

Barbara Barrow, “Queer Poetry and Darwin at the *fin de siècle*: Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden and Laurence Hope.” *Victorian Poetry* 59. 1 (2021): 97-118.

Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing degree of interest in the ways in which late-nineteenth-century women poets engaged with new developments in science. As critics such as Jason Rudy (*Electric Metres*, 2009), Emma Mason (*Christina Rossetti*, 2018), Patricia Murphy (*Reconceiving Nature*, 2019), Clare Stainthorp (*Constance Naden*, 2019) and Gregory Tate (*Nineteenth-Century Poetry*, 2020) have demonstrated, Victorian women poets were often acutely attuned to shifts in thinking in the biological and physical sciences, and their work is now also being read in relation to our own contemporary debates about ecology, climate change and the Anthropocene. Although the recent *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women’s Poetry* (ed. Linda K. Hughes, 2019) interestingly does not have a specific chapter on science, the frequent references throughout to Mathilde Blind’s evolutionary epic, *The Ascent of Man*, is one indication of the ways in which Victorian women poets as commentators on science are now firmly established in our canons.

In her article “Queer Poetry and Darwin at the *fin de siècle*: Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, and Laurence Hope”, Barbara Barrow makes an intriguing contribution to this ongoing assessment of women poets’ engagements with science. Extending previous discussions of the gendering of nature in dominant heterosexual frameworks, particularly around sexual selection and reproduction, Barrow considers a range of poems which reveal nature’s “queer possibilities” (98). Drawing on Sam See’s work in *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* (2020), which points to the ways in which modernist writers picked up the idea from Darwin that not all variations are connected to reproduction, Barrow demonstrates how late-Victorian poets were already aware of this potential “queering” of nature (98-99). Barrow establishes this argument in the article’s introduction with a beautifully poised analysis of Mathilde Blind’s “Spring in the Alps” which emphasises the non-reproductive desire, performance and energy of a dandelion, effectively “defying the male/female binary” found in Darwin’s *Descent of Man* (95). This is part of what Barrow terms, in the article’s first key section, Blind’s “Malleable Nature” (98). Arguing that *The Ascent of Man* decentres both Darwin and literary predecessors like Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, Barrow demonstrates how Blind’s key work (and especially the “Chaunts of Life” section) envisages a nature which is open and eroticised and, as with “Spring in the Alps”, at times resistant to a teleological mechanism of sexual selection.

This idea of resistance is further developed in the treatment of Constance Naden’s “Evolutional Erotics” in part two of Barrow’s article (101). As Barrow rightly notes, this group of poems has received much critical attention and yet the emphasis on how the poems question conventional gender dynamics has tended to elide their queer potential. As with her reading of Blind, Barrow is particularly concerned here with the non-reproductive aspects of Naden’s work. Some subtle readings of “Scientific Wooing” and “The New Orthodoxy” emphasise the pleasures of solitary study over heterosexual courtship, whilst “Natural Selection” is seen to reject the idea of competition between males for a mate that Darwin’s *Descent* asserts as foundational to reproduction. Also discussed here is the strange multi-temporal work, “Solomon Redivivus, 1886”, which resituates the biblical Solomon and Queen of Sheba to the *fin de siècle* where Solomon reflects upon Darwinian evolution only

to suggest that life was more “gleeful” in the more rudimentary forms of the past (105).

In the final part of the article, Barrow turns to the under-studied Laurence Hope, the pseudonym of Adela Florence Nicolson who worked in India and wrote poetry influenced by bhakti verse, a tradition of Hindu devotional poetry which has been connected with the undercutting of heterosexual norms (107). Barrow sees this in action in poems such as the intriguing “Atavism”, “Wings” and “Unanswered” which assert female sexual choice, reject monogamy and, as with Naden’s poems, challenge “conventional accounts of [...] reproductive teleology” (98). And whilst Barrow acknowledges the problems of racialised Orientalism in Hope’s verse, she rightly argues that there is much more work needed on Indian poetic responses to evolutionary ideas generally and their intersections with gender and sexuality in particular.

This is a fascinating article in many respects. Barrow provides nuanced readings of a range of poems, some familiar, some barely known, which locate queer dynamics in eroticised nature, rejection of dominant binaries, and revisions of developmental teleologies. The article consequently offers new ways of envisaging both the complexities of the influence of Darwin’s ideas in the fin de siècle and the often radical positions of women poets as they negotiated the impact of new scientific developments in their work.

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