

Negotiating inclusion and exclusion through Poetry:

The dynamics of Victorian women poets' social, political and artistic networks

Paula Alexandra Guimarães (paulag@ilch.uminho.pt)

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Early, mid and late Victorian women poets experienced and negotiated different forms of inclusion and exclusion, both within emerging and well-established social, political and artistic networks or communities. I will thus explore how the political and artistic networking of Hemans or Landon, Barrett Browning or Rossetti, and Webster, Blind or Levy, evolved in the particular context of women's poetry in the century, and whether the formation and constitution of these different groups (more restrictive or inclusive) resulted from/in a specific feminine dynamics of power.

At the early and mid-century, the profession of writing was still an extremely tough career for English women, especially if they happened to be poets. Faced with the predominant and unfair competition of male journalists and writers, and denied the conventional networking spaces available to men operating in the public sphere, women writers felt the great need to create alternative networks to ensure their professional success.

Thus, initially, these women were for the most part dependent on either more enlightened or profit-seeking male editors. The fact that *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* praised Hemans and Landon's work ¹ may reflect the paper's own editorial policies, which actively supported the work of women poets, and whose periodical voice employed a complex network of layered identities, both domestic and national. [SLIDE 3] And, indeed, though a liberal and a republican by education, with a dissenting background, Felicia Hemans's patriotic and domestic poetics, seemed to work quite well within this discursive network. And, as it seems, on both sides of the Atlantic; as Tricia Lootens observes, "nineteenth-century transatlantic culture is crucial

¹ "Earnestly and keenly alive to all the cheerful and pleasant humanities and charities of this every-day sublunary world of ours" (871). "Noctes Ambrosianæ" was a series of 71 imaginary colloquies usually set in Ambrose's Tavern in Edinburgh, which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* from 1822 to 1835.

within the development of what we have come to term the ‘poetess tradition’” (2008: 14). But, as recent criticism has unveiled (namely my own), her poetry both furthers and complicates *Blackwood’s* layered identity through its focus on folk customs, domesticity, patriotic duty, and mourning.

And Hemans’s “Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England” (1825), the most popular of poems on the migration of the British to the American continent, has mostly served to ‘spiritualise’ and ‘memorialise’ the colonial origins of the United States.² Yet, as Lootens proposes, it is also a “gendered patriotic work” as the Pilgrim Mothers take centre stage in it, helping the poetess “to perform her patriotic role of pointing to heaven as the nation’s ultimate home ground” (17). For Lootens, this suggests that the heavenly project “had clearly transatlantic national implications”, in that it now “comprised a transnational spiritual family” (18-19).

Susan Wolfson refers that this busy mother of five boys was one of the best-selling poets of her century,³ and one of the first women to make a living by writing (nationalistic) verse. Yet, Gary Kelly notes that Hemans’s initial *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819), do “present [national] conflicts [but] from a [specific] Romantic feminist viewpoint, showing the deaths of individuals, communities, nations, and empires in the cycles of ‘masculine’ history” (2002: 25). Indeed, her major work, *Records of Woman* (1828), again develops the form and themes of those earlier attempts, showing the costs of this history (made of conflict, war and destruction) to individuals, especially wives and mothers, and emphasising the heroism and sacrifice of women in the face of patriarchal records. Her poetic chronicle, as Susan Wolfson adds, “was meant to elaborate a general plight of gender – of, in effect, ‘wrongs’ that were readable as transnational, trans-cultural, trans-historical” (2000: xv).

This icon sentimentalized a success born of industry and facility, business acumen and alertness to the literary market, as well as talent. Adept in a range of genres and verse forms, literate, imaginative, and intellectually appetitive, Hemans fashioned popular themes with a transhistorical, international range of subjects, drawing on literatures past and present, English and Continental. Her

² The poem was first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1825), then in the *League* (Boston, 1826). It went through several editions until the 1880s, and was often printed as a gift-book with engravings.

³ According to Wolfson, between 1808 and 1835, nineteen volumes of her works appeared, some in multiple editions. By the 1820s, with increasingly appreciative reviews in the establishment press and a regular presence in popular magazines and ornate annuals, “Mrs. Hemans” had emerged as England’s premier “poetess”.

books were cherished gifts and prizes; many poems were public favorites, memorized and anthologized, illustrated and set to music.⁴

Significantly, in her tribute poem “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans” (1835), Letitia Landon praises her work and draws a connection between the two of them as writers. She suggests that Hemans’s work is memorable and how, through poetry, she has earned a place in history to be remembered. The poem creates this bond between Landon and Hemans - that she has another female poet to look up to and follow in her footsteps. That, in spite of their differences, they both seem to focus on the central idea of finding a place for women within history and that, by being women writers and writing poetry, they share a deeper connection.

When Landon came to the attention of William Jerdan, who was the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, she was only 14 or 15 years old, and already bookish. After the death of her father, Landon assumed financial obligations for her surviving relations, and she earned money by her prolific writing, on assignment and independently, always with an ability to judge what stylistic, generic, and thematic features were popular at the time. Known as L.E.L., Landon herself wrote hundreds of poems, mostly about art, contributing repeatedly and conspicuously to literary annuals (like *The Keepsake* and *The Amulet*) and gift books that emerged in the 1820s. [SLIDE 5] Unlike other poets, however, she went on to edit two such annuals herself, most notably *Fisher’s Drawing-Room Scrap Book*, over which she exerted virtually full editorial control and for which she regularly composed poems (referred to on the title pages as “poetical illustrations”) to accompany engraved pictures that she herself selected (Behrendt).⁵

Landon insistently writes that her aspirations involve not love but fame; even if ‘Erinna’ in *The Golden Violet* (1826) had voiced a loss of that illusion: "O dream of fame, what hast thou been to me / But the destroyer of life's calm content!" Her poetry enables its conventional readership to (mis)recognize the artificial conventions of sentimentality, even to enjoy those conventions, and certainly to buy them, while her poetry simultaneously mocks, parodies, and bitterly criticizes those sentimental illusions. Among the poets of her time to recognise and admire her were Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who wrote "L.E.L.'s Last Question" in homage, and Christina

⁴ *Casabianca* ("The boy stood on the burning deck") became a standard at recitals; Americans took *The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers* ("The breaking waves dashed high") to heart, while *The Homes of England* and *England's Dead* became virtual national anthems for the British.

⁵ Most often, each such poem is literally about a picture or statue (though her descriptions sometimes contradict the pictures).

Rossetti, who published a tribute poem entitled "L.E.L" in 1866. These, thus, in turn recognized in her precursor voice (and that of Hemans) a connection that would last for generations.

A group in a particularly unique position to create an opening for women writers was precisely the one constituted by female author-editors of feminine magazines. As Angela Leighton remarks, "many women predominated as editors of the annuals", and she mentions that Blessington and Power edited *The Keepsake* (1840-60), Hall and Mitford edited *Finden's Tableaux* (1835-41), and *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrapbook* was edited successively by Landon, Howit, Ellis and Norton (Introduction to *VWP's* Anthology, xxvi). For Angela Leighton, these "created a forum which helped to establish and professionalize the work of women writers, particularly the poets" (*ibid*). "In professional and financial terms, the annuals were of immense significance" because, for the first time for women, "they provided a reliable source of income, a practical working world, a professional status, and a framework of supportive literary friendships." (*ibid*).

And it was the poetry, particularly the women's poetry, which made the volumes so popular. Although considered for the most part trivial, sentimental and effeminate, and often offered as social gifts and remembrancers, these annuals and albums promoted a visually heightened poetry (not just elaborately decorated but also ekphrastic) and were sometimes politically critical (as Landon's slavery poem, 'The African', 1832) or challenged gender stereotypes (as E.B.B.'s 'The Romaunt of the Page', 1839).

Marlon Ross (1990) refers to the recovery of a 'cultural space' for a 'feminist poetics of affection', which could express 'a community of shared desire' based on sympathy and community, as opposed to 'the solitary quest and conquest' of male Romantics. Ross shows how the work of Hemans, Baillie and Landon completed the project of earlier 'bluestocking' poets in locating a cultural space outside masculinity. Indeed, for many women of the Victorian period, the poetry published in periodicals represented a network of influence that provided models for performing femininity. Some established later writers, such as the Brontës and Elizabeth Barrett herself, would come to recognise the role that these models had played in the creation of their own famous female characters.

Besides, though scholars have discussed the instructional nature of the writing in women's periodicals, these studies have yet to acknowledge the ways that, namely,

memorial poetry published in women's magazines presents guidance to readers through the lives of both the deceased women subjects and the living memorial poets. By placing these poems within the larger scholarly discussion about instruction offered through women's periodicals, the relevance of women's memorial poetry as a key site for the development of the identities of Victorian women can be argued.

On the other hand, the social networks between nineteenth-century spiritualism and feminism have been fairly well documented. Ann Braude, in *Radical Spirits* (1989),⁶ shows the overlapping principles between the two movements, especially how women functioned as voices (or mediums) for underrepresented people, whether they were living women struggling for their rights or deceased spirits confronting the afterlife. The role of periodicals was in connecting members of the spiritualist community, who were often "isolated" and in need of "solidarity" with others who shared their beliefs. Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room* (1990)⁷ gives a brief overview of the important British spiritualist newspapers and periodicals and how they became an apparatus for expressing the key principles of spiritualism, which included improving the rights of women because of their role in spiritualist communication with the deceased.⁸

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's esoteric interest and participation in spiritualist séances (in which, besides communicating with her dead, she could explore her mediumnic voice) goes hand in hand with her clearly interventionist role in the formation of *salons* for the political campaigns of Italy (the struggle for national unification) and of the U.S.A. (the transatlantic abolitionist networks).⁹

In her recent book, *Networking the Nation* (2015), Alison Chapman explores "how EBB was not working alone in her revolutionary poetics and politics", which culminated in the controversial publication of her *Poems before Congress* in 1860, and "how she was immersed in a dynamic network of politicized women writers who influenced her thought and writing".¹⁰ Chapman examines the most significant salons

⁶ The subtitle is *Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Mid Nineteenth Century America*.

⁷ The subtitle is *Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Victorian England*.

⁸ And John Kucich's *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (2004) devotes a chapter to spiritualist feminism in periodicals, illustrating how spiritualism was used by American periodicals aimed at underrepresented groups (women, Native Americans, and African Americans) to give them a voice in the national consciousness.

⁹ EBB's transatlantic investments were exemplified by her relationship with the New York *Independent*.

¹⁰ "The cost of networking the nation", Chapman observes, "was laid bare by the reaction in the press" to that publication, "which was denounced by the *Saturday Review* as the work of a 'denationalized fanatic'".

run by these expatriate women poets in Florence – a centre of poetic culture that attracted an unprecedented number of foreign poets in the 1840s and 1850s, and concludes that these salons “were informal, fluid and heterogeneous, bringing together a varied group of nationalities and professions, genders and classes”; significantly, one common central feature was the figure of the *improvisatrice*.¹¹

The British ones were Theodosia Trollope (known as a ‘Jewish multilingual Corinne’), Isa Blagden (defined as ‘Eurasian cosmopolitan peripatetic’) and Eliza Ogilvy (an ‘internationalised Scottish minstrel’); the North-American ones were the poet and journalist Elizabeth Kinney and the poet and spiritualist medium Sophie Eckley. Chapman argues that “these women’s identification with Italian struggles was related” not only to “the formation, grounding, and policing of bourgeois liberal identity” but that “the Risorgimento both represented and became their own struggle to achieve public, political agency – individual and collective – in their poetry.” Thus, “the poetry of the female expatriate community can be understood as a matrix producing verbal, social, and political acts”, as Chapman argues in the line of W. Slinn, a performative poetics; one that was produced by the women poet’s networking for and on behalf of a new nation. She thus detects a major shift from the poetry of lyric effusion and hyper-femininity to a much more active and muscular poetics.

It is significant that the first political poem that Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote after her semi-voluntary escape to Italy was “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”, in 1845, when the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar asked her to contribute to the cause. When she took up the commission, E.B.B. was conscious of the fact that her own family had been plantation owners for generations and that she owed her privileged situation to the work of slaves. Therefore, the task was probably faced with the deliberate intention of redeeming herself from the sins of her forefathers. Constructed in the form of a complex dramatic monologue, it gives voice to a black woman slave who had been raped by her white master and who, to prevent the perpetuation of discrimination, takes the final dramatic gesture of murdering her mixed-blood baby-child. Given EBB’s feelings of complicity or guilt, it is not surprising that she wished to assume and embody this woman’s voice and performance as a form of redemption, seeming to suggest that the woman’s infanticide was justified.

¹¹ They assumed a posture modelled on Mme de Staël’s *Corinne*, the Italian improvisatrice, who combined both femininity and fame.

It is no coincidence either that the poem takes place at Pilgrim's Point in New England, the symbolic site of previous fugitives fleeing religious persecution, which recalls Hemans's earlier poem: "I stand on the mark beside the shore / Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee, / Where exile turned to ancestor" (I, 1-3). For her transatlantic critical purpose, EBB showed that the Pilgrims' descendants were now the perpetrators of the systems of tyranny that were creating further displacement and suffering.

As Michele Martinez states in her article on "Women Poets and the Sister Arts in Nineteenth-century England" (2003), the complexities of sisterhood and rivalry were experienced and expressed by several female poets and art critics, namely by Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal in the context of the so-called 'feminine Pre-Raphaelitism'. They made an impression on a literary world saturated with male voices with their thought-provoking symbolism and deep questioning of human mortality. Sister arts analogy was thus instrumental in the quest for women's legitimacy as poets. Nineteenth-century poetesses had transformed *ut pictura poesis* into *ut sculptura poeta* (as a sculpture so a poet) – they had offered their lyrical voice and body for consumption as an aestheticized object. Yet, as Martinez argues, Barrett Browning's sister arts rhetoric called for other women artists to join their ranks and "do the thing / With decent grace we've not yet done at all ... bring your statue – you have room!"

According to Jill Rappaport (*Giving Women*, 2012), "nineteenth-century sisterhood, more than a biological relationship, was also an elective affiliation, 'an achieved and achievable state of relationship to others'." Both Christina Rossetti and the sister to whom she dedicated the manuscript of *Goblin Market* were active in the communal lives and social services of Anglican sisterhoods. Maria Rossetti joined the Sisterhood of All Saints at Margaret Street. Christina later became an Associate or 'lay sister' of the St. Magdalen's Penitentiary in Highgate, participating in the work to rescue women from the margins of Victorian sexual propriety (92-3). For instance, through the Anglican sisterhood, they were able to pursue careers outside of the domestic sphere. Rossetti did not treat the sisterhood relationship as a feminist movement but instead as a support system for women. She believed in the redemptive power of sisterhood and had a utopian vision of such female communities (Rogers SEL, 2003).

Rappaport indeed locates not only the themes of Rossetti's poems but their narrative mode in this movement, claiming that "it owes them more than just its images of women's solidarity, activism and rescue." The sisterhood community viewed the

temptation of the outside world as a threat, which is the prominent theme in Rossetti's poems, namely "Noble Sisters." It emphasizes two roles for sisters, the "protector sister" and the "protected sister" (Rogers). This balance between them is only disturbed when the protected sister has a suitor, as the sisterhood worked to reduce female dependence on male figures. The rapid formation of these communities following the Oxford Movement and the rise of Anglo-Catholicism, expanded their conception to give their work new, professional status, making them appealing to and influencing a number of progressive female writers, such as Gaskell, A. Jameson and F. Nightingale.

As Rappaport states, these sisterhoods were extremely controversial, as "they challenged British and anti-Catholic sentiment", as well as "traditional attitudes toward gender roles, family structure, and Church hierarchy" (93). They also devised an alternative response to the so-called single women 'surplus' problem, which caused many women to be transported, by creating "domestic colonies at home". Besides, theirs was a "redemptive economy" as they refused to be paid for work that ought to be voluntary. By rejecting the cash-nexus of relationships, they pitted their communities against "the 'cruel' brothers of competitive markets" (95); and this gendered moral difference is emphasised in *Goblin Market*, namely through Lizzie's Silver Penny.

However, as Rappaport observes, this approach of the sisterhood did require a privileged position in terms of wealth and status – only upper and middle class women could afford to 'offer' these services. She significantly mentions that "within religious communities themselves, Indeed, "sisters were split along hierarchical lines", as working-class women were not just a minority but had to perform domestic labour and were prohibited from voting (96), thus leaving little room for them to be religious or professional saviours (97).

In the three last decades of the century, English women writers were not just actively fighting for female suffrage and higher education, but also for the creation of alternative artistic circles and selves within the male-dominated Aesthetic Movement. Judith Willson states that

Webster was part of the circle of campaigners for suffrage and education that included Emily Davies, and to which Mathilde Blind and, more distantly, Amy Levy, also had connections. When Blind died, she left a bequest to Newnham College, Cambridge, where Amy Levy had been a student seventeen years earlier. (Introduction, 3)

She thus believes that "*There is a symbolic significance in the link*". She further mentions that "Nor were they writing in social isolation" because "The networks within

which they moved – their friendships with the Rossettis and the Garnetts, Swinburne and William Morris and Eleanor Marx [...] – form recurring, overlapping patterns, as do [...] the colleges and committees and lobbying groups” (4).¹²

Closely associated with the Langham Place circle of women campaigners and reformers,¹³ having worked for the National Committee of Women’s Suffrage in the 1870s and the London School Board in the 1780s, Julia Augusta Davies (1837-94) assumed herself, from the first moment, as a professional woman writer and one with a ‘disguised’ feminist project. Thus “her ideological struggle needs to be seen in relation to the other forms of discourse in which she engaged” (Demoor, 133). She channelled her feminist anger in her writings, namely her poetry, and she negotiated her position as an authoritative critic in a world which was fundamentally hostile to women reviewers.” (134) Marysa Demoor argues that Webster’s poetry stands out as belonging to the most powerful writings of her age (the last quarter of the century): “She adapted the dramatic monologue entirely to her own ends, giving it a distinctly feminist mission.” (134)

In ‘Circe’ “she attempted what now would be labelled as a post-modern, feminist revision of the tale of Ulysses”, by focusing on the predicament of the lonely and depressed Circe, who is also “sexually eager, impatient and dominant”. In her plea of “Give me some change ... Something outside me stirring”, she reminds us of Jane Eyre’s heart-felt sigh for ‘change’ (135). But Circe’s ingrained distrust of man’s nature (which she compares to swine) is put across even more vigorously in the interior monologue of ‘The Castaway’, which voices the defensive thoughts of a prostitute in a

¹² The 1868 *Academy Notes* written by William Michael Rossetti and Charles Algernon Swinburne attacked the Victorian artworld network, while backhandedly recognizing its existence and extent. Swinburne praised art produced outside exhibition systems, critical authorities, and networked spectators. While he posed as a critical authority and wrote for a conventional periodical exhibition guide, he simultaneously unravelled these institutions along with spectators’ complacent belief in an aesthetic network they thought they understood and of which they presumed they had some ownership.

¹³ The Langham Place Circle was a feminist activist network that advocated changes in women’s employment, education, and marital law. Formed in the 1850s, it has been characterized as the first organized feminist movement in England (Caine 1997, 88). The founders spearheaded a number of reform projects, including an employment agency for genteel impoverished women, an emigration society for unmarried middle-class women, a women’s college – Girton – at Cambridge, a women-only reading room, and a law-copying office that employed women. Though most of its initiatives were centered in London, the Langham Place Circle also used its monthly magazines and public-speaking opportunities to broadcast its message, thereby creating a political community of feminist readers, including men, who recognized the twin powers of print and oral media to create change (Tusan 2005, 27–29). Scholarship on the Langham Place Circle has brought attention to both its significance as a hub of middle-class feminist activism and writing and its unique place in the mid-Victorian periodical press market, particularly its role in fostering a public feminist voice. Named after its headquarters at 19 Langham Place in central London, the group had its beginnings in 1856, when two unmarried women from progressive Unitarian families, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon), organized a parliamentary ... (<http://www.blackwellreference.com/>)

deliberately accessible language which has a pamphleteering quality. Although anger, resentment and blame for her situation are levelled against the male Other and her time's double standards, Eulalie openly recognises and psychoanalyses closely her own personal guilt as to her fate. After deconstructing these female stereotypes through her highly subversive poetry and social writings in *a Housewife's Opinions* (1879), "Webster openly confronted the reading public in her signed essays" as a reviewer in the *Athenaeum* and *Examiner*. For Webster, poetry should only fulfil a polemical or political function *if* it is written in such a way that it outlasts its message.

Mathilde Blind (1841-96), a figure interesting for her embeddedness in Pre-Raphaelite, feminist and bohemian circles, is an outstanding representative of the current of polemical unbelief that runs through Victorian literary Aestheticism (as seen, namely, in *The Prophecy of St. Oran*, 1881)¹⁴. A real scholar, feminist and political radical, Blind was an insider within the cosmopolitan world of political revolutionaries; an outsider in middle-class English life. Openly recognised as a republican writer within free-thinking communities, Blind also understood her revolt in terms of gender and she demanded education as a right for women, as James Diedrick has shown. In this she followed other women activists such as Frances Cobbe and Augusta Webster, whom she met regularly at Mary Robinson's Gower Street Salon or the Reading Room of the British Museum (and at George Sims's house). As S. Bernstein notes in her *Roomscape* (2013), these spaces "had the appearance of openness, yet required a process of admissions", which made them somewhat exclusive (77).

Blind used journalism (*Athenaeum* and *The Dark Blue*) to establish and extend her literary reputation and to promote connections between the earlier female aesthetes and the Decadent and New Women writers. Blind's decision to express her social and political activism through a feminist perspective was present in her option to write biographies of strong women figures such as George Eliot and Mary Wollstonecraft. Blind believed that republicanism would lead to a new world order that would change the position of women in society (Vadillo, *Urban Aestheticism*, 122-3). Her early poetry "attests to a strong transnational commitment to nineteenth-century democratic movements" (S. Brown). For I. Armstrong, her poetical work "shares the intensity, and sometimes the violence, of Levy, but in the attempt to create new evolutionary and

¹⁴ A medieval Scottish legend in which a young and saintly monk sins with a young woman and is killed by order of St Columba. Except that the monk stands up in his grave to tell his brothers that there is no God, only to be reburied for his blaspheming tongue.

humanist myths” (366); in particular, “she seems to have seen, in [her long Darwinian epic poem] *The Ascent of Man* (1889), evolutionary ideas as the key to reconfiguring a new myth of creativity and gender.” The poem is thus an attempt to find out how the ‘feminine principle’ might be the source of a new humanist myth.

A generation younger than Webster and Blind, Amy Levy (1861-89) was the first Jewish woman to go up to Newnham, in Cambridge’s predominantly Christian environment but, as Hetherington and Valman have written, she “was also a queer writer who had passionate attachments to other women” (*Critical Essays*, 2010: 2). Therefore, “it is as a symbol of cultural marginality that Levy has achieved iconic status” (2), one that was in turn inflated by her suicide at the age of twenty-seven. Levy’s writing engages with numerous contemporary scientific ideas, namely “those about race degeneracy and her own Jewish identity”, but her poetry “had a broader impact through its reception and dissemination in the feminist press”, forming “a significant site for the consolidation of the female poet as a New Woman” (Hetherington and Valman, 216). It provides a rich and complex discussion of femininity and sexual politics in the context of late-Victorian women’s intellectual circles. But Levy’s writing also reflects and negotiates her position both inside and outside minor (Jewish) and major (British) communities. Critics as Gail Cunningham have mentioned ‘exclusion’ and ‘unfitness’ as themes and motifs in Levy’s stories.

It is perhaps significant that, as Hetherington and Valman state, Amy Levy’s first published poem appeared in a feminist campaign journal, the *Pelican* (8). Soon after, with the probable influence of Webster, she began experimenting with the dramatic monologue, “to interrogate the relationships between race, gender, and class.” (9) At this time, she published in the *Victoria Magazine*, issued by Emily Faithfull’s woman-run Victoria Press. Her most famous monologue “Xantippe” (1880) “dramatizes women’s marginal position in the intellectual life of the university” (H and V, 1) and “it is a passionate plea for women’s education in the voice of Socrates’ wife Xantippe, who was excluded from his circle of male philosophers on account of her sex” (2). The poem was symbolically performed at Newnham in 1881, the year in which women were formally permitted to sit university examinations (2).

After travelling in the Continent by herself (as Blind had done), Levy “threw herself into London life, forging a network of intellectual and literary connections through the British Museum Reading Room” (H and V, 3). There, she met not only Webster and Blind, but also Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx. Nearly all of her friends

were socialists or social reformers and writers, including Clementina Black (a journalist and active trade unionist). In 1883, Levy joined the evolutionary biologist Karl Pearson's discussion club (a place for intellectuals of both sexes to meet) and, in 1885, her family moved to Bloomsbury – the heart of intellectual and artistic London. In the last year of her life, Levy would attend the first Ladies' Literary Dinner (chaired by Mona Caird), which had been “founded to celebrate the achievements of women writers and provide a discrete place for them to socialize and network” (4).

At this time, “Levy appears to have been setting herself up as a professional writer, earning an independent income by penning short stories for women's and society's magazines”, on the topics of sexual morality and limited opportunities for women's financial security outside marriage (H and V, 5). These were published in *Woman's World* under editorship of Oscar Wilde – a new and progressive forum for women writers. Levy also submitted two critical essays, one on the poetry of Christina Rossetti and another on “Women and Club Life”, the latter of which extols these clubs as “newly available spaces for women in London to meet and work undisturbed by the demands of domestic life” (5).

Yet, as Hetherington and Valman observe, Levy's categorization as a New Woman comes rather from her poetry, which was appropriated by feminist literary critics. These mostly seize on “Levy's dramatic monologues for their radical repudiation of civic and sexual institutions oppressive to women” and their selections “highlight her radical repudiation of marital heterosexuality, her [philosophical] pessimism, and her love poems to other women” (10). The latter are “about rejection and disappointment”, whether they “are dedicated to individual women she knew well” or “an unnamed and unresponsive, usually female, beloved” (11). Emma Francis claims that these poems offer a highly complex exploration of femininity, of sexuality and of women's relation to power.

But the title poem of Levy's second collection, *A Minor Poet* (1884), describes the suicide of a male poet, isolated and excluded by the literary establishment, thus reflecting her own concern with marginal and dispossessed voices. For Cynthia Scheinberg, Levy indeed explored the concept of ‘minority writers’ long before such category had any real cultural or critical meaning (13). And there is evidence of Levy being excluded by both British and Jewish communities: she was not invited to attend Pearson's reformed ‘Men and Women's Club’ for scientific discussions and was shunned in the Jewish quarter for her negative portrayal of this community in her novel

Reuben Sachs (1888). Besides, her love for the art critic and novelist Violet Paget was not corresponded. One irony of networks, one may thus conclude, is that their establishment, while appearing solid, is often fragile and subject to conflict because they are both inclusive and exclusive.

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