Chapter Seven: Conclusion

When it comes to the final chapter, I am supposed to conclude my analysis with some final judgement as to the status of women and nature from 1500 to 1850. In addition to a general comment on the purpose and the result of my research, I also intend to point out some deficiency of this study and provide my explanation to justify both myself and those male poets mentioned in this dissertation.

Basically, nature and women share almost the same fate of being discriminated against in the field of lyric poetry but nature is more fortunate in that it becomes almost as important as the human mind or imagination in the Romantic period. This can be seen as a progress. Women, however, are not so fortunate since we cannot detect obvious improvement of women’s status in the lyric poetry during that period of time. As what has been shown in the former chapters, most of the time women in the lyric poetry from 1500 to 1850 are dominated by the male poets. Yet, there is still a crevice for feminine subversion to be nosed out. Therefore, in sixteenth century while in Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney’s Astrophil silences Stella and denies subjectivity to her, in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus*, the female persona Pamphilia retrieves woman’s voice and speaks as a subject being to disrupt the one-sided male discourse. In Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence *Sonnets*, the sharp contrast between Shakespeare’s respective attitude toward the youth and the dark lady indicates Shakespeare’s high esteem of the young man and debasement of the dark lady. Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s ambivalent feeling toward the dark lady reveals his love and fear of the maternal feminine body, which, according to Kristeva and Irigary, is heterogeneous and has the ability to subvert the masculine symbolic order. Similarly, in the seventeenth century, lyric poets, both Metaphysical poets and Cavalier poets, often
look down upon and defame women. Women are sometimes praised for their beauty or virtue, mainly chastity and fertility, as those in the love sonnets in the previous century, but most of the time women are discriminated against and depicted as unchaste, wanton and soulless. Camille Paglia, author of the book *Sexual Personae*, thinks this prejudice basically results from men’s fear of women’s fertility, the procreation power, which is cyclic and chthonian like nature and therefore is beyond men’s understanding. In order to control women, men tend to impose masculine order or value on them through culture or social rules. Paglia’s idea, I think, is an extension and metamorphosis of French feminism and ecofeminism. While women are debased and discriminated against, nature, in sonnet sequences and in the seventeenth-century lyrics, including those of Metaphysical poets, Cavalier poets and George Herbert’s group, is ignored or praised as God’s blessing. Nature actually is a common element in lyrics at that time but it seldom has independent value, or a dominant status. Nature in those lyrics is just a thing for us instead of a thing in itself, since natural elements or external objects are usually used to depict the beloved’s beauty, the poet’s feelings or God’s favor to human beings. Yet, nature becomes dominant in the nineteenth century when a revolution in poetics arises. In the Romantic period, nature finally is in the spotlight and almost all the major poets pay special attention to it. Nature, however, is not the only hero on the Romantic stage. With human imagination as its counterpart, nature has a hard time in getting the dominant role. Romantic poets’ dialectic love between nature and mind/imagination is conspicuous in their poetry. Wordsworth, after a long process of fluctuating between the two loves, finally seems to grant imagination the prominency. Coleridge hesitates between the two important factors of poetry and finally he seems to attribute the great power of nature to God; this probably implies that nature is held in higher regard in his mind. Shelly, I suppose, holds a more
balanced view since in his poems both nature and imagination are deemed great and both bring out the best in each other. Keats, with his idea of negative capability, intends to empty himself to feel or experience the outside world and so he is considered to be more feminine by most feminist critics. It seems that Keats shows greater reverence to nature than to his imagination. Whether the poets give priority to nature or imagination, in this period, nature, instead of the subsidiary role it played before, has almost equal status as human mind; this seems a subversion of the common binary opposition of mind and nature in Western thought. This is really a breakthrough.

It seems that the debasement of women and nature is deeply rooted in history. When the male is the only speaking subject in public, it is understandable that we can hear only one-sided, biased speech. When the male holds all the privilege, the female will certainly be suppressed. Yet, as the French feminists suggest, the female, as a subject, is able to subvert the masculine order and therefore, through Lady Mary Roth’s *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, we can hear woman’s voice as a speaking subject and through Shakespeare’s portrait of the dark lady and those prejudiced descriptions of women in the seventeenth-century lyrics, we can detect the male’s ambivalent feelings to the female. As to their attitude toward nature, I think, it is rooted in the thinking of humanism, in which human beings are of a higher level than other natural creatures, according to the chain of being. Besides, the Christian idea that God creates everything for human beings is also influential since this idea seems to justify human beings’ exploitation of nature. Therefore, in Romantic period, when people become suspicious of those religious teachings, nature gradually becomes those poets’ main concern.

Generally speaking, I believe I objectively study the phenomena presented in the lyric poetry during that period of time, but I dare not suppose that I have shown all
the facts since I have skipped the works of some minor poet and focus only on some works of the major poets, and I also have skipped a whole period, that is, the Restoration and the eighteenth century. On top of that, what I have studied is only a small part in literary world, which occupies a small portion in history. Besides, I have intended to research on lyrics written by women during that time, since I believe the study of the lyrics written by women can provide a clearer picture of women image. Yet, because of lack of time and resources, I give up that research. Furthermore, since I limit my study to lyric poetry, I have to skip those narrative poems which concerns women, such as Wordsworth’s “The Female Vagrant,” “The Thorn,” “The Mad Mother,” “The Ruined Cottage,” “Ruth,” Coleirdge’s “Christable,” and Keats’s “Lamia.” The study of the woman image in those poems will be interesting and inspiring and can help us understand more about the poets’ attitude toward women. I also have to skip some important prose by women, such as Mary Wollstonecrft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* or Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal, for fear that should blur my focus. It is a pity that I cannot include those interesting poetry or prose in this study.

Although those male poets seem biased in their attitudes toward nature and women, yet this does not affect their status as major poets or the excellence of their poetry. In a sense, it is not fair to judge those male poets of several hundred years ago from a modern perspective. The historical background and social value at that time all played a significant role in forming poetics and poetry. It is quite impossible to expect those male poets to surpass the trend of that period of time. Therefore, though they seem to discriminate against women and nature, their greatness, I believe, still cannot be denied. Sidney is great in that he creates the first Elizabethan sonnet sequence that follows the Petrarchan convention. Since the Petrarchan sonnet sequence is the trend of that time, it seems inevitable for the male poets to hold that
kind of attitude and thinking. Therefore, Shakespeare is pioneering in that his sonnet sequence presents something quite different from that convention; he does not resign himself to the role of the despairing Petrarchan lover, and he does not address his poems to a beautiful lady, but to a young man, as the principal object of praise, love, and idealizing devotion; besides, his portrait of a dark, sensuous, and licentious woman is also extraordinary. Metaphysical poets’ witty conceits mark their distinction and excellence, so do Cavalier poets’ elegant lyrics and the religious poems in George Herbert’s group.

Those Romantic poets, with the revolutionary poetics, have great influence on modern poetry. They acknowledge the significant status of nature and imagination as major factors in poetry. They may be different in the way they apply their imagination to the interpretation of nature; their magnificence is similar. Though I criticize Wordsworth’s subjective appropriation of nature, his subjective depiction really gives the reader pleasure and arouses in the reader the love of nature. I have always been enjoying reading his poetry. Besides, I do not intend to deny the importance of imagination and I also do not think it is better or possible to just describe nature objectively. As an essential element in poetry and other art work, imagination signifies human beings’ power over the outside world, which is important in the development of art and also of human beings. The problem I have always thought of and have studied in this research is how to strike a balance between the depiction of nature and the application of imagination. In this aspect, I think Shelley and Keats do a better job than Wordsworth.

After the exploration of those lyric poems, in addition to refuting the male poets’ domination of women and nature, a more significant purpose is to learn how to treat the other sex and all the other creatures in this world equally. Since the Romantic period, nature has been an important element in literary works, especially poems. In
the real world, however, nature is still exploited by human beings and the over
exploitation results in the ecological crisis nowadays. Since Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A
Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, there have been more and more voice asking for
women’s right and gender issue has been crucial in many fields. Yet, sexual
discrimination still exists. Besides criticizing those male poets’ dominant attitudes to
nature and women, what is more important is what we can learn to improve the
situation and I hope my study can provide some inspiration.