

Introduction

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<1>It is perhaps an understatement to say that the nineteenth century witnessed enormous transformations in the scientific comprehension of the natural world. Among the many tectonic shifts in human understanding of the Earth and its inhabitants were those provided by the geologist, Sir Charles Lyell, who gave the planet a much longer history and the zoologist, Charles Darwin, who introduced a raft of evolutionary concepts. These stunningly *new* ideas - and others like them - animated the popular imagination not only about the workings of the natural world, but also in regard to the symbolic implications nature might now embody. Women writers - scientific and literary alike - were particularly invested in these conversations as they bore strong conceptual repercussions in terms of gender. At particular stake were questions about women's ontological, biological and professional relationships to nature and the "natural order."⁽¹⁾ The four articles in this issue showcase writers who absorbed and transformed scientific discourses in order to produce popular, pedagogical, scientific and aesthetic texts that infuse empirical research with domestic and "feminine" discourses, that modestly affirm women's equal rights to conceptualize and broadcast scientific knowledge or that conceptualize nature in ways that tend to affirm women's power. In short, the women writers who are discussed in this issue relied on complex epistemological and narrative strategies to rework female experience and knowledge into the received interpretations of nature, culture and science.

<2>In her essay "'Over my boundless waste of soul': Echoes of the Natural World, or a Feminine *Naturphilosophie*, in the Poetry of Emily Brontë and Mathilde Blind," Paula Alexandra Varanda Ribeiro Guimarães shows how these two poets, separated by the better part of the century, were both invested in forging a "feminine theology" that was also a "feminine" philosophy of nature. In the poems of Brontë and Blind, she finds clear evidence of a shared rediscovery of archaic matriarchal goddess cults that not only challenge patriarchal religion (and the gendered separation of spirituality and nature these imply), but make it possible for both poets to re-conceptualize nature as a powerful feminist nexus for synthesizing and personalizing spirituality, scientific analysis and physical reality.

<3>For Marianne North, the subject of Dr. Eadaoin Agnew's essay, "'An Old Vagabond': Science and Sexuality in Marianne North's Representations of India," reflection on the natural world offered quite different kinds of liberation. Agnew illustrates the ways North was invested in carving out a niche within the British scientific community, while also rebelling against its patriarchal imperialism. North's literary and visual investigations of the world's flora and fauna

not only extended her audience's knowledge of natural history and imaginative experiences of exotic natural habitats, but also gave her an arena in which to explore female independence and sexuality.

<4>In his article "Arabella Buckley and the Feminsation of Evolution as a Communication Strategy," Richard Somerset discusses one woman writer's approach to popularizing evolutionary theory for children. Somerset considers Buckley's communication strategies, which certainly derive in part from the tensions between the "empirical exigencies of science" and the "communicative requirements of popular pedagogy." In her hands, the tale of evolution becomes domesticated and fused with other powerful late Victorian paradigms (such as morality-inflected progress or the primacy of family life). Somerset considers the implications of such a strategy, asking if Buckley is best interpreted as a "radical evolutionist" who softened the edges of a polemical topic or a "radical moralist" who sought to subvert and "reform" Darwin.

<5>Like Buckley, Sarah Grand found her intellectual *métier* within evolutionary discourses. Critics have long noted the investment of Sarah Grand's novels, such as *The Heavenly Twins* and *The Beth Book*, in fin de siècle scientific discovery. In her article, "The Scientific Design of Sarah Grand's Short Story Collection *Our Manifold Nature* (1894)," Stephanie Eggermont extends this inquiry to include Grand's shorter fiction. As Eggermont notes, the late Victorian popular press juxtaposed scientific journalism with creative literary works. Grand's stories were not only originally published in the same journals that showcased scientific writing, but appropriated much of this genre's language and philosophic concerns. Eggermont shows how Grand dramatized the metaphorical impact(s) of evolutionary theories, such as sexual selection, on the women and men who populate her tales.

<6>Taken together, these articles highlight several of the ways women not only wrote about, but also reinvented, the natural world in the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

(1)These questions are articulated—and addressed—best by Barbara Gates in the important study that inspires this issue, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).(^)