joyous innings,
And we made the ball to fly,
As glee together we went batting
O'er the heather, you and I. ('On the Death of a Favourite Dog' 147:25-32)

⁴⁵ This poem is very unlike Jane Ann Hodgson (dates unknown)'s 'My Cat': the dead cat and its mistress display a similar amount of selfishness and affection, even if the poet never really meant to link them. Being concerned by earthly matters rather than heavenly preoccupations, the speaker insists on the indoor activities of the bourgeois cat and woman and on immediate satisfaction, but never hints at a possible reunion in Heaven:

On a long winter's evening she'd purr at my feet,
Or lick my hands with her tongue rough and red,
She remember'd the time when Sam brought the milk,
For she knew that shortly she would be fed. (88:13-16)

Cook similarly remembers shared outdoor pleasures in 'On the Death of a Favourite Hound':

Who saw me wandering, ever might see
 The old dog wandering too;

 Thou hast followed my footsteps everywhere,
 In the rambles of joy and the journeys of care;
 And the stranger who chanced to break on our way
 Was met by the old hound's challenging bay. (300:25–36)

These are no pampered parlour pooches; that is why there is no reference to a burial ground that would enclose their bodies and their identities. They are even presented as anti-pets, drawing their companions outdoors and symbolically out of the social world, allowing 'wild' thoughts to be expressed.⁴⁶

Pet elegies are probably as varied as the type of relationships between pets and their masters. While the classical elegiac model that memorialises dead pets prevailed among bourgeois poets, there is evidence that others – mostly working-class poets – were prepared to take liberties with the genre when it came to describing different types of relationships, thereby highlighting other social models. 'Mourning and Unmourned', for example, by the Australian-born poet Emily Manning Heron (1845–1890), aka 'Australie', has a strong social and political message. In the first part, the speaker tells how, passing by the workhouse, she witnessed a penniless woman crying over the death of her terrier 'Nip', a name which evokes both the dog's small size and the hardship experienced by its owner. Her life had been full when the dog was looking after her as they provided for each other's needs in terms of emotional exchange and capital:

She had shared her all with her faithful friend,
 And to him her best had given;
 And she was content to be hungry, cold,
 If he on her food had thriven. (116:25–8)

Although devoid of a pedigree, the 'mongrel cur' of the poem (115:7) has much to offer in terms of affection, bringing solace to someone willing to share her meagre rations with the animal. The dog took the place of absent relatives and friends,

⁴⁶ Caroline Bowles-Southey describes a similar type of relationship with her dog companion Chloe in her long autobiographical poem 'The Birthday'. Angry at the governess's remarks about her being only a 'Tom-Boy', the narrator replies:

When I'm grown up I'll romp with Chloe still.
 As I do now; and climb and scramble too
 After sweet wild-flowers just as much as now;
 And 'grub the earth,' and 'never put on gloves.'
 Then if I dirt my hands and tear my frock.
 You'll not dare scold when I'm a woman grown –. (72)

'And poor "Nip" was all – her friend, her child' (115:19), and even shared the woman's bed. The only thing the woman had to cling to now was the dead body of her child-like dog:

Ah me! She is dower'd with that strange gift,
 The mother-love that pineth,
 And if childless, still its hungry roots
 Round some dumb thing entwined. (116:33–6)

Although the death of the dog brings to light the full extent of the woman's economic deprivation, the exchange of affection compensates for all the losses of her life. Where there is love, there is hope, we learn, since the childless mother still has a loved body to weep over. Indeed, for Garber, 'what is lost with the dog is a space for feeling' (248). The last two stanzas explain the significance of the antithetical title of the poem as the speaker learns about the death of an unlamented and companionless woman at the hospital. This time, no one, not even the hospital staff, can offer their share of love: 'Fair sisters, could you not spare them / Some few short love-hours only' (116:42–3). For *Australie*, dogs are social love-machines, since their affection fosters the only social link available for the destitute.⁴⁷ Both *Australie* and Cook distort the features of the conventional bourgeois pet elegy by using the latter to denounce social injustice. The traditional family model is either nonexistent or ineffective in a society grounded in the values of the market. Rather than portraying possessive attachment that eventually leads to more domination, such works focus on the space for interspecies communication grounded in equality, sharing and mutual understanding.

While Cook and *Australie* used the coded genre of the elegy to convey their denunciation of the society of their day, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, writing under the pseudonym of Michael Field, adapt the elegiac code to the requirements of less earthly matters: the elaboration of their aesthetic, emotional and religious project. *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (privately published in 1914) is composed of a sequence of 30 poems, written shortly after the death of their beloved chow in 1906. The dog's body is pictured as a mediating figure that helps the two lovers rekindle the passion of their own relationship. The intensity flooding out of their dog's body opens up new possibilities, galvanising their collective identity and transferring the energy and freedom of its desire to the two lovers, completing a holy trinity of piety and love.⁴⁸

Although critics have often denigrated this work, claiming that it deals only with a memorialised house pet, David Banash has argued that its significance goes

⁴⁷ Simons relates Dante Gabriel Rossetti's obsession with his wombat – alive, dead, and preserved by the taxidermist – to the various emotional traumas of his life. Rossetti's pet became a love token that memorialised and materialised the expectations and failures in his personal life.

⁴⁸ 'Trinity' is the title of one of the poems. The two poets converted to Roman Catholicism in 1907.

much further, opening up new literary and emotional possibilities: 'In short, the animal provides a new possibility for the lovers of the poems to develop, experience and articulate an emotional intensity for each other – an intensity inconsistent with heterosexual, patriarchal definitions and expectations of women' (197). These possibilities remain accessible even after death since the last poems show that the poet's heart has been galvanised for eternity by the dog's love and physical intensity. Although written in memory of an adored dead pet, these poems have little in common with other poems of the genre, since the poems keep death at a distance by referring only to the force of life. The craze for memorialisation and its macabre paraphernalia are missing from Field's elegies whose strong Catholic faith celebrates the physical and mystical integrity of the body. The faithful pet becomes a kind of psychopomp, a messenger leading souls to a better world.

As typical representations of Victorian sentimentality, dogs are memorialised and even gain a certain degree of "saintliness" because they behave as humans should do, but often do not. Numerous romanticised tales of fidelity have turned dogs into inconsolable mourners.⁴⁹ For example, Elizabeth Gaskell narrates how after her death, Emily Brontë's mastiff, Keeper, followed his mistress's hearse (230). Similarly, Edward VII's terrier Caesar was 'delegated by Queen Alexandra to follow the coffin in the procession from Westminster Hall on its way to Windsor' (Gibson 70–71). The tales of faithfulness are no female prerogative. Both William Wordsworth and Walter Scott wrote versions of the story of Foxie, the female terrier that watched over her dead master's body for three months in the mountains of the English Lake District.⁵⁰ The last poems under scrutiny in this section are part of the same tradition, concerning not dead dogs but faithful ones, watching over their former masters' dead bodies. Beyond their focus on mourning dogs, the two poems to be considered here have in common the fact that they are ekphrastic works, that is to say poetic descriptions and commentaries on paintings. Despite these similarities, we shall see that they nevertheless offer two very different images of animal grief.

The image of Greyfriars Bobby, the Skye terrier that mourned its master and visited his grave in Edinburgh Greyfriars Kirkyard for 14 years, has been constantly retold and reinvented. The narrative is composed of sentimental layers of memorialisation stacked upon each other: a simple marker was first placed in the cemetery where its master was buried; then a granite fountain with a statue of Bobby placed on top was added in 1873. The American writer Eleanor Atkinson wrote a children's novel about the eponymous dog in 1912 and two children's movies in 1961 and 2005 completed the story of the faithful dog. Today the Scottish tourism industry benefits hugely from the dog's fame, organising "authentic" Bobby tours and selling a large range of Bobby-themed products.

⁴⁹ The craze for the commemoration of famous dogs has not waned with today's readers, who are still eager for stories of canine loyalty and courage. See Sumpter.

⁵⁰ See Mangum 'Animal Angst' 19–20. She briefly discusses William Wordsworth's 'Fidelity' and Walter Scott's 'Helvellyn'.

Another less marketable item may be added to the long list of memorabilia: the poem 'Greyfriars' Bobby' (circa 1873), by the Scottish author Catherine Miller Mitchell (dates unknown). The work was probably inspired by a lost painting by the Edinburgh-born animal painter, Gourlay Steel (1819–1894), and was written around the time the statue was erected. As an ekphrastic poem, it retells the same story as that portrayed in Steel's original, and thereby enhances the artistic impact of the original work. The mere existence of Miller Mitchell's poem testifies to the emotional impact of the Scottish terrier's story and subsequent memorialisation on her contemporaries. While Miller Mitchell adds her own layer of emotion and confirms the national craze for dog memorialisation by staging death in a more sentimental way, she also rewrites the dog narrative as a celebration of national pride and identity, placing the story (and herself) within a broader context.

With its long list of elegies and acrostics, Miller Mitchell's book *Sea Weeds*, from which 'Greyfriars' Bobby' is drawn, is certainly a book about death; but under closer inspection, it turns out to be above all about *Scottish* death. The poem first presents the irrepressible dog, 'hallowing the spot with love's deep devotion' (19:2), as the living embodiment of the dead man's memory. In the second part, the speaker praises the dog's freedom, first because, being a masterless dog, it is not subject to tax, therefore to earthly matters such as monetary transactions, and second because it is the living symbol of Edinburgh's prestige, faithfully serving 'Edina's honour' (19:12). Giving Edinburgh the Latin name previously popularised by Robert Burns⁵¹ (even if the epithet 'Auld Reekie' would no doubt have been more appropriate in 1873) and alluding to Steel's painting, Miller Mitchell situates her poem in the Scottish poetic and pictorial tradition and herself in the artistic canon. She participates in the construction of a national culture by feminising national identity as she grounds it in love, transmitted as an epitaph on a memorial. Steel's painting – as well as Miller Mitchell's poem – aims at '[h]anding to ages down [Bobby's] grateful love – / A lasting and a highly prized memorial' (19:15–16).

As there was never a grave for Bobby or even a body to bury – the Law frowned on burying dogs alongside their masters⁵² – Miller Mitchell's poem constitutes a memorial that celebrates the love and devotion of one of Edinburgh's most faithful inhabitants: a dog. Bobby, first stretched out on a bare slab, is finally buried alive, the poem itself becoming that absent memorial and playing its role in the construction of national identity. Dogs have their role to play in the construction of national pride and prestige. Miller Mitchell's dog finds a final resting place in the poem's consecrated ground; and 'Greyfriars' Bobby' becomes the literary

⁵¹ The first line of Robert Burns's 'Address to Edinburgh' (1786), a praise of the city's past and present glory, reads: 'Edina! Scotia's darling seat!'

⁵² Such was indeed the case in 1873. However Marjorie Garber writes about the American pet cemetery in Bonheur Memorial Park, one of the very few pet cemeteries that does not ban the practice today. See Garber 271.

memorial for the flesh and blood canine and a site from which national identity can be contemplated.

'The Shepherd's Chief Mourner' (1875) by Agnes R. Howell (dates unknown) is her response to Sir Edwin Landseer's immensely popular painting, entitled *The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner* (1837). Reproduced in print form and widely circulated among art and dog lovers,⁵³ Landseer's animal paintings were often dismissed by art critics as 'bywords for cheap sentimentality' (Donald 127). But it is precisely the work's focus on animal feeling that is said to have influenced Darwin and sparked his reflections on dogs in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Landseer's paintings were illustrations – or rather anticipations – of what Darwin tried to prove: that instinct alone cannot explain the full range of animal expressions. For Diana Donald, '[A]nimals' lack of religious belief, and their presumed exclusion from the life of the spirit that survives death, had traditionally been a criterion for the distinction between them and mankind' (158). But Landseer's paintings, and *The Shepherd's Chief Mourner* in particular, 'were emotive moral dramas, in which the mentality of animals and its relationship to that of humans, were the real subject' (127). Darwin even suggested that animals were capable of a kind of religious feeling.

Landseer's painting is about loss and deprivation of all kinds, since even hope has died with the presence of the Bible lying uselessly shut on a stool. No solace is to be expected from humans and little from God either. With the portrayal of the silent and devoted collie whose head rests on his master's coffin, Landseer invites those looking at the painting to probe the dog's confused mind. Humans are excluded from the mourning scene that centres on the dog's silent response when faced with the mystery of death. Howell's poem was written only three years after Darwin's book was published, and shows her ill at ease with Landseer's and Darwin's hints regarding the existence of an animal mind and, a fortiori, an animal soul. The first two stanzas deal with absence and loss, with the enumeration of now useless objects and with the preterition that evokes the mourners missing from the scene: 'No wife, no child, not e'en a friend' (62:3). Therefore Howell cannot do without humans whose influence is felt indirectly through the dog's moral values – faithfulness, loyalty, nobleness, love and sincerity – and through the anthropomorphic expression of its loss: 'Sad watch he keeps, with wistful eye' (62:11).

But Howell replaces thought with instinct and action with behaviour, therefore providing a mechanistic explanation for what Darwin or Landseer saw as the dog's subjectivity. Eileen Crist describes the opposition between action and behaviour: 'Action originates in thought, while behavior is the output of the body;

⁵³ Victorian poets wrote ekphrastic poems about Landseer's paintings after having seen popular reproductions in magazines or on cheap prints. This is probably the case with Alice Argent who wrote 'The Challenge', interpreting the painting called 'Monarch of the Glen' (1851) in more Darwinian terms, namely the stag waiting for its rival. See Argent 59–60.

behavior is something that happens to an organism or an object, while action is performed by an agent or a subject' (213). Surprisingly, all the anthropomorphic signs deciphered by the speaker in the dog's attitude are explained by instinct: 'An instinct sure obeys' (62:16) the poem bluntly concludes, as if to provide a non-negotiable explanation for the dog's sense of grief. However, the adverb seems to leave unresolved the speaker's real views.

There is no doubt that the poems of Catherine Miller Mitchell and Agnes R. Howell conform to the conventions of the maudlin depiction of mourning, a salient hallmark of Victorian representations of the subject; but because they are rewritings, they also bring an extra commentary on official and widely circulated representations of dog mourning. The extra layer of sentimentality added to the already monumentalised visual representation is the sign of the poet's participation in the social discourses linked to death practices. But in very different ways, the mourning dog poem conveys personal reflections, whether memorialisation be a pretext for the construction of national identity or for speculation about the nature of animal grief. In their pet elegies, women poets feminise the poetic form in order to deliver a personalised message absent from the male pet elegy, not to mention the traditional elegy. It is through the exploration of what should perhaps be called the "womanimal" bond that women poets engage with all sorts of issues related to the survival of the soul, the development of creative power or national identity. These are subjects that go well beyond the usual scope of the sentimental poem and the alleged preoccupations of middle-class minor poets. Linked to the natural understanding between women and animals is the question of the poetic construction of animal consciousness and identity. This will be the subject of the following section that will explore poetical forms that allow for the emergence of animal identity.

'A Tale of all Tails'

It is first through a recognition of their difference, and second through the emergence of an animal voice that does not simply complain or lament that animal identity is elaborated in the following poems. Many of the poems discussed so far in this chapter portray pets as individuals, even family members, but generally firmly set in anthropomorphised environments. However, certain animal poems look for other ways to individualise the beloved family pets but also other animals, not only by memorialising them but, on the contrary, by breathing life into them. The kaleidoscopic multiplication of parrots in Barnes's novel and the multilayered interpretation of the parrots in Victorian women's verse illustrate that the archetypal vision of animals or species constructed in Western culture could be subjected to critical examination. This is the purpose of Mary Howitt's playful poem, 'A Poetical Chapter on Tails'. Children beg their father for a tale before going to bed. They will hear 'a tale of all tails', starting with the tail of a cat, a most enigmatic appendage for those who are not familiar with body

language: 'Now this tail can express / All passions, all humours, than language no less' (*Tales in Verse* 205:7-8). The poem moves on to evoke the tails of other creatures – mammals, invertebrates, insects, birds and fish – and ends on a humorous note with metaphorical tails: pigtails, cat-o'-nine-tails and the tail of a comet. Beyond the playful surface of the children's poem, Howitt displays her familiarity with animal behaviour through proto-Darwinian ethological remarks about animal body language, the 'tale of tails', that place the animal back in its natural environment. Howitt presents natural history as a tale that teaches no moral lesson, as it rather defamiliarises and individualises animals that have their own personal and independent story and identity. 'The tail is a capital index of mind' (207:32) for the poet who does not believe that animals simply behave according to instinct but know how to do things with tails.

For some poets shaping their poems like lists of animals, very often birds, the aim is to mirror God's generous creation, but the form can also be used to deny the relevance of subjective classification that downgrades some species, generally for cultural reasons. Placing 'the whistle of the woodland robin' on an equal footing with 'the paean of the cloud-piercing skylark' (xii), Eliza Cook challenges both cultural prejudices and poetic tradition. Barbara Gates observes that Cook's bird poems certainly 'attempted to characterize birds from the inside out in order to gain greater sympathy for them' (*In Nature's Name* 92), but they also illustrate Cook's democratic worldview, that of an egalitarian and free society in which everyone, animal and human, has their part to play. For this reason, it is worth noting that the poem 'Birds', presenting more than 20 species, was first published on 11 November 1843 in the Chartist organ, *The Northern Star*. In this work, Cook wishes to say that it is precisely because they are all different that birds are equal. With their bird's-eye view, these 'pilgrims' can testify that 'Chance and change are everywhere, / Riches here and ruins there' ('Birds' 214:23-4), making the accumulation of wealth and privilege an invalid criterion for happiness. The carrion crow and the ostrich are therefore as legitimate as the robin on the poetical stage and in nature's wider scheme, and are even given a voice of their own in Cook's 'Song of the Carrion Crow' or 'Song of the Ostrich'.

The birds that have been excluded from the poetic canon are thus brought back into the poetical fold, while some emblematic birds in Western culture are granted an unconventional and unsuspected identity. By denaturalising animals and portraying their unorthodox features, women poets welcome into their animal poem 'a kaleidoscope of conflicting meanings' (J. Williams 10), since cultural and aesthetic categories challenge the figurative birds of the poetic canon. Such a feature can be observed over the whole period of this study. Barrett Browning's 'Bianca Among the Nightingales' (1862) is a case in point. The poet eschews the innocuous, solitary and almost invisible bird of Christian and Romantic poetry in favour of a much more complex identity, conveyed by the repetitive patterns and serpentine alliterations in [s] of the nightingales' mesmerising song, one that reminds the poem's female speaker of the end of her love affair:

Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,
They sing for hate, they sing for doom!
They'll sing through death who sing through night,
They'll sing and stun me in the tomb --
The nightingales, the nightingales. (*The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 562:140-44)

Similarly, the speaker in Michael Field's 'Nests in Elms' finds immediate sensuous pleasure in the rooks' songs even if these birds, unlike the robins or skylarks of pastoral and Romantic poetry, have never been traditionally associated with any epiphanic experience. Their songs, like letters in runes, evoke the glory of a pre-Christian and preindustrial past when the rooks had not yet acquired their later reputation as birds of ill omen. Unlike nightingales, their 'cry is harbinger / Of nothing sad' (Leighton and Reynolds 499) and indicates neither loneliness nor death, contrary to the myth developed in Western culture since Ovid's tale of Procne.⁵⁴ The poets wish for the song of the rooks on their deathbed as a hopeful sign that life in nature is eternal.

While some women poets talk *for* animals, siding with and speaking out for these subordinate creatures, others start talking *to* or *with* animals, creating a dialogue with friends or allies that are considered to share the same social environment. In some poems, readers are made aware of the poets' attempts at creating animal identity as they hear the voices of *talking animals* that take charge of their discourse and aim at more autonomy and self-definition. Their voices will never truly threaten the pillars of Victorian society, because they remain the voice of defenceless animals in inconspicuous poems, but at least they constitute a force of resistance against various forms of domination, be they poetical or political, by offering an alternative way of apprehending nature that is not left to male poets or scientists who claim the riches of nature for themselves.

The animal poem has certainly a less anthropomorphic character than the pet narrative, precisely because of its aesthetic specificities. The animal poems that attempt to reproduce the sounds of nature – and not only translate its moral message – allow a kind of mongrel voice to be heard. The zoanthropic tones speak against the cultural construction of animals as inferior mute creatures, offering animals the possibility to be present as actors on the poetical stage. The nascent hybrid or polyphonic voice becomes apparent when the poet starts questioning the impermeable boundaries between animals and humans. In *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, Harriett Ritvo has explored how some bizarre exotic species cast doubt on the received principles of Linnaean classification, with some creatures confounding established scientific and cultural categories. The poems selected for analysis here try to enact animal speech by playing with their own kinds of boundaries and categories, those of speech types. The hybrid utterance, a kind of

⁵⁴ Philomela, a Greek princess, was raped and had her tongue cut out by her brother-in-law, Tereus. Her sister, Procne, fed him the flesh of their son. The gods eventually changed the two sisters into birds, a swallow and a nightingale.

ventriloquistic experience, is created by the emergence of a series of nonverbal and expressive indicators. Some women poets attempted to transcribe animal language or sounds as accurately as possible, through various poetical experiments. In her comprehensive study of talking animals in children's literature, Cosslett refers to only one attempt at transcribing animal language, that of Kipling's wild animal stories, an experiment aimed at connecting native and animal speech (133). John Clare's attempt to reproduce the authentic language of nature through formal manipulation, unique in early Victorian poetry, should also be mentioned in this context. In 'The Progress of Ryhme' (sic) in particular, Clare, a skilled ornithologist, attempted to transcribe the natural sounds made by birds, as he heard them, not as he interpreted them. Here is the result for the nightingale's song:

'Chew-chew Chew-chew' – and higher still
 'Cheer-cheer Cheer-cheer' – more loud and shrill
 'Cheer-up Cheer-up cheer-up' – and dropt
 Low 'tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug' and stopt
 One moment just to drink the sound
 Her music made and then a round
 Of stranger witching notes was heard
 As if it was a stranger bird
 'Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur
 Woo-it woo-it' could this be her
 'Tec-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew
 Chew-rit chew-rit' and ever new
 'Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig'. (*Major Works* 158–9:249–61)

This project contrasts strongly with the conventional rendering of birdsong, seen for example in the work of the Romantics. Only one comparable example has come to light in Victorian women's poetry. Scottish poet Dorothea Ogilvy aimed to get as close as possible to authentic sounds in several bird poems such as 'The Thrush or Throstle' and 'The Sky Lark'. She included the transcription of the thrush song, 'Tirree, wee cheechee, tirree, wee cheechee, / Chiouity, chiouity, too, too' ('The Thrush or Throstle' 60:1–2), and that of the skylark, 'Tirralee, Tirrala, Tirralee' ('The Sky Lark' 56:13); replacing for example the conventional 'cheep' with the phonetically accurate 'chee'. The rendering of the thrush's song does not result from a culturally constructed perception and arrangement of sounds but follows a natural, rhythmic pattern.

A second technique in the construction of animal identity involved formal manipulations that aimed to offer a more authentic rendering of animals' lives. In 'Sea Birds: A Song', Ogilvy adapts a conventional format commonly used by female nature enthusiasts and poets, that of the bird name list.⁵⁵ Ogilvy departs

⁵⁵ See, among many other occurrences, the examples of Cook's 'Birds', Dorothea Ogilvy's 'Birds and Buds', or Edith Nesbit's 'May Song' that contain lists of countryside bird species.

from convention, however, in trying to depict bird flight in an unmediated manner, by eliminating all conjugated verbs and replacing them by -ing forms or by combinations of adjectives or names that endeavour to reproduce the energy of the sea birds' flying style. The alternating use of dimeters and tetrameters reproduces the changing rhythm of the birds in flight:

Whistling and wailing,
 Swinging and sailing,
 Darting and skimming,
 Diving and swimming,
 Over and away, over and away,
 Over and away in the golden ray,
 Flapping and screaming,
 Floating and gleaming,
 The blue sea mew and the grey curlew ... (32:1–9)

The mimetic quality of poetic language can help portray the behaviour of other sorts of animals. Even the most anthropophilic ones, it turns out, like 'Rough', the ironically named dog of a middle-class household depicted in the eponymous poem by Rose E. Thackeray (dates unknown). Despite its conventional lifestyle, Rough is presented to the reader with innovative narrative technique. The sequence of prominent moments in a dog's life is expressed through the successive dimeters that convey the genuine excitement of a bourgeois dog which contrasts strikingly with the uneventful life of his mistress:

Hungry is,
 Wants grub!
 Saturday,
 Into tub,
 Washed clean,
 Looks white,
 Goes out,
 Wants to fight!
 Gets licked,
 Pluck down
 Finds solace
 In a bone. (99–100:9–20)

Thackeray attempts here to enter into the animal's mind through the exploration of certain types of discourse, removed from the naturalist's empirical knowledge. Anthropomorphic descriptions are summoned for a more convincing construction of animal identity. The hybridity of the dramatised voices, staging pets that play opposite their mistresses, turn them in a way into actors in their own decisions and lives, as with Howitt's 'The Carolina Parrot'.

The most commonly used form of speech hybridisation in the period is that of legal discourse; a form that helps animals testify in court and speak up for their own

rights in scenes that look like modern versions of medieval animal trials. An early version of this late-Victorian subgenre can be found in 'The Mouse's Petition' (1771) by Romantic poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825). The poem was so popular in the late eighteenth century that it is said to have influenced Robert Burns's 'To a Mouse'. The poem takes the form of a first-person plea addressed to Dr Priestley, who was using mice in his experiments on the composition of air and it turns into a denunciation of the treatment meted out to all sorts of imprisoned animals and humans.⁵⁶

Anna Knox's similarly themed 'The Thrush's Petition' (1898) is a transposition of Barbauld's poem from the laboratory to the Victorian parlour, with a thrush begging to be freed from its cage and from its mistress's sentimental exploitation. The bird in its cage uses legal parlance to defend its cause, a request to be freed and reunited with its mate. The poem stands for the bird's plea, defended with all the conviction of prisoners testifying in their own defence when hope for release has faded away. The legal setting gives credence to the bird's voice whose miserable situation is counterbalanced by the rhetorical energy, born of a combination of desperation and determination:

Kind are you, but I cannot live,
I will not live within this cage:
The Dainty fare you fain would give
Avails not sorrow to assuage. (20:9–12)

While Barbauld's and Knox's poems simply borrow the words of the testifying animal in their sentimental poem, Nina Frances Layard (dates unknown) integrates legal terms in the body of the poem, giving more leverage to the voice of animals. Layard's 'The Sparrow's Defence' (1890) takes the form of a political tract, taking issue with the prejudices that lead to the denigration of sparrows, those seemingly useless urban birds that have never attracted the nature-loving poet's attention. In the epigraph to the poem, Layard quotes a brief report from the *Standard*, dated 7 April 1887:

What little character the Sparrow ever possessed has of late years been so rapidly disappearing that the accusation which several correspondents now bring against him will probably put a finishing touch to the tale of his iniquities. He is destroying the crocus beds. (139)

The poet seeks to rehabilitate sparrows which, unlike the beloved city canaries, are unfit for the market of domesticity.

Contrary to Howitt who makes Jack Sparrow, 'The bully of his tribe – to all beyond, – / The gipsy, beggar, knave, and vagabond!' (*Sketches of Natural History or, Songs of Animal Life*, 'The House-Sparrow' 78:167–8), a selfish and homeless

⁵⁶ See Bellanca 47–67. It was anti-vivisection fiction that gave a most realistic picture of the physical sufferings imposed on animals.

bird that will not sing for the pleasure of poets, or Caroline Bowles Southey who is constantly reminded by these urban birds, 'vile, pert, noisy things' ('The Birthday' 64), that London's green spaces are only some figment of the imagination, Layard chooses to give the sparrow a chance to defend itself from the prisoner's dock:

Said a sparrow to a crocus,
'You are trying to provoke us
By obtruding on the public an imaginary woe;
For though *Passer Londinensis*
Has been noted for offences,
We were only *passing Bills* about the crocuses, you know'. (139:1–6)

But as birds do not abide by human laws, they cannot be accused of destroying the flowerbeds arranged for the mere visual pleasure of Londoners. Indeed, by literally replacing the power of the law by the efficiency of its beak, the sparrow proves that legislation is irrelevant to the avian population and that its feeding behaviour is no less valuable than human gardening. Giving birds a legal status so that they can defend their own rights allows the line separating animals and humans to be shifted. Unlike the mute animals put in the dock during medieval trials, these birds do not choose to be represented by human legal counsel, preferring to construct their own defence and accordingly their identity.

Conclusion: *Ceci n'est pas un animal*

We have seen in this chapter that Victorian women poets made use of the conventional affinity between humans (especially women) and animals, drawing variously on both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism as a discursive strategy to engage with hegemonic social and cultural forces. Embracing pets as they do other naturally female-oriented elements like flowers, gardens and fairies, they seize on the idea that they share distinctive features with like-minded animals. The boundaries between denaturalising the animal and naturalising the pet are very thin and become thinner still when the poetic medium focuses on voice, hence bringing to the fore questions of authority and identity.

The relevance of potential natural affinities was considered long before Charles Darwin's thesis on the evolutionary continuum, but it is worth noting that the publication of the naturalist's works encouraged women poets to acknowledge and make use of the conception of affinity in their poems. In particular, his penultimate work, *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872, contributed to further constructing animal subjectivity by emphasising the continuity of biological, morphological, behavioural and mental features, with humans and animals seen to share emotions and also the means to express them. Darwin thus radically modified conventional views of animals and provided a scientific argument for those wishing to see human beings removed from their perch of domination. Reading H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) in the

light of Darwin's evolutionist writings, Carrie Rohman explores the emergence of a new approach to animal identity: 'Darwin's insistence that differences between humans and other animals are differences of degree rather than kind radically problematized the traditional humanist abjection of animality, particularly in its purified Enlightenment form' (22).⁵⁷

Even if the modern discipline of ethology is generally considered to have emerged in the 1930s, Victorian readers of natural and animal poetry were very likely to encounter poems directly inspired by the contemplation of works of natural history and ornithology. But what women poets wanted to make clear in their poetry was that animals were *individuals*. Therefore, they sought to demonstrate that there are no such things as "animals" en masse, but only sentient pets, family members, cherished and mourned, or citizens each with its own rights as an individual. The purpose of animal studies is to challenge the overbearing anthropocentric position that reifies creatures serving man's interests and seeks to restore to animals a rightful subjective position. However, such an endeavour may have ambivalent consequences, widening the human/nonhuman gap even more and othering animals, hence accentuating essentialist traits. In the wide range of animal poems, Victorian women poets always renegotiate the physical and sentimental distance and alleged affinities they establish with pets, which highlights how difficult it is to construct animal identity. Such affinities, often constructed by women themselves, were also a double-edged sword, since, by portraying women as "naturally" more sensitive to animals, they risked portraying themselves as subordinate, fragile and inferior creatures, thereby diluting the message of their own cause.

Naturalising the pet or denaturalising the animal, namely questioning the animal/human link, causes potentially significant disruption on both the social and poetical levels. For example, pets play a large part in the construction and deconstruction of the middle-class precisely because of their double status as pets – social animals – and as animals. Jed Mayer regrets that the interest of those engaged in Victorian studies has functioned to further widen the interspecies gap:

Scholars of Victorian literature and culture have enriched our understanding of the ways animals were used in a variety of discursive practices during the nineteenth century. Yet this interest in the symbolic value of animals has tended to displace attention from animals themselves. (348)

It is true that the studies of Victorian animal representations have often stimulated research on the social dimension of the human/nonhuman bond. Providing pets with a significant role in human societies certainly threatens the animal component of their identity, but it also considerably enhances the positive function they are assigned. Their high degree of sociability – their perfect integration in the human physical and cultural environment and their social functions – helps to reinforce

⁵⁷ Ritvo notes 'a lot of free-floating resistance to the very idea of system' (*Platypus* 23) as early as Buffon's lack of enthusiasm for the idea of arrangement and classification.

the interspecies continuum that also enables animal empowerment. The core interest of some poems is the *relation* between animals and humans, not simply using cats, dogs and birds as mere ciphers or metaphors for human behaviour.

The study of women poets' relation with nature so far in this book, whether with flowers, gardens or animals, has shown how cultural constructions could be explored, questioned and sometimes challenged, and another layer of meaning unveiled beneath the idealisation of natural affinities. Animals join the list of all the women poets' beloved creatures; yet, unlike poems about the nonsentient inhabitants of the natural world that challenge the relevance of language and of social codes, animal poems raise the question of *identity*, a central issue for those on the margins of society and art. Paraphrasing Magritte's famous title, it is tempting to conclude that 'this is not an animal'; that animal poems sometimes do not portray animals at all, but illustrate rather how women poets interacted with their social and artistic environment.

As the exploration of animal poems in this chapter has demonstrated, it is impossible to take the poem out of its cultural context, a context shaped in important ways by contemporary developments in science. The next chapter will explore the influence of those scientific discourses and how they contributed to politicising the nature poem. In their poems popularising existing scientific theories or advancing new ones, Victorian women used poetry as a tool to observe nature with their own distinctive lenses, seeking to disseminate scientific knowledge and claim for themselves a rightful place among those seeking to understand and interpret the natural world. We shall see that through their poetical rewriting, interpretation and appropriation of scientific theory, they often revealed a marked dissatisfaction with the dominant patterns of contemporary thinking. Where some rejected mainstream science outright, others would choose to supplement theories they considered incomplete with their own views on what science could and should provide for the betterment of society. Whatever the approach chosen, Victorian women poets consistently offered their *own* vision of science and nature; scrutinising the natural world, not with a view to confirming natural *affinities* but rather to finding natural *allies* to support their own social commitment, one grounded in morality and hope.

and femininity or on the contrary merely confirmed their solidity. Just as this book has examined female resistance to dominant gender-based social practices and literary codes, more needs to be discovered about whether that resistance led to counter-resistance on the part of male poets.

The further study of male pet poetry and male pet elegies would be a useful way of addressing these themes. The question of the gendered construction of feeling is interesting in this respect, calling to mind Kipling's 'The Power of the Dog' in which he wonders: 'Should we give our hearts to a dog to tear?' (Ed. Carmela Ciuraru, *Doggerel* 21:34). Male pet elegies, for example Byron's 'Epitaph to a Dog', Southey's 'On the Death of a Favourite Old Spaniel', Arnold's 'Geist's Grave' or Hardy's 'Last Words to a Dumb Friend', are particularly significant when it comes to exploring male authors' contribution to sentimental poetry. Thomas Hardy in 'A Popular Personage at Home' even uses the sentimental poem to address the question of animal conscience. Mongrels were of special interest to female poets, as we have seen; but do Arnold's 'Kaiser Dead' and Hardy's 'The Mongrel' respond similarly to the questions of gender, class or race? Further research is needed to find out the answer.

This study began with May Probyn's 'To T. Westwood', a dedicatory poem to the poet who had accompanied her first timid steps into the horticultural Pantheon of verse. We shall end it with another dedicatory poem, one addressed this time by a poet to her own book. In this poem entitled simply 'To My Book', a possible allusion to Byron's and Southey's famous exhortations to their own books, Scottish poet Margaret Wallace boldly wishes the best of luck to her 'precious seed' in its quest for fame and recognition. Given the task of fertilising other more ambitious soils, it will have to summon up all its boldness to conquer reluctant readers and distant territories and to accept its failures along the way, along with its successes. But the Leith poet was confident that her little seed poem would one day bear fruit, fulfilling its moral mission and bringing satisfaction to its author:

Go, wing thy flight among the great and humble;
 Bestrew with "precious seed" life's tangled way;
 Let sin's intrenchments at thy presence crumble;
 And by thy light change moral gloom to day.
 Then, when o'er every region thou hast wandered,
 Return to tell me of thy loss or gain;
 And should some "fruit" have sprung from what I've pondered,
 Rejoice with me thou wert not formed in vain. (iv:1-8)

That paradoxical combination of modesty and determination may speak for all the poets discussed in this book. Clearly, there would be both 'losses' and 'gains' as those 'precious seeds' fought to establish themselves and take root in the literary and broader cultural landscape of Victorian Britain, but it was a process that would leave that landscape profoundly transformed.

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