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LEILA WALKER

Elizabeth Kent's *New Tales* of Botanical Friendship

WHEN LEIGH HUNT FINALLY ARRIVED AT LIVORNO NEARLY EIGHT MONTHS after setting out with his family to join Shelley and Byron in Italy, he took the earliest possible opportunity to write to his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Kent—better known as “Bess Kent” or “Bessy Kent.” It had been a terrible journey, and the bulk of Hunt’s July 2, 1822 letter describes the arduous sea voyage that frightened even experienced sailors, the lightning that bent like “the leg of a god,” and the turmoil of the Byron household upon the Hunts’ arrival. In a postscript, however, Hunt turns from his recent adventures to comment on Kent’s most recent literary effort: “I must not forget to say,” he writes, “that I liked your New tales extremely, & that they get better & better towards the conclusion.”¹

For those of us familiar with Kent’s work, this postscript presented the kind of mystery that sends shivers down the spine, for Kent’s first known work, *Flora Domestica*, was not published until the following year. Although scholarly rumors of a collection of children’s tales can be traced back at least to 1930, the dismissal of this collection as lost or forgotten has followed nearly the same history. Now, however, I have been able to identify these “New tales” as *New Tales for Young Readers*, Elizabeth Kent’s first book, published anonymously in May 1822.²

Although Kent has received recent attention for her botanical works, her collection of children’s tales remained a scholarly rumor as efforts

I identified *New Tales for Young Readers* as Kent’s collection of children’s tales in my capacity as the Research Associate for the forthcoming final volumes of *Shelley and his Circle*, a project privately funded by the Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation. I extend my sincerest gratitude to the Foundation and to my colleagues on the project and in the Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle at the New York Public Library: Doucet Devin Fisher, Daniel Dibern, Elizabeth Denlinger, and Charles Cuykendal Carter.

1. Manuscript in the Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and his Circle (LH-86), New York Public Library. Publication forthcoming in *Shelley and his Circle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

2. I first publicly announced this identification at the 2016 Annual Conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, in a talk titled “Elizabeth Kent’s Lost *Tales*, Found.”

to locate the book were hampered by longstanding confusion regarding the title and publication date. Most sources continue to rely on Edmund Blunden's 1930 assertion that in addition to her two major works, Kent "prepared a book on *British Birds*, but I cannot identify it; and in 1831 she published a collection of *New Tales* for children."³ Molly Tatchell takes Blunden's description for the work's title and accepts his publication date, writing that "[i]n 1831 [Kent] published a collection of *New Tales for Children*. But this, like her other works, is now forgotten."⁴ Blunden may have taken the 1831 publication date from notices in the March and April 1831 issues of *The Tatler* directing "young ladies" interested in botanical lessons to inquire after Kent at her stepfather Mr. Hunter's, "where may be had MISS KENT'S 'New Tales for Young Readers.'"⁵ However, as Daisy Hay recently observed, Kent herself tentatively gave 1818 as the publication date in her application to the Royal Literary Fund in the late 1850s. Hay, who correctly identifies the book's title as *New Tales for Young Readers*, surmises from an 1822 notice in *The Monthly Review* that Kent may have misremembered the publication date three decades later, but like Tatchell, Hay presumes the text lost to historical neglect. "This work," she writes, "like many children's books of the period, does not appear in library catalogues, and is unlikely to have survived."⁶ At least one copy, however, did survive, and is held in the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature at the University of Florida, allowing us to confirm Hay's speculative 1822 publication date and make new sense of Kent's literary contributions to the Cockney School.⁷

New Tales for Young Readers, "By A Lady," must have been published in the first two weeks of May, 1822: after May 5, when *The Examiner* announced the publication "in a few days," but before Leigh Hunt left England on May 13, bringing a copy with him. It is a slim book, numbering 117 pages,

3. Blunden, *Leigh Hunt and His Circle* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930), 34^o–41.

4. Tatchell, *Leigh Hunt and His Family in Hammersmith* (Hammersmith: Hammersmith Local History Group, 1969), 64. Ann B. Shteir picks up this date from Tatchell in her *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Elizabeth Kent; in *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science* Shteir assigns a tentative publication date of "ca. 1818" to *New Tales for Young Readers* and takes Blunden's 1831 publication date for a separate title, *New Tales for Children* (137, 144).

5. Advertisement for "Lessons in Botany" placed in *The Tatler*, no. 181 (April 2, 1831): 724.

6. Hay, *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron, and Other Tangled Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 317n. My thanks to Kelli Towers Jasper for pointing me in this direction.

7. I gratefully acknowledge Suzan A. Alteri, curator of the Baldwin Library, who assisted my research and kindly provided a scanned PDF of Kent's *New Tales for Young Readers*.

printed by C. H. Reynell for Bowdery and Kirby.⁸ The printer helps confirm Kent's authorship, as Carew Henry Reynell was related to the Hunts by marriage and was John Hunt's regular printer. The subscription list provides further evidence of the book's authorship. Major supporters include "Mrs. Hunter," Kent's mother; "Lady Knighton," wife of Sir William Knighton, to whom Kent dedicated her *Flora Domestica*; "Mr. Kent," Kent's brother; and "Mrs. Novello," Kent's lifelong friend.

In recent years, as scholarly interest in both women botanists and literary circles has increased, Kent's name, if not canonical, is no longer entirely unknown. Yet the scholarship that addresses her botanical writing tends to take one of two approaches: treating nature writing in the tradition of scientific and pedagogical texts on the one hand, or as part of the social and political project of the Cockney School on the other. A close examination of Kent's previously unknown children's tales illuminates how skillfully Kent challenges conventions of genre to establish an affinity between the realms of botany, pedagogy, and poetry through a common emphasis on the powers of observation and social engagement. At the same time, however, Kent critiques the limitations of our ability to observe, and suggests that what happens *beyond* the observable world might be equally generative. Taken as a whole, Kent's work constitutes a previously unacknowledged challenge to the Cockney School's almost fetishistic attachment to the social. The recovery of *New Tales for Young Readers* brings into focus Kent's efforts to systematize friendship through her writing and clarifies her ambiguous response to Cockney amiability. As scholarship of Romantic sociability over the past several decades has revealed, "sociability was not simply a feature of Romantic-era literary circles or intellectual networks but . . . was also the subject of explicit theorization and debate within the period."⁹ Kent's efforts to systematize her social network while contesting the ethical charge of amiability deserve to be recognized as participating in the Romantic theorization of sociability.

Bessy Kent: A Brief Background

Until recently, scholars could—and did—dismiss Kent's life and work in a single line, memorably articulated by Molly Tatchell in 1976: "If anything keeps her name alive now it is probably only the anecdote that she threw herself into the pond at Hampstead one morning while Keats was waiting for his breakfast."¹⁰ But in her time, Kent was well-regarded as an author, botanist, and integral member of the Leigh Hunt circle.

8. The WorldCat entry lists the author of the anonymously published text as Carew Henry Reynell, the printer.

9. John Savarese, "Social Minds in Romanticism," *Literature Compass* 14, no. 2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12378>, accessed June 4, 2020.

10. Tatchell, *Leigh Hunt and His Family in Hammersmith*, 64.

Elizabeth Kent was born on March 13, 1790, and raised in London by her mother and step-father, the publisher and bookseller Rowland Hunter. She was a precocious, intelligent child with literary ambitions and an interest in botany, whose wide-ranging interests reflected the currents of radical political philosophy. When she was eleven, a mutual friend introduced her to Leigh Hunt, and she was eager to talk with him about the rights of animals, a popular topic among radical thinkers at the time.¹¹

Hunt and Kent shared an intellectual affinity that took root when she cared for him during an illness shortly after their meeting and lasted through the rest of their lives, as Hunt courted and then married Kent's older sister, Marianne.¹² Kent's lively presence made her an integral and at times awkward third member of their relationship. Years later, Kent's nephew, the Hunts' son Thornton, would muse that Kent might have made a more natural partner for his father:

for though coming with little better than a dame-school education, she had so much natural faculty for study as to master two languages, a wide range of history, fiction, and poetry, with a technical knowledge of woman's favourite science, botany; which she illustrated from the library by really graceful writing. Ambitious, of ardent affection, truthful, what 'incompatibility of temper' it was, or what outward uncongeniality of taste, that set up an impassible barrier between the two I know not; but most of all I think it was a sort of masculine, predetermined and inflexible resolution in the sister on matters of conviction, of willfulness or obstinacy on matters of personal liking, which made her insist too much, and which was the very opposite of the brother's nature. . . .¹³

Thornton Hunt's assessment of his aunt's character accords with that of nearly everyone who recorded their impressions of her: she was a woman of extraordinary intellect, who, without the benefit of formal education, became expert in an impressive range of subjects, and whose uncontrollable bursts of temper alienated even her closest friends. Hay has suggested that Kent might have "suffered throughout her life from some form of manic depression" or other undiagnosed mental illness;¹⁴ whatever the cause, Kent's

11. Nicholas Roe, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 63–65; Blunden, *Leigh Hunt and His Circle*, 38.

12. Marianne Kent changed the spelling of her name more than once, from Mary Anne to Marian and finally to Marianne. I have elected to use the last of these spellings throughout this article for the sake of consistency.

13. Thornton Hunt, "Proserpina," in Edmund Blunden, *Leigh Hunt and His Circle* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930), Appendix II, 359.

14. Hay, *Young Romantics*, 17.

friends and family seemed convinced that her outbursts were beyond her control, even as they repeatedly pleaded that she would be better liked if she could control herself.

Through Hunt, Kent found an intellectual community of radical thinkers and poets that included Keats, Byron, and Shelley, among others. She remained with Hunt when he was imprisoned in Surrey Gaol in 1813, acting as his secretary, looking after his health, entertaining his many visitors, and cultivating intellectual and political friendships, while Marianne and their children removed to more hospitable dwellings. After Hunt's release in 1815, Kent continued to live with the Hunts and accompany Hunt on his social visits. With Hunt, Kent established a "poetic retreat from society,"¹⁵ a hive of literary and political activity that was at once highly social and purposefully removed, that was crucial to the development of the Cockney School.

It was not until after the Hunts left for Italy and the Cockney community dissolved that Kent began to develop an independent intellectual reputation and to form literary friendships adjacent to but apart from Hunt's circle. Although Hunt gave input on both *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches*, providing notes on poetry and philosophy in his long letters from Italy, he had ceased to be the center of her intellectual life, and when he tried to arrange for her to join him in Italy despite the persistent rumors that dogged their relationship, she declined.¹⁶

Kent's botanical works were well received, and readers praised the style as much as the content. Her publishers engaged her for *Sylvan Sketches* quick on the heels of *Flora Domestica*'s success; a second edition of *Flora Domestica* came out the same year as *Sylvan Sketches*. Prominent contemporary authors took notice: John Clare encouraged her to embark on a book of British birds, and Coleridge suggested that she write a book on British wildflowers. Kent undertook both projects, and in 1826 she established a lively intellectual correspondence with Clare as she researched and prepared a book about the science and mythology of British birds. This book would have been, like her first two, as much a compendium of literary references as of scientific knowledge, but Kent's publisher, Taylor & Hessey, fell victim to the widespread collapse of the publishing industry in 1825–26, and her projects stalled with no prospects for publication in a shrunken market.

15. Hay, *Young Romantics*, 94.

16. As Hay notes in "Elizabeth Kent's Collaborators," *Flora Domestica* includes many contributions from Hunt, taken often unchanged from his letters. Hay, "Elizabeth Kent's Collaborators," *Romanticism* 14, no. 3 (2008): 272–81. However, Hunt seems to have given less input on *Sylvan Sketches*, and was surprised, and perhaps hurt, to learn that she had nearly completed the text before he knew it was seriously underway. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 143.

As Hay has pointed out, Kent was “one of the more successful authors to emerge from the group gathered around Leigh Hunt.”¹⁷ Yet she remains a marginal figure in the Cockney School, not only because her contributions have received so little scholarly attention until recently, but also because her work expresses a position of marginality even as it asserts the central values of her community.

Collecting a Cockney Canon

Flora Domestica is billed as a guide for urban gardeners looking to rear and care for “a portable garden in pots.”¹⁸ Kent emphasizes in her introduction that she hoped to make botanical principles broadly accessible by using common language rather than scientific language to describe the plants and their proper care. The book, like her later *Sylvan Sketches*, is organized alphabetically by the common names of the plants, from Adonis to Zygo-phylum; the Linnaean names follow the common names as a concession to her publishers, but Kent herself argued that Latin terminology alienated children and excluded women. The plants Kent includes are diverse in their origins but as common in the suburbs as the language she uses. Like the Cockney poets with whom she associated, Kent elevates the daily life and common habits of the English suburbs, boldly proclaiming them worthy of study in their own language.

While both *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches* are nominally botanical texts, their botanical themes provide the structure for what are essentially works of literary criticism. Both books are presented with “illustrations from the works of the poets”¹⁹ rather than the lavish scientific illustrations typically associated with eighteenth-century botany, but Kent draws on the conventions of botanical illustration in presenting these literary specimens. Botanical illustrations of this period were made to emulate the experience of observation, but were only occasionally drawn from life; frequently, as Karin Nickelsen has shown, they would be composed in order to emphasize the key identifying features one *might* observe in nature.²⁰ As illustrators studied one another’s work and followed the artistic theories of the time, representations of plants came to be standardized, stylized, and aestheticized. Scientific illustrations encouraged readers to observe plants according to taxonomic principles and make appropriate

17. Hay, “Elizabeth Kent’s Collaborators,” 273.

18. [Kent], *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower Garden; with Directions for the Treatment of Plants in Pots; and Illustrations from the Works of the Poets* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823), xiii.

19. Kent, *Flora Domestica*, title page.

20. Nickelsen, “Draughtsmen, Botanists and Nature: Constructing Eighteenth-Century Botanical Illustrations,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37, no. 1 (2006): 1–25.

classifications, while also portraying the beauties of nature with “vitality and liveliness.”²¹

Kent’s “illustrations” similarly serve both taxonomic and aesthetic purposes. While she justifies her inclusion of poetry by appealing to “the belief that lovers of nature are most frequently admirers of beauty in any form,” she arranges her selections in order to highlight the poetic characteristics of each plant.²² A yew tree isn’t just *Taxus baccata*. It is a *solitary* tree, planted alone in graveyards and churchyards, found as a symbol of apartness or unsociability in poetry from Shakespeare to Wordsworth.²³ Careful observation of plants might be the key to Linnaean classification, but careful observation of the accrued affective relationships between people and plants is the key to Kentian literary interpretation.

Kent was not alone in adopting the structure of botanical collections to the purpose of literary anthologizing. As Dahlia Porter has convincingly argued, “Romantic-era collections of poetry were not just metaphorically but also materially conditioned by the projects of botanical collecting, preservation, classification, description, and illustration of the previous century.”²⁴ While some editors compiled poetic specimens in order to preserve “collections of representative types,” others offered ahistorical “bouquets” of artfully arranged verse.²⁵ Both approaches drew on the scientific and aesthetic principles of botanical collections to justify the scope, organization, and purpose of the literary canons their anthologies put forward. Porter argues that these approaches represent two sides of a Romantic “canon war” that pitted an historical approach against a mingling of great works from diverse eras.²⁶ Kent’s collections present a sort of ahistorical mingling; Hunt described *Flora Domestica* in the metaphorical language associated with that strain of collecting as “tying up it’s [*sic*] lady-like bunches with posies and ends of verses.”²⁷ However, the canon Kent collects does not just reference botanical collections: it is quite literally organized *as* a botanical guide, undermining the distinction between poetic and botanical subjects while redefining the terms of canonical classification.

21. Dahlia Porter, “Specimen Poetics: Botany, Reanimation, and the Romantic Collection,” *Representations* 139, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 69, 70.

22. Kent, *Flora Domestica*, xiv.

23. Kent, *Sylvan*, 396–408.

24. Porter, “Specimen Poetics,” 62.

25. Porter, “Specimen Poetics,” 85–86.

26. Porter, “Specimen Poetics,” 60.

27. Hunt, “The Wishing-Cap No. XXI,” *The Examiner*, no. 881 (December 19, 1824): 801–2. For the gendered politics of this review, see Sam George, *Botany, Sexuality, and Women’s Writing 1760–1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 177.

Flora Botanica and *Sylvan Sketches* advance a particularly Cockney canon, both in the poets presented and in the manner of their presentation. In these collections, Ovid, Tasso, Shakespeare, and Milton share the page with William Wordsworth, Horace Smith, Sir Walter Scott, John Keats, Leigh Hunt, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Kent constructs poetic affinities unconstrained by historical distances: in just one entry on amaranth, for example, Kent quotes from Milton, Shelley, Rucellai (translated by Kent), Thomas Campbell, Sir William Jones, Ovid, and Horace Smith. Organizing the collection by plant rather than poet allows Kent to generate new connections and establish a literary canon in which the Cockney poets rub elbows with the historic poets whose legacy they proclaimed to follow. Such improbable meetings would surely have delighted Kent's Cockney circle, who conceived of literary production as an inherently friendly enterprise: in his introduction to his *Foliage* (1818), Leigh Hunt justifies his translations of Petrarch and Tasso by arguing a common dedication to a poetry of "cheerfulness," "sociality," and "amiableness."²⁸ Like Kent, Hunt offers a broad canon that could almost resemble an ahistorical literary circle, a community of poets united by what he perceives to be a shared attitude toward poetic values, rather than by historical circumstance.

Indeed, in many ways Kent's *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches* represent the most literal examples of the Cockney School's literary philosophy. Hay has argued that Kent's selection of poetry related to plants that can be found in "a portable garden in pots" might be a tongue-in-cheek response to Z.'s attack on the Cockney School's "laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots."²⁹ But Kent's works do more than defend against critiques of her circle. They enter into dialogue with other foundational Cockney texts in order to participate in shaping the definition of Cockney poetry and the Hunt circle. While Jeffrey N. Cox describes both Keats's *Poems* (1817) and Hunt's *Foliage* as "seek[ing] to represent in verse the group and its life" by incorporating poetic dedications, poems written for Hunt's contests, and frequent invocations of other members of the group,³⁰ Kent's works literally reconstruct the Cockney School (expanded to include a perceived classical lineage) as text. Crucially, Kent executes this reconstruction-as-text by introducing plants as an animating force in Cockney poetry, literally a defining characteristic in the botanical taxonomy of her poetic canon.

In some ways, Kent's taxonomy makes literal the Cockney habit of describing the natural world as symbolically supporting a friendly community of poets. Hunt explicitly connected the natural environment to poetic

28. Hunt, *Foliage* (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1818), 9, 16, 25.

29. Hay, "Elizabeth Kent's Collaborators," 273–74.

30. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 24.

sociability when he proclaimed that in his quest for a poetic creed, he could be “sure that I was right in what I believed or chose to fancy, in proportion as I did honour to the beauty of nature, and spread cheerfulness and a sense of justice among my fellow-creatures.”³¹ In this way, Hunt ties his characteristically “cheerful” poetry to his ability to communicate a faithful rendering of nature’s beauty to his community of “fellow-creatures.” Similarly, Keats portrays social life as a welcome relief from (or culmination to) the build-up of frustrated poetic energy in the aftermath of contemplating nature. In “Sleep and Poetry” (1817), which Cox describes as “a kind of poetic manifesto for this new school,”³² Keats begins by comparing the tranquility of “a musk-rose blowing” to the feeling of “Sleep” before following a train of thought to the overwhelming “task” and “toil” of poetic depiction.³³ Finally, he is relieved of the burden of introspection when “I turn full hearted to the friendly aids / That smooth the path of honour; brotherhood, / and friendliness, the nurse of mutual good.”³⁴ For both Hunt and Keats, nature, friendliness, and poetry are inextricably linked; “poetry’s capacity to forge social bonds,” Elizabeth Jones has argued, provides relief from “natural sublimity,” containing uncontrollable nature within a circle of friends as if within a domesticated pot.³⁵ In this sense, domesticated nature becomes both a symbol of poetic inspiration (often treated as a “gift” likened to the gift of a bouquet) and a metaphor for the social containment of poetry.

While Kent joins Hunt and Keats in joining an affection for nature to an affection for friends, she writes at a remove. The introduction to *Flora Domestica* begins by establishing her position in “town” as a position of isolation and distance from the “country” she loves:

As I reside in town, and am known among my friends as a lover of the country, it has often happened that one or the other of them would bring me a consolation in the shape of a Myrtle, a Geranium, an Hydrangea, or a Rose-tree, &c. Liking plants, and loving my friends, I have earnestly desired to preserve these kind gifts; but, utterly ignorant of their wants and habits, I have seen my plants die one after the other, rather from attention ill-directed than from the want of it.³⁶

While *Flora Domestica* is nominally a guide to the care of plants that doubles as a work of literary scholarship, this passage reveals that the text ultimately

31. Hunt, *Foliage*, 16–17.

32. Cox, *Poetry and Politics*, 23.

33. Keats, “Sleep and Poetry,” 5, 11, 310, 307.

34. Keats, “Sleep and Poetry,” 316–18.

35. Jones, “Keats in the Suburbs,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 45 (1996): 40.

36. Kent, *Flora Domestica*, xiii.

functions as a guide to the care of friendships. Read within the context of Cockney metaphors linking flowers to poetry as symbols of friendship, the “gifts” of flowers that Kent struggles to “preserve” might easily be interpreted as carrying, in addition to the literal meaning, a symbolic reference to *Flora Domestica* itself as a way to “preserve” the poetic “gifts” of her friends. But the passage also reveals acute anxiety: despite her best efforts, the “ignorant” narrator has watched these symbols of friendship “die one after the other.” It is no stretch to imagine that the friendships themselves were equally susceptible to death by “attention ill-directed.”

Flora Domestica provides guidance on the literal care of plants and the metaphorical care of poetic friendships, but it also enacts, through Kent’s editorial practices, the friendships she desires to preserve. In this way, Kent participates in the Cockney practice of presenting poems as gifts of friendship, preserving in print the social network of the poets. Yet she is participating in a social practice that had a tendency to erase her. Kent’s presence was memorialized in poems such as Hunt’s sonnet “To Miss K., written on a piece of paper which happened to be headed with a long list of trees.” While the title embraces flora as a symbol of both friendship and poetry, the poem literally obscures Kent’s own intellectual activity, and it concludes by declaring a preference for gifts made not of plants or fruit, “but two things richer far, / A verse, and a staunch friend;—and here they are.”³⁷ Similarly, Keats’s “Sleep and Poetry” includes a “tribute to Marianne and Bess,”³⁸ but Keats’s depiction of them as static “figures” among “nymphs” and “patient weeds” renders them inactive, somewhere between myth and nature, supporting rather than generating intellectual work.³⁹ As Theresa M. Kelley has argued, the poetic and iconographic tradition that portrayed women as “botanical ornamentation” has a long history that the increasing numbers of “Romantic era women who did botany” only partly “kept at bay.”⁴⁰ Kent’s botanical works resist not only the general aesthetic association of women with “botanical subjects,” but also the specific deployment of that trope within her poetic circle to circumscribe the social role of women. In this way, she makes use of a genre that had become a site of contested femininities in order to challenge the social structure of the Cockney circle.

While Hunt and his circle center their own voices within a larger poetic coterie, heading poems with the names of friends without relinquishing an embodied point of view, Kent’s collections center the natural

37. “To Miss K.,” cxxi, lines 13–14.

38. Hay, *Young Romantics*, 94.

39. Keats, “Sleep and Poetry” (1817), in *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: Norton, 2009), 368, 365, 379.

40. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 90.

world that frequently serves as a backdrop or (metaphorical) subject for Cockney poetry. Her collections reverse the relationship between author and content, using nature and a system of categorization derived from Linnaeus to define the poets who reify their observations of the natural world in poems. Kent's editorial practices allow her to situate herself, as Samuel Lyndon Gladden wrote of Mary Shelley, "simultaneously at the margins and in the center of the meaning" of the poetic legends she described.⁴¹ By collecting a Cockney canon from the margins, Kent uses the conventions of botanical and literary collecting to create a space for herself within (and around) the networks of friendship that defined the Cockney community.

Amiable Tales

The recovery of *New Tales for Young Readers* helps us better understand the multiple literary traditions at play in Kent's work and allows us to place her more solidly beside the contemporary women botanists who also wrote for children. Surprisingly, given Kent's later work and the contemporary use of botany in pedagogical texts, *New Tales for Young Readers* does not address botanical topics. Yet, like the women botanists who presented moral lessons within lessons about plants, Kent employs generic crossings that encourage readers to observe in new ways.

Of the ten tales in Kent's collection, nine show children learning relatively straightforward moral lessons such as the importance of telling the truth, caring for others, and resisting vanity. The tenth tale, however, is "A Fairy Tale," and its departure from the generic conventions that govern the surrounding moral tales invites critical comparison. Recent scholars of children's literature have rejected the teleological chronology in which the rise of the moral tale necessitated the decline of the fairy tale. But it was unusual to include both genres in a single volume; the tendency was rather, as M. O. Grenby has argued, to incorporate moralizing elements from the fairy tale into the moral tale (figurative "fairy godmothers" who reward virtuous characters and punish their wicked foils lend themselves particularly well to the structure of the moral tale), and to "tame" the fairy tales, retaining the genre's supernatural elements while rendering its punitive violence more figurative and foregrounding the lessons that might be learned from observing a character's good behavior.⁴² By presenting a fairy tale in a collection of moral tales, Kent invites readers to apply the observational strategies of one genre to the conventions of another.

41. Gladden, "Mary Shelley's Editions of The Collected Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Editor as Subject," *Studies in Romanticism* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 190.

42. Grenby, "Tame Fairies Make Good Teachers: The Popularity of Early British Fairy Tales," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 1 (January 2006): 1-24.

All of the nine moral tales included in the collection are remarkable for their overemphasis on cultivating the traits that make one likable. At the conclusion to “Opposite Extremes,” for example, a girl who has learned “the medium between insincerity and bluntness” when telling her friends what she thinks of them “is grateful to her mamma for having taken so much pain to cure her of a fault which had formerly made people dislike her. As her disposition is a kind one, her candour is always amiable.”⁴³ In these tales, amiability is a quality that, like other moral virtues, might be developed through careful observation. For Kent, however, amiability is as much about *being* observed as it is about observing: as the mother explains in “The Lovely Child,” to be “amiable” means people “can love you. When they have not time to know from observation of your manners, and they see by the expression of your face that they could love you, they say you are lovely” (28–29). It is the fear of becoming unloved and unlovable, even by her parents, that cures the “lovely child” of her ill-temper by the tale’s conclusion.

“The Lovely Child” articulates the importance of being identified by others as *lovable*, an unstated moral corollary to the Cockney School’s emphasis on amiableness. Belonging to that group, as Cox argues, is “[f]irst . . . an act of willed identification—one elects to be part of a group. Second, however, one is also elected to a group, selected by both its members and by one’s preexisting affinities. Becoming part of a group is an act of self-fashioning that necessarily occurs through the other.”⁴⁴ As the “lovely child” discovered, such “self-fashioning” is often limited by the limited scope of our collective powers of observation. In Kent’s tales, these limits extend even to the supernatural.

The “Fairy Tale” that appears as the seventh story in the collection stands out not only for its generic incongruity with the rest of the volume, but for its setting: while most of the moral tales center on domestic concerns in populated areas, the bulk of the action in “A Fairy Tale” takes place in an uncultivated wilderness. That wilderness, however, along with the tale’s supernatural elements, is contained within a domestic frame narrative. The tale begins when a father’s candle goes out; unable to continue his reading, he agrees to tell his daughter a story. “A great many years ago,” he begins, two sisters, Lily and Giddy, lived with their grandmother “in a very distant country” (58). One day, while playing hide-and-seek in a nearby wood, the sisters accidentally wander too far and cannot find their way home. They are very hungry, and when they come across a shell filled with honey, they eat. Soon a beautiful fairy appears and asks who ate her honey. While Giddy denies responsibility with a quick “Not I,”

43. [Kent], *New Tales for Young Readers* (London: Bowdery and Kirby, 1822), 25–26. Henceforth, all references to *New Tales for Young Readers* appear parenthetically in the text.

44. Cox, *Poetry and Politics*, 6.

Lily admits to eating the honey and offers to replace it (63). The fairy rewards Lily's honesty with the gift of flight and several magic snow-drops to guide her home. As for Giddy, the fairy tells Lily, "For your sake, I will not punish your sister: but I will not help her either" (64). Faced with the agonizing choice of going home without her sister or staying in the woods and leaving her poor grandmother to fret, Lily finally chooses to go back home to reassure her grandmother, promising to return for Giddy. Once home, Lily imitates her sister's voice to deceive her blind grandmother into believing both girls are safe. But when Lily returns to the woods, she finds that Giddy has wandered off. The fairy appears once more, revealing that she is in fact the girls' grandmother, and guides Lily to her errant sister. The fairy grandmother then rewards Lily's good behavior by making her a fairy, but she insists on punishing Giddy. "For your sake," she tells Lily,

I give her this only chance. I have now made her blind, deaf, and dumb: any good action she may perform, or any self-controul [*sic*] she may exhibit, shall be rewarded by the recovery of some one of her lost senses. For every ill action, one must again be lost. If at any time while bereft of these three senses, she shall deserve further punishment, she shall die; if at any time when possessed of these senses, she shall deserve further reward, then and then only she shall become a fairy.

(73–74)

Finally, the fairy grandmother instructs Lily to be Giddy's "guardian spirit" in this moral challenge—and here the story abruptly ends, as the father's candle has been brought and he can see again to read, and the daughter "goes to bed to dream of the fairies" (75).

The content of the girl's dreams is left to the reader's imagination along with the conclusion to this disturbing story. In this regard, her project more closely resembles Godwin's writing for the Juvenile Library, in which familiar tales were left purposefully open-ended to encourage independent thinking, than with the didactic moral tales of women writers like Anna Letitia Barbauld or Sarah Trimmer.⁴⁵ But by including this story in a volume that otherwise hews to the bounds of the moral tale, Kent forces us to attend to generic conventions that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Recent scholarship has illuminated how writers of children's books in this period might write across genre for both literary and pedagogical effect. Mary and Charles Lamb, in *Mrs. Leicester's School* (1808/1809), indicated by the title that the collection of tales should be read in the "category of improving works for children," but the tales themselves actively resist moral

45. Pamela Clemit, "William Godwin's Juvenile Library," *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* 147 (July 2009): 97.

closure, forcing the reader to “look beyond the inadequacy of the [literary] model to question the social order which produced it.”⁴⁶ And Michael Gamer has made a convincing case that even Maria Edgeworth, with her reputation for “rational didacticism,” included elements of the “extraordinary and romantic” into her tales as she developed the conventions of the “romance of real life,” suggesting that fiction must “aspire beyond realistic probabilities to improbable realities if it is to achieve truth.”⁴⁷ Taken in this literary context, Kent’s tales call attention to the “truth” that stories reveal when they challenge narrative conventions. The distressingly ambiguous conclusion to “A Fairy Tale” prepares readers to notice the violence of the moral tale’s emphasis on punishment and reward, and to understand the social structures that make one human being responsible for the moral development of another as hindering the freedom of both. The violence of everyday moral instruction is raised to the level of the supernatural.

How, we might ask, can Giddy learn morality when she has been deprived of the senses that would allow her to observe and communicate? Is it just that she should be punished for failure to adhere to moral standards when she lacks all the faculties that would facilitate the development of normative behaviors? Is it fair to ‘reward’ Lily’s adherence to normative morality with the responsibility for her sister’s moral development—and, by extension, for her sister’s life? These questions are highly suggestive of the violence done to people with mental or social disabilities who are punished for failing to adhere to societal norms. (One might also see parallels to the punishing social isolation imposed on women for lacking an education denied to them.) Yet the resolution to these questions occurs beyond the limits of our observation, as the conclusion to the tale happens beyond our view, and in multiple: the hypothetical conclusion that Kent might have written, that the father might have told, or that the daughter might have dreamed. We are made aware of the gap between observation and ethical determination. It suggests that the most important work of ethical interpretation cannot be shown, but only imagined in the aftermath of careful observation.

Of all the stories included in *New Tales for Young Readers*, “A Fairy Tale” drew particular attention. *The Monthly Review* singled it out for condemnation in an otherwise tepidly positive review, not for the disturbingly violent conclusion, but because “the plan to deceive an old grandmother, even ‘with just cause,’ should not have been commended.”⁴⁸ This review, which otherwise found “nothing very reprehensible” in the collection, applies to

46. Janet Bottoms, “Every One Her Own Heroine: Conflicting Narrative Structures in *Mrs Leicester’s School*,” *Women’s Writing* 7, no. 1 (2000): 39, 51.

47. Gamer, “Maria Edgeworth and the Romance of Real Life,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34, no. 2 (Spring, 2001): 250, 252, 257.

48. *The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal* (1822): 216.

"A Fairy Tale" the standards used to evaluate the moral tales that surround it, and finds it wanting because the fantastical characters are unworthy of emulation. And indeed, the tale seems to undermine the very premise of emulation as a pedagogical tool by presenting a character who has been deprived of the capacity to learn by observing the behavior of others.

Other women authors of botanical and children's writing emphasized the importance of careful observation in the identification and classification of plants and in the identification and classification of right and wrong behavior. While Priscilla Wakefield, Maria Jackson, and Charlotte Smith differed in the way they presented Linnaean systems, all used the relatively standardized, conversational format of botanical instruction books to invite "children to draw their own conclusions about what they see as well as what they are told."⁴⁹ Jackson in particular urged children, again and again, to "*see for yourself*," and stressed that "in botany, as in all other things, we can make little progress if we do not see for ourselves."⁵⁰ Similarly, Smith encouraged children to observe received morals and social norms with the botanist's exacting eye for detail, using the examination of a moth as an opportunity to examine the evils of slavery.⁵¹ These authors blurred the boundaries between botanical instruction and the moral tale in a way that subtly encouraged children to use their powers of observation not only to emulate moral behavior, but also to question received authority. In this context, "A Fairy Tale" is all the more surprising, because Giddy has lost not only the ability to see and emulate normative behavior, but also the ability to question those norms by *seeing for herself*. Resistant and acquiescent social participation are equally inaccessible.

For the Hunt children, "A Fairy Tale" was a particular favorite. Two and a half years after its publication, in a cross-written conclusion to a long letter, Hunt reported that "'Lily & Giddy' are / famous / 'familiar in our mouths as household words.'" Whatever compliment Hunt intended is undermined by the admonishment that immediately follows: "The children growing up are prepared to like the writer exceedingly, & I can tell you, would be very much astonished if they beheld any temper in her unworthy of her / — / volume.—"⁵² Hunt's response underscores what was at stake in including "A Fairy Tale" in a collection of moral tales that focus on developing a more likable persona: her tales challenged not only the pedagogical strategy of observation and emulation common to botanical

49. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage*, 94. See also Shteir, *Cultivating Women*, 4–5; Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage*, 103.

50. Quoted in Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage*, 107.

51. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage*, 118–19.

52. Hunt to Kent, September 1, 1824, The University of Iowa Libraries. <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/leighhunt/id/71/rec/1>.

and children's writing, but also the implicit value placed on amiability in the Cockney School community.

Intimate Landscapes

The identification of Kent's *New Tales for Young Readers* allows us to see her work as complicating "the emotional and creative efficacy of sociability" that Hay sees as Hunt's influence on Kent's botanical collections.⁵³ Rather, as Hay says of Keats, Kent treats the prevailing themes of the Cockney School "as a source of productive disagreement" that provide context to explore "a problematic doubling of solitude and sociability."⁵⁴ By reframing our understanding of amiability, Kent generates space for unobserved reflection within the Cockney Circle's "intense, almost claustrophobic sociability."⁵⁵

New Tales for Young Readers suggests that basic human traits, such as amiability, might be artificial constructions, as cultivated as a window box, and provides guidance for developing the most socially rewarded personal characteristics even as it questions the justice of a normative system of social rewards. *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches*, while appearing to accede to the Cockney School's demand for amiableness above all, in fact offer an alternative approach to friendship, relieving the observed of the burden to be lovable and asking the observer to love more generously.

Both *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches* model the generous work of friendship-making by "introducing" readers to plants, preparing readers to observe and to *care* for the plants they encounter. While *Flora Domestica* anxiously invokes the specter of "*plant-slaughter*" committed by the well-intentioned but ill-informed,⁵⁶ offering to guide readers through the quagmires of care, *Sylvan Sketches* begins not with a warning but with "an unceremonious introduction of certain trees and shrubs to our readers, who are occasionally in the habit of meeting them without being acquainted."⁵⁷ Both texts begin with the premise that readers want to be better *friends* to the plants in their care, but lack the innate knowledge of a friendly approach.

The process of community formation is a central organizational principle of both *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches*. Kent invites her readers to grow familiar with poets as they grow familiar with the plants, and to feel for poets, through knowledge of their treatment of plants, a friendly fellowship. Following a long anecdote from Ariosto's son about his father's tender care for any leaf that pushed through the soil of his garden, Kent concludes, "Who

53. Hay, "Hunt and His Friends," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, no. 59–60 (April–October 2011): <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/2008-n50-ravon0382/1013267ar/>.

54. Hay, "Hunt and His Friends," n.p.

55. Hay, "Elizabeth Kent's Collaborators," 273.

56. Kent, *Flora Domestica*, xiv.

57. Kent, *Sylvan Sketches*, ix.

can read this anecdote of so great a man, and not feel an additional interest in him! In how amiable a light it represents him! Was a cruel, unfeeling, or selfish man ever known to take pleasure in working in his own garden? Surely not."⁵⁸ In being introduced to his garden, readers are introduced to a more "amiable" Ariosto. While in *New Tales for Young Readers*, amiableness is the quality whose absence makes one unworthy of love, in *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches* amiableness is the quality that we seek to project onto others in order to love them better: when Kent exclaims of Ariosto's love of gardening, "In how amiable a light it represents him!" she shifts the emphasis from observed to observer, and amiableness transforms from an observable characteristic to an observed characteristic. Amiableness is at last presented as a quality generated in another through the interpretive work of observation. It is a fiction constructed out of carefully curated stories, much as Kent's botanical works construct a Cockney canon out of carefully curated poems with Kent's "love of nature in detail" as their organizing principle.

The ability to observe the "amiableness" of the natural world forms a bridge between the powers of observation required by botany and the powers of observation required by poetry. Hunt describes the power of poetic vision in terms that strikingly recall the botanical emphasis on cultivating powers of observation: "A sensitiveness [*sic*] to the beauty of the external world, to the unsophisticated impulses of our nature, and above all, imagination, or the power to see, with verisimilitude, what others do not,—these are the properties of poetry."⁵⁹ Keats employs a similarly "scientific objectification of landscape"⁶⁰ when he imagines viewing the scene from "Nature's observatory" in "O Solitude!"⁶¹ For both poets, as Jones writes of Keats, "nature" appears "as something to be observed, not only as a space to be experienced."⁶² Yet, crucially, nature is both the object of observation and the space from which the poet makes his observations; nature provides the holding environment that supports the experience of poetic solitude.⁶³ In cataloging poetic observations about plants, Kent re-situates those fragments within the space of their (presumed) composition—among other poets, certainly, in friendly intertextual society, but

58. Kent, *Flora Domestica*, xv.

59. Hunt, *Foliage*, 13.

60. Jones, "Keats in the Suburbs," 35.

61. Keats, "O Solitude!" (1817), in *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: Norton, 2009), 4.

62. Jones, "Keats in the Suburbs," 36.

63. I refer here to D. W. Winnicott's concept of the "holding environment," in which the analyst "holds" the patient in a space of safety, free from the burden of intersubjectivity, and which Nancy Yousef has extended to include the productive silence of the sustaining other in Romantic poetry. See Yousef, "Romanticism, Psychoanalysis, and the Interpretation of Silence," *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 5 (October 2010): 653–72.

also within a landscape that facilitates a sustaining withdrawal from the expectations of amiable intercourse.

The structure of Kent's botanical works imitates the landscape that is at once the observed object of poetic musings, and the unobserved space that supports poetic inspiration. This support, too, Kent would have us recognize as an unacknowledged type of amiableness. She describes the unique capacity of the natural environment to sustain or relieve human feelings without compelling recognition:

A man may, indeed, love his horse or his dog, his monkey or his cat; may fondle a young tiger, or make a companion of a pet bear; but he will not lounge in a menagerie with his book, take a walk to Exeter Change to relieve his melancholy, or retire to his stable, or his dog-kennel, at twilight, to indulge in tranquil meditation. If he be weary, he will love to repose in the shade, upon the soft green grass; if he be sad, he will love to wander in groves and woods; and, at the approach of sunset, he will doubly enjoy his book, his own thoughts, or the conversation of his friend, if he be seated under his favourite tree.⁶⁴

The natural environment leaves space equally for solitude or sociability; its capacity to support both suggests that the landscape bridges spoken and unspoken experience.

While *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches* anthologize a Cockney canon, they also enlarge the scope of the Cockney circle, embracing a classical lineage and facilitating connections beyond the existing poetic and social circles:

Wordsworth speaks somewhere of the tenderness of feeling excited by trees and flowers, a tenderness which, in the absence of those we love, is often wasted on the senseless weed. It is a conviction of this kindly influence of nature that has emboldened the writer to bring the most opposite parties together amid these woody scenes; not hesitating even to place Mr. Southey by the side of Lord Byron, without fear of the consequences, but rather indulging a faint hope that they may shake hands and be friends before they return to the irritating bustle of towns and cities.⁶⁵

The outpouring of "feeling" that might be perceived as "wasted on the senseless weed," Kent re-conceptualizes as integral to an oppositional friendliness that embraces fellow-feeling across difference. The weeds, like Giddy at the ambiguous conclusion to "A Fairy Tale," may be without "sense" that we

64. Kent, *Sylvan Sketches*, xvi.

65. Kent, *Sylvan Sketches*, xix.

can perceive. They cannot reciprocate the “tenderness” of “feeling” that washes over them. But, Kent suggests, the feeling is not “wasted.” Rather, in cultivating a love “in the absence of those we love,” we are able to imagine a refuge from the petty judgments of the world as it is; love, she suggests, exists most profoundly *beyond* sense. Kent redefines amiableness not as the ability to be liked, the capacity to be alike, but the power to bring together in imagination parties who are fundamentally *unlike*. As Shelley declared of “Poetry,” Kent’s collection *of* poetry “subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things.”⁶⁶

The identification of Kent’s *New Tales for Young Readers* helps us understand *Flora Domestica* and *Sylvan Sketches* as participating in a genre-crossing challenge to literary norms and social expectations. Like other women writers with whom she has recently been grouped, Kent blurs the boundaries of botanical writing, children’s writing, and literary collections, inviting readers to attend to the ethical questions that manifest as structural rather than articulate content. But writing from her particular position both within and on the margins of the Cockney School, Kent invites critical response not only to literary forms in general, but also to the social model of poetic friendships and their textual representation.

While botanical and didactic writing have been linked through their shared emphasis on observation, Kent’s fairy tale subverts the primacy of observation as a method of moral development; her children’s and botanical writing are connected not by observation, but by its failure. But this failure is productive: it is the source of dreams, and of poetry, and of community, as we make the unseen effort to explain or resolve the horrors of the everyday.

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66. Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 698.

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