

# *"Outside / But inside": Eliza Keary, Little Seal-Skin, and the negotiation of space*

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Open Access

Bending, L. (2022) "Outside / But inside": Eliza Keary, Little Seal-Skin, and the negotiation of space. *Women's Writing*, 29 (3). pp. 346-362. ISSN 1747-5848 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2021.1948294> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/98373/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2021.1948294>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

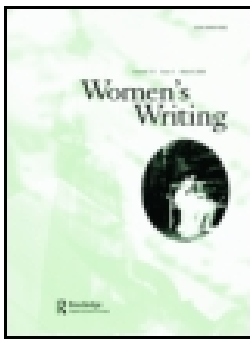
All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



## “Outside / But inside”: Eliza Keary, *Little Seal-Skin*, and the negotiation of space

Lucy Bending

To cite this article: Lucy Bending (2021): “Outside / But inside”: Eliza Keary, *Little Seal-Skin*, and the negotiation of space, *Women's Writing*, DOI: [10.1080/09699082.2021.1948294](https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2021.1948294)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2021.1948294>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 01 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 24



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## “OUTSIDE / BUT INSIDE”: ELIZA KEARY, *LITTLE SEAL-SKIN*, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF SPACE

Lucy Bending

English Literature, University of Reading, Reading, UK

### ABSTRACT


This article explores Eliza Keary's poetry in her 1874 collection, *Little Seal-Skin* in the context of the often unfavourable reviews of the poems, and thinks about why these poems were unpopular with reviewers. It uses the idea of space – of being inside or outside – as a way of understanding where Keary chose to publish and what the particular difficulties and concerns were that faced her as a writer. The article sets the collection in the context of Keary's less well-known writing, particularly her editorship of the Girls' Friendly Society journal, *Friendly Leaves*, and recognises that the desire to build networks of communication marks out both her editorial practice and her poetry. *Little Seal-Skin* is dedicated 'To my sisters', and I offer readings of Keary's poems that act as interpretations and critiques of poems by Rossetti and Brontë, as well as suggesting the importance of connection

**KEYWORDS** Eliza Keary; women's writing; nineteenth-century poetry; Girls Friendly Society; women's suffrage

For the Victorian poet Eliza Keary (1827-1918) women's relationships to space, whether physical or literary, drove her work as poet, editor, and political activist. The ability of women to determine where they lived and travelled, their opportunities to meet up and connect with other women, along with their enclosure within the home coexist within Keary's thought and work alongside questions of where women could publish and how they could reach an audience. Her aim in her work was not just to critique and to lament the limited possibilities open to the marginalised woman, but to offer modes of connectedness between women through her writing.

Such determination to reimagine the social landscape is, as I will argue, central to Keary's only collection of poetry, *Little Seal-Skin* (1874),<sup>1</sup> a

**CONTACT** Lucy Bending  [l.v.bending@reading.ac.uk](mailto:l.v.bending@reading.ac.uk)

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2021.1948294>.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

collection in which Keary explores the transgressive possibilities of same-sex desire (in “Through the Wood”), the limitations and coercions of marriage (in “Little Seal-Skin”), the entry of women into the medical profession (“Doctor Emily”), and the refusal to pay the price to conform to sexual stereotypes (in “Kathleen”). These poems, as I shall go on to discuss, were deliberately written to provoke debate, initially amongst the feminist members of the Pen and Pencil Club, but also in her broader readership, and this article seeks to draw out Keary’s complicated relationship to conformity. By reading the poems of *Little Seal-Skin* alongside the often hostile reviews of these poems, and also in the light of the opposing pulls of her political activism in the suffrage movement and her work as the devoutly Christian editor of *Friendly Leaves* (the journal of the Girls’ Friendly Society)<sup>2</sup> in which she repeatedly extols the virtues of patient acquiescence, this essay will explore the tension at the heart of Keary’s work.

Keary’s writing career, starting in 1857 with the publication of the tales from Norse mythology that she wrote with her sister, Annie Keary,<sup>3</sup> moves through many different kinds of writing, including accounts of Egyptian history,<sup>4</sup> Fairy Tales,<sup>5</sup> short poems written to illustrate Christmas picture books,<sup>6</sup> the striking collection, *Little Seal-Skin*, that is the focus of this essay, a memoir of Annie Keary written after Annie’s death,<sup>7</sup> several collections of biblical texts,<sup>8</sup> the paid editorship of *Friendly Leaves*,<sup>9</sup> two edited collections of letters,<sup>10</sup> a lesbian short story published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*<sup>11</sup> as well as verses written expressly for Christmas cards, all of which show a woman, as Jodi Lustig puts it, who “lived on her writing”.<sup>12</sup>

A closer attention to where Keary chose to publish shows a woman determined to find female spaces in which to publish her work – spaces where she could be read in the light of her female contemporaries, and spaces where she could reach out to a female audience. Her editorship of *Friendly Leaves* makes this explicit as she addresses her editorials directly to the working-class girls who made up the journal’s readership. It is my contention that this same desire for connection is also manifest in her earlier collection of poetry. Rosemary Vanarsdel’s interesting work on *Macmillan’s Magazine* draws particular attention to a series of issues of *Macmillan’s* published in 1869 in which “articles by women authors either equalled or outnumbered those by men”<sup>13</sup> in a manner that was strikingly different to the representation of women in either *Blackwood’s* or the *Cornhill*, “the two shilling magazines with which *Macmillan’s* was most often equated”.<sup>14</sup> Vanarsdel’s contention that this was the result of deliberate strategy rather than chance is compelling. It allows us to position Keary, who first published “The Goose-Girl. A Tale of the Year 2099” (later collected in *Little Seal-Skin*) in the September issue of *Macmillan’s* that Vanarsdel picks out for attention – as someone actively seeking a female space for her writing. The same criteria are in play when Keary chose the feminist periodical, *The Englishwoman’s Review*, as the place

of publication for “Doctor Emily”, and *Macmillan's* once again for “Little Seal-Skin” in November 1869.<sup>15</sup> Such connections between women, made manifest in this determination to publish in journals aimed deliberately at women writers and readers, were vital to Keary. In her publishing, editorial, and in her writing practices she deliberately engaged with and reinterpreted the works of her female contemporaries, creating a web of interconnectedness as the means of reinvisaging space. In creating such connections, Keary reveals herself to be rethinking a model predicated on the idea of insides and outsides, and its necessary corollary, insiders and outsiders. But Keary's positioning of herself is by no means straightforward: she is both radical and reactionary. She is both a writer who seeks publication, and a woman who deliberately and repeatedly effaces her own name as she claims printed space for herself whilst simultaneously repudiating it. She is both the feminist activist who demands the recognition of women in the public arena,<sup>16</sup> but also the staunchly Christian advocate of the quiet acceptance of one's lot in life. This article explores how these vacillations and tensions shed new light on the broader conflicts and demands of female authorship, and of female life more broadly, in the nineteenth century.

Tension is at the heart of the collection, *Little Seal-Skin*, a work that is, undoubtedly, the centrepiece of Keary's literary *oeuvre*. It is an extraordinary collection of poems that pushes hard against orthodoxy, not just in its unconventional rhythms, denigrated by its critics as “metrical irregularity”,<sup>17</sup> but also in its unashamed refusal of enforced domesticity, and its articulation of same-sex desire.<sup>18</sup> It is a text that was met with confusion and contempt by many reviewers, and by engaging with these adverse reviews, before looking at the poems themselves, it is possible to see what Keary was contending with when she published her poetry. The reviews demonstrate the manner in which established literary culture sought to exclude Keary from what they considered to be the legitimate spaces of poetry. A review that appears in *John Bull*, for example, makes manifest the spatial metaphor underlying the reviewer's understanding of literary success: for him, Keary's poems were undoubtedly written “for a smaller circle of readers than that to which the writer now appeals, [and] are better suited for the more limited audience”.<sup>19</sup> The contention is clear: the smaller the circle allowed to Keary the better; her “appeals” for inclusion are appeals that should be ignored.

For Keary, though, inclusion was vital. Through her work as journal editor and political activist, she was determined to find ways to manipulate space, to include and connect, by deliberately creating links between women and girls who would not otherwise come into contact with each other. In an article of 1890 addressed to the girls and women members of the Girls' Friendly Society, Keary wrote of young women who were “out of place”,<sup>20</sup> by which she meant servants who were not currently in employment and who could claim no reputable position in society. The phrase suggests a

dislocation, a sense of wrongness, in where one might find oneself. The determination to reposition and reconnect such displaced women marks Keary's editorship of *Friendly Leaves*. As the journal, with Keary as editor, repeatedly contends in an announcement that appears in every issue, the GFS's aim is "to bind together in one Society, ladies as Associates, and working girls and young women as Members, for mutual help (religious and secular), for sympathy and prayer".<sup>21</sup>

Keary's editorship of *Friendly Leaves* embodies this objective of knitting together the displaced as an alternative form of community. Indeed, one of Keary's projects within the journal is to set up a "Knitting Help Society' amongst its members",<sup>22</sup> providing a forum for the free exchange of knitting patterns between the readers of the magazine:

Any member who wants directions for knitting any article is to write to Mrs Moore, 4 Albert Square, London, E., and mention what she wants, and enclose a stamp for reply, giving full address of course. Mrs Moore will do her best to get the receipt required. When she sends it to the Member, the member must copy quickly and restore the written directions in good condition to Mrs Moore, so that any other Member asking for the same may have it in turn. When Members find any particular pattern very good and useful, and likely to help anyone else, they should kindly write to me saying so, and I will print in *Friendly Leaves*, So-and-so has a knitting pattern for -, which she is willing to lend to any Member wishing for it who will write enclosing a stamp for postage.<sup>23</sup>

These instructions are long-winded and earnest, and yet the desire to draw disparate people into relation with each other, to override separation by geography, and to knit them, almost literally, into a community is manifest. No. 4, Albert Square becomes the central point of a network that stretches across Britain, calling to readers in Northenden, Stoke-on-Trent, and Prittlewell – just three of the many GFS branches named in the January 1886 issue. For Keary, this invitation to connect with others is seen not simply as a journal article to be found by chance, but a letter addressed to the "Dear Girls" from "Your sincere friend":<sup>24</sup> a letter deliberately sent across space to find its intended recipient. Keary's insistence that there is no charge – "there is nothing to pay for having your queries inserted"<sup>25</sup> – in this system of exchange puts forward a counter-cultural argument that is specifically gendered female; the girl who is "out of place" can nevertheless be enmeshed in a larger community.

In the same manner that she deliberately joins servant girls via the postal system in *Friendly Leaves*, Keary seeks, in *Little Seal-Skin*, to think about what it means to be connected to other women poets. The title page bears the legend, "To My Sisters I inscribe this book",<sup>26</sup> and reaches out in the attempt to claim a kind of kinship. Throughout the collection she deliberately rewrites and reimagines the works of her female contemporaries – predominantly Christina Rossetti, but also Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and

Emily Brontë – in a process that Dorothy Mermin astutely describes as “speaking within the female tradition”,<sup>27</sup> rather than “struggling to find a voice within the stringently gendered conventions of the male poetic tradition”.<sup>28</sup> Mermin’s recognition of an enclosed place of connection “within” which women poets could write makes it possible to see the spaces of female poetry not simply as a mode of exile from the male tradition, but as a female place of connectedness and conversation.

The need for such a space is made manifest by the *Athenaeum*’s dismissive review of *Little Seal-Skin*: if the *Athenaeum* is, as its name suggests, a reading room, it is one from which Keary is excluded. It is not only the “out of place” servant girl who is pushed from the centre to the periphery, but other women, too; individuals who are subject to a deliberate work of displacement by those who act as the arbiters of “culture”. For example, the title of the *Athenaeum* piece, “Minor Poets”,<sup>29</sup> positions Keary, first of all, as a liminal figure, someone on the edge, trying, but failing, to gain purchase on a literary world. Indeed, the reviewer finishes the the review of *Little Seal-Skin* with the assertion that he is “satisfied that the writer has, as yet, at all events, no claim to be reckoned among the writers of poetry”.<sup>30</sup> It is a model smugly based on the idea of inside and outside: of a literary elite that pushes unwanted intruders out, and refuses to allow any such writers to come in “among” them.

The reviewer thus cannot accept the possibility of Keary either “speaking within the female tradition”, as Mermin suggests, or seeking to open up the spaces of poetry to innovation. Instead he sees only a failure to find a place “among” culturally-accepted poetry. An *Academy* review of *Little Seal-Skin* found in Keary’s work only a “corrupt following”<sup>31</sup> of Rossetti. Like the *Athanaeum*, the reviewer held up a standard against which Keary’s work was measured adversely, finding in her poetry “hardly a pretence to metre”.<sup>32</sup> Paul Ellis, one of the first to seek to recuperate Keary’s works, rightly contends that the reviewer’s claim here “unintentionally unearths Keary’s principle of disruption”,<sup>33</sup> a claim that finds support in Keary’s evident ability to write, when she chooses, the “graceful lines” of her children’s poetry,<sup>34</sup> with a fluency of verse that is “simple, natural, and well adapted to the capacity of children”.<sup>35</sup> The poems of *Little Seal-Skin* were, however, not aimed at “the capacity of children”, but rather, as its title page makes plain, at the grown-up understanding of her “sisters”. She clearly both knew and loved Rossetti’s work,<sup>36</sup> and yet she was not fearful of engaging with it in stringent fashions, as is made plain in her rewriting of Rossetti’s “Twice”<sup>37</sup> (1866) in her own poem, “Disenchanted”, first published in *Little Seal-Skin*. In the Rossetti poem, a failed secular love is re-run in the second half of the poem in a divine context, and the weak promises of the earthly lover, the speaker’s “hope”, turn out to be “written on sand” (l. 29), whilst the “broken heart” (l. 27) is transformed, in the light of the 51st Psalm, into the “broken and ... contrite heart”, that God will “not

despise" (Ps. 57. 17). The poem ends in the certainty of eternal life, but carries, in its final lines, what seems to be an equivocation: "Smile Thou", the speaker addresses God, "and I shall sing, / But shall not question much" (l. 47-48). This is neither peaceful acquiescence nor downright revolt, but rather a kind of uneasy compromise, with the word "much" unpicking the certainty that washes through the second half of the poem, and that, at least, gestures towards the possibility that dedicating one's life to God might also involve reinclosure, a shutting down of possibilities that takes form in not "question[ing] much".<sup>38</sup> The links between Rossetti's poem and Keary's are made manifest in verbal and syntactical echoes: Rossetti's parenthetical refrain, "(O my love, O my love)" (l. 2 and 6), for example, finds its analogue in Keary's "(I had not found, I had not found)" (l. 21), whilst, more overtly, in the first line, Rossetti's "I took my heart in my hand" (l. 1) becomes Keary's "I took my heart up in my hand" (l. 1). The extra word embodies Keary's "principle of disruption", as outlined by Ellis. The meaning is essentially the same, and yet the words are different, as Keary demands a re-reading and a reconsideration of the poem's Christian engagement with loss. The same emotional space is entered, and yet it is inhabited differently. Where Rossetti puts forward certainty, tempered by a mild ambiguity, Keary's poem, as the title makes plain, is frankly "disenchanted". There is no "Twice" for Keary, no superseding of a secular love with a Christian one to redeem the loss; the speaker is pushed out of an imagined domestic space into a cold exterior: "Alone I went", the speaker cries in the closing line, "Alone I go, through vast abandonment" (l. 23-24).

"Disenchanted" is a poem centred on the idea of space, and the painful movement through the same by a female lover. The beloved man is to be found at the the top of a hill – "that superb height" (l.3) – and can only be reached by the subservient woman's "sweet ... / labour ... to reach [his] feet" (l. 5-6), a labour driven by her "worship[]" (l. 13) of him. When he rejects her love she is displaced from the spot where she has "poured [her] life out" (l. 7) as a kind of sacrifice. The only position that seemed available to her, that of adoring lover, is ripped away, so that her soul "shuddered from its place" (l. 16), losing, as it does so, its recognised position in the world. In Rossetti's "Twice" it is the speaker's heart that breaks when the male beloved "set[s] it down" (l. 17), leaving it open to the ministrations of God; for the speaker of "Disenchanted" it is different. When the man rejects her the speaker's "love broke" not in two as it does for Rossetti, but "Wild from its chain" (l. 17). It is the experience of being chained down that has kept her in the position of the worshipper: when he rejects her, her chain breaks, and she is given a kind of "wild" freedom – a freedom that nevertheless renders her a solitary outsider, one who must travel "alone ... through vast abandonment" (l. 24). As Keary so often does in her writing, a mental



state is turned into a physical landscape, and the speaker finds that her departure from the spot at his feet is difficult: she is forced to “drag [her] life up from the ground” (l. 19) and to walk away whilst the “sharp, stern air” (l. 22) cuts at her “bare” (l. 20) skin, and she loses the shelter from the external environment that is provided by a recognised social position. The space provided by Rossetti’s poem that articulates the sublimation of an earthly distress into a heavenly antidote is invaded by Keary, who, through the parallel processes of allusion and refusal, reinscribes the position of the discarded female lover.

If the speaker of “Disenchantment” finds herself travelling “alone ... through vast abandonment”, through an unwanted rejection that takes form in a spatial metaphor, Keary’s poetry repeatedly recognises the antithetical limitations of the domestic space and the concurrent desire for freedom. In “The Mill Stream”, for example, a poem that appears in *Little Seal-Skin*, Keary turns a moment of desire for freedom into a kind of emblem: the speaker of the poem, a young boy, finds his mother asleep, and his father out at work. He knows that he is meant to remain within the home; that his mother sleeps in the certainty that “he’d never go / Down to the dangerous Mill” (l. 15-16) without her. And yet he does, and is, inevitably, swept away to his death by the furious water. It is, no doubt, a kind of cautionary tale – a poem that works on the antithesis between domestic safety and the dangers of outside – and yet it is also a poem that thinks about moments of choice; about the possibilities and dangers of leaving the enclosed domestic space and venturing out. The poem both starts and ends with an image of hesitant liminality as, at the start, “the child stood at the door” (l. 2), simultaneously inside and outside, weighing up the possibility of freedom. The poem closes, however, in a slightly different key: “But the child will never stand again, / In the opening of the door” (L. 59-60). There is a wistfulness that is not entirely about the loss of the boy, but is also about the loss of choice; a recognition that leaving the home is punished, and yet the curiosity that drives it, and the temptation to fly, even in the face of danger, are irresistible. In a move that we will see mirrored in the title poem, the boy “left the cottage / Without one parting look” (l. 19-20). Security is thrown aside, neither hankered after nor desired. The guardian mother, who cannot recognise in her child the need to escape, sleeps complacently as the boy steps out of her sphere. It is a poem that seems simple, and yet it encapsulates in the image of the boy in the doorway the negotiation of inside and outside, the pull towards domestic safety and the lure of sexual and political freedom. Keary represents both the boy the mother believes in – the boy who remains safely within the home, who has so internalised social constraints that he remains even when no one is watching – and the boy who leaves and never looks back. It is a difficult position to maintain, and fraught with contradictions.

Such enforced enclosure is explored in “Little Seal-Skin”. A fisherman, in a re-telling of an old story,<sup>39</sup> finds “a little white seal-skin” (l. 6) on the beach, and, knowing both that it is the skin of a sea woman’s tail and that without it she cannot return to the sea but must remain painfully on land, he deliberately chooses to hide it in the thatch of his cottage. The pained question of the sea woman on finding that her seal skin is missing haunts the poem: “Who has stolen my skin from me? / And who is there will take me in?” (l. 64-65). Without it, without being able to return to her own element, “the great sea’s purple water” (l. 112), she is left outside, disconnected, unless someone can be found to “take [her] in”. “In a stark recognition of the sea woman’s lack of choice it is the man who deprives her of her liberty, who steals her skin, who also offers her shelter, “coercing her into sexual, domestic and childbearing roles”.<sup>40</sup> It is the fisherman, surrounded as he is by the things he owns – “His boat, ... His net, ... His home”(l. 2-4) – who lays claim to her, who makes her his catch, and who “had his way” (l. 98), not simply in the matter of his will, but also, in an underlying dark pun, sexually, as the marriage that ensues results in three children. As Ellis rightly claims, she must submit to “the alien male environment in which [she has] actually been forced to live”.<sup>41</sup> Her domesticity is enforced when he takes her in on the condition that she will “Care for my house and me” (l. 95). It is the only possibility open to the sea woman, caught in the wrong element, trapped in an unwanted place, having to “set her mind / To keep things orderly” (l. 17-18). Such domesticity is no easy task, but instead is an act of will, a setting of the mind that makes it possible to stay within the confines of the home with a man who sees her as his belonging. She stays for seven years, always against her will, while the sea’s presence makes itself known to her in its “swelling tide” (l. 45), and in “the sound of the breakers” (l. 46). Motherhood cannot make her relent, and the arm she stretches out at night “seeming / To seek little Willie” (l. 108-109), her baby, instead reaches out to the ocean: “It was the sea / She would have clasped, not he” (l. 110-111). The fisherman is confused by this “seeming” as her inner resistance, that takes form in the uneven line lengths and rhythms that resist contented domesticity, is nevertheless masked in day-to-day duty. It is this confusion that prompts him to test her love for him, to see if she will remain even if he returns the seal skin to her. Her answer is swift. She finds the skin, “and ran / Straight out at the door, / And never stopped / Till she reached the shore” (l. 208-211). Her children run after her weeping, begging her to stay with them, but, in a line that is repeated at the close of the poem, “She just put the little seal-skin on, / And slipped into the sea” (l. 234-235). She evades the fisherman’s will and sees the door, which formerly kept her in, as an escape route rather than a barrier. She “slips” out of his grasp, refuting, as she does so, the fisherman’s

assertion of power as he takes control of something that he knows is not his: "she never meant / It for me, / That, I should take it. / But I will" (l. 37-39).

As Ellis rightly contends, the poems in *Little Seal-Skin* "articulate the struggle to reconceptualize woman, domesticity, work [and] love",<sup>42</sup> and "Little Seal-Skin" itself shows a poet determined to speak out against the manipulation of women's lives when confined to unwanted domesticity. It is an overtly feminist poem, and one that refuses even to gesture towards compromise, stemming as it does from Keary's active engagement with feminist politics and social action from the mid 1860s onwards. In 1865 Keary joined the newly-formed Kensington Society, a debating society for female thinkers, including, amongst many others who shaped the women's movement for suffrage, Frances Power Cobbe, Emily Davies, Barbara Leigh Smith, Helen Taylor, Elizabeth Garrett, and Florence Nightingale.<sup>43</sup> The group ran for two years before dissolving in 1867 when Helen Taylor<sup>44</sup> invited those who shared her liberal politics to form the London National Society for Women's Suffrage. Keary not only made the move to this group but was also elected to its executive committee in 1868, and served on this until 1870,<sup>45</sup> a period that coincides with the writing and publication of the poems that would form the collection *Little Seal-Skin* (1874). In a letter of 1865, at the inception of the Kensington Society, Alice Westlake, the artist and women's rights activist, wrote to Helen Taylor, outlining its aims, and persuading her to join: the society, she contends, will "serve as a sort of link between persons, above the average of thoughtfulness and intelligence who are interested in common subjects, but who do not have many opportunities of mutual intercourse".<sup>46</sup>

Keary appears to have experienced a vital connectedness between women at the Kensington Society, and this practice of deliberately linking people together is crucial to the deliberate disruption, in her poetry, of the easy acceptance of a society that sees people as insiders or outsiders. The possibility of poetry being the means of making such links is made manifest by Keary's poem "Kathleen", a piece initially written for the Pen and Pencil Club, a debating group analogous to the Kensington Society, and founded by Clementia Taylor in 1864.<sup>47</sup> In the poem, the title character steps away from society, with its enclosed social space of "talking and laughter" (l. 1), and goes to the Queen of the Fairies to ask to be made beautiful so that her oblivious beloved "would look at [her]" (l. 16). Queen Gwen, however, will grant her beauty, only at the cost of her life: she will transform her from a living woman into a flower. In a refusal of the Ovidian idea of transformation and annihilation of self, Kathleen responds with passion: "'But, oh! Queen Gwen must I die? / Is that the one way to be fair? / I cannot,' she cried bitterly" (l. 34-36). The seemingly-inevitable plot of female submission and death is rejected, and Kathleen deliberately "walked away from death" (l. 39). This poem of repudiation nevertheless ends with a

question, directed not just to an abstract audience, but to the debating members of the Pen and Pencil Club. “Which way”, the final line asks, “did the will-winds waft her?” (l. 42). It is an overt invitation to discuss Kathleen’s choice, to consider the role of will, as the poem provokes debate, and connects people through discussion.

Kathleen, unlike the speaker in “Disenchanted”, who finds herself “alone” in “vast abandonment”, returns, at the end of the poem, to “the talking and the laughter” (l. 40); returns to her place in society, carrying with her the painful refusal of what is needed for her to succeed in love as it is traditionally envisaged. The poem asks what one does with that information; how one positions oneself in the face of “the talking and the laughter” that is seemingly oblivious to pain. Keary’s answers to this are multiple. Poetry itself, as I have argued, is seen by the poet to make connections, between readers – as it overtly does in her poems written for the Pen and Pencil Club<sup>48</sup> – and also in the deliberate net of connectedness that she builds between poets through both allusion and refutation, and her deliberate choice to publish in journals that deliberately foregrounded the work of women writers. It is also evident, though, that Keary sought to answer this question through her own political and social actions. For example, her connection to Clementia Taylor through the Pen and Pencil Club led outwards to her teaching at the Aubrey Institute, set up by Taylor and her husband.<sup>49</sup> She did voluntary work in an East End children’s hospital, and also volunteered, along with her sister, at the servants’ home in Bessborough Gardens, Pimlico, that led to the work that she did as editor of *Friendly Leaves*.<sup>50</sup>

And yet, despite such activities – driven equally by political engagement and by Christian faith – it is impossible not to notice the intractable difficulties facing a woman claiming space for herself in the mid-Victorian period.<sup>51</sup> This becomes most apparent in “Through the Wood”, one of *Little Seal-Skin*’s most extraordinary and daring poems; a poem that puts forward the encounter between two women, and finds as its locus a pastoral, imagined space outside the social world, beyond the “talking and laughter”, the chatter and the scandal, of “Kathleen”. For Megan Norcia, in her fascinating reading of the Keary sisters’ *Early Egyptian History* (1861), this “thinking and acting outside [the] imprisoning spatial matrix” constitutes a kind of “third-space”<sup>52</sup> that is not governed by fact alone, nor by physical geography, but by a reimagining of space and ways of linking people together. In “Through the Wood” Keary seeks exactly this thirdspace, summoning up a compelling illusion, a place outside the usual rules of society, hidden in a fairy-tale wood, which allows connection, touch, and desire, between women.

The poem is voiced by the nameless speaker who finds herself caught between the brutal, public, heteronormative world and the wood of the title. The two realms are recognised as antithetical, and it is clear that for Keary space can be claimed by women only with effort. The poem’s first

word, “outside” – “Outside, / A world in sunshine” (l. 1-2) – resonates throughout. Outside is a place where the speaker cannot be what she wants to be; indeed, it is a place of sunshine so bright, so intense in its scrutiny, that the speaker and Nellie, the woman whom she loves, “were almost / Drowned in it” (l. 6-7). It is only inside the wood that the speaker can seek the connection with another that she desires, and yet entry into the wood is not easy; the two women must cross “rough ground” (l. 11), and this can only be done by “pushing / Our way where the tangled wood came” (l. 22-23). There is no laid-out path showing the way, but a series of obstructions that must be overcome if a way through is to be found.

It is a place strangely out of time: a pastoral space that offers a kind of healing disconnected from the usual rules of progress, and that bends the rules of geography. There is no end point to the woods and the two women, who walk side by side holding hands, affirm through the repetition of “along and along / We went” (l. 21-22) that it is not a specific destination that is being sought but a mode of being. “[I]nside the wood” (l. 8) things are different: “Clean stems grew close to each other; overhead / The intertwined light branches threw / Sweet shade on the rough ground” (l. 9-11). The trees mirror the women’s engagement with each other, and their drawing close together provides a cool, dimly-lit space that can contain two female lovers without adverse, painful scrutiny, allowing them to step into a healing space where they can communicate through touch, and without the need for language: “She, putting her hand in mine, / Led me on softly, and so replied” (l.14-15).

This is another of Keary’s dark puns. The speaker is “led ... on” by Nellie, not simply because she holds her hand, but because she is misleading her. The poem offers a cataclysmic moment of betrayal as Nellie breaks the silence, “the great silent glory / Of the beautiful day” (l. 29-30), that has permeated the poem to hand the speaker a package, which she then asks her to deliver into Robert’s hand. The poem does not divulge who Robert is, and yet his maleness, and his socially-sanctioned connection to Nellie – his right to her hand – crashes in to the wood, displacing any claim that the speaker thought she had. It is this moment that breaks the connection between the two women’s hands, and demands the crossing of space back into the heteronormative world. It is the end of thirdspace. The wood, from being a place that one travels “along and along”, now has an “end”, as the women find “After that, silently, / We walked on to the end of the Wood” (l. 57-58). “End” is a word of duration as well as of distance, and it is evident both that the speaker’s time is over, and that the imagined space of love and same-sex desire has come crashing down. The speaker finds herself in “a wide, dark flood” (l. 62) of light, as the poem returns to its opening words, “Outside, /A world in sunshine” (l. 59-60), and yet this time she is alone. At the beginning of the poem the speaker says “we were almost /Drowned

in it” (l. 6-7). By the end, her aloneness is killing: “I died in it, where I stood – / By the side of Nellie” (l. 63-64). She remains unnamed by the poem, unable to make the story her own by laying claim to it.

Keary overtly manipulates different ways of envisaging space and connectedness within this poem, and in so doing brutally destroys the speaker’s sense of security, leaving her vulnerable and brutally exposed, with no space in which she can live. In the same manner that Keary set her poem “Disenchanted” against Rossetti’s “Twice”, using the precursor poet as a point of both connection and disconnection, “Through the Wood” engages with and to an extent re-enacts Emily Brontë’s 1846 poem “Stars”.<sup>53</sup> The daylight world, for Brontë’s speaker, is one of claustrophobia and limitation presided over by the brutal light of the sun. The night time offers escape, as the cool, creative light of the stars enables and promotes a Romantically-conceived imaginative journey beyond the confines of the body, into a kind of third-space, as “thought followed thought, and star followed star” (l. 13) away from the confines of the room and the day-time world. Such intense communion with the stars is broken by the blatant, phallic light of the sun that “struck” (l. 22) the speaker’s brow in a violent awakening from her night-time communion with the stars. Her imprisonment is enforced, as the boundaries of the room, “both roof and floor” (l. 34), are lit up by the light of the sun, as is the “pillow” (l. 33) that has been her means of escape, and “glow[]” (l. 33) as their presence is once again borne in on the speaker. If Keary evokes Brontë’s sense of the too-intense, too searching, light of the sun, she differs from her precursor poet in the intensity of the dissolution of the space available to the female speaker. Brontë’s poem is part of a long tradition, an aubade, a poem of lovers parting at dawn. The communion that thrives during the darkness must stop during the daylight hours, but can be revisited at night time: the escape route remains open.

Keary’s vision, however, is more brutal, as the space of the woods dissolves and cannot be re-entered. Again, Keary links herself to a female poetic tradition, and yet the initial similarity ricochets off into a more despairing vision. If Keary sought a knitting together of community in *Friendly Leaves*, then what we see in her poetic practice is a reimagining of the connections between women poets, a creation of a resonant poetic space that joins women into a community that recognises and reinterprets the words of its members. It is not necessarily a comfortable place, for it is one that must, unavoidably, recognise the brutal realities of female displacement.

It is in this space dedicated “To my Sisters” that the vision of Keary as political activist and as the claimant of space for women, comes – in a contradiction central to her *oeuvre* – crashing in to another version of her: a version that seeks self-effacement and as little space as possible. Such self-diminution is epitomised in a letter to George Bell, the publisher of her series of collections of biblical texts published in the 1880s: “I will not take up much space”,

she writes of her preface to *A Casket of Pearls*. Her own prefatory words should, she claims, “be printed in a small print I suppose and the texts much larger”.<sup>54</sup> The hierarchies of Christianity prohibit Keary from claiming more space for herself, and her own words fade into insignificance when set against those of the gospel.

Whilst the repudiation of a space for herself is not confined to this preface but runs throughout her work (she repeatedly hides her own name behind that of others),<sup>55</sup> it is an almost inevitable result of her staunch Christianity that manifests itself repeatedly, not just in the collections of Bible texts she edited in the 1880s, but also in her editorship of *Friendly Leaves*, where she uses her role as editor to provide and interpret biblical texts for her readership. Her opening address to young, working-class readers, for example, recommends straightforward acceptance and quiescence: “Jesus is the Good Shepherd, Jesus is on the throne”. “Provision for all we need is then certain, and peace in the heart should be secure”.<sup>56</sup> My discussion, in a sense, positions itself in that “should”: “peace in the heart *should* be secure”. My contention is that Keary’s collection, *Little Seal-Skin*, absolutely and irrevocably resists such peace and facilitates dissent by kicking hard at the constraining structures of society, demanding a space for women where they are neither compelled nor restrained. The power of the collection comes perhaps from the simultaneous recognition that such spaces are illusory, as “Through the Wood” painfully makes clear.

It is in this deliberate disruption of the roles that seemed acceptable to women, and their modes of expression, that much of the strangeness of Keary’s work lies. She is both the author of profoundly resistant poetry that repeatedly looks for the doorway through which she can escape, and of devotional, Christian works that teach acceptance of one’s lot, and that deliberately seek enclosure within the domestic space. It is a tension that finds expression in her *Memoir of Annie Keary*, in which she recognises the opposing, and unavoidable, tensions in her sister’s life. “Everything she did”, Keary writes of Annie, “was inspired by or turned towards what was the centre of her life – her care of [her brother’s] children”.<sup>57</sup> And yet Annie, whilst overtly lauding the domestic space, describes her health-giving trip to Egypt as “her one flight into the world”.<sup>58</sup> As Ann Dingsdale astutely points out, “there is a deep ambivalence in this phrase ‘flight into the world’. From what did she fly but duty and service, and yet the world was somehow alien to the homely centre of her life”.<sup>59</sup>

The exploration of Eliza Keary’s literary and political works put forward in this essay allows us access to that ambivalence; to see it not simply as a local problem for the Keary sisters, but as an integral part of women’s lives in the mid-Victorian period. Through engaging with Keary’s work, with its resistances and modes of acceptance, we may throw a light on the women who sought to move beyond the enclosed domestic space, and to

seek a space of their own. Not only does Keary's poetry overtly push against boundaries by seeking out the possibilities of thirdspace, but she also, as I have suggested, seeks to establish networks of connection that join women into non-spatial alliances. Amanda Paxton, one of Keary's astutest literary critics, claims that a "skepticism of normalised gender roles courses throughout *Little Seal-Skin*",<sup>60</sup> but I would suggest that her poetic work goes far beyond "skepticism", and begins to offer strikingly bold ways of measuring and articulating the desperation of women's enclosed positions, and of nurturing those who found themselves displaced.

## Notes

1. Eliza Keary, *Little Seal-Skin and Other Poems* (London: George Bell, 1874).
2. The Girls' Friendly Society was established in 1875 primarily to protect working-class girls who moved to cities for employment. For a history of the Girls' Friendly Society, see Mary Heath-Stubbs, *Friendship's Highway: Being the History of the Girls' Friendly Society, 1875–1935* (London: GFS Central Office, 1935), and Agnes L. Money, *History of the Girls' Friendly Society* (London: Gardner, [1897]).
3. [Annie Keary and Eliza Keary], *The Heroes of Asgard and the Giants of Jötunheim; or, the Week and its Story. By the author of "Mia and Charlie," and her Sister* (London: David Bogue, 1857). Annie Keary (1825–1879) was the author of well-regarded and moderately popular Victorian novels.
4. [Annie Keary and Eliza Keary], *Early Egyptian History, for the Young, with Descriptions of the Tombs and Monuments. By the Author of 'Sidney Grey,' etc. and Her Sister* (Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1861).
5. Annie and E. Keary, *Little Wanderlin and Other Fairy Tales* (London: Macmillan, 1865), and *Three Fairy Princesses: Old Stories told Anew* (London: Marcus Ward, 1885).
6. *At Home* (London: Marcus Ward, 1881); *Abroad* (London: Marcus Ward, 1882); *At Home Again* (London: Marcus Ward, 1886); *Pets and Playmates* (London: Marcus Ward, 1887).
7. [Eliza Keary], *Memoir of Annie Keary, by her Sister* (London: Macmillan, 1882).
8. [Eliza Keary], *Rays of Light: A Textbook* (London: Frederick Warne, [1884]); [Eliza Keary], *The River of God* (London: Frederick Warne, [1884]); E. Keary, *A Casket of Pearls: Selections from Holy Scripture, for Morning and Evening* (London: Frederick Warne, [1884]).
9. Keary's paid editorship of *Friendly Leaves* suggests the necessity of her earning a living, and ran from January 1886 – December 1889.
10. Eliza Keary and Beata Francis, eds., *The Francis Letters. By Sir Philip Francis and other Members of the Family. With a Note on the Junius Controversy by C.F. Keary, etc.* (London: Hutchinson, 1901); [Eliza Keary], *Letters of Annie Keary*, (London: Christian Knowledge Society, [1883]).
11. Eliza Keary, "Madeleine's Story," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 149.904 (Jan – March, 1891) 103–122; 217–230; 328–344.
12. See Jodi Lustig, "Eliza Keary," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.



13. Rosemary T. Vanarsdel, "Macmillan's Magazine' and the Fair Sex: 1859–1874 (Part 2)," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 34.1 (Spring 2001): 2–15: 12.
14. Vanarsdel, 12.
15. "Little Seal-Skin" (vol. 19, issue 109, November 1868) finds itself alongside two poems by Christina Rossetti, a serial by Charlotte M. Yonge, a discussion of 'the Convent Question', two pieces on 'Girls of the Period', a piece on 'Local Lectures for Women', a piece about Queen Mary, and a piece called 'The Ladies' Cry'.
16. Keary signed the 1868 petition to parliament presented by John Stuart Mill and prepared by the London National Society for Women's Suffrage. See *Glasgow Herald*, 8817 (Tuesday, 7 April, 1868) 2.
17. Review, *John Bull*, 2802 (Saturday 22 August, 1874) 574.
18. The subject of same-sex desire in Keary's poetry has been addressed most notably by Frederick Roden in *Same Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). See chapter 3, "Female Religious Homoeroticism: the Sisters Rossetti and Keary" (61–68). For a compelling reading of Keary's long poem 'Christine and Mary: A Correspondence' see Tonya Moutray McArthur, "The Cloistered Pen: Penetration and Conception in Eliza Keary's "Christine and Mary: A Correspondence," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31.1 (2003): 315–32.
19. *John Bull*, 574.
20. Eliza Keary, "About her Books and a Little About herself," *Friendly Leaves*, XV.161 (October, 1890), 235–8: 236.
21. "Objects of the Society," *Friendly Leaves*, XI.113 (January, 1886): 19.
22. Eliza Keary, "Knitting Patterns: A Suggestion from the Editor," *Friendly Leaves*, XIV.149, (Jan, 1889): 149.
23. Keary, "Knitting Patterns," 149.
24. Keary, "Knitting Patterns," 149.
25. Keary, "Knitting Patterns," 149.
26. Eliza Keary, *Little Seal-skin and Other Poems*, (London: George Bell), 1874.
27. Dorothy Mermin, Book Review: "Victorian Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830–1900," *Victorian Poetry*, 37 1 (Spring 1999): 124–8: 125.
28. Mermin, 125.
29. "Minor Poets," *The Athenaeum*, 2439 (25 July, 1874): 111.
30. "Minor Poets," 111.
31. *Academy*, 233.
32. "Minor Poets," 111. In support of this claim he cites the opening lines of "Dawn, or the Twilight Chorus": "Do you hear the mixed, merry chatter / Of the birds? Listen to the dawn chorus; / Music scarcely, but such a clamour of praise," *Little Seal-Skin*, 93. The reviewer recognises the irregularity of the verse, but sees this only as a failing.
33. Paul Ellis, "Radical Myths: Eliza Keary's Little Seal-Skin and Other Poems (1874)," *Victorian Poetry*, 40.4 (Winter, 2002): 387–408:405.
34. *Academy*, (19 December, 1885) 410.
35. "Christmas Books," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 62.1623 (4 December, 1886): 765–6: 766.
36. See Keary's discussion of *Goblin Market* in "About her Books and a Little About herself," *Friendly Leaves* 16.179 (July 1891): 235–8: 237.
37. In Christina Rossetti, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1866), 64–67.

38. Such a reading is in keeping with the hesitation found in so many of Rossetti's poems, which find it hard to imagine a happy ending, as, for example, when the speaker in "An Apple Gathering" finds herself beyond the reach of the "mother's home," and is left "loiter[ing]" on the periphery.
39. See Peter Le Coutur, "Slipping Off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales," *Gender Forum* 55 (2015): 55-82. Le Coutur effectively positions Keary's poem within the broader context of what he calls 'Selkie Folktales'.
40. Le Coutur, 16.
41. Ellis, 390.
42. Ellis, 388.
43. For information on the Kensington Society, see Andrew Rosen, "Emily Davies and the Women's Movement, 1862-1867," *Journal of British Studies*, 19.1 (1979): 101-21. See also *British Women's Emancipation since the Renaissance. A Central Resource of Information and Primary Source*, accessed 22 Jan. 2019.
44. Helen Taylor was John Stuart Mill's step-daughter, who went on to become the unsuccessful parliamentary candidate for the Camberwell North constituency in 1885.
45. See "Summary of this Morning's News," *Pall Mall Gazette* 983 (Saturday 4 April, 1868): 7.
46. Alice Westlake to Helen Taylor, 20 March 1865, BLPES, Mill Taylor papers, vol. 14, 103.
47. The Pen and Pencil Club differed from the Kensington Society in having both male and female members. Amongst its female members were Barbara Bodichon, Lydia Becker and Elizabeth Blackwell, all women who would go on to shape feminist politics in the nineteenth century.
48. "Doctor Emily," "The Legend of Thora," and "The Goose-Girl" were also written for discussion at the Pen and Pencil Club.
49. See "Peter Taylor," *ODNB*.
50. See Ann Dingsdale, "*Generous and Lofty Sympathies*": *The Kensington Society, the 1866 Women's Suffrage Petition, and the Development of Mid-Victorian Feminism*, PhD thesis, University of Greenwich (1995): 113.
51. See Dingsdale, 113 for the precariousness of the Keary sisters' hold on where they lived.
52. Megan A Norcia, *X Marks the Spot: Women Writers Map the Empire for British Children, 1790-1895* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2010), 175.
53. *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1846), 21-23.
54. Letter to George Bell, 19 November 1883, Reading University Special Collections. MS 1640 / 242 /51.
55. In a typical fashion, Keary's *Memoir of Annie Keary* (1882) claims, on the title page, only that it is written "by [Annie's] sister," or, in a double displacement, the title page of *Early Egyptian History* claims it is by "the Author of 'Sidney Grey,' etc"- who is Annie Keary - "and her sister".
56. Eliza Keary, "The New Year," *Friendly Leaves*, XI.113 (January, 1886): 3-4: 3.
57. Keary, *Memoir*, 62.
58. Keary, *Memoir*, 91.
59. Dingsdale, 157.
60. Amanda Paxton, *Willful Submission: Sado-Erotics and Heavenly Marriage in Victorian Religious Poetry* (Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2018:

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

*Lucy Bending* is a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Reading. She started her career writing about understandings of bodily pain in the late nineteenth century, but her current work is on Victorian women's poetry, and she is pursuing her interests in Eliza Keary and Louise Imogen Guiney.