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<http://www.palgrave.com/dk/book/9781137505477>

PUBLISHER

Palgrave Macmillan. Selection, introduction and editorial matter © Garin Dowd and Natalia Rulyova; Individual chapters © Respective authors

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Parker, Sarah L.. 2019. "The Muse Writes Back: Lyric Poetry and Female Poetic Identity". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/20852>.

The Muse Writes Back: Lyric Poetry and Female Poetic Identity

Introduction

This chapter examines the genre of lyric poetry, focussing on one particular aspect of that genre, the convention of the muse. The love lyric directed at the beloved muse has a lengthy tradition, from Sappho and Catullus to Petrarch, through Shakespeare, Sidney and Donne, and into the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The muse, as the conventional addressee of the lyric, plays a crucial role in enabling the poem to come into being: she is the absent presence towards whom the poet's words are directed. But the gendered positioning of the muse/poet relationship, reiterated throughout literary history, means that the lyric muse has proved a particularly problematic concept for women poets. Due to the concept of the muse, women have been consistently associated with the passive, inspiring role rather than that of active creator – that role is preserved for men. This, along with other social and cultural factors, made it particularly difficult for women poets to claim the role of poet for themselves.

In response to the issues outlined above, this chapter poses the following questions: how do women poets play with the gendered conventions of the lyric genre in order to reconceptualise the poet/muse relationship? Do they claim a muse of their own? Do they try to write as both muse *and* poet? Or do they reject the concept of the muse entirely? The first part of this chapter traces the development of the muse figure in historical poetic tradition. The second part then interrogates the problematic aspects of this concept for women poets. Finally, in the concluding section, I analyse poems from the late-nineteenth century to show how the gendered roles of poet and muse are unsettled via lyric experimentation. Before addressing these matters, however, it is crucial to define the genre of lyric poetry and the debates surrounding the role of the lyric addressee, frequently figured as the female muse.

Lyric Poetry as Genre

What do we mean when we talk of 'lyric poetry'? How has the lyric been defined as a poetic genre? In his introduction to lyric, Scott Brewster writes that '[l]yric [as a form] has proved a problematic case for genre theory. At times it is treated as a timeless, universal aesthetic disposition, at others it is identified as a generic category clearly defined by its subject matter, formal features and purposes' (2009, p.2). Indeed, the comparative literary critic René Wellek believes that 'one must abandon attempts to define the general nature of the lyric or the lyrical. Nothing beyond generalities of the tritest kind can result from it' (1970, p. 252). One immediate issue we face in defining the lyric is that, for many, lyric has become inextricably associated with poetry itself. As Rhian Williams observes: 'the lyric is the form of poetry that most people will think of when they think of poetry in general' (2009, p. 18). Broadly defined as a short poem with a single speaker expressing thought or emotion, the lyric's apparent simplicity seemingly evades further generic definition.

The problem of defining the lyric begins with Aristotle, whose *Poetics* (ca. 335 BCE) defines literary genres as epic, dramatic and lyric, but gives little further comment on what lyric actually is. Aristotle refers to 'Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and lyre in most of their forms' (1997, p.1), before moving on to discuss the dramatic genres (comedy and tragedy) in more detail. Despite centuries of debate, genre theorists continue to disagree over what exactly constitutes 'lyric' poetry, and what defines it in contrast to other poetic genres. M. H. Abrams, for example, defines it as: 'any fairly short poem, consisting of an utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought and feeling' (1993, pp. 108-9). Abrams's definition focuses on the 'I' of the lyric

poem, the speaker, but the ‘you’ or addressee plays an important role as well. Lyric is etymologically connected to song – ‘lyric’ comes from the Latin *lyricus* ‘of or for the lyre’, which itself derives from the Greek *lyrikos* ‘singing to the lyre’. This links the lyric to its original context of a public musical performance before a listening audience. In keeping with this, W. R. Johnson defines lyric as a collective genre, as: ‘a speaker, or singer, talking to, another person or persons, often, but not always, at a highly dramatic moment in which the essence of their relationship [...] reveals itself in the singer’s lyrical discourse’ (1982, p. 3). However we define it, lyric is therefore ‘fundamentally concerned with the conditions and nature of address’ (Brewster, 2009, p. 2). In keeping with its original role as public entertainment, it is both personal and public, an ‘utterance’ addressed to an unheard audience or addressee. Despite this, lyric is often understood by theorists as having: ‘no hearer beyond the poet himself, no true *you*’ (Waters, 2003, p. 3). Such a view of lyric as solitary expression derives from Victorian theorists such as John Stuart Mill, who, taking his cue from the Romantic lyric ode, in ‘Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties’ (1833) defined lyric poetry as ‘feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude’ (2014, p. 37).

The debate over whether lyric is solitary utterance or truly dialogic in nature continues into the twentieth century. Mill’s understanding of lyric as overheard speech is taken up by later influential theorists such as Northrop Frye, who argues that the ‘lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or someone else: a spirit of nature, a muse, a personal friend, a lover [...] The poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners’ (1957, pp. 249-50). According to Jonathan Culler, this address to an absent ‘you’ (termed apostrophe) forms such a central part of lyric tradition that ‘one might be justified in [...] seeking to identify apostrophe with lyric itself’ (1981, p. 137). However, William Waters reminds us that lyric address is not just a convention, but often seeks to make contact with a real, historical person, such as a literary patron or a specific intended reader: ‘Such poems *are* mindful of their addresses and are concerned to guide their uptake’ (2003, p. 4). The intended addressee is often the reader him/herself. For example, Johnson writes that in the lyric, the ‘you’ addressed is actually a ‘metaphor for readers of the poem and becomes a symbolic mediator, a conductor between the poet and each of his readers and listeners’ (1982, p. 3).

Therefore, whether they are addressed to a real person or an imagined receptive audience, lyric poems are often ‘poems that say *you* to a human being’ (Waters, 2003, p. 1). This listener or addressee, the one who is invoked by the lyric speaker, has frequently been represented as a female muse – either a goddess invoked by the poet, who grants him ability to sing or later, the beloved of the courtly love lyric. Thus, the concept of the muse is central to the lyric genre – although it has often been overlooked by critics (for example, the majority of the theorists cited above make no mention of the muse in their studies of lyric). The next section of this chapter traces the history of the concept of the muse from its classical origins to the present day.

The History of the Muse

The traditional female muse, invoked in male-authored poetry throughout centuries of Western literature, has a long, complex history. This account is in no way exhaustive, but provides a glimpse of the heritage of this key literary concept through five broad developments: the classical, the medieval, the Renaissance/early modern, the Romantic and the nineteenth/twentieth century. The nine muses have their classical debut in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (circa 700 BC). The poem opens with the shepherd Hesiod encountering the muses on Mount Helicon. In terms of their genealogy, the muses are the offspring of a union between Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Their various attributes have been further expanded on in literature following their initial appearance in the *Theogony*. They are,

from eldest to youngest: Calliope, muse of epic poetry; Clio, muse of history; Erato, muse of love poetry; Euterpe, muse of music and lyric poetry; Melpomene, muse of tragedy; Polyhymena, muse of sacred song; Terpsichore, muse of choral song and dance; Thalia, muse of comedy; and Urania, muse of astronomy and astrology.

As the daughters of Memory, the muses' original role was to help a poet remember and sing events of the past, such as the histories of gods and heroes. As Hesiod's account demonstrates, the muses' gift could bring fame and greatness to the lowliest of shepherds, for 'every man is fortunate whom the Muses love' (Hesiod, 1988, p. 6). However, power-relations between the poet and the muses are ambiguous, as they warn him: 'we know to tell many lies that sound like truth' (1988, p. 3). Therefore, although the muses themselves are infallible, they often mix lies and truth, perhaps in order to remind the mortal poet that he is merely a passive receiver of their wisdom. In writings of antiquity, the relationship between the male poet and the classical muses is often understood in terms of divine possession or *enthousiasme* – a kind of madness, described in Plato's *Phaedrus* as the 'madness [that] comes from the Muses: taking a soft, virgin soul and arousing it to a Bacchic frenzy of expression in lyric' (Plato, 2005, p.24). As Gayle A. Levy explains, for the Ancient Greeks, the muses 'are not simply a passive catalyst behind the poet's creative act. The author is the compliant recipient and the Muses fill him with their creativity, their ideas and their words' (1999, p. 13).

As Ancient Greek mythology shifted first into Roman, and then Christian culture, the concept of a divine, inspiring feminine power lived on, but became corporealised and connected to an actual, living woman. As Mary DeShazer puts it, rather than a goddess, the muse becomes 'woman spiritualized, the earthly manifestation of heavenly powers [...] a divine mediator between man and God' (1986, p. 14). Within Christianity, a key figure who embodies this mediating role is of course the Virgin Mary, a human woman who bore the divine Word on earth, and inspired countless songs of devotion from her followers. These songs of devotion eventually evolved into the courtly love tradition of the medieval troubadours which spread throughout France, Germany, Spain and Portugal during the thirteenth century. In courtly tradition, the divine and erotic aspects of the female muse are collapsed together; the muse becomes an unattainable mistress whom the poet worships, such as Petrarch's Laura or Dante's Beatrice. But though ostensibly human, these women are still connected to the divine: 'positioned somewhere between the Virgin and actual flesh-and-blood woman' (Prose, 2003, p. 5). For example, Petrarch's passion for the married Laura, who he encountered in church one day, remains unrequited: he worships her idealised beauty from afar. On her death, Laura becomes even more unattainable – and thus the ideal subject for even more longing love lyrics, collected in *Il Canzoniere* (ca.1327-1374).

Poets of the sixteenth-century such as Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard (Earl of Surrey) and Philip Sidney continued this Petrarchan tradition – for example, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) chronicles a similar desire for an unattainable woman. William Shakespeare also draws on such Petrarchan conventions in his sonnets, but begins to disrupt and parody them. Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 130' (1609), for example, inverts the conventions of the Petrarchan blazon (a term for the praising of the beloved's features in a series of metaphors), declaring: 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; / Coral is far more red than her lips' red' (2005, p. 30). In the seventeenth century, John Donne wrote a number of sensuous love lyrics such as 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' (1654) which praises the naked beloved using colonial metaphors: 'Oh my America! my new-found-land' (1963, p. 89).

Aside from lyric, the muse was also a vital tool for those writing in other poetic genres, such as epic and political poetry. For example, Edmund Spenser invokes the muse in his Christian epic *The Faerie Queene* (1596) in order to justify his move from pastoral to historical subject-matter:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
 As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,
 Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,
 For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
 And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds (1995, p. 3)

Equally, in *Paradise Lost* (1674), John Milton's 'Heav'nly' muse, Urania enables him to forge a connection between the nine muses of Ancient Greek mythology (in which Urania is the muse of astronomy) and the Holy Spirit of Christian theology. His muse will 'soar/ Above th' *Aonian* Mount' of Homer and Virgil, helping the poet 'assert Eternal Providence, / And justifie the wayes of God to men' (2000, p. 3). In both cases, the female muse acts as a cover and displacement for the male poet's own epic ambitions, granting him 'permission' to speak on historical and religious matters. In the eighteenth century, poets such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift use the muse in a similar way, with Pope protesting that his satirical muse is not vicious, but merely a way of coping with life: 'The Muse but serv'd to ease some friend, not wife, / To help me thro' this long disease, my Life' (2004, p. 159).

The medieval idea of the muse as positioned somewhere between a living woman and divine mediator persisted into the Romantic tradition of the early nineteenth-century – but rather than being associated with the Virgin Mary, the muse became associated with the more secular (but no less sublime) natural world in the form of Mother Nature. Irene Tayler explains that Romantic male poets such as William Wordsworth frequently used actual women from their lives as inspiration, turning them into 'personae' of the male creative imagination, embodying the 'natural' values that they felt cut off from, as socialised male subjects (1990, pp. 18-19). Mother Nature and real women therefore become connected in Romantic poetry, representing the non-linguistic world of the imagination. Tayler links this Romantic conception of Mother Nature to the role of the mother within Freudian psychoanalysis, arguing that the male Romantic poet's longing for a union with nature reflects his desire to return to the womb. However, the prospect of returning to the womb – of being devoured by the Eternal Feminine – is also a threatening one. Therefore, Tayler argues that the male poet contains these powers within a specific woman, allowing him to explore such feminine 'transcendence' from a safe distance:

The muse as literal woman – a Dorothy Wordsworth, or even better a Lucy (as fictional variant of the actual sister) – thus offers a safer object of love; she represents the sum of all being, yet her dimensions are sufficiently human to allow of human embrace, and as poetic topic she is safely encoded in language. In this way the male artist's female muse offers him a way to encounter both Mother Earth and lost Edenic paradise in a form that is not annihilative but restorative. (Tayler, 1990, pp. 20-22)

The muse as a real woman who embodies the various erotic and terrifying facets of femininity continues as a strong presence in later nineteenth-century literature. For example, the Pre-Raphaelite artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti found inspiration through a series of muses, including his wife Elizabeth Siddal, his housekeeper and mistress Fanny Cornforth, and Jane Morris (wife of his friend William Morris). In his paintings, he obsessively depicts these women as mythical goddesses, literary heroines, angels – even the Virgin Mary herself. His sister, Christina Rossetti, critiques this process in her poem 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856):

One face looks out from all his canvasses, [...]
 A queen in opal or in ruby dress,

A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,
A saint, an angel; – every canvass means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night (2008, p. 49)

The image of the artist ‘feeding’ on the muse’s face suggests the exploitative nature of this relationship, in which he depicts her as a manifestation of his own desires: ‘Not as she is, but as she fills his dream’ (2008, p. 49). But by the *fin de siècle*, it is more often the female muses *themselves* who are depicted as vampiric and dangerous *femmes fatales*. Literature and visual art in the late-Victorian period repeatedly features women who endanger men with their voracious sexual appetites and ruthless cruelty; from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) to Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1871) and H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887), female power and sexuality is frequently represented as a terrifying threat to social order – even Dracula, a classic male monster, attacks through manipulating female desire, as he states: ‘Your girls that you all love are mine already. And through them you and others shall yet be mine’ (Stoker, 1998, p. 21). The archetypal femme fatale of the 1890s is Salomé, depicted in Oscar Wilde’s controversial play of 1896. Following her infamous ‘dance of the seven veils’, Salomé’s unrequited lust for John the Baptist leads her to demand his head on a platter.

The role of Salomé was originally written with Sarah Bernhardt in mind – an actress who could be said to be the first modern manifestation of the muse as celebrity. In the early twentieth century, new technologies and media (mechanical printing, the popular press, photography, radio, film and television) led to the development of a recognisably modern celebrity culture. Thus, muses were increasingly fascinating women of stage and screen – whether Kiki de Montparnasse, photographed by Man Ray; Josephine Baker and Isadora Duncan, whose dances captivated audiences across Europe and America; or silver-screen actresses such as Mary Pickford, Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe. The muse continues to be present in contemporary culture – although the words we might use for a muse figure now are more likely to be celebrity, icon or star. In the twenty-first century, we usually attribute this inspiring feminine role to an artist’s lover, model or collaborator, rather than to a goddess or divine power. Books and films are regularly produced that promise to unveil the secrets of the glamorous and famous muses (often Hollywood actresses and models). Kate Moss, for example, has been depicted by several artists in recent years. Even less glamorous muses still attract the interest of the media – the painter Lucien Freud’s muse, Sue Tilley, who posed for the 1995 painting ‘Benefits Supervisor Sleeping’, was interviewed by several newspapers following the artist’s death in 2011. As these examples suggest, popular culture reveals an enduring fascination with the idea of the muse, with its connotations of female power, sexuality and creativity. However, this concept has also proved highly problematic for women who wished to write *themselves*, rather than inspire others to do so, as the next section will explain.

Women Poets and the Muse

Although the concept of the muse is in many ways an appealing and potent one, offering images of women as powerful goddesses and inspiring beloveds, historically women have found it difficult to assert an *actual* artistic creativity in their own right. This is in part **because** throughout history, the active task of poetic creation has been associated with masculinity, whilst the role of silent, inspiring muse has been associated with femininity. Therefore, reconciling female and poetic identity has often seemed a difficult task. Even the earliest and most famous woman poet, Sappho of Lesbos, was also designated ‘the Tenth Muse’ by writers of antiquity and ‘ranked alongside the nine muses’ (Prins, 1999, p. 23). In

keeping with this, several women poets writing after Sappho were also repeatedly referred to by epithets that defined them as muses rather than poets – for example, in 1650, the American poet Anne Bradstreet's first volume of poetry was published under the title *The Tenth Muse, Newly Sprung Up in America*.

Whether they wrote or not, women were frequently portrayed as Poetry, rather than Poet, implying that, in Susan Brown's words: 'Poetry is for women a mode, not an occupation. [...] They live and inspire it but they do not write it, while other people – namely, men – have the privilege to do so' (2000, p. 181). Although nineteenth-century poems often included women as symbolic representatives of poetic art (such as Tennyson's Lady of Shalott) this 'association of poetry and femininity, however, excluded women poets' themselves (Mermin, 1986, p. 68). Even projects that ostensibly seemed to support women poets' contributions often served only to reassert their inferiority. For example, in his 1883 anthology *English Poetesses*, Eric S. Robertson writes in the preface: 'women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be' (p. xv). He concludes that women's biological capacities will always trump their creative abilities since 'children are the best poems Providence meant women to produce' (p. xiv). The belief that women were poetically inferior to men is also seen in an anonymous 1890 article which declares:

In woman, indeed, the capacity of art [...] is rarely if ever completely developed [...] The Greeks once figured the Muses as women: and – for the Greeks were wise – they may well have meant to signify thereby that the Muses would endure the caresses of none but men. Certain it seems that Poetry in petticoats is only poetry on sufferance; only woman essaying to do the man's part. (*Scots Observer*, March 8 1890, pp. 438-39)

The attitude that women's 'natural' role was that of muse persisted into the twentieth century. This view was expressed by Robert Graves in his study *The White Goddess* (1948), in which he states: 'woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing' (1952, p. 446).

As the preceding examples show, the muse emerges as a highly problematic concept that women must reject in order to assert their own poetic creativity. However, as we have already seen, this concept is also central to the lyric genre. The issues and problems surrounding the muse raise the question: it is possible for the woman writer to claim 'a muse of her own'? Is the muse even necessary, and if so, how might a woman poet reimagine this role? The question of how the woman writer should situate herself within (a historically male-orientated) literary tradition, in order to enable and foster her own creativity, has been an object of concern for several feminist critics, particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century. The muse is one of the issues confronted by Adrienne Rich in her essay on her own poetic development 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971). Rich argues that women have found it difficult to recognise themselves as a source of their own inspiration, because throughout literary history, woman is the image *men* have made her:

A lot is being said today about the influence that myths and images of women have on all of us who are the products of culture. I think it has been a particular confusion to the girl or woman who tries to write [...] She goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world [...] she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and dream, she finds a beautiful face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (1993, p. 171)

In order to challenge and transform these false, destructive images of women, Rich proposes that women writers turn to *female* poetic precursors: 'So what does she do? What did I do? I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness and ambivalence: Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, [Edna St. Vincent] Millay, H.D.' (1993, p. 171). These female voices, though they are often compromised and conflicted, provide an alternative tradition from which the female muse can be salvaged and remade.

Therefore, Rich advocates identifying with female precursors, in order to forge and celebrate an alternative, female tradition. Such revisionist feminist approaches to literary tradition take their cue from Virginia Woolf's famous statement in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): 'we think back through our mothers if we are women' (2000, p. 76). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar continue this emphasis on identifying with literary fore-mothers in their influential study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). They agree with Rich that women writers have been alienated from themselves by male-orientated images of women, arguing that before the woman writer 'can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy [...] she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face' (2001, p. 596). Gilbert and Gubar conclude that if women are to claim poetic identity, they 'must deconstruct the dead self that is a male "opus" and discover a living, inconstant self' (2001, p. 598).

Through turning to the female poetic tradition, women writers need not constantly confront and contend with reductive male-authored images but regain a sense of their own inspiring multiplicity. By reconciling the distorted, binary images of the mother-precursor, women writers can finally uncover the continuity between the two 'masks' of woman (which portray them as either angelic inspirers or demonic *femme fatales*) rediscovering their humanity. Identifying with their female precursors will also enable women writers to imagine themselves in the position of creator, rather than that of silent muse. Studies such as Mary DeShazer's *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (1986) and Alice Suskin Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1987) reveal how this revisionary project gains momentum in the twentieth century, with poets such as Louise Bogan, H.D., Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde increasingly able to claim poetic identity for themselves. But this reimagining of the muse and transformation of lyric conventions begins in the late nineteenth century.

The Muse Writes Back

Women in the late nineteenth century took centre stage in many arenas – including poetry – as never before. As Elaine Showalter, Sally Ledger and Sheila Rowbotham (and others) have observed, the late-nineteenth century witnessed the much-discussed rise of the New Woman and the beginnings of the modern feminist movement, catalysed by significant marriage, education and employment reforms during the mid-nineteenth century. Political action such as mobilising around the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864-9), trade union strikes (such as the matchgirl strike of 1888), and the campaign for women's suffrage (the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was formed in 1897) resulted in women's increased visibility in the public arena and raised further questions about the rights and status of women. At the same time, men's roles were changing too. The aesthetic and decadent movements encouraged men to cultivate their aesthetic tastes and emotional sensibilities, in contrast to previous models of masculinity which emphasised productivity, imperialism and stoicism. Oscar Wilde epitomised this new male dandy – and later became associated with another new 'type' – the male homosexual – following his trial and imprisonment for gross indecency in 1895 (see Sinfield 1994). At the same time, writers such as John Addington Symonds and Havelock Ellis argued for the rights of 'sexual inverts', and Sigmund Freud developed his

theories of infantile sexual development founded on the Oedipus complex. Meanwhile, socialist and utopian writers such as Olive Schreiner, George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells dreamed of a world in which men and women could work together for a better future.

In addition to these social and political factors, in 1892, the literary terrain was substantially altered by the death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. This unseating of the poet laureate (who was succeeded by the less impressive Alfred Austin in 1896) enabled 'minor' poets – including women – to come to the fore. According to Marion Thain, this shift was 'beneficial for women poets [...who] were publishing in such great numbers and with such vigour by the end of the century that there is no longer a polarity between a "women's tradition" and a mainstream [...] the marginal became central' (2007, p. 224). These factors combined made conditions ripe for a major reimagining of the muse/poet relationship during the late nineteenth century – for as women increasingly gained voices of their own, they also sought to give the silent muse a voice. We can observe this shift in poems from the 1890s where the muse writes – or talks – back. For example, in Edith Nesbit's 'The Goose-Girl' (1898, published under 'E. Nesbit'), a young girl answers back to a would-be male poet. Nesbit's male speaker is clearly a parody of a stereotypical Romantic poet – his opening words echo Wordsworth's famous 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. On his daily walk, he encounters a beautiful young girl driving geese across a field:

I wandered lonely by the sea.
As is my daily use,
I saw her drive across the lea
The gander and the goose.
The gander and the gray, gray goose,
She drove them all together;
Her cheeks were rose, her gold hair loose,
All in the wild gray weather. (Nesbit, 1997, p. 33)¹

The male speaker's perspective here recalls numerous Wordsworth poems from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) in which the speaker admires an impoverished girl or woman – for example, 'We Are Seven' and 'Lucy Gray'. In the first, the speaker converses with an eight-year old 'cottage girl', admiring her prettiness: 'She had a rustic, woodland air, / And she was wildly clad; / Her eyes were fair, and very fair, /— Her beauty made me glad' (2013, p. 49). In 'Lucy Gray', Wordsworth describes the 'solitary child' as 'The sweetest thing that ever grew / Beside a human door!' (2013, p. 232) – as if the girl were a fine piece of shrubbery. Nesbit obliquely references this poem in 'The Goose-Girl' through her repetition of the word 'gray'.

In the second stanza of 'The Goose-Girl', Nesbit's speaker addresses the 'dainty maid' with a romantic proposal to 'come and be my bride' (1997, p. 33). Proudly declaring himself a 'poet from the town', he tells her that among the 'ladies there / There is not one would wear a crown / With your charming air!' (1997, p. 33). But the pompous poet is in for a surprise. In the final stanza of the poem, the maid replies:

She laughed, she shook her pretty head.
'I want no poet's hand;
Go read your fairy-books,' she said,
'For this is fairy-land.
My Prince comes riding o'er the leas;

¹ The majority of poems cited in this final section (with the exception of Olive Custance, 'Antinous') are collected in R. K. R. Thornton and Marion Thain's *Poetry of the 1890s* (1997). Original publication dates are given in parenthesis in text.

He fitly comes to woo,
For I'm a Princess, and my geese
Were poets, once, like you!' (1997, p. 33)

In this humorous conclusion to the poet's reverie, the object of his admiration boldly shoots him down, assertively taking control of his fantasies about her and transforming them to her own advantage. Declaring herself already a princess of her own domain, she informs him that she has already chosen a prince (who comes to 'woo', but will not necessarily win, her favour) and that the geese she drives were actually once poets. Like Circe, the maiden is revealed to be a powerful sorceress who turns men into her helpless subjects. The goose-girl's words are a thinly-veiled warning to the poet: you may stare at my beauty and objectify me, but I will answer back to such admiration and transform it into my own fantasy of power. By the end of the poem, he is *her* creature, rather than the reverse.

Another late-Victorian poem in which the muse answers back is Constance Naden's 'Love's Mirror' (1894). In contrast to the flippant tone of Nesbit's 'The Goose-Girl', 'Love's Mirror' is an earnest love lyric written in the first person:

I live with love encompassed round,
And glowing light that is not mine,
And yet am sad; for, truth to tell,
It is not I you love so well;
Some fair Immortal, robed and crowned,
You hold within your heart's dear shrine. (1997, p. 27)

In an inversion of poetic convention, the speaker ('I') here is the female beloved, who fulfils the role of adored muse ('robed and crowned') for her lover ('you'). However, she seeks to remind him that the 'fair Immortal' that he worships actually bears very little resemblance to her true self ('truth to tell, / It is not I you love so well'). As Thain observes, the title suggests that the woman 'is used by her lover to reflect back to himself his own idealised identity, acting as the Imaginary mirror to his ego' (1998, p. 29) – the role conventionally fulfilled by the lyric muse. In the next stanza, she entreats him to recognise her as a flawed human being, not as an idealised paragon:

Cast out the Goddess! let me in;
Faulty I am, yet all your own,
But this bright phantom you enthrone
Is such as mortal may not win. (1997, p. 27)

But despite fighting her idealisation, in the final stanzas, the woman capitulates to her lover's standards, resolving to 'learn of that transcendent grace' (1997, p. 27) and become more like the 'glorious Vision you adore' (1997, p. 27). Yet looking beyond this rather depressing conclusion, the powerful entreaty to 'cast out the Goddess' leaves a lasting impression – anticipating later women poets attempts to 'deconstruct the dead self that is a male "opus"' (Gilbert and Gubar, 2001, p. 598) and find inspiration within themselves.

In the poems discussed above, the muse – the conventional 'you' to whom the lyric poem is directed – finally gains her own voice, becoming the speaker or 'I' of the lyric. In this way, late nineteenth-century women poets begin to assert their poetic identity, moving from being the passive object to the active subject of the poem. The key to this, somewhat paradoxically, resides in the genre of lyric poetry itself. As explained earlier, lyric has traditionally been structured as a gendered dialogue, with the masculine role associated with

poet-speaker ('I') and the feminine role linked to the addressee-muse ('you'). However, the lyric genre, with its 'I' and 'you' pronouns, also contains within itself the potential to undo that rigid dynamic, allowing a multiplicity of gendered positions and desires to come into play. As Virginia Blain observes:

The lyric form of expression in poetry is a mode of discourse which can most easily produce the effect of an effacement or an elision of sexual difference in the subject or speaker; yet it is this very elision or effacement, this absence, that promotes the desire of the reader to attribute signs of such difference to the discourse of the poem. (1999, p. 156)

In other words, while we might, according to literary convention, assign gender roles to the (presumed male) speaker of the love poem, and the (presumed female) addressee of the love poem, the uncertainty of the 'I' and 'you' in the lyric can also lead us to 'question our fixed assumptions about gender roles' (Blain, 1999, 135). Therefore, a variety of different gender positions can be projected onto the lyric poem. For example, the speaker can be imagined as female, and the muse can be interpreted as male, switching the conventional roles of poet/muse.

In this sense, although the roles of 'poet' and 'muse' – the 'I' and the 'you' of lyric – have accumulated gendered *associations* due to centuries of poetic convention and tradition (not least the literary convention of the female muse) they do not inherently pertain either to men or women. During the fin-de-siècle, many poets began using the 'I' and the 'you' in increasingly flexible ways to encode a variety of different desires. For example, 'Antinous' by Olive Custance (1902) introduces questions of gender ambiguity and desire from its opening stanza: 'I spoke of you, Antinous, with her who is my / heart's delight, / The while we watched the dawn of night / through veils of dusk diaphanous' (1902, p. 50). These opening lines instantly complicate a reading of the poem predicated on either hetero- or homoerotic desire by introducing *two* beloveds: one male (the Greek youth Antinous) and one female (the speaker's companion), who is his or her 'heart's delight'. If we read the speaker as male, he has a homoerotic passion for a male statue; if female, she has a homoerotic love for a friend who is her 'heart's delight', whilst both express concurrent heterosexual desire. Such a reading is supported by biographical details from Custance's life: she was at this time romantically involved with both Lord Alfred Douglas (her future husband, and former lover of Oscar Wilde) and Natalie Barney, a notorious lesbian salon hostess.²

So we can see from this poem how the lyric 'I' and 'you' can be used to encode various gender ambiguities. In other poems, the 'you' is wholly androgynous or hermaphroditic. For example, in 'Love Without Wings' by Agnes Mary Frances Robinson (1891), the 'I' and the 'you' remain ungendered throughout. The poem is split into eight short sections; in Part I, the speaker affirms the life-giving powers of their beloved:

I thought: no more the worst endures
I die, I end the strife, –
You swiftly took my hands in yours
And drew me back to life! (1997, p. 180)

² For an expanded reading of this poem, see S. Parker, 2011, 'A Girl's Love: Lord Alfred Douglas Homoerotic Muse in the Poetry of Olive Custance', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 22 (2-3), pp. 220-240.

This opening stanza suggests the speaker is completely reliant on their lover for their existence. We might even read this speaker as the muse, who relies on the poet-lover for affirmation of her existence (as in Naden's 'Love's Mirror'). However, as the poem develops, it becomes clear that theirs is a reciprocal, if indefinable, relationship. For example, in Part III, the speaker claims to be 'the soul of you' (1997, p. 180), affirming that their partner is equally invested in their relationship. Part VII reveals that the speaker 'haunts' their beloved: 'I haunt you like the magic of a poet, / And charm you like a song' (1997, p. 181). As Thain observes, the lyric roles of 'I' and 'you' gradually dissolve in this poem as it 'defies conventional poet and muse positionings by trying to rediscover an ungendered state before difference was recognised: when 'I' and 'you' were indistinct' (1999, p. 168). The poem thus articulates a space in which difference is erased and the two subjects can speak (or sing) in chorus. It concludes with the speaker imagining themselves singing alongside their beloved:

But once I dreamed I sat and sang with you
 On Ida's hill.
 Therefore, in the echoes of my life, we two
 Are singing still. (1997, p. 182)

The possibility of collaboration introduced by this final stanza is also borne out in a poem by Michael Field, the pseudonym of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. Aunt and niece, Bradley and Cooper considered themselves 'closer married' than the Brownings and celebrated their relationship in a series of love lyrics (see Donoghue 1998). One poem in particular, entitled 'A Girl' (1893) appears to reflect on their writing partnership:

A girl,
 Her soul a deep-wave pearl
 Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries;
 A face flowered for heart's ease,
 A brow's grace soft as seas
 Seen through faint forest-trees:
 A mouth, the lips apart,
 Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze

 From her tempestuous heart.
 Such: and our souls so knit,
 I leave a page half-writ —
 The work begun
 Will be to heaven's conception done,
 If she come to it. (1997, p. 61)

At first, the poem appears to be conventional romantic lyric, drawing on Petrarchan tradition by listing and praising the beloved muse's beautiful features. However, in the final lines of the poem, the muse is invited to complete the poem herself, undoing the separation between the 'I' and the 'you' and hinting at Bradley and Cooper's collaborative practice. The poem will not be fully conceived or born until the 'you', the girl of the title, has made her contribution. In this sense, 'A girl' appears to 'free the love lyric, long a genre of possession, into an ownerless, borderless "field" without master or serf' (Koestenbaum, 1989, p. 174).

As this chapter has demonstrated, during the fin de siècle, the lyric genre began to be radically transformed in a number of different ways. A particularly significant aspect of this transformation was the revision of the concept of the lyric muse. Many women poets of this

period, such as Edith Nesbit and Constance Naden, wrote poems in which the muse answers back, finally giving a voice to the silent female found in the male literary tradition. Others, such as Olive Custance and Agnes Mary Frances Robinson, wrote love lyrics with ambiguously gendered participants – poems in which the muse might be male, or in which a variety of desires might be expressed. Through such experiments, the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ of the love lyric are gradually revealed to be fluid positions that can be occupied by both genders. Such transformations eventually mean that the concept of the muse is no longer a wholly problematic one for women who wish to write. Through reimagining the muse, women poets begin to harness the potential of the lyric genre to articulate fluid gender positionings and to celebrate multiple, shifting desires. This revision of the muse is one important facet of a gradual process which eventually enabled women poets to claim poetic identity for themselves.

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