



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 9, Issue 1

Summer 2026

Review: Sarah Parker, *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895-1922: A Line of Her Own* (Routledge, 2024)

Adrianna M. Paliyenko

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2026

Date of Publication: 22 July 2026

Citation: Adrianna M. Paliyenko, 'Sarah Parker, *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895-1922: A Line of Her Own* (Routledge, 2024)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 9.1 (2026), pp. 191-95.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Sarah Parker, *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895-1922: A Line of Her Own*, (Routledge, 2024), pp. vii + 232. ISBN 978103234877

Adrianna M. Paliyenko

Colby College

The work of recovering voices that have been marginalized – whether by dominant narratives of literary history or hierarchical discourses of gender, sexual orientation, and race, or both – requires painstaking archival research to forge innovative pathways from the present to the past. Reception history, in particular, read deftly against the grain by Sarah Parker in her new book, exposes the legacies of poets Alice Meynell, Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Dollie Radford, and Katharine Tynan truncated not only by misogyny but also periodization and ageism. A revisionist project, *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895-1922: A Line of Her Own* ‘sets out an alternative poetic history for the period 1895-1922, focusing on the twentieth-century careers of [these] women poets who continue to be primarily associated with the late nineteenth century’, as Parker elaborates in her erudite introduction richly framing the book’s thesis (p. 2). Each of the four chapters, equally documented with ample notes for further study, examines how the mature work of one of the focal poets responds to the experience of modernity. Read individually, and yet knit together collectively, this later corpus shows nimble continuities with the era of Aestheticism and decadence, rather than breaks from ‘the poetic forms, modes and genres associated with the 1890s’ (p. 3). In reassessing the selected poets’ modern use of forms developed in their fin de siècle production, Parker asks, ‘might there be a value in conventional poetic forms that we have overlooked due to our critical fixation with formal innovation?’ (p. 25)

Throughout this meticulously documented and beautifully written book, Parker draws on the ‘affordances of [these poets] preferred poetic forms’, meaning the potency or creative work of inherited forms when used ‘to treat diverse modern subject matter’ and ‘deployed in different contexts’

(p. 26). Chapter One, evocatively titled “‘Trysts with Time’: Alice Meynell, Metre and the Temporalities of Modern Poetry’, exhumes the arc of Meynell’s reception and, by way of contestatory response to her reputation as a belated Victorian, draws out temporal themes that increase and deepen across her œuvre. ‘Meynell’s negotiation of time’, argues Parker,

is articulated through her manipulation of poetic metre, which she saw as linking her to poets of the past and future. Through her use of poetic form, Meynell thus asserts women’s right to enter tradition, and in the process remaking poetic conventions from the inside. (pp. 41-42)

Using a chronological cursor, Parker systematically relates the concept of time in Meynell’s early verse to her later poems. Parker judiciously adds essential theoretical components from Virginia Woolf’s notion of moments of being and Henri Bergson’s idea of time as an ongoing state of becoming to nuance Meynell’s approach to time ‘as cyclical, overlapping, and relative’ (p. 46). In harnessing shared poetic rhythms, notably iambic and trochaic metres, Meynell claims her place among past and future poets all the while forging ‘her own rhythms’ (p. 48), as Parker illustrates via elegant readings of selected poems, among others wartime poems ‘Length of Days’, 1915 (pp. 53-58) and ‘A Father of Women’, 1917 (pp. 58-63). Interestingly enough, Meynell adamantly rejected *vers libre*, which other women poets at that time viewed as emancipatory from the constraints of the patriarchal canon. Astutely read by Parker against ‘a critical orthodoxy that regards free verse as the only twentieth-century poetry of value and complexity’, Alice Meynell transforms poetic form from within by subtly varying the rhythm of a poem to reflect humans’ ‘trysts with time’ (p. 73).

Chapter Two, “‘Women are ever captive’: Michael Field and ‘Twentieth-Century Verse Drama’, titled, like Chapter One, with a thematic signpost from the focal poet’s œuvre, relates to modernity the way Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913), who shared the pseudonym Michael Field, used blank verse in their plays, thus ‘capturing’, asserts Parker, ‘the conflicted position of the modern woman on a formal as well as thematic level’ (p. 85). Not only do Bradley and Cooper link historical settings to contemporary issues, notably women’s struggles for

authority, liberty, and freedom of expression. They also harness blank verse in their later verse dramas to ‘think through and enact themes of duty, desire, restriction, and autonomy’ (p. 85). Judicious reference to the theoretical underpinnings of blank verse enriches the critical dialogue Parker maintains between the focal poets’ reception history, metacommentary, and mature work. Parker’s sharp analyses of Michael Field’s representative dramas alongside that of their contemporaries foreground the clever way Bradley and Cooper put restriction and freedom in tension, showing ‘the complex ways in which [they] used blank verse to chart, to channel, to move with and against the tides of modernity’ (p. 111). Restored for posterity is the fuller legacy these fin de siècle poets left behind as twentieth-century dramatists.

Chapter Three, “‘The snatch of a song that is sung’: Dollie Radford’s Lyrics of Modernity’, delves, like previous chapters, into the vicissitudes of reception history to shift the focus from this ‘forgotten’ fin de siècle poet’s gender sensitivities to her technical skill. As Parker summarizes, Radford (1858-1920), born Caroline Maitland, promoted as a new Sappho among some twentieth-century critics, ‘embodied an aestheticized version of the poetess, pouring out her feelings in improvised melodies’ (p. 121). To the contrary, as Parker’s fine analysis of the representative ‘Song’ (from *A Light Load*, 1891) demonstrates, Radford’s lyrics showcase prosodic control, the trochaic tetrameter in this case. That Parker’s archival research yielded drafts of Radford’s lyrics explicitly supports how carefully the poet composed and revised her poems, a quality linking her early and late verse. Among Parker’s findings is the surviving manuscript of *An Unfinished Sheaf*, poems composed during the period from 1911 to 1918. As in the two previous chapters, Parker turns to the mature poet’s output overlooked by critics until now. From Radford’s twentieth-century verse Parker gleans her engaged lyric that addresses contemporary issues such as women in the cityscape, reconciling individual and collective identities, and bearing witness from a ‘home-front perspective’ to the wartime experience (p. 123). The British poet was also a dramatist whose *The Ransom* (1915), like the verse dramas of Michel Field,

mobilizes blank verse to ‘approach contemporary feminist issues obliquely’ (p. 125). Against the horizon of readers’ expectations, then and now, the savvy Radford, who had specific venues in mind, exploits lyrical regularity and counters its association with individual subjectivity to unify and thus foster solidarity, for example, among commuters on the underground (‘From the Suburbs’; ‘Spring in the Tube’), suffragists (‘Westminster’), and all denizens affected by the First World War (‘At Home’; ‘London in Shadow’; ‘Peace’). In concluding this chapter, Parker rightly calls for ‘a historically situated and formally sensitive feminist re-evaluation of [Radford’s and Katharine Tynan’s] war poems [that] would acknowledge their restorative affective value, which is inseparable from the lyric’s formal qualities’ (p. 152).

“‘I am the pillars of the house’: Katharine Tynan’s Fortifying Ballads’, the fourth and final chapter, follows neatly, by way of comparison, from the discussion of how Radford, a socialist, worked the lyric for politicizing ends. Across her career, the conservative Irish writer and poet Tynan (1859-1931) ‘used the quatrain as a simple therapeutic device, employing this stanza to both express and contain painful feelings’, on the one hand, and on the other, ‘use[d] the ballad to forge confined yet comforting spaces for working through pain’, advances Parker (p. 160). Reviewers largely disparaged Tynan’s conventional subject matter: ‘her poems celebrate nature, extol the glories of motherhood and childhood; praise God and express her Roman Catholic faith; and eulogize her beloved Ireland’ (p. 161). Obliquely feminist, however, as Parker reveals, Tynan encodes a revaluing of maternal experience. Recourse to the parallels John Hollander has drawn between poetry and architecture supports Parker’s astute reading of Tynan’s poem ‘Any Woman’ (originally published as ‘The Mother’ in *New Poems*, 1911), a poem, among others, that ‘buttresses her ideology of motherhood as form, constructing a protective domestic space through her repetitive quatrains’ (p. 171).

From maternal grief, reflecting Tynan’s own loss of two children, to bereaved mothers of dead soldiers, her ballad quatrains repeat therapeutically, expressing and yet containing painful feelings. As

in previous chapters, Parker draws in the poet's metacommentary, for example, Tynan's memoir *The Years of the Shadow* (1919) which enriches understanding of the reach and impact of her most popular wartime ballad, 'Flower of Youth', first published in 1914. Tynan's work does not fit a critical frame 'privileging standards focused on formal innovation – of the kind promoted by modernism – over adherence to traditional forms, which offer comfort, familiarity, and sustainment' (p. 191). A deeper view of the affective labour of Tynan's architectural verse requires the fresh critical lens Parker offers.

Reception determines a poet's reputation and how her work survives literary history. Interrogating the silences of the recent poetic past, Sarah Parker has made a compelling case for the long view of the individual contributions of Alice Meynell, Michael Field, Dollie Radford, and Katharine Tynan. Each writer examined in this ground-breaking study reworks a traditional poetic form in her mature work, thus responding to the cultural upheavals and shocks of modernity with 'a line of her own'. From the perspective of these poets' collective legacy, one could quibble that Parker missed an opportunity to call for transnational, if not transgenerational, alternative literary histories. Women poets in France and elsewhere, who, like Parker's focal poets, launched their careers during the *fin de siècle* and wrote into the first decades of the twentieth century, also 'assert[ed] their right to participate in poetic traditions, but they rema[de] those traditions on their own terms' (p. 207). In recovering how leading women poets of the late Victorian era reshaped their late verse to consider modernity, Sarah Parker has achieved her stated aim of 'offer[ing] a richer and more representative picture of twentieth-century poetry as a whole' (p. 32). Her impressive book has also set new ground upon which to build innovative ways of reading between the lines of poetic form and understand more broadly that, as put by the modern Irish poet Eavan Boland, 'the poetic past is unfinished business'.