

Karen Dieleman, “Evolution and the Struggle of Love in Emily Pfeiffer’s Sonnets.” *Victorian Poetry* 54.3 (2016): 297-324.

In one of the edited collections to emerge from the foundational “Rethinking Women’s Poetry” conference at Birkbeck in 1995, Kathleen Hickok published an essay with the provocative title, “Why Is This Woman Still Missing? Emily Pfeiffer, Victorian Poet” (*Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, 1999, 373-89). In the two decades since Hickok’s essay, Pfeiffer’s poetry has become more regularly anthologized and a body of criticism on her writings has started to appear. Nevertheless, Pfeiffer still seems less well known than other late-nineteenth-century women poets – Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, May Kendall – and, as Karen Dieleman rightly points out in this article, critical work to date has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been principally concerned with issues of gender. In “Evolution and the Struggle of Love in Emily Pfeiffer’s Sonnets,” Dieleman develops a different approach through an intricate analysis of a selection of Pfeiffer’s sonnets which evidence her complex engagement with evolutionary thought across the 1870s.

In the first main section of the article, “Challenges,” Dieleman questions those critical tendencies which read individual sonnets (for example, the frequently anthologized “The Chrysalis” and “Evolution”) as typical of Pfeiffer’s thinking. She argues instead for practices of reading across sets or series of sonnets, the benefits of which she demonstrates through a sensitive analysis of seven sonnets published in *The Spectator* in 1874, and subsequently in *Poems* (1876) and *Songs and Sonnets* (1880). The result of this is a far more subtle understanding of Pfeiffer’s “sustained grappling” (301) with evolutionary ideas, which moves between interrogation of seemingly malevolent nature, suggestion of potential human resistance to this malevolence, hope that the Darwinian world which Pfeiffer fundamentally accepts may have some meaningful moral future, and a more despairing questioning of purpose. At this point, Dieleman argues, Pfeiffer is rarely able to see sustaining alternatives to Darwinian materialism.

In the following section, Dieleman considers the additional sonnets on evolution included in *Poems*, works which evidence “an ongoing disquietude that spurs the search for a good not found in evolutionary thought” (307). With some particularly sharp analysis, Dieleman considers Pfeiffer’s articulation of “The Gospel of Dread Tidings” (the title of one of the sonnets) which rejects the idea of any transcendence of natural selection. In a move which appears to draw upon Alfred Russel Wallace, and which might also gesture towards Hardy’s concept of an Imminent Will, Pfeiffer contemplates a “Will supreme” (“Dreaming”), and yet the dominant emotion here is the sense of this being an illusion. Similarly, “The Chrysalis” sees Pfeiffer exploring the possibility of a teleological model of progressive moral development, imaged through pupa-like metamorphosis. As Dieleman demonstrates, however, various linguistic shifts and structural discontinuities in the poem suggest that this is “more of an experiment in progressive evolutionary thinking than a point of arrival” (311), a position repeated on several occasions in this collection, including in “Evolution” which, when read in the context of the surrounding poems, is much more unsettling than when read singly.

The final section of the article, “The Struggle of Love,” traces Pfeiffer’s turn to an ethics of Love (significantly capitalized) as an alternative moral necessity, separate from any notion of God or Christ and “inexplicably available to combat evolutionary force” (315). Again, achieving this position is not straightforward for Pfeiffer’s

speakers as Dieleman evidences in consideration of poems from Pfeiffer's first volume, *Gerard's Monument* (1873), through to *Songs and Sonnets*. These works veer, as do the earlier considered ones, between possible hope and loss of confidence, yet what emerges through this intellectual conflict is the sense of Love as a moral force, "greater than natural law" (317) and with the potential to offer a meaningful future. Particularly interesting here is the discussion of the paired sonnets "To Dr. Wilhelm Jordan," another example of the astute treatment of relatively unfamiliar material.

Overall, Dieleman's article is insightful and persuasively argued, with a telling combination of subtle close reading and informed historicist practice. To map out this range of shifting reactions to evolution is no easy matter, and Dieleman achieves it with precision and care, relating Pfeiffer's thinking to that of many of her contemporaries, including Arnold, Blind, Howitt, Kendall, Meredith, Naden and Swinburne (a number of whom she significantly predates in terms of publication on evolutionary ideas). As Dieleman acknowledges in the conclusion, the arguments established might shift somewhat in relation to a wider body of Pfeiffer's work, and it certainly feels as if this analysis could become part of a larger project. For Dieleman's readings here have started to uncover the complex and often contradictory thinking of a particularly powerful poet who, like so many late-nineteenth-century intellectuals, struggled to make sense of the world that evolutionary ideas had ushered in.

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