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NINETEENTH- CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN POETS

AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY PAULA BERNAT BENNETT

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Introduction

When Edmund Clarence Stedman published *An American Anthology* in 1900, he included poems by over one hundred and fifty women poets from Sarah Josepha Hale (1788–1879) to Dora Read Goodale (1866–1953). Within thirty years, the names and contributions of almost all of these women – Emily Dickinson excepted – would be lost. From the standpoint of United States literary history, for most of the twentieth century, it has been as if they never wrote, never were.

There are many reasons for the erasure of one entire field of women's writing. Not all of them have to do with gender. Even more salient in this instance was the profound shift in literary taste resulting from early modernist championship of *vers libre*. "Liberated" from rhyme and from the necessity to adhere to fixed metrical patterns, poets found new, more subtly stringent ways to impose rigor upon themselves and to derive pleasure from their texts. In privileging the musical cadence over the metrical foot, and, even more, in emphasizing "the word," early modernist writers transformed American poetry. From a popular art, self-consciously intended to refine and unify a polyglot and heterogeneous nation, it became a literature that was self-consciously difficult and – despite Whitman's democratizing influence – elite. By the new standards – standards best exemplified by the poetic platform of "New Criticism" – nineteenth-century American poetry not only came to seem "old-fashioned," but, in a profound sense, literarily naive: conventional, timid, and, as Santayana put it, "genteel." Unlike the work of their female peers (the "Sentimentalists"), the poetry of the male "Fireside poets" – Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes – lingered; but the authors themselves were no longer influential. Artistically speaking – Whitman excepted – nineteenth-century men's poetry, no less than women's, had nothing to say to the next generation of American writers, or, at least, so these writers, men and women, claimed.

Since the publication of Cheryl Walker's ground-breaking anthology, *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, in 1992, six more anthologies – four mixed, one devoted to African American poets, and the most recent, by Janet Gray, devoted, like Walker's, to women – have appeared, signaling a major revival of interest in the field and a shift in previous aesthetic evaluations. Nor should this surprise. Since the 1960s, modernist aesthetics, especially that epitomized in "New Criticism," have come under increasing attack for the exclusionary elitism inherent in their (undeclared) ideological agenda. As the political

burden of this agenda has been demystified, so too has the concept of the well-made work of art upon whose filtering capacity New Critics relied.

Disseminated through the school system by means of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), New Critical standards for what constituted "good" poetry, that is, poetry worthy of imitation, study, and preservation, had effectively shaped three academic generations. In the hands of these scholars, a rigorous set of aesthetic criteria evolved, based largely on New Critical readings of seventeenth-century British poetry. More rigid in many cases than Brooks and Warren themselves, critics using these criteria privileged irony, paradox, and ambiguity at the expense of virtually everything else, including any given text's place within its own historical moment. From their perspective, knowing what made a poem "bad" easily became more important than understanding what may have made it "good" to a previous generation of readers. As will be evident from some of my choices and many of my biases, I myself am a recovering New Critic.

But how and by whose standards is the "bad" to be judged, when, as turns out to be the case, even the seemingly "objective" evaluations of the New Critics (like all such aesthetic evaluations) were determined by these critics' own time and cultural milieu and carried with them their own shaping ideological burden? And why should readers so exclusively preoccupy themselves with what is aesthetically "best," in any case? Is not a given culture more than the sum of its "greatest" works? Indeed, does not popular art, which reaches mass audiences, have as much to say about any particular culture as that culture's presumed greatest minds? Perhaps pure (that is, unpoliticized) aesthetic response is not the only reason to engage with art, if indeed such purity is even possible. And perhaps great works of art (like the artists themselves) are not all that separate from the lower forms of culture (and humanity) that surround them. Are Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman really that exceptional? That utterly "Other," yet somehow that comprehensive, that they should be preserved where the remainder can be safely forgotten?

It is questions such as these, as much as those directed towards issues of gender *per se*, that have opened up nineteenth-century American poetry – a poetry vastly popular in its base – once more for exploration and appreciation. Pointing to what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls the contingency of (aesthetic) value – its function as a quasi-economic system that attributes worth to some works at the explicit expense of others – these questions direct attention away from the study of art-in-itself to, in Jane Tompkins's phrase, the "cultural work" that specific artistic fashions and art works perform (how they can be situated historically and socially). But as even a cursory glance at the criticism developing around nineteenth-century American women's poetry makes clear, the asking of these questions has yet to resolve all the problems reading this poetry presents. In particular, it has not resolved the issues raised by its close association with the Sentimental. Since the sentimentality of nineteenth-century women's poetry, indeed of their writing generally, continues to delegitimize it as an area of serious academic concern in the eyes of most scholars, it seems best, therefore, to confront the problems it raises head on here.

No group of writers in United States literary history has been subject to more consistent denigration than nineteenth-century women, especially the poets. Beginning with Mark Twain's "Emmeline Grangerford" in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and culminating in Ann Douglas's scathing analysis in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), their writing has been damned out of hand for its conventionality, its simplistic Christianity, its addiction to morbidity, and its excessive reliance on tears. Equally disturbing, it has been presented,

even by those seeking to revive interest in it (most notably, Jane Tompkins, but also Cheryl Walker and Joanne Dobson) as a literature basically without difference. Whether in praise or blame, this writing – Emily Dickinson's excepted – has been reduced to one perspective, that of the conventionally domestic, the "genteel," the "sentimental." Under such rubrics, and despite the power of Tompkins's critique, it has gone unread, except by a small, if growing, number of aficionados.

Having spent the last seven years reading, literally, thousands of poems by hundreds of nineteenth-century American women, I would not deny the existence of the kind of (bad) sentimental art against which Douglas fulminates in *The Feminization of American Culture*. Nor would I deny that this art was meant to fulfill many of the social functions that Tompkins assigns to it in "Sentimental Power," her highly influential essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe. Many nineteenth-century American women, particularly at mid-century, and particularly from the middle class, took their duties as "Angel in the House" seriously, using their writing to project the spiritual and affective values they associated with this (Christian evangelical) interpretation of their sphere. When combined with the nineteenth-century's fondness for regular meters and conventionally poetic diction, and its obsession with death and moral platitudes, the result can be a kind of narrow formulaic verse even sympathetic readers find indigestible. Thus, for example, when speaking of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "The Sinless Child" (1842) – probably the epitome of this kind of poetry, although an effective poem by its own standard – even Walker becomes uncharacteristically judgmental. Calling the poem "sickly sweet," her anthology reprints only its five-stanza "Inscription," the least, one suspects, she felt she could safely offer, given the poem's historical importance.

But what is lost in such a blanket response to Oakes Smith's poem – whether to damn it (as Walker does) or to recuperate it (as, effectively, Tompkins asks us to do) – is the significance of the fact that within six years of "The Sinless Child's" publication, the author herself rejected the passive, sentimentalized gender values her highly popular poem celebrates. Dropping poetry altogether after the 1840s, Oakes Smith joined the Lyceum circuit, speaking on women's rights and abolition, and she turned to writing pot-boiling, reformist fiction. (Her 1854 novel, *The Newsboy*, is credited with having inspired social legislation on behalf of New York City's street children.) For Oakes Smith, as for many middle-class women of the period, "The Sinless Child" embodied an ideological as well as stylistic moment that was passing even as she wrote. Like the British poet, Coventry Patmore, in the somewhat later, and far more hugely popular "The Angel in the House" (1850), she had given pure expression to one of the century's most popular myths – that of "True Womanhood" – but it was a myth that she, at least, came to see as destructive to women's full realization of their potential before the decade was out.

As the popularity of both Oakes Smith's and Patmore's poems indicates, sentimentality was unquestionably a primary rhetorical mode for many nineteenth-century writers, female and male, British as well as American. Despite the difficulties experienced in trying to sustain such unearthly perfection (see, for instance, Julia Ward Howe's "Woman" [1849]), angelized versions of the female Sentimental Subject also unquestionably helped define the social niche to which many young women aspired, particularly at mid-century. Attainable or not, True Womanhood was, at least for a few decades, a dominant social ideal. But, as I will discuss shortly, sentimentality was not the only stylistic or affective option available to women poets during the century, nor did the basic premises underlying sentimentality's appeals to emotion – premises rooted in its alliance not just with domestic ideology, but with evangelical Christianity – go uncontested. What has been eclipsed in the critical

debate swirling about sentimentality over the last twenty years is that its deployment both as style and subject position was a fraught issue for many nineteenth-century women writers themselves, Dickinson included.

An anthology introduction is no place to undertake an extended *explication de texte*. However, because of the way in which nineteenth-century women's commitment to sentimentality has been overgeneralized in the scholarly literature, a concrete example of how one woman poet in the second half of the century positions herself critically in respect to it might be helpful here. I would like to take Sarah Piatt's "His Mother's Way" (1880) as exemplary in this respect and as a poem central to an understanding of what was at stake for women and for nineteenth-century society as a whole in the debate over sentimentalism that occurred within the century itself. While Piatt's poem engages a sentimental position, it is not in itself sentimental. It is ironic and bitter. And it raises a vexed social issue – the plight of the homeless – that, from the perspective of the poem's adult speaker, the implied author of the poem, neither bourgeois men nor their (sentimental) partners were dealing with effectively, precisely because of the way in which domestic ideology distributed social power and emotional responsibilities between them. (The dilemma Piatt depicts here is being re-played today under the labels Conservative and Liberal, with, I might add, as little success.)

Told until the final stanzas from the limited perspective of a very young boy, "His Mother's Way" describes a woman whose highly sentimentalized reaction to a passing tramp does no more to remedy the underlying social conditions responsible for this man's plight than her husband's macho reaction does to contain the threat to social order his homelessness represents. (The father will "sleep to-night / With both his pistols at his head.") If the husband would use brute force to get his way, all the mother uses is tears to get hers – the same tears, her son tells us disgustedly, she sheds over keep-sake treasures ("old glove[s]" and "ring[s]"), and on clothing she cannot afford to buy ("the shabbiest shawl" [l. 9]). If the child is confused by the excessive lengths to which his father will go not to feel (he would not even cry, the boy says, at his own death), his mother's excessive emotional displays are equally off-putting. Both parents are locked within their respective gender roles, roles that in their rigidity leave the child no room to maneuver. Mother does nothing but weep and wail; father does nothing but posture. Meanwhile, the poet tells us in the final stanzas, speaking in a second voice directly to her readers, the tramp himself goes unhousted, unfed.

To the extent that the mother's tears call attention to the tramp's needs (and would not simply obliterate them with cannon fire or hide them by putting the tramp himself in jail), the mother has the moral high ground of her rather bullish mate. In her capacity to experience another's pain, and in her desire to relieve it, she is closer to her society's normative Christian values (the values, for example, of the sermon on the mount) than are the men who with their "lamp-light leisure, jests, and wine" (l. 46) laugh her to scorn. But Piatt's final speaker – the poem's adjudicating voice – calls the mother "foolish" nonetheless. This is not because she feels – she should feel – but because that is all she does. Action is left to men, and since men have a gendered investment in refusing to feel (being emotional is, after all, the "cultural work" women were supposed to do), there's small chance they will compromise their own comfort to benefit those less fortunate than themselves. Far from remedying the social indifference against which she protests, the mother's excessive tearfulness simply insures that the next generation of males, figured in her son, will continue to behave as their fathers did before them, rather than risk the contempt a cross-gendered expression of sympathy might evoke. (That men are, in fact, permitted to

express other kinds of emotions beside the sympathetic, most notably rage, is something Piatt does not discuss, but Robert Frost's "Home Burial" could be read as a pendant to Piatt's poem on this issue.)

In a thoughtful article on the keepsake tradition, Joanne Dobson argues that nineteenth-century sentimentality celebrates the preservation of human bonds, the affectional bonds that hold society as well as individual families together, and which sentimentalized artifacts such as keepsakes symbolically embodied. (For examples of "keepsake" poems see Hannah Gould's "The Child on the Beach" [1833], and Ethelinda Beer's "The Baggage Wagon" [1872] in Section II.) When directed, as the wife's sentimentality in "His Mother's Way" is, toward asserting the ties of obligation and common humanity binding the rich and the poor, the privileged and the oppressed, the thrust of nineteenth-century sentimentality could indeed be utopic. As is famously the case with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that is, it could help effect progressive social change. Barring that, it could at least make life more difficult for the oppressors — as, for example, Lydia Sigourney tries to do with "The Cherokee Mother" (1831), written at the height of the controversy over President Jackson's Indian Removal policy. Today's readers may find Sigourney's blatant ethnocentrism offensive, but the native editors of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, who published the poem, seemed to have valued its highly sentimentalized portrait of the Cherokee as "brothers under the skin," i.e., just like whites, for what it was: an effective means of eliciting white outrage on their behalf. Certainly, Sigourney — along with other "sentimental" protesters — was a regular on their pages.

Yet when deployed, as the mother's sentimentality in "His Mother's Way" also is, indiscriminately, and without due regard to society's existing power arrangements, sentimentality could also do more harm than good, insofar as, like other positions based on excess, it tended to undermine the credibility of those employing it. For Piatt (as, I might add, for Margaret Fuller in "Governor Everett Receiving the Indian Chiefs" [1844]), sentimental expression was, therefore, a troubled balancing act at best. Too much, and one made oneself appear an idealistic fool, "sloppily sentimental," in today's language, "a bleeding heart liberal;" too little, and one became insensitive to the affective values that presumably make humans "human" — the ability to love, to care, to feel for another's pain. In the latter scenario, "might" would indeed, as Fuller observes, "make right." As she suggests through her reference to "force or fraud," in a world peopled by "Machiavellis," or by his latter-day Jacksonian descendants, Indians did not have a chance. As Piatt's poem suggests, neither did tramps.

I have discussed Piatt's poem at length because it represents the complex way in which one highly intelligent woman poet writing in the second half of the century chose to relate to one of the century's dominant rhetorical modes and to the social and religious values this mode encoded. Sentimentality is an inescapable fact in much nineteenth-century poetry — Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman not excepted. Like Ophelia's rue, however, it could be worn with a difference. Indeed, as Elaine Goodale Eastman's powerful "The Cross and the Pagan" (1912) suggests, when allied with the missionary spirit that is also integral to evangelical Christianity, nineteenth-century sentimentality's dedication to the victim could turn into a perverse mockery of itself.

If the capacity to experience and endure pain, suffering, self-sacrifice, and loss were, as Jane Tompkins argues, intrinsic to the Sentimental Subject, then Indians (together with African Americans) had undisputed dibs to the highest moral ground. But no less than the guns of oppressors, sentimentality's own imperializing drive, a drive inseparable from its association with Christian missionary labor, was responsible for the suffering and losses Indians and African Americans incurred, as Goodale Eastman's early stint as an instructor

at the Hampton Institute and, indeed, as her own efforts on the Indians' behalf may have taught her. Far from being a force for progressive social transformation, in such instances "sentimental power," as critics such as Laura Wexler and Amy Kaplan have recently argued, became a source of oppression in itself.

The point here is that even if much nineteenth-century women's poetry is "sentimental," which it is, what is meant by that term and how it plays out in any particular text or writer's oeuvre can be exceedingly complicated, even treacherous, to sort out. Put another way, for those who believe that sentimentality and irony are inherently incompatible, this anthology may contain more than one surprise, coming at them from more than one direction. Nineteenth-century women's literature, poetry as well as fiction, is neither univocal nor transparent. Like any other complex set of artistic encodings of individual and social experience, it needs to be read with care and with due attention to slippage and to ironic reversals. Only then can this poetry be fairly understood both in terms of the "cultural work" it did and the cultural critique it carried. But having said this, it is now time to turn to the anthology itself.

Behind the poems selected for this anthology lies an enormous bulk of material most of which has not been read, let alone seriously studied, in one to two hundred years. To say that the canon which, for better or worse, will sort this material out has yet to be established is a mammoth understatement. Between us, Walker, Gray, and I share seventeen out of two hundred plus writers. When the huge number of poets none of us include is added in, the freedom the anthologist has to maneuver may well seem — to the anthologist, at any rate — more burden than blessing. This anthology could easily have been twice the size it is had it included every poem that at one point or another was considered seriously. Nor was my search, despite the many venues covered, remotely complete. After seven years of hunting, there simply comes a point when the poem on the next horizon must be allowed to go its own way.

Even more to the point, other anthologists might have chosen a different set of poems or poets altogether. Between the six anthologies now in print, there are at least fifteen poets whom I do not include nor would include in any anthology I put together, even if I did have room. They are poets with whom, for a variety of reasons, some, probably quite illegitimate, I do not "connect." Where the poets are the same, moreover, the poems selected are often quite different. Usually this is because there were other poems by the same author I preferred or viewed as more important. There will undoubtedly be times when readers will respond in the same way to selections of mine. ("Now what on earth does she see in that poet or poem!") If values are contingent, they also, all too frequently, boil down to matters of personal experience and taste. But given this, some explanation of how I arrived at the poems I chose does seem necessary, especially since it bears heavily on the anthology's organization.

Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets began in the basement of Widener Library at Harvard University where I was employed for a year, teaching in the freshman writing program. I was collecting nature poems from periodicals as my share in a projected anthology of nineteenth-century women's nature poetry that I and a colleague hoped to publish. For no particular reason I can remember except that, given Widener's enormous resources, it was easy to do, I decided to begin at "A" (the *American Magazine*) and work my way through to "Z" or its equivalent, whatever magazine came last on those seemingly endless rows of shelves (the *Western Literary Messenger*, as it happened). Before the year was out the collegial project collapsed; but I was left with something far more substantial: a thoroughly transformed view of nineteenth-century women's poetry itself.

I have told this story before and have no wish to repeat it here. What matters is that I came away from the experience persuaded not only that nineteenth-century women's poetry was a vastly underrated field, but that to appreciate its vitality, significance, and diversity meant abandoning received notions of how this or maybe any poetry evolved. Like other scholars, I had come to my field assuming that "major" figures would be the heart of it. What I discovered, however — at least where nineteenth-century American women's poetry was concerned — is that the heart lay elsewhere, not in the poet but in the poem. I discovered, that is, that while there might be very few major poets in this field, there were many, many "major" (or, at any rate, very fine) poems; and that it was in these poems, often written by women who, for whatever reason, never seemed to produce anything quite so interesting again, that the heart of nineteenth-century American women's poetry lay. (Milicent W. Shinn's "In a New England Graveyard" [1880], and Margaret Deland's "Noon in a New England Pasture" [1887], are striking cases in point.)

I also came to realize that given the multiplicity of voices creating this poetry, any attempt to restrict the field to a relatively small, manageable number of writers, even the most carefully selected (for diversity and so forth), would profoundly distort it. If I was going to represent nineteenth-century American women's poetry, I had to do it as I found it — poem by poem, voice by voice, from the bottom of the century up. Focal figures there were — writers such as Lydia Sigourney, Lucy Larcom, Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Piatt, Lizette Woodworth Reese, all of whom created significant bulks of highly interesting poetry, and who were well known within their periods. But finally nineteenth-century women's poetry was most accurately thought of as, figuratively if not literally, an "anonymous" art. That is, it functioned as a craft, where making — not being — was the dominant mode, and where moments of substantive creativity could be discovered not just in a limited number of major writers but scattered diffusely through a population of unknowns.

It was this set of realizations that led me to organize this anthology the way I have. *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets* is divided into two sections. The first section, which comprises approximately two-thirds of the volume, is devoted to the work of thirty-eight women whom, for want of a better term, I call "principal poets." They are poets who created significant bodies of poetry of such quality that it is appropriate (and useful) to treat them individually. The names of many of these writers will be familiar to readers already from other anthologies if they have followed the field at all: e.g., Sigourney, Maria Gowen Brooks, Frances Osgood, Lucy Larcom, Helen Hunt Jackson, Celia Thaxter, and so forth. The names of others, however, especially from the second half of the century, may be less familiar, at least where their poetry is concerned — Harriet Prescott Spofford, Louise Chandler Moulton, Sarah Piatt, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sophie Jewett, and Mary Austin.

Of these, Spofford, Piatt, and Phelps, in particular, were among the most widely disseminated poets of their day, placing hundreds of poems in newspapers and literary periodicals in the United States, Britain, and Ireland. No anthology that attempts to be representative of late nineteenth-century American women's poetry can ignore them, especially since between them they maintained a highly articulated "counter-tradition" to the conventionalized sentimental discourse for which women's poetry of the period is best known.

In this section, the reader will also find selections from the poetry of four significant African American women poets, Sarah Louisa Forten ("Ada"), Frances E. W. Harper, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and two Native American poets, the Papago medicine woman, Juana Manwell ("Owl Woman"), in Frances Densmore's translation, and the Mohawk poet, E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), a Canadian who published widely

in the United States. I have also included in this section a substantial selection of African American spirituals as transcribed by Christine Rutledge of the Carolina Singers. If these spirituals were not necessarily authored by women (and who is to say that women did not participate equally in their creation?), they were and remain such an essential part of the lives of black women in America, I cannot imagine leaving them out.

Finally, this section also includes significant amounts of lesbian poetry by four writers: Fanny Kemble, Emily Dickinson, Celia Thaxter, and Sophie Jewett. Applying the label "lesbian" to poetry written in an age when women generally felt free to express love for each other is, of course, risky business, especially when the label is one the poets themselves would, in all likelihood, reject for themselves. (Jewett excepted, all these poets seem among other things to have entertained sexual feelings for men as well as women at some point in their lives.) But as Emma Donoghue has recently argued in *Passions Between Women*, more may be lost in not doing so. To restrict the concept of lesbian poetry only to that poetry written by women whose passion for women has evinced itself through explicitly genital behavior or to women who identify as such not only artificially limits (and, not coincidentally, essentializes) lesbian identity, but it leaves contemporary lesbians with an excruciatingly narrow definition of what constitutes a usable past. Idealized and romanticized it may be, but the love these poets inscribe is "lesbian" insofar as it projects a passionate and pervasively eroticized desire between women that parallels similar expressions by other poets when addressing male lovers (compare, for example, Wharton's sonnet sequence "The Mortal Lease" with Thaxter's "Two Sonnets" or Pauline Johnson's "The Idlers" with Kemble's "Noonday: By the Seaside"). Given this, taking the risk of using an anachronistic label for such poetry seems justified.

If the anthology's first section provides depth by focusing on individual women poets, the second section, composed of poems drawn from newspapers and periodicals, arranged chronologically, provides comprehensiveness. Presenting an additional one hundred plus writers, the majority of whom are unknown today — and many of whom were "anonymous" even in their own day — this section reflects the multiplicity and diversity characterizing nineteenth-century American women's poetry as a whole. In this section, readers will find poems drawn from mainstream national and regional publications, e.g., the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, *Overland Monthly*, and the *Louisville Journal*, and from many of the "special interest" journals and newspapers that flourished in the period, including the *Colored American*, *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*, the *Vindicator* (a newspaper "devoted to the interests of the Choctaws and Chickasaws"), the *Cincinnati Israelite*, *Lowell Offering*, *Shaker and Shakeress*, the *Irish Nationalist*, *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, the *Southern Workman*, *A. M. E. Church Review*, and *New Century for Women*. In its concluding pages, this section also provides a lively assortment of "avant-garde" poems from late nineteenth-century "penny magazines," the harbingers of the so-called little magazines which proved so immensely important to the development and dissemination of early modernist poetry.

Providing a microcosm for the development of women's poetry throughout the century, this section suggests that the consistent denigration of nineteenth-century newspaper and periodical poetry has been very wide of the mark, at least where women's poetry is concerned. Granted these venues published large quantities of bad poetry, they also provided invaluable open spaces where both white women and women of color could bring their most radical, that is, politically charged, writing, as well as that in which they experimented artistically. Thus, for example, not only does one find an astonishing amount of feminist poetry in mainstream periodicals and newspapers (*Atlantic Monthly*, *Galaxy*, *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* and so on), but one finds a surprising number of artistically innovative

poems as well, poems such as Mary B. Cummings's "Possession" (*Atlantic Monthly* 1875) and Lillie Devereux Blake's "The Sea People" (*Galaxy* 1875). Even more striking, three of the most powerful and innovative poems by black women included in this volume only appear in periodicals, Sarah Mapps Douglass's "The Stranger in America" (*National Enquirer* 1836), Mary E. Ashe Lee's "Afmerica" (*Southern Workman* 1886), of which I will say more later, and Sarah C. Bierce Scarborough's stunning translation of an excerpt from Lamartine's "Toussaint Louverture" (*A. M. E. Church Review* 1888).

As will be apparent from many of these poems, in a way curiously similar to the use of the Internet today, nineteenth-century women used periodicals and newspapers as places to speak, often quite directly, to each other, engaging in a kind of public, yet intimate, dialogue that simultaneously stood in a Bakhtinian sense, in dialogic relationship to the dominant social discourses of their day. (See, for example, the second Ada's "Lines, Suggested on reading 'An Appeal to Christian Women of the South,' by A. E. Grimke" [*Liberator* 1836] and Maria W. Chapman's "The Times that Try Men's Souls" [*North Star* 1848]). To ignore such poetry is to lose touch with much that was most vital and interesting about American women's poetry of the period. Certainly from my perspective this is where the bulk of these women's most important poetry lay – the poetry that best justifies their claim to a significant place in American literary history.

Given both the abundance and the complexity of the material these two sections cover, what then is the best way to go about reading this anthology? Although many readers will probably want to focus on individual poets in depth, I would like to suggest that it can also be profitably read as a whole, especially if it is read in terms of the two basic sets of concerns governing the selection of poems in the first place (for like most anthologies, this one is governed by assumptions). The first set of concerns can loosely be called aesthetic, the second, even more loosely, political. Both hinge on the issue of diversity. I will address the aesthetic concerns first.

Like many other works of feminist scholarship, this anthology participates in the post-structuralist dismantling of absolute standards of aesthetic value. However, as Herrnstein Smith has cogently argued, acknowledging the contingency of values does not necessarily void questions of aesthetic judgment. On the contrary, as long as one admits their contingency, aesthetic judgments are not only possible but inevitable and necessary, particularly when putting a text such as this together. Otherwise, given the enormous volume of material, and the range of accomplishments exhibited by individual writers, one could not get past the starting gate.

In light of this, the criterion of aesthetic selection that seemed to make the most sense (and lock things in the least) was to view poems in terms of how well or poorly they accomplished what they set out to do. While a number of works in this anthology were selected for their cultural interest, with very few exceptions, none were included on this basis alone. As works of art (indeed, looked on purely as verbal constructs) they also had to be effective – well put together, evocative, capable of moving, and so forth. At the same time, however, in selecting for artistic quality, no single standard was applied. Rather, every effort has been made to match the issue of quality to the kind of poem being written, whether neoclassical satire or proto-imagist nature poem, abolitionist "song" or Whitmanesque free verse, epigrammatic quatrain or associatively organized phantasmagoria, the one requirement being that each poem be an "effective" example of its "kind."

Thus, for example, one of the abiding assumptions of this anthology is that even truly popular poetry – that is, poetry written specifically to appeal to and reflect the concerns of a mass audience – can achieve aesthetic excellence when taken on its own terms. Poems such

as Alice Cary's "Pictures of Memory" and Lucy Larcom's "Hannah Binding Shoes" may fail this test for many readers today (they are included, largely, as examples of their authors' early work); but poems such as Annie Keely's "The Beautiful Snow" (1859), Elizabeth Akers Allen's "Rock Me to Sleep" (1860), and Ethelinda Beers's "The Baggage Wagon" (1872), all in Section II, are clear cases in point. In their powerful controlling metaphors and precise use of imagery, these poems, which circulated widely through much of the century, spoke with extraordinary eloquence to nineteenth-century readers in ways that, I think, can still be appreciated today, if even the explicit morbidity or sentimentality of their themes makes them less available to modern readers.

If diversity existed in the kinds of poems nineteenth-century women wrote and the skills they brought to them, the way they wrote also underwent profound changes during the course of the century and this too is a matter of aesthetic concern that needed to be represented. As a quick survey of this anthology will demonstrate, far from remaining static stylistically, women's poetry generally moved from the heavily elaborated discursive style of, for example, Lydia Sigourney's "The Alpine Flowers" (1827) and Maria Brooks's "Zóphiël" (1833), to the elliptically pared-down style and perspective of Edith M. Thomas's "The Deep-Sea Pearl" (1903) and Lizette Woodworth Reese's "In Time of Grief" (1896); and these poets have been cited as imagist forerunners by Watts, Walker, and others. By the 1890s, in fact, many women poets, not just the well-known ones – poets such as Florence Earle Coates ("Longing") and Maude Caldwell Perry ("Summer Died Last Night") – were working outside nineteenth-century stylistic frames of reference. In their obliqueness and classical restraint, their delicate and unobtrusive rhythms, and their enigmatic identification of image with meaning, Coates's and Perry's poems are early modernist in everything save their use of rhyme.

Finally, even within the texts of individual authors, working in the same or different lyric genres, a surprising range of different kinds of writing can be found. Along with sentimentality, many other approaches were available to these women at every point throughout the century, including but not limited to the romantic, the visionary, the parodic, the aphoristic, the satirical, the erotic, the fanciful, and the tragically ironic. I would also stress – precisely because it runs counter to popular assumptions about nineteenth-century women, be they sentimentalists or "bluestockings" – that some of these poets are wickedly funny, none more so than A. D. T. Whitney and Phoebe Cary, both of whom were gifted comic writers. Poets such as Frances Osgood, Phoebe Cary, Rose Terry Cooke, Celia Thaxter, Sarah Piatt, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, Edith M. Thomas, Louise Imogen Guiney, and E. Pauline Johnson, to name only the most striking, tended to maintain repertoires of styles, examples of which are not always represented here for want of space and, sometimes, because their work in one mode was distinctly more interesting than their work in another. Among the periodical and newspaper poets, diversity is, not surprisingly, even more striking. Indeed, some readers may feel they are on a roller-coaster as they move from one poet's work to the next. If they do that is how it should be.

While diversity was a necessary aesthetic guideline for this volume, it has proved just as important as a "political" guideline. Nineteenth-century women poets came from every walk of life and most ethnic groups within the nation. Working primarily with the short lyric, they used this most flexible and handy of literary forms (one can, after all, write a poem on the back of a cooking chocolate wrapper if one is so inclined – Emily Dickinson did) to express the myriad aspects of their lives. Within the first ten pages of the second section readers will find poems on women's "hard fate," on the denial of natural rights ("Epitaph for a Bird"), on the advantages of spinsterhood, on the "rage" to write, on unwed

motherhood, on the fate of Africans, on female education ("The Hot-House Rose"), on taste in men, on how to dominate men ("The Young Girl's Resolution"), on breast-feeding, and on the fate of Jewry. Indeed, by the time I finished collecting poems for this volume, I was persuaded that there was nothing nineteenth-century women poets did not write on. Even abortion is mentioned in one poem ("My Fashionable Mother" [1874]); and wife abuse in its various forms is a persistent theme from one end of the century to the other. Spofford's "Pomegranate-Flowers" (1861), I have argued elsewhere, is one of many nineteenth-century women's poems on masturbation and autoerotic fantasizing. In "Beatrice Cenci" (1871), and in a poem not included here, "Prevented Choice," Piatt may, albeit obliquely, be treating incest. Dickinson has an outhouse poem ("Alone and in a Circumstance" [1167, 1870]). Why not?

If individual women felt free to raise such presumably "forbidden" topics in their poetry, women poets as a whole felt absolutely no compunctions about debating the issue of their rights. The nineteenth century was a period of seismic shifts in women's lives as the spread of education and the growth of urbanization and industrialization opened up employment possibilities for women that they never before had considered. In publishing alone, as Patricia Okker has recently documented, women editors became major industry players. With the rise of higher education for women, white and black women alike began to prepare for a wide variety of white-collar professions, including medicine, the ministry, and law. Not surprisingly, they brought to their poetry both their excitement at the new possibilities before them and their anxieties over what these changes might mean for their lives. They also brought an increasing determination to express their sense of blockage when deprived of access to the "brave new world" in which they hoped to make their mark. Two long poems written in the late 1880s, equally remarkable and powerful, one by an African American writer, "Afmerica" (1886) by Mary E. Ashe Lee, the other by the sister of President Grover Cleveland, "The Dilemma of the Nineteenth Century" (1887), by Rose Elizabeth Cleveland, both express women's profound frustration with the nation's failed century-old promise of equal opportunity — a promise that had no meaning until extended to men and women, to whites and people of color. To read such poetry today is to hear directly (if not necessarily transparently) how these women felt about their lives, both present and future, what they wanted and expected, and intended to have.

Whichever way it is read, whether as a whole, or in terms of individual writers, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets* provides stunning evidence for the complexity of women's subjectivity in the century: the depth and intensity of their passion — autoerotic and homoerotic as well as heterosexual — their positive as well as negative feelings about marriage, childbirth, and family, their complex relations to children, their loving and detailed observation of nature, their mixed responses to the frontier, their outrage over the decimation of Native Americans and the oppression of African Americans, their awareness of and commitment to their own individual racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their abiding, if often conflicted, concern for social inequalities and injustices of all kinds. That is, this anthology provides a highly nuanced, multi-voiced portrait of nineteenth-century American women as a whole in all their differences as well as in what they shared.

At the same time, particularly because of its emphasis on late nineteenth-century American women's poetry (the most neglected aspect of a neglected field), this anthology invites scholars to rethink the origins of modernist poetry, at least where the next generation of women writers is concerned, Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe, H. D., et al. If this happens, then the study of nineteenth-century American women's poetry will no longer be an idiosyncratic occupation, an affair of aficionados, but — what it should be — integral to the

study of the evolution of American poetry as a whole, thus permanently opening this poetry up to the kind of serious academic scrutiny it deserves. Not coincidentally, such a scholarly consequence will also result in the re-situation of Emily Dickinson where she belongs — among the women who were in fact her peers and among whom she was — in fact — no "exception," for all the exceptionality of the genius she possessed.

A Note on Attribution and Editing

American periodicals and newspapers, especially in the first half of the century, played fast and loose with the poetry they published, routinely reprinting without permission, dropping attributions or incorrectly citing them, and editing texts *ad libitum*. Any given "anonymous" work in this text could be by a man or a woman, by an American or not, could have been written in the nineteenth century or earlier, and could represent an accurate version of its original or a heavily edited one. These practices create obvious problems for the anthologist. In one instance, "The Beautiful Snow," published in the editorial pages of *Knickerbocker* in 1859, and other venues, I have knowingly reprinted an edited version because I find its layout more interesting than that of the purported original published in the *Irish Nationalist* some fifteen years later. In another instance, "Woman's Hard Fate" (1800), I have reprinted a poem that was widely circulated through the eighteenth century and which is very possibly British. On the whole, however, if I have made such "errors" I have made them unintentionally as part of the risk I have chosen to take. Since it is virtually certain that readers will recognize some of these poems and their authors or provenance, I would greatly appreciate hearing from them, with any corrections they can make.

When editing these poems I have wherever possible used the earliest available version of a poem as the basis for my text. Where that was not possible I have given both the poem's original date and source, when known to me, and the date of the version I have used. In all cases I have indicated the specific source for my own text. Manifest typographical errors have been corrected, but marked by the insertion of brackets. No attempt has been made, however, to "correct" legitimate nineteenth-century variants such as do'nt for don't and Shakspeare for Shakespeare. In three cases, poems have been excerpted, Brooks's "Zóphiël," Oakes Smith's "The Sinless Child," and Rose Elizabeth Cleveland's "The Dilemma of the Nineteenth Century." Otherwise all texts are presented in their entirety. Dates and texts for Dickinson's poems are based either on Johnson's 1955 variorum edition or, preferably, on the Franklin facsimiles (1981). For ease of reference Johnson-assigned numbers for Dickinson's poems have been provided. Where my texts are based on the Franklin facsimiles, I have followed Dickinson's method for indicating the placement of variants but not her lineation, except in one instance ("Four Trees — upon a solitary Acre" [742]). This decision was difficult and reflects my concerns with space and cost rather than any judgment as to the validity of arguments pro or con the use of Dickinson's own lineation.

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