

**Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes: The Conflict of  
Motherhood in Dollie Radford's Poetry**

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**Abstract:** This article sheds light on motherhood as a theme which – to my knowledge – has not been thoroughly explored to date in Dollie Radford's volumes of poetry published in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It positions Radford's depiction of the theme within Victorian conventions, and simultaneously in line with the radical meanings embraced by her contemporary women poets, including Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell and Augusta Webster. In doing so, the article approaches the representation of motherhood at different levels, thereby eschewing a fixed reading of the selected poems. It offers an insight into Radford's conflict as a mother who wishes to enlighten both her children and the future generation away from the prevailing doctrines. Thus, the argument presented herein adds to the existing body of knowledge on Radford and challenges the gendered readings imposed upon her poems by Victorian reviewers.

**Key Words:** Motherhood, Children, Dollie Radford, Victorian, Feminism, Domesticity.

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## ما وراء الصور النمطية : صراع الأمومة في شعر دوللي رادفورد نبذة مختصرة

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**المستخلص:** تقدم الورقة موضوع الأمومة كأحد المواضيع التي لم يتم تناولها بعمق في قصائد دوللي رادفورد المنشورة منذ أواخر القرن التاسع عشر. تضع هذه الورقة تصوير رادفورد للموضوع ضمن نطاق قيود العصر الفكتوري، وضمن المعاني الثورية التي تناولتها بعض شاعرات العصر مثل كريستينا روزيتي، أليس مينيل وأغوستا ويبستر. لهذا السبب تتناول الورقة موضوع الأمومة من جوانب مختلفة، متجنباً قراءة ثابتة للقصائد المختارة. تُقدّم الورقة العلمية نظرة ثاقبة لصراع رادفورد كأم ترغب في تنوير أطفالها والأجيال القادمة بعيداً عن المذاهب السائدة آنذاك. يُعد النقاش المطروح في هذه الورقة إضافة نوعية لمجموعة الأبحاث الموجودة عن رادفورد. كما تتحدث القراءات النمطية المفروضة على قصائدها من قبل النقاد الفكتوريين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأمومة، الأطفال، دوللي رادفورد، فكتوريان، النسوية، الحياة المنزلية.

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## Introduction

This article sheds light on motherhood as a theme which – to my knowledge – has not been thoroughly explored to date in Dollie Radford’s volumes of poetry published in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It positions Radford’s depiction of the theme within Victorian conventions, and simultaneously in line with the radical meanings embraced by her contemporary women poets, including Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell and Augusta Webster. In doing so, the article approaches the representation of motherhood at different levels, thereby eschewing a fixed reading of the selected poems. It offers an insight into Radford’s conflict as a mother who wishes to enlighten both her children and the future generation away from the prevailing doctrines of her time. Thus, the argument presented herein adds to the existing body of knowledge on Radford and challenges the gendered readings imposed upon her poems by Victorian reviewers<sup>(1)</sup>.

Caroline Maitland, the maiden name of Dollie Radford, was an active member of nineteenth-century literary circles and a close friend of significant names in the history of English literature and culture, including Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, George Bernard Shaw and many others. In 1883, she got married to Ernest Radford and later had three children: Maitland, Hester and Margarete. As a woman in a patriarchal society, Radford was torn between her maternal duties and her passion as a poet seeking recognition. This conflict is a striking theme in many of her published poems but has rarely been acknowledged in the existing literature.

The discussion presented in this article is built on studies conducted by a handful of contemporary scholars who perceive Radford’s poems as revolutionary and subversive. In “Dollie Radford and the Ethical Aesthetics of *Fin-de-Siècle* Poetry”, Ruth Livesey points out: “Trace Radford to the 1880s and 90s and she is to be found sitting under two distinct signs: a political banner and the careful engraving of an aesthetic frontispiece” (Livesey, 2016: 496). Livesey identifies Radford as an active member in socialist campaigns of late-Victorian England. Accordingly, her article offers an in-depth reading of Radford’s poems,



including “Two Songs” (1891) and “If you will sing the songs I play” (1895), which address the poet’s political opinions. Although this paper does not consider Radford’s engagement with nineteenth-century politics, it builds on Livesey’s account of Radford’s unconventional ideals, finding them reflected in her portrayal of motherhood.

In a more recent article, LeeAnne Richardson associates a few of Radford’s poems with the radical politics of the periodicals and magazines in which they were published. Richardson maintains that “Radford was able to write poetry that exploits the tension between public action and private utterance” (Richardson, 2012: 11). As we shall see later in this article, “the tension” Richardson refers to is evident in Radford’s poems which address the theme of motherhood. I take Richardson’s argument forward and explore it in poems which are not yet considered by contemporary scholars.

Like Livesey and Richardson, Emily Harrington sheds light on Radford, yet using a more conventional approach. She argues that Radford “makes no claims of finding or producing what is new or original. Ultimately, what she does defend is the small, the minor, the incomplete” (Harrington, 2014: 141). On the one hand, Harrington’s argument shows that Radford had no intention of mastering “new” poetic forms. However, she points out that in her use of such short songs, Radford was able to give voice to socially marginalised figures, including the working class. On the other hand, Harrington concludes that Radford’s short songs, such as “Shall I make a song for you” (1895), which represent the mother-child relationship, are “unoriginal” and conform to social norms. My analysis of Radford’s poems challenges Harrington’s argument by highlighting Radford’s use of unconventional images and metaphors, thereby questioning the stereotypes of motherhood imposed in a male-dominated society.

This article takes the previously mentioned arguments about Radford and explores some of her poems that have yet to be considered by contemporary scholars. It begins by offering a contextual background on the prevailing beliefs on motherhood in the author’s

time and how it was expected to be a woman's sole duty. Building on the first section, the article then moves to discuss Radford's representation of the theme in her poems "Spring Song" and "What Song Shall I Sing?", both published in her first volume, *A Light Load* (1891). The following section, "Subverting Nursery Rhymes in *Songs for Somebody*", considers Radford's possible intention to hide subversive meanings in her poems "Close to the window" and "Lost in the midnight", published in her book for children, *Songs for Somebody* (1893). The last section demonstrates how the mother figure is overwhelmed by domestic duties in "In Summer Days", which appears in Radford's volume, *Songs and Other Verses* (1895).

Given that the thematic focus and the selected poems included in this study have so far been overlooked by contemporary scholars, I aim to add to the existing body of knowledge on Radford by showing how her poetry engages with and simultaneously challenges Victorian conventions concerning motherhood. In addition, my analysis of the poems places Radford alongside other revolutionary women poets such as Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell<sup>(2)</sup> and Augusta Webster<sup>(3)</sup>, whose representations of the same theme of motherhood also confront the status quo. The significance of this study lies in the way it moves the debate on Radford forward, emphasising that her poetry is worthy of more attention.

### **Motherhood in the Victorian Context**

The expectation that women would become submissive wives and devoted mothers, along with the idealisation of such a role, were flagship characteristics of the Victorian period. As Lynn Abrams points out:

Marriage signified a woman's maturity and respectability, but motherhood was confirmation that she had entered the world of womanly virtue and female fulfilment. For a woman not to become a mother meant she was liable to be labelled inadequate, a failure or in some way abnormal. Motherhood was expected of a married woman and the childless single woman was a figure to be pitied. (Abrams, 2016: 6)



Married women were not expected to have dreams of their own; rather their ultimate goal was to fulfil their husbands' needs. Motherhood was indeed a vital part of their marital duties and was viewed as a sacrosanct function. Due to the existing limitations on women's access to education and the public sphere, middle-class women had no choice but to get married and meet the prevailing social expectations of ideal motherhood. In reference to the Victorian definition of "good mothers", Emma Griffin argues:

Good mothers, they agreed, worked tirelessly to ensure a clean, well-ordered home. Their duties involved the wise spending of a husband's meager wage, and the endless rounds of cleaning, cooking, and sewing necessary for the physical well-being of the family. (Griffin, 2018: 67)

Women were perceived as merely household vessels who produce children and run domestic duties. Such doctrines were dominant during the nineteenth century and have influenced the ethics and themes represented in the literary works published throughout the century. However, the following sections show how women poets, including Radford, Rossetti, Meynell and Webster, sought to challenge the gendered stereotypes imposed on them by their male counterparts.

### **The Duality of Motherhood in Radford's *A Light Load***

Radford's volume *A Light Load* (1891) starts with a poem entitled "Spring Song" accompanied with the illustration shown in Figure 1. The illustration portrays a mother holding her child to show him/her the view of the moon and stars from the window, plausibly anticipating a brighter future. Although illustrations may contribute to our understanding of certain poems, this is not always the case with Victorian poetry. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra explores that "artist[s] took control of the book as a whole in a way that sometimes left both publishers and authors puzzling over the results. In the 1890s the visual held sway over the verbal as never before" (Kooistra, 2002: 409). The inaccuracy of artists' illustrations may be due to the fact that these artists, like their critic and reviewer counterparts, may have been



influenced by the surface of women’s poetry, disregarding the possibility of subversive messages. Therefore, the illustration/poem relationship in Radford’s poetry should be approached with caution, especially when the existing image, like the one accompanied in “Spring Song”, does not fully conform to arguments raised by contemporary scholars. For example, after her analysis of a number of poems in *A Light Load*, Richardson describes *Songs and Other Verses* (1895) as “Radford’s second book of poems for adults” (Richardson, 2000: 113). Thus, Richardson implies that *A Light Load* is Radford’s first book of poems for adults, not children. Therefore, even when the mother/child relationship is addressed in this collection, a fixed reading should be challenged and the complexity of the the original texts should be highlighted.

“Spring Song” is a poem that may be read at two levels. The use of aesthetic language and nature images in a song, which is addressed by a mother to her child, allow us to interpret its meanings as conforming to conventional motherhood:

Ah love, the sweet spring  
blossoms cling  
To many a broken wind-  
tossed bough,  
And young birds among  
branches sing,  
That mutely hung till now.

The little new-born things which lie  
In dewy meadows, sleep and dream  
Beside the brook that twinkles by  
To some great lonely stream.

And children, now the day is told,  
From many a warm and cosy nest,  
Look up to see the young moon hold  
The old moon to her breast.



Dear love, my pulses throb and start  
To-night with longings sweet and new,  
And young hopes beat within a heart  
Grown old in loving you. ("Spring Song", *A Light Load*, p. 1)

At first glance, the poem shows that the mother does not attempt to oppose her projected duties as a caring figure, but is simply singing to her children about the spring season and the new life it brings to the dull images left by the winter before it. The first two stanzas depict images of the "cling" spring whose tree branches are similarly "hung till now". This shows that the new life implied in the metaphor for the spring does not come yet – a meaning which is further emphasised in the "sleep and dream" of "[t]he little new-born things". This reading is inspired by Livesey's reading of the "spring" in Radford's poem "Why seems the world so fair" (1891). According to Livesey, the poem "explores the resources of the aesthetic in preparing for a world of hope in a future 'Spring'" (Livesey, 2006: 505).

In the context of the 1890s, waiting for the spring may be read as the anticipation of modern life and forms which were sought by many *fin-de-siècle* writers and social reformers. Chris Snodgrass observes that one way of perceiving the 1890s is as "the decade [which] represents the creatively stale dead end of the Victorian age, which immediately preceded the creatively resurgent Modern period" (Snodgrass, 2002: 321). The "creatively stale dead end of the Victorian age" that Snodgrass refers to is depicted in the "cling" of the "sweet spring blossoms", indicating that Victorian literature and culture have reached their peak and are waiting for the new.

Radford's admiration of Romantic poets, including Percy Bysshe Shelley<sup>(4)</sup>, whose reference to the spring season carries revolutionary meanings in many of his poems, is of further significance to this reading<sup>(5)</sup>. In "Ode to the West Wind" (1820), for instance, Shelley challenges the status quo through anticipating the spring: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" ("Ode to the West Wind", V: 14). Luke Donahue argues that "whether the gaps and deaths in 'Ode to the

West Wind' lead to a sudden revolutionary spring or the slow encroachment of capitalism, they nevertheless lead to future life" (Donahue, 2014: 223). The futurity in Shelley's poem is associated with new political and social systems – a fact which might have influenced Radford's choice of images in "Spring Song". Radford's appreciation of Shelley's poetry is recorded occasionally in her diary: "John has just been in and given me a sweet volume of Shelley [...] Shelley is my poet, I feel nearer to him than to any: I understand him I think so clearly" (Radford Diary, 7 July 1883). Radford's own declaration provides further support for the possibility of an association between spring and a bright future in the political realm.

The idea of waiting for the new is more explicitly expressed in the same volume in "My Songs", which begins: "There is no unawakened string,/ No untried note for me to ring,/ No new-found song for me to sing" ("My Songs", 1-3). In her reading of these lines, Richardson argues: "Her sense of belatedness, of coming too late to contribute something new, accords with fin-de-siècle concerns that British culture had reached its apex" (Richardson, 2000: 112). Radford's engagement with such debate in a poem which is meant to be, at least from a Victorian perspective, a children's challenges the limited role imposed on Victorian mothers and the conservative education they were supposed to deliver to their children.

Motherhood in Victorian women's poetry is not always portrayed as Victorians wished it to be; similarly, the moral messages expressed in women's poetry were not exclusive to fixed ideals and beliefs. While the speaker makes it obvious that the addressee is her children, there is a possibility of hidden meanings about women's hopes. The social context of the poem allows us to interpret the poet's choice of phrases and images in a more subversive way than it otherwise suggests. Linking the implied meanings of the "spring" images in the first half of the poem to the mother's call in the second half may be one way of Radford's to express her unconventional thoughts as a mother. In addition, reading the word "nest" as a metaphor for home, which is described as "warm and cosy", mirrors the social idealisation of



marriage and domestic life. From the heart of this nest, the mother calls the next generation through her personification of the moon. By holding “the old moon to her breast”, the young moon, possibly referring to the younger generation, holds the same dreams that could not be achieved by their mothers. Instead of teaching her children domestic duties, the mother asks them to pursue her dreams of the new. More importantly, the fact that the speaker describes her hopes as young and having finally “[g]rown old in loving” her children may be interpreted as a reflection of the hardships of maternal duties.

This reading takes as its clue Meynell’s depiction of a young heroine complaining about the burden of nursing her child in “Cradle-Song at Twilight” (1895):

The child not yet is lulled to rest.  
Too young a nurse, the slender Night  
So laxly holds him to her breast  
That throbs with flight.  
He plays with her, and will not sleep.  
For other playfellows she sighs;  
An unmaternal fondness keep  
Her alien eyes. (“Cradle-Song at Twilight”, *Collected Poems of Alice Meynell*, p. 99)

Quoted in full, the poem barely conforms to the Victorian prospect of motherly tender and protective sentiments. In her reading of the poem, Angela Leighton points out: “The slip of reference through several registers: nurse, Night, lover, mother, makes this jolting ‘Cradle-Song’ oddly devious and hardly motherly” (Leighton, 1992: 259-260). Leighton considers the poem to be a reflection of the poet’s frustration rather than satisfaction with her maternal experience. Meynell’s reference to the speaker’s age as “[t]oo young a nurse” may be read as a form of weariness, which prevents her from feeling any joy or love towards her child. The fact that she “laxly holds him” with carelessness might be due to her immaturity and lack of knowledge or even a result of her unwillingness to nurse the child.

While Meynell uses the mother's youth as a form of rejection of the sacrificial models of motherhood, Radford shows that the mother's dreams and worries about her children's future steal her youth and age her<sup>(6)</sup>. Although Radford's portrayal of motherhood is more compatible with Victorian mothers' sacrificial nature, it ironically shows that women forfeit their youth as a cost of good motherhood.

The language used in Radford's poem is in line with her own worries about her children's morals and her desire to teach them advanced and liberal thoughts, which are clear in some of the entries she made in her diary under the subheading "To my dear children". She writes to her son, Maitland: "If you must have your fulfilled life, then your sisters must also. There is no difference between you, only the ideal which the world has made for women, God has not made it" (Radford Diary, 4 June 1892). Radford's belief in equality between men and women is obvious in these lines, which shed light on her role as a loving mother who wishes to educate her son as a modern man and a feminist. She does not want Maitland to grow up as a typical patriarch who does not appreciate women's dreams but makes it clear that there is no difference between men and women except what has been created by unjust human ideals.

A similar entry with similar implications is addressed to her daughters, Hester and Margaret:

Hester & Margaret, when you are grown women. Remember men are lonely – very lonely – in a knowledge of life which the women to whom they belong do not share. Don't let it come between you. Do not shut yourself up with your ideal – go out & understand all things [...] Do not be hurt by a knowledge you have not had. (Radford Diary 4 June 1892)

Radford chooses to enlighten her daughters and teach them about women's emancipation. She wishes to enrich her daughters' souls with liberal thoughts which could grant them happiness and satisfaction throughout their lives. Radford's message shows her awareness of the



limitations placed upon women of her generation and identifies them as having been imposed by men. However, she advises her daughters to overcome these values and not to become overly influenced by them. She challenges the Victorian idealisation of women and their expected place in the private sphere. Alternatively, she suggests that going out would be best for their knowledge and would also improve their understanding of life. In doing so, Radford challenges the status quo concerning women's education, and implicitly criticises figures, such as John Ruskin (1819-1900), whose views on female education played a role in shaping those values. According to Ruskin, women's education should be different from that received by men to only serve the husband's interests. His beliefs were clearly expressed in his lectures *Sesame and Lilies* delivered at Manchester in 1864. He states that "a man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly – while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasure, and in those of his best friends" (Ruskin, 1883: 73-74). The morals in Ruskin's lecture would indeed be an example of what Radford refers to in her message to Maitland as "the ideal which the world has made for women". It is also the same kind of ideal that encourages her to teach her daughters that men are "very lonely" in the knowledge they refuse to share with their female companions. In addition, the language Radford uses in both entries goes hand in hand with the implied meanings in the poem above, where she asks her children to "look up to see" the future beyond the "warm and cosy nest".

Ruskin's views were shared by some earlier Victorian women writers, such as Dinah Craik (1826-1887), whose bestselling novel *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), published ten years before Ruskin's work, addresses the distinction between men and women, especially in terms of education and professions. Craik's representation of John Halifax, the hero, whose study, reading, and hard work are the virtues which differentiate him from other people of his class, reveals her views on women's rights. In *A Woman's Thoughts about Women: By the Writer of "John Halifax, Gentleman"* (1859), Craik describes the

equality between the sexes as “harmful” and claims:

No; equality of the sexes is not in the nature of things. Man and woman were made for, and not like one another. [...] That both sexes were meant to labour, ‘one by the sweat of his brow,’ the other ‘in sorrow to bring forth’ – and bring up – ‘children’ – cannot, I fancy, be questioned. (Craik, 1858: 13-14)

As readers, we are introduced to Craik’s belief in the doctrine of the complementarity of the sexes through John Halifax’s desire to learn from the very beginning of the novel: “He thought a minute, and then said in a low tone, ‘I can’t write, and I don’t know when I shall be able to learn; I wish you would put down something in a book for me’” (*John Halifax, Gentleman*, Ch.2). In contrast, Ursula March is represented as a passive character who says: “I have no time to study much myself” (*John Halifax, Gentleman*, Ch.12), and by the middle of the novel the narrator continues to refer to her as “the mother”. By placing John Halifax in the public sphere and Ursula March in the private domain, Craik offers a fictional example of her own ideals of women’s rights.

The passive role of the mother in Craik’s novel is questioned by Radford’s representation of the unconventional mother, whose maternal duties come into conflict with her career as a woman poet in “What Song Shall I Sing?” This conflict is evident in Radford’s diary in which she describes taking care of Maitland as distracting: “Quite impossible to write up the last five weeks [...] The boy has been the object of many visits at home: his presents cannot be counted: his shoes are numberless” (Radford Diary, 1884: 143). This entry was made a month after delivering Maitland, whose nursing made Radford’s writing an “impossible” task. The same difficulty, that is “the difficulty of combining the work of a poet with the work of a mother”, is addressed by Richardson as the main theme of “What Song Shall I Sing?” (Richardson, 2000: 112). The poem opens by asking the same question as its title, hinting at the mother’s struggle to balance the demands of childcare and writing:



What song shall I sing to you  
Now the wee ones are in bed,  
What books shall I bring to you  
Now each little sleepy head  
Is tucked away on pillow white,  
All sung and cosy for the night?

Many, many singers now,  
Sing their new songs in the land,  
Many writers bring us now  
Many books to understand,  
But I can sing, these evening times,  
Only the children's songs and rhymes

All the day they play with me,  
My heart grows full of their looks,  
And their prattle stays with me,  
And I have no mind for books,  
Nor care for any other tune  
Than they have sung this golden June ("What Song Shall I Sing", *A Light Load*, p. 27-28)

The speaker wonders what kind of books she should choose for writing in the presence of many other works. She simultaneously considers the existence of many writers and poets who write on different subjects. As Richardson points out in her reading of the poem, "[t]he proper subject of her poetry is a continued concern" (Richardson, 2000: 112). She refers to her contemporary poets as "singers" of "new songs" rather than writers of longer narrative poems such as the epic which is known for its representation of heroic tales. The poet's choice may be read in relation to Natalie Houston's argument about how shorter forms increasingly became more popular in late-Victorian poetry, thereby announcing the end of long verse forms which had been dominant until the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>(7)</sup>. Also, the speaker's final decision to sing "children's songs and rhymes" is possibly due to the lack of time which leaves her no choice but to write



shorter songs about her domestic and maternal duties, the subjects of her next two volumes, *Songs for Somebody* (1893), and *Good Night* (1895).

### **Subverting Nursery Rhymes in Radford's *Songs for Somebody***

While Radford's second volume *Songs for Somebody* includes poems that read like nursery rhymes, it may be argued that some of its poems insinuate radical meanings to the younger generation. As Figure 2 shows, the preface of the book includes a song consisting of two couplets accompanied by an image of a young girl reading the volume. The girl, possibly representing young women of future generations, may be the "somebody" Radford targets and refers to in her title. Thus, Radford's revolutionary ideals and her support of women's emancipation continue to be valid subjects in many of her poems in this volume.

As shown in Figure 3, the illustration of "Close to the window" shows a young girl watching the "little birds" addressed in the poem:

Close to the window  
Only I know,  
Three little birds sit  
All in a row.

Hidden by roses  
Only I see,  
How the nest hangs there  
Safe as can be.

Bigger and bigger  
Growing each day  
Soon you shall see them  
Flying away. ("Close to the Window", *Songs for Somebody*, p. 3).

By using the image of "birds", which are sheltered in "the nest", Radford possibly implies Victorian women and their expected attachment to the private sphere. As in "Spring Song", by the end of the poem the speaker makes it clear that these birds, like emancipated



women, will leave behind their homes and “[f]ly[...] away”. In other words, they favour freedom over being imprisoned in a “nest”, even if this “nest” is described as “safe”. In doing so, Radford questions the Victorian stereotypes of ideal womanhood and the segregation between the private and the public spheres. In her most recent study on Radford, Richardson offers a similar reading of Radford’s feminist poem “A Novice” (1895). She states that the poem “demonstrates that women do not have just one role, so changing their positions in society will not overturn the social order: it will enact yet another adjustment in it” (Richardson, 2017: 5). Richardson’s reading bolsters the previous suggestion of Radford’s challenge of patriarchal doctrines which restrict women’s freedom and limit their role to domesticity and childbearing.

It is also worth noting Radford’s use of “roses” surrounding the nest. In addition to their connotation with nature, roses are often read as symbols of sexual love. In “Queering the Victorian Nursery”, Etti Gordon Ginzburg offers a queer reading of selected Victorian nursery rhymes, pointing out:

In the field of children’s literature, normative, binary representations of gender have been increasingly challenged since the 1970s, following the emergence of feminist criticism of works for adults. Primarily, stereotypes have been criticized and the concept of gender—masculinity and femininity as social constructs—has been introduced. (Ginzburg, 2018: 380)

Given that the poem is narrated by an adult, possibly the mother, and that roses and nests together may indicate heterosexual marriage, it may be argued that Radford is preparing the “little birds” to set themselves free by “[f]lying away” rather than holding on that convention.

In the same volume, “Lost in the midnight” is another poem which raises questions about the messages Radford wants to deliver in her book for children:

Lost in the midnight, do not be lonely.  
This is the hour when the fairies roam,  
Does a voice call you? no it is only  
An elf who sings in his airy home.

But now the sprites with a spell have bound her,  
She sleeps and dreams of a fairy band,  
Who kissed her eyes when they passed and found her,  
And led her home through the starlit land. ("Lost in the midnight",  
*Songs for Somebody*, p. 28)

The setting of the poem is reminiscent of Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862), which, despite the Victorian perception of it as a children's tale, has been encountered by contemporary critics as a feminist poem. Michael Tosin Gbogi argues that the poem "subvert(s) patriarchal hegemony through the demonization of the masculine figure(s) on the one hand and the positive characterization of female essences on the other" (Gbogi, 2014: 509). Rossetti undermines gendered stereotypes through her representation of men as goblins, half animal and half human being: "One had a cat's face,/ One whisk'd a tail", questioning their authority over the sisters, Laura and Lizzie ("Goblin Market", 71-72). Likewise, Radford diminishes the traditional image of the male figure by portraying him as a helpless "elf" who is only able to take on a woman's role – that of "singing".

In addition, the speaker in Radford's poem does not attempt to warn the young girl from walking alone at midnight – a time when respected middle-class women were expected to stay at home. In "Goblin Market", Lizzie, the maiden who conforms to Victorian norms, urges her sister: "Dear, you should not stay so late,/ Twilight is not good for maidens" ("Goblin Market", 143-144). In contrast, the girl in Radford's poem is finally "led to her home", safely suffering no consequences of breaking existing rules. Thus, it is plausible to argue that Radford may have intended to challenge the prevailing expectations of ideal motherhood through the morals she taught her children.



### **The Burdened Mother in Radford's *Songs and Other Verses***

The question of motherhood continues in Radford's following volume, *Songs and Other Verses* (1895). Although this volume is assessed by Radford's contemporary scholars, no attention has been given to "In Summer Days" so far. The poem begins with the speaker complaining about the burden of domestic duties. She is "too tired to rise" and is surrounded with "work undone" ("In Summer Days", 3-5). The speaker then addresses her children:

I weep for one short hour to sing  
In all the day,  
The happy fancies I would bring  
The children's play;  
To give the gifts they ask of me,  
which should be so free. ("In Summer Days", *Songs and Other Verses*, p. 21)

Radford's frustration with her role as a mother, who cannot accommodate her children's needs, may have influenced the theme of the poem. In 1892, her husband Ernest Radford, a poet and member of The Rhymers' Club, was institutionalised and she was left alone to make a living for her three children<sup>(8)</sup>. The speaker's sorrow and grief are further emphasised in the following stanzas:

And ever I go out and in  
More wearily,  
With shrunken life so pale and thin,  
And drearily  
I murmur that I must not stay,  
For their grief or play.

I must not stay, the hours are fleet,  
And much to do,  
And much to earn for daily meat,  
The days all through,  
To keep the little hard won nest  
For the children's rest. ("In Summer Days", *Songs and Other Verses*, p. 22)

Radford's choice of adverbs, such as "wearily" and "drearily", connotes hopelessness and despair. The mother's tireless attempt to provide her children with "daily meat" is an unpleasant experience, which has made her "pale and thin". The "nest" is not idealised but rather described as "hard won", implying the struggle the mother goes through to secure her children and ensure their "rest". In doing so, Radford criticises the double standards of social conventions which expect her to remain at home, while simultaneously overwhelm her with responsibilities beyond the feminine.

In her representation of the burdened mother, Radford shares with her fellow poet, Webster, the way she provides non-conforming images of motherhood. For example, "Medea in Athens"<sup>(9)</sup> (1870) depicts the conflict of motherhood through a mother lamenting the loss of her children – a fact not revealed until the very end of the poem:

what if I moan in tossing fever thirsts,  
crying for them whom I shall have no more,  
here nor among the dead, who never more,  
here nor among the dead, will smile to me  
with young lips prattling "Mother, mother dear"?  
what if I turn sick when the women pass  
that lead their boys, and hate a child's young face?  
what if--  
Go, go, thou mind'st me of my sons,  
and then I hate thee worse; go to thy grave  
by which none weeps. I have forgotten thee. ("Medea in Athens",  
*Portraits*, p. 13)

Like Radford, yet using a more tragic scenario, Webster engages with the theme of motherhood as an obstacle in a poet's life. Melissa Valiska Gregory observes that Webster "explore[s] the subtle and complex relationship of motherhood to female creativity, and, by implication, to literary authority" (Gregory, 2011: 35). In her representation of Medea mourning her wasted motherhood, Webster challenges the Victorian idealisation of motherhood. Medea's children



add nothing to their mother's life but misery and sorrowful memories. As Gregory argues: "All of Medea's maternal memories lead toward permanent alienation and obliteration, toward a cavernous self-annihilating loss too terrible to articulate" (Gregory, 2011: 33). In her tragic representation of Medea, who kills her children due to her husband's betrayal, Webster implies that motherhood may complicate rather than bless a woman's life. Thus, like Radford, she complicates the notion of the mother/child relationship and constructs a tangled image of Victorian motherhood.

### **Conclusion**

The article has studied Radford's depiction of motherhood in some of her poems, whose radical meanings are disregarded by Victorian reviewers. As a supporter of women's rights and a mother, Radford could not but showcase her ideals to enlighten future generations. In her representation of motherhood, Radford shares a similar approach adopted by her contemporary women poets, including Rossetti, Webster and Meynell. Thus, the argument presented in this article seconds the debates raised by Radford's contemporary scholars, such as Livesey, Richardson and Harrington. By shedding light on images and themes which have not yet been considered, the article adds to the fragmentary history of women writers, Radford in particular, offering a new insight into her poems.

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### List of Figures



Figure 1: Copied from "Spring Song" in *A Light Load*, p. 1.



Figure 2: Copied from the preface of *Songs for Somebody*.



Figure 3: Copied from "Close to the window" in *Songs for Somebody*, p. 3.

### Endnotes

- (1) See Hadeel Azhar's *Marginalisation Vs. Emancipation: The (New) Woman Question in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry*, for more information about Radford's biography and the conventional reviews her volumes of poetry received (Azhar, 2016: 11-17).
- (2) Meynell (1847-1922) was a British poet, critic, and essayist who is acknowledged by contemporary scholars as a feminist. See F. Elizabeth Gray's "Making Christ: Alice Meynell, Poetry, and the Eucharist" (Gray, 2003: 160).
- (3) Webster (1837-1894) was an English poet and essayist whose poetry is perceived today as engaging "progressively with important political and social questions". See Melissa Valiska Gregory's "Augusta Webster Writing Motherhood in the Dramatic Monologue and the Sonnet Sequence" (Gregory, 2011: 28).
- (4) Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) is a British poet who grew up "in a climate sympathetic to whig notions of liberty, notions that had some influence on, even as they were outdone by, his mature political views" (O'Neill, Oxford DNB: 2018).
- (5) See Livesey's reading of Radford's "Two Songs" in relation to Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (Livesey, 2006: 504).
- (6) See Hadeel Azhar's *Marginalisation Vs. Emancipation: The (New) Woman Question in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry*, for more discussion on similar themes addressed in Radford's and Meynell's poems (Azhar, 2016: 179). Also see Linda Peterson's argument on Radford and Meynell in her chapter "Vigo Street Sapphos: The Bodley Head Press and women's poetry of the 1890s" (Peterson, 2016: 228-229).
- (7) Houston attributes the popularity of the sonnet in the *fin de siècle* to the public awareness of "the value of its economical size for busy modern readers" (Houston, 2003: 150).
- (8) During that time, Radford's correspondences and diary entries convey that she was financially broken. See Hadeel Azhar's *Marginalisation Vs. Emancipation: The (New) Woman Question in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry*, for more information (Azhar, 2016: 15-16).
- (9) In Ancient Greek mythology, Medea "first appears as a lovely and lovelorn princess who enables Jason to steal the Golden Fleece. In this role she fits the paradigm of the 'helper-maiden', which is found in the fairy tales or myths of virtually all cultures. Later in her story, however, Medea appears as a wrathful woman whose lust for vengeance drives her to slaughter her own children. In this role, of course, she is the utter opposite of the 'good' or 'helpful' woman" (Johnston, 1997: 5).



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