


W
A little Road - not
made of Man.
Conceded of the
Accession is still of Bill.
Or Part of Poetry
If you it have heard
it is that I cannot say
I only know - no
that I cannot say
Dear Mr.
I have not yet
to say

SHE WIELDS A PEN

AMERICAN WOMEN POETS OF
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Edited by
JANET GRAY


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INTRODUCTION

A black woman sits cradling a white infant in the corner of a modest middle-class parlour. She gazes into the distance through a window. In the centre of the room a white woman reads from a bright little book, her attention enfolding her audience of toddlers, a girl and a boy. Overseeing all, a young white patriarch stands, hands in pockets, as if he has nothing to do but signify his position in the household. The cover illustration for this anthology captures a certain scene in the history of American women's literary endeavour, a scene especially characteristic of the eastern states in the decades before the Civil War. Print culture linked such private spaces, and women writers, editors and readers used print to construct roles for themselves in shaping the young nation. The red book might hold poems by Eliza Follen, Sarah Josepha Hale or Lydia Huntley Sigourney, pioneers of American children's literature. Reading to her children, the mother enacts what became known as 'republican motherhood', the mission of forming a new kind of citizen – an aim that keeps her at home but calls on her creativity, intellect and autonomy. It is a political role, different from her husband's but, as the painting shows, central – and dependent on the nurse's relieving her of the physical work of nurture. For the moment, the scenes in which the black woman's voice will be heard lie elsewhere, far from the reading of the little red book.

The images that could be painted representing the creative lives of the authors in *She Wields A Pen* are multiple, a function of a vast array of locales, cultures, social settings and historical moments. Jane Johnston Schoolcraft could be depicted at a table in her Irish father's fur-trading post in the far north, on the shore of Lake Superior. Homer's *Iliad* would lie open on the table with Schoolcraft's notes on Ojibwa oral lore placed next to it, as she worked at translating the story of her warrior grandfather into a form that readers educated in European literary traditions could appreciate. A festive gathering of the Hawaiian royal court's poetry club could be shown from Lili'uokalani's life. Or she could appear far from home, in a room in Washington, DC, writing a journal entry in English with mingled

Hawaiian poetic words to disguise her reflections about US political aggression in her beloved native land. Merced Gonzáles and her sister members of the Zaragoza Clubs could appear around a banquet table in the old adobe village of Los Angeles, cups lifted in a toast to the heroes of Mexican resistance to French occupation. Sarah Louisa Forten could be shown, a young woman in her teens, at a biracial women's literary meeting, or in her family's hospitable parlour in Philadelphia. Others in the parlour, besides her parents and sisters, could include the abolitionists Frederick Douglass, John Greenleaf Whittier and Angelina Grimké, with whom Sarah might be deep in conversation. Priscilla Thompson could be shown inside a print shop in a small Ohio city, her manuscript 'Ethiope Lays' set on the counter, paying the shop's owner to make it into a book. Emily Dickinson would appear alone at a busy desk in a closed room; there would be a stack of letters ready to mail, and she would be collating sheets of poetry, needle and thread at hand with which to stitch them together.

Making a poem occurs amid other work – the daily labour of sustaining life and connection, the society's work of shaping, extending and re-evaluating itself. And poems by women come about as instances of the positions that women occupy in daily life and social institutions, whether in acceptance of dominant notions of what women should be and do, in resistance, or as agents of change. During the nineteenth century, in American as in other Western cultures where the middle class had come to dominate social values, women were expected to attend to private life – running the home, meeting family members' daily physical needs, overseeing life-cycle events, building communities. However, home and community could not be taken for granted everywhere in the US. The nation as it came to be constituted over the century was a vast, varied terrain occupied by exiles, captives and emigrés, so that underlying any shared American idea of belonging in a particular place was a voluminous and heterogeneous story of uprooting. Home had to be fabricated for American culture, community to be invented over great expanses, social ideals and class structures redefined and histories retold – whether to emphasise continuity with or radical breakage from the heritage of lands now far away. These were needs that gave American print culture an urgency specific to its national scene. They were also missions consistent with women's prescribed roles – the basis on which women editors, writers and readers formed a distinctive female public sphere through print.

The poetry in this anthology, with few exceptions, appeared in

print in the context of social purposes beyond the making of poems. By the end of the century, a shift in ideals of citizenship from communal moral authority to professional expertise set the stage for American literary culture's acceptance of the idea that poetry is an autonomous discipline responsible only to its own tradition and craft. Though women participated in shaping this poetic, its rise occurred as the influence of female print culture declined, and in time literary critics and scholars used it to eliminate nearly all nineteenth-century women poets from the American literary canon. The recovery of women's poetry has proceeded slowly, in part because of the persisting authority of this poetic. *She Wields A Pen* represents the aspiration to restore some of the plenitude of women's poetic production as well as the history of debate surrounding it. Projects of literary revision, however, require more than a knowledge of history; they come about because an audience arrives on the scene that is asking new questions, seeking to change the present by recovering forgotten dimensions of the past.

Emily Dickinson is the most securely canonical of all nineteenth-century American women poets in English – the only one whose works have been anthologised as frequently as those of forty-five men, from Thomas Wyatt to Randall Jarrell. A century after Dickinson stopped trying to publish her poems, she was the only nineteenth-century American woman recognised as either a true poet or a contributor to the formation of a distinctive national literature. Paradoxically, Dickinson gained this position in part because her life and works were unrepresentative of women writers of her age. Dickinson's status was secured as a distinctly modern poetics gained authority, an approach to poetic evaluation centred on the notions that a poet is an exceptionally gifted person who rises above the literary marketplace and that poetry is a discipline unto itself, answerable only to its own formal rules. In the case of the reclusive Dickinson, the idea that poetry is a solitary, internal art converged with another idea that became entrenched in Western bourgeois culture during the nineteenth century: that women belong in the private spaces of the home. Much of Dickinson's appeal to feminist critics since the 1960s turned on the combination of these ideas: exposing the anguish of women's confinement to the domestic sphere, she seized freedoms through the separate world of imagination. Yet the nineteenth-century gender system was not wholly disabling to women writers. Social sanctions did restrict women's entry into higher education, politics and the professions, and suspicion clung to the

reputations of women who entered the public sphere. The figure of a suicidal fallen woman adrift in the modern urban landscape, appearing frequently in nineteenth-century art and literature (for example, in Julia Ward Howe's 'Lyrics of the Street'), symbolises this association between public women and degraded sexuality. Women writers had to contend with sexist attitudes and institutions, but such social sanctions did not keep them out of print. Women pioneered writing as a paying occupation, and for most of the century, women writers and readers dominated the American literary marketplace.

Any one story about American women's poetry during the century is necessarily partial, a starting place from which to explore differing stories. However, it holds true for most of the poets in this anthology that poetry was not a discipline unto itself. Women wrote in the context of their participation in groups and movements whose purposes extended beyond literary production. The Sunday School movement, begun late in the eighteenth century and established as an institution in the 1830s, provided impetus for the creation of a body of children's poetry. Eliza Follen, Sarah Josepha Hale and Penina Moise all produced verse for use in children's religious education. The growth of the radical anti-slavery movement in the 1830s opened both print and public speaking venues for women and the occasion, rare through much of American literary history, for African American writers (such as Sarah Louisa Forten and Frances Harper) to draw recognition from the white press. Abolitionist writers developed sentimentality, a rhetoric associated with 'feminine' emotionalism, into a powerful political instrument: they invoked confrontative representations of the conditions of enslaved women and children to rouse revulsion against slavery and forge bonds of sympathetic identification between races. Women were engaged throughout the century in fierce criticism of the government's treatment of tribal people, but they also took part in shaping representations of Native Americans that accommodated the rapidly expanding nation. This divided agenda appears in Lydia Huntley Sigourney's 'Indian Names': the poem is engrossed with Native Americans' endurance as words on a map – badges of white guilt – but it situates the aboriginal people themselves in the prehistory of a traumatic encounter rather than in the living present. The women's club movement organised after the Civil War pursued literary study alongside philanthropy and civic activism. Black women's clubs were, in addition, at the vanguard of efforts to uplift the race – an important context for late-nineteenth-century African American poets such as Henrietta Cordelia Ray, who

promoted cultural ideals with little obvious reference to race.

In the last quarter of the century, poetics showed signs of change. Antebellum poet Hannah F. Gould had taught children about theology and revolution through nature poems; Mary Mapes Dodge, an influential postbellum author and editor, addressed children of an urban middle class, protected from nature, labour, politics and religion. Childhood was becoming a separate discursive world with its own rules, as was poetry. Child's and poet's voices converge in the simplified diction and vivid images of Sarah Piatt and Lizette Woodworth Reese, precursors of the women modernists of the early twentieth century (such as Amy Lowell, Sarah Teasdale, Louise Bogan and Edna St Vincent Millay). Political poetry thrived, but its vanguard weapon was irony (as in Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman's poems), a hallmark of modernist poetics. Even Frances Densmore's sparse translation of Owl Woman's healing songs looks like modernist poetry compared with earlier cross-cultural writing, such as Schoolcraft's 'Otagamiad'. Reviewers had begun to distinguish between 'real' poetry and various lesser categories. The poetics that would eventually canonise only Dickinson was gaining sway – and the women's club movement had laid groundwork for it. In their study of literary texts, particularly those of Shakespeare, women's club members were seeking personal growth, aiming to recapitulate the history that they believed great cultural works captured: the history of the self's emancipation from both oppressive institutions and self-defeating individual desires. Drawing on Romantic literary theory – not yet accepted in academia – they turned to works of literary 'genius' for models of an ideal, transcendent self. The clubs developed methods for closely studying literary form, a practice that academic critics later adopted, elaborated and linked to masculine toughness (see, for example, the critical background on Louise Imogen Guiney), using the criteria of fixed, universal value to eliminate all but a very few women writers from the literary canon.

A two-stage transformation affecting the relationship between print and oral culture over the course of the century generated the conditions for the rising influence of the idea that poetry is a discipline unto itself. In the first stage, ideals of citizenship shifted their focus from communal to individual moral authority; in the second, from exemplary individuals to experts whose authority was assumed morally neutral. Early in the century, public life was idealised as a sphere of oratorical debate and consensus based on the Roman model of republicanism. Classically consisting of the professions of law,

politics and the clergy, this oral culture was almost exclusively a white male sphere, while women's oral transmission of culture took place within families and local communities. However, from about 1820 to 1870, an alternative, female public sphere thrived in print under the leadership of women editors, among whom Sarah Josepha Hale was the most influential (see *The Poets and Their Critics* for a discussion of Hale's poetics). Its mission complemented that of the male public sphere but adapted values associated with women's lives to public discourse. Forging the stories and icons of national identity, women writers and editors gave primacy to everyday life and human connection, building networks of community – centred on women and children – over the expanding geographical spread of Euro-American culture. By constructing a public voice through texts, female print culture took part in the first transformation described above, for print – in which speaker and addressee must imagine one another – cultivates individual interior life. Women represented in this anthology who did speak in face-to-face public forums, too, illustrate this first transformation. Elizabeth Oakes-Smith and Frances Harper engaged in political argument in their public speaking, but other poets in this anthology performed under the auspices of the increasingly centralised entertainment industry. By mid century female performers in whom audiences could recognise idealised versions of themselves were attracting large and devoted audiences. Kemble's sonnet 'To Shakspeare' represents her public readings of his plays as almost a spiritualist act invoking his presence and approval. (In her twenty-year career, Kemble set the stage for the women's clubs reverential study of Shakespeare.) For Achsa Sprague, the performance of poetry *was* a spiritualist event, in which the poet modelled a vanguard moral subjectivity in touch with transcendent essences.

A corresponding set of transformations took place in the aims and practices of the American publishing industry. Early in the century, artisan-publishers regarded print as an instrument of God, a revolutionary weapon for creating a democratic nation and abolishing the remnants of feudal mentality. By 1850, publishing had become established as a viable business. A rapidly growing population, high literacy, increased leisure, the extension of railways and technological developments that made printing cheaper all contributed to a tenfold growth in American publishing from 1830 to 1850. Work roles within the press became specialised, and publishers envisioned themselves not as artisans but as patrons. Although business was profitable, these 'gentlemen publishers' considered themselves public servants

and moral guardians rather than businessmen. When entrepreneurial capitalism boomed following the Civil War, publishing lagged behind other industries as publishers resisted overtly commercial practices. Publishers whose primary aim was high sales, who cared little about promoting moral values, began to appear by the 1880s – representatives of the ascendancy of the specialist. Even faced with such competitors, many publishers and authors continued to mask their commercial aspirations, asserting the noncommercial value of their books; *real* literature rose above the marketplace.

The rift between literary and commercial value appeared amid a complex of cultural rifts formed around class, region, gender and ethnicity, resulting in multiple layers that cultural entrepreneurs assumed appealed to the tastes of different groups (summed up as low-, middle- and high-brow). These rifts were evident by 1850 but took different forms by the late 1800s, as two distinctive formats for poetry – the luxury book and the slender volume – illustrate. Artisan publishers early in the century had hailed cheaper printing as an advance that would further democratise literature by making it available to all classes. The cost of periodicals did drop, but the average cost of books remained at about a day's wages for working people. Publishers took advantage of improvements in print technology to increase their production of large luxury books (such as Lydia Huntley Sigourney's *Illustrated Poems*, 1856), investing in heavy paper, colour artwork, leather binding and gold trim. Poetry in this format was a status commodity for the upper classes. Slender volumes appeared in increasing numbers in the 1880s and 1890s, packaging the works of such critically esteemed poets as Lizette Woodworth Reese. Artful but unostentatious, they presented their contents as quality rather than quantity, for consumption by an elite of taste rather than wealth. In between times, Gail Hamilton attacked the gentlemen publishers' practice of avoiding financial talk and Helen Hunt Jackson insisted poetic skill should have a dollar value – both struggling to redefine and preserve the link between merit and money that had made writing, even writing poetry, a paying career for so many women. But in the era of expertise, being an expert at writing poetry paradoxically became an avocation. Selling enough books to support oneself and being praised by critics as a true poet became almost mutually exclusive; one could not have both popularity with a mass audience and recognition as a refiner of taste (a puzzle that plagued the careers of some turn-of-the-century poets, such as Louise Imogen Guiney and Ella Wheeler Wilcox).

The era of expertise also edged women writers out of the processes by which literary works achieve a lasting place in cultural memory. Following on other postbellum businesses and professions, publishing became aggressively competitive; the 'feminine' values on which female print culture thrived had no place in this masculinised world. Women published, but they were largely excluded from the collegial networks among publishers, critics and academics through which enduring reputations, and thus literary canons, are made. Two poetry anthologies published by male veterans of American letters in the mid-1870s, as the influence of female print culture declined, illustrate women poets' status in different approaches to the making of mixed-gender canons. Calling his selection *Parnassus* in keeping with his lofty idea of poetry, Ralph Waldo Emerson included only five of his female contemporaries. John Greenleaf Whittier included at least twenty American women poets in *Songs of Three Centuries*, admitting to eclectic if moralistic taste. Neither man struck on a canon that would endure to the present – neither anthology included Dickinson or Whitman. As a pair, however, these collections illustrate that late-nineteenth-century American literary culture found more room for women poets in poetry conceived as a miscellany of performing voices than in poetry conceived as a singular transcendent pinnacle. Ironically, when the publishers of *Atlantic Monthly* threw a seventieth birthday party for Whittier in 1877, they did not think to invite any women – even though the guest of honour had encouraged, collaborated with, and advanced the careers of more women writers than had any other man. In the early decades of the twentieth century, literary critics continued the process of edging women out; by the 1940s, a canon of American literature had formed centred on the heroic individualism of the common man in his pursuit of freedom from social constraints. The imaginative mode that dominated female print culture, which envisioned the loss of human connections as the greatest tragedy, was dismissed, ridiculed and largely forgotten.

As late-twentieth-century scholars recognised early in the feminist project of recovering forgotten women writers, challenging the processes of canonisation requires interrogating the criteria of value that literary canons embody. The recovery of women's prose has proceeded much more quickly than that of poetry, in part because the persisting authority of the notion that poetry is a separate field of expertise, unrelated to the world in which it is produced, has restricted our ability to read poetry. Focused as it is on the individual as an expert and on the poem as an intricate made object, this poetic implies that

the printed page has an inherent value that supersedes the uses a particular community might make of the words on it; and this implication, in turn, contributes to a long-range forgetting of poetry's vital cultural roles. To see through the authority of the printed text, we need to open up our poetics, our theories of literary making. We need to explore not just the formal qualities of the text itself but the cultural work that such an utterance, localised in time and space, might do.

Searching through volume upon volume of poetry by nineteenth-century American women, I looked for forms associated with the English poetic canon (the sonnet was by far the most common) and for forms associated with folk culture and oral performance – forms built on repetition, simple stanzas and narratives, phrases and situations that would have been familiar to the audience. I chose recitation pieces and hymns that enjoyed extraordinary popularity. I looked for women's representations of the continent's varied natural landscape and modern city scenes. I looked for poems associated with the everyday and life-cycle events – traditional areas of women's culture – and for poems that challenged the distinction between private and public life. I chose poems by women about women, reflecting differing arguments and iconographies from the era that both gave rise to the movement for women's suffrage and impeded its success. I looked for pleasure and desire and their places in the gender system. I looked for humour, since nineteenth-century women poets have been stereotyped as overwhelmingly grim, and children's verse, usually removed to a separate category. I selected poems about the century's historical events, looking for ideologies that supported and ideologies that challenged dominant political and economic structures. I have included poems on performance and print culture and observations about reading, writing and the media. Because our recovery of nineteenth-century texts is too easily dependent on a publishing industry centralised in the northeastern states, I searched for poets excluded because of race, region and language.

This volume reflects my hope of its contributing both to the recuperation of women poets and to other allied projects: restoring the history of conflict over literary value and reframing American literature as a comparative discipline comprising heterogeneous cultures. All of these projects are relatively new and growing – my selection reflects the conviction that now is a time for extending our knowledge, not narrowing the field. This introduction has emphasised historical factors surrounding women's production of poetry in the nineteenth

century, but projects of literary revision do not rely solely on knowing historical facts. They come about because changes occur in how people understand the present; different questions, different perspectives take precedence in their explorations of history. To restore forgotten dimensions of the past, we must ask our own questions, reading as participants in the ongoing process of cultural reevaluation. Much of value lies beyond the limits of this book; much of this is becoming accessible through the internet (see, for instance, the site on nineteenth-century American women writers at <http://clever.net/19cwww>). As it stands, *She Wields A Pen* begins and ends as it does deliberately. Praising nonsense in the first poem, Eliza Follen praises not chaotic absurdity but responsiveness to difference and change. In the last poem, invoking her father's story of an 'uncanny object' that damns a tyrant, Priscilla Thompson invokes the lasting dignity of stories about how people have resisted oppression.

JANET GRAY

References

Secondary sources drawn upon in the Introduction are listed in Suggestions for Further Reading (pp. 365–369) under the categories 'Nineteenth-Century American Literary History', 'Gender in Nineteenth-Century American Cultural History' and 'Issues and Methods in Women's Literary History'.

NOTE ON THE TEXTS

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