

Seeking Alternatives Through Languages in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry

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Abstract

This short article reexamines the *fin-de-siècle* poet Dollie Radford (1858–1920) by foregrounding her engagement with literary resources as intellectual and cultural resistance. Building on alternative readings, this study examines an overlooked dimension of Radford's work: use of foreign languages and classical myths. This study argues that her use of these elements functions as a form of symbolic mobility that fostered openness to other cultures, resistance to gender norms, and participation in modernist currents. Through archival material and poetic analysis, this article contributes to ongoing debates on revolutionary poetics in the works of Victorian women writers, advancing discussions of multilingualism as a resource for negotiating cultural authority.

Keywords: Dollie Radford, Victorian poetry, multilingualism, classical myth, women's writing

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Introduction

Dollie Radford (1858–1920) is a *fin-de-siècle* woman poet whose diary and poetry eschew the prevailing conventional norms of her time, describing the limited opportunities for women writers in late Victorian England. Although some scholars have explored the “subversive” meanings within Radford’s poems, shedding light on her engagement with the social and political movements of her time,¹ research concerning her use of other languages and myths to serve revolutionary ends is limited. In LeeAnne Richardson’s reading of Radford’s *The Ransom* (performed in 1912, published in 1915) and “A Modern Polypheme” (1891), Richardson suggests that Radford wanted “to challenge ancient ideas about human sexual behavior, not reproduce them” (Richardson, 2000, p. 119). Although Richardson examined Radford’s unconventional use of Greek myths, her study did not consider the poem or diary entries included in this article. Recently, Parker (2024) identified Radford as part of a group of neglected Victorian women poets. According to her, “Radford adapted her distinctive lyric mode to address the conditions and challenges of modernity, including women’s increasing presence in the city space” (Parker, 2024, p. 123). While Parker (2024) provided an account of Radford’s feminist and aesthetic poems published during the 1900s, any references to myths and folklore as part of Radford’s engagement with modernity was not acknowledged.

Therefore, to fill this research gap, I assessed notes from Radford’s unpublished diary in the William Andrew Clark Memorial Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the poem “Orpheus” from her first published volume, *A Light Load* (1891) (Radford, 1891). In doing so, I attempted to advance the extant literature on the significance of foreign-language use by women writers worldwide. This contribution is novel as prior research, to the best of my knowledge, has not involved examining previously unacknowledged diary entries and a poem in which Radford referred to foreign languages as a means of empowerment and openness to other cultures.

Reading Foreign Languages in Radford’s Diary

Despite the limited educational opportunities offered to women in the nineteenth century, Radford’s diary frequently includes references to her readings in different languages: “Absorbed in the study of the Netherlands! – Must read some ‘Dutch Art’” (Radford, 1883). Excitement and a sense of compulsion dominate her comments regarding other languages and cultures. For instance, in the above quote an exclamation mark followed by the word “must” suggests her enthusiasm for learning more about Dutch art. In another entry, she points out: “Am reading German with Tussy twice a week” (Radford, 1883). Tussy is the term of endearment she used to refer to her close friend, Eleanor Marx, a socialist and women’s rights activist who supported free love unions. Such acquaintances and readings may have influenced Radford’s thoughts and shaped her opinions on the status quo. In addition to German, French is frequently mentioned in the diary: “Morning at the Museum, reading French plays” (Radford, 1883). The diary continuously reveals her desire to read and learn European languages: “We *must* read French – German – Latin – Greek – & some other tongues!” (Radford, 1883). The repetition of the word “must,” underlined this time, indicates how important it was for Radford to be acquainted with other languages.

Her comments further suggest a correlation between these languages and engagement with modernity: “We get on very nicely with the French tongue. Have had my hair cut in French &

¹ The term “subversive” was first used by LeeAnne Richardson in her research article, which offers readings of Radford’s poems in relation to the New Woman; see Richardson, 2000, p. 112.

bought some things” (Radford, 1883). This indicates, she not only learned French but also adopted the language’s culture and style through a haircut, rejecting the prevailing stereotypes of ideal femininity and long hair.² Daniela Theinová pointed out that Irish women poets expressed the need to find a new language to condemn the historical silencing of women (Theinová, 2020, pp. 79–99). Similarly, Natalie Edwards highlighted how French women writers used their knowledge of other languages to demonstrate openness to different cultures in both life and literary writings (Edwards, 2020, p. 2). Despite the different backgrounds of the writers, I consider the arguments of Theinová (2020) and Edwards (2020) as evidence supporting Radford’s claim regarding foreign languages and cultures being used as a means of empowerment and seeking the new.

Myths and Alternatives in Radford’s “Orpheus” (1891)

Radford’s work, *A Light Load* (1891), includes several poems inspired by the Greek myths and folklore. For example, one of these hitherto-overlooked poems, titled “Orpheus,” challenges male authority in its form and content. In her reading of Radford’s poems, Parker claimed that “Radford uses song to obliquely address political issues. Her work raises wider questions regarding the political capacities of the song-like lyric” (Parker, 2024, p. 128). In my reading of “Orpheus,” I build on Parker’s argument regarding Radford’s use of songs to question gendered attitudes in the nineteenth century that were biased against women. Rather than addressing the love theme in the conventional sonnet form, “Orpheus” is written in a song form divided into four quatrains, with unequal length of lines.³ Additionally, it begins with the pronoun “we,” suggesting equality and reshaping the dominance of the male persona over the female beloved through the common use of the pronoun “I” in traditional forms:

WE wandered in that shadowland,
My fair love, you and I,
Through all its strangeness hand in hand
We journeyed silently.

My lyre is hanging cold and dumb,
Mute with our triumph song,
I have no voice now you are come,
Whom I have sought so long.

But I will bring you in Love’s land,
Into Love’s highest place,
And crown you there, and understand
The wonder of your face.

² In her study *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Galia Ofek pointed out that, “Inasmuch as recurrent images of women’s hair in a variety of Victorian cultural discourses not only reflected existing models of womanhood, but also questioned, revised and redefined assumptions about the nature and making of femininity, they were also a means to create conditions for social and political changes” (Ofek, 2016, p. 10). Thus, I suggest that Radford’s reference to her French haircut endorses the argument of her engagement with foreign languages and cultures to challenge the conventional norms of womanhood.

³ See also how Radford used short songs to seek “something that will be truly new,” Emily Harrington, *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse* (Harrington, 2014, p. 141). This article carries Harrington’s argument forward to show how myths in these unconventional songs were one way of exploring the “new.”

And then my joyous song shall rise
To sun and moon and star;
And all the worlds beyond the skies
Shall tell how fair you are. (Radford, "Orpheus" in *A Light Load*, p. 50)

Tom Furniss and Michael Bath identified allusions as indications that the meanings of poems are part of, and should be read in relation to, other texts (Furniss & Bath, 2022, p. 428). Therefore, an overview of Orpheus's legend would enhance our understanding of Radford's poem. In her account of Orpheus, Maria Daniels stated that, "The legend tells us that Orpheus married Eurydice—the symbol of Light and Truth. Thus, Orpheus did not marry a woman made of flesh and bones, but rather a mystical ideal" (Daniels, 2008, pp. 22–23). Therefore, reading the poem in relation to the myth questions the Victorian perception of the ideal image of wives and beloveds as objects of pleasure. In Greek mythology, Eurydice is considered a "symbol of Light and Truth" rather than a symbol of beauty; similarly, Radford's poem situates the beloved not as a sexual entity but rather a motivating spiritual source for Orpheus. As a musician and poet, his "lyre is hanging cold and dumb," and he remains with "no voice," seeking the presence of his beloved. Therefore, the superiority and autonomy of the male as a lover and poet are absent from the poem. His "joyous song shall rise" only when Eurydice is brought to "Love's highest place" and "crown[ed]" as his equal.

Thus, Radford used Greek sources to challenge the rigidity of the male hierarchy in both private and public spheres. Stevenson (2005) explored the use of Latin by women poets from antiquity to the eighteenth century. She argued that "The issue of women's writing in Latin is often closely connected with the issue of their participation in power" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 11). Although Radford did not use Latin in this poem, her desire to learn other languages (as mentioned in her diary) and adopting Greek myths in her poetry is a strategy through which she sought alternatives for marginalized women in the nineteenth century.⁴ This aspect is further emphasized through the final poem in Radford's work *A Light Load*, titled "A Dream of 'Dreams,'" which is dedicated to the South African writer Olive Schreiner.⁵ Concluding the volume with a particular reference to a non-native feminist woman writer highlights Radford's quest for new possibilities through different languages and cultures.

Conclusion

Through this study, I have examined Radford's engagement with foreign languages and cultures in an attempt to question the rigidity of established conventions concerning women in late Victorian England—an area that has received limited scholarly attention in relation to her work. It emphasizes her desire to read and learn new languages as part of her quest for alternatives. While this finding reinforces the arguments of Theinová (2020), Edwards (2020), and Stevenson (2005) on how women writers adopt different languages to challenge prevailing

⁴ Barrow (2019) considered the use of dialects and informal English by Victorian poets to challenge social and political conventions. "While Victorian scientists studied the origins of speech, the history of dialects, and the barrier between human and animal language, the Brownings, Tennyson, and Hardy harnessed these debates to explore social unrest, the expansion of the electorate, and the ever-widening boundaries of empire" (Barrow, 2019, p. 2).

⁵ For a detailed account of the poem and Radford's friendship with Olive Schreiner, see Azhar, H., *Marginalization vs. Emancipation: The (New) Woman Question in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry* (Azhar, 2016, p. 180–186). Furthermore, in "'Stealing the Fire:' Language as Theme and Strategy in South African Women's Poetry," Deirdre Byrne argued that "South African women poets foreground language as a particular site of resistance against patriarchy and colonial discourse, an emphasis they share with feminist poets around the globe" (Byrne, 2016, p. 28).

norms, it simultaneously extends on them by offering a close reading of previously unexplored materials from Radford's diary and works. Thus, the present study contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the effectiveness of languages and cultures when applied to literary texts. Future research should examine additional examples of marginalized Victorian women poets to consider the significance of foreign languages in each of their lives, writings, and poems, which are worthy of further attention.

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