Chapter One: Introduction

As common elements in lyric poetry, nature and women are often employed by poets to express their feelings or affections. In lyric poems, outward natural objects or landscapes are often used to symbolize the poets’ inward feelings. In love poems poets metaphorically use the natural objects, such as the sun, the moon, the stars, or the flowers, to depict their beloved women. Since they are important elements, through the scrutiny of the nature and the woman’s image presented or re-presented in lyric poetry, we may get to know those poets’ attitudes toward nature and woman and hence the status of nature and woman in a certain period of time.

In a patriarchal society, women, regarded as inferior to men, have long been silenced and oppressed by men and women usually have to struggle and fight for the rights from which men exclude them. With the advent of feminist thinking, there are different voices advocating women’s rights. In recent decades, as the result of ecological crisis, a trend of thought called ecofeminism tries to combine ecological criticism with women’s movements, because most ecofeminists believe that both women and nature are regarded as inferior to men and so are dominated by men.

Different from the Anglo-American feminists, who endeavor to promote women’s status in society through practical liberation movements, the French feminists are devoted to the study of the nature of women’s oppression, the social construction of sexual difference and the specificity of women’s relations to language and writing. And the concern with psychoanalysis signals a central preoccupation of the French feminist ideas. As the forefather of psychoanalysis, Freud completely denied the existence of female sexuality and totally suppressed the notion of sexual difference. He has mentioned in “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” that a girl is just a “little man” without a penis (271). The female is defined in relation to
male so the female is regarded as a “lack”. Because of this “lack” women are doomed. Man is the “one” and woman the inferior “other”. This marginalized other has always been dominated and exploited by man just because she is physically different from men.

Besides, from Lacan’s point of view, a girl is not able to enter the symbolic order; that is, she cannot be the subject in an authorized speaking position because she is positioned as castrated and passive, and she is just an object of desire for men. So, when she speaks, the masculine language is imposed on her and she can only imitate the masculine, phallic subject. According to Lacan, when a boy was born he enters the real stage, in which he can feel no distinction between himself and other since he is one with the mother. This is also the pre-Oedipal stage. When a male child is about six or seven months old, he enters the “mirror stage,” in which he gradually gets to know the distinction between self and other. This is also the imaginary stage. Then comes the Oedipal crisis that is the intervention of the father, who represents the law of the society, the symbolic order. In order to get into the symbolic order, to have access to language, the male child has to learn to identify with the father and separate from the mother, who is regarded as castrated. Then he represses his love for the mother into the unconscious but this separation forms a lack in him and he has always the desire for the mother unconsciously. It seems that Lacan gives the male child the privileged access to the symbolic order but French feminists also find a crevice in this growing process to subvert the masculine language.

Kristeva puts emphasis on the semiotic order which is the dominant order in the pre-Oedipal stage, a state of plenitude. And Kristeva thus emphasizes the role of the mother in this process and also the subversive power of the semiotic order. Kristeva

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1 Lacan’s theory mentioned here is mainly the generalization of his ideas in *Ecrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan.
says that “we shall have to represent the semiotic . . . as a ‘second’ return of instinctual functioning within the symbolic, as a negativity introduced into the symbolic order, and as the transgression of the order” (Revolution in Poetic Language 69). Besides, to Kristeva, the maternal body also has the subversive power to threaten the symbolic order. According to Kristeva, in the patriarchal society motherhood is stressed because it can reduce women to the function of procreation, and she says that “we live in a civilization where the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood” (Tales of Love 234). Yet, the maternal body is “the place of splitting” because through the maternal body the “woman-subject” becomes “a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture’” (Desire in Language 238). In the patriarchal society, for the purpose of procreation of the species, the maternal body is needed but in order to establish the paternal symbolic culture, the maternal body should be deprived of its subjectivity. Besides, the ambivalent relation between the mother and the male child results in the male’s ambivalent feelings toward mother. On the one hand, because of the close relationship between the mother and the child, the child always has the desire for the mother and Kristeva believes the motherhood represents “an idealization of primary narcissism.” On the other hand, in order to enter the symbolic order the child has to separate from the mother and therefore the female body becomes the “abject” maternal body. According to Kristeva, abjection is a revolt against an external menace “from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so . . . .” (Women Analyze Women 135-36). In Kristeva’s account, the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order” (Powers of Horror 4). Thus the male’s ambivalent feeling toward the female body provides a chance for the
female to subvert the masculine symbolic order.

Irigaray, a critic from within psychoanalysis, uses psychoanalytic theory against its own phallocentric bias. Irigaray puts special emphasis on female sexuality, sexual difference and feminine language since she thinks that patriarchy is a sexually indifferent symbolic order, preoccupied with the male. According to Irigaray, in the patriarchal society, vision, or the sense of sight, is emphasized and because sexually the male has something to be seen, they occupy all the attention and the female is regarded as lack sexually. In the theory of psychoanalysis, there exists only one sex in this homosexual economy, that is, the male, and the female, judged by the masculine parameter, is treated as a castrated and defective man. “The ‘feminine’ is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known ‘penis envy’” (The Sex Which Is Not One 69). While criticizing Freud’s theory of female sexuality, Irigaray argues, “Women herself is never at issue in these statements: the feminine is defined as the necessary complement to the operation of male sexuality, and more often as a negative image that provides male sexuality with an unfailingly phallic self-representation” (The Sex Which Is Not One 70). Stressing the tactile sense, Irigaray emphasizes the multiplicity of the female sexual organs as a contrast to the oneness and sameness of male sexuality. While Lacan emphasizes language, the symbolic order, in the construct of the definition of sex; Irigaray points out that “the sexes are now defined only as they are determined in and through language. Whose laws, it must not be forgotten, have been prescribed by male subjects for centuries” (The Sex Which Is Not One 87). Therefore, when Lacan claims that woman does not exist, Irigaray argues, “That woman does not exist owing to the fact that language—a language—rules as master, and that she threatens—as a sort of ‘prediscursive reality’?—to disrupt its order” (The Sex Which Is Not One 89). Therefore, female
sexuality and feminine language are fluid and provide more possibilities, and so more opportunities, than a solid, fossilized patriarchy. Similar to Kristeva, Irigary also advocates the mother’s subversive power. The father always intervenes to censor, to repress the desire of/for the mother and so Irigaray requests, “We must refuse to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to *juissance*, to passion, restore her right to speech . . .” (*The Irigaray Reader* 43). Therefore she suggests to set up a language which can go along with the bodily encounter, words which speak corporeal (*The Irigaray Reader* 43).

In addition, Helen Cixous also contrasts feminine writing (*L’écriture feminine*) with masculine writing (*literature*). For Cixous, masculine writing and thinking are full of binary oppositions, while feminine writing is “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards” (“Laugh of Madusa”).

Cixous questions the binary opposition in the phallogocentric culture:

> Thought has always worked through opposition,  
> Speaking/Writing  
> Parole/Ecriture  
> High/Low

Through dual hierarchical opposition. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatable, dialectical). And all these pairs of oppositions are *couples*. Does that mean something? Is the fact that Logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes and values – to a binary system, related to “the” couple, man/woman? (*The Helene Cixous*
In Cixous’s opinion, the feminine writing should transcend the binary oppositions in the masculine writing and it is open and multiple and full of possibilities. Cixous’s style is an example of the feminine writing she promotes. While male sexuality is boring, female sexuality is infinite and mobile. Susan Sellers in *Language and Sexual Difference* thus interprets Cixous idea, “For Cixous, this willingness to encounter and ‘sing’ the other, without seeking to appropriate or annihilate the other’s difference in order to construct and glorify the self, is the keynote of *écriture feminine*” (141). Through the marginalized other’s criticism of the norms, values, and practices of patriarchy, women hopefully will provide multiplicity and plurality in their society. Consequently, women can be the speaking subjects and have their selfhood.

Nature is often regarded as female and “mother nature” and “mother earth” are common expressions in literary works. With its reproductive power and its abundant resources to support and nourish human beings, nature is always considered to be like a mother. According to ecofeminists, in the patriarchal society, when nature is regarded as a female or a mother, it is put in an inferior place and is dominated and exploited by men. The connection between nature and motherhood results in the exploitation and devastation of the natural environment. As Val Plumwood has noted, nature in the West is instrumentalized as a mere means to human ends; that is, the natural world and the biosphere have been the unimportant background for “civilized” human life, and the taken-for-granted material substratum of human existence, and what really counts is human life or culture (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 69). In order to save the earth, we should break the binary oppositions, such as human/nature, culture/nature, mind/nature, in which nature is regarded as inferior.

Besides, the binary oppositions represent value hierarchies and the left-sided
elements are regarded as superior to the right-side ones and along with this superiority is the “logic of domination,” as Karen J. Warren claims in Ecological Feminist Philosophies:

Oppressive and patriarchal conceptual frameworks are characterized not only by value dualisms and value hierarchies, but also by “power-over” conceptions of power and relationships of domination and by a “logic of domination,” i.e., a structure of argumentation which justifies subordination on the grounds that superiority justifies subordination. (xii)

Affected by this kind of logic, we human beings undoubtedly take the exploitation of nature for granted and this, in a way, results in the ecological crises at the present time, since, as Cantrell says: “The cultural creation of hierarchical relationships between (some) humans and nature is inseparable from the way we see nature, and governs what we do to both” (Cantrell 204). The way nature is represented in literary works tells us the way people look at nature. That attitude also influences the way we readers regard nature since “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). Joseph Meeker further explains the importance of new reading of literature from an ecological viewpoint:

Human beings are the earth’s only literary creatures. . . . If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. (3-4)

Accordingly, I think a scrutiny of the image of nature in lyric poetry can help us probe into those lyric poets’ attitude toward nature and woman and consequently learn how to face nature and the world around us with equity.
In addition, some ideas in Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae* is also applied to the study of certain lyrics. Paglia’s idea, I suppose, is the extension or a kind of metamorphosis of French feminism and ecofeminism. In Paglia’s opinion, nature is chthonian because of its procreative power, and art and culture represent human beings’ efforts to give form and order to this daemonic nature. She views sex and nature as brutal pagan forces, the chthonian elements. She also believes that woman, because of her procreative power, is closer to nature and the identification of woman with nature results in man’s fear of woman and desire to conquering and dominating woman, since it, in a way, represents man’s power over both nature and woman. Besides, she makes use of Nietzsche’s idea of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in Greek culture and suggests that Western personality and Western achievement are largely Apollonian and Apollo’s great opponent Dionysus is ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness (12). Therefore, as the ruler of the chthonian, Dionysus represents the potential subversive power against the rigid social norms. In this way, Paglia provides women and nature the power to subvert the male dominant society.

In this dissertation, both French feminism and ecofeminism are applied to the study of the English lyric poetry from 1500 to 1850. I start my study from the lyrics in the sixteenth century because it is the beginning of modern English and also because most of the poems before that time are anonymous and are basically passed down orally.

The second chapter, ”A Feminine Crevice in the Male Genre: Lady Mary Wroth’s *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* vs. Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*” focuses on the two sonnet cycles, one by famous male poet Sidney and the other by Sidney’s niece, the recondite female poet Lady Mary Wroth. Through the scrutiny of the two sonnet sequences, I try to demonstrate that Wroth’s sonnet sequence with a
female author and a female persona somewhat subverts the male genre: it exhibits sexual difference and retrieve female voice and female subjectivity that have been deprived by the male.

In Chapter Three, “The Two Loves: Masculine Domination and Feminine Subversion in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” through the study of the contrast between the two parts, that is, the “Fair Youth” part and the “Dark Lady” part, we can see Shakespeare’s different attitudes toward his love of the fair youth and that of the dark lady. Although Shakespeare elevates the young man and debases the dark lady, the dark lady induces Shakespeare’s ambivalent feelings toward the maternal/female body. Therefore to Shakespeare the dark lady seems to represent the abject female body suggested by Kristeva. Besides, because of the poet’s ambivalent feelings, the dark lady part also subverts the homogeneity in the young man part.

Chapter Four “Nature in the Sixteenth-Century Sonnet Sequences and the Early Seventeenth-Century Lyrics” puts emphasis on nature presented or represented in the lyrics at that time. In both, nature is used as a means for the poets’ purpose, to show the beauty of their beloved, to express their feelings, to demonstrate God’s mercy on human beings, and so on. Basically, nature is seldom depicted as a thing in itself but always as a thing for us and this represents the common attitude of the lyric poets at that time.

Chapter Five, “Women and Love in the Early Seventeenth-Century Lyric Poetry” explores the woman’s image in the lyric poetry of the early seventeenth century. Both the Metaphysical poets and the Cavalier poets somewhat stigmatize women in their poems, through the disdain of woman’s inconstancy and wantonness, and the preference for spiritual love over physical love. Based on the theory suggested by Paglia, my analysis suggests that the male’s fear of women, or of women’s chthonian nature, results in the stigmatization of women.
In Chapter Six, “Women and Nature in the Romantic Lyric Poetry” the main focus is on those Romantic poets’ dialectic love between nature and mind or imagination, since there is not much breakthrough change in their presentation of the woman image. Through the analysis of the lyrics by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, that is the study of the conflict between nature and imagination in their poems, I try to show how they are able or unable to strike a balance between the two inevitable yet antithetical elements, which in a way demonstrates their attitude in facing nature.

I will skip the period of the Restoration and the eighteenth century because at that time lyric poetry gradually declined and satire flourished. Though in the second half of that period there was the poetry of natural description, which inspired many eighteenth-century poets and also Wordsworth, it is usually deemed as the precursor of the Romantic poetry. Therefore I choose to put emphasis on those major poets in the Romantic period.

Through the exploration of women and nature in the canon of literary works, this dissertation tries not only to present the way women and nature are dominated by the male and the masculine culture but also to demonstrate the subversive power of the repressed, which may be obscure but unextinguishable.