The Feathered Gaze: Birds, Female Identity, and Entrapment in Victorian Literature

Bethany Dahlstrom

(BA, MA)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the multifaceted relationship between women and birds in the Victorian period, examining how this connection influences modern understandings of Victorian society and gender dynamics. Drawing on ideas that compassion towards animals was a hallmark of civilised behaviour, the thesis delves into themes of possession, commodification, and domination. These themes are evident in literature and real-life practices, from George Eliot's depiction of female entrapment to the devastating feather fashion industry that threatened bird species with extinction. Through an analysis of literary works, such as bird-keeping manuals and other literature, as well as contemporary Victorian societal practices, this study examines how women were symbolically linked to birds, both in their nurturing roles and as subjects of entrapment. Key literary figures such as Aurora Leigh and Jane Eyre are discussed to illustrate women's struggle for autonomy, paralleling the freedom symbolised by birds. Aurora's poetic ascent and Jane's journey to self-sufficiency illustrate women breaking free from societal cages, akin to birds taking flight.

The thesis also delves into the feather fashion industry, revealing how women were blamed for the decline in bird populations, despite following trends set by men. This paradox is further examined through satirical depictions in periodicals, such as *Punch* magazine, and the efforts of conservation movements that were spearheaded by women during the period. Ultimately, the research concludes that the kinship between women and birds extends beyond metaphor, influencing both literature and real-life advocacy for bird protection. This study offers a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and societal values in the Victorian era, contributing to broader discussions on environmental conservation and women's roles in society.

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Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their unconditional love, support, and encouragement. My family has been an incredible rock and source of comfort for me, ensuring that I had all the resources I needed to set myself up for success. Alongside my family, particular thanks go to Dr Noel Bruno for keeping me sane during my degree journey. Furthermore, from coffee study dates to Dungeons and Dragons nights, every single one of my friends has given me the gifts of time, energy, and compassion. I would also like to thank my best friend in the entire world, Samantha, for being my dark and twisty sister, always there for me when I needed a chat or encouragement. We've been through so much together, and I love you so much. When it comes to love, there is no one more supportive than my husband, Michael, who made sure I finished this project, whether I wanted to or not. He took on so much in order to make sure I was without distractions, even when I continued to seek them out.

Without everyone's kindness, emotional support, and frequent check-ins, this thesis would still just be a dream.

When I was recovering from cancer, I had a dream to be able to do a PhD, and I wasn't sure that I would ever live to see the day that I could hand this thesis in. A special thanks must go to Dr Selina Luger from Penn Medicine for taking on my case and saving my life. To be able to look at this completed work today has been a dream many years in the making.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Introduction

The Feathered Gaze: Birds, Female Identity, and Entrapment in Victorian Literature

Early on in my PhD, as I began to read through *Scenes of Clerical Life* by George Eliot, I was struck by the character of Catarina Sarti, an Italian orphan with a beautiful singing voice who is adopted by an English family and made to perform for them. Like the organ grinders with their dancing monkeys that littered the streets in Victorian London, Catarina represented an Other, reduced to being a plaything for the Cheverel family. Catarina is routinely referred to as a bird in the text, particularly a 'southern bird', and the family call her their little pet.

[1] As I began to read more Victorian popular literature, I started to find more connections between women and birds in the texts, and this carried over into art as well. Elise Lawton Smith's work on Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, an English painter, and her allegories of imprisonment, further inspired me to delve more deeply into the connection between women and caged birds, in particular.[2] I began to wonder how the use of avian imagery in Victorian literature and art could contribute to both Victorian and modern understandings of women.

Reviewing art from the Victorian period led me to periodicals, like *Punch* magazine, which satirised women for wearing feather fashion. Questions arose for me regarding the hierarchies between animals and humans that existed at this time, something I will touch on later in this Introduction. What struck me most is the paradox in the debates around feather fashion and who was to blame for the killing of birds associated with it: although women were wearing feathers, which was leading to the destruction of bird species, men were creating the feather fashions that women were wearing, and furthermore, I discovered that it was primarily women who were at the forefront of the fight for the protection of birds. In a world presumably dominated by men, I began to wonder how women came to lead the fight for bird preservation and conservation efforts. As I continued researching, I discovered that with the hundred-year anniversary of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds having been celebrated in 2004, there

[1] George Eliot, 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by David Lodge (Penguin Books, Ltd., 1977), p. 167.
[2] To read more about De Morgan, see Elise Lawton Smith, *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body* (Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014). De Morgan's work is explored further in Chapter One of this thesis.

appeared to be a resurgence of contemporary interest in the Victorians and birds, specifically relating to conservation efforts and the impact of feather fashion.[3]

With these questions in mind, I would like to establish a groundwork for this thesis, particularly from a cultural-historical perspective. While we may understand Victorian ideologies through our modern lens, I believe that it is important to understand the social and historical constructs surrounding Victorian ideologies in order to get a better, fuller picture of Victorian belief systems, particularly surrounding power dynamics. To that end, the next section of this Introduction will introduce and discuss some key terms used throughout the thesis, while the section following this will look at Victorian and modern ideas surrounding animal autonomy, many of which influenced the way this thesis is written. Following that, I will briefly discuss the ever-prevalent Woman Question, looking at the dichotomy between the Angel in the House and the Fallen Woman, and the context within which Victorian women sought to lead the fight for birds' protection. Subsequently, I will discuss advancements in Victorian ornithology, particularly the development of the portable microscope, after which I will give a brief introduction to Victorian feather fashion. I will conclude the Introduction with a detailed chapter overview, to guide the reader through the following chapters of this thesis.

Nature, Religion, and Kinship in the Victorian Period

Before I introduce and examine ideas regarding animal autonomy in the Victorian period, I believe it is worthwhile to define the various terms I will use throughout this thesis. In particular, I will discuss the distinctions between "nature" and "Nature", the concepts of autonomy and kinship, and some of the ideas that the Victorians adopted or expanded upon from the Romantic poets. As each era and century builds upon and learns from its predecessor, the Victorians also drew influence from the Romantics. As Linda Shires writes in her review of *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, 'We find in a woman poet what we look for. But it is generally true … that the received role of the woman poet did change and was understood as altering from

[3] Kari Weil, in *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*, indicates that in recent years, there has been an upsurge in 'animal studies' and debates over whether it should 'model itself on women's studies', which I thought was an interesting connection to make. For more information on debates around animal studies and animal agency, see Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

saccharine, sentimental Poetess to a tougher female poet.'[4] While the Romantic 'Poetess' was restricted to domestic ideals, the Victorian woman poet was perhaps able to do something more freeing, challenging the idea that the poetic sphere belonged solely to male poets. Women's writing in the nineteenth century began engaging in things like science and religion, reflecting the growing freedoms that women were being granted due to social and political change.

As Carl Woodring argues in 'Nature and Art in the Nineteenth Century', the Romantic Movement saw what we now refer to as a 'return to nature', embracing the natural world, particularly in how people viewed Art.[5] With this in mind, I believe that it is important to differentiate between "nature" and "Nature", where nature refers to that which inhabits the natural world and "Nature" is understood – in a Victorian lens – through two principal meanings, as defined by John Stuart Mill. In *Nature*, Mill defines Nature:

> In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man.[6]

Therefore, Nature is that which does not include that which has been influenced by humans. Timothy Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, recognises that humanity in the Romantic period largely understood Nature through literature and art, and this ideal has carried through to the modern age. Furthermore, Morton writes, 'Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.'[7] By admiring Nature and putting it on a pedestal, as Morton says, it becomes an ideal that is at once untouchable and unobtainable, thereby removing one's responsibility towards it. In Morton's world of ecocriticism, environmental art and ecocriticism are essential precisely because 'humans have developed all the tools necessary for [Earth's] destruction.'[8] While this thesis does not intend to engage explicitly with ecocriticism, it

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[4] Linda Shires, 'Victorian Woman's Poetry', ed. by Isobel Armstrong and others, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27.2 (1999), p. 602.
[5] Carl Woodring, 'Nature and Art in the Nineteenth Century', *PMLA*, 92.2 (1977), pp. 193–202, doi:10.2307/461940.
[6] John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 3rd edn (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885), p. 8.
[7] Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 5.
[8] Ibid.

would be difficult to talk about the environment without addressing humanity's responsibility towards it. Recent writings that question the separation of nature and humanity do so precisely against the Victorian backdrop in which humanity stood above nature as part of a greater hierarchy of beings. We are seeing a move from an anthropocentric view of the world to one that asks humanity to question its responsibility and ethics of care for the world around us. It is this debate which led to the development of the idea of the Anthropocene epoch.

Although Anthropocene is a contested term, its definition as a geological period which refers to the impacts that humans and their behaviours have had on the Earth is one which serves this thesis well, particularly due to the fact that scientists in 2024 proposed the start of the Anthropocene from the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain in the eighteenth century.[9] Essentially, the Anthropocene epoch suggested that humans had entered a time when humankind was the driving force behind all of the ever-growing changes to the natural world, outweighing natural changes. Donna Haraway diverges from the idea of the Anthropocene, proposing a new term, "Chthulucene". For Haraway, human exceptionalism is dangerous precisely because it places humanity at the top of all hierarchies, suggesting that humans carry more value than other non-human animals, or indeed, any other organism. The Chthulucene instead suggests that all living things are interconnected and must have each other in order to survive, evolve, and thrive. It builds on the idea of "companion species", which 'is a bigger and more heterogeneous category than companion animal, and not just because one must include such organic beings as rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora, all of whom make life for humans what it is – and vice versa.'[10] Our responsibility to the world around us is seen in Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic', explored later in this Introduction, but here, Haraway draws attention to the idea that there is a sense of urgency in understanding the current epoch:

> These times called the Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing

[9] While the International Commission of Stratigraphy rejected the Anthropocene as a geologic period in 2024, the word still has cultural significance. For more information on the Anthropocene, see William J Ripple and others, 'An Environmental and Socially Just Climate Mitigation Pathway for a Planet in Peril', *Environmental Research Letters*, 19.2 (2024), doi:10.1088/1748-9326/ad059e.

[10] Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 15.

> to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away.[11]

It is precisely this "response-ability" that T. M. Scanlon discusses in *What We Owe to Each Other*, examining 'the morality of right and wrong', looking at conduct which may '[lead] to the destruction of animal species'.[12] Of course, Scanlon's argument surrounding animals states, 'Pain – whether that or rational creatures or nonrational ones – is something we have prima facie reason to prevent, and stronger reason not to cause.'[13] He continues that 'it is a serious moral failure to be indifferent to the suffering of nonhuman animals'. Scanlon diverges from Haraway in that he believes that nonhuman animals can be seen as pets, who have 'a relationship involving mutual expectation' with human animals.[14] Haraway, on the other hand, rejects the idea of animals as pets, believing this to be an anthropomorphising of animals. This is where Haraway's idea of 'companion species' becomes important, because companion species – the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals – allows for a mutually dependent, and thus coevolutionary, relationship. In this thesis, birds are understood in many ways to be anthropomorphised, just as Victorian women are related to birds.

This thesis uses the term "kinship" to discuss and examine the relationship between Victorian women and birds. Although from an anthropological perspective, "kinship" is primarily based on familial affinities, this thesis examines the term from a social standpoint, exploring how women came together to support one another. This 'coming together' is most often illustrated in this thesis by the formation of the female-led Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, established in Victorian England. Therefore, the term "fictive kinship" is arguably the most precise descriptor for the relationships among women during the Victorian period, where "fictive kinship" means a 'coming together' of people who are not tied together by familial relationships, and is

[11] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 35. Of interest to this thesis is that Timothy Morton engages with Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic' as well in *Ecology Without Nature.*
[12] T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 6.
[13] Ibid, p. 181.
[14] Ibid, p. 182.

evident in both the fight for the protection of birds and the Women's Suffrage Movement.[15]

A relationship with animals was not a new concept for Victorian women, and in fact, many of the Romantic women precursors wrote about nature in their work. We see women such as Felicia Hemans embracing Nature and its connection to Christian religion.[16] While this thesis does not engage with Romantic women poets, their contribution to society is important to understand how they paved the way for Victorian women poets, in particular. For many Romantic women poets, Nature was upon the pedestal mentioned by Morton, on par with the sublime.[17] While some Romantics like Edmund Burke did not believe that women could partake in experiencing the sublime, Romantic women poets were able to find the sublime in their everyday activities.[18] For example, Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) was able to find the sublime in a thunderstorm, even comparing the gathering rainclouds to skirts.[19] Baillie also wrote a poem entitled 'Lines to a Parrot', where she compared the parrot's appearance to a 'courtly dame, for ball-room drest', a 'gartered lord in silken vest', a bride and groom, and 'youngsters in their fair-day gear', aligning all ages and genders with the parrot's fine appearance.[20] In these comparisons, Baillie was able to compare this relatively normal caged beauty to the fineries around her. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) found similar interest in the presumed dullness of such a domestic duty as laundry day.[21] Barbauld's prolific writing, particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century, expanded upon 'typical' women's writing, writing 'celebrations of domestic life and character, nature poetry, hymns and prayers' but she also pushed the boundaries even further, including 'biting satire, riddles, odes, and poems in the mock-heroic style.'[22]

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[15] When researching kinship analyses for this thesis, I came across the term "blood brother" when looking for information on non-familial kinship. "Blood brothers" swore a loyalty oath to each other through the combining of blood. While this term has less bloody modern connotations, there does not appear to be a colloquially similar term for women who are bound to each other.
[16] Hemans's connection between Nature and Religion can be seen particularly in her *Hymns on the Works of Nature* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1827).
[17] This thesis engages with the sublime and religion as terms which are most often associated with Western Christian ideals, due to the fact that Victorian Britain was largely protestant. For more information on religion in Victorian Britain, specifically Victorian England, see Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
[18] See in particular Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), p. 33, where Burke compares the love of men for women to the love of men for animals, the latter of which lacks only lust.
[19] Joanna Baillie, *Fugitive Verses*, A New Edition (Edward Moxon, 1842), p. 15.
[20] Ibid, p. 23, ll. 21-5.
[21] *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (The University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 133-5.
[22] Ibid, p. xxiii.

As more and more women began a foray into poetry as both a form of self-expression and a way to secure their family's finances, what was acceptable for women to write about became a hotly-debated topic, and women poets began to '[act] the roles of domestic icons who incarnated feminine beauty and respectability' in order to satisfy a public need for material for literate young women.[23] In women's writing, male critics began examining the purpose of women writers, often seeing women writers as 'the objects rather than the creators of art – the sisters, wives, or mistresses of Romantic and Victorian men.'[24] Men and women did not only need to occupy separate spheres in poetic life; rather, women who sought to do 'men's jobs' were seen as more masculine and threatening to the order of society. Thus, even when women could publish poetry, the more popular anthologies often foregrounded those which focused on 'sentimentality, a love of flowers, and spiritual uplift'.[25] Domestic life was still a strong and sought-after theme, even into the Victorian period. As Higonnet explains, 'Tradition identified women poets with nature, love, and religion.'[26] For this reason, as more contemporary criticism began to examine the past writings, there was a distinct loss of female voices in subsequent anthologies due to the idea that Romantic and Victorian women poets did not have the same lived experience as male poets, given the confinements within which they were made to work. Of course, epics like *Aurora Leigh* still remind modern readers that life for the Victorian woman poet was not easy; to a greater degree than their Romantic predecessors, then, Victorian women poets were able to use the new knowledge being discovered and dispersed throughout the Victorian period in order to examine and critique the status of women in society.

Animal Autonomy in the Victorian Hierarchy

As the Romantic period passed into the Victorian era, scientific studies began to explore a new kind of authority over animals, one of supremacy via evolution, as is keenly seen in studies like those by Charles Darwin, which began to offer new ideas surrounding the notion of human authority over animals, coinciding with religious belief of superiority but adding a scientific component of hierarchy through

[23] *British Women Poets of the 19th Century*, ed. by Margaret Randolph Higonnet (Penguin Group, 1996), p. xviii.
[24] Ibid, p. xix.
[25] Ibid, p. xx.
[26] Ibid, p. xxi.

evolutionary change. Darwin, for example, posited that gorillas, chimpanzees, and humans likely had a shared ancestor due to having similar physiological traits.[27] If humans and monkeys were close relatives through evolution, then assumed human superiority challenged the very Western ideas, held by Christianity and Judaism in particular, that humans held 'dominion' over animals.[28] The idea of human 'dominion' over animals was a hugely influential idea, even though it was based on a flawed interpretation of biblical sentiment. In 'Power and Dominion, Patristic Interpretations of Genesis I' in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, Morwenna Ludlow examines the idea of 'dominion' and references an Early Church Father, John Chrysostom, who speculated that due to the Fall of Man, humans 'lost their full authority over other animals'.[29] Like some scholars, I believe that 'dominion' has been misinterpreted as translation upon translation has 'modernised' biblical language to fit a certain narrative or make the text more accessible. In *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Michael Northcott argues that 'dominion' has often been understood to mean 'domination and possession', but that the Hebrew root of the word, a verb, means 'steward', not 'ruler'.[30] Northcott continues:

> God puts humans over nature not as owner or exploiter but as the steward who shares the creative care of the creator. […] The concept of stewardship of nature is mobilised in the Western tradition from the Fathers to Benedict to refer to the just and gentle care of nature by humans. But it has become associated with instrumentalist attitudes to nature which are linked with environmental exploitation and it may be that the association of stewardship with absolute property rights and land ownership patterns in Western civilisation resulted in its

[27] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Wordsworth Classics of World Literature (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2013), p. 154. For more information on Charles Darwin's theories, see his paramount text, *The Origin of Species*, Wordsworth Classics of World Literature (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998).
[28] Here I use the term 'Western' to indicate European civilisation, formed by the combination of Greco-Roman civilisation and Western Christianity (primarily, the Latin Church and Restorationism). Of note here is that the word 'dominion' carries a heavy weight to it, especially in biblical terms. Interpretations of human dominion range from the idea that humans rule over and are superior to animals, to the idea that humans have been tasked with a duty of care towards animals.
[29] Morwenna Ludlow, 'Power and Dominion: Patristic Interpretations of Genesis I', in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. by David G. Horrell and others (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), p. 146.
[30] Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics, 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 180.

> mutation into a metaphor of human control and mastery over nature. […]
>
> Stewardship has become a misleading and potentially harmful metaphor.[31]

Regardless of whether animals are seen as Other, Northcott here argues that humans have a responsibility and a duty of care towards animals, and, indeed, all of nature.[32] This duty of care was identified in early conservationist movements, particularly in the United States, and is discussed further in Chapter Three of the thesis. Ideas of 'dominion' and 'authority' are not only used in relation to animals in religious belief; in fact, women are subjugated by similar authority in the Bible.[33] Together with Islam, Christianity and Judaism have often influenced how humans in Western societies view animals, namely that humans carry dominion over animals and, therefore, humans are not morally responsible for the pain inflicted on animals killed for food, sport, and so on. If animals do not experience or display morality, an argument could be made that they are one more step removed from humans, who do display moral characteristics.

Overall, however, animal studies and the rights or welfare of animals – particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – 'seemed to be the one given the least rigorous or sustained attention by literary and cultural critics' of all the various reform movements, according to Ivan Krielkamp.[34] In *Minor Creatures: Persons, Animals, and the Victorian Novel*, Krielkamp argues that it was only after *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* that the realist novel was able to make 'new attempts to represent the animal not only with sympathy but as a kind of agency-bearing person or novelistic character'.[35] Through domestication, animals in the Victorian period were able to 'conceptually' approach the human.[36] While ideas of 'dominion' might still persist, the idea of domestication allows for a – somewhat frightening to some – reality that animals might not be that different from humans. Furthermore, domesticated pets that reside in the home are often allowed more sympathy than wild animals, particularly because they have been granted what Krielkamp calls 'partial

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[31] Northcott, p. 180.
[32] For more information on 'dominion' and the current environmental crisis, particularly in the context of United States policy, see *Diversity and Dominion: Dialogues in Ecology, Ethics, and Theology*, ed. by Kyle S. Van Houtan and Michael S. Northcott (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010). Of particular interest to this thesis was William H. Schlesinger's chapter, 'Eyes Wide Shut', which discusses the Anthropocene and human dominion over Nature.
[33] See Genesis 3:16, which in the King James Version reads in part: 'and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall *rule over thee*' (emphasis added).
[34] Ivan Krielkamp, *Minor Creatures: Persons, Animals, and the Victorian Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 4.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid, pp. 6-7.

personhood' through their domestication.[37] Anthropomorphism in the Victorian novel allows for animals to be ascribed human-like characteristics, while the anthropocentric nature of the Victorian novel seems to establish a further hierarchy where men are at the top and women are on par with domesticated animals, or house-pets, as is discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.[38]

Birds and Women: How Animals Were Viewed in the Late Victorian Period

Henry S. Salt's *Animals' Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (first published in 1892, republished in 1980) informs the foundational understandings of many of this thesis's ideas surrounding animal rights and their relation to Western modern philosophy.[39] Western modern philosophy covers the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when philosophers like René Descartes,[40] David Hume,[41] and others examined the idea of human supremacy. This thesis will focus on prominent and popular ideas prevalent in the nineteenth century, but it is of course important to understand the context of nineteenth-century debates and understandings, particularly because scientific advances from researchers such as Darwin began to challenge traditional notions of human supremacy over the animal kingdom, due in part to research that showed that because humans were part of the animal kingdom (with the

[37] Krielkamp, p. 13.
[38] As Krielkamp notes of animals: 'The domesticated animal is creaturely precisely because domestication is always incomplete and provisional: no animal, however loved, fully enters the realm of the human and of culture, fully escapes its animal status. (And, of course, this also implies the complementary Darwinian insight: it's also worryingly the case that no *human* fully escapes its animal status.)', p. 16. This sentiment may be best seen in this thesis in the case of Catarina Sarti, discussed in Chapter One.
[39] See Henry S. Salt, *Animals' Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (Pennsylvania: Society for Animal Rights, Inc., 1980). While the book was published in the United States, Salt himself was an English writer. Here, I should note that Salt's *Animals' Rights* was not a popular book when it was published. In fact, as Peter Singer writes in the 1980 preface, the book failed to change public opinion or practice. However, the fact that Salt's arguments still hold up in today's debates surrounding animals' rights is of interest to this thesis.
[40] Descartes held the belief that 'nonhuman animals' were 'soulless creatures created by God for [humans'] use, entertainment, and consumption' (see Desmond Hosford, 'Uneasy Anthropocentrism: Cartesianism and the Ethics of Species Differentiation in Seventeenth-Century France', *JAC*, 30.3/4 (2010), 515–38.).
[41] Hume maintains that humans and animals are separated by morality and, therefore, reason. If animals do not have a sense of morality and humans do, then reason is what sets humans above animals. See Knut Erik Tranöy, 'Hume on Morals, Animals, and Men', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 56.3 (1959), 94–103 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2021984>.

term *homo sapiens* being assigned only in the 1700s), humans were not as different from animals as initially presumed.[42]

Morality entered the discussion about human-animal relations when philosophers began to debate whether animals – referring here to 'nonhuman animals' – could have souls, feel pain or pleasure, or make choices for themselves.[43] While DeGrazia traces these arguments back through Aristotle, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes, to name a few, this thesis would like to focus on the work of Immanuel Kant and his assertion that autonomy is what sets humans apart from animals, as humans have 'freedom from the causal determinism of nature'.[44] Kant's stance on a lack of autonomy assigned to nature echoes biblical ideas of a very mechanical predestination, where animals then would be confined to a 'circle of life' mentality and unable to break the mould of what is expected of them from a human perspective. Salt, in many ways, takes this line of thinking further, rejecting biblical ideology but stating, 'nor will it ever be possible to obtain full justice for the lower races so long as we continue to regard them as beings of a wholly different order, and to ignore the significance of their numberless points of kinship with mankind.'[45]

Sympathy was a trait highlighted as a characteristic that elevated humans above animals. As DeGrazia points out, Hume offers a partial example of alternative views on animal-human relationships by suggesting that sympathy is necessarily a part of moral thought; therefore, human sympathy can extend to animals other than humans. Jeremy Bentham, cited by both Salt and DeGrazia, further defined the boundaries of sympathy and dominion, stating that the consistent and routine infliction of pain against animals should be regarded as human 'tyranny'.[46]

The final pre-Darwin philosopher I'd like to mention is Arthur Schopenhauer, who was influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism.[47] Schopenhauer believed that 'moral living requires compassion for all beings who can suffer'.[48] Salt, too, cites Schopenhauer, considering the following written by Schopenhauer:

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[42] 'Homo Sapiens', *Oxford English Dictionary* <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/homo-sapiens_n> [accessed 8 May 2024].
[43] For more information on non-human animals, see Gary Steiner, 'Descartes on the Moral Status of Animals', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 80.3 (1998), pp. 268–91, doi:10.1515/agph.1998.80.3.268.
[44] David DeGrazia, *Animal Rights: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 5.
[45] Salt, p. 9.
[46] DeGrazia, p. 5.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

> It is pretended that the beasts have no rights. [Moralists] persuade themselves that our conduct in regard to them has nothing to do with morals, or (to speak the language of their morality) that we have no duties towards animals: a doctrine revolting, gross, and barbarous, peculiar to the west, and having its roots in Judaism.[49]

Like Schopenhauer, Darwin believed that animals could feel emotions, a quality that made them worthy of human attention and sympathy.[50] While other philosophers, like Aristotle, claimed that animals had no feelings or souls, Darwin's research proved the opposite – that animals can reason, feel complex emotions, understand general concepts, and display some rudiments of moral sentiments. In *The Descent of Man*, he wrote that 'the lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. Happiness is never better exhibited than by young animals, such as puppies, kittens, lambs, etc., when playing together, like our own children.'[51] If humans evolved from animals and animals feel the same suffering as humans, this thesis then strives to demonstrate that in the Victorian hierarchy, there is a disparity in human equality, where women are afforded the same consideration as animals.

Furthermore, this thesis will approach the relationship between women and birds, in particular, using DeGrazia's second sense of animal rights, an *equal-consideration sense*. By this sense, DeGrazia qualifies it to explain that 'to say someone has rights is to say she deserves equal consideration.'[52] While the first sense DeGrazia discusses is *moral-status sense*, *equal-consideration sense* differs in that, while the *moral-status sense* believes animals have rights but do not deserve consideration above humans, *equal-consideration sense* believes that animal suffering would count just as much as human suffering.[53] Animal suffering – the killing of birds, for example – would

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[49] Howard Williams's translation, cited in Salt, *Animals' Rights*, p. 14. While I could not find Williams's translation that Salt cites, another translation reads thus: 'It is asserted that beasts have no rights; the illusion is harboured that our conduct, so far as they are concerned, has no moral significance, or, as it is put in the language of these codes, that "there are no duties to be fulfilled towards animals." Such a view is one of revolting coarseness, a barbarism of the West, whose source is Judaism.' For this translation, see Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. by Arthur Brodrick Bullock, 2nd edn (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915), p. 218.

[50] See Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1915).

[51] Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 33.

[52] DeGrazia, p. 15.

[53] DeGrazia uses 'her' in his example here, where previously he defined animal rights regarding 'humans', which is interesting to me. The shift here suggests to me that there is a notable shift in the *equal-consideration* paradigm that acknowledges animals and women having similar rights, being below men on the moral consideration hierarchy.

be akin to the suffering of women, either through domestic abuse, murder, or the simple act of making a woman into a parlour piece, where the husband becomes the 'owner' of the woman, and she is his property. Where this thesis expands from DeGrazia's *equal-consideration sense* is that while DeGrazia states that some animal advocates claim that '"all animals are equal"', the Victorian understanding of the Animal Kingdom tried to place animals on a hierarchy that distinguished humans from animals, and because of this, an *equal-consideration sense* was not applicable to Victorian thinking.[54] Perhaps a better interpretation might be that of quasi-equality, where women's lower human status and birds' relatively high animal status seem to give them somewhat equal standing. This thesis does not seek to challenge the commonly accepted view of modern scholars on the Victorian animal hierarchy but rather seeks to present case studies that show what kind of considerations women were given within the hierarchy.

One outworking of animals' perceived lower status was their role in performing: animals were commonly put on display for Victorian entertainment, and their role as performers has an important relationship to the plight of women, as is discussed in later chapters. In her chapter on "Performing Animals/Performing Humanity" in *Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Antonia Losano posits that performing animals captivated Victorian attention precisely because the training of 'lesser' species brings 'welcome assurance of the inherent superiority of humanness as we compel nonhuman creatures to execute human behaviors at our direction, and significantly *not quite as well* as humans do.'[55] Losano continues that these performative displays were not about animal intelligence, but rather, they were signs of the intelligence of the humans who did the training. Losano argues that it proved to Victorians that 'humans possess the power to manipulate and train animals.'[56]

By this token, all behaviours are measured by a human standard, where humanity is placed at the highest end of the spectrum, with men at the very top of the hierarchy. If animal compliance to supposed human superiority is a sign that humans are, in fact, at the top of the Animal Kingdom hierarchy, this idea can also be mapped onto women as performers. Rather than demonstrating the talent of women, it instead enforces the idea that the woman has been adequately trained by a man 'handler' and

[54] DeGrazia, p. 18.
[55] Antonia Losano, 'Performing Animals/Performing Humanity', in *Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture: Contexts for Criticism*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison, Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 131.
[56] Ibid.

demonstrates male superiority over women, thereby robbing women of fame and instead passing the idea of 'talent' onto the man. What this says about the Victorian hierarchies at play is that women were only slightly above animals in the Victorian period but were certainly below men, considering the power dynamics, and that there is therefore a lack of concern for women and their wellbeing because women are seen as 'lesser' creatures. Furthermore, one cannot profess to feel empathy for animals if one is forcing them to perform; in the same vein, one cannot profess to feel empathy for women's plight if one is forcing them to live in inhumane conditions, such as those found in millinery factories, which is discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis. There is little empathy displayed by men for the actual life, subjectivity, or agency of the animal or the woman in many of the case studies in this thesis.

The Woman Question and Kinship Analysis

Central to this thesis and a thread running throughout it implicitly is the Woman Question. The Woman Question, in the Victorian context, looks at the fundamental roles of women in society at a time when women were more visibly coming out of the domestic sphere. This study does not seek to represent feminist views or offer a diluted view of the Victorian gender binary. While some of the women authors and poets discussed in this thesis explore ideas related to the subjugation of women, the purpose of this study is not to offer a feminist examination; indeed, some of the women discussed, such as George Eliot, would not have been considered feminists by modern interpretations of the word. However, ideas surrounding gender and the gender binary are inescapable when talking about differences between men and women in the Victorian period. This thesis, then, relies on work by Daphne Spain, particularly her book *Gendered Spaces*, in order to better understand the concept of a gender binary in the Victorian period. In *Gendered Spaces*, Spain explores the idea of spatial segregation, wherein there are specifically designed spaces for men and for women, following a gender binary. While Spain acknowledges that from a feminist perspective, the concept of "gender" in her book is a socially constructed view of femininity and masculinity, as opposed to reliant on the biological difference between women and men, her notions regarding a binary existing at all fall in line with Victorian ideologies. From her preface to the book, Spain also acknowledges that spatial segregation impacts the distribution of knowledge that women could use to change their position in society.

From a spatially segregated point of view, adhering to the gendered binary, men and women occupy different spheres, and this was especially true in Victorian England. Even though the Victorian period was a time of immense change and saw women coming out of the domestic sphere to engage in work outside of the family home, most – what we could call 'respectable' – women were still relegated to careers that implied domesticity, such as becoming seamstresses or working in textile factories. Even women in higher society were trapped by their station, either implicitly or explicitly relegated to the position of 'parlour piece' for their future husbands. As Spain points out in *Gendered Spaces*, 'masculine spaces […] contain socially valued knowledge of theory, law, and medicine, while feminine spaces (such as the home) contain devalued knowledge of child care, cooking and cleaning.'[57] This concept was especially true in the Victorian period, despite shifting boundaries, as seen in the after-dinner activities of upper-class men and women, where men often engaged in scientific hobbies and pursuit of knowledge. In contrast, women were often expected to read or work on their needlework. As Spain claims earlier on in her work, 'Women and men are spatially segregated in ways that reduce women's access to knowledge and thereby reinforce women's lower status relative to men's. "Gendered spaces" separate women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege.'[58]

Through spatial segregation, a power dynamic is formed and enforced. As Spain writes,

> Spatial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power. By controlling access to knowledge and resources through the control of space, the dominant group's ability to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced. Thus, spatial boundaries contribute to the unequal status of women. For women to become more knowledgeable, they must also change places.[59]

To 'change places', women needed autonomy that was largely out of reach at the time, leading to a sort of 'caging' through the embodiment of the place in which women resided.

To understand the autonomy that women sought in the Victorian period, this thesis relies on the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant's concept of autonomy emphasises

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[57] Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 11.
[58] Ibid, p. 3.
[59] Ibid, pp. 15-6.

self-legislation and moral independence, yet the influence of external forces raises questions about the extent to which individuals can truly act autonomously. According to Kant's moral philosophy, an agent's will must be autonomous – that is, it must be able to answer to itself through self-legislation. As Janis David Schaab writes, 'for Kant, actions are done *either* from inclination *or* from duty.'[60] Thus, 'actions from duty are guided, not by some external object or feature, but by something *internal* to the agent's deliberation.'[61] While humans are responsible to the law and are bound by the law, one's internal moral compass must guide one's decisions, where an incentive to follow the law counteracts impulses and inclinations.[62] In this thesis, one complication to Kant's idea of autonomy is what Ben Colburn calls "covert influence", that is, outside influences which impact the formation of one's sense of self-legislation. As Colburn writes, 'Covert influence on an agent's commitments is bad for autonomy, because it undermines the extent to which we can say she herself is deciding on what is valuable.'[63] While independent thinking and reason should form a person's autonomy – or freedom of will – "adaptive preference" can have an adverse impact on the formation of autonomy, through "endorsement", or the 'covert, nonrational nature of adaptive preferences'.[64] Mary Barbara Walsh expands on Colburn's complications surrounding autonomy and explains, 'Independence requires not only a degree of institutional and economic independence, but also cognitive independence from psychological manipulation.'[65]

Adaptive preferences, or those preferences or beliefs which are formed out of response to oppression, become very important when placed against the backdrop of Victorian ideologies, specifically looking at the space in which women were confined. As mentioned before, some authors discussed in this thesis would not have been considered feminists by modern interpretation, and this fact is starkly represented through the characters in their novels, who are made to live quite conventional lives.[66] I would argue that it is due to social conditioning that women in the Victorian period

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[60] Janis David Schaab, 'Kant on Autonomy of the Will', in *The Routledge Handbook of Autonomy*, ed. by Ben Colburn (Routledge, 2023), p. 46.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid, p. 48.
[63] Ben Colburn, 'Autonomy and Adaptive Preferences', *Utilitas*, 23.1 (2011), p. 63.
[64] Mary Barbara Walsh, 'Feminism, Adaptive Preferences, and Social Contract Theory', *Hypatia*, 30.4 (2015), p. 832.
[65] Ibid.
[66] For more information on feminist critiques of female Victorian authors, see Zelda Austen, 'Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot', *College English*, 37.6 (1976), pp. 549–61, doi:10.2307/376148.

adopted adaptive preferences, and thus, autonomy in this thesis is approached with the caveat that perhaps no woman in the Victorian period was truly autonomous; however, it should be noted that characters like Aurora Leigh approach autonomy through metaphorical flight, which is the basis for the second chapter of this thesis. Furthermore, looking ahead to the chapters on women's involvement in the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, we can see that how women shaped the fight for bird welfare is an act of autonomy, through choosing to act on their internal sense of duty, as seen in Kant's moral philosophy. Kinship in this thesis, therefore, is implicitly about female autonomy precisely because it highlights how both women and birds struggled against confinement. Ultimately, by examining how Victorian women's autonomy was shaped – and often constrained – by societal norms, this thesis seeks to highlight how adaptive preferences complicate the very notion of self-determined will.

Modern scholars have recognised that women in the Victorian period were influenced by the kind of ideas expressed through the trope of the 'Angel in the House', which Coventry Patmore coined in his poem, published in 1854, which is discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. At its core, the Angel in the House is a long-standing image that has come to represent the woman who occupied the domestic sphere with grace and submission, tending to her husband's affairs and looking after the children without complaint. As Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair write, 'We know that among the working classes economic constraints ensured that even if the ideology of domesticity and the attendant image of 'angel in the house' were well entrenched, for many families it remained an ideal to be aspired to rather than a practical reality.'[67] Despite the economic instability of the working class, these ideals placed upon women were paramount. Furthermore, as Mary Evans writes in the introduction to *The Woman Question*, 'women were always, and are still, given automatic and often exclusive responsibilities for childcare and for the maintenance of the household, and these duties in the home prevent them from playing as full a part as men in the wider social and political world.'[68] Women who did not fit into that box were considered to be defiant or deviant. It is telling that the other enduring image of womanhood in this period is the Fallen Woman.

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[67] Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, 'Domestic Fathers and the Victorian Parental Role', *Women's History Review*, 15.4 (2006), 551–59 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020500530588>, p. 552.
[68] *The Woman Question: Readings on the Subordination of Women*, ed. by Mary Evans (Oxford: University Press, 1982), p. 13. Evans goes on to reference John Stuart Mill, who pointed out that 'there is no true equality between the sexes' in the nineteenth century (p. 14).

Completely tied to Christian religion and the idea of a woman being a man's 'help-meet'[69] is the idea that women should not work because their primary duties are to marry, absorb their household into their husband's household, and manage his affairs while he remains the breadwinner of the family.[70] Evans writes that despite advances in women's suffrage, these advances 'foundered on the expectation that women's biological capacity to bear children carried with it an exclusive obligation to rear children and to provide domestic services for men and dependent relatives.'[71] While lower-income women were allowed to work, there was a considerable restriction on the ability of middle-class women to effectively find positions since it was their societal duty to marry well.[72] This allowed the construction of a prison around women in the domestic sphere: 'Although conduct manuals encouraged the wife to transform her home into a sacred shelter from the world's cares, courts allowed it to become a prison where she could be forcibly confined by her husband'.[73] While some men (and women) viewed the 'sacred shelter' of women in the domestic sphere as coming under threat, the workforce was in dire need of more labourers due to the rise of industrialization, and this led to more women engaging in the public world of work. Even middle-class and upper-class women had jobs to do, albeit primarily in the domestic sphere. As Elizabeth Langland points out, 'Whereas men earned the money, women had the important task of managing these funds toward the acquisition of social and political status.'[74]

With women in the Victorian period entering the working sphere, the ideal of the Angel in the House was coming under threat. The Industrial Revolution brought about two fundamental facts: 'First, it drove needy women out of the home and into the factory and workshop. Second, it made women at home and in the family more vital to society than ever before, as the sole preservers of human values which found no place in the modern world of work'.[75] While many advocated for social reform of working conditions, the underlying question became whether women belonged in the working sphere or if their position in society required them to focus their efforts once again on

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[69] This phrase is found in Genesis 2:18 of the King James Version of the Bible.
[70] Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Social Issues, 1837-1883*, The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883, 3 vols (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), II, p. 135.
[71] Evans, p. 17.
[72] Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder realise this foil: 'For all practical purposes, the law recognizes two and only two occupations for women: marriage and prostitution' (II, p. 151).
[73] Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, II, p. 3.
[74] Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 8.
[75] Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, II, p. 109.

undertaking domestic roles. Denying women the right to enter the working sphere exposed a widespread social ideology about women: 'that an essential condition of their existence is a natural and inevitable dependence on men'.[76]

Work wasn't just a male-dominated world; it allowed women some level of freedom which had been previously unavailable to them, while still keeping them 'domestic'. It was 'an attempt to move from passive suffering to active doing, and from the restricted domestic sphere into the "real" (and male) world'.[77] While working didn't necessarily afford women complete independence from domestic duties, those who sought to confine women's work to the home felt as if a woman would be setting aside her moral duty to the family by undertaking outside work. Besides, work was seen to be personally rewarding (both psychologically and financially), and therefore, allowing women to work could change their very nature, as Victorian society upheld the ideal that women were, above all, selfless. According to Helsinger, 'If work alters woman's nature, then it threatens not only the home and family but also the larger social and moral structures in which home and family have become essential if strictly segregated elements'.[78] And while some women could justify their work through the support it provided to their families, the people they had been tasked by society to look after, other women restricted their working ambitions to social services to still maintain their overarching desire to be contained to the domestic sphere.

Because of this, history records women in the Victorian period undertaking jobs as seamstresses (something which could often be done from within the home or small workshops) or governesses – charged with the care and education of someone else's children. In Chapter Three of this thesis, I will be discussing women's work, particularly looking at women in millinery and the conditions to which they were subjected while working. Factory conditions were abysmal, and pay was scarce, but the demand for fashion (notably designed by men) was extremely high. Millinery work, however, was seen as 'woman's work' because was still related to the domestic sphere. By doing more domestically oriented jobs, women could still maintain some of their position as the Angel in the House. Inhabiting separate spheres, Victorian men and women could co-exist peacefully. It is surprising, then, to see the rise of women-led societies in the Victorian period, at a time when societies were notably composed

[76] Evans, p. 14.
[77] Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, II, p. 112.
[78] Ibid., p. 113.

entirely of men, a phenomenon which is discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. However, of note here is the Society for the Protection of Birds, which was one of the leading societies in the Victorian period to work on the preservation and conservation of bird life.

Victorian Scientific Advances in Ornithology

The association between women and birds was not just influenced by ideologies of womanhood. The increase in attention to the study of animals gives us a sense of how the ways in which birds were viewed informed attitudes toward women. Ornithological studies, alongside natural history studies, provide us with unique insight into the challenges surrounding the preeminent ideas of a Victorian Animal Kingdom hierarchy, as noted before. Where women fit in this hierarchy was also being challenged by the shifts in natural history studies due to the ideas of hierarchies being challenged and ideas permeating society surrounding 'women's work' and the dangers of idleness. Shifting away from celebrating beauty, Victorians sought to justify their studies as being morally uplifting, and women began to partake in natural history studies, which we begin to see in some amateur self-studying in literature.[79] While Suzanne Le-May Sheffield states that *Punch* magazine suggested that 'Intellectual pursuits […] rob a woman of her youth and her beauty, aspects of her person that would ultimately lead to the ideal position of wife and mother', women still persisted in the studies and 'to the right audience', Sheffield writes, the image in *Punch* may mean the studious woman 'may be more inspiration to other women than a victim of a gendered society.'[80] Women were beginning to take control of their lives, and the idea that a woman who studied would become a spinster or outcast was no longer as pervasive.

Natural history had been studied informally for centuries prior to the Victorian period, with entomology, landscape, and geology often becoming the most popular studies. However, the nineteenth century saw a sharp increase in interest in natural

[79] Fabienne Moine suggests that women in the Victorian period who wrote nature literature 'felt the need for a conversation with nature, convinced that poetry provided a means of channelling moral sensitivity in an era of industrialisation and urbanisation' (p. 5). For more on Victorian women poets, see Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[80] Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds: Three Victorian Women Naturalists* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1, 3. Le-May Sheffield's work is an interesting study on women naturalists in the Victorian period and how they overcame patriarchal stigma to defy traditional social norms and become naturalists.

history, and as David Allen writes, the Evangelical Revival in the Victorian period was almost a catalyst because it required Victorians to justify any pursuit, scientific or otherwise, discovering in each pursuit what Allen calls 'some moral content' in order to 'proclaim its edifying character'.[81] He notes: 'The more and the useful became, increasingly, intertwined: pursuits like geology could be justified, in the self-same flickering of conscience, as a means of revering the earthly grandeurs of Creation […] and as a means of prospering materially.'[82] Reverence for creation was inherently religious and imbued the material with a sense of spirituality. Intertwined with the moral was the religious; scientific pursuits now elevated the soul and helped people become more spiritual. Allen writes: 'In their study of nature the Victorian middle classes gazed out upon their own image: natural history exercised so compelling a fascination throughout that era for the reason that it offered to the Evangelical characters an unrivalled range of outlets for its expression.'[83]

More than this sentiment however, the Victorian mindset was one that abhorred idleness, and in a society that needed to fill its time productively, the formation of natural history societies filled a range of those purposes most valued by the Victorians: a reverence for nature and purposeful activity.[84] Organisations interested in birds flourished. Among the most notable to be established were the British Ornithologists' Union in 1858 and its journal, *The Ibis*, which launched the following year; the London Natural History Society in 1858; the Manchester Microscopical and Natural History Society in 1880; and the Society for the Protection of Birds in 1889. Detailed guides to birds emerged, including the text made famous in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Thomas Bewick's *A History of British Birds* (published first in 1798, then 1804, with a supplement in 1821).[85] As many readers have noted, this is the book that Jane is first seen reading in her nook, escaping from her reality in order to mentally travel the world.[86] Following Bewick's manual was William Yarrell's *A History of British Birds*

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[81] David Elliston Allen, 'The Victorian Setting', in *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 65.
[82] Allen, 'The Victorian Setting', p. 65.
[83] Ibid., p. 67.
[84] David Allen references this in his book, explaining that for Victorians, 'Every single moment needed to be filled with some useful activity' (p. 70). For more information on Victorian ideas surrounding idleness and the need to be spurred into action, see Lee Anna Maynard, *Beautiful Boredom: Idleness and Feminine Self-Realization in the Victorian Novel* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009).
[85] Thomas Bewick, *A History of British Birds* (London: Longman and Co., 1826).
[86] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Susan Ostrov Weisser, Barnes & Noble Classics (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), p. 12.

(in three instalments issued in bimonthly parts, from 1837-43).[87] As recorded in a review of Christine Jackson's *A newsworthy naturalist: the life of William Yarrell*, Yarrell's *History of British Birds* was 'well known among ornithologists as *the* standard work on the subject through the 19th century, with the notable innovation of including the earliest known record of the occurrence of a species in Great Britain.'[88] Bird imagery and symbolism in Victorian literature became more nuanced as naturalists and authors alike engaged with the new information that was being gathered and published for wider audiences.

Critical reception of research works like Bewick's *A History of British Birds* was varied, wide-ranging, and full of praise. After the publication of the book's second volume (1804), *The British Critic* wrote:

> It would […] be altogether superfluous to expatiate much on the merits of a work, which, by the propriety of its descriptions, the characteristic truth of its figures, the spirit of its wood engravings, and the very ingenious and entertaining variety of its vignette ornaments has, without the aid of critics, united all suffrages in its favour.[89]

While the two-volume book and its 1821 supplement clearly had an impact on its contemporary readers, with one review stating that for every schoolboy who read White's book, a dozen more were influenced by Bewick's, the survival of the text indicates its importance in naturalist history.[90] When Bewick's autobiography was published in 1862, a review in *Ibis* stated, 'Vast has been the advance in systematic knowledge within the last half-century, how few of our living naturalists but must gratefully acknowledge their early debt to White's "History" and to the life-like woodcuts of Bewick!'[91] The review continues, saying that while Bewick could never rank with the likes of Gilbert White on scientific knowledge, 'Bewick was a lover of nature, a careful observer, and a faithful copier of her ever-varying forms.'

Bewick's texts, in particular, opened up naturalist studies to the educated public, making it more accessible, and as already intimated, his books were popular with

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[87] William Yarrell, *A History of British Birds*. 4th ed. 4 vols. (London: J. Van Voorst, 1874).
[88] Henry McGhie, 'Book Review of "A Newsworthy Naturalist: The Life of William Yarrell"', *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*, 142.3 (2022), 275–77, p. 276.
[89] 'Art. IX. The History of British Birds.', in *The British Critic* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1805), XXVI, 292–97 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hxjg2t> [accessed 14 April 2019], p. 293.
[90] 'Review of the Recently Published Memoir of Bewick', *Ibis*, 4.4 (1862), 368–78 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1474-919X.1862.tb07513.x>, p. 368.
[91] Ibid.

authors like Emily and Charlotte Brontë, both of whom studied Bewick's *British Birds* and used the texts and illustrations to further their education, both scientifically and artistically.[92] In fact, as Emily Roberson Wallace asserts in her article on birds in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), both Emily and Charlotte Brontë believed that human behaviour was 'mimicking certain species of birds in nature, folklore and mythology' and that 'these facets of knowledge played an important part in Victorian ideology.'[93] Wallace states that birds are 'strategically placed' throughout the Brontë sisters' novels in order to express character nuances that wouldn't otherwise be possible, engaging with reverse anthropomorphism in order to broaden the reader's understanding of the characters who are being compared to birds. The use of birds like nightingales and birds of prey also bring in symbolism that had previously been relegated to the world of ornithology in order to better develop the human characters within the novels, providing a new and unique insight into human and animal characteristics.[94] Claire McKechnie and John Miller assert in *Victorian Animals* that new scientific studies in the Victorian period led, inevitably, to a struggle to determine what it really meant to be 'human' in an age where the issues of animal liberation and animal companionship began to take hold of contemporary society, engaging with animals in a way that transcended purely scientific observation.[95]

Accessibility was a key feature in the rise of natural history studies during the Victorian period. While many readers may attribute the rise of natural history studies to the new works like Darwin's that began to challenge common conceptions about things like creation and evolution, in fact, it was likely the *lack* of new scientific information in the Victorian period that drove the rise of natural history studies. For the first time in a long time, the common man was able to "catch up" with previous scientific advancements due to the translation of literature and the accessibility of mechanics, like the microscope, that allowed humans to literally see the world through a new lens.[96]

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[92] Emily Roberson Wallace, 'Caged Eagles, Songsters and Carrion-Seekers: Birds in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights', *Brontë Studies*, 41.3 (2016), 249–60 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2016.1186945>, p. 251.
[93] Roberson Wallace, p. 250.
[94] Roberson Wallace specifically traces rooks and ravens, robins, nightingales, birds of prey in her examination of *Jane Eyre*, but nightingales and birds of prey are of specific interest to this thesis and will be discussed in Chapter One.
[95] Claire Charlotte McKechnie and John Miller, 'Victorian Animals: Introduction', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17.4 (2012), 436–41 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2012.735448>.
[96] For more information on the use of the microscope during the Victorian period, as well as its burgeoning popularity with 'amateurs', see Savile Bradbury, 'The Microscope in Victorian Times', in *The Evolution of the Microscope* (Oxford: Pergamom Press, 1967), pp. 200–255.

Animal study was something open to a wide section of society, as testified to in the working-class character of Job, the entomologist in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848). Danielle Coriale argues that the working-class naturalist is something of a paradox in Gaskell's work, receiving 'intellectual extension' but also 'exclusive and alienating', particularly for women.[97] Coriale states, 'Natural history thus appears in *Mary Barton* as a sign of liberation from class constraints, a way of connecting amateurs to a potentially global community of scientists and fostering their knowledge of distant locales.'[98] For those who could afford the time and had the luxury of studying the animal world, new possibilities were imminently available.

These scientific advancements in the exploration of the animal world also had negative outworkings. They led to further destruction of the 'lesser beings'; as Jed Mayer writes: 'The most dramatic and generative public debates over the limits of human dominance in the nineteenth century were waged […] around the physiological laboratories which began to proliferate in British research institutions in the 1870s.'[99] The rise of scientific curiosity came hand-in-hand with the rise of something far more sinister, in the form of vivisection, or the practice of performing operations on live animals for scientific research. These activities focused on celebrating the natural world ironically to specific forms of animal cruelty which led also to a rise in concern for the welfare of animals.[100]

The Victorian period saw a rise in animal preservation through animal welfare organisations and the anti-vivisection movement. This was partly due to human investment in actual animals because of ideological investment in them. Victorian worldviews began to start to shift, particularly in the latter half of the century, as pets became symbolic of happy domestic lives.[101] Victorians experienced genuine care and concern for their animals, particularly their pets, but this new lens that domesticated animals began to expose showed that humans could also interpret the world through

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[97] Danielle Coriale, 'Gaskell's Naturalist', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 63.3 (2008), 346–75 <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2008.63.3.346>, p. 348.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Jed Mayer, 'The Nature of the Experimental Animal: Evolution, Vivisection, and the Victorian Environment', in *Considering Animals: Contemporary Studies in Human-Animal Relations*, ed. by Carol Freeman, Elizabeth Leane, and Yvette Watt (England: Ashgate, 2011), p 94.
[100] Paradoxically, Brenda Ayres points out in *Victorians and Their Animals* that 'the lower classes were derided for living in animal squalor', while the genteel classes were out hunting animals and keeping them as pets (p. 5). For more information on how animals were viewed in the Victorian period, see *Victorians and Their Animals: Beasts on a Leash*, ed. by Brenda Ayres (New York: Routledge, 2019).
[101] See Ayres's description of Landseer's painting, *Queen Victoria and Her Family at Windsor Castle* (c. 1842), in *Victorians and Their Animals*, pp. 5-7.

animals. As people began to learn more about different animals and their behaviours, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism could offer unique insights into human differences and behaviours. On the one hand, animals provided a unique opportunity to understand human behaviour; on the other hand, ascribing humanistic qualities to animals (anthropomorphism) and animalistic qualities to humans (zoomorphism) could disrupt the very tenuous balance with which Victorian society found itself struggling concerning the hierarchy of the Animal Kingdom and human dominion over animals. Whatever the role of animals and however much agency they were attributed in Victorian society, we see plenty of evidence that humans retained a sense of their superiority, with animals relegated to second place – which meant that the harvesting of birds and their feathers could be excused, as we see in Chapter Three.

A Brief Introduction to Victorian Feather Fashion

Important to this thesis is how the world of fashion interacted with women's identities in relation to birds. Alongside the interest in bird welfare and science, fashion in the Victorian period began to see a trend towards birds and bird plumage, beginning in the 1850s, in ways that informed how women were perceived. While feather fashion had a long history – ostrich plume headdresses were used for Court attire from the eighteenth century, for example – the nineteenth century marked a desire for novelty, and, alongside industrialised processes that enabled mass production, resulted in the destruction of many bird species in the process. Although the use of feathers had previously been the convention, with a few feathers here and there used to decorate hats, by the mid-century, whole birds were being used as decoration for extravagant outfits, to the point in the 1880s, when there emerged a trend to affix a whole bird to a hat crown, posing the bird in such a way as to appear 'natural', often using extra feathers to give headpieces more depth and appeal.[102] The details of the feather fashion industry – and the labour and effort involved – is discussed in Chapter Three.

The impact of feather fashion on both the UK and global levels was devastating. Whole species of birds were facing extinction, and some even disappeared from Britain entirely, including the egret, as its osprey feathers were being used in both women's fashion and for military headgear, a point discussed in great detail in letters to the

[102] Alison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), p. 92.

Times, which is discussed in Chapter Five.[103] The disappearance of egrets, in particular, provoked conservationists to publish accounts of how the birds being used for female fashion were actually being hunted and cruelly dissembled, sparking conservationist legislation, including the Wild Bird Protection Act of 1880. In fact, so dire was the plight of wild birds that Parliament passed several acts towards the end of the Victorian period to protect them, in 1880, 1881, 1894, and 1896.

Although the Acts were passed by Parliament, until the Rules Publication Act 1893, they were only available to the public in their publication in the *London Gazette* and were thereby largely inaccessible to all but the most educated and were therefore not followed.[104] Because of this, in 1897, barrister James Robert Vernam Marchant and British Ornithologists' Club member Watkin Watkins published a book entitled *Wild Birds Protection Acts, 1880-1896*. Complete with every Act and subsequent Order regarding the protection of wild birds in the UK, the two men attempted to 'make the Acts and the Orders intelligible and accessible to the public.'[105] One of the most important aspects of the original 1880 Act to note is that Parliament deemed it 'expedient to provide for the protection of wild birds of the United Kingdom during the breeding season', pointing to the fact that many birds were being hunted during their most vulnerable time.[106] Furthermore, nesting birds were more often female, leading to the slaughter of female birds and their offspring. Chapter Five will offer a more in-depth analysis of feather fashion in the Victorian period and the ways in which it interacted with and informed women's identities in the period.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is laid out over five chapters, each one dealing with a different research question and utilising case studies from various forms of literature, including novels, poems, magazine illustrations, educational materials, and newspaper clippings. The focus is on a range of texts because of my interest in popular understandings of the relationship between women and birds. The thesis will range from discussing those

[103] Linda Gardiner, H. B. Tristram, and H. James Rainey, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (London, England, 29 August 1899), p. 10, The Times Digital Archive.
[104] Many of the news reports coming out in Victorian newspapers at the time were surrounding fines and court cases wherein men were being charged for failing to adhere to the rules surrounding the shooting and sale of wild birds.
[105] James Robert Vernam Marchant and Watkin Watkins, *Wild Birds Protection Acts, 1880-1896* (London: R.H. Porter, 1897) <http://archive.org/details/wildbirdsprotec00watkgoog>, p. xii.
[106] Ibid., p. 159.

instances in which birds and women are explicitly associated (such as the artwork in Chapter One and the *Punch* images in Chapter Four) but also will investigate texts that deal only with birds, such as manuals on caging, which feature in Chapter One. Although these texts are solely on birds, in many ways, they echo (and, I argue, most likely inform) how women were viewed, and it is because of the close alliance between women and birds in the Victorian period that they are of interest to this thesis.

Furthermore, this thesis is divided into two separate yet related sections. The first section encompasses Chapters One and Two and focuses primarily on more canonical textual material with a literary focus. The second section covers Chapters Three, Four, and Five, which relate more to the cultural-historical implications of literature in circulation. These pieces of literature were specifically chosen due to limitations in examining solely literature that was widely published and still available; cultural readings allow for access to literature that was more commonly available in the Victorian period. While Part One of the thesis relates to women *as* birds, specifically in art and literature, Part Two of the thesis relates to women *and* birds, exploring the very real relationship between the two.

The first chapter, entitled 'The Taming and Caging of Victorian Women: The Care and Keeping of Birds', will address how the taming and caging of women in domesticity can be better understood through understanding how the literal taming and caging of birds was depicted. I compare the plight of women to that of the care and keeping of birds, particularly by examining the manuals of Johann Matthäus Bechstein and K. A. Buist. The chapter will introduce the idea of a relationship between women and birds, particularly caged birds, using various pieces of art alongside George Eliot's Caterina Sarti as a literary case study.

This examination will lead directly into the second chapter, entitled 'Uncaging the Wild Bird: Female Autonomy in *Aurora Leigh* and *Jane Eyre*', which will address the significance of wild birds in the depiction of women. I look at the depiction of wild birds in the figure of Aurora Leigh, a brief encounter with Marian Erle, and a final discussion of Jane Eyre. The chapter will conclude by examining Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes', looking at the use of voice as it relates to birdsong and freedom.

The third chapter, entitled ''The wholesale slaughter of innocent birds': The Rise of Feather Fashion in the Victorian Period', will begin by giving a more expansive introduction to feather fashion in the Victorian period, looking at how feather fashion evolved from being male-dominated to female-oriented. Specifically, the chapter will

focus on the destruction of egrets and ostriches, both of which were used quite extensively for their feathers, the former of which were hunted during nesting season, when the female birds were killed while taking care of their young, and the latter of which were used extensively for feathers in women's hats and were a sticking point between the women's suffrage movement and antivivisectionists. The chapter will then look at the economic value of birds, both in feather fashion and their use to deter pests in crops, despite criticism raised against them, focusing on why birds were chosen in the fight for animal rights by women. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a look at the impact of (male-dominated) feather fashion on those women who worked in the factories producing it, to demonstrate that, despite often being blamed for their desire for feathers, women were those most likely to suffer within it. I look at the factory conditions for women, many of whom were forced to work in inhumane conditions to provide for their families. It is notable that the 'female' occupations included those in the fashion industry, such as working as seamstresses and in millinery.

The fourth chapter, entitled 'Satirical Responses to Women and Feather Fashion in *Punch*', provides a closer examination of feather fashion which will utilise images from *Punch* magazine. Specifically, this case study will look at images drawn by Edward Linley Sambourne for his series entitled 'Designs After Nature', which saw women donning traditionally unconventional materials in order to keep up with contemporary Victorian fashion trends. These pictures often criticised women for their role in the destruction of birds, ignoring, in part, the work of some women to put a stop to the feather fashion industry. This chapter demonstrates the trajectory, over the course of the mid to late Victorian period, of the trends in feather fashion that became increasingly extreme.

The final chapter, entitled 'A Future Without Feathers: Educating the Victorian Public', will look at non-popular literature, such as newspaper articles, information on Parliamentary law, and educational materials distributed by societies like the Society for the Protection of Birds. This chapter documents the principal role that women played in these societies, adding a final facet to the image of women's relation to birds in the Victorian period. The publications examine the impact that such publications had on the general Victorian public, an impact often initiated and implemented by women. While many records of Society meetings were lost during World War II, the remaining records provide a useful glimpse into some of the actions that Societies and the women who ran them were taking in order to preserve bird life.

In what follows, this thesis tries to trace the relationship between women and birds across the Victorian period, showing how the degree to which the association between women and birds was one founded in women's cultural subjugation, but ultimately revealing the complexity of the many facets of the relationship that reveal spaces for women's expression and agency.

Chapter One

The Taming and Caging of Victorian Women: The Care and Keeping of Birds

'What is it that attracts one to pigeons or doves, or any bird, for that matter? […] Is it a fascination with homing instincts and the adrenaline rush associated with sporting activities? Is it because of the beauty of flight and our own yearning to soar, or is the answer to be found closer to home, that birds represent the "other"?' (Barbara Allen, *Pigeon*)[1]

Introduction

Throughout history, birds have appeared across various forms of art and literature to symbolise different things. The eagle, for example, came to be associated with the USA and ideals of freedom, strength, and power. The dove – due to its depiction in the Bible as Noah's emissary and in the Gospel of John – is a symbol of peace, purity, and love. Owls are often associated with wisdom and intelligence, while the peacock and its beautiful feathers are often connected to beauty, pride, and immortality. While these are commonly accepted associations, the meanings and associations of birds vary depending on the context and culture in which they are used. We see birds in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*,[2] Charles Dickins's *Bleak House*,[3] Oscar Wilde's 'The Happy Prince' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,[4] Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*,[5] and many, many more pieces of literature. Birds are used to symbolise everything from freedom to innocence to transformation and even death. One of the aims of this chapter is to trace some of the contexts and cultures that enable an understanding of the references to birds in the Victorian period and especially how they are associated with women.

What happens when Victorians begin to ascribe bird-like characteristics to women in their work or female attributes to birds? How does this change our

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[1] Barbara Allen, *Pigeon* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 2009), p. 17.
[2] See Emily Roberson Wallace, 'Caged Eagles, Songsters and Carrion-Seekers: Birds in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights', *Brontë Studies*, 41.3 (2016), 249–60 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2016.1186945>.
[3] See Cynthia Dettelbach, 'Bird Imagery in "Bleak House"', *Dickensian*, 59.341 (1963), 177–81.
[4] See Jerome Griswold, 'Sacrifice and Mercy in Wilde's "The Happy Prince"', *Children's Literature*, 3.1 (1974), 103–6; Sheldon W. Liebman, 'Character Design in "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', *Studies in the Novel*, 31.3 (1999), 296–316.
[5] See Linda M. Shires, 'Narrative, Gender, and Power in "Far from the Madding Crowd"', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 24.2 (1991), 162–77 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345561>.

contemporary understanding of Victorian society and particularly Victorian women? This study began with an examination of George Eliot's character Caterina Sarti from 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, but the study expanded quite quickly as I noticed more and more bird references in various pieces of literature. Birds weren't just featured as characters; their attributes, personalities, and characteristics were being ascribed to people as well, particularly to women. Women authors themselves were using birds to describe their female characters, identifying women with birds, and creating a kinship connection that I found fascinating. With these references in mind, I began to formulate several questions about what had piqued my curiosity. Why were women bound to form such close connections with birds? And why did women lead the cause on the streets and in Parliament to protect birds from harm?

This chapter will start to address some of these questions. First, I will look at prevalent pieces of Victorian art that feature both women and birds in order to begin to establish the significance of connections made between Victorian women and birds. The section entitled 'Victorian Artistic Expressions of Women and Birds' will give an overview of this artwork and focuses especially on the phenomenon of both caged and uncaged birds. The juxtaposition of caged and wild birds was especially common in the period. I therefore explore the significance of the caged and wild bird, exploring different kinds of female confinement and asking not only how women's physical surroundings keep them caged but also how physical bodies and the restrictions placed upon them by societal norms were constricting. Next, 'Bird Manuals: The Care and Keeping of Birds' will examine two prominent bird manuals used in the Victorian period by amateur bird keepers. The way that these books depict birds and the use of evidently feminine imagery invites us to draw parallels between the care and keeping of birds and the care and keeping of women. Following this section, and in keeping with the theme, 'The Taming and Caging of Wild Birds' will look at how birds were trapped, tamed, and caged, as well as how these practices were strikingly applicable to the courtship processes in the Victorian period, drawing on similar vocabularies and sentiments. After this section, 'Women and Caged Birds in Victorian Literature' will turn to more popular pieces of fiction writing from the Victorian period, looking at a mix of books and poems to show how there are many allusions to women as birds – particularly caged birds – in Victorian literature. Finally, 'Caterina Sarti, the Italian Songbird' will present an in-depth case study of this one particular character that draws together in fictional form many of the themes and focuses of this chapter.

The following topics are incredibly significant to my research, particularly because they seek to establish and expose the precise workings of the relationship between women and birds in the Victorian period. Establishing and exploring this relationship is important to our contemporary understanding of Victorian women, offering a glimpse into women's societal roles. Women were expected to adhere to strict social norms and were often confined to domestic roles, something that will be discussed in later chapters. Women's connection to birds can be seen as one way in which women could express their desire for freedom and autonomy, particularly in the way that we read books like *Aurora Leigh*. Confinement, particularly expressed in the notion of the 'clipped wings' of female birds to prevent them from flying away (which will be explored in 'The Taming and Caging of Wild Birds'), is ultimately a notion that women could connect with. At the opposite end of confinement and adherence to strict social norms, we also find that women could use bird imagery as a form of empowerment. By identifying with/as birds and their ability to fly, women were able to see themselves as powerful and capable of achieving their goals. Overall, the fact that women felt a kinship connection to birds in the Victorian period is important because it highlights the way in which women were able to express themselves and find empowerment – or at least words to express their confinement – within a highly restrictive society. It also sheds light on the significance of bird imagery in Victorian literature in general and the ways in which it was used to convey meaning and emotion.

There are several key takeaways from this chapter. First and foremost, I establish the fact that there is a specific kind of connection formed between women and birds in Victorian literature, one that can be considered 'kinship'. This connection is incredibly important to understanding my following chapters. In order to establish this kinship connection, I also establish that the way in which birds were captured, tamed, and cared for in the Victorian period is conceptualised and expressed in strikingly similar terms to how women were treated. I will show specific examples of how birds and women are treated and compared, through the case study of Catarina Sarti. Finally, by the end of this chapter, the reader will have seen and understood many of the more symbolic references to and comparisons between women and birds.

Victorian Artistic Expressions of Women and Birds

Birds have long been a part of artistic expression through the centuries, in artwork, tapestries, clothing, and more. Their appearance alongside women, therefore, should not be a surprise; however, the symbolic nature of the relationship between birds and women in artwork and literature has not been fully explored. In fact, not much has been written about the associative relationships between the Victorian female figure and the songbird since Elise Lawton Smith's 1997 article and 2002 book on Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, famed English painter, and her use of Pre-Raphaelite-inspired motifs to unveil the role of women in the nineteenth century, highlighting her allegories of imprisonment. The artwork in this section shows that Victorian ideas surrounding female entrapment are particularly linked to the imagery of birds, usually caged songbirds or talking birds. Although some of the paintings fall outside of the Victorian period, they serve to improve contemporary understandings of the framework set about in this thesis to draw parallels between Victorian women and birds.

While Lawton Smith focuses on De Morgan's *The Gilded Cage* (1919) and *The Prisoner* (1907-8), as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Veronica Veronese* (1872) and Walter Howell Deverell's *A Pet* (1910), particularly exploring the likenesses of De Morgan's paintings to those of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, there are many more paintings that explore themes related to women and caged birds. This section will examine some of the paintings that show women with birds or caged birds. Looking at De Morgan's *The Gilded Cage*, for example, a woman is depicted looking at what may be a window or a painting while her husband sits underneath a bird cage that hangs in the upper right-hand corner of the painting.

Figure 1: The Gilded Cage (1919), Evelyn Pickering De Morgan

It is unclear whether the woman is looking out through a window or if the 'window' is actually a painting, symbolic of her further entrapment through her lack of ability to engage with the outside world. The scene 'outside' is further complicated by its apparent reference to a Bacchanalian feast, increasing the possibility that it is, in fact, a painting, perhaps inspired by Botticelli, whom De Morgan revered.[6] Bacchanalia were Roman festivals which celebrated freedom of all sorts, and their appearance in De Morgan's *The Gilded Cage* seems to suggest that the woman in the painting longs for the specific societal freedoms that those revellers are enjoying.

While the woman is confined to a room with a caged bird, a free bird flies unconstrained above the painted or outdoors scene, accompanying the dancing people on whom the woman overlooks. Lawton Smith's interpretation of the significance of the caged bird in the woman's room is that the viewer is given an insight into the

[6] 'Evelyn De Morgan', *The De Morgan Foundation* <https://www.demorgan.org.uk/discover/the-de-morgans/evelyn-de-morgan/> [accessed 3 September 2022], 1875 – 1883 Early Career: The Influence of Botticelli and Aesthetic Movement Style.

'cushioned confinement of middle-class domestication' that the woman is subjected to.[7] I would argue that although the woman's surroundings are beautiful, she herself is unable to enjoy them because she is trapped. The visual parallel increases as the viewer is drawn to similarities in appearance between the woman and the caged bird; De Morgan was playing with the motif of 'full throats, upwardly extended necks, and open mouth or beak.'[8]

The idea of domestic entrapment is perhaps evoked even more strongly in De Morgan's *The Prisoner*, where a young woman is looking wistfully outside at the rolling hills, through a barricaded window, presumably (given the title of the painting) the window to a jail cell. In the painting, the woman is wearing a peacock feather on her dress, symbolic here of immortality: according to the De Morgan Foundation, this painting echoes the idea that the soul is immortal, while the fleshly body will eventually die off.[9] However, I would argue that there is an additional symbolism in the idea that the

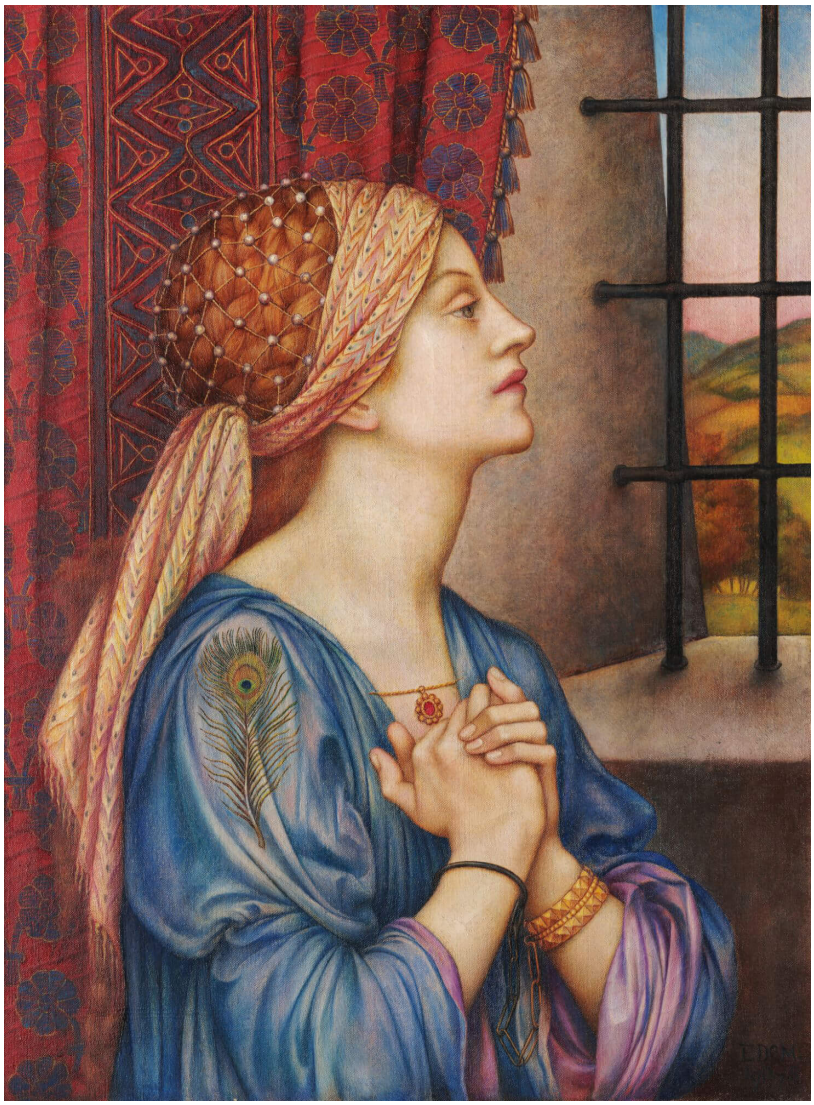

Figure 2: The Prisoner (1907-8), Evelyn Pickering De Morgan

[7] Lawton Smith, *Allegorical Body,* p. 117.
[8] Ibid.
[9] 'The Prisoner', *The De Morgan Foundation* <https://www.demorgan.org.uk/collection/the-prisoner/> [accessed 3 September 2022]. As Edmund Sedding wrote in *The Antiquary*, early Christians adopted the peacock as 'a general emblem of mortal exchange for the immortal existence, or immortality'. See Edmund Sedding, 'Christian Symbolism.', ed. by John Charles Cox, *The Antiquary*, 29 (1894), p. 160.

woman is trapped both inside her cell and, indeed, inside her body, where her body has become a cage for her soul. With the feather adorning her sleeve, the woman's clothing takes on a new meaning, not solely for clothing her body but also drawing a further parallel between woman and bird; as a feathered bird is trapped in its cage, so too is this woman wearing clothes that trap her physically, as well as in symbolic ways as to their work in gendering an individual. I would argue that this feather is purposefully depicted to symbolize the woman's entrapment rather than immortality. Although the De Morgan Foundation points to the feather as being related to immortality, I would argue that the choice of a feather from a peacock, a bird prized for its feathers and kept as pets by those wealthy enough, is indicative of the way that women in society were trapped by those with means to keep them. Cage and entrapment imagery became increasingly common in Victorian paintings, and De Morgan utilised this theme in her 1887 painting, *Hope in a Prison of Despair*, which does not contain any bird imagery.[10]

[10] I have purposely chosen not to include *Hope in a Prison of Despair* here, as it does not include a depiction of birds or feathers. In the painting, the figure of Hope is seen holding a light behind an imprisoned woman. Although the woman is free from her chains, she is still confined to the prison.

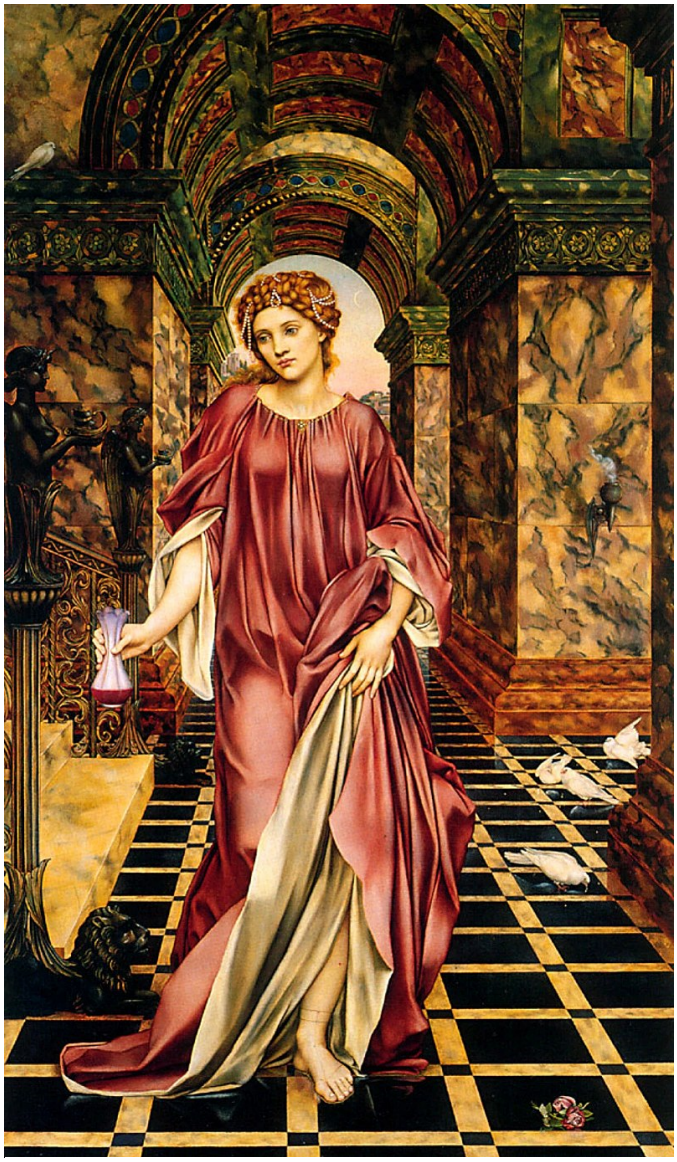

Figure 3: Medea (1889), Evelyn Pickering De Morgan

Birds are apparent alongside other figurative images of entrapment in De Morgan's painting of the figure of Medea from 1889, who became popular again in the Victorian period. Although Medea was not a popular character in eighteenth-century England due to her 'immorality' (killing her children), the nineteenth century after Queen Victoria's accession to the throne saw an upsurge in Medea's appearances in plays, poems, and artwork.[11] By the middle of the nineteenth century, in England, spouses were required to apply for special dispensation from Parliament in order to get a divorce, meaning that only wealthy men could afford it.[12] The nineteenth century was a time of political change and growth, and Medea offered creative minds an outlet to voice women's increased power.[13]

[11] Nicola Goc argues that Medea's case became popularised because of the New Poor Law of 1834, which made infanticide an illegal offence, due to the rising tide of women becoming pregnant out of wedlock and murdering their babies to avoid having to go to the workhouses in order to support them, as the law required. For more information, see Nicola Goc, 'Medea in the Courtroom and on the Stage in Nineteenth-Century London', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 14.1 (2009), 30–45.

[12] For more information on obtaining a divorce in the nineteenth century, see 'Divorce' <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/divorce/> [accessed 9 May 2024]. For a man to divorce his wife, he only needed to prove adultery in the courts; for a woman to obtain a divorce from her husband, she not only needed to prove adultery but also that her life was in imminent danger from him. See Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989), particularly pp. 22-4 and Chapter Six, entitled 'Another Law for the Poor'.

[13] As Edith Hall writes in 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War', 'Medea came to the fore at almost exactly the same time as legislative activity surrounding divorce and the rights of married women', p. 50.

As the tale goes, Medea is spurned by her husband Jason after ten years of marriage when he decides to wed another woman. Before Medea and her sons with Jason can be banished from Corinth, Medea murders her sons and flees to Athens to begin a new life. Infanticide was seen as one of the most abominable and incomprehensible acts in Victorian society, but some Victorians reframed Medea as a powerful, sympathetic woman trapped in a loveless marriage. In 1856, actress Adelaide Ristori put on a production of Ernest Legouvé's *Médée* at the Lyceum, in which Medea kills her sons to protect them from a far crueller fate when the Corinthians discover that she has poisoned her husband's bride-to-be.[14] In her own words, Ristori wrote,

> The Corinthians had determined to seize the children and murder Medea, in revenge for the death of the wretched Creusa, whom Medea had killed in a moment of savage jealousy. What course remained open to the persecuted mother? Should she yield, and abandon her sons to Jason, certain that they would be brought up in hatred of her. No, her whole soul revolted against such an idea. To face the infuriated mob, which had gathered against her, would only be to court death for herself, without saving her children; and in this frightful dilemma, she is seized by an overwhelming impulse herself to destroy her offspring. Indeed, no other course is open to her, possessed as she is by the Furies, and therefore, quick as lightning, she plunges her dagger into those innocent breasts.[15]

In Legouvé's drama, Medea, then, becomes the slighted wife who mercifully kills her children, instead of the monster that she had previously been portrayed as, making her more sympathetic, especially in light of the laws of the time surrounding divorce and infanticide.

De Morgan's Medea shows this softer side, depicting Medea with gentle, flowing clothing, surrounded at her feet by doves, once again referencing Aphrodite and love, echoing the flowing clothing that Ristori herself wore on the stage.[16] Although the vial she holds could contain the poison she used to commit her murders, the overall tone

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[14] Ristori had been approached previously to play Medea but declined due to her 'maternal instinct', stating that she 'instinctively revolted from the idea of a woman who, by her own hand, and with deliberate design, could murder her children', from 'Medea', in *Adelaide Ristori: Studies and Memoirs: An Autobiography* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888), pp. 197-8.

[15] Ristori, 'Medea', in *Adelaide Ristori*, p. 201.

[16] Ristori recounts that her costume was made by painter Ary Schefster: 'By simple and natural movement, he had arranged that I was to make the large and artistically disposed folds fall behind my shoulders' (p. 203). Ristori's costume is held by the Theatre Museum and Library of the Musei di Genova and can be viewed online.

of the painting suggests softness and femininity. These doves at her feet are free from a cage, much like Medea, who has been able to free herself from her unfaithful husband. Unlike other paintings which show birds as confined as the women depicted alongside them, Medea and her birds are unconfined, having thrown off captivity.

The free bird also figures in Walter Howell Deverell's *A Pet*, which shows a young woman inside what looks to be a greenhouse or potting room, a very obviously domestic abode, wherein she is leaning forward towards a caged bird near the door.

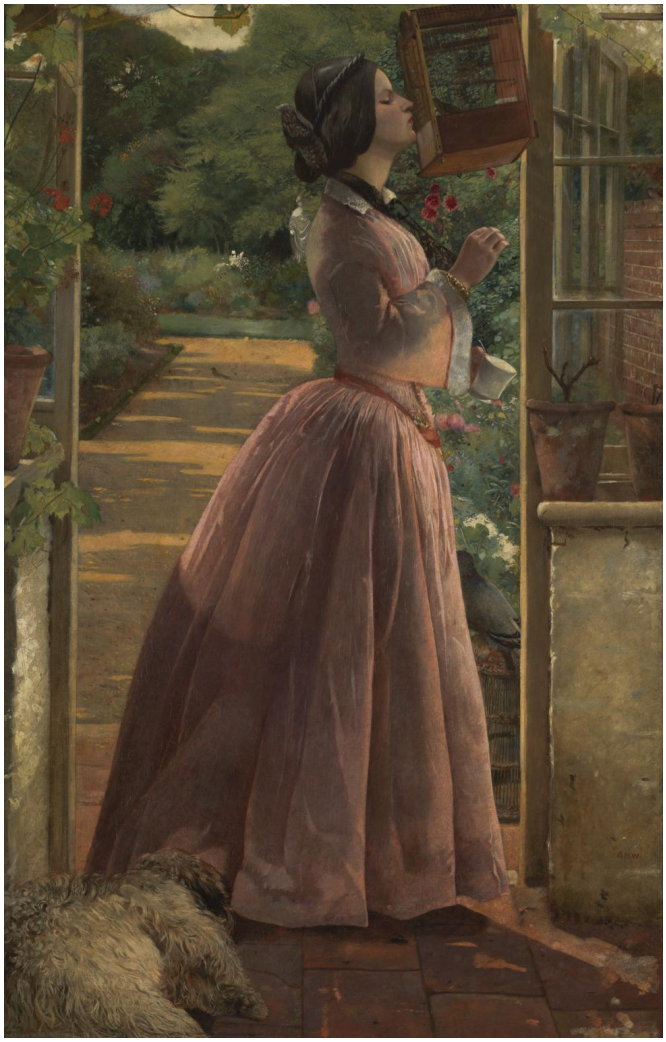

Figure 4: A Pet (1910), Walter Howell Deverell

The door itself is wide open, as if beckoning the woman to take a step outside towards freedom. Like the bird, the young woman is situated so very close to freedom, but unable to step over the threshold and fully experience that freedom. There are several other birds pictured in this painting, including a pigeon at the woman's feet, which is standing on its cage, and a blackbird walking down the garden path.

The choice of birds here is very suggestive for understanding the situation of the woman pictured, and women's cultural predicament more generally. First, let us look at the pigeon. Scientifically, the pigeon and the dove are unrecognisably different, told apart only by their sizing.[17] I draw attention to this fact because doves in the Victorian period were often used as symbols of love. Because doves mate for life and are thus seen as loyal creatures, the same might be applied to pigeons. When understood in this context, it is no surprise that the pigeon on top of the cage has not flown away. It is loyal to its master, its caretaker, the woman

[17] Allen, *Pigeon*, p. 20.

who will undoubtedly nurture and care for it. What need does it have to fly away when its needs are taken care of? The conclusion we can draw is that, like the pigeon on top of its cage, the woman has been domesticated into accepting her confined life. If the woman took a single step towards the blackbird, she would be free; instead, she is confined like the caged bird.

Figure 5: Veronica Veronese (1872), Dante Gabriel Rossetti

In a somewhat different scene, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Veronica Veronese* shows a young woman with a violin, seemingly plucking at its strings without much passion. The inscription below the painting provides a different description: 'she remained still for a few minutes listening to the inspiring bird, while her left hand wandered over the strings searching for the supreme, still elusive melody'.[18] It is significant here that in this painting, although the birdcage is still present, the bird itself is outside of the cage, able to fly around and land where it desires. This could point to music as a source of freedom for both the bird and the woman, who can play out her passion wordlessly. Music as a source of both freedom and punishment for the entrapped woman is discussed later in this chapter, and women's voices as birdsong is discussed in Chapter Two. While the connection between women and birds is evident in art, there are also comparisons that can be made between the two when looking at the care and keeping of birds, as seen in bird manuals.

[18] Translation in Lorraine Wood, 'Filling in the Blanks: Music and Performance in Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Victorian Poetry*, 51.4 (2013), pp. 541-2. The original inscription reads: "Se penchant vivement, la Veronica jeta les premières notes sur la feuille vierge. Ensuite elle prit l'archet du violon pour réaliser son rêve; mais avant de décrocher l'instrument suspendu, elle resta quelques instants immobile en écoutant l'oiseau inspirateur, pendant que sa main gauche errait sur les cordes cherchant le motif suprême encore eloigné. C'était le mariage des voix de la nature et de l'âme—l'aube d'une création mystique."

Bird Manuals: The Care and Keeping of Birds

The connection between women and caged birds was prevalent in art. The relation between the beauty, timidity and artfulness of both women and birds perhaps explains this connection. This section turns to two prominent bird books that were available in the nineteenth century to examine the language used to discuss birds and discuss the ways in which it echoes the language used to discuss women in the Victorian period. Catching birds and finding exotic birds to add to parlour collections was a favourite sport and pastime in the Victorian period. Thus, there were many manuals available which discussed both how to trap birds and how to care for birds once they had been acquired. In this section, I will examine the guides of K. A. Buist and Johannes Matthäus Bechstein, comparing the way that they write about birds to the way that women in the Victorian period were described or addressed.

First, this section will examine K. A. Buist and his book, *Birds, Their Cages and Their Keep: Being a Practical Manual of Bird-Keeping and Bird-Rearing*. Published in 1874 by Macmillan and Company, Buist's manual was largely accessible despite his being rather unknown during his time period. Buist was a naturalist and collector of birds, and while he was not a professional ornithologist, his contributions to the field of bird-keeping express and suggest the wider similarities between bird-keeping and the care of women that are implicit in the association of women with birds. Furthermore, Buist himself identifies a link between birds and humans, writing in his Preface, 'A bird's instinct corresponds in its own proportion and degree to a man's power of thought; mind it has not, but remember, - brains, nerves, and feelings, it has.'[19] Other animals lack the 'personal characteristics' that raise birds to the same level of consideration as 'the more favoured horse or dog'.[20] Although not stated explicitly, women's place in this hierarchy of animals can be assumed to be similarly below that of

[19] K. A. Buist, *Birds, Their Cages and Their Keep: Being a Practical Manual of Bird-Keeping and Bird-Rearing* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1874), p. vi.
[20] Ibid., p. iii. Of a bird's capacity for intellectual thought, Buist later writes, 'Do not expect a mere bird, with its curious circular-shaped head, to accomplish feats man himself, with all his intellect, requires years of application to acquire; dogs and certain other animals may be instructed by means of their superior intellect, but a bird is not gifts with the necessary amount of brain to receive, retain, and repeat the permanent impressions requisite for compulsory educational purposes. Their capacity is not great enough for anything but imitation.', p. 113.

the superior intellect of the man, and women were often depicted in the Victorian period as not necessarily being above that of 'the more favoured horse or dog'.[21]

Buist opens his manual by stating that he is against the practice of capturing wild birds, 'who daily delight us with their harmony'; however, he continues somewhat paradoxically, by advocating for the capture of wild birds by saying that society must consider the hardships that birds face in winter months.[22] While respecting the free birds' ability to entertain, his expressed concern is for their welfare. It is not difficult to see the connections with women here. Women in the Victorian period were considered to be both existing for the entertainment of men (as discussed later in this chapter) as well as the weaker sex, therefore needing more protection to be kept safe and 'pure' in society. Buist writes of caged birds, 'Liberty is very sweet, but it has its drawbacks in the perils to which its enjoyment is exposed; and these should be well considered, before wholesale denunciations are fulminated against those who imprison their feathered neighbours.'[23] While Buist advocates for the protection of birds, his manual makes clear that protection from the elements is more important than protection from human enjoyment.

One of the most prominent sections of Buist's manual, and perhaps most important to this thesis, is the section on health and illness. In many ways, the care and keeping of birds can be related to the care and keeping of women, which will be seen extensively in the later section on George Eliot's character Caterina Sarti. Here, however, this thesis seeks to examine the care and keeping of birds as relayed by Buist. Of birds, Buist writes, 'The eyes, beak, and legs must be decidedly bright and clear.'[24] Should a bird fall ill, 'Disease is entirely your own fault; there is no excuse for it whatever. It indicates culpable selfishness on your part […] for disease there is no extenuation; it is entirely the result of idleness.'[25] Caring for a bird is relatively easy, Buist relates, and is much like taking care of a delicate human: 'Keep your birds clean in body and surroundings, daily fed and looked after, and you need never have cause to complain that "that tiresome bird is always moping" or "becoming unwell!"'[26] By

[21] For more information on the Victorian supposed hierarchy of pain in the Animal Kingdom, see H. G. Wells, 'The Province of Pain', in *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, ed. by Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
[22] Buist, pp. 1-2.
[23] Ibid., p. 2.
[24] Ibid., p. 32.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

adequately caring for birds, their keepers are ensuring that the birds have a good life and no cause for complaint. The language used here is easily transferable to any dependent of a man, which would include wives as well as children.

There are many ways to compel a bird to sing, Buist explains, but the most practical way to ensure the best singing, which is what birds were often kept for, is to make sure that birdseed is adequately mixed. Buist writes that 'unequal feeding produces unequal singing' and that after the best seeds have been consumed, a bird 'refuses to give you his finest notes, on the principle of doing unto others as they do unto him.'[27] This final note echoes biblical ideas, particularly those surrounding the 'Golden Rule': 'Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you: do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.'[28] What Buist is saying is that if a bird is treated in a way it perceives to be unfair, it will not reward its keeper with its beautiful singing voice. Feeding of birds is a particularly strong point in Buist's manual, as he writes, 'A bird's life is one of incessant motion, strength must be supplied from without, whether in captivity or freedom.'[29] While birds in the wild are able to hunt and gather for themselves, birds in captivity must be provided the same kind and amount of food or else they will become malnourished. On the point of feeding birds often, Buist says, 'If you are too indolent to take that trouble, give your birds to another who is not; you have no right to torture any animal you keep in confinement, merely for your own pleasure.'[30] While Buist is writing a manual for those who are taking birds from their natural environments, he also expresses concern for the wellbeing of the birds themselves; in his manual, he continually makes it clear that those who would not afford birds all of the luxuries they require should not be keeping them in the first place. Like dependent humans, birds require constant care and consideration and cannot be denied basic rights.

Also like dependent humans, birds can fall ill if not cared for adequately. According to Buist, 'The most dangerous and rapidly fatal of all illnesses from which birds suffer are attacks of inflammation; these being caused either by catching cold or by partaking of impure water, bad food, surfeits and fractures.'[31] Water should be changed frequently in order to prevent contamination. Furthermore, Buist writes that a

[27] Buist, p. 35.
[28] Matthew 7:12, King James Version.
[29] Buist, p. 36.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Buist, p. 37.

bird-keeper will notice the symptoms of inflammation, which are similar to symptoms portrayed by humans: 'a red beak, dull filmy eye, and heavy, lumpish, lethargic movement.'[32] Here, the bird's beak could be compared to the human nose, the eyes might display similar characteristics, and it is not uncommon to be bed-bound when a human is sick. The answer to bird inflammation, or illness in general, is quite similar to that of convalescent humans – Buist recommends treating birds to a course of soft food: 'it answers to the nourishing jellies supplied to human invalids.'[33] In this context, 'jellies' refers to something akin to modern jelly, but instead of being made with sweet, fruity flavours, it was made of animal or vegetable stock combined with gelatine. This was often fed to invalids with a mixture of lemon juice and wine in order to help their constitution.[34] Like humans, birds are subject to other illnesses, many showing symptoms like humans might display with the flu or a fever. For example, Buist writes,

> For a general chill, manifested by his going to sleep at all hours, constantly shuddering and shivering, a warm bath and holding the bird in the hand till it is quite dry, wrapped in a handkerchief, then hanging his cage before the fire or in a warm sunny nook free from draughts, cannot fail speedily to remove the affection.[35]

Much like a human wrapping themselves in blankets to fend off the cold, Buist recommends that bird-keepers ensure that their charge is wrapped up in a warm, dry handkerchief in order to protect it from draughts of cold.

Buist makes note that some illnesses seem to be exclusive to female birds, and there are similarities here to how women were looked at in the Victorian period. 'Sweating sickness', as Buist calls it, was in his mind 'solely the result of weakness, over-anxiety, and want of exercise.'[36] The answer to this was simple: 'Turn [the bird] out in a room or large aviary containing other birds, who will rouse it, and by example and gentle interference with its apathetic, listless attitudes and attempts to remain motionless in the same position, compel the sufferer to take exercise.'[37] The presence of other birds, fresh air, and a change of scenery should be enough to ensure a bird was nursed back to health. The solution of a bird being roused by companions is strikingly

[32] Buist, p. 37.
[33] Ibid., p. 39.
[34] See Mary Hooper, *Cookery for Invalids, Persons of Delicate Digestion, and for Children* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1876), particularly pp. 14-5.
[35] Buist, p. 42.
[36] Ibid., p. 45.
[37] Ibid.

reminiscent of attitudes towards ailing women and their need for female company: the female companion was commonly assumed as a necessity for the upper-class woman.[38] Similarly, the requirement for exercise is reminiscent of the common recourse for ailing women to be sent to the seaside for health reasons, as prescribed by physicians.[39] The seaside – particularly sea air and saltwater – was thought to have healing properties that positively impacted lung diseases.[40] Compared to the cramped and polluted cities in the Victorian era, the seaside was seen as a more moral and wholesome environment that could improve a woman's physical and moral character.[41] Just as a woman who was sent to the seaside was thought to have a delicate constitution, birds who were afflicted with sweating sickness were liable to become sick again; therefore, Buist writes, there is a 'necessity of hindering further nesting operations; if her labours be permitted to continue unbroken, the eggs will probably come to nothing, the bird perish, or if the chicks be hatched they will always be delicate and troublesome to rear'.[42] Much like the mother, the child's – or fledgling's – constitution will be weak and delicate, making them a lot more work for the keeper.

In his insistence that each bird has its own characteristics, making it a unique individual, Buist's language seems more suitable for application to humans than animals. Buist observes, 'How inquisitive, active, imitative, affectionate, and "larky" are some! others, again, greedy, selfish, unobservant, and self-indulgent!'[43] Here, Buist ascribes characteristics that have also been ascribed to humans to birds, and many of the characteristics are notably feminine in terms of imitation and affection. It is worth noting that he also uses the word 'larky' to describe some birds, as this word is seldom

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[38] To better understand the role of the female companion to the Victorian lady, see Lauren Nicole Hoffer's PhD thesis on '"That Inevitable Woman": The Paid Female Companion and Sympathy in the Victorian Novel' (Vanderbilt University, 2009). Hoffer points to the female companion in many Victorian novels, including William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, in which Thackeray states, 'An article as necessary to a lady in this position as her brougham or her bouquet is her companion' (in Hoffer, p. viii).

[39] At the start of the century, Jennifer Wallis writes that health resorts became popular as medical climatologists could prescribe certain sea-based remedies for clients depending on their ailments. See Wallis, 'A Machine in the Garden: The Compressed Air Bath and the Nineteenth-Century Health Resort', in *Histories of Technology, the Environment and Modern Britain*, ed. by Jon Agar and Jacob Ward (UCL Press, 2018), pp. 76–100, doi:10.2307/j.ctvqhsmr.9.

[40] For more information on "Change of Air" and the Victorian draw to the seaside, see Richard E. Morris, 'The Victorian "Change of Air" as Medical and Social Construction', *Journal of Tourism History*, 10.1 (2018), 49–65 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2018.1425485>.

[41] This is keenly seen in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* when Margaret goes to the beach and hears 'the eternal psalm' and is 'soothed without knowing how or why', p. 414 of Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. by Angus Easson, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[42] Buist, pp. 45-6.

[43] Ibid., p. 82.

used outside of British English. Larky generally describes something as playful, high-spirited, or mischievous, and used to describe something that is light-hearted and fun.[44] As a colloquialism, the word is thought to have originated from the word 'lark', which is a small bird known for its playful and high-spirited behaviour, high-spirited here operating two-fold: on the one hand, the bird is high-spirited in the traditional sense, and on the other, the lark is known for singing at higher altitudes than most birds. The lark will be investigated in greater detail in the following chapter in this thesis, on *Aurora Leigh* and her comparison to the lark as a woman poet.

The comparison between birds and humans is made quite explicitly in Buist's manual, and while he writes that 'there is nothing new under the sun', he calls the human a 'great copyist' and says that humans are good at 'adopting the habits of those around him, repeating their faults, speaking, acting, thinking, and living very much as Adam did before him'.[45] Birds, too, often mimic those around them, which is one reason why Buist earlier recommends putting infirmed birds in the same aviary as other birds, in order to boost the infirmed bird's spirit. Mimicry can also be found in birdsong. As birds mimic and learn from each other, so too do humans, and Buist writes that if a bird-keeper practically applies the wisdom of knowing that there is nothing new in history, they will find that 'patient perseverance and unwearying kindness can remove any obstacle, and when united to, and governed by, the faculty of mind, must prove invincible at all times, if directed towards the purpose of instruction, whether of human beings or of animals.'[46] Here, Buist makes it plain that dependent human beings and animals can both be treated similarly with the same expected results. Although applicable to men of a lower status, the emphasis upon humans who are to be instructed makes sense in terms of why the association between birds and women was so tenacious: women, like birds, were considered beings dependent upon their father or husband for nurture.

With this idea in mind, I would like to set the stage for thinking about why birds and women were considered to be quite similar, if not the same. When thinking about both the songbird and the woman singer, training is essential. In Germany, for example, Buist writes that a bird's food is removed and an instructor brought in to sing or play a

[44] 'Lark', *Collins English Dictionary* <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lark> [accessed 23 January 2023].
[45] Buist, p. 103.
[46] Ibid., p. 103.

few notes for the bird to copy. The food is not returned to the bird until the notes have been properly learned. This practice is only used on very young, impressionable, and intelligent birds.[47] These birds are highly prized for their singing voices and are imported to England to be sold for large sums.[48] Similar treatment of women singers will be seen later in this chapter in the story of George Eliot's Caterina Sarti, an Italian orphan who is adopted by an English family and brought to England to live with them, induced to perform for them at their leisure. It is worth noting here that Caterina's health severely declines under the care of her adopted family, and part of what will be examined is both her mistreatment as well as her emotional ailments. Caterina is a traveller from a foreign land, performing for the pleasure of others, and Buist notes that travelling singing birds were not uncommon during the period.

We can understand Caterina's decline in health in light of concerns over the treatment of performing birds. There were many celebrated travelling singing birds, including 'Jones' Performing Canaries', 'Browne's Collection of Feathered Actors', and 'Robinson's Regiment of Winged Artillerymen'.[49] The mistreatment of these birds might not be discernible to the untrained eye, but to an expert, Buist calls attention to 'the numb, still look of wing, tail, and head, the expressionless despair of the dim eye' and asks, 'Do you not know that a long course of persistent brutality has deprived the unhappy birds of hearing, sight, health, and all pleasure in his wretched little life?'[50] Buist goes on to say that the birds have had their eyes scorched with red hot needles so that they can't tell the time of day, enabling them to sing on command at any time. He writes: 'Reflect on the weeks of torture, the months of cruelty, and if you possess the smallest spark of feeling, avoid the dreadful show, and do not give encouragement to the perpetration of such wanton brutality by patronising it with your presence and your purse.'[51] Any person who would willingly blind birds so that they sing all day, or scorch their perches to make them dance, simply for amusement or small pecuniary gains is not someone who will feel the pain of others. Buist writes that a person of this kind is full of 'grovelling self-interest' and 'utterly devoid of all capacity of feeling for others'

[47] Ibid., pp. 106-7.
[48] Ibid., p. 107.
[49] Buist, p. 109.
[50] Ibid., p. 110.
[51] Ibid.

pain.'[52] Furthermore, while the person is after money, in reality, Buist comments that maiming the poor bird only depreciates its value, as its personal appearance is spoiled.[53]

As birds were valued for their beauty, the capture of exotic birds became more common across the Victorian period. Here the characteristic of foreignness becomes added to that of the dependent animal. Attitudes to the foreign bird are then suggestive about attitudes to foreigners, and especially foreign dependents in the period. This becomes applicable especially when considering the depiction of a foreign, singing woman such as Caterina. Buist strongly discourages the purchase and use of foreign birds as caged pets. Because a bird's looks were highly valued, many women sought the feathers of foreign birds as fashion pieces, which is discussed in more depth in Chapter Five. Buist's reasons for condemning the purchase of foreign birds lies in the fact that they were highly experimented upon, being foreign and unknown, until, 'in self defence, their spirits wing their way to a happier world than ours, leaving their wretched bodies to the tender mercies of the bird-stuffer, as a reproachful, mute, pathetic memorial of past suffering.'[54] Although concern for women was not often expressed so clearly, Buist's concern is expressed in anthropomorphic terms that make them easily applicable to women's 'wretched bodies'. Buist's unhappiness over the mistreatment of foreign birds extends to his condemnation of the art of taxidermy, especially when a bird has been cruelly tormented and died from such experimentation – in the name of science, curiosity, or amusement, it does not matter.

Furthermore, Buist's condemnation of foreign birds extends beyond just his disdain for experimentation on them. He writes,

> They are far more plague than profit; very dirty in their habits, from the fact of their being wild birds, not born in captivity, accordingly more or less untameable and undomestic; they are exceedingly delicate; most expensive to buy in the first instance, difficult to replace in the second, and troublesome to preserve in health throughout.[55]

Given the expensive – and often prohibitive – cost of these foreign birds, Buist wonders why anyone would pay the extortionate price for a wild bird, not already trained to be a parlour-piece. Returning to his original belief that humans should not capture wild

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Buist, p. 121.
[55] Ibid., p. 122.

birds, Buist reminds the reader that 'these beautiful creatures are *wild* birds, suddenly caged for man's amusement, not tame birds *born* in captivity and habituated to cramped space.'[56] Therefore, if someone insists on buying these wild, foreign birds, they must be prepared to spend even more money to ensure that the cage is of a sufficient size to hold several birds, so that they can preen each other and have space to fly about. However, even with adequate space, Buist warns that foreign birds will be incredibly difficult to tame and that they require a lot more work than naturalised birds who have already become accustomed to caged life.[57] He writes, 'Foreign birds are chiefly desirable pets as curiosities. For the most part they are exceedingly full and interesting in disposition. Greedy and very dirty, delicate, quarrelsome, most difficult to naturalise'. Some of these characteristics will be examined in the character of Caterina Sarti later in this chapter, and Buist's descriptions here are easily ascribed to the human sphere, in which immigrants in the Victorian period were thought of in strikingly similar ways and who, often as a result of prejudice, lived in mostly horrid, slum-like conditions.[58] Because their living spaces lacked basic amenities such as running water and sewage systems, many immigrants were left to live in absolute filth.[59] Furthermore, because of cultural differences, many Victorians saw immigrants as being strange and unhygienic in their practices. While women, like immigrants, were outsiders, looked at as the 'Other', the migrant woman was doubly marked.[60]

Buist's attitudes to foreign birds is indicative of his ascription to societal hierarchies that are now identifiable as racist. His decrying of miscegenation in birds not only demonstrates his attitudes to other races but also reveals his commitment to the value of beauty, a value that identifies these foreign birds with women and means his attitudes can be understood as applicable also for understanding the fine nuances of attitudes towards women. Moving on, Buist turns to the breeding of foreign birds with domestic birds, or breeding different types of birds in order to produce a more highly valued bird in its rarity. Of mule breeding, as it is called, he writes that he has never undertaken it, preferring instead to '[seek] to establish the most perfect ideal of beauty

[56] Ibid., p. 125.
[57] Buist, p. 132.
[58] One such example can be seen in Roger Swift's article, 'The Outcast Irish in the British Victorian City: Problems and Perspectives', *Irish Historical Studies*, 25.99 (1987), 264–76.
[59] See Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, trans. by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1892).
[60] For more information on xenophobia in Victorian Britain, see *Fear, Loathing, and Victorian Xenophobia*, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Maria K. Bachman, and Heidi Kaufman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

of which any species is capable, of mating like with like, and thus firmly defining and establishing the distinctive identity of loveliness in each individual kind'.[61] Instead of creating hybrid birds, which Buist says produces only 'grotesque and curious' results that are 'more or less painful to behold', Buist focuses on breeding birds of the same species in order to enhance their natural beauty and features. According to Buist, it is in the natural that beauty is to be found.

This sentiment of natural beauty and the abhorrence of hybridisation can be seen in the way that the Victorian novel addresses inter-class marriage. In *Nobody's Angels*, Elizabeth Langland discusses the disappearance of successful inter-class marriages from the Victorian novel, suggesting that although such cases can be found in real life, in the novel, such relationships were often doomed to fail. While women could potentially 'marry up', rising from the working class to the lower middle class, men would rarely 'marry down', as it would ostracise them from 'polite' society.[62] Etiquette manuals played quite a part in relegating women to their own classes, particularly because they 'establish as normative the notion of social barriers' and suggested that women in lower classes were 'vulgar' outsiders.[63] Although some novels appear to show women of a lower class 'marrying up', such as *Jane Eyre*, which will be discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, in reality, many of those novels are about genteel women who, through circumstance, are forced to work. In many ways, the way in which these women are forced to work is akin to the clipping of wings that Buist recommends in his manual.

Like humans, birds need space to adequately grow in order to thrive. Buist writes that this is particularly important for larger wild birds, 'accustomed as they are to soar unfettered under the wide boundless dome of heaven', and that they should not be 'confined in cages so diminutive that it is necessary to clip their wings, in order to hinder them dashing their brains out against the bars of their prison in frantic efforts to escape, or, in despair, end their hopeless existence.'[64] Comparing bird cages to the confines of human housing, Buist writes,

> Think what would be your feelings, reader, were you hung up in a basket in a dreary, cold, draughty, noisy doorway; or against a brick wall in some stuffy

[61] Buist, p. 135.
[62] Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 28-30.
[63] Ibid., p. 28.
[64] Buist, p. 136. Here Buist points out that parrots, which are commonly bought and usually tame, also face similar concerns with having cages that are fall too small for them and do not have enough to engage them in their confines.

> city, shut in a wooden box with only one side open to admit the air! Then let me plead successfully in behalf of the rights of the wild bird. Listen to the dictates of your heart; open his cage door, and rejoicing in his recovered freedom, let him go free.[65]

In this passage, Buist comments that letting a wild bird go free would be infinitely better than keeping it in a stuffy, cramped cage, unable to see outside or rejoice in the light of the day. Taking a wild bird from its natural habitat and forcing it into dreary conditions is a form of cruel punishment, although the same is not said for domesticated birds that have been bred in captivity.

Regardless of whether a bird is wild or domesticated, it should not be kept in the same house as a cat. Buist writes:

> Suppose again that you yourself were shut up by "kind *friends*" and caressing guardians, in a den wired round with frail tin bars, from which you could neither escape nor offer any resistance, and a lion were permitted to perambulate around you at his discretion, showing his teeth and claws, and glaring you into a petrefaction of fear? How would you like it?'[66]

Buist's imagery here is highly reminiscent of the painting by William Holman Hunt called *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), in which a man's keeping of a mistress is likened to a cat playing with a bird. The immediate focus of the painting is a man holding a woman on his lap, apparently his mistress (given the lack of a ring on her finger), while the woman appears to be looking into a sunlit garden outside, indicative of her potential redemption from her immoral ways.[67] Although the painting is full of symbolism, I would like to draw the reader's attention to one aspect in particular – in the bottom left corner of the painting, hardly visible for the lighting, a cat crouches with a small bird trapped under its paw, the wing of the bird visibly broken and mangled. The bird symbolises the woman's plight – caught as she is by her lover – the painting demonstrating exactly what Buist has written about, that having a cat in the same house within which you keep a bird is cruel and terrifying for the poor creature, who cannot itself escape. A common understanding of the cat and bird imagery in the painting, as Martin A. Danahay notes, is that 'The cat symbolizes male domination and control

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[65] Ibid., p. 137.
[66] Buist, p. 139.
[67] ''The Awakening Conscience', William Holman Hunt, 1853', *Tate* <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075> [accessed 15 February 2023].

made possible by unequal class and gender distributions of power', recognising the hierarchy at work here.[68] But more pertinently, the conclusion that can be drawn, from the conversation set up between Holman Hunt's painting and Buist's discussion of the bird kept in a house with a cat, is that the strong association of women and birds necessarily pushes an attitude toward the bird and woman that is one of care and protection. This may be put to use in political terms in Holman Hunt's painting, but it reveals the ways in which women's helplessness and vulnerability are underscored by the association.

Ultimately, Buist concludes that taking care of birds is not for the everyday person, especially with how much care birds require in order to maintain their health and happiness. He writes:

> Indolent persons may argue that in these pages I have converted bird-keeping into a perfect bug-bear;[69] that no one but enthusiasts would or could take all that daily trouble with mere birds upon which I so strenuously insist; in short, that my prescription is such as will dishearten ordinary people from attempting the harmless amusement of bird management and bird rearing on any consideration whatever. So much the better, I reply, for ninety-nine out of a hundred miserable feathered victims at present languishing in misery and cruel neglect. A living creature's necessities and happiness are not things to trifle with, nor subjects you can maltreat with impunity, as a thoughtless child does its inanimate play things. Do not attempt the care of birds, unless you possess an innate love for an interest in animals and their habitats.[70]

Buist makes it clear that his intentions are to weed out those who would let a bird languish and suffer from those who genuinely care for birds, acknowledging them as living creatures with needs and that can experience happiness. If someone is unwilling to take care of the birds to the full extent, when the novelty of having them has worn off, Buist issues a stark warning about the fate of the birds:

> […] much suffering is inflicted on the dumb, helpless, dependent creatures, who rely solely on your care, and towards whom you have voluntarily assumed the

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[68] Martin A. Danahay, 'Nature Red in Hoof and Paw: Domestic Animals and Violence in Victorian Art', in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 111.
[69] 'Bug-bear' here likely means 'an object or source of dread' or 'a continuing source of irritation'. See 'Bugbear', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bugbear-word_n> [accessed 15 May 2024].
[70] Buist, p. 144.

> position and character of protector, purveyor, and guardian. Unless you are prepared to make their happiness, health, and comfort your primary consideration and subject of regular daily regard, leave the pleasures of "pet keeping" untasted. Let others enjoy the gratification of winning the love and gratitude you have rendered yourself unworthy to possess, perhaps from habits of self-indulgence, thoughtlessness, carelessness, or want of feeling and appreciation for another's needs.[71]

I'd like to note here that Buist does not end by talking about appreciation for a bird's needs but rather for 'another's needs'. Yet again, comparisons can be made between having compassion for birdlife and having compassion towards fellow humans, especially those that are dependent. Self-indulgence, thoughtlessness, and carelessness towards the feelings of others can cause much suffering, even when it comes to relationships with other humans, and if extended to male-female relationships, it again emphasises their patristic nature. The emphatic concern for the health of the bird will be returned to in my discussion of Caterina, later in this chapter.

Before I conclude this section, I'd like to introduce the work of Johannes Matthäus Bechstein, a German naturalist and ornithologist who lived in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His works were widely read and distributed, and they continue to be used and cited by ornithologists today. Their importance in this thesis is regarding the differences between male and female birds, as well as some of the misconceptions around them. Bechstein went into great detail discussing different kinds of birds and their habits, but of particular interest is the fact that Bechstein seems to say that male birds are the more important of the sexes for a number of reasons, which is discussed in this section and the next. Bechstein posits that male birds are more valuable for their plumage, in particular, something which is at odds with hunting accounts discussed later on in this thesis. Early on in Bechstein's *Cage and Chamber-Birds: Their Natural History, Habits, Food, Diseases, Management, and Modes of Capture* (1856), he writes that it is 'especially necessary to be able to distinguish between the sexes, since, as is well known, the males are, in almost every respect, more valuable than the females.'[72] The idea that male birds were more valuable than female

[71] Buist, p. 145.
[72] Johann Matthäus Bechstein, *Cage and Chamber-Birds: Their Natural History, Habits, Food, Diseases, Management, and Modes of Capture* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1856), p. 1. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as *Cage and Chamber-Birds*.

birds, particularly as caged birds, is supported by the fact that at the time, birdsong was considered to be a masculine trait and something which allowed male birds to attract a mate.[73] We now know that birdsong is common across both sexes of birds, and the ascription of birdsong to male birds reveals the extent to which scientific understanding of birds was shaped by gendered assumptions of the time. Birdsong, like any valued cultural activity, seems to make more sense as a male activity even though birds more generally were associated with women. A paradox, therefore, arises in the sense that women's voice and singing aligns them with birds, who nonetheless, in their artistry, are assumed to be male. Once again, the ownership of women's performances by men comes into play. Such contradictions were clearly no barrier to the prevalence and strength of the association between women and birds.

Furthermore, Bechstein indicates that the plumage of male birds was much more brightly coloured or prominent in order to attract females. The plumage of male birds, therefore, was highly sought after for adornment. Female birds of all species tended to have more muted feathers, which could be used for adornment but were considered to be less expensive because they were duller and the birds themselves were easier to kill during nesting season. Again, the association of birds and women in terms of their shared beauty is not constrained by science of the time.

Bechstein also states that birdsong itself is incredibly important to understanding birds, particularly as it is their form of communication. He writes, 'Every species of bird has a peculiarity of voice possessed by no other. By this variety of vocal endowment, birds are not only distinguished above the rest of the animal creation, but are enabled to express to one another their wants and passions.'[74] Bechstein goes on to write that birdsong is a tool used for capturing birds, particularly by fowlers. In order to catch more birds, fowlers would build a hut, cover it with green boughs, and make sure that the roof would be covered with limed twigs.[75] Because birds flee at the warning calls of danger, the fowlers would use a bird of prey and imitate the cry of a bird in fear or distress, and birds in the surrounding area would flock to the hut and find themselves trapped.

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[73] Later in the Introduction, Bechstein writes, 'females but rarely sing, as this organ is much less fully developed in them than in the male', p. 5.
[74] Bechstein, *Cage and Chamber-Birds*, p. 1.
[75] Ibid., p. 2.

Birdlime was a common tool used for catching birds, as described in Rob. F. Walsh's experience 'Bird Catching at Glengarriffe'. According to Walsh, birdlime was 'the stickiest of all the sticky things that exist' and was made out of holly trees.[76] To make birdlime, bird catchers would harvest several pounds of bark from the holly trees and crush the bark in a mortar and pestle until it has been reduced to a pulp, and then the mixture is washed and pounded again in the mortar and pestle until it becomes a fine powder. After the mixture is washed again, it is left to become a pulpy mixture in a greyish colour. Walsh indicates that there are two or three methods of giving the birdlime its final preparation, but the most common preparation involved pulling and washing the pulp until is because a slate-colour paste. Then, the paste is buried in the earth – or, more often, Walsh claims, in a dung heap – and left to mature for seven to twenty-one days, at which point the water from the pulp will have been fully absorbed by the earth, leaving only a sticky paste, which is called birdlime. Birdlime was then smeared over the twigs and other utensils used in the trapping of birds, and once they landed on it, their feet would become stuck, and the bird-catcher could come retrieve it to put in a cage.[77]

Returning to Bechstein, there are many ways to catch wild birds. In a section on general instructions for capturing wild birds, Bechstein makes note of the traditional bird trap used in Thuringia, Bechstein's place of birth. Bechstein leaves very detailed instructions for the reader. Bird catchers must use strong oak or beech boughs that still retain some leaves, cutting off the boughs' ends and creating a flat top that ranges roughly one to one and a half feet in width. The bird-catcher must then make notches in the cut branches, into which limed twigs are inserted. These traps are then placed in areas where birds usually fly, and they are often referred to as 'decoy bushes'.[78] Underneath the bushes, bird-catchers would place decoy birds, covered with additional boughs so that the birds being baited would not be able to see the decoy birds. Bechstein also notes that full-grown caught birds make better decoys than those raised in captivity, as birds raised in captivity will not have learned the sounds of their particular species. The remainder of Bechstein's manual is a list of every classification

[76] Rob. F. Walsh, 'Bird Catching at Glengarriffe', *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Sport, Travel and Recreation*, 16.1 (1890), p. 50.
[77] Walsh, pp. 50-1.
[78] Bechstein, *Cage and Chamber-Birds*, pp. 24-5.

of bird species in Britain that was recorded at the time, with details about their habitats, food needs, general characteristics, and methods of capture.

The Taming and Caging of Wild Birds

Bechstein published another manual, the final edition of which was published in 1868, entitled *The Natural History of Cage Birds: Their Management, Habits, Food, Diseases, Treatment, Breeding, and the Methods of Catching Them*.[79] A self-professed amateur bird keeper, Bechstein intimates that the public has asked him to write this manual, and in doing so, he has compiled a list of European birds that are capable of being tamed, as well as some foreign birds.[80] As in his previous manual, Bechstein indicates that distinguishing between male and female birds is highly important 'since the former are generally superior in their powers of song, and therefore preferable'.[81] According to Bechstein, song is incredibly important when it comes to birds and can create a hierarchy within the bird kingdom depending on the birds' superiority of memory.[82] Furthermore, Bechstein writes that the strength of a bird's voice depends on the size of its larynx: 'In the female, it is weak and small, and this accounts for her want of song'.[83] When talking about the habitation of tame birds, Bechstein writes that several birds will never sing unless confined to a small space, 'being obliged, as it would appear, to solace themselves, for the want of liberty, with their song'.[84] The beautiful songs that bird-keepers value in birds can very well be attributed to their sorrow – this is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, looking at the case study of Catarina Sarti. In distinction, the best songs, Bechstein writes, comes from those birds which have full run of an entire room of the house, for their song comes from a place of liberty.[85]

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[79] Johann Matthäus Bechstein, *The Natural History of Cage Birds: Their Management, Habits, Food, Diseases, Treatment, Breeding, and the Methods of Catching Them* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1868). This book will hereafter be referred to as *The Natural History of Cage Birds*.
[80] Ibid., p. ii.
[81] Ibid., p. 1.
[82] Ibid, p. 2.
[83] Ibid, p. 3. In our modern society, birdsong is now known to come from male and female birds, contrary to Victorian belief. For more information, see Matthew R. Wilkins and others, 'Analysis of Female Song Provides Insight into the Evolution of Sex Differences in a Widely Studied Songbird', *Animal Behaviour*, 168 (2020), 69–82 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2020.07.018>.
[84] Bechstein, *The Natural History of Cage Birds*, p. 4.
[85] Ibid.

Victorian bird cages were typically designed to be ornate and decorative, much like the Victorian houses of the era. Although usually designed and owned by men, houses were indicative of domesticity and in the detailed attention to birds' houses and their suitability for different bird species, they are telling of the relationship between domesticity and entrapment for Victorian women. Birdcages often featured intricate details, such as scrollwork and floral motifs, and were made from metal, wood, or wicker materials. The cages could be quite large and elaborate, with multiple levels and compartments for the birds to move around in. Some cages also had built-in features like food and water dishes, perches, and even miniature birdhouses. Much like a husband providing suitable housing for his wife, at least for the upper classes, so the provision of suitably comfortable and decorative housing for a bird reflected on a man's ability to provide and protect. Similarly, Victorian houses were known for their elaborate architectural details and decorative features. These houses often featured ornate woodwork, decorative mouldings, and elaborate facades with intricate designs. The interiors of these homes were also typically decorated with luxurious materials, such as silk, velvet, and damask, as well as decorative objects, such as vases, sculptures, and paintings. In both cases, the ornate and decorative design of Victorian bird cages and houses reflected the wealth and status of their owners, and their desire to showcase their affluence through their possessions.

Cheverel Manor, the primary setting for 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' in George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* is one such ornate building that represents a bird cage, as is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. According to the text, Cheverel Manor is a large, old-fashioned country house that dates back to the Elizabethan era. It is described as having a 'gabled roof' and 'latticed windows', as well as a 'wide entrance porch' and a 'large hall with a minstrels' gallery'. The interior of the house boasts an 'oak-panelled dining-room', a 'spacious drawing-room', and a 'wide staircase'. In everything, hints of opulence suggest that Cheverel Manor is a grand and imposing country house, typical of the English gentry during the Victorian era. Bechstein's examples of bird cages echo the architecture of the period, with gabled roofs, spacious areas for birds to fly about in, and wooden frames.

Figure 6: Cato's Blackbird's Cage from Bechstein's Manual

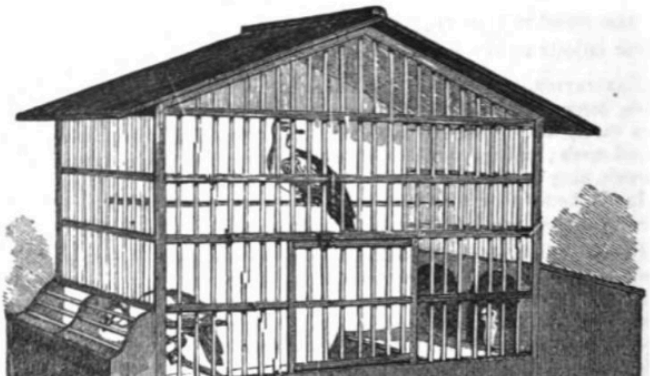
In the example to the left, a blackbird sits in its 'large' cage, which is shown here with a gabled roof. Bechstein notes that a blackbird must be kept in a cage by itself because it will otherwise 'pursue and kill its little companions of the aviary or room'.[86]

Figure 7: Sky-Lark Cage from Bechstein's Manual

The sky-lark cage shown below is quite similar to the blackbird's cage; however, readers will note several subtle differences. According to Bechstein, for a single sky-lark, the cage must be 'at least eighteen inches long, nine wide, and fifteen high', and the bottom should have 'a drawer in which enough of river sand should be kept for this scratching bird to be able to roll and dust itself conveniently'.[87] Furthermore, there should be a little patch of fresh turf in the corner, and the top of the cage must be furnished with linen in order to prevent the wild sky-lark from injuring itself on the wood or iron of the cage when attempting to fly away.

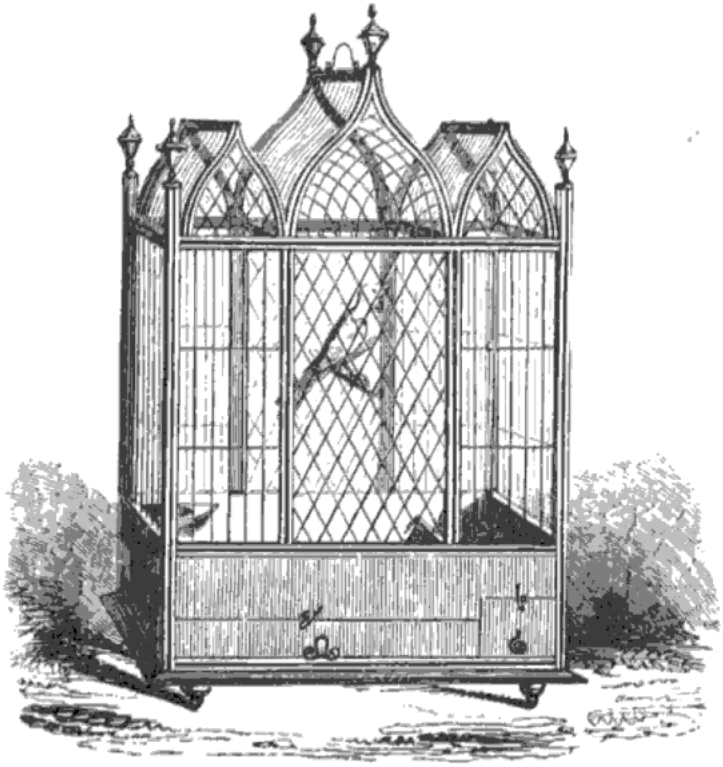
[86] Bechstein, *The Natural History of Cage Birds*, p. 199.
[87] Ibid., p 175.

The dove's breeding cage again features a gabled roof, but this example highlights the miniature birdhouses that could be attached to the primary birdcage, allowing nesting doves to pair and breed within the attached miniature birdhouse. Opposite the miniature birdhouses are the fillable seed containers, allowing easier cleanliness.



More ornate birdcages can also be found from the Victorian period. For example, Bechstein shows examples of more ornate birdcages in his manual, especially as parlour pieces. The canary cage to the left is more square, as gabled roofs would harm the bird because it would strain itself hopping about instead of flying.[88] This cage is indicative of Gothic Revival architecture, prominent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[89] Gothic

Figur



CANARY CAGE FOR PARLOUR.

Figure 9: Canary Cage from Bechstein's Manual

[88] Bechstein, *The Natural History of Cage Birds*, p. 147.
[89] Suzanne Waters, 'Gothic' <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/gothic> [accessed 23 February 2023]. For more information on Gothic Revival architecture and its origins, see Charles L. Eastlake, *A History of the Gothic Revival* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1872). A shorter introduction to Gothic Revival architecture can be found in Trevor Yorke, *Gothic Revival Architecture* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017).

Revival architecture was characterised by pointed arches or windows, rich colours, and decorative elements. On this cage, we see many elements of Gothic Revival architecture, including vertical emphasis. One way in which vertical emphasis is achieved in Gothic Revival architecture is through the use of pointed arches. These arches are tall and narrow, drawing the eye upward and creating a sense of height. They were often used in doorways, windows, and other openings, as well as in the decorative tracery found in Gothic Revival buildings.

Another way in which vertical emphasis is achieved in both Gothic Revival architecture and this bird cage is through the use of tall, narrow windows with decorative tracery. These windows often featured elongated shapes, such as lancets or trefoils (seen here in the lancetry on all three domes), which further enhance the vertical emphasis of the building. In addition to these elements, Gothic Revival architecture often features tall, slender towers and spires, seen in the elongation of the spires on each side of the cage. These towers can be highly decorative and are often topped with pointed roofs or ornate finials, as seen in the birdcage above.

Figure 10: Aviary from Bechstein's Manual

In the image to the left, the relationship between the bird cage and women's domestic status is more obvious and highly suggestive. Two women are standing in front of a large aviary intended for a drawing room. In her hand, the older woman holds a small birdcage. Both of them are looking up into the larger aviary, which is full of birds and features a small tree with outstretched branches on which birds perch. There is hardly any context for this photo in Bechstein's manual – it is nestled between

information on the Flusher, which Bechstein says cannot be housed with other birds, and the Raven, which Bechstein says cannot be considered a house bird. Regardless of what type of bird is in the cage, Bechstein does say in his introduction that 'birds prized only for the beauty of their plumage or their pleasing actions, are best placed in a room', rather than confined to a narrow space, in order to enable them to sing best.[90]

Women and Caged Birds in Victorian Literature

Exploration of bird manuals has demonstrated the ways in which the care of birds, and especially the attention given to the housing of birds and its effect upon the health of birds but also the birds' capacity or inclination for singing. The idea that a woman was like a caged songbird has been discussed in relation to art but is also evident across a range of cultural expressions. Poets such as Coventry Patmore, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, William Blake, and Elizabeth Oakes Smith made this allusion in vivid depictions of women and the caged bird. The poets draw on the simple equation of the relationship between women and birds in order to draw more complex associations and conclusions. Patmore, in 'The Angel in the House' (1854-1862), writes that a songbird, once caged, will look out of an open cage door and '[fear] the freedom of his wings', flitting about unsurely until he is emboldened to venture forward and fly.[91] Patmore continues:

> The maiden so, from love's free sky
> In chaste and prudent counsels caged,
> But longing to be loosen'd by
> Her suitor's faith declared and gaged
> When blest with that release desires,
> First doubts if she is truly free,
> Then pauses, restlessly tired,
> Alarm'd at too much liberty […][92]

The poem says that the maiden, like the bird, once set free, will doubt her own freedom and flit about in confusion until she declares her love for the one who opened her cage door – doubting, even then, whether her love is born from duty or truth, and she will feel 'treasonous' in her shame and remorse from uttering her love confession.[93] While

[90] Bechstein, *The Natural History of Cage Birds*, p. 4.
[91] Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1863), II. II. I. ll. 1-8.
[92] Ibid., II. II. I. ll. 9-16.
[93] Ibid., II. II. I. l. 29.

Lawton Smith interprets this as a metaphor for being released from 'a cage of sexual inexperience',[94] the overarching sense of purpose seems to be attacking the idea of domesticity, taking something that is meant to be free and in nature (a songbird) and trapping it, confining it, and holding it prisoner. The husband who frees the woman from her previous life is letting the bird out into a more expansive room, although the woman's true freedom, as well as the bird's, is somewhat questionable.

Dedicated to his first wife, Patmore's poem speaks extensively of all of the qualities of the 'perfect' wife and does so in ways that draws extensively on the relation between women and birds. In Canto II, Patmore writes of the ideal woman as if a caged bird, longing to be set free by her suitor's declaration of love. For Patmore's woman, it is this love alone which the caged beauty seeks, and once it is obtained and she has received her liberation, she will be confused by having so much freedom and must be won over by her suitor's 'mastering air',[95] 'flattering look',[96] smile – and she should be sure to never cause him anger lest he lose this,[97] '[h]is power to do or guard from harm',[98] his words – which she should heed as instruction,[99] his 'clear repute',[100] his love of her – which notably comes last,[101] and his ability to 'catch her up in one strong arm' and make her 'weep, or laugh',[102] which shows that man has a physical dominance over a weak woman. More than all of these things, however, is the explicit suggestion that the woman will adhere to her 'rote' 'duty'[103] and proclaim her love for her suitor, though the 'thought half chokes her in her throat'.[104] Despite supposedly being about a pure love between man and woman, it would seem that the poem to some degree recognises, despite itself, that there is something toxic about this declaration, as the woman-bird issues a 'fatal "I am thine"',[105] sealing her fate to union with her suitor-turned-'emancipator'. The fatality of the message is clear; the woman is bound to her suitor in gratitude for freeing her, out of fear of angering him, out of desperation,[106] and

[94] Lawton Smith, *Allegorical Body*, p. 223.
[95] Patmore, II. II. I. l. 37.
[96] Ibid., l. 39.
[97] Ibid., l. 41.
[98] Ibid., l. 45.
[99] Ibid., l. 49.
[100] Ibid., l. 57.
[101] Ibid., l. 60.
[102] Ibid., ll. 47-8.
[103] Ibid., ll. 18-9.
[104] Ibid., l. 20.
[105] Ibid., l. 21.
[106] Ibid., l. 29.

despite her 'shame' and 'remorse'[107] in giving herself so 'rashly'[108] to her emancipator-jailer, her verbal declaration of binding love to this suitor should wash away her reservations and let her get carried away into a 'sea of bliss' where she 'laughs to think of her alarm' and 'avows she was in love before'.[109] In ways that are perhaps not always intentioned or consistent, the overtones of the caged bird makes the woman's emancipation quite questionable.

In a twisted way, the woman-as-bird is supposed to accept her newfound cage, one of matrimony, with grace and a saviour-like devotion to the man who at once freed and enslaved her. Instead of being greeted with mutual admiration and respect, she is treated as an object for his pleasure in the relationship, where the 'sum of her desires' is the 'devotion unto his'.[110] The poem records that when the man deigns to touch the woman, to show any sign of affection, her response is to stand 'dizzied, shock'd, and flush'd',[111] overwhelmed by this incredible act, which to her 'seems a crime'[112] because just this simple act 'makes her love him more'.[113] The suitor finds himself uttering this same sentiment in a different passage. He says, 'she's so simply, subtly sweet,/My deepest rapture does her wrong'.[114] He continues, saying that he has chosen to sing her 'worth', particularly as 'Maid and Wife',[115] and that on 'wings of love uplifted free',[116] he is able to teach other men how to achieve a virtuousness through loving such a gentle creature. Where the wings of love have lifted the man to a higher station, the freedom that love brings is denied to the woman by the cage of prudence and chastity. The male suitor's impression of himself is that by praising the woman and elevating other men with the knowledge of this higher love, the woman will 'wish to be desired,/(By praise increased)…',[117] concluding that indulging a woman with this 'power of art' will bring 'new fairness even in her fair heart', which is already 'so meek, so far unlike [men's]'.[118] Through flattery and praise, the male suitor will win over the woman, who

[107] Ibid., ll. 26-7.
[108] Ibid., l. 26.
[109] Patmore, II. II. I. ll. 32-4.
[110] Ibid., ll. 71-2.
[111] Ibid., l. 75.
[112] Ibid., l. 79.
[113] Ibid., l. 80.
[114] Ibid., I. II. I. ll. 35-6.
[115] Ibid., l. 38.
[116] Ibid., l. 41.
[117] Ibid., ll. 56-7.
[118] Ibid., ll. 43-7, 52, 56.

will immediately be entrapped by matrimony, 'the poles/On which the heavenly spheres revolve'.[119]

Returning to 'The Changed Allegiance', the poem continues by suggesting that this ideal woman will never let her suitor know how much she loves him, or else he will stop trying to win her over, despite already having her heart.[120] However, his small touches that leave her so absorbed in his every action will win her 'allegiance',[121] and 'prizing what she can't prevent' (that is, marriage to this man), her very will becomes subject to his desires, 'indomitably bent/On mere submissiveness to him'.[122] She is expected, as stated in the Bible,[123] to leave her father and mother and 'cleave' to her suitor: 'He is her lord, for he can take/Hold of her faint heart with his hand'.[124] In this entire Prelude, which is aptly entitled 'The Changed Allegiance', the woman is depicted as being inherently submissive and responsive to masculine authority and affection and so, to a degree, she is depicted as never having a choice as to whether she wishes to join with her suitor in matrimony. She begins the poem as a weak-willed bird caged by the desire to have her suitor proclaim his love for her, and it is suggested that she has allowed herself in this situation to be caged by 'chaste and prudent counsel';[125] she is freed from this expectation of chastity once he has uttered his proclamation of love and it is found to be true; and she is immediately placed in another cage – sealed shut by the locks of duty, fear, and a rejection of her own personal desires (which, through matrimony, are expected to align with her suitor's). Her suitor's journey is far less taxing; once he has uttered his proclamation of love, he is only bound to capture the woman-bird, as a conqueror who has breached the walls of her fortress, 'street by street'[126] until she has finally broken down and 'divorced from self',[127] allowing herself to continue to be caged for his pleasure. As in the bird manuals discussed previously, there are acts of care that are required on the part of the suitor in order to attract the woman and 'domesticate' her in his keeping. These acts of care might appear to be 'work' for the suitor, but in reality, there are no sacrifices made on his part like there are

[119] Ibid., ll. 63-4.
[120] Patmore, II. II. I. ll. 81-8.
[121] Ibid., l. 92.
[122] Ibid., ll. 93, 95-6.
[123] Genesis 2:24 states: 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.'
[124] Patmore, II. II. I. ll. 97, 99-100.
[125] Ibid., l. 10.
[126] Ibid., l. 88.
[127] Ibid., l. 90.

in the case of the woman, who is required to relinquish her very essence in order to merge with her future husband for his pleasure. Her heart is in his hand, to do with what he will, and he is not required to make any sacrifice in return.

However, once comfortable in its domestic confinement, the woman-bird will begin to sing again – if cautiously. In 'The Course of True Love', Patmore writes about hearing his betrothed wife singing behind a 'half-shut door'.[128] Notably, the wife is singing 'my verses'[129] – that is, those written by her husband – and nothing of her own creation. He further recalls,

> There was a passion in her tone,
> A tremor when she touch'd the keys,
> Which told me she was there alone,
> And uttering all her soul at ease.[130]

Without an observed audience, this caged woman-bird is able to give voice to her soul through song, bringing herself restorative peace through this action. Having accepted her captivity, the woman-bird is able to find a sort of repose in song, whomever the words of the song may belong to, for in a way, her voice remains her own. Despite this, it would seem that the soon-to-be husband hoards the voice for his own, particularly at the altar, when, in singing with her 'soft voice',[131] the woman is heard by the lover, overcoming – for him alone – the 'roar of voices' around them, 'like a bird/ Sole warbling in a windy wood'.[132] Her gentle and kind nature upon the matrimonial altar brings him joy and a sense of freedom, through a 'bright spring-tide of pure love'.[133] Without this gentleness and appeal to her lover, however, the man could still potentially be enthralled; for in the next Canto, he is willing to 'accept/ All her own faults'[134] if his love withers,[135] and a woman who disappoints him *could* be admirable, he says, if only she knew about his love for her. This presumption ties back to the idea that it is the suitor's love alone which sets the woman-bird free from her confinement, binding her to him out of gratitude for loving her, despite her perceived defects.

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[128] Patmore, II. II. I. l. 5.
[129] Ibid., II. II. 1. l. 7.
[130] Ibid., ll. 13-6.
[131] Ibid., I. X. 'Going to Church'. 6. l. 1.
[132] Ibid., ll. 2-4.
[133] Ibid., l. 11.
[134] Ibid., I. XI. I. ll. 3-4.
[135] Ibid., l. 2.

Another comparison made of the caged woman is that of '[a] water-lily, all alone/ Within a lonely castle-moat'.[136] Trapped in the confines of this virgin castle, she is told that she will be courted for her youth, honoured and desired by many men,[137] and it is written that she sighs, "If those sweet tales be truths,/ What bliss to be so much admired!".[138] From this, it would seem that the woman's sole purpose and desire in life is to be sought after by suitors. However, she rejects all of her suitors until one comes '[a]s in the grass a serpent glides'[139] and wins her over with his peaceful nature, until, her guard down, he strikes and 'frightens her to death' with intensity, calming down again just as suddenly, bringing imbalance into her life and condemning her to silence, 'subduing' her with his unpredictable nature.[140] While his prey tries to collect her breath and defend herself, the predator strikes: 'He looks as if he loved her so,/ She smiles to him against her will'.[141] Suddenly, this dominating man, 'in all more strong than she',[142] has 'tender talk' and 'gentle tone',[143] 'manly worship in his gaze',[144] and the woman-bird, thrust into the cage of courtship, wonders, 'Why fly so fast?'.[145] She is flattered by the unexpected attention, as a fly to honey, and '[t]hanks him who finds her fair and good'.[146] Somehow, joy begins to intertwine with and cover her internal turmoil and terror, and by 'secret, sweet degrees, her heart,/ Vanquish'd, takes warmth from his desire'.[147] Once caught, the suitor mysteriously imbues her with virtue through his flatteries, as '[n]ow she through him is so much more'.[148] Still, this caught woman is untameable, however, for the section ends:

> But still she flies. Should she be won,
> It must not be believed or thought
> She yields; she's chased to death, undone,
> Surprised, and violently caught.[149]

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[136] Ibid., ll. 3-4.
[137] Ibid., ll. 13-4.
[138] Ibid., ll. 15-6.
[139] Patmore, I. XII. I. l. 30.
[140] Ibid., ll. 38, 43.
[141] Ibid., ll. 47-8.
[142] Ibid., l. 42.
[143] Ibid., l. 50.
[144] Ibid., l. 51.
[145] Ibid., l. 65.
[146] Ibid., l. 66.
[147] Ibid., l. 69-70.
[148] Ibid., l. 80.
[149] Ibid., ll. 89-92.

As a bird in the wild can never be truly tamed, so a woman obtained with flattery and falsities does not truly belong to the man who captures her. In Part III of 'The Abdication's Prelude', it becomes apparent that the intent of the suitor was not in the obtainment of the woman at all; rather, the suitor, in all of the games he played with the woman in order to confuse and ensnare her, was simply interested in the chase itself. [150] This attitude is demonstrated in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story', in the presented behaviour of Captain Wybrow, whose affections for Caterina turn cold when he decides that it is time to marry a woman more suited to his station in life. He views Caterina more as a cat might view a canary in a cage: a delicious piece of meat that could be enjoyed whenever he so wished but of which he tired quite easily once he discovered it was out of reach.

The sentiment of entrapment is also seen in William Blake's song, 'How sweet I roam'd from field to field'. [151] The nineteenth-century woman could be constrained by society, family, honour, and duty, all of which would pull her away from her own desires. Blake writes, 'He caught me in his silken net,/ And shut me in his golden cage', suggesting that the lover in the song has entrapped the woman much like a bird.[152] The cruelty of the lover is taken even further when Blake writes:

> He loves to sit and hear me sing,
> Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;
> Then stretches out my golden wing,
> And mocks my loss of liberty.[153]

In this final stanza, the caged woman has become 'un-human', her 'wings' turning into gold, symbolising both her inability to fly to freedom and that her physical environment has undergone a transformation where she is being caged. David Punter asserts that the woman 'has not, indeed, merely been put into a position where she seems to be *like* a songbird; she has *become* a songbird.'[154] The woman has ceased to be human, and thus, she becomes a sub-human animal to be viewed. Punter draws in the work of Laplanche and Pontalis, French psychoanalysts, who would have defined this transformation of the woman to 'inanimate' (or, monster) as *trauma*, or 'An event in the subject's life defined

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[150] Ibid., I. XII. III. l. 4.
[151] William Blake, 'Song: How Sweet I Roam'd from Field to Field', *Poetry Foundation* (Poetry Foundation, 2022), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43684/song-how-sweet-i-roamd-from-field-to-field> [accessed 3 September 2022].
[152] Ibid., ll. 11-2.
[153] Ibid., ll. 13-16.
[154] David Punter, 'Blake, Trauma and the Female', *New Literary History*, 15.3 (1984), 475–90 <https://doi.org/10.2307/468716>, p. 482.

by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation'.[155] As Kelly Hurley notes in 'Trauma and Horror: Anguish and Transfiguration', trauma is 'a kind of infernal mechanism that cannot be stopped once it is set into motion; symptoms themselves (nightmares, hallucinations, psychosomatic illnesses, stress-induced illnesses) become in their turn instruments and agents of further trauma.'[156] For Blake's woman-turned-songbird, there is a cycle of trauma that is perpetuated by the lover's cruelty when he mocks her 'loss of liberty', reminding her again and again that she is completely at his mercy.

Caterina Sarti, the Italian Songbird

Trauma is a poignant sentiment for Caterina Sarti in George Eliot's 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' from *Scenes of Clerical Life*. After Caterina's father dies, leaving her an orphan in Italy, Caterina is adopted by an English family called the Cheverels and called a 'little Southern bird'.[157] Although not expressed in precisely the following terms, we can read her journey as the plucking of an Italian chick from her roost in Italy who is then introduced abruptly to the English countryside, at Cheverel Manor. As Catarina develops from girl to woman, Eliot writes that her voice 'recalled the love-notes of the stock-dove', immediately aligning her with birds.[158] While the protagonist of the story, Maynard Gilfil, is in love with Caterina, she desires Captain Anthony Wybrow, the nephew of Sir Christopher Cheverel. The Cheverels see Caterina as more of a pet than a member of the family and often bring her out at social occasions to sing for their guests.[159] They intend for her to wed Gilfil. Captain Wybrow, despite knowing that his uncle wishes him to marry Miss Beatrice Assher, leads Caterina on and flirts with her, until he is told to go propose to Miss Assher. Upon returning to the Manor with Miss Assher and her mother, Captain Wybrow dies quite unexpectedly, and Gilfil finds Caterina with a knife on her. Although Captain Wybrow's death is caused by a heart condition, Caterina seeks refuge with a former employee of the Cheverels. Gilfil finds

[155] Ibid, p. 483.
[156] Kelly Hurley, 'Trauma and Horror: Anguish and Transfiguration', *English Language Notes*, 59.2 (2021), 1–8 <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-9277216>, p. 1.
[157] George Eliot, 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by David Lodge (Penguin Books, Ltd., 1977), p. 158.
[158] Ibid., p. 159.
[159] Caterina's musical education becomes a high priority to Lady Cheverel and elevates her position within the household (pp. 160-1).

her, helps her rediscover her passion through music, and the two get married. While Gilfil firmly believes that Caterina will return to her former self through the joys of motherhood, both Caterina and her child die during childbirth, and Gilfil is left on his own, lamenting what could have been.

With Hurley's definition of trauma in mind, it is no wonder that Caterina dies so young; after having her mental stability unbalanced by Captain Wybrow's affections, assertions, denials, and, ultimately, death, her mind is unable to cope with the stress of such 'emotional whiplash'. When she returns to music as a form of coping mechanism, she is reclaiming the imagery of a songbird, with her music as a form of healing. This is an idea recorded by Elizabeth Oakes Smith, in her poem 'The Poet', first published in Rufus Griswald's *The Female Poets of America* in 1848. Oakes Smith writes,

> Sing, sing – Poet, sing!
> With the thorn beneath thy breast,
> Robbing thee of all thy rest;
> Hidden thorn for ever thine,
> Therefore dost thou sit and twine
> Lays of sorrowing –
> Lays that wake a mighty gladness,
> Spite of all their mournful sadness.
> Sing, sing – Poet, sing!
> It doth ease thee of thy sorrow […][160]

Here, Oakes Smith highlights the same healing power that Caterina feels when she begins singing again after Captain Wybrow's death. Through her music, Caterina can express all her sadness, rage, and overwhelming emotion in Italian songs that overwhelmingly have tragic themes, which she cannot express directly in English perhaps due to personal anguish or societal duty.

It is worth noting that the comment preceding Oakes Smith's poem reads thus: 'It is the belief of the vulgar that when the nightingale sings, she leans her breast upon a thorn.' In singing, then, the nightingale (or woman), is engaging in bloodletting, a common medical practice even into the nineteenth century, and perhaps this is why Caterina does not recover; even though she is engaging in a healing act – that of singing –, she only gets weaker until she eventually dies. In trying to purge her system of her

[160] Elizabeth Oakes Smith in Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *The Female Poets of America* (Ardent Media, 1978), p. 194, ll. 1-10.

love for Captain Wybrow, she instead invited in a figurative infection that is heartbreak, a supposition supported by her languishing and her eventual fate. Returning to the notion of trauma discussed in the last section, the word 'trauma' itself derives from the Greek word for 'wound', which in turn comes from the word for 'to pierce'. Caterina's singing and engaging in a metaphorical piercing, or 'bloodletting', is her trauma and what ultimately leads to her perishing.

Singing, however, releases a pressure that Caterina has had building up within her, much like Robert Browning's Pippa, who operates as a representation of the lyric poet with her singing:

> the girl, like the conventional songbird, provides an effective if unintentional symbol for the lyric poet […] It is significant that the one motive for her songs is simple joy: in her own existence, in the beauty of the world, and (especially in the later songs) in the songs themselves: their themes, the images and incidents – that is, their art.[161]

We can intimate that in singing, Caterina can freely express all her pent-up, unspoken regrets, and this nourishes her. Singing becomes her confessional for all the feelings that she could not otherwise express, and music becomes a form of both acceptance and escape.

The idea that music once operated as a symbol of her confinement within the Cheverel Manor can be explained much in the same way that an 1881 *Athenaeum* review of Christina Rossetti's *A Pageant and Other Poems* discusses the music of Rossetti's work; it is 'apparently lawless as a bird's song, yet, like the bird's song, obeying a law too subtle to be recognised'.[162] We can take this response to Rossetti's work as helpfully applicable to Caterina, who, in her song, obeys the command (and thus, the silent obligation) to sing for the entertainment of the people of the Manor. A bird's song is unintelligible to the human ear, bringing joy simply through the peaceful beauty of nature's notes; Caterina, too, sings her passions and pleas out in her music, which is simply adored for her lovely voice, not for the meaning behind the words. Lady Cheverel, for example, fails to notice that Caterina's song choice of *Che farò senza Euridice?* is from Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, and is a song

[161] Milton Millhauser, 'Poet and Burgher: A Comic Variation on a Serious Theme', *Victorian Poetry*, 7.2 (1969), p. 166.
[162] Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 168.

about lost love and 'dread anguish'.[163] In *Orfeo ed Euridice*, based on the myth of Orpheus, Euridice has died and Orfeo is given an opportunity to bring her back to life, on the condition that he is not allowed to look back at her as he retrieves her from hell. Caterina's song, *Che faro senza Euridice?* is sung in the third and final act, when Orfeo looks back at Euridice to console her, thereby killing Euridice again. Orfeo sings the song in anguish and decides he will kill himself so that he can be with Euridice.[164] It is a song of intense sorrow and suffering. Caterina's second song selection is just as telling. *Ho perduto il bel sembiante*, by Giovanni Paisiello, (literally: 'I have lost the fair face') is sung with anguish and yearning over the lost love of the singer and is from an opera called Amor Vendicato, or 'Avenged Love'.[165] In these selections, Caterina focuses her emotions: the narrator tells us that 'her love, her jealousy, her pride, her rebellion against her destiny, made one stream of passion which welled forth in the deep rich tones of her voice'.[166] Knowledge of the content of the songs only works to emphasize the negative strains of Caterina's suffering as well as the more explicitly expressed suffering.

Reducing Caterina to the status of *ingénue*, the Cheverels beg her to entertain them with the songs repeatedly, unaware of the heartbreak behind her melodies. In this way, Caterina's situation mirrors that which Elizabeth Barrett Browning recorded in *Aurora Leigh*. Of Aurora's aunt we learn that '… She had lived/A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage/Accounting that to leap from perch to perch/Was act and joy enough for any bird'.[167] Caterina is expected to find joy and fulfilment in the act of pleasing those inhabiting and ruling over Cheverel Manor. We can also turn to *Aurora Leigh* to find suggestions for Caterina's emotional state as an orphan and outsider, in terms of her overwhelming feeling of being alone and abandoned, living a life devoid of understanding or compassion:

> The sun came, saying, 'Shall I lift this light
> Against the lime-tree, and will you not look?

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[163] 'WHAT IS LIFE? (Che Faro Senza Euridice) from 1762 Opera "Orfeo Ed Euridice"', trans. by Peter Akers, *International Lyrics Playground* <https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/w/whatislifeeuridice.html> [accessed 3 September 2022].
[164] 'Orfeo Ed Euridice' <https://www.metopera.org/discover/synopses/orfeo-ed-euridice/> [accessed 12 May 2024].
[165] For more information on George Eliot's operatic choices for Catarina, see Delia Da Sousa Correa, 'George Eliot and the "Expressiveness of Opera"', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 48.2 (2012), 164–77 <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqs006>.
[166] Eliot, p. 143.
[167] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), I. ll. 306-9.

I make the bird sing – listen! … but, for you.
God never hears your voice, excepting when
You lie upon the bed at nights and weep.[168]

So it seems to Caterina, who, despite feeling miserable and utterly alone, is never noticed in her misery by anyone other than Maynard Gilfil. As for Aurora, it is possible that she views even nature as rejecting her desires for sympathy, turning cruel and forlorn as she views it.

The one person whose affection Caterina truly craves is Captain Wybrow, and in his selfishness, he sees her pain and does nothing to assuage it. If anything, Wybrow becomes like a predatory hawk, nondescript, beautiful only in the sense that he exists. The bird imagery here can still be applied even to Wybrow; although he is never compared to a bird, the association is fitting because he is also confined himself by needing to marry within his station in order to bring honour to the family and secure its future. However, he is significantly freer than Caterina, who has further restrictions placed upon her by her indebtedness to the Cheverels, her sex, and her place in Victorian society. This scenario is also seen in Browning's *Aurora Leigh* in which we see depicted the fate of the smaller bird when attacked by a bird of prey:

All the rest, he held her hand
In speaking, which confused the sense of much;
Her heart, against his words, beat out so thick
They might as well be written on the dust
Where some poor bird, escaping from hawk's beak,
Has dropped, and beats its shuddering wings […][169]

Like Romney and Aurora in *Aurora Leigh*, Wybrow and Caterina come from different classes; he is from the noble class, and although she is born from noble people – a father rich in faith and wealthy benefactors upon his death – due to this imbalance in position, they cannot be together. The connection between these stories sheds some light, perhaps, on why Aurora is so wary of Romney at first and why Caterina should be more wary of Wybrow.

For Wybrow and Caterina, the finality of their relationship is called into question by Wybrow's predatory stalking of Caterina, always trying to find her alone, stealing up behind her in the hallway where she, like the artefacts in the room filled with cabinets

[168] Ibid., I. ll. 671-5.
[169] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, IV. ll. 135-40.

that they often meet in, is contained for his viewing pleasure. When he reveals that he cannot marry her, nor had ever fancied the idea, Caterina is confused by the way that he continues to behave around her, in how his words do not match his actions as he continues to toy with her affections. As an orphan, however, Caterina is completely at the mercy of her hosts, no matter how much they proclaim to consider her 'family' (a sentiment rejected by the household staff). Thus, she has no wherewithal to be the master of her own fate; she is a slave to those who have captured her, and although they provide for her, she will never have true freedom. Once she accepts that – through her confessional relationship with Gilfil – she can sing again, and her soul finds freedom in its release, through music. Until that moment, she is kept: 'So that the little southern bird had its northern nest lined with tenderness, and caresses, and pretty things.'[170] But Caterina is not a magpie, attracted to all that sparkles and glitters; she more resembles a nightingale, whose mournful song is heard but not understood.

It is illuminating, then to consider Caterina in the light of the birds tortured in Buist's manual for the entertainment of others. Caterina's metaphorical wings are clipped by her background, her status as an orphan and foreigner, and her lack of means to support herself as an individual. Caterina's main desire is to be united in matrimony with Captain Wybrow. She longs to be able to find her own voice and express her passion. But in all things, she must maintain her façade of propriety, and her only freedom of expression comes through the medium of singing. In singing, she can proclaim her hopes, her dreams, her overwhelming sadness at her circumstances, and the only thing her heart desires. Thus, Caterina embodies a caged songbird, and its strange connotations of suffering but also of artistic expression. Although Caterina will never have what she truly desires, she is able to continue singing, freeing herself at times, if only figuratively, from her confinement, letting her soul soar above her circumstances.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began to establish the ways in which women and birds share a special connection in Victorian literature, particularly through the case study of Caterina Sarti, who was the catalyst for this thesis topic. The symbolism of different species of birds and the way that comparisons between women and birds are drawn out both lead

[170] Eliot, p. 158.

to a better contemporary understanding of how the social confinement that Victorian women faced in their strict society was understood, conceptualised, and experienced in the Victorian period. While Lawton Smith's work on De Morgan's paintings began to develop the ideas of women as birds in confinement, the prevalence of Victorian paintings which feature women in the same frame as birds shows that many artists acknowledged, continued, and complicated the special connection that women and birds had. Through the use of different species of birds, artists were able to convey themes such as entrapment, confinement, freedom – or lack thereof – and loyalty alongside the more complex relationships between confinement and artistry (and especially singing) as well as beauty.

Alongside paintings that depict the themes of entrapment and confinement, bird manuals expand our understanding of the way in which women and birds were connected because they echo the language used to discuss women in the Victorian period. Buist's and Bechstein's manuals on the taming and caging of pet birds draw implicit connections between women and birds, particularly in the way that they acknowledge that birds, echoing prevalent discourse on women, experience feelings and need looking after properly. In writing this, Buist makes it clear that birds, in the animal hierarchy, are more favoured than animals of lower intellect but do not have the same position as the 'favoured' horse or dog. In much the same way, Victorian women were not considered to have the same status or power as men, and their connection with birds makes sense of the outworking of their lower place in the social hierarchy. The way in which Buist discusses the disadvantages of owning and caging a wild bird offers a framework for thinking about Caterina's treatment at the hands of the Cheverels, who thought they were getting a tame pet and instead got an unsettled wildling. While there is not always a conscious connection made between birds and women, the same structural and conceptual logics are at work and are mutually informative. Buist's descriptions of foreign birds also pertain to the way in which human migrants were seen, and of course Caterina would have been one. Even the Cheverels, despite having adopted Caterina, don't see her as 'one of their own' and therefore don't even consider Captain Wybrow to be a suitable match for her.

We can see a similar resonance between the treatment of the woman-bird, her confinement, and attitudes to her freedom in the comparison between Patmore's 'angel' and Eliot's Caterina. Patmore's idea in 'The Angel in the House' that the suitor's love sets the woman-bird free from her confinement, binding her to him out of gratitude for

loving her, despite her perceived defects, is keenly seen in Catarina's case. In Eliot's story, Mr. Gilfil loves her, despite her involvement with and love for Captain Wybrow, and she is bound to him – perhaps out of a sense of duty to her family and duty to him for looking after her when she was poorly after Captain Wybrow's death. Caterina is the perfect case study for the comparison between the cause-and-effect logic of the care and keeping of birds and the way in which women were viewed and treated, particularly because her emotional and physical decline are in line with the depiction of the decline of birds when they were neglected. The next chapter will build on the comparison between women and birds but will focus instead on those once caged bird-women who have found themselves uncaged, having developed autonomy.

Chapter Two

Uncaging the Wild Bird: Female Autonomy in *Aurora Leigh*, *Jane Eyre*, and 'Pippa Passes'

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the care and keeping of caged birds, using the work of Johann Matthaeus Bechstein and K. A. Buist to analyse the treatment of George Eliot's character Caterina Sarti, the 'pet' of Cheverel Manor. While the previous chapter examined how Caterina was subject to the whim of the Cheverels, this chapter will continue to develop the concept of the Victorian woman as a caged bird but will instead focus on women who have exercised their own autonomy and rejected the idea of being caged. This chapter will focus on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes'. These three works have been chosen because each has a strong female character who is aligned with a bird who uses her voice in order to retain – or gain – autonomy in a society that increasingly pressured women to know their place. This chapter begins to ask and uncover how some literary Victorian women characters used their voices to find autonomy.

First, this chapter will examine the extensive link between birds and poetry during the Victorian period, using Frederick Noël Paton's 1894 book *Bards and the Birds* as a publication that offers a good indication of what poetry would have had popular appeal.[1] Paton's book – which spans through Chaucer's Middle English, Shakespeare's Early Modern texts and sonnets, Wordsworth's Romantic poetry, and Barrett Browning's Victorian musings – is full to the brim with various excerpts from poems and books that reference birds in English literature. Paton has selected what he deems to be some of the most aesthetically pleasing published poetry that mentions birds, and indeed, he has ordered the poems aesthetically instead of chronologically in order to inspire certain moods within readers. The poems from the book that I discuss below, while largely Victorian, also serve as a historical collection of poems available to Victorian readers, a resource establishing a link between birds and poetry, as well as between birds and poets themselves.

[1] Frederick Noël Paton, *Bards and the Birds* (Reeves and Turner, 1894).

Moving on from *Bards and the Birds,* the first character discussed in this chapter will be Aurora Leigh, from Barrett Browning's epic poem of the same name. Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning utilises specific bird imagery to add a deeper interpretation of character to both Aurora and the (arguably) Fallen Woman, Marian Erle. Barrett Browning's use of particular types of birds extends the readers' understanding of the symbolism that birds hold. Barrett Browning's choice of particular species of birds draws on symbolic conventions but also offers new meanings and connotations of the text and its characters. While some of her comparisons are innovative, they also point to the ideals of the time and explain the kind of expectations society had for its women. Of the numerous bird references in *Aurora Leigh*, one bird species is highlighted extensively – the lark. The dove (or pigeon), while not extensively discussed, is mentioned quite intentionally, and the second and third sections of this chapter will focus on the significance of these two birds for understanding both Barrett Browning's poem and her use of bird imagery. Barrett Browning's attention to these two birds is complemented and supported by a range of references to different birds.

Following on from the two sections of *Aurora Leigh*, the next section will give a brief overview of bird imagery in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, looking at Jane as a nightingale and Bertha Mason as a bird of prey. While there have been many studies focusing on *Jane Eyre*'s avian imagery, most of them have only briefly touched on the presence of the nightingale or have chosen instead to focus on why Jane can be found reading Bewick's *A History of British Birds*.[2] This section of my chapter will examine the nightingale imagery and invite the reader to think more deeply about the connotations of choosing a nightingale to represent the relationship between Jane and Rochester, a bird most commonly associated with pain and heartache. While there are many references to Rochester as a bird throughout the book as well, this section of the chapter focuses on Jane and Bertha, looking at how voice is used in order to obtain freedom.

[2] For more information on bird imagery in *Jane Eyre*, see Amanda Anderson, 'Reproduced in Finer Motions: Encountering the Fallen in Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh', in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture (Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 167–97 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g5k0.9>. To read more about Bewick's book and gender politics in *Jane Eyre*, see Helena Habibi's article '"The Volume Was Flung, It Hit Me": Coarseness, Bird Imagery and Thomas Bewick's A History of British Birds in Jane Eyre', *Brontë Studies*, 44.1 (2019), 56–67 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2019.1525876>.

Finally, the chapter will conclude with an examination of Pippa from Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes'. As Pippa walks through her village, singing her song on her way home, she invites herself into the lives of those whom she passes. In the poem, song is associated with birdsong and so I suggest we can read Pippa's singing as identifying her with a bird. Through her song, she is able to influence the outcome of different scenarios, without realising the impact her voice has, ultimately saving herself from being kidnapped and murdered. As with Nature in *Aurora Leigh*, bringing Aurora and Romney together in the end, Pippa's song acknowledges that all of humanity is united under and through God, who, in the end, has saved her. Pippa becomes a lyric poet through her singing, and in doing so, she finds her autonomy. When studied together, *Aurora Leigh*, *Jane Eyre*, and 'Pippa Passes' all address ways in which women's voices, understood within the context of bird imagery of the period, can provide them autonomy during the Victorian period.

Birds and Victorian Poetry

While the last chapter introduced the idea of women as birds in Victorian literature, focusing on the character of Catarina Sarti in particular, this chapter seeks to uncover another facet of the link between women and birds, particularly where characters can find autonomy through using their voices. Before I present various case studies of women as birds in Victorian literature, I would like to briefly discuss the apparent link between avian imagery and poetry/poets in the Victorian period.

Published in London in 1894, Frederick Noël Paton's *Bards and the Birds* features centuries of poetry dedicated to birds. In his introduction to the text, Paton asks why poets are so naturally drawn to birds in their work and answers: 'When a poet writes of happiness, he thinks of birds. When he writes of birds, a crowd of sunny memories rushes to his heart; everything morbid and unwholesome flees away; and he sings of happiness.'[3] While birds like the nightingale conjure up images of sadness more than happiness, the overall tenor of bird imagery evokes images of freedom, of flight, and of ascendence.

[3] Paton, p. x.

By using bird imagery, poets are also able to ascend to certain heights, as evidenced in 'The Foot-Path' (1868) by James Russell Lowell.[4] Lowell writes:

Sing on, sweet bird, close hid, and raise
    Those angel stairways in my brain,
That climb from these low-vaulted days
    To spacious sunshines far from pain.[5]

For Lowell, the bird's song is the best of Nature, hidden from mere mortals but alive and full of promise for the poet.[6] Although the bird is hidden from the poet as they traverse new paths, its song elevates the poet's mind, allowing the poet to find the sunny memories of which Paton writes.

What sets birds and humans apart, writes Paton, is not the gift of song but rather the gift of flight: 'There is, in all the so-called "brute creation," no other faculty so purely enviable as this of flight – so palpably an advantage over the condition of self-complacent but grovelling humanity.'[7] As humans watch birds take flight, soaring happily above the earth-bound humans, Paton believes that 'wings are another natural attribute of joy.'[8] There is an essence of delight in being able to ascend so freely.

Another attribute that Paton calls attention to is the fact that birds are the only creatures which exist both in nature and in the city, and birdsong reminds humans of 'lanes and woodlands in the quiet country-places.'[9] Thus, there is something quite pastoral in the nature of birds, something which at once brings harmony between the peaceful and idyllical countryside and the hustle and bustle of industrial urban life. Birds not only transcend human capability, but they also transcend the spaces to which humans have been confined, merging the natural with the industrial. Because of this dichotomy, birds are noticeably less confined and range further than other animals, except perhaps humans.

At the same time, Paton writes that birds are susceptible creatures, and '[i]t would be difficult to say how much of the affection we give to the birds arises in the

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[4] Although Paton cites several American poets in his collection, the poems are indicative of the thoughts that were prevalent during the time period and are therefore still of importance to this thesis, particularly since Paton's collection was published in England.
[5] Selection of 'The Foot-Path' in Paton, p. 16.
[6] To read Lowell's full poem, which was originally published in *The Atlantic* in August 1868, see James Russell Lowell, *The Vision of Sir Launfal: The Cathedral; Favorite Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Company, 1876).
[7] Paton, p. xii.
[8] Paton, p. xiii.
[9] Ibid., p. xii-xiv.

consciousness of their weakness, their inability to harm, and even their positive dependence on our charity at times.'[10] Compare this sentiment to that of K. A. Buist in the previous chapter of this thesis, when he says that birds are 'dumb, helpless, dependent creatures' who rely solely on the care of humans.[11] Victorian sentiment seems to indicate, then, that birds were seen as weak and in need of human care and compassion – this despite the fact that birds were known to flourish in their natural habitat.

Paton cites a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, entitled 'Each and All'(1839), where Emerson writes that he brought home a beautiful sparrow, whose song made him think of heaven: 'He sings the song, but it cheers not now,/For I did not bring home the river and sky'.[12] What Emerson points to with these two lines is that although he provided a home for the sparrow, because it has lost its freedom and does not have the inspiration of nature around it, its song can no longer be as free and pleasing. Its inspiration – Nature – is far from its grasp.

There is a sort of reverence afforded to birds that is not given to other animals in the Victorian period, and as such, there are many poems which reflect the unique relationship drawn between birds and poets, specifically. One poet in particular, Leigh Hunt, in 'Sudden Fine Weather', writes:

> Now all these sweets, these sounds, this vernal blaze,
> Is but one joy, express'd a thousand ways:
> And honey from the flowers, and song from birds,
> Are from the poet's pen his overflowing words.[13]

In this poem, the poet's words, flowing from his or her pen, are directly compared to songs from birds. There is a natural connection between the words and the songs, relating birdsong to the collective human experience relayed in poetry. Paton cites a poem by Longfellow entitled 'The Birds of Killingworth' from *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), wherein Longfellow posits: 'Tis always morning somewhere, and above/ The awakening continents, from shore to shore,/ Somewhere the birds are singing evermore.'[14] Birdsong, in this regard, is as universal as the human experience is

[10] Ibid., p. xv.
[11] Buist, p. 145.
[12] Selection of 'Each and All' in Paton, p. xix.
[13] Selection of 'Sudden Fine Weather' in Paton, p. 76.
[14] Selection of 'The Birds of Killingworth' in Paton, p. 12.

collective. There is a clear parallel drawn between birdsong and the human experience, particularly when considering poetry to be akin to birdsong.

In *A Drama of Exile* (1844), Barrett Browning, for example, embodies a bird in order to give it a speaking voice. The bird says, '… I build my song of high pure notes/ Note over note, height over height,/ Till I strike the arch of the Infinite'.[15] The song being sung by the nightingale in the poem is a sad song, one that says farewell to Adam and Eve after they are evicted from Eden after the Fall. What Barrett Browning brings to light is the idea that the song of the nightingale can transcend even the boundaries humanity is subject to, as the song carries over the gates of Eden, only stopping at Eden's door, reminding Adam and Eve that they will never again hear the song of the nightingale in Eden. The song is pure, but it also soars higher than humanity, and while in the garden, the song was 'sweet', The tune becomes a reminder of the melancholy of being outcast from Eden, never again to experience its pleasures, separated from God in a way that the birds aren't.

The nightingale and its song feature quite prominently in bird poetry. The nightingale is seen in Percy Shelley's 'Prince Athanase', in Part H, where he writes, '… How many a spasm/ Of fevered brains oppressed with grief and madness/ Were lulled by thee, delightful nightingale![16] The idea of the nightingale being 'delightful' seems like a very Romantic notion, given the Romantic focus on emotion, particularly love, while nightingales in the Victorian period were seen as singing sad and melancholy songs. In the context of Shelley's poem, the 'grief and madness' of the listeners would suggest that they were lulled by the sad songs, perhaps even comforted by them. Christina Rossetti sees the nightingale's song as one of 'love and pain' both, writing in 'Twilight Calm':

> Hark! that's the nightingale,
> Telling the self-same tale
> Her song told when this ancient earth was young:
> So echoes answered when her song was sung
> In the first wooded vale.
>
> We call it love and pain
> The passion of her strain;

[15] Selection of *A Drama of Exile* in Paton, p. 18.
[16] Selection of 'Prince Athanase' in Paton, p. 343.

And yet we little understand or know:
Why should it not be rather joy that so
Throbs in each throbbing vein?[17]

While the nightingale's song is conventionally seen as one of mournful sorrow, Rossetti here seems to be pointing out that humans cannot fathom the verses of the birds.

Overall, the suggested tone of the nightingale appears to be one of sadness, however much humans cannot understand the sentiments being sung by the bird. Frances Anne Butler, in 'To the Nightingale', writes:

… Who shall say,
Thou lone one! that thy melody is gay,
Let him come listen now to that one note,
That thou art pouring o'er and o'er again
Thro' the sweet echoes of thy mellow throat,
With such a sobbing sound of deep, deep pain.[18]

The song of the nightingale is highly emotive and brings the speaker to tears with its sad, sombre song. Furthermore, Philip Bourke Marston, in 'Roses and the Nightingale', writes:

From the tall Trees' listening branches,
Comes the sound, sustained and holy,
Of the passionate melancholy,
Of a wound which singing stanches.
[…]
Oh, the passionate, sweet singing,
Aching, gushing, throbbing, ringing,
Dying in divine, soft closes,
Recommencing, waxing stronger,
Sweet notes, ever sweeter, longer,
Till the singing wakes the Roses![19]

In the first stanza here, Marston refers to the idea of bloodletting, discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, wherein it was believed that the nightingale pierced its breast whilst singing and through this bloodletting and singing, relieved some of its pain or

[17] Selection of 'Twilight Calm' in Paton, p. 333.
[18] Selection of 'To the Nightingale' in Paton, p. 351.
[19] Selection of 'Roses and the Nightingale' in Paton, p. 357.

heartbreak. Oscar Wilde, in 'The Nightingale and the Rose', writes that the Nightingale believes that Love is beautiful and says as much of the Student: 'What I sing of, he suffers: what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely love is a wonderful thing.'[20] The nightingale in this short story sings of Love, and her unselfish desire to see the Student in love compels her to pierce her breast upon a thorn until it strikes her heart, killing her in order to stain a white rose red for the sake of the Student. The little bird dies before she can see the Student unite with his beloved, who rejects him. Perhaps this is why the nightingale's song is seen as mournful; the song points to unrequited love.

Birdsong, in general, features heavily in the poetry that Paton has selected. Alfred Austin asks of the bird in 'A Spring Carol', 'Wherefore dost thou sing, and sing?/ Is it for sheer joy of singing?'[21] The third stanza of his poem concludes:

> Sing, because it is thy bent;
> Sing, to heighten thy content!
> Sing, for secret none can guess;
> Sing, for very uselessness!
> Sing for love of love and pleasure,
> Unborn joy, unfound treasure,
> Rapture no words can reach, yearning no thoughts can measure! [22]

In Austin's poem, the bird sings for many reasons, but ultimately, while the song seems to have no clear purpose, the song is one of 'love of love and pleasure', reaching heights that words cannot. While Austin suggests that the meaning of the bird's song is a secret, Robert Browning writes, in 'The Englishman in Italy', 'Then, stand there and hear/The birds' quiet singing, that tells us/What life is, so clear!'[23] The poem alludes to Ulysses' journey in *The Odyssey*, although in Homer's epic, it is siren song that Ulysses hears, not birdsong.[24] While the siren song calls to Ulysses, in Browning's poem, the birdsong reveals truths, particularly the meaning of life, if one would only stop and listen.

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[20] Oscar Wilde, 'The Nightingale and the Rose', in *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1994), p. 63.
[21] Selection of 'A Spring Carol' in Paton, p. 73.
[22] Selection of 'A Spring Carol' in Paton, p. 74.
[23] Selection of 'The Englishman in Italy' in Paton, p. 132.
[24] Ernest Fontana, in his article entitled 'Sexual Tourism and Browning's "The Englishman in Italy"', suggests that 'Nature no longer harbors the terrors formerly figured by myth, but instead they have been vanquished by modern bourgeois prosperity and rationality'. See Ernest Fontana, 'Sexual Tourism and Browning's "The Englishman in Italy"', *Victorian Poetry*, 36.3 (1998), p. 302.

Like the nightingale, different birds' songs hold different meanings in the eyes and words of the poet. Christina Rossetti wrote of the wood pigeon in 'Maiden-Song', saying:

Love-noted like the wood-pigeon
Who hides herself for love,
Yet cannot keep her secret safe,
But coos and coos thereof.[25]

Rossetti's maiden, May, has a voice as sweet as a wood pigeon's, and neither can keep their love hidden. Like birdsong so often does, it moves the nearby shepherd to propose to May and offer himself to her, totally and completely. Rossetti's comparison of May to the wood pigeon suggests that May is timid and shy, hiding herself like the wood pigeon, but that she is also sweet, fair, and innocent. The stock dove, like the pigeon,[26] holds similar regard in Wordsworth's 'Poems of the Imagination':

He sang of love with quiet blending;
Slow to begin and never ending;
Of serious faith and inward glee;
That was the song – the song for me![27]

The stock dove here also sings of love, although this love seems less romantic and more about faith. In *English Critical Essays, Nineteenth Century*, an excerpt from John Keble sheds more light on this passage from Wordsworth. Keble, in a selection from 'Sacred Poetry' (1825), writes that Wordsworth's description of the stock dove could be applied to the Christian lyricist. Serious faith, in Keble's eyes, looks like sacred poetry: 'fervent, yet sober; awful, but engaging; neither wild and passionate, nor light and airy; but such as we may with submission presume to be the most acceptable offering in its kind, as being indeed the truest expression of the best state of the affections.'[28] While Keble writes that sacred poetry must have 'rapture and inspiration', those speaking of God must have 'dignity and calmness.'

With these ideas in mind about sacred poetry, is it any wonder that the skylark became a comparison point for the Christian lyricist? Psalm 84:11 identifies God with

[25] Selection of 'Maiden-Song' in Paton, p. 217.
[26] The relationship between the dove and the pigeon will be explored later in this chapter, in the section on Marian Erle from *Aurora Leigh*.
[27] Selection of 'Poems of the Imagination' in Paton, p. 350.
[28] John Keble, 'Sacred Poetry (1825)', in *English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century)*, ed. by Edmund D. Jones, The World's Classics (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 172.

the sun, and the lark soars the highest of all the birds towards the sun. Christina Rossetti, in 'Bird Raptures', writes: 'The sunrise wakes the lark to sing,/ The moonrise wakes the nightingale.'[29] Only through soaring with the lark can humankind access Truth and Knowledge. In 'The Owl and The Lark', Alfred Austin makes several bird references. In the first stanza, he writes:

A grizzled owl at midnight moped
Where thick the ivy glistened;
So I, who long have vainly groped
For wisdom, leaned and listened.[30]

The owl speaks of the world in its wisdom, and in stanza five, Austin writes:

… since nothing 'neath the sun
Avoids material tether,
How life must end, when once begun,
In scale, and hoof, and feather.[31]

One commonality between all species is that death is as inevitable as life. The owl is not the only bird which carries truth with it, for in stanza eleven, Austin writes that as he was getting bored with the owl's song, '…sudden, came a burst of song!/ It was the lark ascending.'[32] The lark flies higher than any other bird, and Austin continues in stanza fourteen:

And when I could no more descry
The bird, I still could hear it;
For sight, but not for soul, too high,
Unseen but certain Spirit.[33]

The lark is ascending towards the heavens, and Austin makes a final comparison between the poet and the lark in stanza nineteen, writing:

O souls perplexed by hood and cowl,
Fain would you find a teacher,
Consult the lark and not the owl,
The poet, not the preacher.[34]

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[29] Selection of 'Bird Raptures' in Paton, p. 382.
[30] Selection of 'The Owl and The Lark' in Paton, p. 395.
[31] Ibid., p. 396.
[32] Ibid., pg 397.
[33] Ibid., p. 398.
[34] Ibid., p. 399.

'Go, mount up with the lark,' writes Austin, 'and leave/The bird of wisdom blinking.'[35] While the owl is traditionally associated with knowledge, to find heavenly truth, humans must ascend with the lark, which Austin here has associated directly with the poet.

Many poets had an affinity with the lark, with Eric Mackay writing in 'Ecstasy' that the 'holy lark' was 'A feather'd frenzy with an angel's throat,/A something sweet that somewhere seems to float/'Twixt earth and sky, to be a sign to men.'[36] Mackay finishes the poem: '…bid me sing to thee, my chosen one,/And do thou teach me, Love, to sing aright!' The lark is a sign to men, Mackay writes, who can 'kiss the tresses of the sun'.[37] With such a reach, the lark is once again proven to be the bird which soars the highest and can be associated with heavenly love. George MacDonald, in his poem 'What Makes Summer', mentions the holy lark:

> 'Tis the sun that rises early,
> Shining, shining all day rarely;
> Drawing up the larks to meet him,
> Earth's bird-angels, wild to greet him.[38]

Once again, the lark is compared to an angel and placed so highly towards heaven. Alexander Anderson writes of the lark in 'The Lark': 'Thou poet of heaven! for of this earth/ We deem thee not…'[39] As the speaker listens to the singing of the lark, they reflect:

> Draw the street-fever from the blood,
> The city from the weary brain,
> Till I am left such boon to bless,
> Full of unthinking happiness.

Anderson here seems to point to a yearning for the pastoral, but additionally, the lark is seen as a 'poet of heaven', a representative of heavenly truth and love. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, the titular character sees herself as a lark, a 'poet of heaven', speaking truths through her poetry. This will be explored in the next section.

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[35] Ibid., p. 400.
[36] Selection of 'Ecstasy' in Paton, p. 262.
[37] Eric Mackay, 'Ecstasy', in *Love Letters of a Violinist and Other Poems* (New York: Brentano's, 1894), pp. 215-6.
[38] Selection of 'What Makes Summer' in Paton, p. 248.
[39] Selection of 'The Lark' in Paton, p. 263.

The Heavenly Truth and *Aurora Leigh*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is a perfect Victorian novel poem in which the poet is like the lark, in part because Aurora herself makes explicit connections between herself and the lark throughout the epic poem. While previous scholarship surrounding Aurora Leigh has focused on issues surrounding gender, class, and motherhood, this thesis seeks to examine the relationship between female poet and skylark, thus looking at Aurora Leigh and her poetic pursuits.[40] While the link between the poet and the skylark is not a new concept, linking the skylark with the female poet is something that appears to have originated with Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*, making the novel poem integral to providing new understandings of the female poet and her ascension through poetry.

Barrett Browning's use of lark imagery draws on its use as a symbol to represent the poet. Both the lark and the nightingale were known for their singing, but the lark became a stronger representation of the lyrical poet due to its ascension towards the heavens. Previous research on Barrett Browning's relationship with birds has been confined to the examination of nightingales, positioned as a foil to the lark; while the nightingale can be seen as a representation of the lyrical poet, its song is likened to 'paralysis for the female writer'.[41] The more positive representation of the lark as a lyrical poet and sorrowful representation of the nightingale can be seen in James Baker's 1950 article on 'The Lark in English Poetry', which begins by juxtaposing imagery of the nightingale and the lark.[42] The nightingale, he says, begins with a tragic story: because it sings at night, the nightingale became representative in 'tragic myth', most notably used in Latin mythology when Philomela becomes a nightingale.[43] Her transition into a nightingale becomes even more important when considered alongside the fact that in the original Greek mythology, Philomela was turned into a swallow, which is not a songbird, therefore depriving her of a voice.[44] As Angela Turner relays in

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[40] For more scholarship on *Aurora Leigh*, see: Laura J. Faulk, 'Destructive Maternity in Aurora Leigh', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41.1 (2013), 41–54 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150312000216>; Alison Case, 'Gender and Narration in "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian Poetry*, 29.1 (1991), 17–32; Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, '"Aurora Leigh": The Vocation of the Woman Poet', *Victorian Poetry*, 19.1 (1981), 35–48.

[41] Jeni Williams, *Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class, and Histories* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 10.

[42] James V. Baker, 'The Lark in English Poetry', *Prairie Schooner*, 24.1 (1950), 70–79.

[43] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. by E. J. Kenney, trans. by A. D. Melville, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[44] For more on Philomela as a swallow, see fn. 67 on p. 204 of Deborah Levine Gera's *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech, Language, and Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Swallow, 'Because Philomela has no tongue, the swallow could from then on only twitter.'[45] In Latin mythology, Philomela is given the sorrowful song of the nightingale. As Baker argues, the lark was 'burdened with no such tragic story, so that the mythopoetic power of the English poets was free to turn the lark into a symbol bearing whatever meaning they desired.'[46]

A foil of the nightingale, the lark became seen as a joyful and uplifting spirit in English poetry. Baker articulates the specific qualities attached to the lark: 'no bird is apparently more airy and carefree or ventures higher; yet it always has an invisible cord of attachment that pulls it back to its grassy nest concealed on the ground.' While Baker asserts that Shakespeare used the lark in his plays and sonnets to symbolise joy, he argues that it was not until the Romantic movement that poets began to identify with the lark and project their lofty aspirations onto it. For example, Thomas Hood tapped into the contrast between the lark and the nightingale in his sonnet 'False Poets and True', the final lines of which read: 'But only lark and nightingale forlorn/ Fill up the silences of night and morn.'[47] In these lines, the lark and the nightingale are relegated to different periods of the day and thus carry different meanings, which can be seen in some of Hood's other poems. In 'False Poets and True', the lark 'soars upwards' towards the heavens, giving the feeling of weightless joy, 'a spirit as he nears the sky.'[48] Conversely, the nightingale's song is linked to sorrow, as seen in another of Hood's poems, 'Ode to Melancholy', where he writes that she 'Was born to pain our hearts the more/ With her sad melody.'[49] The lark and nightingale are foils once more in the thirtieth stanza of 'The Plea of the Midsummer Fairies', where Hood writes that the 'shrill sweet lark' is present in the morning, while the evening is the time for 'the bird forlorn/ That singeth with her breast against a thorn.'[50]

Returning to 'False Poets and True', we can see that Hood also makes a connection between the lark and the poet, writing that the lark's 'voice is heard, but body there is none' and that this holds true for poets and their 'songs', which 'stay with us, though [the poets] die.'[51] But the bird imagery in Hood's poem goes beyond simply

[45] Angela Turner, *Swallow*, Animal (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 128.
[46] Baker, 'The Lark in English Poetry', p. 70.
[47] Thomas Hood, 'False Poets and True', in *Poems of Thomas Hood: In Two Volumes*, 2 vols (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1854), II, ll. 13-4.
[48] Ibid., l. 1.
[49] Thomas Hood, 'Ode to Melancholy', in *Poems of Thomas Hood,* II, ll. 25-6.
[50] Thomas Hood, 'The Plea of the Midsummer Fairies', in *Poems of Thomas Hood,* II, ll. 9-10.
[51] Hood, 'False Poets and True', ll. 3, 5.

aligning poets with the lark; he writes that what makes the lark so memorable is that its music is 'so sweet and loud' that it cuts through the 'noisy day' which is 'deafened by a crowd/ Of undistinguished birds, a twittering race.'[52] Presumably, the 'undistinguished birds' in this poem would be the everyday, common person, no different than a finch or a sparrow, a bird so often seen that it has become commonplace and dull. While the masses conduct their 'twittering', the lark-poet is exceptional and emits a 'rich melody,/ Like raining music from the morning cloud.'[53] Not only is the lark's song more lofty due to its literal height in the sky, but the song is more beautiful and rare than common words and language.

The idea that the lark's song ascends to greater heights than that of other birds is also evident in the Victorian period, as seen in George Meredith's poem and hymn 'The Lark Ascending'. Originally published in 1881, the poem pays particular attention to both the song of the lark and the lark's physical elevation above the world below.[54] Reminiscent of the lyric poetry of the preceding period, Meredith's poem evokes a joyful feeling whilst describing the habits of a playful lark as it goes about its day. As the lark sings his 'song of light', he 'drink[s] in everything' around him and it bring him ecstasy.[55] Like many authors, the lark is 'Impell'd by what his happy bill/ Disperses' and he takes a drink of water, 'Unthinking save that he may give/ His voice the outlet, there to live/ Renew'd in endless notes of glee.'[56] Moreover, the lark's song seems imbued with innocence, and he sings so that all the world may know 'That he is joy, awake, aglow,' his song 'Shrill, irreflective, unrestrain'd' and 'sweet-silvery, sheer lyrical.'[57] In this last line, the poem connects the lark to lyrical poetry, a long-lasting association.

The effect that the lark's song has on its audience is strong. Meredith writes, 'The starry voice ascending spreads,/ Awakening, as it waxes thin,/ The best in us to him akin.'[58] Here, Meredith is suggesting that the lark's song awakens the poet's ability to evoke a sense of innocence and spirituality within those who listen to the poet's words. As listeners take in the song of the lark, they too ascend spiritually, and the lark's

[52] Ibid., ll. 9, 11-2.
[53] Hood, 'False Poets and True'., ll. 7-8.
[54] George Meredith, 'The Lark Ascending', in *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1883), pp. 64–70.
[55] Ibid., l. 20.
[56] Ibid., ll. 25-6, 27-9.
[57] Ibid., ll. 32, 37, 40.
[58] Ibid., ll. 54-6.

song unites both lark to men and man to man: 'The voice of one for millions,/ In whom the millions rejoice/ For giving their one spirit voice.'[59] Meredith concludes the poem by indicating that there are few on earth who can come close to the significance of the lark's song, whose words can invoke the same feelings in men: 'In them, that song aloft maintains,/ To fill the sky and thrill the plains/With showerings drawn from human stores.'[60] While the lark's song seems almost celestial due to the lark's physical closeness to the heavens, man's song draws not from heavenly wisdom but rather from 'human stores' – that is, human experience. The poet is able to bring people together and express emotions that have been drawn from the collective human experience, thereby becoming more universally relatable and as close to heaven as a human can get. The poet's metaphorical ascension is compared to the physical ascension of the lark, and though the poet will never reach the same heights as the lark due to the poet's humanity, the poet's ascension comes through the words that he or she speaks or writes, creating a link between the lark's song and the poet's words.

The story of Aurora Leigh is increasingly about ascension, for both Aurora and the seamstress Marian Erle. Tragedy befalls poor Aurora when at the age of thirteen, she is sent to live with her aunt after her father passes away. After being brought up by her father and learning 'unladylike' ideals and behaviours, being sent to her aunt, who seems to embody Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House', is trying for Aurora. Her aunt is 'generous, bland,/More courteous than […] tender'.[61] Aurora explains that she had lived '[a] harmless life, she called a virtuous life,/ A quiet life, which was not life at all', a life that called her to exercise her Christian duty in taking care of the poor through her womanly tasks of knitting and stitching.[62] She had no higher aspirations than to fulfil this duty, which, as mentioned earlier, 'Was act and joy enough for any bird.'[63] Aurora, on the other hand, with her 'unsuitable' education from her father, was '[a] wild bird scarcely fledged'.[64]

As a wild bird, Aurora tries to reject the confinements placed upon her once in the care of her aunt, choosing to write instead of finding contentedness in 'womanly pursuits'. She yearns for the heavenly communion of Italy, but she is instead left with

[59] Ibid., ll. 96-8.
[60] Ibid., ll. 115-7.
[61] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, I. ll. 368-9.
[62] Ibid., ll. 290-1.
[63] Ibid., ll. 306-9.
[64] Ibid., l. 313.

the Nature of England. Nature becomes a blessing to Aurora, for although alone in the house with her aunt, the sun and the moon come to keep her company:

> … The moon came,
> And swept my chamber clean of foolish thoughts
> The sun came, saying, 'Shall I left this light
> Against the lime-tree, and you will not look?
> I make the birds sing – listen! … but, for you.
> God never hears your voice, excepting when
> You lie upon the bed at nights and weep.'[65]

At night, Aurora becomes like the nightingale, whose sad, mournful song pierces the night air. This same Nature which makes the birds sing gives Aurora the inspiration that she needs to begin her writing and open her soul, finding a renewed vigour in life.[66] Life, then, *is* Nature, by its very existence, for that renewal of the soul can only be found in Aurora's connections to her surroundings. Unlike the ignorant bird embodied by her aunt – one who is confined to a cage and thinks of no other life – Aurora is able to sing (write poetry) because she is connected to the natural world around her and can draw inspiration from her surroundings which offer her a semblance of freedom from similar confinement.

Throughout Barrett Browning's epic poem, Aurora seeks to become a poet and sees herself above common humanity, so she frequently aligns herself with the lark. The most prominent alignment that Barrett Browning writes is Aurora's continuous 'ascensions', seen in comments from the narrator, Aurora herself, and even her cousin Romney. First, Barrett Browning establishes the sanctity of the lark when Aurora says, 'Alas, near all the birds/ Will sing at dawn, - and yet we do not take/ The chaffering swallow for the holy lark.'[67] From the very first book, Barrett Browning establishes a difference between the 'holy' lark and the 'chaffering', or common, sparrow. 'Chaffering', although not a word used commonly today, comes from the Middle English idea of trading, but at its roots, the Old English origin of the word suggests it is more akin to 'a bargain.'[68] It would seem, then, that the 'chaffering swallow' is seen as cheap, perhaps worthless, holding no value in comparison to the lark. The poem sets up

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[65] Ibid., ll. 669-75.
[66] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, I. ll. 678-9.
[67] Ibid., ll. 951-3.
[68] 'Chaffer, n.1', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30167> [accessed 24 April 2019].

the lark as a marker of the exceptional artistic individual who stands above the run-of-the-mill humanity, still capable of song (through voice) but in a common way. Whatever disparaging objections those like Romney might have of Aurora's profession, the lark – or the artist – still soars higher than anyone else.

The hierarchy of birds is seen later in *Aurora Leigh*, when Aurora is in Paris and comes across a group of young women at the market. She records:

> the crowd
> Of young vivacious and black-braided heads
> Dipped, quick as finches in a blossomed tree,
> Among the nosegays, cheapening this and that
> In such a cheerful twitter of rapid speech.[69]

Aurora's observation of the young women seems rather condescending, comparing them to finches, a common bird, and implying that they are of a fickle nature, moving from one interest to the next quickly, never stopping to admire the beauty around them. Birdsong, here, relates to gossip instead of artistic voice, with a play on words using 'cheapening' to describe how the young women speak. Aurora, on the other hand, is able to rise above these 'finches' because she has a calling to be a poet. Essentially, Aurora cannot be compared to these common birds, particularly because her soul practices more artistic work, as seen in her feeling constrained by her aunt's insistence that she engage in activities considered proper for young ladies of her time. While Aurora's aunt wishes for her to pick up her crochet work, Aurora ponders her happiness while she completes such a menial task:

> My soul was singing at a work apart
> Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm
> As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight
> In vortices of glory and blue air.[70]

Here, Aurora's 'work apart' relates to her poetry, which, being 'behind a wall of sense' makes it inaccessible to the common reader. Furthermore, her poetry is safe from harm, safe from criticism, because she keeps it within herself, locked away, unshared. As the lark, Aurora's transcendence of earthly tasks is no scarier to her than the lark's natural ability to glide across the windy skies. Aurora's ponderance of her heavenly, intellectual task of composing poetry is akin to Percy Shelley's description of the lark in 'To a

[69] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, VI. ll. 429-33.
[70] Ibid., I. ll. 1053-6.

Skylark', where he records that the lark is 'Like a Poet hidden/ In the light of thought,/ Singing hymns unbidden.'[71] In many ways, Aurora, as the female poet, not only experiences a hiding through her secret poetic writings, but she also experiences a further hiding due to her gender, which prevents her work from being acknowledged at the same level as male poetic work. The lark-poet in Shelley's poem is tasked with evoking a sense of sympathy within humanity, showering humanity with a song that contains 'Things more true and deep' than 'mortals dream.'[72] Although Aurora is unable to openly admit to her aunt that she finds delight in composition, she is still able to begin her ascent as a poet by composing her poems within herself, in secret, and letting the truths within her poems guide her to a higher plane of thinking.

However, her flight towards the heavens is shattered when her cousin Romney proposes and tells her that poetry should be designated as a man's role, for women cannot understand the complexities of human life. Facing creative confinement from her aunt and social confinement from her cousin, Aurora feels crushed and hopeless. After her aunt coldly rebukes her for rejecting Romney's marriage proposal, Aurora thinks of her father, who she imagines to be in the 'fair June-heaven/Where all the souls are happy', and she is struck with immense sadness.[73] There is a common thread running through the first two books of *Aurora Leigh* that human song is never as powerful as that of the bird. In the first book, Aurora feels like the sun is mocking her isolation and sadness. When she is weeping, Aurora is at her most vulnerable, allowing her inner fears and worries to manifest themselves through her crying, and the truth of her emotions allows her to begin her metaphorical ascent towards the heavens, but she is unable to acknowledge that her crying is a form of truth. This is seen later, in the second book, as Aurora thinks about her father in heaven and mourns the fact that no one will hear her crying. She seems to believe that in order to ascend like the lark, she must be audibly heard by those in heaven and on earth, and her selfishness is what stunts her ascension. She thinks:

> Now I might cry loud;
> The little lark reached higher with his song

[71] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *To a Skylark* (Phoenix, 1996), ll. 36-8. Shelley also compares the lark to the 'high-brow maiden/ In a palace-tower,/ Soothing her love-laden/ Soul in secret hour/With music sweet as love…' (ll. 41-5). Although Aurora isn't necessarily a 'high-brow maiden', her familial and financial circumstances do allow her the luxury of being able to dream of becoming a poet in the first place.
[72] Shelley, 'To a Skylark', ll. 87-8.
[73] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, II. ll. 738-9.

Than I with crying. Oh, alone, alone, -

Not troubling any in heaven, nor any on earth.[74]

Although here Aurora feels completely alone and isolated, her isolation is not caused by a lack of creativity or spiritual connection. Rather, she believes that because her pain is not heard by those around her, she is unable to become a poet and share heavenly truths that would allow her to continue her lark-like ascension. Because her ability to write and create, to express herself artistically instead of internally, is curtailed by the societal expectations that would confine her to the domestic sphere, Aurora believes that her tears are not valuable and will not allow her to be heard like the lark. The lark is important because Aurora wishes to reach that heavenly ascension, as no other bird can.

Bird imagery continues to emphasise Aurora's identity even after Aurora throws off societal conventions after her aunt's death and she rejects Romney's offer of money. In this act, Aurora solidifies her independence from her family and their ideals, as well as displays to Romney that she can be neither bought nor owned, and she is finally free to pursue her passion for poetry. She begins a new life for herself in a house in Kensington, and the location of her flat within the house is important in the way it continues to link Aurora to the lark. While Aurora's poetry and relation to the lark as a poet brings her spiritual ascendance, her physical room is located "up three flights of stairs/ Not far from being as steep as some larks climb."[75] The location of her chamber and her journey to get to it are significant because Aurora herself notes that the lark soars to great heights as well, which is why it has become so closely connected to the idea that it soars the closest of all birds to the heavens. While other birds may climb heights as well, Barrett Browning's choice to compare Aurora's literal ascent to that of the lark's when it is in flight shows that Aurora is starting a new part of her life where she will be free to compose poetry that will fulfil her spiritual need to ascend. Furthermore, the link between Aurora and the lark is indicative of the fact that her calling as a poet raises her to heights that others are not afforded – she is no common finch, dipping her head among the nosegays. In many ways, Barrett Browning flips the common narrative where higher rooms are cheaper and symbolic of someone's poverty, and instead raises Aurora to a physically higher level, above the rest of society.[76]

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[74] Ibid., ll. 744-7.

[75] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, III. l.159.

[76] For more information on social housing in Victorian London, see Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London*, Studies in Urban History, 5 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1877).

The common human is problematic and complacent in Aurora's eyes, and, as in the case of the finches of Paris, can be fickle and easily enticed. This idea becomes even more apparent in Aurora's dim view of humans that she holds before she moves to her flat in Kensington. She writes, after reading her letter from Vincent Karrington,

> The music soars within the little lark,
> And the lark soars. It is not thus with men.
> We do not make our places with our strains, -
> Content, while they rise, to remain behind
> Alone on earth instead of so in heaven.[77]

The strains referred to here reference the strains of music that would rise to the heavens, in other words, hymns of praise. While the lyrics of the common human rise upwards, humans themselves are unable or unwilling to ascend with the lyrics, content instead to stay grounded. While the use of the word 'we' seems to suggest that Aurora categorises herself with the common human and sets her at odds with her conviction that she is a lark, above the common person, she is not content to stay grounded, choosing instead to continue on in her calling to write poetry, and she becomes quite successful as a published poet. Aurora here opposes Romney's argument that women are unsuited to poetry because they do not have enough life experience. On the contrary, argues Aurora, it is precisely their elevation from politics and the everyday grind of life that enables their poeticism.

Aurora expresses her conviction that the common human will never be able to ascend to the same heights as those poets who are called to their vocation by God because they have been beaten down by complacency and societal conventions. She begins her third book with the following condemnation of humanity, into which she includes herself with the use of the plural first person 'we':

> We are apt to sit tired, patient as a fool,
> While others gird us with the violent bands
> Of social figments, feints, and formalisms,
> Reversing our straight nature, lifting up
> Our base needs, keeping down our lofty thoughts,
> Head downwards on the cross-sticks of the world.
> Yet He can pluck us from that shameful cross.[78]

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[77] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, III. ll. 151-5.
[78] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, III. ll. 16-22.

Without a calling from God, humanity is unable to experience the 'lofty thoughts' that indicate that an individual's mind is set on heaven rather than on earth. Just as a person's physical body is separated from his or her spiritual lyrics, so too are his or her mind and desires, corrupted by the traditions of 'social figments, feints, and formalisms', traditions which are not necessary and, in fact, impede a person's ability to reach a higher calling spiritually. These social figments weigh an individual down and keep him or her from ascending in purity, elevating instead his or her base needs and cementing his or her need for these desires through formalities that have been ingrained into society through habit and corruption. Aurora sees herself outside of this entrapment, and her poetry becomes a vessel through which, like the lark's song, some individuals can find a way to escape the 'violent bands' and rise closer to the heavens.

From the beginning of the poem, Aurora makes mention of the confinements placed upon Victorian society, particularly upon Victorian women, comparing them to caged birds, an outcome which she rejects for herself as a lark, and the bird imagery that is used indicates that Aurora becomes free through her poetic expression to soar towards the heavens. The tension between Aurora's relation to the lark and the societal expectations of Victorian women is best seen in Aurora's relationship with her aunt, as already discussed. When Aurora arrives at her aunt's house as a child, she observes that her aunt is like a caged bird, and she says, 'Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live/ In thickets, and eat berries!'[79] The implication in these lines is that the wild bird, which lives in thickets and eats berries, is viewed by the caged bird as being silly. In being caged, there is joy to be found in routine, in being provided for, in living in the 'luxury' of the cage, or shelter. But this mindless routine is not enough for Aurora, who identifies herself as a 'wild bird scarcely fledged' and says that she was 'brought to her [aunt's] cage'.[80] As a wild bird, Aurora views the life of the caged bird – her aunt – as constrictive and empty, saying that her aunt 'has lived, we'll say,/ A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,/ A quiet life, which was not life at all.'[81] At the same time, the caged bird looks upon the wild bird and thinks it 'silly', when life inside the cage is so satisfying and feels so complete. Not knowing life outside of the cage (Victorian society and traditions) makes Aurora's aunt feel as though Aurora needs to be tamed so that she, too, may enjoy the caged life and be satisfied within it. Taming Aurora, in her aunt's

[79] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, I. ll. 308-9.
[80] Ibid., l. 311.
[81] Ibid., ll. 287-9.

mind, is accomplished through teaching Aurora how to fit into the traditional role assigned to women, and Aurora says that she 'spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax,/ Because [her aunt] like accomplishments in girls.'[82] Although Aurora partakes in these activities to satisfy her aunt, internally, she composes her poetry and lets her soul 'sing at a world apart.'[83]

Aurora does try to learn from her aunt and endeavours to be a 'good' child, but she yearns for something more. In reading, she can find some semblance of escape, discovering that she can evoke the memory of her father in the stories that she reads, particularly those about love. After she 'read[s] for memory', Aurora says that she 'read[s] for hope'.[84] '[L]ike the red-breast bird', she says, 'My own self-pity […]/ Flies back to cover all that past with leaves'.[85] The significance of this self-identification as a 'red-breast bird' can be found in the work of Reverend John George Wood, an English writer who contributed to *Every Boy's Book: A Complete Encyclopaedia of Sports and Amusement*, which was originally published in 1855, a year prior to *Aurora Leigh*. In this book, Wood references a 'redbreast' bird, which he writes is a 'robin redbreast', a 'well-known favourite song-bird' that is 'beloved by everyone' and is 'the bird of faith and hope'.[86] Of the domesticity of a redbreast, Wood writes: 'They may be taught many pleasing tricks, and made so tame as to fly about the room without flying away'.[87] With that in mind, however, Wood also writes of the construction of a cage for the bird when it is first brought in from the wild to be kept as a pet, including the fact that it should be pulled from its parents at a young age so as not to desire their company. The main purpose for training them to fly about is because they are prone to 'the cramp and giddiness' and so should be fed moderately and kept clean and warm.[88]

It is interesting that such instructions are given about how to take a wild animal from its natural habitat in order to please the household. These instructions indeed read more like a parenting manual than a nature book, with the entry for the nightingale consisting of nearly three full pages, concluding with the conviction that '[t]here is an atrocious custom among bird-fanciers of making this bird sing, which is so diabolically

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[82] Ibid., ll. 425-6.
[83] Ibid., ll. 1053-6.
[84] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, I. ll. 745-6.
[85] Ibid., ll. 754-5.
[86] John George Wood, 'Part III: The Young Naturalist', in *Every Boy's Book: A Complete Encyclopaedia of Sports and Amusements*, ed. by Edmund Routledge (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1860), p. 242.
[87] Ibid., p. 243.
[88] Ibid., p. 243.

wicked that I cannot name it; but I may tell my young readers that any cruelty practised to birds is an offence against the law, and can be severely punished'.[89] Such a conclusion seems at odds with the captivity of the songbird in the first place, since caging it is already a form of torture for a creature of Nature that has been forcibly displaced. This caging does reflect Aurora's sense of captivity, after having to force herself to be confined by her aunt's wishes and teachings. Furthermore, by removing the wild bird from its parents, as Aurora is removed from her own parents, the wild bird has its natural, yearning propensities and affections numbed so that it seems 'happy'. Aurora's aunt tries to confine her and change her ways, forcing her into her aunt's own cage of societal restrictions.

Aurora's aunt is not the only relative of hers that questions her calling to be a poet and continually draws her back down from the heavens; her cousin Romney repeatedly tells her that poetry is not the work of women and that even if she were to write as well or even slightly better than most women, her poetry is useless, for 'We want the Best in art now, or no art', implying that Aurora will never succeed as a poet because her work will never be of more value than a man's.[90] He prefaces his marriage proposal by telling Aurora that women will never understand the world and therefore must not write of it:

> Therefore, this same world
> Uncomprehended by you, must remain
> Uninfluenced by you. – Women as you are,
> Mere women, personal and passionate,
> You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,
> Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
> We get no Christ from you, - and verily
> We shall not get a poet, in my mind.[91]

The final two lines of Romney's commentary on the place of women bring to light the relationship between poetry and religion, pairing poetry with Christ and, therefore, truth. In one sense, Christ's image is being evoked here because he is a saviour-prophet, able to see the truth but also do something salvatory. Aurora's work, Romney says, will never be judged by men as 'mere work but as mere woman's work', and that she will be

[89] Ibid., p. 242.
[90] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, II. l. 149.
[91] Ibid., ll. 218-225.

congratulated for being educated enough to spell, rather than praised for the content of her work, an argument which he makes in order to convince her to give up poetry because he believes that she will never be satisfied with male criticism of her work.[92] Unlike Christ, Romney is telling Aurora that she will never ascend toward the heavens with her writing, simply because she is a woman. Romney has found a vocation in serving the poor, doing charitable work, and he finds Aurora's calling to be a poet pure folly. Although Romney can see pain, suffering, and evil in the world, where Aurora sees the potential for growth and goodness, Romney's inability to see past 'what is' to 'what could be' is the violent band that prevents him from reaching the elevation that Aurora seeks.

Their constant and repetitive arguments over Aurora's choice of profession make Aurora comment to Romney:

> there's the point
> We sweep about for ever in argument,
> Like swallows which the exasperate, dying year
> Sets spinning in black circles, round and round,
> Preparing for far flight o'er unknown seas.[93]

It is worth noting here that up until this point in the novel, Romney has not once been compared to a bird himself. In fact, the bird references found alongside scenes in which Romney is a participant point to him as a falcon-keeper, completely in possession of the birds he keeps and so sure that they will not leave him if granted the chance at freedom. Aurora is likened to the falcon, looking at the falconer as if to say 'You'll see – you'll see! I'll soon take flight,/ You shall not hinder.'[94] Romney blithely dismisses Aurora's rebellious nature, and 'He, as shaking out/ His hand and answering 'Fly then,' did not speak,/ Except by such a gesture.'[95] In dismissing Aurora's challenge to Romney to consider her ability as a poet, he cements her belief that they will never see eye-to-eye, and their arguments become, to Aurora, like the migratory patterns of the swallows; they are expected, predictable, spiralling. While the swallows may reach their destination, it seems that Aurora and Romney never will, indicated by the statement that they are 'for ever in argument', stuck in a state of stagnation, with the image of the

[92] Ibid., ll. 234.
[93] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, IV. ll. 1171-3.
[94] Ibid., II. ll. 121-2.
[95] Ibid., ll. 122-4.

dying year lending the stanza a bit of darkness that points to futility within their arguing. The bird imagery here becomes increasingly important, as the spinning swallows show that Aurora and Romney are not just stuck; rather, they are stuck in dynamic, energetic, and exhausting motion that never seems to end.

Bird imagery is used in another scene, where Romney is related to the hunter, trying to trap Aurora and keep her from pursuing her profession. Romney tries to coerce Aurora into taking money from him, presumably as part of his plan to try to persuade her to marry him, but Aurora rebukes him, saying that if she takes the money, 'I am snared perhaps,/ Just so. But, cousin, shall I pardon you,/ If thus you have caught me with a cruel springe?'[96] The 'springe' that Aurora refers to is a spring-trap that was often used in the Victorian period to entrap birds. While the trap did not kill the bird, many of the birds caught in this manner were kept in cages as pets. Aurora's use of the term suggests that Romney's intentions are to hunt her, trap her, display her like a parlour piece, keeping her as a caged bird; that is, Romney wishes to make her his wife and expects that she will give up her foolish desire to become a poet so that instead she can focus on what he believes really matters – motherhood and keeping within the domestic sphere, not entering what he considers to be the sphere of men.

Romney's constant criticism of Aurora's calling is what spurs her to reject the money he offers her and instead set off to London to pursue her writing, away from the constraints that Romney wishes to place upon her, and in doing so, rejecting both the cage that entrapped her aunt and the trap that Romney has tried to set for her. Away from Romney and his criticisms, Aurora flourishes. After reading her latest book, Romney finally admits to the fact that Aurora's book has ameliorated his soul through its own elevated position amongst writing. He says, 'It stands above my knowledge, draws me up;/ 'Tis high to me. It may be that the book/ Is not so high, but I so low, instead.'[97] Romney's reversal in his belief that Aurora could be a poet is solidified by the reaction he marks upon reading her last book, a reaction so strongly akin to a man or woman hearing the lark's song from Meredith's poem, 'awakening […]/ The best in us to him akin.'[98] One striking remark that Romney makes is that he tells Aurora, 'You have shown me truths', a direct link between her words and the belief that the song of

[96] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, II. ll. 1093-5.
[97] Ibid., VIII. ll. 285-7.
[98] Meredith, 'The Lark Ascending', ll. 55-6.

the lark is of the heavens, solidifying her as a poet in his eyes.[99] The truth that Romney has learned from Aurora's poetry is 'truth not [hers], indeed/ But set within [his] reach by means of [her]'.[100] Again, Romney's beliefs about the power of Aurora's poetry relate back to Meredith's poem, as Romney has been shown the truth, which has caused an 'awakening' within him not unlike the awakening that humanity feels upon hearing the lark's song. Romney has been able to begin his spiritual ascent due to the reaction he has had to reading Aurora's poems, and she has become the catalyst for his ascension.

The ascension that Romney has begun is very spiritual in its nature, and like the lark, he too begins to rise above the material obsession of common people, observing that many people understand the 'natural world' too 'insularly' – much like Aurora's insular composition of poetry in the beginning of the novel – rejecting the spiritual 'counterpart' which he says completes the natural world and 'consummates' it.[101] Aurora has finally, by the end of the novel, set herself apart from the rest of humanity, transcending it as would a lark towards the heavens, by uniting in her writing the natural and spiritual worlds, writing the heavenly truth for those who are completely focused only on what is in front of them.

Just as humanity is prone to live too much in the natural world, Aurora must learn how to adapt and find a balance between her spiritual world and the natural world of those around her, coming back to the earth as does the lark, relating back to Baker's observation that the lark always returns to the natural world, for it has 'an invisible cord of attachment that pulls it back to its grassy nest concealed on the ground.'[102] Aurora's relationship with Romney is the invisible cord that keeps her tethered to the ground, even as she ascends in her lofty career, and eventually, by the end of the poem, her settled nest is the one she decides to make with Romney, finally agreeing to marry him. Even from her lark-like heights, Aurora is not flawless, and Romney, from his newfound elevation, catches her assuming his character without knowing all of the facts, assuming the truth without proof. He says to her, 'At last then, peerless cousin, we are peers,/ At last we're even. Ah, you've left your height,/ And here upon my level we take hands.'[103] Aurora has been blinded by her hatred of Lady Waldemar and her

[99] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, VIII. ll. 608.
[100] Ibid., ll. 610-1.
[101] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, VIII. ll. 617-9.
[102] Baker, 'The Lark in English Poetry', p. 70.
[103] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, VIII. ll. 1236-8.

assumptions about her cousin's true intentions and motivations in life, and these assumptions bring her down to meet Romney at his new-found level. Romney says to Aurora that long ago, 'you only seemed/ So high above, you could not see below.'[104] By the end of the novel, Aurora has finally become a lark, and she has taken Romney with her.

Marian Erle as a Dove

Before I close out my analysis of *Aurora Leigh*, I'd like to draw attention to one of the more obscure but direct depictions of a woman as a bird in the novel – that of Marian Erle. As mentioned before, Marian, although originally a seamstress for Lady Waldemar (who wishes to wed Romney herself), is carted off to a brothel in Paris and raped, subsequently giving birth to a son out of wedlock. Many studies of Marian's character in *Aurora Leigh* focus on Marian Erle as a working-class woman or her position as a Fallen Woman. Because she gives birth out of wedlock, she is indeed branded by Victorian society as a Fallen Woman, but I believe that modern scholarship fails to consider how the bird references surrounding her character and the environment in which she is placed can better our understanding of Marian as a woman. [105]

There is some argument as to whether Marian Erle is a Fallen Woman. On the one hand, she has a child out of wedlock and is not married; however, some scholars have argued that because Marian was subjected to her circumstances and did not actively choose the lifestyle forced upon her, she is not truly a fallen woman. It is worth noting that most of the scholars who argue that Marian is not a fallen woman are modern and that literary critics in the Victorian period were scandalised not only by Marian's entire storyline but that she remains unmarried at the end of the novel.[106] While some of Barrett Browning's contemporaries could agree that the character of Marian is well written, others pointed to 'obvious' flaws in the character, such as the fact that Marian's 'thoughts and language are not those of a girl reared in the midst of

[104] Ibid., ll. 1242-3.
[105] For more on Marian as a Fallen Woman, see Leslee Thorne-Murphy, 'Prostitute Rescue, Rape, and Poetic Inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh', *Women's Writing*, 12.2 (2005), 241–57 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699080500200262>.
[106] For a closer examination of the fallen woman in *Aurora Leigh*, see Amanda Anderson's 'Reproduced in Finer Motions: Encountering the Fallen in Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh', in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture (Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 167–97 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g5k0.9> [accessed 27 November 2023].

sordid poverty, vice, and ignorance.'[107] Thus, to some critics, her character is not an authentic depiction of the working-class woman. Marian's decision at the end of the novel to reject Romney's final marriage proposal is, of course, an odd one to those readers in the Victorian period, who would have expected an unwed mother to immediately accept a chance to give her son a father, herself a husband, and to elevate her station in life.[108] Perhaps her rejection is what makes her like the dove, pure and innocent and closely associated with God's truth and love.

Marian is only directly referred to as a bird once, when Barrett Browning calls her a 'hurried dove', but when Aurora first seeks out Marian – at Lady Waldemar's insistence, before Marian is to wed Romney and before she is sent off to Paris in a plot to keep them apart – Aurora is met with squalor and despair as she walks down the streets to Marian's living space. From a window nearby, a woman 'rouged/Upon the angular cheek-bones/…/and flat lascivious mouth'[109] – features indicating here a prostitute or Madame – asks Aurora: 'What brings you here,/My lady? is't to find my gentleman/Who visits his tame pigeon in the eaves?'[110] The choice to use a 'pigeon' to describe the woman that a gentleman might be coming to see appears to be quite intentional, symbolic perhaps of the prostitutes that would have lived in the 'eaves' of the buildings. In many ways, it seems like Barrett Browning is prompting the reader to make assumptions about Marian's character early on in the novel, either as a foreshadowing of her position as a Fallen Woman (pigeon) or as a slighted woman who has been wronged by the people in positions of power above her (dove).

During the Victorian period, pigeons were not seen as the kind of pests that they are often likened to in modern times. The phenomenon of hating pigeons came about somewhere in the mid to late twentieth century, as pigeons began to overpopulate cities, bringing with them disease and uncleanliness.[111] Pigeons seem to be related in many ways to prostitutes; as Judith and Daniel Walkowitz write, 'the prostitute threatened

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[107] William Edmonstone Aytoun, 'W. E. Aytoun's Review of Aurora Leigh', in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds, A Norton Critical Edition (W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 415.
[108] See the discussion surrounding *Nobody's Angels* in Chapter One of this thesis. Marian is an accurate depiction of a working-class woman precisely because she does turn down the marriage proposal – although she does not turn it down because she does not wish to elevate herself, but rather, she turns it down in order to give all her love to her son, thus fulfilling her duty as a mother.
[109] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, III. ll. 764-6.
[110] Ibid., ll. 773-5.
[111] For more information tracking the public dislike of pigeons, see Matt Soniak, 'The Origins of Our Misguided Hatred for Pigeon', *Audubon*, 2016 <https://www.audubon.org/news/the-origins-our-misguided-hatred-pigeons> [accessed 24 November 2023].

morally and physically to contaminate respectable society.'[112] Many of these prostitutes were actually poor working women who were just trying to survive in a society that offered them limited working opportunities and little chance to 'marry up' into a higher social status. Furthermore, many of them were victimised by the 1864, 1866, and 1869 Contagious Diseases Acts, which required women who were suspected of being prostitutes to register with the police and further subjected to medical examinations for venereal diseases. Furthermore, if a woman failed to submit voluntarily to an examination, she was taken to court, where 'the burden was on the woman to prove she was virtuous – that she did not go with men, whether for money or not.'[113] While I was unable to find any specific answers in Victorian contemporary criticism about why Barrett Browning would choose to align the prostitute with the pigeon, contextual clues – namely the description of the Madame in the lines prior – point to the 'tame pigeon' as being akin to the Victorian 'kept woman'. Referring to William Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience* (1853), Hunt depicts the quintessential 'kept woman': while morally, her choice to become a mistress is questionable, the woman appears to be trying to leave her lover's possessive grip, straining towards the open window and nature. As discussed earlier, the cat on the floor has pinned down a bird, trapping it much like the man is trapping the woman in his lap. As an analysis of the painting by the Tate points out, the 'man's discarded glove warns that the likely fate of a cast-off mistress was prostitution.'[114] Once the man has finished with his mistress, or once she has broken free from his possession, she will likely find herself in poor social standing, unable to find a husband, and thus resort to prostitution to provide for herself. Knowing the fate of a mistress or prostitute, the connection holds that a 'tame pigeon' is quite like a 'kept woman': trapped, unable to move, forced into the practice of prostitution that was immoral in Victorian society.

The nature of pigeons furthers the connection between pigeons and prostitutes, as Allen notes: 'Pigeons have a remarkable ability to adapt to a variety of different environments… They have survived despite the fact that they have a number of

[112] Judith R. Walkowitz and Daniel J. Walkowitz, '"We Are Not Beasts of the Field": Prostitution and the Poor in Plymouth and Southampton Under the Contagious Diseases Acts', *Feminist Studies*, 1.3 (1973), p. 73.
[113] Walkowitz and Walkowitz, p. 74.
[114] '"The Awakening Conscience", William Holman Hunt, 1853', *Tate* <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075> [accessed 24 November 2023].

predators, and have no means of defence apart from escape via flight.'[115] There is a sense of adaptability on the part of the pigeon that, read into the character of Marian Erle, suggests that Marian has a chance to adapt positively to her future circumstances. Her forced prostitution offers another link between Marian and the pigeon. Pigeon shooting and hunting was a predominately male-oriented sport in the Victorian period; a further connection can be made between women and pigeons, considering that most prostitutes during the Victorian period were lower-class women who were subject to the 'sport' of rich men.

Reading the pigeon as an animal used for sport, perhaps the woman means that Aurora is, indeed, surrounded by prostitutes. Pigeon shooting, a classic sport that persists to this day (although it has been largely outlawed globally) often involved trapping pigeons that then were starved or became sick because of their poor keeping. Allen records, 'Many are left to die, or stomped on, or thrown in the garbage'.[116] The fate of the sport pigeon and the Victorian prostitute seems quite similar, with many women abandoned to the street with poor health care, liable to contract a terminal illness or die of starvation. Whatever the symbolic meaning, the reference to the bird's nest 'in the eaves' suggests that the woman in question lives within the houses Aurora has passed on her way to see Marian. Having established a connection between the 'tame pigeon' and the prostitute, we move on several lines in *Aurora Leigh* to find Aurora's first depiction of Marian Erle.

The first observation that Aurora makes of Marian Erle is not her appearance, but rather her voice: that of a 'hurried dove'.[117] At the time of the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which extensively studied pigeons, had not yet been published, and general knowledge did not necessarily indicate that Victorians knew that pigeons and doves came from the same family. Despite noticeable visual differences, both the pigeon and the dove come from the same zoological family, *Columbidae*. As Allen writes, 'This may come as a surprise, for many regard pigeons as pests yet see doves as symbols of higher virtues, such as peace and love',[118] but in fact, both the pigeon and the dove have descended from the blue rock pigeon.[119] Allen encourages readers to set aside the modern notion that pigeons are dirty creatures that

[115] Allen, *Pigeon*, p. 24.
[116] Allen, *Pigeon*, pp. 127-8.
[117] Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, III. l. 796.
[118] Allen, *Pigeon*, p. 20.
[119] Ibid., p. 23.

should be avoided, especially since until modern times, pigeons and their by-products were used for everything from medicine to sport. Doves, separate from pigeons, were seen as symbols of sexuality, love, and fidelity.[120] Biblical stories depicted birds as symbols of freedom, due to their ability to fly heavenward towards God, and doves are seen numerous times throughout the Bible.[121] As Allen notes in *Pigeon*, there is a dichotomy within the image of the dove: 'on the one hand the dove represents sexuality and passion, and on the other she is viewed as a symbol of motherhood and the maternal instinct.'[122] While Marian Erle is living on a street with prostitutes when Aurora first finds her, Marian becomes a symbol of purity, a strong emblem of motherhood and the maternal instinct, eventually rejecting Romney's offer of marriage in order to look after her son and give him all of her love.

It is unlikely that Barrett Browning would have used the words 'pigeon' and 'dove' interchangeably, despite their classification as the same species, in part because she appears to have chosen her bird descriptors throughout the novel – and her writing in general – quite intentionally. In 1856, the same year in which *Aurora Leigh* was published, Barrett Browning also published a poem entitled 'My Doves'. In it, she referenced the doves that she owned that had come from India, and particularly how, despite their sudden and severe change of scenery, she hoped that they could teach her 'to move/ Along the city-ways with heart/ Assured by holy love…'[123] Again, we see the theme of adaptability, with Barrett Browning's hope that the doves would acclimate to the 'city prison' within which they now found themselves, away from their warm skies and blue ocean.[124]

While the dove certainly holds a holier connotation than other birds, as seen in its biblical references, the reference to 'holy love' displayed by the doves does not seem applicable to the woman referred to as a pigeon in *Aurora Leigh*. The choice to denote one woman as a pigeon and another as a dove within the same book appears to be a rather intentional choice. Furthermore, the fact that Barrett Browning chose to liken Marian to a dove instead of another type of bird holds significance. While Marian is a holy dove among questionable pigeons – a fate she cannot escape and a foreshadowing

[120] Ibid., p. 60.
[121] Ibid., p. 61.
[122] Allen, *Pigeon*, p. 60.
[123] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'My Doves', in *The Complete Poetical Works of Mrs. Browning*, ed. by Harriet Waters Preston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1900), p. 51. ll. 62-4.
[124] Ibid., l. 31.

to what becomes of her in Paris – there are other birds which one might assume she could be aligned with, for example, the nightingale or a swallow.

As this thesis has previously discussed, the nightingale was closely associated with the story of Philomela, who, like Marian, was raped. Philomela, in the Latin stories, is turned into a nightingale which prevents her from telling her story except through song. Because Marian doesn't bemoan her position in life but rather embraces it, she is not like the nightingale, singing its sad song of woes. Nor is she like the Greek Philomela, turned into a swallow and unable to tell her story at all, for Marian can relay what happened to her to Aurora quite succinctly. Marian has accepted what happened to her with the grace and poise of someone far above her station. Of course, it is Marian's station which allows for the possibility of her to throw off the convention of a Fallen Woman; after all, how can she fall when she's from such a low class that her reputation cannot lower her status at all? Marian throws off the conventional redemption arc of the nineteenth-century woman, foregoing wedding Romney and reintegrating into the Victorian family, choosing instead to exercise the autonomy that her lower-class station allows.[125] By the end of the novel, Marian's position as a dove is a bold choice; in Victorian eyes, she may be sullied and Fallen, but Barrett Browning makes it clear that Marian is still pure in her soul and seeking God's truth – therefore, she must be like the holy dove.

The Released Nightingale: A Note on *Jane Eyre*

Turning from the dove to the nightingale, we see representations of it in many novels, but *Jane Eyre* is one of the more popular novels that I would like to discuss in this thesis that utilises bird imagery to further the reader's understanding of the female character. In the very first chapter of *Jane Eyre*, the reader finds Jane sitting in a window seat reading Thomas Bewick's *A History of British Birds*.[126] Jenny Uglow, in her book *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick*, claims that Bewick found

[125] For more on the redemption of the Victorian Fallen Woman, see Linda Nochlin's 'Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman', *The Art Bulletin*, 60.1 (1978), 139–53 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3049751>.

[126] The notes by Susan Ostrov Weisser in the Barnes & Noble Classics edition of *Jane Eyre* comment that Jane would have been reading Volume 2 of Bewick's guide, on water birds. Although the full text is colloquially referred to as *Bewick's History of British Birds*, Bewick took over writing the book in the second volume. Ralph Bielby, who had worked with Bewick before on *A General History of Quadropeds* (1790), drafted the first volume, with notes added by Bewick. Bewick's primary contribution to the book as a whole were beautiful wood carvings depicting the birds talked about therein.

immediate success in his publication and that he 'changed the way we view the natural world'.[127] Writing just before a substantial rise of interest in Natural History, Bewick published what would become a highly-regarded piece of scientific literature, with one critic at the time writing that the work 'united all suffrages in its favour.'[128] In an article for *The Guardian*, Uglow suggests that Bewick's works should be considered alongside Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Elizabeth Bishop, particularly because 'nature was the source of joy, challenge and perpetual consolation', and his 'philosophic mind' viewed Nature in 'an endless cycle of destruction and reproduction'.[129] Bewick's *A History of British Birds*, therefore, can be seen to play a distinctive part in Jane's development, from a child into an adult, from being caged to finding autonomy, much like the wild birds in her books. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, Jane's act of reading Bewick's book affords her a sense of escapism, both mirroring the inner turmoil she is feeling through the depictions of the icy landscapes in Bewick's book and allowing her to traverse to unknown lands in order to get away from her family. In many ways, the appearance of Bewick's book suggests that Jane herself will go on a journey, and through the imagery of birds, the reader better comes to understand Jane as a female character.

The primary bird that I would like to focus on that is referenced in *Jane Eyre* is the nightingale. There are three instances of nightingales being used in *Jane Eyre*, and all three instances occur in just a few short pages. In the first instance, Jane is walking through the garden, hoping not to disturb Rochester, with whom she has already fallen in love. She hears a nightingale warbling in the distance as she tries to avoid Rochester, a foreshadowing of the heartbreak she is about to endure.[130] Despite Jane's quiet movements, Rochester senses her anyway and calls her forward to meet him in the garden. Jane has previously declared that the garden is 'Eden-like'.[131] Like the nightingale in Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile*, the nightingale in *Jane Eyre* foreshadows the main character's departure from Eden, for Jane is told by Rochester

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[127] Jenny Uglow, 'Small Wonders', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2006, section Art and design <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/oct/14/art.biography> [accessed 7 December 2023]. For more information on Bewick, see Jenny Uglow, *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).
[128] 'Art. IX. The History of British Birds.', in *The British Critic* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1805), XXVI, 292–97 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hxjg2t> [accessed 14 April 2019], p. 293.
[129] Uglow, 'Small Wonders'.
[130] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Susan Ostrov Weisser, Barnes & Noble Classics (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), p. 291.
[131] Brontë, p. 290-1.

that she is to leave immediately for Ireland, never to see the Thornfield garden (or Rochester) again.[132] The nightingale's song echoes the heartbreak that Jane feels, but it is Rochester who becomes the nightingale then, as he says that with their cord of communion snapped, he 'should take to bleeding inwardly',[133] as if a nightingale piercing its breast upon a thorn. A few lines later, interrupting Jane, Rochester brings her attention to the nightingale singing, saying 'Jane, do you hear that nightingale singing in the wood? Listen!'[134] As Jane listens to the mournful song, she breaks down into convulsive sobs, noting: 'I could repress what I endured no longer; I was obliged to yield; and I was shaken from head to foot with acute distress.'

In that distressing moment, Jane whispers that she wishes she had never been born and never come to Thornfield. This time, Jane becomes the nightingale: 'The vehemence of emotion, stirred by grief and love within me, was claiming mastery, and struggling for full sway and asserting a right to predominate – to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last; yes, and to speak.'[135] As Jane embodies the nightingale, the story appears to reference that of Philomela, discussed earlier in the chapter. Unlike the Greek tragic myth, where Philomela is turned into a swallow and thus deprived of a voice, Jane becomes the Latin Philomela, who is turned into a nightingale and can sing her sorrows aloud.

Though Jane belittles herself in her speech to Rochester, she makes it very clear that she cannot marry him.[136] When she continues by saying that she will go to Ireland to get away from him, Rochester says to her: 'Jane, be still; don't struggle so, like a wild, frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.'[137] This description of a wild bird 'rending its own plumage' is reminiscent to the wild birds discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, in the section on bird manuals. The caging of wild birds is akin to putting them in a prison where they will '[dash] their brains out against the bars […] in frantic efforts to escape'.[138] Unlike a caged bird, Jane finds autonomy through the use of her voice. Once again asserting her right to speak, Jane says at once: 'I am no

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[132] In Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile*, the nightingale sits by the gate to Eden and sings to Adam and Eve as they depart from the garden. The parting is sorrowful, as the nightingale tells them that they will never hear the birds of Eden singing ever again.
[133] Brontë, p. 291.
[134] Ibid., p. 291.
[135] Ibid., p. 291.
[136] Jane says: 'Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! … if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me as it is now for me to leave you.'
[137] Brontë, p. 297.
[138] Buist, p. 136.

bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being, with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.' As Jane struggles mentally to leave and Rochester offers her a share in his life and possessions, the wind dies down and the only thing that can be heard is the mournful nightingale's song, causing Jane to break down and weep again.[139]

After a persistence that wears Jane down, Jane agrees to marry Rochester, and Rochester curiously states: 'It will atone – it will atone. Have I not found her friendless, and cold, and comfortless? Will I not guard, and cherish, and solace her? Is there not love in my heart, and constancy in my resolves?'[140] For all of his lovely platitudes, Rochester seems to imply that Jane is a helpless, weak creature who cannot take care of herself, much like Buist's wild bird, captured and caged in order to save it from the harsh winter cold.[141] Pleased with Jane's acceptance of his proposal, Rochester immediately sets up adorning her with all manner of jewels and gold, in order to claim her as his own, constructing his own gilded cage for her and trapping her in his love. He says: 'I will myself put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead […] I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings.'[142] Jane objects to the fancy items, saying that she will look like a 'jay in borrowed plumes.'[143]

This allusion to a jay in borrowed plumes is likely relating to 'The Jay and the Peacock' tale by Aesop, who wrote that a jay picked up moulted feathers from some peacocks and dressed himself in them, only to be picked apart by the peacocks for mimicking them. Upon returning to his fellow jays, who watched on displeased, the jays told him, 'It is not only fine feathers that make fine birds.'[144] In the collection of Phaedrus, who translated Aesop's tales into Latin, the jay is instead a jackdaw, and the moral of the story changes slightly, and the jackdaws say to their fellow bird: 'If you had been content to dwell among us, satisfied with what Nature had bestowed on you, then you would not have been humiliated by the peacocks, nor would your disgrace

[139] Rochester's offer of a 'share of all [his] possessions' and the emotional tension of the scene is reminiscent of Esther 5:3 in the Bible: 'Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom' (KJV).
[140] Brontë, p. 299.
[141] Refer to the discussion in Chapter One of this thesis in 'Bird Manuals: The Care and Keeping of Birds' regarding Buist's bird manual.
[142] Brontë, p. 303.
[143] Ibid., p. 303.
[144] While Aesop's fables were published in 1867 in English, they were available in Greek well before then. The phrase 'fine feathers make fine birds' will be discussed later, in Chapter Four of this thesis.

have met with our rebuff.'[145] In the second telling of the story, the moral states that to attempt to rise above one's station is an affront to Nature, for Nature has provided all that is necessary. A very Victorian ideal, men would rarely 'marry down', as discussed in Chapter One. Jane, in being adorned with such fineries as a woman befitting Rochester's station, would look like she is attempting to rise above her own station, bringing scorn from her equals and superiors alike.

At this point in the novel, Rochester already has a wife to match his station. Compare the character of Jane Eyre to the character of Bertha Mason, Rochester's actual wife for most of the novel. Where Jane describes herself as being 'obscure, plain and little', Bertha is described as a wild beast, and in fact, after one incident before Jane finds out about Bertha, Jane wonders:

> What crime was this, that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner? – what mystery, that broke out now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night? What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?

Jane describes the screeching sound that Bertha makes as if she is a 'carrion-seeking bird of prey', which is an interesting comparison because this 'bird of prey' seems like a foil to Jane's demeanour. Jane says Bertha was 'a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back.'[146] She appears unkempt and untamed, a wild animal. Akin to a vampire, Jane also relays that Bertha has 'a discolored face – it was a savage face' with 'red eyes' and 'fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments'.[147] This 'savage face' with 'red eyes' is also reminiscent of some of Buist's records of bird illnesses, as discussed in Chapter One, and it is of interest that Brontë chooses to describe Bertha as a wild bird here. In many ways, by locking Bertha in the attic of the house, Rochester has metaphorically 'clipped her wings' by physically chaining her and confining her to a small room, and later, when Jane finally meets Bertha, Bertha attacks Rochester. Jane recounts in that moment that Bertha 'was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides. She showed virile force in the contest – more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was.'[148] Bertha is large

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[145] Aesop, 'Fable 326: The Jackdaw and the Peacocks', in *Aesop's Fables*, trans. by Laura Gibbs, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 156.
[146] Brontë, p. 330.
[147] Ibid., p. 331.
[148] Ibid., p. 342.

and intimidating, athletic like a hunter, and predatory, as seen in Jane's assertion that her cries were like a 'carrion-seeking bird of prey'. Bertha's attempt to escape is very much akin to the wild bird locked in a too-small cage, thrashing about in order to seek freedom or kill itself. It is telling that while Jane eventually unites with Rochester due to her increase in station, his blindness, and their ability to become equals, Bertha finds her freedom by setting fire to Thornfield and jumping to her death. Having been caged in the attic, there is no release from captivity except through brutal escape. For Bertha, there is no autonomy through the use of her voice, whereas Jane is able to unite with Rochester through open discussion, freed through her ability to verbally express herself.

'Thought none may stay': Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes'

Birdsong plays an important role in Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes' as well, as the titular character, Pippa, uses her child-like joy of living to create song, freeing herself and others from otherwise horrible circumstances. It is through the meditation on the voice-as-birdsong that allows the characters of the story to assess their situation and change their own outcomes. It is worth mentioning that Pippa is constrained by her station in life, and as a poor orphaned girl with no family to speak of, she must work from a young age to sustain herself. In her singing on her day off, she is able to transport herself into the lives of those whom she considers to be the happiest in her community – regardless of their actual circumstances – and like a caged bird, she can envision and sing of a freedom she likely will never truly experience. In her song, Pippa likens her own voice to that of a bird. The 'voices of birds' are 'our words/ Only so much more sweet', and it is with this knowledge that 'my life begun', she declares.[149] Pippa's restorative journey, despite her otherwise confined life, is mirrored in a poem published in an 1839 *Reading Book for the Use of Female Schools*, aptly titled 'I Would I Were A Little Bird'.[150] The poem begins much the same way as Pippa's song, pining after the 'golden clouds'[151] and the 'azure sky',[152] and the speaker talks of watching the sun from dawn until dusk, '[f]ar down the crimson west'.[153] Just like Pippa, the speaker

[149] Robert Browning, 'Pippa Passes', in *Robert Browning's Poetry*, ed. by James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer, A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), pp. 44–83. IV. p. 80.
[150] 'I Would I Were A Little Bird', in *Reading Book for the Use of Female Schools* (Dublin: Commissioners of Natural Education, 1839), pp. 182–83.
[151] Ibid., l. 3.
[152] Ibid., l. 4.
[153] Ibid., l. 10.

of this poem sings 'my evening song,/Ere yet I sought my rest'.[154] Wishing for wings, the speaker yearns to see the world, to fly among the hills and plains, understanding that simple human vision is blocked by humanity's inability to see from above.[155]

The speaker notes that though caged by a human body and its subsequent limitations, the mind does not have the same limitations, and so through the 'mental eye',[156] *thought* is what allows the speaker to travel, to see the world's beauty, all the while, enjoying life more freely than even those birds whose wings the speaker keenly seeks. For, the speaker notes, a bird's wings may tire or its flight may be restrained,[157] but '*Thought* none may stay',[158] and it is this transcendence of human confinement through the mind that allows the soul to find peace in its 'bright eternal home'.[159] Pippa seeks a life outside of her own through her song, like the bird, soaring through the sky to places the human body cannot go, embodying a different space through imagination. By singing as she walks along, she is able to recognize that bright eternal home through collective human experience, but that which is transcended by being united as part of God's creation.

First published in 1841 as a series of eight pamphlets called *Bells and Pomegranates*, Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes' perhaps best represents the healing nature of the female song. Although Pippa's songs are those of joy, reflecting the goodness of life (perhaps displaying some child-like naiveté), they are also substantially indicative of the restorative power of music. Unintentionally – and repeatedly – Pippa's singing prevents some bad acts from happening. In every word that Pippa sings, there is hope and the suggestion of renewal. In her singing, there is also a suggestion of royalty, of being superior over Nature, biding it to bow down to her, to 'Love thy queen, worship me!'[160] While some scholars interpret this as Pippa being 'egotistical', I believe that in many ways, as a poet, she is aligning herself with the lark in her song, rising to heights above Nature and in communion with Creation.[161] Pippa is allowing herself an out-of-character moment, where she says, 'To-morrow I must be Pippa who winds silk',[162] but on the day of the poem, she is able to transcend her daily activities and

[154] Ibid., ll. 11-2.
[155] 'I Would I Were A Little Bird', ll. 13-4.
[156] Ibid., l. 28.
[157] Ibid., ll. 41-2.
[158] Ibid., l. 43, italics mine.
[159] Ibid., l. 48.
[160] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', *Introduction*, l. 103.
[161] Dale Kramer, 'Character and Theme in "Pippa Passes"', *Victorian Poetry*, 2.4 (1964), p. 243.
[162] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', *Introduction*, l. 107.

instead imagine more interesting scenarios. Although Dale Kramer argues that Pippa's entire story is self-centred and selfish, as it focuses entirely on her interpretation of events and stories, I believe that her position as a poet gives Pippa a unique position of interpretation that allows the reader added insight into the lives of each of the characters she passes.[163] This reading that Pippa provides is arguably one of love, albeit in various forms, and healing.

In the beginning of 'Pippa Passes', during the prelude of sorts, Browning lays out Pippa's plan for her one day off from work in Asolo, Italy: she will pass by the houses of Asolo's 'Four Happiest Ones' – Ottima, Jules/Phene, Luigi, and the Monsignor – and of each she imagines, with childlike naiveté, true happiness. With imagination that can only be granted to one not well-versed in life experience, Pippa dreams that she is each one of them in turn, first picturing herself as Ottima, feeling worldly love in full force;[164] next, as Phene, recently married and presumably overcome with bridal bliss;[165] further, as Luigi, whose mother cares about him and protects him, keeping him safe from harm;[166] and finally, as the Monsignor, 'that holy and beloved priest'.[167] Each of these scenarios is full to the brim with love, and Pippa dreams of having each kind of love herself. It is clear, despite her unintentional wisdom in each scenario, that Pippa is ignorant to the inner workings of each life, for she imagines of Ottima and Phene, '[a] soft and easy life these ladies lead!'[168] In the four following sections, Browning intricately lays out situations which are highly complex and far from Pippa's imagined truths, weaving in Pippa's songs seamlessly as she passes each abode, creating an effect with her words that has such a restorative value as can only be found in fiction.

In the first part, 'Morning', Browning sets out two lovers, Ottima and Sebald, who have just murdered Ottima's husband Luca, an old man towards whom Ottima apparently feels only hatred. Sebald feels the guilt of this murder quite keenly, saying 'I'd commit ten crimes/ Greater, to have this crime wiped out, undone!'[169] Seeing that Sebald is descending into remorse and despair, Ottima ensnares him – both figuratively and literally – by bringing to mind the story of their most passionate night and

[163] Kramer, 'Character and Theme in "Pippa Passes"', *Victorian Poetry*, 2.4 (1964), 241–49.
[164] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', *Introduction*, ll. 114-5.
[165] Ibid., *Introduction*, ll. 132-3.
[166] Ibid., ll. 174-6.
[167] Ibid., *Introduction*, l. 185.
[168] Ibid., l. 146.
[169] Ibid., I. ll. 152-3.

commanding him to wrap her hair for her and bind it on her head like a crown, telling him, 'I love you better now than ever,/ And best […]/ Best for the crime'.[170] She forces him to remember their 'crowning night',[171] when they snuck off to the woods and she stretched herself upon him as she 'shook/ All [her] locks loose, and covered [him] with them', reminding Sebald of the passion that he felt in that evening.[172] As she continues to repeat the story of their fervent evening, she says, 'I felt you,/ Taping into a point the ruffled ends/ Of my loose locks 'twixt both your humid lips', a sensuous memory that she follows by dragging him back into the present, merging the past emotion with the present situation, confusing him, pulling him in as a spider wraps its prey in silk (an apt analogy given that she is wearing the silk woven by young Pippa), adding, '(My hair is fallen now: knot it again!)'.[173]

As Sebald is drowning in her recollection, he begs Ottima to forgive him, presumably for his weakness after committing a murder for her sake, and she orders him to 'Bind it [the hair] thrice about my brow;/ Crown me your queen, your spirits' arbitress,/ Magnificent in sin.'[174] She further commands him to repeat the phrase as he is binding her hair, and he begins, 'I crown you/ My great white queen, my spirits' arbitress,/ Magnificent…'[175] Before he can utter the final words, 'in sin', that would bind him to Ottima in their crime forever, Pippa's voice is heard singing outside. The beginning of her short song is significant only in that it recalls the pure joy of living that Pippa is feeling; it is the final two lines of the song that stop Sebald from completing his assignment, as Pippa's voice soars out to them: 'God's in His heaven - /All's right with the world!'[176] Significant in Pippa's song is the line 'The lark's on the wing',[177] which I would argue is applicable to Pippa herself. The song that Pippa is singing implies that everything in Nature is in its place – including herself, the messenger of the day.

Of course, Pippa is not privy to the conversation taking place inside, nor to the fact that Luca is laying murdered just beyond the entrance to the house. But her conviction that 'All's right with the world' because 'God's in His heaven' invades Sebald's conscience and breaks Ottima's spell over him. Immediately snapped out of his

[170] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', I. ll. 155-7.
[171] Ibid., I. l. 185.
[172] Ibid., I. ll. 199-200.
[173] Ibid., I. ll. 212, 213.
[174] Ibid., I. ll. 217-9.
[175] Ibid., I. ll. 218-20.
[176] Ibid., I. ll. 227-8.
[177] Ibid., I. l. 225.

seduced reverie, Sebald orders Ottima to cover herself, to leave him, and as he examines her, all of her seductive charm dissipates, and he sees her for who she truly is – that is, the 'strange grace' which once she seemed to possess is now 'miraculously gone'[178] and the hair that had just been ensnaring him 'Drops, a dead web!'[179] Sebald seems to disassociate from the situation, addressing Ottima's person instead of talking to her, and this enrages Ottima, who proclaims Sebald an 'ungrateful, perjured cheat!'[180] Pippa's words, not Ottima's, strike a chord in Sebald's conscience, and he exclaims, 'That little peasant's voice/ Has righted all again.'[181] Although unclear as to the mode in which he kills himself, the poem continues with Ottima trying to dissuade Sebald from committing suicide, and as he engages in the act anyway, he utters, 'God's in His heaven!', echoing Pippa's song just moments before.[182] Sebald has righted his sin, left his mind at ease as he takes his own life as a consequence for taking the life of another, and Pippa carries on walking down the road, oblivious as to the impact that her words have had on the couple inside of the house. Here is the renewal: as Sebald dies, he feels 'at swift-recurring intervals,/ A hurrying-down within me, as of waters/ Loosened to smother up some ghastly pit', and his sins reach a conclusion with the flood of death.[183] Pippa's words have 'righted all again', as she has spoken God's truths through her song.

By 'Noon', Pippa is passing the house of Jules, who has just entered with his new bride, Phene. At the end of 'Morning', Pippa has passed some students who claim that they have set up Jules' new marriage by tricking him into thinking that Phene is in love with him, when in fact, it was they who sent him love letters and seduced him with their words. Phene has been made to memorise a scathing response to Jules' love, which she is only allowed to recite to him after they are married, in order to cause maximum damage to Jules, of whom the students are quite jealous. Phene, having fallen in love with Jules, is reluctant to recite such a harmful speech, but she recalls that Natalia, who forced her to memorise the words exactly, threatened Phene with harm if she did not follow through, and as Natalia told Phene that she and the students were Jules' friends – something Phene doubts due to the content of the speech – she is confused. Upon the delivery of her speech, Jules falls into despair, handing over the money he had set aside

[178] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', I. ll. 241, 240.
[179] Ibid., l. 247.
[180] Ibid., l. 250.
[181] Ibid., ll. 261-2.
[182] Ibid., l. 268.
[183] Ibid., ll. 278-80.

for their travel together, telling her that all 'is over now,/ All chance or hope or care or need of it!'[184] In addition, he tells Phene to sell his art – the very thing that the Venetian students envy – in order to save Phene from returning to Natalia. Jules implies that he is going to go face the students who put Phene up to this task, and he does not expect to survive the encounter.

As Jules makes this tragic declaration, Pippa passes by at precisely the necessary moment, singing of Queen Caterina Cornaro, a former queen from Venice who abdicated her throne in Cypress to return to the Venetians, showering them with benevolence. Pippa echoes the sentiments of the subjects, who proclaim: 'Give her but a least excuse to love me!'[185] As Pippa passes, Jules reminisces that Caterina had no need of assistance from her pages but that their love for her compelled them to yearn to serve her. Upon reflection of his own circumstances, Jules finds that he is in the place of the queen, able to influence Phene with a power he has not felt before. Ever the artist, Jules wonders: 'Shall to produce form out of unshaped stuff/ Be Art – and further, to evoke a soul/ From form, be nothing? This new soul is mine!'[186] He recognizes that Phene has internally struggled over whether or not to recite the speech given to her and that her words are not her own. Jules abandons his plot to confront Lutwyche, instead deciding to travel with Phene far away from the jealousy that surrounds them. Phene's love – and Pippa's words of the great queen – allow Jules to refocus on what is important to him: 'Who, what is Lutwyche, what Natalia's friends,/ What the whole world except our love – my own,/ Own Phene?'[187] Finally, Jules admits to the renewal of his purpose: 'To begin Art afresh.'[188] His old anguish is wiped away, with the clean slate of love taking its place. Pippa's voice, her song, has inspired Jules to continue creating his Art, to take up painting instead of sculpting in order to show the world in a new light.

Love is what drives Luigi as well, the next person that Pippa passes in 'Evening', although his love is a strong form of patriotism for his country, which has been oppressed under Austrian rule. While young, Luigi keenly feels the struggles of his nation and begins a plot to kill the tyrant king. Despite seeming rather ironic that committing murder could be seen as restorative, Luigi echoes the sentiments of Judith and Jael before him, believing that he must exercise self-sacrifice (for indeed, he may

[184] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', II. ll. 244-5.
[185] Ibid., l. 253.
[186] Ibid., ll. 298-300.
[187] Ibid., ll. 312-4.
[188] Ibid., l. 318.

be killed for his efforts) in order to save his country. His mother, worried for her son's life, begs him not to leave, telling him that writers have exaggerated the control of the Austrians, saying that he is young and selfish, and finally, when all else fails, reminding him that Chiara – presumably his betrothed – will be coming to visit and that he will not make it back to meet her. Being young, and perhaps naïve, Luigi fondly reflects on the beauty of the earthly life, with its 'crescent moons with notched and burning rims',[189] a double rainbow in March,[190] 'May's warm, slow, yellow moonlit summer nights'[191] – but all of this will not keep him, for his duty is to Italy above himself.

Enter Pippa, whose song begins thus: 'A king lived long ago,/ In the morning of the world,/ When earth was nigher heaven than now'.[192] This ideal king, whose 'morning' indicates the world's inception, lived before the sin of greedy oppression took hold of Luigi's beloved Italy. Pippa continues, singing of the beauty of the king, whose kingdom, so pure, had not yet become corrupted, and who was thus 'safe from all decrepitude',[193] and Pippa's words move Luigi as she recalls, 'having lived thus long, there seemed/ No need the king should ever die.'[194] Caught up in this beautiful ideal, Luigi echoes the sentiment, proclaiming, 'No need the sort of king should ever die!'[195] This king is pure in deeds, as well as looks, for he acts as impartial judge, imbued with such wisdom that he is well respected, unlike Luigi's monarch, for Pippa's king judges 'sitting in the sun'.[196] Once more, Luigi is called to echo this powerful sentiment, crying out, 'That king should still judge sitting in the sun!'[197] Finally, Pippa's song concludes, testifying to a moment when a Python (presumably Satan, from the context) comes to uproot the old king. The Python never makes it to the throne, however, for he did not dare approach 'that threshold in the sun',[198] seeing that the old king was wise and full of grace. Her song ends on the line, 'Such grace had kings when the world begun!'[199]

This is the final empowering word that Luigi needs to cement his resolve, for he sees a contrast between the king described in that song and the king whose foot is on his country's neck. He recognizes that in allowing the Austrian king to rule over Italy, the

[189] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', III. l. 78.
[190] Ibid., l. 81.
[191] Ibid., l. 82.
[192] Ibid., ll. 164-6.
[193] Ibid., l. 173.
[194] Ibid., ll. 176-7.
[195] Ibid., l. 178.
[196] Ibid., l. 203.
[197] Ibid., l. 204.
[198] Ibid., l. 220.
[199] Ibid., l. 222.

men of Italy have allowed the Python to gain power, out of fear that they 'fall his prey'[200] and so he decides to carry out his plan, for: 'Tis God's voice calls, how could I stay?'[201] With this final line, Luigi bids farewell to his mother and sets off on his journey to set to right the world in which he lives. The call-and-response between Pippa and Luigi is interesting here because it mimics the call-and-response in a church setting, or the parroting of spoken words by birds. Pippa's song is the truth that Luigi needs to fortify himself and give himself the strength and resolve to carry out his task. Even though his task will ultimately end in his demise, Pippa's song frees Luigi from his earthly constraints and instead puts him on the path to freedom, gaining power for Italy.

In the final scene of 'Pippa Passes', 'Night', the Monsignor of Asolo, who turns out to be Pippa's uncle (again, like everything that takes place in the poem, unbeknownst to Pippa), a vile man who faces the temptation of doing away with Pippa in order to gain the inheritance that her father left her; chiefly, land, which would have given him even more power. The Monsignor, it is revealed, is from a wicked family, whose ancestors had 'gone on polluting themselves with every wickedness under heaven'.[202] Despite this, the Monsignor has gained a life for himself as a bishop, attempting to find pleasure in service to God. He recalls his plight thus: 'my food would be millet-cake, my dress sack cloth, and my couch straw'.[203] As he continues to address the Intendent, who appears to have stolen some of the land belonging to the Monsignor's brother, the Monsignor says, 'I have whole centuries of sin to redeem' (referring to the evildoings of his family) 'and only a month or two of life to do it in!'[204]

He continues, saying that the Pontiff has charged him with the task of gaining back the land of his brothers, which, upon belief that the brother's daughter (Pippa) is dead, would pass to the church. When the Monsignor demands a confession from the Intendant, Maffeo (as he is called) responds with a plan: the girl is alive and well, is the very silk-girl who passed singing that morning, and he is willing to take her away to Rome and there she will die, while the Monsignor will get all of the land owed to Pippa – if only the Monsignor will pardon Maffeo for his troubles. Pippa, innocent child, is used as a bargaining chip, and the temptation of gaining the land – and favour – is almost too much for the Monsignor. At that moment, Pippa's singing reaches them, as

[200] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', III. l. 226.
[201] Ibid., l. 229.
[202] Ibid., IV. p. 78.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.

she recalls a beautiful song of childhood's simplicity. She sings, 'For, what are the voices of the birds/ - Ay, and of beasts, - but words – our words,/ Only so much more sweet?'[205] The tenderness with which she sings is indicative of one not yet acquainted fully with life's hardships, but the song ends abruptly: 'Suddenly God took me!'[206] It is this final, jarring line which shakes the Monsignor from his temptation, whereupon he orders that Maffeo be bound and removed. Pippa's song has not just saved herself; rather, she has saved the Monsignor from forsaking his pious life and giving into temptation, following the sinful nature of his ancestors. His scene ends with a cry, 'Miserere mei, Domine!', translating from Latin to 'Lord, have mercy on me!'[207]

Looking back over the course of Pippa's musical musings, it can be seen that she has unwittingly saved many souls, including her own. At the end of the final section, Pippa returns home and prepares for bed, reflecting on her day's journey, wondering how she might ever 'approach all these/ I only fancied being, this long day!'[208] She wishes to 'move them – if you please,/ Do good or evil to them some slight way',[209] and she further reflects that even though she set out with the intention of imagining herself as each of the Happiest Four, and despite starting her day by acknowledging that all are God's puppets and are therefore equal in his kingdom, she does not feel as if she makes such an impact as they, nor does she feel that she has impacted them at all with her presence. But through her song, Pippa has indeed touched each person on whom she wished to have some small impact (though she has, in the morning, acknowledged that no deed is ever really 'small'). These stories, each seemingly self-contained, are connected through Pippa and her song, for her words have entered into each soul and altered it in some way. She begins and ends her day by saying, 'All service is the same with God – / With God, whose puppets, best and worst,/ Are we: there is no last or first.'[210] In this sentiment, all of humanity is united under and through God in Pippa's mind, and in unknowingly impacting the lives of those around her, she, by consequence, shows the interconnectedness of humanity. It is not through her actions, but rather through her song, that Pippa reaches into the soul of each person who hears her and breaks them from their sinful reveries, bringing them back to a purer purpose, setting

[205] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', IV. p. 80.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid., 'Scene', ll. 100-1.
[209] Ibid., ll. 103-4.
[210] Ibid., ll. 113-5.

aside notions of revenge, lust, and greed in favour of conviction, truth, and repentance. She says, 'Oh lark, be day's apostle',[211] and in many ways, she has become apostle herself through her singing, guiding each person who hears her sing to better decisions and convictions. Her song continually heals those who listen; those who not only listen to Pippa's song but heed its underlying message will prosper, heal, and pursue what is good and just.

Conclusion

Overall, the themes of Nature and heavenly truth bring *Aurora Leigh*, *Jane Eyre*, and 'Pippa Passes' together, showing that for Victorian women, their bird-song voices – expressed through poetry, authenticity, or singing – can allow them to break free from the domestic sphere which confines them, thereby granting them autonomy. However, as each story shows, women who use their voices to break free from confinement face rather a large battle. While Aurora uses her voice to become like a lark, a lyric poet, soaring high above others, Romney is a tether which keeps her tied to the ground, to Nature, from which her poetry must stem. Marian Erle, finally free from the demands of English women who betrayed her, is able to speak for herself and reject Romney's proposal, choosing instead to be a single mother and pour all of her love into her son. For Jane, whose mournful history aligns with the song of the nightingale, Rochester's insistence on showering her with gold and jewels, while perhaps alluring to a woman of a higher station, keeps her grounded. Finally, Pippa acknowledges that women are caged like birds, trapped by their very bodies and subsequent limitations, but transcendence and ascendence – like that of the lark – can be found through the process of imagination, much like Aurora's poetry and Jane's education.

Nonetheless, whilst Nature played a significant role in transcendence, the next chapter explores the tangible implications of how Victorian women ensnared themselves by embracing feather fashion. This not only reinforced the connection between women and birds but also underscored the destructive nature of the feather fashion industry during that era. The next chapter marks a shift into Part Two of this thesis, which focuses on the social-cultural aspects of feather fashion and the links between Victorian women and birds.

[211] Browning, 'Pippa Passes', 'Scene', l. 87.

Chapter Three

‘The wholesale slaughter of innocent birds’: The Rise of Feather Fashion in the Victorian Period

‘Is womanly pity quite dead, that the appeals on behalf of the poor birds are in vain? It really seems so, for, after all that has been said upon the subject, there cannot be a woman in the land who does not remember the outcry against this fashion as she bedecks herself with the dead carcasses of the creatures slain to decorate her.’[1]

Introduction

While women in literature were being compared to birds, in real life, Victorian women were *wearing* birds. This quickly became a contentious activity, with the press pitting the environmentally conscious against those who sought to attain social stature via their fashion choices. Feather fashion was up-and-coming from the start of the Victorian period and was very circular; feather fashion started and concluded, through the years, with a simple ostrich feather in the hat of a woman.

Figure 11: Emmeline Pankhurt's purple feather, in storage at the Museum of London. Pankhurst's ostrich feather was purple in order to symbolise her ties to the Women's Suffrage Movement.

One of the most prominent figures now from the Victorian period who wore feathers in her hat was Emmeline Pankhurst, a political activist who fought for the rights of women and actively encouraged her followers to wear feather fashion in order to draw

[1] ‘Feathers’, *Greenock Telegraph and Clyde Shipping Gazette*, 6 October 1891, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000472/18911006/041/0002> [accessed 7 February 2024].

attention to themselves.[2] Her actions were at odds with female conservationists, who believed that feather fashion was destroying bird populations. Indeed, while men were doing the hunting, trapping, and killing of birds for exportation and sales, women were consistently blamed for perpetuating the feather fashion industry and drawing demand for feathers. The complexity of the situation for women in this period is made especially acute when considering feathers and feather fashion: here we find a spectrum of experiences from those who were fighting for women's rights at the time to those who were simply trying to survive, which can be seen in the factory conditions to which women who worked in the millineries were subjected and confined. Not only were women pitted against men in these arguments, but they were also often pitted against each other.

This chapter will use letters, illustrations, articles, and other media in order to collate and present information about women wearing feathers and the destruction of birds during the Victorian period. While previous chapters have discussed the comparisons made between women and birds in primarily high-brow literature, this chapter seeks to examine other literary and cultural materials, especially popular literature, in order to give a more comprehensive view of the exploitation of women during the Victorian period. These materials will also examine the feelings of entrapment that plagued women during the period, much like the caged birds that were being kept as pets and parlour pieces.

The Creation of Feather Fashion in the Victorian Period

Feather fashion became pervasive during the Victorian period, with fashion trends for women pointing to using various parts of birds as adornments. The *Illustrated London News* ran a column on October fashion in September 1851 that displayed women wearing '[y]ellow straw bonnet[s], trimmed with two bunches of cock's feathers.'[3] By the 1860s, ostrich feathers began to accompany floral wreaths and butterflies as adornments.[4] Joan Nunn writes in her book *Fashion in Costume, 1200-2000* that in the late Victorian period, trimmings on hats could be 'elaborate and even

[2] Tessa Boase, *Mrs. Pankhurst's Purple Feather* (Aurum Press, 2018), p. xi.
[3] 'The Illustrations', *The Illustrated London News* (27 September 1851), section Paris Fashion for October, p. 396, British Newspaper Archive.
[4] 'History of Fashion 1840 - 1900', *Victoria & Albert Museum*, 2013 <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/history-of-fashion-1840-1900/> [accessed 27 March 2019].

bizarre', including such items as small birds, feathers, feathered wings, and aigrettes, among other strange additions.[5] In 1871, *The Court Newsman* reported that at the marriage of Princess Louise and John Campbell, the Princess of Wales wore a blue dress with 'white Brussels lace and blue feather trimming', as well as a 'Head-dress, blue feathers, pearls, and diamonds.' After the marriage ceremony, Princess Louise herself appeared wearing 'a white corded silk dress, trimmed with swansdown and fringe'.[6] The attire at the wedding was quite important because it signalled to ladies of the time what the current fashion trends were that they should be emulating. While not at the height of feather fashion, the appearance of blue feathers – not a standard colour – was already showing the manipulation of feathers in fashion. Feathers were becoming commonly accepted in fashion and perhaps even essential. In fact, an advertisement in the *Dublin Daily Express* in May 1880 lists the 'three essentials in ladies' attire', with the first being a bonnet or hat, '(In Silk, Velvet, or Satin, with Lace, Flowers, and Feathers.)'.[7] Feathers were already being touted as 'essential' in Victorian female fashionwear, with royal family members wearing feathers, and the fashion was trickling down into every class. It was a trend that was set to wipe out several species of birds in Great Britain.

Figure 12: Actress Christie MacDonald in 1902. Although the birds and feathers are artificial, this picture gives some idea of what the fashion trends were like in the late Victorian period.

In his book *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection*, Robin Doughty calls attention to the fact that in the nineteenth century – in both the UK and the USA – public attention to and consideration of wildlife preservation was in short supply. Specific to the UK, Doughty relates that the 'public did not notice the disappearance of the ruff (*Philamochu pugnax*), osprey (*Pandion*

[5] Joan Nunn, *Fashion in Costume: 1200-2000*, 2nd edn (New Amsterdam Books, 2000), p. 160.
[6] 'The Royal Marriage. The Wedding Attire.', *The Belfast Weekly News* (25 March 1871), p. 1, British Newspaper Archive.
[7] 'Three Essentials In Ladies' Attire.', *Dublin Daily Express* (8 May 1880), p. 1, British Newspaper Archive.

haliaetus), and black tern (*Childonias niger*)' during the nineteenth century.[8] Doughty claims that the two foundations responsible for drawing the most attention to the disappearance of birds across the globe were the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (UK) and the Audubon Society (USA). Early members of the groups focused on the problematic trend of wearing bird feathers for millinery ornamentation, expressing 'man's duties to the creatures and the natural environment', ideas which later fed into the philosophy of 'land ethic', a term coined by American environmentalist and conservationist Aldo Leopold in 1949.[9] Although this phrase was coined by an American well after the conclusion of the Victorian period, its rejection of human-centred views of the environment and its focus on preserving healthy, self-renewing ecosystems make it a concept well worth looking into.[10] Leopold's land ethic calls upon humans to view themselves as members of biotic communities as opposed to 'conquerors' of the land, hearkening back to Darwin's challenge of humans as being superior to animals. Notably, Leopold's land ethic does not require humans to stop eating animals but rather focuses on maintaining a healthy ecological balance. Feather fashion challenged the healthy ecological balance globally, as it had a far-reaching impact on the bird community.

Feather fashion first emerged in France, as Doughty notes in his book, particularly in the court of Marie Antoinette. The 'Minister of Fashion' at the time was Marie-Jeanne Rose Bertin, dressmaker for the queen, and together with Léonard Autié, Marie Antoinette's hairdresser, she created piled hairstyles that incorporated feathers, stuffed birds, and flowers.[11] These trends continued into the nineteenth century, travelling from France to England. In fact, many English fashions originated in France over the years, and the rise of the women's periodical assisted in making feather fashion popular. Magazines like *La Mode Illustrée* (1860 – 1937; later, merged with *La Mode Pratique* which ran until 1951), *Le Petit Écho de la mode* (1879 – 1983), *France Mode*, *Le Follett* (1829 – 1892), and *Mode Pour Tous* gave way to English periodicals such as *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1852 – 1879), *The Queen* (est. 1861, now

[8] Robin W. Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection* (University of California Press, 1975), p. vii.
[9] For more information on Leopold's 'land ethic', see J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, SUNY Series in Philosophy and Biology (State University of New York Press, 1989), particularly Part I on 'Animal Liberation'.
[10] 'Land ethic' philosophies are more appropriate for considering the Victorian issues that I am addressing than more recent theories of the Anthropocene, particularly because 'land ethic' focuses are closer to those of the Victorians that I am studying.
[11] Doughty, p. 1.

known as *Harper's Bazaar*), *The Lady* (est. 1885), *The World of Fashion* (1829 – 1875), and *Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion* (1875 – 1912).[12] Although periodicals took on a life of their own, establishing a unique identity in each country where they were being published, the origins of fashion largely remained the same: Paris 'retained its position as fashion capital.'[13] As Daly recounts, even in Britain and America, magazines featured images from the Paris fashion scene, and milliners and dress-makers 'bought and copied Paris hats and dresses'.[14] While tailoring was often country-specific (see the less constrictive bloomers that originated in the United States), Paris, London, and New York grew to be the largest inspirations for fashion.[15]

Figure 13: From Mary Evans Picture Library, circa 1886.

What the Victorian newspapers often dubbed 'murderous millinery' – or the destruction to bird life that was occurring as a result of fashion – was no exception to this transatlantic and continental set of influences, having originated in Paris and quickly spreading to other fashion houses through magazines and the styling of celebrities and royalty alike. The art of taxidermy was also on the rise, enabling dead birds to be preserved enough to act as decorations and trimmings on hats and clothing; although taxidermy had ancient origins in the embalming process, nineteenth-century advances in naturalist studies allowed for better preservation of raw materials.[16] As Fiona Clark notes in *Hats*, the 1880s and 1890s were 'the heyday of the commercial development of the art of taxidermy which had been developing since the middle of the century among

[12] Nicholas Daly, *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 167.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] We see the impact that London and Paris have on 'fashionable' society in characters like Lady Dedlock, from *Bleak House*, who moves between London and Paris seeking amusement.
[16] For more information on taxidermy, see 'Taxidermy | Animal Preservation, Mounting & Restoration', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/science/taxidermy> [accessed 15 April 2024].

collectors and sportsmen.'[17] Clark adds that while using birds' plumage as trimming began in the 1860s with a single feather or small wing on hats, by the end of the decade, the bird's whole head was often used, and by the late 1870s and into the 1880s, whole birds were frequently adorning hats and dresses. Cunnington's account of English fashion disputes this idea by presenting a single ostrich feather as trimming in evening dress as early as 1830.[18] By 1867, a full bird adorned a promenade costume.[19] By 1895, Cunnington cited a source which claimed that 'Some twenty to thirty million dead birds are imported to this country annually to supply the demand of murderous millinery.'[20] Taxidermy played a huge part in the sales of birds for adornment, particularly because clients expected the birds to be set within 'an accurate and realistic natural setting', which meant gathering other materials within which to set the birds.[21] The extent of these murderous fashions is evident in magazines like *Punch*, which satirized the extravagant feather adornments.[22] The criticism of women who dressed themselves in bird feathers was not new to the nineteenth century; an anonymously written satire called 'Feathers', published in the 1790s, wrote, 'Do not the ladies more or less appear/ Just like the birds whose various plumes they wear?'[23] After Marie Antoinette's death, feather fashion fell out of style, but it was revived again through Empress Eugénie in the late 1850s, and designers around the world began to incorporate this renewed interest in feather fashion by copying the styles coming out of Paris and London fashion houses. By the 1860s, Charles Frederick Worth had become Empress Eugénie's chief dressmaker and was able to go about 'raising the status of the dressmaker or dress designer' in Paris, eventually leading to his popularity transatlantically.[24]

The types of birds used in fashion for their feathers became more widely varied in the nineteenth century, but one bird that had been continually used throughout feather fashion history, even prior to the nineteenth century, was the ostrich. Doughty traces ostrich feathers in fashion back to the Romans and Greeks, and by the end of the nineteenth century, ostrich farming began in Cape Colony and North Africa, spreading

[17] Fiona Clark, *Hats*, 2nd edn (B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1985), p. 36.
[18] C. Willett Cunnington, *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (Faber and Faber Ltd, 1937), p. 99.
[19] Ibid, p. 242.
[20] Ibid, p. 398.
[21] Clark, p. 37.
[22] A deeper examination of *Punch* magazine's satirical responses to feather fashion will be discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.
[23] Doughty, p. 2.
[24] Nunn, p. 137.

to Australia, Europe, and the US.[25] Ostrich feathers were so high in demand that millinery conversations centred on the idea of setting up ostrich farms, attesting to the fact that there was an awareness in millinery circles that overharvesting of ostriches could lead to their extinction.[26]

Ostrich feathers were incredibly valuable, in part because, unlike other feathers, where the centre of the quill was off to one side, causing the feathers to appear lopsided or unequal on either side, the ostrich feather quill was exactly in the centre of the feather.[27] Historically, ostrich feathers had not been used in female feather fashion, however. Traditionally, in some of the first mentions of ostrich feathers studied by historians, ostrich feathers were relegated to warriors.[28] During the fourteenth and fifteen centuries in England, ostrich plumes were seen sprouting from velvet caps worn by nobility.[29] The plumes varied in quality according to the location where the ostrich was found:

> Those of the well-watered and luxuriant districts are long and heavy, but stiff and ungraceful, owing to the thickness of the quills; whilst those of the Kalahari, and the adjoining countries, are shorter, lighter, and superior, having finer quills, which allow the feathers to droop in a graceful curve.[30]

Furthermore, although ostrich farming became popular in South Africa, de Mosenthal and Harting write that '[i]t appears to be generally admitted that the feathers produced by domesticated or artificially reared birds are always inferior to those of the wild.'[31]

Alongside ostrich feathers, peacock feathers were in high demand, particularly in Europe and Greece, although they were replaced in fashion by the ostrich feather until Marie Antoinette began to don them.[32] Peacock feathers fell out of fashion in France after her death, but there was a rise in the use of pheasant feathers, particularly due to their exquisite length. The bird which brought about nineteenth-century awareness of the overuse of bird feathers, however, was the heron or egret. Used for

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[25] Doughty, p. 7.
[26] In their book *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, Julius de Mosenthal and James Edmund Harting discuss the fact that in New Zealand, some supposed twenty species of *Struthious* birds, of which the ostrich and rhea were a part, co-existed and were largely supposed extinct due to subsidence of the land. For more information, see Julius de Mosenthal and James Edmund Harting, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming* (London: Trübner & Company, 1877), p. 4.
[27] Mosenthal and Harting, p. 10.
[28] Ibid., p. 14.
[29] Ibid., p. 15.
[30] Ibid, p. 52.
[31] The plight of the ostrich will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.
[32] Doughty, p. 8.

military helmets and hat ornaments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the way that the feathers were collected from the birds was scathingly rebuked by organisations like the Society for the Protection of Birds, and in 1899, osprey feathers were replaced by ostrich feathers on the helmets of the British Army, marking a significant win for those looking to protect the lives of wild birds.

Although bird feathers had previously been used in female fashion before the nineteenth century, the trade opened up for women of more moderate means by the middle of the century, and by the end of the century, middle-class women in particular were expected to wear 'fine clothing and stylish accessories', making bird plumage an ideal decoration since it 'contributed interesting colors, fascinating shapes and assemblages to dress hats at garden parties, and proved attractive trimmings on fans, gowns, capes, parasols and muffs at theatres, bazars, and elegant gatherings'.[33]

As the market became overloaded with ornamental plumage imported from around the world, breeding grounds began to exhibit signs of extinction, and Doughty reports that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the idea that whole species were going to be lost to feather fashion evoked feelings of 'disgust and outrage' among people who then began to band together to mount a movement against the use of ornamental feathers.[34] Birds – and their by-products – which were sacrificed for feather fashion were no longer seen as inanimate objects to be used and abused, and the adornments that were once admired became symbols of suffering. The gross exhibitionism of feather fashion in the nineteenth century can be seen in the comparison made by Cecil Willett Cunnington, English historian on costume and fashion, who contrasted the 'Romantic' 1830s with the 'Revolting' 1860s.[35] While in the 1850s, women's hats were adorned with dove, blackbird, swallow, seabird wings, and ostrich, heron, and bird of paradise plumage, by the 1880s and 1890s, women's hats were being adorned with 'owls' heads with blank staring eyes', whole small birds, and 'hummingbirds perched on artificial flowers'.[36]

Doughty examines Cunnington's research on the escalating use of birds in nineteenth-century fashion and reports that Cunnington believed that the evolution from

[33] Doughty, p. 14.
[34] Ibid., p. 15.
[35] Ibid., p. 16.
[36] Ibid., p. 16; note the juxtaposition between whole, preserved birds, and fake, artificial flowers – while difficult to preserve flowers, especially for adornment, it's interesting to me that the life of the birds was worth less than the lives of the flowers – while it may be more practical to use fake flowers, could fake feathers have been more practical as well? Why were birds' lives less important?

bird by-product to whole bird (and other animal) adornments stemmed from 'sadistic cravings' and pointed to sexual origins.[37] I believe that this is a rather reductive reading of Cunnington's work, which begins, in the introductory chapter, by saying that 'the desire to attract the other sex is an Instinct' and continues later to say that exhibitionism, which I believe feather fashion became, was brought about by 'an instinctive desire' to expose oneself and '*compel* Man's attention'.[38] Exhibitionism, according to Cunnington, in extreme cases, leads to Perversion, and I believe that this is how feather fashion in the Victorian period can be defined.[39] In part, I agree with Cunnington's views because he presents them as a form of extreme Exhibitionism, where Exhibitionism is meant to *compel* attention, and in many ways, women in the Victorian period were dressing to surprise or stun, dressing to express their wealth, and dressing to increase their prospects, particularly women in the upper classes, whose main responsibility to the family was to secure a beneficial marriage.

Of the Victorian woman, Cunnington writes, 'it would have been possible to gather from her head excellent specimens of dead parrots, owls, humming-birds, pigeons, hawks, larks, thrushes, finches, sea-gulls, as well as birds' nests with eggs complete'.[40] What Cunnington asks in his book is what symbolism woman hoped to achieve with her flagrant displays of what he sees as wanton destruction. He suggests that these birds and their carcasses might suggest a 'starved maternal instinct trying to represent the longed-for offspring by animal forms'.[41] While there is a connection between women and birds maternally, I disagree with Cunnington's analysis that women were wearing bird plumage in order to represent a maternal instinct.[42] Rather, as many critics assert, feather fashion was more likely used by women as part of a straightforward expression of wealth and to attract attention.[43]

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[37] Doughty, pp. 16-7.
[38] C. Willett Cunnington, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (The MacMillan Company, 1936), p. 2, 6.
[39] Ibid., p. 7.
[40] Ibid., p. 251.
[41] Ibid., pp. 251-2.
[42] For more information on the maternal connection between women and birds, see the section of this chapter on egrets.
[43] Cunnington's interest in 'Fashion' reveals a complex understanding of the social significance of fashion that considers how fashion is created and why it matters in society. He writes that 'Fashion' is 'a taste shared by a large number of people for a short space of time' (p. 2). Continuing, he writes, 'A taste persisting long enough ceases to be a Fashion, and becomes a Custom. A Custom which endures still longer becomes a Habit, and a Habit of immeasurable antiquity becomes established as an Instinct. So that an Instinct is simply a Fashion which has been found so convenient that it has never been given up.' The wearing of feathers for fashion was pervasive in the Victorian period, but I would be interested to know if Cunnington found the wearing of feathers to be an 'Instinct', given its long history.

Bird feathers and adornments were certainly used by women to accentuate different features in order to attract male attention. For example, by the end of the nineteenth century, the ideal female silhouette shifted focus from the lower body to the upper body, neck, and head, and plumage served to provide height and elegance to these upper features.[44] The use of rare plumage also pointed to a woman's social standing and separated her from other women.

Obtaining Bird Feathers for Feather Fashion

There are conflicting accounts as to how bird feathers were obtained for feather fashion, and here, I'd like to examine some of the accounts in order to explain why many people blamed women for the often despicable ways in which collecting feathers were described. While some people claimed that bird feathers were removed harmlessly, usually due to the moulting process, others countered these claims by saying that birds were actively being destroyed for their feathers, something backed up by the extinction of several bird species during the Victorian period. An article in the *St. James's Gazette* in 1902 claimed that moulting 'takes place just after the breeding season as a rule, and it is present among all birds from the ostrich to the humming-bird.'[45] While it is true that all birds moult, the desire for feathers was so high in the fashion industry that moulted feathers alone could hardly meet the demand. Furthermore, it was observed that some types of feathers changed colour and lost some of their vibrancy during the moulting process, making them less appealing.[46]

One writer, in an 1894 edition of the *Dover Chronicle*, submitted that animals, particularly birds, should be killed in the most merciful manner possible and *then* skinned for their feathers, rather than being skinned alive in order to protect the rich colours of the feathers.[47] This statement is a shocking take on the idea that death was the better of two presented evils. Birds across the globe faced similar plights, although ostrich farming became a novel concept and promoted itself as a more humane way to obtain feathers. While the ostrich will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter,

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[44] Doughty, p. 17.
[45] 'Birds and Their Feathers', *St James's Gazette*, 6 September 1902, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001485/19020906/092/0014> [accessed 16 April 2024].
[46] Ibid.
[47] 'How The Feathers Are Obtained', *Dover Chronicle*, 6 October 1894, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0004083/18941006/015/0002> [accessed 16 April 2024].

it is worth noting here that one method of obtaining bird feathers was as follows: 'The bird being secured, the feathers are wrenched, bleeding, from his tortured body, after which the down and marabout are torn off.'[48] This graphic tale is one of many accounts that show how brutal the feather collecting industry was.

The egret, which will again be discussed later in this chapter, faced similar brutality. One account, from the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* in 1892, said that the egret faced a barbarous execution: 'The hunters find that the best and easiest time to shoot the birds and secure these feathers is when the young egrets are fully fledged, but not yet able to fly.'[49] The article continues,

> It has been computed that for every bird of the rarer species – such as the humming bird, the orange and scarlet cock of the rook, and the kingfisher – that is worn in a woman's headgear, at least ten have suffered the death-pang, counting in the young who die of starvation, the wounded which fly away to drop down and die in the woods or among the reeds, and those which are mutilated and destroyed by the pellets so much as to be unavailable for purposes of decoration.

Such was the wasteful consequence of the demand for feathers. The killing of live birds – during nesting season or otherwise – was not the only atrocity being committed in the eyes of some Victorians. Closely related to the anti-vivisection movement were the complaints from women and men alike who were uncomfortable with the desecration of birds' bodies after they had been killed. An article in the January 1897 publication of *The Queen* further examined how ostrich plumes were worked and manipulated for feather fashion, adding, 'I cannot help thinking that if a good many of the people who raise such an outcry against the use of plumes were to see the foundation material […] they would not think that quite so many birds are destroyed on purpose to produce them.'[50] The author recalls a visit to a feather-making workroom and thus explains the process:

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[48] Ibid.
[49] 'The Destruction Of Birds For Feather Decoration', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1 March 1892, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000453/18920301/036/0003> [accessed 16 April 2024].
[50] 'Feathers', *The Queen*, 23 January 1897, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002627/18970123/244/0047> [accessed 7 February 2024].

> Ostrich feathers are first cut the required length, and two sewn together, then subjected to the steam of a kettle, and finally curled into the required form with a blunt knife and the fingers. Cocks' feathers when they come to the workroom are almost straight, and all those beautiful rounded shapes, in which is it now the fashion to wear the coque plume, are simply produced by rounding them with the fingers. […] Before they are suitable for millinery every feather is separately treated and placed in the shape and form in which it is required.
>
> Many varieties of feathers are formed into the aigrettes which appear on the less expensive hats and bonnets, and the beauty of these pretty well entirely depends on the manipulation and the wiring. […] When the stiff wing comes into the workroom every feather has to be pulled off, and then they are set into those dainty little angles, which take such a perfect position on the hats and bonnets. No untrained hand could do this, but a little care, a little steam, and a blunt knife, can do wonders in restoring the pristine freshness of an ostrich plume.

Although this article claims that bird life is not altogether destroyed in the process to produce feather fashion, I found the idea that every feather must be pulled from the wing to be a grotesque feature in the production process, particularly with this article having been published at a time when, in fact, whole birds were being killed to be placed on top of hats.

It was not just hats that were causing the destruction of birds. Just two years prior, in February 1895, *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* ran an article regarding the collection of fur and feathers.[51] In the section on feathers, the author makes note of the fact that 'man's art has improved on Nature for his own profit', stating that wild ducks, for example, were 'getting improved off the face of the earth, by being destroyed in the process of transforming them into tame ones'. The author recounts the plight of the eider duck, who plucks down feathers from her own breast once she nests, placing the feathers around and over the eggs to cover them. Each time she lays her eggs, the feathers and eggs are collected, and she begins the process again, until she has exhausted all of her feathers and either flies away or dies. As for the feathers, '[a]t least one pound and a half of down is required to make a coverlet; so that each coverlet is the

[51] 'The Economies Of Fur and Feather', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 3 February 1895, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000079/18950203/058/0013> [accessed 23 February 2024].

result of at least six such pluckings.' A coverlet was used as bedding, meaning that feather usage was not simply relegated to the fashion sphere.

Another bird facing destruction, as noted by the author of the article, was the Kingfisher, which was 'almost extinct'. Used for adorning hats and for the dressing of fly-fishing hooks, the author writes that 'it is a common thing for the hunters ruthlessly to tear off the wings and throw the poor, helpless, bleeding birds into the water to linger and die after frightful and wholly unnecessary agonies.' The author concludes the article by saying that these practices are 'at once the romance and tragedy of nature in its contact with human beings.' Through the extermination of species, however, the author warns that the balance of nature is 'disturbed' and that 'whole populations will suffer' due to the destruction that humans have caused. There was an awareness that birds were being hunted off the face of the earth and that the violence that birds suffered should be intolerable to the general public.

Although the general public was being made aware of the destruction that birds were facing, it was largely women who were being blamed for the diminution of bird life in the name of feather fashion. In a letter to the editor of the *South Wales Daily News* in December 1898, G. C. Wade, the Provincial Secretary for Wales to the Vegetarian Federal Union, wrote an appeal to pastors to address the wanton destruction of birds for feather fashion.[52] Referring to women as 'human cockatoos', Wade wrote that 'women are causing a danger of extinction of many beautiful species of birds by wearing feathers' and that it was the Christian duty of ministers to address the 'atrocity'. Wade continued by citing 'the great naturalist' "Mickelet", who was 'of the opinion that if all the birds should die human life would be impossible on this earth on account of the insects'.[53] The role of birds in controlling insect life will be discussed later in this chapter, in the section on the economic value of birds. Nevertheless, of note in this passage is the blame placed upon women for causing the destruction of bird life.

Women largely faced the blame for the slaughter of birds for feather fashion, despite the fashions of the day being dictated by male dressmakers. In January 1887, the *Larne Reporter and Northern Counties Advertiser* ran the following on feather fashion:

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[52] '"Feathered Women" and "Human Cockatoos"', *South Wales Daily News*, 29 December 1898, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000919/18981229/017/0003> [accessed 26 February 2024].

[53] Presumably, Wade was referring to Jules Michelet, famed French historian and writer. For more on Michelet and Natural History, see Lionel Gossman, 'Michelet and Natural History: The Alibi of Nature', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 145.3 (2001), pp. 283–333.

> Ladies are sporting a great deal of feather just now, writes a London correspondent. Feathers of every conceivable colour and hue are shown in the bonnets and hats of the period. Time was when a wing, or a tail, or a small bunch of plumage sufficed for the adornment of the hat. Now the entire plumage of a bird is considered requisite for the decoration of a single hat. The time may come when the bonnets of fair women will be an aviary. The plumage of the commonest British birds, ranging from the barndoor fowl to the farmyard duck, are dyed and dressed in imitation of the plumage of rich and rare birds from southern and sunny countries.[54]

While the article makes note that some British birds' feathers were being used to mimic the feathers of more exotic birds, perhaps due to the cost of importing foreign birds' feathers, the gross, global destruction of birds for the feather fashion industry is evident in the comment that women's bonnets will appear as if an 'aviary', full to the brim with whole bird carcasses. Furthermore, although British birds' feathers may have been used in part by the trade, it was a largely global operation, and an article in the *Thetford & Watton Times* in 1899 contained a reprint of a *Leisure Hour* report discussing the sale of feathers at Cutler Street, which it called the 'headquarters of the trade'.[55]

Feather shows at Cutler Street were something to behold, mainly because feathers and skins were brought in from all around the world for sale. The author of the article mentions that when visiting Cutler Street, they saw 'humming birds by the thousand', 'birds of paradise by the dozen', and 'heaps of parrots and Himalayan pheasants'. The author also noted that ostrich farming, while originally profitable, could only be profitable at the time 'where land is cheap, for each bird requires ten acres to roam about on.' As is evident from the report, feathers were still being imported by the tonne into the United Kingdom for the purpose of feather fashion, even in the late 1890s. This thesis will now examine the importance of two birds in particular, the egret and the ostrich, as case studies of the destruction of birds during the Victorian period.

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[54] 'Feathers', *Larne Reporter and Northern Counties Advertiser*, 1 January 1887, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0004043/18870101/045/0003> [accessed 8 February 2024].

[55] According to the City of London website, Cutler Street was close to the docks where feathers were being delivered, and so the warehouses there were used to display stock to potential buyers. For the original article, see 'Feathers', *Thetford & Watton Times*, 7 January 1899, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001534/18990107/170/0008> [accessed 19 February 2024].

The Egret Dilemma: A Case Study

One of the primary birds culled for female fashion during the Victorian period was the egret, prized for its beautiful white plumage and used for both female fashion and military headpieces. Although Parliament passed a Wild Bird Protection Act in 1880, the debate over the killing of egrets and other rare or otherwise beautiful birds continued well into the twentieth century, with historical reports on Parliamentary procedure, particularly from the House of Commons, showing numerous debates about the penalties and protections that the Act might entail. There were many accounts in the newspapers about how egret feathers were actually collected, with some people claiming that the feathers were collected from the ground and other people claiming that the feathers were ripped from the bird while it nested. Many people took up the cause of the egret, but no one was as vocal as the Society for the Protection of Birds, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five. From its inception in 1889, the Society for the Protection of Birds became increasingly insistent that something must be done about the tragedy that had befallen the egret, especially since the egret population had seen a drastic decline in population globally.

Members of the Society frequently wrote in to the Editor of the *Times*, and in August 1889, one Letter to the Editor drew particular ire from members and well-known ornithologists such as Alfred Newton, Watkin Watkins, Henry Baker Tristram, H. James Rainey, and Linda Gardiner, who was at that time the Assistant Secretary for the Society. The letter demonstrates the difficulties the British public faced in discerning the true cost of feather fashion because they were not able to see the end of the supply chain themselves. The letter in question was sent in by a K. Thomson, from London, who had just returned from a trip to the Orinoco, in South America, and it painted a positive picture of egret hunting. Thomson was keen to set the record straight on the treatment of egrets, especially in response to Gardiner's letters to the *Times* about the destructive practices of harvesting egret feathers.[56] Thomson claimed to have been to Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela, and he said that, although he personally shot white herons in Nicaragua, Gardiner's facts about the culling of egrets was completely false. He offered as evidence an account from Venezuela, where he said that people were 'beginning to farm the birds' and that it was 'marvellous how easily they [were]

[56] K. Thomson, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (25 August 1899), p. 8, The Times Digital Archive.

domesticated'. Thomson said that in order to harvest the feathers, hunters (or owners) would need around one hundred birds to make just one ounce of small plumes, as each bird produced approximately fifteen plumes.

Thomson also disputed the idea that those who hunted the egret killed both the male and female birds, since he said that 'the female bird never has plumes, and [gun]powder is too valuable to kill a bird without value'.[57] Instead, he claimed that the hunters he knew would go to the breeding grounds of the egret and collect their plumes from the ground after the males shed the plumes from mating season. He concluded his letter by saying that on his way back from the Orinoco, he had encountered two hunters who each had about one hundred pounds of feathers, 'and this without killing one single bird'. All of this information, he wrote, was to 'satisfy lady wearers of egret feathers'. The women who joined the Society had to take a pledge not to wear bird feathers, so Thomson's claims were meant to assuage them that the feathers were at least taken ethically in order that they could continue wearing feathers if they so chose.

Following Thomson's submission to the *Times*, the Editorial ran a longer piece regarding the 'strange and perplexing conflict of testimony […] involved in the two letters',[58] the first being a submission by Gardiner from the *Chicago Record*, which disclosed the brutal manner in which egrets were being stalked and killed, and which prompted Thomson to send in his letter. The Editorial stated that they had 'every disposition to believe [the *Chicago Record's*] account because it accords in substance with what we have printed on the subject from time to time during the last few years…' W. H. Hudson, a prominent member of the Society for the Protection of Birds, had submitted several articles to the *Times* regarding the treatment of birds, further to the material that he had already developed for the Society for educational purposes. The Editorial disputed Thomson's claim that only the male egret was harvested for its feathers, saying that it was an indisputable fact that the 'plume-hunter' waited until the egret breeding time, when egrets gathered to nest, in order to have an easy opportunity to kill both male and female birds: 'He slaughters the adult birds for the sake of the coveted plumes, and the slaughter of the parents involves the death of the unfledged nestlings from starvation.'[59] It was a shocking indictment on the hunters of egrets that

[57] Ibid.
[58] 'A Strange and Perplexing Conflict of Testimony', *The Times* (26 August 1899), p. 7, The Times Digital Archive.
[59] 'A Strange and Perplexing Conflict of Testimony', *The Times* (26 August 1899), p. 7, The Times Digital Archive.

they would leave eggs and nestlings without parents in order to satisfy the demand for feather fashion.

Later, the Editorial acknowledged that it was widely accepted at the time that only male egrets produced the feathers desired for fashion and questioned why the female egret would be slaughtered as well, particularly since the female is still capable of taking care of the offspring, nurturing more egrets to be killed in the future. The Editorial stated, 'In point of fact, it is far more profitable to spare the egrets than to shoot them.'[60] The main point that the Editorial was making was that a dead egret would only supply a bulk of feathers once, while a living egret would bear feathers annually. While the Editorial did not condemn Thomson's testimony, it presented the paradox of both Gardiner's and Thomson's accounts and concluded by saying that until further evidence could be presented, they would not retract earlier statements about the 'bad taste and inhumanity of women wearing feathers which can only be obtained by the wholesale slaughter of innocent birds.'[61] Earlier in the piece, the Editorial had issued a strong indictment on Victorian women and men alike, stating, 'Hence, in order that women may adorn themselves with "ospreys," men are trained in wanton, wholesale, and revolting cruelty, and a beautiful class of birds is threatened with imminent extinction.'[62] The Editorial acknowledged one of the tensions within the plumage trade; while women were wearing feather fashion, it was men who were doing the hunting, trapping, and killing of birds for their feathers, thereby continuing to supply the milliners with stock.

Just two days after the Editorial was published, the *Times* published two Letters to the Editor, one from Alfred Newton regarding Thomson's account and the other from Watkin Watkins, whose brief paragraph had attached to it a newspaper clipping from Aberdeenshire that said a dead osprey was for sale. Newton's letter was short and he wrote that, while Thomson claimed that Venezuelans had begun to domesticate the egret in order to harvest its feathers humanely, a 'considerable number of expert ornithological collectors' had visited Venezuela and Nicaragua, and it would have been a great achievement in the zoological world to discover that either country's inhabitants had been able to domesticate a wild bird, particularly since several centuries had passed

[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

without any news of other domestication.[63] He also called upon Thomson to provide further details to support his claims from the letter. Thomson's rebuttal, published over a week later, cited the taming of egrets recorded in the publications of famous ornithologists, such as John James Audubon in the United States, and he quoted a passage from Newton's own work, which explained that herons were regularly bred by societies for falconers. His final address to Newton's letter reminded readers that ostrich farming had only begun in the thirty years prior in Australia and that they 'now breed freely under domestication'.[64]

The second half of Thomson's rebuttal was directed primarily towards Gardiner, although he mentioned Tristram's account of the treatment of egrets in India. Gardiner's letter, published a day after the letters from Newton and Watkins, called into question Thomson's whole account, saying that the egret had been 'slaughtered in enormous numbers' for their plumage and that the fact had been confirmed 'by the leading naturalists of England and America and by the Press for at least a dozen years,' continuing that 'the assertion has received no authoritative contradiction.'[65] She cited the work of Lord Lilford, who in 1891 had written that the destruction, and subsequent extinction, of several species of birds was done solely for 'feminine and military headgear' and served no other than a purely ornamental purpose. Gardiner also cited an interview with David Bennett, an egret hunter who had talked about his experience of hunting the birds in Central America, with Nicaragua specifically named. In his account, Bennett said that he and his hunters would take boats out about an hour or two before the birds returned to their nests in the evening. Once the birds returned, Bennett would begin to shoot, followed immediately by his fellow hunters, and each would shoot three or four shots at the birds, scaring them from their nests. While Bennett claimed that the birds flew away unharmed and that the men would then collect the feathers and plumes from the ground, Gardiner submitted that these plumes would 'scarcely satisfy market requirements as to the condition of plumes' due to the fact that some of the plumes would have been tainted by 'discoloured water or the stain of

[63] Alfred Newton and Watkin Watkins, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (28 August 1899), p. 6, The Times Digital Archive.
[64] K. Thomson, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (7 September 1899), p. 8, The Times Digital Archive.
[65] Linda Gardiner, H. B. Tristram, and H. James Rainey, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (29 August 1899), p. 10, The Times Digital Archive.

weeds', by Bennett's own account. Therefore, she found it highly implausible that these plumes would suffice or even be usable for supplying the feather fashion trade.

Gardiner's letter went on to state that an 1898 trade report from the Venezuelan Consular recorded that the destruction of birds for hats was 'really appalling'.[66] After a calculation of how many birds would have to be killed in order to meet the demand for plumage, the report stated that the number of birds killed annually would have been anywhere from 610,385 to 2,469,930. This report would seem to negate Thomson's claim that the Venezuelans had been able to domesticate the egret in order to humanely harvest its feathers. Finally, Gardiner concluded her letter by proving that the trade and sales of dead birds was very much alive. As proof, she offered up an event at a London auction-room just the week prior to her letter, in which over 46,000 hummingbirds were sold, and an additional event in the year prior where 35,000 birds of paradise were sold. In both cases, the birds had been killed, and the feathers were very much real. While fake or ethically sourced plumage had been promoted, and despite the Wild Bird Protection Act of 1880, the inhumane slaughter of exotic birds continued.

Thomson's response to Gardiner indicated that while he acknowledged that the egrets were being shot 'in great numbers, exterminating it even in Florida', he firmly maintained that hunters had realized that it was more prosperous to harvest loose feathers, especially since shooting birds would become costly due to ammunition prices.[67] On the point of the trade report, Thomson rebuffed with a report by a Colombian civil engineer whom he claimed was 'the greatest authority' on the region. The engineer claimed that although the plumage of the 'garza' was a massive export, the breeding grounds provided enough plumage to meet the growing demands, 'and there is no need to kill [the birds], as they themselves drop the feather after the epoch of breeding is over.'[68] Thomson never dealt directly with the report on Venezuela, only submitting the report from Colombia as evidence of his previous domestication claims.

His response concluded with a brief paragraph addressed to Tristram, who had written to the Editor: '… in every species of plume-bearing egret the female during the breeding season has plumes like her mate, though both sexes shed them as soon as ever the young birds begin to leave the nest.'[69] Tristram also wrote that he had never seen

[66] Gardiner, Tristram, and Rainey, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', p. 10.
[67] Thomson, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (7 September 1899), p. 8
[68] Ibid.
[69] Gardiner, Tristram, and Rainey, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', p. 10.

any loose feathers for sale in the city, 'only scalps taken from the living or freshly-shot bird'. Thomson's response to Tristram acknowledged that he had been in error when he said that the female birds had no plumage. His explanation for the misunderstanding was, 'As I am not a naturalist my mistake is very easily accounted for, as while shooting these birds I went by native testimony, which in things of birds is rarely at fault.'[70] He further admitted that he had only recently learned that 'very few plumes now come to [England] with the "scalp" […] attached' and that 'feathers picked up off the ground do certainly get spoiled if allowed to remain long', which harkened back to Gardiner's claim that hunts like Bennett's could hardly have maintained a steady supply of loose feathers to be sold at market. Interestingly, while Thomson had previously claimed that his personal experience outweighed the reports by world-renowned ornithologists and publications by the *Chicago Record*, he very swiftly dismissed his lack of knowledge and passed the blame onto those he had been hunting with, which should have called his entire testimony into question for its authenticity and authoritative voice.

The argument over whether or not feathers should be used for fashion purposes became volatile, particularly due to the way in which feathers were retrieved. At one point, trade representatives claimed that the feathers used for hat trimmings were largely artificial. As Thomson wrote in his letter, these trade representatives later claimed that the feathers came from farms in South America and India, where moulted feathers were collected and shipped globally for trade. Opponents of these trade representatives claimed that these were lies meant to 'reassure a concerned public about the innocence of an industry engaged in the ruthless and indiscriminate exploitation of scores of wild bird species'.[71] Overall, the correspondences above evidence the fact that the Victorian public had no idea how bird feathers were being collected or the science behind what was really going on with the hunting and killing of birds, nor did they properly understand the actual cruelty involved in harvesting bird feathers. The fact this argument could take place in the newspapers demonstrates just the degree of ignorance in public understanding of the impact of feather fashion. The desecration of the egret nests, for example, highlights the fact that female birds were being slaughtered just as much as the male birds, even though the male birds' plumage was more desirable. As will be seen in Chapter Four, in an image from *Punch* magazine that displays a woman crushing egret eggs under her foot, the wanton destruction of birds' habitats in order to

[70] Thomson, 'The Harvest Of The Plumes', *The Times* (7 September 1899), p. 8
[71] Doughty, p. 52.

supply feathers to the fashion industry was a brutal and heartless procedure, for which women were often being blamed.

The Plight of the Ostrich: A Case Study

The egret was not the only bird that was contentious in the debate over whether the birds used in feather fashion could be obtained in a non-lethal or less cruel fashion. Debates over the ostrich and its ability to be 'tamed' emerged in force in the late 1800s. Ostrich farming began in earnest between 1857 and 1860 in the Cape Colony in South Africa.[72] The appeal was apparent – ostrich feathers were in high demand, and the fact that the bird did not need to be killed in order to obtain its feathers, mainly because it was not able to fly, meant that it was easier to obtain its feathers than from its flying brethren. In fact, although feather fashion was already beginning to be questioned before the 1880s, an October 1887 article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* cited a submission from Dr Anna Kingsford regarding the use of ostrich feathers to make wraps instead of sealskin or furs.[73] Her reasoning was that while obtaining sealskin or fur required killing animals, ostrich feathers were obtaining 'painlessly' from the ostrich twice a year, comparing the process to shearing sheep.[74] Dr Kingsford comments demonstrate the degree to which the public believed feather retrieval for fashion was not harming wildlife.

Dr Kingsford's article calls particular attention to the decline of feather fashion in the UK, noting that ribbon and flowers were now in demand, dropping the prices of feathers substantially. Given that the article was written in 1887, I believe that it overlooks the impact of lobbying on feather fashion, disregarding the role that many people played in trying to eradicate feather fashion and the destruction of bird species. Nevertheless, the article points out that while 5,000 to 6,000 women were previously employed in London to prepare and manufacture plumage, at the time of publication, only around 1,000 were able to find similar employment due to the decrease of feather fashion.

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[72] A. J. Beyleveld, 'Ostrich Farming in South Africa', *Agrekon*, 6.3 (1967), pp. 14–16.
[73] 'Ostrich Feathers', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 October 1887, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000098/18871014/016/0011> [accessed 22 February 2024].
[74] It is of note that Anna Kingsford was an influential figure withing the Victorian vegetarian movement. She argued that abstinence from meat laid the foundation for all physical, moral, and spiritual progress.

While Empress Eugenie's influence on Parisian – and thus, London – fashion is mentioned in the article, it is also mentioned that milliners were beginning to use their excess feathers to adorn Boulanger hats and naval hats. As well, trimmings made from the 'fluff' of the centre quill of feathers and 'worked on cord or wire' were particularly of interest for making gigantic fans or screens, as seen at the Queen's Jubilee.[75] Dr Kingsford recommended using the ostrich feathers to make capes and cloaks, as the plumage was naturally straight ('though we have been accustomed to see it artificially curled') and could be dyed any shade or colour. Interstices could be filled with smaller feathers, making the cape 'not only soft and graceful' but having a 'charming finish at the edge.' Feathers were also 'practically impervious to the attacks of moth', meaning that they were relatively indestructible. There were put forward many reasons why feathers were superior in fashion to other forms of animal products.

Dr Kingsford had previously written to the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the 14th September 1887 (published 17th September 1887), saying that while 'Mr Punch' had published 'lines against the massacre of birds for dress', the 'horrors' of the seal fishery were infinitely worse.[76] Kingsford wrote that while sealskin could not be obtained without slaughter, 'There are, however, certain feathers which are obtainable without slaughter, and, I am assured, without cruelty – ostrich feathers, the plumes being cut yearly from the birds, which are kept in large numbers on farms for the purpose and well treated.' For Dr Kingsford, it seemed that gathering ostrich feathers was a rather benign process, and since it did not presumably hurt the animals, it was not just a matter of a lesser 'evil' because it was not 'evil' at all.

The debate regarding ostrich farming was rife with conflicting information. In *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* on the 3rd February 1895, an article ran regarding the collection of fur and feathers.[77] The author discusses ostrich farming, stating that the ostriches are 'thrown down and the feathers wrenched from their bleeding bodies, the former being frequently stained with blood; and after this the down and marabout are torn off.' While the birds do everything they can to escape, the author writes that

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[75] 'Ostrich Feathers', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 October 1887. The writer recalls that the carriage cloak presented to Queen Victoria at her Jubilee was presented by the 'ladies of Heligoland' and was 'remarkable for its great warmth and fairy lightness'. Also referenced are two gigantic screen fans sent from the Cape of Good Hope, also made out of ostrich feathers.

[76] The 'lines' from Mr Punch that Kingsford referred to were published in the 14th September 1887 edition of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in poem form, titled "Mr 'Punch's' Plea for the Birds: An Appeal to the Ladies of England'. For the full text of the poem, see Appendix B.

[77] 'The Economies Of Fur and Feather', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 3 February 1895.

sometimes half a dozen men are employed to hold down one bird. Contrary to some accounts of ostrich farming, the author claims that farmers have said the feathers must be plucked because feathers dealers will only buy the complete quills.

A letter to the editor in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, published the 17th February 1895, responded to the above article and discussed the removal of ostrich feathers on South African ostrich farms.[78] According to the writer, the ostriches were rounded up into a small pen, and the ripe plumes were clipped, while those feathers which are not fully matured were left for the future so that they continued to grow. If the feathers were plucked instead of clipped, 'no feather would grow in that place again', meaning that the bird would become useless for the feather fashion industry. The writer also claims that only wing feathers are removed, and only those in the first row, as well as a small number from the tail. Contrasting with the earlier statements that ostrich farming was a brutal, senseless task, this author suggested that the process was much more humane.

Even though the Victorian public seemed unsure about who to believe about how ostrich feathers were collected, it is imperative to remember that ostriches were wild animals, and their natural instincts would have encouraged them to fight against the taking of their feathers; therefore, the first account, stating that the birds must be held down as their feathers were plucked or snipped, seems very persuasive. While those like Dr Kingsford believed that there were humane ways to harvest bird feathers, evidence rather points to the contrary.

The Economic Value of Birds

Although this thesis does not seek to examine Victorian economics, there is a two-fold economic argument to be made about bird usage that is relevant to the feather fashion debate. To put the argument simply, on the one hand, birds were of great value to farmers (although many farmers could not see this fact) because they would eat destructive insects, while on the other hand, it was a large cost to import feathers from around the world to satisfy the demand for feather fashion. I would first like to address the arguments made for the killing and extermination of birds regarding their status as 'pests' to farmers and the agricultural industry. These arguments do not claim that the

[78] 'Ostriches & Their Feathers', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 17 February 1895, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000079/18950217/038/0008> [accessed 22 February 2024].

collection of feathers was harmless but rather that harming the birds was a necessary by-product of farming practices. This section will consider the argument that birds were viewed as vital to farming processes.

The *Newcastle Courant* published an article in December 1888 regarding the growing bird population and its impact on crops.[79] Entitled 'Feathered Agricultural Pests', the article took particular umbrage with rooks and wood pigeons, stating that these populations had greatly increased due to the Wild Birds Protection Act and 'the sickly sentimentality which has been encouraged by the promoters of that and similar measures.' The main crops suffering from destruction were clover and corn. The article indicated that birds of all kinds were on the increase, apart from hawks and owls, since those were largely hunted by gamekeepers and their numbers kept in check. The Farmers' Club suggested that if hawks and owls were less hunted, they might keep the population of sparrows and other small birds under control. Overall, the article stated that 'diminution and not extinction is what is wanted.' Birds were considered to be harbingers of disease, and 'consequently the more birds the greater the liability to danger' to stock.

Contrasting these views, the *Hampshire Telegraph* published an article in December 1896, titled 'Our Feathered Friends: Their Economic Value'.[80] A mere decade after the aforementioned farmers' meeting, the Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society declared that 'were it not for their feathered friends the world would be practically devoid of vegetable life.' Birds were effective in controlling grubs and insects, and they also aided in seed dispersal. The Society believed that birds had a certain utility, and they lamented the fact that farmers waged war against birds 'owing to the small quantity of seeds or corn they destroyed, entirely overlooking the good they did in the destruction of large quantities of insects and worms.' Dr J. E. Kelso, who presented the paper on the economic value of birds, proposed appealing to the maternal instinct of women, particularly those of 'high social position', to discourage the use of birds' plumage. In response, the President of the Society noted that 'owing to the feeling

[79] 'Feathered Agricultural Pests', *Newcastle Courant*, 15 December 1888, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000086/18881215/033/0004> [accessed 26 February 2024].
[80] 'Our Feathered Friends', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 5 December 1896, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000069/18961205/026/0006> [accessed 26 February 2024].

prevailing against cruelty, dealers were in the habit of telling ladies that the plumage was artificial' when it was, in fact, real.[81]

Even as early as 1866, the value of bird life was recognized by naturalists. In March of that year, the *Hampshire Telegraph* published an article titled 'Our Feathered Friends and Their Use.'[82] The article underscored the significant role of birds, particularly in crop protection. Many types of insects posed a threat to crops, but the bird population was known to 'check the undue increase of the insect tribes (a fact which observation and experience confirm)'. Swallows, swifts, and martins, in particular, were noted for their role in destroying 'millions of insects every day'. The writer recounted an incident where a friend shot a swift and 'found its bill and throat apparently so choked up with flies, that he wondered greatly how it was able to breathe.' Because birds consumed the very insects which destroyed crops, they had a high value in the agricultural industry, even if that was not always recognised.

The foolishness of destroying birds was a hotly debated topic, and the conversations primarily revolved around how feather fashion was contributing to the destruction of birds. An article in the *South Wales Daily News* from the 15th January 1894 recounts an evening with the Humanitarian League, wherein a paper by Miss Edith Carrington, entitled 'Feathered Women; or the Extermination of Birds', was read aloud by the secretary of the league.[83] Carrington was highly critical of the destruction of birds, calling it 'the most foolish' of 'all the foolish infatuations which induced men to sacrifice their higher interests to the caprice of the moment'. This shift to blaming men was not a common phenomenon. Carrington continued, asserting that '[t]he lower animals should no longer be regarded as something to eat, to wear, to shoot.' 'Lower animals', in this situation, included birds, and Carrington wrote that the 'feathered creation met with the greatest cruelty', many of the species being 'rapidly destroyed'.

Carrington was particularly critical of women, declaring them 'responsible for the countless millions of birds that were imported from all parts of the world' for fashion. The treatment of the birds' carcasses was appalling: 'The wings of sparrows, robins, and other birds were taken and dyed in bright colours. Sea-gulls and kittiwakes

[81] The lies that women were told about the plumage trade will be discussed further in Chapter Five.
[82] 'Our Feathered Friends and Their Use', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 17 March 1866, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000069/18660317/022/0006> [accessed 10 April 2024].
[83] 'Feathered Women', *South Wales Daily News*, 15 January 1894, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000919/18940115/170/0006> [accessed 19 February 2024].

perhaps paid the heaviest toll, and their wing were frequently torn off before they were dead.' Even in 1894, the toll that the feather fashion industry was taking on certain species of birds was stark; should the market continue on its trend, 'in fifty years, [the skylark] would be destroyed.' Carrington's paper finished with a damning and cautionary proclamation, particularly addressed to farmers who were wrongly destroying birds that they thought were eating their crops: 'there was a danger of a birdless world, which meant an uninhabitable one, through the host of small enemies that would arise.' As will be discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis, the destruction of birds led to the rise of pests like wireworms, snails, and slugs, all of which caused the destruction of crops.

Both Carrington and Kelso brought to light the impact that feather fashion was having on bird life, calling on women to stop wearing feathers due to the detrimental impact of feather fashion. As examined earlier in this chapter, feather fashion was pervasive in the Victorian period, and the importation of feathers was a booming industry. As discussed in Doughty's *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation*, it is difficult to track down exact figures on the importation of feathers to the United Kingdom during the Victorian period.[84] What is evident through the records that are available is that ornamental plumage was a large trade until World War I, when plumage importation dropped significantly. France held a large majority of the imports into the United Kingdom, from 250,000 pounds annually in the 1880s to 360,000 pounds annually in the 1890s, showing that despite conservationist movements, feathers were still in high demand into the early 1900s.[85] All told, excluding South African exportation of ostrich feathers, the United Kingdom roughly imported around 40 million pounds of feathers between 1870 and 1920.[86] Ornamental plumage that was being imported into the United Kingdom was largely supplied by Cape Colony farms and India from 1872-1880, with importation lines opening up to France and Holland from 1881-1890. Small quantities were also imported from the United States and Latin America from 1891-1900, although the majority of feathers transported between the United States and the United Kingdom were being sent *to* the United States, in the form

[84] Doughty, p. 25.
[85] Although this thesis does not examine post-Victorian importation, it is of note that Doughty claims that feather importation topped 500,000 pounds annually between 1900 and 1910, this just from France.
[86] Doughty, p. 25. It is worth noting here that Doughty references T. Gilbert Pearson, who recorded nearly twice as many feathers being imported into France during that same period.

of treated and untreated feather millinery.[87] As of Doughty's book in 1975, '[n]o exhaustive list of birds used by the trade has been compiled, and such a compilation would be a laborious task, involving analysis of original customs declarations, interpretation of milliners' lists and a search of trade and ornithological literature.'[88] Further research into the amount of feathers coming into the UK would prove fruitful to understanding just how enormous the feather fashion industry was during the time period.

The Exploitation of Women in Millineries

While men were busy profiting from the sale of bird carcasses and feathers, they were also busy making money off the workers in the millineries and factories that created feather fashion during the Victorian period, further leading to the financial entrapment and exploitation of women.[89] It should not be lost on the reader that the very people who made fancy, feathered hats were women, particularly vulnerable women whose working conditions did not improve with the Factory Act of 1844.[90] For the first time, women were included in the Factory Acts, with the Act stating that women should work no more than twelve hours each day during the week and nine hours on Saturdays. In 1847, a further Factories Act was passed, known as the Ten Hours Act, and, as the name suggests, it limited the working hours of women and children to ten hours per day.[91] As difficult as the working conditions of the Victorian period might seem to be to a modern reader, the conditions of the factories within which the women worked were even worse.

For the Victorian woman, factory work was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, working allowed for a certain amount of freedom and independence, particularly in learning a specific trade; on the other hand, the long hours, having to take work home, and looking after a family proved difficult. Furthermore, a woman's status was not necessarily considered to be raised by taking on work. Patriarchal views, that a

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[87] Doughty, pp. 26-7.
[88] Doughty, p. 29.
[89] For more information on the trapping of women by societal expectations and through strict adherence to gendered roles in Victorian society, see Chapters One and Two of this thesis.
[90] 'Later Factory Legislation' <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/laterfactoryleg/> [accessed 15 May 2024].
[91] Ibid. For more information on how the Factory Acts impacted women, see B. L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, 'The Women's Rights Opposition Movement, 1874-1901', in *A History of Factory Legislation*, 2nd edn (P. S. King & Son, 1911), pp. 173–99.

woman's place was at home, pervaded, and although women were engaging in high-class traditions like dressmaking, they were rarely, if ever, seen as being of the same station as a man in similar employment. With that said, as Wendy Gamber notes in *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930*, 'with the possible exception of prostitution, no trade contained larger numbers of female proprietors' than dressmakers and milliners.[92] Gamber continues, 'If the woman of fashion was a victim of oppression, the woman who made fashion appeared to enjoy an enviable independence.'[93] Here, the word 'appeared' becomes of great importance, as although those women in the role of proprietors did make money, many other women were often relegated to ''unskilled', poorly paid jobs that offered few prospects for advancement and reinforced their dependence on marriage.'[94]

Operating within the millinery trade came with a few advantages, such as the possibility of one day being able to open one's own shop; however, this prospect was usually only available to those coming from economic privilege (i.e., family money), as opposed to 'working the way up the ranks'. Nevertheless, the appeal of the millinery trade to many women was that it offered 'highly skilled work, creative labor, relatively high wages, and the very real possibility of opening an establishment of one's own some day.'[95] Millinery offered what Gamber refers to as a 'female economy', wherein women were able to make a place for themselves and use their sex to their advantage. Unfortunately, this hold on the millinery trade did not last forever; by the end of the nineteenth century, the revolution of mass production, which was largely held and operated by men, overtook the small-scale production of millinery trade that had been occupied by women, and large-scale retailing, also owned and operated by men, put many small shops out of business.[96]

I would like to highlight here the almost radical ideology purported by female tradeswomen. As Gamber notes, successful tradeswomen 'implicitly rejected both the middle-class tenet of domesticity […] and the working-class ideal of the family

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[92] Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.
[93] Ibid, p. 2.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid, p. 3. For more information on the conditions that women faced in 'female-oriented' professions like dressmaking and sewing, see Deborah Denenholz Morse, 'Stitching Repentence, Sewing Rebellion: Seamstresses and Fallen Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction', in *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Vanessa D. Dickerson, Origins of Modernism: Garland Studies in British Literature (Garland Publishing Inc., 1995), VII, 27–73.

wage'.[97] In rejecting both the idea that a woman's place was in the home and the idea that men should be the breadwinners of the family, the female tradeswoman was attempting to set up her own place in a society that, from a young age, told her that she should be a good daughter, wife, and mother. Indeed, many of the pleas to women regarding the dismantling of the feather fashion trade implored them to consider their feminine side and their maternal instincts, asking them to put traditional patriarchal ideals above their desire to fit in with the latest trends. Female tradeswomen appeared to reject these traditional patriarchal ideals, instead opting to try to forge their own culture of feminine authority.

Unfortunately, the fight for independence through becoming a tradeswoman meant being depicted as upstarts and either as 'distressed gentlewomen', who 'failed to challenge cherished stereotypes of female dependency', or 'ambitious upstarts of working-class origins', who 'appeared in popular culture not as victims but as villains' due to their appearance as 'vulgar, often disreputable women'.[98] Because of their fight for the right to independence, female tradeswomen were often regarded as disreputable or disrespected due to the presumption that they were seeking to defy the gender imperatives placed upon them in a male-dominated world. Although there are not many accounts in popular literature surrounding the plight of the tradeswoman, what follows is a case study of one particular factory worker who exposed some of the working conditions in the newspaper at the time.

This case study, that of a worker in Crewe, underscores the substantial strain that women were placed under in the factories. In a series of letters to *The Crewe Chronicle*, a writer signing as 'Crewe Factory Girl' (later revealed to be worker Ada Nield Chew, hereafter referred to as Nield), wrote about the conditions in factories where women worked, particularly tailoresses, who would have been working alongside women in millineries. '[U]nder-paid, over-worked' girls were paid 'fearfully low' wages and this resulted in a bland existence. Instead of being able to better themselves through '[c]ultivation of the mind', Neild wrote, 'We eat, we sleep, we work, endlessly, ceaselessly work, from Monday morning till Saturday night, without remission.' She

[97] Gamber, p. 6.
[98] Gamber, p. 6.

also wrote that sleep was neglected in order to meet base needs, like eating. Instead of a living wage, women were making a 'lingering, dying wage'.[99]

While hesitant to give exact information on wages, conditions, and the amount of work done for fear of being outed, Nield wrote that she was 'emphasising – for it must already be known – the fact that we are suffering from a great evil which stands in need of redressing.' Divulging some information, Nield wrote that women workers were paid by the garment, instead of by the hour, which meant that wages could vary greatly, meaning they were not a secure source of income. While the average tradesman could earn up to eighteen shillings a week, women at the factory were paid just eight shillings a week, with a considerable minority averaging below five shillings a week.[100] Moreover, women were unable to escape poverty (Nield writes that they '[have] quite as often to do without') and thus had to work late into life, when 'eyes have grown too dim to thread the everlasting needle, and to guide the worn fingers over the accustomed task.'

With busy seasons and 'slack' seasons fluctuating throughout the year, Nield wrote that most women had to take work home with them due to the legal restrictions on factory working times. She wrote, '[h]ome-work, then, is the only resource of the poor slave who had the misfortune to adopt 'finishing' as a means of earning a livelihood.' Therefore, most women were working around fourteen to fifteen hours a day instead of the legal nine to twelve. Were factory positions taken by men, Nield argued, not only would there be an eight-hour workday, but they would 'have to be paid on a very different scale.' Alongside tending to families, women working in finishing factories had excruciatingly long days of work. Nield asks,

> Are you prepared, my reader, to come and work hard with us 9 hours in the factory, and then to come home with us and begin again, and sew till you can sew no longer, from sheer fatigue – such fatigue as some of you, I hope have not felt – and then to rise early again with some of us and do a little more before it is time to wend our way back for another day of it.[101]

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[99] Ada Nield Chew, 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe', *The Crewe Chronicle*, 5 May 1894, section Correspondence, British Newspaper Archive.
[100] Ada Nield Chew, 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe', *The Crewe Chronicle*, 19 May 1894, section Correspondence, British Newspaper Archive.
[101] Ada Nield Chew, 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe', *The Crewe Chronicle*, 23 June 1894, section Correspondence, British Newspaper Archive.

Although this scenario relates to the busy season in the factories, Nield indicates that this is not an uncommon situation for the women. During the off-season, or 'slack season', as she calls it, Nield writes that many of the factory workers, though arriving to work in a timely manner, are unable to secure clothes to work on and are therefore made to wait until a garment becomes available. In order to acquire work, the women must 'take advantage of each other', as Nield writes, clamouring for a garment in a way that she says is debasing, for the 'more respectable we appear to be, the less noise we make, the less we parade our private affairs, the less chance we have of getting anything to do.' [102] Because some women who were louder or suffering more were often given more work than the other women, some women could make 'a good week's wage' while others 'should not get a third of a living'.

Furthermore, the women were required to purchase the materials for their work out of their own money, meaning their take-home pay was substantially less than a living wage. Speaking of a living wage, Nield writes a revolutionary comment for the time, saying that the manager, assistant manager, 'and all the ladies and gentlemen under them who get a living wage all year round, no matter what kind of orders may be in process of execution, should have their wages reduced in exact proportion to the price paid the factory girl, and of the saving effected thereby the factory girl should receive her due share.'[103] Nield essentially says that the factory girls should not be shouldering the brunt of the costs, when everyone above them is being paid a living wage and able to manage financially in society. Powerfully, Nield continues later in her letter, 'the reason we do not get [a living wage] is that somebody who has money and power is taking advantage of our weak, unorganised, dependent state to rob us of our right.' While Nield is not in favour of strike action, she does call for the workers to unionise and stand up for their dwindling and lost wages. Overall, Nield's account asks one question of the treatment of women in the factories: 'Does that tend to elevate or demoralise?'[104]

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[102] Ada Nield Chew, 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe', *The Crewe Chronicle*, 30 June 1894, section Correspondence, British Newspaper Archive.
[103] Ada Nield Chew, 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe', *The Crewe Chronicle*, 14 July 1894, section Correspondence, British Newspaper Archive.
[104] Ada Nield Chew, 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe', *The Crewe Chronicle*, 30 June 1894, section Correspondence, British Newspaper Archive.

Conclusion

While this chapter has primarily focused on the treatment of birds, looking at the case studies of egrets and ostriches, I have also shown that the plight of Victorian women is closely linked to the plight of birds. Although women were being blamed for the drive of feather fashion, I have shown that the primary designers of feather fashion were the male French dressmakers, whose designs took the world by storm, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States. Why, then, were women blamed for the feather fashion craze when it was men designing and creating feather fashion? Some women, particularly those of the upper classes of society, were often engaged in the latest trends, and some even went so far as to own their own shops, but it was primarily men who were doing the hunting, shooting, importing, and selling feathers, while the women who were involved in the trade were often relegated to the cleaning and production of feathers for millinery purposes.

Even though women were only just coming into the workforce en masse, their confinement to the domestic sphere continued in the factories, relegating them to the "women's work" of delicately binding feathers together to make them appear fuller and more beautiful before being sent off the milliners. Their treatment in the factories was dire, and many of the women often had to take work home with them in order to complete orders in time, despite this being against the Factory Acts of the time. As Ada Nield demonstrated in her letters to *The Crewe Chronicle*, women were mistreated, unable or barely able to make a living wage, and overworked, despite the claims that Gamber made that women in millinery trades were able to reach comfortable financial independence. The lived experience of the women in the factories kept them in the domestic sphere and often unable to progress up the social ladder.

Those who were already on the social ladder were the most likely to be the ones wearing feather fashion in the first instance, with feather fashion trickling down into all social classes in some way or another, and although there were numerous debates about the distasteful practices surrounding the hunting and killing of birds, feather fashion persisted throughout the late nineteenth century. Evidence of this can be seen in the many fashion periodicals of the day. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the more satirical responses to feather fashion, particular in the blaming of women for wearing feather fashion in the first place.

Chapter Four

Satirical Responses to Women and Feather Fashion in Punch Magazine

'What cares she that those wings were torn/ From shuddering things, of plumage shorn/ To make *her* plumes imposing?'[1]

Introduction

In his 1975 book on feather fashion, Robin Doughty notes, 'If plumes were costly looking, then ladies demanded them by the crateload, and the elegant trimmings pictured regularly in journals meant that bird populations all over the world fell under the gun.'[2] The yearning for more and more feathers to keep up with the fashions spreading through magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, as Doughty notes, 'created a spectre of suffering and extinction over the breeding grounds of many species' of birds.[3] While Doughty makes connections regarding the ecological repercussions of feather fashion, his blame of women is a feature that commonly recurs throughout the nineteenth century as well. Feather fashion (and subsequent blaming of women for the destruction it caused) was not just a nineteenth-century speciality; feather fashion's origins in Western Europe can be dated back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while other countries have much longer traditions using feathers. What was new in the Victorian period was the extent to which women were blamed for feather fashion's negative impacts.

In 1885, the *Montrose Review* published an article entitled 'Feathers and the Feather Industry'. The opening line states, 'The taste for feathers is not an outcome of modern civilisation.'[4] The article goes on to say that 'plumes, beautiful in colour or in form, have been prized as personal ornaments alike by savage and civilised man in all ages.' Pharaohs wore ostrich feathers, chiefs of African tribes wore headdresses made with things like turaco feathers, high-ranked Mexicans were allowed to wear the feathers of the quetzal, and the Chinese frequently used peacock feathers as adornment.

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[1] 'A Bird of Prey', in *Punch, or the London Chivari* (Bradbury, Agnew, & Co., 1892), CII, 230 <http://archive.org/details/punchvol102a103lemouoft> [accessed 7 February 2019].
[2] Doughty, p. 15.
[3] Ibid.
[4] 'Feathers and the Feather Industry', *Montrose Review*, 31 July 1885, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001421/18850731/092/0007> [accessed 30 January 2024].

Even the Prince of Wales had three ostrich feathers on his crest. The ostrich feather in particular was quite sought after due to its use by royalty, starting with Edward, the Black Prince.[5] The *Montrose Review* article claims that feather fashion first came into the UK in the thirteenth century, and for approximately two centuries, only men wore bird feathers. Women began wearing the feathers during the time of Henry VIII, as court attire, and Grant Allen (a Canadian scientist who publicly promoted the idea of evolution in the nineteenth century in England) wrote, 'Have we not here a direct survival from the simple ornaments of the savage chief?' In *The Collected Works of Grant Allen*, Allen's words are taken even further:

> Feathers form almost universal ornaments of savage or civilised humanity. […] And now, in our barbarous civilisation, millions of humming-birds from Trinidad and South America come yearly to Europe for the bonnets of our English ladies; ostrich-farms at the Cape supply our savage court-dress; and marabou plumes decorate the heads of our Belgravian beauties. The bird-of-paradise forms a regular article of commerce; grebe and swans' down line our mantles and jackets; even our very funerals are surmounted with the black-dyed nodding plumage of tropical birds. Our military officials wear feathers as the mark of highest distinction; and the heir-apparent to the British crown uses them as his armorial cognisance.[6]

Looking at the various uses of bird feathers in the UK during the nineteenth century, it is no wonder that birds faced eradication. Many birds were killed to obtain their plumage, and the cost of imported feathers skyrocketed due to demand. Feather fashion had been around long before the nineteenth century, but something shifted with the industrialisation of the nineteenth century, wherein access to travel and the ability to import and export around the world made feather fashion more accessible to women in nineteenth-century Britain.

Returning to the *Montrose Review*, the author of the article references P. L. Simmonds' report in the *Society of Arts Journal* of 19th June 1885, which stated that the importation of bird feathers and skins had increased from £800,000 in 1875 to over £2m

[5] 'Ostrich Feather Trade', *City of London* <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/london-metropolitan-archives/collections/www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/london-metropolitan-archives/collections/ostrich-feather-trade> [accessed 30 January 2024].
[6] Grant Allen, 'The Colour-Sense: Its Origin and Development', in *The Collected Works of Grant Allen* (Delphi Classics, 2017), chapter XII, paragraph 36.

in 1883.[7] The article also indicates that about a million and a half bird skins were being imported into the UK every year, and from that number, about a quarter of a million of them were from hummingbirds. The rest of the skins were made up of parrots, sunbirds, kingfishers, orioles, and birds of paradise. Even as early as 1885, however, extinction was becoming a concept worth exploring in the news. The article says that most feathers being imported into the UK in 1883 came from ostriches and refers to the fact that twenty years prior, ostriches in North Africa were still being hunted and killed for their feathers, meaning that ostriches were at the brink of extinction there. The article refers to the fact – discussed in the previous chapter – that Cape farmers had discovered that they could domesticate the ostrich, breeding them in captivity and obtaining their feathers without killing them. The article suggests this practice offers a sustainable supply of feathers: 'The plumes had only to be cut off near the skin, and the stumps pulled out afterwards when fully ripe, to make way for the growth of a second crop of feathers.' The article suggests that this method means harvesting could take place twice a year, making ostrich farming a much more lucrative procedure than hunting. Despite some reporting of such methods, hunting persisted globally to meet the high demand for feathers for fashion, and public response to feather fashion included extremely negative depictions.

In June 1890, the *Morning Post* published an article on the use of feathers in fashion that focuses on the distinction between nature and artificiality, saying,

> There is something artificial in the employment, for aesthetic purposes, of articles which are not manufactured, but have already accomplished a similar object in their natural sphere, and it sounds, as it were, the note of that similarity of artistic feeling which runs through the whole animal creation, when we find man using for his personal adornment those brilliant or graceful baubles which were originally designed to charm the fastidious eyes of hen birds and to induce them to choose their mates.[8]

The article reveals important facts about feather fashion's long history and the labour that went into it, maintaining that while feathers could be regarded from a commercial standpoint, feathers had largely been employed for ornamental purposes, which was the

[7] In today's currency, this importation would have roughly increased from £115m in 1875 to £304.7m in 1883.

[8] 'Feathers', *Morning Post*, 9 June 1890, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000174/18900609/004/0002> [accessed 7 February 2024].

focal point of the article. The article mentions that peacock and ostrich feathers were found in the Book of Job, and that the Egyptians saw ostrich feathers as a symbol of justice since 'the width of the webs is equally balanced on each side of the shaft.' While feathers and bird skins had often been used for garments around the world, most of their use was for warmth until the close of the thirteenth century. While feathers were worn in the conical caps that featured during the reigns of Edward III and Richard II, by the time of Henry V, they became part of the military headdresses. By the fifteenth century, during the reign of Henry VIII, ladies began wearing feathers in their bonnets, and by Elizabeth I's reign, Sir Walter Raleigh's feathered cap, fastened with a ruby and pearl drop, became a prominent image. While feathers had been predominantly worn by men, by the Tudor period, they began to accessorise and adorn female fashion. In the 1830s, the article notes that an unkind epigram was published, which read as follows:

> "Wit is a feather," Pope has said,
> And females never doubt it;
> For those who've least within the head
> Display the most without it.

This expression of 'wit is a feather' comes from Pope's poem which says that an honest man is noble.[9] The comparison suggests the fickleness of wit, and the author of the epigram is, rather shrewdly, suggesting that the fact women take the phrase at face value – that feathers denote wit – suggests that they are of lesser intelligence. Furthermore, the article discusses the use of 'inferior' feathers, perhaps suggesting that women who wear feathers are, in fact, less intelligent for not knowing that the feathers they wear are significantly manufactured and not natural. The article goes on to talk about the preparation of the feathers for sale, starting first with the cleaning process. From there, they were frequently dyed, pared, or scraped, bleached, and curled. A great deal of skill was required to bring ostrich feathers up to scratch, with full, rich, long feathers being produced through the joining of scraps and fragments of inferior feathers.[10] The use of such 'inferior' feathers did nothing to alleviate the growing public outrage against the burgeoning feather fashion industry.

[9] The first line is a nod to Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, where he writes, 'A wit's a feather and a chief's a rod/But an honest man's the noblest work of God'.
[10] Indeed, many of the advertisements I found in the British Newspaper Archives were for long ostrich feathers that had been cleaned, curled, and dyed.

This chapter examines some public responses to feather fashion, focusing primarily on views shared in *Punch, or the London Charivari* during the Victorian period.[11] One of the most prolific publications to come out of the Victorian period, *Punch* magazine was founded in 1841 and fashioned after a French satirical magazine, *Le Charivari*. *Punch* quickly became a radical source of entertainment in the Victorian period, and the magazine was so popular that it ran until its completion in 2002.[12] Of *Punch*, M. H. Spielmann wrote in *The History of 'Punch'* that *Punch*'s 'sympathy for the poor, the starving, the ill-housed, and the oppressed; for the ill-paid curate and the worse-paid clerk; for the sempstress, the governess, the shop-girl, has been with him not only a religion, but a passion.'[13] While most of what was published in *Punch* might be considered Horatian satire, peppered with light-hearted jabs and ridicule, the caricatures of women and their relationship with birds reveals a lot about contemporary attitudes towards women's involvement in feather fashion that bordered on cruel, at times.[14]

While *Punch* featured contributions from many well-known satirists, both authors and artists, one artist in particular drew many connections between women and the birds that they were wearing. Edward Linley Sambourne was the only *Punch* cartoonist who offered a sustained focus on the rise of female feather fashion, particularly in his collection of illustrations called 'Mr. Punch's Designs After Nature'. Sambourne's images follow the fashion trends through the Victorian period, with the explosion of feathers in the fashion industry most prominently from the 1860s, culminating in a severe tension in society by the 1890s, as evidenced in Sambourne's depictions and the written context within which the depictions are found. I would classify most of these portrayals as caricatures, that contain exaggerated features to make a point, and this is in line with much of what was being published in *Punch*. As Spielmann wrote,

> … the greatest caricature […] is necessarily that which goes straightest to the heart and mind. No drawing is true caricature which does not make the beholder

[11] Hereafter, this magazine will simply be referred to as *Punch* or *Punch* magazine.
[12] The magazine's initial reception was varied, according to M. H. Spielmann, who recounted a number of early readers who believed that the magazine wouldn't last more than a few weeks.
[13] M. H. Spielmann, *The History of 'Punch'* (Cassell & Co., 1895), p. 3.
[14] *Punch*'s own website recounts that by the 1860s, the magazine had become more mild and less inclined to harsh criticisms; however, much of the satire directed towards women who wore feather fashion had quite an edge to it. See 'A Brief History', *PUNCH Magazine Cartoon Archive* <https://magazine.punch.co.uk/p/a-brief-history> [accessed 3 April 2024] for more information on the magazine's history.

> *think*, whether it springs simply from good-humour or has its source in the passion of contempt, hatred, or revenge, or hope or despair. [15]

This chapter will take the reader on a visual journey through a selection of Sambourne's cartoons to show the relationship between women and feather fashion in the Victorian period. It will also highlight the escalation of bird destruction that would eventually lead to the extinction of some bird species and show some of the thoughts that were circulating in the Victorian period surrounding feather fashion and women.

Examining the Images

While Sambourne published images on far more subjects than just women and birds, some of his most striking images come from the 'Designs After Nature' series mentioned above. Sambourne highlighted a rather ironic connection between women and the work that they did, since many of the factory workers employed to help create feather fashion were women.[16] Magazines like *Punch* featured cartoons of women both as birds and wearing birds, engaging with and emphasising the duality and paradoxical nature of feather fashion; the birds being slaughtered were being pointed to as analogous to feminine features and attributes, whilst the women were adorning themselves with and devastating the populations of the very birds to which they were being compared.[17] A further paradox is apparent when we consider that while female feather fashion persisted throughout the Victorian period, opposition to it came from a female-led conservationist movement, a phenomenon rare for the time due to the marginalisation of women in the political sphere.[18] As Joan Nunn has written,

> Alongside women's demands for greater intellectual and physical freedom and the desire for an 'artistic' style of dress came admiration for a new type of beauty: the tiny, frail creature with minute hands and feet, represented by Dickens' young heroines, gave way to the type painted by Watts and Leighton and described by Mrs Oliphant in her novel *At his Gates* in 1872 as 'a full-

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[15] Spielmann, p. 5.
[16] For more information on women in millinery factories, see Chapter Three of this thesis.
[17] For more depictions of women as birds in *Punch* magazine, see: 'Edward Linley Sambourne Cartoons from Punch Magazine', *PUNCH Magazine Cartoon Archive* <https://punch.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Edward-Linley-Sambourne-Cartoons/G0000.TjGSdWDEsM/I0000FW02iEBiAXQ> [accessed 28 March 2019].
[18] The position of women in political societies will be discussed further in Chapter Five of this thesis.

> blown Rubens beauty, of the class that has superseded the gentler pensive heroine in these days.'[19]

The most 'feminine' attributes of clothing from the previous centuries, with their softness indicating a demure nature, were being replaced with more masculine traits, and this idea fits in with *Punch*'s criticism of those women who were participating in the exploitation and extermination of birds for feather fashion.

In the following series of eight pictures drawn by Sambourne for *Punch*, each image taken in turn across the series shows the woman progressively turning into a bird, culminating in a striking image where the woman has become the bird, followed by the final image, wherein the woman is actively partaking in the destruction of the bird for her pleasure. It is of note that of the eight images, only one image has contextual information surrounding it in the pages of the magazine; the majority of images that will be discussed in this chapter had no contextual information but rather, the magazine featured the images prominently – and perhaps, boldly – by themselves.[20]

[19] Nunn, *Fashion in Costume*, p. 138.
[20] It is unknown whether the decision to feature the images by themselves was intentional or a matter of utilising and maximising space in the magazine. Regardless, the images remain all the more striking and intriguing for not having contextual information surrounding them.

Figure 14: Published 21st December 1867.

In this first bird image from Sambourne, published in the 21st December 1867 issue of *Punch*, there are several different elements of bird feathers being worn by a woman walking down a street that draw the eye. The woman is carrying a parasol that appears to be covered in peacock feathers, while behind her trails an enormous train, also composed of peacock feathers, which was in line with the fashion of the time.[21] The look is complemented by feathers shaped to look like wings that fall by her side, while her headpiece has been arranged to resemble a peacock's pointed beak, rounded head, and small crest of stiff head feathers. Furthermore, an 'eye' has been mounted on the cap to give the illusion that the headpiece is actually a peacock's head. The focal point of her head is the peacock's head, with the woman's face turned and, therefore, partially obscured, and while the nose of the male onlooker in the forefront of the

[21] Nunn makes note that by the 1860s, the back skirt of women's dresses 'was draped and decorated even more elaborately and finished, except for active sport, with a train reminiscent of a peacock trailing his closed tail' (p. 153).

picture is rounded, the nose of the woman wearing the peacock feathers appears more pointed, mimicking the beak of the bird on top of her head.

The caption to this picture reads, 'As birds' feathers and train dresses are all the go, Miss Swellington adopts one of Nature's Own Designs.' It is worth noting here the paradox occurring in this picture; the *woman* is wearing *male* peacock feathers, which were traditionally utilised by *male* peacocks to attract a *female* mate, and the *woman* is, in turn, drawing the attention of *male* viewers (see the two male onlookers in the forefront and background of the picture). The use of male birds' plumage on human women upends the natural order, wherein the male of the species uses decoration to attract a mate.

Punch's 'Designs After Nature' were a stark, though satirical, commentary on how far the fashion industry – and women, in particular – would go to destroy the beauty of nature whilst, ironically, trying to emulate it. Although reports about birds being shot for sport or science were numerous, as I have already discussed, newspaper reports and Letters to the Editor largely blamed women and feather fashion for the country's absurdly large importation and use of feathers. One source estimated that by 1921, around 64,000 tonnes of bird skins had been imported into London during just half a century for the feather fashion trade.[22] Laws on bird protection during the Victorian period were abundant, to the point that James Marchant and Watkin Watkins, authors and social reformers, published a plain English examination of all of the laws that had been introduced by 1896, arguing that the common man would not be able to understand the complex Parliamentary laws banning the hunting of specific birds during specific seasons.[23] Still, newspapers reported weekly on the fines being handed out to hunters who had killed wild birds in order to make some extra money, and still, women were being blamed for fuelling the craze for feathered hats, dresses, and accessories. While men were hunting, trapping, and killing the birds, and men were ultimately designing the fashions and owning the auction houses and millinery factories through which the feathers were being processed, the blame was pointed firmly at the women who were wearing the feathers and, such critics argued, keeping the demand high.

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[22] Tessa Boase, 'Hats off to the Women behind the Feather Ban', *The Telegraph*, 29 June 2021 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/original-woke-women-took-cruel-fashion-feathers/> [accessed 12 July 2023].

[23] For more information on Parliamentary laws protecting birds during the Victorian period, see Chapter Five of this thesis or refer to James Robert Vernam Marchant and Watkin Watkins, *Wild Birds Protection Acts, 1880-1896* (R.H. Porter, 1897) <http://archive.org/details/wildbirdsprotec00watkgoog>.

We can see consistently the focus on women's culpability in feather fashion often focused on their stupidity. In *Punch*'s 14th December 1867 issue, the following was written on feather fashion, referring to a French article that stated that a woman should wear a gallon of swansdown:

> [W]hen covered with so vast a quantity of swansdown, would she look more like a little duck or a great goose? Fine feathers may make fine birds, but can they ever make fine ladies? And is it not a pity that fine birds should be destroyed for the mere sake of their fine feathers? Now that swansdown is in fashion, swans everywhere will be slaughtered.[24]

This quotation seems to be ridiculing women for following absurd fashion trends, indicating that what came out of French fashion houses would be emulated across the world, leading to the further extermination of bird species. The second line cited, which asks, 'Fine feathers may make fine birds, but can they ever make fine ladies?', refers to a French proverb dating back to the sixteenth century that indicates that one's clothes 'confer beauty or status on the wearer'.[25] The question is essentially asking whether the wearing of feathers can truly make women 'fine', or elevated in their station due to the beauty that the feathers confer upon them, particularly given that they are enabled by undeniable cruelty: birds – in this case, swans – would be slaughtered in order to reach that potential elevation.

Further along, the passage from *Punch* reads: 'Clearly, anyone who sings *Oh, Would I were a Bird!* would run into great danger while feathers are so fashionable. At least one specially would shrink from being metamorphosed into any of the birds whose names are catalogued.'[26] The author is referring to a popular song and seems to be suggesting here the ridiculousness of the notion that one would want to emulate or be associated with birds that are being slaughtered. Wearing feathers appears to be equated with looking like a bird, and wanting to look like a bird is nothing to aspire to, according to this author. Furthermore, the above picture (Figure 1) shows that the process of the woman in *Punch* turning into a bird is indeed like a metamorphosis, a

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[24] 'Fashionable Avicide', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 14 December 1867, p. 239.
[25] 'Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, ed. by John Simpson and Jennifer Speake, 5th edn (Oxford University Press, 2008) <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199539536.001.0001/acref-9780199539536-e-784> [accessed 4 April 2024]. This phrase is also discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, in the section on *Jane Eyre*.
[26] 'Fashionable Avicide', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 14 December 1867, p. 239.

clear *transformation* from a feather-wearing woman into a bird itself, furthering the ridiculous nature of the woman-bird.

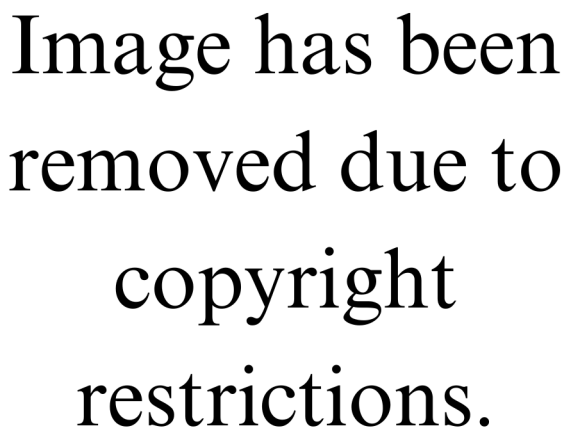

Figure 15: Published 28th March 1868.

In March of 1868, Sambourne published an image of a woman wearing the entire body of a swan on her own body, with its head protruding from her hair, its wings lying flat against her own, reminiscent of the beret sleeve popular from 1829-35.[27] Its webbed feet dangled from her waist, while her own hands were hidden. The woman's hair was knotted and up, in order to elongate the head, making the woman's head into the neck of the swan. Dangling from the woman's ears, one can see mini webbed feet as earrings. The caption read, 'This little duck wears an effective aquatic jacket, strongly recommended for the boating season.' The woman is slowly becoming one with the bird, and the proportions of the bird to the woman appear quite intentional. For example, while the peacock's beak protruded on the hat of the woman in the last image, making it appear that she was wearing a full peacock, the swan's beak in this image runs parallel to the woman's nose, a kind of mirroring and blending of the woman and the bird together.

Again, we see here a metamorphosis and a mimicry, that is also echoed in calling the woman a 'little duck', demonstrating long-standing associations between the characteristics of birds and femininity. These sentiments were also expressed in pet ownership. It is worth making a special note here that at a time when women were

[27] The beret sleeve featured a stiff lining that was fashioned into a frill, often know as a 'wing'. For more information, see Nunn, *Fashion in Costume*, specifically p. 121.

vying for the vote and better education[28] – central to establishing a more elevated place in society for themselves – the ownership of pets, particularly birds, highlighted some of the complex gender dynamics in the Victorian period; while men hunted or captured birds for sport, women were once again seen as caretakers, and the confinement of the caged bird mimicked the confinement of women in the domestic sphere.

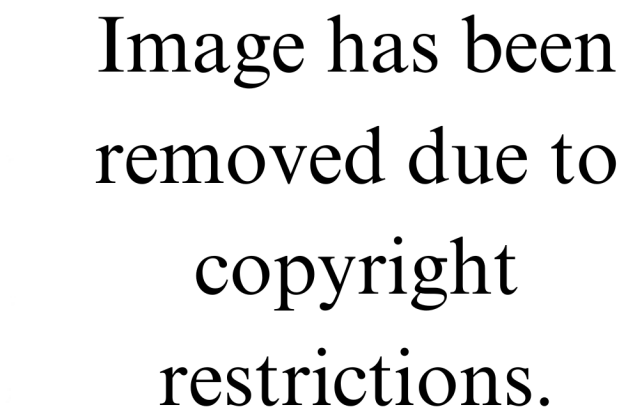

Figure 16: Published 25th April 1868.

A month after the previous image was published, Sambourne published yet another image of a woman wearing a bird as a hat, entitled 'The Celestial Hat'. While fur surrounded the woman's neck, the focal point of the image was the large bird propped upon the woman's head. While the type of bird is unclear from the image, what is clear is that there is a blending between the woman and the bird through the hair once more. The bird is placed with its beak pointed upwards, almost at an unnatural angle, and its wings sweep to the side, covering part of the woman's ear. Two long feathers protrude from its tail – or perhaps her hair, which is blended in with the bird's body. From the top of the bird's body protrudes a multitude of worked, curled feathers, perhaps elongated through the process of weaving the feathers together with wire, given their length.

Looking at the hat, the bird does not appear to be a domesticated songbird but rather a wild bird that has been slain for the making of the hat. Domesticated birds were generally smaller and more delicate, able to fit inside aviaries, whereas this bird is quite large to take up the entire hat. There seems to be a disconnect for the Victorians between

[28] For more information on the Women's Suffrage Movement, see 'Women and the Vote' <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/> [accessed 8 April 2024].

the slaughter of birds for fashion and the keeping of pets, although that distinction seems quite small. Later that year, in the 12th December 1868 issue of *Punch*, there appeared a written piece entitled 'A Little Word from a Little Bird'.[29] In this short submission, an unidentified author asked why birds, specifically canaries, were not treated like other household pets, such as cats. They referenced a case of cruelty brought before the court, where a man had 'tamed' canaries by 'breaking both their wings, and then showed the little crippled creatures in the streets, where people paid their pennies to see how tame they were, and how fond they seemed, because they did not fly away from him.' However, the man was not convicted of cruelty because, 'after consulting the statues [it was found that] a bird was not an animal within the meaning of the Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, even if the specific act of cruelty alleged in this case could be proved.' The submission continues,

> I often hear young ladies sing, "Oh, would I were a bird!" but, until the law be altered, they are surely ill for expressing such a wish. How would they like the cruel torture of having their poor wings broken, so that they might seem tame, and then the further torture of gaining a good living for the wretch who had thus crippled them, and whose cruelty the law as yet is powerless to prevent!

The law at the time of this publication dated back to 1849 and was called 'An Act for the more effectual Prevention of Cruelty to Animals'.[30] Animals, within this context, were explicitly named as 'any horse, mare, gelding, bull, ox, cow, heifer, steer, calf, mule, ass, sheep, lamb, hog, pig, sow, goat, dog, cat, or any other domestic animal'. Note here that while 'any other domestic animal' is mentioned, birds were not considered domestic animals and were therefore not protected. Due to their nature, even songbirds were considered to be wild captives, not afforded the same benefits as domesticated dogs and cats.

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[29] *Punch, or the London Chavari* (London, 1868), LV, p. 271.
[30] To see the whole Act, please refer to '1849: 12 & 13 Victoria c.92: Cruelty to Animals Act', *The Statutes Project*, 2017 <https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/nineteenth-century/1849-12-13-victoria-c-92-cruelty-to-animals-act/> [accessed 16 May 2024].

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 17: Published 13th June 1868.

A few months after the previous picture was published, in June 1868, an image from Sambourne was published which depicts a woman dressed entirely in bird parts, entitled 'The Dove Style'.[31] On her head sits the headless body of a white bird, with a full, unplucked wing hanging down by its side, almost mimicking wisps of hair that fell out of place. The hair is no longer on top of her head, showing that the woman is starting her integration with the bird. Meanwhile, the woman's actual hair is combed down, almost wildly, to her waist, where she features ornate heads of what appeared to be peacocks or doves, surrounded with light-coloured feathers, creating an almost Elizabethan ruff around each head. Finally, a bird's full head and wing are draped on the woman's arm, with the head of the bird looking down her arm, again reminiscent of the beret sleeve seen in the March 1868 image. The wing placement here mimics the woman's own arm.

[31] 'Mr. Punch's Designs After Nature: The Dove Style', in *Punch, or the London Charivari* (1868), LIV, 252.

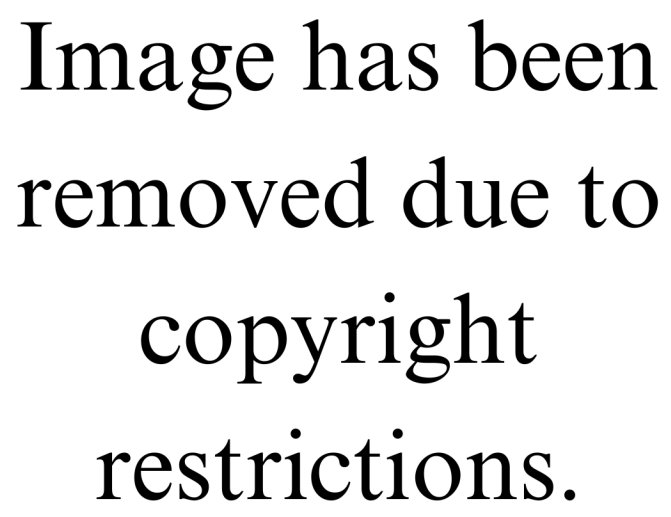

Figure 18: Published 23rd April 1870.

In the 23rd April 1870 edition of *Punch*, Sambourne published another picture of a woman in feathers, this time completely decked out in them, from head to toe, another crest formed on her head, although this one was made as an imitation crest instead of something truly realistic. Once again, the crest becomes an important element in understanding the transformation of the woman into a bird. In this image, unlike the previous image, the woman wears the feathers almost as naturally, as if they belong on her body. While the shape of the dress was quite classic for the period, the feathers don't appear to overwhelm her but are rather more fitted to her body. [32] Note that the feathers that the woman is wearing are curled, which likely indicates that they have been worked on by the women in the millinery factories and are not in their natural shape. Where the first image discussed in this chapter showed a hat fashioned to look like the beak of a peacock and a previous image showed the whole head of a swan on the woman's head, starting to blend with her hair and neck, this image removes the head of the bird altogether and instead places the crest directly on the woman's head. Her sharp, angular facial features, particularly her nose, suggest a beak-like shape. The caption underneath began with that very repeated phrase – 'I would I were a bird'. Punch declares this impossible – in very patronising terms – but adds that the woman in this picture is experiencing birdhood as closely as possible.

[32] See examples of female fashion in the Victorian period in Nunn, *Fashion in Costume,* specifically the chapters on 1800-1850 and 1850-1900.

In the same edition of the magazine, just a few pages prior to this image, *Punch* writers published a short article called 'Fine Feathers for Fine Birds'.[33] In the article, the writers argued that women should consider alternating in which seasons they purchased fashion and in which seasons they made their own replicas, thereby at least halving the amount that they were spending on the newest fashions. They cite an unknown source, which said, 'Feather trimmings are gaining ground daily, but on account of their cost they will never become common. There is a mixture of peacock with marabout, which is especially charming for evening wear.' It is worth noting here that 'marabout' is the traditional spelling of what is now known as 'marabou', down feather trimming which comes from the marabou stork – although traditionally white turkey feathers have been used to mimic the stork's feathers due to the latter's rarity.[34] The source from *Punch* seems to suggest that, like other fashions, feathers would be 'in' and then 'out' very quickly. The article continued, saying,

> Ladies with long purses may plume themselves on wearing the costliest of feathers, and may be as proud as peacocks in their borrowed peacock's plumes. But ladies, whose nests have not been so well feathered, must content themselves with purchasing a less expensive plumage, and instead of wearing the feathers of a peacock, must put up with the plainer wardrobe of a partridge, or even, it may be, of a common barndoor fowl.

Fashion trends began with the upper classes, many of whom were mimicking what came out of the Paris fashion houses at the time and trickled down through the lower classes. Even peasant girls, maidservants, and factory workers tried to keep up with the fashion of the times, though they often had to settle for cheaper alternatives.[35] The idea of being 'proud as peacocks in their borrowed peacock's plumes' seems to hearken back to the conversation earlier regarding the 'jay in borrowed plumes', discussed in Chapter Two, wherein Aesop's fable was used to illustrate the idea that rising above one's station was frowned up. Women who did not have the same means to bedeck themselves in 'fine feathers' would have to wear hen feathers and the like, befitting of both their

[33] 'Fine Feathers for Fine Birds', in *Punch, or the London Charivari* (1870), LVIII, 157.
[34] Apparently white marabout feathers were very rare but were seen on display at the Great Exhibition of 1851, second in popularity at the time only to peacock feathers. For more information on what was on display, see Royal Commission for the Exhibition, 'Feathers', in *Reports by the Juries on the Subjects into Thirty Classes into Which the Exhibition Was Divided* (The Royal Commission, 1852), p. 387.
[35] Nunn, *Fashion in Costume*, p. 150.

purses and their station in society. The idea of a woman in peacock feathers continued in later images published by Sambourne.

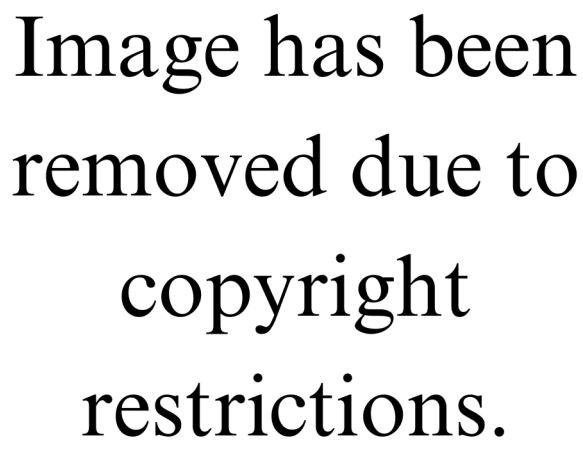

Figure 19: Published 1st April 1871.

In April 1871, Sambourne once again published a picture of a woman wearing peacock feathers. Featuring prominently on the first page of the magazine's issue, the peacock feathers shown were woven into the woman's hair, creating the illusion that her hair was, in fact, the train of a peacock. While the earlier peacock fashion showed a hat fashioned to look like a peacock's head, this image shows an entire peacock's head and body mounted on a hat, connected to the train-hair of the woman. Of note is that while the first peacock-woman was depicted in a park, a natural place to find a peacock, this woman is by the docks. Her unnatural placement seems to mirror the unnatural nature of her transformation into a bird. While the hat is a departure from the transmutation of the woman into a bird, the hair – an important Victorian quality that a truly feminine woman would possess – was an important part of the fashion of the time.[36] For the feathers to be woven into the hair to create a train would take a lot of time – perhaps more time than the milliners spent weaving osprey feathers together to look fuller for mounting on hats. While the dress that the woman is wearing is not decked out in feathers, its slim shape resembles a bird cage: it is of note that, by the 1870s, women

[36] Grace Traver, 'Hairstyles', 2020 <https://editions.covecollective.org/chronologies/hairstyles>

were wearing slim crinoline cages under their dresses, usually made of steel – the same material used to make expensive Victorian bird cages.[37]

The confinement of the woman within the crinoline cage is a potential mirror to the confinement of a caged bird and points to the fact that women were themselves becoming caged birds – in many ways, they were becoming slaves to fashion, trapped in the transformation of woman into bird by the designs of the time. This transformation of women into birds is very like the idea of transmutation. Transmutation is, by historical and biological definition, 'the conversion or transformation of one species into another', and it preceded Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.[38] In the eighteenth century, French authors proposed that some species had morphed – or transmuted – into different species through crossbreeding and hybridisation. Women were no longer merely emulating birds but, the image makes clear, they were becoming birds.

[37] For more information on the steel-cage crinoline, see 'Understanding Underwear: The Victorian Crinoline | European Fashion Heritage Association' <https://fashionheritage.eu/understanding-underwear-the-crinoline/> [accessed 8 April 2024].
[38] Phillip Sloan, 'Evolution' <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/evolution/>

Figure 20: Published 14th May 1892.

Sambourne's 1892 'Bird of Prey' identifies further tension within Victorian society between women wearing feathers and those defending the lives of birds.[39] Depictions like this were engaging with and emphasising the duality and paradoxical nature of feather fashion; the birds being slaughtered were being pointed to as analogous to feminine features and attributes, whilst the women were adorning themselves with the very birds to which they were being compared. The woman-bird has massive, black wings, but she is also covered in a feather-trimmed boa around her neck with a mountain of plumage attached to her on-trend hat.[40] Underneath the cartoon is a nod to the Society for the Protection of Birds, reading that despite the Society's best efforts, 'the harpy Fashion appears still, and even increasingly, to make endless holocausts of small fowl for the furnishing forth of "feather trimmings" for the fair sex'. The caption goes on to describe how the birds used for fashion were tortured and left to 'die slowly of wounds, thirst, and starvation' – and yet, it would seem, 'fashionable ladies' are unwilling to 'rend their much-beplumed garments'. It would seem that the caption implies there was a tension between the women fighting for the protection of birds and the women who, uncaringly, were active participants in the destruction of birds for feather fashion.[41]

The cartoon is horrifying for a variety of reasons. First, the woman-bird is imposing, not just in the way that her wings expand across the entire width of the cartoon, but there is a stark contrast between her and her surroundings. The eye is immediately drawn not to the fleeing, white birds in the background – perhaps egrets – but rather to the darkness of the woman herself, bringing her forward in the picture. It is not her body that emits feathers, but rather her outfit; despite the woman-as-bird, she is not quite a bird, only wearing a bird's image. The feathers emerge from her long-sleeved top, black and foreboding, and quite comedically, a boa of black feathers is

[39] The caption underneath the picture reads: 'Despite the laudable endeavours of "The Society for the Protection of Birds," the harpy Fashion appears still, and even increasingly, to make endless holocausts of small fowl for the furnishing forth of "feather trimmings" for the fair sex. We are told that to obtain the delicate and beautiful spiral plume called the "Osprey," the old birds "are killed off in scores, while employed in feeding their young, who are left to starve to death in their nests by hundreds. Their dying cries are described as "heart-wrending." But they evidently do not rend the hearts of our fashionable ladies, or induce them to rend their much-beplumed garments. Thirty thousand black partridges have been killed in certain Indian provinces in a few days' time to supply the European demand for their skins. One dealer in London is said to have received, as a single consignment, 32,000 dead humming-birds, 80,000 aquatic birds, and 800,000 pairs of wings. We are told too that often "after the birds are shot down, the wings are wrenched off during life, and the mangled bird is left to die slowly of wounds, thirst, and starvation.'

[40] Nunn, *Fashion in Costume*, p. 160.

[41] The Society for the Protection of Birds will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

wrapped around her neck, trailing behind her, layer upon layer of feathers covering her entirely, even as she hunts for more, emphasising a gross excess. On top of her head is a hat overloaded with more feathers, of various birds – some small, thick and dark, while others spring up, lighter, giving her more height. While her body remains that of a woman, her feet have been transformed into talons, the only feature that is physical rather than an adornment, a symbol of her greed as they reach out towards the small bird she is hunting, although the small bird remains just out of reach.

With the addition of the caption, the meaning of the excessive number of feathers on the woman-bird becomes clearer – the feathers are a warning of the surfeit in which Victorian women are partaking. It is worth noting that the woman-bird is chasing down the one, small black bird, when numerous white birds are flying away in the background. The woman-bird is facilitating the 'endless holocausts of small fowl' in order to adorn herself with even more of the black plumage that she has come to desire. Women who wore feathers as fashion-pieces did not want 'common' birds' plumage, but rather the exotic and the rare, to set themselves apart. Therefore, the woman-bird hunts the one, small black bird, rather than the abundant white birds. Being at the forefront of fashionable society is more important to the 'Bird of Prey' than ecological preservation, and there is a juxtaposition between what is feminine and what is unfeminine.

On the page preceding the 'Bird of Prey' image, *Punch* has included a 'Bird of Prey' poem, which consists of eleven stanzas, each with six lines [see Appendix A]. It follows a tail-rhyme pattern and begins with a nod to Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate at the time. The poem opens with the word 'Woman', indicating that the poem is speaking about the woman, first and foremost. It is clear from this opening line, and the words that follow – 'we know her slavish thrall' –, that the Bird of Prey in the poem, the hunter of other birds, is, in fact, the Victorian woman. The poem compares 'Nature red in truth and claw', a reference to Tennyson's *In Memoriam* canto fifty-six, to Woman, indicating in the first stanza that any bard who declares woman a 'sweet soft-bosomed thing' is not offering the truth, for Woman is more like the Nature of Tennyson's poem, 'fierce and ruthless'.[42] Suggestive of the idea of transmutation, the hybridisation process through which one species becomes another, Tennyson's poem

[42] Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ll. 2-3; 5.
For the full text of Tennyson's poem, see: Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1895).

questions why Nature, as a species, has such ruthless disregard for her kin.[43] The same sentiment can be found in the 'Bird of Prey' poem, when the poet says that the woman-bird gleams 'in borrowed glory', referring to the feathers that she has stolen from her bird-kin.[44] The poem states that women are slaves to the 'despotical' rule of Fashion, even though women were 'born for grace and love'.[45] Here the dual reference to birds is apparent – as a measure of femininity in positive and negative forms, a tension between harsh despotism and soft grace. In a nod once more to movements like that of the RSPB, the poem asks what it will take for women to move from 'slavish thrall' to 'rebellious passion' on behalf of the feathered beings to which women are often compared.[46] For women, bird-mothers die, thereby killing off their young, who are left motherless. The very nature of motherhood necessarily connects women to bird-mothers in their shared ability to birth and sustain life. A woman obsessed with Fashion is compared to a Harpy, traditionally a monster with 'the winged figure of a woman, with no other distinguishing feature, unless it be that in one instance her hands are drawn in a method suggestive of claws.'[47] This is quite like the woman-bird depicted in the 'Bird of Prey' cartoon. However, instead of carrying evil souls to the underworld, the Bird of Prey kills off 'hordes' of innocent birds for her own pleasure.[48]

The birds in the poem become a sacrifice to appease the woman-bird's need for feathers, and in curtailing their flight, she is able to achieve her own. If the 'pangs and fears' of the birds that she called to slaughter would 'soft [echo] in her ears', the poem asserts that her 'whims support would languish', meaning that if she could actually hear the cry of the slaughtered birds, woman may curtail her desire to wear their feathers because their agony would lead her not to support that 'vile trade', that is, millinery and feather fashion.[49] The vile trade in the poem is expressed in graphic and disturbing terms, and birds' 'wings are torn' from their 'shuddering' bodies, just so that her

[43] Transmutation was a theory prevalent before Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was released to the general Victorian public. While the term stems from an 1809 French publication, it was popularised in England by Robert Chambers in his book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, of which Tennyson procured a copy. For more information on transmutation and Tennyson, see Christopher Lane, 'Natural History Sparks Honest Debate', in *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty* (Yale University Press, 2011).
[44] 'Bird of Prey', l. 9.
[45] Ibid., ll. 32; 35.
[46] Ibid., ll. 31; 36.
[47] Cecil Smith, 'Harpies in Greek Art', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 13 (1892), pp. 103–14, doi:10.2307/623895, p. 103.
[48] 'Bird of Prey', l. 43.
[49] Ibid., ll. 46-8.

clothing can be adorned fashionably, and Fashion makes her heart hard, shutting off her compassion for the poor, slain creatures.[50]

The types of birds referenced in the poem are very significant. While the birds mentioned in the poem are, of course, the birds which were most often killed for their plumage in female fashion, the different species all have one thing in common: they are often seen as soft, beautiful birds, they are revered, and the poem accentuates these qualities through its use of qualifying adjectives. The poem references shade-loving doves, the aether-soaring lark, and the beautifully decorated hummingbird, all of whom are songbirds whose slaughter is depicted as tragic. An actual bird of prey is mentioned only once, in the fifth stanza, where an eagle swoops down to hunt 'lesser creatures', smaller birds, and the poet says that even this predator is more sparing than the Bird of Prey.[51] The femininity that might have once described the woman is abandoned once she begins to hunt the lesser creatures, and she becomes a predator. Even though birds like hawks and falcons were routinely bred in captivity for sport, it is the doves, the larks, and the hummingbirds who suffer in this poem. Why is it that these particular, perhaps even vulnerable, birds were chosen for fashion adornments?

It would seem that birds of prey were usually thought to be more masculine, especially since falconry was usually a male-dominated sport.[52] Women, on the other hand, were expected to exhibit the same qualities of the birds listed in the poem; that is, they should be soft, nurturing, mothering, songbirds – a parlour piece for men to observe and prize for being the most beautiful and rare entertainment for other onlookers. In the cartoon and the poem published with the same title on a preceding page, the Bird of Prey becomes a woman, a hunter, who preys on the softer creatures around her for her own benefit, giving up the ideals that society would ascribe to her for her own pleasure. She is attractive and exceptional, but this image comes at the expense of the birds who were not so quick to get away, who were slaughtered so that she could elevate herself. In becoming a hunter, the woman-bird leaves the domestic sphere and instead perverts the feminine nature that she is supposed to exhibit. In many ways, this perversion points back to the ideas of hybridisation and transmutation; by becoming the

[50] Ibid., ll. 49-50.
[51] Ibid., ll. 25-30.
[52] In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is likened to a falcon twice, once when compared to Mr. Mason (p. 172) and once when he approaches Jane, 'full falcon-eye flashing' (p. 245).

hunter of the weak, the woman-bird takes on a more masculine role and, in the poem insinuates, perpetuates her own destruction.

Figure 21: Published 6th September 1899.

Finally, in September 1899, Sambourne published his final image that featured a woman with feathers. The image itself takes up an entire page of *Punch*, and it strikes the reader on the very second page of the magazine issue. Unlike the previous image, where the woman had become the bird, this image features a woman triumphantly displaying a hat that contains the full body of a bird upon it, while she herself is surrounded by birds. Looking closely at the image, one will note that the cap she is wearing is actually made up of just birds' wings and additional feathers, while the cap that she's holding features a full bird, beak to tail feathers, its white body complementing the black feathers that also adorn the hat. Once again, the black feathers on the hat have been curled, while the white feathers appear to have been added on to the bird to make it appear bigger. A great white egret, who was facing extinction due to the use of its feathers in fashion, looks up at its dead brethren that is featured on the woman's hat.[53] While the woman wears a smile, under her feet, cracked egret eggs are visible in the nest, further indicating the extinction of the species due to the killing of female egrets during nesting season, as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. There is also a bird falling upside-down in the background, presumably having just been shot down. Slain egrets lay just to the left of the woman's feet, next to a nest of fledglings crying out for food. Ultimately, this picture is the culmination of the judgement on women for their cruelty; triumphantly, the woman has caused destruction for her own pleasure. The real-life slaughter of birds, rather than the transformation of woman into bird, is emphasised in this image, where the woman has returned to elegance instead of the image of the Harpy.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have focused on the transformation of the Victorian feather-wearing woman from woman to bird, as shown through the drawings of Edward Linley Sambourne in *Punch* magazine. While most of the images did not have any contextual information surrounding them in the magazine, all of the images quite boldly spoke for themselves in their striking nature. There is a clear metamorphosis throughout Sambourne's images of woman-and/as-bird, which includes the transformation of the

[53] William Souder, 'How Two Women Ended the Deadly Feather Trade', *Smithsonian Magazine* <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-two-women-ended-the-deadly-feather-trade-23187277/> [accessed 8 April 2024].

woman's hair into feathers or the train of the bird she is wearing. The disappearance of the woman's arms in the second image leads the viewer's eye to the dangling, webbed feet of the bird she is wearing, other images show the woman's arm being mimicked in the placement of the wings of the dead birds. The woman's head becomes the head of the bird, with the crest becoming more predominant and blending into the top of her head and face. By the end of the transformation, the woman has become a bird of prey herself, hunting other birds, highlighting the paradoxical nature of these images; although men were physically doing the hunting, catching, killing, and selling of the birds, women were seen as being the cause of birds' destruction due to their consumeristic ways.

Consumerism will play a large part in the ideologies discussed in the next chapter, which will focus on what a future without birds would have meant for the Victorians and, indeed, our own modern civilisation. The high demand for feathers to meet the fashions coming out of Paris and London fashion houses meant that bird species were facing extinction, as shown in the final Sambourne image presented in this chapter. Furthermore, the next chapter will look at women's roles in the bird fashion industry and how women from societies like the Society for the Protection of Birds fought to enlighten other women about the destruction they were causing – inadvertently or not – within the ecosystem.

Chapter Five

A Future Without Feathers: Educating the Victorian Public

'Heaven and earth know no more ridiculous spectacle than that of a jackdaw strutting about with a peacock's tail instead of its natural caudal appendage! We cannot *all* be fine birds … but those of us who are not fortunate enough to be born with fine feathers will do well to be content with those which Nature has given us. They will suit us better than borrowed or stolen plumage; and oh! what misery, what toil of heart and brain, what humiliation we shall escape, if we refuse to pine after the peacock's or the eagle's!'[1]

Introduction

In previous chapters of this thesis, I have examined the relationship between women and birds, both in literature and in the public sphere. The way in which women were cared for and approached often aligned with how birds were cared for and treated, showing that there was, indeed, a connection between women and birds, particularly in the Victorian period. Overall, the tone of newspapers and other media suggested that women should be content with their lot in life, and as the quotation at the start of this chapter indicates, there was a pervasive idea that women should be 'content with [that] which Nature has given' them. If women were to be content with their lot in life, then the focus on bird preservation and conservation efforts can be seen in a different light: a woman-led identification with birds led to a greater care for them, a largely paternalistic care that echoes the earlier discussions in this thesis surrounding the care of caged birds. Birds' aesthetic appeal objectified them, to a degree, in the same way that women's aesthetic appeal overlooked their complexity as humans, but birds were also a symbol of nature's beauty, and were therefore valued as autonomous and valuable Others.

While bird conservation itself was motivated by practical concerns, such as conserving bird numbers for food sources or maintaining a healthy population for the purposes of hunting, there were also ecological concerns that came into play, such as the idea that birds' natural habitats must be preserved and protected in order to conserve species, and a shift in cultural attitudes to birds that were at least partly informed by the associative relationship between birds and women. For a long time, birds had been

[1] 'Feathers and Birds', *Illustrated London News*, 23 March 1889 <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001578/18890323/019/0006> [accessed 7 February 2024].

appreciated for their aesthetics, but they were also an important food source, and recreational shooting was a popular sport among the upper classes. It was during the Victorian period that the threats became especially acute, with excessive hunting, both for fashion and sport, beginning to threaten the survival of certain species. Furthermore, the industrialisation of Britain and the destruction of natural habitats threatened many bird species, and conservation efforts were necessary to protect them. Another factor specific to the Victorian period was the growing prominence of the scientific study of birds and their behaviour. In the light of increased scientific study, conservation efforts were seen as a means to better understand these creatures and their role in the natural world. Overall, bird conservation was important during the Victorian period for both practical and aesthetic reasons, and it laid the foundation for the modern conservation movement.

A Woman's Initiative: The Society for the Protection of Birds

As discussed in the previous two chapters of this thesis, the controversies surrounding feather fashion were becoming an important issue in the Victorian period. The feather fashion industry was devastating the bird population and, despite often being identified as the cause of the problem, many women came together to form societies to combat this situation and spread awareness about the harm being done to their feathered friends, with whom they found a kinship connection. As I have established in previous chapters, women identified with birds as the Other in society, with whom they shared many characteristics, as well as being culturally paired with birds for generations. Birds were seen as the Other in a similarly complex way to women: they were often perceived as wild and unpredictable creatures that could not always be tamed and controlled, but at the same time were often treated as tamed pets, valued for their aesthetics, and this was a very specific set of characteristics that aligned them with women, particularly for the male artists and writers discussed in this thesis. During the Victorian period, there was a growing interest in domesticating animals and creating order in the natural world, where Man was at the helm; birds, with their ability to fly and migrate, presented a threat to this order. That they could not easily be trapped or tamed logically led to their depiction as unruly and disruptive. For men, birds represented the unpredictability of the natural world and the need to impose order on it – as can be seen in the huge efforts made to impose order, as seen in the various capture,

caging, and taming manuals that were published during the Victorian period. In this way, birds represented the similar threat, challenge, and potential for a hard-won success that women were seen to pose. Furthermore, I believe that for women, birds' flight and freedoms represented a welcome resistance to male control. This can be gleaned from the numerous references to flight in women's cultural productions, and the freedom that birds had in their flight and freedom can be seen quite clearly in publications like *Aurora Leigh*. Birds were, consciously or unconsciously, the conduit through which they could enact social change and perhaps even fight for their own rights in the process.

At a time when societies were male-dominated and incredibly exclusive, it is surprising to see female-led societies cropping up, but crop up they did, and with such fervour that they swiftly took Victorian society by storm. It was primarily in relation to bird protection that these societies flourished. There were at least five societies during the Victorian period that flourished at the hands of women, including the National Society for Women's Suffrage, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and the Women's Social and Political Union. In February 1889, Emily Williamson was inspired to start the 'The Plumage League' after realising the impact that feather harvesting was having on the bird population. The League was originally 'born out of frustration that the male-only British Ornithologists Union was not acting on the issue' of bird extinction.[2] In the same year, Etta Lemon and Eliza Phillips founded the Fur, Fin, and Feather club, which eventually merged with Emily Williamson's society in 1891 to create the initial Society for the Protection of Birds. Emily Williamson became the organisation's first president, while Etta Lemon took on the role of secretary and Eliza Phillips became the organisation's treasurer.[3]

Although in her report on the Society, Philippa Bassett claims that when the Societies merged in 1891, the remaining Society for the Protection of Birds was moved from Manchester to London, the Society's own publication in 1903 suggests the move occurred a little while later. The publication, *Bird Notes and News*, states that the Society actually formally moved to London in 1898, where it rented a room from the

[2] 'RSPB History: From Humble Beginnings to Thriving Today', *The RSPB Wildlife Charity* <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/our-history/>.
[3] Philippa Bassett, *A List of the Historical Records of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds* (Birmingham: Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980), p. i.

Zoological Society.[4] While the Society did not have huge initial success, once relocated to London, its membership rapidly expanded. In June 1891, the Duchess of Portland (Winifred Cavendish-Bentinck) took over as President of the Society and remained in the position until her death in 1954.[5] These remarkable women led the fight for bird protection laws during the Victorian period, paving the way for the RSPB to become one of the most successful societies that still exists today.

From its very beginning, the Society for the Protection of Birds was focused on its female membership. Its first annual report recorded that the Society was founded 'in the hope of inducing a considerable number of women, of all ranks and ages, to unite in discouraging the enormous destruction of bird life exacted by milliners and others for purely decorative purposes'.[6] In January 1893, the *Herne Bay Press* reported that 5,200 women had banded together under the rule 'not to wear the feathers of any birds not killed for the purposes of food, the ostrich only accepted.'[7] This statement was contained in an advertisement for the Society for the Protection of Birds, and it concluded by noting that 'Not only are the native songsters of our land being snared and killed, but one of the London dealers is said to have received in a single consignment 32,000 dead humming birds, 80,000 aquatic birds, and 800,000 pairs of wings, and all this in the name of Fashion.' As already established in previous chapters, an appalling number of birds had been slain for the prospect of feather fashion, and women were becoming equally appalled by the atrocities committed against birds.

That same year, the Society began charging a membership fee of one shilling for the title Associate, 'so as to suit every class of sympathiser', demonstrating the democratic impulse of the group, while Life Associateship could be purchased for one guinea.[8] Furthermore, a subscription was offered beginning in 1897, allowing members to pay one guinea a year for the term Fellow. By the end of 1893, the Society's register

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[4] Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, *Bird Notes and News* (London: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 1903), I, 1–124 <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/127897>. April 1903, p. 2.
[5] 'RSPB History: From Humble Beginnings to Thriving Today'.
[6] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903, p. 1.
[7] 'The Feathered Tribe', *Herne Bay Press*, 7 January 1893, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003424/18930107/054/0006> [accessed 7 February 2024].
[8] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903, p. 2. Note that one shilling is roughly six pence in modern currency, while one guinea is one pound and one shilling. It is also worth noting that in textile factories, where many women worked, women were paid roughly seven shillings a week, so one shilling would be approximately one days' wage, making the membership very affordable. For records regarding Victorian pay, see 'Working Conditions in Factories - Industry — Textile Factories and Coal Mines - National 5 History Revision', *BBC Bitesize* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zkxrxyc/revision/2> [accessed 21 May 2024].

had nearly 500 Associates; by April 1903, with the first publication of the Society's *Bird Notes and News*, the number of Associates had multiplied by about ten times. A report on the RSPB notes that by 1898, the Society had 20,000 members with 152 branches, some international.[9] The scope of the Society grew immensely in its first few years:

> Sympathy with its efforts quickly brought naturalists and other bird-lovers into its ranks; ornithologists as well as humanitarians recognized from the first the potentialities of such an association as a leader in promoting laws for bird protection, and in educating the general public to a fuller sense of the utility of birds as well as of their beauty and charm; and it is through the co-operation of many varying minds working for a common end that the Society has expanded from an anti-plumage league into an organization working for the protection of wild birds in every way and by all available means from wanton slaughter and cruelty, and especially for the preservation of rarer species.[10]

The women who ran the Society were able to attract outspoken bird lovers, not just naturalists, but people who had a public voice and were not afraid to use it to further the cause of these women. But while the people in charge of the Society were largely women, in part due to the Society's early rules that only women could be members, they employed a male voice – in terms of having extremely influential men in their association who also acted as spokespeople – in order to lend authority and command to their cause.[11]

Much has been written about the Society for the Protection of Birds, which gained its Royal Charter in November 1904. The RSPB is still active today, with over one million members, making it the largest nature conservation charity in Europe.[12] But its 'humble beginnings', as the official RSPB publication names them, in the homes of women from Manchester make it of particular interest to this thesis. While the Society's initial focus was to end the plumage trade, it was not until 1921 that an Act was passed banning the importation of plumage into the United Kingdom.[13]

The Society faced immense backlash from its inception, even from other women, many of whom, like Emmeline Pankhurst, felt that the anti-plumage campaign efforts of women were, at best, distracting from the Women's Suffrage movement. At

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[9] Bassett, p. i.
[10] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903, p. 2.
[11] Ibid., p. 2.
[12] 'RSPB History: From Humble Beginnings to Thriving Today'.
[13] Bassett, p. ii.

worst, the Society stood in direct opposition to women's rights, threatening a conservativism that tamped down a woman's right to dress the way she wanted to, to call attention to herself and her cause. As Boase points out, 'The "suffragettes" were precisely the sort of women […] most likely to *wear* murderous millinery. Few of them seemed to go out without a flock of long-tailed parakeets or half an Arcadian owl upon their heads.'[14] While Boase writes that humanitarian and feminist movements would obviously share sympathisers, it is clear through the narrative of the Victorian period that a clash was bound to happen due to the core issues being discussed by each movement. However, one fact that becomes clear through reading the history of the RSPB is that while the Women's Suffrage movement supporters were busy campaigning, rioting, and antagonising Parliamentary leaders, the women and men of the Society for the Protection of Birds were focused on producing educational materials and forming a more peaceful protest through the formal and informal education of society, through the schooling system, pamphlets, and other information. Before moving on to a discussion of these materials, the following section will examine some of the more prominent members of the Society for the Protection of Birds in order to understand who was in charge and how both women and men laid the foundation for the Society's continued success, spearheaded by women.

Prominent Society Members

In its first issue of *Bird Notes and News*, the Society publication lists some of its earliest members and supporters, some of whom had huge societal influence as well as being leading lights in the early science of birds. Understanding who is on this list is important for recognising the heft of authority that it represents. The list is of names only without any biographical information, but the biographies are very revealing. Among the first to be mentioned was Lord Lilford, who is most likely to be Thomas Littleton Powys (also known as Baron Lilford), a British naturalist and ornithologist, and who was described by the Royal Collection Trust to be passionate about birds.[15] Unlike other naturalists, however, the RCT notes that Lord Lilford preferred to study the animals alive, as they were supposed to be, instead of as prepared specimens.

[14] Boase, *Mrs. Pankhurst's Purple Feather*, pp. 159-60.
[15] 'Thomas Littleton Powys, 4th Baron Lilford (1833-96) - Coloured Figures of the Birds of the British Islands ; v.3 / by Thomas Littleton Powys Lilford.' <https://www.rct.uk/collection/1057077/coloured-figures-of-the-birds-of-the-british-islands-v-3-by-thomas-littleton> [accessed 17 March 2023].

Although he preferred live animals, he did keep a large collection of captive wild birds at Lilford Hall. Perhaps most importantly for the RSPB, Lord Lilford was one of the founding members of the British Ornithological Union, and therefore had the backing of many of its members.

Another prominent male member was Professor Alfred Newton, an English zoologist and ornithologist, who notably travelled around the world on ornithological expeditions from 1854 to 1863 as a holder of the Drury Travelling Fellowship from Magdalene College at Cambridge University.[16] After returning home from his excursions, Newton became an editor for *Ibis*, an ornithological journal. Some of his work is still integral to today's ornithologists, including his most notable work, *A Dictionary of Birds*, some of which is still cited for bird classification guides.

Also known as Lord Lucas, Auberon Herbert was a British political philosopher and Member of Parliament, following in the footsteps of his father, also Auberon Herbert, and was a member of the Society for the Protection of Birds.[17] Herbert Senior was one of the leading MPs to support the 1872 Wild Bird Protection Act, which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, and many considered him to be more radical than his son, as he became a vegetarian and objecting to killing in any manner, and was even against the slaughtering of animals for food.[18]

Artist Henry Stacy Marks was also among the first male members, and by the 1870s, he specialised in painting bird subjects, usually in watercolour.[19] In 1870, Marks finished an oil on canvas entitled *The Convent Raven*, marking a shift into bird paintings. That same year, he depicted *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds*, showing St. Francis of Assisi with an array of birds around his feet.[20] This painting is in reference to a sermon that St. Francis of Assisi gave one afternoon to some birds who were around him, telling them that they were blessed, for God had provided everything they needed to survive, without asking anything in return.[21] The image is one of human-nonhuman

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[16] 'Alfred Newton' <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Newton> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[17] 'Auberon Thomas Herbert (1876–1916)' <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/parliament-and-the-first-world-war/parliamentarians-and-staff-in-the-war/written-portraits-of-parliamentarians-during-the-first-world-war/auberon-thomas-herbert-1876-1916/> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[18] 'Auberon Herbert – Milton Heritage Society' <https://miltonheritagesociety.co.uk/chapters/ashley/auberon-herbert/> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[19] 'Henry Stacy Marks | British Museum' <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG37290> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[20] Wilfrid Meynell, *Some Modern Artists and Their Work* (Cassell, 1883), p. 64.
[21] Fioretti di San Francesco, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi*, trans. by Abby Langdon Alger (The Eastern Press Co., 1887) <http://archive.org/details/littleflowersofs00fioriala>, pp. 73-4.

relationship in which birds are present as an aspirational model to humans. Marks specialised in long-legged birds, although he often visited the parrot house at the London Zoo.[22] One of his most famous paintings, entitled *A Select Committee* (1891), still resides in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool today. It depicts a selection of macaws, parrots, and cockatoos, whose meeting resembles in its appearance, and through its title, the kind of parliamentary or official gathering familiar in Victorian politics. The birds appear very anthropomorphic in nature, gathering around in formation to 'listen' to a parrot that is perched above them.

Canon Henry Baker Tristram, a British clergyman and ornithologist, was another prominent male member of the Society who spent most of his time travelling to warmer climates due to illness, and as he visited the Near East, Japan, and the Caribbean, he often recorded his observations on natural history, particularly birds. He published many papers in *Ibis* and was a founding member of the British Ornithologists' Union, alongside Lord Lilford.[23]

Another prominent early member was William Henry Hudson, an Anglo-Argentinian author, naturalist, and ornithologist. Much of his early life was spent studying plant and animal life, and he read *Origin of Species* quite early on in his life. One of his most well-known characters is Rima, from *Green Mansions* (1904), who is a half-bird, half-human; her likeness was portrayed in a 1925 statue in the Hudson Memorial Bird Sanctuary in Hyde Park, London. Hudson contributed quite a lot to the Society for the Protection of Birds, especially through his publications for the Society, which included pamphlets like 'Osprey, or Egrets or Aigrettes' (1891), 'Feathered Women' (1893), 'Lost British Birds' (1894), and 'The Trade in Bird Feathers' (1898). Some of his work will be discussed later in this chapter.

Finally, Edward Linley Sambourne is the English cartoonist and illustrator that was featured in the previous chapter. He was a notable member of the Society in its early days, and his relationship with *Punch* magazine ensured that the Society's views were often represented in his work. Sambourne's work has provided a vital source for this study and focus on the transformation of Woman into Bird through the consumption

[22] 'Marks, Henry Stacy (1829–1898), Artist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/18075>.
[23] 'Tristam, Henry Baker', *JSTOR* <https://plants.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5555/al.ap.person.bm000010181>.

of feather fashion featured prominently in *Punch* magazine through his series 'Designs After Nature'.

Here, it is also worth noting the names of the men who presided over meetings of the Society, particularly since many of them were Members of Parliament and could, therefore, lend a voice to the Society within Parliament. Those men are as follows, with the year(s) they presided in parentheses following their names: Mr. E. H. Bradley, MP (1894); Mr. Sydney Buxton, MP (1895, who later became the Society's treasurer); Sir Herbert Maxwell, MP (1896); the Earl of Stamford (1897); Mr. Montagu Sharpe (1898, 1901); Sir Edward Grey, MP (1899); the Marquis of Granby (1900); Sir George Kekewich, K.C.B. (1902); and the Duke of Bedford, K.G. (1903).[24] Other early supporters of the RSPB included ornithologists such as Henry Seebohm and Oliver Pike, who helped shape the organisation's scientific approach to bird conservation, as well as Robert Gray, who was a lawyer and bird-lover who served as the organisation's first legal advisor. Finally, Alfred Newton, a prominent ornithologist and professor of zoology, was one of the founding members of the RSPB and served as the organisation's first vice-president, making the society more powerful by having a man's voice in a top position.

While all the male members of the Society were relatively easy to uncover, the list of female members given in the first issue of *Bird Notes and News* was more difficult to investigate, in part because women were commonly known by their husbands' names. What follows is a list of brief accounts of each prominent female member for whom I have found some biographical information. One prominent figure on the Society's list is Elizabeth (Wellesley), Duchess of Wellington. According to the British Museum records, Elizabeth served as Mistress of the Robes to Queen Victoria from 1861-1868 and 1874-1880. [25] According to the *Banbury Beacon*, Elizabeth was also a Lady of the Bedchamber from 1843-1858, which would have given her Victoria's ear.[26] The *Banbury Beacon* also noted that the Duchess was a 'great favourite' of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Elizabeth lent her name to Society circular letters, alongside

[24] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903, p. 2.
[25] 'Elizabeth Wellesley, Duchess of Wellington | British Museum' <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG162192> [accessed 24 April 2024].
[26] 'The Society Papers. (From The World.)', *Banbury Beacon*, 4 May 1901, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001605/19010504/020/0002> [accessed 24 April 2024].

the Duchesses of Portland, Northumberland, and Somerset.[27] It is also notable that Elizabeth's brother was Colonel Arthur Hay (Viscount Walden), a Scottish ornithologist and naturalist, who served as a president of the Zoological Society of London and had a large private collection of birds, which were later donated to the Natural History Department of the British Museum.[28]

Little personal pertinent information is available about the next member of the Society for the Protection of Birds listed, the Duchess of Somerset, who is likely to have been Jane Georgiana Seymour, wife of Edward Adolphus Seymour, a politician and trustee of the British Museum.[29] Another noble member mentioned was Eleanor (Percy), Duchess of Northumberland. She was the wife of Algernon Percy (also known as Lord Prudhoe or the fourth Duke of Northumberland), who was a fellow of the Royal Society (The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge), director of the British Institution, and trustee of the British Museum. An avid collector, he also donated some pieces to the British Museum.[30]

I was unable to uncover any information about 'Aldine Lady Forester' in my initial research. It is also unclear whether Aldine is a name (like the other women listed above) or a position, as 'aldine' in the Victorian period referred to small, portable books made by the Aldine Press and there is a slim possibility that the term could indicate this woman's participation in a publishing house. However, there is an Honourable Mary Anne Jervis, later known as Lady Forester (c. 1803-1893), who was the daughter of Edward Jervis, and of whom there is a painting by John Scott.[31]

The other women listed were very difficult to track down in archives, but those who are traceable were prominent and socially radical in different ways. First, there was a Mrs Owen Visger. One record notes that Mrs Owen Visger attended a Literary Ladies'

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[27] 'Feathers and Fashion', *Linlithgowshire Gazette*, 9 October 1897, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001906/18971009/054/0002> [accessed 24 April 2024].

[28] For more information on Elizabeth's brother, see Arthur Hay Tweeddale and R. G. Wardlaw Ramsay, *The Ornithological Works of Arthur, Ninth Marquis of Tweeddale* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1881) <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.13643>.

[29] 'The Duchess Of Somerset', *The Queen*, 16 August 1862, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002625/18620816/015/0002> [accessed 24 April 2024]. For more information on the Duchess of Somerset's husband, see David R. Fisher and Terry Jenkins, 'SEYMOUR, Edward Adolphus, Lord Seymour (1804-1885), of 18 Spring Gardens, Mdx.', *History of Parliament Online* <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/seymour-edward-1804-1885> [accessed 24 April 2024].

[30] 'Prudhoe, Lord - Griffith Institute Archive' <https://archive.griffith.ox.ac.uk/index.php/prudhoe-lord> [accessed 17 March 2023].

[31] 'Mary Anne Jervis, Lady Forester (c.1803–1893) | Art UK' <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mary-anne-jervis-lady-forester-c-18031893-18421> [accessed 24 April 2024].

Dinner in 1899.[32] In 1922, *Nature* magazine referred to a Mrs. Jean A. Owen Visger, who was 'a woman of considerable attainments, with a good deal of masculinity in her character, both mental and physical.'[33] It is intriguing to consider that it was perhaps this 'masculinity' in her character that made her a staunch and reputable supporter of the RSPB in its early days, as the *Nature* article records that she was very interested in nature and applied this interest to her literary works. Another author on the list is Frances Power Cobbe. She was an Anglo-Irish writer, philosopher, social reformer, anti-vivisection activist and women's suffrage campaigner. She published many materials on women's suffrage, including an 1877 pamphlet entitled 'Why Women Desire the Franchise'.[34] Another member, Rhoda Broughton, was a Welsh novelist who defied 'ladylike' ideals with her novels; many of her novels were 'considered sensational for their depictions of female erotic desire'.[35] At a time when women were often relegated to talking about 'women's issues', it is interesting to have a powerful female novelist who was unabashedly writing about women's issues from an intimate perspective. The woman listed as Lady Lyall, given the time period, is presumably Cora Cloete, wife of Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall, who was a British civil servant, literary historian, and poet.[36] Finally, Dr. Sophia Jex-Blake was an English physician, teacher, and feminist who was the first practising female doctor in Scotland. She was part of the elite 'Edinburgh Seven', a group of seven women who began studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1869.[37] Together, all these men and women formed a formidable Society whose voice echoed through Parliamentary chambers. That the societies were formed initially by women but became mixed-sex societies demonstrates the importance of the cause to women, as well as revealing the fact that it was still necessary to have male involvement for their success. Some of the men who were involved in the work of the Society for the Protection of Birds worked on making the laws passed by Parliament more accessible to the public, and the following section will explain some of the laws passed in Parliament during the Victorian period pertaining to bird protection, some of

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[32] 'The Literary Ladies' Dinner' <https://www.robertbuchanan.co.uk/html/literaryladies.html> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[33] 'Mrs. J. A. Owen Visger', *Nature*, 110.2755 (1922), 257–58 <https://doi.org/10.1038/110257b0>.
[34] 'Frances Power Cobbe - Women's Suffrage Resources' <https://www.suffrageresources.org.uk/resource/3250/frances-power-cobbe> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[35] Rhoda Broughton, *Cometh Up As A Flower*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Broadview Press, 2010), p. 9.
[36] 'Lyall, Sir Alfred Comyn (1835 - 1911)', *Representative Poetry Online* <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca> [accessed 17 March 2023].
[37] 'Sophia Jex-Blake', *The University of Edinburgh*, 2018 <https://www.ed.ac.uk/equality-diversity/celebrating-diversity/inspiring-women/women-in-history/sophia-jex-blake> [accessed 17 March 2023].

which may have been influenced by the work of the Society for the Protection of Birds due to the Society having several Members of Parliament presiding over their meetings and getting involved in their work. These laws offer an important context for understanding the educational work of the Society for the Protection of Birds, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

A Brief History of Parliamentary Laws

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, James Robert Vernam Marchant and Watkin Watkins published a book entitled *Wild Birds Protection Acts, 1880-1896* to make the Parliamentary laws being passed at the time easier for the common person to understand. I am using it in this thesis to draw on the significance of each act, as Marchant and Watkins are an indicator of how the acts were viewed during the Victorian period. Marchant and Watkins elaborated that wild birds had been the subject of a 'great number' of statutes, some of which were 'to prevent the destruction of wild birds which were articles of food and objects of sport, or to encourage hawking […] or to the promote the destruction of such birds as rooks, which were supposed to prey upon crops'.[38] Most of the statutes were repealed by the Game Act of 1831, in order to bring all of the statutes together under one law. In this section, I will highlight some of the most prominent bird laws that were passed in the Victorian period, many, if not all, campaigned for by the members of the Society for the Protection of Birds.

First, I would like to give a brief introduction to the Game Act of 1831, since it was the basis for many subsequent acts. The Game Act of 1831 regulated the hunting of game, which included 'hares, pheasants, partridges, grouse, heath or moor game, black game…'[39] Primarily focusing on the damage caused by unregulated hunting, the Act established a system of game licenses that were required for individuals to legally hunt game and introduced a close season for hunting, which prohibited the hunting of game during certain times of the year, usually to allow the animal populations to recover and breed.[40]

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[38] Marchant and Watkins, p. 9. All of these acts can be found in the Hansard Parliamentary archive: 'HANSARD 1803–2005' <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/index.html> [accessed 27 May 2024].
[39] 'Game Act 1831' (Statute Law Database) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Will4/1-2/32/section/2> [accessed 22 April 2024]. Marchant and Watkins note that moor game relates to red grouse and black game relates to the black grouse (p. 2).
[40] Marchant and Watkins, p. 26.

The first Act introduced in the United Kingdom which specifically related to birds was 'An Act for the Preservation of Sea Birds', passed in 1869. The Act aimed to protect sea birds from hunting and disturbance on certain islands and rocks around the British coast and was introduced in response to concerns about the depletion of seabird populations, which were being killed for their feathers, eggs, and meat. The Act prohibited the taking or destroying of sea birds, their eggs, and their nests on designated islands and rocks during the breeding season, which was defined as between the 1st of April and the 1st of August each year.[41] The Act also authorised the appointment of wardens to monitor the islands and enforce the regulations. In 1872, "An Act for the Protection of certain Wild Birds during the breeding season" was passed, which protected seventy-nine scheduled birds, making it an offence to 'knowingly or with intent to kill, wound, or take any of the scheduled wild birds or to expose or offer for sale any such bird recently killed, wounded, or taken between the 15th March and the 1st August in any year'.[42] As the authors noted, the penalties imposed by the 1872 Act were so minor that a new Act was passed in 1876 ("An Act for the Preservation of Wild Fowl"), which protected wildfowl between the 15th of February and the 10th of July. Of note in this Act is that breeding season is specifically mentioned in regard to the depletion of the bird population in the United Kingdom, as the Act said: 'the wild fowl of the United Kingdom, forming a staple article of food and commerce, have of late years greatly decreased in numbers by reason of their being inconsiderately slaughtered during the time that they have eggs and young'.[43]

In 1880, another new Act was passed, that repealed the Acts of 1869, 1872, and 1876, and at the time that Marchant and Watkins wrote their book was the legal Act being enforced. This "Wild Birds Protection Act" had a much wider scope than previous Acts, extending to all wild birds, not just those previously specified. Exceptions included only those birds found in the Isle of Man, the Channel Isles, and St. Kilda, primarily because those islands were not under Parliamentary law unless specifically named.[44] The Act also expanded the scope of the protected period, bringing the protection back from the 1st of April to the 1st of March and continuing until the 1st of August. Furthermore, the Act expanded in scope the range of protections for birds: 'The

[41] Marchant and Watkins, p. 26.
[42] Ibid., p. 27.
[43] Ibid., p. 27.
[44] Ibid., p. 28. It is worth noting here that St. Kilda had a special exception because it had coastal protection for Sea Birds.

Act makes it unlawful for any person knowingly and wilfully […] to shoot, or attempt to shoot, or to use any boat for the purpose of shooting or causing to be shot any wild bird, or to use any lime, trap, snare, net, or other instrument for the purpose of taking any wild bird'.[45]

Expanding from the Sea Bird Protection Act of 1869, the Wild Bird Protection Act of 1880 notably precluded anyone from using bird traps, including bird lime, which was a highly destructive and torturous way of capturing birds.[46] The Act, in general, cast rather a large net over the protection of birds, defining 'wild birds' as 'all birds of a wild nature which have not become subject to moral control'.[47] The Act continues that it includes 'all wild birds at liberty, and also all wild birds that are forcibly detained in captivity, such as those caged birds which are untamed, or birds kept in some place from which they cannot escape'. Marchant and Watkins did make a note that the language of the Act provided a loophole; while the Act of 1876 prohibited the killing and taking of the wild birds listed, the Act of 1880 only prohibited the shooting or attempted shooting of birds, meaning that other methods could be employed for the taking of wild birds, or if someone was caught with a bird that they had killed, they could only be charged if it could be proved that they had taken the bird through the means prohibited.[48]

Another loophole discovered in the Act of 1880 was that birds could be killed or taken during certain periods when it was legal, or they could be obtained from someone residing outside of the United Kingdom. This Act, therefore, did almost nothing to stem the flow of dead wild birds from coming into the UK. Because of several instances of this Act being brought forward in court cases, a further Wild Birds Protection Act of 1881 was introduced, which stated that someone could not be prosecuted if they could prove that the bird was killed on or before the 1st of March or if they could prove that the bird was imported from someplace 'to which the Act does not extend'.[49]

Regarding the taking or destruction of bird eggs, Marchant and Watkins note that the Game Act of 1831 only had provisions in force to protect the eggs of game birds. With the Wild Birds Protection Act of 1894, a Secretary of State could prohibit the taking or destroying of wild birds' eggs in any year or place within the country. The

[45] Marchant and Watkins, p. 29.
[46] As discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, bird lime was a sticky paste spread over twigs to cement birds' feet down until trappers could cage them.
[47] Marchant and Watkins, p. 38.
[48] Ibid., p. 30.
[49] Ibid., p. 32.

Act also made it illegal to incite someone else to take or destroy wild birds' eggs. The importance of this Act will have been seen in Chapter Two of this thesis, which discussed the gendered implications of hunting and catching birds, and will again be discussed in the following section on "Literature for the Masses". Finally, the Wild Birds Protection Act of 1896 extended the Act of 1894 even further, allowing councils to apply to a Secretary of State to ban the taking or killing of certain wild birds during a period of the year to which the Act of 1880 did not already extend.[50] Under both the Act of 1880 and the Act of 1896, the court could order anyone who took a wild bird to forfeit any traps, snares, nets, or decoy birds used.[51]

Unfortunately, the Act of 1896's Schedule (the birds that came under the protection of the law) contained only a small number of British birds from the Order Passeres; 'out of 376 British birds, 127, including all of our songsters, belong to this Order, but of the 127 only ten are to be found in the Schedule'.[52] Many 'pet' birds and songsters were omitted from protection, and many rare birds, such as the osprey, which was in danger of extermination, were omitted as well.

Alongside the Parliamentary lobbying work that the Society for the Protection of Birds undertook, members also commissioned accessible literature that could be obtained by the public and distributed throughout schools. The next section of this thesis will look at some of the literature that was being published by the Society for the Protection of Birds, including the work of W. H. Hudson, who, as mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, produced many pamphlets that were passed along by the Society.

Literature for the Masses

There were many forms of literature published by the Society for the Protection of Birds in the Victorian period, including their own periodical, *Bird Notes and News*, which will be discussed later in this section, and the purpose of the literature was to educate the general public, including schoolchildren, particularly schoolboys, who were seen as the main culprits in the destruction of bird nests and eggs. Often the scapegoats for the destruction of birds themselves, women were at the forefront of educating the

[50] Marchant and Watkins, pp. 33-4.
[51] Ibid., p. 34.
[52] Ibid., p. 57.

public, as seen in the meeting notes and the Society for the Protection of Birds' publications. The annual meeting of the Society for the Protection of Birds held on the 10th of February 1903, the first recorded in the Society's periodical, was reported in many newspapers and editorials. Prominently, *The Times* published an article stating that the knowledge of birds and their ways was 'the best preventative of "the wanton destruction of a form of wealth that cannot be replaced"' – even newspapers of the time could recognise that birds were worth more to society alive than dead. Furthermore, *The Times* wrote that bird-catchers, armed with their traps and limed twigs, would amount to nothing and were 'cruel, ignorant, idle, and a pest', while *The Country Gentleman* reported that village boys were destroying eggs and taking pleasure 'in merely tearing the nest from the hedge or tree and throwing it on the ground', noting that '[t]he number of eggs that they destroy in a year must amount to millions, and there is practically no available machinery to prevent such destruction."[53] In order to combat such wanton destruction, the Society set about to educate the general public, particularly through *Bird Notes and News*, alongside educational pamphlets for distribution that could be obtained from their London headquarters.

Bird Notes and News

It was in 1903, a year before the Society gained its Royal Charter, that the Society began publishing the regular publication for its members that has been an important source in the earlier part of this chapter. *Bird Notes and News* appeared because, having enrolled over 5,000 associates and many thousand members, the Society decided to publish a record of its various activities from different branches and items of general interest to bird protectors.[54] Recording meeting notes from branches outside of London, in the July 1903 edition of the publication, the Society noted that although it could not stop the wanton destruction of birds outside of the United Kingdom, members 'could discourage the demand, and, when the demand ceased, the destruction of the birds would cease also.'[55] Demand for feathers was still incredibly high, and in the April 1903 issue of *Bird Notes and News*, the editors published a section on The Plume Trade, which took figures from the London Commercial Sale Rooms'

[53] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903, pp. 2-3.
[54] Ibid., p. 1.
[55] *Bird Notes and News*, July 1903, p. 4.

catalogue. For 1902, the total number of osprey packages (roughly thirty ounces of feathers to a package) was 1,608; given that roughly four birds are required to produce one ounce of plumes, the Society estimated that around 192,960 birds were killed in the breeding season in order to supply one year of feathers. Furthermore, the Society found that 19,552 Birds of Paradise skins were sold, of which 13,992 were catalogued as females.[56]

In the July 1903 issue of *Bird Notes and News*, the editors chose to highlight the story of the Osprey for their public audience. They noted that no story would be more remarkable in the future than the plight of the 'osprey' plume:

> Fifty years hence, when the egret has been practically exterminated, or its plumes are no longer considered fit wear for civilized women, our descendants will read with amazement that, at a period when woman was loudly claiming to be intellectual, rational, and cultured, she became possessed of a passion for ornamenting her head-gear with a certain tuft of plumes; that to procure this she had distant lands ransacked and beautiful harmless birds ruthlessly slaughtered in their breeding time, and nestlings by the hundreds of thousands starved to death; that she was deaf to the appeals of the humane against the widespread and wanton cruelty involved, deaf to the invective of the naturalist as he looked forward to the extirpation of a noble species, deaf to the contempt and disgust of the thoughtful, expressed plainly enough by the Press of the day; careless as to how the creatures were done to death, or what the world lost of life and loveliness.[57]

The harsh language used against women in this quotation is important, particularly due to the fact that women were not solely to blame for the destruction of birds, yet the blame was being placed squarely at their feet for the effect that feather fashion was having on the bird population. The idea that women were 'deaf' to the pleas of the humane and thoughtful suggests that women were being largely cruel and uncaring, the opposite of the womanly ideals of the time.

The editors of the issue also noted that despite constant protests and the presentation of scientific fact, many in the plumage trade denied that the bird feathers were real, instead claiming that they were 'manufactured' from materials other than egret feathers. The Society launched an investigation in 1896, when plumes were being

[56] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903, p. 4.
[57] *Bird Notes and News,* July 1903, p. 1.

sold as 'artificial', after Sir William Flower from the Natural History Museum wrote to *The Times* to protest against the falsehood that was being used to bolster the fashion industry. Importantly, the deception that was being sold to women was being created and marketed by men, revealing the fallacy of blaming women for the destruction of the bird population when many of these women were trying to be more conscious of their purchases. While the Society tried to obtain samples of the 'imitation ospreys', they were never able to obtain a single sample. In fact, the Society noted that two assistants in millinery establishments confessed that 'imitation' was simply a trade name and that artificial feathers did not exist. Every 'artificial' sample that the Society obtained was sent to the Natural History Museum for examination; every sample came back as positive for being a real feather from an egret. The 'artificial' feathers could be bought at any price, from a few pence to over a pound, and the Society explained the discrepancy by suggesting that more birds could be killed for their feathers in an afternoon by a few men than it would cost to employ skilled workers to make imitation feathers look as real. An 'eminent' ornithologist wrote to the Society to say that due to the plumage trade, egrets '"have been wiped out in nearly every one of their old haunts, and 'ospreys' will go out of fashion, as there will soon be no birds left to kill."'[58]

By December 1903, the Society had been able to invite a forewoman from a leading drapery establishment in London to talk about how the artificial feathers were made and that talk was reported in *Bird Notes and News*. Neither the forewoman nor the factory owner were able to say where the artificial feathers had been manufactured. The paper was so keen to demonstrate the falsity of this claim to the public that they cited the testimony of Professor Ray Lankester, of the Natural History Museum, who was asked by the *Daily News* to comment on how genuine imitation plumage might be. He responded by saying that it was 'absolutely impossible' to make artificial feathers that would in any way resemble real plumage. He continued that in every case of women coming to him to verify that their artificial feathers were, in fact, fake, the feathers proved to be real: 'An osprey has never been imitated, and, whatever the shop-keeper may say, it is always obtained from the parent bird slain at the breeding season.'[59]

The publication was also keen to highlight to its public the limitations of the laws protecting birds. For example, they focused on the fact that the breeding season was constantly under threat from hunters, and especially those trying to employ

[58] *Bird Notes and News*, July 1903, p. 2.
[59] *Bird Notes and News*, December 1903, p. 20.

loopholes in the Wild Bird Protection Acts. In the October 1903 edition of the publication, the Society noted that a Bill for the suppression of the pole-trap had been introduced into the House of Commons in July. The pole-trap was particularly lethal and cruel and had not been banned in previous Acts; it consisted of a tall pole with a baited trap at the top, and when a bird landed on the trap, it would trigger a mechanism that caused a heavy weight to drop, trapping and, in many cases, killing the bird. Because the trap looked like a perch, larger birds (such as owls and hawks) would land on it unsuspectingly, activating the mechanism, and the traps often weren't checked for hours or days, leaving the birds to suffer and die. The Society noted that although the traps were intended for certain birds, any bird could set it off, meaning that the Wild Bird Protection Acts were for naught.[60] It wasn't until a third reading of the Bill in 1904 that the Bill was passed through Parliament for Royal assent, a fact duly published by *Bird Notes and News*.[61]

The publication, of course, also addressed its female readers in its aims to educate the public. Returning to the October 1903 edition of *Bird Notes and News*, a letter from the Duchess of Portland, published in the Society's paper in December of that year while she was still President of the Society, implored women to stop wearing birds in and on their hats. Bird feathers were still in fashion until the 1920s, when shorter hairstyles and more streamlined clothing styles became more popular, and elaborate hats with feathers and other embellishments fell out of fashion, as discussed in the previous chapter. The Duchess of Portland's letter highlighted to Society members that despite all of their hard work and campaigning, the plight of birds was still very dire in the early 1900s. She wrote: 'Hats composed of feathers – some wreathed in bullfinches, some with twisted and distorted bodies of terns, others decked with dyed plumes – offend the eye at every turn.'[62] High street fashion houses were still promoting birds and their feathers in fashion, and this prompted the Duchess to write: 'The personal vanity which sacrifices not the life only but the very race of birds created for the beautifying of the world is unworthy of the civilization of the twentieth century. In the interest of good taste, and for the sake of bird-life, I hope I need not plead in vain.' Copies of the letter were available for distribution at the Society's head office in

[60] *Bird Notes and News*, October 1903, p. 10.
[61] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1904, p. 26.
[62] *Bird Notes and News,* December 1903, p. 18.

London, and the letter itself was apparently well-received within press at the time. Published in the Society's news, Lord Medway wrote to *The Times*:

> Partly from ignorance, partly from indifference, but still more because ladies appear to be the slaves of their dressmakers and milliners, they continue to turn their hats into cemeteries. Why does no young Member of Parliament grasp the nettle, and bring in a Bill making it illegal to exhibit in a shop a hat decorated with feathers, except those of the ostrich and birds killed for food? It would be a case of protection to which no one could object.[63]

Despite the lobbying and campaigning, and despite the laws that had been established by the time, if milliners were still able to cheaply produce hats with real feathers, then the Acts put into place – without proper enforcement – truly made no difference.

This sentiment is amplified in the April 1904 Society's publication, where it is recorded that the British government at the time seemed willing to save the birds, but in England, the lucrative nature of the plume trade made enacting laws difficult. The Society makes an example of the Audubon Society in the USA, showing how the society had reported that feathered millinery was decreasing due to both the growth of the society's impact, as well as the difficulty in obtaining plumes.[64] The Society makes mention of the fact that while the Audubon Society was able to protect native birds, most of the birds used for plumage in England were imported, and therefore, there was no national interest in protecting them. Furthermore, the commercial import of foreign bird-skins was incredibly lucrative and there was no immediately prominent reason for the trade to be stopped because the trade appeared not to have an immediate impact on the country itself. Here, the publication demonstrates a wide-ranging political stance in its attempts to educate the public.

The press's efforts in the United Kingdom were supported by publications in the United States. In the April 1904 edition of *Bird Notes and News*, it was announced that a prominent leaflet from the Audubon Society entitled 'The Snowy Heron' would be available for collection from the Society for the Protection of Birds' London office. Penned by William Dutcher, the Society noted that the leaflet, widely circulated in the United States, 'deserves the thoughtful consideration of English women.'[65]

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[63] Reprinted in *Bird Notes and News,* December 1903, p. 18.
[64] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1904, p. 28.
[65] Ibid., p. 32.

William Dutcher was the first chairman of the National Association of Audubon Societies in 1905, and he was an avid researcher and scholar, the first to promote the idea of bird sanctuaries in the US.[66] His educational leaflet for the Nation Committee of Audubon Societies was not his first one, and it painted a stark picture of the plight of herons in the US. He called attention to the fact that herons were rapidly becoming scarcer and that due to the continued high demand for the feathers, some dealers were willing to break the laws regarding the protection of these birds in order to continue their profits (roughly quadruple what they were twenty years prior).[67] These feathers were so highly sought-after because the heron only produced them once a year, in the breeding season. During the breeding season, the birds would gather together in colonies, making them easier to kill in large quantities. Dutcher noted, 'with the growth of the parental instinct they lose all sense of fear or wildness and the hunter has little trouble in securing his victims.' Furthermore, only the parent birds were killed, leaving the nestlings to suffer and die from starvation. The continued growth of the plumage industry was a blood stain on every part of the world, according to Dutcher, and he wrote: '[a] few more years of reckless slaughter during the breeding season and the white Herons will be classed among the extinct birds, the number of which is far too rapidly increasing.' At a time when feathers likely seemed to be in infinite supply, Dutcher called attention to the fact that the destruction of birds for feathers meant that bird species would go eventually go extinct from mass hunting.

Dutcher also had the goal to expose the millinery trade's lies as well. He wrote in *Bird-Lore* that while dealers often declared that their feathers were manufactured, 'man has not yet been able to imitate successfully these beautiful plumes; all that are offered for sale have been torn from the backs of the smaller white Herons.'[68] Specifically, Dutcher addresses women – as the main wearers of feathers – and pleads with them not to continue buying feather fashion. It becomes a question of ethics, he writes, and says: 'It matters not a whit where the plume comes from, the fact remains the same that the woman who wears one is party to a cruel wrong and the plume itself becomes a badge of inhumanity and is no longer a thing of beauty.'[69] Whether the

[66] 'William Dutcher Award Winners', *Audubon Arkansas*, 2019 <https://ar.audubon.org/press-release/william-dutcher-award-winners> [accessed 16 March 2023].
[67] National Audubon Society, National Association of Audubon Societies for the Protection of Wild Birds and Animals, and National Committee of the Audubon Societies of America, 'Bird Lore.', 42 v. VI, p. 39.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p. 40.

plumage has been obtained from a bird or manufactured, the feather has become a symbol of the suffering and destruction of the bird population. Of Motherhood, Dutcher writes that it is 'the closest of all human ties' and calls upon women to think of the grief they would feel if separated from their own children, comparing it to the emotional plight of the bird-mother, who faces immediate danger in order to stay with her offspring. Dutcher writes an impassioned plea:

> Oh, human mother! will you again wear for personal adornment a plume taken from the dead body of a bird-mother, the plume that is the emblem of her married life as the golden circlet is of your own, the plume that was taken from her bleeding body because her motherhood was so strong that she was willing to give up life itself rather than abandon her helpless infants!

The link that Dutcher makes here between women and birds is that of motherhood, calling on women to remember their duty as mothers to provide a nurturing and caring disposition towards all life, particularly bird life. That Dutcher explicitly invokes anthropomorphic imagery when discussing women and birds should not be lost on the reader. In a way, the bird's aesthetic qualities are being used as indicative of human establishments such as marriage, and women are being called upon to exercise their duty to protect these birds with whom they have been identified as having a kinship connection through the shared experience of motherhood.

The plight of certain birds during the time was dire. The April 1904 edition of *Bird Notes and News* opened with the story of the Great Auk. The Great Auk was a coastal bird that inhabited land across the North Atlantic. The Society publication makes note that the bird had no fear of man, but neither did it have the wing-power to get away from man; 'Consequently, as soon as their main haunts were discovered, the birds were easily butchered by the boat-load for food, and, when not needed for food, were done to death for "sport," or slaughtered wholesale for their feathers and the bodies used for fuel.'[70] While the last known breeding pair of Auks were killed in 1844 off the coast of Iceland, the Society notes that the last bird seen in Britain was captured by inhabitants of the Isle of St. Kilda, tied up, and stoned to death because the inhabitants believed it to be a witch. The vilification of women wearing feather fashion and the witch-hunt become explicitly tied together in this story. The plight of the Great Auk is not the only sad story reported in the Society's publication. From a leaflet distributed by the

[70] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1904, p. 25.

Audubon Society in the USA, the Society notes that the passenger pigeon had faced a similar fate, having been hunted for sport or fed to hogs.[71] Meanwhile, Egrets in Florida were being slaughtered 'without even the excuse of serving for human food', and the Emu, which only occupied one small region, was facing near-extinction as people were slaughtering it both for its feathers and its highly sought-after eggs.[72]

Education for the public went beyond presenting the idea that birds were simply good for feathers and eggs, looking at how birds impacted agricultural industries around the world. Among other sections, the Society's publication examined what was being talked about in other countries at the time. One column in particular discussed an article which had recently been published in the West Indies regarding agricultural news and the protection of birds. In the article, the writer commented that should birds be exterminated, the insects which feed on crops would be left unchecked, resulting in the destruction of the crops. Those involved in agriculture, therefore, should do everything in their power to encourage bird life.[73] The main perpetrator of crimes against birds were peasants and small boys, according to the writer, and while Ordinances had been put into place, the author noted that they were rarely enforced. Furthermore, the author noted that due to agricultural expansion, bird life was threatened as their homes were destroyed in the process, and bird life should therefore be supported as much as possible so that the increasing crop sizes didn't prove too much for the birds to maintain naturally.

In a somewhat related section beneath the report from the West Indies, a *Times* article published on 30th March 1903 indicated that plover eggs were being raided in large numbers, as there was no protection for the eggs. As a result, the article said, the insects which fed on crops were increasing, particularly the wireworm. Wireworms are the larvae of click beetles, and they are a serious pest of crops. They cause significant damage to crops by feeding on the roots, stems, and underground parts of plants, as they reside in the soil. Furthermore, in the October 1903 edition of the publication, the Society reported that 'grub'-like leather-jackets and wireworm were increasing immensely due to the extensive destruction of rooks, and that slugs and snails were

[71] *Bird Notes and News*, April 1904, p. 26.
[72] While the Emu today is listed as 'Least Concern', three subspecies of the Emu in Australia went extinct in the late 18th century. It wasn't until the 1970s that commercial Emu farming began in Western Australia.
[73] *Bird Notes and News*, July 1903, p. 3.

wreaking havoc on gardens, with seedlings being utterly destroyed.[74] In May of 1903, the *Aberdeen Weekly Free Press* reported that although early-sown corn had not been eaten over by crows, the corn crop on the whole would be a complete failure due to the destruction caused by grub, whose natural predator was the crow. Across the Atlantic, the *Ontario Agricultural College Bulletin* wrote that if birds were destroyed, farmers and gardeners would no longer be able to bring any crop to maturity in ten years' time. Once again, nurturing and care were being proposed – this time for land –, aspects which were traditionally relegated to women.

Nurturing extended to wild birds as well, with the Society stating that wild birds should not be caught and caged. The July 1904 edition of the Society's publication opened with a focus on the caging of wild birds. Proponents of caging wild birds argue that caging birds encourages a love of birds: 'they are pets with ladies and children; they must be happy because they go on living and singing and are saved from their natural enemies; their presence gladdens and refines the slum; and so on.'[75] The sentiment that caged birds must be happy because they survive and sing is seen in Buist and Bechstein's manuals, and questioned in the case study of *Aurora Leigh*. The prominent idea at the time of how to transport and display the birds was to keep them in a kind of cell: 'It's kinder to give them small cages; they'd beat themselves to death in bigger ones' went the thinking.[76] Starkly, the Society imagines that of the scarce few that actually reach the dealer from the capturer, only one in six of the remaining birds actually make it alive to be purchased. Of the birdsong argument, the Society remarks:

> That is to say, they continue, unless utterly broken-hearted, to exercise the one bird-faculty left to them – to cry aloud for the warm sunshine, the green shade, and the never-seen, ever-delaying mate, even though they can never be understood by a single listener and never answered in their own mystical language.

Bird song, according to the Society, may be a cry for help from the bird, rather than the rejoicing music that manuals such as those discussed in Chapter One propose. Furthermore, bird song is a mystical language, one which cannot be understood or interpreted by humans and will ultimately be misunderstood by them.

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[74] *Bird Notes and News*, October 1903, p. 15.
[75] *Bird Notes and News*, July 1904, p. 33.
[76] Ibid., p. 34.

Once the birds realise that their cries will never be heard, they cease trying to escape, resign themselves to the seed supplied to them, and begin to appear 'merry'. Some birds, such as the chaffinch, can be taken for walks once tamed in order to improve their fading songs or serve as decoys in order to ensnare more birds. The article is emphasising the idea that caging any bird for its song is inhumane and cruel. While native birds were being caged with immense popularity, 'foreign' birds were also being imported and sold to fanciers and dealers, and excuses were continually made that because these birds were not from the region, they would need to be caged. But, the Society wrote: 'a bird is a bird the world over; even a cage-bred one never entirely loses the passion for liberty, the powerful instinct of flight, which are the glory of free bird life.'[77] This is in direct opposition to the claims of Buist, who, as discussed in Chapter One, claimed that birds needed humans to rescue them in order to keep them safe and well taken care of. There is a real shift in attitude apparent from when Buist's manual was published in 1874 and the Society's publications less than thirty years later, and these attitudes can be assumed to be logically telling of wider shifts in attitudes towards women as well.

[77] *Bird Notes and News*, July 1904, p. 35.

Figure 22: A Dedication, by George Frederic Watts (1898-9), housed in Watts Gallery and Artists' Village.

In the October 1904 edition of the Society's publication, the editors included a highlight of G F Watts (George Frederic Watts), who was a member of the Society. The publication notes that in 1899, Watts sent a painting entitled *The Shuddering Angel* (1898) to the New Gallery [Figure 22]. Formally known as *A Dedication*, the painting bore the inscription: 'To all who love the beautiful and mourn over the senseless and cruel destruction of bird life and beauty.'[78] The painting depicts an angel weeping over slaughtered birds and destroyed feathers, with the luminous white of the bird echoing ideas of divine purity and innocence. The slaughtered birds are in stark contrast to the rest of the painting, which is quite dark, spotlighting the destruction of the birds. While the blue of the angel's outfit is perhaps traditionally a calming colour, it contrasts sharply with the red of the cuffs and centre of the outfit, drawing the eye in and leading it down towards the dead birds, suggestive of a river of blood. While the dead birds' species is not identified, the white of the bird parts suggests that the bird is likely a dove, associated with innocence and purity.

Osprey feathers were also associated with innocence and purity, which is one reason why their feathers were used so often in female feather fashion, and in the December 1903 edition of the Society's publication, a woman named Ada F. Slack published a poem dedicated to the ladies who wore ospreys.[79] The poem is a stark reminder of the participation that women had in the destruction of birds. In the poem, despite the pretty maid's acknowledgement that the osprey feathers are gotten from 'famine and slaughter', she is still going to buy some to adorn her outfit. The unidentified male speaker, who talks with an air of authority, laments the fact that women are ignoring the motherly pains of the female birds who are being ripped from their fledglings. The poem is more than a little crude; the responses from the maid are rather unrealistic and unlikely, reading like a bad propaganda to the public. Furthermore, the onus is on women to exhibit 'tender care' by helping the helpless and the weak, including, in this case, helpless birds who have been hunted for their feathers. Due to their greed, women covet the beauty that God has blessed the egret with, the pure light and innocence, the 'bridal love' that is pure and wholesome. Because of this

[78] *Bird Notes and News*, October 1904, p. 44. Of note to the reader is the fact that this image was used as the cover image for Diana Donald's *Women Against Cruelty*, which discusses societies and female-led initiatives like the Society for the Protection of Birds. For more information, see Diana Donald, *Women Against Cruelty: Protection of Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Gender in History (Manchester University Press, 2020).
[79] *Bird Notes and News*, December 1903, p. 20. For the full text of the poem, see Appendix C.

greed, the male hunters are spurred on to kill the mother birds, with whom the speaker believes the pretty maid should feel a connection, in order to furnish these feathered fashions. It is of note that the poem is authored by a woman and yet spoken with male authority, which continues to blame women for the destruction of birds. Even in the Society's own publication for its (majority women) members, the blame for the destruction of birds was being placed solely at the feet of women.

Information for the General Public

While the Society's *Bird Notes and News* was published for the benefit of its members, the Society also published information for the general public, especially in order to educate members of the public on the destruction of birds. This section will look at some of the information published and made accessible to the public, particularly because this information was geared towards adults, making it of interest to this study. This section will also briefly look at some of the authors of the work published for the public by the Society, in order to establish that a male voice was needed to spread the information that was necessary to educate the public, men and women alike.

In October 1891, William Henry Hudson published the Society for the Protection of Birds' first educational material, a pamphlet entitled 'The Osprey, or Egrets and Aigrettes. Leaflet no 1 = Destruction of Ornamental Plumaged Birds'. Among his other books and educational materials, he published 'Feathered Women' and 'Bird Catching' in 1893, 'Lost British Birds' in 1894, 'The Barn Owl' in 1895, 'Pipits' in 1897, and 'The Trade in Birds' Feathers' in 1898.[80] He continued publishing for the Society well into the twentieth century.

While Hudson may have been one of the most prolific writers for the Society, he was not the only author in the membership of the Society for the Protection of Birds. As noted in 'A Woman's Initiative', the Society had many writers as prominent members during the Victorian period, including many poets. One of the most prominent poets associated with the Society was Gerard Manley Hopkins, a nineteenth-century English poet and Jesuit priest. Hopkins was an avid bird-lover and wrote several poems about birds, including 'The Windhover', which associates Christ's ministry with a kestrel's flight, and 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', which opens on the arresting image of bright

[80] Bassett, p. ii.

plumage. His poetry celebrated the beauty of birds, suggesting they communicated a divine quality, offering another lay of importance for protecting them.

Another key figure who wrote educational pamphlets for the Society during the Victorian period was Edmund Selous. Selous was an English writer, naturalist, and ornithologist who was passionate about bird preservation.[81] He wrote several books on birds and was a regular contributor to *The Field*, a popular sporting and natural history magazine of the time. Selous was a strong advocate for bird conservation, pioneering birdwatching as a scientific method, and he wrote several educational pamphlets for the Society for the Protection of Birds to inform the public about the importance of protecting birds and their habitats. His pamphlets were widely distributed and helped to raise awareness about bird conservation issues throughout Britain.

Other prominent writers and naturalists who contributed to the Society's educational efforts during the Victorian period included Mrs. J.A. Owen Visger and H. Eliot Howard. Visger was a British author and naturalist who contributed several articles to the Society's magazine, including a series of articles on bird migration, while Howard was a British writer and naturalist who wrote several books on birds and contributed articles to *The Field* and other natural history magazines, writing several articles on bird behaviour and conservation for the Society's magazine.[82] Finally, Richard Kearton, a British naturalist and photographer who was known for his pioneering work in wildlife photography, contributed articles and photographs to the Society's magazine in order to raise awareness about bird conservation issues.[83] Together, these individuals and others helped to promote the cause of bird conservation.

One particular pamphlet from the Society, published by Hudson, that drew quite a bit of attention in the media was 'Feathered Women'. 'Feathered Women' was originally published as a letter to *The Times* in October 1893 and was re-issued in May 1902 in the form of a double leaflet.[84] It was the tenth publication from the Society for the Protection of Birds, and when it first came out in *The Times*, it was discussed by many newspapers across the country. The *Globe* reported on the letter in the same

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[81] 'Selous, Edmund', *Encyclopedia.Com* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/selous-edmund> [accessed 25 April 2024].
[82] For more information on Mrs. Visger, see 'Mrs. J. A. Owen Visger', *Nature*, 110.2755 (1922), 257–58 <https://doi.org/10.1038/110257b0>. For more information on Eliot Howard, see 'Mr. Eliot Howard', *Nature*, 147.3721 (1941), 231 <https://doi.org/10.1038/147231a0>.
[83] For more information on Richard Kearton's work, see 'The Naturalist's Picture Gallery', *Nature*, 86.2170 (1911), 450 <https://doi.org/10.1038/086450a0>.
[84] George Francis Wilson, *A Bibliography of the Writings of W.H. Hudson* (London: The Bookman's Journal, 1922) <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.124440>, pp. 35-6.

month it was published and wrote that 'the sin of women in the matter is as great now as it ever was, possibly even greater.'[85] The reports on the letter note that it was a scathing condemnation of feather fashion. The *Globe*, a London publication that began in 1803 as an opposition to the government and its supporters,[86] wrote that while feather fashion had seemed to be dying out prior to the article's publication, this dip was 'merely a transitory caprice of fashion' and that fashion 'has thus once more proved that, in its influence over the female mind, it is more than a match for humanity – that the "decoration" of the person is more to most women than the preservation of nature's beauties.' Of fashion, the *Globe* was highly critical:

> Of the forces that regulate human society, fashion is one of the most irresistible, the most irresponsible, and the least intelligent. Inscrutable in its origin, impalpable in its authority, it is independent alike of humanity, taste, and sense.

Once more, publications were blaming women for the destruction of birds when, in reality, women were simply following the fashion trends that were being created by men. Furthermore, there appears to be a connection between fashion and the women wearing it that suggests that women and their fashion are unintelligent, impalpable, and irresponsible.

Gentlewoman took issue with Hudson's letter to *The Times*, writing that 'once again the angry ornithologist is launching his thunderbolts at the innocent head of the women of fashion'.[87] Unfortunately, the writer in *Gentlewoman* was misguided in their assumptions about the feathers that women wore, writing, 'Mr. W. Hudson's is a word out of season, because at the present moment the birds and feathers with which we are pleased to decorate hats and bonnets are mainly gathered from the farmyard.' As discussed in the section '*Bird Notes and News*' above, the Society for the Protection of Birds launched an investigation into feathers that were being sold as artificial or manufactured and found that every single feather examined was real. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, bird feathers were mostly obtained in horrific ways, with great harm done to the bird, usually resulting in death. Therefore, the

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[85] '"Feathered Women."', *Globe*, 17 October 1893, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001652/18931017/027/0003> [accessed 25 April 2024].
[86] Dorothy Deering, 'The London "Globe" of the 1840s and 1850s', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 11, 1971, p. 28.
[87] 'Feathered Women.', *Gentlewoman*, 28 October 1893, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003340/18931028/140/0028> [accessed 25 April 2024].

assumption that the bird feathers in use at the time were 'gathered from the farmyard' was likely a fallacy that was being pandered to women in order to induce them to continue buying feathers, perhaps to offload the masses of real feathers that milliners had purchased before feather fashion began to fall out of style due to its horrible origins.

However, in one regard, *Gentlewoman* brought to light a harsh reality that was often otherwise overlooked in the conversation surrounding feather fashion:

> […] after all, even in this case of cruelty with which we are so wrongly charged, do we not secure these feathers and these birds through the means of the *male* purveyors, who have bought them from *men* who have butchered the innocents to make our modish holiday?

Quite rightly, *Gentlewoman* discusses what was so often skirted around in conversations about feather fashion: bird feathers and carcasses that decorated female feather fashion accessories came from men who hunted and shot them, men who shipped and carried them, men who created the designs, and men who bought them and men who sold them.

Unfortunately, *Gentlewoman* ended the response to Hudson's letter on a rather sour note:

> I wonder whether it is not more soothing to feathered dignity to be placed in a hat, and allowed to crown feminine beauty, than to be deposited in a pie or grilled upon toast to satisfy the appetite of mere men!
>
> But seriously, we cannot for an instant allow man to coerce the dictates of Fashion even in the interests of the birds of the air. Let him propagate the laws of science if he will; but it must always remain the privilege of woman to determine the laws of Fashion, taste, and beauty, and to do this worthily will ever ensure a feather in her cap.

While the author of the response to Hudson's letter points out that men have butchered the birds, they fail to realise that men were creating feather fashion as well, stating that women dictate the fashion of the day and will, therefore, continue to wear feathers.

Likely, this desire to feel as if women were in control of the fashion of the day was in response to a line in Hudson's letter, as reprinted in *Evening Mail*, which asked, 'Why then do women, who have received sufficient enlightenment on this subject during the last few years, still refuse to give up a fashion which degrades them?'[88] Even

[88] 'The Wearing Of Feathers. To The Editor.', *Evening Mail*, 20 October 1893, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003187/18931020/067/0007> [accessed 25 April 2024].

though he was a member of the woman-led Society for the Protection of Birds, Hudson was scathing in his judgment of women, who he believed to be the main point of concern regarding the demand for feather fashion. The response to the editor of *Evening Mail* was largely sympathetic for women, drawing attention to the fact that women were not to blame for the 'wholesale slaughter of innocent and many-hued songsters' because 'she is equally helpless.' The author of the letter, Bella Löwy, finished with a strong, almost call to action for women, writing,

> It was only through the united efforts of thousands of women that they have actually escaped the impending horrors of the crinoline, and it can only be through the united efforts of thousands that women may ever hope to control the vagaries and cruelties of those fashions of which at present they are the unresisting slaves.

Work such as that undertaken by the woman-led Society for the Protection of Birds was vital, ensuring that women were addressing the issues that 'enslaved' them to things such as feather fashion.

Overall, the pamphlets, leaflets, and other publications that came out of the Society for the Protection of Birds and other sources were meant to educate the general public on the destruction of birds, primarily for feather fashion. However, it became clear that educating the general public was not enough. Telling women not to wear feather fashion was only one prong of the two-prong approach that the Society decided to take; the other prong revolved around pushing for Natural History, a subject which had previously been relegated as an 'odd hobby', to be taught to schoolchildren, who were often seen as perpetrators of the destruction of birds. Although not in the scope of this thesis, the Society's push for the education of children on the importance of protecting birds and bird-life would provide additional insight into their fight for bird preservation from the early formative years.

Conclusion

Women, identifying with birds as societal Others and culturally linked with them, formed societies to combat the issues surrounding feather fashion in particular, challenging male-dominated institutions. Notably, Emily Williamson founded 'The Plumage League' in 1889, which merged with the Fur, Fin, and Feather Club to form the Society for the Protection of Birds (SPB) in 1891, later led by the Duchess of Portland.

The Society, focused on female membership, grew rapidly and became influential, promoting bird protection laws. Despite some opposition, including from women's rights activists like Emmeline Pankhurst, the Society's educational efforts contributed significantly to bird conservation, laying the groundwork for the RSPB, now Europe's largest nature conservation charity.

James Robert Vernam Marchant and Watkin Watkins, recognising the inaccessibility of many of the laws in place at the time, published *Wild Birds Protection Acts, 1880-1896* to simplify contemporary bird protection laws for the public. Initially, many statutes protected birds for food, sport, or agricultural reasons, but the Game Act of 1831 consolidated these laws, regulating game hunting through licenses and closed seasons. The 1869 ‘Act for the Preservation of Sea Birds’ was the first specific bird protection law, followed by the 1872 Act protecting seventy-nine bird species during breeding seasons. Due to minimal penalties, the 1876 Act was enacted and offered further protection for wildfowl. The 1880 ‘Wild Birds Protection Act’ extended protections to all wild birds, barring specific geographic exceptions, and prohibited various methods of bird capture. However, loopholes allowed continued bird exploitation, prompting the 1881 Act to address these issues. The 1894 Act enabled the prohibition of egg destruction, and the 1896 Act allowed councils to request seasonal bird protections. Despite some omissions in the 1896 Schedule, these Acts significantly influenced bird protection. The Society for the Protection of Birds also promoted public education through literature, including W. H. Hudson's pamphlets, to support bird conservation.

The Society played a crucial role in raising awareness about bird conservation during the Victorian period through a range of publications aimed at adults at all levels of society. Key figures such as William Henry Hudson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edmund Selous, and others contributed significantly to this educational effort by producing pamphlets, articles, and poetry that highlighted the importance of protecting birds from the rampant feather trade. These efforts were instrumental in educating the public and advocating for changes in societal attitudes towards feather fashion, which was largely driven by male-dominated fashion industries but blamed on women. Despite the Society’s educational campaigns, the issue was complex and deeply intertwined with gender dynamics, as evidenced by the contentious responses to Hudson’s condemnations of feather fashion. The Society’s educational campaigns recognised that simply telling women not to wear feathered fashions was insufficient.

Final Remarks

Fabienne Moine wrote of the Victorians, 'Compassion and kindness towards animals were considered true signs of civilised behaviour.'[1] In a society that valued being 'polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish', and above all, moral, civility was paramount. Yet, as Moine underscores, 'natural closeness between human and nonhuman does not preclude questionable social and economic practices that illustrate the Victorians' propensity for possession, commodification, and domination.'[2] Possession, commodification, and domination are key themes that resonate throughout this thesis, observed from the implicit caging of Catarina Sarti in George Eliot's 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' in *Scenes from Clerical Life*, right through to the fervour of the very real feather fashion industry that drove several bird species to the brink of extinction.

From the outset of this thesis, my primary aim has been to address questions regarding the relationship between birds and women during the Victorian era and how this relationship can shape our contemporary understanding of Victorian society. Imagery depicting women alongside caged birds delves into the gendered implications of keeping such birds and the nurturing attitude that society expected women to adopt towards their feathered companions. In much Victorian literature, birds represented a form of Other with which women were both connected and identified. Moreover, various species of birds were chosen to symbolise diverse concepts, and several of the more anthropomorphic traits attributed to birds were typically associated with women, establishing a kind of 'kinship' connection between them.

Although 'kinship' technically refers, in everyday usage, to blood relatives, the term has increasingly come to be associated with the meaningful and profound relationships that are akin to familial ones. The fictive kinship exhibited between women and birds during the Victorian era is therefore striking. In many respects, this fictive kinship can be compared to a 'chosen family', where women took on the responsibility in the fight for bird protection precisely because they felt a connection with birds and regarded them as equals in their Otherness. If one does not advocate for the smallest members of the community, can they truly look out for anyone in the community? I believe this reflects the mindset of Victorian women, evident in both their

[1] Fabienne Moine, 'Manipulating the Animal', in *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), p 155.
[2] Ibid, p 155.

advocacy for bird protection and the campaign for women's rights. When we consider the Women's Suffrage Movement in the UK, we might think of Emmeline Pankhurst, founder of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), known for its empowering motto, 'Deeds not words'.[3] This motto can also be applied to the highly active Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The relationships formed among the women who campaigned for bird protection and against the mass slaughter of birds for feather fashion reveal a profound kinship connection, a vibrant bond that transcends generations and familial ties. While the RSPB remains active today, its membership is no longer limited to just women, and its expanding membership list serves as a testament to its 'people power'—the capacity of its members to create positive change in the world, one step at a time, by addressing the issues that matter most to them.

Why did the women of the RSPB choose to align themselves with birds? I believe it was not solely because women were often compared to birds in literature and the wider culture; rather, I think women saw in birds what they longed to see in themselves: grace, beauty, and — more importantly — freedom. The ability to soar towards the heavens, the natural inclination to sing and create beauty in both song and nesting (an oft-used metaphor for the domestic household in literature), and the opportunity to be at once delicate and resilient through survival must have appealed to Victorian women in numerous ways. There are many juxtapositions that birds share with women: the tension between being delicate and resilient, the idea of being both protected yet imprisoned, and clipped wings signifying confinement for a species born to fly. Although women weren't literally born to fly, they found figurative flight in terms of their achievements and recognition of their abilities, seeking opportunities that would elevate them to a higher station, a better place for themselves and their families in society, a chance to break free from domestic confinement into a world of possibilities. For Victorian women, bird caging and confinement must have seemed torturous and cruel, a means for a patriarchal society to maintain its dominance over "lesser animals".

While many people might believe that women chose to advocate for bird protection due to the association of birds with homemaking and nesting—reinforcing notions of women in the domestic sphere and as caregivers—I contend that kinship analysis and identification would reveal, as this thesis has endeavoured to demonstrate, that the relationship between Victorian women and birds is far more nuanced and

[3] 'Start of the Suffragette Movement' <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/startsuffragette-/>

complex. When we look to Christian theology, we discover a belief in humans possessing souls, an immortal self that transcends and outlives the physical body. Birds, regardless of whether they were believed to possess souls, were viewed as spiritual beings, often symbolising purity, grace, and a connection to the divine. Reflecting on De Morgan's painting, where the peacock feather signifies the immortal soul, it is little wonder that women sought to protect birds from slaughter if birds were indeed perceived as symbols of divinity. More than that, however, divinity transcends earthly living, and I think that women had to hope that there was a better future for themselves and future generations of women.

One of Emily Dickinson's poems critically reflects the feelings that Victorian women had relating to birds. She wrote,

"Hope" is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all – [4]

I firmly believe that this poem strongly resonates with the Victorian woman's experience and her symbolic connection to birds. The poem describes hope as a small bird that perches in the soul, enduring hardship and never asking for anything in return. This metaphor aligns closely with the way Victorian women were expected to be—resilient, gentle, and unwavering in the face of life's challenges. Unlike the caged bird metaphor commonly used in Victorian literature, Dickinson's bird is free. It is not bound by restrictions; it weathers storms and sings without stopping, just like the women of the RSPB and WSPU. This bird suggests a more hopeful perspective—perhaps an assertion that women, despite societal limitations, possess an inner freedom that cannot be taken away. The image of a bird that continues to sing through adversity represents the quiet defiance of women who found ways to express themselves through poetry, letters, and social activism, like the educational materials produced and distributed by members of the RSPB. Overall, Dickinson's poem both aligns with and subtly challenges Victorian ideas about women. While it embraces the image of women as gentle and self-sacrificing, it also presents hope as something inherently free and untamed, suggesting that women, like birds, might possess an inner resilience that cannot be confined.

[4] Emily Dickinson, '"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers', *The Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>

Victorian women's fictive kinship with birds was intricate and multifaceted. Caged birds mirrored women's confinement within rigid gender roles, while free birds symbolised the independence many women yearned for. Literature, fashion, and social movements all echoed this connection, reinforcing the notion that women, like birds, were both admired and constrained. Through this symbolic relationship, Victorian women found a voice for their frustrations, aspirations, and evolving roles in society. With all of these issues in mind, it becomes easier to see the complexities involved in the relationship between Victorian women and birds, particularly through the messy phenomenon of women's involvement in feather fashion and bird preservation. If women aligned themselves with birds, the question of why women chose to wear bird feathers and participate in the destruction of bird species becomes more apparent and problematic. Though the answers are not always evident, one thing does become clear: the women who sought to put an end to the destruction of birds by boycotting feather fashion and educating others so that they might do the same saw birds as under their protection, exercising a duty of care to creatures with whom they found a kinship connection. The connection between women and birds was not relegated to art and literature; rather, it was a definitive kinship that transcended books and pictures, permeating all facets of society.

Appendices

Appendix A

'A Bird of Prey'[1]

Woman? We know her slavish thrall
To the strange sway despotical
Of that strong figment, Fashion;
But is there nought in *this* to move
The being born for grace and love
To shamed rebellious passion?

'Tis a she-shape by Mode arrayed!
The dove that coos in verdant shade,
The lark that shrills in ether,
The humming-bird with jewelled wings, -
Ten thousand tiny songful things
Have lent her plume and feather.

They die in hordes that she may fly,
A glittering horror, through the sky.
Their voices, hushed in anguish,
Find no soft echoes in her ears,
Or the vile trade in pangs and fears
Her whims support would languish.

What cares she that those wings were torn
From shuddering things, of plumage shorn
To make *her* plumes imposing?
That when – for *her* – bird-mothers die,
Their broods in long-drawn agony
Their eyes – for *her* – are closing?

[1] *Punch, or the London Chivari*. Vol. 102. London: Bradbury, Agnew, & Co., 1892., p. 230.

What cares she that the woods, bereft
Of feathered denizens, are left
To swarming insect scourges?
On Women's heart, when once made hard
By Fashion, Pity's gentlest bard
Love's plea all vainly urges.

A Harpy, she, a Bird of Prey,
Who on her slaughtering skyey way,
Beak-striketh and claw-clutcheth.
But Ladies who own not her sway,
Will you not lift white hands to stay
The shameless slaughter which to-day
Your sex's honour toucheth?

Appendix B

Mr. "Punch's" Pleas for the Birds: An Appeal to the Ladies of England[2]

Lo! the sea-gulls slowly whirling
Over all the silver sea,
Where the white-toothed waves are curling,
And the winds are blowing free.
There's a sound of wild commotion,
And the surge is stained with red;
Blood incarnadines the ocean,
Sweeping round old Flamborough Head.

For the butchers come unheeding
All the tortures as they slay.
Helpless birds left slowly bleeding,
When the wings are reft away.
There the parent bird is dying,
With the crimson on her breast,
While her little ones are lying
Left to starve in yonder nest.

What dooms all these birds to perish,
What sends forth these men to kill,
Who can have the hearts that cherish
Such designs of doing ill?
Sad the answer: English ladies
Send those men to gain each day
What for matron and for maid is
All the Fashion, so folks say.

Feathers deck the hats and bonnet,
Though the plumage seemeth fair,

[2] 'Mr. "Punch's" Plea For The Birds', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 September 1887, British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000098/18870914/012/0009> [accessed 22 February 2024].

Punch, whene'er he looks upon it,
Sees that slaughter in the air.
Many a fashion gives employment
Unto thousands needing bread,
This, to add to your enjoyment,
Means the dying and the dead.

Wear the hat, then, *sans* the feather,
English women, kind and true;
Birds enjoy the summer weather
And the sea as much as you.
There's the riband, silk, or jewel,
Fashion's whims are oft absurd'
This is execrably cruel;
Leave his feathers to the bird!

Appendix C

Ada Slack's poem[3]

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid?"
"To the milliner's show-room, sir," she said.

"And what would you seek there, my pretty maid?"
"The beautiful ospreys, sir," she said.

"And how are they brought there, my pretty maid?"
"By famine and slaughter, sir," she said.

"And if it be so, my pretty maid,
Yet will you wear them? Alas!" he said;
"Around every plume that is waving there,
Stirred by the tremulous summer air,
There has wailed the moan of a fledgling's pain
Uttered in anguish, but uttered in vain –
A cry of starvation raised o'er and o'er
To the parent birds that shall hear no more.
In the days of gladness, the days of spring,
Nature sighed in the breeze thro' the egret's wing;
And like snow in its exquisite softness white,
A delicate plume crept forth to the light,
Like a sanctioning seal from the God above
On Nature's teaching and bridal love.
But woman, whose tenderest care should seek
To succour the helpless and guard the weak,
Coveted still the beauty given
To the creature of earth by the God of heaven.

At fashion's bidding the hunter has sped,
The plumes are ravished, the mother lies dead;

[3] *Bird Notes and News*, December 1903, p. 20.

And if such be their story, my pretty maid,
Yet will you wear them?” again he said.

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