Representations of Feminist and Lesbian Consciousness and
the Use of Subversive Strategies in Selected Poetry of

Isabella Jane Blagden

(1817-1873)

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of Edinburgh Napier University, for the award of Doctor
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to recover and revise the contribution made to women's writing by the English minor novelist and poet, Isabella Jane Blagden (1817-1873), who was the centrifugal force of an influential literary and artistic milieu in Italy, in the mid-nineteenth-century. Key figures in the group were the poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning and the American writer, Henry James. This study is a revisionist critique which questions the prevailing masculine discourse and conventions which oppressed women in terms of their sexual, political and economic freedom. This, therefore, fits into the Victorian phenomenon of women poets finding their own space and expression against patriarchal norms. My focus on Blagden's poetry, with its scope for liminal/subliminal suggestiveness, enables an exploration of her subversive and transgressive feminist-lesbian poetics. Recent contributions from feminist and lesbian theorists and critics, are examined in order to establish a feminist-lesbian interpretation of gender, sexuality, subversion and transgression.

A secondary consideration is Blagden's role in the aesthetic consciousness of others and her apparent inspirational position at the centre of the creative groups of intellectual emigrès in her circle. While most of her friends and acquaintances had a public persona, Blagden did not, and her work has received little discussion and debate. In order to ensure her significance as a feminist-lesbian poet and Muse, this study will focus on her contribution to nineteenth-century women's poetry. As a contribution to literary scholarship my aim is to bring Blagden in from the margins as a poet of non-canonical status, to one whose status is placed firmly within the continuous literary tradition of radical feminist-lesbian women writers in the nineteenth century.
Acknowledgements

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And last, but not least, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my husband, Michael, and to my daughter, Natasha, for their unfailing support and encouragement throughout my research.
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Fig. 15  Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (c1510). (Courtesy of Dr Emil Krén, editor, Web Gallery of Art).
Biographical Timeline

1817  Isabella Jane Blagden, born in Calcutta, India on June 30.

c.1840  Educated in London at Louisa Agassiz's Ladies School, 2 Allsop Terrace, near Regent's Park, London, a school for the daughters of diplomats and merchants.

1842  "What is Sir Lytton Bulwer's 'Zanoni?' ", first poem to be published in The Metropolitan, in July. Poem sent to Lytton giving the school address.

1843  'To Sir E.L. Bulwer, on his "Last of the Barons", a review, published in The Metropolitan, in April.

1850  Arrives in Florence in March and meets the Brownings in the same month. Living at the Villa Moutier, near the Poggio Imperiale, about one kilometre from the Porta Romana, Florence. Spends winter in Rome. Father dies in Calcutta on December 10.

1850-51  Spends winter in Rome with her school friend, Charlotte Agassiz, residing at 18 Via de'Prefetti.


1853  Visits Rome in August, residing at 13 Via Gregoriana, on the second floor until ?October.

1854  In Rome during early part of the year. Later went to England. Returns to Florence.

1855  Louisa Alexander leaves Florence for India. Blagden leaves Florence with the Brownings for Marseilles, then goes on to Paris by train. Later visits England.

1856  In January meets the Brownings in Paris."Words", by an English Lady, and "La Tenentina", by J.T.Gozes, both reviews, published in Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, in July. Returns to Florence in July. Takes a five year lease of the upper floor of Villa Brichieri.

1857  'La Tenentina' is reprinted in the The Ladies Companion in January. Annette Bracken, Blagden's cousin, resides with her at Villa Brichieri. Blagden and Bracken visit the Brownings who are on holiday at Bagni di Lucca, residing close by with Robert Edward Bulwer Lytton.
1858 'Light and Dark', a poem, appeared in *The English Woman's Journal*, in May. 'Felice de Fauvau', a non-fiction piece, published in *The English Woman's Journal*, in October.
In November departs for Madrid, with her cousin, Ellen Alexander.

Returns from Madrid in March. In July/August? or September/October? residing at Villa Alberti, Siena, with the Brownings and American journalist, Kate Field.
Arrives in Rome in November.

1860 In Rome until June residing near Charlotte Cushman, Harriet Hosmer and Emma Stebbins.
Brownings also visiting Rome.
Later in summer visits Siena where the Brownings are holidaying.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies in Florence, June 29, 1861.
In England in August, sometimes residing at her aunt's home, Stone House, Broadstairs, Kent, at other times, residing across the road from Robert Browning in Chichester Road, London.

1862 'A Tuscan Wedding', a short story, in *Once a Week*, January 11 and January 18. 'The Woman I Loved and the Woman who Loved Me', published in serial form in *Once a Week*, from January 18-March 8. Reprinted in *The Living Age*, April 26 – May 10. These two publications were later published in one volume by Chapman and Hall in 1865.
February-March at Stone House, Kent, later moving to 20 Blessington Road, Lee, Kent, the home of Charlotte Agassiz (Mrs Brice).
Later, rented two rooms at Clifton, Bristol, close to Frances Power Cobbe.
"The First of May in Rome", by J.F.G., a review, appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, in May.
'A Tuscan Villa', a short story, appeared in *Once a Week*, July 4.
'A Day at St. Gimignano', published in *Once a Week*, July 25. 'Studios in Florence. No. 1', published in *Once a Week*, December 19.

In Rome, residing at 28 Via del Corso.

In Venice as the guest of her uncle, William Bracken.
Visits Rome.

1866  'Gibson's Studio', a poem, appeared in *All The Year Round*, March 10. 'Alice', a poem', published in *Once a Week*, November 17. 'My Schoolfellows', a short story, published in *Once a Week*, appeared in two parts, November 24 and December 1.
Spends the summer in England, returning to Florence and takes tenancy of Villa Isetta, Bellossguardo.

In Bagni di Lucca from May to October.

1868  'Recollections of Gibson the Sculptor', a memoir, published in *The Cornhill Magazine*, in May. 'A portrait from Memory', a poem, published in *All the Year Round*, October 3.
Leaves Villa Isetta and spends the summer in England. On her return to Florence, takes the tenancy of Villa Castellani, Bellossguardo.

1869  'Two Sonnets: Despondency and Reproof', July 10 and 'Orphanhood', a poem, September 25, both published in *All the Year Round*.

1870  Spends the summer in Siena.

1872 Two poems, 'Wild Flowers', published June 29, and 'The Invitation' published November 30, in All the Year Round. Travels to England for the summer.


1874 Poems is reviewed in The Examiner, November 15; The Pall Mall Gazette, December 12, and The Athenaeum, January 3.¹

¹ I am indebted to Phillip Kelley and Sandra Donaldson, editors of Florentine Friends (Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press and Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 2009) for the details of Blagden's biographical and publishing history. Blagden's whereabouts in her early years are unknown. Circumstantial evidence suggests that she was educated in London at Louisa Agassiz's Ladies' School, 7 Allsop Terrace, near Regent's Park, a school for daughters of diplomats and merchants. Her first recorded letter, written from the Ladies School, was addressed to the novelist Edward George Bulwer Lytton in January 1842. The headmistress's niece, Mary Thornton (later Tassarini), had preceded Blagden to Florence by several years. Louisa Agassiz bequeathed a brooch, a ring and hair bracelet to Blagden.
Fig. 1 Isabella Blagden (1817-1873).
Introduction

Isabella Jane Blagden (1817-1873) was a nineteenth-century English novelist and poet. Much of her work was written in the years 1853-1873 and is concerned with issues regarding the Woman Question, the emerging independent New Woman, female friendship and the notion of sisterhood. Blagden wrote and published five novels, several short stories and non-fiction essays. A volume of her poems was published posthumously in 1874, many of which were not published in her lifetime.1 Her radical and subversive approach challenged the prevailing patriarchal ideology regarding the social roles prescribed to women. In order to support my argument that Blagden was a feminist-lesbian poet, my approach is from current-day feminist and lesbian critical perspectives.

Little by way of investigation has been carried out on Blagden, and she has only been acknowledged tangentially in scholarly work on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning and others, who were part of her literary circle in Italy.2 Nevertheless, recent evaluation of Blagden's poetics, in the context of the relationship between women and nation, has been pursued by Alison Chapman.3 However, where Chapman pursues the relationships between expatriate women poets and the notion of nationhood, she does not offer a sustained argument regarding Blagden's feminist-lesbian poetics, which is the focus of this thesis.

Blagden's cultural inheritance, mysterious background and outsider status were a

1 There is evidence to suggest that Blagden wished to write under the pseudonym of 'Ivory Beryl', but no work published under that name has surfaced. She was known as 'Isa' 'pronounced as eas(a) or eas(e) the short for Isabella'. See Edward McAleer, ed., Dearest Isa (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press), 1951, xxi. Most of her work is published using the abbreviated form of her name, 'Isa'.
major force in her life and work, and in the first part of Chapter One, 'Isabella Blagden in Context', I provide a comprehensive biographical background with particular emphasis on Blagden's matri/patrilineage heritage and the imperial tenets that prevailed in her time, given her imperial background. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Blagden was born in Calcutta, having an English father and an Indian or Spanish mother, whose history is unknown. Blagden was educated in London and lived there as a young woman before moving to Florence, Italy, in 1850, where she spent the last twenty three years of her life. Italy, Florence, and Rome, became major protagonists in the narrative of Blagden's life and work. It is the perception of others which provides a profile of Blagden, as much of her personal correspondence and papers were destroyed by her uncle at the time of her death in 1873. What is known about her life, and death, is recorded in the letters and biographies of writers who knew her well, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning and Henry James. By providing a birth-to-death overview of Blagden's life, I lay the foundation from which to move forward with my appraisal of her writing.

In the second part of Chapter One, 'Isabella Blagden: Professional Context', I situate Blagden in the tradition of women poets, thus giving her a rightful place in this long continuum. Firstly, I consider the famous precursor for the Victorian woman poet, the iconic figure of the Greek lyric poet Sappho (c600 BC), and draw on the work of feminist critic, Jane McIntosh Snyder, who provides a comprehensive appraisal of Sappho's persona and iconic status which has resonance in Blagden's poetry. The overtly gendered attitude to women's poetry that existed in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century in terms of the 'poetess' tradition is considered in my appraisal of the work of the leading Romantic 'poetesses' such as Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), who paved
the way for an exploration of the intricate relationship between gender and genre in their poetry. This exerted a strong influence on mid-Victorian women poets such as Blagden, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), who explored women's subjectivity in less emotional terms by manipulating form and challenging contemporary political opinion in terms of the social and political changes taking place in Britain in the mid-nineteenth-century. For their critical assessment of the 'poetess' and the construction of the nineteenth-century woman poet, I draw on the work of twentieth/twenty-first century feminist critics like Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain as they provide the framework for my argument.4

Blagden's skill as a poet as perceived by others, for example, Barrett Browning and a review in the *Athenaeum* of Blagden's posthumously published volume of poems, a selection of which are the focus of this study, provide a positive critique of Blagden's poetic aesthetics. Others, such as Thomas Trollope, provide a typically male-inscribed critique of her *oeuvre*, while Charles Dickens rejected her work for publication in *Household Words*. As I argue, this was because Dickens considered her poems too radically feminist for his readership.

Contemporary feminism was an area which Blagden sought to address in her writing, and in Chapter Two, 'Feminist Influences: Social Context and Social Critiques in Isabella Blagden's Poetry', I consider women's rights issues, collectively known as the Woman Question. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the emerging Women's Movement. Key figures in the movement who were actively involved in feminist politics, some of whom were known to Blagden, such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827-1891) and Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925),

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are introduced. This is followed by a consideration of the controversial issues like education and marriage which affected women's lives. The stigmatised unmarried woman, who, in patriarchal terms was considered deviant from the 'norm', versus the status of the married woman and the notion of 'The Angel in the House', are foregrounded by Blagden in two of her novels, *Agnes Tremorne* (1861) and *The Cost of a Secret* (1863), to which I refer by way of quotation in order to establish her feminist position.

A comprehensive appraisal of the notion of the fallen woman, her rescue and rehabilitation, prostitution or 'the great social evil' as it became known, and the subsequent Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1868 and 1869, are considered in this section in order to establish a cohesive argument for my later discussion of Blagden's two dramatic monologues, *The Story of Two Lives*. This discussion provides a context for Blagden's social critique of the laws which worked against vulnerable women.\(^5\) In order to offer a critical analysis of Blagden's *Two Lives*, I draw on the research of Glennis Byron, who provides an explanation of why Victorian women poets exploited the dramatic monologue form. This offers a useful exposition in terms of Blagden's female protagonist who relates her own story in the second monologue.

The construct of the 'fallen' woman in the nineteenth century relied upon Christian teaching, and, as the feminist critic Amanda Anderson explains: 'the condition of falleness derives from the act of original sin'.\(^6\) Anderson's comment allows for a further critical examination of the rhetoric of 'falleness' by the feminist

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5 Henceforth, I will refer to this poem as *Two Lives*.

critics F. Elizabeth Gray and Marina Walker. Gray and Walker offer an analysis in the context of Eve, the first prototype of the 'fallen woman' and Mary Magdalene's identification with the repentant whore.

The second part of the chapter is a consideration of Blagden's two monologues, *Two Lives*, which are social critiques of the sexual exploitation of women. Blagden's deployment of the iconographic distressed needlewoman exposes the economic factors which forced women onto the streets, and, as the social historian Beth Harris suggests, the needlewoman 'sewed for a stranger not for her husband (in performing wifely duties for the market place, her work was not unlike prostitution itself)'.

Blagden's needlewoman narrative is drawn from the many 'Condition of England' literary works written in the early to mid-nineteenth-century, which addressed the wretchedness of poverty, destitution, the unmarried mother, and the last resort for many, the workhouse. Blagden is highly critical of the legal discourse that created such conditions, and which worked against women.

In the second monologue Blagden addresses the issue of the Victorian preoccupation with the feminisation of suicide, not in terms of the symbolically fallen woman's destiny of death by drowning, but in terms of redemption through a female redeemer, the notion of which is highly subversive. Barbara Gates' scholarly work on the feminisation of suicide provides a useful framework for my discussion. The notion of female redemption through a female Christ-like figure in *Two Lives* foregrounds the prominence of sisterhood as both nurturer, redeemer and

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9 Influential 'Condition of England' novels were, for example, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1839), Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854).
saviour, and hence subverts the traditional Christian resolution that we are saved and
redeemed of our sins through the death and resurrection of a male Christ.

In Chapter Three, 'Isabella Blagden: Feminist Consciousness', I consider
Blagden's encoded sub-texts, in three of her poems, 'The Wrecked Life', 'Mesmerism'
and 'To Georges Sand: On Her Interview With Elizabeth Barrett Browning', which
allow for a subversive feminist reading of women's experience. As Liz Stanley and
Sue Wise explain:

[W]omen's experiences constitute a different view of reality [. . .] or way of
going about making sense of the world [. . .] Women sometimes construct or
inhabit [. . .] an entirely different social reality [. . .] Feminist consciousness
involves an interpretation of social reality, experiences and states of mind.11

An alternative interpretation of women's experiences deeply informs Blagden's
feminist consciousness, and in my discussion of her three poems I examine how
social reality is reconstructed and negotiated by her in order to offer an alternative
vision of the future for women.

The first of these poems, 'The Wrecked Life', is an exploration of forbidden desire
and is a richly ambiguous representation of passive female sexuality. In order to
depict the enigmatic woman in her poem, Blagden draws on the canon of
Renaissance art by alluding to Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Mona Lisa. In my
evaluation of this poem I draw parallels between the twenty-first century academic
critics Hilary Fraser and the academic author and essayist Stefan Klein, with the
views of the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet and the literary/art critic
Walter Pater, whose critiques represent the Mona Lisa as 'a model of visual

11 Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research
consumption', as Fraser describes her.\textsuperscript{12} Their views aid my discussion of Blagden's appropriation of the Mona Lisa trope, in terms of the commodification of women and the notion of a two-way gendered gaze which provide an erotic undercurrent in the poem. Blagden's response to the images and tropes present in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem, 'The Lady of Shalott' (1832), are appropriated by her in order to speak of women's experiences. The feminist critic Dorothy Mermin provides the framework for my discussion regarding the 'damsel in distress' trope. The scholarly work of J. Gerald Kennedy and the academic and literary editor, Peter Wagner, underpins my discussion and analysis of the notion of necrophilic fantasy in 'The Wrecked Life',\textsuperscript{13} This is achieved through the inter-play between da Vinci's pictorial representation, Tennyson's poem and Edgar Allan Poe's narratorial representation of Ligeia (1838), or, 'the hideous drama of revivication' as Poe describes his tale.\textsuperscript{14}

There is a marked shift in perspective in Blagden's poem from the erotic to the symbolic by her introduction of the themes of seduction and abandonment, and hence, the notion of woman's 'falleness'. Her appropriation of the Christian metaphor of Christ's pain and suffering and the stigmatic crown of thorns is projected onto her female protagonist and thus introduces the subversive notion of women's immortality.

The metaphoric suggestiveness of suffering womanhood is further considered in Blagden's poem 'Mesmerism' which is a consideration of the nineteenth-century mesmeric phenomena of mental possession. In the poem Blagden appropriates


\textsuperscript{14} Edgar Allan Poe, \textit{The Seventy best Tales of Edgar Allan Poe} (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), 140.
elements of the gothic in order to create an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty in the face of a threatening and tyrannical male mesmerist-figure. In my critique of this poem I draw on twentieth/twenty-first century academic critics, for example, Alison Winter, who provide the framework for my anachronistic analysis of Blagden's poetics in terms of the appropriation of the gendered gaze and elements of the gothic.15 ‘Mesmerism' is an exploration of the relationship between female sexuality and death, the objectified beauty of Blagden's female protagonist serving as a sexual intoxicant for the double-male gaze. Blagden's appropriation of the female doppelgänger motif, is, as Andrew J. Webber explains, 'typically in the service of male fantasies of the other' and her deployment of a 'triangle of desire' as Webber describes it, reveals a sub-text which is complex and radically subversive.16

Blagden's deployment of the tropes of invalidism, passivity and delusive madness provide further evidence of her intertextual relationship with Poe, this time drawing on his gothic tale of The Fall of the House of Usher (1839). The three characters in Poe's tale possess similar traits to Blagden's narrator-mesmerist-female-protagonist in the context of their mysterious illnesses, both mental and physical. The shadowy illusion of three, or triplet metaphor, suggests that Blagden's speakers have split personalities and her deployment of the gothic elements of terror and horror are an endorsement of the sinister undercurrent which pervades the poem.

Blagden's exploitation of the female life-in-death figure in 'Mesmerism' is introduced by the notion of a terrifying female vampire whose presence in the narrative has subversive resonance in the context of sexual deviance. As the feminist critic Nina Auerbach suggests, the female life-in-death figure was 'a metaphor for

higher [. . .] concerns [. . .] her recurrent fits of vampirism [. . .] mesmerism or hysterical paralysis [were] somewhat fearfully imagined in women throughout the nineteenth century'. As I argue, Blagden's deployment of vampirised sexuality in 'Mesmerism' was a socially subversive revisioning of the prevailing dominant discourse which allowed her to raise unspoken questions in order to promulgate the female process of individuation.

The inspirational figure of the French writer, George Sand, is foregrounded in Blagden's poem 'To Georges Sand: On Her Interview with Elizabeth Barrett Browning', which is a vicarious rendition of Barrett Browning's first meeting with Sand in Paris in 1852. Barrett Browning's response to this meeting is recalled by her in two sonnets 'To George Sand: A Desire' and 'To George Sand: A Recognition'. Sand, and her culturally perceived deviant and transgressive sexuality held a fascination for Blagden (and Barrett Browning) and her appropriation of the fallen woman trope and the rhetoric of the angel/whore dichotomy present opposing images of an angelic Barrett Browning and the figure of Sand, portrayed in terms of a gothic vampire preying on her victims. The feminist critic, and expert on George Sand's life and oeuvre, Belinda Jack, describes Sand's reputation as a 'bisexual nymphomaniac', and this is an apt description in the context of Blagden's attraction to Sand's transgressive sexuality and lifestyle. As 'the counter-culture heroine of many feminist writers' as the feminist critic Elaine Showalter describes her, Sand 'was involved in the turbulence of womanly suffering'. 'Womanly suffering' and the notion of a shared sisterhood of women was in keeping with Blagden's feminist agenda, which is foregrounded by her, and by Barrett Browning, in their respective

18 Blagden uses the French spelling of 'Georges'.
20 Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (London: Virago Press, 2009), 84-85.
dedications to Sand.

In Chapter Four, 'Italian Influences', I discuss how Italy became a major character in the narrative of Blagden's life and in her poetry. Romantic representations of Italy, which form part of my discussion in this chapter, were at odds with the political turmoil in the country at the time Blagden resided there. Known as the Risorgimento, it was, as Derek Beales explains: 'the product of the interaction and conflict of many forces'. Based on Beale's historical material, I provide a brief background to the political situation in order to evaluate two of Blagden's Risorgimento-inspired poems. The first of these, 'On the Colours Being Replaced on the Palazzo Vecchio', was written to commemorate the Tuscan Revolution of 1859. The poem is a subversive expression of Blagden's feminist poetics in the context of a freed and feminised Florence, a 'New Jerusalem', presided over by a feminised Christ-like figure. The second poem in the context of the Risorgimento, 'Rome, 1870', portrays a plundered and ravaged Rome as a foreboding gothic space, the brutality of which is projected onto the figure of a sleeping woman. Hence, Italy's politics become synonymous with sexual politics.

At this time of political struggle, Blagden resided at Bellosguardo, just outside Florence. The metaphoric suggestiveness of Bellosguardo provided her, and others in the Anglo-Florentine group, with the stimulus for creative expression. Blagden's villas, and her role as Muse in the lives and work of others, is insightful in terms of her powerful presence in this intellectual milieu. The Tuscan landscape surrounding Blagden's garden at Bellosguardo provided the setting for two of her lyrical poems, 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation', in which the garden's flowering becomes an identification with the natural world and a desiring female sexuality. In this context, I

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draw on Paula Bennett's scholarly research which provides a useful framework for my analysis of Blagden's deployment of flower imagery in the two poems under discussion. I also put forward the argument that 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation' are a semi-autobiographical expression of a painful and emotional encounter which Blagden experienced at Bellosguardo, and which serve as a subversive expression of an earthly paradise in which to define sexual longing and yearning. The poem 'What is there in a Kiss?', a strident critique of heterosexual love, is also discussed, and together with 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation' introduces the notion of sexual indeterminancy and the possibility that Blagden was bisexual.

Blagden's relationship with the American actress Charlotte Cushman and others in her coterie of women friends in Rome during the 1850s and 1860s, is the focus of my discussion in Chapter Five, 'Isabella Blagden: Lesbian Consciousness'. Blagden's lesbian consciousness is defined in terms of her erotic attraction to women and the notion of a utopian lesbian sisterhood. Neeru Tandon and Preeti Tiwari explain that 'the powerful bond between women is a critical factor in women's lives and that sexual and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her consciousness and thus her creativity [and] this perspective can be uniquely liberating. In order to establish Blagden's aspirational lesbian poetics in this chapter, I focus on how female homoeroticism is deployed by her as a socially subversive theme.

In the first part of this chapter, I consider the concept of lesbianism from an historical perspective and explore the grammatical status of the word 'lesbian' and its historically complex and difficult meaning derived from Sappho. In order to establish

a feminist-lesbian interpretation of Blagden's poems, I will draw on the scholarly work of feminist-lesbian critics Laura Doan and Bonnie Zimmerman for their discussions of the origins of lesbian culture, the nineteenth-century notion of Sapphism and the theories of 'inversion', which help underpin my argument.  

This discussion is followed by an introduction to Blagden's coterie of women friends in Rome in terms of their decadent and bohemian lifestyles, of which Blagden was a part. These emancipated women were, like Blagden, proto-type New Women. Cross-dressing and the use of marital metaphors, for example, provided a site not only for self-expression, but also evoked homoerotic responses from many women in her social circle. In order to provide a framework for discussion, I draw on the scholarly contributions by Sharon Marcus and Lisa Merrill, who, among others, provide a comprehensive appraisal of romantic friendships between women.  

Blagden's group of women friends in Rome, were of consummate interest to Barrett Browning, and her role as a 'go-between' on behalf of Blagden and Cushman anticipates her radical stance on gender politics and the handling of androgynous gender/gender inversion, in her verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

In the second part of the chapter I provide an analysis of a selection of Blagden's poems which were not published in her lifetime, implying perhaps, a private exercise couched in metaphoric suggestiveness. There is evidence of Cushman's shadowy presence in the first four poems I evaluate in this chapter, namely: 'A Dialogue Between Two Friends', 'The Angels of Life', 'Say Which Were Best' and 'A Love Poem: Rosamond'. Written in the dramatic monologue form, 'A


Dialogue Between Two Friends', is a covert expression of lesbian desire in which the speaker reflects upon a past sexual encounter. Blagden's use of language in this poem provides a psychological projection of the emotional torment the speaker experiences.

In order to offer a coded representation of women's intimacies in her poem 'The Angels of Life', Blagden draws on the iconic figure of Sappho and an ethereally constructed Cushman. The abstracted perspective of the first person-narrator's phantom-haunted consciousness in this poem is characterised by a dream-driven discourse, the sublimation and intensity of which provides a transcendent homoeroticism. Written in the sonnet form, 'Say Which Were Best' and 'A Love Poem' are an interplay of literary allusions to the myths of classical antiquity. 'Say Which Were Best' draws on the character of Circe, in Homer's *Odyssey*, a manipulative enchantress who drugged her victims with a honied intoxicant, and, as I argue in my evaluation of this poem, Blagden projects her version of Circe onto Cushman in order to foreground the hedonistic aspects of the poem.

In my consideration of 'A Love Poem: Rosamond', my focus is on the first stanza of the poem, which recalls an epiphanic experience invoked by the natural world in which the speaker's dreams are sought by association with a swarm of bees, the pulsating and hovering aspects of the bee, building to an orgasmic fantasy. The classical philologist Susan Scheinberg's theoretical account of 'bee maidens' who formed female trinities, are an appropriate metaphor for the affirmation of lesbian desire and lesbian sorority in the context of my evaluation of Blagden's poem. In both poems Blagden deploys the motifs of bees and honey in order to exploit the

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wild, intoxicating and prophetic aspects of the bee metaphor as a site of pain, pleasure and desire.

Romantic representations of Italy provided Blagden with the imaginative inspiration for her long poem, *L'Ariccia: Death in Life. No.1. and L'Ariccia. Life in Death. No.11*, in which she deploys an imagined dream-like, Utopian, all-female space in which sexuality could be explored and redefined. As the literary critic Terry Castle explains: 'lesbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades in surface detail, a strong, allegorical, utopian tendency'. Blagden displaces the theme of lesbian desire by locating it in the pagan Etruscan civilisation in Italy, which endured in pre-Roman times. Etruscan society was a permissive and pleasure-seeking society, where the women were powerful, influential and emancipated. Blagden's portrayal of them is thus as sensuous, beautiful and enigmatic. The poem's theme, the idolisation of women, is written in a language imbued with overt patterns of Christian symbolism which give rise to many interpretative and subversive possibilities in the context of the desiring lover-mother-sister figure.

The absent mother-figure in Blagden's early years has resonance in her short poem 'Orphanhood', which, as the title suggests, privileges the absent mother-figure in emotional terms. Set in the shadowy depths of a forest, Blagden's exploration of the hidden depths and secret spaces that a forest yields, envisions subversive possibilities in the context of lesbian desire.

Blagden again draws on the canon of High Renaissance art for her iconographic representation of Venus, the goddess of love, which is projected onto her female protagonist in her poem, 'A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice, Rome', composed in

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28 The Italian classicist, Larissa Bonfante, editor of *Etruscan Life and Afterlife* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), provides a comprehensive overview of the women in Etruscan civilisation and my evaluation of Blagden's poem is based on her scholarly research.
the Petrarchan sonnet form. The eroticised feminine form becomes the object of a voyeuristic lesbian gaze and fits within the context of female lust. The notion of the angel/whore dichotomy, appropriated by Blagden in terms of the image of the Madonna/gypsy-figure, serve as the poem's transgressive subtext. The metaphoric suggestiveness of the gypsy-figure in the poem connotes depravity, and as Judith Okely explains, the gypsy-woman 'is supposed to be sexually available and promiscuous in her affections although sexual consummation and prostitution are elusive in the image'.\(^{29}\) As I argue in my evaluation of this poem, the idealisation of the desiring-woman-figure and the associated images of freedom, elusiveness and exoticism, though couched in metaphoric suggestiveness, serve as an expression of Blagden's lesbian consciousness.

In this introduction I have provided a context and framework for my consideration of Blagden as a radical and subversive feminist-lesbian poet. Her unique contribution to women's poetry, considered in this thesis from an anachronistic perspective, supports the notion that Blagden transgressed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate discourse for a woman poet writing in the nineteenth century. Thus, by foregrounding her contribution to nineteenth-century feminist-lesbian poetry, I fulfil my objective of assuring that Blagden has a place in the continuous tradition of women's writing.

Chapter 1: Isabella Blagden in Context

Overview

In the first part of this chapter I provide a comprehensive biographical background to Blagden in order to gain a better understanding of the woman, and therefore, the poet. So much mystery surrounds Blagden's history in terms of her birth, matrilineage heritage, mixed-race heritage and her separation from her father, both physically and emotionally. Hence, her background requires explanation, as this impacted on her life and work, as will become evident throughout this thesis. Blagden's imperial heritage and her family's wealth, enabled her to traverse two continents, three countries and four major cities. Without her father's financial support she could not have attended a prestigious school in London, or afforded to go to Italy as a financially independent woman, and hence, live an independent lifestyle free from the patriarchal restrictions imposed on women living in Britain. The influential and highly esteemed group of radical writers and artists in Florence and Rome are introduced as they played an important role in the narrative of Blagden's life and literary career when she resided in Italy. Blagden's heritage and life in Italy are vital factors in determining what influenced her poetics in terms of the underlying themes resonant in her work.

In the second part of the chapter, I will consider Blagden in the context of her professional life by situating her, and giving her a place in the long tradition of women poets. In my discussion I consider the influential and iconic precursor woman poet Sappho and the influential literary foremothers of the early nineteenth century,

1 The faded inscription on Blagden's tombstone in the English Cemetery in Florence suggests that her date of birth was either June 30, 1816 or June 30, 1818. Her Italian death certificate indicates that she was born in the 'Indie Orientali', and that her father, 'Tommaso Blagden', was Swiss. Both Blagden's British and Italian death certificates state that her age at the time of death in 1873, was fifty-five. Given that she was born in the month of June and died in the month of January, would indicate a birth-date of 1817, but this is not backed up by any other evidence. For the purposes of this study I will use the year 1817 as her birth date.
for example, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. The transition of the 'poetess' to the Victorian woman poet and the progression towards a feminist poetics is discussed in the context of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti's writings. This is followed by a discussion of the major influences on Blagden as a poet and the subsequent criticisms of her poetic contributions.

**Part 1: Biographical Context: Anglo-Indian-Spanish Heritage**

There have been many assumptions regarding the mystery surrounding Blagden's heritage by those who knew her, and the occasional references to her in later years have been mostly rumour and conjecture. It was suggested by the American journalist and writer, Lilian Whiting that Blagden 'was the daughter of a strange union, that of an English gentleman and a Hindoo princess, and many Oriental characteristics were apparent in her temperament'. The American writer, Henry James described Blagden as 'an eager little lady whose type gives, visibly enough, the hint of East Indian blood', and the American literary critic, William Raymond said of Blagden:

> It is symbolic of the shadowy, elusive, yet pervasive individuality of Isabella Blagden that she should appear upon the Florentine scene with her origins shrouded in mystery. She was evidently Eurasian. Rumour has toyed with the

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2 I am heavily indebted to Philip Kelley and Sandra Donaldson, eds., *Florentine Friends* (Winfield, Kansas: The Wedgestone Press, 2009), for their invaluable research into Blagden's family history. The following biographical information would not have been possible without their research. My grateful thanks to Philip Kelley for the generous gift of a copy of *Florentine Friends* for the purposes of this thesis.

3 Lilian Whiting (1847-1942) was an American writer and journalist who was a frequent visitor to Florence, and, as previously mentioned was Kate Field's literary editor and first biographer. The above quotation is from Whiting's *The Florence of Landor* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1912), 138.

4 Henry James (1843-1916), was born in New York City. He went to Italy for the first time in 1869, where he met Blagden and the two became friends. Blagden's villa Castellani at Bellosguardo, was, as I argue in Chapter Four, the inspiration for James' novel, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). The above quotation is from James' recollections of *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1903), vol. 2, 95.
fancy that she was the daughter of an Indian Rajah, but in all probability her father an Englishman and her mother an East-Indian.\(^5\)

The perceptions of Blagden are, however, stereotypical racial representations of the time, but have to some extent created an exotic myth around her. However, none have provided any concrete evidence as to her matrilineal heritage. However, not everyone who knew Blagden in Italy believed her to be Eurasian. There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Blagden possibly had Spanish family connections on her mother's side. The American writer Elizabeth Kinney, who had met Blagden in Florence, refers to her 'bright black eyes' and dark complexion as being 'of a very Spanish type',\(^6\) and the French Historian, Jules Michelet (1798-1874) who knew Blagden states that: 'Miss Blagden had a Spanish mother, born in India. Nursed by an Indian woman; orphaned at 18 months; drinks marsala; loves Napoleon III in memory of his glorious days in 1859'.\(^7\) Michelet's comments provide circumstantial evidence of Blagden's possible matrilineal heritage, supported by her decision to visit Spain. Evidence gleaned from a letter written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Blagden about a planned trip to Madrid, hint at a possible maternal

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\(^5\) William O. Raymond (1812-1889), 'Our Lady of Bellosguardo: A Pastel Portrait', The University of Toronto Quarterly, 12.4 (July 1943), 449.

\(^6\) Elizabeth Kinney (1810-1889) 'Personal Reminiscences' (on microfilm at Columbia University), cited by Philip Kelley and Sandra Donaldson, eds., Scott Lewis, Edward Hagan and Rita S. Patteson, associate eds., Florentine Friends, xviii.

\(^7\) Blagden's professional relationship and friendship with Michelet is discussed in Chapter Four in the context of the Italian Risorgimento. The above quotation is in Claude Digeon, ed., Jules Michelet, Journal, 1868-1874 (Paris, Gallimard,1976), 281.
connection. Writing to Blagden from Paris on October 2, 1858, Barrett Browning comments:

I must think this scheme about Madrid [. . .] is a very hazardous scheme – [. . .] consider the expense. If your friend really wants you and not a visitor & [sic] an amusement [. . .] she should pay your way to her. The expenses of travelling . . . especially in Spain . . . are enormous, and, if you once get involved, you will never, with your reduced income, have a calm sense of independence again.9

In November 1858, Blagden went to Madrid with her cousin, Ellen Alexander, returning to Florence in March 1859. Philip Kelley and Sandra Donaldson state that Blagden's friend in Madrid was Henrietta de Bertodano y Lopez (1817?-1869), an English woman who, in 1837, married a Spaniard, Ramon de Bartodano y Lopez, Marquis del Moral. In the Brownings' address book for this period Barrett Browning listed Blagden's Madrid address as care of M. de Bertodano, Casa y calle del Duque de Alba. It is possible that by 1858 Blagden's trust fund, administered by her uncle, had diminished in some way.10 It is something that she had obviously discussed with the Brownings, which is remarkable in itself, given that she appears never to have discussed her heritage with anyone. Writing to Blagden from Florence on November 17, 1858, Barrett Browning, states:

8 Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1812-1889) was born in Durham. In 1846 she married Robert Browning and shortly afterwards they moved to Italy, where she remained until her death in 1861. She was a prolific poet. On the death of William Wordsworth in 1850, Barrett Browning's name was promoted by the Athenaeum as a candidate for the Poet Laureateship (Alfred, Lord Tennyson was appointed). Some of the best examples of Barrett Browning's work are 'The Cry of the Children' (1843); Poems and a collection called Sonnets (1844); a collection of love-poems dedicated to her husband Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850); a two-part political poems Casa Guidi's Windows (begun in 1847 and published in 1851), was written as a protest to the oppression of Italy by foreign forces; her epic feminist verse-novel, Aurora Leigh (1856), was published to great acclaim. Her collection Last Poems was published posthumously in 1862. Barrett Browning died in Florence on June 29, 1861, and is buried in the English Protestant Cemetery there. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 8, henceforth referred to as ODNB. Barrett Browning was a close and influential friend of Blagden. She had a son, Robert Weidemann Browning, who was born in Florence I n 1849. He was known as 'Pen' or 'Penin'.

9 Florentine Friends, 170.
10 Ibid., 172. This is further discussed in the subsequent section 'The Indian Brackens'.
I do hope & trust your merciful disposition will induce you to write from Spain [. . .] I did hate to see you go away so, Isa – it was a pain & [sic] grief to me. And yet, now that [. . .] you're gone fairly, I turn on myself by a revulsion, & struggle to take up the other side of the question, & count on various advantages & pleasures which must surely fall to you . . . otherwise you would not have been let go, with so little apparent motive. You see there must be some grand fate under the cards, to which the spirits were determined to direct you.\textsuperscript{11}

These lines are revealing. Blagden appears to be a beneficiary of some kind regarding the 'various advantages and pleasures' which might come her way, both in monetary terms and renewed family connections perhaps. In another letter, written to Blagden from Rome January 7, 1859, Barrett Browning comments:

[Y]our letter interested me deeply. I knew you would have that interview & [sic] renewal of sight, but I could only guess till you told me how magnanimous you could be under it. We both admired you entirely- "Perfectly digne" said Robert. "Perfectly Isa" thought I. After all it was one of my motives for my vehement & factious opposition to the Spanish scheme. Forgive me.\textsuperscript{12}

The 'interview and renewal of sight' suggests that Blagden had met up with someone whom she had not seen, or been in contact with for some considerable time, possibly, a Spanish relative of her mother. It would appear that the meeting was a success and that Blagden had handled a difficult situation with good grace. Blagden, as this study will reveal, gave little of her personal life to anyone, and, arguably, the Brownings knew more than most. However, Blagden might only have divulged her reasons for going to Madrid through these letters, and not through face-to-face communication, which would explain Barrett Browning's comment: 'Your letter interested me deeply'. Barrett Browning's letters go some way to substantiate Michelet's comments regarding Blagden's Spanish heritage, but if her mother was Spanish, Blagden, for some reason, felt the need to keep silent about the issue.

\textsuperscript{11} Florentine Friends, 174.
\textsuperscript{12} Florentine Friends, 180. 'Perfectly digne' means 'praiseworthy'.
During the nineteenth century it was socially acceptable, in the English imagination at least, to be European, but 'dangerous' to have an Indian identity in colonial times, when mixed race credentials were taboo. Hence, Blagden would have been culturally defined as 'other', and thus occupied a socially inferior position. The Indian Revolt of 1857, a backlash against British rule and economic exploitation, led to the dissolution, in 1858, of the East India Company. India thereafter, was taken over and governed by the Crown, therefore, any person of mixed race acquired an illegal status, any marriages between mixed races, annulled. Blagden, who was dependent on the Empire for her annuity might well have felt the impact of change, which Barrett Browning alludes to as her 'reduced income'. This would help explain Raymond's comment regarding Blagden's 'shadowy' and 'elusive' heritage, and her silence. Her childhood years in India were something she never spoke about.

An autobiographical reading of her poem 'Orphanhood' is revealing: 'My childhood withered (1:2)/ And love and hope and joy were dead' (2:3) and similarly in her poem, 'The Wrecked Life', Blagden's speaker reiterates: '[n]o mother's kiss/ Was an amulet about her heart /.../The debile and pathetic falterings/ Of infancy and childhood' (129-30; 134-35). These words, arguably, shaped by her childhood experience have other connotations regarding the absent mother-figure and which are discussed in Chapter Five.

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13 Prior to 1858, Blagden's birth would have been legitimate, after that time she would have acquired an illegitimate birth-status. Given that she would have been forty-one years of age in 1858, does not support the fact that her surname was Blagden, and not Bracken, her father's name, which is discussed in the next section.
14 *Florentine Friends*, 170.
The Indian Brackens

The facts concerning Blagden's English patrilineal heritage are more established. Her father, was a wealthy merchant in Calcutta in the early part of the nineteenth century, and later, as a Civil Servant in India, he had ties with the East India Company, as the next section reveals. Recent circumstantial evidence sheds light on the Bracken and Alexander families in India as being relatives of Blagden on her father's side, suggesting that she was born in Calcutta, and the daughter of Thomas Bracken (1791-1850). The most revealing piece of evidence which supports the paternity of Thomas Bracken is to be found in his will in which he states that Blagden be provided with £150 per annum. In present day terms, the income value of that sum, that is, the relative average income that would be used to buy a commodity, is

[15] The evidence has been collated by the editors of Florentine Friends. Thomas Bracken is described in his will as 'A member of the Civil Service of the East India Company on their Bengal Establishment of Calcutta, East Indies'. (The National Archives, Kew, PROB: 11/2128/258). A Mrs Constanza Hulton, whose mother Linda Mazini, had been with Blagden in her last days states: 'Very little was known to me about her family connections, her only relations I ever heard of are a widowed Mrs Bracken living in Florence in those years (1865-72) & [sic] and her son.' (Letter to Dr. A. Joseph Armstrong, dated February 24, 1935, cited in Dearest Isa. Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden, Edward C. McAleer, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers, 1951. xxiii.). The 'widowed Mrs Bracken' was Blagden's aunt, Mary Egerton Bracken (nee Smith), the second wife of Blagden's uncle, John Bracken (1806-1851) and her son, William Stewart Egerton Bracken, known as 'Willie.' Willie became a playmate of the Browning's son, Peni, and both families holidayed together on the Tuscan coast. Mary's sister, Annie Egerton Smith became a close friend of Robert Browning and his sister Sarianna. Annie was part-owner of the Liverpool Mercury. On her death Browning wrote the poem 'La Saisiez' (1878) in her memory. Another Bracken family member in Florence when Blagden resided there, and who is often mentioned in the Browning's correspondence, was Annette Bracken, Blagden's cousin. Mary McKenzie, an aunt of Mary Bracken, gave Robert Browning and Annette Bracken painting and drawing lessons in Rome.

[16] Copy at the Public Records Office at the National Archives, Kew, London.
£181,700. This would suggest that during her years in Florence, Blagden was a financially independent woman.

Thomas Bracken's wealth was derived from his years as partner in Alexander & Company of Calcutta, who were merchants, bankers and agents. After the firm's closure in 1832, Bracken became secretary and treasurer in the Bank of Bengal, Calcutta. He retired from the bank in 1847, and sailed to England, hoping to retire there. Ill health prevented him from settling in England and he returned to the warmer climes of Calcutta in early 1850. Around this time Blagden left England for Florence. Bracken died on December 10, 1850, and was buried the following day. From the time-scale of Blagden's whereabouts in the 1850s, there is no indication that she attended her father's funeral. Bracken's younger brother, William Bracken (1809-1891) became co-executor of his brother's estate and co-administered Blagden's trust. He also managed Blagden's affairs after her death in 1873.

17 Based on the calculations from MeasuringWorth.com. In Thomas Bracken's will, Blagden is the first of two named legatees, the other being Mary Rebecca, his daughter by his wife Rebecca Sewell, who he married in Calcutta on September 1, 1818. This would make Blagden about one year old at the time. The will states that out of the interests and dividends of Bracken's investments, which are to be held in trust, Blagden was to be provided with £150 per annum for 'as long as she lives'. Mary Rebecca is bequeathed the remaining interests and dividends but only 'after the said provision for Miss Isabella Blagden.' Upon Mary Rebecca's marriage, she is to receive all of her father's estate, 'saving and excepting a portion sufficient to defray the above Annuity' to Blagden. (Based on the findings of Kelley and Donaldson in Florentine Friends). The RootsWeb's World Connect Project: Rear Admiral Policarpus Taylor – British Royal Navy's research reveals Thomas Bracken's two supposed marriages. 'Marriage 1 Blagden, Married BEF 1815; Children: Isabella Blagden b. 30 June 1816 in India.' Presumably 'BEF' would indicate 'before' 1815. This might suggest that Blagden was illegitimate, or perhaps the daughter of a marriage that couldn't be declared for reasons of race. 'Marriage 2: Rebecca Sewell, b. 14 Oct 1794 in Madras. Married 1 Sep 1818 in St John's Cathedral, Calcutta. Children 1 Mary Rebecca Bracken b: 15 Dec 1819 in India.' Blagden would have been 15 months old when her father married for the 'second' time and two and a half years old when her half-sister was born. If Michelet's comment is accurate that Blagden's mother died when she was 18 months old, she must have died three months after Bracken's marriage to Rebecca Sewell. This would suggest that there was no first marriage and that Blagden was illegitimate.

18 No evidence has surfaced to date that Blagden acknowledged, or responded to, the death of her father, or ever visited India as an adult.

19 William Bracken (1809-1891) was the youngest of five Bracken brothers. He was appointed as a writer in the Bengal establishment of the East India Company. He arrived in India on June 10, 1827. During his years in India, mostly in Calcutta, he took up various other appointments. Like Blagden, he made his London home with his sister Mary Alexander. He never married. During his life he administered Blagden's trust fund, provided for her in other ways, and upon her death took charge of her estate. (See Florentine Friends, 495).
After meeting Thomas and William Bracken's sister, Mary Alexander (1790-1867), Robert Browning, writing to Blagden comments: 'I liked her much – fancied her like you somewhat in face'. When Mary Alexander died, Blagden wrote to Beatrice [known as 'Bea'] Trollope, the daughter of Thomas Adolphus and Theodosia Trollope:

You have often heard me speak of her. Her house was my central home in England. I always arrived at Grosvenor Place, and made it my headquarters when in town and I always left England from Stone House. She was my oldest friend and was as dear to me as your Uncle Tony [Anthony Trollope] is to you. My happiest holydays [sic] were all spent with her when I was a child and I feel as if I had lost (almost) a mother.

This provides some insight into Blagden's whereabouts during her London years. Her aunt had provided a base for her in England, somewhere for her to put down her roots. Given that Blagden's mother was an absent and silent figure in her life, the italicising of 'almost' would suggest that her aunt had acted as a surrogate mother. On her death in 1867, Mary Alexander left Blagden £50 in her will. In present day terms, the income value, that is, the relative average income that would be used to buy a commodity, is £38,180.00. Had Blagden experienced any loss of income, as, for example, at the time she went to Madrid, she would by now have been financially independent once again.

20 Dearest Isa, op. cit., (February 19, 1863), 152.
21 Letter dated February 9, 1868, Cited by Kelley and Donaldson in Florentine Friends, xx. (MS at Princeton). Mary Alexander married Josias Du Pre Alexander (1771-1839) in Calcutta in 1809 and was one of the founders of Alexander & Co. Merchant Bankers, Calcutta. He was also a director of the East India Company. The father of Henrietta de Bertodano, who Blagden visited in Madrid, a silk merchant, served on the governing board of the East India Company at the same time as Blagden's uncle. When he retired in 1816, Alexander purchased Stone House, Broadstairs, Kent. The Alexanders' London address was Hanover Square, but after her husband's death, Mary moved to Grosvenor Place. When she was in England, Blagden always gave her addresses as Grosvenor Place and Stone House.
22 Based on the calculations of MeasuringWorth.com.
The London Years

The year in which Blagden arrived in London is unknown, but circumstantial evidence suggests that she resided there until 1850. Little is known of Blagden's childhood, other than the evidence that she spent holidays with her aunt, Mary Alexander, in London and Kent. Further circumstantial evidence suggests that Blagden attended Louisa Agassiz's Ladies' School at 7 Allsop Terrace, Regents Terrace, now part of Marylebone Road in London.\textsuperscript{23} The school educated the daughters of diplomats and merchants living abroad, which would suggest Blagden had a privileged background. Louisa Agassiz' niece, Charlotte (1820-1900), accompanied Blagden to Florence in 1850, so it is possible they had met at the school.\textsuperscript{24}

Blagden's first recorded letter, to the novelist Sir Edward George, Earle Lytton, Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) in January, 1842, gives her address as 7 Allsop Terrace. Blagden would have been twenty five at the time, so it is possible that she was a teacher at the school.\textsuperscript{25} In the letter she asks Bulwer Lytton to read a play she had written when she was seventeen, 'after I saw you when I was a mere child'.\textsuperscript{26} This contact proved to be a very useful one for Blagden. In May 1842, she wrote the poem 'What is Sir Lytton Bulwer's "Zanoni?" ', which was published in \textit{The Metropolitan}, July 1842, signed 'J.B'.\textsuperscript{27} The poem was written in response to Bulwer Lytton's work of occult fantasy, \textit{Zanoni} (1842), which embraces the Rosicrucian concept of mystic

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Florentine Friends}, xxi.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Florentine Friends}, xxi.
\textsuperscript{25} This was Lytton's full title. He became a baronet in 1838. His London address was Grosvenor Square, so it is possible Blagden had met him through her aunt, Mary Alexander, whose London address was also Grosvenor Square.
\textsuperscript{26} MS with Cobbold. No play written by Blagden has surfaced to date.
\textsuperscript{27} Blagden's handwriting was flamboyant in style, having long flourishing strokes, and in original copies of her letters the capitalised letter 'I' could easily be read as 'Y', evidence of which can be seen in the MS copy of her poem 'Rome 1870', a copy of which is in the Poems Appendix.
Christianity. The novel works within the Gothic tradition and, as I argue in later chapters, Blagden deployed elements of the Gothic and Christian mysticism in order to provide a subversive reading of many of her poems as the focus for her feminist-lesbian consciousness.

Florence and Rome: Influences

When Blagden went to Florence in March 1850, she was defying convention for many Victorian women by arriving in the city unmarried, unescorted by a male relative and financially independent. In this respect she could be regarded as a prototype New Woman. Wishing to seek literary acquaintances, Blagden took with her to Florence a letter of introduction to Barrett Browning and her husband, Robert. Her friendship with Bulwer Lytton suggests that she was known in established circles in London. A letter written by Barrett Browning to her sister Arabella on March 12, 1850, suggests that it was about this time that the Brownings

28 As Tyler R. Tichelaar explains: 'Zanoni has a Christian theme that affirms God's power over humanity, and the novel's immortal characters are true Christians in their practice and belief, despite their contact with the supernatural [. . .] Rosicrucian heroes [were] examples of how anyone can achieve redemption and salvation'. In The Gothic Wanderer: From Trangression to Redemption: Gothic Literature from 1794-Present (Ann Arbor, MI: Modern History Press, 2012), 184.

29 The term 'New Woman' was first coined by the writer Sarah Grand in 1894. In the same year the dramatist Sydney Grundy in his 'The New Woman: A Comedy in Four Acts', portrays the emancipated New Woman as masculine and aggressive, hence unfeminine. As Carolyn Christensen Nelson suggests: '[t]he New Woman was already in the minds of many a comic figure who could be easily caricatured and mocked. The New Women in Grundy's drama are strident and aggressive while their male companions are languid and effeminate, [. . .] Grundy further satirizes the New Women by characterizing them as intellectual lightweights'. Carolyn Christensen Nelson, ed., A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles and Drama of the 1890s (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000) 295.

30 Robert Browning (1812-1889) was born in London. As a poet he did not receive the same recognition as his wife during her lifetime. His collection of poems, Men and Women (1855) failed both critically and commercially to make an impact. A year after the publication of Men and Women, Elizabeth, published her feminist verse-novel, Aurora Leigh (1856), which earned her high praise. After his wife's death, Browning returned to England. It was not until the publication of his epic work, The Ring and the Book (1868-1869) which was well received, that he gained recognition as a major poet. He continued writing poetry, having established himself as a popular literary figure. He died in Venice in 1889, while visiting his son. He is buried in Westminster Abbey, London. Source of reference: ODNB, vol. 8. Browning was a close and influential friend of Blagden. She was his amanuensis for his collection of poems Men and Women and the Muse for his epic work The Ring and the Book, which is discussed in Chapter Four.
and Blagden met:

We have had . . . a visit from a Miss Blagden, a single lady, with black hair, black eyes, yet somehow not pretty, who does literature, leads a London life among the "literateurs" when she is in England, & [. . .] is an intimate friend of Bulwer Lytton to whom she applied to Forster to get a letter of introduction to us, as she particularly wanted to see us. Mr Forster wouldn't give her a line - And why, do you think? "Because" said he to her, "if I gave you one you would only see Browning. As to Mrs Browning, it is as difficult to see her in Florence as it ever was in London . . ." She got the letter however from Robert's half-uncle (who gave it, at another person's interposition) & by way of making sure, she brought it and presented it, herself. I liked her little dog extremely and by no means disliked her.  

Fig. 2 (a) Elizabeth Barrett Browning with her son, Pen, in Rome, 1860.  
Fig. 2 (b) Robert Browning in Rome, 1860.

Obviously Bulwer Lytton's credentials were sufficient enough to persuade Barrett Browning to want to meet Blagden. The letter also gives an insight into Barrett Browning's continuing reclusive life-style, partly due to her ill-health and partly due to the Brownings' self-imposed 'outsider' status from the expatriate community in

Florence. As Barrett Browning states, she and Robert: 'struggled to keep out of it [the expatriate community] with hands and feet'.

It is quite extraordinary therefore, that four months after their first meeting, Barrett Browning sent Blagden an invitation to 'Come to see us . . . & make use of us at breakfast time, dinner time or tea time, just as you like, & set it down as our gain'. It appears that no-one else ever received such an invitation to the Brownings' home, the Casa Guidi in Florence, an indication perhaps of Blagden's connections, intelligence and charismatic and engaging persona. Blagden's close friendship with the Brownings endured until Barrett Browning's death in 1861.

Aside from the Brownings, who arrived in Pisa shortly after they were married and later settling in Florence in 1847, the aesthetically conscious group of writers and artists who were part of Blagden's Anglo-Florentine Group were other intellectual émigrés who made Florence their home. These included the poet Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1865); Frances Power Cobbe, who resided for a time with Blagden; the feminist writer and critic, Anna Jameson (1794-1860) and the English

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32 Kenyon, op. cit., 476. Cited from a letter to a Mrs Martin, January 30, 1851.
33 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 7.
34 Blagden's enduring friendship with Robert Browning lived on after his wife's death in June 1861, agreeing to write to each other every other month, Blagden on the 12th and Browning on the 19th. Blagden's letters to Browning have not survived, possibly because Browning had informed Blagden that: '[r]emember I read your letters, twice, & then burn them: mine I trust, - earnestly conjure you will never show: but you will not'. In Edward C. McAleer, ed., *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1951), 117. It is possible that Browning felt he had revealed too much that would endanger his reputation as the loyal romantic lover-husband and poet. After his wife's death, Browning never returned to Italy. He did, however, meet Blagden on several occasions when she visited London. Browning's letters to Blagden have survived, because at the time of her death, her uncle, William Bracken, returned his correspondence to him. Browning's letters form the volume *Dearest Isa*.
35 Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904) was born in Dublin. She was a writer, philanthropist and campaigner for women's rights. She lived with Blagden for several months at Blagden's villa at Bellosguardo, Florence. She was the Italian correspondent for the *Daily News* and reviewed Blagden's novel *The Cost of a Secret* (1863) for the paper. As well as spending time in Florence, she was, like Blagden, a frequent visitor to Rome and became part of the American actress, Charlotte Cushman's circle of women friends. Cobbe wrote numerous essays and pamphlets on marriage, domestic violence, women's education and was a leading figure in the battle to outlaw vivisection. Cobbe's essay *Workhouse Sketches* (1861) and her travel book, *Cities of the Past* (1863) feature in Blagden's poem *The Story of Two Lives*, which is discussed in the next chapter in the context of the fallen woman.
poet, Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864). The son of Blagden's mentor Sir Edward George Bulwer Lytton, Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer (1831-1891), a poet, writing under the name of Owen Meredith, was a close friend of Blagden during his Florentine years. Others residents and close friends in Florence were the writer Frances (Fanny) Trollope (1780-1863), mother of the novelist Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) and her elder son, the writer Thomas Adolphus Trollope (1810-1892) and his first wife, the poet, writer and translator Theodosia Garrow Trollope (1825-1865), all of whom were close and influential friends of Blagden in Florence. The Trollope family resided at what became known as the Villino Trollope in Florence, a well-known gathering place for the expatriate community.

Among the American writers who resided in Florence and with whom Blagden had a close association were Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Henry James (1843-1916), Elizabeth Kinney and her husband William B. Kinney, one-time United States Minister to the Court of Turin and the United States vice-consul in Florence in the 1850s. The American, sculptor William Wetmore Story (1819-1895) and American journalist Kate Field (1838-1896) who lived with Blagden in Florence for a while.

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36 Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer (1831-1891) was a poet, author and diplomat. At the time of his birth, as E. Neill Raymond explains: 'The new Edward [...] bearing the name Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer without a second Lytton – was usually called Teddy in his youth'. In *Victorian Viceroy: The Life of Robert the First Earl of Lytton* (London: Regency Press, 1980), 20. Both father and son are frequently referred to as Lytton, Bulwer-Lytton, Bulwer or Edward. For the purposes of my analysis of Blagden's poem, 'Wild Flowers' discussed in Chapter 4, and her relationship with the younger Lytton in Florence, I will refer to him as Bulwer (based on Raymond's comment above) to avoid any confusion. Bulwer, writing as Owen Meredith, was best remembered as a poet for his volume of poetry *Clytemnestra* (1855); *The Wanderer* (1857), a volume of lyrical poems and *Lucile*, a novel in verse, published in 1860. He acted as second attaché of the British legation in Florence from 1852-1854, and thereafter served as a diplomat in Paris, The Hague, Vienna, Belgrade, Copenhagen and St. Petersburg. In 1877 he was appointed the first Viceroy of India by Prime Minister Disraeli. He was well known in London literary circles and Charles Dickens was a friend. His bearing, interest in culture and knowledge of European languages made him highly successful at moving in diplomatic circles of aristocratic Europe. During his lifetime and afterwards, Bulwer was compared to the ideal 'Renaissance man'. (*ODNB*, vol. 34).
before moving to Rome, and American art collector and critic, James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888) who paid tribute to Blagden at the time of her death, also resided in Florence during the 1850s. Other frequent visitors during the period were the poet, and later Poet Laureate Alfred Austin (1835-1913), a close friend of Blagden, who wrote a memoir of her at the time of her death and which appears in her small volume of poems, Poems, by the late Isa Blagden (1874). The feminist and co-founder of the English Woman's Journal, Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925), was invited to tea by Blagden at Bellosguardo. In the letter of invitation, Blagden addresses her as 'My dear BRP' and asks 'Will you come and drink tea with me tomorrow evening – and let us talk about poetry to our hearts content [. . .] I have asked a poet to meet you and I will give you such a good tea'. The intimacy with which she addresses Parkes, suggests that Blagden knew her well. No evidence has surfaced as to who the poet might have been. Had it been Browning or Barrett Browning it is more than likely she would have mentioned them by name.

Blagden was a frequent visitor to Rome during her Italian years and a key figure in the Anglo-American group of writers and artists residing there. These included the American actress Charlotte Cushman who was, arguably, the Muse for Blagden's

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37 Kate Field (1838-1896) was a journalist, editor and actress. As Gary Scharnhorst explains in his introduction to Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008): 'She was so famous during her life that she was the model for characters in novels by both Henry James and Anthony Trollope [. . .] As one of the first celebrity journalists [. . .] she both reported the news and was the subject of newspaper reports', xi [. . .] She served as the Florence, Italy, correspondent of the Boston Courier', xii. On her arrival in Florence, Field resided with Blagden, describing Blagden as 'Our Lady of Bellosguardo'.

38 Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925) was born in Birmingham. She had a Unitarian background and her father's political connections and the culture of radical dissent meant that her upbringing was less circumscribed intellectually. (Joanne Shattock, ODNB, vol. 42). Parkes was a journalist, an active feminist and member of the Langham Place group of radical women who are are discussed in the next chapter in the context of the Woman Question debate.

39 The MS of this letter is at Girton/GCPP Parkes 9/19a, and is undated.
lesbian poetics, which informs the discussion in Chapter Five;\textsuperscript{40} Cushman's English lover, the writer and journal editor, Matilda Hays \textsuperscript{41} and the American sculptors Harriet Hosmer \textsuperscript{42} and Emma Stebbins.\textsuperscript{43} The Welsh sculptor John Gibson (1790-1866), of whom Blagden wrote a memoir, 'Recollections of Gibson the Sculptor', resided in Rome for over fifty years.\textsuperscript{44} One of his models, as I argue in Chapter Five, was the Muse for Blagden's poem 'A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice, Rome'.

The period in which Blagden and her aesthetically conscious friendship groups were residing in Italy, was a time of intense political turmoil, a critical moment in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) was born in Boston, Massachusetts and became a well-known actress in the United States and Europe. She was a tall imposing woman, who, reviewers of her stage performances referred to as 'Amazonian'. She set up household twice in Rome, the first in 1852 after retiring from the stage. She then left Rome after the first winter in 1852-53, after her relationship with Matilda Hays had become somewhat strained. Cushman returned to the stage in London in 1854 and retired again, returning to Rome in the spring of 1857, still with Hays, although by this time Cushman was falling in love with another woman, the sculptor, Emma Stebbins. Source of reference: Bonnie Zimmerman in \textit{Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia}. Cushman resided in Rome for the next eleven years where she continued to have female lovers, and, as I argue in Chapter Five, Blagden was possibly one of them. Certainly Cushman played an important role in the narrative of Blagden's time in Rome.

\item \textsuperscript{41} Matilda Hays (1820-1897). There is uncertainty as to where Hays was born. The identity of her mother is unknown, but she was thought to have been half-Creole. She lived with Charlotte Cushman in Rome between 1853-57, a relationship which ended after Cushman became involved with the sculptor, Emma Stebbins. Hays threatened to sue Cushman for damages, alleging she had sacrificed her literary career and health to live with Cushman. (Lisa Merrill in \textit{ODNB}, vol. 26). Hays had much in common with Blagden, not least their mixed race heritage and the non-identity of their respective mothers.

\item \textsuperscript{42} Harriet Goodhue Hosmer (1815-1908) was born in Massachusetts. She grew up renowned for her fearlessness and unconventional behaviour. She went to Rome in 1852 and was accepted as a student by the Welsh sculptor, John Gibson, in his studio in Rome. Hosmer became a well-known sight around the city, for she wore her hair, and sometimes her skirts – short, rode her own horse [...] and frequently carried pistols or a steel-tipped umbrella for protection. A member of Charlotte Cushman's circle of sophisticated professional women, Hosmer lived a strikingly independent existence. Source of reference: \textit{American Dictionary of National Biography}, vol. 11.

\item \textsuperscript{43} Emma Stebbins (1815-1882) was born into a wealthy family in New York City. She trained as a sculptor and one of her commissions was a bust of Cushman between 1859-1860. Source of reference: Lisa Merrill, \textit{When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators} (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 249. Stebbins lived with Cushman and Hosmer for several years in Rome. After Cushman's death, Stebbins published \textit{Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life} (1878). Stebbins died in New York.

\item \textsuperscript{44} John Gibson (1790-1866) was a Welsh sculptor, who spent most of his adult life in Rome. He gave instruction to Harriet Hosmer, with whom he shared a studio for a number of years in Via Fontanella. Blagden wrote two variations of the same poem, 'Gibson's Studio, which appeared in \textit{All the Year Round}, (March, 1866) and 'The Studio', which appeared in Blagden's posthumously published in \textit{Poems, by the late Isa Blagden}, (1873). On his death, Blagden wrote a memoir of him 'Recollections of Gibson the Sculptor', which appeared in the \textit{Cornhill Magazine} (May 1868, 540-546). He never married, but formed long-lasting friendships with women, Blagden being one of them. Gibson is buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. Blagden's memoir, appeared in \textit{The Cornhill} magazine (May 17, 1868), 540-546.
\end{itemize}
country's history due to the resurgence of nationalism known as the *Risorgimento*.\(^{45}\)

Living and writing at a time when Italy was in transition, Blagden witnessed a remarkably changing country during her time there and this provided the inspiration for two of her poems, 'On the Colours Being Replaced on the Palazzo Vecchio' (1859) and 'Rome, 1870', which will be appraised in Chapter Four.

**Death and Legacy**

At the time of Blagden's death, Virginia Vaughan wrote the following tribute:

> For many years she [Blagden] was the centre of all the finest English life in Florence. She had a cultivated literary taste and at the same time was a most charming and congenial hostess. She had had some great sorrow in her life, no one ever knew just what it was. She had written two novels that had won her the recognition of some of the very highest critics, and she was wealthy, she kept a splendid house, at which most of her friends at some time made their home.\(^{46}\)

Vaughan's words aptly sum up the perceptions people had of Blagden, who died suddenly on January 20, 1873, at the age of fifty-five. She had felt ill for some days, refusing to see a doctor until two days before her death. Her friend Thomas Trollope said of her: 'Our Isa was extremely obstinate about calling in medical advice [. . .] I was absent for a few days [. . .] I knew that if I had been there I could have made her call a doctor before it was too late'.\(^{47}\) Blagden's refusal to seek help for

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\(^{45}\) The *Risorgimento*, or the 'resurgence', convened in 1859 through to 1861, when the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed with the allied defeat of Napoleon III, Emperor of France. There had been political unrest in Italy since the eighteenth century when Italy was divided into seven regions, speaking different languages or dialects, and governed mainly by the French and the Austrians. During the years 1861-1871, the Papal States in Rome, had remained separate. Florence became the temporary capital of the Kingdom in 1865. After the success of the *Risorgimento*, Italy became united in 1871, under one government and one language, and Rome became the capital. See Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2007) and Derek Beales, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (London: Longman Group UK Ltd., 1981).

\(^{46}\) Virginia Vaughan (1832-1913) was a writer and translator. The above quotation is from 'Famous Men and Women as a Southern Abolitionist's Daughter Recalls Them', which appeared in the *New York Times*, November 26, 1911.

herself illustrates not only her selflessness, but strength of character and independent spirit. Her friend, Linda White Mazini Villari, who was with her during her last days, is responsible for gathering together the manuscripts of Blagden's poems which were published in the volume *Poems, by Isa Blagden* (1873). Recalling Blagden's death to a friend, Villari comments: 'She passed away in my arms surrounded by a few of her oldest friends'. Based on contemporary correspondence, her cousins Annette Bracken (later Fraschieri) and Willy Bracken, and her aunts, Mary Egerton Bracken and Annie Egerton Smith, were in Florence at the time.

Blagden was buried in the English Cemetery in Florence, or the 'Island of the Dead' as it is sometimes called, on January 28, 1873. She is buried near Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Frances Trollope, Theodosia Trollope and Walter Savage Landor, united in death with her English friends. A cross is placed on her tombstone on top of which is a flower garland.

![Fig. 3 Blagden's grave in the English Cemetery, Florence.](image)

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48 Linda White Mazini Villari (1836-1915) was a writer and translator. She translated many of the works of her second husband, the Italian politician and historian, Pasquale Villari (1827-1917).
49 Letter to Jane Maria Strachey, January 21, 1873, MS at the India Office, London.
50 Cited in *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., MS at Armstrong Browning Library, Texas. Letter from Sarianna Browning to Annie Egerton Smith, January 13, 1873, gives this information.
William Bracken writing to Cushman informs her that: 'Her interment took place on the 28th & [. . .] was attended by troops of friends - & her coffin was covered with flowers'.\textsuperscript{51} Stebbins, in her biography of Cushman writes: 'Miss Cushman, as long as she herself lived, kept her [Blagden] memory green by ministering care of her grave in the Protestant Cemetery at Florence'.\textsuperscript{52} Stebbins' words support later discussions in which I argue that the relationship between Blagden and Cushman was of a particularly intense and homoerotic nature.

William Bracken took charge of his niece's estate upon her death. In a letter to Robert Browning, January 27, 1873, he states:

\begin{quote}
I have taken upon myself the responsibility of destroying her vast quantities of preserved correspondence. . . But in regard to your letters, whatever found I have thought it right to retain – also some of your poor wife's to Isa - [. . .] God willing, I shall be in London in early midsummer . . . & [. . .] be the bearer of them myself to your house.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

The reason why Bracken felt the need to destroy Blagden's correspondence would suggest that he wished to hide any evidence which might embarrass the Bracken family regarding Blagden's mixed-race heritage, her possible illegitimacy and her relationships with other women, such as Cushman. Robert Browning's letters to Blagden, suggests that Bracken felt that they might vindicate his niece because she was in correspondence with such a prominent poet, and one-time devoted husband.\textsuperscript{54}

Conforming to an effusive patriarchal discourse, Alfred Austin endorses the view that Blagden was a well-loved and well-respected figure in the Anglo-Florentine

\textsuperscript{51} Florentine Friends. The letter is dated January 31, 1873. (MS at Library of Congress, Washington). Blagden had a close, if not lesbian relationship with Cushman, which might explain the following comments by Bracken in his letter to Robert Browning.

\textsuperscript{52} Emma Stebbins, \textit{Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life} (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1879), 126.

\textsuperscript{53} Brownings' Correspondence, op. cit., vol. 16, 284.

\textsuperscript{54} As previously discussed, these letters form the volume, \textit{Dearest Isa}. 

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group. In his Memoir he comments:

The gifted and virtuous authoress, whose death last winter filled the widest circle of friends I have ever heard one person possessing, with the feelings of deepest pain. [...] As she understood life and its conditions, pain, sorrow, and disappointment necessarily play an important part in it. She relished joy as few can ever have relished it; but when the wings were not permitted to exult, the breast was resigned, and she usually found in ministering to the wounds of others a more than partial forgetfulness of her own.  

Austin's words, though conforming to a masculine-gendered lexicon in terms of the Victorian stereotype of women as 'virtuous' and self-sacrificing, are revelatory in that they provide an insight into Blagden's own 'wounds' which have resonance in her poetry. Another stereotypical representation is given by Thomas Trollope, who, when commenting on Blagden's posthumously published collection of poems states:

It is impossible to read that little volume without perceiving how choice a spirit the authoress must have been, and understanding how it came to pass that she was especially honoured by the warm and close attachment of Mrs Browning.

Trollope's words, concerned more with her human qualities than her poetry, substantiate the generally accepted view that Blagden was known mainly for her friendship with the Brownings, rather than as a writer in her own right. Similarly, an obituary which appeared in the Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions said of Blagden's demise that she was: 'M]ore remarkable for the warmth and attachment she inspired in men and women of acknowledged genius than for the

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55 Alfred Austin's memoir appears in the posthumously published Poems, by the late Isa Blagden (1873). The above quotations are to be found on pages vii and xxiv respectively. Alfred Austin was a poet and critic who was appointed Poet Laureate in 1896, after the death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson.  
56 Trollope, op. cit., 174.
fame of her own intellectual gifts. To be accepted into the Browning's circle in Florence had carried with it a certain kudos. Henry James in his appraisal of Blagden states:

She had seen the procession, the human panorama, more or less polyglot; there were odd people [...] on her list! - whom she had known and of whom I knew; and then we had friends in common, figures of the Florentine legend [...] moreover there were wistful questions that were at the same time, for the passer-by, provocations of envy; the books she would have liked to read, the news she would have liked to get, the people she would have liked to see, amounting all, in their absence, as I remember ingenuously thinking, to nothing more than a sign of how deep one might be in Italy.

James' comments are telling and revealing. Those 'wistful questions' and her deeply-felt regret for things not done, imply that Blagden had been able to bury her sorrows regarding her absent mother, and lead a secretive life regarding her sexuality when closeted 'deep' in Italy. There is a sense of sexual ambiguity in James' life and work and he will have understood Blagden's yearnings and longings. Hugh Stevens suggests that 'James, in his own secret social circle, paradoxically constituted himself as "queer" – as a desiring male subject involved with other men – without making an identity statement'. Blagden's regrets and desires and questions of identity resonate in her work and provide the focus for discussion of her feminist and lesbian consciousness in subsequent chapters.

Several months after Blagden's death, James Jackson Jarves paid tribute to her in his memoir entitled 'Our Lady of Bellosguardo', commenting that:

If we should venture as to her lineage, we would surmise it must have been an intermingling of a highly impassioned, sensitive, tropical race with a prosaic colder current of northern blood, that tempered the intellect without wilting the

fine affectional and aesthetic qualities. Whatever was her origin, she honored
entire humanity in her disinterested life [. . .] Quietly ardent in her attachments,
yet she chose a single life, as if determined none should be closely related to
her, and she be free to be the loving kinswoman of all persons [. . .] To the ill,
or the spirit-worn human being, she was [. . .] the tireless, thoughtful nurse
and conoler, ever volunteering to fill the forlorn hopes of sickness and anguish.
Once to be fully received into her confidence was to abide there forever.  

Jarves' language, though conforming to the nineteenth-century sentimentalised
'angelic' stereotype of women as consolers and nurturers, does however,
acknowledge Blagden's 'aesthetic qualities', a reference perhaps, to her artistic
capabilities as an intelligent woman writer.

**Part 2: Professional Context**

The perceived status of women as intellectually inferior to their male counterparts
due to their lack of educational opportunity, placed them in a marginalised position in
nineteenth-century society.  

The sentimentalised 'angelic' trope confined middle-
class women to their domestic spheres as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters who
were subordinate to, and financially dependent on, their male kin. Women's domestic
virtues and perceived strengths as nurturers and consolers placed them in the position
of self-sacrificing saint-like figures. Hence, women writers and poets were ranked as
possessing all the traits synonymous with virtue, piety and overt sentimentality.
Although written a year after Blagden's death, the following statement by a *Times*
reviewer, is a representative example of the prevailing contemporary attitude towards
women poets of the period:

Whatever is said the fact remains that the female mind has seldom or never
produced poetry of the first order, but it must be remembered that women have
not been prevented from becoming poets as they have been prevented from

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60 Jarves' memoir appeared in *The Aldine* (October 6 1873), 197. During his life time Jarves was a
newspaper editor, art critic and collector of Italian art.
61 This is further discussed in the context of the Woman Question in the next chapter.
becoming soldiers or members of Parliament. They have tried and they have failed – because it was not in them [. . .] the most cultivated woman in the world will set us yawning if she takes to writing verse. It is women who inspire the best poetry in the world; how, then, can it be expected that they should write it? 62

These lines suggest that as muses, women could not be poets and, hence, as inspirers, women become objectified, eroticised and subjected to the male gaze, which suitably fitted the patriarchal conventions of the day. As the feminist critic Susan Brown states: 'women are poetry. They live and inspire it but they do not write it, [. . .] men, have the privilege to do so'. 63 The notion that women could not write well, though a Victorian patriarchal construct, was also about discouraging women from entering the public domain through writing and publishing, a sphere which was considered male territory.

Another example of an overtly gendered attitude to women's poetry, was made by Blagden's friend, Thomas Trollope regarding the volume of poems published shortly after her death: 'They [her poems] are not such as could take by storm the careless ears of the world [but] must, I suppose, be admitted to be marked by that mediocrity which neither gods nor men can tolerate'. 64 The feminine-gendered 'mediocrity' is an example of patriarchal superiority and foregrounds the notion that women cannot, and should not, write poetry. This was considered the preserve of the poet- 'gods' of antiquity, revered for their intellectual prowess and of the writing tradition associated with male authorship. As a consequence of these gendered views I will draw on the 'poetess' tradition in order to situate Blagden in her professional context, which is followed by a discussion of the emergence of the Victorian woman poet.

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62 The review was written by an anonymous reviewer in the context of Emily Pfeifer's poem, Gerard's Monument in the Times (1874) and is cited by Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow and Cath Sharrock, eds., in Nineteenth Century Women Poets (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 494.
64 Trollope, op. cit., 173-74.
The 'Poetess' Tradition

The term 'poetess' was the label applied to women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century who wrote poetry. As Anne Mellor states: 'the Victorian literary establishment defined [. . .] "poetesses" [as being] distinctly different from the male poet'.\(^{65}\) This difference manifested itself in two ways. Firstly, in terms of the overt sentimentality which supposedly 'existed' in lyrical poetry authored by women, and secondly, the feminisation of the term 'poetess' as Blain explains, 'with its connotations of "prettiness" and "lightness" became less popular as the century went on'.\(^{66}\) Over time, the Victorian woman poet constructed a poetics which challenged the tradition of the 'poetess' and which also challenged the authority of the male-centred poetic tradition in terms of convention, style and plot. In order to place Blagden within the tradition of women poets, it is useful to consider the contributions made by her literary foremothers.

The famous precursor for the Victorian woman poet was Sappho, born about 610 BC on the island of Lesbos, who was hailed by Plato as 'the tenth Muse'.\(^{67}\) Sappho's poems were sung and accompanied by the lyre, as was the tradition at the time and which became an icon for women's poetry down the centuries. Many women poets in the nineteenth century wrote poems dedicated in honour of Sappho, as for example:

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\(^{65}\) Anne Mellor, 'The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830' in *Studies in Romanticism* 36. 2 (Summer 1997), 261.


Letitia Landon, 'Sappho's Song', contained in her poem, *The Improvisatrice* (1824);\(^{68}\) Felicia Hemans, 'The Last Song of Sappho', (1834);\(^{69}\) Caroline Norton, 'The Picture of Sappho', (1840); Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'A Vision of Poets', (1844) and two of Christina Rossetti's poems, both entitled 'Sappho' (1846 and 1848). Blagden's tribute to Sappho can be found in her sonnet-sequence 'The Seven Chords of the Lyre', which are individually sub-titled: 'Aspiration', 'Love', 'Joy', 'Doubt', 'Sorrow', 'Endurance' and 'Faith' and which have echoes of Sappho's 'Hymn to Aphrodite'.\(^{70}\)

Sappho's poetic influence has resonance in the Romantic notion of sublimity, and Catherine Maxwell, speaking of 'the theory of the sublime' in the context of Sappho, suggests that it is an 'elevated phrasing [...] style', a 'manifestation of emotion'.\(^{71}\)

The development of the 'Sapphic sublime', as Maxwell describes it, together with Edmund Burke's categorisation of the 'sublime', are manifest in the poetry of the male Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth (1780-1850), Lord Byron

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\(^{68}\) Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), started to compose poetry at an early age. While still in her teens she came to the notice of the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, and began contributing to the magazine under the initials of 'L.E.L.', although at first she had great difficulty finding a publisher for her long poem *The Improvisatrice*. However, notoriety of her work for the *Literary Gazette* made it comparatively easy to find a publisher, who, in 1824, paid her £300 for the poem (in today's terms approximately £23,030,000). It was an instant success, going through six editions within the year. William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, calculated that Landon earned £2,585, in total from her work, about £250 a year (in today's terms, approximately £198,500 and £19,200 respectively. (Source: MeasuringWorth.com). Ths biographical reference is in Duncan Wu, ed., *Romanticism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 1100.Gossip connected Landon with Blagden's friend and mentor, the poet and novelist Sir Edward George Bulwer Lytton. How Landon died, at the age of thirty-six, has not been proven. Virginia Blain suggests that 'Her reputation was enhanced by the mystery of her premature death [...] All kinds of gothic rumours were spread (suicide? Murder?) and sale of her work multiplied'. Virginia Blain, ed., *Victorian Women Poets* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2001), 4.

\(^{69}\) Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) had her first volume of poems published, by subscription in 1808 when she was fourteen years old, followed by a third volume in 1812. She married and had five sons, her husband deserting her in 1818, to live in Rome. Left alone and with her children to support, her literary output was prolific, averaging a volume a year. She contributed poems and essays to a wide range of periodicals and magazines. By the 1820s she was popular, and critics acknowledged this when commenting on her work. (Wu, op. cit., 990-992).

\(^{70}\) I have not selected these sonnets for consideration as many of the sentiments expressed are repeated in those under discussion in this study.

\(^{71}\) Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 92.
Perceived as an intellectual and philosophical pursuit, poetry was, therefore, considered a highly respected, high-status vocation for men. As writers of 'sublime' lyrical poetry, women 'poetesses' were, in the Victorian mind at least, considered sentimental, irrational, and hence, intellectually inferior. Yet in order for male poets to access the sublime experience they had to draw on the feminised imagery of Mother Nature and Mother Earth. However, as Stephen Bygrave suggests, in Romantic poetry, 'Nature is used to find an equivalent for a state of the self', and hence, the sense of privacy and solitude characterised the male Romantic poets, did not privilege poetry written by women. As Dorothy Mermin suggests: 'the association of poetry and femininity [. . .] excluded women poets'. Even though it was women who inhabited the private sphere, in the minds of men, poetry was privileged not only in emotional terms, but also intellectually and philosophically.

Though marginalised, women were prolific writers of poetry during the Romantic and early Victorian periods and Blagden's influential poetic foremothers were Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, known as 'L.E.L.'; Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1852); Charlotte Smith (1749-1806); Mary Robinson (1758-1800) and Joanna Baillie (1762-1851). The poetic contributions made by these women were mostly ignored by anthology editors and critics who were responsible for framing the canon, even though Hemans was one of the best-selling poets in the early nineteenth

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72 Maxwell, ibid., 94. In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Burke proposed that the notion of sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment. Yet in order to achieve a sublime experience, the Romantic (male) poets used Nature, perceived as the embodiment of the feminine in terms of 'the beautiful' Mother Nature and Mother Earth, in order to access the masculine sublime.


Hemans, 'the first poetess of the day', and Landon, 'the English Sappho', both explored the intricate relationship between gender and genre in their poetry, but in entirely different ways. Hemans' most important single volume of poems, *Records of Woman* (1828), expresses the hardships that women faced in their lives. Speaking from a personal standpoint, she states: 'My life after eighteen became so painfully, laboriously domestic, that it was an absolute duty to crush intellectual tastes [. . .] I could neither read nor write legitimately till the day was over'. Married at the age of eighteen, Hemans was abandoned by her husband six years later after having given birth to five children. It could be argued that Hemans was defined by her suffering womanhood, an example of which is foregrounded in her semi-autobiographical poem, 'Indian Woman's Death Song', which relates a similar story to that of Hemans' own experience. Even though her intentions were perhaps not overtly feminist ones, Hemans had something very important to say in her poetry about relationships between men and women, and, as Duncan Wu suggests: 'The moral questions at the heart of her work are not gender-specific; they extend beyond those barriers into areas of life that concern everyone'. From the point of view that her concerns embraced the needs of others and she was selfless in doing so, her work is, arguably, 'gender specific'.

Possessing the supposed characteristics of sentimentality had earned Hemans the title of 'the first poetess of the day'. Yet, as Blain comments:

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75 In addition to numerous publications in magazines and gift-books, Hemans produced nineteen volumes of poems and plays between 1808 and 1834. Lord Byron, with whom she shared the publisher John Murray, was sensitive to the competition. In a letter to Murray, he refers to her as 'Mrs Hewoman'. In Nanora Sweet and Julie Melyn, eds., *Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 102.
77 Cited by Wu, op. cit.,1100, from William Jerdan, the editor of the *Literary Gazette* who described Landon as such. Like Sappho, Landon was mired in scandal because of her lifestyle.
79 Wu, op. cit., 992.
Her poetry became a very marketable commodity and Hemans herself grew extremely skilled at selling it [. . .] she exploited her 'image' as a blameless and submissive (never rebellious) victim of sad circumstances, selflessly doing her best for her five sons, to arouse paternalistic generosity in her publishers [. . .] and an eagerly sympathetic mood in her readers.80

Hemans' successful exploitation of her femininity in terms of it working on her behalf rather than against her, and her manipulation of an all-male publishing industry is remarkable for a woman of her time. By not stepping out of her patriarchally defined domestic sphere, her suffering womanhood had worked in her favour.

The 'poetess' most often associated with Hemans is Landon, who, as Blain suggests is entirely her opposite. Their only true similarity lay in their ability to market themselves to the public: L.E.L., as idealised female victim was adored by a generation of readers. Many of these were young males [. . .] who happily swallowed the projected image of a mournful poetess who had turned to her lyre for consolation only after her heart had been broken, and who like the Greek poet Sappho on whom she modelled herself, could look forward only to death to bring release from the anguish of her abandonment. [. . .] her brand of poetry – which characteristically featured heroine-as-victim - had less influence on the succeeding generation of Victorians [. . .] if anything she served as a negative model [both] Rossetti and Barrett Browning were moved to write poems rebuking her narcissism.81

Although Landon was accused of exploiting her sexuality, she did not, however, serve as 'a negative model' with regard to her deployment of poetic form. Her long poem, A History of the Lyre, influenced the poetics of late Romanticism, foreshadowing the highly successful genre adopted in the Victorian period, the dramatic monologue, famously associated with Robert Browning and Barrett Browning, which Blagden appropriates in her two dramatic monologues, The Story of Two Lives, which is discussed in the next chapter.

80 Blain, op. cit., 19.
81 Blain, op. cit., 4.
New Dimensions in Women's Poetry

As the precursor to the Victorian woman poet, the Romantic 'poetess' and her experimentation with gender and genre, had paved the way for her poetic sisters in the mid-Victorian period and beyond.  

It is ironic, however, that Elizabeth Barrett, expressed the following:

England has had many learned women [. . .] and yet where are the poetesses? [. . .] I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none [. . .] Of poor L.E.L., [. . .] It appears to me that she had the gift – though in certain respects she dishonoured the art – and her latter lyrics are, many of them, of great beauty and melody. [. . .] having once touched the ear of a reader, live on in it.

I observe in your 'Life of Mrs Hemans' [. . .] she [. . .] never appears, in any given letter or recorded opinion, to esteem her contemporary. The antagonism lay, [. . .] in the higher parts of Mrs Hemans's character and mind, and we are not to wonder at it.

Barrett's comment on the absence of 'poetesses'/ 'grandmothers', is interesting given that her epic verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* could be considered a reworking of Landon's *A History of the Lyre*, in terms of its plot, setting and origins, even though Landon, according to Barrett, had 'dishonoured the art' of poetry.  

Barrett further adds: 'It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, [. . .] witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!'  

Mermin suggests that Barrett was not acknowledging 'the popular "poetesses" who adorned the literary scene', as they were not 'the noble lineage with which she wished to claim affiliation'.  

This suggests that Barrett had unwittingly, internalised the male construction of poetry written by women, as inferior, and

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82 For a full discussion of 'Gender as genre', see Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain in *Women's Poetry: Late Romantic to Late Victorian* (London: Macmillan, 1999). My quotation is taken from the book's sub-heading.

83 The above letter was written to a Henry Fothergill Chorley (1808-1872) a literary, art and music critic. He wrote *Life of Mrs Hemans*, which was published in 1842. Barrett's letter appears in Frederic G. Kenyon, ed., *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1897), vol. 1, 231-232. At the time this letter was written Barrett was unmarried. She married Robert Browning in 1846, and hence, became known as Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The date of the above letter is January 7, 1845.

84 This had perhaps more to do with her 'narcissism', as Blain suggests.


sought to find the approval of other male poets and male readers. If Barrett, as Mermin suggests, had wished to 'claim affiliation' with 'the noble lineage' of the male poets she achieves this in *Aurora Leigh*. By experimenting with genres generally associated with the male canonical tradition of poetry, in this case the epic/heroic tradition, Barrett Browning also pays homage to Landon's *A History of the Lyre*, in terms of plot, settings and origins.

As the century progressed, the sentimental and self-pitying style of Landon's poetics was no longer popular with women poets, and the 'next generation' of women poets such as Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) and Augusta Webster (1839-1894), explored women's subjectivity in less emotional terms by manipulating form and subversively challenging religious belief and contemporary political opinion regarding the Woman Question issues. Barrett Browning's influence has resonance in Rossetti's secular and devotional poems and Webster's powerful dramatic monologues. As Carrie J. Preston explains: 'Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Webster [...] use[d] biblical typology [and] typological parallels to include classical myth, and interrogate gendered identity through the speech of mythic characters'.

These influences resonate in many of Blagden's poems considered in this thesis. In order to explore women's experience, Blagden recurrently appropriated Christian typology and the Greek legends of antiquity and her exploitation of the dramatic monologue and sonnet forms, traditionally associated with male poets such as Shakespeare and Browning and the Italian sonneteers Dante (1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374), enabled her to assert her feminist consciousness in a discourse that was subversive and transgressive, thus allowing her to renegotiate female sexuality and redefine women's writing tradition. As Blain suggests: 'Even the age-
old 'language of flowers', traditionally associated with women, whereby feelings could be expressed in a kind of code [. . .] lends itself to some unexpected manipulation in the verse of Rossetti and others'.

In two of Blagden's poems, 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation', which are discussed in Chapter Four, the seemingly innocuous titles and the surface simplicity of the language, fit the stereotypically feminine-gendered poetic sensibility, whilst actually undermining it. This is what Isobel Armstrong refers to as 'the doubleness of women's poetry [. . .] the more simple the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it'. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the legacy of the 'poetess' tradition, Blagden aligned herself with the traditionally masculine inscribed conventions of poetic form and thus formulated her own distinctive way of manipulating and subverting the traditional tropes of ideal femininity, which will become evident in subsequent chapters.

As part of the progression towards a feminist poetics which undermined the conventional 'poetess' tradition, 'the Victorians', as Blain suggests, were 'developing [. . .] a growing interest in the psychology of the couple [. . .] which hint at the realms of darkness in the human spirit which are anything but congruent with any ideal of happy domesticity as the natural goal of female desires'. An example of this is to be found in Blagden's poem, 'Mesmerism', (to be discussed in Chapter Three), which explores the dark side of sexual fantasy and desire. Browning's volume of dramatic monologues, appropriately named, *Men and Women* (1855), had, as Blain comments: 'really chimed with women poets [. . .] he had been strongly influenced by [his wife's] poetry'. Blagden, was Browning's amanuensis for this volume, so she will

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88 Blain, op. cit., 16.
90 Blain, op. cit., 16.
91 Blain, op. cit., 16.
have had first-hand knowledge of the poems, the evidence of which is discussed in Chapter Three.

**Major Influences and Positive Criticisms**

An example of Barrett Browning's professionalism and skill, in the context of Blagden's poems, can be seen in the following exchange between the two women. Evidence suggests that Blagden sent a copy of her poem entitled 'Seeming', together with others, to Charles Dickens at the time he was the editor of *Household Words*.

In a letter to Blagden, Barrett Browning states: 'Yes – it pleased me very much to hear of Dickens's disinterested opinion of your poems – I almost wonder, that taking such a view, he did not publish them in his Household Words, - but probably it was too much of pepper for milk-teeth of his most innocent public'.

Barrett Browning's sarcasm hints at a possible contempt for Dickens and for his journal, a possible indication that Blagden's poem was too controversial in the context of her overt feminist ideology, which might have offended the finer sensibilities of his middle-class readership. *Household Words* (1850-1859), was, as Laurel Brake suggests:

> aimed at affluent middle-class families and people of influence [. . .]

*Household Words* was also a magazine with attitude. Dickens wanted his [. . .] weekly to distinguish itself through the freshness of its [. . .] stylistic flair [. . .] of its more than 380 contributors, some 90 were women – Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Martineau and Eliza Lynn Linton.

The majority of contributors were writers, whose work was serialised in the journal,

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92 The MS of this poem is at Columbia University, New York. The poem does not appear in Blagden's volume of poems and it remains unpublished. I have contacted Columbia on several occasions, but they appear to be unable to locate the manuscript. My original source for this information is *Florentine Friends*, 57 and 500.

93 *Florentine Friends*, 78. The letter is dated September 21, 1855.

although some women's poetry was published, as in the case of Linton and also, Adelaide Procter. There is no evidence to suggest that any of Barrett Browning's poetry was published in the journal. As Michael Slater states:

No comment of Dickens's has so far come to light on the work of the most famous woman poet of the day [. . .] but we may imagine that he would have found *Aurora Leigh*, if he ever looked into it, disagreeably coarse and unwomanly in places. The gentle [. . .] religiosity of Adelaide Procter, quantities of whose verse he happily published in *Household Words* was more the sort of poetry appropriate for a woman to produce.

It could therefore, be assumed that Blagden's poems were either too 'unwomanly' or controversial in their subject matter, or lacked 'stylistic flair', in Dickens' eyes at least. Adelaide Procter, whom Blagden knew, was a committed Roman Catholic, and with the income derived from the publication of her poetry she established a refuge for homeless women and children in London. Another factor regarding the publication of Procter's verse, was that her father, the poet Bryan Waller Procter, writing as 'Barry Cornwall', was a close friend of Dickens. Undoubtedly, the friendship will have opened doors for her.

In the Preface to her volumes of poetry published in 1844, Barrett Browning states that: 'Poetry has been so serious a thing to me as life itself'. The comment

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95 Adelaide Procter (1825-1864), poet, feminist and social reformer, was born in London. Seventy three of her poems were published in *Household Words*, when Dickens was editor. By 1866, two years after her death, *Legends and Lyrics*, with an introduction by Dickens, had reached its tenth edition. The first edition was dedicated to the author, journalist and translator, Matilda Hays (1820?-1897). She was a childhood friend of the feminist campaigner and journalist Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925) and was involved with Parkes in founding the *English Woman's Journal* (1858). In 1861 she edited *Victoria Regia*, a collection of poetry and prose intended to demonstrate the work and skills of the Victoria Press, which provided work for female compositors. Procter published a collection of her poems, *A Chaplet of Verses* (1861) for the benefit of the Catholic organisation, Providence Row, an institution for homeless women. (*ODNB*, vol. 45, and the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12). Procter's benevolent activities are fully discussed in the next chapter in the context of the 'fallen woman' theme.


reveals much about her sense of professionalism, and, as Simon Avery states: 'The writing of poetry was neither a game nor an accomplishment for her but a demanding and challenging profession'.

The friendship and respect that existed between Blagden and the Brownings is plainly evident when they took the time to give a professional critique of some of her poetry. Writing to Blagden, Barrett Browning states:

I will write down my thoughts on your poems, because it will be better & [sic] clearer for us both [...] I have been happy in reading the poems – they are superior to any expectation I had formed of them. There is considerable fancy, & power both in the feeling & expression – some defect I think in art, - a redundancy of epithets sometimes, & a raggedness about the rhythm. I should like often too much compression . . . a pushing together of paragraphs . . . to make the whole more weighty. The curious thing is (and I accept the omen for you gladly) the curious & promising thing is, that the long poems are the best by far. [...] The master-work without any comparison, in my mind, is 'Seeming'. There is power & passion in it to a degree which surprised me. [...] The 'Love Rhapsody', 'Orphanhood' 'Angels of Life' . . . and the sonnets, which have beautiful thoughts, [...] only 'Seeming' comes first, I do hold. [...] I shall make Robert read it when he has done with 'Which were best' – and I hope the proofs may be free from him to go back to you this evening, seeing that I have marked in pencil a few marginal criticisms & suggestions.

Barrett Browning's close reading of Blagden's poems provides an encouraging critique regarding the sensory aspects and the technical elements of her poems. The poems highlighted by Barrett Browning : 'The Love Rhapsody', 'The Angels of Life' and 'Say Which Were Best', draw on the tales of classical antiquity and will have appealed to Barrett Browning's knowledge of the classics. The poems, as I argue in Chapter Five, are an exploration of Blagden's subversive homoerotics. With modesty and humility Barrett Browning, in the same letter, adds:

99 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 57-58. Barrett Browning's critique of one of Blagden's poems, which she refers to as 'the Magnetic story' (published title is 'Mesmerism') is discussed in Chapter Three, because, as Barrett Browning explains: 'the rhythm is NOT good'. The 'sonnets' Barrett Browning refers to are entitled: 'The Seven Chords of the Lyre', which I have mentioned previously in the context of Sappho.
All of these things I say freely, truly, . . heart to heart, as I love you. Don't think me bold & conceited in saying them when I am only true. Of course I am as liable to mistake as another, & your own judgement is free to set me to rights in that case.

Given her superior status as 'the most famous woman poet of the day' as Slater describes her, and who, it was rumoured, might be invited to succeed Wordsworth as Poet Laureate in 1850, Barrett Browning's advice would not have been offered had she thought Blagden lacked the potential to aspire to becoming a poet worthy of recognition, as this thesis will reveal.100

Barrett Browning's influence on Blagden's poetics is hinted at in a review of Blagden's posthumously published volume of poems, which appeared in the *Athenaeum* in 1874:

> Miss Blagden's [poems] are the only other poems in our present batch the printing of which we do not consider lost labour. On the whole, though she seems to some extent a follower of Mrs Browning, the bent of her mind must have resembled a good deal more that of Mr Clough. There is the same intense love of natural beauty, especially the beauty of Italy, together with the same unwilling uncertainty of religious belief; evidently in both minds the centre about which all feeling revolved.101

Although Blagden was, without question, 'a follower of Mrs Browning', the reviewer's acknowledgement that Blagden's aesthetics rivalled those of a male poet, namely, Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861), is quite remarkable given the bias levelled at women's writing at the time.102 Clough was a religious sceptic, and was, as Isobel Armstrong describes him, 'The Radical in Crisis', who died at the age of forty-

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100 In Blain, op.cit. 14. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was appointed the Poet Laureate in 1850.
101 The *Athenaeum* 2410 (January 3, 1874).
102 Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861) was a cousin of Florence Nightingale and acted as her secretary for a while. He died of malaria in Florence and is buried in the English Cemetery near to Blagden and Barrett Browning. His close friends in England were the poet Matthew Arnold, the philosopher Thomas Carlyle and the American Transcendentalist poet and essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson.
two, in Florence.  

No evidence has surfaced that would suggest that Clough and Blagden had met when he was in Florence. Like Clough, Blagden's poetics embody her questioning of religious faith and the inherent uncertainties of human experience, and like Clough, she drew on the sensuousness of nature, deployed by her in terms of clitoral symbolism (flowers, insects, bees and birds, as expressed, for example, in her poem 'Wild Flowers') in order to explore human sexuality. In Clough's 'erotic poem', 'Natura Naturans' (1846?) as Anthony Kenny suggests: 'the erotic forces of the verses cannot fail to suggest that underlying them was some personal experience of passion [and the poem is] astonishingly different from our conventional expectations of a Victorian writer'. The suggestion that Clough and Blagden shared the same 'intense love of natural beauty', has, arguably, different connotations from that expressed by the reviewer.

Clough's poem *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* (1848), is a contemplative search for 'truth'. As Evelyn Barish Greenberger comments: ' "The Bothie" is about the soul in the shelter of the wilderness', which aptly describes Blagden's persona and poetics in the context of the 'self' and 'other', as this study will reveal. The poem also expresses Clough's radical poetics in the context of class, the role of women in contemporary society and the institution of marriage, although, as Cora Kaplan explains: ' "The Bothie" takes as its subject a radical revision of bourgeois marriage [but] without reference to contemporary feminism'. This would have appealed to Blagden in terms of her feminist agenda regarding women's rights issues (although

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103 Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, op. cit., The above quotation is the title of Chapter 7, 178.
104 It has not been established whether Clough had met the Brownings in Florence. By the time of Clough's death in November 1861, Barrett Browning had been dead for five months and Browning had moved back to England.
there is no evidence to suggest she had read 'The Bothie') which are expressed in her two dramatic monologues *The Story of Two Lives*, which I discuss in the next chapter. By aligning Blagden's poetic sensibilities with those of Clough, the *Athenaeum* reviewer's praiseworthy comments not only acknowledge her intellectualism, but the moral earnestness present in her work. This is commendable in the context of Blagden’s professionalism given the patriarchally defined attitude towards women poets that existed among reviewers, editors and publishers alike.

**Conclusion**

The comprehensive overview of Blagden's biographical background provided in the first part of this chapter contributes to a better understanding of her as both a woman and a poet. Her matrilineage heritage in terms of her absent-mother, her mixed-race heritage and her emotional and physical separation from her father, impacted on Blagden's life and work, as will become evident in the subsequent chapters in this thesis. Her identity, in terms of being known as 'Blagden' and not 'Bracken', although arguably, both names contain six letters, starting with 'B' and ending in 'en', might suggest, that as an illegitimate child, she was given another surname for the sake of respectability. Blagden's imperial heritage and paternal family's wealth, enabled her to traverse two continents, three countries and four major cities, and consequently, her nomadic lifestyle equipped her with the confidence to offer a poetics which was radical and subversive. Without financial support, Blagden would not have afforded to go to Italy as a financially independent woman and live an independent lifestyle, free from the patriarchal restrictions imposed on women living in Britain. My introduction to Blagden's esteemed friendship groups in Italy at this stage in the study, lays the foundation for future discussions of their influence in her life and
work. Her heritage and friendships are vital factors in understanding who Blagden was, and thus aids my understanding of what influenced her poetics in terms of the underlying themes resonant in her work.

With regard to Blagden's professional context, which I discussed in the second part of the chapter, my consideration of the 'poetess' tradition foregrounds her as part of the tradition in women's literary history. The reactions by others to Blagden's writing, for example, Thomas Trollope, endorses the contemporary attitude which prevailed regarding poetry written by women as 'mediocre', in other words, sentimental and lacking any intellectual depth. On the other hand, those such as Barrett Browning's approbation of Blagden's poetic potential in terms of technical expertise and aesthetics and the *Athenaeum* reviewer's endorsement of Blagden's poetics likening her to the well-respected, yet radical male poet, Arthur Hugh Clough, adds weight to my argument that Blagden's poetics were different from the conventional expectations of a 'poetess'/Victorian woman poet, both in terms of theme and form. Contemporary feminism was an area which Blagden sought to redress in her professional context as a novel writer and a poet, and in the next chapter I discuss the contentious issues surrounding the Woman Question debate, which has influence and resonance in the context of Blagden's feminist consciousness.
Chapter 2: Feminist Influences: Social Context and Social Critiques in Isabella Blagden's Poetry

Overview

The first part of this chapter is set against the background of rapid social and political change in the nineteenth century regarding women's rights issues, collectively known as the Woman Question. The period was one of rapid economic development and prosperity in Britain with the expansion of industry and the cities brought about by the industrial revolution. The demands of an increasingly expanding market economy created new opportunities for women to engage in the public sphere. They were becoming publicly and politically engaged with social issues that concerned their lives, campaigning for reform of the laws regarding educational provision for women, marriage, divorce, prostitution and the subsequent Contagious Diseases Acts and the right to vote. I will provide an introduction and background to the rapidly evolving women's movement by foregrounding key figures who were actively involved in feminist politics, many of whom were known to Blagden. While later in this chapter I focus intensively on Blagden's poetry, any extensive evaluation of the Woman Question issues would be incomplete without her novels. Hence, reference is made by way of quotations to two of her prose works, *Agnes Tremorne* (1861) and *The Cost of a Secret* (1863), as they provide the context for foregrounding and substantiating her feminist position regarding women's lack of educational opportunity, the role of the unmarried woman in society and the institution of marriage.

In the second part of this chapter I focus intensively on the Woman Question issues pertinent to my appraisal of Blagden's two dramatic monologues, *The Story of Two Lives: His Life and Her Life* (1864), which frame the fallen woman discourse based on biblical representations and the so-called tenets of Christian morality; the
binaries of the angel/whore dichotomy; the highly contentious issue of prostitution regarding the exploitation and degradation of women, and more subversively, the notion of the sister-protector figure as nurturer, redeemer and Christ-like saviour. Blagden's poem is didactic, offering a powerful critique of the social and economic factors that force women onto the streets, namely class, unemployment, poverty and homelessness. The dramatic monologue form, usually associated with canonical poets such as Robert Browning and Barrett Browning, is exploited by Blagden as it crucially offered an alternative model in which to allow women to relate their own stories in their own voices.

**Part 1: Influential Women in Blagden's Milieu**

The Women's Movement in the first half of the nineteenth century, with its concerns regarding equality and a re-definition of gender, had taken hold in England by the 1850s. Feminist activists, such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, her sister Anne Leigh Smith and Rayner Parkes were key figures in the women's movement. All three of these women were known to Blagden through their mutual friendship with Adelaide Procter. In 1858, Bodichon and Parkes founded the *English Woman's Journal*, which Bodichon and her sister Anne, financed. The journal published several of Blagden's essays and poems and a review of her novel, *Agnes Tremorne* in

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1 Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon) (1827-1891) was a feminist activist and artist. She was the first of five children to be born illegitimately to the radical unitarian politician Benjamin Leigh Smith, and a seventeen year old milliner. Bodichon was co-founder of the *English Woman's Journal*. Her sister, Anne, sat on the board of the journal. (Pam Hirsch, *ODNB*). As a journalist, Parkes campaigned vigorously for more equality of opportunity for women. In 1852 she published a volume of poems which are dedicated to Barbara Leigh Smith. (Joanne Shattock, *ODNB*).

2 In 1862, Anne Leigh Smith, who represented her sister, Barbara, on the board of the *English Woman's Journal* 'was the major shareholder and financial support with sixty shares'. Jane Rendall "'A Moral Engine': Feminism: Liberalism and the English Woman's Journal" in Jane Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different, Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1987), 118. The journal ceased publication in 1864.
May 1861. The Langham Place Ladies, as the founders of the journal became known, included Procter, and the novelist and journalist Matilda Hays (1820-1897). Hays, whom Blagden knew well in Rome, became the journal's first editor, having left Rome after the acrimonious break-up of her lesbian relationship with Charlotte Cushman, which is further discussed in Chapter Five in the context of Blagden's lesbian consciousness.

The suffragist and education reformer Emily Davies (1830-1921) was the *English Woman's Journal*'s editor from 1862-63. Davies also edited the journal's successor publication, the *Victoria Magazine*, published by Emily Faithfull (1835-1895), a feminist activist and founder of the printing firm, the Victoria Press. The Press, which published the *English Woman's Journal*, trained and employed female typesetters. It also published articles of relevance to women's employment and education in its publication, the *Victoria Magazine*. Another off-shoot of Faithfull's enterprise was the *Victoria Regia: A Volume of Original Contributions in Poetry and Prose*, edited by Procter, and published by Emily Faithfull & Co., 1861. The volume included Blagden's poem 'Voices: Youth, Love, and Death' and is signed 'Isa Blagden'. The Victoria Regia also included the writings of many male literary notables such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Makepeace Thackerary, Anthony Trollope and his brother Thomas Trollope, and his wife Theodosia, both close friends of Blagden in Florence. To be included in such a prestigious publication would

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3 The other published works include Blagden's poem 'Light and Dark' (May 1858), 163-4, signed 'IB'; an essay 'Felicie de Fauveau' (October 2 1858), 83-94 and signed 'IB' and a prose piece entitled 'Success and Failure' (April-June 1859), 106-120, 172-185 and 252-259, signed 'IB'.
4 By 1864 Hays' reportedly difficult temperament led to her removal from the journal. She was a close friend of Adelaide Procter who dedicated her volume of poems, *Legends and Lyrics* (1858) to her. Hays translated many of George Sand's works from French into English. (Merrill, *ODNB*).
5 Emily Davies, suffragist, feminist and women's education reformer, was herself denied any serious education at home or outside of it. She founded the London Schoolmistresses Association which, in 1866, was the first professional body for women school teachers. Davies was the sole surviving member of the Langham Place group, the only one alive to cast a vote at the general election of December, 1918. This was the first election after women won parliamentary reform. (Sara Delamont, *ODNB*).
indicate that Blagden was not only respected as a poet of note, but that she had associated, albeit on the margins, with a network of dynamic women activists and literary heavyweights who opened doors for her.

The *English Woman's Journal's* offices at 19 Langham Place, London, became a centre for a wide variety of feminist enterprises. As a leader of the Langham Place group, Bodichon was well placed to be at the centre of female agitation in England, leading four major campaigns which sought that married women be granted legal recognition and parity with men; that women have the right to work; the right to vote and to have access to secondary and higher education. In 1856 Blagden added her signature to the petition regarding 'The Laws of Property as they Affect Women' which was presented to parliament on March 14, 1856. Other signatories of note were Barrett Browning, Cushman, Hays, Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Gaskell, Rayner Parkes, Jane Welsh Carlyle and Bodichon. This act of support on behalf of the feminist movement is evidence that Blagden was part of a network of dynamic and intellectual women, whose feminist activities were highly influential in providing a catalyst for her feminist poetics.

**The Education Question**

The education of women became a controversial issue on the women's rights agenda in the mid-nineteenth-century and many activists met with hostility from the all-male Establishment. Many middle-class women were aware of the fact that the reason women were not taken seriously at an intellectual level, was because the educational

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6 Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, Sheila McIntosh, David Sorenson, eds., *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), vol. 31, 36. The editors' note reads: 'JWC did not mention the petition in her letters'.

7 The *Scotsman* in Edinburgh, February 14, 1856, noting that a copy [of the petition] lay in their office stated: 'If anything should give weight to this petition, it is the list of names already appended to it'. Ibid., *Collected Letters*, 33.
opportunities available to them were extremely narrow and limited. In her novel, *Agnes Tremorne*, Blagden takes up the issue:

> [T]here was [. . .] a great want of earnestness in women's pursuits. They were always considered amusements, rarely as a means of mental growth [. . .] absorbing pursuits, were considered out of place in a woman's education.\(^8\)

'Women's pursuits', as Blagden describes them, were governed by expectations of marriage and motherhood and not until they had the same educational provision as men, would women achieve equal intellectual status.\(^9\) The notion of women being in a position to change the existing social and political structures, would have been perceived as threatening to the status quo. Overtly gendered assumptions regarding their intellectually inferior status made sure they did not step over the boundaries which confined them.

The prevailing attitudes of the medical profession, were put forward as reasons why the education of women might not be a successful enterprise. The psychiatrist, Henry Maudsley's concern was that if women were too intellectually stimulated they might suffer from a 'morbid irritation of the reproductive organs'.\(^10\) He further explained that:

> It will have to be considered whether women [who] live laborious days of intellectual exercise [. . .] without injury to their functions as the conceivers, mothers, and nurses of children. For it would be an ill thing, if it should so happen, that we got the advantages of a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled, and sickly race.\(^11\)

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9 Pioneering women such as Dorothea Beale (1831-1906) and Frances Mary Buss (1827-1894), together with Emily Davis, would change the status of middle-class women by educating them to a standard required to enter the professions and subsequently make them financially independent. For further discussion regarding the education of women during this period see Kathryn Gleadle *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 140-142 and Janet Howarth, ed., *The Higher Education of Women (1866 - Emily Davis)* (London: Hambledon Press, 1988), xxii.
10 Henry Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind', *Fortnightly Review* (Jan-June 1874), vol. 15, 469.
11 Ibid., 471-472.
As Patricia Murphy comments:

The decay of women's health that Maudsley linked to excessive mental activity, Garrett Anderson also remarked, instead 'distinctly' resulted from a 'want of adequate mental interest and occupation'. As a result Garrett Anderson explained, women 'become gradually languid and feeble under the depressing influences of dullness.¹²

The following passage from Blagden's *Agnes Tremorne* is a strident critique of the masculine rhetoric associated with a woman's 'languid' and 'feeble' condition within her allocated sphere:

Had women subjects of serious importance to occupy them that emptiness of heart would be avoided [. . .] A family of grown up daughters living at home in almost the same state of tutelage as in their early youth, debarred from freedom of action and from freedom of opinion, with miserable little occupations which fritter away, but do not occupy time - often prohibited the healthy exercise which is as necessary to the mind as to the body, and systematically leaving the intellect [. . .] in total stagnation [. . .] what pictures of ennui [. . .] busy idleness with the women, sordid striving with the man. Too much interest in politics [. . .] prohibited as unladylike, and yet these are all living, and breathing women [. . .] and we proclaim this virtue, and we count this happiness!¹³

These lines foreground Blagden's feminist position by highlighting the limitations imposed on women regarding their political and psychological freedom. Due to their lack of education women occupied a subordinate and inferior position in society, and therefore missed out on the opportunity of an active role in the public sphere.

However, many women who chose not to marry, were afforded the opportunity to acquire certain freedoms, though not without criticism from within the all-male Establishment.

The Unmarried/Married Woman Question

Unmarried women were, as William Landels suggests, to 'feel themselves married to every creature of the race'.\(^\text{14}\) In other words, if marriage was not the fulfilment of their lives, they were in a position to develop their potential as women, through self-sacrifice, benevolence and compassion towards others. Such attitudes did not allow for the fact that some middle-class women preferred to remain single and that marriage and motherhood were not the fulfilment of their lives. These women considered that the independence spinsterhood offered them was preferable to the state of subjection within marriage. Blagden's narrator in *Agnes Tremorne*, taking up the issue, poses the following questions: '[S]etting aside all the false, illusory, inconsistent reasons on which marriages are usually based, is there not the co-existent fact of an increasing number of single women? Are they to live lonely, unloved lives, because what is considered the only outlet for human affection is denied them?'\(^\text{15}\) Blagden acknowledges the patriarchal myth that the only outlet for a woman's affections is the love of her husband and children. As a single woman, denied that love, she was to be pitied and stigmatised, or in patriarchally defined terms, considered to be selfish, unnatural even deviant from the 'norm', and therefore transgressive. The woman who was neither wife nor mother was status-less and even without existence, or 'feme sole', the irony being that in marriage a woman loses her identity to become a 'feme covert', at 'one' with her husband.\(^\text{16}\) Consequently, a woman remained inside or outside of marriage, without legal recognition or existence.

Society emphasised the importance of marriage, motherhood and domestic

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\(^{16}\) 'Feme sole' refers to an unmarried woman's status, hence, spinster. 'Feme covert' refers to a married woman without legal status.
ideology, as the prevailing features in Victorian family life. However, some
nineteenth-century middle-class women considered marriage to be a form of slavery
and resented the limitations imposed upon them. In *Agnes Tremorne*, Blagden's
narrator has the following to say on the matter:

> It is such a mistake to suppose, as so many do, that there is but one feeling strong
> enough to mould or inspire a life, - love between man and woman. It may seem
> so, when the man and the woman in the highest, truest sense of the word Union,
> complete each other's lives, and offer on earth a shadow of that love which is
> our idea of God's sustaining, comprehensive, creative love: but practically where
do we find such marriages? ¹⁷

Blagden's questioning critique of the exalted state of marriage as a divinely inspired
institution, is socially subversive in that she is challenging the established view.
This is in contradiction to the view of John Ruskin who suggested that the role of a
woman in marriage was that she be 'incapable of error, [. . .] enduringly,
incorruptibly good [. . .] wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation:
wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail
from his side'. ¹⁸ Ruskin's notion of meekness, gentleness and self-denial places the
woman in a position of subservience which works towards consolidating the
domestic status quo.

By negating these ideal images of married love in the above lines, Blagden is,
arguably, positioning her narrative voice on the side of the middle-class woman, who
is expected to live up to the ideal of 'angel' within the domestic sphere, an ideal that
is humanly impossible to achieve. Patriarchal discourse identified femininity with
domestic love and the notion of separate spheres for men and women. The woman,

¹⁷ *Agnes Tremorne*, op. cit., vol. 2, 45.
¹⁸ John Ruskin, 'Of Queen's Gardens,' in *Sesame and Lilies* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1865),
112-113.
existing within the confines of the home was considered the nurturer and upholder of moral values to family and Empire. However, for many women, domestic love was oppressive and restrictive. The notion of an angelic domesticated woman was a sentimentalised ideal of the middle-class patriarchal family, with the woman at home devoting herself to the needs of husband and children, docile, dependent, submissive, virtuous and an object of beauty, and hence, ineffective. These assumptions were a middle-class construct, and much of the rhetoric endorsed by many writers and poets, was reiterated by them because they did not wish to destabilise the status quo. Generalisations about women's lives, in particular the lives of middle-class women on which this discussion of the Woman Question is centred, obscured the differences and diversities regarding class, regional variations and occupational variables, which also determined the position of women in the nineteenth century.

'The Angel in the House' 20

In his long verse-sequence, The Angel in the House, the poet Coventry Patmore, celebrates the notion of married love. In the section of the poem entitled 'The Wife's Tragedy', the woman's selflessness serves only to bolster the man's ego, based on the notion that 'Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman's pleasure'.21 Written as a response to The Angel in the House, Barrett Browning considers the Woman Question discourse in her seminal work Aurora Leigh (1856):

19 As Angelique Richardson explains: 'Responsible motherhood was a moral obligation and a woman's first act of citizenship in [. . .] Victorian Britain. It conferred nobility, prestige, and power [. . .] motherhood and imperialism were drawn into an alliance in which the function of reproduction was crucial', in Love, and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 75.
20 The Angel in the House is the title of Coventry Patmore's long verse-sequence first published in 1854 and expanded until 1862.
21 Coventry Patmore, The Angel in the House (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), 73.
I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking
-books demonstrating
Their right of comprehending husband's talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it is.'

As long as they keep quiet by the fire
And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay',
For that is fatal, - their angelic reach
Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
And fatten household sinners, - their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything
Of abdicating power in it: she owned
She liked a woman to be womanly,

And English women

Were models to the universe (1:427-33; 436-43; 444; 446) 22

_Aurora Leigh_ is a subtle revision of the notorious attitudes to women in the
nineteenth century and Barrett Browning foregrounds issues that could potentially
destabilise the notion of the separate spheres which dominated middle-class ideology
and which were perceived as troubling and threatening to the status quo. The overt
manner in which Barrett Browning presents the taboo topics of prostitution and rape,
which implicated men in violent and brutal sexual violence against women, boldly
spoken by an intellectually independent heroine, broke with the conventional
tradition that a woman writer should not engage with taboo subjects.

There is strong evidence to suggest that Blagden had read _Aurora Leigh_ as the
following letter from Barrett Browning suggests: 'I have barely done the book [. . .]
So you will have to wait for a copy until I get it from England after publication [. . .]
So glad am I that you like my name. . . 'Aurora Leigh'. I thought you wouldn't object
much on that ground'. 23 In another letter to Blagden, written in early December1856,

23 _Florentine Friends_, op. cit., 116-117.
Barrett Browning writes: 'I cannot tell you what satisfaction your feeling about my book gave me – That's help in itself'. The month and the year suggest that Blagden had read, or was in the process of reading *Aurora Leigh*, as Barrett Browning had presented her with a copy on December 2, 1856. Barrett Browning's words are another example of the respect she had for Blagden, which in this context, is an acknowledgement of Blagden's literary opinion regarding her great seminal work.

The notion of 'the angel in the house' as 'models of the universe', as Barrett Browning describes it in *Aurora Leigh*, was perceived as a means of establishing security and stability in the midst of anxieties brought about by the effects of industrialisation, urbanisation and a burgeoning business environment. Carol Christ suggests that:

Religious doubt and the viciously competitive atmosphere of business combined to threaten the stability of many traditional religious and moral values. [...] those values [were relocated] in the home, and in the woman who was at its center. [...] she could create a sanctuary both from the anxieties of modern life and for those values no longer confirmed by religious faith or relevant to modern business.

Anxieties relating to new discoveries in science which conflicted with religious belief, brought about what became known as the 'crisis of faith', which was perceived

24 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 116-117.
25 As Kelley states: 'Aurora Leigh, published on 15 November, 1856, bears an 1857 imprint. All that has been located of Isa's presentation copy, promised here, is its half-title page, which bears the following inscription in EBB's hand: "Isa Blagden with true love of EBB, Florence, Casa Guidi. Dec. 2d. 1856". This page was later bound in a set of proof sheets of the 1859 fourth edition, now at Lilly. [the Lilly Library at Bloomington, Indiana]. In *Florentine Friends*, Letter 68, fn 2, 113. Kelly further adds that: 'RB [Robert Browning] returned a list of corrections for the fourth edition of *Aurora Leigh* with a letter to Chapman [the publisher] on 19 March, 1859 [...] the corrected proof, from which the list of corrections was made, bears an annotation in RB's hand on a fly-leaf: "These proofs of the Fourth Editions of 'Aurora Leigh' were sent to us at Rome, in the winter of '59, and have been preserved for Isa Blagden by her affectionate friend, R.B. 43 Bocca di Leone, May 21, '59". At some point later, the half-title page from Isa's copy of the first edition was bound with this set of proofsheets, which is now at Lilly [...] After Isa's death, the proofsheets came into the possession of Mary Egerton Bracken [Blagden's niece], who signed her name above R.B.'s inscription'. In *Florentine Friends*, Letter 117, fn. 5, 201.
as a serious threat to the prevailing parameters. Consecutively, it fell to the woman to create a stable 'sanctuary' in which to protect and nurture her family.

In her overtly feminist novel, *The Cost of a Secret* (1863), Blagden protests against the sentimentalised fantasies of the ideal woman, her narrator stating that:

He was severe and exacting in his judgement of her and was totally unconscious that it was because he expected her to act up to the faultless ideal that he had formed of her […] From his own wife Mr Ashley never experienced a contradiction […] Mrs Ashley was not highly educated nor was she naturally possessed of a strong character or a keen intelligence. As a girl she was a gentle, lovely, loving being; as a woman she was tender, patient, indulgent to a fault. […] To minister to him indefatigably and continually, was her notion of perfect happiness. To hear Mr Ashley talk, to see Mr Ashley eat, to watch Mr Ashley sleep, were the objects for which she had been brought into the world.

By mocking the existing patriarchal conventions Blagden offers a critique of a society which endorses them. Her use of irony, like that of her feminist foremother Mary Astell (1666-1731) and her literary foremother, Jane Austen, serves as a didactic exercise in order to expose society's endemic hypocrisy. It is an irony that at the time when women were struggling for their rights in the nineteenth century, the most powerful position in the country was held by a woman. Queen Victoria epitomises the dichotomy and ambivalence of the times. In a letter to Sir Theodore Martin, Queen Victoria wrote: 'The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who

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27 Earlier in the nineteenth-century works such as Charles Lyell's *Principles in Geology* (1830) and Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), created growing unrest amongst the middle and upper-classes. Traditional notions of religious faith were being shattered by these newly emerging scientific theories, and the concept of a beneficent God was being challenged. The publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) did little to appease Victorian anxieties.


29 Mary Astell, philosopher, theologian, poet, political commentator and educational theorist, made an important contribution to political and feminist discourse in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. She was well aware of her own intellectual abilities and she did not accept the notion that it was a woman's duty to remain silent and inactive in the public sphere. Further scholarly work on Astell can be found in Joan Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism' in *The Journal of British Studies* 19.1, (Autumn 1979), 53-75.

30 Queen Victoria (1819-1901) was on the throne from 1837-1901.
can speak or write or join in checking this mad, wicked folly of 'Woman's Rights' with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety'. Considered a role-model for women in the realm of domestic life (she bore nine children) Queen Victoria's domestic situation was, arguably, totally unrealistic given the economic and social status of a monarch.

**Two 'Fallen' Sisters**

One of the greatest threats to the institution of marriage and to the strict Victorian moral framework was the notion of women's 'falleness' and the insidious and menacing 'great social evil', prostitution. To label a woman as 'fallen' in the nineteenth century, was to suggest that she had transgressed sexually, and by so doing had lost her 'innocence', the construct of which relied upon Christian teaching. The Book of Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible depicts Eve as the first prototype of the 'fallen' woman, who was tempted by a serpent to eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and, as Amanda Anderson explains: 'the condition of falleness derives from the act of original sin'. According to the Biblical story, Eve's 'falleness' came about because she enticed Adam to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. These images have resonance in *Two Lives*, when Blagden's female persona, relating the story of her 'falleness', comments: 'Then did that road begin/ Which led from Eden to a world of sin' (2:48-49). However, as Anderson argues: 'Eve's temptation was based on a desire for knowledge, not sexual

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31 Sir Theodore Martin (1816-1909) was a royal biographer. He prepared *The Life of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort* for Queen Victoria. In 1908 he wrote *Queen Victoria as I Knew Her* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1901). The above letter is quoted from this publication, 69-70.
32 *The Great Social Evil: Its Causes, Extent, Results and Remedies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1871), was the title of a book written on the subject by the Scottish missionary, William Logan.
33 Anderson, op. cit., 2.
34 This poem is published in *Poems, by the late Isa Blagden*, With a Memoir [by Alfred Austin], (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1873), 1-25. This volume is out of print. For a full text of this poem and all poems evaluated in this thesis, see Poems Appendix.
and in her poem, 'Eve, the Liberator', Bashabi Fraser substantiates Anderson's point:

She reached out for the apple
Of wisdom and once she had
Had a taste of the joy of knowledge
She did not want to be alone
With the secret, but in the
Generosity of her giving self
She shared her gift with her
Soul-mate and in the act of
Welcoming participation, she
Opened the doors of agency
And choice, of exploration
And discovery.\(^{36}\)

The notion of Eve as 'the Liberator' of humankind, in a male-authored world, was deemed dangerous to the status quo. However, it is Eve's identification with 'falleness' in a sexual context, that has been expanded upon in Christian teaching down the centuries and remains a contentious issue within the Established Church. Mary Magdalene's identification with the fallen woman in New Testament teachings has similar associations to that of Eve's fate. Theological discourse conflates Mary Magdalene of the Bible with the repentant prostitute who was forgiven her 'sins' by Christ as she washed and anointed his feet, drying them with her hair, a woman's hair being the icon of male desire down the centuries.\(^{37}\)

F. Elizabeth Gray explains that it was Mary Magdalene's 'identification [with the repentant prostitute], rather than that of her ministry and leadership roles, that was retained, expanded, and handed down in Church commentary'.\(^{38}\) This comment supports the notion that Christian history has denied women a voice, and in silencing

\(^{35}\) Anderson, op. cit., 3.
\(^{36}\) Bashabi Fraser, 'Eve' in *Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2015), 48-49.
\(^{37}\) For further discussion on the festishisation of women's hair, see Galia Ofek *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009). Ofek's scholarly research is further discussed in subsequent chapters.
\(^{38}\) Gray, op. cit., 108.
them, their history has been either skewed or obliterated, and Blagden, in her oeuvre, works to restore such a voice. As Marina Warner states: ‘The Magdalene, like Eve, was brought into existence by the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity, which associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh’.39

_Magdalenism_, was the name given to a book on the subject of fallen women by William Tait (1842), and Magdalene, (or Magdalen) was the name given to institutions for fallen women.40 Linda Mizejewski has suggested that Mary Magdelene had become ‘the archetype of the tragic but redeemable woman' and 'the model of female sexuality'.41 Consequently, the Eve and Mary Magdalene myths have, down the centuries, been perpetuated by Christian ideology. The 'sins' of female falleness were the outcome of what was considered improper feminine sexual behaviour on the part of women which was at odds with society's religious and moral expectations of the 'pure' woman, exalted for her spirituality and moral influence. Lord Byron uses the fallen woman motif in his historical tragedy, _Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice_: 'Vice cannot fix and virtue cannot change./ The once fall'n woman must forever fall'.42 Byron's words exerted a later influence on Blagden's _Two Lives_, in which her male speaker utters 'she fell as such must ever fall' (1:170). Byron's words, and Blagden's male speaker, reflect society's double standards, that men never 'fall', but fallen women were beyond spiritual redemption.

40 William Tait, _Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh_ (Edinburgh: P. Rickard, South Bridge, 1842). Tait was the House Surgeon to the Edinburgh Lock Hospital, later to become part of the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, in 1842.
42 George Gordon, Lord Byron, _Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice_ (London: J. Dicks, 1879). The above quotation is from Act 11, Sc.1, 544-545.
Prostitution: Cause and Effect

The double standards endemic in middle-class Victorian society confined women's (wives') sexuality within the domestic sphere yet made allowances for husbands to have paid sex with prostitutes, their reputations remaining unblemished from the 'stain' of prostitution. Therefore, the stigma of this 'monstrous evil' was almost always linked to the perceived problem of female sexuality, and not of male sexuality. However, the reason why many resorted to prostitution was because there were few employment opportunities for poor working-class women in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, and many of these women received little or no education. Dressmakers and needlewomen, laundresses and domestic servants, were particularly vulnerable as they worked long hours for low wages. As Anne Isba comments: 'the reality was that hard economic times meant that for many women, prostitution was the only way to make ends meet. Many [...] were only transient fallen women, moving in and out of the profession as family finances dictated'. The plight of the distressed needlewoman, an iconographic image in nineteenth century art and literature, will be discussed later in this chapter within the context of Two Lives.

The Victorians, though well aware of the moral and social implications of prostitution, did not discuss it openly, at least not in polite society. However, the extent, causes and social consequences of prostitution, were addressed by writers and social commentators alike. The influence of social reform texts influenced the work of writers, such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens. Opinion was split over Gaskell's fallen woman novel, Ruth (1853) and, as Alan Shelston has suggested:

44 Anne Isba, Gladstone and Women (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 102.
Far from over-stating her case, Mrs Gaskell has compromised it by the way in which she has presented her heroine. In particular they [the reviewers] drew attention to Ruth Hilton's faultlessness, represented as it is by her unworldly innocence in matters of sexual relationships before her fall and by the acquiescence in the life of self-denial she is required to lead after it.\textsuperscript{45}

For reasons of social conscience Gaskell portrays a sympathetic and 'faultless' heroine, but for reasons of social conformity or, as W. R. Greg suggests 'False morality', (she was the wife of a minister to the Manchester Unitarian community), she conforms to the Christian line, that: 'only a life of atoning [ . . . ] persistence could rid Ruth of her "sin"'.\textsuperscript{46} Hence, whilst challenging social structures Gaskell also reaffirms them. The character, Nancy, in Dickens' \textit{Oliver Twist} (1838), is, as Norman Page suggests, 'a prostitute (though her profession, like her language, is very delicately touched on by Dickens)'.\textsuperscript{47} Dickens' authorial intention, like that of Gaskell, was the desire to neither condone nor condemn, whereas Blagden's response to the debate in \textit{Two Lives} is an overt condemnation of the contemporary conditions of women.\textsuperscript{48}

Social reform texts, such as those written by, for example, the Scottish missionary William Logan and Edinburgh surgeon William Tait, express an empathetic discourse about the 'evils' of prostitution. The 'great social evil' of which Logan speaks had become a serious social issue and one which many acknowledged as needing to be addressed. Prostitutes were blamed for being polluters of men through the spread of venereal diseases, rather than victims of sexual abuse. In

\textsuperscript{47} Norman Page, \textit{A Dickens Companion} (London: Macmillan, 1984), 93.
\textsuperscript{48} Whilst raising an awareness of the issue of prostitution, it is possible that neither Gaskell nor Dickens would wish to offend the Establishment or their readership. As Barrett Browning commented regarding the poems Blagden had sent Dickens for his \textit{Household Words}, they were 'too much of pepper for the milk-teeth of his innocent public'. (Previously cited in Chapter One, Part 2).
Magdalenism, Tait, who, as the Chief Surgeon to the Edinburgh Lock Hospital, defines the prostitute as 'generally a person who openly delivers herself up to a life of impurity and licentiousness, who is indiscriminate in the selection of her lovers, and who depends on her livelihood upon the proceeds arising from a life of prostitution'. Tait does however, acknowledge the fact that prostitution was, for some women, an economic necessity. Logan, expressing his 'sympathy' for the plight of prostitutes, refers to 'the invisible nets that are spread across the paths of unsuspecting innocence, the fiendishly-ingenious methods which are plied to snare virtue, what masks of friendship are worn, what cunning acts of apparent kindness resorted to that vice may get the victims with her grasp, and drag her down to hell'. It is interesting to note that the word 'vice', in the sense of immorality and depravity, is conventionally and conveniently gendered as feminine. Arguably, Logan was suggesting that experienced prostitutes, or perhaps male pimps, lure 'innocent' women into the trade, thereby making the distinction between those who have become irreclaimable, hence corrupting others, and the 'unsuspecting' innocent who may yet be reformed.

The hypocrisy and double standards of the so-called tenets of Christian morality are reflected in Victorian society's attitude to venereal diseases. In order to control the rapid spread of venereal diseases in Britain, the first Contagious Diseases Act was passed by Parliament in 1864, amended in 1866, 1868 and 1869, and repealed in 1886, thanks to the campaigning efforts of women like Josephine Butler, who led a

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49 Tait, op. cit., 2-3. Lock hospitals, as the name suggests, comprised of wards that were locked until it was considered that a prostitute was free of venereal disease.
50 Logan, op. cit., 46.
campaign to abolish the Acts.\textsuperscript{51} Presented by the Establishment as the wages of sin, venereal diseases were believed to have been spread by women and not by men. This reinforces the ideology entrenched in Victorian society, that men lived by a different set of moral values to those of women, leaving the latter unprotected from contagious diseases, and by the law. Institutions for the detention of prostitutes and other 'fallen' women, such as penitentiaries and Magdalene homes, were established for those considered to be in need of moral guidance and rehabilitation.

**Rescue and Rehabilitation**

The rescue and rehabilitation of 'fallen' women became a life-long preoccupation for many prominent figures, for example, Josephine Butler, Charles Dickens, the four-times Prime Minister William Gladstone, and the women poets Christina Rossetti and Adelaide Procter. In 1847, together with his friend and financial supporter, Angela Burdett-Coutts, Dickens helped set up a home for the redemption of fallen women, named Urania Cottage, which he wished to be run on less harsh lines than the existing penitentiaries and Magdalene institutions.\textsuperscript{52} Dickens' and Burdett-Coutts' philosophy was a modernising and progressive force when considered within the

\textsuperscript{51} Josephine Butler (1826-1906) was an active feminist involved in women's suffrage and issues relating to domestic violence. She also promoted the higher education of women. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 and 1866 had established state regulated prostitution in the garrison and naval towns across Britain. The purpose of the Acts was to establish an enquiry into the spread of venereal disease which affected not only soldiers and sailors, but also their offspring. The Acts empowered the magistrates, all men, to detain and subject prostitutes to compulsory, degrading and intrusive medical examinations by force, if necessary, whereas as men using the services of prostitutes were not required to undergo examination. For a further scholarly discussion see Judith R. Walkowitz in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

\textsuperscript{52} Angela Burdett-Coutts, (1814-1906), was a philanthropist and social reformer. As 'the richest heiress in Europe' she had poured much of her very large banking fortune into many humanitarian causes. She inherited her fortune from her banker grandfather, Thomas Coutts, at the age of twenty three. She met Charles Dickens in 1835 and shared his concern for social causes and compassion for the poor. Their most noteworthy collaboration was the establishment of Urania Cottage in 1847, in a notorious red-light district in West London. Dickens chose not to publicise this act of private philanthropy, perhaps as he did not wish to offend some of his readers. In 1844 Dickens dedicated *Martin Chuzzlewit* to Burdett-Coutts. (Helen Rappaport, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers*, vol. 1, 115-116.)
context of mid-nineteenth-century discourse. Rather than reinforce the notion of the need to be spiritually reclaimed from their perceived evil ways, the women at Urania Cottage were taught household skills in order to prepare them for work as maids and servants, wives and mothers.53

In an effort to help 'fallen' women redeem their ways, Prime Minister Gladstone's private life was given over to the 'rescue' of prostitutes whom he visited on the streets of London at night after he had left behind his public parliamentary duties for the day. With the support and approval of his wife, Gladstone worked on the rescue and rehabilitation of many prostitutes working on the streets of London, and by so doing, risked ruining his political reputation.54 He also supported their cause financially for a period of over forty years. In 1848 Gladstone founded the Church Penitentiary Association for the Reclamation of Fallen Women, and, as the name suggests, it was a strict and disciplined environment, unlike Dickens' wish 'to avoid the rhetoric of redemption', as Rosemarie Bodenheimer suggests, at Urania Cottage.55

The binaries of a life of vice or a life of rescued virtue only applied to women. This pious attitude regarding the notion of redeemability goes hand in hand with the middle-class mores of respectability, and reinforces the double standard of sexuality endemic in Victorian society. Male rescue workers like Dickens (although supported by Angela Burdett-Coutts) and Gladstone (although supported by his wife) were considered by some to be at risk of being led into temptation, and hence, it was

53 For further discussion on Dickens' work at Urania Cottage see Jenny Hartley, Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women (London: Methuen, 2008).
54 Henry C.G. Matthew suggests that 'for Gladstone rescue work became not merely a duty but a craving; it was an exposure to sexual stimulation which [he] felt he must undergo and overcome'. In Gladstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 91. Arguably Gladstone was hiding behind the respectability of his marriage, home, and religious beliefs, using them as a premise for more perverse and transgressive behaviour, a contradiction to the ideological domestic sphere of Victorian middle-class family and religious life and upholder of moral values. As an Anglo-Catholic he possibly sought Christian justification for his work with 'fallen' women.
thought that women would be better suited to 'rescue' work. As F.K. Prochaska explains: 'The Magdalene's Friend was explicit on the issue: It is for the Bible women of the nineteenth century to penetrate the moral gloom of our cities and to regenerate society, with the antidote to all impurity'. 56 Charitable conduct, as promoted by 'Bible women' such as the Evangelical Hannah More, as Prochaska, suggests: 'raised philanthropy to the level of obedience to God'. 57 Consequently, active participation in the public sphere, when closely aligned with religious rhetoric and social discourse, was considered a 'respectable' occupation for a woman.

Conforming to her High Church Anglican beliefs of 'personal holiness' and 'social responsibility' as Serena Trowbridge describes them, Christina Rossetti worked as a volunteer with 'fallen' and homeless women at St. Mary Magdalene's Penitentiary at Highgate in London from 1859-1870. 58 Some of her poems were informed by her time there, for example, 'Light Love', (1856) and 'Cousin Kate', 'Noble Sisters', 'Sister Maude' and Goblin Market, all published in 1862. In the context of my discussion of Blagden's poetry, I will refer to Rossetti's 'Cousin Kate' and 'Light Love' later in this chapter.

Institutions which were less stigmatised, were being established as refuges for

57 Prochaska, op. cit., 6. Hannah More (1745-1833), an Evangelical Anglican, played a significant role in political, literary and social life of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She was a poet and dramatist, as well as a campaigner for Christian evangelicalism and anti-slavery campaigner. Evangelicalism, a former of religious revival and fervour, had resonance in both political and social spheres. More's proposals were to redefine women's position in society. She was a rigid moralist who concerned herself with defending patriarchal conventions and accepting the notion of the two spheres. She wrote numerous conduct pamphlets, or Tracts, imbued with Christian moral teachings. She was unmarried and highly successful in the public sphere and was not required to resort to a male pseudonym, nor to publish anonymously. As a conservative conformist she adhered to the 'norm' set by male writers and men in general. For scholarly discourse on More see Anne Stott, Hannah More: The First Victorian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
58 As Serena Trowbridge states 'the High Church Movement [...] was undoubtedly the greatest single influence on Rossetti's work [...] High Church Anglicanism [...] concentrated on personal holiness, social responsibility and the aesthetics of worship', in Christina Rossetti's Gothic (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19.
homeless and destitute women. For example, Adelaide Procter, financially supported the first Catholic refuge for homeless and abandoned women from the publication of her poetry, *A Chaplet of Verses*.\(^59\) The refuge, in east London, was the aptly named Providence Row Night Refuge for Homeless Women and Children. Although Rossetti and Procter considered it their calling to promote purity and morality in line with nineteenth century discourse as their poems will illustrate later in this section, their feminist agenda was achieved by more subversive means. Procter, whom Blagden knew, was a committed Catholic (she converted to Roman Catholicism in 1851).\(^60\) An entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* endorses Procter's benevolence: 'She was generous, yet practical with the income derived from works [...]. In 1862 she published a slender volume of her own poems, "A Chaplet of Verses" mostly of a religious form, for the benefit of the Providence Row Night Refuge for Homeless Women and Children, which [was] the first Catholic Refuge in the United Kingdom', adding somewhat condescendingly: 'If her verses are unambitious dealing with simple emotional themes, they have the merit of originality'.\(^61\)

Many of Procter's poems are informed by her observations at her refuge. In 'The Homeless Poor', for example, she makes the following observation: 'Crouching in a doorway was a mother/ With her children shuddering at her feet. (14:3-4)/ She was silent – who would hear her pleading?' (15:1).\(^62\) Prior to the amendment of the Poor Law Act, (1834), parishes were generous with relief often providing food and temporary accommodation in night shelters. After the amendment, many found

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59 *A Chaplet of Verses* forms the latter part of Procter's volume of poems *Lyrics and Legends* (1862).
60 In a letter to her friend in Florence Margherita Mignaty, Blagden states: 'A lady (Miss Adelaide Procter) asked me if I knew a gentleman artist who would allow a lady to study painting in his studio [...]. The lady's name is Miss Leigh Smith.' The letter is in La Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, and was written September 22, 1861. The 'Miss Leigh Smith' mentioned here is either Anne Leigh Smith or her sister Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon).
62 Ibid., 305.
themselves destitute, and if shelter wasn't found in the increasingly crowded refuges, many had no choice but to enter the workhouse. These issues, which are pertinent to the Woman Question debate, are examined in the following section in the context of Blagden's two dramatic monologues, *The Story of Two Lives*.

**Part 2: The Story of Two Lives: A Social Critique**

Blagden's poem offers a powerful social critique of the sexual exploitation of women and the economic factors that forced them onto the streets, namely, class, unemployment, poverty and homelessness. There are many parallels between Procter's poems noted above, and her social commentary which have resonance in Blagden's poem. For example, when commenting on the large numbers of women who were turned away from her refuge, Procter states:

> [S]he [the nun] had the sad task of selecting among the waiting crowd the number who may enter, [. . .] there are still many - sometimes thirty or forty nightly – turned away for want of space [. . .] it is the cruel office of the kind Nun to bar the door against them [. . .] they turn once more to their weary wanderings in the dark bleak streets.\(^63\)

These lines are echoed by Blagden's 'fallen' female persona, who, recalling her plight, exclaims:

> I strove to 'scape from this accursed state [. . .] I stood beside a gate, It was a "Refuge," and I trembling rung . . . "No room-all full;" the iron portal swung, And I was left without. \((2:90-94)\)

These lines echo the Biblical phrase 'no room at the inn', when the Virgin Mary seeks

\(^{63}\) Author's Note in *Legend and Lyrics*, 262-263.
a place of refuge in which to give birth to her son, Jesus Christ. The metaphoric
suggestiveness of the image of the woman as a suffering and rejected figure is deeply
subversive in terms of the notion of a feminised Christ-like figure. This is a common
theme in Blagden's poetry, as will become evident in this and following chapters.

The two dramatic monologues, composed as *His Life* and *Her Life* within the
poem's title, allow Blagden's two personae to narrate their own story. The dramatic
monologue form offers an alternative model in which to allow the fallen woman to
tell her own story in her own voice. Glennis Byron comments that

women use the dramatic monologue form as an instrument of criticism
by giving voice to marginalised figures [...] the most notable community
of speakers emerges in the monologues spoken by prostitutes or fallen
women, women who have been seduced and abandoned.  

Blagden's poem could be described as a new fallen woman narrative in which she
exploits the dramatic monologue form to allow the woman's voice to be heard in the
second monologue. She takes a bold stance for a woman writing in the nineteenth
century, and is critical and outspoken regarding the suffering of fallen women who
became social outcasts as a result of sexual exploitation by men, as the following
lines spoken by her male persona in *His Life: Scene – An English Park. Time –
Evening'* demonstrates:

I love her with her shame; I love her sin.

the lost woman, fallen, desperate,
Brute passion's hireling slave, the purchased mate.
Of villains, and of fools, a mark for scorn;
Not the white flower from which my youth was torn,
But the poor ravaged weed, which I flung down

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To be a byword for the virtuous town.
I try to image thee as thou wert then;
I see thee, prey and toy of dastard men. (1:207; 209-16)

These lines are explicit in their allusions. The fallen woman's 'shame' and 'sin'
suggest that it is she who has transgressed. As the victim of masculine gendered
'Brute passion', the prostitute, 'the purchased mate', a commodity which can be
bought, is held in 'scorn' by those who judge her actions, yet pay for her services. The
metaphorical suggestiveness of the 'white flower', as pure and virginal, is hinted at
here in the context of the female-seducer-temptress, who had 'deflowered' her lover.
The binary oppositions of 'flower' and 'poor ravaged weed' as something worthless
and discarded becomes the 'byword' for the embodiment of sin, thus endorsing
society's attitude towards female sexuality and prostitution. There is an element of
guilt expressed by the male persona when recalling his former lover. Acknowledging
her with a modicum of sympathy she was 'prey' and 'toy', hence victim, of cowardly
'dastard' men. These lines anticipate Dante Gabriel Rossetti's dramatic monologue,
'Jenny' (1870), a prostitute, who was

Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea.

Fresh flower, scarce touched with signs that tell
Of love's exuberant hotbed: Nay,
Poor flower left torn since yesterday.

Poor shameful Jenny. (2:12-14; 18) 65

In both Blagden's and Rossetti's dramatic poems, a sympathetic, subjective view of
the objectified status of the women is filtered through a male speaker's memory and
his gaze. However, in the second monologue of Blagden's Two Lives and similarly,

for example, in the fallen woman monologues of Dora Greenwell's 'Christina' (1857) and Augusta Webster's 'A Castaway' (1870), giving the prostitute-figure a voice was an attempt by women poets to exploit the form and, as Byron suggests, 'to dismantle, or at least destabilise' patriarchally defined structures of female sexuality.66

The male speaker in Blagden's monologue, a man of social standing who bore 'a wealthy, old, patrician name', (1:86) and who possessed an 'ancient hall' (1:225) and 'stainless name', (1:226) remarks:

My life has been as lives of other men:
Pleasure and pride, ambition, some success, 
And a heart flattered into selfishness. 
The past I soon forgot, as all men can: 
Didst thou? But thou wert a woman; I a man.     (1:91-95)

These lines are an endorsement of Blagden's overt feminist views regarding the notion of the separate spheres and differing moral standards, her protagonist speaking the discourse of the society of which he is a product. The death of the male speaker's former lover is reported to him by his aristocratic wife, 'my bride, the daughter of an earl' (1:113). Reading a newspaper she comments:

Poor thing, how much she must have borne of pain! 
Found dead, none knew her home, her name, her 
Age; 
One of those outcasts!

Poor outcast of the world!
If killed by grief, disease, or hunger, none
Would ever know, for she had died, alone;
But one poor relic, in her hand held fast,
This squalid misery with some brighter past
Must once have bound – a soiled, torn heron's 
Plume.     (1:26-29; 31-37)

66 Byron, op. cit., 65.
Although a stereotypical representation of the fallen woman, this sympathetic portrayal of the woman's circumstances, who was 'an orphan' and 'poor', (1:82) presents a perceptive social analysis on Blagden's part of the plight of the 'Poor outcast of the world'. The symbolic white heron plume denoting purity, was a 'love-gift' (1:75) once given by the man to his lover. As 'soiled' and 'torn', it is explicit in its allusions, and together with the woman's 'squalid misery', becomes the trope for the woman's falleness. Claire Nahmads Watkins suggests that 'The heron signifies time [. . .] and secret knowledge. It symbolises fertility [and] forgetting. Heron plumes are a symbol of silence [. . .] a keeper of secret knowledge'. 67 The metaphorical associations with the heron and its plume, as symbols of silence, secret knowledge, fertility and forgetting, are central to the poem's richly ambiguous meaning.

The notion of the angel-whore dichotomy is addressed by Blagden in the poem, when her male persona speaks of 'My stainless wife, that she should live to have/ A husband weeping o'er a wanton's grave!' (1:145-46). Expressing remorse and accepting of his guilt, he admits that

I flung a flower upon the road  
For other men to trample –

Twas I who sinned.

On me the guilt of thy betrayal lies;  
I led thy virtue down the slope to vice.  
(1:102-03; 154; 157-58)

However, for all his grief and remorse, the images of degradation and sexual

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exploitation remain in his desire 'To clasp once more the form upon that bed/ In its soiled rags' (1:231-32). To 'clasp' suggests possession and control, and as a 'form' the fallen woman is dehumanised, having no control over her body. She becomes an 'it', objectified and fetishised, by the male gaze, emblematic of patriarchal perceptions. The clitorally symbolic 'flower', as mentioned previously, and the 'soiled rags' are misogynistic in this context, suggesting images of the exploitation of women who were seduced, abandoned, and hence, forever 'fallen'.

There is an emphasis on the sensual qualities of the woman's objectified and dead body, her former lover recalling:

Was that soft, golden hair all faded dim?
Did those poor eyelids, 'neath their swollen rim,
Lose the arch sweetness of that bending curve
Which gave those eyes their delicate reserve?
Was it all marred and broke, that tender line
Of the small throat, so soft, so white, so fine? (1:218-223)

With her pen, Blagden allows her male persona to paint his dead lover with an artist's gazing eye, suggested by the curves, spheres and tactile qualities of her body. For him, she remains sensuously provocative, a sexual intoxicant, even though she is portrayed as 'marred' and 'broke', the fetishisation of which, functions as a metaphor for sexual deviance.

The Seduced Woman Iconography

The seduction of a working-class woman by an aristocratic male is a common theme in Victorian poetry and prose, and Blagden deploys the standard tropes associated with seduced woman iconography in the second monologue: Her Life. Scene - A London Street. Time – Evening. Narrating her own story in the opening lines of her
monologue, the female persona, abandoned and alone on the streets of London, states:

I wander up into the crowded street,
I hear the rolling wheels, the busy feet,
I see the misty rings, round lamps which shine
Far in the distance, as a double line
Of clouded brightness, piercing night's dim track,
Glittering like nails upon a coffin black. (1:1-6)

The ordinariness of a busy crowded street appropriated in these lines, morphs into something more threatening and menacing. Blagden's deployment of the oppositional forces of light and dark, of heaven and hell, are suggested by the oxymoron 'clouded brightness', which has echoes of Milton's 'No light but darkness visible'. Blagden's appropriation of the good and evil metaphor is suitably fitting to the woman's situation, the spectral-like qualities of the 'Glittering [. . .] nails' and 'coffin black' menacingly foreshadowing the omen of death. Recalling events of her early life she states:

My parents served his mother. From their grave
She took me to her home.

Oh, better I had lived as poor.

(There was my Paradise, and there my fall)
Until she found her son dared love me – then
She banished me. (2: 50-51; 53; 57-59)

These lines encompass the imagery associated with the abandoned and seduced woman: orphanhood, a working class young woman from the country, who, as the narrative progresses finds herself abandoned, alone and unemployed in the city. Interestingly, the role of the mother in the above lines negates the notion of female solidarity.

Similarly, in Rossetti’s ‘Cousin Kate’ (1862), an abandoned woman, narrating her own story recalls:

I was a cottage maiden.

Why did a great lord find me out,
And praise my flaxen hair?

He lured me to his palace home
To lead a shameless shameful life

So now I moan, an unclean thing,
Who might have been a dove.

(1; 5-6; 9; 11; 15-16) ⁶⁹

Rossetti’s suggestion that the maiden is ‘an unclean thing’ with its aspersions of ‘shameless shameful’ and hence impure, is in opposition to the imagery of the ‘dove’, and has similar allusions to Blagden’s ‘heron’s plume’ as white and pure. In ‘Light Love’ (1856), which was informed by Rossetti’s work at the Highgate Penitentiary, her male protagonist shows no remorse for his actions. After she has his child, he heartlessly informs her that he intends to marry a woman of his own class. Rossetti’s highly eroticised imagery in the following lines forces the reader to consider its carnal elements:

For nigh at hand there blooms a bride,
My bride before the morn;
Ripe-blooming, she as thou forlorn.
Ripe-blooming she, my rose, my peach;
She wooes me day and night:

She reddens my delight;
She ripens, reddens in my sight. (43-47; 49-50) ⁷⁰

Rossetti’s images are explicitly misogynistic in their allusions, and foreground the sexual objectification of women prevalent in contemporary society. The associations

⁷⁰ Ibid., 130-132.
of fecundity imagined by the twice repeated 'Ripe blooming' and 'ripen', and the 'potential clitoral symbols', represented by the 'rose' and the 'peach' become an encoded subtext for heterosexual desire and orgasmic fantasy.\footnote{Paula Bennett uses this phrase in her essay, 'Critical Clitoridechtomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory', in \textit{Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society} 18 (1993), 243. Clitoral symbolism is again discussed in the next chapter, in the context of Blagden's poem, 'Wild Flowers'.} The repetition of the word 'reddens', explicit in its implied eroticised imagery, also alerts us to the dangers of female sexuality. Though the woman in Rossetti's poem 'wooes' him, she remains a pure woman, unlike his former lover, she is, 'nay, not like thee:/ She leans, but from a guarded tree'. (64-65) In this way, the virginal bride, becomes a sexual intoxicant for him. In Blagden's monologue, similar images of ripeness and redness are associated with carnality, her speaker recalling:

> The red geranium's ardent crest of flame.
> I see a girl amid those flowers at play.
> A boy is near – two human buds, whose May
> Has ripened with the flowers – both, How fair!
> Then did that road begin
> Which led from Eden to a world of sin.

\[(2:42; 44; 45-46; 48-49)\]

The language is explicit and supports the iconography of the virginally pure woman and the fallen impure woman. Blagden's evocation of 'red geranium's ardent [..] flame', 'buds', 'ripened' and 'flowers' in the above lines, become powerful erotically charged symbols in which the garden's flowering possesses vivid sexual images. The above lines suggest a possible sexual liaison, which is explicitly supported in the following lines: 'I felt remorse, and grief, and shame, and scorn/ The veil was rent, the fond illusion torn!' (2:62-63) In speaking of her 'shame' the woman has internalised the discourse of the society which condemns her.
The Distressed Needlewoman

One of the most iconographic group of women who frequently found themselves condemned to inhabiting 'a world of sin' (2:49) in nineteenth-century discourse were dressmakers and needlewomen. The iconic image of the needlewoman was an ideal tool with which to offer a critique of the major social changes taking place in the mid-nineteenth-century, brought about by industrial capitalism. Women's perceived 'falleness' was often due to economic factors, as highlighted by Tait in *Magdalenism*, in which he suggests that 'The most distressing causes of prostitution are those which arise from poverty – want of employment – and insufficient remuneration for needle and other kinds of work, in which females are employed'. The established tropes associated with the needlewoman working long hours late into the night, in poor health, and lowly paid, became the dominant narrative in needlewomen literature and poetry. The choice she faced was either to succumb to prostitution, or, in order to retain her virtue, fade away and die. As Jenny Hartley suggests '[t]he needlewoman was in some ways the opposite of the prostitute. She was virtuous suffering, she could be openly discussed as a problem, she could be pitied and helped'. This was because she was associated with images of domestic economy and harmony, sewing in the sphere of her home for her husband and family, hence, needlework was perceived as the ultimate female act, an icon of femininity.

The dominant narrative of the needlewoman, was, as Beth Harris explains: 'Trapped within her garret she sewed day after day, [...] but she sewed for a stranger not for her husband (in performing wifely duties for the market place, her work was not unlike prostitution itself)'.

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74 Harris, op. cit., 6.
farious, the sub-narratives suggesting other interpretative possibilities. By 'prostituting' herself in the world of paid labour, the needlewoman became exposed to the public gaze. Needlewoman literature, was, as Elizabeth Wilson suggests 'a literature of voyeurism [. . .] which offered not so much grist for reform as vicarious, even illicit enjoyment of the forbidden "Other"'.75 Hence, the 'virtuous suffering' needlewoman became a fetishised, objectified and commodified victim of economic exploitation brought about by industrial capitalism.

The needlewoman-seamstress narrative was deployed by several writers and poets in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, Thomas Hood's 'The Song of the Shirt' (1843), Thomas Mills' story 'The Seamstress' (1851) and George W.M. Reynolds' novel, *The Seamstress; Or, The White Slave of England* (1853).76 Hood's poem, 'The Song of the Shirt', is a sympathetic and iconic portrayal of the needlewoman's plight:

> With fingers wear and worn,
> With eyelids heavy and red,
> A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
> Plying her needle and thread -
> Stitch, stitch, stitch!
> In poverty, and hunger, and dirt.
>
> Sewing at once, with a double thread,
> A shroud as well as a Shirt. (1-6; 31-32)77

These lines invoke the standard iconography of the needlewoman as an exploited worker, denied any human dignity. The imagery suggests that she works herself to

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76 Thomas Hood (1799-1845), was a journalist and poet, whose writings exposed the conditions of the working poor. 'The Song of the Shirt', first appeared unsigned in the 1843 Christmas number of *Punch* magazine. Thomas Mills' story, 'The Seamstress', was published in the *Penny Illustrated News* (February 1,1851). George W.M. Reynolds (1814-1879), was a journalist and Chartist agitator. *The Seamstress, Or, the White Slave of England* (London: John Dicks, 1853), was originally published as a series of stories on the theme of worker exploitation.
death stitching her metaphoric 'shroud' in order to produce an item of man's clothing. The needlewoman in Mills' *The Seamstress*, like Blagden's female persona in *Two Lives*, is an orphan, the victim of seduction and betrayal. As a poor needlewoman, threatened with homelessness, she pawns some of her clothes and thus, 'falls'. Mills portrays her as a victim of economic and sexual exploitation:

> The remuneration for her labour was so small, so utterly insignificant, that she found it impossible to live, as she had done, in innocence and virtue [. . .] Blame her not then, if in the evil hour she fell; blame her not, if, when suffering under an accumulated load of sorrow and misery – poverty before her, and starvation and death staring her in the face – she succumbs to the power of the seducer.78

Mills' words indicate a social watershed. By foregrounding the male seducer as the tempter, he negates nineteenth century discourse of woman as temptress. Mills' social commentary reinforces the notion that the only choice for the destitute needlewoman was either to succumb to prostitution, or, in order to retain her 'virtue', wither away and die of starvation. Her decline was almost always inevitable. Yet some needlewomen progressed to becoming entrepreneurs, establishing their own shops as milliners and dressmakers to the middle and upper-class woman. Many of their employees were, however, paid low wages. As Harris explains: 'In 1844, a needlewoman was paid two and a halfpence to sew a shirt [. . .] and six pence to make an embroidered shawl [. . .] they paid her a starvation wage'.79 The following lines in Blagden's *Two Lives* invoke the standard needlewoman iconography:

> [. . .] I know 
> Each phase of suffering, from the wretched toil 
> Which keeps out Death, but gives not Life ; to sew

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79 Harris, op. cit., 133 and 134. Two and a half pence in terms of today's purchasing power is approximately 80 pence; Six pence, mentioned by Harris above, has a relative value in today's terms of £2.18 (MeasuringWorth.com). To embroider a shawl would have taken many weeks.
Whole days, whole nights; week after week to seam.

To that despair which finds even this withdrawn . . . "Some ebb in trade". Oh, why are women born!

(2: 75-79; 81-82)

Blagden's reference to 'Some ebb in trade' was possibly as a result of the rise of ready-made, mass produced clothing. This rise in consumerism, and in particular the rise of the female consumer, was partly due to the establishment of Moses and Son in Aldgate, London, a large department store and the first of its kind, which had a 'Ready Made Department'. In *The Seamstress, Or, the White Slave of England*, Reynolds depicts the fictitious firm of Aaron and Sons, who were revolutionary in providing well priced, ready-to-wear clothing, and whose: 'accursed system is spreading an awful demoralisation throughout the country – filling the streets with unfortunate women, peopling the gaols with victims, and crowding workhouses with a mass of human wretchedness'.

Reynolds, a Chartist agitator, engages with the social and political issues raised by Thomas Carlyle's the 'Condition of England Question' by offering a critique of industrial capitalism and, indirectly, of the middle-class law-makers and men of religion, who believed that somehow the poor were responsible for their situation, due to their perceived vices and laziness. There is also the possibility of an anti-semitic undertone at work in Reynold's prose, which suggests that the poor are being corrupted and criminalised by the machinations of greedy Jewish traders. The desperation of poor needlewomen who failed to make a living out of sewing, was highlighted by the Mary Furley case. Having left the workhouse, and refusing to

80 Reynolds, op. cit., 94.
81 Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) referred to the 'Condition of England Question' in his work 'Chartism' (1839), in which he argued for social reform regarding the lives of the working classes affected by industrial capitalism.
return there with her child, she attempted to drown herself and her child. She
survived, but the child did not. In 1844 Furley was sentenced to death, but, as Gates
suggests: 'the Home Secretary [ . . . ] gave a stay of execution and commuted the
sentence to seven years transportation'. 82 Penal transportation of women to the
Colonies was commonplace in the nineteenth century, most of their 'crimes' having
been committed out of economic necessity. 83

The Workhouse: Prisons for the Poor

Under the New Poor Law Act of 1834, England was divided into districts, in which a
Commissioner had the power to form poor law unions. This was achieved by
grouping parishes together. An all-male Board of Guardians became administrators
of the workhouse, replacing the parish overseers who had previously dispensed food,
clothing and shelter. The Board were responsible for running the Union Workhouse,
and for setting the Poor Law rates in individual parishes. The workhouses carried the
stigma of poverty and destitution, and to seek refuge in one was the last resort for
many. Many 'Condition of England' novels written in the early to mid-nineteenth-
century, attempted to highlight the wretchedness of poverty and its consequences.
Inspired by the Mary Furley case, Dickens wrote a fictional account of it in 'The
Chimes', in which poor, poverty stricken 'Meg' attempts to drown herself and her
child. Similarly, in his novel, A Christmas Carol (1843), Dickens writes the
following dialogue:

      Gentleman: At this festive time of year, Mr Scrooge
      [. . .] it is more than usually desirable that we should make
      some slight provision for the Poor and destitute [. . .]
      Scrooge: Are there no prisons?

 82 Gates, op. cit., 51.
 83 For further scholarly discussion see Rachel G. Fuchs and Victoria E. Thompson, Women in
Gentleman: Plenty of prisons.

Scrooge: And the Union workhouses, [. . .] are they still in operation?
Gentleman: They are.[...] I wish I could say they were not. 84

Here, Dickens forces the reader to consider the diametrically opposed points which reflect society's attitudes to the poor: philanthropy versuspunition. In his novel, Oliver Twist (1838), subtitled The Parish Boy's Progress, Dickens exposes the Poor Law system and the administration of the workhouse and Benjamin Disraeli in his novel, Sybil, or the Two Nations (1845), contrasts the extreme poverty of the working-class poor in the rapidly expanding industrial towns to that of the prosperous nouveau-riche, the Church and the aristocracy. 85 The last resort for many of the victims of industrial capitalism and the New Poor Law, was to enter the workhouse. Hood's poem 'The Workhouse Clock' (1844), highlights their dilemma:

'While round the Workhouse door/ The Labouring Classes flock (5-6)/ At last, before that door/ That bears so many a knock' (69-70). 86

The following lines in Blagden's Two Lives are a critique of the system that created these social conditions:

[. . .] I thought the laws
Were harsh and stern; men spoke of prisons, or
Would mocking point where frowned the workhouse door,
But none gave help.

In vain three more, my weary footsteps tried :
At last the workhouse.* Oh my God ! The shame,
The Board of Guardians and their cruel blame ;
The terrors of those cells, that dread dark ward,
Its jeering blasphemies, its vice ignored. (2:70-74; 96-100)

85 Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), an aristocratic Tory politician, twice became Prime Minister. He wrote eighteen novels. Sybil was published in the same year as Friedrich Engels' The Condition of the Working Classes in England (1854).
86 Hood, op. cit., 648.
The insertion of the asterisk by Blagden, explained in a note at the foot of the page of her poem, states: *Vide* 'Uncommercial Traveller', a reference to Charles Dickens' *The Uncommercial Traveller*, a series of semi-autobiographical essays, which appeared in serial form in *All the Year Round* in 1860. Speaking of the Wapping Workhouse for Women, Dickens states: '[I] made bold to ring at the workhouse gate', and on entering 'the Foul wards in a building most monstrously behind the time [. . .] on the floor, were women in every stage of distress and disease [. . .] No-one appeared to care to live'. These dehumanising conditions are echoed by Blagden when she begs the question: 'Is there a lower Hell?' (2:102). Her vision is Dantesque in its notion of a journey through hell with all its attendant 'terrors', 'blasphemies' and 'vice'. The image of the 'dread dark ward' (2:99) in *Two Lives* alludes to Cobbe's *Workhouse Sketches* in which she speaks of 'the young souls left helpless [who] have been suffered to drop into that lowest deep of woman's shame, whose end is the "Black Ward of the Workhouse"', where conditions were extremely punitive.

Blagden's reference to 'Its jeering blasphemies, its vice ignored' (2:100) also evoke Cobbe's words in *Sketches* in which she describes 'a ward full of these "unfortunates", locked up together [. . .] wrangling, cursing, talking of unholy things [. . .] mad with sin and despair'.

The transformative feminine power of women like Cobbe in their endeavour to alleviate the suffering of workhouse inmates, is in opposition to the transactional masculine power of the gloomy and menacing imagery of 'where frowned the workhouse door' (2:72-73), which Blagden describes in her poem, and the

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87 The essays were later published by Chapman and Hall, in London in 1861. All my references are from the third edition.
88 Ibid., 27.
89 Dante Alighieri was a 14th century Florentine poet. *Inferno* (the Italian for 'hell') is the epic poem in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: *Inferno* is followed by *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.
90 Cobbe, op. cit., 215.
91 Cobbe, op. cit., 131.
dehumanising aspects of the workhouse with 'Its jeering blasphemies, its vice ignored'. Mocking of the hypocrisy of the 'Board of Guardians' and of the law, Blagden's speaker rails:

Yet righteous men
Have dreamed that here was refuge, peace, reform,
A shelter from the world's inclement storm.
Herded together, ruled by gyve, and rope,
Evil grew rampant, evil with no hope. (2:102-106)

The opposing dualisms in these lines imagine a vision of heaven and of hell, an earthly paradise which is in opposition to the pit of hell, into which the fallen angels must fall. 'Herded together', like writhing figures desperate to escape their confinement, is dystopic in its imagery, and has echoes of Dante's underworld, overseen by Satan. The image suggested by the fettering or shackling together by the 'gyve', reflects the conditions of workhouse inmates who were chained at the ankle and ruled by the 'rope', a reference to the practice of oakum picking, a common form of hard labour in the workhouse. Inmates were forced to tease out the fibres of old pieces of rope, which was then separated into shreds.\(^92\) Dickens made reference to the practice in *Oliver Twist* and Josephine Butler visited the oakum sheds of the Brownlow Hill Workhouse in Liverpool, where she witnessed the wretchedness of the conditions for herself.\(^93\) This vision of the inner hell of the workhouse was considered an even worse condition than that of the outer hell of living on the streets.

However, seeking solace in a fellow sister-sufferer she meets on the streets, Blagden's female persona is able to transcend the suffering of her worldly existence.

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\(^{92}\) Oakum picking was particularly hard on the hands. The fibres were sold to ship-builders, mixed with tar and used to line ships.

On meeting a young girl, 'flung down upon a stone' and pleading for help, the speaker rails at the injustice she feels against the 'righteous men' and their laws:

[...]
What a stormy gust
Of wrath and hatred rose within me then
'Gainst all this rigid world of righteous men!
Outcasts and homeless – here two human lives
Were left to perish; yet these men had wives
And sisters; little girls upon their knee...
But have no pity; must she end like me?  (2:166-172)

Blagden's speaker is highly critical of the legal discourse that created the conditions in which she and the girl find themselves. The girl, 'an orphan by the parish placed/
With a bad mistress, artful, vile, unchaste/ Who had [... ] starved her, then had bid/
Her do, with drunken oaths, what others did! She had refused' (2:173-177), is an obvious reference to a brothel-keeper. With 'No bonnet – cloak - ' (2:182), Blagden's persona, Samaritan-like, gives the girl 'the poor trifle I had saved' (2:185), together with her shawl. This act of kindness is a celebration of the sisterhood of women in which one fellow sister is saved by the help of another. More subversively, the lines that follow are, arguably, an example of the desiring female body, in which the girl becomes the focus of the lesbian gaze:

Then for a moment was that young frank mouth
Pressed close to mine. Oh God! how my lost youth
Rose from its tomb, as those fresh lips pressed mine!
I drank each kiss as dying men drink wine.  (2:192-196)

These lines make reading and interpretation problematic and are transgressive in their possibilities. They seem out of place in the narrative, but arguably serve as a rejection of heterosexual love, emphasising that love between women is stronger, more powerful, and ever-enduring. The overtly eroticised language lends itself to
seeming contradictions and ambiguities, both sensual and spiritual, which evoke the Eucharistic scene in Rossetti's *Goblin Market* between Laura and Lizzie. Laura's words recall the words of Christ to his apostles at the Last Supper: 'Eat me, drink me, love me', (471) and like Blagden's female persona, Laura 'clung about her sister/Kissed and kissed and kissed her' (485-6), and kissing her 'with a hungry mouth' (491-2).  

The drinking of the wine is symbolic of Christ on the cross, who was given wine to drink in order to alleviate his suffering. In Matthew's gospel Christ was 'offered a draught of wine mixed with gall', and Blagden's female persona alludes to this when she says: 'I drank each kiss as dying men drink wine' (2:196). Selfless and self-sacrificing, she morphs into a feminised Christ-like-figure, who, having received the stigmata in ecstasy, says 'I'd given my all but she was saved' (2:199).

**The Stigmatised Unmarried Mother**

The consequences for a poor innocent girl being seduced, becoming pregnant and ultimately abandoned to the streets, only affected a small minority of women who resorted to prostitution. Judith Walkowitz suggests that 'in general illegitimacy seems to have been a social problem distinct from prostitution [. . .] Most unwed mothers were domestic servants who were not prostitutes', as the workhouse bastardy registers confirmed.  

The 'Bastardy Clause', a controversial part of the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834, protected the upper-class seducers of these young women, some of whom had learned their domestic skills in the workhouse. As Walkowitz states: 'Socialists and Chartists claimed that these clauses were introduced to relieve upper-class rakes of responsibility to support their illegitimate offspring', and the

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clauses were implemented by men as they were the disseminators of the law.\(^97\)

In *Two Lives*, Blagden cross-examines the legal discourse which worked against women. Unable to support herself and her unborn child, Blagden's speaker has no choice but to enter the workhouse.\(^98\) Ironically, it was difficult to find shelter in a refuge as is evidenced by Procter, but the workhouse, of the kind supported by Twining and Cobbe, provided food, a bed and medical care. The representations and tropes associated with pregnancy in the poem are indicative of the movement of a foetus:

\[
\text{[. . .] a sharp and piercing pain} \\
\text{Shot through my side – again, [. . .]} \\
\text{As if a knife was searching through my breast.} \\
\]

\[
\text{Some of my old, impatient restlessness} \\
\text{Stirred in my heart to-night – beneath my dress} \\
\text{It throbs like a poor hunted thing.} \\
\]

\text{Fights its hard fight for life. (2:201-03; 215-17; 219)}

These lines have a subversive resonance. Defined by her legal status as an unmarried mother-to-be, the woman is deemed to be socially deviant and, as Kristin Brandster suggests: 'monstrous in her sexuality as evidenced by her pregnant body'.\(^99\) Middle and upper-class women were respectfully confined to the home during pregnancy. Blagden's persona, alone and homeless, was ostracised by 'respectable' society.

Yet, a sympathetic reader will know that the woman in Blagden's poem is not morally perverse, but an unfortunate victim of the law's failure to protect her and

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 35.  
\(^{98}\) Frances Trollope's novel *Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day* (1843), is a critique of the 1834 Bastardy Clause of the New Poor Law Amendment Act. The novel raised awareness of the unmarried mother's dilemma and the iniquity of the law. Trollope's protagonist is a young seamstress, seduced and abandoned by a wealthy aristocrat. Trollope lived in Florence and she and Blagden were friends, so it is highly likely that Blagden will have been familiar with the novel.  
others like her. In a final act of desperation the woman seeks out a friend whose 'hard, ill-omened trade' (2:231) was 'To make coffins for the pauper dead' (2:232).

On looking through his window she sees that

By his knee [. . .]
[. . .]in matron-beauty stands
A woman; and a baby's tiny hands
Are clasped around her neck. Could I have been
A wife and mother!

- a baby on my breast. (2:234-38; 240)

The tropes associated with the desiring mother suggest a longing to be in an acceptable social position in marriage, as a wife and mother, and a longing for the security of a home, but marriage is denied her. As the woman gazes through the window she recalls:

How wide my thoughts are wandering to-night!
These three I gaze on dimly in the light,
Through that small dusty pane – recall to me
A famous picture of a group of three.

Painted by Raphael so legend saith -
The Virgin and the Babe of Nazareth.
The scene recalls that picture - parent love -
The emblem and the type of God's great Love -
The glory will fill up my darkness, I,
Soothed by its sweetness, now, calmly die. (2:245-47; 250-56)

In this psychological projection of the woman speaker's repressed 'parent-love' anxieties, the image morphs into an iconic painting of The Holy Family (1518) by the Italian Renaissance painter, Raphael, in which she envisions the nurturing mother-figure of the Virgin Mary. Blagden conflates this image with another of Raphael's paintings, La Madonna Sistina (1512), depicting the Virgin Mary holding the Christ-child in her arms, floating on clouds and ascending heavenwards. This image offers a
powerful vision of a spiritual reunion with the mother-figure in heaven. Having been 'Soothed' by the 'sweetness' of this comforting image, the woman has no fear of death. Blagden's deployment of the binary oppositions between life and art, express her female persona's interstitial existence between the temporal and the heavenly.

The woman's past is linked to the present by the 'heron's plume' leitmotif, the re-occurrence of which, indicates the woman's social and sexual fall:

What ! do these stiffening fingers still retain
In their loose hold, this soiled, torn, heron's plume,-
Pledge of love that led me to this doom?
"It was his crest," he said, which I should wear,
And laughing placed it waving in my hair. (2:260-264)

It is her former lover's words that the dying woman speaks, and arguably, he all but has the final word. Having internalised society's moral codes regarding female sexuality, the speaker is accepting of blame:

I know there has been wrong, but mine seems worst -
The guilt, the blame, be mine. (2:269-271)

Rossetti, however, is more questioning at the end of her poem 'Light and Love' when her speaker, who has an illegitimate child: 'raised her eyes, not wet/ But hard to Heaven: Does God forget?' (69-70). Rossetti's questioning of a God who allowed her woman speaker to be betrayed on earth, raises the notion of her desire to have her betrayer punished in heaven. The woman in Blagden's monologue, however, is more forgiving: 'May God forgive him as I long have done' (2:268). In Rossetti's poem, there is no forgiveness, and, interestingly, she does not follow the model of Christian

100 Rossetti, Complete Poems, op. cit., 130-132.
forgiveness as does the Non-Conformist Blagden, which is something of an irony given Rossetti's High Church Anglican faith. However, at the end of Blagden's male speaker's monologue, he pleads to 'man' to 'restore' his 'soul' (1:260) and not to God. This could be seen as an example of male arrogance, or possibly Blagden is suggesting that he is not worthy of forgiveness because he has transgressed God's law which teaches that people should behave honourably towards each other. Male protagonists did not usually die in Victorian literature, and in this Blagden conforms to convention. Her male persona lives on. He is not afflicted with blindness like Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), neither does he commit suicide, like Dalton in Trollope's novel, *Jessie Phillips* (1843). However, the notion of the despairing fallen woman's destiny, death by suicide, fixated the Victorian public.

**Resignation and Redemption**

Death by suicide, was feared by the Victorians as something subversive. The plethora of images of women depicted in art, literature and poetry with their representations of women either floating martyr-like on the surface of water, leaping Sappho-like off the parapet of a bridge, or crouching penitent-like under the darkened arches of a bridge, had a metaphoric social significance reflecting the 'evils' of the time. As Gates comments: 'The profusion of images [of female suicide] helped perpetuate the inaccurate myth of frequency of female suicide, another myth that women writers strove to counter [. . .] female characters most often lived on past suicidal urges'.

In *Two Lives*, Blagden's speaker twice contemplates suicide, but lives on. The first 'suicidal urge' is depicted by the taking of poison:

101 Gates, op. cit., 143.
Arguably, Blagden was referring to the purchase of arsenic which was cheap and readily available from drug stores. If swallowed, it was more often than not, fatal and death from arsenic poisoning was a particularly agonising way to die. The second 'suicidal urge' contemplated by the woman is the conventional death by drowning. Recalling that 'far below, lulling and cool, I heard the waters flow/ A moment to feel tempted, then to shrink/ Back, back from that beguiling, awful, brink' (2:121-124), the woman, by shrinking back from the 'brink' does not, stereotypically, fulfil the notion of the symbolically fallen woman's destiny. More subversively, however, Blagden implies another level of meaning, that of the potential of sisterhood. In an epiphanic moment, while 'pacing to and fro' (2:129) the speaker meets a feminised Christ-like saviour, whose voice and words 'had power to probe, yet heal' (2:131), who 'had been to the far East' (2:133) and stood 'where our Jesus spoke, "Go, sin no more"*' (2:137). The asterisk, inserted by Blagden, is referenced at the bottom of page nineteen in Poems, and reads: Vide 'Cities of the Past', which is the title of a travel book written by Cobbe in 1863. In chapter three, entitled: 'A Day at the Dead Sea', Cobbe recalls:

By some chance I was alone [. . .] I saw a man coming towards me [. . .] He was a [. . .] shepherd [. . .] Round his neck [. . .] lay a little lamb he had rescued [. . .] It was actually the beautiful parable of the gospel acted out before my sight [. . .] the lesson that God suffers no wandering sheep to be finally lost from His great fold of heaven [. . .] yet the Good Shepherd rejoicing, shall bring the wanderer home - even on the Dead Sea shore.103

103 Ibid., 122.
Blagden's use of intertextuality is apparent when she relates Cobbe's story of the metaphorical lost sheep in her poem:

A shepherd, bearing back into the fold
A little yearling lamb, all starved and cold,
And tired and bleeding, for its truant feet
Had rambled from green paths and meadows sweet

But there it had been found, and thence brought home
With gentlest care and love. (2:140-143; 146-148)

The watery images suggested by the Dead Sea as being unable to support life, are supported by Cobbe's words in 'Cities of the Past' as

the terror-haunted "Purgatory" beneath the waters of -
That dim lake where sinful souls their farewell take
Of this sad world. 104

The indictable 'sinful souls' depart this 'sad world' through death by drowning, the gateway to oblivion. Blagden incorporates this imagery in Two Lives as 'the Dead Sea's bitter wave', (2:144). Water offers a discourse which embodies femininity in its fluidity, and, as Gates suggests: 'Fallen women [. . .] drowned in grief or in conjunction with childbearing, both of which were associated with their states and with female fluids in general [. . .] many fallen women openly acknowledged this affinity with water'. 105 In Biblical terms, water is the source of life, redemption and purification. 106 Arguably, through 'baptism' in water by drowning, the woman is cleansed of her sins, but only in death is she redeemed, there is no forgiveness in life.

104 Ibid., 108.
105 Gates, op. cit., 135.
However, in the case of Blagden's speaker, she does not cross the threshold as she is momentarily redeemed by a female redeemer. Crossing from the sphere of other-worldliness into the temporal sphere, the following lines reinforce the realism of the woman's situation:

How oft beneath the vast and echoing arch
Which strides across the river's stately march,
I've crawled to lay my weary hopeless head,
While loud above I heard the City's tread!  (2:115-118)

The architectural metaphor deployed by Blagden has a multi-layered suggestiveness. The masculine-gendered bridge, in terms of its verticality and towering strength, places the woman in a subordinate position and by confining her 'beneath the vast echoing arch', her subordinate position is exposed. The energetic action and bodily strength suggested by the arch's 'strides', the river's 'stately march' and the 'loud [.] City's tread', are in opposition to the woman's passivity and abject situation of utter humiliation as she crawls to a place in which to lie down.

Blagden's deployment of architectural metaphors in Two Lives evokes Augustus Egg's well-known painting, Past and Present, (no.3), 'Despair' (1858), which depicts a woman crouching beneath an arch under a London bridge, resting her head on a boat and staring heavenwards in the gesture of a penitent Magdalene, while protecting a small child under her shawl. Interestingly, the woman crouches below a placard displaying the word 'VICTIMS'. Egg's intention was, arguably, to expose a hypocritical and unjust society regarding poverty, worker-exploitation and women as victims of male exploitation. On the other hand, he might be suggesting that woman is a victim of her own weakness, a temptress, but easily tempted and drawn to sin and downfall by her very nature. The feminisation of suicide is also depicted in Gustave Doré's illustration, The Bridge of Sighs (1850), portraying a young woman
standing on the parapet of Waterloo Bridge moments before she takes a suicidal leap. Similarly, Thomas Hood in his poem, 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844), relates the suicide of a young woman who is dragged from the river moments after her death:

Once more Unfortunate,  
Weary of breath,  
Rashly importunate,  
Gone to her death!        (1-4)

The poem had an emotional impact on the Victorians as it suggests some pity for the 'Unfortunate' fallen woman, but at the same time it is judgemental. As the woman is taken from the water, Hood's narrator rather didactically suggests:

Touch her not scornfully;  
Think of her mournfully,  
Not of the stains of her,  
All that remains of her  
Now is pure womanly.          (15-16; 18-20)

Having undergone a pseudo-baptismal ceremony, the woman becomes morally purified (of her 'stains') through death, hence her purity is restored. Gates suggests that 'Kindly as Hood is toward his "Unfortunate", one can hardly miss an underlying message that the only good prostitute is a dead prostitute'. The 'underlying message' also warns of the dangers of female sexuality: 'Still, for all slips of hers/One of Eve's family' (27-28), and again, in the final stanza, the Eve myth is repeated:

107 The title is inspired by the Ponte dei Sospiri (The Bridge of Sighs) in Venice. Prisoners would look out from the bridge, to the world beyond, before going to their cells. It was, for some, their last glimpse of freedom.  
108 Gates, op. cit. 136.
Owning her weakness,
Her evil behaviour,
And leaving, with meekness,
Her sins to her Saviour!  

The woman, like so many fallen women in Victorian literature written by men, dies, and is humbled before (a male) God, who stands in judgement of her. Hence Hood, in his poem, provides a social discourse that was deeply entrenched in Victorian 'respectable' middle-class society.

Both Gustave Doré and Thomas Hood provided Blagden with the 'Bridge of Sighs' trope of doom and tragedy for her sonnet, 'Despondency'. As the title suggests, the poem conveys a sense of hopelessness and resignation: 'Regret, remorse, for time misspent and gone' (10). The speaker, recalling that: 'My life is as a weary Bridge of Sighs/ "A palace and a prison on each hand"', is borrowed by Blagden from the first two lines of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in which his first-person narrator recalls: 'I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs/ A palace and a prison on each hand'. The opposing dualisms in Blagden's poem, emphasised by the use of alliteration, serve as metaphors for her speaker's past and present experiences:

But I have left my youth's bright palaces,
And passed the portals of Love's fairy-land,
And entered on that dark and dreary path
Which every earth born traveller must tread,
Wherein the soul foredoomed no solace hath.  

These lines depict the crossing over from one level of experience to another: past to present, life to death, both transitional and transcending, highlight the irony of the vastly contrasting options that life offers.

110 Blagden, Poems, op. cit., 73.
111 The above lines are from the fourth canto, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 143.
The architectural imagery appropriated by Blagden in the final two lines of 'Despondency': 'While through the arches moan continually/ The dull deep breakers of life's surging sea!' (13-14), foreground the woman's doomed existence. The metaphorical suggestiveness of stormy waters serves as an expression of the woman's emotional crisis, emphasised by the thud of the alliteration, her plight being heightened by the darkness and depth of the water which beckons her to step over life's threshold.

In Dickens' observations of the Wapping Workhouse, he encounters 'a creature', an apparition, with whom he enters into dialogue:

'A common place for suicide?' said I. 'Sue?' returned the ghost [. . .] 'Yes! 'And Poll. Likewise Emly. And Nancy. And Jane [. . .] Ketches off their bonnets or shorls, takes a run, and headers down here, they doos. Always a headerin' down [. . .] They are often taken out are they and restored?' 'I dunno about restored', said the apparition [. . .] 'they're carried into the werkiss [. . .] and brought round. But I dunno about restored'.

The speaker differentiates being 'restored' spiritually and morally, to being 'brought round' from a state of physical unconsciousness. As Gates suggests: 'The most powerful liked to think of self-destruction as the appropriate refuge or punishment for the seemingly weaker, even when evidence suggested the contrary. Middle-class men [. . .] tended to make suicide the province of other selves, of make-believe monsters, or of women'. The feminisation of suicide was, arguably, more symbolic than a reality, but it satisfied the Victorians' appetite for sensationalism and fetishism.

When Blagden's speaker in Two Lives asks: 'Are the wild waters closing o'er my

112 Dickens, op. cit., 44.
113 The swing-bridge which Dickens passed on his way to the Wapping Workhouse was known as 'Mr Baker's Trap'. Because of its association with suicides, it was locally known as 'The Bridge of Sighs'.
114 Gates, op. cit., xv.
head./ That thus I see the Past before me spread?’ (32-33), death by suicide beckons, but she does not drown. Instead, Blagden offers an apparent Christian resolution. The following lines provide the space for disengagement as the woman cries: 'I hear a voice – I see a radiant light -/ A hand held out which stills this aching breast/ (274-275), and the triumphant Christian resolution: 'Come unto me, and I will give you rest' (276), presents religious redemption, through death. This epiphany, couched in pseudo-scriptural imagery, echoes the words in St. Matthew's Gospel: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'.\footnote{The King James Bible (Collins Edition), 11:28.} These lines foreground the question of ambiguity, making interpretation problematic and transgressive in its possibilities. Blagden's central theme focuses on the notion of sisterhood. The woman, in {	extit Two Lives}, seduced and abandoned by a man, is saved and redeemed through sisterly love. In turn, she had the power to 'save' the woman she found abandoned on the street. By undercutting the traditional Christian resolution of a male Christ, usually associated with the forgiveness of sin, Blagden offers instead the notion of a female Christ and the prominence of sisterhood as nurturer, redeemer and saviour, a common theme in her poetry. The metaphorical suggestiveness of suffering womanhood is further discussed in the next chapter.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Blagden's awareness of the Woman Question debate and her response to the contemporary conditions of women as discussed in this chapter, foreground her political vision. As the centre of an intellectual milieu, as Blagden was, the activities of those in her feminist circle who were involved in reformism and whose agenda was radical and revolutionary, were highly influential in providing a catalyst for
Blagden's feminist poetics in terms of themes and approach. My evaluation of *Two Lives* foregrounds her disregard for overt sentimentality and radically challenges the prevailing patriarchal and politically defined structures which confined women to within those structures. In the next chapter, I examine Blagden's feminist poetics and sensibilities have a deeper and more complex resonance, thus providing a more radically subversive reading of women's experience.
Chapter 3: Isabella Blagden: Feminist Consciousness

Overview
The aim of this chapter is to foreground Blagden's radically subversive approach to the notion of suffering womanhood as a revisionist critique which questions the prevailing masculine-inscribed dominant discourse. In this context, I discuss three of her poems: 'The Wrecked Life', a non-rhyming narrative poem; 'Mesmerism: A Death-Bed Confession', comprising of forty stanzas and written in the octave form and 'To Georges Sand: On Her Interview With Elizabeth Barrett Browning', which comprises of four tercets, building to a two-word refrain. The tercets are followed by fourteen stanzas in iambic pentameter and written in the sestet form. In all three poems Blagden deploys gothic literary devices and draws on Greek mythological legend in order to provide an encoded sub-text which allows a subversive feminist reading of women's experience, which, I argue, is in keeping with Blagden's feminist consciousness.

'The Wrecked Life', an exploration and exposition of forbidden desire, is a richly ambiguous representation of passive female sexuality in which a rejected woman, isolated from the world, is confined within her metaphoric tower. As I argue, the images in the poem are a response to Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott', which Blagden exploits for feminist purposes. In order to depict the mysterious and enigmatic woman protagonist in her poem, Blagden draws on the canon of Renaissance art by alluding to Leonardo da Vinci's painting, the Mona Lisa, whose persona has been the object of the concentrated gaze for centuries. Poe's tale, 'Ligeia', is reworked by Blagden as a response to the gendered power relations present in his text.

1 There is no evidence which would that these poems were published in any journals or anthologies during Blagden's lifetime. I assume, therefore, that the manuscripts were collected by Linda Mazini Villari at the time of Blagden's death, and later published posthumously in Poems, op. cit. The above poems appear on pages 98-105; 112-125 and 106-111, respectively.
Nineteenth-century anxieties regarding the emergence of the prototype New Woman, are exploited by Blagden in her appropriation of the gothic elements of nightmarish visions and necrophilic fantasy, the metonymic function of which, serve to convey the duality of meaning. The themes of a supportive sisterhood and the subversive notion of women's immortality are drawn from the tales of Greek mythology and serve to promote Blagden's radical feminist poetics. My appraisal of the poem 'Mesmerism', is a consideration of the nineteenth-century mesmeric phenomena of mental possession. The poem is suffused with an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty and Blagden appropriates elements of the gothic in order to evoke a nightmare vision of her young female protagonist's distress, induced by the threatening and tyrannical figure of a male mesmerist. Blagden again reworks and manipulates one of Poe's texts in order to exploit the binaries of good and evil, desire and loathing, this time in his tale, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839). Her deployment of the *doppelgänger* motif serves as an expression of her protagonists' darker doubles in the context of an implied triangle of sexual fantasy and desire. The metaphorical suggestiveness of the vampire motif, as a sexual and religious allegory, enabled Blagden to explore and expose what was forbidden in a society which feared a destabilisation of the status quo. In Blagden's feminist poetics, the themes of passion and obsession, desire and destruction, act as a warning of the dangers of male sexuality and hence, reverse the masculine-inscribed notion of the dangers of female sexuality.

Blagden's counter discourse of the inspirational figure of the French feminist writer, George Sand (1804-1876) are foregrounded in her poem 'To Georges Sand:
On Her Interview with Elizabeth Barrett Browning'. The poem is a revision of Barrett Browning's two sonnets 'To George Sand: A Desire' and 'To George Sand: A Recognition', and of Barrett Browning's first meeting with Sand in Paris in 1852, recorded in letters to various friends. Sand, and her culturally perceived transgressive sexuality, held a fascination for both Barrett Browning and Blagden, as their poems reveal. In her poem Blagden deploys the fallen woman trope and the rhetoric of the angel/whore dichotomy in order to present the opposing images of the culturally perceived saint-like Barrett Browning and a transgressive Sand. In order to provide a subversive account of Sand's deviant and transgressive lifestyle, her promiscuity and bisexuality is portrayed by Blagden in terms of the gothic vampire preying on her victims. The allusory connotations associated with Greek mythology are again exploited by Blagden in her consideration of the notion of the human mortal in the figure of Sand, and the divine immortal in the figure of Barrett Browning, whose centrality is foregrounded in this literary narrative. The three poems under discussion in this chapter are, arguably, a subversive expression of the subjectivity of women's experience in a phallocentric culture which are in keeping with Blagden's feminist sensibilities.

'The Wrecked Life': Innocent Victim of Sexual Predation

The woman in question in 'The Wrecked Life', who 'had no commune with the outer world' (78), 'Beside her casement for long hours [. . .] sate' (99), 'Mute, motionless,

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2 George Sand, was born Amandine Aurore Lucie Dupin of a working-class mother and an aristocratic father. She was a notorious figure primarily because of the transgressiveness of her personal life. She married but had affairs with other men and women. She was known for wearing men's clothing and smoking cigars, which earned her the label of hermaphrodite in the popular press. Her early writings are marked by forceful critiques of the institution of marriage. Her third novel, *Leila* (1833), created a scandal raising the possibility of an incestuous lesbianism as an alternative to female sexual frustration. (Leyla Ezdinli, in Bonnie Zimmerman, ed., *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*), vol. 1, 666.
and resolute (105). As the title of Blagden's poem suggests, the woman had been 'ruined' by her male lover's rejection of her: 'her sad life [was] jarred/ With unaccomplished aims – discordant hopes' (123-24). Similarly, the Lady of Shalott's isolation from the world in Tennyson's poem is foregrounded by his narrator, who poses the question:

   But who hath seen her wave her hand  
   Or at the casement seen her stand?  
   Or is she known in all the land,  
   The Lady of Shalott?,³ (1: 3. 6-9)

Tennyson's poem, as Dorothy Mermin states, 'reinforced aspects of conventional Victorian femininity [. . .] passivity, submission, silence – most inimical to creative activity'.⁴ It is these gendered stereotypes which Blagden responds to in 'The Wrecked Life'. Although appropriating much of the imagery in Tennyson's poem, Blagden's reworking and manipulation of these images and tropes with which readers of Tennyson's poem would have been familiar, enabled her to speak of women's experiences.

   Whereas Tennyson deploys the motifs of burning and blazing images in terms of masculine empowerment and sexual potency, as for example when the dazzling sunlight 'flamed upon the brazen greaves/ Of bold Sir Lancelot' (3:1, 4-3) and [His] 'helmet feather/ Burned like one burning flame together (3:3, 3-4),⁵ Blagden exploits the landscape as both metaphor and metonymy. In the opening four lines of her poem the potentially destructive forces of male passion are expressed in terms of

   The burning heart of red autumnal woods, -  
   The flushing pomp of sunset skies – a blaze

⁴ Dorothy Mermin, 'The Damsel, the Knight and the Victorian Woman Poet' in Critical Inquiry, 13, (Autumn 1986), 69.  
⁵ Cunningham, op.cit., 195 and 196.
Of fierce, wild, hurrying fire, as when upbursts
Some city's conflagration.

These lines evoke the notion of the sublime, which as Elizabeth A. Fay suggests, 'was considered something belonging to the realm of landscape painting, a way to depict Nature, at her most terrific and awe-inspiring'.

Though conceived as feminine in terms of its maternal and beneficent qualities, Nature's destructive qualities, as Fay further emphasises, are associated with 'the rural landscape and wild tract [which] are distinguished from the female aspect of the natural as Nature'. The sublime became a transcendent and visionary experience associated with the poetry of the High Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, and it was, as Anne Mellor states: 'associated with an experience of masculine empowerment' and 'patriarchal tyranny'.

The notion of the sublime identified by Burke, as Mellor explains: 'specified the qualities of the sublime in a landscape; a greatness of dimension [...] intense light, [...] intensely bright colors [...] confronted with such natural phenomena as [...] a blinding sunset [...] the human mind first experiences terror or fear [...] then astonishment, admiration, reverence and respect'. Arguably, the energy of the above lines, suggested by the sublime motifs of burning and blazing images, become, in terms of Blagden's agenda, representations of male sexual potency, the metaphorical suggestiveness of which, provides a warning of the dangers of male sexuality.

The binaries of the feminine, defined by Burke as the 'beautiful', and the masculine sublime, are evidenced in the following lines:

'mid the hush
And darkness of the night – commingled flame
Of still pale glories of lurid light. (4-6)

7 Ibid., 13.
9 Mellor, op. cit., 85. As discussed in Part 2 of Chapter One, Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry*, is an exposition on the theory of the sublime and the beautiful.
The 'hush/And darkness' and 'still pale glories', conceived as feminine, is distinguished from the suggestiveness of the 'commingled flame' in terms of sexual intercourse/procreation. This is emphasised by the penetrating 'lurid light'['s] identification with the masculine sublime, and, arguably, brings into play the notion that the woman in question is the innocent victim of male sexual predation. In the context of this argument, Blagden draws on Renaissance art in order to reconcile the binaries of victim/predator and to offer other interpretative possibilities.

**The Enigmatic Woman: Representations in Art and Tales of Terror**

Blagden's female protagonist is constructed not as a real image, but as an idealised representation of passive femininity, the object of the voyeur/spectator/narrator's gaze, whose unattainableness and ethereal beauty make her temptingly seductive. Blagden was a frequent visitor to Paris so it is likely that she will have seen Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of the *Mona Lisa* (1503-06), which arrived in the Louvre in 1804.  

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10 In Italian, the *Mona Lisa* translates as *La Giocanda*, literally meaning 'the joker'. This might, therefore, imply that it is the woman, who, in the end, has 'the last laugh', thus lending another strand to Blagden's complex and encoded subtext in this poem. It is thought by some art historians that Leonardo took the painting with him to Amboise in France, when he moved there in 1516, finishing it just before his death in 1519. Blagden visited Paris in July 1852, June 1855, January 1856 and August 1861.

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The art historian Enrico Crispino explains that: 'the Mona Lisa was to reach the peak of popularity in the nineteenth century when there was a real explosion of "Leonardism"'. Arguably, the fervour and fantasy surrounding the work provided Blagden with the inspiration for the following lines in her narrative poem, which read like a pictorial representation of Leonardo's masterpiece:

So gorgeous, magical, and strangely fair,
That lady's face! (4-8)

The Mona Lisa's enigmatic facial expression has been the source of debate among art historians for centuries. The nineteenth-century literary and art critic, Walter Pater, spoke of 'the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it [. . .] It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh [. . .] of strange thoughts

and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions'.\textsuperscript{12} A contemporary of Pater's, and friend of Blagden, the French historian Jules Michelet warned: 'Beware, La Gioconda [the joker] is a dangerous picture [. . .] the painting attracts me, revolts me, consumes me. I go to her in spite of myself, as the bird to the serpent'.\textsuperscript{13} The physical painting and the woman in the picture become synonymous. Hilary Fraser describes the \textit{Mona Lisa} as 'a model of visual consumption' [in which] 'sight and sexuality are metaphorically linked'.\textsuperscript{14} La Gioconda's sexuality, revered and loathed by Michelet, becomes a sexual intoxicant like that of the prostitute or fallen woman. The traditionally male-gendered serpent-figure, is turned around by the suggestion that the Mona Lisa is the predator, predating on small prey, which in this context, are 'innocent' men, but whose predatory gaze nevertheless, is focused on women. Stefan Klein suggests that Leonardo's work 'is the portrait of a pregnant woman' and that there was some scholarly thought that 'the Mona Lisa [. . .] was a courtesan', hence, the portrait splits into the two binaries of predatory woman and/or innocent victim, thus adding to its mysterious allusions.\textsuperscript{15}

The metaphoric suggestiveness of the Mona Lisa, with her 'fantastic reveries' and 'exquisite passions' as Pater described her, together with the painting's many encoded interpretative possibilities, provided Blagden with the inspiration for her female protagonist in 'The Wrecked Life'. Her alluring, yet aloof, qualities are described in the following lines:

\textsuperscript{12} Walter Pater, \textit{The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry} (London: Macmillan, 1873), 122. Although this work was published in the year of Blagden's death, Pater had published several essays on Leonardo da Vinci which had appeared in the \textit{Fortnightly Review} in 1869. Pater had visited Florence in 1865, so it is possible that Blagden met him, given the artistic and intellectual prominence of the group in Florence, of which she was a part.


\textsuperscript{14} Fraser, op. cit., 91.

None read the meaning of its smiles, and none
Could trace the passionate haunting grief-
Which wrote its sad defeature on her brow.   (9-11)

Her smile, it was so rare and marvellous,
And so became the mouth which palaced it,
That the proud curve became a gracious type,
Indelible in death.       (22-25)

The subtlety of her enigmatic expression is imagined in terms of her bewitching
siren-like qualities and alluringly seductive powers. The two-way gaze, like that of
the Mona Lisa gazing at her bemused spectators, and the gendered gaze of the
observer, provides an erotic undercurrent. Leonardo's portrait, as the art historian
Andrew Graham-Dixon explains,

is charged with feeling although quite what that emotion might be is not easy
to determine. Ever since Walter Pater wrote his purple poem in homage to
Leonardo [. . .] it has been fashionable to find something sinister in the
painter's works [. . .] The face of the Mona Lisa [. . .] looks out at us with a
serene, disturbing, otherworldly expressions on her face [. . .] there is an
undeniable challenge in her mysterious expression. The half-smile that plays
across her face [. . .] makes of her a sphinx [. . .] the depth of expression [a]
mystery.16

Consequently, as I argue, the inscrutability of the Mona Lisa's smile, is an
appropriate trope for Blagden's depiction of her female protagonist. Further evidence
of Blagden's response to the male tradition of writing in the context of her feminist
consciousness is her appropriation and reworking of the images and tropes present in
Poe's representation of 'Ligeia'. The parallels, drawn between Poe's tale of
'revivification' and Blagden's poem, enable my discussion in terms of the gendered
power relations in both texts, which Blagden exploits for feminist ends.17 Poe's

17 Poe's narrator speaks of the 'revivification' of the female protagonist in 'Ligeia', in The Seventy
Best Tales of Edgar Allan Poe (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), 140, henceforth referred to as
'Best Tales'.

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imagery has resonance in Blagden's depiction of her female persona's corpse-like figure, whose death is foreshadowed when

The shadows darkened, and the glow died out
And a pale phantom of a perfect face,
Set lips, stern nostrils, and a white, cold cheek
Alone remained! (18-21)

The spectral appearance of her 'phantom' [...] 'face' become translucent like a marble statue on a tomb, imagined in terms of the statuesque imagery of the 'hollowed out' and 'opal arch' (12) of her eyes. Similarly, Ligeia's features are 'cold' [and] 'not of that regular mould [her] skin rivalling purest ivory'.\(^{18}\) The mortification of the female subject, as Carol Christ explains, 'endows' upon women 'a fetishistic power that absorbs the beholder within a mortifying gaze',\(^{19}\) and the appropriation of the 'mortifying gaze' is described in Blagden's poem in terms of her female protagonist's 'large eyes (dark violets, sweet but sad,) (28), which 'Were empty sockets, and the veined pearl/ Of the transparent flesh was ashes, dust (2-30).

The gruesome images in these lines suggest the possibility that the narrator is mad, and who, like Ligeia's opium-fuelled hallucinating speaker/husband gazes upon 'the sunken veins of the eyelids [...] the hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black [...] the strangeness [...] which I found in the eyes was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, [of] those shining orbs'.\(^{20}\) These images have resonance in Blagden's description of the eyes of her female protagonist as 'dark violets' (28), from 'whence shone/ Inviolate the sorrow of her eyes' (12-13). The architectural metaphors deployed by Blagden in terms of the 'opal arch' of the woman's eyes is further

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 133.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 140-41. The title of Christ's contribution in *Death and Representation* is: 'Painting the Dead: Portraiture and Necrophilia in Victorian Art and Poetry'. Her comments are made in the context of her discussion of the paintings and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
\(^{20}\) *Best Tales*, op. cit., 140 and 133.
eroticised by 'the proud curve' (23) of her mouth which serve to emphasise her shapely feminine form. Similar eroticised imagery is deployed by Ligeia's speaker/husband in terms of 'the magnificent turn of the short upper lip – the soft, voluptuous slumber of the under'.

The gruesome images of bodily decay connote the subversive possibility of an eternal presence, as when Blagden's speaker, haunted by the spectre of the woman's corpse, recalls her smile as 'Indelible in death' (25):

I recognised the parted line of that rare lip -
Its matchless sweetness, now left desolate. (31-32)

As her metaphorical shroud disintegrates, Blagden's speaker perceives the woman in terms of 'transparent flesh' and 'ashes', and similarly, Poe's speaker reiterates that: 'Shrinking from my touch she let fall her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it'. Hence, the Gothic fantasy of the physical disintegration of the female body becomes a psychological metaphor for the speaker/husband's mental disintegration. Although the woman in Blagden's poem is dead, she remains 'indelible in death', and as such, has control over her speaker/lover. Similarly, the mental well-being of Ligeia's husband is totally dependent on his wife, hence, he is helpless without her. Thus, Blagden turns around the notion of masculine independence, strength and assertiveness by foregrounding women's quietly defiant resilience and determination.

Poe's tale, and Blagden's poem, raise questions of ambiguity regarding whether their women exist as real images, or whether they are the beautiful/loathsome creations of their speakers' hallucinatory imaginations. Arguably, as manifestations of

21 Best Tales, 133.
22 Best Tales, 141.
the binaries of love and hate, they become the psychological embodiment of Blagden
and Poe's own anxieties regarding sexuality, death and the emotional
disruption/disconnection in the context of the absence of a biological mother-figure
in their lives.

In Poe's tale, the speaker's first wife returns as the revenant who occupies the
body of his second wife Rowena, a situation which the speaker refers to as 'the
hideous drama of revivification [and the] wild changes in the personal appearance of
the corpse'. As J. Gerald Kennedy suggests, 'the story seemingly repeats the motif
of reincarnation but with the ambiguous suggestion that the narrator's first wife
returns to inhabit and transform – the body of his second wife'. Hence, the ghoulish
image of Blagden's female protagonist, like that of Poe's Ligeia/Rowena figure, is
transformed into a figure who, as Diane Price Herndl suggests, 'shows even more
energy and power in death than in life'.

The fetishised representation of a beautiful feminine corpse having morphed into
a monstrous decomposition, serves as an adjunct of necrophilic desire. As Peter
Wagner suggests: 'Victorian writers and artists [. . .] exploited [. . .] image[s] in
representations of women that combine necrophilia with the wish to overcome the
male fear of the femme fatale: women are invariably depicted as confections of saints
and sinners or as powerless sleeping or dead beauties'. Blagden's appropriation of
the Gothic motif of necrophilic fantasy, reveals a subtext which is deeply subversive
and transgressive. Considered in terms of the objectification of women under the
scrutiny of the male gaze, Blagden foregrounds the masculine-inscribed 'dangers' of

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23 Best Tales, 140.
26 Peter Wagner, ed., Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality (Berlin: Walter
de Gruyter, 1996), 30.
female sexuality. Representations of necrophilia, considered in terms of the transgression of prescribed gender roles, as Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen explain, 'bring into play the binary tensions of gender constructs, as life/death engages permutations with masculinity/femininity and with fantasies of power'. The notion of the possessor and the possessed becomes a site of tension as the dead woman under scrutiny in Blagden's poem has the power to inhabit the speaker's consciousness and to possess his soul, and like the Ligeia/Rowena figure, she remains in a position of control. Read as a tale about women's power, Blagden's exploitation of Poe's misogynistic fantasy serves to promulgate her feminist agenda.

The reliability of the narrator in Blagden's poem is problematic in terms of his/her implied gender and the ambiguous relationship between the narrator and the woman in question. The first-person retrospective point of view implies the male gaze or more subversively, the lesbian gaze. A shift in the narrator/spectator's consciousness marks the move from a site of ghoulish terror to one of beauty and calm, imagined in terms of the female persona's 'matchless sweetness' (32):

None knew her, but all felt who saw her once
That this was Beauty – that their lives henceforth,
were richer by this boon. (50-52)

These lines present a pictorial representation of the idealised and passive (dead) woman, whose life, like that of the Mona Lisa, takes place within the metaphoric

28 The anxiety over narrative mastery, is, as Lynne Vallone explains in her review of Alison A. Case's 'Plotting Women' a disconnect exists between the act of narration – telling the story through plots and plotting – and eighteenth and nineteenth-century expectations of virtuous feminine conduct that require a woman's 'artlessness' and unselfconsciousness. Women should be transparent; plotting and narrating introduce complexity and interpretation – troubling to traditional conceptions of female conduct'. Hence, as I argue, Blagden writes from the perspective of a male narrator, or more subversively, a lesbian narrator. The full title of Case's essay is 'Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century-British Novel'. The review by Lynne Vallone appeared in Victorian Studies 43.4 (2001), 659-661.
frame. Gazed upon by the spectator/narrator, the obscure and mysterious woman, in her elusiveness becomes a sexual intoxicant for him. Both visual and auditory hallucinations inhabit his consciousness as he recalls:

The ear which listened to her
The eye which dwelt upon her gracious shape,
The ear which listened to her rich, sweet voice,
The senses, ravished by the soft perfume
Which hung around her. (53-57)

Blagden's deployment of the rhetorical device of the anaphora, the repetition of 'The' at the beginning of the line, carries the rhythm of the poem forward, serving to stimulate and intensify the auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory senses. The eroticised language, 'rich', 'ravished', and the sexually explicit connotations of 'soft perfume' evoke a memory of a previous sexual encounter. Perfume is, as Renata Saleci comments, 'nothing one can physically discern, but it is alluring and poisonous at the same time', thus, the metaphor serves to express the woman's mysterious, fascinating and seductive traits, which are in opposition to the potentially threatening and deadly undercurrent.29 Catherine Maxwell has suggested that 'smell can as sense or sensation connote a rude or raw physicality at odds with civilized manners and values, it can also include the transcending or sublimation of that rawness to a higher level of experience'.30 As an aphrodisiac and intoxicant the perfume metaphor serves not only as an indicator of sexual desire but its inherent headiness lends a strongly symbolic dimension to the Romantic notion of transcendence and transformation.

There is a marked shift in perspective from the erotic to the symbolic as the narrative voice, drawing on the Christian metaphor of pain and suffering, hints at the

notion of sisterhood. The fallen woman trope, expressed in the Christian context of saints and sinners, is deployed by Blagden in the following lines from 'The Wrecked Life':

And there are some whose sorrows give them palms;  
Others whose passion is of shame – who,'stead  
Of saintly aureole must wear a brand,  
A stigma ineffaceable and drear,  
In expiation of Ancestral wrong. (70-75)

In Christian iconography 'palms' were symbolic of the suffering of Christ's entry into Jerusalem prior to his crucifixion, a victory of the spirit over the flesh. In the Victorian psyche, the iconographic images of falleness, which Blagden is alluding to here, there is no forgiveness. The woman's symbolic crown of thorns, which define her 'brand' and whose 'shame' and 'stigma ineffaceable' marks her as once fallen, forever fallen. The image of passivity is shattered when the woman morphs into a living, breathing being, when

once some hurried, sudden tidings came -  
A few brief words writ on a mourning scroll:  
She read with breathless, fevered haste, then rose,  
And tore off from her hand a ring.  
So hastily the soft fair skin was grazed.  
She smiled – a bitter, sad, self-pitying smile -  
"The link has chafed me deeper here," she said,  
And smote her breast. (79-86)

The imagery associated with the 'ring' suggests a certain ambiguity. The implication that the ring is an engagement ring and the woman has been jilted, is a more plausible interpretation of her anguish than the fact that she might have been widowed. The shadowy presence of an implied absent male figure in the poem becomes the silent 'other', and as Mermin explains, 'it suggests that for a woman to
speak, men must be forcibly silenced'.

The gender-defined images of 'soft fair skin' and the contrasting 'grazed' and 'chafed' skin express the hurt experienced both at a physical and emotional level. Given a voice with which to articulate her woes, the woman rails:

"Free – free – too late – my God!
"A life-long sorrow, and a life-deep wrong,
For the blind errors of a girl's vain choice -
Is this thy law – is this thy justice – God?"

The woman’s momentary elation at the thought of being ‘free’ of the relationship, is undercut with the realisation that she will be punished due to her 'errors' and 'vain choice'. Like the Lady of Shalott, who 'hath no loyal knight and true' (2:3, 8), Blagden's female protagonist's demise begins. As discussed in Two Lives, the themes of seduction and abandonment are also alluded to in this poem, though in less explicit terms. In 'The Wrecked Life', the woman's 'life-deep wrong' suggests her loss of innocence due to her 'blind errors' and consequently, like the female persona in Two Lives, she becomes forever fallen, in the eyes of a phallocentric culture, that is.

Blagden's feminist agenda is further expressed in terms of the woman's 'proud endurance', even though 'blent with shame', (147) as

with that swan-like plumage and soft down
Of her pure woman's heart, was she enforced
To satiate his serpent-sting?          (149-52)

The metaphoric suggestiveness of the mute swan with its distinctive white plumage, who mates for life and whose song, at the time of death, is beautifully haunting, is, as

31 Mermin, op. cit., 80.
32 Cunningham, op. cit., (2:3.8), 191.
Mark Brazil suggests an erotic symbol of opposites. In its whiteness and purity it represented [in mythic legend] the nakedness and chastity of womanhood. In its rounded body it represented the [. . .] feminine form, while at the same time, in the phallic length of its [. . .] neck [. . .] it potently encompasses the erotic image of the productive male.\textsuperscript{33}

The swan's symbolic duality is aptly suited to a subversive feminist reading of the woman's experience, who with her 'pure woman's heart' was empowered to 'satiate' the male-gendered 'serpent-sting'. The serpent metaphor, recalls the serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempts Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.\textsuperscript{34} In the Book of Revelation (12:10) the serpent is referred to as the 'Devil' and 'Satan'.\textsuperscript{35} Hence, the male-gendered metaphorical serpent/Devil/Satan as tempter shifts from the woman as guilty temptress/seductress, and in the context of Blagden's poem, foregrounds her critical feminist engagement with nineteenth-century discourse.

\textbf{The Sister Stars in Greek Legend}

Hope, optimism and the notion of sisterhood pervade the following lines in 'The Wrecked Life' in which Blagden deploys the motif of a star cluster:

\begin{quote}
We gaze where piercing and eternal burn  
The gentle lustre of the Sister Stars.  
\end{quote}

\hspace{2cm} (159-60)

In order to foreground her feminist agenda, Blagden draws on the Greek legend of the Pleiades star cluster, also known as the seven divine sisters, who were, as Munya

\textsuperscript{33} Mark Brazil, \textit{The Whooper Swan} (London: T & A.D. Poyser, 2003), 69. Brazil is a biological scientist.  
\textsuperscript{34} This is discussed more fully in Chapter Two in the context of the fallen woman.  
\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{King James Bible} (London: Collins, 400\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Edition).
Andrews explains: 'interpreted as a sign of immortality'. The legend tells the story of Zeus (the leader of the Greek gods) having put the sisters among the stars to save them from being chased by the lustful, Orion (the hunter), whereupon he (Zeus) turned them into doves, the metaphoric appropriateness of which provides the context for the themes of love, peace and sisterhood in the poem. The brightest star, and leader of the cluster, Alcyone, was, as Andrews explains 'known for her mysticism', hence, she serves as an appropriate metaphor for the woman-figure in Blagden's poem who has communion with God, and 'whose mercy touched her secret woe' and 'saved her' (164/65).

Blagden's reworking of the divine sister, Maia, whose name in Latin is 'the Great and Fruitful Mother' or 'the Great One' who lived alone in a cave, was seduced by Zeus and gave birth to a son, foregrounds Blagden's preoccupation with the absent mother-figure in her own life and work. By revisioning the fate of the only 'mortal' sister, Merope, who shamelessly married a mortal instead of a god, and whose 'punishment' was to shine more faintly than her sister stars, Blagden offers a subversive critique of the institution of marriage by suggesting that women would be more fulfilled if they remained unmarried, at least in the heterosexual context. By foregrounding women's invisibility in marriage and the dullness of their lives in which they are literally outshone by their husbands, women, the chief protagonists in Blagden's poetry, take the limelight and thus, are foregrounded against a whole literary canon of male representation in poetry.

The strong bonds between women in friendship and love, both in sexual and

36 Munya Andrews, *The Seven Sisters of Pleiades: Stories from Around the World* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press Pty. Ltd, 2004), 82. The seven sister stars were Alcyone, Maia, Merope, Taygete, Asterope, Celeano and Electra. For the purposes of the discussion in the context of the poem, I will consider Alcyone, Maia, Merope and Taygete.
37 Ibid., 72.
38 Ibid., 67 and 68.
non-sexual relationships, were of crucial importance to Blagden in terms of emotional support. The silent sister star, Taygete, who lived alone, was, as Andrews suggests: 'worshipped in deer form and her subjugation represents subsequent patriarchal control of the Western world', an appropriate trope in the context of Blagden's silent and subordinate woman-figure in the poem. Blagden's appropriation of the 'Sister Stars' metaphor offers several interpretive possibilities, as for example, the collective 'We' in her poem serves as an affirmation of the notion of sisterhood and the eternal feminine, whose comforting 'eternal' presence and 'gentle lustre' connotes the spiritual and purifying influence of women.

The quiet defiance and illuminating presence of the 'gentle lustre of the Sister Stars' in 'The Wrecked Life' is in opposition to Tennyson's highly symbolic images of 'starry clusters bright' (3: 3, 7) in 'The Lady of Shalott'. The heroic-knight figure in shining armour, whose 'gemmy bridle glitter'd free' (3:2,1) and who, 'Like some branch stars we see/ Hung in the golden Galaxy (3: 2, 2-3), is positioned as the brightest star in the 'golden Galaxy', and hence, outshone all other stars. Although appropriating the star imagery in Tennyson's poem, Blagden's reworking of the trope serves to turn around the notion of masculine heroism in order to foreground the notion of a heroic and powerful sisterhood. In preparation for her future role as an enduring and shining presence, the woman's fading existence in Blagden's poem becomes the metaphor for her earthly demise, as when

39 Ibid., 74.
40 In her poem, 'The Seven Chords of the Lyre', Blagden appropriates the Sister Stars metaphor in terms of 'Aspiration', 'Love', 'Joy', 'Doubt', 'Sorrow', Endurance' and 'Faith'. In her discussion of the Sister Stars trope, Andrews suggests that: 'Each one of the seven strings of the lyre can be related to the sisters, whose voices perform in perfect harmony [...] this harmonic resonance captivates the Greek gods and beautifies the Seven Sisters in the form of Muses'. Ibid., 68.
41 The above quotations from Tennyson's poem are in Cunningham, 196.
suddenly she grew more sad, more pale,
Was it God's mercy touched her secret woe,
And pitied it, and saved her? So she died.        (163-65)

By questioning 'God's mercy' the lines become more ambivalent. The reader is left to
decide if the woman is saved by God 's intervention or the intervention of a divine-
like sisterhood. Though her temporal existence is over, her life begins anew in an
other-worldly place, a female utopia, the liminal suggestiveness of which endorses
Blagden's subversive feminist poetics.42 As the narrator explains:

So, with a darkness pregnant of the light -
A silence resonant of music – was
The sylvan spot she called her home; - its air
Was a holy place of sanctuary -
Its empty chambers were instinct and rife
With influence from shining Presences,
Unseen, but felt with earnest, soothing power:
Her soul had loved it, and still lingered there!        (176-83)

The appropriation of the reproductive trope 'pregnant' functions as a coded reference
for the woman's physical condition, yet her transition from a space of 'darkness' (in
death) to one of 'light' (in heaven) offers a hopeful resolution. The romantically rural
'sylvan spot's identification with the natural world and its associations with the
pastoral in a spiritual and allegorical context, functions as an alternative space in
which to envision other possibilities for women, and hence, as a 'holy place of
sanctuary' the sylvan landscape becomes a spiritual home. And, as such, it is in
contrast to the masculinised conflagratory images at the beginning of the poem of
'the burning heart of red autumnal woods'. Taking comfort from the shining presence
of the 'Sister Stars' (160), sisterhood is transposed in an after-life as the woman's

42 The notion of female utopian spaces and liminality as an in-between existence, is fully discussed
in Chapter Five in the context of Blagden's subversive lesbian consciousness poetics.
haunting spirit 'still lingered there'. Christ-like, as Blagden implies in lines 70-75, through death, the woman achieves victory of the spirit over the flesh, and so her spiritual journey begins. Hence, the 'damsel in distress'-figure, waiting to be rescued by the archetypal heroic Lancelot-knight-figure, is undermined. The notion of misogynistic fantasy in the context of the objectification and fetishisation of the female body is further considered in the next poem.

**The Supernatural Phenomena of Mesmerism**

The poem 'Mesmerism', is an exploration of the relationship between sexuality and death, in which the destructive forces of passion, possession, power and desire are considered in the context of the nineteenth century phenomena of mesmerism.\(^{43}\) By the mid-nineteenth century the Victorians were gripped by this supernatural phenomena, the creation of an eighteenth century Austrian physician, Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). Mesmer's claim was that 'mesmerism', as it became known, would give one person the power to control another's mind or body. Given that there was 'a crisis of faith' in nineteenth century Britain, religious bodies such as the Evangelicals, as Alison Winter explains: 'condemned the phenomena as diabolical [. . .] that mesmerism was satanic [. . .] the work of the Devil'.\(^ {44}\) Such supposedly satanic influences, they believed, preyed on the vulnerable.

However, mesmeric practices were considered by some as a suitable alternative treatment for invalidism, as was the case with the writer Harriet Martineau, who, from early in her life, suffered from various physical ailments. Diane Postlethwaite explains that Martineau 'used mesmerism to explore the interactions of passivity and

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\(^{43}\) 'Mesmerism' comprises of forty stanzas. My referencing will state the stanza number, followed by the line numbers.

power through the inwardly directed, emotional self-exploration that characterised her illness'.  

An invalid for most of her life, Elizabeth Barrett had become fascinated by this phenomena, but as Winter explains: 'Barrett's fascination was purely an abstract intellectual interest, not a personal and practical one'.  

In her correspondence with her yet-to-be husband Robert Browning, Barrett was preoccupied with the subject of mesmerism and the question of how one person could 'possess' another. The outcome of Browning's interest in the phenomena is the subject of his poem 'Mesmerism', published in *Men and Women* (1855). As Blagden was Browning's amanuensis for this collection of poems, she will no doubt have been familiar with his version of 'a method as strange as new', which is discussed later in this section.

Blagden's speaker, whose lover is a 'poor, fragile flower' (3:5) and who 'ever seemed as one who bloomed/ For angels' (4:1-2), searches 'for one, whose Art most strangely swayed/ Both mind and body's health' (6:1-2) in the hope that 'his magnetic power could save/ My cherished blossom from the grave' (6:5-6). In his desire to save her from her inevitable fate, the speaker states his intention:

I hoped to conquer Death and thought at last  
Through strong magnetic aid  
To wrestle with the langour which had cast  
O'er that sweet brow its shade;  
To save that Life, I would have given  
All peace on earth, all joy in heaven!  

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46 Winter, op. cit., 237.
47 Quotation from the first stanza 'Mesmerism', line 4, in *The Poems of Robert Browning* (Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2007), 474. It is uncertain when Blagden wrote her poem of the same title. It did not appear in any of the journals during her lifetime. It is more likely to have been collected in manuscript form by Linda Villari at the time of her death, and hence, published in the volume of her poems in 1873. Blagden's role as amanuensis is discussed in Chapter Four.
Mesmerism for some became a new form of religion, due to the crisis in religious faith in Victorian society. Rather than turn to God in the context of this poem, the narrator turns to man, whose 'strong magnetic aid' would save his stereotypically defined languorous, lover from death. The gendered binaries of 'strong' in the context of men's vigour and 'langour' in the context of woman's supposed weakness, substantiate the notion of woman as helpless and subordinate to the male figure.

The speaker, emphasising his apprehension, recalls:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But chill my heart with boding gloom} \\
\text{When we three met in this dark room.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(1:5-6) 48

As he gazes upon his lover, her objectified beauty becomes a sexual intoxicant for him:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{‘Twas here she sate; her long luxuriant hair} \\
\text{A silver crescent bound,} \\
\text{(A crescent such as Roman women wear;)} \\
\text{One soft thick curl unwound} \\
\text{Hung down her neck its loose bright fold.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(2:1-5)

The sensuousness of the uncoiling hair becomes an encoded expression of women's femininity and sexuality. As Galia Ofek comments: '[W]omen's hair mediated and negotiated the ideological constructions of female sexuality'. 49

The sexual

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48 As discussed in Part 2, of Chapter One, in the context of Blagden's professional life, Barrett Browning had offered her professional expertise. With regard to the poem 'Mesmerism' she comments: 'As to the Magnetic story, now dearest Isa I do not mean to petition you to make some changes to the rhythm of it – because the rhythm is NOT good, and the poem is good and excellently conceived enough for you to give it a worthy rhythm. The lines constructed in the fashion you have chosen I object to strenuously – Turn them into lines of ten, by dropping two syllables as you go . . I have shown how, with my pencil's impertinence & [sic] with very little trouble could have continued to the end . . only the sense of my impudence suddenly confounded me – Also I would, if I were you, write the fifth line in two as you have rhymed it – thus -

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But dark my heart with boding gloom} \\
\text{I, one of three, who in that room} \\
\text{Shortening the first & third lines has the advantage (besides the rest), of getting rid of some weakening redundancy of epithet}. \text{ In Florentine Friends op. cit., 57.}
\end{align*}
\]

suggestiveness of the phallicised 'one soft thick curl', recalls the Medusa myth of 'snaky, phallic hair', which, as Ofek suggests was 'considered a touchstone against which fears of female sexuality may be assessed'.

In Victorian culture 'respectable' women were expected to keep their hair tightly coiled and close to their heads. Any eroticised pictorial representations of Eve, as Ofek suggests:

> [F]ocused [. . .] attention on the sexual nature of Original Sin [. . .] identified with Eve, her hair curling profusely down the tree, intertwining with the coiling snake. Such depictions of hair as seen through the male gaze, turned Eve into the evil cause of the Fall, merging her locks with the body of the tempter, so that the woman's hair and the devil become one.

Ofek's comments substantiate the themes in Blagden's poem, which foreground women's sexuality with danger and the notion of the tempter-mesmerist's power to possess another's mind and body, and hence, merge as one.

**Predation and Power**

The repeated imagery of the metaphorical predatory serpent, 'This serpent to my Eve' (7:1-2) serves to foreground Eve, in the context of the young woman's, as yet, unfallen status, whose 'tender bloom' (8:2), connoting the young woman's innocence and youth and 'delicate perfume/ Of graceful health' (8:4-5), serve to express her seductively alluring qualities. As the object of the male gaze, the young woman

\[
\text{sate with drooping head} \\
\text{And he gazed on her; will} \\
\text{And power in that dark eye intense -} \\
\text{His heart all ice, his love all sense.} \quad (9:3-6)
\]

Martin Wills and Catherine Wynne suggest that 'Much of the literary interpretation of

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50 Ibid., 70.  
51 Ibid., 72.
nineteenth century mesmerism envisaged a male mesmerizer invariably insidious and foreign [. . .] manipulating the mind of a young and passive female', and the image, suggested by a darkly-brooding, demonic Heathcliff-like mesmerist endorses this view.\textsuperscript{52} The mesmeric ritual lends an erotic undercurrent to the following lines:

\begin{verbatim}
With a voluptuous sensuousness
His fingers lingered o'er each tress.       (10:5-6)
He touched her hand, he bent above her brow,
    Her neck, her limbs; the whole
Of that fair body 'neath his will did bow;
    He seemed to sway her soul.
No quivering lyre could yield as much
Obedience to its master's touch.         (11)
\end{verbatim}

These images resonate with the authority of male power over a female subordinate. The young woman becomes the object of the double male gaze, the vicarious lover's gaze and the mesmerist's hovering and lingering gaze.

Blagden's appropriation of the female \textit{doppelgänger} motif, which, as Andrew J. Webber explains is 'typically in the service of male fantasies of the other' [and] 'may be said to act as the vicarious agent of repressed fantasies', serves to gratify the male sexual appetite.\textsuperscript{53} Webber further explains that '[I]n Doppelgänger stories the dyadic scheme is typically undone by a triangle of desire, the potential of which apparently lies in the rivalry of host and double over a female third party'.\textsuperscript{54} Blagden's deployment of a 'triangle of desire' scheme, is, given the complex nature of the poem, suitably exploited by her in order to reveal a sub-text which is radically subversive. The metaphoric suggestiveness of 'voluptuous sensuousness' in the tenth stanza, carries a sexually charged undercurrent which serves the male fantasy of female

\textsuperscript{52} Martin Wills and Catherine Wynne, eds., \textit{Victorian Literary Mesmerism} (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2006), 8.


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 18.
eroticism. The mesmerist, usually a man, the subject, usually a woman, as Winter explains, made 'magnetic passes over her [. . .] These passes were long, sweeping movements, of the hands skimming the surface of her skin. [. . .] After a period [. . .] the subject went into a mesmeric "trance" or "coma". Her senses of smell and touch disappeared, as did all awareness of her surroundings'. Hence, by his actions she is disempowered, the 'master's touch' having 'sway[ed] her soul' and rendered her a fetishised object of the desiring double male gaze.

In Browning's version of 'Mesmerism' the dominant masculine discourse is perpetuated in the following lines:

Til I seemed to have and hold.

From the hair-plait's chestnut gold
To the foot in its muslin fold. (6:1; 4-5)

Have and hold, then and there,
Her from head to foot,
Breathing and mute,
Passive and yet aware,
In the grasp of my steady stare  (7)

Hold and have, there and then
All her body and her soul
That completes my whole,
All that women add to men
In the clutch of my steady ken (8) 56

The repetition of the controlling images of 'have' and 'hold' reinforces the notion of a woman's subjectivity which has echoes of the marriage vows, described in misogynistic terms.

Mad with jealousy and anguish, Blagden's narrator conveys his torment:

55 Winter, op. cit., 2.
I watched him well.

And rushed towards her, - God! to see
Her turn to him – to him! from me.

He touched her hand, 'Do I now hold thee, sweet?
Thou'rt mine by spirit might -
Then come with me. (12:1; 5-6; 14:1-3)

The image resonates with power and possession, seduction and abduction, as when

She rose upon her feet
Out – out into the night.
I followed swift her gliding tread,
Poor angel! by a demon led. (14:3-6)

The binaries of 'angel'/demon' serve to foreground the gendered binaries of man/woman and the duality of good and evil in the human condition. Posited between an angelic being and ethereal spirit the young woman's

pale form shone white
Before me, and those snowy robes outspread. (17:2-3)

The spectral qualities connote the young woman's interstitial existence between life and death and the metaphoric suggestiveness of the unadulterated pure whiteness of her 'snowy robes' connotes Christ's adornment in white robes, recalled in the Book of Revelation 3:5: 'He that overcometh [...] shall be clothed in white raiment'. More subversively, in the context of the poem, Blagden implies that woman's earthly existence is transient and that Christ-like, she will ascend into heaven and thus, achieve everlasting life.

57 The King James Bible (Collins edn.).
Delusive Madness

Blagden's deployment of the tropes of invalidism, passivity and delusive madness in 'Mesmerism', provide further evidence of her intertextual relationship with Poe, this time drawing on his gothic tale, The Fall of the House of Usher (1839).\textsuperscript{58} The parallels, drawn between Poe's tale and Blagden's poem, enable my discussion in terms of the gendered power relations in both texts, which Blagden exploits for feminist ends. The gloomy and menacing House of Usher, becomes an emanation of the psychological state of Poe's three characters, two men and one woman: the narrator; the male protagonist, Roderick Usher, who suffered from a 'mental disorder which oppressed him' and which was the cause of 'excessive nervous agitation', and the 'lady Madeline', Roderick's identical twin sister, who suffered from a 'severe and long-continued illness'.\textsuperscript{59} As G.R. Thomson explains:

\begin{quote}
The ghosts in the tale of Usher are in the mind [. . .] significant patterns such as the incest motif, the eerie hint of vampirism, the use of [. . .] art to suggest sexuality [. . .] such a reading incorporates them into its overall pattern [and] the delusiveness of the experience is rendered in and through the consciousness of the narrator.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

And, similarly, in Blagden's poem, her narrator, mesmerist and female protagonist, who are unnamed, possess similar traits and manifestations associated with mysterious illnesses, both mental and physical, which are alluded to by the narrator and expressed as: 'Thick foam was on my lips' (13:2). His shadowy lover-figure is defined as: 'Thou'rt mine by spirit might' (14:2), and when portending his own ghostly apparition, he states: 'I followed bound as in my shroud' (15:6). These

\textsuperscript{58} All references are from Edgar Allan Poe, Seventy Best Tales.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 39, 41, 42 and 42, respectively.
\textsuperscript{60} G.R. Thompson, Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Tales of the Gothic (University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 96.
hallucinatory and ghostly manifestations described by the narrator as: 'Our triple shadow/ An element of ill' (18:3-4), serve as an ominous warning that the narrator is unreliable, as in *Ligeia*, and therefore, his recollections suggest that the narration is a fabrication of his mental disintegration. The ambivalence suggested by the subtitle of the poem, 'A Death-Bed Confession', raises the question of whose 'confession' it is. Blagden does not give her female persona a voice, she remains silent throughout and the sequence of events are relayed by the 'spirit' of the shadowy narrator-mesmerist figure. Arguably, it is this figure's 'confession', who, on his metaphoric death-bed seeks God's forgiveness.

The shadowy illusion of three suggests that the speaker has a split personality, but whether the split is three ways or two, becomes problematic. It is possible that Blagden borrowed the identical-twin metaphor from Poe's tale. After Madeline Usher's death, Poe's narrator states: 'I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them'. These 'sympathies' have resonance in Blagden's poem by the notion of: 'Her very life is of my life a part' (26:3). It is possible that Blagden expanded the twin metaphor by suggesting that 'our triple shadow' are identical triplets, and thus, one of the same. The haunting fear which pervades Blagden's poem is foregrounded in the following lines by her deployment of the gothic elements of terror and horror:

```
Beside our lake

A lurid ripple o'er its surface crept,
A wan phosphoric gleam,
And through the gleam an upturned face
Of mocking menace I could trace.  (19:1; 3-6)
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The metaphoric suggestiveness of the gloomy and threatening 'lurid ripple' and the suggestion of the 'wan phosphoric gleam' shining in the moonlight evoke images associated with the gothic nightmare in Poe's tale, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which his narrator falls 'victim to the terrors that he had anticipated', as for example, when he sees the distorted reflection of his psychological double, in 'a black and lurid tarn'.

Given that it is uncertain at this point in Blagden's poem as to who the divided self is, the potentially sinister undercurrent suggested by the 'upturned face', is, as Terence Cave explains: 'The fascination and fear of a "doubled" self – a mirror-image, a Doppelgänger, a ghost'. Hence, the reflected mirror-image in the lake, becomes the tormented psyche of the the demonic narrator/mesmerist whose threatening 'mocking menace' is ambiguously expressed.

The binaries of domination/subordination pervade Blagden's poem, evidence of which is expressed by her mesmerist-figure in the following lines:

'I've done my work, and now I bid thee speak'.
Instant at his command,
With faint low gasp for words she seemed to seek.

And then I saw the pale lips stirred,
But a faint murmur all I heard. (22: 1-3; 5-6)

Having rendered the young woman all but speechless, her 'murmur' becomes firmly placed within the mesmericist's narrative, and, as Winter comments, the subject 'lost her speech and hearing, unless the mesmerist addressed her', evidence of which is suggested by: 'Nay strive not, swerve not, thou art mine, my sweet' (23:1) in Blagden's poem.

Like the penitent woman:

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64 Winter, op. cit., 2.
She fell before him, clasping low his feet
And prostrate at his side;

Her long fair hair, all loose unwound,
Like angel's wing shone on the ground. (23:3-6)

Having given herself up to the mesmerist by lying 'prostrate' at his feet, signals the woman's humility and subservience.

However, the image of the seductive power of coiled phallicised hair discussed earlier, is in opposition to the metaphoric suggestiveness of 'loose unwound' hair, which, in Blagden's agenda, defies the notion that overflowing hair signified a woman's loose morals. As Ofek suggests: '[R]ecurrent and proliferating images of overflowing hair [during the 1850s] suggests growing cultural, political and personal concerns with the difficulties of controlling, managing or channelling women's vigour'. Blagden's deployment of the image of freeing and liberating hair becomes the trope for women's freedom and liberation from patriarchal control, and thus, defies containment. The metaphoric suggestiveness of the feminised angel's shining presence is in opposition to the narrator-mesmerist's demonic persona and Satan's dark shadow which pervades the poem.

The Female Life-in-Death Figure

Blagden's appropriation of the creation tropes in 'Mesmerism', for example, 'My creature', has echoes of Frankenstein's monster. The Biblical depiction of 'My Eve! Born of my very breath!' (25: 5-6) also expresses a certain ambivalence, and consequently, a conflict in interpretation. In giving life to his creation, the monster-mesmerist takes on the role of God, both as creator and destroyer. In the Book of Genesis, God created the first woman Eve from the rib of Adam, hence the notion

65 Ibid., x.
that the woman in 'Mesmerism', whose 'very life is of my life a part' (26:3), is created in man's image and likeness. The notion of a Man/God creator expressed by Blagden in the above lines, is arguably, a questioning of Victorian society's fears and anxieties of a world thrown into religious and scientific conflict and the threat to the status quo regarding the role of women in a society in transition.

As Blagden's female persona becomes an imprint of her mesmerist's psyche, she:

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led by
Blind instinct, her own footsteps laid
In every footprint his had made.           (20:3-6)
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The metaphoric suggestiveness of the 'footprint' has similar resonance in Browning's 'Mesmerism', in which he states: 'Having and holding, till/ I imprint her fast'.\(^6^6\) In both poems the language is misogynistic in its suggestiveness, and the 'God created man in his own image' trope is exploited in order to express subversively the subjectivity of women's experience. Fearful that his 'creation' dies, Blagden's mesmerist-figure warns:

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'Speak not; one word
would wake her – and she dies.

Death will free,
And Death alone, her bond to me'.     (27:1-2; 5-6)
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Ignoring the warning, the narrator implores his lover to 'Awake!' hence, he becomes instrumental in her death. Expressing his remorse he reiterates:

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'Mine all the guilt, mine all the pain'.

'I bore
Her home, my arms close round
That pallid form, while from her lips gushed o'er
Her blood upon the ground'.         (30:2; 31:1-4)
```

---

'That plashing sound, I hear it yet
Still with that stain my lips are wet'. (32:5-6)

There is a duality of interpretation in Blagden's deployment of the vampire motif and there is a certain ambiguity around the question of whether the vampire is gendered male or female. In order to address contemporary concerns regarding female sexuality she introduces the notion of a terrifying female vampire having sunk her teeth into her lover's flesh, as 'her lips gushed o'er'. As Tamar Heller notes: 'the female vampire embod[ies] a relation to desire that nineteenth century culture finds highly problematic', hence, the metaphorical suggestiveness of the darkly disturbing vampire has subversive resonance in the context of sexual deviance.

The possibility of Blagden's vampiric narrator-speaker disempowering her by having metaphorically sucked the life-blood out of her, is, as Byron suggests: 'the ultimate embodiment of transgression'. In broader social terms, vampirised sexuality, as Markman Ellis explains, can be construed as

The discourse of the New Woman [which] offers a revision of the model of the passive domestic woman self-consciously feminist and revisionist, the account of middle-class feminine behaviour in New Woman discourse was based on a new model of sexual independence [. . .] the New Women were perceived as an attack on received moral standards: they were accused of being promiscuous, unruly and self-interested; of being masculine, socialist and revolutionary.

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67 Markman Ellis explains that: 'The term "vampire" was first used in English in a newspaper report, published in the London Journal in March 1732. The report [. . .] announced the sensational discovery in Hungary "of Dead Bodies sucking, as it were, the blood of the Living; for the latter visibly dry up, while the former are filled with Blood". In The History of Gothic Fiction (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 162.

68 In Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyers, eds., The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction (Oxon: Routledge, 1996), 78. See also Ellis Hanson, ed., 'Lesbians Who Bite' in Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film (Duke University Press, 1999). Vampire imagery is further discussed in the context of Blagden's 'sexual deviance' and the notion of the lesbian vampire, in the next chapter.

69 Byron, op. cit., 268.

70 Markman Ellis, The History of Gothic Fiction (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 195-96. Although Ellis' comments concern his critique of Bram Stoker's vampire novel, Dracula (1897), his comments are equally appropriate in the context of my discussion on Blagden's deployment of the vampire motif.
In the context of Blagden's poetics, Ellis' comments aptly describe her feminist agenda, and therefore, substantiates the thrust of my argument in this study that Blagden was a prototype 'New Woman', who was ahead of her time. As a life-in-death figure, a woman may be, as Nina Auerbach suggests: 'a metaphor for higher [. . .] concerns, but if we look at her simply as a literal woman, her recurrent fits of vampirism, somnambulism, mesmerism or hysterical paralysis illuminates powers that were [. . .] somewhat fearfully imagined in women throughout the nineteenth century'. Blagden's deployment of vampirised sexuality is therefore subversive, allowing her to raise unspoken questions regarding women's sexuality and their subordinate position in a patriarchally defined society.

**Transgression, Perversion and Obsession**

As already mentioned in this complex poem, 'Mesmerism' elicits many interpretative possibilities. Blagden's female protagonist's shadowy presence, like that of lady Madeline in Poe's tale, is arguably a manifestation of their narrators' minds. Their 'illnesses', expressed in Blagden's poem as 'the langour which had cast [. . .] its shade' (5:3-4) and lady Madeline's 'malady', characterised by 'a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person', are thus, a premonitory warning, foreshadowing death. As Blagden's speaker, who, like Roderick Usher, became 'victim to the terrors that he had anticipated' deteriorates mentally, his lover deteriorates physically. Similarly, upon the death of his young lover, Blagden's speaker descends into a morbid depression, which renders him 'speechless, senseless, blind' (33; 6).

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72 *Usher*, op. cit., 42.
73 *Usher*, op. cit., 49.
Expressing the desire to retain his lover's corpse Blagden's speaker declares:

So tight was my death-clasp,
They could not loose my hold
That day, that night. At length, freed from my grasp,
They bore her stark and cold. (34:1-4)

Similarly, Roderick Usher, having been informed 'abruptly that lady Madeline was no more, stated the intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previous to its interment). The brother had been led to his resolution by consideration of the unusual malady of the deceased'. As Kennedy explains:

[B]ecause the male protagonist has staked his entire being on the love of a beautiful woman, her absence leaves him not simply bereaved but prostrated by melancholy. He has no existence apart from the consciousness of separation from the beloved and finds his life reduced to exercises in self-inflicted anguish, indicating that the grieving male must undergo perpetual self-punishment for the unworthiness implied by the abandonment of the nurturing female.

Thus, Poe's story can be read as a critique of male fantasy, as Kennedy implies. And Blagden, by rendering her speaker despairing and helpless, offers a reading which turns around the notion of the strong and independent hero, thereby raising questions about the notion of manhood and the destructiveness of male fantasy and desire. As previously discussed in the context of the female persona in 'The Wrecked Life', the necrophilia motif connotes the fetishised representation of a beautiful feminine corpse, thus, foregrounding the subversive possibilities that the poem yields in terms of the notion of manhood, deviant sexuality, fear and anxiety.

The first two lines of the following and final stanza of Blagden's poem hint at the wider concerns of society's anxieties and uncertainties:

74 Usher, op. cit., 45.
75 Kennedy, op. cit., 117.
It is possible that Blagden was familiar with Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843), a pessimistic assessment of contemporary society, which has resonance in 'The Future's dread despair', and which offers little comfort or hope when equated with 'the anguished Past'. A familiar pattern in Blagden's poetry, as previously discussed, is the requisite seeking of God's forgiveness and the Christian resolution that death is never final. The final two lines of the above stanza offer a subversive critique which offers 'In that calm heaven by angels trod' a radical 'new world vision' which, as Avery explains, was 'dependent upon the dismantling of male-dominated political structures [and] sustained resistance to oppressive systems of thought'.

76 By defining her poetics as a socially subversive revisioning of the prevailing dominant discourse, as espoused by such worthy notables as Carlyle, Blagden had created a powerful counter-cultural discourse in order to promulgate the female process of individuation.

**The Counter-Culture Heroine**

The notion of an enduring female identity in the face of a continuing hostility towards female sexual independence, is foregrounded by Barrett Browning and Blagden in the context of their admiration for the controversial French writer Georges Sand (1804-1876). In Paris, in 1852, Barrett Browning met Sand, her long-time heroine and literary muse. As Avery comments: 'Sand was one of the most controversial authors of her day whose strong feminist and socialist beliefs resulted

76 Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* op. cit., 97. Avery's comments are made in the context of Barrett Browning's feminist polemic, *Aurora Leigh*, but equally apply to Blagden's poetics in the context of this discussion.
in a series of novels [. . .] which openly critiqued the institution of marriage, the systemised oppression of women, sexual hypocrisy [. . .] and the failures of established religion'. Sand's feminist agenda, therefore, would have been in accordance with that of Blagden's concerns regarding the Woman Question issues, discussed in the previous chapter.

It had long been Barrett Browning's ambition to meet Sand, whom she eventually met, on three occasions, in 1852. Eight years previously, Barrett (she was unmarried at the time) had written two sonnets in celebration of Sand, namely: 'To George Sand: A Desire' and 'To George Sand: A Recognition' (1844). No evidence has surfaced to suggest that Barrett Browning wrote to Blagden from Paris regarding her visit to Sand, but it is highly likely that Barrett Browning's observations in numerous letters to others, will have been shared with Blagden, given their close friendship. Barrett Browning's sonnets, together with her record of her meetings with Sand, are foregrounded in Blagden's vicarious rendition of her poem entitled: 'To Georges Sand: On Her Interview With Elizabeth Barrett Browning'. In the poem, Blagden draws on the contrasting nature of the two women in terms of the angel/whore dichotomy, but also in terms of their consummate intelligence and shared accolade as writers. The attraction of Sand to Barrett Browning was her woman's 'true genius', both as a writer and feminist, together with her long held fascination for androgynous women, as will be discussed in Chapter Five in the context of Blagden's women friends in Rome.

Belinda Jack highlights Sand's notorious reputation as a 'fantastically vampish yet androgynous figure [. . .] her eyes always beguiling, disproportionately large, almost

77 Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (London: Longman, 2003), 92. 
78 Blagden uses the French spelling of Georges, with the final 's'.
79 Quotation from the first line of the second sonnet: 'A Recognition'.
black, and invariably mysterious [and] variously described not in relation to her writing but rather as a frigid, bisexual nymphomaniac.\(^{80}\) As a vampish, 'bisexual nymphomaniac', Sand preyed on others, particularly effeminate young men and actresses.\(^{81}\) The exoticised and eroticised eyes are alluringly gypsy-like, hence foreign, and consequently, other.\(^{82}\) With regard to Sand's attire, Jack explains that 'Sand's dress [. . .] drew attention [. . .]. Smoking was a pleasure that she indulged in in public at a time when the practice was wholly unacceptable. She smoked cigars [. . .] also cigarettes, which she rolled with deft expertise, and she delighted in her beloved hookah'.\(^{83}\)

However, after meeting Sand, Barrett Browning, though acknowledging the androgynous aspects of her persona, undermines the perceived lurid aspects of her lifestyle by suggesting that: 'Her usual costume is both pretty and quiet, and the fashionable waistcoat and jacket [. . .] make the only approach to masculine wearings to be observed in her [. . .] the cigarette is really a feminine weapon if properly understood [. . .] But I didn't see her smoke'.\(^{84}\) As Piya Pal-Lapinski explains, women posing 'provocatively with a cigarette in hand, wearing trouserlike garments [were] perceived as signs of female transgression in the nineteenth -century', and accordingly, Sand was a prototype New Woman.\(^{85}\) Smoking was perceived as a sexually explicit gesture, 'a really feminine weapon' as Barrett Browning describes it, but she might well have understood it as a gesture of defiance.

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80 Jack, op. cit., 1.
82 Images of the exotic and 'other' are discussed in Chapter Five in the context of Blagden's appropriation of the gypsy trope.
83 Jack, op. cit., 2. A hookah is a Turkish tobacco pipe through which smoke is inhaled through water.
on the part of women seeking to be liberated from patriarchal domination.

Recalling another meeting with Sand, Barrett Browning comments that she 'seemed to be, in fact, the man in that company', an acknowledgement of her intellectual powers, with 'her voice [. . .] low' [and] 'speaking of grave matters'. As Avery explains: 'Barrett even sought to commemorate Sand, whose real name was Aurore, in her most revolutionary protagonist' [Aurora Leigh]. As a role-model for feminism, Sand enabled women writers such as Barrett Browning and Blagden, to write in a language which was bold and assertive, usually the preserve of men. The attraction for Blagden, however, will not only have been Sand's feminist agenda which is the focus of the discussion in this chapter, but also her culturally perceived transgressive sexuality, the subject of which, is discussed in Chapter Five in the context of Blagden's relationship with her women friends in Rome. Elaine Showalter states that: 'Sand with her trousers and her lovers, became the counter-culture heroine of many feminine writers. It was Sand whose life suggested how women writers might develop [. . .] Sand became a heroine, not because she transcended femininity, but because she was involved in the turbulence of womanly suffering', and 'womanly suffering', together with the notion of sisterhood, is foregrounded by Blagden and Barrett Browning in their respective dedications to Sand.

Letters and Observations

Barrett Browning's meetings with Sand were achieved through various negotiations within their network of notable friends. Such was her infatuation with the French writer, Barrett Browning informed her friend, Mary Russell Mitford that: 'I won't die,

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87 Avery and Stott, op. cit., 93.
88 Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (London: Virago Press, 2009), 84-85.
if I can help it, without seeing George Sand'. In a letter to Browning, Thomas Carlyle, who acted as intermediary between Sand's friend, the Italian political activist Giuseppe Mazzini and the Brownings, informs Browning:

Mazzini can afford you and Mrs Browning without any difficulty the required introduction to Madme Dudevant [Sand's married name] only he says this sublime Highpriestess of anarchy is seldom now in Paris [. . .] I participate in your liking for the melody that runs thro' that strange 'beautiful incontinent' soul - a modern Magdalen, with the 'seven devils' mostly still in her! [. . .] At any rate the introduction is most ready, the instant you write me for it.  

The notion of a 'sublime Highpriestess', arguably conflicts with Sand's presumed anarchic tendencies as the personification of lawlessness. Describing her as 'incontinent', in the sense of lacking self-restraint in sexual matters, together with the damning comments regarding her status as 'a modern Magdalen', Carlyle's rhetoric reinforces the notion of the angel/whore dichotomy. His reference to Christ's casting out of Mary Magdalene's 'seven sins', through which she was 'purified' (discussed in the previous chapter in the context of the fallen woman trope), implies that Sand, whose 'sins' are 'mostly still in her', is forever fallen. Carlyle, speaking a condemning patriarchal discourse, reinforces the notion that women who stepped over their allocated social boundaries, became the butt of ridicule and hostility, and hence, were perceived as dangerous in the context of destabilising the status quo. Sand's

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89 Kenyon, op. cit., 50. Letter was written on February 15, 1852.
90 Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) was an Italian political activist who supported the unification of Italy, known as the Risorgimento, which is discussed in Chapter Four of this study. He was, intermittently, in exile in London for his political ideology from 1837 until 1860. Both Barrett Browning and Blagden were passionate supporters of the Risorgimento, which is expressed in some of their poetry. In her 'Risorgimento' poem, 'Rome From The Ripetta', Blagden, expressing her political fervour in inciteful terms, addresses Mazzini thus: 'Mazzini! In thy sad and exiled home/ Arise!' Mazzini was a friend of both George Sand and Thomas Carlyle, whose letter to Browning is discussed above.
perceived scandalous lifestyle was more the focus of attention than her status as a woman writer of note. Given Carlyle's comments and the 'various annoyances and persecutions in and out of print', as Barrett Browning describes it, Browning was reluctant for his wife to meet Sand. 92 However, Barrett Browning insisted that the meeting take place, informing her husband: 'No', [. . .] 'you shan't be proud, and I won't be proud, and we will see her'. 93 Browning will no doubt have been concerned that any association with Sand would tarnish his wife's highly esteemed reputation, both as a woman and a poet.

Having achieved her ambition, Barrett Browning informs Mitford:

[W]e have at last sent our letter (Mazzini's) to George Sand, accompanied with a little note signed by both of us, though written by me [. . .] it is most difficult to get at her, she having taken vows against seeing strangers in consequence of various annoyances and persecutions in and out of print [. . .] she is in Paris for only a few days [. . .] to escape the plague of notoriety. 94

After her first encounter with Sand, Barrett Browning informs her cousin, John Kenyon: 'She received us very kindly with hand stretched out, which I, with a natural emotion (I assure you my heart beat) stooped and kissed, when she said quickly "Mais, non je ne veux pas" [But no, I do not wish that] and kissed my lips'. 95 Kissing on the lips between the two women as an expression of their shared sisterhood, rather than desire, is discussed in the later section, 'Poetic Contributions', in the context of Blagden's poem regarding Barrett Browning's meeting with Sand.

Recalling a later visit to Sand, Barrett Browning informs Mitford that

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92 Barrett Browning's comments, cited above, were made in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford on February 15, 1852, in Kenyon, op. cit., 50.
93 Kenyon, op. cit., 50.
94 Kenyon, op. cit., 50.
95 Kenyon, op. cit., 55. Letter written February 15, 1852.
She seems to live in the abomination of desolation as far as regards society. Society of the ragged Red [socialist] diluted with the lower theatrical. She herself so different, so apart, as alone in her melancholy disdain! I was deeply interested in that poor woman, I felt a profound compassion for her. I did not mind much [. . .] the vulgar man of the theatre who went down on his knees and called her 'sublime'. A noble woman under the mud, be certain. I would kneel down to her, too, if she would leave it all, throw it off, and be herself as God made her.96

The metaphoric suggestiveness of 'the abomination of desolation' evokes a terrifying spectre and her 'melancholy disdain', serves as indicator of Sand's sense of isolation and despondency. Having literally fallen from grace, to become 'a noble woman under the mud', arguably, foregrounds Barrett Browning's mild disapproval of Sand's lifestyle, but one from which she cannot help but be enthralled. Barrett Browning would however, go down on bended knee to a woman who was prepared to shake off her metaphoric shackles and be as 'God made her', or in modern parlance, be true to herself. In a rather pessimistic tone Barrett Browning adds: 'We tried hard to please her [. . .] we always felt we couldn't penetrate – couldn't really touch her – it was all in vain', an expression of her disappointment at not having bonded with her feminist-sister-hero[ine] as she would have wished.97

Poetic Contributions in Honour of George Sand

The influence of Barrett Browning's letters and her two sonnets have deep resonance in Blagden's rendition of her poem: 'To Georges Sand: On Her Interview with Elizabeth Barrett Browning', in which each stanza (eighteen in total), presents opposing images of a saintly Barrett Browning and a 'sinful' Sand.98 In her first sonnet: 'To George Sand: A Desire', Barrett addresses Sand as,

96 Kenyon, op. cit., 63.
97 Kenyon, op. cit., 64.
98 For the purposes of clarity, I will refer to Barrett Browning as 'Barrett' in my consideration of her two Sand sonnets, which were published in 1844, two years before she married Robert Browning.
Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,
Self-called George Sand! whose soul, amid
the lions
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance
And answers roar and roar, as spirits can:
I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
Above the applauded circus. (1-8)

The notion of a 'large-brained woman' would be at odds with what a patriarchally
defined Victorian society would consider appropriate feminine behaviour in the
context of intellectual stimulus and pursuits. Sand also fits the vocabulary of the
gothic, her largeness of brain (and her physical size as previously described), a
terrifying spectre, and hence threatening to the status quo. In response to Barrett's
verse, Blagden, in the opening stanza of her poem describes Sand in the context of a
grotesque and disturbing vision:

The sin-bound soul's fierce struggle to be free,
A fettered maniac raging in her lair
Are thine! (2-4)

The metaphorical suggestiveness of a mad, caged animal-woman in a circus arena,
who, like Sand 'flung thyself into th'arena's strife' (8:8) whilst attempting to break
free from the metaphorical social conventions that bind and confine women, is
imagined in these lines. These images, which echo Barrett's description of Sand
'whose soul amid/ the lions (3-4)/ roar for roar (6) Above the applauded circus' (8),
reinforce the difficulties women like Sand encountered in their attempts to
redefine traditional models of femininity. Blagden's imagined Sand is in opposition
to her description of Barrett Browning as 'An angel child who sings beside her knee'
(2:2). The binaries of the 'angel child' and the 'sin-bound soul' in the above stanzas,
are a representation of the angel/whore dichotomy, which is in accordance with
Blagden's feminist agenda regarding the 'angel in the house', discussed in the previous chapter.

Sand and Barrett Browning are again juxtaposed in the following stanza in Blagden's poem, when

Amid the world's wild roar, that tender song,
Throughout its jarring discords heard between,
Rung out heroic protest against wrong.
Where coward souls had recklessly despaired,
That dove-like heart with fortitude serene
Through Sorrow's whelming flood victorious dared. (13)

The metaphoric suggestiveness of the lion and the dove provide the context for Blagden's acknowledgement that both Sand and Barrett Browning, in their own and different ways, fought for women's rights. The appropriation of Sand's masculinised 'roar' is in opposition to Barrett Browning, whose 'dove-like heart' beat with 'fortitude serene', yet both women, 'Rung out heroic protest against wrong' in their respective feminist writings, and against all odds were daringly 'victorious'. The plaintive 'tender song' of women writers, whose 'coward souls had recklessly despaired', reinforces Blagden's admiration for both Sand and Barrett Browning's moral strength and fortitude in a society that oppressed women's ambitions.

The final line of Barrett's first sonnet: 'To kiss upon the lips a stainless fame' is alluded to by Blagden in her poem: 'As to thy lip that purest lip was pressed' (16:6) and 'By that healing kiss, be thou assoiled' (18:1). These lines reinforce the notion of the sister who, Christ-like, is empowered to save another through a kiss, and hence, serves as an act of healing, purification and absolution of one's sins. In the nineteenth century it was acceptable for two women to kiss on the lips as an act of friendship, or
bond of sisterhood, and was not necessarily an identification of same-sex desire.99

In Barrett's second sonnet, 'To Georges Sand: A Recognition', the imagery suggested by 'Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn' (8) serves as an encoding of Sand's femininity. The proliferating image of overflowing hair that: 'Floats back dishevelled strength in agony' (9), has echoes of Blagden's 'fettered maniac raging in her lair' (1:3) with 'Dark hair strained backwards' (3:1). Images of women's hair, as Ofek suggests, are associated with 'the difficulties of controlling, managing or channelling women's vigour'.100 In the context of Sand's intellectual 'vigour', the hair trope serves as an appropriate device with which to foreground women's identification with their intellectual strengths, whilst acknowledging that the process is an agonising one.

In the third stanza of Blagden's dedication to Sand she imagines

Her Dark eyes, in whose chill light strange secrets live,
As in the deep grim monsters watch and ward,
Are thine!         (3)

Sand's eyes, previously described by Jack as 'always beguiling [. . .] almost black, and invariably mysterious', suitably describe the spectral qualities of the 'chill light' in which 'strange secrets live' as a representation of Sand's transgressive and deviant lifestyle. The gothic element apparent in these lines, supports Barrett Browning's comment that Sand 'seems to live in the abomination of desolation' which works as a suitable metaphor for Blagden's 'deep grim monsters', who, in psychological terms, aptly describe Sand's tormented soul. These images of Sand are in contrast to Barrett Browning's 'Calm brows, where holy thought has power to give/ Transfigured glory

100 Ofek, op. cit., x.
to a woman meek' (4:6-7), as described by Blagden. The metaphoric suggestiveness of 'Transfigured glory' serves to empower women, or, as Barrett describes the phenomena in her first sonnet, 'mild miraculous thunder' and 'holier light'.

In her appropriation of the gothic motif as something destructive and transgressive, Blagden's narrator recalls the

shapeless horrors though has given name.
And woes, 'neath which poor tortured hearts had Bowed.
And woman's wrongs, like opened graves, avowed
Their stark foul secrets to the startled air! (1-3; 6-7)

The negative fears associated with the 'shapeless horrors' and 'tortured hearts' provide a sinister undercurrent concerning 'woman's wrongs' and whose 'stark foul secrets' serve as veiled representations of Sand's transgressive and deviant lifestyle. Considered as improper feminine behaviour, her androgyny, bisexuality and numerous lovers were perceived as threatening to the rigid Victorian standards of sexual conduct. By portraying Sand as a messianic 'Deliverer' (7:1) of women from the stranglehold of a phallocentric culture, Blagden also acknowledges her as a 'Victim' (7:1) of a gender-biased and socially sanctioned oppressive society. As punishment for attempting to step out of the metaphorical frame: 'Th'avenger ever wears the martyr's palm' (7:2) is a reference to the symbolic palm carried by a suffering Christ en-route to his crucifixion.

As previously mentioned, Barrett Browning in her letters, hinted that Sand was prone to being 'alone in her melancholy disdain' and living in 'the abomination of desolation', and in regard to this, she felt that they [Robert and her] 'couldn't penetrate – couldn't really touch her'. In this context, Blagden's narrator, when addressing Sand states that: 'With thee life stagnates, or is flashing storm' (5:6), and
in twenty first century discourse this might indicate that Sand was bi-polar. Drawing on the Greek mythological tale of Orestes, a character in Homer's *Odyssey*, who was, as Peter Toohey suggests: 'the victim of melancholia' and 'manic behaviour alternating with profound depression', Blagden likens Sand to Orestes, stating that: 'It is the Orestes whom the fiends pursue' (7:3), hence, the metaphoric suggestiveness of 'the fiends' serves as an expression of those 'annoyances and persecutions', as Barrett Browning described them.Unable to be free herself of her melancholia, the narrator in Blagden's poem states: 'The spectre frowns, the boding shadows rise' (7), a portentous warning of Sand's 'melancholic disdain', alluded to by Barrett Browning in her letter to Mary Russell Mitford, cited earlier.

For the purposes of this discussion I will focus on the final two stanzas, in which Blagden expresses her vision of 'The holiness of womanhood', raising questions as to the 'holiness' of whose 'womanhood', which, therefore, offers several interpretative possibilities:

Thy genius to her stainless genius knelt,
And with pathetic reverential awe
The holiness of womanhood was felt
Deep in thy soul; to thee, she was a shrine
Of sanctuary -
The earthly human won to God's divine!          (17)

By acknowledging Sand's 'genius' allows for a greater emphasis to be placed on Barrett Browning's 'stainless genius' which places her in the position of a heavenly presence, a 'shrine/ Of sanctuary' and hence, recognised as 'God's divine'. Therefore, Barrett Browning, in Blagden's imagination morphs into a sanctified figure, which is in keeping with her 'holy thought has power to give/ Transfigured glory' (4:6-7), cited

earlier in the poem. As the title of Blagden's poem 'To George Sand' suggests, it is as much a dedication to Sand's 'Genius, God Born' (15:1) as it is a eulogy for Barrett Browning, suggested by: 'And o'er that face beloved a halo shed' (15:6), which would indicate that Blagden wrote this pastiche in terms of its fusion of the epistolary and the poetic, after Barrett Browning's death in 1861.

In her consideration of the notion of the human mortal and the divine immortal: Blagden draws on the Greek mythological tale of

The radiant Twins whose joys in Heaven are shown
(The Mortal and Immortal), thus uncoiled
The death-doom which was long the curse of One
She, by that love which pressed to thine embrace,
By her own star-crowned soul has claimed thy place. (18:2-6)

The 'radiant Twins', in Greek mythology were the mortal Clytemnestra and the immortal Helen. One twin was divine, and is, arguably, likened to Barrett Browning, and the other twin, human, and likened to Sand. Mortal Clytemnestra, who Robert Graves suggests was 'noted for her (questionable) praiseworthy womanhood', was forced into a marriage against her will, and bore one son, Orestes.102 Vowing to kill her husband, as Graves explains, Clytemnestra 'threw over his head a garment of net, woven by herself, without either neck or sleeve-holes. Entangled in this [her husband] perished. Following [this event] Clytemnestra decreed a festival of celebration. Some applaud her resolution, but others thought she brought eternal disgrace, upon all women, even virtuous ones'.103 The metaphorical net that binds women, is turned around as an act of revenge on men, who trap women within their confining spaces, and this, as previously discussed, was Sand's controversial agenda.

103 Ibid., 416.
regarding the 'systemised oppression of women' as Avery describes it. Hence, the allusion to the 'radiant Twins' in Blagden's poem reveals a sub-text which has a subversive resonance in keeping with Blagden's feminist consciousness.

In the second part of the above stanza, 'The death doom which was long the curse of One', acknowledges Barrett Browning's poor physical health, from which she suffered for most of her life. Having transcended this earthly life, Barrett Browning is, in accordance with Blagden's rhetoric, sanctified 'By her own star-crowned soul' and hence, through her immortality, can save her feminist sister, Sand: 'by that love which pressed to thine embrace' and, hence, through death can claim her 'place' in a heaven-like transcendent space. Inspired by Barrett Browning's androgynous construction of her two sonnets, which Avery suggests: 'emphasises Sand's power and agency in breaking traditional models of femininity', Blagden's feminist agenda in her 'Sand' poem, serves as a subversive critique of the power-based structures which underpin the confining spheres of women's activity.

Conclusion

The complex and coded narrative content of the three poems discussed in this chapter reveal a radical feminist poetics which challenged the prevailing masculine-inscribed dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. As an exploration of what is forbidden, the poems' social subversiveness and homoerotic content provide a subtext in which women's sexuality can be redefined and renegotiated. In my consideration of the intertextual significance of Blagden's response to male-produced texts in 'The Wrecked Life' and 'Mesmerism', the inherent issues of gender and sexuality are rewritten by her in order to foreground women's experiences. Hence, she not only

104 Avery and Stott, op. cit., 93.
105 Avery and Stott, op. cit., 93.
addresses these issues, but unsettles them.

As a single and financially independent woman, Blagden was at liberty to escape from England's power-based structures and to expand her liberal ideologies and feminist poetics in a country that was to become her spiritual and emotional home, Italy. The literal and metaphoric suggestiveness of Italy provided Blagden with the freedom of artistic expression, and this will inform an essential part of my appraisal of her radical feminist-lesbian sensibilities in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Italian Influences

Overview
In this chapter I discuss how Italy became a major character in the narrative of Blagden's life and work. As a source of imaginative inspiration, Italy provided a creative space for Blagden and the Anglo-Florentine groups of writers and the Anglo-American groups of writers and artists in Rome in the mid-nineteenth-century. These radical and talented groups of people, with Blagden in their midst, who wished to express themselves artistically, socially and intellectually, were at liberty to enjoy the freedoms not available to them in their own countries. Barbara Caine suggests that some 'found in Italy a place where they could escape the restrictions imposed on them by their families and their society, and which offered opportunity for the pursuit of artistic, [and] literary [. . .] interests'.¹ Free from these constraints, women writers such as Blagden, single and economically independent, found expression in their life and work in Italy.

Metaphorically cast as a 'femme fatale', Italy has for centuries been shrouded in a language full of gendered representations. Anna Jameson imagined Venice as 'a beautiful courtesan repenting in sackcloth and ashes' and 'Florence a blooming bride dressed out to meet her lover'; Naples possessed 'all the allurements of a Syren and all the terrors of a sorceress' and Rome 'sits crowned upon the grave of her power, widowed [. . .] and desolate'.² Constructed as possessing a corrupting beauty and a doomed fatality, the notion of a feminised Italy had particular resonance with the fate of women, both literally and metaphorically.³ However, in spite of Italy's Romantic

¹ Barbara Caine, 'La Bella Liberta' in Women's Writing 10.2 (2003), 237.
³ For a detailed discussion on the feminisation of Italy, see Maura O'Connor The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998) and Caine's essay, previously cited.
representations, the country was, at the time Blagden resided there in political turmoil, due to an upsurge in nationalism which became known as the *Risorgimento*.\(^4\)

In the first part of this chapter I will provide a background to the political situation in Italy and evaluate two of Blagden's *Risorgimento*-inspired poems: 'On the Colours Being Replaced on the Palazzo Vecchio', (1859), written in the form of nine cross-rhymed quatrains and 'Rome, 1870' subtitled 'Written on the Eve of the Entrance of the Italian Troops into Rome' and written in the form of ten quatrains, each qualified by a refrain.\(^5\)

The first of these two poems, written to commemorate the Tuscan Revolution of 1859, is a subversive expression of Blagden's feminist poetics in the context of a freed and feminised Florence, a 'New Jerusalem', presided over by a feminised Christ-like figure. In 'Rome 1870', Blagden portrays the city as a foreboding gothic space in which the atmosphere is one of menace and of threat. Blagden's deployment of the vampire motif serves as an expression of the anxieties regarding gender and sexual politics in the context of Italian politics and the plundering of Rome, the brutality of which is projected onto the figure of a woman, thus, Italy's struggles become synonymous with women's struggles.

At this time of political upheaval Blagden resided at Bellosguardo, just outside of Florence, for twenty three years, renting several villas there. Both Bellosguardo and her villas were major characters in the narrative of Blagden's life and work, and this informs my discussion in the second part of this chapter. The metaphorical suggestiveness of Bellosguardo provided Blagden, and others, the stimulus for creative expression, as, for example, Barrett Browning, Robert Browning and Henry James. The Tuscan landscape surrounding Blagden's garden at Bellosguardo

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\(^4\) See Chapter One, 30, footnote 45, for an account of the *Risorgimento*.

\(^5\) Blagden, *Poems*, op. cit., pages 142-144 and 30-32, respectively.
provided her with the creative inspiration for her two lyrical, eight stanza poems, 'Wild Flowers' (1872), and 'The Invitation' (1872), in which the garden's flowering becomes an identification with the natural world and a desiring female sexuality.\(^6\)

Written in the first person, the poems are, arguably, a semi-autobiographical expression of a painful and emotional encounter which Blagden experienced at Bellosguardo. The musicality of the lines and the sensory images of the 'Wild Flowers' capture the essence of the human characteristics of life, youth and passion, and their hoped-for enduringness. 'The Invitation' is dedicated to an absent lover, whose hoped-for return is seductively described in terms of the enticing and alluring landscape which surrounded Blagden's home. The poems serve as a subversive expression of an earthly paradise in which to define sexual longing and yearning. The notion of sexual indeterminancy and the possibility that Blagden was bisexual is discussed, and the third poem, 'What is there in a kiss?', is, arguably, another semi-autobiographical expression of a past emotional experience. Written as a critique of heterosexual love, the poem is imbued with a profound sense of disillusionment regarding the binaries of youth, love and passion, mature love and pain.

**Il Risorgimento (The Resurgence)**

The political upheaval in Italy, from which Blagden and her literary friends such as Barrett Browning and Theodisa Trollope were mostly immune at Bellosguardo, did, however, provide a catalyst for their *Risorgimento*-inspired poetics. In order to discuss Blagden's contribution to the Italian cause I offer a brief outline of her political allegiances and the background which culminated in Italy's struggle to be free of foreign domination.

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\(^6\) Blagden, *Poems*, op. cit., pages 28-29 and 26-27, respectively.
The Risorgimento was an ideological movement of Italian nationalism and unification which gathered impetus in the nineteenth-century culminating in the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy in 1861. This was, as Derek Beales comments, 'the product of the interaction and conflict of many forces'. Blagden, together with those who formed the Anglo-Florentine group were well-informed observers of Italian politics and society and self-confessed *italianissimi*, who witnessed a living renaissance around them. Florence and Rome, the two cities which are the focus of Blagden's poetics, experienced considerable political upheaval and change. In 1865 Florence was named the temporary capital of the kingdom, and in 1871 Rome was declared the capital of the united country.

The two main opposing forces in the struggle were Napoleon III (1808-1873), Emperor of France, who ruled Piedmont in the French speaking north with the assistance of King Victor Emanuel of Piedmont and Camile de Cavour, the prime-minister of Piedmont, versus the leading Italian revolutionary activists Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) and Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872). Blagden's sympathies were with Napoleon III, as were Barrett Browning's. An insight into Blagden's political sympathies are to be found in a letter written by her friend Jane Maria Strachey, who states: 'I went up to Bellosguardo [. . .] to Miss Blagden [. . .] we

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7 Beales, op. cit., 58.
8 *Italianissimi* translates as 'True Italians'. Blagden and the Browning spoke fluent Italian/Tuscan dialect. The Italian language was only introduced as the official national language at the time of the Risorgimento. Prior to that French (also spoken by Blagden and Barrett Browning) was spoken in the north, and every region had its own dialect. The Tuscan dialect was considered the literary tradition of the Italian language because it was spoken and written by Dante.
9 Barrett Browning's political support for Napoleon III is found in her poem 'Napoleon 111. Italy' in *Poems Before Congress* (1860) in which the refrain: 'Emperor/Everymore' is repeated in praise of him at the end of fifteen out of the nineteen stanzas that make up the poem. Robert Browning disagreed with his wife's and Blagden's support of Napoleon 111. In a letter to Blagden, nine years after his wife's death, Browning writes: 'I am astonished at having apparently vexed you by something I said about [. . .] Napoleon [. . .] so as to give you the impression "that we probably differ in toto": [. . .] with respect to Napoleon, - he should simply be blotted out of the world as the greatest failure on record.' In McAleer, Dearest Isa, op. cit., 347.
talked a great deal about French affairs [. . .] Miss Blagden is Imperialist, but thinks Red Republicanism the next best thing'. This would suggest a certain ambivalence on Blagden's part. It is perhaps not surprising, given her Anglo-Indian-Spanish background, that she will have supported a leader whose imperialist dominance was similar to that of the political elite of the British Empire.

Further evidence of Blagden's political allegiances are foregrounded by Blagden's friend, the French historian, Jules Michelet. In 1870, Blagden translated Michelet's political work, *France Before Europe*. In his acknowledgement: 'To My Translator, Florence February 27th', Michelet says of Blagden:

> It is a great pleasure for me that the translation of a book, which is of some importance in my eyes, should have been undertaken by so enlightened a mind as yours, and one who has so well and clearly caught my thought and the form in which I express it. The correction of the proofs by one whom I value and esteem, makes this translation unique and precious in every point of view to me and to all.'

Michelet's comments reinforce the high esteem in which Blagden was held in the Florentine community, and are a fitting tribute to her intellectual capabilities. Though not identified by name, there is extant evidence that Blagden was the translator. A review in *The Weekly Louisianian*, entitled 'A Reminiscence of Jules Michelet' states the following:

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10 Jane Maria (Grant) Strachey (1840-1928) was a prominent suffragist and involved in the British women's movement. She came from an Imperial family and married Richard Strachey (1817-1908) in Calcutta in 1859. He was an Indian administrator who played an important role in establishing the system of public works. She is the mother of Lytton Strachey (1880-1932), the Bloomsbury modernist writer. The MSS of the above letter is in the India Office Records, London, and was written to her husband in India, on April 9, 1871.


12 The omission of Blagden's name as the translator of the work, reflects the nineteenth-century view that translation work was a gendered activity (carried out by well educated women). In the context of boys' education, history was a subject taught along with the classics, hence, a male domain. On this pretext there was an assumption on the part of the publishers that Michelet's readers will have been men. For a further discussion see Judith Johnston, *Victorian Women and the Economics of Travel, Translation and Culture 1830-1870* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).
While in Florence where he spent some months, he wrote a masterly pamphlet called 'France Before Europe' [...]. This brochure was translated from the author's manuscript by Miss Isa Blagden, vivacious and charming English authoress, who was a very much loved member of that little British coterie composed of the Brownings, the Trollopes [...]'Our Lady of Bellosguardo' as Kate Field so felicitously called her. Miss Blagden was an ardent patrician of France against Germany as she had been of Italy against her enemies and naturally she and the Michelets became friends.¹³

The reviewer's words give an insight into Blagden's 'ardent' patricianship towards Napoleon III of France, and of her allegiance to the Italian cause.

Beales suggests that 'Napoleon's cause was that of a dynasty, or of himself, rather than that of a nation or principle'.¹⁴ Napoleon's hegenomic interventionism, his imperial authority, and the resentment felt towards foreign domination by France and Austria, incited the revolutionary movement, headed by Garibaldi and Mazzini, to act. Strachey's comment regarding 'Red Republicanism' will have been a reference to Garibaldi's guerilla soldiers who wore red shirts and helped liberate Italy from the rule of imperial Austria, which had been ceded to Napoleon III in 1859.¹⁵ Barrett Browning claimed Napoleon III to be 'an incarnation of Democracy' and was, like Blagden, an ardent and passionate supporter of the unification of Italy.¹⁶ Caine suggests that

Many [women] felt a profound involvement with Italian political struggles because of their sense of the close parallel between their struggles and the fight for Italian independence [...] the idea of Italy as a 'feminine' nation which offered women opportunities not available in other European countries, [her] destiny was of special importance to women.¹⁷

Political and personal freedom took on a new importance for Blagden in Italy, and

¹³ The review was written by Laura Curtis Bullard, New York, February 21, 1874 for The Weekly Louisianian, New Orleans, Louisiana, published on Saturday March 21, 1874.
¹⁴ Beales, op. cit., 80.
¹⁶ Florentine Friends, op. cit., 211.
¹⁷ Caine, op. cit., 237.
her feminist sensibilities are bound up in four of her poems written at this time of revolutionary passion and fervour. Her political rhetoric, however radical and revolutionary in her *Risorgimento* poems, is, arguably, a romanticised and imagined feminist-lesbian poetics. As Maura O'Connor states: 'Italy was not 'free' or liberated as an independent nation-state like England was, but culturally allowed for more freedom of expression'.

Although Blagden's *Risorgimento*-inspired poems are not the main focus of this thesis, the notion of a 'feminine' nation and 'freedom of expression', informs the discussion of two of her poems, 'On the Colours Being Replaced on the Palazzo Vecchio' (1859) and 'Rome, 1870', subtitled 'Written on the Eve of the Entrance of the Italian Troops into Rome'. These two poems are discussed within the context of Blagden's feminist-lesbian sensibilities.

'Palazzo Vecchio', was written to commemorate the Tuscan revolution of 1859. In the poem, Blagden imagines the apocalypse in the context of a freed and feminised Florence: 'which so fair doth lie, A dream of beauty at my feet' (7:1-2) and in whose 'life o'er death must rise [. . .] in triumph bold' (6:2-3). More subversively, the feminised 'fair' Florence is re-imagined in the eighth stanza, in the context of the Revelation of St. John in the Bible:

As fair, and shining, and as bright  
Art thou as she we hear came down  
From heaven in bridal robes of white,  
Thy New Jerusalem, St. John.

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19 'Rome 1870' was published in *All the Year Round*, June 17, 1871, unsigned. As previously stated, it appears in *Poems*, 30-32. A manuscript copy, entitled 'A Roman Picture' is in the Armstrong Browning Library Collection at Baylor University, Waco, Texas. For the purposes of brevity, I will, henceforth, refer to 'On the Colours Being Replaced on the Palazzo Vecchio', as 'Palazzo Vecchio'. Blagden's other *Risorgimento*-inspired poems were 'A Roman Street' and 'Rome from the Ripetta'. These poems were not published in journal contributions, so it can be assumed that they were collected by Linda Mazini Villari, at the time of her death. They do, however, form part of Blagden's volume of poetry, *Poems*, and appear on pages 155-160 and 77-82, respectively.
These lines mirror Christ's second return to earth, in which St. John 'saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down from God, out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'.\textsuperscript{20} The imagery presents several interpretive possibilities. Blagden's use of the pronoun 'she', imagines a feminised Christ-like figure, pure and virginal in her 'bridal robes of white', the metaphoric suggestiveness of which expresses her radical feminist and lesbian poetics. Another possibility concerns the marriage between the Church, symbolised as a woman, and Christ, the bridegroom, the 'marriage' functioning as the union between Christ and the Church, as is evident in Christian teaching, in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation. Either of these possibilities raise questions of gender, and gender subversion, in which Italy becomes the 'New Jerusalem', an earthly paradise, to be presided over by a feminised-Christ-like-saviour, whose 'promise stands' (9:1) as 'Witness and pledge to Italy' (9:4).

Rome was declared the capital of Italy in 1870, and Blagden commemorated the event with the poem, 'Rome 1870', in which she imagines Rome as a beautiful woman on a fresco:

There is a picture, I remember well.
A woman sleeping on the burning sand. \hfill (1:1; 3)

and as she sleeps

The slant sun searches for her cheek, and warms
Its golden brown to amber, till the bee,
Confused by its sweetness, sucks it as a flower. \hfill (2:1-3)

\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{King James Bible}, The Book of Revelation, 21:2.
The metaphorical suggestiveness provided by the bee, becomes a form of sexual expression. The eroticised language connotes the subversive possibilities that the poem yields. As the nucleus of the ancient world, Rome's setting becomes a subversive gothic space in which to express anxieties regarding Italian politics, gender politics, and sexual politics, in terms of repressed desire. In the fifth stanza, the plundering of Rome prior to its liberation, and the implied rape of the woman, are imagined by

An empty wallet lies beside her hand
A cross defaced hangs scarlet on her breast. (5:1-2)

The disturbing vision of a deserted and abandoned woman, connotes Christ's crucifixion, projected onto the woman's violated body. The Christian iconography of the crucifix in this context is symbolic of the Papacy in Rome, which, after much bloodshed, had ceded to unification. Another possibility is that the poem is a critique of the Catholic Church as the reincarnation of the Devil, based on the Christian ideology of the binaries of good and evil. Even more transgressive is the metaphoric suggestiveness of the woman-figure, having been crucified, and who, like Christ, died to redeem the world from sin. The ravaged city, conflates with the ravished woman, presenting an image of beauty which is brutally corrupted:

Alas, alas! to me that picture seems
My country's symbol. Rome, thus fair art thou.
Dead vampire lips thus fasten on thy breath. (8:1-33)

The vampire imagery, suggestive of the metaphoric sucking of the city's life-blood, also presents an image of deviant sexuality. As discussed in the previous chapter,

21 The bee metaphor is again deployed by Blagden in her two poems 'Say Which Were Best' and 'A Love Poem' which are discussed in Chapter Five, in the context of her lesbian consciousness.
Blagden deploys the vampire motif to suggest the metaphoric sucking of her male/female protagonist's life-blood by her demonic-lover-figure. As Byron suggests: 'the vampire is particularly well adapted to signify "deviant" sexuality. With the penetrating teeth set in the softness of the mouth, the vampire mouth problematizes any distinction between the masculine and the feminine'.  

This darkly disturbing, sexually ambiguous vampire, is arguably, an early prototype of a lesbian vampire, for as Byron further suggests, 'the vampire is the ultimate embodiment of transgression'. The monstrous image of the vampire in the poem functions as the metaphor for otherness, marginality and sexual deviance. By the time Blagden had written this poem in 1870, she had had several possible lesbian liaisons in Rome, particularly with Charlotte Cushman, who arguably, morphs into the lesbian vampire in this poem as Blagden's seducer-demon-lover. This possibility is further explored in the next chapter in the context of Blagden's close and intense relationships with her women friends in Rome in the 1850s and 60s.

One of the fundamental principles of Christian teaching, is that good eventually overcomes evil, and a resolution is attained in 'Rome, 1870' when hope is reinstated in the final stanza: 'But THOU art saved;/ thy brave deliverers come'. The capitalisation of the pronoun 'thou', capitalised in reference to God, or more subversively, in reference to women, stands out on the page, its emphasis unavoidably conveying Blagden's feminist agenda. These lines, couched in pseudo-scriptural language in the context of Christ and his disciples the 'brave deliverers', 'come', as saviours. The above lines have resonance in St. John's Gospel in the Bible, when Christ, who saved human beings from their sins, raised Lazarus from the

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23 Ibid., 268.
dead. With similar connotations to the woman depicted on the fresco, and Rome itself, who 'sleeps 'mid ruins, as thou sleepest, Rome!' (9:1), Lazarus slept a deep sleep, only to rise again at the hand of Christ. The metaphoric suggestiveness of these connotations is proclaimed in the the final refrain, 'Arise, be free, O Rome!' in which Blagden, arguably, appropriates the language of revolution in the context of inciting women to action.

For Blagden, who, like Italy, had a fractured identity, her emotionally disruptive experiences and Italy's struggles became synonymous, thus providing her with the scope for literary creativity and an alternative space in which to conceal her matrilineal heritage. In spite of the political turmoil in Italy, Bellosguardo remained a place of sanctuary for Blagden and her literary group of friends and acquaintances and her literary sensibilities and creativity are marked by her Bellosguardian years.

**Bellosguardo and the Salon Tradition**

The hill-top setting of Bellosguardo was Blagden's home for twenty three years. It is reached via the Porta Romana in Florence, a twenty minute up-hill walk out of the city. Blagden rented several villas at Bellosguardo in the years 1850 to 1873, and was fondly known as 'Our Lady of Bellosguardo'. Her garden, and the surrounding landscape, provided her with the inspiration for many of her poems, as for example, 'The Invitation' and 'Wild Flowers', which are discussed later in this chapter.

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24 The *King James Bible*, 1 Corinthians, 15:2-3.

25 To be discussed in the next chapter in the context of her lesbian proclivities.

26 The American journalist, Kate Field, noted that: 'Florence without the Trollopes and Our Lady of Bellosguardo would be like bread without salt'. *Atlantic Monthly* (December 14, 1864), 671.
Blagden's villas were the frequent setting for the English rituals of Saturday luncheon, afternoon teas, and soirées on the terrace at least four evenings a week. Robert Browning, spent several evenings a week at the Villa Brichieri, with the encouragement of his wife who was sometimes too tired to go there in the last years of her life.\textsuperscript{27} As William Raymond states: 'Villa Brichieri, not Casa Guidi [the Brownings' home] or Villino Trollope [as the Trollope household was called] was the English and American social centre of Florence between 1850 and 1870 [. . .] Isa Blagden is the pivotal figure of a galaxy of men and women whose names are still bright in the remembrance of posterity.'\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27} Cobbe recalls that: 'There was always a ripple of laughter round the sofa where he used to seat himself, generally beside some lady of the company, towards whom, in his eagerness, he would push nearer and nearer till she frequently rose to avoid falling off the end'. Frances Power Cobbe, \textit{Life, By Herself} (Boston: 1895), 343.

\textsuperscript{28} William O. Raymond, 'Our Lady of Bellosguardo: A Pastel Portrait' in \textit{The University of Toronto Quarterly} (1943), vol. 12, 458.
Although Blagden only resided at Villa Brichieri from 1856-1861, she did, as previously mentioned, reside in other villas at Bellosguardo during the years to which Raymond refers. After Barrett Browning's death in 1861, the salon tradition continued at the Villa Castellani, where Blagden resided from 1868 until her death in 1873.
Speaking of 'this little cameo of English and American life, centring around Isa Blagden and the Villa Brichieri [sic]', Raymond likened the villa to an *imperium in imperio* with Isa Blagden, the unassumming, yet acknowledged mistress of her little salon'.\(^{29}\) His language perpetuates the view of Blagden 'not as an authoress, but as a personality in her proper setting as the focus of a gifted social milieu'.\(^{30}\) Field substantiates the notion of *imperium in imperio*, describing Blagden as: 'a chosen friend of the noblest and the best; and on her terrace the Brownings, Walter Savage Landor and many choice spirits have sipped tea'.\(^{31}\) Although inspired by Italy's sensuous landscape, this literary enclave of like-minded intellectuals, retained many of the customs of the English way of life.

Alfred Austin, a frequent visitor to Blagden's literary salons recalls that:

> She had the 'non so che' which attracted everyone to her, high and low, young and old, distinguished and obscure, ambitious and meek [. . .] Her wit was delightful, her sprightliness irresistible, her conversational fervour, inexhaustible.\(^{32}\)

> [S]o large and comprehensive was her own humanity, that she would sometimes make the mistake of bringing fire and water together, and yet expecting them to fuse. Yet she herself possessed some secret charm, which enabled her to fuse equally well with either.\(^{33}\)

Austin paints the portrait of a woman with a sparkling wit and an intellectual energy. What he fails to understand is that her 'secret charm' was her intellectual acumen which enabled her to think and argue as an independent woman, attributes not usually ascribed to, or acknowledged, in mid-nineteenth century women. Blagden

\(^{29}\) Raymond, op. cit., 458. *'Imperium in imperio'* translates as 'absolute authority within the sphere of higher authority'. (Chambers Dictionary).

\(^{30}\) Raymond, op. cit., 447.

\(^{31}\) Kate Field, op. cit., 671.

\(^{32}\) Austin, op. cit., xxii. *'Non so che'* translates as 'I know not what'.

\(^{33}\) Austin, op. cit., xxi.
possessed all the attributes of a Bluestocking, and she will have delighted in the lively intellectual atmosphere and combative *conversazione* in her salon, acknowledged as an aesthetic centre for intellectual discussion, even though she was relegated to the position of 'charming centre', as Jarves suggests.\(^{34}\)

In a letter to a friend, Barrett Browning describes Blagden's Villa Brichieri as having 'ten or eleven rooms furnished' and costing 'two hundred and twenty scudi a year – which is dear for Florence, & [sic] my husband & I shake our heads over her rash bargain – but the view from the drawing room window atones & accounts for everything'.\(^{35}\) In Tuscany at this time, 220 scudi was the equivalent of £45, which suggests that Blagden had at her disposal more money than the Brownings, who paid £28 a year for Casa Guidi, and so could afford to live in such a grand and imposing building.\(^{36}\) Life at Villa Brichieri was not constrained by household chores. Blagden employed an Italian maid, Irene, and an Italian cook and man-servant, Ansano. She had a carriage and shared her home with other women, one being her cousin Annette Bracken, who lived at regular intervals with Blagden between 1857 and 1861.

Frances Power Cobbe, who arrived in Florence in the spring of 1860, lived at Villa Brichieri with Blagden for a period and gives an indication of their shared household expenditure:

\(^{34}\) 'Bluestocking' was the derogatory name given to women with intellectual pretensions. As Jane Robinson explains: 'The very first bluestocking was not a woman at all, but the [. . .] writer Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702-71). He belonged to a group of fashionably learned friends who met together during the latter half of the eighteenth century in various London salons to cultivate the art of intellectual conversation. The novelty of Stillingfleet's group was that most of its members were female. Elizabeth Montagu (1720-1800) its 'Queen', was a wealthy woman passionately interested in English literature [. . .] One evening Stillingfleet presented himself at Montagu's Mayfair house [. . .] clad [. . .] in workaday knitted blue stockings [. . .] soon Mrs Montagu's clique became collectively known as the 'bluestocking philosophers' '. Jane Robinson, *Bluestockings* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 5 and 6. The word *conversazione* translates as 'conversation'. Jarves' comment, is, as previously cited: op. cit., 197.


\(^{36}\) These figures are quoted in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, op. cit., 280. Although it was cheaper to live at Bellosguardo, Blagden's villa was considerably larger than the Brownings' home, at Casa Guidi, in the city.
The villa was delightful with a little podero [farmland] across the road, and a
great terrace which held an unlimited number of chairs, and which was reached
through a spacious room, and whence there was a splendid view of Florence
against the background of Fiesole and the Appenines. We were both of us poor,
but in those days poverty in Florence permitted us to rent fourteen well-
furnished rooms in a charming villa, and to keep a maid and a man-servant. The
latter bought our meals every morning in Florence, cooked and served them;
being always clean and respectably dressed. He swept our floors and he opened
our doors and announced our company and served our ices and tea with a
uniform quietness and success. A treasure indeed, was good old Ansano! Also
we were able to engage an open carriage with a pair of horses to do our
shopping and pay our visits to Florence as often as we needed. And what does
the reader think it cost us to live like this, fire and candles and food for four
included? In those halcyon days and under the old regime it was precisely £20 a
month. We divided everything exactly and it never exceeded £10 a piece.37

Cobbe's detailed description of life at Villa Brichieri provides an interesting insight
into Blagden's lifestyle, her standard of living and privileged social position. The
'food for four' Cobbe refers to, would presumably include sustenance for the maid
and man-servant, both of whom lived in, illustrating Blagden's generous lifestyle.

Since Italy was divided into seven states, each had their own currency and the scudi
was the currency used in Italy under Napoleon III's 'old regime', up until the time of
the unification, after which, the currency became the lira. There appears to be some
discrepancy between the rental figures Barrett Browning quotes and those of Cobbe,
but it is obvious that Blagden at this time was not 'poor' or living in 'poverty'. To
think of such a thing would suggest a lack of sensitivity on Cobbe's part as to the
actual conditions of poverty, given that she worked in the Ragged Schools of
Bristol and was involved in many philanthropic activities.38 Giuliana Artom Treves
suggests that 'Miss Cobbe enjoyed the material advantages of Villa Brichieri, and
was especially happy about the people she met there, listing them with pride; the
Brownings, the Trollopes [. . .] Landor, [. . .] Linda White, Frederick Tennyson, [. . .]

38 The Ragged Schools were free schools for children living in poverty.
The fact that Blagden was surrounded by these radical writers, thinkers and artists reveals much about her social credentials and highly intellectual attributes.

**Blagden: Amanuensis and Muse**

In the early 1850s, Browning spent many mornings at Blagden's villa preparing his poetical collection, *Men and Women* (1855). He dictated and Blagden transcribed. In a letter to Browning's sister, Sarianna Browning, Barrett Browning writes:

'He [Robert] is overwhelmed with business just now in getting his poems transcribed – he wont [sic] let me do it, but submits to use Isa Blagden who is very good natured & [sic] pleased to be useful to him [. . .] and now for four hours together every morning he is at her house & at dictation'. When *Men and Women* appeared in 1855, Barrett Browning wrote to Blagden: 'you are [. . .] the best and most intelligent of secretaries, you were of so much use to Robert. How large a debt the volume owes you!' In the context of the transition of the 'poetess' to the woman poet, Browning's volume of dramatic monologues had, as Blain comments: 'really chimed with women poets'. Their influence on Blagden's feminist-lesbian poetics, in the context of the darker side of sexual fantasy and desire, had, as mentioned in the previous chapter, foregrounded their shared interest in the phenomena of mesmerism.

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39 Giuliana Artom Treves, *The Anglo Florentines 1847-1862* (London: Green and Co. Ltd., 1956), 179. Frances dall'Ongaro (1808-1873) was a poet and professor of dramatic literature at Florence University. He was responsible for translating Barrett Browning's poems into Italian. In a letter to Blagden, written from Rome on May 18, 1861, Barrett Browning comments: 'I send you [. . .] two more translations for Dall'Ongaro [. . .] You will have explained & [sic] will make him thoroughly understand, that in sending him a verbal and literal translation I never thought of exacting such a thing from him but simply of letting him have the advantage of seeing the raw, naked poetry as it stands – In fact, my translation is scarcely Italian [. . .] I mean it for English rather – conventional idiomatical Italian forms have been expressly avoided – I used the Italian as a net to catch the English in for the use of an Italian poet'. *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 467.

40 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., xxxi.

41 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 89.

42 Blain, op. cit., 16.
Although relegated to the role of being 'useful' as Browning's amanuensis, Blagden's role within this literary sphere was also as Muse. In 1857, Blagden presented the Brownings with the gift of two gold signet rings made by the Roman jeweller Castellani. The rings were given as a token of friendship. Barrett Browning's ring was inscribed 'AEI', the Greek for 'eternally' or 'always' and she acknowledged the gift with the following note: 'I can't wait till tonight to thank you my dearest Isa for this exquisite little ring - Shall I not keep it forever, as a memorial of what must last as long, - my true love for you dear. Oh – I like it so much better than any 'Aurora' in the world . . . .'.  43 In another letter to Blagden, Barrett Browning, speaking of her husband's ring, makes reference to 'the finger with your ring on it! Which reminds me of mine'. 44 Browning's ring, inscribed with the Latin words 'VIS MEA' meaning 'my strength', bears the same inscription as the ring belonging to Blagden's protagonist, Geoffrey Wentworth, in Agnes Tremorne: 'Agnes looked and saw a simple Etruscan ring, with the device Vis mea on it'; the literal and the literary become entwined to symbolise the knitting together of Life and Art. 45 The symbolism of the rings demonstrates the strong bond of friendship between Blagden and the Brownings, one that was enduring and eternal. As a source of unity, Blagden became the metaphor for the ring that bound the Florentine circle of friendship; she was, as Jarves states, the 'bond of union'. 46

Three years after Barrett Browning's death, Robert Browning, in a letter to Blagden, recalls: 'You gave me a ring (which I shall wear to my dying day) and gave orders for it at Rome: suppose Castellani had sent it'. 47 The opening lines of

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44 Florentine Friends, op. cit., 155.
45 'My strength' 'VIS MEA' are cited in Florentine Friends, fn.13, 157. The quotation from Blagden's novel, Agnes Tremorne, appears in vol. 1, 152.
46 Jarves, op. cit., 197.
47 Dearest Isa, op. cit., 198. (November 19, 1864).
Browning's long narrative poem, *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869), read: 'Do you see this Ring?/ Tis Rome-work, made to match/ (By Castellani's imitative craft)/ Etrurian circlets found'.\(^{48}\) The 'Etrurian circlets', a reference to ancient Etruscan rings, 'such slivers of pure gold', were precious objects to the people of Etruria.\(^{49}\) Known as the Etruscans, these ancient people lived in pre-Roman times, in the regions of Italy today known as Tuscany and Lazio, and in this Blagden shares the same themes with Browning.\(^{50}\) Blagden was well versed with Etrurian/Etruscan civilisation and draws heavily on this in order to offer a critique of her long poem *L'Ariccia*, which is discussed in the next chapter. Hence, the gift of the two Etruscan-themed rings lends weight to the suggestion that Blagden influenced Browning in terms of their metaphoric suggestiveness.\(^{51}\)

**Bellosguardo: A Metaphor for Literary Inspiration**

Villa Brichieri on the hill of Bellosguardo, played an important role in the narrative of the expatriate community of writers. Field recalls 'the dreamy air and the poetry of the golden sunsets as seen from Villa Brichieri where Miss Blagden dwelt on Bellosguardo'.\(^{52}\) The intoxicating beauty of the landscape surrounding the villa, morphed into the psychological landscape of its occupants' minds to create an imagined poetics, imbued with sensual description. In the seventh book of Barrett Browning's verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856), her speaker comments:

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\(^{49}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{50}\) Etruscan civilisation endured from c700 BC, until its assimilation into the Roman Republic between the 8th and 1st centuries.

\(^{51}\) Commenting on Browning's source of inspiration, Altick and Collins suggest that: 'The title of the poem has multiple suggestions. It points to the source, the old yellow book; to the pattern of monologues which is circular; to Browning's initials; and in the ring, to the memory of his wife', op. cit., 3. Hence, my argument is an expansion of the views expressed by Altick and Collins.

\(^{52}\) Lilian Whiting, *Kate Field, A Record* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1899), 133.
I found a house at Florence on the hill
Of Bellosguardo

The valley of the Arno (holding as a hand
The outspread city) straight towards Fiesole
and the setting sun, -
The Vallombrosan mountains to the right.
Which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups
Wine-filled, and red to the brim because it's red.
No sun could die, nor yet be born, unseen
By dwellers at my villa: morn and eve.

From the outer wall
Of the garden, dropped the mystic floating grey
Of olive trees (with interruptions green
From maize and vine) until 'twas caught and torn
On that abrupt line of cypresses
Which signed the way to Florence. Beautiful
The city lay along the ample vale.

Like Blagden, Barrett Browning draws upon the natural beauty of the landscape in order to assist her protagonist's search for a spiritual space, without the confines of patriarchal discourse and rhetoric, thus, foregrounding their shared poetical vision.

In a letter to Anna Jameson, Barrett Browning recalls that 'On April 6 we had tea out of doors, on the terrace of our friend Miss Blagden, in her villa up [at] Bellosguardo, (not exactly Aurora Leigh's, mind). You seem to be lifted up above the world in a divine ecstasy. Oh, what a vision!' 54

The notion of 'a divine ecstasy' lurks in the space of Blagden's two published 'garden' poems, 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation', inspired by her garden at Villa

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54 Fredric G. Kenyon, ed., *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1898) vol. 2, 259. The letter is dated Florence, April 9, 1857. Barrett Browning's comment: 'Not exactly Aurora Leigh's' might suggest that Aurora's 'house' was a fictitious amalgam of the many villas at Bellosguardo that the Browns frequented over the years. However, Barrett Browning had visited Villa Brichieri when Edward Bulwer was a previous tenant in the years 1852-54, as the letter dated July 1853 reveals. The above letter was written after the publication of *Aurora Leigh* in 1856, so Brichieri might well have been the inspiration for Aurora's 'house at Florence on the hill'.
In his memoir, Alfred Austin recalls

[t]he sweetness of her accord with surrounding nature, and more especially
the scenery that girt her Tuscan home [. . .] This was the beautiful Pagan side of
her, that found full scope in Italy [. . .] and which sought expression [. . .] in two
of the poems [. . .] 'The Invitation' and 'Wild Flowers'. [. . .] she wrote her
poems and cultivated her anenomes and tulips tall, her sweet verbenas, her
roses, and against her wall her vines; imprisoning the sunshine in the long
oval muscat-flavoured grapes.56

In 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation' Blagden invokes the garden and the wider
Tuscan landscape as described by Austin, portraying Italy as an earthly paradise,
which carries a symbolically charged and energised eroticism. In neither of the
poems does she mention God, but describes in detail His creation, that delights in
flowers, fruits, vines, birds and insects. As discussed by Bennett in Chapter Two:
'Women in the nineteenth century privilege[d] clitoral images – buds, berries, seeds,
and small compact flowers [. . .] women's flowers poems [were] powerful statements
of female desire', and Bennett's comments substantiate what, arguably, Blagden's
intentions were in 'Wild Flowers'.57

There is evidence to suggest that Austin exploited his editorial licence when
editing 'Wild Flowers' as there are significant differences between the published
version of the poem, and the manuscript version which is entitled 'On a picture of
wild flowers painted by E.B'.58 What is significant are the initials, which, I argue, are
those of Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer (writing under the pseudonym, Owen

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55 These two poems were not published until 1872. However, I consider that these poems must have
been written in the 1850s, Blagden's inspiration for them being her garden at Bellosguardo and her
friendship groups, who frequently met on the terrace of her villa at Bellosguardo. 'Wild Flowers'
was first published, unsigned, in All the Year Round, June 29, 1872, 155-156, and appears in her
posthumously published Poems, (1873). There is a MS of a modified version of 'Wild Flowers',
entitled: 'On a picture of wild flowers painted by E.B.' and signed 'I.B. Bellosguardo, April 13,
1872,' which is discussed later in this chapter. 'The Invitation' was published in All the Year Round
on November 30, 1872 and appears in Poems.
56 Austin, op. cit., xx and xxi.
57 Bennett, op. cit., 243.
58 See Poems Appendix. MS in the Armstrong Browning Library Collection.
Meredith) whom Blagden had a deep affection for.  

When on holiday at the Bagni di Lucca in Tuscany in 1857, Bulwer became seriously ill and Blagden took it in turns with Robert Browning, to care for him during the night. Browning, writing to his sister about the arrangement, comments: 'Through sentimentality and economy combined, Isa would have no nurse (imbecile arrangement), and all has been done by her, with help to me'. Barrett Browning had teased Blagden that she was the prototype of Bulwer's heroine, Cordelia, in his long,

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59 As previously mentioned in Chapter One, Blagden knew Bulwer and his father, having written to the senior Lytton in 1842 regarding a play she had written. She had again contacted Lytton senior, in May 1842, having written the poem 'What is Sir Lytton Bulwer's "Zanoni"'. At this time the younger Lytton, or 'little Teddy' as his mother called him (in Raymond, op. cit., 17) would have been eleven years of age. As previously cited, Raymond explains that at the time of his birth: 'The new Edward [...] bearing the name Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer without a second Lytton – was usually called Teddy in his youth', op. cit., 20. This, therefore, substantiates my argument that the initials 'E.B' are those of Edward Bulwer.

60 Kenyon, op. cit., vol. 11, 268. Browning's letter is dated August 18, 1857.
"The Wanderer" - & you observe how the *Athenaeum* praises it, *don't you,
*Cordelia?"* However, Bulwer's protagonist turned out to be another woman with
whom he had fallen in love, much to Blagden's disappointment it would appear. In
the same letter Barrett Browning adds: 'Is it good for him indeed, Isa? - and is it not
bad for HER, indeed? - Pray be humane, you who are magnanimous – or do the great
virtues exceed the small?"*

Further evidence to suggest the possibility that Blagden was in love with Bulwer
is provided by Barrett Browning who makes reference to a story written by Blagden
which was published in the *English Woman's Journal* in 1859:

> I have read 'Success & Failure', & [sic] dearest Isa, it is a success – Very cleverly
done - & your progress in expression & style . . *savoir faire* altogether [. . .]
Let me confess – Consciously or unconsciously your Arthur is too like your
Lytton, I think: no one could mistake it, Isa – and from henceforth you must
avoid this shoal of Lytton, & keep more out at sea, for art's sake.*

Whatever emotions Blagden felt for Bulwer, none are more poignant than in the
manuscript version of the poem, which she signed 'I.B. Bellosguardo April 13, 1872',
written nine months before her death, when she was fifty four years old. The
retrospective and semi-autobiographical account is introduced in the first stanza of
the manuscript version of 'Wild Flowers' as an evocation of sexual desire:

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61 McAleer, *Dearest Isa*, op. cit., 33. The letter was written on February 15, 1859.
62 Ibid., 33
63 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 206 and fn 9, 207. 'Success and Failure' appeared in three parts for
April, May and June, 1859. The character of 'Arthur' in Blagden's story achieves literary success
whilst embarking on a diplomatic career. He is loved by a gentle, self-sacrificing woman whom he
spurns because she has no fortune, and he instead marries a wealthy woman. Bulwer married the
wealthy aristocrat Edith Villiers (1841-1936) in 1864, and as David Washbrook explains: 'after a
courtship complicated by his penury. She brought him £6000 a year' (*ODNB*, vol. 34). Barrett
Browning uses Bulwer's family title of 'Lytton'.
White fleecy blossoms and red flowers -
    Proud tulips flaming, dark and tall,
Which light as with a torch the showers
    Of slim green leaves that round them fall.

The binaries of 'white fleecy blossoms' and 'red flowers', together with the phallic verticality of the red 'proud tulips flaming, dark and tall', become erotically charged symbols connoting sexual activity which is expressed in terms of the passionate and fiery images associated with the active colours of 'red', 'flaming' and 'torch'. Having 'served' the now prostrate and virginal 'slim green leaves', the striking visual imagery of flowers, as Maxwell suggests: '[r]epresent[s] an emotionally charged tryst, brief encounter, or sexual scenario between a man and a woman'.

Hence, the sexually suggestive 'tulip' evokes a memory reminiscent of sexual climax. The published version reflects a few emendations, with the noticeable omission of the 'proud' and 'flaming' tulips:

    Pale apple blossoms and red flowers,
    Anemones and tulips tall,
Which light with flaming torch the showers
    Of slim green leaves which round them fall.  

The second line of this stanza is evidence that Austin bowdlerised Blagden's original version by substituting 'Anemones and tulips tall', which echo his appraisal of her poem mentioned above. In the first line of the second stanza Blagden addresses 'E.B.' recalling that:

    You painted a picture for me and the gift
Is precious. Many a thought will rise.
As on the glowing tints I lift,
In coming years, my longing eyes.  

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64 Maxwell, op. cit., 217.
In the published version there is no suggestion of a pictorial representation, but the sentiment expressed remains as intense:

\[
\text{And through the rift} \\
\text{Of vanished years what thoughts arise,} \\
\text{As on each glowing bud I lift,} \\
\text{Dazzled and dim, my wearied eyes.} \quad (2)
\]

Peering through the haze of time in remembrance of the metaphoric 'glowing bud', the two versions evoke a yearning and regret for things not done, and support what James recalls regarding Blagden's unfulfilled 'yearnings' and 'longings', as discussed in Part 1, of Chapter One.

The speaker's reminiscences are evocatively poignant in the third stanza of 'Wild Flowers', and remain unchanged in the published edition:

\[
\text{The sweet-brier fragrance of your youth,} \\
\text{A wild, free blossom, tender, pure,} \\
\text{Rich with promise (such in truth} \\
\text{Ever, to raciest fruit, mature).} \quad (3)
\]

The erotically charged symbolism associated with the invisible aura of 'sweet' and 'fragrance', and the metaphoric suggestiveness of the prickly, thorny brier of the rambling wild rose, serve as an evocation of Bulwer, both as a sexualised young man and care-free poet, who was 'Rich with promise'. The eroticised 'raciest fruit' in terms of it being 'mature', provides a coded subtext in the context of Blagden's desiring sexual proclivities.

In the following stanza of the manuscript version, the speaker delights in:

\[
\text{The glory of our Florence spring} \\
\text{Transparent, warm with ruddy gleam,} \\
\text{From leaves and flowers, this gift will bring} \\
\text{Both to my heart as in a dream.} \quad (4)
\]
The metaphorical suggestiveness of spring's identification with vernality and the eroticised 'ruddy gleam' serve as an expression of sexual desire. In the published version of the first line of the fourth stanza, 'Florence spring' is emended to become 'Tuscan spring', and lines 1-3 read thus:

Transparent, warm, with bloom divine,  
From leaf and flower and vines which cling  
From tree to tree with tendrils fine.

By choosing to omit that the 'gift' of the painting which had evoked such beautiful memories of Florence, Bulwer and Blagden's garden, Austin's emendations somewhat diminish the poignancy of the lines. The omissions are, arguably, intentional. Given Austin's patriarchally-defined code of appropriate feminine behaviour, he might not have approved of a 'mature' woman falling in love with a much younger man (Blagden was fifteen years older than Bulwer), and, as previously discussed, evidence would suggest that Blagden's feelings for Bulwer were known in Florentine circles.

The speaker's vision of a utopian Florence is foregrounded in the seventh stanza of the manuscript:

All, in this pictured panel live,  
Which, like a charm, unseals my eyes;  
As spells divine that fairies weave,  
To clothe the earth with rainbow-dyes.  

The metaphoric fairy's spell casts the earth as an interstitial space in which to live out a love-fantasy. The emendations in this stanza are minimal, and therefore, do not alter the essence of the poem's original intention. Nature is portrayed as a celebration of hope and fulfilment in the final stanza:
The moonlight and the sunlight clear,  
Each vivid hue which nature wore,  
Life, Youth, and Passion, all are here,  
And Italy is mine once more.

Italy's identification with the seductive Bulwer-lover-figure serves as an expression of unrestrained sensuousness. Austin's emended version of 'Each vivid hue' becomes 'The hope, the joy, which nature wore', and Blagden's capitalisation of 'Life, Youth and Passion' are undermined by Austin's use of lower-case letters. Blagden's intentional emphasis on the three words are, arguably, an echo of Bulwer's: 'Midnight, and love, and youth, and Italy', which appears in his autobiographical collection of lyrical poems, *The Wanderer* (1857).

**Belosguardo: An Imaginary Utopia**

Bulwer resided at Villa Brichieri from 1852-1854 (Blagden resided there from 1856-1861), when he was serving as a diplomatic attaché in Florence. In July 1853, Barrett Browning, nostalgically recalling a visit to Villa Brichieri, comments:

> Mr Lytton had a reception on the terrace of his villa at Belosguardo the evening before our last in Florence, and we were all bachelors together there, and I made tea, and we ate strawberries and cream and spoke of spiritualism through one of the pleasantest two hours I can remember. Such a view! Florence dissolving to the purple of the hills, and the stars looking on.

Whilst retaining the English rituals of 'tea' and 'strawberries and cream', Italy was, in essence, an imaginary Utopia, a place of perpetual youth, spiritual renewal and free artistic expression. The metaphorical poeticalness of Belosguardo is endorsed by Anna Jameson in July 1857:

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66 Kenyon, op. cit., vol. 2, 125. The letter, dated July 26, 1853, was later written from Bagni di Lucca to Blagden who was in Rome.
Last night after sunset I went up to the villa [Brichieri] on Bellosguardo belonging to an English lady (Miss Blagden). The Brownings, Mr Bulwer Lytton (a son of Sir Edward) and myself formed the party. We sat on a balcony, with a starry night above our heads and Florence spread in the valley at our feet. Mr Lytton read us with a charming voice and expression some of his own poems of great beauty and originality. The scene was very striking on the whole and in itself poetical.\(^{67}\)

The 'poetical' scene described by Jameson, with Bulwer as the imagined Romantic poet-hero, recalls the lines in his poem 'An Evening in Tuscany' (1855) in which he recalls his vision of Florence from Bellosguardo:

```
Look! The sun sets. Now's the rarest
   Hour of all the blessed day.

But look down now, o'er the city
   Sleeping softly among the hills -
Our dear Florence!  (1:1-2; 9:1-3)  \(^{68}\)
```

At the time Jameson wrote her lines, Bulwer was convalescing with Blagden at Villa Brichieri after his illness at Bagni di Lucca.

In Blagden's poem, 'The Invitation', the conditional 'IF', in the first stanza frames the following question:

```
IF I called thee, wouldst thou come,
   Love across the Northern Sea.
From thy dark and rugged home
   Back to Italy and me?
```

These lines suggest one of two possibilities. Firstly, the speaker-Blagden is calling her Bulwer-lover-figure to return to Italy from 'across the Northern Sea', (after his


\(^{68}\) In \textit{Poems, by Owen Meredith} (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), vol. 2, 188-189.
illness Bulwer left Florence and took up a post in the diplomatic service in Northern Europe), and secondly, the speaker is offering his/her fictitious lover a haven from modernity, due to the expansion of industry in Britain, as 'thy dark and rugged home', which has allusions to William Blake's 'dark Satanic Mills', suggests.\(^6\)

In the second stanza, the speaker-narrator entices his/her lover with the sensuous images of an eternal Tuscan summer:

Here the sky is blue, intense;  
Here the Arno's lingering feet,  
Blend, with Earth's glad affluence,  
Sounds and sighs of summer sweet.\(^7\)

The speaker's experience is heightened by the use of alliteration in 'Sounds', 'sighs' and 'sweet', which are similarly recalled by the American writer, Virginia Vaughan, who, after visiting Bellosguardo, noted:

One night Isa Blagden, Owen Meredith and I sat on the verandah of the villa and looked out over the beautiful country. The fireflies of Florence were swinging before us in their innumerable glows of light. Owen Meredith suggested that we all write some verses about fireflies. We all wrote, Isa Blagden, Owen Meredith and I.\(^8\)

Blagden's response to the suggestion was:

Here the fireflies wing their flight,  
Pulsing to the magic tune.  
Murmured every breathless night  
Through our warm delicious June. ('The Invitation' 3)\(^9\)

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70 The reader will recognise that the poem is located in Tuscany, as the river Arno, referred to here, flows through Florence.


72 Although written in the mid-1850s, 'The Invitation' was not published until much later, appearing in *All the Year Round* (November 30, 1872).
With fireflies glittering through and through.
('Wild Flowers' 5:4)

The magical and mysterious qualities of the fireflies provide an erotic undercurrent of imagined 'pulsing', 'murmured', 'breathless' and 'delicious June', expressed by the emphasis on the sensual description of the fireflies. As previously mentioned, in Bennett's discussion of 'clitoral symbols', the fireflies are identified with both the natural world and with female sexuality.

For Bulwer, the fireflies express a somewhat philosophical intellectual activity as described in his poem 'An Evening in Tuscany':

And the fireflies, bevy on bevy
Of soft sparkles, pouring fully
Their warm life through trances on trances
Of thick citron-shades behind,
Rose, like swarms of loving fancies
Thro' some rich and pensive mind. (24:3-4; 25)

The energy and fleeting transience of the 'soft sparkles' and the emphasis on the 'trances of trances', reinforces the abstracted state of the onlookers on the 'verandah' of the villa at Bellosguardo, the use of alliteration lending an emotional intensity to the meaning and possible emotional tension between Blagden and Bulwer. The metaphorical suggestiveness of the mystical 'swarms of loving fancies' serves to illuminate the 'pensive mind' and, hence, become a process of self-illumination. Ironically, if Blagden was in love with Bulwer, the 'swarms of loving fancies' take on a more sexually overt interpretation which is similarly expressed in the first stanza of her poem, 'A Love Poem':

73 Poems, by Owen Meredith, op. cit., 191.
Oh what a golden swarm of dreams
    Came to my couch last night
And hovered o'er me with their gleams
    Of soft and mystic light.\textsuperscript{74}

The invisible aura of the 'fragrance here' in the seventh stanza of 'The Invitation',
evokes the memory of a lover's lingering and continued presence.

The phallic verticality of the

\begin{quote}
    Lithe green reeds with lifted spear  
    Purple grapes 'mid ripening grain'.  \textit{(7:3-4)}
\end{quote}

provides an encoded account of heterosexual desire and the possibility of a forbidden
tryst. In the final stanza, the landscape is transformed into an other-worldly place in
terms of its alluring and enticing appeal:

\begin{quote}
    Beauty's fairest home is here,  
    Earth baptised in light and dew,  
    Haste, the summer draweth near!  
    Haste, where souls are born anew.  
    I have called thee, thou wilt come.
\end{quote}

This stanza is couched in pseudo-scriptural imagery, and the suggestion that one can
be reborn in an Italy transformed into a heaven-on-earth space, is utopian in its
vision.\textsuperscript{75} The final instruction, 'thou wilt come', is a command rather than a statement,
the language of the refrain mirroring the words of Christ.\textsuperscript{76} The question posed in the
first line of 'The Invitation' is answered in the final refrain. 'IF' does not express

\textsuperscript{74} The possibility of an unconscious bisexual identification and the notion of polyvalent sexuality is
discussed later in this section. This poem is also discussed in the next chapter in the context of my
argument regarding Blagden's lesbian consciousness.

\textsuperscript{75} In the context of Blagden's loyalty to the \textit{Risorgimento}, another possible interpretation in addition
to the two mentioned above, is the notion of Italy as a utopian space where 'souls are born anew',
hence, a new beginning for a free and united Italy.

\textsuperscript{76} In the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 42, 6, Christ says: 'I the LORD have called thee in righteousness',
the \textit{King James Bible}. 

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uncertainty, but suggests other possibilities. The acknowledgement of the possibility that 'her' lover might not return, is denied.

After his diplomatic post in Florence expired in 1854, Bulwer left for Paris. Thereafter, subsequent European postings took him to The Hague in 1856, and to St. Petersburg in 1858. As previously discussed, Bulwer had visited Florence and Bagni di Lucca in 1857, where he had become seriously ill and was nursed by Blagden, later convalescing at Villa Brichieri. He was in Florence again in 1861 for Barrett Browning's funeral, at which Blagden was also present. The emended version of 'The Invitation' was published in *All the Year Round*, on November 30, 1872, seven months after Blagden had written the original version, 'On a picture of wild flowers painted by E.B.', which she signed 'I.B. Bellosguardo, April 13, 1871'. The dates of Bulwer's residence at Villa Brichieri, the letters written by Barrett Browning, Virginia Vaughan and Anna Jameson and the publication date of his poem, 'An Evening in Tuscany', substantiate my argument that these two poems are recollections of a past, passionate and painful heterosexual experience.

There is also the possibility that Blagden recalls her love for a younger man in her unpublished poem, 'What is there in a Kiss?' Having praised the 'shy lips' of 'youth and maid' (1:2) and the 'loving lips of man and wife' (2:2), she is confronted with the notion of forbidden love:

But guilty kiss of matron bold  
Is like the kiss that's bought with gold  
Hell gapes within the kiss.    

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77 In a letter to her aunt, Kate Field commented that the 'young Lytton [...] paid the last tribute to her memory'. In Carolyn J. Moss, ed. *Kate Field: Selected Letters* (University of Southern Illinois Press: 1996), 28.
78 The manuscript copy of 'On a picture of wild flowers painted by E.B.' is in the Armstrong Browning Library Collection.
79 The manuscript copy of 'What is there in a Kiss?' is in the Armstrong Browning Library Collection. See Poems Appendix for the manuscript copy of this poem.
The connotation of a 'guilty kiss', which like gold has its price, supports the notion of an illicit relationship. In the context of my argument, the associated adverb 'matronly' is a more appropriate interpretation of 'matron' in terms of a mature, middle-aged woman, who boldly steps over the boundaries of propriety. The shocking image of the gaping jaws of hell is a powerful psychological projection of the speaker's emotional torment, the metaphoric suggestiveness of which implies punishment and damnation. By foregrounding the speaker's awful self-realisation that she might never, at least as a mature woman, find love in a heterosexual relationship, the poem introduces the notion of sexual indeterminacy and the possibility that Blagden was bisexual. Arguably, the three poems under discussion were written as a response to Blagden's infatuation with Bulwer, who might have awakened something in Blagden in terms of her unconscious sexual awareness and in keeping with her Sapphic tendencies, she was, like Sappho, in love with a younger man.

The possibility of an unconscious bisexual identification and desire, allows for an amorphous representation of gender and the notion of polyvalent sexuality, which, as Robert Samuels explains: 'is derived from Freud's early theory that the unconscious is inherently bi-sexual'. In the context of Blagden's possible bisexual/lesbian identity, her relationship with Bulwer might have afforded her the opportunity to deny her lesbianism for the sake of public respectability. However, drawing on the notion of the 'primary' lesbian, Arlene Stein comments that:

'Primary' lesbians generally have to struggle to establish a positive sense of themselves as lesbians during adolescence, when other issues of social identity are being negotiated. Women who came out in later life, [...] may have already negotiated other issues of social identity before they assume

a 'deviant' sexual identity. They may have established a sense of self as relatively 'normal', at least in terms of their sexuality.  

Stein's comments are an appropriate summation of my analysis of the unstable relations between social identity, sexual desire, and sexual identity, in my consideration of Blagen's sexual orientation.

Whatever Blagden's sexual preferences were, Barrett Browning hints that Blagden was sexually uninitiated. Writing to her in 1861 she states:

Isa I am afraid you don't sufficiently realize to yourself the physical tendencies of the sexes. [. . .] I do verily believe that you [. . .] are too spiritual in your way of apprehending the economy of sexual love; and are unaware of certain dangers. You are in the other extreme from the man who put a padlock on his wife's body and never left her without locking up his "honor".  

Written as a response to the news that Blagden's maid, who was unmarried, had become pregnant, Barrett Browning, whilst implying that Blagden was naïve in sexual matters, is also critical of the fact that Blagden had been too liberal in her dealings with the girl by giving her a free rein in her relationships with men. If Barrett Browning is right in her analysis of Blagden's 'spiritual' attributes in terms of 'sexual love', there is an argument to suggest that Blagden transposed her sexual fantasies onto her poetry.

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82 In Florentine Friends, op. cit., 389.

83 After the child was born, 'Emilia' was back in Blagden's service, which reveals much about her magnanimity and the fact that she was non-judgemental.
Reminiscences and Enduring Influences

Bellosguardo is poignantly described by William Raymond when he recalls:

The English and American visitor to Florence will, however, always link Villa Bricchieri [sic] with the years it was tenanted by Isa. Historic shades seem to haunt it,- the hovering ghosts of Landor, the Brownings, Robert Lytton, the Trollopes, Kate Field, Frances Cobbe, Charlotte Cushman, the Storys, Harriet Hosmer, Hawthorne and others- who in life walked in the garden, drank tea on the terrace, looked at the stars from the balcony, discussed music, painting, sculpture and literature in the the reception room.84

The contemplative mood of these lines is a fitting tribute to the enduring legacy of this intellectual enclave of like-minded people, with Blagden in their midst, who found literary inspiration and artistic expression from their shared times together at Bellosguardo.

Thirty years after meeting Blagden, Henry James recalls:

These friendships and generosities, in a setting of Florentine villas and views, of overhanging terraces and arched pianterreni [ground floors] of Italian loyalties and English longings, of shy literary yearning and confessed literary starvation - these things formed her kindly little legend, and they still, after long years, melt together, for my personal reminiscence, into the springtime air of a garden at Bellosguardo. I feel again the sun of Florence in the morning walk out of the Porta Romana and up the long winding hill; I catch again, [. . .] the 'accent' of the straight black cypresses; I live myself again in the sense of the large cool villa, already then a sense of histories, memories, echoes, all generations deep; [. . .] in especial I talk with an eager little lady [. . .] The villa had, [. . .] a past then and has much more of one now; with romantic actualities and possibilities, a crowd of international relations, hung about us as we lingered and talked, making . . . A mere fond fable of lives led and words done and troubles suffered there.85

James' pervasive regret for times past is palpable. His pensive and reflective mood becomes elegiac, his prose, poetic. The 'romantic actualities and possibilities' to

84 Raymond, 'Our Lady of Bellosguardo', op. cit., 462.
85 James, William Wetmore Story and His Friends, op. cit., 95.
which James refers, were transposed by him to become the suggested setting for his novel, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), begun in Florence in 1879. His use of architectural metaphors in the novel aptly describe the villas Brichieri, Castellani and their inhabitants, which arguably, were the inspiration for Gilbert Osmond's Tuscan villa in the novel:

[A] small group [. . .] was gathered in one of the many rooms of an ancient villa crowning an olive-muffled hill outside the Roman gate of Florence. The villa, was a long, rather blank-looking structure, with a far-projecting roof which Tuscany loves and which, on the hills that encircle Florence, [. . .] makes so harmonious a rectangle with the straight, dark, definite cypresses that usually rise in groups of three or four beside it. The house had a front upon a little grassy, empty, rural piazza which occupied a part of the hill-top.86

![Fig. 9 Villa Castellani, Bellosguardo, from a painting by Frank Duveneck (1848-1919).](image)

[T]he villa overhung the slope of its hill and the long valley of the Arno, [was] hazy with Italian colour. It had a narrow garden, in the manner of a terrace, [. . .] and beneath it the ground declined into vagueness of olive-crops and vineyards [. . .] one of the several distinct apartments into which the villa was divided [. . .] were mainly occupied by foreigners of random race long resident in Florence.87

87 Ibid., 250.
The parallels and comparisons, the imagery and association, are echoes of his 'crowd of international relations' and 'mere fond fable of lives', which James so poignantly recalls in his recollections of Blagden at her villa.

**Conclusion**

Italian politics, gender politics and sexual politics are bound together in the poems I have evaluated in this chapter. A major character in the narrative of her life and work, Italy afforded Blagden the political and personal freedom to express her feminist sensibilities and sexual preferences (though indeterminate) at a time of turbulence, both literally and metaphorically. The metaphoric suggestiveness of Bellosguardo as the catalyst for Blagden's subversive poetics, in terms of sexual longing and repressed desire, is successfully accomplished by her in the poems considered in this chapter, both in terms of execution and artistic expression. In James' tribute to Blagden, the suggestiveness of 'longings', 'yearning' and 'starvation' introduce the
notion that she was unfulfilled both in her literary career and personal life, constrained by society's sexual code of conduct from making an identity statement, hence her deployment of subversive strategies in her poetics.

Blagden's sexual orientation and marginalised position as a writer, together with her matrilineage inheritance, might well have added to her feelings of frustration and inferiority, and to her sense of 'otherness'. In this context, Rome and its environs provided the scope and inspiration for what, as I argue in the next chapter, are Blagden's lesbian poetics. Written in the context of female homoeroticism, her poems are analysed in terms of the absent-mother-lover-figure and the notion of sisterhood and supportive female networks, the tropes of which, are a recurring pattern in Blagden's lesbian consciousness poetry.
Chapter 5: Isabella Blagden: Lesbian Consciousness

Overview

In this chapter I discuss the intense relationships between Blagden and her coterie of expatriate women friends in Rome during the 1850s and 1860s, and the influence they had on her, both in her life and in her work. The absence of a mother-figure, the silence around her matrilineal heritage and the possibility of a failed heterosexual relationship, provided Blagden with the emotional need for supportive female figures. In this context, I will consider that Blagden's poetry, written in the 1860s, was, arguably, a response to her intensely emotional friendship with the actress Charlotte Cushman, a dynamic and radical figure in the American expatriate group in Rome. Poetry was the ideal genre in which to explore lesbian consciousness because it was, due to its condensed form and compacted coded language, best suited to organising intense moments of experience, as opposed to the more expansive nature of Blagden's novels, although occasional reference by way of quotations to two of her novels, namely Agnes Tremorne and The Cost of a Secret, will be given in the context of her feminist-lesbian consciousness.

The first section of this chapter explores the grammatical status of the word 'lesbian' and its historically complex and difficult meaning derived from constructions of Sappho. I will discuss Blagden's 'Rome Lesbos' and her relationship with her women friends in Rome known for their 'female marriages', and their influence on her in the context of how homoeroticism as a subversive theme, is deployed in her poetry.¹ The focus on her poetry, with its scope for

¹ 'Rome Lesbos' is a modification of 'Paris Lesbos', the name given to the capital of same-sex love among women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Quoted from Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940* (Austin, Texas: 1986), 47. The reference to 'female marriages' was made by Barrett Browning in a letter to her sister Arabella in a letter dated, February 13, 1853, when describing the relationship between Charlotte Cushman and Matilda Hays. In Scott Lewis, ed., *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Her Sister Arabella* (Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2007), vol. 1, 506.
liminal/subliminal suggestiveness, enables an exploration of her subversive homoerotic poetics. In order to establish Blagden's aspirational lesbian poetics, I will provide an analysis of selected poems in the second part of this chapter. The poems to be discussed are: 'Dialogue Between Two Friends', 'The Angels of Life', 'Say Which Were Best', 'A Love Poem: Rosamond', *L'Ariccia: Death in Life. No. 1.* and *L'Ariccia. Life in Death. No. 11*, 'Orphanhood', and 'A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice, Rome'.

In 'Dialogue Between Two Friends', written in the dramatic monologue form, Blagden draws on the metaphorical shipwreck in order to convey the turbulence of human experience in the context of lost love. More subversively, the poem is an expression of covert lesbian desire in which reconciliation is unattainable. In her seventeen stanza poem, 'The Angels of Life', Blagden draws on the iconic figure of the Greek poetess, Sappho, the reputed lover of women, in order to offer a subversive description of women's past intimacies, which I argue, are a coded representation of Blagden's relationships with her women friends in Rome. The poem also reinforces the notion of a sisterhood of 'Angels', whose temporal existence is brief.

As previously discussed, Blagden was familiar with the myths of classical antiquity and in 'Say Which Were Best' and 'A Love Poem: Rosamond' there is an obvious interplay of literary allusions to Greek mythology. In 'Say Which Were Best', written as a variant of the sonnet form, Blagden draws on Circe, the manipulative enchantress in Homer's *Odyssey* in order to express the irresistible forces of temptation and desire. The poem offers a highly subversive reading of a covert

2 These poems appears in *Poems*, op. cit., on pages 137-141; 88-92; 149-154; 47-57; 64-67 and 58-59, respectively. 'Orphanhood' was published in *All the Year Round*, September 25 (1869), and was unsigned. The other poems referred to above were not published during Blagden's lifetime.

3 The first fourteen lines of the poem conform to the traditional Shakespearian sonnet form, followed by a variant of the form in the second stanza of twenty lines, in the third and fourth stanzas of twelve lines and a final stanza of twenty-seven lines. The poem follows the iambic pentameter rhythmic pattern.
lesbian world in which death is ambiguously expressed and man's spiritual journey begins. The poem 'A Love Poem: Rosamond', recalls an intensely emotional dream-like expression of lesbian desire, invoked by the natural world. The twelve stanza poem, written in the sonnet form, is eclipsed by a final quatrain in which hope and reconciliation are envisaged in an other-worldly place. Blagden draws on the pagan Etruscan civilisation in Italy, which endured in pre-Roman times, in order to provide a revisioning of women's lives in her long poem L'Aricca. Written in a language imbued with Christian symbolism and dense in richly ambiguous imagery, the poem is subversive and transgressive in content. The first part is constructed in three interconnected parts, a forty-one line verse-paragraph in iambic pentameter, followed by a five-quatrain song-poem, conceived as an interlude which is followed by a twenty-four verse-paragraph in iambic pentameter. Part Two of the poem, is constructed as twenty-three saphically-inspired lyrical stanzas which suitably fit the poem's theme of the idolisation of women. The final stage of the women's metaphoric journey in the poem takes them to an other-worldly transcendent space in which sexuality can be redefined.

The poem 'Orphanhood' is, arguably, a semi-autobiographical account of the absent mother-figure in Blagden's own childhood. Set in the shadowy depths of a forest, the trees' identification with the natural world envisions subversive possibilities. Childhood fears are displaced onto the forest to provide an encoded account of lesbian desire in terms of the eroticisation of the absent mother-figure. Composed of fourteen tercets with a repeated refrain structure at the end of each tercet, the refrain's repetitive intensity builds up to an emotional/orgasmic climax,

4 'Man' is expressed in terms of the universal epithet of all (hu)man beings.
5 The poem follows the Petrarchan octave form with a variant on the traditional rhyming scheme of abbaaabba.
expressed in the penultimate stanza. The transitoriness of the fulfilment of erotic
desire is foregrounded in the last two lines of the final stanza when death beckons,
but not before the speaker has acknowledged the notion of 'Tis better to have loved
and lost/Than never to have loved at all'.

Blagden again draws on the canon of High Renaissance art for an iconographic
representation of Venus, the goddess of love, which is projected on to her female
protagonist in the poem, 'A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice, Rome'. The subject/
object of the poem is an artist's model living in Rome, whom Blagden knew. The
model's eroticised feminine form becomes the object of, arguably, Blagden's
voyeuristic lesbian gaze. Blagden draws on the notion of the angel/whore dichotomy,
which in the context of this poem is the Madonna and the model/gypsy-figure which
serves as the poem's transgressive subtext. The poem, composed in the Petrarchan
sonnet form, comprises of three stanzas, the refrain of the final stanza foregrounding
the notion that having transgressed the socially-defined boundaries of sexual love,
immortality is denied.

Lesbian Consciousness: A Context

As I discussed in Chapter One (part 2), the famous Greek poet Sappho, a woman
who reputedly loved other women, came from the Greek island of Lesbos and
consequently, the terms Sapphist and lesbian, became associated with female
homosexuality. Many myths, mostly scandalous, have surrounded Sappho, and, as
Jane McIntosh Snyder notes, she was the 'symbol of the Eternal Feminine', a
'desperate lover of girls', the 'suicidal mistress of a younger man' and, in order to save

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her reputation, a 'headmistress of a girl's school'.

According to Snyder, any 'notions of "scandalous aberrance" in connection with Sappho only began to emerge after the Christian era and seems not to predominate until the Victorian period'.

Sappho was, reputedly, a writer of erotic poetry. Her 'Hymn to Aphrodite', is the only extant complete poem in which she begs Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to help her attain the love of a woman whose love is unrequited.

The writings of Lucian (c120 AD-c 200 AD), a Greek satirist, provides a stereotypical description of a woman from Lesbos:

We hear strange things about you Leaina – that the rich woman from Lesbos loves you as though she were a man and that you live together and do heaven knows what with each other [. . .] What do you do when you are together? [. . .] They say that in Lesbos there are masculine-looking women who refuse to have intercourse with men, but who want to be with women as if they themselves were men.

Scandal, deviance, and immorality are represented in the above lines and provide all the elements associated with the nineteenth and early twentieth-century notion of the nouns Sappho and Sapphist and the associated adjectives, sapphism and sapphic.

As Bonnie Zimmerman states: 'French dictionaries note the occurrence of *saphisme* in the sense of "female homosexuality" as early as 1838 and *lesbienne* in the sense of "female homosexual" in 1867. In English a similar vocabulary for female same-sex love develops later.' Sapphist, or tribade were terms commonly used by critics of

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8 Ibid., 7.

9 Ibid., 9.

sapphist texts for women who had same-sex relationships, their behaviour being
euphemistically termed as strange, abnormal, or exotic.\textsuperscript{11}

Sharon Marcus explains that '[c]ritics of sapphic texts replaced verbs and nouns
with a cluster of recurring adjectives: unnatural, artificial, morbid, obscene,
immoral, perverse, impure, diseased. Those adjectives functioned as pronouns [. . .]
but semantically replaced words like invert, lesbian, or sapphist. By using such
adjectives, reviewers could substitute negative evaluations of sapphism'.\textsuperscript{12}
The 'negative evaluations' of the adjectival pronouns which replaced the verbs and nouns,
carried the same level of prejudiced meaning, whose connotation implied the
ubiquitous derogatory label attached to women who had same-sex relationships,
therefore, the stigma remained. The word 'lesbian' was not in common use in Britain
until 1908, when it appeared in the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}.

However, Terry Castle considers \textit{The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister} as 'a
spectacular rebuke to the no-lesbians-before-1900 myth,' and rejects 'the lugubrious
myths of lesbian asexuality'.\textsuperscript{13} Anne Lister (1791-1840), a wealthy Yorkshire
landowner, had affairs with other women and had a long-term spousal relationship
with an Anne Walker. Ironically, Lister's diaries were written mostly in code, as
Helena Whitbread explains:

\begin{quote}
The idea of using an esoteric code appears to have had its roots in Anne's
burgeoning knowledge of the Greek language: she mingles Greek letters with
other symbols of her own devising. She felt safe in the belief that no one would
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} 'Invert' was a mid-nineteenth-century term for homosexual, devised by the British psychologist
Havelock Ellis (1859-1939). 'Tribadism', or a 'tribade', was the Greek classical term for female
homosexuality.
\textsuperscript{12} Sharon Marcus ‘Comparative Sapphism’ in Laura Doan's \textit{Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a
\textsuperscript{13} Terry Castle, \textit{The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture} (New York:
Columbia University Press, 1993), 96 and 106. Anne Lister's diaries were discovered by John
Lister in the early twentieth century. Helena Whitebread, the editor of Lister's diaries, spent several
years decoding them. The diaries were published under the title: \textit{I Know My Own Heart: The
Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840} (London: Virago, 2010).
be able to decipher the coded passages, and as her confidence grew, they
became longer and much more explicit when dealing with those aspects of
life which could not be written about in 'plainhand'.

Although Lister lived openly as a lesbian in the early nineteenth-century, such
subterfuge was necessary and she was well aware of the need to conform to
convention. By encoding her sexual predilections, her erotic lesbian relations were
never explicitly stated. In one diary entry Lister declares 'I love and only love the
fairer sex and thus, beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love
than theirs', and, as Whitbread comments: 'This is an explicit statement of lesbian
love and one to which she remained true to the day she died'.

As previously mentioned, most of Blagden's correspondence and papers were
burned at the time of her death, an act which might suggest that they could have been
of an explicit nature, or a declaration of same-sex love. Whatever the reason, it
remains speculative. As I argue in this chapter, Blagden's subverted lesbian
consciousness in her poetry suggests a lurking shadowy eroticism, which is never
explicitly stated. The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, suggests that a woman
experiences 'a jouissance of the body which is [...] beyond the phallus'. My
analysis of Blagden's poems in this chapter in the context of a transcendent
homoerotic desire, will be a reworking of Lacan's theory of jouissance as a site of
female pleasure and desire.

Blagden and her coterie of women friends in the mid-nineteenth-century were
prepared to challenge gender conventions and sexual norms through their dress,
behaviour and lifestyle. Their lesbian jouissance was, therefore, expressed in terms

14 Whitbread, op. cit., xiii.
15 Whitbread, op. cit., 145 and x.
Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (ed.), Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudiennne
(London, 1982), 145.
of their unfettering of 'phallocentricism' as Doan explains: 'early prototypes of the mannish lesbian [...] placed an emphasis on self-fulfilment and the flamboyant presentation of self'.¹⁷ Doan's comments suitably describe Blagden's 'Rome Lesbos', the network of expatriate professional women artists, living in 'female marriages', who had a *jouissant* sense of their own bodies in terms of sexual pleasure.

**Rome Lesbos**

The most iconic of the women in Blagden's circle, was Cushman, known to reviewers as 'Charley de Boots'.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Doan, op. cit., xvi.
¹⁸ Zimmerman, op. cit., 217.

![Fig. 11 Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876).](image-url)
She had amassed a fortune from acting and retired from the stage at the age of 36, moving to Rome in 1852 with her then lover, Matilda Hays, referred to as 'Max' or 'Matthew' by her friends. In a letter to her sister Arabella, Barrett Browning, describing Cushman's relationship with Hays, states: 'they have made vows of celibacy & [sic] of eternal attachment to each other – they live together, dress alike, [. . .] it is a female marriage'. Regarding Hays' attire, Barrett Browning notes that she 'dresses like a man down to the waist'. Cushman and Hays, and other women in the group, not only used male pseudonyms to express their intimacy, but their apparent masculine characteristics also applied to their gait and how they wore their hair.

Fig. 12 Charlotte Cushman with Matilda Hays.

19 Lisa Merrill, When Romeo Was A Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators (Anne Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 160.
21 Ibid., 196.
In the early Roman years, Cushman ran a household of unmarried, financially independent women who were referred to as 'jolly female bachelors'.\textsuperscript{22} They openly cohabited together at 28 Via del Corso which was known as 'old maids hall'. Story, visiting Rome in 1852-53, wrote to his friend the poet and diplomat, James Russell Lowell (1819-1891): 'your poems, [. . .] are creating a furore in 28 Corso, [. . .] harem (scarem) as I call it – among the emancipated females who dwell there in heavenly unity – viz the Cushman [. . .] & Co. [. . .] They all live together'.\textsuperscript{23} Arguably, these 'emancipated females' were early prototypes of the New Woman who earned their living, travelled abroad, lived independently, remained unmarried (in the heterosexual sense), and were portrayed as having masculine traits.\textsuperscript{24} In the same letter Story adds: 'The Cushman sings savage ballads in a hoarse manny voice'.\textsuperscript{25} Whether Story was at risk of being lesbophobic, or could not reconcile himself to the notion of the New Woman, is difficult to assess. It is interesting to note Story's derogatory use of the definite article 'the' when referring to Cushman, hence, he dehumanises her by giving her the status of object.

Cushman, like Sappho, loved women, and as the head of a household of gifted young women 'dedicated to the Muses' in Rome, she nurtured her Sapphic family.\textsuperscript{26} Sappho was, as Ellen Green suggests: the leader of [a] \textit{thiasos} [. . .] a cult-like community of women', who, as Claude Calame explains: 'talk of their most intimate friends' and who worshipped Aphrodite, the goddess of love.\textsuperscript{27} Cushman's apotheosis,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} The terms were used by the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer, in a letter to Wayman Crow, 11 June, 1853, and are in the Harriet Goodhue Hosmer Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} In Henry James, \textit{William Wetmore Story and His Friends: From Letters, Diaries and Recollections} (London: Thames and Huson, 1903, vol. 1, 254. The letter is dated September 29,1852. Blagden knew the Storys when they lived in Florence.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} As previously discussed, term 'New Woman' was not coined until later in the nineteenth century.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 255.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} In Ellen Greene, ed., \textit{Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), by Claude Calame, 'Sappho's Group: An Initiation into Womanhood', 113.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ellen Greene, ed., \textit{Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 8 and 178 and Calame in Greene, cited in previous footnote, 114.
\end{itemize}
has similarities with Sappho's apotheosis, in the sense of a deified and exalted Muse, and inspiring goddess of the liberal arts, whose off-stage theatricality was every bit as homoerotic as her on-stage performances. As Merrill suggests: '[W]ith her unprecedented [theatrical] success came further social success, much of it due to the eroticism other women read into Charlotte's performances'. As 'Charley de Boots', Cushman 'is most famous for playing "breeches" or men's parts in all-female productions', notoriously her role of Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*. Charles Durang, recalling a time in 1842 when he first knew Cushman, says of her: '[w]hen she put her breeches on and assumed *toga virilis* she was every inch a man of good proportions', further adding that 'A lady in London, being asked of her opinion of Miss Cushman's Romeo, answered [. . .] "Miss Cushman is a very dangerous young man"'.

Cushman's transgressive cross-dressing provided not only a site for self-expression but also evoked homoerotic responses from many women in her social network. Field, addressed her letters to Cushman as 'Beloved Romeo' and the young American actress Emma Crow, who later became one of Cushman's lovers, claimed that she 'felt a thrill when [. . .] Romeo returned again for a last embrace'.

Cushman's assertion of a female masculine identity refutes stereotypical gendering.

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28 'Sappho's Apotheosis' is taken from the title of an essay written by Laura Doane, 'Sappho's Apotheosis: Radclyffe Hall's Queer Kinship with the Watchdogs of the Lord', in *Sexuality and Culture* 8.2 (Spring, 2004), 82-108.
29 Merrill, op. cit., 178.
30 Zimmerman, op. cit., 217.
32 In Charlotte Cushman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. The library have filed Cushman's vast array of papers, scripts and photographs, in numbered containers or boxes, hence I give the container number, then letter number, where possible. Merrill's research on Cushman also supports my referencing. The reference for Field's letter is 11: 3295, and is dated 15 March 1860. Crow's comment is from her unpublished memoir, 'Charlotte Cushman: A Memoir', and is contained in Charlotte Cushman's Papers, 15:4019-36. Henceforth, Cushman's Papers will be referred to as CCP.
As Merrill suggests: 'Cushman was also seen as "virile", given to intense melodramatic displays usually associated with an ideal representation of masculinity'. Negative criticism, mostly from men, focused on her 'unfeminine' demeanour due to her large body size, as commented upon by Durang's description of her 'good proportions'.

Wishing to return to the stage, Cushman left Rome in the Spring of 1853, returning to the city again in 1856-57, having lavishly refurbished her apartments at 38 Via Gregoriana. However, by this time her relationship with Hays was strained.

In a letter to Bodichon, the prison reformer, Florence Davenport Hill (1829-1919), complained that 'a party of ladies among whom was Miss Cushman and Miss Hayes [sic] brought great discredit on the plans of young ladies independent of chaperones, by the very extraordinary manner in which they discredited themselves', further adding: 'Your pretty young sister might perhaps find herself in a painful position if she be not aware of the states of feeling which the ladies I have alluded to created in the artistic circles in Rome'.

The 'pretty young sister' was Anne (also known as Annie or Nannie) Leigh Smith.

Among the 'jolly female bachelors' in Rome was Hosmer, whom Cobbe described as 'the most bewitching sprite the world ever saw'. Hosmer, referred to by all who knew her as Hatty, arrived in the city in 1852 and soon after joined the studio of John Gibson. Rayner Parkes, on meeting Hosmer, described her as 'the funniest little creature, not at all coarse, rough or slanguy, but like a little boy', adding that she

33 Merrill, op. cit., 90.
34 Blagden mentions Via Gregoriana in Agnes Tremorne, vol. 1, 15.
35 As discussed in Chapter Two, Hays left Rome and returned to London. At the invitation of Rayner Parkes, co-founder of the English Woman's Journal, Hays became its editor. Her relationship with Cushman ended acrimoniously.
36 Barbara McCrimmon Papers related to Barbara Bodichon (nee Leigh Smith) in Women's Library, London School of Economics, 7BMC/E/10. The letter is dated October 8, 1854.
37 As discussed in Chapter Two, Anne Leigh Smith, financially supported the English Woman's Journal, and was also a contributor.
38 Cobbe, Life, op. cit., 27.
had 'never seen anything as innocent as Hatty, nor so very queer [. . .] she even 'manage[d] her petticoats with a certain extraordinary ease suggestive of trousers'.

Hosmer, and the other 'jolly bachelors' living on Via Gregoriana, were of consummate interest to Barrett Browning. In a letter to her sister Henrietta, Barrett Browning comments: '[T]here's a house of what I call emancipated women – a young sculptress – American, Miss Hosmer, a pupil of Gibson's, very clever and very strange and Miss Hayes [sic] the translator of George Sand'. Arguably, by 'strange' Barrett Browning is referring to Hosmer's culturally defined 'otherness', hence her deviance from the norm. The letter's contents, written three years before the

39 Bessie Rayner Parkes to Elizabeth Parkes, at Girton College, Cambridge, GCPP Parkes 2/7, dated April 21, 1857. The use of the word 'queer' might not have had the same connotation as we know it today, and the use of the word in this context would perhaps be 'odd.' The word 'queer' meaning 'homosexual' was first recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1932.
publication of *Aurora Leigh*, anticipate Barrett Browning's radical stance on gender politics and her handling of the notion of androgynous gender/gender inversion in her verse-novel. Her fascination with Blagden's group of 'Roman' women and their alternative lifestyles, might well have been a part of her literary inspiration, as they were for Blagden.

By January 1854, Blagden had returned to Rome from Florence and was living at 13 Via Gregoriana, on the floor below Hays and Hosmer. The Brownings too were visiting Rome at this time. In a note to Blagden, Barrett Browning writes: 'Will Miss Hayes [sic] & Miss Hosmer come with you on Wednesday? Do as you like about asking them'.\(^{41}\) All was not 'heavenly unity' as Story suggests, and Barrett Browning's use of italics might suggest certain jealousies and tensions that erupted from time to time amongst these women. Evidence of these tensions are apparent in the exchange of letters between Blagden and Barrett Browning regarding Cushman's invitation to Blagden to reside at 38 Via Gregoriana, which are discussed later in this section.

While Blagden might have formed an erotic bond with the androgynously alluring Hosmer, she might have felt a closer bond of love for Hays. As previously mentioned, both Blagden and Hays were of mixed race. Hays was half-Creole and Blagden half-Indian/Spanish, and neither women knew their matrilineal heritage.\(^{42}\) Because of this shared sense of culturally defined 'otherness', and hence, their marginalised position, they might well have found in each other a protective and nurturing mother-lover-figure.

Writing from Rome in May 1854, Barrett Browning informs Blagden that 'Hatty is quite satisfied with [the invitation to] your Villa Moutier, & sends her love'.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{41}\) *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 47.
\(^{42}\) Hays' Creole lineage is commented on by Merrill, in *ODNB*.
\(^{43}\) *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 52.
Any apparent tensions however, appear to have been resolved by July 1854, when Hosmer stayed with Blagden at Villa Moutier in Florence for the rest of the summer, returning to Rome in the October. Hosmer's androgyny and boy-woman appearance may have held some fascination for Blagden. Writing to Blagden in 1858, Barrett Browning comments: 'we may catch her [Hosmer] perhaps before she recovers breath from your kissing', an acknowledgement that Barrett Browning was well aware of Blagden's lesbian proclivities. Recalling a rather amusing incident, Barrett Browning informs Blagden:

The night before she [Hatty] had been with Miss Cushman, & returning home at ten was encountered by a man who extended his arms & enquired why, she walked the streets of Rome at so late an hour– It was close to her own door, & she knocked before she spoke. Then turning round she said . . "You ask my reason for walking so late. This is my reason- " And crash across his face she struck with her iron-pointed umbrella. He turned & fled like a man – I won't say as Miss Cushman did, like an Italian. So there's your Hatty for you.

It is uncertain if the man in question was Italian or English, or whether the conversation took place in Italian or English. The incident does, however, have both racist and gendered overtones. Cushman's perception of Italian men as fickle and Barrett Browning's gendering of 'fled like a man' questions the notion of manhood, and foregrounds the notion that women were as strong, if not stronger beings. Barrett Browning's recollection of the incident appears to condone Hosmer's behaviour rather than condemn it, and is telling regarding Barrett Browning's gender politics. Hosmer's independent and unchaperoned lifestyle has a strong affinity with Blagden's female protagonist in her novel, *Agnes Tremorne* who 'used to walk about

44 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 168.
45 *Florentine Friends*, op. cit., 178. The letter is dated 12 December, 1858. Blagden had, by the time the letter was written, returned to Florence.
46 Many in the expatriate communities in Rome and Florence spoke Italian, but it was spoken mostly to their servants. Blagden, like the Brownings, were fluent speakers.
alone, and sometimes late [. . .] We have enquired a little about her, and what we have heard is not very favourable [. . .] she lives alone [. . .] and is thoroughly independent of all conventionalities'.

The speaker's voice, apparently positioned on the side of the existing patriarchal assumptions regarding women's prescribed roles, speaks a double-discourse which is effectively challenging these assumptions.

When Cushman arrived back in Rome in 1857/58 she arrived with the wealthy Emma Stebbins, and, with her dog Bushie, resided at 38 Via Gregoriana. Stebbins had replaced Hays in Cushman's affections and consequently, Hays felt aggrieved and threatened to sue Cushman for damages, alleging she had sacrificed her literary career and health to live with her. Cushman agreed to pay Hays more than $1000.

After Hays left Rome, Hosmer accepted an invitation from Cushman to live in an apartment at 38 Via Gregoriana with her and Stebbins.

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47 *Agnes Tremorne*, op. cit., 27 and 37. Hosmer did live alone before moving to Cushman's apartment in Via Gregoriana.

48 On the death of Stebbins' dog, Blagden wrote a poem entitled: 'To Dear Old Bushie From One Who Loved Her'. In the poem Blagden contrasts the animal's loyalty, devotion and 'pure fidelity' with that of human relationships: 'Not human but more true' and 'that our human friends could be/Like thee thou faithful one.' The poem was kept by Stebbins in her *Papers* and was published in Blagden's posthumously published volume, *Poems*.

49 In 1866 Hays published the novel, *Adrienne Hope, (AH)*, which is partly set in the Anglo-American community in Rome. Drawing on the details of her relationship with Cushman, she depicts the anguish of a woman in a 'secret marriage'. The characters include a 'Miss Reay', who, like Hays, was 'engaged in editing a philanthropic journal' and felt that her 'best years had been utterly and uselessly sacrificed in a relationship with an unworthy woman'. *AH*, 217. (Merrill, *ODNB*). In today's terms the value of the relative average income used to buy a commodity is $245,000.00, in sterling, approximately £125,400. Source: MeasuringWorth.com.
Blagden too was invited to live at number 38. In a letter to her, Barrett Browning states:

[A]nd here is Miss Cushman [. . .] and all of us with expectation of your consenting to fill some empty rooms of hers & being her visitor at Rome. Dearest Isa dont [sic] disappoint us. Rome will do you such good [. . .] And there will be no expense for you, [. . .] And Miss Cushman yearns to have you, & swears you have "promised" her! - with what verity I don't know.50

The collective 'all of us' suggests that Blagden was put under some pressure to move into the Cushman residence at 'no expense', foregrounding the notion that Cushman bought people, as one might purchase a commodity, and then paid them off quite

50 Florentine Friends, op. cit., 180. The letter is dated January 7, 1859.
literally, as she had done with Hays. Barrett Browning's use of the word 'verity', in the context of some promise Blagden purportedly made, is a hint that she was aware of the homoerotic tension between these two women. Blagden certainly appears to have been under some strain, as testified by Barrett Browning who states: 'I am anxious to know that you are recovering your good looks & proper bodily presence as to weight'.

In another letter regarding 'Miss Cushman', Barrett Browning recalls:

I wish you could have heard through a half-open door all the good she said of you, my Isa. And she is vexed about you, too – She thinks you may or must see her under a cloud just now, because of the invitation to her house. . . Which you heard and never received. The fact was, that the bedroom (to be offered) was not hers, but Hatty's. Therefore Hatty was entreated to write the invitation, & [sic] I think Miss C. was under the impression that it had been sent- Hatty had promised to instantly. Miss Cushman was very vexed to find that the whole subject had been ignored [. . .] & that Hatty had confined herself to proposing to you! [. . .] Miss Cushman repeats quite with pain – "But what can she think of me? Hatty has ruined me with her-" [. . .] Miss Cushman has much admiring esteem for you, & speaks of you with apparently the most cordial affection.

These comments reveal Cushman's manipulative trait and self-centredness, reflecting her dominance and the emotional hold she had over these women. Blagden appears not to have taken up Cushman's offer, and it is apparent that there was some tension between them, possibly over Hays' dismissal. In a letter to Blagden, Barrett Browning, in her role as go-between, comments:

As to Miss Cushman, you did not like her message – but if there was anything unpleasant in it, I believe it was simply that she has felt unpleasantly through her great disappointment at failing to get & [sic] hold you. She was impatient & wanted to bring you to a point, - sceptical of your intentions to her, & pained in proportion to her desire of having you here. Dont [sic] be vexed therefore about the message. She and Hatty have had an idea from the beginning that you meant to cheat them, put them off with a promise.

51 Florentine Friends, op. cit., 202. The letter is dated March 25, 1859.
52 Florentine Friends, op. cit., 205. The letter is dated April 15, 1859.
53 Florentine Friends, op. cit., 303. The letter was written in Rome and is dated March 6, 1860.
There is a certain ambiguity regarding Blagden's silence. She does appear to visit 38 Via Gregoriana with some pleasure. If she was in love with Hays, she might well have not wanted to take her place in Cushman's affections as she had the evidence that Cushman manipulated women for her own gratification and then dismissed them. Blagden might well have been searching for a more meaningful and stable relationship, but was none-the-less seduced by Cushman, which is alluded to in her poem, 'The Angels of Life', which is discussed later in this chapter.

Whenever Blagden visited Rome she was a part of what Cobbe refers to as the society [that] often gathered in that bright house in the Via Gregoriana, the merry feasts where Campagna wild-boars and American oysters were dispatched together amid many a jest; the evenings with large assemblies and fine music; or, better far, those with two or three friends only, and Miss Cushman's magnificent readings of Mrs Browning – of all these pleasant hours, whoso has been admitted to share them, is sure to retain a lively recollection. Among all the circles into which the chances of a wandering life may throw us, few, I think, are nearly so charming as that of the great American artists in Rome.54

These lines evoke orgiastic feasting and merriment at the time of the Roman Empire, referred to by Anthony F. Aveni, as 'the celebrated Roman Bacchanalia', which is alluded to in the discussion of Blagden's poem 'Say Which Were Best', discussed later in this chapter.55 The Bacchanalia, was, according to the Roman historian Livy (c59 BC-17 AD), an all-women cult in which he cites the 'sexual depravity instigated by these women [. . .] and the general instability of the female character as a whole'.56 However, as Aveni explains: 'The senate [. . .] put an end to the wild music, [. . .] ecstatic delirium and (what they termed) lewd practices', or, in other words, what

54 Cobbe, Italics, op. cit., 415.
they termed licentious, homoerotic behaviour.\footnote{Aveni, op. cit., 6.}

The notion of 'an all-woman cult' in the sense of a supportive sisterhood, is expressed in the following quotations from Blagden's novel, *Agnes Tremorne*, which, as previously discussed, tells of an aspiring English woman artist in Rome:

I think few writers lay sufficient stress on the large space which a true friendship, such as two mature minds can feel for each other, holds in the lives of two single women, and what exquisite enjoyments are derived from it. In the personal intimacy which exists in such a relation, there is entire comprehension and knowledge of each other. This is seldom attained, even in the holiest and truest marriage [...] two women who dwell together, work together, and who, in the highest sense of the word, live together, see each other face to face; love is theirs in its purest impersonality, and yet in its closest sympathy. When I try to realise the words "the communion of saints," I can imagine nothing more perfect or more sacred than an affection of this nature – warm as fire, clear as flame, but without the smoke which too often accompanies all other love, and without ashes into which it usually burns.\footnote{Agnes Tremorne, op. cit., vol. 2, 37-38.}

Why should not two friends of the same sex, even if there is no tie of relationship between them, live together, enriching each other's lives with mutual sympathy.\footnote{Ibid., 45-46.}

The concept of homosocial bonding as a condition of same-sex, non-sexual friendship is expressed in these lines, and, as Ivy Schweitzer explains: 'Sisterhood describes the consciousness of specifically female commonality based on experience and expressed through a kinship metaphor that does not depend on or necessarily generate intimate personal bonds'.\footnote{Ivy Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 175.} However, in the context of Blagden's relationships with women, the notion of homosociality, is, suggestively, homoerotic. As Eve Sedgwick explains '[a]n intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations link lesbianism with other forms of women's attention to women: the bond
of the mother and daughter [. . .] women's friendships [. . .] and the active struggle of feminism.\textsuperscript{61} Blagden's language justifies an interpretation that suggests a shared sexual identity, in which 'exquisite enjoyments' and 'personal intimacy' express her lesbian consciousness. Her women are categorised as 'saints' in harmonious 'communion' with each other, suggestive, not only of a supportive sisterhood, but of a shared sexual identity. The metaphorical suggestiveness of the binaries of 'fire' and 'flame', indicative of the intensity of love between women and the 'smoke' and 'ashes' indicative of love's dying embers in 'all other love' as Blagden's narrator puts it, is, arguably, a critique of heterosexual love as the weaker bond of union. As Merrill explains: 'Heterosexual marriage was not an attractive option to independent women like Harriet Hosmer, Charlotte Cushman and Emma Stebbins, who actively chose to pursue their artistic careers and found emotional sustenance in their all-female households'.\textsuperscript{62} Cushman regarded heterosexual marriage as 'that awful question and more awful responsibility,' whilst acknowledging her 'marriage' with Stebbins.\textsuperscript{63} To another lover, Emma Crow, Cushman wrote: 'Do you not know that I am already married and wear the badge upon the third finger of my left hand?'\textsuperscript{64}

Marital metaphors were frequently used between the women in Blagden's Roman circle. As Merrill further suggests: '[P]ersonal narratives that included marital metaphors for women with close affectional bonds were routinely used in this circle and framed the domestic space they inhabited. Cushman described Stebbins as her "other and better half", their closeness and their "marriage", and Cushman's position

\textsuperscript{62} Merrill, op. cit., 211.
\textsuperscript{63} Merrill, op. cit., 211.
\textsuperscript{64} CCP, 1. Letter dated 27 April, 1858.
as the more male-identified member of the partnership. 65 Blagden's friend, Cobbe, met her partner, the sculptor Mary Lloyd, through Cushman and they later set up home together, referring to Lloyd as 'my wife' and 'truant husband', when Lloyd was away from their home. 66 Field, referred to Blagden as 'Hubby', and the use of this marital metaphor strongly hints at the nature of the relationship Blagden had within Cushman's coterie of women in Rome. 67 As Martha Vicinus states: 'The independent women of Rome [...] moved in and out of a range of erotic options'. 68 Although Cushman's relationship with Stebbins lasted for thirteen years, she did have other affairs with women, and it was perhaps this emotional instability that prevented Blagden from accepting Cushman's invitation to reside at 38 Gregoriana, preferring instead to keep an emotional and physical distance.

**Transgressive Personal Powers**

Because of her 'versatile powers and commanding presence' Cushman had an emotional hold on her women friends. 69 Stebbins says of her: 'There was a winning charm about her [she] had moreover [...] a fine stately presence, [...] beautiful wavy chestnut hair, and the finest eyes in the world'. 70 Stebbins claimed that 'no salon seemed complete without her, and her potent charm enhanced all delights of the place'. 71 According to William Stillman, the United States Consul to Rome, the

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65 Lisa Merrill, "Old Maids, Sister-Artists, and Aesthetes": Charlotte Cushman and her circle of "jolly bachelors" construct an expatriate women's community in Rome. *Women's Writing* 10.2 (2003), 375.
67 CCP, 11.3295, 15 March, 1860.
69 Charles Durang, op. cit., 275.
71 Stebbins, ibid., 100.
women Cushman 'chose to fascinate [were] completely under her control'. Cushman was certainly strong and manipulative in character, and her lesbian consciousness allowed for not only an expression of transgressive personal power, but also for an expression of female empowerment. From Barrett Browning's letters and Blagden's writings it becomes apparent that Blagden was seduced by Cushman and her group, and she certainly flirted with the notion of same-sex love in order to establish an erotic and emotional identification with them as part of a lesbian sisterhood. As Merrill suggests: 'Cushman [. . .] began to attempt to negotiate the shifting priorities that each of these women would represent for her and to articulate the terms of their relationships'. For Blagden, as I will argue later in this chapter, Cushman filled an emotional gap, that of the absent mother-lover-figure.

Writing to her friend Margherita Mignaty in Florence Blagden remarks: 'when I wrote to you [. . .] it was all settled that we [. . .] were to be off Saturday, but the non-arrival of Miss Cushman's letter on Wednesday altered our plans so much I did not wish to go there, she had paid it - [. . .] On the day you met her, we were going to the Post again about it – Fortunately on Thursday it arrived. So our original intention was carried out'. In modern parlance this would suggest that Cushman had Blagden in her pay. Yet, there existed an emotional bond between the two women which is evidenced by the fact that Cushman kept a photograph of Blagden in her album and her death notice is also her Papers. In her novel, *The Cost of a Secret* (1863), Blagden's narrator comments: 'In looking back on our early recollections, most of us recall a feeling, which has perhaps left a heartache, in all our subsequent experience [. . .] and in women's lives some other woman has taken a place and held an

73 Merrill in *When Romeo Was a Woman* op. cit., 211.
influence, which no other impressions can erase'.\textsuperscript{75} Writing to Cushman, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer in 1869, Blagden suggested to her the following palliative: 'what you want is not external torture [but] the sedative of a kiss'.\textsuperscript{76} The comment expresses a sexually charged intimacy between the two women, conveyed in a language that is sensuous and erotic and denoting the complexity of their relationship. Given the tensions and jealousies that arose within Cushman's circle of women friends and lovers, and the fact that Cushman felt 'cheated' by Blagden over the invitation to stay at 38 Via Gregoriana, it is likely that there will have been an estrangement at some point between the two women. Certainly this is hinted at by Browning in a letter to Blagden in 1864, in which he states: 'I am glad, but a little surprised that you are in Rome again: a sudden fancy, it seems – I wish you all the enjoyment in the world'.\textsuperscript{77} The significant suggestiveness of 'sudden fancy' and 'enjoyment' lends meaning to the fact that Blagden and Cushman were reconciled and hence, their intimate relationship might be reignited.

'Women Alone Stir My Imagination' \textsuperscript{78}

In her writing, Blagden drew on Italy's unrestrained sensuousness and the lives of her Roman group of influential and powerful women in order to establish an aspirational lesbian poetics, in which Rome played a role in the narrative as a place of romance and seduction. A discussion of the following poems supports this argument: 'A Dialogue Between Two Friends', 'The Angels of Life', 'Say Which Were Best' and 'A Love Poem'.

\textsuperscript{75} Blagden, \textit{The Cost of a Secret}, op. cit., 22.
\textsuperscript{76} CCP, 9. July 16, 1869.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Dearest Isa}, op. cit., 187. The letter was written by Browning in London, and is dated March 19, 1865.
\textsuperscript{78} The title is taken from an essay by Blanche Wiesen Cook which appeared in \textit{Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society} 4.4 (1979), 727-728.
The theme, in 'A Dialogue Between Two Friends', is one of love and loss. In keeping with the style of the dramatic monologue form, the first section of the poem, subtitled, 'First Friend', speaks to an auditor, the 'Second Friend', who remains silent throughout the first monologue, although the Second Friend's presence is clearly implied when addressed: '[y]ou see my friend'. There is no obvious male persona which might suggest that the speaker, arguably Blagden herself, is speaking of her love for another woman. Reflecting upon a past intimacy, the poem's tone is immediate: 'The sharp regret, the gnawing pain/ The dumb and helpless sense of grief (1:1-2)/ Wild tossings on a sleepless bed/ All these I know' (9-10). The adjectives 'sharp' and 'gnawing' provide a psychological projection of the emotional torment the speaker experiences, and her subjectivity, defined as 'numb' and 'helpless', carries an image suggestive of her vulnerability. The metaphorical shipwreck, associated with 'wild tossings', becomes an adjunct of the speaker's turbulent emotions. The speaker's former lover's physical characteristics and demeanour resemble those of Cushman. In his observations of Cushman, Durang remarked that 'her face [ . . . ] was animated with a vivid blue eye', the description of which is present in the second stanza of Blagden's poem:

And stern and cold
My eyes met hers. Their fatal blue
Has no more power to search me through
The tale is told. (2:15-18)

The sensory elements of the speaker's 'stern and cold' eyes become as spectral metaphors, suggestive of a cold and inhospitable emotional landscape, her lover's seductive 'fatal blue' eyes symbolically connoting negative associations of coolness,
hostility and aloofness. The speaker's emotional detachment is suggested in the following lines:

I can withstand her smile. My heart,
Which leapt if she but shone afar,
Sees her without a thrill or start,
Unmoved as frozen billows are. (2:1-4)

The 'frozen billows' attach meaning to the surging sea metaphor, thus conveying the notion of a frozen heart. Covert lesbian desire is expressed in terms of the mysterious light of the moon in the following stanza:

All stark and hushed beneath the moon,
No longer swayed by her soft breath,
Locked in a dark impassive swoon. (2:6-8)

The spectral qualities associated with the light and dark side of the moon as an expression of the realm between conscious and unconscious states, provides for the 'dark impassive swoon' imagined as an orgasmic swoon, though undercut by the use of the word 'impassive'. The following two stanzas:

I hear her sigh,
And no wild tumult of the soul
Doth cast me prostrate at her feet.

And no delirium, sad yet sweet,
Now holds me fast.
The joy, the passion, and the fever,
Are dead for ever and for ever.
   The dream is past. (2:10-12; 14-18)

The homoerotic possibilities imagined in terms of 'wild tumult', 'delirium', 'passion'

79 Durang, op. cit., 275.
and 'fever', are undercut by the speaker's resignation that the love affair is over. However, the desire to possess her lover once again is expressed in the following two stanzas as the speaker moves from the realm of pain to one of anticipated pleasure:

And yet -  
Must I not see her once again,  
If but to prove by cold disdain  
That I forget?  
That I have read her through and through,  
Indifferent to those queenly charms.  
(3:13-16; 4:1-2)

The 'queenly charms' are evidence of Cushman's shadowy presence in this poem and in the following rhapsodic mental soliloquy the language builds to an ecstatic fantasy:

Ah! but to clasp her in these arms.  
And clasp her close.  
To gaze on those  
Wild, mystic, and unfathomed eyes,  
The witchery of that changeful mouth,  
The blond hair falling angel-wise,  
The tender bloom, the glorious youth.  
(4:4-5; 10-14)

The imagined 'clasp' and the lesbian 'gaze' suggest the erotic interplay between the speaker and the object of her desire. In her lesbian-feminist reading of Antonia White's *Frost in May*, Paulina Palmer suggests that

In *Frost in May*, as in the novels of Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf, devices of metonymy and displacement plays an important part in the text. Instead of treating female erotic relations explicitly, White creates a metonomic discourse focusing on 'hands' 'arms' and 'mouth'.80

These strategies apply equally well to Blagden's oblique 'devices of metonymy and displacement' in her search for an acceptable language with which to convey lesbian consciousness.

In 'Dialogue Between Two Friends', the sensuous language suggested by the words 'arms', 'clasp', 'wild', 'mystic', 'unfathomed' and 'witchery', provides for an indirection and displacement of a sexually charged intimacy in which the speaker fantasises a sexual re-encounter. The woman's description, and the sexually codified image of the 'blond hair falling angel-wise', fits Durang's description of Cushman's 'hair of auburn colour [which] fell in wavy profusion'.81 The freshness and ripeness associated with the 'tender bloom' and the beauty of 'glorious youth', suggest a homoerotic union of youthfulness indicative of Spring and a new beginning. The speaker's transgressive fantasies are, however, undercut by her enduring feelings of emotional exploitation:

I was a fond and foolish slave,
Who perished by her cruel scorn.

On whose crushed faith and love upborne
She lightly trod
To reach some other heart less sad.   (4:16-17; 19-21)

The stridency of the adjectives 'perished', 'cruel scorn' and 'crushed' in these lines suggests the intensity of the speaker's emotional crisis and of the devastation she feels, which is reiterated in the following lines:

By all this bitter sense of wrong,
By this deep hatred, fierce and strong . . .   (4:26-27)

81 Durang, op. cit., 275. Cushman's hair was sometimes described as blond/light brown.
The 'bitter' and 'deep hatred' reinforces the intensity of the moment, which is abruptly undercut by Blagden's use of ellipses which indicate a break in the speaker's thought process. The Second Friend, who, having assessed the speaker's feelings, responds at the end of the poem in the following four word refrain: 'That still you love'. The words are non-judgemental, and the effect of this sudden modulation in tone not only serves to comfort the speaker, but insists that the affair has no closure.

The abstracted perspective of the first person narrator in 'The Angels of Life', arguably Blagden herself, is characterised by a dream-driven discourse with its sense of utopic other-worldliness. This sapphically inspired poem, opening with its reference to 'the rock-bound shores of time/ I wept o'er all the buried wrecks sublime', subversively expresses the subjectivity of women's experience. In this seventeen-stanza poem, the first eight stanzas read as a displaced lament for all women who are victims of male exploitation in a phallocentric culture. The ghost-like presence of 'the footsteps of bygone years/ As slow they passed with chill, relentless eyes' (2:1-2), become menacing psychological projections of the suggestive haunting dead spirits: 'Said one - "I bore thy bloom of health away/ I kissed its rose with breath all icy cold/ Thy being could not ripen nor unfold" ' (3:1-2/ 4). As an appropriation of lesbian eroticism, the flower/fruit imagery represented in terms of 'bloom', 'ripen', 'rose', and 'unfold' are potential clitoral symbols which support the notion of a repressed and concealed lesbian consciousness in the poem, and, in support of this argument, the final eight stanzas are discussed.

The speaker's phantom-haunted consciousness provides for a transition, in the ninth stanza, from one state of consciousness to another. The 'mocking Phantom' (6:1) and the 'mournful spectres of the past' having 'Faded' (10:4) in the memory, the
speaker then experiences a rhapsodic moment as 'a light/ Broke/ and o'er its gleaming path fair spirits bright/ Trod with soft noiseless feet' (9:4) "We are thy future" said the gracious band' (10:1). The spectral qualities of the 'fair bright spirits' (9:3) envision a female utopia in which Blagden assigns Cushman and her thiasos, 'the gracious band', to a position of fantasy as ethereally constructed angels. Terry Castle has suggested that 'many lesbians [. . .] have engaged in a sort of self-ghosting, hiding or camouflaging their sexual desires', and the following four lines express the sublimation and intensity of the 'self-ghosting' of Blagden's lesbian speaker:

One kissed my lips with kisses warm and pure -
A sweetness without smiles was on her brow.
Each kiss aroused me, I could now endure,
Accept my grief, and thus resist its blow. (11:1-4)

The speaker's jouissance, in the Lacanian sense, provides a transcendent homoeroticism by which she is empowered: 'where hopes despairs, I can o'ercome' (12:5). Although lesbian desire and pleasure are displaced in these lines, and sexual arousal is not explicitly stated, the overt eroticism fits an accepted language with which to represent lesbian desire in the mid-nineteenth-century.

The binaries of utopian other-worldly lesbian desire and transient, earthly heterosexual passion is expressed when 'with linked hands two seraph forms serene/ Approached; harmoniously their voices flowed' (13:1-2). The imagery suggested by the angelic-like linking of hands suggests a mystic companionship between women lending feminine homoeroticism the innocence of divine sanction. The metaphoric suggestiveness of the harmony of their flowing voices imagines a soothing honey-like seductive sedative. This is in opposition to the discordant imagery associated

82 Castle, op. cit., 7.
with 'earthly passion's fiery glow/ Its transient ecstasy, its wild unrest' (14:1-2),
which imagines the destructive forces of passion associated with heterosexual love.
The appropriation of the utopian imagery associated with the maternal metaphor in
the following lines: 'Between our torches calm thy life shall flow'/ (14:1-3) and 'the
fairest, last/ Filled her grand maternal form the space' (15:1-2), is in opposition to the
active colour associated with the 'fiery glow'. Blagden's deployment of the maternal
metaphor imagines a protective and nurturing figure, engulfing 'the space' which
envisions the grandeur of a universe filled with maternal love. Cushman, who had,
according to her lover Stebbins, a 'fine stately presence', was a tall, fair-haired, well-
built woman and her role was always that of a nurturer-mother-lover figure in her
Roman thiasos, and arguably, Blagden imagines the 'maternal form' in a utopian
world as a vision of Cushman, the powerful woman by whom she was seduced.

In 'The Angels of Life' powerful images of the mother-figure and her body,
suggest a quasi-sexual fantasy world, suggestive of transgressive possibilities.
Suzanne Raitt suggests that: 'lesbian poems [. . .] reach back to a world [. . .] in
which women – and particularly the mother – collude to keep men out'. 83 The joy
expressed in the poem, is literally overshadowed and 'darkened by the shade' of the
masculine-gendered 'pinions vast' (15:3), the speaker's vision of the mother being
obliterated when she 'saw not yet the glory of her face' (15:4). This is perhaps
revelatory regarding Blagden's attempts to recapture the loss of her own mother, an
absent and silent figure throughout her life, and a haunting presence in much of her
poetry. The final resolution for 'The Angels of Life' is everlasting life in heaven, the
Christian dwelling-place for angels, and not on earth. Sappho-like the 'maternal form'
slowly 'unveiled, and beautiful arose' (16:4) and in the final stanza her disembodied

83 Suzanne Raitt, Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia
voice cries out:

"Mortal! The dream of life I solve for thee"
She spoke, it was a voice without a breath -

"I am the pilot of Eternity -
Though seest Happiness, I bring thee Death!"

Hence, death is not the fearful alternative to life. Rather than jumping Sappho-like to her death from a rock and descending into the deep, the 'fair spirit' ascends Christ-like to heaven, a transcendent utopian space in which female sexuality can be redefined.

**Literary Allusions to Greek Mythology**

As previously noted, Blagden was familiar with the cultures and fables of classical antiquity. In her two poems 'Say Which Were Best' and 'A Love Poem' there is an obvious interplay of literary allusions to Greek mythology in terms of the motifs of bees and honey, appropriated by Blagden in order to exploit the wild, intoxicating and prophetic aspects of the bee metaphor as a site of pain, pleasure and desire. In 'Say Which Were Best' Blagden draws on the character of Circe, the enchantress-goddess in Homer's *Odyssey*. In this allegorical tale, Circe a beautiful and manipulative woman entices her victims to drink a honied intoxicant from her goblet in order to drug them. The opening two lines of the poem reveal the dreamy inertia and hedonistic aspects of the poem: 'Steeped in some soft delicious sin,/ Whose charmèd langours wrap thee in'. Enticed by the 'honied sweetness' (1:9) from her goblet, her victims descend into a drunken stupor: 'More luscious, rich, and strong the wine/ Half delirious, half divine!' (1:13-14). The potency of the enticingly honey-frenzied drink and the linguistically overt sensuousness of 'delicious sin', suggest the subversive possibilities of lesbian seduction and transgression.
As her victims fall prey to 'the poisoned dregs' (1:10) the more

Loud the mighty sorceress laughed
As her slaves her goblet quaffed
The liquid flame ran wild within
And each was happy in his sin,
Unconscious of the outward shame,
Sealed from regret, remorse, or blame -
Sealed from all passion which might stir,
Or sting, each sense-bound worshipper. (2:1-8)

The licentiousness suggested by 'The liquid flames ran wild within', the decadence associated with 'each was happy in his sin', the honey-maddened oblivion suggested by 'Unconscious of the outward shame', acknowledges the hedonistic aspects of the poem, serving as a critique of self-indulgence and an over-indulgent lifestyle.

Questions of morality and of the futility of a false existence invade the speaker's thoughts in Blagden's poem:

The false enchantress! she knows well
That if the joys were bitter sweet,
That if the guilt were not complete
A moment's suffering breaks the spell!
And thus she guards their tranced sleep
With opiates strange, luxurious deep. (2:9-14)

The effect of these lines is intensified by the oxymoron 'bitter sweet' which inhabits the realms of both pain and pleasure.

The above two stanzas recall Cobbe's description of the orgiastic feasts in Via Gregoriana, and of the sensuous aspects of wine, food and feasting, in which 'the merry feasts where Campagna wild-boars and American oysters were dispatched [. . .] amid a merry jest', is Bacchanalian in its imagery. Arguably, Blagden projects
her version of Circe the 'mighty sorceress' and the 'false enchantress' onto Cushman, with her 'potent charm' (expressed by her lover Stebbins) and her 'versatile powers' (suggested by Durang), imply that she had an almost divine-like power over those (particularly women) with whom she came into contact. The controlling images inherent in the last two lines of the second stanza recall Stillman's comment regarding Cushman as 'the women she chose to fascinate were completely under her control'.

Cushman is cast as a 'femme fatale', though this is complicated by the same-sex victim. The honied intoxicant with which Circe plies her victims so as to erase their thoughts and memories, is implied in the line: 'The soothed senses wildly blest/ The lulled conscience charmed to rest' (2:17-18), which imagines a dream-like inertia supported by the utopian concept of 'Life, one long voluptuous dream!' (2:20). Likewise, the lotus eaters in Tennyson's poem (1832) were under a similar spell, their trance-like behaviour induced by seduction through sinister hedonistic potions. The ambiguity of the questions Blagden poses: 'And this is sin? then what is error?' (3:1) appear to condone the 'sin' suggested by the 'voluptuous dream' as a preferable state to the 'error' of 'anguish', 'terror' (3:2), 'retribution' (3:5) and the 'self-wrought doom' (3:6) of a profane and earthly life. Arguably, Blagden's referential use of language comes as a warning against such self-destructive attraction.

Acquiring self-knowledge through painful experience created the need for utopian transcendency. In the context of Sackville West's poetics, Raitt has suggested that '[she] reimagined the natural world as a space in which sexuality could be renegotiated and enjoyed in seclusion and safety'. The following lines in Blagden's 'Say Which Were Best': 'Hushed in some fair and downy nest/ To pass through Life in

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84 Stillman, op. cit., 361-62.
85 Raitt, op. cit., 12.
idle swoon' (3:22-23) anachronistically reflect Raitt's comment in the context of Sackville-West's utopian poetics. The language, an affirmation of lesbian erotic desire, is searching for a means of escape from a disapproving world in order to be closeted and comforted in a transcendent place of safety.

In much of Blagden's poetry there is a point of transition, a crossing over from the realm of fantasy and pleasure to one of earthly pain and suffering:

Sorrow th'eternal law of Earth  
The pangs of travail prelude Birth,  
And through the unuttered agony 
Which we call Death, our souls are free.    (4:3-6)

The procreative trope, 'The pangs of travail prelude Birth', depicts the suffering and pain mortal beings, namely lesbian women, must endure before they can achieve a transcendent consciousness. In the final line of the poem, 'Life sanctified – Death perfected!'/ Say which were best', death depicts the end of earthly existence as we understand it, but through death, mankind's spiritual journey begins. In drawing on Homer's spiritual *Odyssey*, which addresses man's struggle (in the sense of the universal epithet) with the irresistible forces of temptation and desire, Blagden's poem transposed those themes onto a highly subversive reading of a covert lesbian world.86

Similarly, an expression of lesbian desire and fulfilment is embedded in the lines of Blagden's poem, 'A Love Poem: Rosamond'. For the purposes of my discussion, I will concentrate on the first stanza of the poem which is conveyed with Sapphic intensity, as for example, the honey bee imagery in Sappho's fragment, 'Orchard', which 'pulsates', as Snyder suggests, 'with ecstatic eroticism':

the honey-seeking, golden banded
the yellow swarm
was not more fleet than I
The honey-seeking
paused not,
the air thundered their song,
and I alone was prostrate.  

Similarly, the bee metaphor, repeated again in Blagden's poem, recalls an epiphanic experience invoked by the natural world, in which the speaker's dreams are sought by association with a swarm of bees, expressed in the first stanza:

Oh what a golden swarm of dreams
    Came to my couch last night,
And hovered o'er me with their gleams
    Of soft and mystic light,
And sucked the sweetness of my sleep
    Through long and quick'n'ing hours!
Then left me dewless, rifled, spent,
    As satiate bees leave flowers.

The mystical 'golden swarm of dreams' and the associated active adverbs of pulsating and hovering, provide an encoded subtext for lesbian desire, the eroticised language building to an orgiastic fantasy in the first six lines.

The above lines pay tribute to Homer's Hymn to Hermes, and in this context, Scheinberg cites the 'bee maidens' who were not 'unlike [. . .] female divinities' who had oracular powers and formed 'female triads'.  

As soothsayers and prophets, the bee maidens' method of prophecy, which alternated between truth and lies, was dependent on their satiated condition. The satiated bee, symbolic of its honied-sweetness but also of its sting, are evocative of the boundaries between pleasure and pain, between truth and lies. The orgiastic image associated with the phrase: 'sucked

87 Snyder, op. cit., 145.
88 Scheinberg, op. cit., 1-2.
the sweetness' in the fifth line, expressed in terms of excessive sexual arousal, falls to
an anticlimax in the final two lines as the speaker is left 'dewless', 'rifled' and 'spent'.
A sense of displaced release is conveyed by the use of these adjectives which are
suggestive of autoeroticism and of post-coital love-making. Ironically, satisfaction
and disappointment are ambiguously expressed as the adjectives also convey a
certain negativity associated with the violation of 'flowers', or de-flowering, and the
connotation of rape.

The twilight imagery associated with 'soft and mystic light' (1:4), connotes the
liminality between the unconscious and conscious mind. As Angela Smith explains,
the concept of liminality is '[T]he impression of living in-between', and in this
context, in 'A Love Poem', Blagden writes her own mystical narrative which offers an
in-between zone in which to negotiate questions of sexuality and identity.89 Raitt
comments that there appears to be a 'close connection between mystical and
autobiographical narratives', and Blagden's poem stands up to that analysis as a
psychological expression of her own jouissance and transcendent experience.90

Though these poems are not necessarily and exclusively a semi-autobiographical
reflection of Blagden's own desires, they are, more broadly speaking, poems about
illicit (lesbian) desire and relationships between women. Hence, in a broader context,
Blagden was a poet who wanted to give a voice to socially marginalised identities,
regardless of her own sexual feeling.

89 Angela Smith, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, a public of two (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1999), 2.
90 Raitt, op. cit., 131.
Alternative Spaces

The interconnection between 'mystical and autobiographical narratives', suggested by Raitt, is foregrounded in the following two poems in the context of alternative, utopian spaces: *L’Ariccia. Death in Life. No. 1* and *L’Ariccia. Life in Death. No. 11* and 'Orphanhood'. *L’Ariccia* is a revisioning of the Pagan Etruscan and Latini civilisations, written in a language imbued with Christian symbolism and this enables Blagden to subvert her transgressive fantasies in the poem in the context of her lesbian consciousness.\(^1\) The poem's setting, is the forested landscape and groves of the Alban Hills in Ariccia: 'These Alban Hills, these fair Arcadian shades' (2:19,1).\(^2\) Ariccia has a long history of welcoming artists and writers who left Rome in the summer months to escape the heat of the city. The area particularly appealed to writers and artists associated with Romanticism, and the German Romantic poet, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, visited in the 1780s. The Scottish poet, Eliza Ogilvy, in her work, 'Traditions in Tuscany in Verse' (1851), recalls the Alban Hills and Ariccia and the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, wrote his epic verse-play, *Brand*, in Ariccia in 1865. American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow mentions Rome and Ariccia in his recollections of 'A Year in Italy' (1828), and Henry James was also captivated by the beauty of Ariccia which is recalled by him in his travelogue, *Italian Hours* (1909).

The tripartite structure of Blagden's poem in the first section of *L'Ariccia. Death in Life. No.1*, comprises of three interconnected parts: a forty-one line verse-

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91 The Etruscans inhabited areas of Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio, from c700 BC until they became part of the Roman Republic between the 8th and 1st centuries BC. The Latini, were another group of people who inhabited an area around Rome from 5th to 3rd centuries BC. (See Lisa Bonfante). Several artefacts are in the British Museum in London and a curator's note reads: 'From 800 BC the Etruscans grew wealthy from mining, agriculture and trading throughout the Mediterranean. They were famed for their metalwork and powers of prophecy, and derided for the freedom they allowed their women and their love of banqueting. They heavily influenced Roman culture, but by 200 BC, like the rest of Italy had fallen under Roman rule'.

92 The Alban Hills and Ariccia are twelve miles south-east of Rome. During the Etruscan age Ariccia was spelt Aricia.
paragraph in iambic pentameter, which, as Terry Eagleton suggests is 'saturated with social meaning', hence, the significance of Blagden's choice of metre in this poem. 93 As Eagleton adds: 'the ritual chant and regular thuds of the rhythm' of the iambic pentameter, evoke, in the context of this poem, the rhythm of a beating heart. 94 The verse-paragraph is followed by a Sapphic-like five-quatrain song-poem, conceived as an interlude. The third section comprises a twenty-four line verse-paragraph in iambic pentameter. The second part of the poem, L'Ariccia. Life in Death. No.11, comprises twenty-three quatrains, the cadence of which, suitably fits the subject matter, having all the elements of an elegy in the first eleven stanzas. A common feature in much of Blagden's poetry is a cross-over point mid-way through the poem, and this occurs in stanzas twelve to twenty, which build to the final resolution expressed in stanzas twenty-one to twenty-three. Blagden's choice of form, the sapphically-inspired lyrical stanza, suitably fits with the poem's theme, the idolisation of women, and its connection with the poetic traditions of Ancient Rome and Greece. 95

L'Ariccia is a lesbian poem, subversive and transgressive in content and dense in richly ambiguous images. In order to express her vision, Blagden deploys representations of past civilisations, intertextuality and overt patterns of Christian symbolism, which give rise to many interpretative possibilities. An imaginative dream-like world is imagined as: 'a space for visioned dreams [. . .] midway 'twixt earth and/ heaven' (1:9-10), thus creating an earthly paradise which values above all, the female sex. Terry Castle has suggested that 'lesbian fiction characteristically

94 Ibid., 162.
95 For the purposes of referencing this poem, I will indicate the first section, L'Ariccia. No. 1, as 1: followed by the verse-line number(s). The interlude/lyrical section is referenced by the stanza number. The third section, a continuation of the verse-paragraph, is referenced as 1: followed by verse-line number. The second part of the poem is referenced as 2 and followed by the stanza/verse-line number.
exhibits, even as it masquerades as "realistic" in surface detail, a strong fantastical, allegorical or utopian tendency'.\textsuperscript{96} Castle's comment is supported by Blagden's dream-like vision of a female utopian space, the metaphoric suggestiveness of which is expressed throughout the poem. By locating the poem in the sacred past, Blagden identifies 'the Etruscan age' (1:43). Living in pre-Christian times, the Etruscans placed a high value on sensual pleasure: 'the Pagan glory [whose] soul throbs here/Voluptuous still' (1:56-57).

Etruscan society was pleasure-seeking and permissive, and in order to subvert her lesbian consciousness in the poem, Blagden locates her desiring women in Ariccia. As Bonfante explains: 'All the standard charges of luxurious living are present [in Etruscan society] lust, luxury, nudity, homosexuality, the parties'.\textsuperscript{97} Group orgies at social functions were an accepted part of their society. Etruscan women were powerful, influential and emancipated, and Blagden portrays them as sensuous, beautiful and enigmatic: 'Inebriate with joy and life and youth'/ (1:59), 'luxuriant, fervent and supreme' (1:63). The women often exercised naked with men, not necessarily their own husbands, and with other women. Images from paintings in Etruscan tombs, and engravings on the backs of bronze hand-held mirrors, often depict homosexual and other erotic acts, as well as scenes of family life, reading, music, dancing and drinking. As Bonfante states: 'There is an emphasis on [. . .] literacy in Etruscan mirrors and urns, inscriptions of people reading, writing, or holding writing tablets or scrolls'.\textsuperscript{98}

Etruscan women were highly literate and played a role in Etruscan divination, as prophets and religious figures, or deities, seeking to know the future by supernatural

\textsuperscript{96} Castle, op. cit., 229.\textsuperscript{97} Bonfante, op. cit., 235.\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 241.
means. One such figure was Vegoia, who, as Nancy Thomson suggests, was 'an important figure in Etruscan prophecy [. . .]. She is mentioned as the author or source of books on lightning [. . .] and is particularly recognised as a source for an account about the creation of the world'.\(^99\) This imagines the vision of a powerful woman-creator figure, an appropriate theme in the context of Blagden's feminist-lesbian consciousness. Blagden's appropriation of Etruscan women as signifiers (I use the term in the Saussurrean sense) of erotic power masks a powerfully questioning lesbian discourse in *L'Ariccia*.\(^100\) The speaker retreats into the imagination to construct a paradisical landscape. Raitt suggests that there is a 'tradition of the lesbian pastoral' in which 'fantasies of a pastoral social stability' and 'Lesbian pleasure and the love of women are imaged as part of a nostalgic golden world'.\(^101\)

The theme of Blagden's 'nostalgic golden world', is set in the opening lines of her poem: 'I gaze upon a scene of Arcady', an image which is similarly repeated in the fourteenth line: 'I gaze in rapture deep and still'.\(^102\) Arguably, the 'gaze', is a reversal of the conventional male gaze to become the unconventional lesbian gaze, projected onto the women characters in the poem. Hence, Blagden displaces the theme of lesbian sexual desire by locating it in the permissive society of the Etruscans. The utopian aspect of this poem is comforting in the face of Victorian society's view of 'deviance' from the true 'norm' of the heterosexual position, and consequently,

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100 My comment is based on the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure who claimed that language is a system of signs, or semiotics, a system of differences and of elements within the system of language, whose 'most precise characteristic is to be what others are not'. In Jonathan Culler, ed., *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57-58. Hence, Etruscan women, as signifiers, are signals to the meaning of the image. As signifiers they give meaning (or signification) to how the image is communicated.
101 Raitt, op. cit., 12-13. Although Raitt applies these comments to Sackville-West in her search 'for images of an originary or Edenic relationship', they are also applicable in the context of my discussion of Blagden's poem.
102 Arcady, a district in Greece, whose people were traditionally idolised as having a simple, innocent and rural lifestyle, filled with music and dancing.
Desiring Women: Lovers, Mothers, Sisters

The speaker, entranced by a group of young girls singing and dancing, for whom they become the eroticised object of a voyeuristic lesbian gaze, visualises . . . a joyous laughing throng
Of brown-cheeked girls, with large flashing eyes
And ebon locks vine-garlanded are grouped;
And one who, fairer than the rest, has looped
Those scarlet blossoms 'mid tendrils, flings
High o'er her head her tambourine and sings
A measured chant, through which the greenwood
Rings. (1:34-41)

The fascination with gypsy women, as imagined in the above lines in terms of their seductiveness, exoticism and passion, was particularly appealing to both the lesbian and male gaze. As previously discussed in Blagden's poem 'Rome, 1870', in the context of the woman's 'cheeks' which were burnished from 'golden brown to amber' (2:2), the 'brown-cheeked girls' in this poem, a possible Indian/Spanish allusion, is coded in racial terms. In her discussion of the gypsy figure in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847) and George Eliot's The Spanish Gypsy (1868), Deborah Epstein Nord suggests that 'the gypsy could signify social marginality, nomadism, alienation, and lawlessness' and symbolise 'not only cultural difference but a deep sense of unconventional, indeed aberrant femininity'. Hence, the gypsy functions as a symbol of otherness.

103 The notion of sexual deviance was previously discussed in Chapter Two in the context of the Woman Question, and in Chapter Three, in the context of Blagden's feminist consciousness poems.

104 Deborah Epstein Nord, "Marks of Race": Gypsy Figures and Eccentric Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Victorian Studies 41.2 (Winter, 1998), 189 and 190. The gypsy trope is further discussed in the context of Blagden's poem 'A Living Picture' which is discussed later in this chapter.
Although frequently portrayed romantically, the gypsy, with her 'large flashing eyes' and 'ebon locks', is often defined (by men) as the fallen or depraved woman. The imagery associated with wild, hot-blooded women with free-flowing hair, becomes a sexual code indicative of freedom and liberation and later in her poem, Blagden imagines: 'Bacchante's dark-floating hair' (1:58) in the context of the hedonism of Etruscan society.\(^{105}\) There is evidence of Blagden's intertextual relationship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous Romantic ode, *Kubla Khan or A Vision in a Dream* (1816) from which she borrows his 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair' (50) imagery.\(^{106}\) Coleridge's poem was conceived by him in an opium-induced vision of a dark mysterious figure, who, is at once terrifying and intriguing, much like the gypsy herself. Gypsy women imagery becomes dangerous and problematic, displaying an independence and freedom of spirit that was threatening to Victorian representations of gender, and hence, the status quo.

Victorian society placed great importance on the notion of motherhood, thus reinforcing patriarchal expectations of woman's procreative role as nurturer and carer. *L'Ariccia* is a poem that worships women and venerates motherhood.\(^{107}\) Blagden's idealisation of the mother-figure in the poem, is, however, subversive and transgressive in its metaphorical suggestiveness. In the following lines Blagden appropriates the maternal metaphor in order to reimagine the mother-lover-figure:

\[
\text{. . . leaning down o'er earth, a tender face} \\
\text{(its sweetness mortal, but its calm divine)} \\
\text{Fair Nature smiling o'er her chosen shrine!} \quad (1:13-15)
\]

\(^{105}\) Bacchante was a drunken female reveller, a priestess of Bacchus, the god of wine, hence the term Bacchanalia. Etruscan women drank alongside men, and so defied male domination.

\(^{106}\) The above quotation is from *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press, 1907), 276.

\(^{107}\) A repeated theme in Etruscan art, and in the engravings on the back of bronze hand-held mirrors, was that of the mother and child. As Bonfante states: '[b]irth scenes are popular; nursing scenes, the figure of the mother holding the baby and the mother nursing at the breast. Mythical mothers and nurses were popular and venerated in Italy', op. cit., 238.
This powerful image of a protective maternal presence is symbolised as an identification with mother-nature, whose 'sweetness', though 'mortal', is transcended by a divinely inspired and serene 'calm'. Likened to the Virgin Mary who died an earthly death, her 'tender face' is personified in terms of 'Fair Nature smiling'. The 'chosen shrine' and its connotations of veneration in the context of the mother-figure, is elevated to the status of a celestial being, evidence of which occurs in the second part of the poem, *L'Ariccia. No. II*: 'When angel mothers sing of parent love' (2:8,1).

Raitt suggests that 'Lesbian poems and autobiographies reach back to a world before the assumption of heterosexuality, a world in which the women – and particularly the mother – collude to keep men out'.[^108] Raitt's comments have particular relevance with the interlude section of the girl's song, reflecting a participatory woman's world which rules out the presence of men:

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Our vineyard toils are done.
Sisters let us rest
Each beside, her chosen one,
I on my mother's breast.       (1)
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This stanza is a celebration of the sisterhood of women, of motherhood, and the Christian ethic of work and toil.[^109] In the following two stanzas of the girl's song, the mother is not only a model of femininity, she is also the object of female desire:

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For me, no lover's smiles o'er shone,
Beguiling where it charms;
I seek it not, I envy none,
Clasped in my mother's arms.        (2)
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[^109]: Although the Etruscan people were Pagans, Blagden fuses the two beliefs of Paganism and Christianity, in order to subversively express her poetics.
My love is hers, and hers alone,
Each pulse of hers a part;
My very life to hers has grown
Linked to my mother's heart.  (3)

These powerful images of the mother and her body, hint at a quasi-sexual fantasy world, suggestive of transgressive possibilities. A semi-autobiographical reading of the absent mother-figure in Blagden's life, has resonance in these two stanzas. Her inscriptions are marked by displacing a lover's love onto the mother, the language moving between a lover's love and a mother's love, which speaks of a relationship between women that had no name in Victorian patriarchal discourse. The following stanza in the girl's song, is, perhaps, an allegory of Blagden's own history:

Ye smile, 'No mother has thou known,
An orphan from thy birth.'
Her tender love ye all may own
Our loving mother – Earth.  (4)

The recurring theme of the absent mother-figure in Blagden's work would suggest that she wished to reclaim her mother's image, and this can only be achieved by locating her in a utopian world, in which death is banished. This argument is supported by the pseudo-scriptural imagery in the final stanza, which imagines the vision of a woman imitating Christ:

But most am I her cherished one,
She calls me to my rest.
To lay all toil and sorrow down
Asleep upon her breast!

The language and sound patterns are imitative of Christ's: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest', which imagines the divine being located in the mother-lover figure and morphing into Mary, the virgin mother
Hence, the mother is not only a model of femininity, but the object of female desire. The repetition of the last two words of each stanza, 'mother's breast', 'mother's arms', 'mother's heart' and 'mother-Earth', echo the ritual chanting of a thudding and beating heart, and thus reinforce the fantasy of longing, yearning and desire. The nurturing mother is imagined in the verse-paragraph following the girl's song, in terms of breasts and milk: '[t]he early children of the earth,/ Who from her affluent breasts derived their birth' (45-46). The milk metaphor in Christian terms, is, as Marina Walker suggests: 'a crucial metaphor for the gift of life [...] of which [the Virgin] Mary's milk is a sublime epiphany'. In the context of the Etruscan civilisation, which pre-dates Christianity, images of breasts were commonly depicted in their art and artefacts. Anthony Corbeill suggests that: 'Images of breasts reinforce the fertile significance that Etruscans attached to the female breast [...] Artefacts found in Etruscan funerary contexts [...] highlight a probable relationship between breasts, lactation, and the notion of an afterlife for the deceased'. In the context of Blagden's deceased absent mother-figure, her spirit lives on, and consequently her protective maternal presence lingers.

In the first eleven stanzas of L'Ariccia. No.11., the speaker expresses sorrow at the death of the young songstress: 'For her, poor child, both song and dance are o'er!' (2:2,4). In the heterosexual context, the songstress, an improvisatrice, like Landon's Eulalie, dies for the erotic pleasure of men. In the lesbian context, Blagden subverts this notion:

Oh what a wealth on that low bier is spread,
O'er which the curious eye may scan and hover.

111 Walker, op. cit., 197.
The mouth, on which no lover's lips may press,
Its rosy promise all untimely pale.  (2:4,1-2; 5,1-2)

The male gaze becomes 'the curious eye' of the lesbian gaze, and the eroticised language of 'lover's lips' and 'rosy promise', supports this notion. The songstress, posing as the figure of Sappho, the poetic sister, becomes self-silencing through death: 'Low veiled thy virgin brow, and hushed thy lyre' (2:8,4). The reader is not informed how the songstress died. However, by subverting the traditional feminine literary death, Blagden is making a bold feminist statement:

Thy fate yet unfulfilled – so young to die!
Ah! Not to such as though is earth a prison
Nor death glad freedom from captivity.  (2:6, 2-4)

The metaphors of containment, her 'prison' and 'captivity', in the sixth stanza, speak of the reality of the lives of many women living in a patriarchally defined society in the nineteenth century.

Blagden's 'Arcady' has echoes of Coleridge's opium-induced pleasure-dome in 'Kubla Khan, or, A Vision in a Dream', in which her young tambourine-playing songstress is imitative of Coleridge's 'Abyssinian maid' who, 'on her dulcimer she played (40)/ Her symphony and song/ (43) with music loud and long' (45). The speaker's mourning for the dead songstress in Blagden's poem is evoked by the sensoriness of: 'A solemn hymn is ringing through the dome' (2:1,1), which she borrows from Coleridge's vision of 'The shadow of the dome of pleasure' (31). The hymn-song's 'echoes' still resonate throughout the 'dome' long after the songstress in Blagden's poem has died. However, the allusion created in this poem, defined as: 'And yet she lives: for ever and for ever' (2:12,1), also speaks of other

113 Coleridge's lines, as quoted above, are from The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, op. cit., 277.
realities for women which transcend this world. In her Xanadu dream-like space, Blagden's songstress lives on 'In joys eternal lives the soul' (2:21,3). The poem's subtitle, 'Life in Death', conveys Blagden's imagined and triumphant vision of an all-female utopian space in which death (for women) is overcome.

The final stanza of the poem reads as an evocation of Blagden's 'vision in a dream', which she defines as

The fountain's music is the hymn of praise,  
That murmurs oft, from yon orbed worlds to this,  
The fountain's prismed hues, the blended rays  
Which there shall merge, past, present, future  
Bliss!

The 'prismed hues, the blended rays', become, in their metaphoric suggestiveness, a rainbow, a bridge between heaven and earth, and a symbol of reconciliation between God and (wo)man. The poem ends on a climax, the word 'Bliss', being delayed until the final line. Standing on its own, it builds up to an epiphany, carrying with it its own jouissance in terms of sexual pleasure.

The apparent mirroring of the word of God and the distillation of Pagan sensuousness in the poem, carries a powerful and erotically charged sexual symbolism in fairly unambiguous terms. Although the poem is divided into parts and varies in form, it can be read as a unifying whole. Blagden's unifying devices are successfully and skilfully achieved by the repetitive occurrence of sensory and sensual images throughout the poem, connecting by association, rather than by any obvious connection. These devices are deployed by Blagden to express her feminist-lesbian sensibilities. By aligning the poem with sexual politics she creates a powerful

114 This pseudo-scriptural imagery has resonance in The Book of Revelation in the Bible: 'And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever', Chapter 10: 6.  
115 The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, op. cit., 277.
feminist-lesbian discourse in order to establish a powerful feminine identity.

The Absent Mother-figure

As previously discussed in Chapter One, in the context of the absent mother figure in Blagden's own childhood and her emotional and physical detachment from her father, her fourteen-stanza poem 'Orphanhood', read as a semi-autobiographical account, is revealing: Beneath the 'spell' of the 'shadow of the forest trees' (1:1), her 'childhood withered' (1:2). The trees' identification with the natural world, suggests other, more subversive possibilities. Unpacked in the context of Blagden's lesbian consciousness, the poem displaces her childhood fears onto the forest to provide an encoded account of lesbian desire. The first five stanzas express the speaker's struggle to escape the dark shadows of the trees, the metaphorical suggestiveness of which, introduces the notion, in twenty-first century parlance, of fighting her way out of the 'closet'. The tree metaphor, repeated in every refrain at the end of each stanza, and the refrain's indentation draws the reader's attention to the poem's layout, thus creating the notion of an alternative space within the poem itself, in which to envision other possibilities:

The shadow of the forest trees -
One morn they 'quivered in the blast
Wild moaned the storm, and broke at last
The shadow of the trees. (6)

The associated imagery of quivering and moaning signal sexual desire and the fulfilment of a personal fantasy, the notion of which is supported in the seventh stanza when the speaker: 'hailed a sky of happy blue/ Unshadowed by the trees' (3-4), is followed in the ninth stanza, when: 'My heart awoke to raptured love/ Unshadowed by the trees'. The experience, though fleeting, is reiterated in the thirteenth stanza:
'Alas for heart!/ also for stream/ both have had one blessed gleam' (2-3), the 'stream' and 'gleam' having orgasmic connotations. However, the speaker's ecstatic state is undercut by the foreboding, overshadowing trees:

   Alas! Alas! The forest trees -
   Again they closed around my head,
   And love and hope and joy were dead,
   Shadowed by the forest trees.          (11)

These lines foreground the speaker's anti-climax, both literally and metaphorically, and warn of the possible dangers of transgressive desire. The apparent fulfilment of personal desire becomes one of resignation in the final stanza:

   Despite the shadow of the trees,
   The heart has loved, the stream has sung,
   Now let their mournful knell be rung,
   Shadowed by forest trees.

Any potential meanings remain elusive and enigmatic, but the imagery of the 'stream' as previously mentioned, has a subversive resonance in the imagining of an orgasmic experience, one in which Blagden perhaps, sought to alleviate her own suppressed frustrations and anxieties. Another interpretative possibility is suggested by the phallic verticality of the trees which take on a symbolic dimension in terms of patriarchy, women's confinement and of living in the shadows of men.

In her examination of Sackville-West's lesbian proclivities, Raitt cites Sackville-West's poem, *The Land* (1926), which provides, albeit anachronistically, an interesting interpretation when read in the context of Blagden's poem. The following section of Sackville-West's poem provides the analogy:
Women and woods, with shadowed aisles profound
That none explore.

There is a kinship: down the open ride
She strays, eternal nymph, and glances swift
Into the ambushed depths on either side;
Now fears the shadows.  (240-241; 250-253) 116

Raitt suggests that 'the "shadowed aisles profound" are the enticing entrances to the woman herself, as well as to the secret woods. The passage signals [...] the explicit exploration of lesbian desire and its unexplored contours'. In her poem, Blagden's exploration of the 'enticing' hidden depths and secret spaces that a forest yields is not only an expression of lesbian desire, but also connotes the liminality between the hidden recesses of the conscious and unconscious mind.

Unrestrained Sensuousness

The lesbian pastoral gives way to the lesbian pictorial in the following art-inspired poem in which Blagden seeks an alternative exploration of lesbian consciousness.

In her poem 'A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice, Rome', Blagden again draws on the canon of High Renaissance art. Her poem imagines the Italian masterpiece, Giorgione's Sleeping Venus (c1510) an iconographic and eroticised interpretation of Venus, the goddess of love, who, in the painting, reclines naked upon a couch.

117 Raitt, op. cit., 99.
Art conflates with life, and, as the title of the poem suggests, this is 'A Living Picture' in which Blagden superimposes the goddess in Giorgione's painting onto an artist's model living in Rome, whom she knew. In her memoir of the sculptor Gibson, Blagden writes of

His most beautiful model, Grazia [. . .] was the frequent subject of his conversation. Her sordid avarice, her fierce chastity, her furious temper [. . .] and the contrast which her moral nature presented to her beauty, was graphically described [as] this wild panther of a woman [. . .] An English lady who had often heard of Grazia's marvellous beauty, asked permission to see her as she was sitting for her bust to Gibson.118

Although Grazia was a sculptor's model, for the purposes of her poem, Blagden morphs her into the sensuous model in her imagined poetic 'painting'. Arguably, the anonymous 'English lady' was the vicarious watcher, Blagden herself, and in the first stanza of the poem Grazia is the imagined object of her desiring lesbian sexuality:

118 Isa Blagden, 'Recollections of Gibson the Sculptor' The Cornhill Magazine 17 (May 1868), 545.
The casement, burnished by the setting sun,
Shines round thee, like a rare and antique frame
Of intricate device - the glory thrown
By its illumined tracery lies like flame
Upon the shadowy masses of thy hair;
And like a pictured saint thou glowiest there,
Enshrined so high, with the blue skies above thee:
How may I dare to this dim earth to call thee!

In Giorgione's painting, the sleeping goddess of love is depicted in tints of 'burnished' gold, which illuminates her naked body and which 'lies like flame' upon the sexually codified image of the 'shadowy masses' of her hair. More subversively, the image of the woman captured within the 'antique frame' in the poem, has associations with the iconic image of the Madonna, the 'pictured saint'/ 'Enshrined so high', whose precious golden halo symbolises the adoration of the divine, or, in the context of Blagden's poem, the adoration of the sensuous Grazia.

The voyeuristic lesbian gaze in Blagden's poem anticipates Michael Field's rendition of Giorgione's *The Sleeping Venus* (1892). In her discussion of Field's poem, Hilary Fraser comments that: 'Venus is appropriated by the desiring female gaze [. . .] Subverting the conventionally gendered economy of this vision, this poem celebrates the scopophilic pleasure of women gazing upon the beauty of a woman's body in a paen to female sexuality. Lesbian sexuality is inscribed in the field of vision'. The sensory experience of gazing at the painting and the intensely erotic interaction with the Grazia/Venus image, is described thus in the second stanza:

---

119 Michael Field was the pseudonym for Katherine Harris Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Emma Cooper (1862-1913). The two women lived together as a lesbian couple and wrote using their joint identity under the pseudonym, Michael Field. The poem appeared in *Sight and Song*, (London: Elkin Matthew and John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1892).
120 Fraser, op. cit., 92.
The crimson cushion under thy soft arm
Swells proudly round its whiteness, and has lent
To its pale splendour hues so rich and warm
No painter's hand so cunningly had blent
The jealous shades; thy dark dreamy eyes
Are raised in rival beauty to the skies.
Deem'st thou each cloud that floats so bright above
A kindred angel sighing for thy love?

Giorgione's pictorial representation of Venus reclining on a 'crimson cushion'
becomes erotically charged in Blagden's poem, as the woman's 'soft arm', which
'Swells proudly round its whiteness', is expressed in terms of her breasts. Her
voluptuous body, reclining on the seductively suggestive velvet and silk fabrics
associated with 'hues so rich and warm', add to the sensuality of the images. Sexual
jealousy and obsessive love are expressed by the 'jealous shades' and 'the dark
dreamy eyes' which transcend upwards to heaven, leaving a 'kindred angel', arguably,
the speaker in the poem, 'sighing' for what is out of reach. The speaker's foreboding
sense of loss and disillusionment is thus expressed in the third stanza:

I feel, as gazing thus upon thy face,
From the low darkness of the sordid street,
As when, revealed amid th'ethereal space,
The saints of old beheld Madonna sweet,
To comfort and to soothe, a glimpse of heaven,
Foretaste and type of bliss, to them was given.
Less happy I – the heaven where I would soar
To me is closed – rejected, I adore,
And, vainly true, my fruitless worship pour!

In realist terms, the 'low darkness of the sordid street' is in keeping with the condition
of 4 Via Fontanella in Rome, where Gibson had his studio. In her novel Adrienne
Hope, Matilda Hays, mentions Gibson by name and describes his studio as 'the
transition from the dirty unfragrant street to the cool large studio'. On many occasions Blagden resided in Via Gregoriana at the top of the Spanish Steps, which unite Via Babuino (a by-street of Via Fontanella) with Via Felice, the name of which appears in the title of the poem. The 'sordid street', in the context of Grazia's 'sordid avarice' as described by Blagden in 'Recollections of Gibson', foregrounds the notion of the angel/whore dichotomy. Hence, the image of Grazia as a sexually promiscuous woman, whose 'furious temper' described in terms of a sleek, untameable 'wild panther of a woman', provide sexually coded images which are in contrast to the soothing and comforting image of the 'Madonna sweet' in the poem. The ironic incongruity of the name Grazia, meaning Grace, is in opposition to the perceived cat-like demeanour and gypsy-like traits so tantalisingly described by Blagden.

Although often portrayed romantically, the gypsy is frequently linked with depravity, and therefore, beyond the boundaries of social acceptance. As Judith Okely states: 'She [the gypsy woman] is supposed to be sexually available and promiscuous in her affections although sexual consummation and prostitution are elusive in the image'. As discussed in the last chapter in the context of Blagden's poem, 'Rome 1870', and in my discussion of L'Ariccia in this chapter, the stereotypical gypsy woman is imagined in terms of her sensual 'otherness'. As a woman of mixed race, the imagery is perhaps an imitation of Blagden's physical double, with her 'bright black eyes' and dark complexion being 'of a very Spanish type'. These images, together with the suggestion that she was the offspring of the 'intermingling of a highly impassioned [. . .] race', define Blagden as exotic and hence, 'other'. As Marilyn Button comments: 'Gypsies [. . .] represented the

122 Okely, op. cit., 201.  
123 Elizabeth Kinney in 'Personal Reminiscences', cited in Chapter One.  
124 Jarves Jackson's tribute to Blagden, cited in Chapter One.
realization of English desire for liberty and adventure, qualities often thwarted by English social structures [. . .] If the freedom to roam the world appealed to some English writers, the provocative sensuality and sexuality of Gypsy women captured the imaginations of others.¹²⁵ Like the gypsy, Blagden was a compulsive traveller, nomadic and free, and thus beyond social norms and mores. The idealisation of the desiring-woman-figure and the associated images of freedom, elusiveness and exoticism, though couched in metaphoric suggestiveness, express Blagden's lesbian consciousness in 'A Living Picture'. The speaker, having lusted after the sensually hypnotic temptress has transgressed, therefore heaven, which 'To me is closed' (3:8), is not an option. As 'punishment' for the speaker's culturally perceived transgression, both heaven and Grazia are unattainable and, arguably, this subversive account of lesbian desire serves as a critique of what society termed as sexual 'deviance'.

Conclusion

My evaluation of Blagden's poems in this chapter, as I have argued, were written as a response to her intensely emotional relationships with the dynamic and radical coterie of women in Rome, who, with Blagden in their midst, created an island existence beyond the social milieu. Like the gypsy, they were an isolated group of bohemians, whose outsider status occupied a marginalised position. The notion of the sisterhood of women as a supportive and nurturing network, the liminal/subliminal suggestiveness of female homoeroticism and the exploration of covert lesbian desire, are successfully negotiated by Blagden in the poems considered in this chapter. These subversive themes were deployed by her in order to foreground what is forbidden in the context of lesbian desire in the mid-nineteenth-century. Blagden's

¹²⁵ Marilyn Button, Toni Reed, eds., The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders (Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 151 and 152.
emotional and erotic connection with her network of women friends in Rome, as I have argued in this chapter, helped shape and define her lesbian poetics.
Afterword

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, Isabella Blagden inhabited a space within her feminist-lesbian consciousness in which to write and speak as a woman and a poet, hence, transgressing masculine-defined structures of woman in her confined sphere. In her pursuit of a language befitting her feminist-lesbian poetics, Blagden deployed complex and encoded subtexts which allowed for an exploration of women's consciousnesses. Blagden's matrilineal inheritance and mixed race heritage were vital factors in determining what influenced her poetics in terms of the underlying themes in her poetry. The absent mother-figure in her life and her physical and emotional separation from her father, though reference to them is never explicitly stated, have resonance in her work.

A prototype New Woman, Blagden was writing decades before the second wave of feminism, yet, as a feminist-lesbian writer she provided a radically subversive reading of women's experience in the mid-nineteenth-century. Her revisioning of fallen woman discourse in her dramatic monologue, *The Story of Two Lives* discussed in Chapter Two, and her innovative exploitation of the dramatic monologue form which allowed her female persona to narrate her own story, suitably fits Blagden's feminist objective. Her intertextual relationship with Tennyson and Poe, discussed in the poems 'The Wrecked Life' and 'Mesmerism' in Chapter Three, enabled a reworking of the male-authored tropes of misogynistic fantasy, and these are exploited by her in order to raise powerful questions regarding the notion of manhood. If the male gaze trope serves to underline women's objectification and sexualisation, then the gothic literary elements concerned with damsels in distress, curses, supernatural beings and vampires, serve to explore and expose what was forbidden in a society which feared destabilisation of the status quo. George Sand's
vampiric sexuality, discussed in Blagden's poem, 'To Georges Sand: On Her Interview with Elizabeth Barrett Browning', for example, functions as a metonymic displacement of society's anxieties regarding femininity and female sexuality. Blagden's exploitation of the androgynous bisexual Sand-figure thus serves to position her as a victim of a gender-biased and socially sanctioned oppressive society.

As I discuss in Chapters Four and Five, Italy was a major character in the narrative of Blagden's life and work. Not only did Italy provide her with the creative inspiration for her most of her literary work, it also enabled her to foreground her political vision and feminist-lesbian consciousness. The metaphoric and gendered representations of Italy, as a seductive and alluring space, provided the catalyst for Blagden's subversive poetics in terms of sexual longing and repressed desire. She found an emotional and spiritual home at Bellosguardo, and this offered a space in which to negotiate and define her sexual identity, as my discussion of her poems demonstrates in Chapter Four. Her two poems, 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Invitation', examined in the context of Edward Bulwer, foreground the notion of an unconscious bisexual identification, hence raising issues of sexual identity. Further analysis of Blagden's sexual fantasies in terms of her lesbian consciousness were, as I argue in the poems discussed in Chapter Five, written as a response to her emotional and erotic connection with Charlotte Cushman. For example, her poem 'The Angels of Life' offers an erotic interplay between the speaker and the object of her desire. A dream-driven discourse, with its sense of utopian other-worldliness, the poem imagines a transcendent space in which female sexuality can be redefined. Similarly, in 'A Love Poem: Rosamond', Blagden writes her own mystical narrative in order to convey the notion of a liminal space in which to negotiate questions of sexuality and
identity. The voyeuristic lesbian gaze, demonstrated in Blagden's eroticised interpretation of 'A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice', enforces the sensory experience of gazing, and arguably, in this, she indulged her own sexual fantasies.

Blagden's intervisual relationship with the canon of Renaissance art and her intertextual relationship with the classical tales of antiquity, as discussed in Chapters Three and Five, enabled a feminist-lesbian discourse which was a subversive expression of her anxieties regarding the so-called 'deviant' forms of sexuality.

As I have demonstrated, Blagden's poetics were a profoundly creative and liberating experience for her. She believed in the transformative power of women, and her secular/pagan aesthetics and her apparent Christian belief have an easy alliance in her poetry. Her deployment of the tropes of sisterhood and the absent-mother-figure, represented as sacred and powerful figures of the past, or as suffering/saviour Christ-like figures, enabled her to foreground women's experiences. In this, Blagden's feminist-lesbian objective is realised.

Blagden's political vision in the context of the Woman Question, female homoeroticism and covert lesbian desire in her novels, short stories, and other poems not considered in this thesis, present further opportunities for research. On the basis of the groundwork for a feminist-lesbian critical reappraisal of Blagden's poetics which this thesis has provided, further work in this area would benefit Blagden studies, and hence, the wider sphere of nineteenth-century women's poetry. The field of Queer Theory, considered in terms of the theory's articulation of gender politics and its interpretation of sexual identity, would provide a framework for further discussion in the context of Blagden's appropriation of lesbian visibility/invisibility; marginality/other; sexual longing/repressed desire and the notion of a desiring absent-mother-lover-figure. Her interest in the supernatural phenomenon of
spiritualism and the occult, which has resonance in some of her writings not
discussed in this thesis, would increase our understanding of her utopian vision of
women's individuation. A feminist engagement with the notion of nationhood and
women in the context of her 'Risorgimento' poems, Italian-themed novels and short
stories, also provide scope for further research.

My argument, from an anachronistic perspective, therefore, supports the notion
that Blagden adopted a poetics which was radical and subversive and which
transgressed the boundaries of what was considered the appropriate discourse for a
woman poet. Hence, her contribution to nineteenth-century women's poetry negates
the notion that poetry written by women was trivial, lightweight and sentimental. Her
creative imagination and intellectual acumen surpassed those structures which
defined women's poetry, thus contradicting the conventional view that the 'best'
poetry was written by men.

Blagden's poetics, written in defence of, and on behalf of women (and most of her
protagonists are women), foreground her versatility as a minor novelist and poet.
Although her literary output was small, had she lived longer than her fifty-five years,
she would have undoubtedly expanded her oeuvre and embraced a New Woman
discourse compatible with that of the later nineteenth-century, and, consequently,
might not have been relegated to the status of a minor poet. Blagden has all but
disappeared from the public consciousness. Bringing her in from the margins, and
giving a minor writer a voice alongside her contemporaries in the mainstream,
affords her a place in the annals of literary history, thus helping to create a greater
sense of cohesion in women's literary heritage. Based on my analysis and evaluation
of her writing, and regarding it from the perspective of twenty-first century feminist
and lesbian criticism, I conclude that Blagden's contribution to women's poetry earns her a place in the twenty-first century canon of feminist-lesbian literature.
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Appendix 1: A Chronology of Historical and Cultural Events in the context of Isa Blagden's Life

1816  Birth of Charlotte Brontë.
1818  Births of Emily Brontë and Mary Shelley.
1819  Birth of Queen Victoria.
1820  Birth of Anne Brontë.
1833  Publication of Robert Browning's *Paracelsus*.
1834  The New Poor Law Act passed by Parliament.
1837  Queen Victoria ascends the throne.
1838  Publication of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Robert Browning's first visit to Italy. Publication of Elizabeth Barrett's *The Seraphim and Other Poems*.
1839  Publication of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*.
1840  Marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Publication of Browning's *Sordello*.
1841  Publishing of Browning's *Bells and Pomegranates* commences.
1844  Publication of Elizabeth Barrett's *Poems*.
1845  Robert Browning begins correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett and makes his first visit to Wimpole Street, London.
1846  Publication of *Poems* by Curer, Ellis and Acton Bell (Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë) Charles Dickens founds *The Daily News*. Final part of Browning's *Bells and Pomegranates* published. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett marry in London and travel to Pisa, Italy.
1847  Publication of *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë; *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *Agnes Grey*, by Anne Brontë. The Brownings arrive in Florence. Take rooms in Via delle Belle Donne.
1848  Publication of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Revolutions in Europe. Louis Napoleon comes to power in France. Emily Brontë dies. Publication of William makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*; Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Charles Dicken's *Dombey and Son*. The Brownings move to Casa Guidi, Florence.


1851  The Great Exhibition in London. Publication of Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi’s Windows*, written as a response to the Risorgimento, it is a plea for the freedom of Florence from Austrian rule in the 1840s.

1852  Louis Napoleon becomes Emperor of France.

1853  Publication of Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Villette*; Dickens's *Bleak House* and Gaskell's *Cranford*.

1854  Publication of Dickens's *Hard Times* and Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*.

1855  Death of Charlotte Brontë. Publication of Gaskell's *North and South*; Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* and Browning's *Men and Women*.

1856  Publication of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

1857  Divorce Law passed by Parliament. Publication of Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor* and Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

1857-58  Indian War of Independence, known as the 'Indian Revolt'.

1858  *The English Woman's Journal* established by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes. Napoleon 111 signs armistice with Austria in Villafranca.

1859  Second War of Independence in Italy and the ensuing Tuscan Revolution. Publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

1860  Publication of Barrett Browning's *Poems Before Congress*.

1861  Death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Florence. Italy proclaimed a united kingdom (apart from the Papal States in Rome) Robert Browning leaves Florence. Publication of Isabella Beeton's *Mrs Beeton's Books of Household Management*.

1863  Publication of Browning's *Poetical Works*.

1864  The first Contagious Diseases Act passed by Parliament.
1865  Publication of Robert Browning's *Dramatis Personae* and John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*. Florence named the contemporary capital of Italy.

1865-66  John Stuart Mill becomes Member of Parliament for Westminster and sponsors women's suffrage and married women's property legislation.

1866  Contagious Diseases Act amended.

1868  Publication of Browning's *The Poetical Works* and *The Ring and the Book*. Contagious Diseases Act amended.

1869  Publication of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*.

1870  The Italian troops enter Rome and defeat the Papal States.

1871  Rome declared the capital of the newly united country.

1872  Publication of Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*.

1873  Publication of Browning's *Red Cotton Night-Cap County*. Deaths of Napoleon III and Giuseppe Mazzini.
I gaze upon a scene of Arcady.
'Tis noon, and o'er the vales and through the woods
The myriad voices of the summer's hymn
Ring out 'tis noon throughout their solitudes!
Such glittering radiance in the air, that dim
And distant seems the blue and cloudless sky,
As if a space for visioned dreams were given,
The veil withdrawn midway 'twixt earth and heaven,

That, bathed in golden light, the painter's eye
Seraphic glories in its depths might trace,
Or, leaning down o'er earth, a tender face
(Its sweetness mortal, but its charm divine)
Fair Nature smiling o'er her chosen shrine!

Ay – Time for once calls back fair Arcady;
And as I gaze, in rapture deep and still,
Before me winding pass through vale and hill,
And through the arches of the wooded glades
The herds as slow they seek the forest shades,
While wears the sun his noontide majesty;

And first, with watchful eye and steadfast tread,
The broad, disparted crescents on their brows,
Austerely borne, the grey-hued steers have led
The rustic path; and then with antic play,
And many a sidelong bound, grotesquely wreathing
Their wild fantastic horns amid the boughs,
It seems as 'twere some sculptured pageant breathing,
A chiselled record of the Pagan Past--

A fair procession bound for sacrifice!
And nought we miss – for even the choral song
And dance is here: where yonder pines have cast
A thicker shade, a joyous laughing throng

Of brown-cheeked girls, with large flashing eyes
And ebon locks vine-garlanded are grouped;
And one who, fairer than the rest, has looped
Those scarlet blossoms 'mid tendrils, flings
High o'er her head her tambourine, and sings
A measured chant, which through the Greenwood rings: --
1
“Our vineyard toils are done,
   Sisters, let us rest
Each beside, her chosen one,
   I on my mother's breast.

2
“For me, no lover's smiles o'er shone,
   Beguiling where it charms;
I seek it not, I envy none,
   Clasped in my mother's arms.

3
“My love is hers, and hers alone,
   Each pulse of hers a part;
My very life to hers has grown,
   Linked to my mother's heart.

4
“Ye smile. 'No mother hast thou known,
   An orphan from thy birth.'
Her tender love ye all may own
   Our loving mother – Earth.

5
“But most am I her cherished one,
   She calls me to my rest,
To lay all toil and sorrow down
   Asleep upon her breast!”

I heard a cadence in this simple song,
Which echoed of the Etruscan age, most sweet
And yet most sad: such ever did belong
   To these, the early children of the earth'
Who from her affluent breasts derived their birth,
And knew no other source or end; complete
In them, the sensuous life, and oh! How fair,
   the clime which poured its sunshine through their
   Veins,
And with a passionate and raptured heart,
Of Beauty filled all earth, and sky, and air!
Beats that fiery pulse no more? remains
   Of that intoxicating charm no part?
Ah! yes, there lives by mount and vale and stream,
The Pagan glory, and its soul throbs here
 Voluptuous still – lo! Where we catch the gleam,
   Of yon Bacchante's dark far-floating hair,
Inebriate with joy and life and youth,
Yet with divine yet half-unconscious sense,
Of Nature's deep pathetic influence,
In her wild song; the instinct of the south,
This Life luxuriant, fervent and supreme,
The type and rose and crown of all beneath
The gorgeous mask, the hollow brows of Death!

L'ARICCIA. LIFE IN DEATH.
NO. 11.

1
A SOLEMN hymn is ringing through the dome,
And heavy incense rises through the air,
And from the casements of my village home
I gaze upon a pageant, sad yet fair.

2
Again I see the village maidens stand
Around their fairest one, but she no more
With song and dance shall join the vine-wreathed band;
For her, poor child, both song and dance are o'er!

3
Beneath the porch they pause, and on that face,
O'er which the mantling blush no more will rise,
I gaze, ere earth's maternal close embrace
Has veiled its fading beauty from my eyes.

4
Oh what a wealth on that low bier is spread,
O'er which the curious eye may scan and hover,
Ere all in yon dark grassy tomb be laid
For the thick waving woods to hide and cover!

5
The mouth, on which no lover's kiss may press,
Its rosy promise all untimely pale;
The breast, from which no child's caress
Shall draw sweet life, ere its white found shall Fail.

6
A mist before my yearning eyes has risen.
Thy fate yet unfulfilled – so young to die!
Ah! not such as though is earth a prison,
Nor death glad freedom from captivity.
7
Oh! If this earth th'imperfect prelude be
To the full harmony of heavenly song,
How many a deep-toned chord is mute to thee,
Thou, to whom yet no tender ties belong!

8
When angel mothers sing of parent love,
How musicless thy voice amid the choir,
When lover's faith is sung in courts above,
Low veiled thy virgin brow and hushed thy lyre.

9
Some say that sleep and death are twins: have they
E'er seen Death clothed in garments quaint and rare?
Or watched the living sunshine, laughing, play
On the cold polished brow and waveless hair?

10
This dumb negation, with solemn sky
Shining on its white lips, from all around
Divorced as far as some lone mystery,
With marble face amid the desert found.

11
This chill prophetic Presence claims no tie
With the bright world, around, above, beneath,-
Blank and austere, a crownless majesty,
Inscrutable-immitigable Death!

12
And yet she lives: for ever and for ever
Still floats the solemn hymn throughout the dome
As if sought, with passionate endeavour,
To reach all hearts and bear its glad truth home.

13
Not the dark moral of the Pagan world,
Its painted cheeks and false illusions fair,
Now here, now past, as when a banner furled
No longer spreads its blazoned pomp to air.

14
For them this life was as a dream, and death
The one reality; with us nought dies.
Beauty, to them but transitory breath,
To us th' eternal smile of paradise!
These gracious scenes, which with a rare delight
And charm divine have banqueted the eye,
Were chastened hues to them, and shone less bright,
Sharing the doom of frail mortality.

With us they claim a bright inheritance,
And shine emancipate from Death's control -
They perish not with perishable sense,
But live eternal in th' eternal soul.

And in those spheres towards which our spirits
yearn,
What magic memories will oft arise !
What thrilling records in our souls will burn ,
And moisten, with soft tears, immortal eyes !

Remembered melodies, or blooms divine,
A line of beauty, or a word of power,
There glow more bright, as on some jewelled shrine,
Earth's gems are consecrate evermore.

These Alban hills, these fair Arcadian shades,
Yon lake's transparent breadth of tenderest blue,
The herds defiling through the sunlit glades,
This hour's Elysian charm shall oft renew.

These joyous girls, whose eyes dark flashing gleam,
This poor pale corpse, with locked and stony brow,
Not fleeting shadows of a fading dream,
But portions of the Everlasting Now.

And thus a palace, stately and divine,
Each chamber by its guardian angel trod ;
In joys eternal lives the soul – a shrine
Holy and pure, and consecrate to God.

There shall we roam, as in yon home of art,*
Pilgrims 'midst priceless records, while through all
Echoes the beating of each raptured heart,
Clear as a fountain's soft melodious fall.
The fountain's music is the hymn of praise,
    That murmurs oft, from yon orbed worlds to this,
The fountain's prised hues, the blended rays,
    Which there shall merge, past, present, future
    bliss!

*Vatican
Orphanhood

1
The shadow of the forest trees -
My childhood withered 'neath their spell,
In the old home remembered well,
  Shadowed by forest trees.

2
The shadow of the forest trees
  Between me and the black sky spread,
As I lay waking on my bed,
  Shadowed by forest trees.

3
The shadow of the forest trees -
  I wept and struggled for the light,
But all around was black as night,
  Shadowed by forest trees.

4
The shadow of the forest trees
  Robbed us of life's enchanting plays;
Both heart and stream were dark always,
  Shadowed by forest trees.

5
The shadow of the forest trees -
  We heard of love and of the sun,
But in our gloomy world were none,
  Shadowed by the forest trees.

6
The shadow of the forest trees -
  One morn they quivered in the blast,
Wild moaned the storm, and broke at last
  The shadow of the trees.

7
The shadow of the forest trees -
  'Mid tossing branches struggling through,
I hailed a sky of happy blue
  Unshadowed by the trees.
8
The shadow of the forest trees
No longer hushed the streamlet's song,
In fierce wild mirth it sped along,
      Unshadowed by the trees.

9
The shadow of the forest trees
Clouded no more my heaven above;
My heart awoke to raptured love,
      Unshadowed by the trees.

10
Alas! Alas! the forest trees -
    Once more the time grew dark and still,
Murmured no more the poor lone rill,
      Shadowed by forest trees.

11
Alas! Alas! the forest trees -
    Again they closed around my head,
And love and hope and joy were dead,
      Shadowed by forest trees.

12
Alas! alas! the forest trees -
    The wind that woke the stream is past,
This heart, wild beating, breaks at last,
      Shadowed by forest trees.

13
The shadow of the forest trees -
    Alas for heart! alas for stream!
But both have had one blessed gleam,
      Unshadowed by the trees.

14
Despite the shadow of the trees,
    The heart has loved, the stream has sung,
Now let their mournful knell be rung,
      Shadowed by forest trees.
Wild Flowers

1
Pale apple-blossoms and red flowers,
   Anemones and tulips tall,
Which light with flaming torch the showers
   Of slim green leaves which round them fall,

2
Are smiling here, and through the rift
   Of vanished years what thoughts arise,
As on each glowing bud I lift,
   Dazzled and dim, my wearied eyes.

3
The sweet-brier fragrance of your youth,
   A wild, free blossom, tender, pure,
Yet rich with promise (such in truth,
   Ever, to raciest fruit, mature).

4
The glory of our Tuscan spring,
   Transparent, warm, with bloom divine,
From leaf and flower and vines which cling
   From tree to tree with tendrils fine.

5
The teeming splendour of our plain,
   A sea of verdure lost in blue;
Our curving hills, the ripening grain,
   With fireflies glittering through and through:

6
Our old tower * whence the owls would call
   Oft and again their one sweet note;
The wealth of roses on our wall,
   By summer, spring, and autumn brought:

7
All in this pictured panel lives,
   And like a charm unseals my eyes;
A spell divine a fairy weaves,
   To clothe the earth with rainbow dyes.

8
The moonlight and the sunlight clear,
   The hope, the joy which nature wore,
Life, youth, and passion all are here,
   And Italy is mine once more.
*Hawthorne lived for three month at the Tower of Montauto, Bellosguardo, and there began “Transformation.”
The Invitation

1
IF I called thee, wouldst thou come,
   Love, across the Northern Sea,
From thy dark and rugged home
   Back to Italy and me?

2
Here the sky is blue, intense;
   Here the Arno's lingering feet
Blend, with Earth's glad affluence,
   Sounds and sighs of summer sweet.

3
Here the fireflies wing their flight,
   Pulsing to the magic tune.
Murmured every breathless night
   Through our warm, delicious June.

4
Here the roses in sweet scorn
   Smile above the rugged wall;
Here wave fields of yellow corn
   Lit by poppies, red and tall.

5
Music here from soft-voiced birds,
   Wild, pathetic, eager song,
Plaintive as a lute's low chords,
   Piercing as a clarion strong.

6
Here are vines which clasp and fold
   Rude, bare boughs with tendrils fine;
Here are fruits of orient gold,
   Fountains which like rainbows shine.

7
Melody and fragrance here,
   Opal tints on hill and plain,
Lithe green reeds with lifted spear,
   Purple grapes 'mid ripening grain.

8
Beauty's fairest home is here,
   Earth baptised in light and dew.
Haste, the summer draweth near.
   I have called thee, thou wilt come.
The Story of Two Lives

1 – His Life

(Scene – An English Park.  Time – Evening)

My long dark swoon is o'er – I dimly feel
These palsied scenes wake; and now, the wheel
Of Time, so long fast-locked, revolves again,-
Again I live through all that past of pain:
Regret and longing, shame, resentment, pride,
Conscience – too long suppressed, too oft defied -
Unite to sting me; every writhing nerve
Thrills into torture, till my senses swerve
Perplexed and racked. Life founders in the shock;
The mast is down . . . the ship has struck a rock.

When first this terror all my soul o'ercame,
I sate with her, the lady of my name.
'Mid this convulsion of all Time and Space
How strange to think of that familiar face!
The haughty features and the large bright eyes,
So keenly steadfast in their cold surprise.
Her jewelled fingers, white and thin, turned o'er
The journal of the day – no more! No more!
It all returns, the words are burning here,
And fall like molten lead upon my ear.

She read, with languid, slow, indifferent tone,
Calm as a child, who throws in, one by one,
Pebbles, deep down into some mighty lake,
Reckless what stormy echoes that may wake.
Sudden she spoke, half pity, half disdain -
"Poor thing, how much she must have borne of pain!
Found dead, none knew her home, her name, her age;
One of those outcasts!" . . . rustled here the page,
Scorned by the dainty hand, the proud lip curled
As she read on: "Poor outcast of the world!
If killed by grief, disease, or hunger, none
Would ever know, for she had died, alone;
But one poor relic, in her hand held fast,
This squalid misery with some brighter past
Must once have bound – a soiled, torn heron's plume." . . .
God! what white Presence shivered through the room?
"How strangely pale you look! are you not well?"
She rose and left me.
Ah! What bell
Was that she touched that rang so sharp a sound,
Vibrating down the wall, and from the ground,
Louder and louder till it clove my brain,
Which throbbed and throbbed, and echoed it again?
Who groaned? Not I – I firmly laid my hand
Upon a chair; I could each pulse command.
But why should all things glow with sudden fire,
Or fade in sudden darkness? why require
To grope my way around by sense of touch,
As if I could not trust my sight as much?
Did no accusing phantom enter there,
Shadowy, impalpable, yet deathly fair?
Could these few words, read in that smooth, chill tone
Root up my being – leave it all o'erthrown?
And o'er the ruin did an angel come,
And roll away the stone from my heart's tomb?

I had, methought, bridged o'er my young despair -
I dreamed my prosperous manhood had no share
In that vain past – the records of that day
Hid (fool to think so) with that past away!
But memory lives wherever has been guilt -
The stain remains where'er the wine is spilt!
And though so hushed and still the present seemed
At times beneath its wave, strange shadows gleamed:
I looked with more of self-contempt than pain,
And proudly turned to busy life again,
All soft emotions I have long represt -
What need of garlands on a mailed breast?
So best; so marble hard my heart has grown
That what was foliage once, is now but stone,
Life petrified to flint. But what shines there?
Why do I tremble thus? Art still so fair?
Woman! Did I love thee? Speak – speak! was thine
That death she read of? Was that love-gift mine?
That heron plume! Art these the eyes, the mouth
Whose wooing sweetness passion-filled my youth?
Why dost thou rise before me thus? Adored,
Thy bare white arm uplifted as a sword,
What seek'st thou at my hands? was't not a Fate -
Betrayed, undone – did Love wrong more than Hate?

We loved. She was an orphan, poor and young,
My mother's ward; we to each other clung,
Playmates for years in yon dark ancient hall.
We loved, were parted, who dares blame our fall?
I bore a wealthy, old, patrician name,
My mother swore it should be kept from shame;
She thrust her from my side. Forgive me, Sweet!
Would God that day I perished at thy feet!

Time passed, and with it love. Alas! since then
My life has been as lives of other men:
Pleasure and pride, ambition, some success,
And a heart flattered into selfishness.
The past I soon forgot, as all men can;
Didst thou? But thou wert woman; I a man.

And once again we met; pearls gemmed thy hair,
Thy wasted cheek was pale, but yet how fair!
Doubting and eager, in thy hollow eyes
Methought I saw a struggling memory rise.
I turned away. "Thank Heaven," I said, "I'm free,
I have outgrown that weakness." Pharisee!
Because I flung a flower upon the road
For other men to trample—I thanked God!
Less sullied thou in body, soul, and heart,
Than I, who acted the self-righteous part;
Better the impulse of some warm, wild sin
Than the world's mildew, rotting all within;
Better a torrid than an arctic sky;
Better a fever than a leprosy!

I sought once more my old ancestral hall;
All was so changed, if dared no ghosts recall.
Where the impassioned boy? The gentle girl?
There stood my bride, the daughter of an earl.
All praised the decent order of my life,
My graceful children, and my stately wife.
None saw but I, that where my daughters played,
There stood among them an appealing shade;
None knew that where their girlish voices sung,
A softer music in my ears had rung.
Yon woods glare vengeful red in day's decline,
For there, a young bright life was poured like wine!

When from the church pealed loud the hour of prayer,
I entered with a self-applauding air;
Observance of these rites to God is due,
My station claims my presence in my pew;
I doubt the dogma, but respect the form,
Nor yawn unless the tedious day be warm.
I gravely hear of life, of sin, of death,
And sanction give to Him of Nazareth:
Religion is a social state machine;
A fence to keep the untutored herd within.
I listen, and I hear unmoved the doom—
"Woe, woe to him through whom offences come!"
But now the frozen surface of the stream
Breaks wide ; below, the heaving waters gleam.
How quietly I have recalled all this,
And yet, between me and this Past there is
A murdered Life ! What is it that I feel ?
I think I swooned, and still my senses reel.
What chance divorced me from my Life ? uptorn
From all which made my life until this morn.
I rushed into the air exhausted, spent ;
My wife, saw she I staggered as I went ?
My stainless wife, that she should live to have
A husband weeping o'er a wanton's grave !

But why, if thou wert vile, and lost, and weak,
Should I thus suffer ? I adjure thee, speak !
Here must have been some early warp towards
sin,
And soon or late the self-same course had been.
Had we not loved the end had been the same . . .
Ah no ! that lie is burnt out as with flame.
'Twas I who sinned, 'twas I who failed thy trust ;
I the foresworn, the perjured, false, unjust ;
On me the guilt of thy betrayal lies ;
I led thy virtue down the slope to vice.
And I at last to this conviction brought ?
What fearful horror in that damning thought !
The pseudo-virtues which I claim as mine,
My cold decorums, and the bigot line
By which I nicely gauged all human act -
Shrivel before the terror of this fact.
Large is my ruin, utter and complete,
The world's vain creeds are ashes at my feet.
I tear this grass, I fling it to the sky,
My hollow faith, its paltry forms defy -
I blaspheme God, and Fate, and Man, and all,
Because she fell as such must ever fall.

I glance on high at yon relentless heaven,
Its stern attesting witness has been given,
And there is sentence in its silence. Where
Obtain remission from my doubts ? The air
Is void of answer ; all is still ; no sound
Save ripe loose acorns rustling to the ground
With sudden, muffled, fall . . . and, hark ! a song
Borne faintly by the echoes. While among
The wild dark coverts of this haunted wood
I've crept to die, by vengeful shades pursued,
My wife is singing in our home ; so wide
The fate-drawn rifts which soul from soul divide.
Strange, how those notes seem searching to be heard, 
Ringing and sharp, like dagger-thrusts, each word; 
Strange, too how that clear crystal voice of hers 
Chills the fond pathos of the quaint old verse: 
"Youth, Love, and Death," persistently repeat 
The echoes that refrain, "Sweet, angel sweet." 
Must then the inexorable third come in, 
Where'er the first, their Orphic rhyme begin? - 
Alas! that concord – one poor life fulfilled, 
That mournful sequence one poor heart has stilled; 
And I am hastening to the self-same fate, 
I break the tardy hinges of the gate.

Await me Love! Enfranchised on that shore, 
The world's false claims assert their rule no more! 
I dare not live. I dare not once again 
Fold round my soul those weary bonds of pain, 
And, with a hideous mockery, resume 
My life of yore - a dead man from the tomb. 
My voice sounds strangely for familiar speech - 
And how through these remorseful spasms reach 
The polished jargon, which must be the food 
Of worldly needs. I would not if I could!

I dare not now deceive myself; I know 
I never loved her as I love her now. 
I love her with her shame; I love her sin; 
Not the pure child who first my love did win, 
But the lost woman, fallen, desperate, 
Brute passion's hireling slave, the purchased mate 
Of villains, and of fools, a mark for scorn; 
Not the white flower which from my youth was torn, 
But the poor ravaged weed, which I flung down 
To be a byword for the virtuous town. 
I try to image thee as thou wert then; 
I see thee, prey and toy of dastard men.

Was that soft, golden hair all faded, dim? 
Did those poor eyelids, 'neath their swollen rim, 
Lose the arch sweetness of that bending curve 
Which gave those eyes their delicate reserve? 
Was it all marred and broke, that tender line 
Of the small throat, so soft, so white, so fine? 
How impotent is Life! I would give all - 
My fair possessions, and my ancient hall, 
My stainless name, the world's so just esteem, 
All that my pride could hope, ambition's dream -
To wander through some lawless misery,  
Forlorn, and homeless, and outcast . . . with  
   Thee !  
To clasp once more the form upon that bed,  
In its soiled rags. My God ! found dead, found dead !

Night's darkness gathers o'er the accusing skies,  
The boding stars await a sacrifice -  
I must arise from this damp tear-stained ground,  
Where all my life seems bleeding through one wound.  
I would each pang were prelude of disease,  
Some fierce and mortal fever, which should seize Me, sweeping onwards with its fatal power.  
Too late, too late, I have lived o'er that hour -  
By my own hand I've sworn to die – (what shout Of devil mirth) – my sin has found me out.

I pause ; I would not startle from her nest  
Yon timid bird, low hovering to her rest,  
Low calling to her young and to her mate -  
I now know pity, tenderness – too late  
Dost thou assert thyself. Oh, broken heart !  
Oh mad ! oh fool ! Oh blind ! Thou wert, thou art.

Still there : nay look not on me thus, Adored ! -  
Thy bare white arm uplifted as a sword, -  
With all that questioning sorrow and despair.  
Those eyes wild weeping, loosely streaming hair -  
That death in life, that terror, that surprise,  
As on that day of parting sacrifice .  
Through Time, through Space, through all Eternity,  
Must I still hear that wild, remorseful cry -  
Its speak of doom, e'en as I reach the goal,  
It is my curse – "Oh man, restore my soul !"

11. - Her Life.  
[Scene – A London Street. Time – Evening]

I wander up into the crowded street,  
I hear the rolling wheels, the busy feet,  
I see the misty rings, round lamps, which shine  
Far in the distance, as a double line  
Of clouded brightness, piercing night's dim track,  
(Glittering like nails upon a coffin black) -  
And am no more afraid, for life is here ;
Below, I am alone, with Death and Fear.
How oft I've paused, when all was not yet o'er,
Where yon red globes, above the druggist's door
Warned me that I could enter in, and find
The cheaply purchased end of all; unbind
This chain of life, which then held strong and fast -
I now can wait; that guilty wish has passed.

The air revives me, and I lose the dread
Which haunts me when alone. When I am dead
I shall not be more lone and still than there,
In that damp cellar gloom – no fire, no air -
Although, so near, the gaudy, reckless town
In its triumphant life heaves up and down.

I always feared the darkness as a child.
A child? Could I have ever been a child?
Light-hearted, innocent, and glad and free?
One such long since I knew . . . was she like me?
Did I love snowdrops, and the lambs in spring?
The little birds, each soft and helpless thing?
I could be gentle then . . . ah me! how strange,
These thoughts rise, now, to torture and avenge!
They say that drowning me can thus recall
Their whole lives through, as sinking, slow, they fall;
Are the wild waters closing o'er my head,
That thus I see the Past before me spread?
I see the terrace gleaming in the sun,
The golden plain ere reaping was begun,
The church-tower hid beneath close ivy sheaves,
The pigeons fluttering o'er moss-grown eaves,
The garden bright, with summer's sweetest flowers,
Its quaint pleached walks, its gold laburnum bowers;

I see the jasmine's white and dainty graces,
Black hollyhocks, with laughing negro-faces,
The red geranium's ardent crest of flame,
And mignonette, from which he took my name . . .
I see a girl amid those flowers at play -
A boy is near – two human buds, whose May
Has ripened with the flowers – both, how fair!
Was he the boy? was I the girl, who there
Stood hand in hand? Then did that road begin
Which led from Eden to a world of sin.

My parents served his mother. From their grave
She took me to her home, and swore to save
My life from all their lives, she said, had borne.
Oh, better had I lived as poor, forlorn
As thou, my mother; better on thy bier
Had I been slain, then sent to perish there!

The lady kept me in her ancient hall
(There was my Paradise, and there my fall)
Until she found her son dared love me – then
She banished me. He followed, and again
She came between us. Did I love or hate
When I sent back her bounty? Oh, too late
I felt remorse, and grief, and shame, and scorn -
The veil was rent, the fond illusion torn!

Oh, not to share in innocence and ease,
But only for bare life, on bended knees
I prayed for service, work; but hunted, tossed,
From depth to depth, the world proclaimed me lost.
'Twas sin to be a coward as I was;
I was afraid to starve; I thought the laws
Were harsh and stern; men spoke of prisons, or
Would mocking point where frowned the workhouse door,
But none gave help. Oh, in that fearful coil
Which like a whirlpool sucked me in, I know
Each phase of suffering, from the wretched toil
Which keeps out Death, but gives not Life: to sew
Whole days, whole nights; week after week to seam.
Till walls and floors whirl round as in a dream;
To that despair which finds even this withdrawn . . .
"Some ebb in trade." Oh, why are women born!
After long years I saw him once again,
I was so stunned, I scarcely felt the pain;
I trembled not, but calm, I met his eye,
Which scanned me through, and yet I did not die.
No love was in my life, I learned "to smile
Beneath the gas," my heart all cold the while;
Deaf, dumb, blind, a prey to passions rude;
Alas! I had no home, no bed, no food!

I strove to 'scape from this accursed state
One dismal eve, I stood beside a gate,
It was a "Refuge," and I trembling rung . . .
"No room – all full;" the iron portal swung,
And I was left without – and that hope died -
In vain three more, my weary footsteps tried:
At last the workhouse.* Oh my God! the shame,
The Board of Guardians and their cruel blame;
The terrors of those cells, that dread dark ward,
Its jeering blasphemies, its vice ignored,
Unguessed, by even such as I till then . . .
Is there a lower Hell? Yet righteous men
Have dreamed that here was refuge, peace, reform,
A shelter from the world's inclement storm.

Herded together, ruled by gyve and rope,
Evil grew rampant, evil with no hope
Here or hereafter, strong enough to save
The soul alive in that unresting grave!

I know not how I left, or where I went,
All impulse, courage, energy, were spent -
Warped as by fire, both age and sex effaced,
(That lava holds no trace of woman's breast),
I lost all shame; I robbed – or begged for food,
And "homeless 'mid a thousand homes I stood."

How oft beneath the vast and echoing arch,
Which strides across the river's stately march,
I've crawled to lay my weary hopeless head,
While loud above I heard the City's tread!
With sinking pulse, and dizzy, swimming brain,
Torn by stiff aching cramps, and racked with pain,
Haunted by feverish dreams, while far below,
Lulling and cool, I heard the waters flow -
A moment to feel tempted, then to shrink
Back, back from that beguiling, awful, brink;
The start – recoil – the tottering to one's feet -
Once more, once more, into the hideous street,
Blindly to grope back into life anew . . .
Father, forgive, we know not what we do!

As I one night was pacing to and fro,
A woman met and spoke to me; though low
Her voice, her words had power to probe, yet heal,
Mild, yet incisive, bright and strong as steel.
She told me she had been to the Far East,
Had traced the steps of each Evangelist -
Had stood where once stood wide the Temple
door,
And where our Jesus spoke, "Go, sin no more," *
One eve, she said, as slow the sun went down,
She saw, as there she paused and mused alone,
A shepherd, bearing back into the fold
A little yearling lamb, all starved and cold,
And tired and bleeding, for its truant feet
Had rambled from green paths and meadows sweet
Until it reached the Dead Sea's bitter wave,
Where the foul waters fouler deserts lave;
But there it had been found, and thence brought
home
With gentlest care and love – "Thus God says come,
To you ; will you not come, my child ? for see,
The same Good Shepherd seeks for you and me."
Her outstretched hand upheld me for a time.
I found a service. Wast it such a crime
That I concealed my past – my present state
From all my former guilt to separate ?
Some old companions found me ; whence I came
Was thus betrayed ; they called me by my name,
And I stood helpless - for that name was known -
The door was shut, and I was bid "begone!"

I was not worse than others. Through my tears
I heard a cry which told of sharper fears -
A cry more wild and desperate than my own.
I saw a girl flung down upon a stone,
Sobbing with fright – I almost feared to speak,
But went towards her ; and she raised a meek
And tear-stained face, with pleading, clinging trust -
"Oh ! will you help me ?" What a stormy gust
Of wrath and hatred rose within me then
'Gainst all this rigid world of righteous men !
Outcasts and homeless – here, two human lives
Were left to perish ; yet these men had wives
And sisters ; little girls upon their knee . . .
But have no pity ; must she end like me ?
She was an orphan by the parish placed
With a bad mistress, artful, vile, unchaste,
Who had ill-treated, starved her, then had bid
Her do, with drunken oaths, what others did.
She had refused, had been thrust out, and now
She was so frightened, blushes dyed her brow.
She had a friend – far off – if she could reach
Her house she would be safe. With timid speech
She told me this, then pointed to her dress -
No bonnet – cloak – and she was penniless.
Her tears fell faster – "I must beg," she said ;
"I know not where to-night to lay my head."
I gave her the poor trifle I had saved ;
My shawl I gave her ; I too long had braved,
More lightly clad, the winds, the rain, the night,
To fear them now. Her pure child's face shone bright
With joy – "I owe you more than life," she said.
"Tell me your name." I silent shook my head.
Then for a moment was that frank young mouth
Pressed close to mine. Oh God ! How my lost youth
Rose from its tomb, as those fresh lips pressed mine !
I drank each kiss as dying men drink wine.
She hastened on, and I, alone once more,
Felt calm. The bitterness of death was o'er.
I'd given my all – but she was saved; for me
It mattered nought – could I more wretched be?

As I thus stood – a sharp and piercing pain
Shot through my side – again, and once again -
As if a knife was searching through my breast,
To find my heart, and give its tumult rest.
It passed, and left a sense of dim release,
I knew that pain was harbinger of peace.

I found a shelter on that very night -
A cellar loathsome, dark, but with the right
Of solitude, I need no more; by day
I earn, or beg, a trifle, then I stay
Quite still, exhausted, for long hours – no pain -
No care – in this last conflict I shall gain.

Sometimes I creep up for a little air,
As now; but rarer grows the wish, more rare.
Some of my old, impatient restlessness
Stirred in my heart to-night – beneath my dress
It throbs like a poor hunted thing, which fears,
And madly still resists the leaguered spears;
Fights its hard fight for life, as stags, they say,
Wounded to death, will yet keep death at bay.

And thus I come once more, for air and light,
It was so piteous in that dreary night;
And then, perchance, some kindly passer-by
Will speak some word to soothe me, ere I die.
If not, in yon poor street, I think I know
A friend, to whom undoubting I could go
For help in this last hour; - a labouring man
And poor, but kind, as oft we poor ones can
Be kind to one another. Though so late,
He will be working still; they cannot wait
Who need his work – his hard, ill-omened trade,
To make coffins of the pauper dead.
'Tis here, the shutter is not closed – I see.
Let me look in. He's working. By his knee,
I see her well, in matron-beauty stands
A woman; and a baby's tiny hands
Are clasped around her neck. Could I have been
A wife and mother! Oh my God! - what sin
To murmur now! - all is, and must be, best.
And yet – and yet – a baby on my breast
Had been a shield secure, a hope, an aim.
The long-spent ashes kindle into flame
At the bare thought. Dare I repine at Fate?
Oh! Hush, poor broken heart, - too late, too late!

How wide my thoughts are wandering to-night!
These three I gaze on dimly in the light,
Through that small dusty pane – recall to me
A famous picture of a group of three,
See in that grand old chapel of the Hall,
Over the altar set, midst tapers tall -
Painted by Raphael, so the legend saith -
The Virgin and the Babe of Nazareth.
The scene recalls that picture – parent love -
The emblem and the type of God's great Love -
The glory will fill up my darkness, I,
Soothed by its sweetness, now, can calmly die.
I will not enter in – poor friends, I go -
May God bless both – I need no kind word now.
I will go down to my dark home again.
What ! do these stiffening fingers still retain
In their loose hold, this soiled, torn, heron's plume, -
Pledge of a love that led me to this doom ?
"It was his crest," he said, which I should wear
And laughing placed it waving in my hair ;
He swore to leave all else, whate'er might be,
If I but sent that plume, to fly to me.
I dared not send it. - I am now alone ;
May God forgive him as I long have done !
I know there has been wrong, but mine seems worst -
The guilt, the blame, be mine – I have no thirst
For aught but to forgive, and be forgiven ;
I cling for mercy to God's feet – Oh Heaven ! -
How that fair picture deepened in the night !
I hear a voice – I see a radiant light -
A hand held out which stills this aching breast -
"Come unto me, and I will give you rest."

Note: The asterisk in lines 94 and 133 are inserted by Blagden:
94: Vide 'Uncommercial Traveller.'
133: Vide 'Cities of the Past,'
The Wrecked Life

The burning heart of red autumnal woods, -
The flushing pomp of sunset skies – a blaze
Of fierce, wild, hurrying fire, as when upbursts
Some city's conflagration, 'mid the hush
And darkness of the night – commingled flame
Of still pale glories of lurid light -
So gorgeous, magical, and strangely fair,
That lady's face!
None read the meaning of its smiles, and none
Could trace the passionate and haunting grief
Which wrote its sad defeature on her brow,
And hollowed out the opal arch whence shone
Inviolate the sorrow of her eyes.
Sometimes a thought like a warm Afric wind,
Which with its breath makes vermeil tardy blooms,
Hid from the sun in lone Sicilian vales,
Would redden o'er her cheek, then all too soon
The shadows darkened and the glow died out -
And a pale phantom of a perfect face,
Set lips, stern nostrils, and a white, cold cheek
Alone remained!
Her smile, it was so rare and marvellous,
And so became the mouth which palaced it,
That the proud curve became a gracious type,
Indelible in death – its radiance flashed
All Paradise upon me once ; and when
Long years had passed away, and the fine brow,
And the large eyes (dark violets, sweet but sad,)
Were empty sockets, and the veined pearl
Of the transparent flesh was ashes, dust -
I recognised the parted line of that rare lip -
Its matchless sweetness, now left desolate,
And barren evermore of smiles.
Dost ask me wherefore she did smile or weep?
Know'st thou, O curious Questioner of Hearts,
That memories of balmy, vernal woods
Live in the Frost-King's thought, when with froze
breath,
In chrysal characters, while mystic boughs,
With delicatest foliage, plumy sprays,
And all the tender secrets of the spring?
Or wherefore was she sad? Vain fool! dost know
The dark archangel, whose vast wings do sweep
Between the sea and sky, unseen by man,
Yet leaves his mighty shadow on the wave,
Which, like a great soul conscious of a fate,
And darkened by an omen, all ignore,
Accepts, but shudders at the prophecy?
None knew her, but all felt who saw her once
That this was Beauty – that their lives henceforth,
Their daily lives, were richer by this boon.
The ear which listened to her
The eye which dwelt upon her gracious shape, -
The ear which listened to her rich, sweet voice, -
The senses, ravished by the soft perfume
Which hung around her, - did accept the gift,
As wandering beggars do receive rich alms,
With benedictions merged in ecstasy.
Some lives are like rare missals, golden-clasped,
And ruby-bound ; - but open them, and read.
Within are pictured bleeding agonies
And expiations, struggles, martyrdoms,
All blazoned on the dainty vellum page.
And some, all luminous unto the eye,
Are in themselves lone, cold, dark ; - without
Glorious as that Archangel who does stand
Facing the east, the sunset on his wings,
Exalt o'er Rome, - within, impassive bronze.
And there are some whose sorrows give them palms;
Others, whose passion is of shame – who, 'stead
Of saintly aureole must wear a brand,
A stigma ineffaceable and drear,
In expiation of Ancestral wrong.
Whate'er it was – the burden of the heart
Which bled to death within that lady's breast
Remained for aye a solemn mystery.
She had no commune with the outer world ;
But once some hurried, sudden tidings came -
A few brief words writ on a mourning scroll :
She read with breathless, fevered haste, then rose,
And tore off from her slender hand a ring.
So hastily the soft fair skin was grazed.
She smiled – a bitter, sad, self-pitying smile -
"The link has chafed me deeper here," she said,
And smote her breast – "Free – free – too late – my
God !
A life-long sorrow, and a life-deep wrong,
For the blind error of a girl's vain choice -
Is this thy law – is this thy justice – God ?"
And one large, heavy tear dropped slowly down,
(What argosies of hope that tear o'erwhelmed !)
And the eyes closed to prison back the tears
She would not shed ; then all was calm again -
A plenitude of hopeless, lifeless calm -
As when, amid the desert, where stood tents
Only a heap of blank grey ashes tells
That life, and joy, and being have been there,
Beside her casement for long hours she sate;
It opened on brown, russet prairies, where
The tawny harvest spread its burnished sea.
She watched it as it rippled into gold,
Stirred by light winds, or slept in yellow flakes
Of yellow foam beneath the quiet stars.
Mute, motionless, and resolute, she sate,
As Rizpah in the time of harvest sate
Beside the corpses of her murdered sons,
Through the long, breathless, scorching summer days,
Through sultry nights lit by the Syrian moon,
Till she outwatched the ravening cruel beasts,
Who shrank before her eye, fierce with the woe,
"The mighty hunger" ne'er to be appeased -
The wild forlorness of a mother's heart -
And thus the Lady sate, and sate, and watched,
Not the stark visage of the unburied dead,
But by one wrecked, bereaved, and wasted life.
The late rose in her bosom mated well
Its beauty – fragrant flower and soft white breast -
Each peerless, and so frail – most fair the flower,
In its ripe harmony and fate fulfilled,
And loyal to the death unto its Queen.
Not so the Lady ; - her sad life was jarred
With unaccomplished aims – discordant hopes,
She seemed as one to whom Fate owed a debt,
One never to be cancelled. Tender ties,
Sweet charities, and bounteous ministerings,
Were not for her. No father's hand had laid
A blessing on her brow; no mother's kiss
Was as an amulet about her heart.
She seemed as if no childhood had been hers, -
Like some strong spirit, ever young and fair,
But who ignored the clinging weaknesses,
The debile and pathetic falterings
Of infancy and childhood. E'en that breast,
Which gave such promise, prodigal of love,
In its magnificent and queenly wave,
Looked marble cold; - no little child's caress
Had made it heave with soft, delicious pain,
As flowed its life to feed another's life!
And in the unbroken stillness of her voice,
Here was no tremulous and yearning tone,
Such as oft stirs the heart with echoes deep
Of loving welcomes and heart-wrung farewells!
And since that scroll there was a deeper shade -
A something of endurance and self-scorn
Around her – proud endurance blent with shame.
A chained captive might look thus, if doomed
To suffer in the presence of a foe. Was this remorse?
And with the swan-like plumage and soft down
Of her pure woman's heart, was she enforced
To satiate his serpent-sting? None knew.

And thus she lived. Perchance this lonely life
Was not all sorrow; none can ever know.
The stars shine ever brightest unto one
Beneath those toiling feet are arid sands.
The Ghebir's faith arose in burning wastes.
And when no flowers bloom around us, or beneath,
We gaze where piercing and eternal burn
The gentle lustre of the Sister Stars -
Steadfast Arcturus, with his solemn brow,
And armed Orion, with his blood-red sword.
But suddenly she grew more sad, more pale.
Was it God's mercy touched her secret woe,
And pitied it, and saved her? So she died.

Alas!
Hast felt the thrilling and vibrating hush
When great resolves are born of words sublime
And promise of heroic deeds, struck out
From the warm depths of fiery beating hearts,
Till full the air with guardian angel wings?
Hast marked the strange, sweet, fluttering pause
which comes
O'er night's fast-throbbing pulse — as if the stars,
All faint with adoration, lapsed in prayer?
So, with a darkness pregnant of the light -
A silence resonant of music — was
The sylvan spot she called her home; - its air
Was holy as a place of sanctuary -
Its empty chambers were instinct and rife
With influence from shining Presences,
Unseen, but felt with earnest, soothing power:
Her soul had loved it, and still lingered there!
Mesmerism.
A Death-Bed Confession

1.
'Twas here we met that eve; the harvest moon
Shone steadfast, large and bright.
Warm pulses stirred the air, as in mid-noon;
A joy filled all the night.
But chill my heart with boding gloom
When we three met in this dark room.

11.
'Twas here she sate; her long luxuriant hair
A silver crescent bound,
(A crescent such as Roman women wear;)
One soft thick curl unwound
Hung down her neck its loose bright fold;
Ah! Dainty ivory and gold.

111.
How fair! her long, dark lashes drooping low
Half veiled her downcast eyes;
But I could read upon her virgin brow
A terror, a surprise,
As if she felt, poor, fragile flower,
The awful menace of that hour!

IV.
My flower! she ever seemed as one who bloomed
For angels, not for earth.
Pathetic sweetness, as of one foredoomed,
Hung round her, from her birth.
In that fair form there seemed a strife,
A struggle as 'twixt Death and Life.

V.
I hoped to conquer Death and thought at last
Through strong magnetic aid
To wrestle with the langour which had cast
O'er that sweet brow its shade;
To save that Life, I would have given
All peace on earth, all joy in heaven!
V1.
I sent for one, whose Art most strangely swayed
   Both mind and body's health,
And with a fevered hope I sought his aid,
   And offered untold wealth
If his magnetic power could save
My cherished blossom from the grave.

VII.
He came. Think you it was no pang to bring
   This serpent to my Eve?
Each day some sweet familiar joy took wing
   And yet I dared not grieve.
He said no influence must be
Between them – and I left them free.

VIII.
I yielded for a time; I saw she gained
   Something of tender bloom,
A deeper sweetness o'er her beauty reigned,
   A delicate perfume
Of graceful health, "One trial more,"
I sighed, "and then this task is o'er."

IX.
I must be brief! - 'twas here we met, I said
   (Methinks I see them still),
For the last time. She sate with drooping head
   And he gazed on her; will
And power in that dark eye intense -
His heart all ice, his love all sense.

X.
I had borne much. This time, as 'twas the last,
   He seemed resolved to strain,
Beyond all pangs through which I yet had passed,
   My jealous, maddened pain.
With a voluptuous sensuousness
His fingers lingered o'er each tress.

XI.
He touched her hand, he bent above her brow,
   Her neck, her limbs; the whole
Of that fair body 'neath his will did bow;
   He seemed to sway her soul.
No quivering lyre could yield as much
Obedience to its master's touch.

XII.

I watched him well. I saw as once he waved
Above her head his hands,
That flames fell from them; once I madly braved
His resolute commands,
And rushed towards her, - God! To see
Her turn to him – to him! from me.

XIII.

I strove to speak, my voice seemed weak and strange;
Thick foam was on my lips -
"Pause, pause," I said; I saw her features change
As when a black eclipse
Makes void the sky of the great Sun . . .
"Tis o'er," he said, "my work is done."

XIV.

He touched her hand, "Do I now hold thee, sweet?
Thou'rt mine by spirit might-
The come with me." She rose upon her feet
Out – out into the night.
I followed swift her gliding tread,
Poor angel! by a demon led.

XV.

As drowning men a lifetime's former sin,
Without a break or flaw,
Recall at once, all bare and clear within,
I felt I heard, I saw,
But neither word nor sign allowed.
I followed, bound as in my shroud.

XVI.

Through my old hall; its banners stirred
As moved by a strong wind,
Yet as we passed no sound, no step was heard;
The burnished shields which lined
The walls were lit as with a flame,
And clashed together as we came!
XV11

Through the arched porch its gloom a warning shed;
  But that pale form shone white
Before me, and those snowy robes outspread.
  I followed through the night.
My bloodhounds knew as well, yet why
Howled they so loud as we passed by?

XV111

Among her flowers – they slept 'mid dew and balm,
  Nature's deep heart was still -
Our triple shadow blent with the soft calm
  An element of ill.
From some dim cloud, as we went past,
Large sudden drops were o'er them cast.

X1X

Beside our lake, which 'neath its cedars slept
  (I tell thee 'twas no dream);
A lurid ripple o'er its surface crept,
  An wan phosphoric gleam,
And through the gleam an upturned face
Of mocking menace I could trace.

XX

Through the oak wood its branches closed and
  spread
Between us and the sky -
But on, still on, he never turned his head,
  Nor spoke, and she, led by
Blind instinct, her own footsteps laid
In every footprint his had made!

XX1

Upwards we strained through the brief August night,
  Far, far we onward sped.
The round moon long had set, the morning's light
  Flamed o'er us wild and red -
Until on yon accursed hill
She, he, and I at length stood still.

XX11.

"I've done my work, and now I bid thee speak."
  Instant at his command,
With faint low gasp for words she seemed to seek.
He fiercely raised his hand -
And then I saw the pale lips stirred,
But a faint murmur all I heard.

"Nay, strive not, swerve not, thou art mine, my sweet;
Forget thy waking pride."
She fell before him, clasping low his feet
And prostrate at his side;
Her long fair hair, all loose unwound,
Like angel's wings shone on the ground.

"Tell him thou lovest me," A wild, dumb strife,
A deep emotion stole
O'er than wan face. "I've given your statue life,
Your fair Undine a soul,"
(Was that the wind's low piercing moan,
Or broke her heart in that faint groan?)

He turned to me, "I tell thee, she is mine,
We love, and we are young;
No other hand shall draw a song divine
From the sweet lute I strung;
My creature! whom I snatched from death!
My Eve! Born of my very breath!

"Canst thou not see I've drawn from thine her heart,
Each pulse and each desire?
Her very life is of my life a part,
Bound by a chord of fire;
Sprung from the joy of our embrace,
Earth yet shall see a nobler race!

"For aye divorced from thee. Speak not; one word
Would wake her – and she dies.
One word from thee would pierce – a sword;
Yet make the sacrifice
If thou wouldst win her! - Death will free,
And Death alone, her bond to me."
"Wake!" My voice like the last trumpet pealed.
She started wild, and dim,
She looked around, and all was then revealed.
She turned from me to him.
All, all, in that one look she read.
One sob – Who said that she was dead?

Yes! Dead. The ermine lives not when its robe
Receives some soiling stain;
And poison breaks clear glass. I dare not probe
The madness of that pain.
I raised her in my arms, I bore
Her home with frantic speed – no more!

It was my work. He warned me, yet I spoke.
Mine all the guilt, the pain.
I tell you 'twas my voice, my voice which broke
Her sleep's magnetic chain.
It was thus planned by him to add
A pang – oh no, I am not mad!

In vain. I will not think of him. I bore
Her home, my arms close round
That pallid form, while from her lips gushed o'er
Her blood upon the ground.
He loved her – knew she was my bride;
Lost thus to him. Enough, she died!

That dull, dead sound – that broken heart that burst
O'ercharged as it had been
By that strange life – and he with skill accursed
The end had all foreseen -
That plashing sound, I hear it yet,
Still with that stain my lips are wet!
That dull, dead sound – those drops tracked all the path
(I see it in the night).
I reached the porch, my hounds with fierce loud wrath
Flew out; but as the light
Fell on my face, they crouched and whined,
And I fell speechless, senseless, blind.

They bore us here. So tight was my death-clasp,
They could not loose my hold
That day, that night. At length, freed from my grasp,
They bore her stark and cold . . .
Sometimes it seems but yesterday -
Sometimes . . . . I know not what I say.

No strength for grief? Did I say that? Am I
The finite – infinite -
Not made for heaven nor hell? Yon starry sky
Doth hold both day and night.
All depths of woe or bliss to scan,
God made in His own image man.

Restored in heaven! an angel with her palm,
But no my child – my bride.
Speak, man of God! can heaven this anguish calm,
That on my heart, she died?
Alas! Alas! the bliss foregone
Will pierce my heart before God's throne.

You tell me, Preacher, patience conquers grief.
Am I not patient? See,
Am I not calm? when have I sought relief
I bear my misery.
Without a tear, with scarce a sigh,
My sole impatience – that I die
How could I live? She's dead – and thus I know
    That all of life but breath
Has died with me. Is death escape? Oh no!
    As life is, so is death.
Here 'tis but sorrow – there 'tis hell.
I was foredoomed – I know it well -

Here and hereafter – still – yes, still to bear
    A grief undying – vast -
To love – to lose . . . The Future's dread despair
    Equals the anguished Past.
In that clam heaven by angels trod
I seek that form. Forgive, O God ! . . . . .
To Georges Sand
On Her Interview With Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The late repentance, and the long despair,
The sin-bound soul's fierce struggle to be free,
A fettered maniac raging in her lair

Are thine!

A life all musical with happy love,
An angel child who sings beside her knee,
Pulses which true too heavenly rhythms move,

Are hers!

Dark hair strained backwards from a forehead broad,
Dark eyes, in whose chill lights strange secrets live,
As in the deep grim monsters watch and ward,

Are thine!

Soft curl which droop around an oval cheek,
Calm brows where holy thought has power to give
Transfigured glory to a woman meek,

Are hers!

Her childhood smileth still around her mouth -
O'er thy white gleaming teeth, thy full lips part -
Eager for joys which may renew thy youth;
Some brief wild rapture which may cheat, yet warm,
Kindling the langour of a hopeless heart.
With thee life stagnates, or is a flashing storm.

To shapeless horrors though has given name,
And woes, 'neath which poor tortured hearts had bowed
And borne till now in trembling patient shame,
Rose at thy call, and spoke their loud despair,
And women's wrongs, like opened graves, avowed
Their stark foul secrets to the startled air!

Thou wert Deliverer, but Victim too,
Th' avenger ever wears the martyr's palm.
It is the Orestes whom the fiends pursue -
Alone to foredoomed Hamlet's vengeful eyes
(While sleep the murderous pair in guilty calm)
The spectre frowns, the boding shadows rise.
Stern as that voice which in the desert cried
Majestic prophecy and mystic woe,
And poured its warning o'er the Jordan's tide -
Thou, 'mid the dreary wilderness of life,
With bleeding feet and burning soul didst go,
And flung thyself into th'arena's strife.

Naked and hungered, with what bitter scorn,
Banned from sweet charities of earth and sky,
By passions and impulsive senses torn,
At earthly banquets, poisonous yet sweet,
Didst though thy Nature's ruthless wants supply,
Earth's locusts and its bitter honey eat!

Like forked tongues of fire round blackened wood
That leave charred ashes where was glowing flame,
Thy lurid idols made thy heart their food
And ruined and consumed it evermore,
And powerless now the best beloved name
That cold dead heart to kindle or restore.

And therefore wears thy brow its sullen scorn,
And therefore glooms thy large prophetic eye,
And in thy song are cadences forlorn,
Which blend their sighs with lingering echoes fine
Of thrilling sweetness, yet of agony -
Grand revelations, utterances divine.

Not thus her song. The seraph chorus bowed
And leant entranced from jasper thrones to hear
A mortal's voice so nigh the throne of God.
Its rich Hellenic harmonies had power
Of wide reverberation far and near.
A woman's witness to her God, they bore!

Amid the world's wild roar, that tender song,
Throughout its jarring discords heard between,
Rung out heroic protest against wrong.
Where coward souls had recklessly despaired,
That dove-like heart with fortitude serene
Through Sorrow's whelming flood victorious dared,

And won Faith's vernal promise; glowing words
revealed eternal hopes, and music fraught
Ravished silences and sweet accords
Upon her lips the altar's living coal
With cherub glories circled mortal thought,
And birth consummated stirred within her soul.
Genius, God-born, full filled its worshipper,
And flowed God-voiced, as flows the sacred river,
Through holy places ever and for ever!
Mild guardian angels smiled above her head,
And round her hearth their sheltering pinions spread,
And o'er that face beloved a halo shed!

She came! - the tumult of thy soul subsided,
And erst beside the Gate called Beautiful,
A shining Angel o'er the waters glided.
Lo! The dark stream became a fountain blessed -
So did her presence all thy being lull,
As to thy lip that purest lip was pressed.

Thy genius to her stainless genius knelt,
And with pathetic reverential awe
The holiness of womanhood was felt
Deep in thy soul; to thee, she was a shrine
Of sanctuary – inexorable law -
The earthly human won to God's divine!

Ah! By that healing kiss, be thou assoiled!
The radiant Twins whose joys in Heaven are shown
(The Mortal and Immortal), thus uncoiled
The death-doom which was long the curse of One.
She, by that love which pressed to thine embrace,
By her own star-crowned soul has claimed thy place.
Despondency

My life is as a weary Bridge of Sighs
"A palace and a prison on each hand;"
But I have left my youth's bright palaces,
And passed the portals of Love's fairy-land,
And entered on that dark and dreary path
Which every earth-born traveller must tread,
Wherein the soul foredoomed no solace hath,
No refuge from its anguish or its dread,
But in that frowning prison-house, the grave,
Regret, remorse, for time misspent and gone.
Jailers, whose cruelty I dare not brave,
Walk at my side and goad me sternly on,
While through the arches moan continually
The dull deep breakers of life's surging sea!
Dialogue between Two Friends

First Friend

1
The sharp regret, the gnawing pain,
   The dumb and helpless sense of grief,
The struggle which we feel in vain,
The tears which never give relief
   Though they flow;
The restless longing and the fear,
   Desiring most what most we dread,
The frenzied cries when none can hear,
   Wild tossings on a sleepless bed, -
      All these I know.
But they are past; you see me stand
   Free from regret, from fear, surprise;
My hand lies calmly in her hand,
   I falter not in my replies,
      And stern and cold
My eyes meet hers. Their fatal blue
Has no more power to search me through
   The tale is told.

2
I can withstand her smile. My heart,
   Which leapt if she but shone afar,
Sees her without a thrill or start,
   Unmoved as frozen billows are,
      When calm they lie
All stark and hushed beneath the moon,
   No longer swayed by her soft breath,
Locked in a dark impassive swoon,
   The rolling tides are still as death.
      I hear her sigh,
And no wild tumult of the soul
   Dost cast me prostrate at her feet;
No spirit tempests o'er me roll,
   And no delirium, sad yet sweet,
      Now holds me fast.
The joy, the passion, and the fever,
Are dead for ever and for ever.
   The dream is past.
I feel as feels a shipwrecked man
Swimming the waves for dear life's sake.
I yield up all; the ocean can
Each joy, each costly treasure take,
So life be won.
I yield my Tyrian merchandise -
Those argosies of hope which give
Life to man's life, and I arise
Naked, forlorn; but yet I live,
And shall live one.
You see, my friend, I have o'ercome.
There is no weakness in this breast.
Vainly you'd stir the void for some
Old feeling which it once possessed.
And yet – and yet -
Must I not see her once again,
If but to prove by cold disdain
That I forget ?

That I have read her through and through,
Indifferent to those queenly charms;
That I resist, and triumph too -
Ah! But to hold her in these arms,
And clasp her close;
And by the strong magnetic force
Of love, full-statured and complete,
Draw her to me, as to its source,
The sun, is drawn volcanic heat !
To gaze on those
Wild, mystic, and unfathomed eyes,
The witchery of that changeful mouth,
The blond hair falling angel-wise,
The tender bloom, the glorious youth.
As when O God !
I was the fond and foolish slave,
Who perished by her cruel scorn,
Whose heart found in her heart its grave,
On whose crushed faith and love upborne
She lightly trod
To reach some other heart less sad,
With more of sunshine, less of cloud.
Some love, I know, and yet are glad ;
Some wear its purple, some its shroud :
But I will prove,
By all this bitter sense of wrong,
By this deep hatred, fierce and strong . . .
Second Friend
That still you love.
The Angels of Life

1

Prostrate beside the rock-bound shores of time,
   Alone and storm-tossed and harbourless I wept -
I wept o'er all the buried wrecks sublime
   Which in its flood irrevocably slept.

2

I heard the footsteps of the bygone years,
   As slow they passed with chill, relentless eyes,
And with a shuddering awe, amid my tears,
   The gift each bore away could recognise.

3

Said one – "I bore thy bloom of health away,
   I kissed its rose with breath all icy cold ;
Child of the sun ! Without its fostering ray,
   Thy being could not ripen nor unfold.

4

"Stead of the buoyant gush of southern fire,
   Which should have burnt within thy veins like flame,
Trembling and dim and yearning to expire,
   Life's waning, flickering pulses went and came."

5

"I," said a voice more stern and cruel yet, -
   "I bought thee a cup, where lustrous shone
The pearl of love, but, ere thy lip was wet,
   I smote thee back, and dashed the goblet down."

6

"And know'st though me? One mocking Phantom said;
   "Perished with me thy fair aspiring dreams;
The curse of failure by my influence shed
   Baffled in mid career thy ardent schemes."

7

Health, love, ambition lost, I could but find
   A crushed and broken life's successless years,
A solitude of heart, a waste of mind,
   And bitter end of all these bitter tears !

8

"I want my Happiness," I madly cried,
   "Some poor brief joy to gild Fate's ruthless course;
O'er some its flows a lavish bounteous tide :
   O God ! But one – one drop from Thy rich source !
And, as yet hopelessly I wept, a light
Broke on the dun horizon's lowest verge,
And o'er its gleaming path fair spirits bright
Trod with soft noiseless feet the heaving surge.

"We are thy future," said the gracious band -
"Life's promised heritage, the best, the last!"
As each advancing footstep touched the strand,
Faded the mournful spectres of the past.

One kissed my lips with kisses warm and pure -
A sweetness without smiles was on her brow;
Each kiss aroused me, I could now endure,
Accept my grief, and thus resist its blow.

"I bring thee Patience," said the gentle voice,
"Thou calledst me Hope when life was in its bloom;
But Hope matured is Patience. Ah, rejoice!
'Tis thus, where hope despairs, I can o'ercome.

Then with linked hands two seraph forms serene
Approached; harmoniously their voices flowed;
"And we," they said, with hushed and solemn mien,
"We bring thee Love to man and Faith in God!

"Instead of earthly passion's fiery glow,
Its transient ecstasy, its wild unrest,
Between our torches calm thy life shall flow,"
And breathed a blessing on my throbbing breast.

Dried were my tears, when lo! The fairest, last
Filled with her grand maternal form, the space,
But darkened by the shade of pinions vast,
I saw not yet the glory of her face.

But as the glittering fleece of spray divides
The white wings of the waterfall, and shows
The luminous arch o'er which its beauty glides,
Slow she unveiled, and beautiful arose.
"Mortal! The dream of life I solve for thee"
She spoke, it was a voice without a breath -
"I am the pilot of Eternity -
Thou seekest Happiness, I bring thee
Death!"
Say Which Were Best

1
Steeped in some soft delicious sin,
Whose charmed langours wrap thee in,
Soul! Take thy golden ease and play
All the orient summer day;
No storms thy joyous calm shall break,
From thy bliss thou shalt not wake.
Some will tell thee there is gall
Within the purple cup – that all
Its honied sweetness will o'erflow
And leave but poisoned dregs below.
The fools they lie! They lie – securely drink;
More deeply as thy lip shall sink,
More luscious, rich, and strong the wine -
Half delirious, half divine!

2
Loud the mighty sorceress laughed
As her slaves her goblet quaffed:
The liquid flame ran wild within
And each was happy in his sin,
Unconscious of the outward shame,
Sealed from regret, remorse, or blame -
Sealed from all passion which might stir,
Or sting, each sense-bound worshipper.
The false enchantress she knows well
That if the joy were bitter sweet,
That if the guilt were not complete,
A moment's suffering breaks the spell!
And thus she guards their trancéd sleep
With opiates strange, luxurious, deep,
And, nerveless, pulseless they remain,
Hugging their sweet enthralling chain -
The soothed sense wildly blest,
The lulled conscience charmed to rest
Borne adown the siren stream,
Life, one long, voluptuous dream!

3
And this is sin? Then what is error?
Oh, the anguish! Oh, the terror!
Of the well deserved blame
Of the soul's unquiet shame -
The retribution which must come
As we face the self-wrought doom;
Sowing seeds which we must gather,
Rousing storms which we must weather,
Some yoke 'neath which our souls are driven,
Some chain to which our souls are riven,
Some brand which must for aye remain,
Some self-inflicted damning stain!
And is this all? Oh! If it were,
It then were well to bravely dare
The whelming floods of guilt and sin,
And plunge our shivering souls within,
And let its headlong torrent flow
O'er all remorse, regret, or woe,
Laving in Lethe tides all sense
Of Being's nobler influence:
If but to be a worm, 'tis best
Hushed in some fair and downy nest,
To pass through Life in idle swoon
Until th' ignoble dream be done.

4
But 'tis not so—we must endure
The fester ere the wound we cure.
(Sorrow th' eternal law of Earth,
The pangs and travail prelude Birth,
And through the unuttered agony
Which we call Death, our souls are free.)
'Tis our prerogative, our doom,
To strive, to struggle, to o'ercome;
Through error's veils to burst away
From silken dalliance into Day,
Unweaving Folly's fettering coil.
To work out bitter truth by Toil;
Bravely our clanking chains to wear,
Nobly our humbling yoke to bear,
And stand erect beneath the skies
Through self-renouncing sacrifice;
Baffled, defeated, not undone,
To expiate and to atone -
(What angel glory in those words!
They pierce the soul as flaming swords)
To expiate and to atone -
To hope, endure, achieve, aspire,
Though bleeding, tortured, tried by fire,
Till heaven's redeeming path be won,
And we the crowning height shall tread,
Life sanctified—Death perfected!
Say which were best.
A Love Poem

Rosamond

1
Oh what a golden swarm of dreams
    Came to my couch last night,
And hovered o'er me with their gleams
    Of soft and mystic light,
And sucked the sweetness of my sleep
    Through long and quick'ning hours!
The left me dewless, rifled, spent,
    As satiate bees leave flowers.

2
O Pillow! To thy spell when I
    Had yielded up my soul,
On magic wings o'er earth and sky
    I flew where yonder roll
The waters of that fatal sea,
    Whose surges heave beside,
And lave with ceaseless, wailing tears,
    The tomb where sleeps my bride.

3
O couch! Whereon I sought my rest,
    Grief-bowed and passion-worn,
Soon as my limbs thy folds had pressed,
    In spirit was I borne
At once, from that dark grave, to heaven!
    Then pardoned, free I trod,
And knelt amid the ransomed ones
    With her I loved, to God!

4
It was so sweet that, even in dreams,
    I knew the dream was vain.
Too soon I said, the morning beams
    Will bring back grief again.
(For dreams are gems which only shine,
    Illusive, on Night's brow;-
O'er Day's pure forehead, clear and bright,
    Such jewels may not glow.)

5
And then this wearied, baffled life,
    With struggle rent and torn,
Must needs resume its toil and strife
    With the bereaving morn.
And beckoning palms, and argent wings,
    And bowers of asphodel,
Will change to sands and dreary wastes,
   And welcomes, to farewells.

6
Yet still I slept ; and then, as stars
   That faintly, one by one,
Expectant, hushed, look through cloud-bars
   At the departing sun ; -
Or roses flushed with crimson bloom,
   Mature, perfumed, complete,
Drop in their places garland-wise
   Around the trellised seat ;

7
Incarnate in fair shapes of light,
   The hopes of my glad prime
Appeared, as seraph faces bright,
   Circling an arch sublime.
A godlike mystery arose
   Within my 'wildered brain,
Still deepening, as a ringer's chime
   Vibrates and peals again.

8
And there, upheld, made manifest,
   In that pomp of light -
Wert thou, my loved, my lost, my best,
   In angel vesture white;
Like a Madonna cherub-bound,
   My rose ! I saw thee stand,
The halo on thy virgin brow,
   Thy lily in thy hand.

9
O my beloved ! Was this a sign,
   A symbol that in thee
My life should merge, and, blent with thine,
   Thy love its guerdon be ?
That all the longing infinite,
   The future, present, past,
Should tend through, every stage of life
   To thee, its first, its last ?

10
Since that primeval moment, when
   From discord God's own breath
Evoked one concord, perfect then
   Of Love, and Life, and Death,
Till now, I know I found thee not
   In my long drought of heart ;
And, found too late, our lives but met
To sever and to part.

But yet was I made man for this,
For this that Cross was mine.
The mortal failed to reach that bliss,
Not so shall the Divine!
And yet — and yet — my human love
Still vainly, fondly sighs;
I pine to touch thy hand, thy cheek,
To kiss thy lips, thine eyes.

To clasp thee closer, close to press
The glory of thy hair,
To watch thy blushing loveliness
When I proclaim thee fair . . .
Alas! How vain to long, to yearn!
How impotent, Desire!
An angel waves a sword which girds
My Paradise with fire!

And — Death the angel, Life the sword -
Thy Death, my Life, must be
Both vanquished, ere I claim, Adored!
My Eden lost, in thee!
A Living Picture Seen in Via Felice, Rome

1
The casement, burnished by the setting sun,
Shines round thee, like a rare and antique frame
Of intricate device – the glory thrown
By its illumined tracery lies like flame
Upon the shadowy masses of thy hair;
And like a pictured saint thou glowest there
Enshrined so high, with the blue skies above thee:
How may I dare to this dim earth to call thee!

2
The crimson cushion under thy soft arm
Swells proudly round its whiteness, and has lent
To its pale splendour hues so rich and warm
No painter's hand so cunningly had blent
The jealous shades; thy dark dreamy eyes
Are raised in rival beauty to the skies.
Deem'st thou each cloud that floats so bright above
A kindred angel sighing for thy love?

3
I feel, as gazing thus upon thy face,
From the low darkness of the sordid street,
As when, revealed amid th'ethereal space,
The saints of old beheld Madonna sweet,
To comfort and to soothe a glimpse of heaven,
Foretaste and type of bliss, to them was given.
Less happy I – the heaven where I would soar
To me is closed – rejected, I adore,
And, vainly true, my fruitless worship pour!
On the Italian Colours Being Replaced on the Palazzo Vecchio

1
O'er the old tower, like bright flame curled
    Which leapeth sudden to the sky,
Its emblem hues all wide unfurled,
    Upsprings the flag of Italy.

2
Its emblem hues! The brave blood shed,
    The true life-blood by heroes given,
The green palms of the martyred dead,
    The snowy robes they wear in heaven!

3
These colours all high hearts must bear;
    They tell of courage, truth and faith,
The heart to know, to will, to dare,
    The threefold life which o'ercomes death.

4
The death which tyrants deemed held fast
    The lands o'er which their armies trod
Hath no more power, the grave is past.
    A living people bless Thee, God.

5
Freed from the yoke of alien kings,
    The nations wake to life and breath;
Th'immortal from the mortal springs,
    'out of the body of that death.'

6
No sepulchres can freedom hold,
    'Tis life; and life o'er death must rise.
Glad bells ring out in triumph bold;
    Wave, flag of freedom, to the skies!

7
My Florence, which so fair doth lie,
    A dream of beauty, at my feet,
While smiles above that dappled sky,
    While glows around that ripening wheat.

8
As fair, and shining, and as bright
    Art thou as she we hear came down
From heaven in bridal robes of white,
    Thy New Jerusalem, St. John.
And like hers too a promise stands
  In this great victory won by thee,
A hope to all the yearning lands,
  Witness and pledge to Italy.
Rome. 1870.
WRITTEN ON THE EVE OF THE ENTRANCE OF THE
ITALIAN TROOPS INTO ROME

1
There is a picture I remember well,
A fresco, fading in my Southern home,
A woman sleeping on the burning sand,
While baleful sunset vapours fill the land,
   A type of thee, O Rome!

2
The slant sun searches for her cheek, and warms
Its golden brown to amber, till the bee,
Confused by sweetness, sucks it as a flower.
No queen, who dreams within her palace bower,
   Is throned more royally.

3
Above, the blue, far-off, mysterious sky,
O'ercanopies her grave, majestic head,
And presses her shut eyes, so sadly sweet;
The swart Campagna stretches round her feet,
   As 'twere a carpet spread.

4
Around (bold headlands in that tideless sea)
Surge awful ruins, prone, august, and hoar,
Void temples, broken columns, arches vast,
Where oracles and echoes of the past
   Reverberate evermore!

5
An empty wallet lies besides her hand,
A cross defaced hangs on her scarlet vest;
Forlorn and poor, she sleeps abandoned there,
Her face, o'ershadowed by a grand despair,
   Is hushed in mournful rest.

6
Unconscious of all peril, calm, she sleeps,
Though soon the treacherous fatal dews will rise
Which lead from sleep to death; soft cobweb folds
Thus bind a captured fly in spider holds,
   Where, crushed, it slowly dies.
The poison murders with a bland caress,
A sugared venom 'neath which life expires;
But wake her and she's saved.  Is there no name
Will rouse her from this sleep, as sudden flame
Is held to smouldering fires?

Alas, alas! To me that picture seems
My country's symbol.  Rome, thus fair art thou.
Dead vampire lips thus fasten on thy breath,
And beauty deepening into solemn death,
Thus crowns thy faded brow.

She sleeps 'mid ruins, as though sleepest, Rome!
Beneath as subtle, deadly a control;
A worse malaria enervates thy will,
And fate and falsehood both unite to kill,
To soil and crush thy soul.

But thou art saved; loud o'er thy purple hills
The silence breaks, thy brave deliverer come;
Clear as a clarion's note the music falls,
And nations greet the kingly voice which calls,
Arise, be free, O Rome!