

THE  
FEMALE POETS  
OF  
AMERICA.

BY RUFUS WILMOT GRISWOLD.

I AM OBNOXIOUS TO EACH CARPING TONGUE  
THAT SAYS MY HAND A NEEDLE BETTER FITS;  
A POET'S PEN ALL SCORN I THUS SHOULD WRONG,  
FOR SUCH DESPITE THEY CAST ON FEMALE WITS....  
BUT SURE THE ANTIQUE GREEKS WERE FAR MORE MILD,  
ELSE OF OUR SEX WHY FEIGNED THEY THOSE NINE,  
AND POESY MADE CALLOPE'S OWN CHILD?—  
SO MONGST THE REST THEY PLACED THE ARTS DIVINE.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS: By Anne Bradstreet. Boston, 1640.

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## P R E F A C E.

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It is less easy to be assured of the genuineness of literary ability in women than in men. The moral nature of women, in its finest and richest development, partakes of some of the qualities of genius; it assumes, at least, the similitude of that which in men is the characteristic or accompaniment of the highest grade of mental inspiration. We are in danger, therefore, of mistaking for the efflorescent energy of creative intelligence, that which is only the exuberance of personal "feelings unemployed." We may confound the vivid dreamings of an unsatisfied heart, with the aspirations of a mind impatient of the fetters of time, and matter, and mortality. That may seem to us the abstract imagining of a soul rapt into sympathy with a purer beauty and a higher truth than earth and space exhibit, which in fact shall be only the natural craving of affections, undefined and wandering. The most exquisite susceptibility of the spirit, and the capacity to mirror in dazzling variety the effects which circumstances or surrounding minds work upon it, may be accompanied by no power to originate, nor even, in any proper sense, to reproduce. It does not follow, because the most essential genius in men is marked by qualities which we may call feminine, that such qualities when found in female writers have any certain or just relation to mental superiority. The conditions of æsthetic ability in the two sexes are probably distinct, or even opposite. Among men, we recognise his nature as the most thoroughly artist-like, whose most abstract thoughts still retain a sensuous cast, whose mind is the most completely transfused and incorporated into his feelings. Perhaps the reverse should be considered the test of true art in woman, and we should deem her the truest poet, whose emotions are most refined by reason, whose force of passion is most expanded and controlled into lofty and impersonal forms of imagination. Coming to the duty of criticism, however, with something of this antecedent skepticism, I have reviewed the collection of works which my task brought before me, with frequent admiration and surprise; and leaving to others the less welcome task of rejecting pretensions, which must inspire interest, if they can not command acquiescence, I content myself with expressing, affirmatively, my own conviction, that the writings of Mrs. Maria Brooks, Mrs. Oakes-Smith, Mrs.

Osgood, Mrs. Whitman, and some others here quoted, illustrate as high and sustained a range of poetic art, as the female genius of any age or country can display. The most striking quality of that civilization which is evolving itself in America, is the deference felt for women. As a point in social manners, it is so pervading and so peculiar, as to amount to a national characteristic; and it ought to be valued and vaunted as the pride of our freedom, and the brightest hope of our history. It indicates a more exalted appreciation of an influence that never can be felt too deeply, for it never is exerted but for good. In the absence from us of those great visible and formal institutions by which Europe has been educated, it seems as if Nature had designed that resources of her own providing should guide us onward to the maturity of civil refinement. The increased degree in which women among us are taking a leading part in literature, is one of the circumstances of this augmented distinction and control on their part. The proportion of female writers at this moment in America, far exceeds that which the present or any other age in England exhibits. It is in the West, too, where we look for what is most thoroughly native and essential in American character, that we are principally struck with the number of youthful female voices that soften and enrich the tumult of enterprise, and action, by the interblended music of a calmer and loftier sphere. Those who cherish a belief that the progress of society in this country is destined to develop a school of art, original and special, will perhaps find more decided indications of the infusion of our domestic spirit and temper into literature, in the poetry of our female authors, than in that of our men. It has been suggested by foreign critics, that our citizens are too much devoted to business and politics to feel interest in pursuits which adorn but do not profit, and which beautify existence but do not consolidate power: feminine genius is perhaps destined to retrieve our public character in this respect, and our shores may yet be far resplendent with a temple of art which, while it is a glory of our land, may be a monument to the honor of the sex.

The American people have been thought deficient in that warmth and delicacy of taste, without which there can be no genuine poetic sensibility. Were it true, it were much to be regretted that we should be wanting in that noble capacity to receive pleasure from what is beautiful in nature or exquisite in art—in that venerated sense—that prophetic recognition—that quick, intense perception, which sees the divine relations of all things that delight the eye or kindle the imagination. One endowed with an apprehension like this, becomes purer and more elevated, in sentiment and aspiration, after viewing an embodi-

ment of any such conception as that specimen of genius materialized, the Belvidere Apollo, "at the aspect of which," says Winckelmann, "I forget all the universe: I involuntarily assume the most noble attribute of my being in order to be worthy of its presence." I shall not inquire into the causes of the denial that this fine instinct exists among us. The earlier speculations upon the subject, by Depaw and others, were deemed of sufficient importance to be answered by the two of our presidents who have been most distinguished in literature and philosophy: but they have been repeated, in substance, by De Tocqueville, who had seen, or might have seen, the works of Dana, Bryant, Halleck, Longfellow, and Whittier; of Irving, Cooper, Kennedy, Hawthorne, and Willis; of Webster, Channing, Prescott, Bancroft, and Legaré; of Allston, Leslie, Leutze, Huntington, and Cole; of Powers, Greenough, Crawford, Clevenger, and Brown. Such prejudices, which could not be dispelled by the creations of these men, will be little affected by anything that could be offered here: yet to an understanding guided by candor, the additional display of a body of literature like the present, exhibiting so pervading an *aspiration* after the beautiful—under circumstances, in many cases, so little propitious to its action—and in a sex which in earlier ages has contributed so sparingly to high art—will come with the weight of cumulative testimony.

Several persons are mentioned in this volume whose lives have been no holydays of leisure: those, indeed, who have not in some way been active in practical duties, are exceptions to the common rule. One was a slave—one a domestic servant—one a factory girl: and there are many in the list who had no other time to give to the pursuits of literature but such as was stolen from a frugal and industrious housewifery, from the exhausting cares of teaching, or the fitful repose of sickness. These illustrations of the truth, that the muse is no respecter of conditions, are especially interesting in a country where, though equality is an axiom, it is not a reality, and where prejudice reverses in the application all that theory has affirmed in words. The propriety of bringing before the world compositions produced amid humble and laborious occupations, has been vindicated by Bishop Potter, with so much force and elegance, in his introduction to the Poems of Maria James, that I regret that the limits of this preface forbid my copying what I should wish every reader of this book to be acquainted with.

When I completed "The Poets and Poetry of America," a work of which the public approval has been illustrated in the sale of ten large editions, I determined upon the preparation of the present volume, the appearance of

which has been delayed by my interrupted health. I must be permitted, however, to congratulate with the public, that since my intention was announced and known, others have relieved me from the responsibility of singly executing that which I had been hardy enough singly to plan and propose. Their merits may compensate for my deficiencies. The first volume of this nature which appeared in this country, was printed in Philadelphia in 1844, under the title of "Gems from American Female Poets, with brief biographies, by Rufus W. Griswold." As Mr. T. B. Read, in his "Female Poets of America," (it is Mr. Read's *publisher* who declares, in the advertisement to this work, that "the biographical notices which it contains have been prepared in *every instance* from facts either within his personal knowledge, or communicated to him directly by the authors or their friends,") and Miss C. May, in her "American Female Poets," (in the preface to which she acknowledges a resort to "printed authorities,") have done me the honor to copy that slight performance with only a too faithful closeness, I owe them apologies for having led them into some errors of fact. Both of them, transcribing from the "Gems," speak of Mrs. Mowatt as the daughter of "the late" Mr. Samuel Gouverneur Ogden: I am happy to contradict the record, by stating that Mr. Ogden still enjoys in health and vigor the honors of living excellence. Mr. Read, reproducing my early mistake, has given Mrs. Hall the Christian name of Elizabeth, and the birthplace of Boston. Nothing but the extraordinary haste with which the trifling volume of 1844 was put together, could excuse my ignorance that the name of the authoress of "Miriam" was Louisa Jane, and that she was a native of Newburyport. In one or the other of these volumes are many more errors, for which I confess myself solely responsible: but it would be tedious to point them out, while it would be scarcely necessary to do so, as they will undoubtedly be corrected, from the present work, should the volumes referred to attain to second editions.

It is proper to state that a large number of the poems in this volume are now for the first time printed. Many authors, with a confidence and kindness which are justly appreciated, not only placed at my disposal their entire printed works, but gave me permission to examine and make use of their literary MSS. without limitation.

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