

10. Quoted in Marie Bancroft, *Gleanings from "On And Off the Stage"* (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1892), 55–56 (emphasis original).
11. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).



## Poetess

TRICIA LOOTENS

WHO made the Victorian Poetess white? No one; not ever. The pre-Victorian historical career of Phillis Wheatley; the fictional life of Germaine de Staël's 1795 Senegalese poet Mirza;<sup>1</sup> the public career of nineteenth-century African-American poet, novelist, and orator Frances E. W. Harper; even the present-day currency of "Black Poetess" as a vital category of African-American poetic performance: as all these testify, the popular life of Victorian feminine poetry moves in part through figures and figurations of the Black Poetess. Indeed, positioned as she has long been at the imaginary "heart" of "separate spheres," the mythic Poetess, including the Black Poetess, now invites rereading both as authorized literary agent and mythic inhabitant of that shockingly resilient, albeit historically implausible, fantasy space, the "private sphere." For Poetess performance remains, as it has always been, explosively unstable, bitterly contested, and expressly political. To confront the inseparability of "Poetess"/ "Black Poetess," then, might serve as a means both to invite and incite new readings of the transatlantic, transnational, and even transimperial ambitions of Victorian literary culture.<sup>2</sup>

To compose poetry as a Victorian woman was, by definition, to confront the prospect of adopting, accepting, or even being unwillingly assigned the title of "poetess." It was as "Woman," after all, that public Poetess performers stepped forward, thus entering a rich, troubling company poised (and posed) at the boundaries of history and fantasy. Sappho, juxtaposed with mythology's Philomela and Procne, no less than the Pythia; Felicia Dorothea Hemans, paired with Germaine de Staël's Corinne or Maria Jane Jewsbury's Egeria no less than Letitia Elizabeth Landon or Lydia Huntley Sigourney (the "American

Hemans”); Wheatley, even, shadowed by Staël’s Mirza: such figures helped people a Victorian cultural dream space whose authority claims promised to exceed those of mere mortal, historical existence. Indeed, even at the century’s end, to publish poetry under a woman’s name was to risk being assimilated to the warring company of, say, William Makepeace Thackeray’s Lady Jane Sheepshanks; Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh; Christina Rossetti’s Maude; or even Mark Twain’s Emmeline Grangerford: for “poetess,” whether deployed in dismissive, celebratory, or apparently neutral terms, remained an active category.

Active—and accessible: for as Alfred Tennyson, much less William Sharp (“Fiona Macleod”), famously dramatized, the challenge of performing (as) “Woman” remained open to all. Not “the content of her own generic representation; not a speaker, not an ‘I,’ not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self,”<sup>3</sup> the mythic Poetess was, after all, less a heroine than a heritage: “a ‘trope, available for occupancy’ yet also advertising its vacancy.”<sup>4</sup> “Adoption of the mask of the improvisatrice”; “insistence that love and the domestic affections are primary to a woman’s happiness”; “rejection or condemnation of poetic fame”; “embracing of Edmund Burke’s aesthetic of the beautiful as the goal of female literary desire”: these were her defining requirements—along with “acceptance of the hegemonic doctrine of separate spheres.”<sup>5</sup> For in practice, the Poetess’s vacancy has always been clearly positioned. Policed, however tacitly, by the defining claims of unmarked, uncontested whiteness, Englishness, gentility, chastity, heterosexuality, and orthodox Christian faith, hers remains an imaginary realm whose historically untenable “doctrine” continues, even now, to shape accounts of “the Victorian”—and with them, intransigently racialized, histrionically apolitical post-Victorian fantasies of national innocence.

Open secret: Poetess performance has always been thoroughly public. Even as a space of cliché, the Poetess’s “private sphere” acts as staging-ground for displays of “secret” sorrows: intimate mourning, anguish, and suicidal despair. For generations, mere reference to such Poetess stocks-in-trade invited a highly particular merging of political and formal abjection: a comfortable indulgence in nostalgia, mockery, and contempt. With early Second Wave feminism, this changed. Polemical accounts of “the personal” as “political”; insistence on the potentially violent instabilities, even of the “private sphere” as stereotype: these helped spark an ongoing revolution in sentimental poetic reading. As critical “Keep-off” signs begin to fall, visions of naïve “lack of originality” may resolve into views of bravura citationality; “artificiality” may become

“artifice.” Indeed, the very “gush” itself now seems, to many, increasingly legible as a figure for calculated, corporealized affective force.<sup>6</sup> What *are* Poetess poetics? We are, by now, beginning to ask—and to ask, in part, by moving both through and beyond long-familiar accounts of “separate” (or, more accurately, suspended) spheres, straight towards the very “heart” of a great (and guilt-ridden) “anti-slavery empire.”<sup>7</sup> Who is “Woman,” as she is invoked within struggles to define this always violently unstable, historically implausible visionary heart/hearth/home? Even to pose such a question is to underscore the Poetess’s claims as a figure of transatlantic, transnational, and, indeed, transimperial contestation. Black Poetess: as touchstone and flashpoint for fantasies of a globally expanding “free” (and, indeed, liberatory) British home, hers is a figure we have long occluded—and one we cannot, now, afford to forget.

## NOTES

1. Germaine de Staël, “Mirza, or Letters of a Traveler,” in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women’s Writing, 1783–1823*, trans. Françoise Massardier-Kenney, ed. Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1994), 146–57.
2. Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1–19.
3. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “Lyrical Studies,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 521–30, 523.
4. Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 180.
5. Anne K. Mellor, “Distinguishing the Poetess from the Female Poet,” in *Approaches to Teaching British Women Poets of the Romantic Period*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt and Harriet Kramer Linkin (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1997), 63–68, 64.
6. See, in this context, Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 318–77.
7. See, for example, Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

