

"The Poetess" and Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets**© Virginia Jackson and Eliza Richards 2007**

The notion of "the Poetess" often seems to undermine the work of nineteenth-century American women poets, who may seek to "drop the feminine termination," as Elizabeth Oakes Smith put it, but cannot do so, in spite of themselves. Yet if we are tempted toward a pejorative reading of the Poetess—if, like Oakes Smith, we want to drop the –ess and get on with poets and poetry—we may also undermine the cultural value of the figure for pre-twentieth century poets and readers. For nineteenth-century American writers who inherited the generic category of the Poetess from their British counterparts, the fact that it *was* an inherited category made it an available commodity for reconfiguration and redistribution. Thus American women poets played many variations on the Poetess theme established and explored by Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (to name just a few of the most influential English women poets) and sent those variations back across the Atlantic and into the future. If in those variations, American women poets have always troubled categories of genre, authorship, nation, and gender, the recent resurgence of interest in women poets has caused a similar category confusion for American literary history.

In defining American literature as a legitimate field of specialized study distinct from English literature, twentieth-century literary critics stressed romantic principles of originality, unconventionality, self-reliance, and democratic individualism in determining which nineteenth-century authors were worthy of study. The only two poets who made the cut were Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson—with special allowances for Emerson and Poe. More recently, critics committed to the "recovery" of "non-canonical" nineteenth-century literature, particularly by

women and African Americans, focused almost exclusively on the "cultural work" of the novel. But only in 1977, with the publication of Emily Stipes Watts' *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945*; in 1982, with Cheryl Walker's *The Nightingale's Burden*; and in 1986, with Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, did critics begin to turn their attention to the poetry of American women who wrote before the twentieth century. Noting the difficulty of rendering the work both compelling and interpretable to twentieth-century readers, these critics encountered difficulties in explaining the massive popularity and cultural centrality of poets like Lydia Sigourney and Frances Sargent Osgood. According to modernist reading practices, these poets worked against the grain of everything an American writer should be. If Whitman and Dickinson were transgressive, subversive, experimental, and unconventional, popular women poets seemed clearly circumscribed by tight conventions imposed by a patriarchal public sphere: they appeared derivative rather than original, conventional rather than individual, interchangeable rather than independently motivated. Critics were searching for something these poets did not provide: an authentic female voice that disrupted the extreme constraints on women in public in the nineteenth century.

A new generation of scholarship has sought to address this critical dilemma. Paula Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon*, (2004), Eliza Richards' *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (2004), Angela Sorby's *Schoolroom Poets*, (2005) and Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery* (2005), all published within the last four years, have sought, in different ways, to read history back into the figure of the woman poet. While these recent scholars have a variety of views on poetry by nineteenth-century American women, they tend to agree that in order to understand this work, we first need to understand more about nineteenth-century conventions of poetic reading. For a more historical

reading of women's poetry, it is important to reconstruct how and why the Poetess became a conventional figure in the first place. Nineteenth-century women poets and twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary critics may like or dislike, accept or reject, parody or embrace the Poetess, but in order to understand the wide and complex range of reactions to poetess conventions, we first need to trace the patterns of those conventions.

Like other ideas that crossed the Atlantic in the eighteenth century (ideas associated with capitalism, revolution, mass print, liberalism) the Poetess found room to grow in an emerging nation of invention, or in the newly invented nation. With Yopie Prins, in the 1999 article entitled "Lyrical Studies," Virginia Jackson proposed that that growth was possible precisely because the Poetess is an empty figure of transatlantic exchange. In the American context, especially in the nineteenth century, the Poetess remained what she was in the British context, a location for the many contradictions of gendered self-representation and vicarious identification. But in America those contradictions took on a national character and another sort of market value. In the U.S. in the nineteenth century, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Poetess became a figure for the American literary marketplace itself. The fact that the Poetess herself became and remains a medium for cultural exchange may make it difficult for us to see in retrospect the cultural tenor within that vehicle.

The poets and critics gathered together on this site offer many different versions of what it is or was that the Poetess became a vehicle for. Critics like Paula Bennett claim that women labeled poetesses were not vehicles or figures at all but were historical women struggling against the conventions that restrained them; according to this view, women poets' resistance to

sentimental and genteel convention made it possible for them to speak more freely in the public sphere and, by the mid-nineteenth century, in the emerging American literary marketplace. But what were the forms of such resistance? Mary Loeffelholz emphasizes the role that the literary marketplace played in the character of the public sphere into which women poets could and could not emerge. Race and class, no less than gender, determined the forms in which poetry circulated and the readers it reached. The private, domestic sphere was no less a part of that circulation than was the apparently public world of business and commodity; thus the figure of the Poetess was in part fashioned to pass between the no-longer-separate spheres of privacy and publicity. For Eliza Richards, that passing took the form of the lyric genre itself: what successful women poets managed to do, according to Richards, was to turn the conventions of lyric into media for their own conventional status. On this view, the reason that nineteenth-century women poets seem to us now so conventional is that they exploited conventions of self expression in order to display the displacement of themselves.

That strategy becomes especially visible when male poets appropriate it: as Richards demonstrates, when Edgar Allan Poe uses the techniques of Frances Osgood or Elizabeth Oakes Smith or Sarah Helen Whitman, he is not called “a Poetess” but is praised as a lyric innovator. Thus women poets in the nineteenth century were in a recalcitrant double bind: self-expression was made difficult by conventions that forbade it, while both the embrace and the manipulation of those conventions could be mistaken (as it has been mistaken) for an absence of self, or an absence of expression. “The Poetess,” then, is feminine, but it is not female. Male poets are not female poets, but they admired, mimicked, and appropriated popular feminine conventions of lyric that were identified with women poets who were often, against their will, called “poetesses.” Poe was not alone in his attempt to harness the Poetess' popularity and

marketability. Male poets were often bewildered and envious of the success of their female peers, and while they never needed to "drop the feminine termination," they tried to figure out ways to assume the position of cultural medium that enabled market exchange and print circulation. Poets as different as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Walt Whitman trained in the magazine school of the poetess. Whitman's poem "Mediums," for example, adapts the feminine figure of the spirit medium to his figure of the representative bard:

They shall arise in the States,
They shall report Nature, laws, physiology, and happiness,
They shall illustrate Democracy and the cosmos.

Longfellow, credited with being the first American professional poet, arguably followed in the footsteps of Lydia Sigourney, who earned a living cultivating the moral myths of nineteenth-century US nationalism. If one compares the work of popular male and female poets of the period without attribution, it is difficult or impossible to discern, in many cases, whether the writer is male or female. Thomas Holley Chivers, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, John Hay, James Whitcomb Riley, and many other well-known male writers of the nineteenth century wrote in ways that were stylistically and thematically indistinguishable from female poetesses. Though a term of denigration when applied to male poets, and supposedly a neutral term of literal description when applied to women poets, we suggest that "the Poetess" is a useful term to designate a generic mode that is more closely associated with, but is not restricted to, the work of women poets.

Thus the Poetess emerged in the nineteenth century as a figure of a person, one that could circulate between historical persons of different genders, different races, and different understandings of the figure. We hope to take advantage of the capacious potential of web

publication to make visible the extraordinary ingenuity of both poets and readers in response to the many versions of the Poetess. Harriet Gould’s playful animal allegories for children, Lydia Sigourney’s immensely popular elegies for dead children, Frances Osgood’s flights of fancy, Phoebe Cary’s astute parodies of works by Shakespeare, Longfellow, and Poe, Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s elaborate variations on Wordsworth and Schiller, Adah Isaacs Menken’s female complaints of voicelessness, Helen Hunt Jackson’s conflation of the domestic and the foreign, and Emily Dickinson’s verse riffs on everyone else’s writing are just some of those versions. But Walt Whitman works within the Poetess tradition when he presents himself as figure of ideal sympathetic identification in *Leaves of Grass*. Longfellow’s female figures, most notably Evangeline, are often Poetess figures, as are his feminized men like the Village Blacksmith or Hiawatha. And of course Poe’s beautiful, dead women are nothing if not poetesses whose position the male speakers usurp. As Virginia Jackson has argued, those responses will become more fully legible when we understand more about the nineteenth-century reading practices—practices that understand the poetess to be an empty figure of exchange that works in tension with any individual poet’s attempt at self-expression—to which these writers appealed. In *Dickinson’s Misery*, Jackson claims that the “lyricization of poetry” in the twentieth century has caused critics to misread the complex circulation and reception of a range of poetic genres in the nineteenth century by collapsing the variety of nineteenth-century poetic genres—and, not incidentally, the variety of figures associated with those genres—into the modern lyric. As Angela Sorby has argued, in order to recover these practices and that range we need to look more closely at how nineteenth-century American poetry was incorporated into? nineteenth-century everyday life. In each section of this site—in sections on individual poets and in sections in which individual critics express their own views of those poets—we will give views into those

practices, genres, writers, and readers that formed the nineteenth-century production and reception and that continue to inform the twentieth- and twenty-first century interpretation of the nineteenth-century American Poetess.