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Hughes, Linda K. ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 308 pp.

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<1>*The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* is an intelligently edited collection of essays that seeks both to take the temperature of its field of study and to intervene into some of its most compelling debates. The import of Hughes's collection is perhaps best captured by a short concluding section titled, 'Reading Victorian Women's Poetry'. It comprises two chapters by two of the most influential contemporary critics of nineteenth-century literature, Natalie M. Houston and Isobel Armstrong, who both contribute chapters that reflect on the kinds of critical practice that has shaped the field and offer some signposts towards directions for future scholarship. Each chapter has a strikingly different approach to 'women's poetry' as a category. Houston proposes 'distant reading' as a strategy that might allow critics to 'examine the socio-cultural systems of value that produce the very category of literature' (253), and, by extension, the category of women's literature. Just as Rita Felski and Eve Sedgwick have suggested 'surface reading' and 'reparative reading' as correctives to the suspicious hermeneutics of in-depth analysis, Houston suggests 'distant reading' as an alternative to close reading, the critical paradigm that has produced a male-dominated canon. Distant reading is a quantitative approach that takes advantage of the digitisation of nineteenth-century materials to look for patterns across large quantities of published work. In this way, distant readings aims to look 'beyond the individual author to perceive larger cultural and historical changes that might be reflected or enacted in formal features' (260). Her 'feminist computational' analysis of a late-Victorian poetry anthology points towards connections not confined within the separate spheres of masculine and feminine.

<2>Whereas Houston's approach is guided by a belief that 'women's poetry' is an over-determined cultural category that needs to be dismantled, or at least opened up to other kinds of relationship, Armstrong's chapter begins by asserting that 'we have forgotten the structural intransigence of the symbolic order' (268). Armstrong argues that it is neither possible nor desirable for us to ignore the question of gender when we read poetry by women; but that, rather than viewing gender solely as a structure of oppression, we can understand it as 'one of the routes to self-affirmation' (269). Her reading of Alice Meynall's 'West Wind in Winter' shows how this late-Victorian woman poet employs poetic language and form to negotiate and overcome the power relations that must always define her.

<3>These two chapters make explicit the debate that Hughes's excellent essay collection stages. In her editor's introduction Hughes asks whether Victorian women's poetry should be 'approached en masse' or 'envisioned through its high points' and chooses to chart a 'middle course' between the approaches suggested by Houston and Armstrong, between distance and closeness, breadth and depth (3).

Taken together, the collection examines the work of over a hundred poets, but each chapter also carries out detailed, expert readings of individual works. In this way the companion reveals both the diversity that exists within the category of Victorian women's poetry and the diverse ways that the poets negotiate, resist, articulate and rewrite their gendered identities.

<4>In so doing it reiterates and advances the work of critics writing at the latter end of the twentieth century (including Hughes and Armstrong themselves) who pioneered the recovery and critical appreciation of nineteenth-century poetry by women. The concerns that emerged as part of that early work of recovery remain central to the discussions that take place in these pages. Chapters by Elizabeth Helsinger and Jason R. Rudy on poetic voice and touch offer fresh perspectives on the ways women writers owned and inhabited the embodied materiality that characterised dominant cultural definitions of femininity. Another clutch of chapters address the roles adopted and performed by women, from the private and domestic to the public and political. Emily Harrington's discussion of the representation of marriage, motherhood and domesticity in poetry by Augusta Webster, Caroline Norton, E. Nesbit and Mathilde Blind describes a Victorian domestic poetics fraught with competing demands and freighted with an understanding of the domestic space as the birthplace of human civilisation and human species. Marjorie Stone's rich overview of political poetry by women offers an insight into the vast range of national and international issues about which women felt entitled to speak.

<5>There are also chapters that address the relationship between women writers and poetry itself (its forms, its genres, the work of publication and illustration), each of which reminds us that women poets were canny and skilful practitioners of their craft. As Meredith Martin points out in her chapter on the prosody of Victorian women's poetry, such reminders remain necessary when our understanding of metre continues to be shaped by Victorian prosodic tradition and its attendant ideology. Martin's stand-out chapter argues that women poets worked within and pushed beyond the formal and generic expectations that readers brought (and continue to bring) to their work, concluding, 'the more we uncover women's writing about prosody [...] the more accurately we can add to the historical record of women's versification beyond the merely melodious' (32).

<6>This statement captures the approach of *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry*, which repeatedly demonstrates how a deeper and broader knowledge of Victorian women's poetry moves us beyond dominant critical paradigms. Perhaps the most important achievement of this approach is the way it addresses the intersections between gender, class, sexuality, race and nationality. Alexis Easley's discussion of the publication and reception of women's poetry focuses on the strikingly different reception histories of two working-class women poets, Frances Brown and Eliza Cook, offering a nuanced comparison that shows the variety of experience available to writers who shared the same gender and social class. Kirstie Blair and Alison Chapman build powerful cases for the broadening of the geographical reach of the canon so that it reflects both the diversity of regional voices within the United Kingdom and the transnational experience of women writing from beyond its shores.

<7>There might be a danger that this intersectional ethos could call into question Victorian Women's Poetry as a category of study, but these essays repeatedly show

that gender remains an important part of the way nineteenth-century women writers understood themselves as poetic practitioners, making a powerful case for the continued, even urgent, relevance of the study of their work. By offering a rich and exciting overview of the field that brings debates about Victorian women's poetry right up to date, *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Poetry* promises to provide insight and inspiration for current future scholars.