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Framing the Woman Poet: William Archer’s *Poets of the Younger Generation* (1902)

Sarah Parker

William Archer’s *Poets of the Younger Generation* is an imposing volume. Bound in navy cloth with a gilt top edge and a cover stamped with a gold lyre, the volume runs to nearly six hundred pages. With this anthology, Archer—now mostly remembered for his theatre criticism and his translations of Henrik Ibsen’s works—sought to capture the most promising poets of his generation, those born after 1850 who, in his words, “still seemed to be more or less on probation” in terms of their poetic reputations (W. Archer, *Poets* 2). I use the word “capture” purposefully, as Archer’s volume also depicts the poets themselves in striking woodcut portraits by the Scottish artist Robert Bryden. The volume features the thirty-three poets in alphabetical order, alongside critical commentary and poetic extracts intended to represent their best work. In this article, I will consider how Archer’s criticism builds a vocabulary of judgment and hierarchy based on assumptions regarding national identity and gender. Looking in particular at how the nine women poets in the anthology—Alice Brown, Katharine Tynan Hinkson, Nora Hopper, Alice Meynell, Edith Nesbit, Dollie Radford, Dora Sigerson Shorter, Rosamund Marriott Watson, and Margaret L. Woods—are represented in both Bryden’s images and Archer’s critique, I will argue that Archer’s anthology ultimately frames the woman poet as a “poetess” distinct from the male poets in the volume.

While now remembered primarily as a drama critic, a translator of Ibsen, and the author of *The Green Goddess* (1921), Archer was also an active reviewer of poetry in the periodicals and newspapers of the 1890s. He began lecturing on contemporary poets around 1891 and publishing anonymous book reviews in the *Daily Chronicle, Fortnightly Review, Pall Mall Gazette*, and other influential magazines, these interests bringing him into “fruitful relations with authors of distinction—such men as Thomas Hardy, Francis Thompson, William Watson” (C. Archer 207). Many of the pieces in *Poets of the Younger Generation* are
expanded versions of these articles; others originated from Archer’s lecture “On Some Living Poets” given in January 1898 to the Society of Women Journalists. By January 1899, Archer worried that “The Younger Generation will be grey-haired before my laurels are woven for them” (qtd. in C. Archer 231–32). In August 1899, he was “very busy, trying at last to get the confounded poets book off [his] hands” (232), but it was not until 1902 that the volume was finally published, owing—as Archer wrote to Henry Newbolt on 27 November 1900—to delays caused by the Boer War: “It has, as I daresay you have heard, been delayed by the war, + has been maturing in a safe in Chancery Lane. Meanwhile my living poets have been dying off” (W. Archer, Letter to Newbolt).²

The anthology was published by the Bodley Head in January 1902. It was bound by the Edinburgh-based Ballantyne Press and cost twenty-one shillings. This was fairly expensive, even taking account of the volume’s considerable size and high-quality production. Therefore, Archer’s volume was likely aimed at the same “broad middle-class spectrum” as The Yellow Book, also published by the Bodley Head and costing five shillings per quarterly number (Kooistra par. 5). Archer’s anthology provides a sense of how John Lane’s publishing house sought to sustain its status as a promoter of cutting-edge poets following the closure of The Yellow Book in 1897—a closure partly catalyzed by Oscar Wilde’s trials in 1895, in which he was seen with a yellow book tucked under his arm. Archer began working on his anthology a year after the periodical folded and many of the poets featured had been regular contributors to The Yellow Book.³ Although Archer, in his introduction, rejects the tendency “to assume that English poetry has of late entered on a (temporary or permanent) period of decadence” (1), many of his poets were in fact already associated with the decadent movement, as was the Bodley Head press itself.

Archer’s anthology, with its four-year delay, consequently embodies a liminal moment at the tail end of the fin de siècle and on the cusp of the Edwardian era. Archer’s attention to
the “minor” poet in this volume reflects both the diversity of poetic work in this period and the anxieties regarding the status of poetry following Alfred Tennyson’s death in 1892. In 1896, Tennyson was succeeded as Poet Laureate by Alfred Austin, mockingly referred to as “Alfred the Little” in *Punch* (Arata 54). While Austin’s appointment raised concerns that poetry was in decline, the “absence of a figure-head icon” was also enabling, democratizing the poetic field and fostering a sense of multiplicity: “By the 1890s there was a dizzying array of poetic movements, genres, types and coteries…. [T]he marginal became central” (Thain 224). Archer’s text, with its thirty-three poets from Britain, North America, and Canada, reflects this poetic diversity, seeking to emphasize the energy and variety of poetic production in the 1890s: “If the reader will bear in mind that by far the greater number of the poems here quoted have been written within the past ten years, I think he will admit that the last decade of the nineteenth century has been anything but a barren period” (W. Archer, *Poets* 26). Although eschewing comparative judgment between poets, Archer seeks to “enhance the reader’s estimate of the value of contemporary poetry as a whole” (1). In this regard, the volume marks a transitional moment, implicitly raising questions about the status of poetry in the new century and reflecting back on the nineteenth century’s considerable achievements. Several of the poets featured in the volume continued to publish into the twentieth century, exerting an important influence on the next generation; for example, Laurence Binyon played a key role in the imagist movement, Madison Cawein’s “Waste Land” (1913) provided inspiration for T. S. Eliot’s more famous poem, and W. B. Yeats became a key poet within both the symbolist and modernist movements.

Before I turn to the visual aspects of the anthology, it is important to contextualize Archer’s approach to literary criticism, outlined in his introduction. Archer is aware that his criteria for inclusion are idiosyncratic, stating: “I have included only those poets whose work, or some substantial portion of it, gives me genuine pleasure” (W. Archer, *Poets* 3). This
statement of purpose implies a Paterian approach focused on subjective appreciation over objective aesthetic standards. This approach is made explicit by Archer’s opening sentence, “Appreciation is the end and aim of the following pages” (1), which signals that his volume follows in the footsteps of Pater’s *Appreciations* (1889) and obeys the dictum of *The Renaissance* to “know one’s own impression as it really is” (Pater 3). In keeping with this aim, Archer attempts to delineate his preferences, giving an account of his background and his opinions on literature from the Renaissance to the present day (for example, he states that he is “of the Keats-Tennyson not of the Shelley-Browning faction” [*Poets* 16]). This approach also derives from John M. Robertson, a fellow Scottish critic and friend of Archer whose *New Essays towards a Critical Method* was published by the Bodley Head in 1897 (the year that Archer began working on his anthology). Robertson proposes that critics should give full account of their backgrounds in order to contextualize their judgments: “the perfect scientific critic, the critic of the future perhaps; might be conceived as prefacing his every judgment—or the body of his judgements—with a confession of faith, bias, temperament, and training” (Robertson 24–25). Robertson also advocates a combination of biographical, psychological, and even physiological criticism that takes into consideration the “temperament and physique” of the poet under discussion (vi).

Although Archer explains that he will not attempt “psychological criticism”—having, he claims, little personal knowledge of his poets (a claim that was not strictly true)—he does seek to “throw into relief such character-traits as [he] found imprinted on the work before [him]” (5), suggesting that the poets’ personalities may somehow reveal themselves in their work. Elsewhere, Archer refers to poetry in terms of “physiognomy” (24) and “portraiture” (413). These references reverberate interestingly in a volume that includes intricate portraits of all its poets, implying a subtle connection between the poet’s “physiognomy” and the poetry itself. Archer emerges as obsessed by national characteristics that, he argues, make
themselves apparent in the work of his poets. For example, in his discussion of Hopper’s *Songs of the Morning* (1900), he muses on the “Keltic character”:

> The Keltic character, I take it, is, more clearly than any other race-character, a product of geographical conditions. The Kelt has for ages inhabited the western fringe of the world…. And his mind has taken its imprint from this region of mountain and river and firth, of coolness and moisture and briny fragrance, bounded on the one hand by hostility, and by mystery on the other. (177–78)

Archer then connects these notions to Hopper’s poetry, suggesting that this ancestry influences her work:

> These reflections on the Keltic temperament in general may seem to have led us far away from Miss Hopper in particular. But they are really suggested by the sense of wide space, clear colour, wind, water, and the cool breath of flowers that comes to us from her poetry. May we not see in such verses as these, for instance, the quintessence of the Keltic spirit? (179)\(^4\)

Elsewhere, of the Irish poet Sigerson Shorter, Archer writes: “There is race in her work; it smacks of the soil; it is no mere imitative culture-product, but an expression of innate emotion and impulse. Mrs. Shorter has all the fanciful melancholy, the ardent spirituality, and the eerie-pathetic invention of the western Kelts” (396). Such ideas are visually manifested in Bryden’s use of symbols (such as the winged rose with a Celtic cross included in Yeats’s woodcut portrait) and the landscapes used as backdrops, underlining the connections between environment, blood, and poetic inspiration suggested by Archer. The Canadian poet Bliss Carmen, for example, is depicted against an ocean backdrop in order to reflect his “intimate feeling for the sea” (Archer 69), while A. C. Benson is backed by Cambridge University, where he worked as Master of Magdalene College.
Little information is available on the illustrator himself. Born in Ayrshire, Scotland, Bryden specialized in etchings, woodcuts, and, increasingly after 1900, sculpture in wood and bronze. Prior to illustrating Archer’s *Poets of the Younger Generation*, Bryden had produced a volume entitled *Some Woodcuts of Men of Letters of the 19th Century* (1898), featuring twelve woodcut portraits based on photographs of such authors as Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, Rudyard Kipling, William Morris, John Ruskin, Walt Whitman, Tennyson, and Ibsen—clearly demonstrating his qualifications to illustrate Archer’s volume. Bryden’s woodcuts for Archer’s anthology are also based on photographs of the poets, submitted to John Lane. For example, in 1899, Lane evidently encouraged Alice Meynell to be photographed by London-based photographer Alexander Bassano; as Meynell wrote, “I have just returned from France, and I have at last sat to Bassano. I do hope it is not too late” (Meynell to Lane, 24 June 1899). It is unclear if this photograph was used as the basis for Bryden’s woodcut (fig. 1), as the original photograph remains untraced (see Peterson, “Presenting Alice Meynell” 180–81). Face-to-face meetings between the poets and Bryden were also evidently arranged through Lane; for example, two weeks later, Meynell wrote, “If Mr Bryden could come to me next week, I should be more at leisure than I am this week. Tuesday afternoon the 11th would suit me best, if that would be convenient to him” (Meynell to Lane, 5 July 1899). Earlier that year, Edith Nesbit had written,

I will get photographed as soon as I can. As to meeting Mr Bryson [sic] at your house, I am terribly busy just now, during the day-time— + I am always unhappy in a bonnet!

Do you think he would come + dine with me instead?—If so, I will write + ask him. In fact I enclose an invitation which you can, if you approve, forward to him. (Nesbit to Lane, 22 Feb. 1899)
However, it is unlikely that Bryden met all the poets in person (particularly those based in the United States and Canada), and he probably worked based on the photographs that Lane forwarded to him. For example, Rosamund Marriott Watson’s woodcut portrait (fig. 2) is clearly based on the photograph included as a frontispiece to the posthumous collection *The Poems of Rosamund Marriott Watson*, published by the Bodley Head in 1912 (reproduced in Hughes, *Graham R* 208). As Hughes notes, Rosamund’s husband, H. B. Marriott Watson, “dispatched his favourite photograph of Rosamund to Lane in October [1899], asking it have it back when Bryden was through with it” (*Graham R* 260). Both the photograph and the woodcut portray the poet gazing upward, as if listening for poetic inspiration, her much-admired dark curls clustered on her forehead. However, Bryden altered Rosamund’s gown: the original photograph shows a velvet gown with a wide bow at the neckline and lace sleeves, whereas the woodcut portrays her in a higher-necked gown with smocking and embroidery at the neck. This dress actually more closely resembles one worn by Rosamund in an 1892 photograph by Frederick Hollyer (reproduced in Hughes, *Graham R* 166). Therefore it seems possible that Bryden combined the two photographs in his woodcut (perhaps at Rosamund’s suggestion). Archer’s poets certainly endeavoured to exercise choice in how they appeared. For example, Meynell wrote to Lane, “I have written to Mr Bryden, greatly praising the Francis Thompson and telling him of the points in which my portrait be altered, but I fear they are fundamental and constructional. Looking at it today I am more struck by its expression of a woman on the point of crying, and that for no worthy cause” (Meynell to Lane, 3 Aug. 1899). It is difficult to determine if Bryden did make any alterations—but since the resulting Meynell woodcut is indeed rather pensive looking, it seems unlikely that substantial changes were made.

Bryden’s woodcuts combine photographic detail with an Arts-and-Crafts aesthetic reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. But why use woodcut illustrations for a volume
that is supposed to capture the contemporary poets of the younger generation? In other words, Bryden’s woodcut images might seem somewhat antiquated for an Edwardian book, which readers might have expected to feature photographs of its poets instead. However, Bryden’s woodcuts are in fact symptomatic of an Arts-and-Crafts revival that occurred in the late 1890s, when Archer was originally planning the volume. The first Kelmscott Press book to include woodcut illustration, *A Dream of John Ball*, was published in 1892, followed by the Kelmscott Chaucer in 1896. In 1897, Gleeson White published *English Illustration, ‘The Sixties’: 1855–1870* based on his collection of Pre-Raphaelite woodcuts, and, in 1898, an exhibition devoted to John Everett Millais included over thirty woodcuts and wood engravings. As Simon Houffe observes,

> It was a strange irony of the art world that within a few years of facsimile wood engraving being superceded, and within months of the Dalziel Brothers bankruptcy in 1893, the more progressive illustrators were turning their attention with nostalgic eyes to the wood engraved line. Just as the Pre-Raphaelite illustrators had collected woodcuts of the early sixteenth century, the late Victorian artist collector was being urged to assemble wood-engraved work of the ’Sixties with the idea of self-education. (14)

Bryden’s work is a product of this revival of interest in woodcuts and wood engravings. His woodcuts share a similar aesthetic to those of other fin-de-siècle artists including William Strang, A. Garth Jones, Edward Gordon Craig, and William Nicholson, whose *Twelve Portraits* (1899–1900) represents a similar project to Bryden’s *Men of Letters*, featuring woodcut portraits of celebrities such as Kipling, Henry Irving, and Sarah Bernhardt.

Archer’s decision to include woodcut portraits of his poets also reflects a wider preoccupation with visual representations of the poet during this period. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a rapid proliferation of representations of authors, stemming from the
invention of photography in the late 1830s and important developments in print culture such as the use of line blocks and half-tone blocks in mechanical printing. As a result, images of the author became practically ubiquitous during the *fin de siècle*, making “the physical appearance of the producer … inseparable from the circulation, interpretation and reception of literary and visual texts” (Stetz 19). This boom is embodied by such phenomena as the *Poet’s Calendar* of 1897 sold by the firm of Marcus and Ward and the “Bodley Heads” published in *The Yellow Book* from 1895 to 1897, featuring portraits of Le Gallienne, John Davidson, George Egerton, and others. But while this expanding visual field offered opportunities for writers to utilize their images in order to market their work, it also provoked anxieties about looking the part. As Stetz explains, theories of physiognomy led poets to cultivate the appearance of genius … conspiring with portraitists to produce a look of heightened spirituality, thought, and intensity, in order to impress upon the viewer the idea that there was a creative spark firing the face from within…. It was no longer enough to write a book or paint a picture; one also had to look the part of the creative artist. (18–19)

Stetz argues that we can observe this attempt in Julia Margaret Cameron’s 1865 portrait of Tennyson, dubbed “the Dirty Monk,” in which he appears draped dramatically in a cape, wind-swept and sage-like, tome in hand. Gerard Curtis compares Tennyson’s image to visual representations of Charles Dickens (such as William Powell Frith’s 1859 portrait or George Herbert Watkins’s 1858 photograph, both of which depict Dickens busily working at his desk). Curtis argues that while the novelist’s various portraits emphasize his productivity, hard work, and heroism, Cameron’s “soft-focussed and romantic” portrait of Tennyson is “anachronistic—the fading image of the author who could no longer match the sales, or popularity of prose” (146). Curtis here implies that the antiquated style of Tennyson’s image symbolizes the poets’ increasing obsolescence as the nineteenth century progressed. But I
would argue that it instead reflects the different cultural expectations levelled at poets as opposed to novelists: poets were supposed to be inspired—even divinely possessed (an idea that can be traced back to Plato’s *Ion*, but that had been more recently promoted by Romantic poets such as Blake and Shelley)—and were therefore far more likely to be represented as ethereal, romantic—even “anachronistic”—while novelists were more likely to be contextualized in their own historical moment and connected to ideas of industry rather than inspiration.

Rather than Bryden’s woodcuts marking the poet as outdated or obsolete in the age of photography, Archer’s anthology is part of a self-conscious attempt to aestheticize the poet as an inspired romantic entity—a marketing strategy very much in keeping with John Lane’s canny brand of aestheticism for the masses. The poets, through being transformed into woodcuts, appear as they might in a sixteenth-century chapbook—their very appearance transformed into art. Writers such as Wilde had demonstrated that becoming a work of art oneself could be extremely lucrative—if risky. Archer conveys his awareness of the problems that poets might encounter when constructing their images, commenting on Le Gallienne’s appearance: “There is such a thing as looking a part too well; and Mr. Le Gallienne’s eminently poetical exterior, taken along with his liquid and exotic name, have done some injustice to his real talent. Such a name and such a physiognomy are hard to live up to” (251).

However, it was not necessarily male poets who faced the greatest challenges when forging a public image; issues of celebrity, publicity, and self-fashioning were particularly vexed for women writers. As Alexis Easley observes, “the increasingly visual, sensational nature of celebrity profiles featuring women writers highlighted the ‘embodiment’ of the woman writer as a visual commodity” (147). This embodied role was a dangerous position to occupy for women who, until fairly recently, had been viewed primarily as the objects of poetry rather than the subjects. As several critics have observed, throughout the nineteenth
century, women were often associated with the silent, inspiring muse, the “object, and not the writer, of poetry” (Pulham 28). While beauty could help promote one’s work in the increasingly visual economy of *fin-de-siècle* celebrity, it also risked enshrining the woman writer as a muse/object—a role that many late nineteenth-century women poets were still striving to avoid. The belief that women were muses and had no right to appeal to the muses themselves was articulated in an anonymous 1890 review of Amy Levy’s poetry (published shortly after her death), which declared: “Poetry in petticoats is only poetry on sufferance; only woman essaying to do the man’s part” (*Scots Observer* 439).

The belief that writing poetry was “the man’s part” was often reinforced in nineteenth-century visual culture. Victorian depictions of Sappho—considered the first woman poet—frequently portrayed her wearing a diaphanous *chiton*, poised on the Leucadian cliffs, and singing her last song of unrequited love before leaping to her death. As Yopie Prins notes, several early nineteenth-century poetesses including L.E.L. and Caroline Norton emulated Sappho in their own representations. The belief that a woman poet’s exterior should be as beautiful as her verses was also reiterated in reviews. For example, in her literary sketch of Felicia Hemans, Maria Jane Jewsbury expresses the assumption that “a poetess ought to be ladylike, claiming acquaintance with the Graces no less than the muses…. [A]ll that we know are so, and Mrs Hemans especially” (467–68). Over fifty years later, Louise Chandler Moulton echoed this opinion in her remarks after meeting Rosamund Marriott Watson (then known as Graham R. Tomson): “I wrote to you not long ago of the moving and beautiful poems of Mrs. Graham R. Tomson. Shall I add that she herself is a poem?…. [She] looked as a poet ought. She is tall and slight, the very perfection of grace in manner and movement” (22). Thus, later women poets continued to be portrayed in ways that suggested that their bodies and their work were intertwined.
During the fin de siècle, the pressure to fashion a memorable image became increasingly intense, making it “necessary for women to perform selves they had fashioned in order not only to emerge from a crowd of writers, but even to survive” (Demoor 8). Photographic technologies intensified the challenge of presenting oneself as a gendered body without being objectified, sexualized, or accused of “self-exposure.” Carefully managing and restricting images of oneself was one strategy. For example, Linda H. Peterson has shown how Meynell was vigilant about her photographic representation throughout her career: “only distinguished artists or celebrity photographers produced her images, and she suppressed those she disliked or felt unsuitable” (“Presenting Alice Meynell” 177). In her portraits by Elliott & Fry, Meynell dressed in black with a single string of pearls (a trademark also seen in Bryden’s woodcut), in order to look “delicate, refined, soulful, spirituelle—all those attributes expressed by her admirers” (Peterson, “Presenting Alice Meynell” 180). Placing such an emphasis on the spiritual/cerebral over the corporeal enabled women poets to evade the problems of gendered embodiment. But this was not an easy game to play. As Annette Federico has observed, popular writers such as Marie Corelli were derided both for avoiding the camera and for circulating their images. It was impossible to avoid representation because “[p]ublishing images was both a commodification of the woman writer and a form of discipline in a culture where women had to have bodies as well as books” (Federico 31). And although both men and women were active participants in fin-de-siècle visual culture, for women the tainting association with popular culture caused their work to be devalued: “such publicity located women within a culture of commodities focused on the new, the beautiful and the sensational…. Consequently their works were often viewed as fads of the moment rather than legacies for all time” (Easley 255).

For these reasons, when women poets are portrayed in Archer’s volume, the implications of their aestheticization are different from those of the male poets in the volume.
These woodcuts come uncomfortably close to casting the women poets as pseudo-Pre-Raphaelite muses. The troubling implications of this casting are reinforced by Archer’s construction of the women poets as “poetesses” throughout the volume.⁸ Although his anthology is alphabetically arranged, rather than segregated by gender (as in other anthologies such as Elizabeth A. Sharp’s Women’s Voices [1890] and Alfred H. Miles’s The Poets and Poetry of the Century [1907]), Archer still treats women poets as a discrete category throughout.⁹ His introduction to Meynell reveals that he viewed “poetesses” as a separate and inferior group:

Stern veracity, I fear, enforces the admission that few poetesses of the past have shown a very highly developed faculty for strict poetical form. I am not aware that the works of any woman in any modern language are reckoned among the consummate models of metrical style. In England, at any rate, we have had no female Milton, Coleridge, or Swinburne. Great poetesses though they were, beyond a doubt, Mrs. Browning and Miss Rossetti were incurious of formal perfection, especially in rhyme; and ladies as a rule seem to have aimed at a certain careless grace rather than a strenuous complexity or accuracy of metrical structure. In respect of accuracy, though not of complexity, Mrs. Meynell is one of the rare exceptions to this rule. (264)

Elsewhere, Archer worries that if Sigerson Shorter is not berated for her imperfect rhymes “other poetesses may plead the sanction of her talent for similar slovenlinesses” (401). Thus it becomes clear that “poetesses” are set apart here as a separate group, to be judged by different standards. (At no point in Archer’s anthology are a male poet’s failings considered to threaten every other male poet.) This separation is signified visually by the use of frames. All nine portraits of women poets in the anthology are enclosed within a decorative border in contrast to the portraits of the male poets. And while twelve male poets are depicted against
the detailed backdrops previously mentioned, none of the women are. Thus, the women poets
are to some extent decontextualized, removed from the world of action and inspiration that
characterizes their work. Instead, decorative borders frame them as objects, frozen pictures to
be looked at and admired.

As the volume progresses, the qualities that Archer expects and appreciates in women
poets become more distinct: prettiness, charm, sweetness, womanliness, maternal feeling, and
artlessness. For example, Hopper’s poetry is repeatedly described as “very pretty” (177):
“Miss Hopper never writes otherwise than prettily” (176). Such descriptions—alongside the
woodcut of Hopper that replicates in painstaking detail her intricate lace collar, tightly curled
hair, and intent, confiding gaze—imply that such “prettiness” may not be confined to her
verse (fig. 3). In his discussion of Tynan Hinkson’s work, Archer emphasizes maternal
subjects as one of the few in which women can excel:

*The Dead Mother* strikes that note of intense maternal feeling which had been
anticipated, indeed, by a few of the greatest male poets, and by certain
nameless ballad-singers, but which has naturally entered much more largely
into literature since women learned, not merely to write more or less like men,
but to make their sex articulate. (164)

Archer values Tynan Hinkson for her “profoundly feminine emotion” (165) and “frank
womanliness” (170) and takes pains to emphasize that her patriotic Irish verses are neither
“shrill” (164) nor “hysterical”: “Her love of the country … is heartfelt and intense, without
hysterical exaggeration” (171). By constructing Tynan Hinkson’s work as primarily an
expression of private, feminine emotion, Archer carefully overlooks the political dimension
of her Irish nationalism at a historical moment when the campaign for home rule was
intensifying. Equally, Archer plays down the political aspects of Radford’s poetry (such as
her socialist verses and her ironic feminist poem “From Our Emancipated Aunt in Town”),
fashioning her instead as a poet of love:

A delicate ear, a very true voice, though of limited range, and a brave and
beautiful human spirit—these are the gifts which make Mrs. Radford a
poetess. Her philosophy is love, her learning is love, her gospel is love. It is
evident that love has meant to her not only joy but suffering; yet her saddest
songs are neither querulous nor accusing. (359–60)

Again, anger is warded off as an inappropriate mode for a poetess. Likewise, although Archer
is highly complimentary about Marriott Watson’s work, Hughes noticed that Archer remains
“blind to the note of anger and rebellion in Rosamund’s poems” (Graham R 261).

Since the women poets in Archer’s volume are judged by their ability to measure up to
his expectations of femininity as sweet, emotional, and confiding, an apparent lack of
personal expression is interpreted by Archer as a “defect.” Margaret Woods attracts praise for
her intellectualism but is criticized for the impersonality of her work, which Archer feels
makes it too masculine:

[I]f Mrs. Woods’s poems had been published anonymously, it would have
taken a rather keen critic to declare with confidence that their author was a
woman…. [W]e feel a lack of intimacy, almost of individuality, in the
utterances of this fastidious spirit. Her poems have sometimes the air of
literary exercises, evidences of faculty rather than expressions of feeling. (522)

Archer’s admiration is reserved for “poetesses” whose work arises from spontaneous feeling.
Whereas in Woods’s poetry there is “never a laugh, never a sob, never a pulse-beat of
exultation or of agony” (522), in contrast, the womanly Tynan Hinkson satisfies “lovers of
song who are content with the unforced notes of a fresh human voice, in whose rhythms may
be felt the throbings of a warm human heart” (173). Thus, throughout the anthology, Archer
engages with the long-standing stereotype of women’s poetry as an outpouring of personal expression, termed “the gush of the feminine” by Isobel Armstrong in her discussion of Romantic women’s poetry and epitomized by the “improvisatrice” depicted in Madame de Staël’s Corinne (1807). Fin-de-siècle women poets still found their work judged “according to the rubric of spontaneous singing” (Hughes, “Contested Spaces” 869). Archer refers to Hopper as a “born singer of songs” (181), Tynan Hinkson “sings like the birds she loves” (162), and MarriottWatson “touches a little lyre…. Its strings being few, she can all the more easily keep them in perfect tune” (470). Sappho and her lyre haunt Archer’s commentary, recalling the golden lyre on the cover of his volume. This symbol appears frequently on Bodley Head books and links to John Lane’s marketing strategy for his women poets. As Peterson has noted, Lane not only “verbally linked his women poets with Sappho … he linked [them] visually” using the lyre symbol (“Vigo Street Sapphos” 355–56). The lyre appears on the Bodley Head edition of Henry Thornton Wharton’s translations of Sappho and several other Bodley Head books by women poets—for example, a lyre features on Patten Wilson’s woodcut title page for Radford’s Songs and Other Verses (1895), which depicts Radford herself playing the instrument and singing. Thus, in a similar manner, Archer signifies his admiration for such Sapphic singers by adorning his anthology with a lyre—but while his criticism casts women poets as singers valued for their spontaneity, sweetness, and feminine subject matter, he consistently overlooks poetic contributions that do not fit this “poetess” model.

I will conclude by briefly discussing the reception of Archer’s anthology on its publication in 1902. In general, reviewers agreed that the anthology was too bulky and Archer too unselective in his choice of poets. Sidney Low expressed bemusement that so much poetry was produced in an apparently “unpoetical” age, finding the quality of the work inconsistent: “The compiler of the ‘Gems’ is not a severe critic, and he is moved easily to
admire” (754). William Morton Payne chided Archer for expending attention on “minor” poets: “One should long hesitate about enshrining in a big book of any sort the names of men and women whose own books may be absolutely forgotten two or three decades hence” (151). The visual aspects of the anthology also attracted mockery. Life magazine featured a satirical piece entitled “A Real Conversation with William Archer”—a parody of Archer’s own interview series “Real Conversations.” The piece by “Walter Satyr” was accompanied by a cartoonish, grainy “woodcut” of Archer himself (no artist is specified) and concluded with the Satyr praising Archer’s “Pantheon of present-day poetry” before inquiring, “Weren’t the portraits a little wooden though, that accompanied them?” (Satyr 258). Archer is imagined to respond with outrage: “Wooden? Of course they were wooden! Wood-cuts, my dear boy. Why shouldn’t they look wooden? They afford a magnificent example of the artistic revival in England to-day” (Satyr 258). This comical scenario suggests that some readers may have found Archer’s decision to include woodcut portraits strange, old-fashioned, and, indeed, rather pretentious.

Only one reviewer specifically mentions the women poets in the anthology. Edith Thomas remarks on the “perfunctoriness” of Archer’s treatment of women poets:

[Archer’s] characterisations are for the most part distinguished by a fine sympathy of insight…. Some exceptions, some lapses, may remain, for a critic of critics to point out…. [W]e might mischievously question whether some of the encomiums meted out to the ladies of Mr Archer’s Parnassus do not savour of journalistic perfunctoriness. For instance, “Mrs. Hinkson is a born poetess, if ever there was one”; and as to Mrs. Radford’s work, Mr Archer assures us: “Never was there poetry with less of the ‘big bow-wow’ style about it.” (161) Thomas highlights here that Archer uses a limited and somewhat clichéd vocabulary to discuss the work of women poets, suggesting a lack of true engagement with their work. To a
2016 reader, this suspicion remains. Archer clearly had good intentions in compiling his anthology, but the resulting volume perpetuates some enduring and restrictive assumptions about the woman poet. Like the woodcut images themselves, Archer’s criticism frames women poets in ways that are limiting and—to echo Walter Satyr—a little wooden.

Works Cited


1 Several versions of the book are digitized online (see https://archive.org/details/poetsofyoungergerge00archuoft).

2 One of Archer’s poets, Richard Hovey, actually died in 1900 during an operation—meaning that Archer had to drop “Living” from the title.


4 Interestingly, Hopper was actually born in Devon and spent very little time in Ireland. Her father was Irish, however.

5 Some biographical information about Bryden can be found at http://www.futuremuseum.co.uk/collections/people/key-people/artists/robert-bryden.aspx.

6 Especially when, by 1901, even *Punch*—which had long favoured traditional methods—had “ceased to publish cartoons on wood” (Hamilton 27), using line-block and half-tone block reproductions of photographs instead.

7 The 1897 Poet’s Calendar also featured seven younger poets from Archer’s anthology—Alice Meynell, Edith Nesbit, Katharine Tynan Hinkson, Dollie Radford, Margaret L. Woods, William Watson, and Richard Le Gallienne—proving just how present these poets were in *fin-de-siècle* culture. For more on the Calendar, see Peterson, “On the Appointment.”
8 Archer’s use of this term is by no means unusual in this period, but it is worth noting that objections to it had been raised during the 1890s. For example, in 1894, Le Gallienne claimed that “the barbarous word ‘poetess’ is seldom employed by any one with a literary character to lose” (650).

9 It is also worth noting that Archer devotes less space to women poets. The longest sections of the book are invariably dedicated to the male poets. The longest section is devoted to Stephen Phillips, at forty-six pages; the second-longest to John Davidson (forty-three pages); the third-longest to William Watson (forty-one pages). Kipling, Yeats, Henry Newbolt, and Francis Thompson all receive over twenty pages. At a rough count (including the images and poetry extracts, as well as Archer’s prose), 444 pages of the anthology are devoted to male poets and eighty-eight to women (Hinkson’s is the longest section at fourteen pages).

10 Archer’s “Real Conversations” were a regular feature in the Pall Mall Magazine (ca. 1901–1905). They were later published as Real Conversations, with Twelve Portraits (London, William Heinemann, 1904). The portraits were photographic.