

AMERICAN WOMEN POETS

of the Nineteenth Century



An Anthology

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Lydia Sigourney

TO A SHRED OF LINEN

Would they swept cleaner!—

Here's a littering shred

Of linen left behind—a vile reproach
To all good housewifery. Right glad am I,
That no neat lady, train'd in ancient times
Of pudding-making, and of sampler-work,
And speckless sanctity of household care,
Hath happened here, to spy thee. She, no doubt,
Keen looking through her spectacles, would say,
"This comes of reading books:"—or some spruce beau,
Essenc'd and lily-handed, had he chanc'd
To scan thy slight superficies, 'twoud be
"This comes of writing poetry."—Well—well—
Come forth—offender!—hast thou aught to say?
Canst thou by merry thought, or quaint conceit,
Repay this risk, that I have run for thee?
——Begin at alpha, and resolve thyself
Into thine elements. I see the stalk
And bright, blue flower of flax, which erst o'erspread
That fertile land, where mighty Moses stretch'd
His rod miraculous. I see thy bloom
Tinging, too scantily, these New England vales.
But, lo! the sturdy farmer lifts his flail,
To crush thy bones unpitying, and his wife
With 'kerchief'd head, and eyes brimful of dust,
Thy fibrous nerves, with hatchel-tooth¹ divides.
——I hear a voice of music—and behold!
The ruddy damsel singeth at her wheel,
While by her side the rustic lover sits.
Perchance, his shrewd eye secretly doth count

1. A hatchel or heckle was a tool used for combing flax.

The mass of skeins, which, hanging on the wall,
 Increaseth day by day. Perchance his thought,
 (For men have deeper minds than women—sure!)
 Is calculating what a thrifty wife
 The maid will make; and how his dairy shelves
 Shall groan beneath the weight of golden cheese,
 Made by her dexterous hand, while many a keg
 And pot of butter, to the market borne,
 May, transmigrated, on his back appear,
 In new thanksgiving coats.

Fain would I ask,
 Mine own New England, for thy once loved wheel,
 By sofa and piano quite displac'd.
 Why dost thou banish from thy parlor-hearth
 That old Hygeian harp, whose magic rul'd
 Dyspepsia, as the minstrel-shepherd's skill
 Exorcis'd Saul's ennui? There was no need,
 In those good times, of callisthenics, sure,
 And there was less of gadding, and far more
 Of home-born, heart-felt comfort, rooted strong
 In industry, and bearing such rare fruit,
 As wealth might never purchase.

But come back,
 Thou shred of linen. I did let thee drop,
 In my harangue, as wiser ones have lost
 The thread of their discourse. What was thy lot
 When the rough battery of the loom had stretch'd
 And knit thy sinews, and the chemist sun
 Thy brown complexion bleach'd?

Methinks I scan
 Some idiosyncrasy, that marks thee out
 A defunct pillow-case.—Did the trim guest,
 To the best chamber usher'd, e'er admire
 The snowy whiteness of thy freshen'd youth
 Feeding thy vanity? or some sweet babe
 Pour its pure dream of innocence on thee?

Say, hast thou listen'd to the sick one's moan,
 When there was none to comfort?—or shrunk back
 From the dire tossings of the proud man's brow?
 Or gather'd from young beauty's restless sigh
 A tale of untold love?

Still, close and mute!—
 Wilt tell no secrets, ha?—Well then, go down,
 With all thy churl-kept hoard of curious lore,
 In majesty and mystery, go down
 Into the paper-mill, and from its jaws,
 Stainless and smooth, emerge.—Happy shall be
 The renovation, if on thy fair page
 Wisdom and truth, their hallow'd lineaments
 Trace for posterity. So shall thine end
 Be better than thy birth, and worthier bard
 Thine apotheosis immortalise.