

“AN OBTRUSIVE SENSE OF ART”: THE POETESS AND AMERICAN  
PERIODICALS, 1850-1900

Dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the explicit artistry of women poets within the context of American periodicals from 1850 to 1900. The broadest goal is to address how four women poets developed their artistic identities within a periodical culture that was dependent upon gendered conceptions of artistry embodied in the image of the poetess. In periodicals, the “poetess” was consistently depicted as a woman who freely recognized the limits of her sex and wrote poetry that embodied the virtues of the ideal Victorian woman. In contrast to the argument that the poetess tradition restricted women’s artistry, I contend that it actually gave women poets the space and motivation to develop poetic practices that were self-consciously artistic.

By approaching this subject through a study of specific facets of periodical culture, ones that women’s poetry visibly responded to, this project offers a nuanced conception of what women poets’ artistry entailed. Even as there was a uniform “poetess” present in periodicals, women poets’ interactions with and responses to this persona produced vastly different artistic models. Poetesses explicitly demonstrated their artistry when, for example, they deliberately experimented with generic categories and wrote meta-critical poems that obscured or refused simple interpretations. Each chapter focuses on a poetess and a periodical context that was influential in shaping her artistic

identity: Emily Dickinson as a mass media critic and artist within the context of her local paper, the *Springfield Daily Republican*; Charlotte Forten as a Black Victorian Poetess and activist within the context of abolitionist newspapers; Sarah Piatt as an art critic and realist within the context of the periodical discourse on the fine arts; and Celia Thaxter as a conventional poetess and regionalist within the context of the *Atlantic Monthly*. This dissertation concludes that the emergence of women's "obtrusive art" from within a culture so attached to the idea of women's "artlessness" is an important event in American poetic history—one that has not been fully noticed or assessed by literary scholars.

In addressing how women poets' aesthetic agendas were intricately tied to their periodical cultures, this dissertation accomplishes three major goals. First, I extend the rich criticism about the social and political significance of women's poetry by foregrounding women poets' artistic agendas in order to explain how women poets' ability to identify themselves as deliberate literary artists depended on a periodical culture that was adverse to the concept of a "serious woman poet." Second, I broaden the aims of periodical scholarship by illustrating the importance of periodicals to understanding nineteenth-century poets and the specific facets of periodical culture that were fundamental to women's poetics. Finally, and perhaps most importantly to American literature studies as a whole, this project advocates for reintegrating women's poetry into American literary history and for the necessity of reevaluating both nineteenth-century and current conceptions of the poetess so that the term reflects the actual practices and artistry of individual women poets.

*To Diane Thomas and Richard Thomas*

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## FIELD OF STUDY

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE POETESS AND AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

In March 1855, *Peterson's Magazine* published a passionate love poem by a woman named Lily May Soper. In it, Soper professes her undying fervor for her beloved and explains how this beloved serves as a source of artistic and intellectual inspiration. What makes this love poem unusual is that the object of love is not another person, but the periodical, *Peterson's Magazine*. In "Lines to *Peterson's Magazine*," Soper unreservedly declares her love and devotion for the monthly periodical:

I love to linger o'er every page  
Where fancy weaves a magic spell,  
Poetic fires will e'er engage,  
And wake within my heart a swell  
Of uncontrollable delight;  
Til every pulse will wildly thrill,  
And visions dance before my sight,  
Called up by fancy's will.

Be thine the task, to spread abroad  
Pure words for the inquiring mind;  
In learning's high and blest abode,  
Such treasures we may truly find,  
And mine to garner up a share  
Of thoughts that breathe and words that burn,  
To consecrate with gentle care  
To mem'ry's sacred urn. (1-16)

The sexualized rhetoric in this poem is striking, particularly because Soper depicts her creative process in physically passionate terms and because it is a monthly magazine, not

a lover, which ignites her “poetic fires.” It is both the experience of reading the edifying content of *Peterson’s* and holding the physical pages of the magazine that “wake[s] within [her] heart a swell / Of uncontrollable delight” (4-5). The result of this creative and physical union with *Peterson’s* was that Soper experienced a type of poetic inspiration in the Romantic tradition of William Wordsworth, who was immensely popular in nineteenth-century America. In her physically and intellectually excited state, at the end of the first stanza, Soper asserts that, “visions dance[d] before [her] sight, / Called up by fancy’s will” (7-8). Although twenty-first century readers might initially find Soper’s devotion to a periodical humorous, her invocation of the Romantic concept of artistic inspiration indicates that her intentions are serious. In an earnest tone that intensifies in the second stanza, Soper highlights the mutually beneficial relationship between *Peterson’s Magazine* and her artistry. The periodical’s task is to “spread abroad” intellectually stimulating “treasures” for awaiting readers. As a poet, Soper’s role is to read these “treasures” and “garner up” from its pages the “thoughts” and “words” that speak to her as an artist. In return, Soper gives *Peterson’s*, and its readers, a poem dedicated “to mem’ry’s sacred urn.” This poem is intriguing for the self-consciousness with which Soper portrays the reciprocal relationship between the periodical and her artistry—just as a woman cannot live without her lover, Soper seems incapable, or at least unwilling, to live without her muse, *Peterson’s Magazine*.

Soper, who wrote poems for periodicals throughout the mid-century (using her full name, initials, or very likely publishing anonymously), was not the only woman poet to compose a poem about a periodical. In fact, in the second half of the nineteenth

century, numerous American women poets wrote poems that expressed their affection for particular periodicals and discussed how the magazines offered intellectual and emotional comfort. For example, in a poem “Inscribed to the *Home Magazine* of 1861,” Mrs. A. C. S. Allard thanks *Home Magazine* for its “gentle genius,” that “elevate[s]” and “purify[ies]” readers’ minds (Feb. 1861). In another instance, on the opposite coast, Lillian Shuey writes passionately about how the *Overland Monthly* enriches her lonely life in the wilderness more than any person could. The magazine is her steadfast friend, and while she watches people come and go throughout her life, the *Overland Monthly* is a “Good friend” who is “faithful more than all” (Mar. 1886). These heartfelt tributes to individual magazines indicate that periodicals served a crucial role in the lives of women poets. Whether as an intellectual colleague, “a good friend” or an inspiring muse, periodicals clearly fueled the “poetic fires” of women poets.

Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate that periodical culture was a critical agent in women poets’ artistry, and not merely a publication venue. Even as Soper, Allard, Shuey, and many other women poets wrote lyrics professing appreciation and undying love for their favorite periodicals, periodicals did not always express the same level of commitment and adoration toward women poets. Anne Boyd argues that as readers, women were regularly courted by periodicals, primarily because they were thought to be the principal consumers of them. Even the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*, which prided itself on its elite group of male contributors, begrudgingly made the “economically expedient decision to include women among the *Atlantic*’s contributors” in order to attract female readers (Boyd 17). While periodicals desired women readers,

they often criticized women poets who attempted to extend beyond what nineteenth-century periodicals considered to be the natural limits of their sex.

The broadest goal of this project is to illustrate how women poets developed identities as self-conscious literary artists within a periodical culture that was unequivocally dependent on gendered conceptions of artistry. I illustrate how these gendered conceptions of artistry characterized men as artistic and professional poets who wrote poetry that was rooted in thought and objectivity, and, conversely, portrayed women as inartistic and amateur poetesses who wrote poetry rooted in emotion and subjectivity. This gendered hierarchy led to a double-standard in periodicals: men could write poetry that embodied both the feminine and the masculine ideals while women could only write in the tradition of the poetess. In nineteenth-century periodicals, the “poetess” was a woman who freely recognized the limits of her sex and wrote poetry that embodied the virtues of the cult of true womanhood. Consequently, because the poetess was the dominant model of the woman poet in the nineteenth century, periodical reviewers and publishers regularly assumed that women poets and their poetry adhered to the conventions of the poetess.<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation argues that the gendered constraints inherent to the poetess persona motivated women to develop artistic identities on their own terms, which were simultaneously at odds with the periodical “poetess” persona and heavily influenced by it. I contend that the poetess persona, prolific in periodicals, actually gave women the space and motivation to develop poetic identities rooted in self-conscious artistry. I have adopted the term “self-conscious artistry” to describe the overt manipulation of

expectations for the appropriate subject and content of poems by the poetess. The women poets featured in this dissertation, and others who have yet to be studied, demonstrate self-conscious artistry when they deliberately experiment with generic categories and write meta-critical poems that obscure or refuse simple interpretations. While scholars in the tradition of Jane Tompkins and Cheryl Walker have primarily been interested only in the political or social value of the poetesses' poetry, I contend that we need to explore the artistic value of the poetess persona for women poets. Therefore, I do not seek to "recover" or "rescue" women poets from the category of the "poetess." Instead, I illustrate the necessity of reevaluating both nineteenth-century and current conceptions of the poetess so that the term reflects the actual practices and artistry of individual women poets.

In order to understand how women poets developed identities as self-conscious artists, we need to further understand how periodicals defined and used the concept of the "poetess" and how each individual poet defined herself in relationship to this concept. In nineteenth-century American periodicals, "poetess" was a term that could be applied very loosely to describe any woman who wrote poetry. Yet, as scholars like Eliza Richards and Laura Wendorff have noted, the "poetess" also had very specific connotations that described a particular type of female poet and her poetry. These connotations were used to separate women from their male counterparts and to separate "poetesses" from women poets who wrote for political and social reform.<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century literary culture understood the poetess as a natural producer of amateur verse. Restricted by the limits of her sex, the poetess wrote emotional, spontaneous verse, which differed from the more

logical and methodical verse of male poets. The poetess persona was also defined by its embodiment of popular nineteenth-century literary aesthetics. Specifically, the poetess's poetry must offer moral or edifying lessons and use conventional nineteenth-century forms, primarily the lyric.<sup>3</sup> As a whole, poetesses' poetry was always thought to be inferior to their male counterparts and, thus, even the best poetess could never be on par with the male poet.

The nineteenth century's most prestigious literary magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly*, demonstrates how periodicals relied on and promoted the traits of the poetess. As the self-appointed leader of American literary culture, the *Atlantic Monthly* consistently extolled the qualities of the poetess. In an 1872 review of Julia Dorr's collected poems, the *Atlantic* stated:

The poems of Mrs. Dorr have the merits of easy and pleasant verse; and if she nowhere touches very profound meanings, it is to be said in her favor that she never causes her meaning, like Mr. Tennyson's chord of self, to "pass in music out of sight." We think there is not a conundrum in the book; and we are quite sure of much earnest and some delicate feeling. The worst about it all is that there are too many words and too many morals. The greater number of the poems teach each one a lesson at a length implying forgetfulness of the fact that lessons are tedious at the best; but there are certain narrative poems, or ballads, which have greatly compensated us, being done with spirit, brevity, and dramatic form, with an emotion that passes at once to the reader's heart. (May 1872)

In the opening sentence, the reviewer, likely William Dean Howells, who had just taken over as editor of the *Atlantic*, praises Dorr with the adjectives "easy" and "pleasant"—key traits of a model poetess. When Howells compares Dorr to Tennyson, he illustrates how popular literary aesthetics were fundamental to the poetess persona. The only critique Howells levels against Dorr is that she overwhelms the reader with moral



lessons. This was a common criticism that appeared throughout the *Atlantic* reviews; editors and reviewers continually critiqued both male and female poets for stating too many or too obvious morals. The reviewer then suggests that Dorr balances the morality with an “emotion that passes at once to the reader’s heart.” This phrase succinctly embodies one of the most significant characteristics of the poetess for nineteenth-century reviewers and readers. She should, above all else, extol emotion in a way that makes the reader feel as the poet does. The preeminent poetess, regularly singled out by the *Atlantic*, was Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In an article commemorating her death, the *Atlantic Monthly* described her as “the world’s greatest poetess” and characterized her “genius” in decidedly feminine terms (Sep. 1861). Most important for the *Atlantic*, Barrett Browning’s poetry expressed “sympathetic warmth, varying its colors from day to day as though an index of the heart’s barometer” (Sep. 1861). Similar to Howells’ praise of Dorr, the *Atlantic* identified Barrett Browning as the best model of a poetess who *felt* her verse as only a woman could.

A review of Sarah Piatt’s *A Woman’s Poems*, encapsulates the most important quality of the poetess—that she composes poetry like a woman and not like a man. Capitalizing on the appropriateness of Piatt’s title, Howells depicts Piatt as a model poetess: “The author has well named this collection of delicate and graceful verses; for they are thoroughly feminine in thought and expression, in subject and treatment” (Jun. 1871). For Howells, Piatt’s “perfectly feminine” collection embodied the ideal virtues of the poetess. After this affirmation, Howells continues by commenting on Piatt’s poetry and women poets in general:

We like them so well for what they are, that we shall be far from making it a cause of offence in the author that she has not written like a man. It appears to us that the only quality which it is worthwhile for women to contribute to literature is precisely this feminine quality. (Jun. 1871)

In a kind of backhanded compliment, Howells claims that the *Atlantic* cannot fault Piatt for “not writ[ing] like a man” while at the same time implying that writing like a woman *is* a “cause of offence.” Piatt and women poets are not to blame because, according to Howells, their best “contribut[ion]” to the field of literature is their femininity. Although it was unlikely Howells’s intention, his final words epitomize the double-standard inherent in the poetess persona that places men’s poetry as the highest standard and denies women the ability to achieve this standard. The poetess, then, is not only defined by her intrinsic “feminine qualities” but also by what she cannot and should not do—write poetry “like a man.”

Even as the *Atlantic*, and periodical culture generally, encouraged poetesses to respect the gendered hierarchy of artistry, and subsequently remain in their proper artistic sphere, men could compose poetry that drew upon both masculine and feminine qualities without fear of censure or of being considered feminine. For example, an *Atlantic* reviewer might praise Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s verse for its “graceful form, bright color, and delicate perfume” (Aug. 1866) without implying a lesser artistic ability. Instead, the *Atlantic Monthly* regularly implied that male poets possessed an innate superiority on the basis of which they were evaluated in the context of their male peers. For example, in a review of British poet Aubrey De Vere, the *Atlantic* reviewer wrote: “In refined and delicate sensibility, in purity of feeling, in elevation of tone, there is no English writer of

verse at the present day who surpasses him” (Apr. 1862). The reviewer used adjectives like “delicate,” which could be ascribed to a woman, but he also emphasized De Vere’s superiority, suggesting that De Vere achieves this “purity of feeling” through a methodical, studied approach to poetry. The reviewer concludes, “The fine instinct of the poet is united in him with the cultivated taste of a scholar. There is nothing forced or spasmodic in his verse; it is the true expression of character disciplined by thought and study, of fancy quickened by ready sympathies, of feeling deepened and calmed by faith” (Apr. 1862). The difference between De Vere and his female contemporaries is that while both sexes create poetry from internal emotions, De Vere’s is always balanced with the masculine qualities of “thought and study,” “the cultivated taste of a scholar” (Apr. 1862). The best male poet was one who could balance the feeling necessary to describe nature with a masculine logic to mediate the feminine impulses. An 1864 review of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman criticized his poetry because it displays a noticeable imbalance between masculine and feminine creative energies: “What is gained in delicacy is lost in manliness and power” (Jun. 1864). Despite this critique of Tuckerman, men were often forgiven for their temporary lapses into emotion, thanks, in part, to the Romantic tradition and Wordsworth as a model of an ideal poet. In the above review of De Vere, the reviewer compared him to the “master of English verse” (Wordsworth), indicating that his use of emotion possessed a noble purpose (April 1862). What we can observe in these reviews of men’s poetry is that men could take on any of the traits of the poetess without being considered feminine.

These gendered standards of artistry impacted women poets who did not adhere to their proper poetic sphere in that they were regularly censured by periodicals. *Atlantic* reviewers condemned numerous women poets for their poems' complexity, often describing their poetry as overwrought and obscure. The *Atlantic* was particularly critical of women poets who relied too much on the masculine energies of "thought and study" (Apr. 1862). For instance, in an early review of Anne Whitney's *Poems*, the reviewer claimed that "obscurity of thought and a lack of facility in versification cause evident defects in her otherwise fine book" (Dec. 1859). In another review of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Poetic Studies*, Howells emphasizes the complexity of her poetry in negative terms; her poems were filled with "vagueness" and "over-subtlety" (Jul. 1875). Although the editors attempted to understand her poems, Howells concluded, "We think it a fault in the author that they [the poems] are left so vague" (Jul. 1875). While reviewers rarely stated that a woman poet had crossed over into the men's poetic sphere, they seemed obsessed with critiquing the complexity—a definitively masculine trait by nineteenth-century standards—in women's poetry. In a review of "The Poems of Mrs. Spofford, Owen Innsly, and Miss Hutchinson," George Parsons Lathrop explained why women poets could not write the same type of poetry as men: "As a rule, their poetry is more subjective than that of men; they do not treat eagerly and with convincing reality stories and subjects in which they find no relation personal to themselves, so often as men do" (Apr. 1882). In short, artistic complexity belonged to men because of men's innate intellectual superiority and their wealth of experience that comes from a life in the public sphere.

While the *Atlantic*, and numerous other periodicals that followed the *Atlantic*'s lead, regularly critiqued women poets for deviating from the poetess persona it was *Scribner's Monthly* that first identified women poets' defiance as a trend. In a *Scribner's* review of Piatt, a poet who regularly drew strong praise and criticism throughout her career, the magazine admonishes Piatt and her female peers, stating, "The quality of artlessness, which was once so characteristic of the poetry of woman, has given place of late years to an obtrusive sense of art" (May 1877). The review further laments, "The poetry of this period puzzles us more and more. Judging it by the eye and the ear, we have no fault to find with it, but judging it otherwise we find a thousand faults with it. We do not understand much of it, and we certainly do not feel it" (May 1877). This anonymous review is notable for its tone—passionate and exasperated. As the central focus of the review, Piatt bears the brunt of the reviewer's frustration toward women's poetry:

She is studied, and hard, and more dramatic in intention than her subject warrants. [...] Her mind, like the mind of most women, is subjective; but she is not satisfied with it, so she tries to make it objective. She does not wait for thought to come to her, but sallies out in search of thought. She endeavors to realize situations in which she has never been placed and to gain wisdom from imaginary experiences; in other words she strives to be superior to her own personality. (May 1877)

In short, Piatt reaches beyond the acceptable domain of women poets. The reviewer asserts that because Piatt is in possession of a woman's characteristically "subjective" mind, her poetry should center on appropriate form and content for women's poetry and not "sall[y] out in search of thought," the traditional domain of men's poetry. If we adopt the reviewer's gendered binary, in which men's poetry based in thought is superior to

women's poetry based in feeling, then we can observe how the reviewer's frustration with Piatt, as a representative of her female peers, lies in the consciousness of her artistry. Her art is so "obtrusive" the reviewer cannot ignore it. It strays so far from the acceptable range of women's poetry that the reviewer can do nothing but reproach Piatt for "striv[ing] to be superior to her own personality" and attempt to guide her back to her proper sphere. The reviewer concludes by identifying Piatt's poem, "Tradition of Conquest," as "a touching little story of the great Duke of Marlborough," and wishes, "Would that Mrs. Piatt would write more such!" (May 1877). This (grammatically dizzying) plea and the review as a whole betray *Scribner's* awareness and anxiety about the changing nature of women's poetry and a desire for a return to "artlessness." The review's assessment of Piatt and women poets, exemplifies the fundamental "problem" in American poetic culture that this dissertation addresses: women poets' self-consciously "obtrusive sense of art." Hence, within a periodical culture that was firmly attached to its gendered hierarchy of artistry, and the concept of the poetess, new models of artistry emerged from women poets in the second half of the century, ones that contradicted and complicated the poetess persona promoted by the *Atlantic Monthly*. This project finds that the emergence of women's "obtrusive art" from within a culture so attached to the idea of women's "artlessness" is an important event in American poetic history—one that has not been fully noticed or assessed by literary scholars.

In the twenty-first century, writing about women poets' aesthetic agendas does not necessitate the same kinds of justifications that were required of early scholars of American women's literature, like Emily Watts, Cheryl Walker, and Nina Baym, who

had to justify women's literature as a valid field of study. Perhaps one of the greatest accomplishments of early feminist scholars is that, for the most part, my generation of scholars treats American women's literature as a self-evident literary tradition. Retracing the scholarly paths that have led me to this subject reveals an important evolution in literary history as well as in the scholarship of American poetry and women's writing, one that moves from the study of the social and political value of women's poetry to my focus on its aesthetic value.

A reevaluation of nineteenth-century women poets is particularly important to American literary studies because, for most of the twentieth century, scholarship has consistently ignored and devalued the vast poetic output of hundreds of poets, particularly women, from 1850 to 1900. Edmund Clarence Stedman, an influential nineteenth-century anthologist and poet, referred to this period as the "twilight interval" of American poetry that could only offer a seamless mass of "minor voices [with] their tentative modes and tones" (xxviii). As a result, twentieth-century criticism and major anthologies isolate Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as the sole geniuses during an otherwise barren poetic period. Joseph Harrington succinctly encapsulates the "problem" of poetry within American literary scholarship in the title of his essay, "Why American Poetry is Not American Literature" (1996). Harrington argues that "the exclusion of American poetry from 'American literature' and the identification of the latter as prose narrative has more to do with institutional history than with any inherent generic or national characteristics" (510).<sup>4</sup> According to Harrington, as well as Alan Golding and Timothy Morris, the rise of modernism and the concurrent development of American

literature as an academic discipline mark the historical moment of the reduction of the canon of American poetry to a handful of poets.<sup>5</sup> In *Sentimental Modernism* (1991), Suzanne Clarke rehearses a common critical argument: beginning in the early twentieth century, writers and critics concluded that late nineteenth-century poetry's emphasis on lyricism and the genteel paled in comparison to modernism's call to "make it new" in content and form. George Santayana's famous essay "Genteel American Poetry" (1915) captures the disdain modernists held for the dominant poetic mode of the nineteenth century: genteel poetry is "simple, sweet, humane Protestant literature, grandmotherly in that sedate spectacled wonder with which it gazed at this terrible world and said how beautiful and how interesting it all was" (73). In short, the second half of the nineteenth century had only one poetic mode to offer American literature: the genteel lyric, which is thematically pedestrian and formally deficient. Santayana's characterization mirrors Stedman's description of the period as the "twilight interval" of American poetry. We see this trend emerge repeatedly in foundational poetry studies such as Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961) and David Perkins's *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (1976). I note these works not to find fault but rather to demonstrate how ingrained this idea of the "twilight interval" is to scholarly narratives about the development of American poetry. In his assessment of American poetry, Harrington identifies what I consider to be the major implication of this scholarly history: the devaluation of poetry from 1850-1900 has less to do with the poetry itself and more to do with how we have been taught to interpret the time period as a bland precursor to modernist experimentation.



The institutional history of American poetry impacts the study of nineteenth-century American women poets because critical interest in women's poetry continues to be years behind the study of women's fiction. Since Jane Tompkins's foundational 1985 study of the political significance of sentimental novels, scholars have actively explored the social and cultural value of women's fiction and other prose literature. Within the last ten years, scholars have begun to address the aesthetic agendas of women authors and their aspirations to become serious and professional literary artists. For instance, Anne Boyd, in *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (2004), describes how postbellum women saw writing and publication as "a central part of their identities, leading to the development of new ambitions as they sought to fulfill their potential as artists" (2). Similarly, Naomi Sofer's *"Making the 'America of Art'": Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (2005) identifies women's fiction and prose writings after the Civil War as self-consciously invested in aesthetic purposes and situates these purposes within American culture's discourse on the purpose of art in American society.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Susan S. Williams's study, *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850-1900* (2006), illustrates how the parlor served as a transition site between the "private social writing" of early women writers to the "public professional writing" of women authors after 1850.<sup>7</sup> My project extends this scholarly work to the arena of women poets in order to more fully integrate their artistry into women's literary history.

My study of women poets in terms of aesthetics, therefore, corrects a tradition that continues to portray women poets, or poetesses, as the worst offenders of the

“twilight interval.” As Cheryl Walker observed, the poetess was such a powerful term, and comical image, in the nineteenth century that Mark Twain was able to create Emmeline Grangerford with the assurance that his readers would recognize the trope of the poetess (Walker 23). For scholars writing throughout the twentieth century, the image of Emmeline Grangerford, as a hopelessly terrible but prolific woman poet, epitomized the poetess persona. When Walker published her comprehensive study of nineteenth-century women’s poetry in 1982, *A Nightingale’s Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900*, her goal was to explore the social power and powerlessness that the poetess persona afforded women poets, attempting to separate the poetess, or “nightingale,” from the humorous character of Emmeline Grangerford.<sup>8</sup> According to Walker, the “nightingale” was a kind of “female sage” whose burden was to write poetry that was “bound up with themes of aspiration and frustrated longing” (15). By tracing the continuities from Anne Bradstreet in the seventeenth century to Louise Guiney in the 1890s, Walker argues that women’s poetry possessed its own literary tradition, one in which the poetess played a significant role. In the scholarship that follows Walker’s initial study, critics like Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Joanne Dobson, and Elizabeth Petrino have sought—sometimes overtly and other times implicitly—to distance women poets from the image of the foolish and comical poetess by uncovering the social and political relevance of women’s poetry.<sup>9</sup>

The most comprehensive study of women’s poetry since Walker, and the most instructive study for my project, is Paula Bernat Bennett’s *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800-1900* (2003). Through an

exhaustive study of women's newspaper and magazine poetry of the nineteenth century, Bennett argues that the tradition of women's poetry is most accurately characterized by its public and political role in nineteenth-century culture. Bennett locates the origins of nineteenth-century verse in the eighteenth-century genre of complaint poetry that appeared in early American newspapers. Bennett demonstrates how nineteenth-century lyric poetry emerged from this highly political literary tradition in the eighteenth century and argues that scholars need to study lyric poetry in the social and historical contexts it originated in rather than extracting it from these contexts (4). When we locate women's lyric poetry within its historical context, Bennett persuasively demonstrates that the tradition of women's poetry can no longer be seen as an apolitical genteel tradition. Instead, Bennett illustrates how women poets consistently used their poetry to advocate for social change and juridical rights throughout the century (10).

I extend Bennett's and other scholars' work on the political and social significance of women's poetry into the realm of artistry. In doing so, I am indebted to the work of Mary Loeffelholz. Similar in purpose to Bennett, Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (2004) argues that American women's poetry is not apolitical or asocial as new critical constructions of poetry suggest. Instead, Loeffelholz uses women's poetry to chart the emergence of high culture in the nineteenth century, which she marks through the changing site of the production and consumption of women's poetry—from the didactic purposes of the school setting in the first half of the century to the high aesthetic agendas of the salon in the second half of the century. Women poets' artistry is a wide and varied field, and

while my approach to this subject differs from Loeffelholz's method in important ways, our studies should be interpreted as complementary rather than competing. Unlike Loeffelholz's monograph, a central claim of my dissertation is that women poets could not construct their sense of artistry outside of the idea of the poetess. Hence, in order to understand how women poets developed their artistic identities, I examine how each individual poet defined herself in relationship to the image of the poetess promoted by periodicals. By approaching this subject through a study of specific facets of periodical culture, ones that women's poetry visibly responded to, this project offers a more exacting conception of what women poets' artistry entailed. Although there was a uniform "poetess" present in periodicals, women poets' interactions with and responses to this persona produced vastly different artistic models.

Methodologically, my study of women's poetics is largely historical. My decision to focus on American periodicals is not an arbitrary venue I selected to correct a scholarly gap (although my project does this, too) or just one of many sites to understand women poets' historical circumstances. Rather, periodicals are the most appropriate historical venue because in the second half of the nineteenth century, as William Charvat has claimed, "the periodical became the primary outlet for poets" (102). In *The Profession of Authorship* (1968), Charvat asserts, "the rise of the American magazine was, indeed, crucial in the development of American poetry," especially the brief lyric form (102). The lyric, in particular, was "excellent 'filler' not only because an editor must cover all of his white space with type but because magazine buyers, geared to brevity, read and run" (102). Hence, periodicals were essential to the development of

American poetry both on the large scale described by Charvat and on the small scale as captured in Soper's poem to *Peterson's Magazine*.<sup>10</sup>

During the fifty years that I cover in this dissertation, periodicals became a prominent and prolific element of American society. For instance, the number of magazines published in America increased over four and a half times, from 700 in 1865 to 3,300 in 1885 (Mott 3: 5). Circulation rates for periodicals rose to meet the numbers of magazines available to readers. Census records indicate that *Godey's Lady Book* circulation rates increased from 70,000 in 1851 to 150,000 by the start of the Civil War (Spiller 805-6). In the postbellum era, *Harper's Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly* consistently held circulation rates of over 100,000 from 1865-1885 (Mott 3: 6). More significant than the numbers of periodicals and the rates of circulation is that the period from 1850 to 1900 witnessed an increase in the importance of periodicals to Americans' daily lives and literary culture. As I discuss in chapter one, for example, Emily Dickinson's local newspaper, the *Springfield Daily Republican*, predicted that the periodical would make the book extinct by 1900 (8 Sep. 1860). The *Republican* stated that the newspaper was the "only book possible" for the busy post-industrial America and that there were "multitudes [...] who not only read nothing but newspapers but who [had] time to read nothing but newspapers" (8 Sep. 1860). Perhaps the best literary representation of the *Republican's* assertion is William Dean Howells's character Silas Lapham, who claims, "I get about all the reading I want in the newspapers" (89). Even though Silas's statement is riddled with class issues that define his character, the tenor of his remark—nineteenth-century readers were increasingly more likely to turn to

periodicals rather than books—has not escaped scholarly notice. Collections like *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America* (1999), “*The Only Efficient Instrument*”: *American Women Writers and the Periodical, 1837-1916* (2001), *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (2003), *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth-Century America* (2005), and *Seeking a Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the 19th Century Press* (2009) demonstrate a sustained scholarly focus on periodicals (magazines, newspapers, journals, reviews, and pamphlets), recognizing them as the centerpiece of nineteenth-century literary culture.<sup>11</sup>

Periodicals held a vital role in American literary and popular culture because, in addition to technological developments in the publishing and papermaking processes that made periodicals widely available, the rise of periodicals in America were integral to one of the most important developments in nineteenth-century American literature: the emergence of high culture. Scholars like Lawrence Levine and Richard Brodhead argue that high culture in America came to delineate the standards for highbrow and lowbrow literature shortly before and long after the Civil War.<sup>12</sup> Periodicals were one of the most important mediums of this culture. Indeed, Nancy Glazener’s *Reading for Realism* (1997) persuasively argues that an elite group of periodicals, led by the *Atlantic Monthly*, played a significant role in forming and dictating standards for highbrow culture. As Glazener demonstrates, the *Atlantic Monthly*’s influence was far-reaching and cannot be over-emphasized; newspapers and magazines habitually reviewed and summarized the *Atlantic Monthly* and other high culture literary monthlies, which Glazener labels the “Atlantic Group.”<sup>13</sup> In these summaries, other periodicals regularly acknowledged and

praised the high culture agenda of the *Atlantic*. For instance, the *Christian Union*, a weekly Baptist magazine printed in New York described the lofty goals held by one of the *Atlantic*'s first publishers, Moses Dresser Phillips, and first editor, James Russell Lowell:

[Phillips] and the editor did not propose to make a "popular" magazine, but a strong one—as strong and good as the state of literature in America would or could make possible. In fact, Mr. Lowell, writing an obituary notice on Mr. Phillips, said, in the number for October 1859, that it was the wish and hope of that gentleman "that the *Atlantic* should represent what was best in American thought and letters." (Nov. 1874)

The *Atlantic* influenced not only magazines with a high circulation rate like New York's *Christian Union*, but also the small, regional papers such as Dickinson's *Springfield Daily Republican* and a small Pennsylvania periodical, the *Mercersburg Review*, published in association with Franklin and Marshall College. Before its overview of the "*Atlantic* for 1876," *The Mercersburg Review* stated, "The *Atlantic Monthly* is one of our best American monthlies, and we may say *the best* in its own character. It aims to be a literary magazine of high order, and it has realized its aim" (Jan. 1876). These statements represent one of the most significant trends in a diffuse and dynamic periodical culture. The majority of periodicals recognized the *Atlantic Monthly*, and to a lesser extent, the periodicals that comprise the Atlantic Group, as America's cultural leader. Periodicals possessed unwavering confidence in the *Atlantic*, allowing this "flagship" of high culture to define literary standards, especially in reference to women poets.

In addressing how women poets' aesthetic agendas were intricately tied to their periodical cultures, and specifically the concept of the poetess, this dissertation

accomplishes three major goals. First, building on the rich criticism about the social and political significance of women's poetry, I extend our understanding of women poets' self-conscious artistry. By foregrounding women poets' artistic agendas and uncovering the aesthetic nuances of their work, I explain how women poets' ability to identify themselves as deliberate literary artists depended on periodical culture that was adverse to the concept of a "serious woman poet." Second, I broaden the work of periodical scholars such as Bennett and Glazener by illustrating the importance of periodicals to understanding nineteenth-century poets and the specific facets of periodical culture that were fundamental to women's poetics. Finally, and perhaps most importantly to American literature studies as a whole, this project advocates for reintegrating poetry, especially women's poetry, into American literary history. No longer can the second half of the nineteenth century be treated as a "twilight interval" in American poetry.

This project does not aim to be a comprehensive survey; if it did, it would most certainly have included poets like Helen Hunt Jackson, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Emma Lazarus. Instead of a comprehensive survey of all significant women poets, this study offers what I consider to be an essential area in need of development: in-depth qualitative studies of nineteenth-century women poets. Only by careful and extended focus on individual women poets can we hope to put to rest the image of the woman poet as just one of the indefinable mass of amateur verse-makers. Thus, in this dissertation, I study four poets who represent different models of artistry through their interactions with their periodical cultures: Dickinson as a mass media critic and artist, Forten as a Black Victorian poetess and activist, Piatt as an art critic and



realist, and Thaxter as a conventional poetess and regionalist. Notably, these poets are best defined by not a single model but, more often, two roles that the poets balanced. Additionally, in the years between 1850 and 1900, the rise of the prominence of periodicals and the emergence of high culture coincided with larger cultural and historical changes for women in American society, most notably the abolitionist, feminist, and reform movements that gave women unprecedented access to the public sphere. Thus, as America was defining its cultural identity, women poets from 1850 to 1900 were able to redefine the identity of the woman poet by crafting new models of artistry.

All the poets of this dissertation are exemplars of self-conscious artists who possessed complex artistic principles. Each chapter showcases a periodical context that was specific to a poet and became undeniably influential in shaping her poetic identity. The chapters are organized by how the poets primarily interacted with periodical culture, moving from poets who were predominantly avid readers of periodicals to poets who were avid writers for them. I begin with the only canonized woman poet of the nineteenth century, who was virtually unknown in her own culture, Emily Dickinson, and end with a poet who was hugely popular in the nineteenth century but who is virtually unknown and unstudied today, Celia Thaxter. I identify Dickinson and Charlotte Forten as primarily active periodical readers, not prolific producers, because their periodical oeuvres were either accidental or relatively small. As periodical readers, Dickinson's and Forten's poetics respond directly to political and artistic issues within their specific periodical cultures—a regional daily newspaper and Boston abolitionist newspapers. In contrast, as poets who actively published in periodicals for both economic and artistic

reasons, Sarah Piatt's and Thaxter's poetics respond to periodical cultures that center on the Atlantic Group. Both poets engage directly with the gendered standards of artistry that the Atlantic Group advocated, and they serve as models of women poets that balance periodical standards with their own artistic inclinations.

By beginning my study with Emily Dickinson, I demonstrate that even a fiercely private poet's verse was deeply affected by periodicals, specifically her local daily newspaper, the *Springfield Daily Republican*. Chapter one explores how the *Republican* informs both the subject and the form of Dickinson's poetry. Dickinson responded to a variety of unusual and seemingly uninteresting components of the newspaper: from a mundane medical advertisement to routine stock and weather reports, and from the *Republican*'s frequent mission statements to its commentary on the developing technology of the telegraph. The eclectic nature of the *Republican*, its self-assurance in its role in the development of mass media news in America, as well as Dickinson's personal connection to its editors, makes this newspaper an ideal site for Dickinson to interrogate mass media, since she could write private letters to its editor that responded to the newspaper's mass (and public) identity. By considering how Dickinson's poetry addresses the *Republican*, in content as well as form, we can observe how the newspaper gave Dickinson occasion to contemplate the larger issue of the nature of mass communication. I argue that Dickinson envisions mass communication as diminishing the importance of the individual by treating readers as an undefined collective and thus forcing the reader into a single, predefined role. In response to this unnatural homogenization, Dickinson models how the artist, specifically the woman poet, can

prosper in the era of mass communication by crafting individualized works of art from what is produced for an undefined vast readership.

Just as Dickinson wrote back to the *Springfield Republican* about the effects of mass communication, African American poet Charlotte Forten responded to abolitionist newspapers concerning the role of poetry in the abolitionist movement. As an extremely well-educated activist and a member of one of Philadelphia's most prestigious black families, Forten's class position and education made her uniquely able to comment on the conflict between activist and aesthetic principles in abolitionist poetry. In chapter two, I explore how Forten's self-conception as a poet emerged from her reading of and publishing in both abolitionist newspapers, like *The Liberator* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and elite literary journals, including the *Atlantic Monthly*. I contend that Forten's poetic identity was motivated by two forces that Forten found equally compelling but also irreconcilable: writing poetry that served the abolitionist movement and writing poetry in the poetess tradition. That is, on one hand, Forten was a poet deeply committed to being an activist in the abolitionist movement and saw her poetry as a way to persuade readers to support the movement. On the other, Forten saw herself as a nineteenth-century woman poet, a poetess, invested in composing poetry that suppressed political issues and that, instead, was intended to be written and read primarily for pleasure or apolitical benign edification. I argue that Forten's conflicted poetic identity emerged from her subject position that I identify as a "Black Victorian poetess." Forten offers scholars an essential model of a periodical poet who consciously addresses the divide between activism and aesthetics in a culture defined by slavery and racism. Thus,

for both her nineteenth-century readers and twenty-first century critics, Forten crafted a new artistic model by integrating her racial politics into her identity as a poetess.

Chapter three examines the work of recently recovered Ohio poet Sarah Piatt. I locate Piatt's periodical poems on the visual arts in the context of the periodical discourse on the fine arts in the *Atlantic Group* and *The Crayon*, the first American periodical entirely devoted to the visual arts. Within this periodical discourse invested in debating the qualities of the artistic genius in highly gendered terms, I identify how Piatt conceptualizes her role as an artist and the aesthetic purpose of her poetry. In direct contrast to the prevailing trend in periodicals to laud the artistic genius, I argue that Piatt rejects this model and advocates a counter-model that deemphasizes the importance of the artist and magnifies the relationship between the audience and art. This reader-centered conception of artistry promotes the reader's interaction with art, and trains readers to critically interpret art for themselves, which bypasses the approval and ratification of critics. By refusing the "genius" artist model for herself, Piatt suggests that women poets should neither aspire to a male-form of artistry nor quietly embody the poetess persona. Instead, Piatt envisions her artistry as a reader-focused democratic experience that emphasizes the central role of women. Repeatedly in Piatt's poetry, the figures who best model this artist and reader mode of interaction are women—Piatt represents them in critical and creative roles, with enough expertise and insight to critique the "artistic geniuses" that periodicals celebrated.

In chapter four, I address New England poet Celia Thaxter and her identity as a prolific and popular poetess of the *Atlantic Monthly*. While Piatt published widely

throughout a variety of American periodicals, Thaxter was consistently recognized as particularly one of the *Atlantic Monthly*'s most important poetesses. Although Thaxter fell into obscurity after her death, during her life she was one of the most popular periodical poets, publishing over 300 periodical poems. In reading Thaxter's poetry in the context of the poetic culture of the *Atlantic Monthly*, I argue that while Thaxter is very much a conventional nineteenth-century poetess, this identity did not restrict her artistry. Instead, I find that the label of "*Atlantic Monthly* poetess" was such a powerful and attractive marker for editors, writers, and readers that Thaxter could compose poetry that challenged and redefined this identity from within. She wrote feminine verse expected of the poetess, local color or realist poems that pleased *Atlantic* editors, particularly Howells, and, poems that articulated Thaxter's gender politics, specifically her commentary on the senseless violence that men inflict upon women and nature. I argue that while *Atlantic Monthly* poetry reviews reinforced Thaxter's reputation as an amateur poetess who writes simple songs, the poetry it printed frequently conflicted with the traits of the poetess. Thus, Thaxter's relationship with the *Atlantic* models what this dissertation argues was an essential disconnect between the poetess that periodicals lauded and the actual poetess writing poems for them. By revealing Thaxter's dissatisfaction with her public image as a poetess, and how she redefined it to express an artistry rooted in regionalism, I do not seek to "recover" or "rescue" Thaxter from the category of "the poetess." Instead, because Thaxter's artistry is intricately tied to the poetess persona, we should understand her poetics as not contradictory to this persona but fundamental to it.

For the conclusion to this study, I address the scholarly benefits of reconstructing the image of the nineteenth-century poetess to encompass how women poets defined it. Just as Thaxter redefined her identity as the *Atlantic Monthly* poetess—one that balanced artistic and market concerns—scholarly understandings of the poetess need to adapt to account for the complex and critical ways nineteenth-century women poets interacted with the poetess identity. This argument emerged partially from a discussion at a panel, “Nineteenth Century Poetry vs. the Poetess,” at the 2009 Society for the Study of American Women Writers Conference in Philadelphia. Thus, in the conclusion, I discuss my project in terms of the scholarly debate that arose from this panel. Ultimately, my dissertation asks readers to look beyond traditional narratives of nineteenth-century poetry to see the intrinsic artistry of women poets and the necessity of integrating these figures into the literary canon. In doing so, I contend that we need to incorporate nineteenth-century poets, particularly women, into American literary history as well as reevaluate the scholarly conception of the poetess so that the term reflects the actual practices and artistry of individual women poets. Finally, the following chapters on four women poets and their respective periodical cultures reminds us of the necessity of, as Soper wrote, “linger[ing] o’ver ever page” that nineteenth-century women poets read and wrote.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I use “poetess” to encompass the literary culture’s assumptions about the popular woman poet as well as popular women poets themselves. Although periodicals do not always employ the term “poetess” to describe every woman poet, reviews, particularly from the *Atlantic*, strongly suggest that periodicals imagine all women poets to be “poetesses.”

<sup>2</sup> See Eliza Richards’ *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe’s Circle* (2004), especially chapter one, “‘The Poetess’ and Poe’s Performance of the Feminine.” Also see, Laura Wendorff’s “‘The Vivid Dreamings of an Unsatisfied Heart’: Gender Ideology, Literary Aesthetics, and the ‘Poetess’ in Nineteenth-Century America” (2001). In order to show how the “poetess” held a central rather than peripheral spot in nineteenth century literary culture, Wendorff discusses how the traits of the poetess, what she refers to as the “poetess ideal,” were incredibly popular in the nineteenth century and readily adopted by male poets. Wendorff’s conclusions about the poetess are primarily based on the major women’s poetry anthologies that were published around mid-century: Rufus Griswold’s *Gems from American Female Poets* (1842) and *The Female Poets of America* (1849), Caroline May’s *The American Female Poets* (1848), and Thomas Read’s *The Female Poets of America* (1849).

<sup>3</sup> Many of these traits naturally intersect with the genteel tradition. While the genteel tradition is important to nineteenth-century American poetry, I follow Wendorff’s lead and suggest that the concept of the poetess is a more productive notion for understanding women’s poetics, especially in relationship to periodicals because “poetess” was such a powerful label in periodicals.

<sup>4</sup> Also see: Brett C. Fox’s “‘That Need, Then, for Poetry?’: The Genteel Tradition and the Continuity of American Literature” (1994).

<sup>5</sup> See Alan Golding’s *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (1995) and Timothy Morris’s *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry* (1995). For scholarship on the development of American literary studies see: Elizabeth Renker’s *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (2007) and Joseph Csicsill’s *Canons by Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literature Anthologies* (2004).

<sup>6</sup> In her study of women prose writers, Sofer argues that it was typical, rather than exceptional, for women writers to integrate their ideas of artists and artistry into their works instead of relegating them to separate prose pieces. In *Making the “America of Art”* (2005), Sofer contends that “it is not until the end of the century that we find women writers producing memoirs in which they articulate their aesthetic vision” (8-9); Sofer cites Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *Chapters from a Life* (1896) and Rebecca Harding Davis’

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*Bits of Gossip* (1904) as the first memoirs in which women provide aesthetic manifestos (230). For instance, nineteen years before *Chapters from a Life*, Phelps publishes *The Story of Avis* (1877), in which she chronicles the rise and fall of a female artist whose roles as wife and mother ultimately ruin her artistic ability. Davis' depiction of an artist in her short story "Life in the Iron Mills" is another example of this trend. In the genre of poetry, Harriet Prescott Spofford's poetic exploration of female creativity and eroticism in "Pomegranate Flowers" offers a type of artistic manifesto. Sofer's argument is specifically about women fiction writers, but I find her ideas are applicable to women poets as well. Sofer bases her argument on Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978).

<sup>7</sup>See the additional foundational works on nineteenth-century women's authorship that I do not directly address in the introduction: Judith Fetterley's and Marjorie Pryse's *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2003), Frances Smith Foster's *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (1993), Elizabeth Ammons' *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (1992), Susan Coultrap-McQuinn's *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), Josephine Donovan's *New England Local Color Literature* (1983), and Nina Baym's *Women's Fiction* (1978). Many of these studies will be discussed as relevant to individual chapters.

<sup>8</sup> For the first comprehensive study of women's poetry see Emily Watts' *The Poetry of American Women: From 1632-1945* (1977).

<sup>9</sup> See Alicia Suskin Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), Joanne Dobson's *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989) and Elizabeth Petrino's *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885* (1995). For studies on the social significance of nineteenth-century American poetry see: Angela Sorby's *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917* (2005) and Joan Shelley Rubin's *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Numerous essays in Meredith McGill's edited collection, *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* (2008), address the important relationship between poetry and American and British periodicals.

<sup>11</sup> Other significant studies of American periodicals include: *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* (1995), *Outsiders in Nineteenth-Century Press History: Multicultural Perspectives* (1995), and *Women in Print: Essays on the Print Culture of American Women from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (2006).



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<sup>12</sup> See Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988), Richard Brodhead's *The Culture of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993). For other discussions of this cultural shift in mid-century America see: Heidi L. Nichols's *The Fashioning of Middle-Class America: Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art and Antebellum Culture* (2004), Jennifer Phegley's *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation* (2004), Ellery Sedgwick's *The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at the High Tide and Ebb* (1994), Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982), Burton Bledstein's *The Culture of Professionalism: the Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (1976), Robert Harris Walker's *The Poet and the Gilded Age: Social Themes in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Verse* (1963).

<sup>13</sup> Glazener uses "the Atlantic Group" to characterize the culturally elite periodicals that dominate the era, defining it as a group that "shared contributors with the Atlantic and each other, endorsed each other's cultural authority, and based that authority in similar understandings of class-inflected cultural trusteeship" (257). "The Atlantic Group" includes: the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Critic*, *The Forum*, *The Galaxy*, *Harper's Monthly*, *Lippincott's*, *The Nation*, *The North American Review*, *Putnam's Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly*/*The Century*.

## CHAPTER 1

### EMILY DICKINSON'S POETICS OF MASS COMMUNICATION AND THE *SPRINGFIELD DAILY REPUBLICAN*

In 1858, the *Springfield Daily Republican* claimed that newspapers were basic “necessities” that survived dire economic times because individuals saw them as essential to their daily lives:

The common law of America now recognizes the newspaper as a family and individual necessity. It is classed with pig and potatoes, cassimere and calico, a thing to be exempted from the reductions of economy, something to be allowed to a widow or an insolvent, in the settlement of an estate,—like the family Bible never to suffer from rapacious creditors, never to be parted with in the direst poverty [...] It is sacred; economy cherishes it, poverty touches it not profanely, the sheriff respects it, the judge of probate court acknowledges it. Happy people! Happy publishers! (21 Jan. 1858)

The *Republican* concluded that the recognized ascendancy of the newspaper produced harmony and prosperity: “happy people” and “happy publishers!” The *Republican* unrelentingly acclaimed the role of newspapers in daily life during the years Emily Dickinson read it. Indeed, the pervasive power of the newspaper was such a conspicuous subject in the *Republican* that it became an invaluable resource for Dickinson’s poetics; she composed numerous poetic responses that critiqued the *Republican*’s unquestioned celebration of, and high-minded rhetoric about, mass communication. Dickinson responded to unusual and seemingly uninteresting components of the newspaper: from a mundane medical advertisement to routine stock and weather reports, and from the

*Republican*'s frequent mission statements to its commentary on the developing technology of the telegraph. By considering how Dickinson's poetry addresses the *Republican* in content as well as form we can observe how the newspaper gave Dickinson occasion to contemplate the larger issue of the nature of mass communication.

Even given this connection between Dickinson and the *Republican*, Dickinson's poetry may initially appear to be an unusual case study to begin a project about the poetess and periodicals. After all, Dickinson's status as the only canonical American woman poet of the nineteenth century has largely depended on her supposedly self-imposed distance from both her female peers and nineteenth-century culture. However, I argue that Dickinson is an exemplar of what my dissertation identifies as a self-consciously artistic woman poet, the first to be recognized as such by the scholarly community. Beginning in the early twentieth century with the formation of the American literature canon, Dickinson has been the only nineteenth-century woman poet to be consistently extracted from the supposed mass of amateur verse-makers of the postbellum era and heralded as a complex, proto-modernist poet.<sup>1</sup> A consequence of her canonical status was that for much of the twentieth century, scholars "de-sexed her," as Elsa Greene has phrased it (70), separating her poetry from her identity as a woman.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1970s, scholars such as Barton Levi St. Armand, Joanne Dobson, Paula Bennett, and Elizabeth Petrino have worked to reconnect Dickinson's poetry with her immediate culture, with her identity as a nineteenth-century woman and with other women poets.<sup>3</sup> I enhance this body of criticism by addressing how Dickinson's reading and contemplation of her specific periodical culture connects her to the practices of the other poetesses of

this dissertation. Just like other women poets in the nineteenth century, Dickinson encountered the poetess tradition through her reading and then responded to it, and revised it, through the writing of her own poetry. Hence, Dickinson's poetics is a model of how the poetess tradition enabled her artistry, an artistry that scholarship continues to characterize as unique. By reconnecting Dickinson to the poetess tradition we can see how she developed a dual identity to relate to her periodical culture, a strategy used by all the poets of this dissertation. Dickinson maintained the personas of an ideal newspaper reader and of an artist, employing these identities in her poetics to critique the effects of the emergence of mass communication in the mid-nineteenth century upon the individual reader and artist.

Dickinson's commentary on this transformation centers on the *Republican's* conscious reflection on its role in the new era of mass communication. As a mass daily newspaper, the *Republican* was disseminated by what Richard Ohmann refers to as "a few for the many" (205). Ohmann's understanding of "mass" incorporates what I consider to be the most important role of the adjective: a few people intentionally producing news, media or communication designed for a large, homogenized audience, treated as a composite "many." Dickinson's poetry explores this aspect of newspaper writing, implying that in the process of "a few" communicating for "the many," the institution of mass communication perpetuates an erasure of the needs of the individual, which leads to fundamentally trivial and untrustworthy relationships with readers.<sup>4</sup>

In her poetry about mass communication, Dickinson demonstrates how the individual, specifically the artist, can prosper in the era of mass communication by taking

what is generic and mass produced and crafting individualized works of art from it. This most often took the form of her preferred type of interpersonal communication, the letter, to serve as an alternative to the various false palliatives and technological optimism she encountered in the *Republican*. Addressing mass communication in her poetry thus became a way for Dickinson to articulate both what she disliked about mass media and what she valued in the medium of the letter. Moreover, Dickinson's poetry reveals a nuanced understanding of the communicative potential of each of these forms. Elizabeth Hewitt describes the letter as a "genre that self-consciously emphasizes the exchange from author to reader" (7). For Dickinson, this self-conscious exchange involved a sense of personal responsibility and connection between the author and the reader, or sender and recipient. That is, the sender could be assured that there was someone behind the pen who was personally invested in receiving communication with one particular reader. Through the content and form of her poetry, Dickinson advocated a medium that nurtured interpersonal connections: Dickinson wrote poetry that constituted a form of communication that privileges the individual through the sender-recipient relationship, and in the content of her poems that address the subject, she praised the letter as an ideal mode of communication. Dickinson saw mass communication as diminishing the importance of the individual by treating readers as an undefined mass and thus forcing the reader into a single, predefined role. In reaction, Dickinson offers the kind of "news" in her poetry that is an alternative to the unidirectional one offered by newspapers. Her "news" does not force the reader to occupy one position; rather, it allows for the possibility of multiple opinions for dialogue and for a mutual construction of discourse.

Although nineteenth-century newspapers regularly depicted themselves as forums for open dialogue, Dickinson did not portray them in this light. Rather, because she understood interpersonal relationships with chosen individuals as the basis for communication, and privileged poems and letters as the best opportunity for self-exploration, Dickinson was invested in depicting the potentially confining and limiting effects of the impersonal position that mass communication inevitably imposed on its readers. This does not imply, though, that Dickinson abjured newspapers and other forms of mass media, especially since she was an avid reader of periodicals like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Monthly*, and the *Hampshire and Franklin Express* (in addition to the *Republican*). Instead, Dickinson's poetry suggests that she saw herself as capable of occupying the position of mass-media reader even as she scrutinized this position as an artist.

Dickinson's personal letters and family connections attest to her intense and long-term engagement with the *Republican*. Dickinson and her family were life-long friends with the editor-in-chief Samuel Bowles and associate editor Josiah Gilbert Holland. When Bowles changed his father's weekly paper into a daily in 1844, the Dickinson household immediately subscribed and received the newspaper for over forty years, ceasing the month that Dickinson died. Dickinson wrote to Holland's wife Elizabeth about the newspaper, stating that she "read in it every night" (L133).<sup>5</sup> In the same letter, Dickinson describes the newspaper's importance to the family: "The *Republican* seems to us like a letter from you, and we break the seal and read it eagerly" (L133). Other letters attest that Dickinson did read the *Republican* "eagerly" and frequently. In an 1859 letter,

again to Mrs. Holland, Dickinson asserts that she learned of the birth of Mrs. Holland's son from the *Republican* (L210).<sup>6</sup> In addition to the personal reasons that the newspaper was significant to Dickinson's daily life, the *Republican* was also a key venue for her poetry. As Karen Dandurand and other scholars have discovered, five out of the ten poems published in Dickinson's lifetime surreptitiously found their way into the *Republican*.<sup>7</sup> A final indication of the newspaper's impact upon Dickinson's life and works is that the subscription to the *Republican* ceased the month that Dickinson died (Kirkby 246).

Even though the Dickinson family subscription records document the magazines and newspapers received at the Dickinson home, her periodical reading remains a largely unexplored—but a potentially rewarding—area for study. For the past thirty years, in an effort to study Dickinson within her culture rather than outside of it, critics such as Jack Capps, Willis Buckingham, and Benjamin Lease have turned to her reading as a way to understand her relationship to contemporary social and political issues.<sup>8</sup> This body of criticism has tended to privilege the famous books in the Dickinson family library, such as the Bible, William Shakespeare's plays, Ralph Waldo Emerson's collected essays, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Dickinson scholars have begun to extend their studies beyond the book-form through, for example, Ingrid Satelmajer's work on the posthumous reception of Dickinson's poetry in periodicals and, more recently, through a special issue of *The Emily Dickinson Journal* devoted to Dickinson's reading.<sup>9</sup>

As editor-in-chief from 1844 until his death in 1878, Bowles possessed almost all of the power in shaping the mission and content of the *Republican*, overseeing every

aspect of its publication with a meticulous eye.<sup>10</sup> His own politics defined the newspaper's political views: like Bowles himself, it supported the abolition of slavery and the women's rights movement. The *Republican*'s taste in literature, on the other hand, was thoroughly conventional, reflecting Bowles's and Holland's literary preferences. Holland, who would later become the editor of *Scribner's Monthly*, served as associate editor of the *Republican* from 1849 to 1868, during which time he praised popular authors like Emerson and Longfellow, acknowledged the *Atlantic* as America's cultural authority, and advocated the most conventional subjects and forms for literature.<sup>11</sup>

Bowles's and Holland's literary preferences intersect with the periodical discourse of the poetess, primarily by reinforcing the popular conception of the poetess as an amateur verse-maker who wrote pleasant poetry. Typical of periodical culture at large, the *Republican* both praised and criticized the poetess's poetry. For instance, in an article by Bowles entitled "When Should We Write?", Bowles critiques what he calls the "literature of misery" that is written mostly by women (7 Jul. 1860). He states, "There is [...] a kind of writing only too common, appealing to the sympathies of the reader without recommending itself to his judgment. It may be called the literature of misery. Its writers are chiefly women, gifted women may be, full of thought and feeling and fancy, but poor, lonely and unhappy" (7 Jul. 1860).<sup>12</sup> Bowles connects women with this genre of "misery" and with key traits of the poetess, the most important being an overabundance of emotion, in this case, melancholy. Despite Bowles's condemnation of it, "the literature of misery" was well represented in the poetry the newspaper printed.



The death of children, loved ones, lost beloveds, and general melancholy pervade the *Republican's* poetry. For instance, local poet Julia Gill's poem "Our Sister" recounts the death of her sister and friend (14 Jul. 1860); and, an anonymous poem, "The Little Grave," was an elegy about a child (24 Nov. 1860). These poems were often written by members of Springfield or the surrounding communities; this local status reinforced the conception of the woman poet as occasional or amateur writers. The *Republican* consistently published local women poets who were favorites of Bowles and Holland, which may account for how five of Dickinson's poems were printed in the newspaper. At the same time, these local women were regularly juxtaposed with nationally recognized poets, such as Longfellow, Lowell, and Emerson; their poems were regularly cut (literally) from the pages from prestigious and popular journals like the *Atlantic Monthly* or *The North American Review* and pasted into the *Republican*, sometimes with the original journal's name still attached, which added further credence to a divide between "bad" and "good" poetry. The *Republican* recapitulated the gendered hierarchy women poets faced in national periodicals: women were limited to writing poetry appropriate for the poetess and, simultaneously, criticized for writing what Bowles referred to as the "literature of misery." Although we can never know how Dickinson interpreted the *Republican's* treatment of women's poetry and literature, it might have contributed to her displeasure when she saw her first published poem in the pages of the *Republican*. When "A narrow Fellow in / the grass" (Fr1096) was surreptitiously published in the newspaper, Dickinson wrote to Higginson: "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me—defeated too of the third line by the

punctuation. The third and fourth were one—I had told you I did not print—I feared you might think me ostensible” (L316). Dickinson’s discontent, as she conveyed it to Higginson, lies in that not only was it printed without her permission but also the *Republican* altered her punctuation, likely so that it was more similar to other women’s poetry that the newspaper printed. This instance suggests that Dickinson’s attention to the *Republican* may be more astute than scholars have previously recognized. In addition to understanding Dickinson’s reading of the *Republican*’s poetry and its commentary on literature, I contend that we need to pay equal attention to her response to other moments in which the *Republican* attempts to dictate reader’s tastes and opinions, particularly on the subject of mass communication.

## I

To understand how Dickinson responded to the newspaper as an important medium of mass communication, one must understand the transition the newspaper underwent in the nineteenth century and how it was instrumental in redefining the terms “communication” and “news.” Similar to most newspapers in the nineteenth century, during the years that Dickinson read it, the *Republican* was in the process of moving to a more commercial model. Since the *Republican* began as a weekly in 1824 and transitioned into a daily in 1844, scholars can observe the changing nature of the newspaper industry in the evolution of the *Republican*. The major factors that impacted the newspaper’s development over the nineteenth century include the inauguration of the penny papers in the 1830s; the increased speed and diffusion of news from the

metropolitan centers to geographically isolated areas; and the advent of the telegraph. All of these factors affect how newspapers changed their definitions of what counted as “news” that was worthy of publication in the papers.

As precursors to the penny papers of the 1830s, early nineteenth-century newspapers were primarily four-page weeklies that were partisan instruments. Local news was not part of these newspapers because it was communicated primarily by word of mouth (Blondheim 13). Instead, these papers conceived of “news” as state and national politics as well as international affairs, although international news was usually two or three weeks old and often reported on events that occurred months ago. For instance, the content of the first issue of the *Evening Post* in 1801, the daily newspaper of the Federalists of New York City included “attacks on the Jeffersonians, essays on American politics and on the press, notices of an upcoming city charter election, accounts of foreign events, reports on shipping, and news about the Philadelphia Theater” (Baldasty 3). In stark contrast, by the end of the nineteenth century the *Evening Post* had grown in material size. An 1897 issue of the *Evening Post*, twelve pages long, included “articles on sports, lectures, murder, road improvements, books, business, auctions, stocks, European money markets, theater, fashion, literature, crime, accidents, parks, and New York real estate, as well as accounts of various local happenings and a calendar of upcoming events” (3). By the late nineteenth century, the average newspaper was eight to twelve pages long, covered a wealth of topics for a diverse readership and possessed savvy business agendas that were disconnected from partisan politics.

Penny papers of the 1830s represent the first shift toward the nonpartisan business papers of the late nineteenth century and were, thus, a significant factor in redefining what “news” was in newspapers. With the emergence of penny papers in the 1830s, readers’ expectations about the purpose of the newspaper changed; readers expected that newspapers cover current and entertaining “news.” Furthermore, because editors of penny papers were outsiders to what was considered “newsworthy” information on state and national politics, they began to focus on local news and to fill their papers with regional news of crimes, accidents, and what came to be known as the “human interest story” (Blondheim 21). Perhaps most notoriously, penny papers introduced entertainment into news reporting. Practically speaking, penny papers also turned to local news because they wanted the news that arrived fastest, which primarily included reports of crimes, fires and stories of local residents. The penny papers’ primary function was to “promote the speed of news at any cost” (Blondheim 20).

The demand for constant and current “news” initiated by the penny papers increased the assumed importance of the news in the daily lives of Americans throughout the nineteenth century. In the *Republican*, Bowles continually predicted that newspapers would eventually overshadow all other media of writing. Under the headline of “Books and Newspapers,” he addressed the supremacy of the newspaper in American society:

Lamartine is reported to have said that at the end of the century the newspaper will be the only book possible. With those who have watched the developments of the newspaper during the last twenty-five years, this will not seem an extravagant statement. There are multitudes, even today, who not only read nothing but newspapers but who have time to read nothing but newspapers. (8 Sep. 1860)

Bowles reacted to French writer and poet Alphonse de Lamartine's condemnation of the influence of the newspaper in the nineteenth century by spinning his negative statement into a positive one:

[A]s the newspaper takes the place of books in the popular usage, it will be improved as an agent in the inculcation of a true taste and a sound morality. [. . .] Men will be brought by it into contact with living, instead of dying realities; and it will be written with the care and acuteness and conscientiousness which characterize the best of our books. (8 Sep. 1860)

By focusing on its role as an agent of taste and morality, Bowles insisted that the *Republican* would improve upon the virtues offered by traditional literary forms such as lyric poetry and the novel. Even in its first years of circulation as a daily, the newspaper announced its purpose quite audaciously as becoming “the fruit of all human thought and action” and “the daily nourishment of every mind” (4 Jan. 1851). Accordingly, the newspaper became the intellectual fodder that was vital for readers' daily sustenance, which in turn nurtured their thoughts and actions day after day. These types of assertions represent how Bowles conceived of the *Republican* as central to the construction and distribution of mass media news. The *Republican's* meditation on its status as mass media made it possible for Dickinson to perform a similar type of meditation in her poetry. Thus, Dickinson was not in dialogue with just any newspaper, or all newspapers in general, but specifically with the *Republican* because it was undergoing a public process of definition.

As it advocated its own importance and greatness as a medium of mass communication, the *Republican*, like many nineteenth-century newspapers, insisted upon its ability to function as a medium of personal communication by attempting to create

meaningful connections with readers and representing their interests—connections that Dickinson challenged. In a statement of “declarations and principles” for 1858, Bowles described the *Republican* as intricately connected to its location “in the center of New England” and “identified with the interests of her people” (30 Jun. 1858). Even though Bowles identified the newspaper with a specific locale, he represented it as a cultural center that radiates outward, citing praise for it from Michigan, Ohio, and Iowa newspapers, as well as subscribers from as far as California. Bowles attributed “the constantly widening circle of readers” to the paper’s ability to elicit “popular sympathy” from readers. In another mission statement for the New Year’s Day edition of 1862, Bowles focused specifically on how the newspaper represented “every theme of practical or theoretical interest to the people of New England” (1 Jan. 1862). Furthermore, Bowles confidently asserted the personal relationship that the *Republican* cultivated with its readers. Stating that the newspaper “has sought successfully to become their guide, companion and friend” (1 Jan. 1862), Bowles indicated his belief that a mass media newspaper could address the individual interests of its readers just as one would those of a friend, essentially suggesting that mass communication can meet the needs that interpersonal communication fulfills. The *Republican*’s continuous meditation on its status as a mass medium invited Dickinson to perform a similar type of meditation in her poetry. Her poetry challenges Bowles’s claim that the newspaper can represent the individual needs of readers by demonstrating how mass communication and interpersonal communication are incongruent. In the poem “Would you like Summer? Taste of our’s—” (Fr272), Dickinson satirizes the *Republican*’s claims to a trustworthy and

personal connection with its readers by transplanting the form of a mass media advertisement from the *Republican* into a personal letter.

Advertisements were essential to both the financial success and physical layout of each issue, often occupying a prominent position on the front page of the paper. In 1859, advertisements covered the entire front page in the weekday editions. Medical advertisements were placed alongside ads selling farm equipment, clothing, and miscellaneous services. They regularly offered remedies for mysterious illnesses with equally mysterious cures, as well as practical solutions for hair loss and missing teeth. The Bliss Dyspeptic Remedy ad was printed in the *Republican* for over three years, from 1858 to 1861.<sup>13</sup> It followed a pattern of questions and answers, covering a medley of ailments:

Have you Dyspepsia?  
Take BLISS DYSPEPTIC REMEDY. [. . .]  
Have you acidity of the stomach?  
Take BLISS DYSPEPTIC REMEDY.  
Troubled with heartburn?  
Take BLISS DYSPEPTIC REMEDY. [. . .]  
Would you have a fat, plump figure?  
Take BLISS DYSPEPTIC REMEDY.  
Would you have more color?  
Take BLISS DYSPEPTIC REMEDY. (2 Jan. 1858)

This advertisement promises that Bliss Dyspeptic Remedy can cure over sixty illnesses or maladies, both common and obscure. While its questions vary over time, the advertisement's structure remains parallel, with the answer always the same: "Take Bliss Dyspeptic Remedy." Given the comprehensive list of maladies, the makers of the Bliss Remedy likely hoped that readers would find that they suffered from at least one of the ailments.

In 1861, Dickinson sent a personal letter to Bowles in which she includes a parody of the Bliss advertisement from the *Republican*. The prose portion of the letter explains the impetus for her correspondence: she wrote to wish Bowles well as he recovered from an illness. Writing on behalf of her sister Lavinia, her sister-in-law Susan, and herself, Dickinson reminds Bowles of a time in the previous year when they had all been together and then, in the final prose paragraph that breaks into verse, offers him religious and natural metaphoric gifts:

We hope our joy to see—you gave of its own degree—to you—We pray  
for your new health—the prayer that goes not down—when they shut the  
church—We offer you our cups—stintless—as to the Bee—the Lily, her  
new Liquors—

Would you like Summer? Taste of our's—  
Spices? Buy, here!  
Ill! We have Berries, for the parching!  
Weary! Furloughs of Down!  
Perplexed! Estates of Violet—Trouble ne'er looked on!  
Captive! We bring Reprieve of Roses!  
Fainting! Flasks of Air!  
Even for Death - a fairy medicine—  
But, which is it—Sir? (L229)<sup>14</sup>

The metaphors that Dickinson “offers” to Bowles in the prose paragraph preceding the poem are immediately striking because they indicate, quite forcibly, that this letter is not a simple get-well letter. Dickinson’s playfulness toward Bowles as a friend—she simultaneously offers her ailing friend the healing power of the communion “cup” as well as the sexualized “cup” of the Lily’s “new Liquors”—carries over to her playfulness toward Bowles as editor of the *Republican*. Here Dickinson implicitly contrasts her preferred form of interpersonal communication, the letter, with a form of mass communication, the mass media advertisement selling the Bliss Dyspeptic Remedy.



Whereas Dickinson presents the relationship between the advertisement and the reader as inherently commercial, and thus suspect, because it had designs upon the reader, she invokes the letter as a model of a purer and more honest form of communication because it has the reader's best interests at heart. Just as the prose portion of the letter appeals to and teases Bowles as a friend, the poem sets out to do the same to him as an editor, by satirizing advertising in his newspaper. In "Would you like Summer? Taste of our's—" Dickinson adopts the form of the Bliss advertisement so that it visibly resembles a medical advertisement from Bowles's newspaper. The opening phrase in the poem, "Would you," corresponds to the advertisement's "Have you." It also imitates the ad's question-and-answer format, albeit in a more condensed form—instead of the fully worded questions of the advertisement, Dickinson relies on one-word questions, such as "Spices?" Finally, Dickinson adopts the imperative mood that the advertisement employs to direct readers to "Take Bliss Dyspeptic Remedy!"

While the poem's form mirrors the advertisement, Dickinson alters what is for sale. She replaces the generic mass-produced medical elixir with intangible remedies: rest ("Furloughs of Down"), serenity ("Estates of Violet"), beauty ("Reprieve of Roses"), and breath ("Flasks of Air"). In contrast to the tangible and purchasable remedy that the mass media advertisement promotes, in her individual letter to Bowles, Dickinson offers natural remedies to cure his particular ailments, mocking the notion that a mass media advertisement and its medicine (things that are purchasable) are what Bowles needs for his ailments. The speaker then proposes to cure one malady that the Bliss advertisement does not address—death—with a "Fairy Medicine." In doing so, Dickinson suggests that

the Bliss advertisement is as absurd as the speaker's hypothetical "Fairy Medicine," but whereas the speaker presents her remedy with a tinge of playfulness and irony, the Bliss advertisement does not. Dickinson's poem suggests the improbability of the existence of any "cure-all," natural or otherwise, that could offer a remedy for each individual ailment. In comparison, her poem promotes natural and intangible remedies that allow for a more organic cure for the individual sufferer.

To return to the impetus for the letter, Bowles's illness, one wonders why Dickinson would send to him a parody of a seemingly mundane advertisement that appeared in the *Republican*. The *Republican* considered advertising economically essential for the business but an unimportant aspect of the newspaper's benevolent mission. From an article in the *Republican*, aptly titled "Something About Advertising," the writer, likely Bowles himself, provides a brief history and defense of advertising as an economic necessity. The article opens by depicting advertising as a type of cultural and historical artifact, "The history of advertising would make no inconsiderable volume. There is nothing which so truly and graphically reflects back the manners, morals, literature, discoveries, charities, and vices of the time" (14 Jan. 1862). After granting advertisements cultural and historical value, the article defends newspaper advertisements specifically, stating that the newspaper "by general consent, is the appropriate organ and receptacle for advertisements" (14 Jan 1862). The final paragraph provides the strongest justification:

Advertising is not the clap-trap and humbug, but rather a necessary auxiliary to every thorough business man. It is his legitimate means of keeping himself and his business before the public, and the men who succeed without employing it are few and far between. Indeed so essential

has it become, that success without it is necessarily limited and uncertain.  
(14 Jan. 1862)

By its end, this article is a powerful manifesto for the business value of advertising, perhaps anticipating objections like those from the Coreys in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), who found advertising aesthetically displeasing. Dickinson did not necessarily find it aesthetically displeasing, but her poem suggests that she did find that it created a false connection with readers, especially when it was printed alongside the *Republican's* mission statements.

Notwithstanding these occasional bold statements about the value of advertising, Bowles primarily suppressed its importance when describing the *Republican's* altruistic mission to readers. That is, although Bowles understood advertising as economically essential for the business and as a manifest part of the physical layout of the newspaper, he never acknowledged this in the numerous mission statements he authored. In the mission statement for 1858, typical of others printed throughout the 1860s, Bowles listed the various qualities that attract and retain readers: "Its compilations are made with the most pains-taking care, the chaff is sifted out and the fresh ruddy kernel alone is given" (30 Jun. 1858). Assured of the integrity and reputation of his newspaper, Bowles asserted, "The course and character of the *SPRINGFIELD REPUBLICAN* are so well known that a declaration of principles and purposes, by its conductors, has become superfluous. Its past is security for its future" (30 Jun. 1858). Bowles associated the newspaper's quality with its ability to extract the reliable information, or the "ruddy kernel," from a mass of undesirable material. His disregard for advertisements could certainly be justified by the fact that they were an accepted part of a print culture that most readers

would either treat as unimportant and harmless or as fascinating and entertaining. However, Dickinson's mimicry of the Bliss advertisement indicates that she found its presence neither unimportant nor meaningless. By satirizing the Bliss remedy, Dickinson critiques the frenzied culture that has no time for "Furloughs of Down" and instead accepts a generic, and temporary, remedy that allows individuals to continue their fast-paced lives rather than sharing intangibles with their loved ones. Dickinson likely found this advertisement a worthy subject for her poetry because it is a microcosm of the type of ironic inconsistencies she encountered in the *Republican* as it continued to define itself as an emblem of mass communication. On one level, she found these inconsistencies ripe for playful mockery. On another level, Dickinson saw the *Republican* attempt to co-opt elements of what she considered the territory of personal communication: trustworthiness and an emotional proximity that can arise from a relationship between two individuals. Her juxtaposition of the two different media of communication—the mass advertisement and the personal letter—reveals their mutual incompatibility. Bowles may have seen these two as complementary, but for Dickinson when the mass media advertisement is read in the context of documents like the mission statements, the contrast that results exposes the falsity of the *Republican's* claims to personal communication with its readers.

## II

Dickinson's response to the *Republican's* coverage of technological advancements in mass media, especially the telegraph, further reveals her apprehensions

about the inability of mass media to achieve the same level of interpersonal communication that writing enables. For Dickinson, the telegraph fails to accomplish the most significant goal of a piece of writing—to serve as a form of personal communication that expands, rather than reduces, the potential for shared connections between individuals.<sup>15</sup> The telegraph, arguably one of the most important technological inventions in the nineteenth century, was developed in a close-knit relationship with newspapers from its inception. Despite the government’s use of the telegraph during the Civil War, media historian Menahem Blondheim finds that the press, not the government, was the telegraph’s “first great patron” (31).<sup>16</sup> Even though twenty-first century readers may view the telegraph as a medium for interpersonal communication, nineteenth-century readers primarily considered it a tool of mass communication connected to the reporting of news. Even by the 1860s the telegraph was too expensive for individual use, except for the very rich (Starr 177). In its first year of operation, “the major users of the telegraph line were members of the commercial community and the press corps” while “the postal service employed the wire only twice during that period” (Blondheim 35). While commercial business communication during the first year of operation sent twice as many messages as the press, the telegraph messages sent by the press were “significantly longer than personal or business messages (press messages averaged forty-six cents, other messages twenty-four cents), and they accounted for 32 percent of the line’s income” (Blondheim 35).

The *Republican* relied on the telegraph to convey news from one newspaper or area of the country to another. Although Dickinson was wealthy enough to send and

receive personal telegrams, her poetry commonly treats the telegraph as a tool of mass communication. In “The Lightning playeth—all the while—” (Fr595), she describes the telegraph using the phrase “the Ropes—above our Head—” and suggests that it is “Continual—with the News—.” This characterization of the literal telegraph wires reveals an instance of how Dickinson associated the telegraph with the transmission of news, which was closely connected to mass media and the newspaper industry.

The *Republican*’s coverage of the development of the Atlantic telegraph consistently portrays the telegraph in an optimistic light. In a series of articles in 1858, the year in which the first telegraph message over the Atlantic cable was sent by Queen Victoria to President Buchanan, the *Republican* expressed immense optimism regarding the ways in which this technological advancement would benefit humanity. Even though the message from Queen Victoria to President Buchanan was incomplete and took days to verify, the *Republican* heralded the transmission as a “triumph of a vast enterprise” and told readers: “For the first fruits of its success, imperfect as they are, let us rejoice. It is the distinguishing event of the age, gloriously marking its material and moral progress upon the record of time (17 Aug. 1858). Another article described the completion of the Atlantic telegraph cable in equally grandiose (and even Shakespearean) rhetoric: “It brings the world into a nutshell: and the eye of progress, in the light of science, sees that the sea like the land, wherever commerce spreads her sails [. . .] will some time, and soon, be a network of wires, bearing the thoughts of men, outrunning wind and steam, and transforming the world into a vast community” (7 Aug. 1858). The *Republican*, like other newspapers at the time, was eager to present the Atlantic telegraph not as a mere

tool to increase the speed of communication, but as a humanitarian invention that would lead to worldwide unity. Throughout this period of sustained excitement, the *Republican* consistently defined the Atlantic cable's potential greatness by its ability to transmit messages over vast distances and almost always ignored or downplayed the content of the messages.

The *Republican*'s emphasis on the medium, rather than the content, of telegraph messages carried over to its general news reports, which highlighted every news story that was "received by the telegraphs." Headlines such as "Latest News by the Telegraph to the *Republican*," "Cable and Telegraph Notes," and "The Latest Markets from the Telegraph" quickly became regular features of the *Republican*. In one instance, a news story on the sensationalized "Sickles Murder Trial," which described the exciting "tenth day of testimony," was framed by the headline "The Latest News by Telegraph to the *Republican*" (15 Apr. 1859). Despite the *Republican*'s effort to stress the importance of telegraphic news, however, much of it was likely inconsequential to readers. In one day's report, typical of telegraph news in the *Republican*, readers learned the following: gold diggers find a lucrative spot near the Gila river; 1000 sheep die of starvation in the desert; "Adam's Express," a company in Montgomery, Alabama, must pay the cost for stolen merchandise; A. H. Stephens, congressional representative from Georgia, will not seek reelection; and an amateur prize fighter in Boston wins a fifty dollar prize (5 Feb. 1859). While relevant to the local communities, these one-line stories likely held little personal meaning for *Republican* readers. They possessed the appearance of meaningful news and

may have been intended for entertainment, but they lacked the context and details to make them relevant to Springfield readers.

The lack of substance was a common critique leveled against the telegraph by Dickinson's literary contemporaries. As Leo Marx famously demonstrates in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Romantic treatises against technology allied technologies like the telegraph against nature, spontaneity, and imagination. For instance, in *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau characterized the advancements in mass communication as "pretty toys" that were an "improved means to an unimproved end" (Thoreau 95). Of the telegraph specifically, Thoreau concluded, "[w]e are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate" (95). Even more pointedly, Emerson, in an address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1867 entitled "The Progress of Culture," posed the questions that dominated the Romantics' and transcendentalists' musings on mass communication: "What is the use of telegraphs? What of News-papers?" (227). For Emerson, the telegraph was one of many "ingenious crutches and machines" that impeded the development of the soul (227). "To know in each social crisis," Emerson wrote, "how men feel in Kansas, in California, the wise man waits for no mails, reads no telegrams. He asks his own heart" (227). Here, Emerson finds the telegraph antithetical to self-improvement and self-reliance because the telegraph encouraged individuals to rely on modern communication methods to learn what others think, rather than to trust their own intuition.



Dickinson's critique of the telegraph was likely influenced by this larger cultural skepticism about its usefulness. Dickinson, however, does not merely dislike the telegraph, but actually faults it for destroying the characteristics of person-to-person communication that she most valued. In Dickinson's characterization, the telegraph encourages readers to turn to it for personal communication but then fails to fulfill their needs, leaving readers voiceless and indifferent. In "Myself can read the Telegrams" (Fr1049), Dickinson depicts the telegraphic news as not merely trivial but actually hostile to personal communication. Importantly, the poem captures the absurdity of her speaker's attempts to read the telegrams—one of the most broadly circulated, mass forms of communication at the time—as a personal letter:

Myself can read the Telegrams  
A Letter chief to me  
The Stock's advance and retrograde  
And what the Markets say

The Weather—how the Rains  
In Counties have begun.  
'Tis News as null as nothing,  
But sweeter so, than none.

Although "Telegrams" is plural and "Letter" is singular, the speaker makes a conscious choice to substitute one for the other. After she transforms the "Telegrams" into a "Letter," the remainder of the poem suggests that the actual content leaves her disappointed, dejected, and unfulfilled. The suggestion that she is reading multiple telegrams that do not warrant a distinction from one another indicates that the "Telegrams" are not personally meant for her, but are more likely designed for a mass readership. The speaker seems to desire the type of message from the telegrams that

Hawthorne's Clifford describes in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). In expostulating on the potential of the telegraph, Clifford states, "An almost spiritual medium, like the electric telegraph, should be consecrated to high, deep, joyful, and holy missions. Lovers, day by day—hour by hour, if so often moved to do it,—might send their heart-throbs from Maine to Florida, with some such words as these 'I love you forever!'" (264). Clifford suggests that telegrams could communicate intimate messages between people in love.

In contrast to Clifford's imagined telegrams, the content that Dickinson's speaker treats as a "Letter" is anything but personal. While the act of receiving communication excites the speaker, the content does not. With a lackluster tone, she reports on the stock markets and the weather—two topics unlikely to be the richest parts in a personal letter but readily available in the *Republican*'s daily reports "from the telegraph." For instance, in a typical report on the markets the *Republican* reports on the stocks' inactivity: "There has been but little doing in the market this week, and money rules as before while stocks are if anything a trifle better with small sales" (1 Feb. 1861). The *Republican* considered the lack of change in the markets newsworthy. It acknowledged "there has been but little doing in the market this week" but reported it nonetheless. Dickinson capitalizes on this specific feature when she describes the "stock's advance and retrograde," which suggests that the true nature of the stock market is a type of constant movement without progress. The "Markets" may "say" something to the speaker, but beyond the stock's movement, she does not reveal "what the Markets say," either because it is uninteresting or nonexistent. The fact that she reports on the "retrograd[ing]" stock market without

emotion indicates her general disinterestedness in the content of her “Letter.” The information about the weather is described in an equally lackluster tone and is particularly gloomy considering that the “Rains [...] have begun.” When we consider the uninteresting, impersonal, and dreary content of the “Telegrams” that she consciously chooses to read as a “Letter chief to me,” we must question whether the control she wields over the content and form of her correspondence benefits her in any way.

The speaker is then left in the position of either finding the information personally relevant or admitting its mundane, impersonal nature. When the speaker states at the conclusion of the poem that her “Letter” contains “News as null as nothing,” she acknowledges her inability, as the recipient of a “Letter,” to make impersonal telegraphic news fit the medium of the personal letter. Despite this realization, the speaker concludes by admitting that she would rather have the worthless news “than none” at all. In effect, Dickinson’s poem models the dissatisfied longing of the reader seeking personal contact through the mass media, and suggests that readers are falsely positioned by such media, which trains them to turn to the wrong resources for personal connections. While the information passed in a personal letter may also be in many ways “null as nothing,” the simple writing, sending, and reading of the letter between two people serves the purpose of continued contact, a purpose that the telegraphic news defeats by divorcing the form and the content from an individual hand.

For Dickinson, telegraphic news from the *Republican* positions readers in ways that are potentially alienating because it transforms dialogue between two individuals into a one-way passage of information. Without the form and content of personal

communication, the speaker is left with the option that Dickinson described approximately ten years later when she more playfully suggested, “The Most pathetic thing I do / Is play I hear from you—” (Fr1345). Dickinson acknowledges that imagining, or “playing” at, correspondence cannot substitute for actual personal communication. With this awareness, Dickinson represents one of her major anxieties about the ways in which mass communication threatens personal communication in “Myself can read the Telegrams.” In relying on mass communication to fulfill her needs, the recipient is left without any avenues through which to establish and maintain personal communication. For Dickinson’s recipient, mass communication has invaded the realm of personal communication and effectively isolated her by denying potential interaction with another individual. In this state of isolation, the recipient may be thoughtfully invested in the correspondence, but these traits do not compensate for the absence of a sender, or for what Dickinson sees as the impersonal and trivial nature of mass communication.

Dickinson approaches the antipathy between mass and personal communication from the perspective of the sender in her more popular poem “This is my letter to the World” (Fr519), in which her speaker sends a message about nature to people who do not acknowledge the message’s importance. Dickinson finds that the letter remedies this potential alienation because it does not presume a reader’s interest; rather, the letter invites interest by leaving space for an imaginative exchange between sender and recipient. Whereas the speaker of “Myself can read the Telegrams” attempts to create a personal letter from impersonal telegrams, the speaker of “This is my letter” confidently

chooses to construct a momentous message to an impersonal outside world: “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me— / The simple News that Nature told— / With tender Majesty” (1-4). Within this first stanza, the speaker emphasizes both her choice to write a letter to “the World” as well as the lack of communication she receives from this depersonalized entity. In contrast to what the speaker considers trivial information transmitted by the telegrams, the speaker’s “letter” contains undisclosed majestic news of nature, just as Dickinson’s letter to Bowles offered him natural remedies. The news that “Nature told” is the opposite of the denatured information contrived by a mechanical device. In addition to the naturalness of its “News,” Dickinson emphasizes the medium of communication—the letter—and the significance of its “News”—“majestic”; both of these elements function as the foundation for a personally invested readership. Even though the speaker’s letter embodies the necessary elements for personal interaction with another individual, she is anxious about her ability to control her message in the context of mass communication. In many ways, this poem models Dickinson’s ideal communication from the perspective of the sender—the speaker is actively engaged in expressing a “tender” and natural message to others. Yet, because “Her Message is committed / To Hands I cannot see—” the speaker cannot control how her message is transmitted or to whom it is directed. The unknown hands could be those of the telegraph operator who does not understand or care about the content of the message, which may be why she asks her “Sweet—countrymen—” to evaluate her with kindness; the speaker cannot guarantee the quality of her message once it becomes part of mass communication. Thus, whereas Dickinson models the ideal reader’s position in

“Myself can read the Telegrams,” in “This is my letter to the World” she models the anxiety of the sender who does not have the luxury of an ideal reader. Although Dickinson attempts to exploit the promise of mass communication by writing one “letter to the World,” in the end, mass communication becomes the common denominator that corrupts this ideal communication by eliminating the individualism of either sender or recipient. In further identifying the ways in which mass communication negatively impacts interpersonal communication, Dickinson specifically targets the lofty rhetoric about the telegraph’s potential higher purpose for humanity as an equally problematic consequence of mass media. In poetry as well as editorials, the *Republican* promoted the belief that mass communication, particularly the telegraph, would enable a mass union of all voices throughout the world, a union that would fulfill a Christian utopian vision. This vision was precisely what Emerson would warn against a few years later when he argued that technological advancements in mass communication encourage individuals to imprudently put their faith in a technology for spiritual growth.

Within in a month of reports on the celebration of the Atlantic cable, numerous poems appeared in the *Republican* depicting the telegraph as a “mysterious life-force.” The “Hymn of the Atlantic Telegraph,” which was “sung at the celebration in Walpole, N. H., and probably written by Rev. Dr. Henry Bellows of New York,” portrays the Atlantic telegraph as a “celestial wire” that disciples of Christianity created to serve God:

1.  
Fountain of Light, on high!  
Far from our Source, we die  
Without thy heat!  
Under the waves of care,  
In the long journey’s snare,

With answers to our prayers,  
Make our souls beat.

2.

By the divine Messiah—  
That true celestial wire—  
To heaven we're bound!  
Whisper thy message low,  
Swift let the tidings go,  
'Till Grace run to and fro  
The whole earth round.

3.

With thy word-woven cord  
Bind all men to the Lord,  
And man to man!  
Tie thou the hands of war,  
Strangle the tyrant's law,  
Shut up the lion's jaw,  
Loosen the Lamb!

4.

Again, Lord of earth and sky,  
For thee the sea is dry,  
Solid the wave!  
Fill up death's frightful sea  
Make time, eternity!  
Let heaven and earth agree!  
Faith knows no grave! (1 Sep. 1858)

The most fascinating revelation from Bellows's hymn is the steadfast belief in the Atlantic telegraph's power to transform the world. Read at a celebration of the Atlantic cable, this hymn characterizes the telegraph as a kind of new messiah, a technology with the divine power to connect human beings to each other and to God. This reading becomes more convincing when we consider that nineteenth-century Americans treated the telegraph as a "mysterious life-force" and as what critic Jerusha Hull McCormack characterizes as a "medium for a kind of preternatural communication which not only

eliminated the resistances of time and space but also crossed the barriers between this world and the next” (570-71). Bellows’s hymn embodies these cultural assumptions about the telegraph’s ominous power. Similar to the way in which the *Republican* claimed that the Atlantic cable could “bring the world into a nutshell,” Bellows’s hymn asserted that it would resolve the world’s crises because it allows for communication between all men, and divine communication between men and heaven: “Bind all men to the Lord / And man to man!”

Another poem dedicated to the divine power of the Atlantic cable, “John and Jonathan: A Manifest Destiny Rhyme” by Charles Mackay (23 Jan. 1858) captures the telegraph’s literal and metaphoric significance for two brothers who are missionaries at opposite ends of the world.<sup>17</sup> Framed as a dialogue, the two brothers discuss the ways the telegraph can facilitate their ability to “civilize and teach” God’s message. The final stanza reveals that the transatlantic telegraph will allow them to communicate with each other:

They shook their hands, this noble pair  
And o’er the ‘electric chain’  
Came daily messages of Peace  
And Love betwixt them twain.  
When other nations, sore oppressed,  
Lie dark in Sorrow’s night,  
They look to Jonathan and John,  
And hope for coming light. (23 Jan. 1858)

Here, the telegraph cannot only unite two brothers but also bring their “daily messages of Peace / And Love” to oppressed nations; thus, the telegraph becomes an avenue to metaphorically create fraternal and national unity. The remarkable and elevated religious rhetoric of the poetry complements the boisterous secular rhetoric of the *Republican*



articles about the Atlantic cable. Interestingly, what neither the religious nor the secular writings on the Atlantic telegraph address is precisely how the telegraph will accomplish these magnanimous tasks. Mackay does not detail how the messages sent from brother to brother “o’er the ‘electric chain’” translates into national freedom. This is much more noticeable in Bellows’s hymn, in which he never explains what messages will be sent across the Atlantic. In the *Republican* reports of the Atlantic telegraph, there is an assumption that the ability to communicate will necessarily lead to the creation of a benevolent worldwide community. What we see in the sustained celebratory rhetoric about the telegraph in the *Republican* is how the medium of communication overshadows the content. What exactly the telegraph sends from person to person is unimportant. Instead, these poems posit that the ability to send any message is at the core of the telegraph’s greatness.

Dickinson’s “The only news I know” (Fr820) enacts the logic of the Atlantic cable poems’ rhetoric, imagining what it would be like to receive messages from, to use Bellows’s language, the “divine messiah” through “celestial wires.” In doing so, Dickinson transforms something that is heralded as awe-inspiring into a regular daily activity, effectively demonstrating that mass communication adds nothing to a person’s spiritual growth. Hence, while Bellows has difficulty confining to four stanzas his excitement for the immensity of the “celestial wire,” Dickinson depicts in three brief unemotional lines the transfer of “News” from heaven to earth: “The only news I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality” (1-3). McCormack reads this stanza as Dickinson “solemnly declaring to her mentor,” Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her

rejection of “merely sensationalized news reports” in favor of a more spiritual correspondence (582). McCormack’s reading suggests that the poem is praising the reception of news from “Immortality” as the most significant source. Yet, read in the context of Dickinson’s treatment of the telegraph and other sources of mass communication throughout her poetry, the poem reveals much more of Dickinson’s characteristic playfulness. In describing these divine messages from heaven as mere “Bulletins” that arrive continuously “all Day,” Dickinson’s speaker suggests that even messages from “Immortality” become mundane. The frequency of the message, in contrast to a unique and consequential communication, actually downplays the message’s significance while the impersonality of the messages becomes antithetical to the speaker’s spiritual development.

Her speaker’s treatment of divine messages as inconsequential “Bulletins” indicates that communication for the sake of communication, even through a “celestial wire” or with “Immortality,” does not necessarily produce remarkable “news.” Rather, the speaker seems much more intrigued by the interpersonal relationship that she has with the “You” in the final stanza of the poem: “If other news there be— / Or admirabler show— / I’ll tell it You—” (10-12). Everything the speaker says throughout the poem leads up to the act of personal correspondence with the addressee, which seems to be the most exciting connection for the speaker. While the “Bulletins all Day / From Immortality” may be monotonous for the speaker, the act of describing them for another individual is momentous because it invites a response from the recipient. Dickinson’s poem itself, then, becomes the model of purposeful communication, particularly because

it ends with the promise of future and sustained personal communication with the addressee, which is something that the speakers in “Myself can read the Telegrams” and “This is my letter to the World” never achieve through mass communication.

### III

The telegraph not only impacted mass media and religious culture of America, it also affected the language of communication, which is important when considering Dickinson’s unique poetic style. In “Domesticating Delphi: Emily Dickinson and the Electro-Magnetic Telegraph,” Jerusha Hull McCormack addresses Dickinson’s “telegraphic style” (the language of telegraph messages), particularly her use of dashes, ellipses and capitalized nouns, which were all common practices in telegrams.

McCormack’s interest in Dickinson’s “telegraphic style” focuses on its connection to the nineteenth-century spiritualist movement. Indeed, many of Dickinson’s poems make use of the telegraph as a way to communicate with God. While McCormack is primarily concerned with the telegraph as personal communication related to spirituality, I am interested in how Dickinson’s style was influenced by the changing nature of language used to communicate in the era of mass communication, both in terms of “telegraphese” and the condensed form advocated by newspapers. Placing Dickinson’s form in the context of nineteenth-century methods of mass communication offers an alternative to seeing her form as proto-modernist or as a unique form that emerged entirely from within her. Rather than highly theoretical, ethereal, and beyond her time period, Dickinson’s

poetry can be understood as rooted in the changing nature of language during the period of the emergence of mass communication.

In his history of the telegraph, Lewis Coe describes how the telegraph and Morse code, which was quickly adopted after the advent of the telegraph, changed the language of communication between two parties. For instance, telegraph messages were normally sent without punctuation because punctuation marks were counted and charged as full words (70). Hence, the expense of sending a telegraph often motivated senders to dramatically condense their messages, sometimes to the detriment of the message's meaning. A literary representation of the potential incomprehensibility of telegraph messages appears in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1886), in which Ralph Touchett and his father attempt to decipher a telegram from Mrs. Touchett. About his mother's telegrams, Ralph states:

[Her] telegrams are rather inscrutable. They say women don't know how to write them, but my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation. "Tired America, hot weather awful, return England with niece, first steamer decent cabin." That's the sort of message we get from her—that was the last that came. But there had been another before, which I think contained the first mention of the niece. "Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent." Over that my father and I have scarcely stopped puzzling; it seems to admit of so many interpretations. (27)

The fact that Mrs. Touchett's telegrams are open to "so many interpretations" connects to the fact that she has "thoroughly mastered the art of condensation." Similar to Mrs. Touchett's condensation, press telegraphers created their own shorthand to submit news stories over the telegraph. Coe observes that press telegraphers were a highly skilled group who communicated in "Philips code," which allowed single letters to stand in for

common words (126). In his study of communication in nineteenth-century America, James Carey addresses how the telegraph affected the length of written language: “news wires demanded scientific bare language stripped of colloquialisms” (210). For instance, a “Stringer,” or local reporter who would send his story by telegraph to a New York or Boston office, was required to omit colloquial language and any individual nuance from the story. One of the major effects of this method, Carey concludes is that “the telegraph displaced a fiduciary relationship between writer and reader with a coordinated one, that divorces the story from the storyteller” (211).

Despite the potential disadvantages of telegraphese in terms of the losing the nuances of a message or a story, newspapers and periodicals celebrated the benefits of the telegraph’s effect on language, much like it celebrated its spiritual benefits. For example, the *Atlantic Monthly* addressed the potential benefit of telegraphic Morse code to transform communication. In “The Dot and Line Alphabet,” the writer emphasizes the simplicity of Morse code and its applicability for all methods of communication:

[T]his curious alphabet reduces all the complex machinery of Cadmus and the rest of the writing-masters to characters as simple as can be made by a dot, a space, and a line, variously combined. Thus, the marks . – designate the letter A. The marks – . . . designates the letter B. All the other letters are designated in a simple manner. [...] Long and short make it all, —and wherever long and short can be combined, be it in marks, sounds, sneezes, fainting-fits, canes, or children, ideas can be conveyed by this arrangement of the long and short together” (Oct. 1858).

It is nearly impossible to read this excerpt on Morse code without thinking of Dickinson’s unusual use of dashes in her poetry, especially in her poetry about telegraphs. For example, consider Dickinson’s “The Future—never spoke—” (Fr672), which concluded with the enigmatic line about Fate’s communication with the Future through a

“Telegram.” In addition to the literal parallels that we can see throughout Dickinson’s oeuvre, the discourse on the language of the telegraphs suggests that telegraphese was not simply a form of communication used in the nineteenth century but also a subject that spurred a wealth of writing about condensed language’s effect on communication.

The *Republican* published articles about the value of condensed language not just in relationship to the telegraph but, more generally, in the genres of newspaper writing and literature. One of the most striking features of Bowles’s articles on condensed form is from his weekly column, “Books, Authors, and Art,” in which he advocates writing newspaper articles in short condensed form:

A tremendous thought may be packed into a small compass, made as solid as a cannon ball, and alike projectile, and cut all down before it. Short articles are generally more effective, find more readers, and are more widely copied than long ones. Pack your thoughts closely together and though your article may be brief, it will have weight and will be more likely to make an impression. (14 Jul. 1860)

While it was likely practical for Bowles to argue for condensed prose in the genre of newspaper writing, he also applied the same philosophy to the venue of literature. In an article that offered writing advice, Bowles asserts, “the sketch is better than the novel. Many a thick volume might be condensed into a page of a newspaper, and yet retain its liveliest incidents, its most striking characters, its aroma and zest; in a word, all that makes it readable” (21 Jul. 1864). The *Republican* also published a short excerpt by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, entitled “The Power of Style.” In 1862, weeks before Dickinson would write her first letter to Higginson asking him if her poetry “breathed,” the *Republican* quoted him:

There may be phrases which shall be palaces to dwell in, treasure-houses to explore; a single word may be a window from which one may perceive all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. Oftentimes a word shall speak what accumulated volumes have labored in vain to utter; there may be years of crowded passion in a word, and half a life in a sentence. (31 Mar. 1862)

Within the context of Bowles continually advocating and modeling the virtues of condensed writing, Higginson's assertions about the "power of style" closely mirrors what could potentially be Dickinson's goal in her poetic form—that "there may be years of crowded passion in a word and half a life in a sentence" (31 Mar. 1862). Because Dickinson's form, can very much be described as "a tremendous thought [...] packed into a small compass" (14 Jul. 1860), the *Republican* and periodical culture's discourse on condensed writing likely held some influence on Dickinson's form. The newspaper and telegraphs consistently offered daily examples of condensed writing. Much of Dickinson's poetry about mass communication responds to and condenses articles in the *Republican*; "Would you like summer?" condenses an approximately 100-line advertisement into nine brief lines.

While both newspaper writing and poetry imply a desire to communicate with a reader, there are necessary distinctions between condensed writing in the newspaper and the density of Dickinson's poetry, mainly their different purposes. Newspaper writing, as Bowles described it, is primarily designed to inform, record, or perhaps, entertain and persuade. It is written so that a range of readers can understand it, or as Bowles said above, it should be "readable." Dickinson's poetry, on the other hand, often seems purposefully unreadable. Her characteristic dashes and irregular hymn meter are markers of a desire to make her poetry complex rather than understandable. Yet, much of

Dickinson's poetry centers on questions of communication and relationships with others. In her letter to Bowles in 1862, she exclaims, "I cant explain it Mr Bowles," and then uses a poem to try to communicate her perplexity. At the center of both the language of newspaper and the language of Dickinson's poetry are the subject of communication and the question of whether density in language can enhance or inhibit meaning. Ultimately, I want to suggest that Dickinson's style developed in response to cultural factors and that her reading of the *Republican* was one of several important influences on that style. Thus, mass communication impacted both the content of her poetry and its form.

#### IV

Throughout her poetry that responds to mass communication, Dickinson implicitly argues that the individual, particularly the artist, can survive and potentially thrive in the era of mass communication by taking what is generic and mass produced and crafting individualized works of art from it. Ironically, then, despite her poetic treatises on the trivialities of the forms of mass communication exemplified by the *Republican*, in the end, mass communication becomes a significant resource for her poetics. We see this phenomenon most clearly in a poem like "How News must feel when travelling" (Fr1379), which directly addresses the importance of not just personal communication, but individuality in the era of mass communication. In a move reminiscent of "Myself can read the Telegrams," we see the speaker of "How News must feel" attempt to make "News" into an acquaintance that can feel and think like any other



person. Dickinson personifies “News” and envisions a way in which it might possess the fundamental human abilities to “feel,” “think,” and act (“do”):

How News must feel when travelling  
If News have any Heart  
Alighting at the Dwelling  
'Twill enter like a Dart!

What News must think when pondering  
If News have any Thought  
Concerning the stupendousness  
Of it's perceiveless freight!

What News will do when every Man  
Shall comprehend as one  
And not in all the Universe  
A thing to tell remain?

By personifying “News” and treating it as an independent entity, Dickinson disconnects it from a sender, transferring responsibility for the harsh delivery of the message onto “News” itself. As an independent entity, “News” simultaneously arrives gently, “Alighting at the Dwelling,” but pierces the recipient “like a Dart.” This indicates that “News” is unaware of its negative impact on the recipient and thus does not possess a “Heart.” Dickinson repeats this pattern in the second stanza. Translated as “What news thinks—if news can be said to think at all”—the speaker wonders whether “News” possesses the ability to think, and by the end of the stanza we learn that it cannot because it is unaware of its own “stupendousness / of it's [sic] perceiveless freight.” From Dickinson's use of “perceiveless,” we know that even though “News” is “stupendous,” it neither can be seen nor, more to the point, can see its own “freight.” Ironically, by the end of the second stanza, Dickinson has personified “News,” imagining it can feel and think, and then depersonified it, concluding that it is a medium without heart and without

thought. Dickinson portrays “News,” such a powerful entity in the nineteenth century, as a monolithic medium of communication that cannot invite thought, reflection, or personal responsibility. This effectively relieves “News” of any blame and places it back on the sender.

After such a cynical portrait of the “News” in the first two stanzas, Dickinson’s third stanza achieves what the *Republican* treats as the ultimate goal and logical progression of mass media: instantaneous communication. Dickinson’s speaker wonders what will happen to “News” “when every Man / Shall comprehend as one.” The phrase echoes the *Republican*’s prognostication that the Atlantic telegraph will “transform the world into a vast community” (7 Aug. 1858) and Bellows’s hymn’s claim that it would fulfill a Christian utopian vision of universal spiritual unity (1 Sep. 1858). While the *Republican* treated this unification that mass communication will usher in as the realization of an ideal, Dickinson’s poem focuses on what will happen to the individual “Man” when “every Man / Shall comprehend as one / And not in all the Universe / A thing to tell remain?” The idea that mass communication allows everyone to think “as one” necessitates, Dickinson fears, an erasure of all difference and thus a total loss of individuality. In this poem as well as her poetry about mass communication generally, Dickinson argues against embracing a medium of communication that, as she depicts it, endangers personal interaction and the concept of individuality. Dickinson’s poem reveals that while the union of all voices into one may be a common utopian vision, such unity necessitates the loss of individual voices. In response, her poem argues for and ultimately embodies a form of communication that downplays the significance of “News”

and privileges the individual, the sender-and-recipient relationship, and meaningful content. Rather than a mindless merging of all voices into some mass union idealized by the *Republican*, each person would retain her individuality and be able to establish attentive and complex dialogues with other individuals. Dickinson's poetry about mass communication, then, conceives of the best "News" as inherently dialogic. In contrast to the homogeneity that is possible through mass communication, Dickinson's poetic voice models an alternative in which the transfer of information between individuals can invite thoughtfulness, reflection and congenial discourse, which, in turn, encourages a type of self-exploration by both parties that arises from a genuine relationship.

Dickinson's "The way I read a Letter's this" (700) promotes the individuality that the speaker desires in "How News must feel when traveling." In describing how the speaker reads a letter she reveals: "The Way I read a Letter's—this / 'Tis first—I lock the Door— / And push it with my fingers—next— / For transport it be sure—" (1-4). After secluding herself deep within a room in order to "Counteract a knock," the speaker is free to not just read the letter, but by reading the letter explore the depths of her own individuality, which is exactly what the letter-form offers Dickinson: the opportunity to retain and nurture individuality. Throughout Dickinson's poetics of mass communication, her poems become models for how the individual, particularly the artist, can survive and potentially thrive in the era of mass communication. Dickinson creates meaning from mass communication by taking what is generic and mass-produced and crafting individualized works of art, many of which were sent in or as letters. Ironically, then, despite her poetic treatises on the trivialities of mass communication that she

encounters in the *Republican*, in the end, mass communication becomes meaningful resources for her poetics.

Dickinson's self-conscious artistry about mass communication demonstrates how her periodical culture is an essential resource and inspiration for her poetics. Like the other poetesses of this project, Charlotte Forten, Sarah Piatt, and Celia Thaxter, Dickinson found periodicals to be a complex site both for formulating conceptions of her poetics and publishing a response to those formulations. Because of the negative connotations associated with the poetess tradition, in the past feminist scholars have desired to distance her from the concept of the poetess. Yet, it is important to recognize that Dickinson represents some of the most important traits of the conventional nineteenth-century poetess. As an intensely private poet who (arguably) never aspired to become a public and professional poet, she, at least outwardly, extolled the virtues of the poetess who respected the separate spheres ideology. For instance, Bennett argues in *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (1990) that Dickinson's public persona embodied the poetess and that, because of this, her contemporaries saw her as a poetess (9-10). By devoting herself to household duties, Dickinson's life was a model of domesticity. Her peers' descriptions of her poetry reinforced the tenets of the cult of true womanhood. As Bennett describes, "To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, [Dickinson was] a pattering child. To Joseph Lyman, a figure too rare and spirituous to kiss" (10). While Dickinson embodied her society's conception of the poetess, she also embodies what I identify as the most important trait of the poetesses of this project: Dickinson relates to the concept of the poetess critically. Instead of writing poetry that recapitulated the traits of the

conventional nineteenth-century poetess, evidenced in the local poetry printed in the *Republican*, Dickinson chose to engage with national debates about mass communication in the public sphere, which directly impacted her identity as an individual literary artist. Ultimately, by articulating how Dickinson created her self-conscious artistry through her reading of the *Republican*, this chapter argues for the artistic similarities between Dickinson and other poetesses of the nineteenth century. As we will see in the next chapter, Charlotte Forten provides a second model of a woman poet whose artistry emerged from her careful periodical reading. In contrast to Dickinson, who read, pondered, wrote about, but did not publish poetry that responded to her newspaper, Forten wrote and published poetry that engaged with contentious issues within abolitionist newspapers during the 1850s.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Ingrid Satelmajer's dissertation, "Remapping Dickinson and Periodical Studies" (2004), for a discussion of the posthumous reception of her poetry by periodicals, which was the first step in her canonization. See also Timothy Morris's chapter on Dickinson in *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry* (1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Elsa Greene's "Emily Dickinson was a Poetess" (1972). In my conclusion, I will discuss the significance of Greene's article to past, present, and future studies of women poets. Critical work on Dickinson prior to 1972 was divided along the lines that Greene articulates. That is, Dickinson's sex was primarily addressed in biographical studies but not in studies of her poetry. For examples of this trend see: Grace B. Sherrer's "A Study of Unusual Verb Constructions in the Poems of Emily Dickinson" (1935); Gilbert P. Voigt's "The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson" (1941); Donald F. Connors's "The Significance of Emily Dickinson" (1942); Herbert E. Childs's "Emily Dickinson and Sir Thomas Browne" (1951); Richard Chase's *Emily Dickinson* (1951); Charles Anderson's "The Trap of Time in Emily Dickinson's Poetry" (1959).

<sup>3</sup> See Elizabeth Petrino's *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885* (1998); Paula Bennett's *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (1990); Joanne Dobson's *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989); and Barton Levi St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and her Culture: The Soul's Society* (1984).

<sup>4</sup> For cultural and historical studies on the development of mass communication in the nineteenth century, see Kevin G. Barnhurst's and John Nerone's *The Form of News: A History* (2001); David Paul Nord's *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (2001); Gerald J. Baldasty's *The Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century* (1992); James W. Carey's *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (1989); Frank Luther Mott's "Facetious News Writing, 1833-1883" (1942); and Alfred M. Lee's *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument* (1937).

<sup>5</sup> The following abbreviations are used to refer to the works of Emily Dickinson: "Fr" for *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998); citation by poem number. "L" for *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958); citation by letter number.

<sup>6</sup> For others of Dickinson's letters in which she references the *Republican* see L204, L316, L381, L564, L866, L908, and L1007.

<sup>7</sup> See Dandurand's "Another Dickinson Poem Published in Her Lifetime" (1982) and "New Dickinson Civil War Publications" (1984).

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<sup>8</sup> For scholarship on Dickinson's reading see: the special issue on Dickinson's reading in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* (Apr. 2010); Willis Buckingham's "Emily Dickinson and the Reading Life" (1996); Joan Kirkby's "Dickinson's Reading" (1996); Benjamin Lease's *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books: Sacred Soundings* (1990); Carlton Lowenberg's *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks* (1986); Richard Sewall's "Books and Reading" in *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974); and Jack Capps's *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886* (1966).

<sup>9</sup> *The Emily Dickinson Journal's* special issue on Dickinson's reading (19.1, Apr. 2010) includes the following essays: Joan Kirkby's "[W]e thought Darwin had thrown 'the Redeemer' away": Darwinizing with Emily Dickinson;" David Cody's "When one's soul's at a white heat": Dickinson and the "Azarian School;" Shannon L. Thomas's "What News must think when pondering": Emily Dickinson, the *Springfield Daily Republican*, and the Poetics of Mass Communication;" and Elizabeth Pertino's "Allusion, Echo, and Literary Influence in Emily Dickinson." For critical work on Dickinson and periodicals, see Eliza Richards's, "'How news must feel when traveling': Dickinson and Civil War Media" (2008); Ingrid Satelmajer's "Fracturing a Master Narrative, Reconstructing 'Sister Sue'" (2008); and Satelmajer's dissertation "Remapping Dickinson and Periodical Studies" (2004); Robert J. Scholnick's "'Don't Tell! They'd Advertise!': Emily Dickinson in the *Round Table*" (1995); and Barton Levi St. Armand's "Emily Dickinson and *The Indicator*: A Transcendental Frolic" (1993). See also Joan Kirkby and Ellen Shoobridge's online archival project, The Dickinson Periodical Project, which began in 1993.

<sup>10</sup> For additional information on Bowles and the *Republican*, see Stephen G. Weisner's *Embattled Editor: The Life of Samuel Bowles* (1986); Richard Hooker's *The Story of an Independent Newspaper: One Hundred Years of the Springfield Republican, 1824-1924* (1924); and George S. Merriam's *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles* (1885).

<sup>11</sup> Holland treated Emerson as the preeminent authority on literature and regularly deferred to Emerson's opinion on literature. The one case in which Holland openly disagreed with Emerson concerned Walt Whitman. Both Bowles and Holland detested Whitman even though Emerson publicly supported Whitman. In April 1860, in the recurring column "Books, Authors, and Art," Holland, in response to the news that a new edition of Whitman's poems would be published soon, stated, "We didn't suppose anybody admired them but Emerson, and that fact was the only really bad thing we ever knew of him" (3 Apr. 1860). Again, in August of the same year, the *Republican* quotes from *The London Saturday Review*, which criticized Whitman for his vulgarity and being "absolutely without sense and decency" (11 Aug. 1860). This critique is followed by fifteen lines from *Leaves of Grass*. This episode becomes significant to a study of Dickinson's newspaper poetics when we consider Dickinson's letter to Higginson, written just two years after these reviews, in which she claims that she "has never read [Whitman's] book—but was told it was distasteful" (25 Apr. 1860). While Dickinson may never have read *Leaves of Grass*, she likely had access to the excerpts reprinted in

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the *Republican*. Considering these reviews from the newspaper that Dickinson read daily alongside her letter to Higginson allows us to suggest that Dickinson was indeed creating a persona for Higginson and also gives a location for her opinion of Whitman. If this new evidence does not offer unequivocal proof that Dickinson read Whitman, it certainly raises the issue of what other missing links can be uncovered in the untapped resource of the *Republican*.

<sup>12</sup> We might consider Bowles's statement that most women who write the "literature of misery" are "poor, lonely, and unhappy" in the context of an article entitled "How an Authoress Did It," (19 Jan. 1859). In this article a reporter explains how a female author attracts a man and eventually secures a marriage; after marriage, the woman gives up her profession as a writer and is transformed from a lonely spinster into a happy wife. See also a similar article on "Literary Misery" by Charles Goddfrey Leland (4 Jan. 1862).

<sup>13</sup> The Bliss Dyspeptic Remedy advertisement also appeared in the Barre Gazette, a newspaper in Barre, Massachusetts, approximately 50 miles northeast of Springfield.

<sup>14</sup> This citation refers to Johnson's edition of Dickinson's letters. The poem, not in the context of the letter, is 272 in Franklin's edition of Dickinson's poetry.

<sup>15</sup> As scholars like Marta Werner and Melanie Hubbard explore, Dickinson's interest in the telegraph also connected to her interest in the materiality of advertisements and telegrams, since she occasionally composed poems on the back of telegrams. For studies on the materiality of Dickinson's poetry see: Melanie Hubbard's "'Turn It, a Little': The Influence of the Daguerreotype and the Stereograph on Emily Dickinson's Use of Manuscript Variants" (2005); Hubbard's "As There Are Apartments: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts and Critical Desire at the Scene of Reading" (2003); Hubbard's "Dickinson's Advertising Flyers: Theorizing Materiality and the Work of Reading" (1998); Marta Werner's *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (1995); and Marta Nell Smith's *Rowing in Eden: Reading Emily Dickinson* (1992).

<sup>16</sup> For cultural histories on the development of the telegraph in the nineteenth century, see Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (2004); Tom Standage's *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth-Century's On-line Pioneers* (1998); Menahem Blondheim's *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (1994); Lewis Coe's *The Telegraph: A History of Morse's Invention and Its Predecessors in the United States* (1993); Daniel J. Czitrom's *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (1982).

<sup>17</sup> This is the same issue in which Mackay's more famous poem "Little Nobody" appears, which, as Thomas Johnson first noted, is the inspiration for Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are You?" (Fr260).



## CHAPTER 2

### CHARLOTTE FORTEN, THE BLACK VICTORIAN POETESS, AND ABOLITIONIST PERIODICALS

In 1859, *The National Antislavery Standard* published “The Two Voices” by African American poet and abolitionist Charlotte Forten. Printed with the epigram, “For *The Standard*,” Forten’s poem describes the conflicted feelings of a woman torn apart by the world’s brutality. In a private reverie, the speaker hears a voice that fuels her feelings of rage and despair and, then a second voice that promotes more virtuous feelings of determination and sacrifice:

In the dim December twilight,  
By the fire I muse alone;  
And a voice within me murmured  
In a deep, impassioned tone—

Murmured first, and then grew stronger,  
Wilder in its thrilling strain—  
“Break, sad heart, for, oh, no longer  
Canst thou bear this ceaseless pain.

“Canst thou bear the bitter anguish,  
All the wrong, and woe, and shame  
That the world hath heaped upon thee,  
Though it hath no cause for blame?

“True it is that thou dost give it  
Hate for hate, and scorn for scorn;  
True it is that thou would’st gladly  
Make it bear what thou hast borne.” [...]

Then another voice spoke to me,  
Spake in accents strong and clear;  
Like proud notes of a trumpet  
Fell its tones upon my ear.

“Shame,” it cried, “oh, weak repiner!  
Hast thou yielded to despair?  
Canst thou win the crown immortal  
If the cross thou wilt not bear?

“Hast thou nothing left to live for?  
Would’st thou leave the glorious strife?  
Know, the life that’s passed in struggling  
Is the true, the only life.

“Canst thou see the souls around thee  
Bravely battling with the wrong,  
And not feeling thy soul within thee  
In the cause of Truth grow strong?

“Art thou, then, the only wronged one?  
With thy sorrows will all cease?  
Thou forgettest other sufferers  
In thy selfish prayer for peace.

“Live for others; work for others;  
Sharing, strive to soothe their woe,  
Till thy heart, no longer fainting,  
With an ardent zeal shall glow.” (1-16, 49-72)

In its content and publication venue, this poem is metonymic of Forten’s poetic identity as a periodical poet in the antebellum era. Sent expressly to *The Standard* on the eve of the Civil War, Forten’s poem models how African American readers can retain hope and persistence in moments of self-doubt. Forten first identifies with the frustration and despair African American readers likely felt, and then, through the second voice, encourages readers to relinquish their “selfish prayer for peace” and, instead, to “live for others” (68-9). “The Two Voices” concludes specifically with a reaffirmation of the

abolitionist cause, and more generally, a determination to end the suffering of others.

The reason and passion of the second voice triumphs, and the speaker ends the poem by stating, “Bravely will I bear earth’s burden” (586).

Although the nineteenth-century habit of reading women’s poetry as reflecting the poet’s genuine feelings could lead to misreadings (Wendorff 111), Forten’s readers would have been correct in attributing the emotion of “The Two Voices” to the poet herself; Forten’s poem mirrors the sentiments that she expressed regularly in the daily journal she kept from 1854 to 1864. For example, in 1855, Forten describes the racism she experiences on a daily basis in Salem, Massachusetts:

Oh! It is hard to go through life meeting contempt with contempt, hatred with hatred, fearing, with too good reason to love and trust hardly anyone whose skin is white, however loveable, attractive and congenial in seeming. In the bitter, passionate feeling of my soul again and again there rises the question, “When, oh! When shall this cease?” “Is there no help?” “How long oh! How long must we continue to suffer—to endure?” Conscience answers it is wrong, it is ignoble to despair; let us labor earnestly and faithfully to acquire knowledge, to break down barriers of prejudice and oppression. Let us take courage, never ceasing to work,—hoping and believing if not for us, for another generation there is a better, brighter day in store, when slavery and prejudice shall vanish before the glorious light of Liberty and Truth. (140)

Mirroring the sentiment and language of “The Two Voices,” this journal entry expresses Forten’s ardent desire to meet “hatred with hatred” when she encounters racism, and demonstrates how she self-monitors these desires. “Conscience,” perhaps Forten’s own or a larger social conscience, guides her away from hatred and toward more productive feelings of faith and courage. “The Two Voices” publicizes Forten’s divided feelings about being an activist in the abolitionist movement, specifically for *The Standard’s*

readers, indicating that her personal struggle could resonate with the larger African American community. In doing so, “The Two Voices” became emblematic of Forten’s antebellum periodical oeuvre. Just as Dickinson wrote back to the *Springfield Republican* about the effects of mass communication on interpersonal relationships, Forten engaged major debates within the abolitionist community and addressed the purpose of poetry in abolitionist newspapers.

Forten’s poetic identity is motivated by two forces that Forten found equally compelling but also irreconcilable: writing poetry that served the abolitionist movement and writing poetry in the poetess tradition. That is, on one hand, Forten was a poet deeply committed to being an activist in the abolitionist movement, and saw her poetry as a way to persuade readers to support the movement. On the other, Forten saw herself as a nineteenth-century woman poet, invested in composing poetry within the poetess tradition that suppressed political issues and was intended to be written and read primarily for pleasure or apolitical benign edification. I argue that Forten’s conflicted poetic identity emerged from her subject position as a “Black Victorian poetess.” I use this term to define the poetics of an African American woman who embodies the traits of what Shirley Carlson identifies as the “Black Victoria” figure. Forten played out her identity as a Black Victorian poetess in the pages of the abolitionist periodicals because she understood her struggle as representative of larger issues within the abolitionist and African American communities that she wanted to address.

According to Carlson’s foundational essay, “Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era” (1992), Carlson defines a “Black Victoria” as an African American

woman who “embodied the genteel behavior of the ‘cult of true womanhood’” and, at the same time, “exemplified the attributes valued by her own race and community” (61).

Hence, the Black Victoria personifies the type of “two-ness,” to use W.E.B. DuBois’s phrase, which has long been associated with African American identity (17). In listing the virtues of the ideal African American woman, Carlson states, “Black Victoria, like her white counterpart, was committed to the domestic sphere, where she was a wife and mother. [...] Morally unassailable, she was virtuous and modest. Her personality was amiable—or ‘sweet’ to use black parlance—she was also altruistic and pious” (62).

While these values of “the cult of true womanhood” have been well-documented since Barbara Welter’s 1966 essay, Carlson complicates the image of the ideal African American Victorian woman by illustrating how Black Victorias also had to embody those virtues of the African American community that would place them in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

These virtues included the following:

First and foremost, she was intelligent and well-educated. She displayed a strong community and racial consciousness, often revealed in her work—whether paid or unpaid—within the black community. Self-confident and out-spoken, she was highly esteemed by her community which frequently applauded her as a “race woman” and role model for young people. (62)

These virtues that the black community esteemed, particularly those of civic service and activism, conflict with the cult of true womanhood’s demand that women remain in the private sphere. As a Black Victoria, Forten had to balance her class position within the African American community, which provided her with the activist passion of a “race woman,” and her education and life experience in New England, which gave her the sensibility and disposition of a white Victorian woman.<sup>2</sup>

As an extremely well-educated African American activist and a member of one of Philadelphia's most prestigious black families, Forten embodied the virtues of the Black Victoria figure. Born in 1837, she lived at the center of major historical events, political movements surrounding the abolitionist community and the Civil War, as well as on the periphery of elite New England literary culture. Due in large part to her family's long-term participation in the abolitionist movement, Forten was great friends with the community's key figures, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Forten grew up in the abolitionist community of Philadelphia until 1853, when her father sent her to live with friends in Salem, Massachusetts, and attend the all-white Higginson Grammar School. Her presence in an all-white school, as well as the high level of education she received, gave Forten a unique experience as a child and young adult. Equally rare for an African American woman, after graduating from the Grammar school and then Salem's Normal School, Forten taught at Epes Grammar School in Salem, where she was the only African American teacher in a school comprised entirely of white students. Forten was also a member of the Salem Female Antislavery Society and was active in the abolitionist community of neighboring Boston. She is perhaps most noted for being the first African American woman to travel to Port Royal, South Carolina, to educate recently freed slaves during the Civil War. Forten later revised her journal entries and letters from her time at Port Royal and published them in the *Liberator* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>3</sup> Both nineteenth-century literati and twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars consider this Forten's most notable literary achievement.

Forten scholarship centers on the private journal that she kept from 1854 to 1864, scrupulously documenting her experiences in the all-white Salem school system, her feelings and thoughts on abolition and racism, her voracious reading habits, and her reactions to the various lectures she attended. It was not until 1988, when The Schomburg Library published a new edition of her journal edited by Beverly Stevenson, that scholars gained access to a complete and carefully edited version of the four journals, as well as a fifth journal that Forten kept during the final years of her life from 1885-1892.<sup>4</sup> Since the publication of the 1988 edition, scholarship has focused on Forten's experiences as a free African American middle-class woman working within the radical abolitionist movement. Carla Peterson, in a rhetorical analysis of the diaries, explores Forten's fractured racial and class identity and contends that Forten's involvement with the abolitionist movement amplified her sense of alienation from both the southern African Americans and the New England white abolitionists. I find that, in addition to providing a picture of her conflicting class and racial identities, Forten's journal offers a unique glimpse into her life as a poet and her dialogue with contemporary poetics.<sup>5</sup>

As a poet, Forten's oeuvre includes ten poems published in her lifetime, all appearing between 1855 and 1860, primarily in the *Liberator* and *The National Antislavery Standard*, the two periodicals that Forten's journal treats as the center of the abolitionist movement; Forten also published two poems in the African American periodical *The Repository of Religion, Literature, Science and Art*.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the critical interest in Forten's journal, her poetry has received little attention. Biographers and critics note her aspirations for a career as a public poet, but almost unanimously

dismiss it as negligible in volume and mediocre in quality; adjectives such as “minor” and “amateur” are used to describe it. Gwendolyn G. Thomas describes Forten’s poetry as “express[ing] the sentimentality and piety characteristic of poetry catering to the poorest of popular Victorian tastes” (65). Thomas’s statement is heavily influenced by the negative descriptors that scholars continue to associate with nineteenth-century women’s poetry in general.<sup>7</sup> Critical neglect of Forten’s poetry likely stems partially from her fairly recent appearance as a figure in American literature but also because she regularly wrote within the poetess tradition. As Eric Gardner has persuasively argued about nineteenth-century African American women periodical poets, poetic output should not be the measure of whether a poet is worthy of scholarly attention.<sup>8</sup> Even though Forten wrote few poems, she offers scholars an essential model of a periodical poet who consciously constructed her artistic identity through her readings of and responses to periodical culture.

By identifying Forten as a periodical poet, one who published in both white and African American periodicals, my work is necessarily in touch with scholarship on the African American press and African American periodicals.<sup>9</sup> I am particularly indebted to Ronald Zborary and Mary Saracino Zboray, who were the first to address Forten’s poetic identity in relationship to the *Repository of Religion, Literature, Science and Art*, one of the first African American periodicals devoted to literature and the arts. While there is much work left to do on Forten’s complex relationship to African American periodicals, I focus specifically on her relationship to the white abolitionist newspapers the *Liberator* and *The Standard* because her poetry in these periodicals highlights the specific strategies



she used to develop her artistic identity. In addition, because Forten's poetics was tied to the abolitionist newspapers that she revered, this chapter focuses on Forten's abolitionist poetry. In the postbellum era, Forten wrote six poems between 1874 and 1890, but these were only circulated in letters to family and friends.<sup>10</sup> Instead of poetry, Forten's postbellum periodical career was defined by her prose publications, in which she published essays, short stories, sketches, and letters to both white publications like the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's Monthly* and African American periodicals like the *Christian Register*. In what follows, I will discuss Forten's poetic identity as a Black Victorian poetess writing for abolitionist periodicals. Therefore, I will first address how Forten's biography and journal reveal her to be conflicted about her identity as a poet, and then I will address the different ways her poetry engages this dual identity in abolitionist periodicals.

## I

Forten's journal entries reveal how the competing identities inherent to the Black Victoria figure weigh heavily upon her. During her years in Salem (1854-1862), at which time she attended grammar and normal school and then taught at a grammar school, Forten lived the life of a Black Victoria.<sup>11</sup> She resided with a family friend, and, because she did not work, she devoted all her time to her studies. Her free time was spent in activities appropriate for a genteel Victorian woman, such as attending luncheons, church activities, and lectures on religion and literature (Carlson 61-2). In addition to these activities, which any white woman might have participated in, Forten was also active in

the New England antislavery community; her journal details antislavery lectures and activities that she attended. While not in school, then, Forten's life reflects that of a Black Victoria who upheld the general social standards of American culture at large as well as the activist standards of the black community.

Although "Black Victoria" is an anachronistic term that Forten would never have applied to herself, her journal reflects the anxiety this double-identity regularly caused her, particularly how it produced feelings of alienation. As the only African American pupil in a Salem school, Forten regularly wrote in her journal about the overt and subtle racism that defined her time as a student. For instance, in 1855, recalling her first day of the new school year, Forten describes her fellow students' reactions to her and the antipathy she feels towards their racism:

To-day school commenced. Most happy am I to return to my studies, ever my most valued friends. It is pleasant to meet the scholars again; most of them greeted me cordially, and were it not for the thought that will intrude, of the want of entire sympathy, even of those I know and like best, I should greatly enjoy their society. [...] I wonder that every colored person is not a misanthrope. Surely we have everything to make us hate mankind. I have met girls in the schoolroom—they have been thoroughly kind and cordial to me—perhaps the next day met them in the street—they feared to recognize me, once I liked them, believing them incapable of such measures. (139-40)

In this quotation, Forten describes the profound sense of alienation that she feels at school. Notably, Forten imagines that it is not only she who is a "misanthrope" but also "every colored person" (140), imagining that her personal struggle is representative of the struggle of all African Americans. This statement reveals how Forten connects her own identity with that of the African American community even though she is geographically

separated from her extended family and friends in Philadelphia. To combat these feelings of isolation from the African American community and alienation from the white community of Salem, Forten turned to her studies, which she described as her “most valued friends” (139). Indeed, books, authors, and poets became a refuge where Forten could assuage her sense of alienation.

Another effect of the pressures of the Black Victoria ideal on Forten was that it caused her to adopt white cultural and literary standards, even at the expense of other African Americans. In one instance, in November 1855, Forten attended a reading by an African American woman and wrote in her journal:

This evening attended Mrs. Mary Webb’s readings; they were principally from Shakespeare. I was not very much pleased. I wish colored persons would not attempt to do anything of the kind unless they can compare favorably with others. But I know that I should not presume to criticize; and most sincerely hope if she has talent, it may be cultivated, and that she may succeed in her vocation, reflecting credit upon herself and race. (144)

Forten’s critique of Webb’s reading is rooted in racist ideas about the ability of African Americans to read Shakespeare. Forten first indicates that she believes Webb’s poor performance has embarrassed or injured African Americans. After writing this, Forten recognizes the danger of criticizing an African American and qualifies her original statement by asserting that she hopes Webb’s “talent” can be “cultivated” (144). If Webb can succeed in her vocation, then, Forten believes Webb can be a “credit upon herself and her race” (144). This final claim retains the idea that Webb’s success is dependent upon white standards for Shakespearean recitation. What we see in this representative example with Mary Webb is the conflict implicit in Forten’s identity as a Black Victoria. Forten’s

journal entry simultaneously articulates white Victorian social and literary standards that appear unconscious for Forten, as well as African American community values that Forten seems to consciously add afterwards—all to suggest that Forten is aware of this double-bind between her experience in a white education system and her subject position as an African American abolitionist. The end result is a tension between two sets of competing cultural and social values that Forten was forced to balance as a Black Victoria.

This tension emerges in her reading preferences, which she meticulously documents in her journal. During her years as a student and teacher, Forten engaged in a rigorous self-education, reading approximately 100 books a year as well as learning Latin, Greek, and German (Sherman 90). Forten often separated works into those that possessed an antislavery agenda and those that did not. For antislavery poetry, lectures, and novels, Forten commented on the communal good that a particular work accomplished for the abolitionist and African American communities. For example, Forten commends Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), John Greenleaf Whittier's abolitionist verse, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1848) for their condemnation of slavery. After reading Browning's antislavery poem in 1854, Forten states:

How earnestly and touchingly does the writer portray the bitter anguish of the fugitive as she thinks over all the wrongs and sufferings that she has endured, and of the sin to which tyrants have driven her but which they alone must answer for! It seems as if no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost on behalf of the oppressed.  
(63)

Browning was always one of Forten's favorite poets. In reference to "The Runaway Slave," Forten highlights how the poem has the potential to "rouse" the sympathy of readers. Again, in 1854, Forten comments on how a work can aid the larger abolitionist movement. She read Mary Hayden Green Pike's antislavery novel *Ida May* (1854) and commented: "It [*Ida May*] is extremely interesting but I do not think it compared with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Still it shows plainly the evils of slavery, and may do much good" (113). Most important, for Forten, again, is that the novel advocates the abolitionist position and can potentially "do much good" (113).

For those works that were apolitical, Forten regularly described their aesthetic qualities and commented on the personal benefit and pleasure she gained from reading them. In reading Wordsworth, Forten remarked how his poetry inspired her to reflect on the beauty of the natural world: "Sat by the window with Wordsworth open before me, but looking oftenest at the beautiful blue sky, itself a glorious poem, and one which we have had the pleasure of reading but rarely of late" (128). Here, Wordsworth's poetry inspires Forten's admiration of her natural surroundings; interestingly, although she regularly wrote of the pleasure she gains from Wordsworth, she never addresses the politics of his poetry.<sup>12</sup> After reading *Thorpe* in school, which Forten describes as "an interesting story of English country life," she comments on its positive qualities: "It contains many beautiful expressions of deep, earnest feeling, and glorious thought through which is breathed the true spirit of poetry, clothed in prosaic garb" (82). Forten's review of *Thorpe* represents her treatment of non-abolitionist works. Throughout her journal, Forten celebrated these works for their emotional profusions and beautiful

descriptions of the natural world. Her journal indicates that she learned to praise these traits partially through her education in the Salem school system. In one instance, Forten learned to appreciate Walter Scott's "The Lady of the Lake" through the principal's recitation of it in school. Although she has read it before on her own, Forten recalls the pleasure she gains from hearing it read, stating, "Mr. Edwards reads it ["The Lady of the Lake"] so splendidly that it seems more beautiful to me than ever" (134). The trends that emerge from Forten's commentary on her reading demonstrate how she praises abolitionist and non-abolitionist works for different qualities. I contend that these reading practices are influenced by her identity as a Black Victoria, which requires that she balance two contradictory worldviews. She lauds abolitionist novels and poetry for the political work they accomplish, and she praises non-abolitionist works for their aesthetic and pleasurable qualities.

Forten's identity as a Black Victoria carries over to her aspirations as a poet, in that her journal entries reflect a competing desire to write antislavery poetry and to write poetry that adheres to the poetess tradition. Even though Forten possessed numerous friends who modeled the ability to be both an abolitionist and a poet or poetess, like John Greenleaf Whittier or her close friend Mary Shepard [sic], Forten conceived of these career paths as in tension. In 1854, during her first year in Salem, Forten wrote two consecutive journal entries that addressed her fledgling desire to be a poet. After taking a walk in the hills surrounding Salem, Forten writes, "I enjoyed the novelty of wandering over the hills, and ascending some of the highest of them, had a fine view of the town and harbor. It seemed like a beautiful landscape; and I wished for the artist's power or the

poet's still richer gift to immortalize it (70). This is the first moment in her journal where Forten articulates her desire to write poetry, and it is significant that in this moment Forten does not connect poetry with her commitment to the abolitionist movement. Focused entirely on the pleasure she gained from the natural surroundings, Forten associates "the artist's power" or the poet's "gift" with the ability to "immortalize" the natural world. Forten seems to desire to recreate in poetry the sanctuary that the "beautiful landscape" granted her.

On the following day, Forten visits her friend, Mary Shepard, and writes in her journal about her admiration for Shepard's poetry: "After school, stayed with Miss Shepard who was writing some sentiments for a fair, I wondered how she could write them so easily and rapidly; they were all excellent, and one so very amusing that I dared insert it here" (70). Forten's description of Shepard's composition process models that of a poetess. As Wendorff observes, the poetess was supposed to compose her verse "spontaneously, rather than thoughtfully or carefully" (111). Forten refers to Shepard's poems as "sentiments," which reinforces the importance of emotion to the verses. Shepard is also an amateur poetess, writing entertaining and "amusing" poems for an antislavery fair. By noting the traits of the poems and their venue, Forten places emphasis on the qualities of a poetess's poetry that she finds appealing: the ease with which Shepard composes poems, the enjoyment they both receive from them, and the pleasurable venue where the poems will be recited. After admiring her friend's compositions, Forten describes her own poetic desires in contrary terms, "How often have I invoked in vain the spirit of song; the muse is always most unyielding, despite my

assurances, that should she deign to bless me, my first offering should be upon the shrine of liberty” (70). Initially, Forten desires the composition process of her friend and writes about it in the language of popular romanticism employed by the poetess (Wendorff 112).<sup>13</sup> After this statement, though, Forten consciously distances herself from her friend’s “amusing” poems, and asserts that her first poetic “offering” will serve the abolitionist cause “upon the shrine of liberty” (70). Forten articulates both her desire to compose like a poetess, just as Miss Shepard does, and her aspirations to write politically driven poetry, as opposed to apolitical “sentiments.”

Just over a year later, in July of 1855, Forten acknowledges how her subject position as an African American woman of means necessitates a life devoted to others rather than to her own desires. In a letter to her aunt, Forten describes her feelings of loneliness since school ended. In this journal entry, Forten articulates the difference between herself and her white classmates: “I had no idea that I should miss the companions of my school hours so much. Had I but their entire sympathy I might truly be happy! But why should I repine; are we not to sacrifice rather than indulge self? Born as we are to the stern *performance of duty* rather than the *pursuit of happiness*” (137). Here, Forten separates herself from her white classmates, using “we” to refer to African Americans. Forten associates self-indulgent behavior as a luxury reserved for her white classmates. As an African American, Forten conceives of her future as defined by “sacrifice” and the “performance of duty” (137). By relinquishing her “pursuit of happiness,” echoing the Declaration of Independence, Forten recognizes that her individual happiness must be forfeited to her duty to others. Although Forten does not



directly address her poetic identity in this statement, her antebellum poetry reflects the tension between the poetess tradition, which provides her personal enjoyment, and the abolitionist cause, which Forten interprets as her duty. As a Black Victorian poetess, Forten's artistry is defined by this constant tension of purpose.

## II

In its March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1855 issue, the *Liberator* published the first poem Forten sent directly to an abolitionist periodical. "To W. L. G. on Reading His "Chosen Queen" was Forten's poetic response to "My Chosen Queen," which appeared one month earlier in the newspaper, and which was written by famous abolitionist and editor of the *Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison. This poem marks Forten's first engagement with abolitionist periodicals as a poet, and it demonstrates how she conceived of the role of poetry in this venue. That is, Forten uses her poem to engage a contentious debate that was dividing the abolitionist movement. In terms of her identity as a Black Victorian Poetess, Forten chose to, in this moment, adhere to the African American community's ideal of womanhood. Even as her poem displays the power and courage of a "race woman," it also displays elements of the cult of true womanhood. Thus, in Forten's first abolitionist poem, we can observe how she attempts to negotiate the conflicting sides of her dual identity.<sup>14</sup>

Both Forten and Garrison's poems need to be understood within a volatile debate occurring within the abolitionist movement concerning the use of violence to resist slavery. In 1855, the year Garrison and Forten published their poems, the abolitionist

movement was embroiled in the controversy surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The Kansas controversy was a pivotal moment in the debate about whether moral suasion or physical violence was the correct path to end slavery. Garrison was a founding member of the New England Non-Resistant Society and regularly used the *Liberator* to advocate the principles of nonviolence. In 1856, the *Liberator* printed a piece from the *Olive Branch*, a newspaper in Norristown Pennsylvania, describing the Non-Resistants as follows: “[They] assume that moral suasion is the legitimate mode of abolishing the evils in society or individual; that physical violence is always wrong, and always detrimental to the permanent triumph of every moral movement” (4 Apr. 1856).<sup>15</sup> Moral suasion, the article asserts, was the preferred method to end slavery within the abolitionist movement throughout the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>16</sup> However, by the 1850s, a large segment of the abolitionist movement began to consider violent resistance as essential to ending slavery. This view developed, in part, as a response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required all runaway slaves to be returned to their masters, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which permitted these territories to decide if they would allow slavery within their boundaries. Key figures in the antislavery movement, like Lydia Maria Child, Henry Ward Beecher, and Angelina Weld Grimké, renounced pacifism as a result of the Kansas controversy. In 1855, Garrison continued to advocate nonresistance in public even though biographers have noted that his support for nonresistance began to waver as early as 1848.<sup>17</sup> Garrison likely possessed sympathy for supporters of physical resistance long before he made his ideological shift public. It was not until 1859, amid the John Brown trial, that Garrison publicly changed his position and supported a slave’s

right to violently resist and overthrow his oppressor (Risely 148).<sup>18</sup> Garrison's writings in the *Liberator* in 1855 reveal the beginning of his shift to publicly supporting violent resistance.

During the first months of 1855, the *Liberator* published both Garrison's defense of nonresistance and articles that justify violent acts of resistance because he was committed to making his newspaper an open forum for public debate. The specific issue in which Garrison's poem appeared, February 23, 1855, also contained an article by Adin Ballou about the upcoming New England Non-Resistance Society meeting and a poem by George G. W. Morgan entitled "Who Fears to Speak?" in which Morgan advocates violent resistance. The editorial preface that introduces this poem reads, "We like all but the warlike conclusion of the following stanzas" (23 Feb. 1855). Most importantly, the diversity of voices that prevails in this issue emphasizes the role of the *Liberator* as a means by which writers and poets could participate in the debate about nonresistance. The editorial preface to Morgan's poem, likely written by Garrison, frames how "we" (the newspaper's editors and, perhaps, readers) should interpret the poem, stating that they should disdain the "warlike conclusion" of the poem. Although Garrison encourages readers to disdain Morgan's poem because it advocates violent resistance, Garrison's own poem, "My Chosen Queen," exposes some tensions that characterized his position on nonresistance.

First and foremost, "My Chosen Queen" reads as a passionate expression of Garrison's devotion to the abolitionist cause that is rooted in Christian martyrdom. Mayer describes Garrison as "animated ... with the fervor of militant, messianic

Protestantism” (209). In 1835, twenty years before composing “My Chosen Queen,” Garrison was captured and almost lynched by a mob. As a result of this event, Mayer states that Garrison’s “brush with martyrdom left Garrison elated” (206). His zeal for martyrdom becomes the dominant theme in “My Chosen Queen”:

No fealty will I pay to any Queen,  
Who wears her crown by accident of birth,  
As though she were not made of common birth,  
Yet has no innate goodness to be seen.  
The only one I bow to is, I ween,  
Impartial Liberty, whose matchless worth  
Early inflamed my spirit to go forth,  
And all Oppression’s edicts contravene.  
She is the passion of my soul, for whom  
I count no sacrifice too great to make,  
E’en though it lead me to an early tomb,  
Or send my body to the fiery wake;  
For welcome be the martyr’s bloody doom,  
If thereby the oppressed their chains may break. (23 Feb. 1855)

Garrison’s sonnet establishes both the importance of the “Queen” of “Impartial Liberty” as well as his own status in the abolitionist movement as “Liberty’s” most devoted subject. By emphasizing his subjection to the allegorical queen of impartial justice, he indicates his resistance to subjection to United States law. We should notice that the description of his commitment to the Queen is described in terms of martyrdom. He is willing to go to “an early tomb” (11) and does not fear bodily harm. Instead, he openly “welcomes” the “martyr’s bloody doom” as an opportunity to display his passionate devotion to the cause. The principal path of devotion that Garrison can imagine in the poem is one of potentially violent sacrifice. While the octave of the sonnet is concerned with the positive qualities of the “Queen” and explains why his devotion to her is so

great, the sestet is focused on describing his potential sacrifice. Interpreted in the context of the Kansas controversy, in which numerous abolitionist leaders are renouncing nonviolence and advocating violent resistance, Garrison's poem emphasizes his radicalism, particularly his willingness to die a martyr for the antislavery cause.

Written in iambic pentameter, closely mirroring the meter of Garrison's sonnet, Forten's "To W. L. G. on Reading His 'Chosen Queen'" reads as a sober and laudatory tribute to Garrison's devotion to the abolitionist cause and particularly, "impartial Liberty," his "chosen queen" (6). Forten's poetic response to Garrison's poem functions as a tribute to him and articulates Forten's political stance of nonresistance. In directing the poem to Garrison, Forten chooses to highlight his peace politics:

A loyal subject, thou, to that bright Queen,  
To whom the homage of thy soul is paid;  
Long to her cause devoted has thou been,  
And many a sacrifice for her has made.  
Thy chosen Queen, O champion of Truth,  
Should be th' acknowledged sovereign of all;  
Her first commands should fire the heart of youth,  
And graver age list heedful to her call.  
Thou, who so bravely dost her battles fight,  
With truer weapons than the blood-stained sword,  
And teachest us that greater is the might  
Of moral warfare, noble thought and word,  
On they shall rest the blessing of mankind,  
As one who nobly dost the Right defend;  
Than thee, thy chosen Queen shall never find  
A truer subject nor a firmer friend. (16 Mar. 1855)

In this poem, Forten has two audiences, Garrison and the readers of the *Liberator*. She writes to reassure both audiences of Garrison's leadership role in the abolitionist

movement, reinforcing Garrison's status as "a loyal subject" of "that bright Queen" (1). She also reassures Garrison that his devotion to the Queen has not gone unnoticed, publicly praising the numerous sacrifices he has made to the cause. In the second quatrain, Forten underscores Garrison's status as leader of the movement by indicating that everyone should follow his lead and "acknowledge" the Queen as "sovereign over all"; everyone, from "youth" to those of "graver age" should "list heedful to her call" (7-8).<sup>19</sup>

With her two audiences in mind, Forten deemphasizes the need for martyrdom and stresses the path of moral suasion of the nonresistance philosophy in the second half of the poem. "To W. L. G." replaces Garrison's martyrdom with lines like "truer weapons than the blood-stained sword" (10). She describes him as "bravely" fighting the Queen's battles, but also suggests that while he may possess "weapons," they are not "the blood-stained sword" (10). Instead, she reminds Garrison and her readers that "greater is the might / Of *moral* warfare" (11-2), offering Garrison a way to maintain some of his warlike rhetoric while framing it in nonviolent terms. Forten, then, literally contains warfare by prefacing it with "moral" and qualifying it further with "noble thought and word" (12). Moreover, Forten limits the war rhetoric to one quatrain. She acknowledges its relevance to Garrison's position as an important male leader of the abolitionist movement who remains committed to a political position that could be interpreted as feminine or emasculating; yet, Forten seeks, in the final quatrain, to advocate the ideals of nonresistance. Just as Forten begins the poem, she reinforces Garrison's significant role in the abolitionist movement: "On thee shall rest the blessing of mankind, / As one

who nobly dost the Right defend” (13-4). Importantly, Forten broadens Garrison’s significance beyond one particular movement in order to figure him as a kind of savior for all “mankind.” At the conclusion of the poem, Forten reveals what we gain by resisting through “noble thought and word”: friendship and long term relationships. Forten sets up Garrison’s relationship with the Queen as not just a “subject” but also a “friend,” which restructures the power dynamics of the relationship from submission to the allegorical queen of impartial justice to a more democratic model of devotion to a comrade.

As much as this poem is about Forten’s revision of Garrison’s poem, it is also Forten’s first poetic engagement with abolitionist periodical culture, and thus a formative moment in her identity as an artist. Forten claimed to have hated this poem. After seeing it in print, she wrote, “If ever I write doggerel again I shall be careful not to sign my own initials” (132). Yet, Forten thought enough of the poem to send it to the *Liberator*. If we take her at her word, that she despises this poem and considers it “doggerel,” we must question what about it seemed valuable for publication. In 1855, she was well-established in Salem and did not need to write for money. Instead, the governing sentiments and thoughts throughout her journal address the abolition movement and the importance of the antislavery papers to her personal development. We can think of “To W.L.G.” as her first deliberate public “offering to the shrine of Liberty” (70). I use the term “deliberate” because although Forten wrote three additional pro-abolition poems in 1855 and 1856 that were eventually published in periodicals, “To W.L.G.” is the only poem that she sent directly to the *Liberator*. It represents the first moment in which

Forten chose how to present herself as a type of “race woman” to the abolitionist community. Most significantly, it demonstrates her conscious choice to support the nonresistance movement through poetry.

In these formative early years of development as a poet Forten is consciously linking her poetic identity to her activist principles in the public realm of the *Liberator*. In 1855, Forten began to carve out a specific role for herself within the most popular abolitionist periodical, a role that is inextricably tied to her identity as a Black Victorian poetess. In “To W.L.G.,” Forten enters a contentious debate to support the nonresistance movement and models how poetry can be used not just to advocate a general political position but also to respond to a specific ongoing debate. Forten engages this political debate about nonresistance with the subtlety of a poetess. She carefully situates her critique of Garrison by writing a poem that overtly praises him. The cult of true womanhood dictated that white women could influence the public sphere by persuading male family members. Forten adapts this philosophy to convey her political opinion in her poem, situating her position as an extension of Garrison’s political stance. In her first periodical poem, Forten balances the traits of white Victorian sensibility and the related poetess tradition, and the values and politics of the African American community.

### III

Forten’s “To W.L.G.” marked the beginning of Forten’s negotiation of her identity as a Black Victorian poetess in the pages of abolitionist newspapers. In the remainder of the years before the onset of the Civil War, Forten published poems in the



*Liberator* and *The Standard* that address what she considered to be a central issue for the abolitionist movement: the questionable value of apolitical poetry, and related to this, the poetess tradition, for the abolitionist cause. Forten was troubled by what she saw as an irreconcilability between her identities of poetess and activist, and, significantly, chose to publicly work through this dilemma for abolitionist readers, who she imagined should be questioning the usefulness of poetry and other literature that did not explicitly serve the abolitionist cause. Unlike her commentary on non-resistance that was a popular subject in the pages of abolitionist newspapers, Forten's commentary on the role of poetry emerged not from an ongoing debate but from her own critical reading of, and ideas about, poetry in the newspapers.

Abolitionist and antebellum African American periodicals regularly published politically motivated literature and poetry alongside apolitical works. Elizabeth McHenry's work on African American literary societies and the black press explains that the placement of apolitical literature in African American and abolitionist periodicals was intended for the cultural and literary edification of readers. For instance, in her study of the *Christian Recorder*, a Boston-based general interest black newspaper established in 1852, McHenry quotes one contributor's assessment of the importance of literature to African Americans: "If ever there was a time when our people should read [...] it is now, in order to improve their understanding, and cultivate their minds" (130).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the contributor suggests that literary education would permit African Americans to "cultivate and improve ourselves, that we may be able to stand in juxtaposition with our friends, who think themselves the favoured of God" (130). Periodical readers were

encouraged to appreciate literature that was promoted by mainstream white literary culture and periodicals. In terms of content, McHenry argues, African American periodicals mirrored their white counterparts by printing “poetry of the European ‘masters’ alongside verses by local amateur poets like ‘Amelia’ and ‘Emma’ (101).<sup>21</sup> Gardner’s summary of the poems published in the *Christian Recorder* suggests that it promoted the tradition of the poetess much like white periodicals. Gardner states, “many of the poems are consonant in tone, tropes, and approaches with the sentimental and didactic poems by mid-nineteenth-century white poets (for example, Lydia Sigourney); many also center on key events in domestic life” (814-5).

While Gardner’s and McHenry’s work focuses primarily on African American periodicals, the patterns they identify are visible in the content of the *Liberator* and *The Standard*, which printed politically driven poetry that addressed the issue of slavery alongside apolitical poetry within the poetess tradition. For instance, the *Liberator* printed British poet Jane Ashby’s lyric, entitled “Lessons from Nature,” which celebrates the rejuvenating effects of the natural world and asks readers to “listen” to the story of the trees “of this glorious summer time” (3 Jun. 1859). This poem is typical of other apolitical poems of the *Liberator* about nature, which combine a reverence for nature and Christian piety.<sup>22</sup> The *Liberator* and *The Standard*, like African American antebellum periodicals, were invested in cultivating and maintaining the image of the poetess because these women’s verse was evidence of the intellectual and artistic ability of African Americans, and it demonstrated the newspaper’s adherence to the literary standards of its day. Gardner’s explication of the role of African American women’s

poetry in the *Christian Recorder* indicates that apolitical poetry written by African Americans or published by African American or abolitionist periodicals actually possessed an inherent political purpose. Gardner quotes a letter from Hester A. B. Jay, a poet for the *Recorder*. In November 1862, Jay wrote, “our people, who, for many years, have been ground down to the earth by the iron heel of affliction,” should be neither “ashamed nor afraid to come up and let their enemies know that they are a people that are not brutes; but men and women, possessing intellects as well as themselves” (qtd. in Gardner 814). In essence, Jay argues that even poems written without an explicit political intent possess political significance because they demonstrate the intellectual and creative abilities of African Americans. What I want to suggest from the quotation from Jay, as well as Gardner and McHenry’s assessment of the role of literature in African American periodicals, is that, at the time Forten was writing, the predominant opinion about the purpose of apolitical literature was that it was good for the African American community and the abolitionist cause.

Periodicals’ celebration and promotion of poetry written in the tradition of the poetess likely fueled Forten’s internal debate about what type of poet she wished to be: a poetess writing beautiful and pleasing verse or a poet writing overtly political verse. Two of Forten’s poems, “The Wind Among the Poplars” and “In the Country,” published in 1859 and 1860 respectively, represent her experimentation with the limits of her identity as a poetess. On the surface, these poems represent the poetess tradition that Forten loved and described in her journal as “beautiful expressions of deep, earnest feeling, and glorious thought” (82). By sending these poems to *The Standard* and the *Liberator* and

integrating politically laden phrases that reference slavery, Forten publicizes the dilemma that the poetess identity creates for her, and the potential dilemma apolitical poetry might create for readers: apolitical poetry encourages readers to retreat too far from the antislavery movement. She imagined that it could lead them down the path of self-indulgence rather than duty, a worry that Forten expressed about herself throughout her journals.

“The Wind Among the Poplars” is a narrative poem about Clare and Bertha, who have different experiences with the natural world. Clare is invigorated when she feels the “wind among the poplars,” while Bertha is reminded of her lost lover and, thus, is saddened by the natural world. Read in the poetess tradition, this is “a poem of secret sorrow...in which a speaker reveals that her life has been blighted by experiences she hides from public scrutiny” (Walker xxvi). Forten’s “The Wind Among the Poplars” was one among many lyrics the *Liberator* published about how nature reminds female speakers of lost lovers, and I argue that Forten’s poem is a direct address to one particular *Liberator* “poem of secret sorrow”: “We Still Can Wait,” a poem published multiple times in the *Liberator* during the 1850s. This poem, whose author is only identified as “W” (not Forten), was first printed in the *Christian Register* in 1850 and reprinted in the *Liberator* in 1858, just months before Forten published “The Wind Among the Poplars.” As a response to “We Still Can Wait,” Forten’s poem integrates the communal sorrow of slavery into a subgenre that is supposed to exclusively express the private emotions of a “woman’s secret sorrow.” The main figure of “We Still Can Wait” shares the name Bertha with Forten’s speaker. The Bertha of “We Still Can Wait” is equally affected by

spring winds as the Bertha of Forten's poem. In "We Still Can Wait," a third-person speaker recounts Bertha's unfailing faith in her husband's eventual return from a doomed sea voyage:

The leaves have fallen from the trees—  
For under them grew the buds of May  
And such is constant Nature's way—  
Let us accept the work of her hand;  
Still, if the winds sweep bare the height,  
Something is left for heart's delight—  
Let us but know and understand.

Bertha looked from the rocky cliff—  
Whose foot the tender foam-wreaths kist—  
Toward the outer circle of mist  
That hedged the old and wonderful sea.  
Below her, as with endless hope,  
Up the beach's marbled slope,  
The waters climb unweariedly [sic]. (1-14)

Bertha's story of "endless hope" is framed by the speaker recognition of Nature's mysterious power in daily life. The remainder of the poem recounts Bertha's unfailing patience as she waits for a husband. Bertha's faith in her husband's return is depicted in natural and religious terms. At one point, Bertha, speaking directly to God, states, "He does not come [...] / But the shore is dark and the sea wild, / And, dearest Father, we still must wait" (19-21). In the following stanza, Bertha reminds herself of nature's slow fruition, both as it waits for "harvest time" as an individual aloe plant waits "a hundred years for its flower" (28). Trusting in "God's distant ends," Bertha remains committed to waiting for her husband's return. Even though she is uncertain of the future, Bertha defines herself by her unfailing hope. In the final stanza the speaker asks,

'Was it well?' you ask—nay—was it ill?

Who sate, last year, by the old man's hearth—  
The sun had passed below the earth,  
And the first star locked his western gate—  
When Bertha entered her darkening home,  
And smiling said—'He does not come;  
But, dearest Father, we still can wait.' (57-63)

The speaker asks the question whether it was “well” or “ill” for Bertha to wait for a husband who was unlikely to return. Implied in this question is whether Bertha should be a model for readers. Instead of answering this question directly, the speaker ends with a powerful image of Bertha “smiling,” speaking to God, and seemingly remaining content to spend her entire life waiting. Ultimately, this poem epitomizes a poem of “a woman’s secret sorrow” and her unfailing religious faith. The speaker suggests Bertha’s unquestioning devotion to God becomes the defining feature of Bertha’s life. “We Still Can Wait” combines Christian piety with a woman’s private grief, epitomizing key tenets of the poetess tradition.

In “The Wind Among the Poplars,” Forten responds to “We Still Can Wait” in order to address the potential problems of apolitical poetry. Forten uses the name Bertha and addresses the themes of a loved one lost at sea and how nature communicates this loss. While Forten comfortably writes an overtly apolitical poem that lyricizes a woman’s private sorrow, she also reveals her personal conflict with the apolitical genre: its denial of slavery, the greatest public sorrow. In doing so, Forten challenges the presentation of nature as a uniformly positive experience in “We Still Can Wait.” Forten’s poem situates Bertha’s story of loss within a conversation between Clare and

Bertha that highlights the vastly different experiences each woman has with nature. The poem begins with Clare attempting to draw Bertha away from her book:

‘Close thy book, and come, my Bertha,  
Come into the wood with me,  
Where the wind among the poplars  
Wildly roareth, like the sea.  
Lov’st thou not the strange, wild music  
Of this March wind, bold and free?  
Ah, in it my soul exulteth!  
Hath it not a charm for the?’

‘No,’ she answered, slowly raising  
From the book her sad, dark eyes—  
‘Clare, thou knowest not the sorrow  
That within my bosom lies.  
Ah the wind among the poplars  
Hath a mournful sound to me,  
For it moaneth to me over  
Of a loved one, lost at sea. (1-16)

Clare’s request for Bertha to “come into the wood” presumes that Bertha will be happier when she feels the “wind among the poplars.” For Bertha, though, the opposite is true: a walk in nature brings sadness, while reading seems to offer her some sort of contentment. As Clare tries to entice Bertha to take a walk in the woods, we see Forten depict Clare as childlike and innocent, excited and rejuvenated by the mysterious power of nature. In contrast to Clare, Bertha appears older and more mature, sobered by life experience that she associates with nature. Because Clare cannot empathize with Bertha, the remainder of the poem is Bertha’s attempt to communicate to Clare precisely why “the wind” “hath a mournful sound” (14). Bertha recounts how “the wind among the poplars” was an important presence in her relationship with her lover. They walked together in the woods, and when he left for sea “the wind among the poplars / Sang a dreary song to

[her]” (31-2). For Bertha, it was the wind that first communicated to her that her lover was dead:

‘Like a wail of human anguish,  
Raving, shriking [sic] in my ear;  
And I shuddered, as I listened,  
With an agonizing fear—  
For I know that he was coming  
O’er the dark and stormy sea,  
And that wild wind sadly sounded  
Like a requiem to me.

‘Ah, my heart, too, too prophetic!  
‘Twas in truth a funeral knell;  
In the storm, my Clare, he perished  
He whom I had loved so well.  
So the wind among the poplars  
Hath a mournful sound to me,  
For it moaneth to me ever  
Of that loved one lost at sea.’ (41-56)

In contrast to the Bertha in “We Still Can Wait,” who possesses an unfaltering faith in her loved one’s return, Forten’s Bertha is a measured woman who has accepted the loss of her lover. Rather than waiting year after year for a lost lover to miraculously return from sea, Forten’s Bertha rejects false hope by acknowledging the truth of her lover’s death. With this recognition, Forten’s Bertha gains the ability that neither Clare nor the other Bertha possesses: to hear “a wail of human anguish” from the wind. As Forten notes at the beginning of the poem, Clare only hears “wild music” from the wind that “exulteth” her soul” (5, 7). The Bertha of “We Still Can Wait,” remains staunchly unchanged throughout her life, which the poet suggests is a model quality that the readers should possess. Nevertheless, as she waits on the cliff for her lost lover, she continues to attempt to hear “the distant whisper of the gale / winging the forgotten home” (52-3); she is



literally straining to hear in the wind what she most desires, which, after all these years, has become a “whisper.” In contrast, in “The Wind Among the Poplars,” Bertha’s ability to hear the wind becomes stronger after she realizes her lover is dead. Rather than a “whisper,” Forten’s Bertha hears “a wail of human anguish, / Raving, shrieking in [her] ear” (41-2). The recognition of her personal loss, and the pain that is associated with it, heightens Bertha’s ability to hear what the wind communicates: human anguish. This is something that neither Clare nor W’s Bertha can ever hear. M. H. Abrams’s classic discussion of the “correspondent breeze” reminds us that “the wind” becomes an outer manifestation of an essential truth that the poet wishes to communicate.<sup>23</sup> For Forten, the essential truth lies in the ability to hear a “wail of human anguish” when others hear pleasurable “wild music” or hopeful “whispers.” By narrating her story for Clare, Bertha initiates Clare into the world of “human anguish.” While it is unclear how Clare reacts to Bertha’s story, it is likely that Clare will not be able to walk in the woods and hear the wind without at least acknowledging Bertha’s pain.

Within the context of *The Standard*, Forten’s use of the particular phrase, “a wail of human anguish,” takes on a racial significance. That is, by writing a poem about “human anguish” and sending it to an abolitionist periodical, Forten displays an awareness of the racial politics of this phrase. The poem is no longer about Bertha’s private sorrow of a lost loved one, but embodies the unceasing “wail” of the greater human anguish of slavery. Importantly, in this poem Forten approached the subject of slavery without overtly violating the tenets of the poetess tradition. That is, her poem could be read as specifically about the anguish Bertha feels in losing her beloved. Yet,

given Forten's passionate devotion to the abolitionist cause and her frequent emotional identifications with victims of slavery in her journal, I conclude that Forten did not strictly adhere to the apolitical nature of the "poem of secret sorrow." Forten constructs for her abolitionist readers an older and wiser Bertha who can educate the young and innocent Clare in the sorrows of the world. Forten's Bertha has accepted her lover's death and exists in a state of intense sadness, but it is a state that is real, rather than the imagined state of futile hope in which the other Bertha exists. Forten gives readers a poem in the poetess tradition that has been modified to account for the constant human anguish that motivates the publication of *The Standard* and the *Liberator*. Forten attempts to resolve the conflict she observes in the poetess's poetry in abolitionist periodicals by reconstructing an apolitical poem so that it addresses the presence of slavery in the world.

Forten's "In the Country" continues Forten's experimentation with the poetess tradition so that it acknowledges slavery. Seemingly apolitical on the surface, "In the Country" reads as a poem about the pleasure and rejuvenating effects of nature. Within the poetess tradition, "In the Country" is a "sanctuary poem," which "expresses longing for a private realm protected from incursions from the outside world" (Walker xxvi). This mode was particularly meaningful to Forten because, as I noted earlier, Forten often wrote in her journal about feeling revitalized by the natural world, particularly the hills surrounding Salem. Even though Forten felt personally rejuvenated by nature, "In the Country" should not be interpreted only as an extension of Forten's personal experiences in nature as critics like Peterson have previously argued. More accurately, this poem should be read as Forten's experimentation with the concept of "sanctuary" and the

function of the “sanctuary poem” within the abolitionist periodical. Forten explores how the poem functions as a “sanctuary” not only for the speaker but also for poet and readers, particularly readers of *The Standard*.

Characteristic of sanctuary poems, “In the Country” begins with a speaker recording the ease and contentment she experiences in nature:

Listening, as I lie here,  
Amid the fragrant hay,  
To sweet bird-voices singing soft and clear  
Their happy summer lay.

Drinking the golden wine  
Poured by the gracious sun,  
Richer than richest juices of the vine,  
With rarer sweets o’errun;

Gazing into the deep,  
Unfathomable blue,  
That arches o’er my head with boundless sweep,  
In glory ever new; (1-12)

Here, nature is inviting and pleasurable for the speaker. Each stanza focuses on how nature delights the speaker’s senses. Lying in the sun on a summer day, the speaker is revitalized by literally hearing and seeing nature as well as metaphorically tasting it. Just as the speaker finds nature calm and pleasurable, the artist, Forten, seems relaxed by the genre itself. Her diction complements the calmness of the speaker’s experience in nature, with phrases like “unfathomable blue” that force the reader to take in the poem at a relaxed pace.

Over halfway through the poem the speaker begins to reveal that this sanctuary is necessary because she is both physically and spiritually exhausted. This move on

Forten's part parallels the moment at which she brings in "human anguish" into "The Wind Among the Poplars." That is, in both these poems, Forten conforms to the modes of "the sanctuary poem" and the "poem of secret sorrow" for at least half of the poems. After connecting each poem as part of an apolitical poetic mode, she integrates an element that is uncharacteristic of the subgenre. For "The Wind Among the Poplars," this element is "the wail of human anguish." For "In the Country," it is an outside world marked by pain. Although pain and anguish are universal experiences of the human condition, Forten's use of them within poems for an abolitionist audience suggests she was not interested only in universal human pain, but also, and more specifically, the pain caused by the institution of slavery. In the middle of a catalog of the beauty and vividness of nature characteristic of the genteel, the speaker of "In the Country" describes an encroaching darkness that pervades the rest of the poem:

Resting my weary eyes  
With the delicious green  
Of grass and trees; while bluer than the skies  
The river's deep serene;

A strange, sweet rapture steals  
Into my heart and brain;  
What magic touch thy loveliness reveals,  
Oh, world, so full of pain!

Once, once again I rest,  
A trustful child I lie,  
Oh, Mother Earth, upon thy loving breast,  
As in the days gone by!

Passion hath passed away,  
And weariness and woe;  
Wrapt in the glory of this perfect day,  
Sweet peace at last I know. (21-36)

These lines represent a break in the unyielding celebration of the beauty of nature, as well as, at the conclusion, an attempt to reclaim the peacefulness of the early stanzas. It is important to recognize the ambiguous manner in which worldly pain enters into the speaker's thoughts. While the speaker is detailing the beauty of the "river's deep serene," she recalls that "a strange, sweet rapture st[ole] / Into [her] heart and brain" (24, 25-6). These lines suggest that the speaker lacks any agency in this experience since "the rapture" acts upon the speaker's "heart and brain." Despite the power of nature to invoke the state of happiness for most of the poem, the reverie cannot keep worldly evil from infiltrating the speaker's thoughts. Just as the pain of the outside world "steals" into the speaker's reverie, so does it seem to "steal" into Forten's poem. The passive emergence of the pain of the outer world suggests that its entrance into the poem is inevitable.

With the introduction of pain into the speaker's reverie, the poem is no longer a form of peaceful communion with nature, but rather a means of negotiation or competition between the "world, so full of pain!" and the healing power of nature's beauty. After the emotionally draining stanza that concludes with the "world, so full of pain!" (28), the next stanza provides a reprieve for the speaker. She attempts to reclaim the serenity of the first half of the poem by simply stating, "Once, once again I can rest" (29). As the speaker becomes calmer she also seems to regress, becoming "a trustful child" and asking Mother Nature to take her into "thy loving breast." Although in this concluding stanza the speaker reveals that she has succeeded in reclaiming the peace of the beginning of the poem, Forten's poem suggests that something must be sacrificed for

the speaker to achieve this state: “Passion hath passed away, / And weariness and woe;” (33-4). The speaker ends in a state of blissful “sweet peace,” undisturbed by the absence of passion. Most importantly for the speaker, quiet reverie returns and the speaker is metaphorically “wrapt” in the glory of nature.

While the speaker is content to trade “passion, weariness, and woe” for “sweet peace,” Forten, as a devoted abolitionist, could not make this same exchange. Her journal reveals that her ardent passion is a vital motivation for political activism. Although Forten expresses “weariness and woe” as an activist in the abolitionist movement, she also reveals that these depressing feelings eventually become a motivating force. For instance, in 1854, after a judge ruled that fugitive slave Anthony Burns would be returned to his master, Forten reports that her current despondency will act as an “incentive to more earnest study, to aid [her] in fitting [her]self for laboring in a holy cause” (66). That is, the depths of her feeling will prompt her to fight against its cause.

With this dynamic in mind, Forten felt that apolitical sanctuary poems in the poetess tradition were missing the motivating forces of passion; indeed, this motivating passion is exactly what Forten’s speaker trades for her “sweet peace” at the end of the poem. In the context of the *Liberator* and *The Standard*, which regularly printed articles about the atrocities of slavery, genteel poetry functioned as momentary sanctuaries from the grim content of the rest of the paper. Literally surrounding Forten’s poem in *The Standard* were articles with titles like “Three Little Slave Boys” that detailed individual

stories of slaves' treatment in slavery and accounts of slaves that had been recaptured and returned to the South.

In the context of the abolitionist periodical, the larger question that Forten raises for her readers is whether apolitical poetry belongs in a newspaper devoted to the end of slavery. Forten asks her abolitionist readers the same question she asks herself: should *The Standard* offer readers a sanctuary from the horrors of slavery? The concluding stanza of "In the Country" indicates that something valuable is lost when the speaker allows herself the pleasure of a temporary sanctuary in nature. It may bring temporary moments of relief, but Forten's conclusion suggests that too much must be sacrificed for the pleasure of a momentary sanctuary. Forten's publicizing this dilemma for the paper's readers indicates that it is a dilemma that she believed they shared. Her poem asks them to question what they gain from the sanctuaries that apolitical poetry offers readers committed to abolition. Forten's attempts to reconcile her competing passions of a Black Victorian poetess in "The Wind Among the Poplars," and "In the Country" integrates the topic of slavery into a genre that prefers to ignore it. By integrating slavery into the poetess tradition, she forces her poems to perform political work and does not allow them to function as small literary "sanctuaries" for abolitionist readers, implying that there should be no "sanctuaries," even in art, while slavery exists.

### III

Forten's "The Slave-Girl's Prayer," first published in *The Standard* in 1860, is her most sophisticated experimentation with abolitionist and poetess poetry. Writing from

the perspective of a slave-girl, Forten connects her poem to the slave prayer poem subgenre, with its “conventional plot of the slave girl [...] who begs to die rather than be sold into slavery” (Peterson 182). This subgenre within abolitionist poetry, which permits non-slaves to write in the persona of a slave, was popular within abolitionist periodicals.<sup>24</sup> Typically, slave prayer poems were private soliloquies meant to evoke sympathy from readers, in which a speaker laments her enslavement and prays to God to alter her circumstances either through miracle or death. Notably, authorship of these poems was not restricted to formerly enslaved people. Rather, it was quite common for slave prayer poems to be written by white and free people of color. For example, John Pierpont, a well-known antislavery minister and poet, wrote “The Fugitive Slave’s Apostrophe to the North Star” (1839), in which the speaker is an escaped slave traveling to the North. Characteristic of the subgenre, Pierpont’s poem depicts the wretched state of a slave while also featuring pleasurable descriptions of nature. In another example, Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1848), which Forten first read in 1854, depicts a fictional account of a slave woman who, after being raped by her master, kills her white-skinned child and prays for death.<sup>25</sup>

Forten writes within the slave-prayer subgenre but attempts to integrate elements of the poetess tradition, specifically by using Wordsworthian language, an important aspect of the American poetess tradition, to attempt to depict the lived experience of a slave. She adapts Wordsworth’s language and themes from his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” to see whether his poetic language and style can depict the slave experience. Peterson interprets “The Slave-Girl’s Prayer” as a product of nineteenth-



century sentimental culture and argues that we should read “beneath the surface to uncover Forten’s own personal anguish” (182). However, interpreting this poem as one that comments on Forten’s private emotions allows us to see only part of Forten’s purpose. This poem is less about Forten’s individual sorrow and more about the tensions between her identities as poetess and activist, wherein Forten tests whether Wordsworthian language can honestly and productively describe the slave experience.

Forten’s depiction of the emotional and psychological suffering that a slave-girl experiences draws on actual events either reported in abolitionist papers, discussed in abolitionist circles, or depicted in fiction and poetry. The *Liberator* and *The Standard* considered it part of their duty to the abolitionist cause to publish articles such as “The Slave Auction” (23 Sep. 1859), which details the selling of different slaves, including a young slave girl.<sup>26</sup> In addition, in Forten’s journal, she describes how stories and images of slaves, particularly female slaves, greatly impacted her. For instance, in 1857 Forten recounts seeing a “daguerreotype of a young slave girl who escaped in a box” (235), stating,

My heart was full as I gazed at it; full of admiration for the heroic girl, who risked all for freedom; full of indignation that in this boasted land of liberty such a thing could occur. Were she of any other nation her heroism would receive all due honor from these Americans, but as it is, there is not even a single spot in this broad land, where her rights can be protected,—not one. (235)

This daguerreotype incited not only passionate feelings of outrage at the institution of slavery and American hypocrisy but also heroic praise for the girl. Forten’s journal indicates that she is invested in understanding the lived experience of slaves, not

recapitulating idealized portraits of them. What makes “The Slave-Girl’s Prayer” different from other slave prayer poems is Forten’s experimentation with using Wordsworthian language to depict the slave experience.

Forten’s admiration for Wordsworth was part of a larger cultural phenomenon in nineteenth-century America that celebrated the British poet. In *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture* (2005), Joel Pace and Matthew Scott characterize Wordsworth as a “cultural presence” in America, whose writing impacted American politics, social movements, and literature (4).<sup>27</sup> For example, in her essay on William Cullens Bryant, Virginia Jackson illustrates Wordsworth’s influence on one of the nineteenth century’s most popular poets by stating that readers regularly interpreted Bryant as the “American Wordsworth” (188). Pace and Scott note that numerous writers, such as Lucy Larcom, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Lydia Sigourney adopted Wordsworth’s philosophy or style of writing, often composing their own versions of Wordsworthian poems. Lance Newman describes Wordsworth’s influence on American poetics in the following statement: “Perhaps the clearest indicator of his influence is that, as Karen Karbiener is discovering, the magazines of the period were full of unabashed imitations produced by dozens of genteel versifiers, including ‘American Lakers’ such as Nathaniel Parker Willis, Richard Henry Dana, William Henry Channing and James Percival” (70).<sup>28</sup> Wordsworth’s popularity in American literary culture necessarily intersected with elements of the poetess tradition. For example, Wendorff argues that the “poetess’s spontaneity can be traced to popular romantics who [echoed] Wordsworth’s call for poetry that recreated a ‘spontaneous overflow of power feeling’” (117).

Like her contemporaries, Forten was inspired by Wordsworth poetry; she regularly described her reading of his poetry in her journal and articulated how it motivated her to compose similar poetry. Her life-long esteem for Wordsworth can perhaps best be represented by a tribute poem she wrote to him in 1890, just three years before her death, in which she referred to him as “Poet of serene and thoughtful lay!” (1). In her tribute to Wordsworth, Forten describes how she and other individuals turn to him to rejuvenate their souls:

We turn to thee, true priest of Nature’s fane,  
And find the rest our fainting spirits need,—  
The calm more ardent singers cannot give;  
As in the glare intense of tropic days,  
Gladly we turn from the sun’s radiant beams,  
And grateful hail fair Luna’s tender light. (15-20)

While Forten herself feels rejuvenated by Wordsworth’s poetry, she composes a poem about how a slave girl cannot experience the same rejuvenation.

In “The Slave-Girl’s Prayer,” Forten suppresses her own personal enjoyment of Wordsworth in order to explore a subject position that is contrary to her own identity.

Forten begins the poem with a rich description of nature:

Within the fairest of the Southland’s bowers,  
Beneath thy blue, star-jewelled canopy,  
Amid the clustering vines and fragrant flowers,  
Father, in agony I kneel to thee!

Still through the leaves I see the moonlight gleaming,  
Still hear the far-off murmur of the sea;  
But, ah! no longer comes the old, sweet dreaming;  
In anguish deep and strong I kneel to Thee!

The dreams of childhood, they were glad once ever,  
I knew not then the misery of my lot;

Too soon I learned; and in my soul, oh! Never  
Can that dark hour be forgot.

Once every flower and wave and star seemed given  
To fill my heart with joy; now all is o'er;  
The glory of Thy earth, and sea, and heaven,  
But mocks my woe—it gladdens me no more.

I know that Thou art merciful and tender,  
Thou can'st not hear, unmoved, the prayer of woe;  
Oh, take me to Thee! Let me now surrender  
This hated breath—my spirit longs to go.

Ah, worse than death the doom of shame and sorrow,  
That now, oh! Father, waits thy suffering child!  
The horrid fate that waits me on the morrow,  
Whereat my heart grows sick, my brain turns wild. (1-24)

In the opening stanzas, the slave-girl secludes herself deep in the natural world and prays to God. Within her prayer, we learn that she can remember a time before her awareness of her status as a slave, in “the dreams of childhood,” when she was joyful. Forten carefully describes the slave-girl’s joy in terms of her relationship with nature. It is the “flower and wave and star” that used to “fill [her] heart with joy” (13, 14). After losing her childhood innocence, she finds that the beauty of nature “gladdens [her] no more” (12).

Throughout these four stanzas, Forten adopts some of Wordsworth’s language from “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” as well as the situation and setting of his poem. The most obvious connection between the two poems is the shared loss of childhood innocence that is directly connected to how the speaker experiences nature. In the first stanza of Wordsworth’s ode, he describes his loss of innocence as an inability to experience nature as he once did:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparell'd in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—  
Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (1-9)

In Forten's fourth stanza, she adopts Wordsworth's listing of parts of nature ("flower and wave and star," "Thy earth, and sea, and heaven"). She ends this stanza as Wordsworth ends his with a lament that the "glory" of the natural world "gladdens me *no more*" (16, emphasis mine). By connecting her poem so explicitly with Wordsworth's poem, Forten is neither imitating his poem to honor him nor critiquing his poetry. Instead, Forten uses this juxtaposition to establish the cause of the slave-girl's loss as drastically different from Wordsworth's speaker's loss. She depicts the loss that Wordsworth's speaker describes as fundamentally different from the slave girl's loss. The slave-girl must move from childhood innocence to the recognition that she is human property. In "Ode," Wordsworth's speaker depicts his loss as a universal human experience that is inevitable; just by growing older, one loses one's ability to connect with and experience nature. In contrast, Forten depicts the slave-girl's loss of innocence as unnatural and preventable. That is, for the slave-girl, nature does not become joyless because she grows older but because of her first "dark hour of suffering" in which she becomes fully aware of her enslavement. By identifying slavery as the cause of the slave-girl's loss of innocence, Forten implies that this loss could have been prevented; if the girl had never known slavery, she might still be able to enjoy nature.

Forten engages directly with the way in which Wordsworth employs the language of enslavement to describe what he considers a universal human experience. In the famous stanza that begins, “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,” Wordsworth’s speaker describes how the “shades of the *prison-house* begin to close / Upon the growing Boy” (68-9, emphasis mine). Later, when speaking directly to the Child, or as Wordsworth’s speaker names him, “the Mighty Prophet!” (115), the speaker states: “Thou, over whom thy Immortality / Broods like the Day, *a master o’er a slave*” (119-20, emphasis mine). Instead of using slavery as a metaphor for the loss of innocence, Forten uses it as the slave-girl’s lived experience; it is not a metaphor for the slave-girl but her actual life. It is the slave-girl who knows what happens as the “shades of the prison-house begin to close.” While Wordsworth’s speaker laments the eventual metaphoric imprisonment, the slave-girl speaks of the maddening terror she anticipates from actual enslavement: “Ah worse than death the doom of shame and sorrow, / That now, oh, Father! Waits thy suffering child! / The horrid fate that waits me on the morrow, / Whereat my heart grows sick, my brain turns wild” (21-4). In these lines, Forten captures what slavery does to both sentiment and reason. The slave girl’s ability to express positive sentiment or feel emotion is progressively lost as her “heart grows sick” (24). Similarly, her ability to reason is lost as she acknowledges that her “brain turns wild” (24). On the other hand, Wordsworth’s speaker describes how the threat of the “prison house” motivates him to try to reconnect with nature and his childhood self. Wordsworth accomplishes this through more feeling, as he expresses in the final lines of the poem: “Thanks to the human heart by which we live, / Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and

fears, / To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (205-8). In these famous lines, Wordsworth celebrates “the human heart” for its ability to feel so deeply. This allows him to retain a glimpse of the joy and innocence he knew as a child. Forten’s slave-girl has no such opportunity because slavery has destroyed her ability to feel anything but sorrow and terror. Forten replaces Wordsworth’s metaphoric use of slavery with actual experience, indicating that even in poetry the institution of slavery should not be taken out of its historically and socially specific context.

While in the first half of the poem, the slave-girl can at least recall her pleasant “dreams of childhood” (9), once she imagines the “horrid fate” she will suffer on the following day, she can only focus on her present anguish and wish to die. In the final four stanzas, Forten distances herself from Wordsworth and instead connects her poem more closely with the slave prayer genre:

Only to die! It seems not much to pray for!  
‘Tis but a little boon, yet oh, how blest!  
And the crushed soul, with naught on earth to stay for,  
Enters with joy into that perfect rest.

The night speeds on! And yet Thou dost not harken  
To the last prayer o’er to be breathed by me;  
Closer the clouds of anguish round me darken,  
For I am losing faith and hope in Thee.

Oh, hear me, Father! Let it not be shaken—  
My trust in Thee—my only hope of peace;  
Oh, grant my prayer! For if by Thee forsaken,  
By mine own hand my miseries must cease!

From friends, from kindred, every loved one parted,  
No heart to pity me, no hand to save,

I seek the refuge which the broken-hearted  
Find only in the quiet of the grave. (25-40)

As the slave-girl prays “only to die,” nature is almost entirely absent from her thoughts. When it does appear, Forten uses nature, specifically “the clouds,” as a metaphor for the slave-girl’s impending fate and her increasing sense of hopelessness. Forten returns to the realm of metaphor to illustrate how nature can embody the slave-girl’s experience, but it is an overwhelmingly negative metaphor. Through her metaphoric language, Forten suggests that nature not only fails to soothe the slave-girl, but also becomes an accomplice to her increasing illness and insanity. Lacking faith in nature, the slave-girl places all her faith in God, describing him as “my only hope of peace” (34). Even her faith in God, though, wavers, since as the night goes on, God still has not granted her prayer. The slave-girl is prepared for God to abandon her, and she concludes, “for if by Thee forsaken / By mine own hand my miseries must cease!” (35-6). By verbalizing thoughts of suicide, a sin in Christian theology, the slave-girl prepares herself to be utterly alone in the world and afterlife. The sense of complete abandonment is the predominant focus of the final stanza, in which the slave-girl lists every human bond that slavery has broken: “From friends, from kindred, every loved one parted / No heart to pity me, no hand to save” (37-8). Disconnected from all human companionship and love, the slave-girl retreated to nature to appeal to God. Thus, Forten’s slave-girl, unlike Wordsworth’s speaker, seeks not rejuvenation from nature, but resignation and death. Furthermore, while Wordsworth seeks solitude, the slave-girl, having been forced into solitude, is desperate for relationships.



Forten's dire conclusion, in which the slave-girl asks for solace in "the quiet of the grave" (40) while she is secluded in nature, indicates the inability of Wordsworthian language to realistically capture the girl's experience in nature. Peterson, in her analysis of Forten's poetry, encourages us to see this poem as one where Forten can express her personal sorrow through the slave-girl's lament. Yet, we should recognize that the slave-girl's experience in nature is drastically different from Forten's experience. In "The Two Voices," Forten asks God to end her suffering on earth because it is too much to bear. Unlike the slave-girl, Forten is chided by the "second voice" to continue the fight against injustice and enslavement: "Prayest thou for death? Pray, rather, / For the strength to live, and bear / All thy wrongs with brave endurance. / Scorn to yield thee to despair" (77-80). In recognizing the difference in subject positions between herself and the slave girl, Forten recognizes that the different life-experiences necessitate different resolutions. As a Black Victoria, a retreat into nature may rejuvenate Forten, as she says it does in her journals, but she also acknowledges that the same retreat can do nothing to help the slave girl. Wordsworthian poetic language may be able to capture Forten's feelings, a woman with no experience in slavery, but it cannot accurately portray the experience of the slave-girl. Because "The Slave-Girl's Prayer" was published in the *Liberator* and *The Standard*, Forten's poem suggests the limitations of Wordsworthian romanticism for the slave community. When read in the context of "The Wind Among the Poplars" and "In the Country," the poem illustrates Forten's belief that some poetic modes are incompatible with the brutality and dehumanizing experience of slavery and ill-placed when printed in abolitionist papers. Just as the slave-girl says that the beauty of nature

“mocks [her] woe,” Forten’s antebellum poetics suggests that poetry celebrating the beauty and pleasure of nature “mocks” the slave experience and is incompatible with the expressed politics of abolitionist papers. With the publication of “The Slave-Girl’s Prayer,” Forten suggests the irreconcilable nature of her dual identity as a Black Victorian Poetess. This realization impacts her artistry in that she understands that the cultural influences of the white poetess tradition and the political artist model of the African American community are irreconcilable in her poetry. With the start of the Civil War, Forten abandons poetry as her primary method to contribute to the abolitionist movement. Instead, she adopts the position as a “race woman” and leaves for Port Royal, South Carolina to educate recently freed slaves.

## V

Forten’s career as a periodical poet ended on the eve of the Civil War. In fact, the years of the Civil War were significant markers in Forten’s life and literary career in a number of ways. Most importantly, historians remember Forten for her participation in the Port Royal experiment during the Civil War, in which she was the first African American woman to travel to the South Carolina islands to educate recently freed slaves. This event also became significant for literary historians as Forten’s journal entries during this period were published in the *Liberator*, and with the help of Whittier, published as essays in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864. Given the prestigious stature of the *Atlantic Monthly*, this was a noteworthy achievement for an African American woman

writer in the mid-nineteenth-century, especially one who had until that time published primarily in abolitionist newspapers.

Despite the significant accomplishment that Forten's *Atlantic Monthly* publications represented, it also marked the beginning of an extended hiatus from writing. The exact month that "The Life on the Sea Islands" appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1864, Forten ceased writing in her journal and did not return to it for twenty-one years. Nor did she publish in periodicals for four years after her *Atlantic Monthly* publication or write another poem until 1874.<sup>29</sup> It was not until she married Francis Grimké in 1878 that she returned to consistently composing poetry. When she did return to poetry, Forten wrote most often in the form that she so admired in the antebellum years: the poetess tradition. She composed tributes to Charles Sumner and William Wordsworth as well as lyrics about nature like "A June Song" and "In Florida," which was addressed to her husband and celebrated genteel depictions of nature. While this could be interpreted as a renunciation of her political poetry of the antebellum era, we should acknowledge the different venue Forten chose for her postbellum poetry. Instead of the public sphere of abolitionist periodicals, Forten selected a semi-public sphere for her postbellum poetry, circulating poems among friends and family, many of them written directly to her husband. With the change of venue, Forten's artistic identity changed as well, from a periodical to coterie poet. Forten's abandonment of her identity as a periodical poet after the Civil War could mean that she found poetry an ineffective vehicle for political and social change. Many of her postbellum prose writings are powerful condemnations of racism and Forten might have considered these direct

messages incompatible with the genre of poetry. In terms of my study of Forten's antebellum poetics, I find that this major shift in her artistic identity—from periodical to coterie poet—reinforces the consciousness of her choice to construct herself as a poet for abolitionist readers in the late 1850s.

Forten's participation in the Port Royal experiment and her postbellum prose publications suggest that Forten took on the role of a "race woman," overcoming extreme shyness and quelling the influence of the cult of true womanhood. Significantly, throughout the postbellum era, Forten's identity continued to be defined by the duality of the Black Victoria figure. While Forten became a "race woman" in her periodical prose writings, she continued to write poetry in the tradition of the poetess within the private sphere. The poetess tradition, then, was an incredibly important influence on Forten's conception of herself as an artist both before and after the Civil War. Forten's periodical poetry suggests that she found the poetess tradition's apolitical nature incompatible with her political artistic aims within the abolitionist movement. In the next chapter, I address how Sarah Piatt reconciled her identity as a woman poet within the poetess tradition. Just as Forten's reading of and publishing in abolitionist periodicals defined her conflicted relationship to the poetess tradition, Piatt's poetry engaged ongoing debates about the fine arts in order to articulate her artistic identity and agenda.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" (1966); Mabel Donnelly's *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality* (1986); Frances B. Cogen's *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (1987); Ellen Plante's *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (1997); and Tiffany Wayne's *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> There is no book-length biography of Forten. Beverly Stevenson's introduction to the 1988 edition of Forten's journal provides the most extensive biographical information (*The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* 1988). For shorter treatments of Forten's life see the following bio-critical essays: Karen M. Davis' "Charlotte Lottie Forten Grimké" (2000); Trudier Harris' "Charlotte L. Forten," (1986); Theodore Hovet's "Charlotte Forten," (2003); Katherine Rodier's "Charlotte Forten," (2001); and Gwendolyn Thomas' "Forten, Charlotte L." (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Forten is likewise noted for her numerous relationships with famous literati of the nineteenth century: hearing Emerson's lectures, corresponding with John Greenleaf Whittier, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Lydia Maria Child, and conversing with Robert and Maria Lowell and Frederick Douglass (Stevenson 19, 41).

<sup>4</sup> Edited by Brenda Stevenson, this new edition revised and corrected the errors present in Ray Allen Billington's edition of *The Journal of Charlotte Forten: A Free Negro in the Slave Era* (1953). Billington's edition was based on the Anna Julia Cooper's private printing of the journal in 1951, *Personal Reflections on the Grimké Family* (1951). Gloria C. Oden was the first scholar to identify and correct the errors in Billington's edition; see: "The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten: The Salem-Philadelphia Years (1854-1862) Reexamined" (1983).

<sup>5</sup> For scholarship on Forten's journal see: Silvia Xavier's "Engaging George Campbell's Sympathy in the Rhetoric of Charlotte Forten and Ann Plato, African American Women of the Antebellum North" (2005); Lisa A. Long's "Charlotte Forten's Civil War Journals and the Quest for 'Genius, Beauty, and Deathless Fame'" (1999); Carla L. Peterson's chapter on Forten in *"Doers of the Word": African American women Speakers and Writers in the North* (1995); Lisa M. Koch's "Bodies as Stage Props: Enacting Hysteria in the Diaries of Charlotte Forten Grimké and Alice James" (1998); Geneva Cobb-Moore's "When Meanings Meet: The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké" (1996); Nellie Y. McKay's "The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké: Les Lieux de Memoire in African American Women's Autobiography" (1994); Joanne Braxton's chapter on Forten in *Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1985).

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<sup>6</sup> The following is a list of all of Forten's known poems, organized chronologically by the first publication venue or by the composition date: "A Parting Hymn" (c. Mar. 1855); "To W.L.G. on Reading His Chosen Queen" (*Liberator* 16 Mar. 1855); "In earnest path to duty" (*Liberator* 24 Aug. 1855); "They Boast of Freedom in this land of ours" (*The Standard* 2 Aug. 1856); "The Angel's Visit" (*Repository of Religion, Literature, Science and Art* Nov. 1858); "Flowers" (*Repository of Religion, Literature, Science and Art* May 1858); "The Two Voices" (*The Standard* 15 Jan. 1859); "The Wind Among the Poplars" (*Liberator* 27 May 1859); "The Slave-Girl's Prayer" (*The Standard* 14 Jan. 1860); "In the Country" (*The Standard* 1 Sep 1860); "Charles Sumner" (c. 1874); "A June Song" (c. 1885); "Charlotte Corday" (c. 1885); "At Newport" (c. 1888); "The Gathering of the Grand Army" (c. 1890).

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of Zboray and Sarcino Zboray, who perform an excellent close-reading of Forten's poem "Flowers" and discuss her role as an amateur poet, most scholars treat Forten's poetry as secondary in importance to her journal. For scholarship that has extended discussions of Forten's poetry see: Zboray and Saracino Zboray's *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (2005); Peterson's *"Doers of the Word": African American women Speakers and Writers in the North* (1995); Joan Sherman's *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (1989); and Braxton's chapter on Forten in *Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1985).

<sup>8</sup> See Gardner's "African American Women's Poetry in the *Christian Recorder*, 1855-1865: A Bio-Bibliography with Sample Poems" (2006) and *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2009).

<sup>9</sup> I have found the following scholarship on the African American press and African American periodicals particularly useful: Frances Smith Foster's "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African American Print Culture" (2005); Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002); Robert S. Levine's "Circulating the Nation: David Walker, the Missouri Compromise, and the Rise of the Black Press" (2001); Todd Vogel's *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (2001); Frances Smith Foster's "African Americans, Literature, and the Nineteenth-Century Afro-Protestant Press" (1999); Frankie Hutton's *The Early Black Press in America, 1827-1860* (1993); Penelope Bullock's *The Afro-American Periodical Press, 1838-1909* (1981); Martn E. Dann's *The Black Press, 1827-1890: The Quest for National Identity* (1971).

<sup>10</sup> Forten's postbellum poetry was first published in Anna Julia Cooper's private printing of the Grimké family papers in 1951.

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<sup>11</sup> From 1854 to 1862 Forten resided primarily in Salem, but spent occasional months with her family and close friends in Philadelphia (Stevenson 17).

<sup>12</sup> For references to Wordsworth in Forten's journal see the following entries in Stevenson's edition: 20 Jan. 1855, 11 Mar. 1855, 25 Mar. 1855, 23 Apr. 1857, and 8 Oct. 1857.

<sup>13</sup> Wendorff argues, "[The] focus on the life and character of the poetess, on her poems as a kind of lucid record or exemplar of her experiences, can be traced to an intersection between domestic ideology and popular romanticism [...]" (112). According to Nancy Cott, white women were "exalted for their supposed inherent morality and propensity for religion (128). Hence, in terms of spirituality, "white women were said to the superiors of men" (Wendorff 112). Domestic ideology comes to intersect with popular romanticism through the emphasis on the poetess's character. Wendorff states, "Consider the popular nineteenth-century romantic belief that poetry was an expression of the soul's eternal truths and that poets were somehow divinely touched [...] There is a marked intersection between this idea of the poet, who somehow operates above the fray of politics and money, and the 'true woman,' who does likewise" (112).

<sup>14</sup> In addition to "To W.L.G.," three other of Forten's poems were published in 1855 and 1856. However, Forten did not choose to send them to periodicals; they likely made their way into print through close friends. These poems were composed for specific occasions: her graduation from Higginson Grammar School, a semi-annual examination at the State Normal School, and her graduation from the State Normal school. Biographers and critics have confused Forten's poems for her school graduations. The most consistent inaccuracy that needs to be corrected is the confusion surrounding poems Forten wrote for her graduation ceremonies for Higginson Grammar School and Salem Normal School. Forten's "A Parting Hymn" was written for her grammar school graduation in March 1855, and as Zboray and Sarcino Zborary report, was printed in the graduation program. The confusion centers on a second graduation poem for her Normal School graduation. Forten wrote in her journal that her classmates selected her to write a poem for the graduation ceremony in July 1856. All sources have identified the Normal School graduation poem as "In the earnest path of duty" (poem is untitled, thus, this is the first line), and state that the *Liberator* published it on August 24, 1856. However, "In the earnest path of duty" was actually published on August 24, 1855, a year before Forten's Normal School graduation. There is an untitled poem, "They boast of Freedom in this land of ours" that *The Standard* reprinted from the *Salem Register* on August 2, 1856, which is most likely the poem she read at her Normal School graduation.

<sup>15</sup> For more detailed accounts of the non-resistant movement, see: Ford Risley's *Abolition and the Press: The Moral Struggle Against Slavery* (2008); Robert Fanuzzi's *Abolition's*

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*Public Sphere* (2003); Henry Mayer's *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (1998).

<sup>16</sup> I do not mean to imply that Garrison was a gradualist. Garrison is best described as an "immediatist" abolitionist (Mayer 70, 72-3). His commitment to non-resistance did not quell his extremism and his contemporaries considered him to be an extremist. For Garrison's philosophy and actions in the 1850s see Mayer's biography of Garrison (1998).

<sup>17</sup> For instance, see Mayer's description of the Shadrack case of 1848 (408-10). In the middle of a trial that would return an escaped slave known as Shadrack to his master in Virginia, Shadrack was rescued by a group of radical abolitionists. After this rescue, also referred to as a "judicial kidnapping," Garrison stated, "Nobody injured, nobody wronged, but simply a chattel transformed into a man by unarmed friends of equal liberty" (qtd. in Mayer 408).

<sup>18</sup> Garrison's letters provide a similar portrait of his shifting views on nonresistance. These letters were often public documents printed in the *Liberator* or read at antislavery meetings and parallel his support for nonresistance up until the hanging of John Brown. See the following letters: 25, 138, 145, 241, 251, and 318. Numbers refer to Louis Ruchame's edition of Garrison's letters: *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Vol. IV: From Disunion to the Brink of War, 1850-1860* (1975).

<sup>19</sup> Forten's title identifies her just one of a number of abolitionist who chose to express their esteem for Garrison in verse. Most notably, Whittier composed "To William Lloyd Garrison" in 1832 and read it at the convention in 1833 where the American Antislavery Society was formed in Philadelphia. The dates of other tribute poems, all titled "To William Lloyd Garrison," printed in the *Liberator* include: 16 Jan. 1836 by W.C.; 30 Jan. 1836 by R.; 8 Sep. 1837 by anon.; and 27 Nov. 1846 by J.T. Gilmore. Also, Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "To William Lloyd Garrison" appeared in *The Liberty Bell* (1846).

<sup>20</sup> In addition to Gardner's 2006 essay cited earlier, for scholarship on the *Christian Recorder* see: Mitch Kachun's "Interrogating the Silences: Julia C. Collins, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Black Readers and Writers, and the *Christian Recorder*" (2006); and Gilbert Anthony Williams' *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: History of a Forum for Ideas, 1854-1902* (1996).

<sup>21</sup> Joan Sherman's essay makes a similar point. Sherman argues that the African American press was not first established to serve the abolitionist movement or to combat racist attacks by white Americans. Rather, she argues that the African American press originated from the "desire to create a positive and purposeful self-identified African



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America" (718). For her full argument see her essay: "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African American Print Culture" (2005).

<sup>22</sup> For other examples of genteel poetry in the *Liberator*, particularly in the years Forten's poetry was published see: "The Ideal is the Real" (5 Nov. 1858); "Autumn (26 Nov. 1858); "Spring" (3 Jun. 1859); "The Gladness of May" (25 May 1860); and "A Reverie" (24 Aug. 1860).

<sup>23</sup> See M. H. Abrams's "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor" (1984).

<sup>24</sup> For instance, in the *Liberator* poems with the title "The Slave's Prayer" appeared repeatedly over the paper's 30 years of publication. A poem by Gibbs Campbell, entitled "Slave's Prayer," was published a few months before Forten's poem was reprinted in the *Liberator*. As a representative slave prayer poem, Campbell's poem begins with a plea to God: "Oh God! Look down and see / Outraged Humanity / 'Neath the Oppressor's Rod / Give ear, oh God!" (20 May 1859). In another slave's prayer poem, printed anonymously in 1834, the speaker desires an answer from God that would explain his enslavement: "Why is it Lord, that I am doomed / to a life of slavery? / Why are my earnings all consumed / by men of cruelty?" (*Liberator* 27 Dec. 1834). In a final example from the *Liberator*, a poem simply titled "The Slave Girl" was published about a year after Forten's poem (21 Jun. 1861). Perhaps the most famous is Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," which Forten first read in 1854.

<sup>25</sup> In interpreting Forten's admiration for Browning's poem, Braxton argues that Forten identified with the "literary sensibility" of Browning and the "feminine heroism of the narrator" (87), suggesting that because of Forten's middle class identity and literary education, she was very comfortable identifying with the gender issues of an elite white woman's writing.

<sup>26</sup> For other examples of *Liberator* articles that focus specifically on slave girls see: "Scenes of Violence and Blood" (25 July 1851); "The Bloody and Oppressive South; Another Fearful Record" (13 Jul. 1855); "Life on the Plantation" (10 Aug. 1855); "Southern Crimes and Atrocities" (3Apr. 1857); and "A Slave Girl's Narrative" (13 May 1859).

<sup>27</sup> For scholarship on Wordsworth in America see: Joel Pace and Matthew Scott's edited collection *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture* (2005); Meredith McGill's edited collection *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* (2008); Stephen Gill's edited collection *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (2003); and Gill's *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1998).

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<sup>28</sup> Newman is referencing Karen Karbiener's presentation about the "American Lakers" at the 2003 conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism at Fordham University in New York City. See Newman's *Our Common Dwelling: Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (2005).

<sup>29</sup> Scholars have explained this extended break from writing by Forten's increasingly poor health and dire economic circumstances. While ill health and a need to earn a living could be factors, they did not affect her writing in the antebellum years. The years from 1858 to 1860, directly after Forten had to resign from her school in Salem and return to Philadelphia because of bad health, were her most productive years as a periodical poet and as a journal writer; she saw seven poems published in periodicals and wrote consistently in her journal during these years. Rather than assume that Forten's writing career fell victim to her health or financial difficulties, scholars should explore other motivations that potentially caused Forten to cease writing. One direction that might be useful is an examination of Whittier's mentorship of Forten, specifically his role in shepherding her essays into the *Atlantic Monthly*. This direction could potentially connect Forten's hiatus from writing to editorial and publishing circumstances of postbellum America rather than associating it with a circumstance specific to Forten's life.

## CHAPTER 3

### SARAH PIATT'S ART POETRY AND THE PERIODICAL DISCOURSE ON THE FINE ARTS

In 1871, the *Atlantic Monthly* published Sarah Piatt's "A Statue," a poem that represents Piatt's preoccupation with the fine arts. The title, "A Statue," suggests that readers will likely find an ekphrastic poem, perhaps in the tradition of John Keats's "Ode of a Grecian Urn." Yet, instead of describing a statue in detail, Piatt's poem conveys an argument for not sculpting a statue, employing an irony that is characteristic of her oeuvre. The short poem articulates a speaker's request to a sculptor not to carve a statue so that the purity of the marble can be preserved:

Leave what is white for whiter's use;  
For such a purpose as your own  
Would be a dreary jest, a coarse abuse,  
A bitter wrong for snowy stone.

Let the pure marble's silence hold  
Its hidden gods, and do not break  
These unseen images, divine and old,  
To-day, for one mean man's small sake! (1-8)

Throughout this brief poem, the speaker mocks the artist's ambitions, claiming that the sculptor's talent and purpose are a "dreary jest" and a "coarse abuse." The speaker suggests that the "pure marble" in its original and natural form possesses more majesty and artistry than whatever the sculptor could carve into the "snowy stone." The sculptor

is not the only subject of the speaker's critique; the viewer or recipient of the sculpture is also depicted in negative terms, as being an average man with petty motivations. As a whole, Piatt offers a pessimistic portrait of the process and reception of art, and, in doing so, she articulates her investment in two of the most prominent issues that dominated fine arts criticism in the nineteenth century: the purpose of art and the role of the artist.

In what follows, I argue that we must read "A Statue" within the context of the discourse of fine arts in American periodicals, specifically within the context of the term "artistic genius," which was employed to separate the best artists from those who were merely average. "A Statue" is just one of Piatt's many poems about the visual arts, a subgenre of Piatt's work that I call "art poetry." Piatt's "art poetry" explicitly addresses the role of the artist, the process of artistic creation, and the reception of works of art, both visual and written. By examining how Piatt's "art poetry" enters into the discourse on the visual arts in periodicals, this chapter demonstrates how Piatt uses the visual arts to articulate her artistic identity as a woman poet. I argue that Piatt's art poetry rejects the model of the romantic artistic genius popular in the nineteenth century and, instead, advocates a counter-model that deemphasizes the importance of the artist and magnifies the relationship between the audience and art. This type of interaction allows readers freedom to interpret art on their own terms rather than basing their interpretations on the artist's purpose or the critic's appraisal. Piatt's art poetry, then, promotes a democratic model of artistry that aligns her with literary realists of the era who understood the concept of genius as anti-American and undemocratic. Significantly, Piatt's participation in the discourse of the fine arts and artistic genius ultimately allows her to address the

parallel discourse in the written arts about the poetess. Instead of writing about her identity as a poetess directly, we see her engage it through her art poetry.

In contrast to Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Forten, who interacted with nineteenth-century American periodical culture primarily as readers and published a limited number of poems in periodicals, Piatt was a prolific writer for periodicals and an exceptionally popular poet with readers. Her periodical oeuvre includes approximately 440 poems published between 1866 and 1911 in 37 different periodicals, including leading national monthlies like *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Galaxy*, and *Harper's Monthly*, and progressive metropolitan newspapers like New York's *Independent* and Washington DC's the *Capital* (Bennett xxviii).<sup>1</sup> In addition to her periodical publications, Piatt published eighteen volumes of poetry, two of which she coauthored with her husband; these volumes garnered over forty reviews by periodicals (Bennett xxviii). For these reasons, in a ground-breaking collection of Piatt's poetry, *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (2001), Paula Bennett argues that periodicals were essential to understanding Piatt's verse. Bennett is particularly interested in recovering Piatt's political verse, most of which appeared in periodicals. Matthew Giordano also identifies Piatt as a "periodical poet," and he treats the variety of her poetry as essential to her publication, asserting that a diverse periodical readership required that Piatt write equally diverse poetry.<sup>2</sup> In order to further enrich our understanding of Piatt's identity as a periodical poet, I explore a specific facet of Piatt's poetry that has been overshadowed by interest in her political agenda and her readership: the complex relationship between Piatt's poetry and the active periodical discourse on the fine arts. Periodicals are

significant to understanding Piatt's artistry not only because she published widely and profusely in them, but also because through her poetry we see her consciously "write back" to art criticism, reviews, and essays that discuss the fine arts.

To explore the interaction between the visual and written arts in Piatt's poetry, this chapter draws on recent scholarship about the "interarts." Also referred to as "word and image studies," interart criticism is a vast and interdisciplinary field of study that crosses traditional temporal, field, and generic divisions that usually separate academic disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Most useful to my analysis of the visual arts in Piatt's poetry is the wealth of criticism on the visual arts and the British Victorian era, particularly Antonia Losano's *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (2008).<sup>4</sup> In her study of British Victorian women's fictional depictions of women painters, Losano identifies the term "scene of painting" in order to study "the act and process of painting, and the reception and judgment of women's artworks" (3). Losano argues that these "scenes of painting" are "self-reflexive moments, articulating not simply writers' large-scale aesthetic and social opinions but their literary theories as well" (7). In essence, I share Losano's interest in the social aspects surrounding the creation of art and its reception in women's works because this was how women writers on both sides of the Atlantic expressed their artistic agendas.<sup>5</sup> In her study of American women's artistry, Naomi Sofer argues that many women writers saw their fiction as the "primary vehicle" for articulating aesthetic visions (9). Given her position as a woman poet in the second half of the nineteenth century, Piatt's poetry is the most likely place for her to articulate her aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> Thus, using interart criticism enables me to understand Piatt's art poetry as participating in the larger

phenomenon of women authors who use the visual arts to explore and challenge conceptions of what art is and who should create it.

Piatt's career, beginning with writing poetry early in her life and advancing to national publication after she married, was largely enabled by her social and economic background and life circumstances. Born Sarah Morgan Bryan in 1836, Piatt was a member of one of the wealthiest families in Kentucky. Even in her teens, Piatt was already writing poems for periodicals, publishing them in her local paper, the *Louisville Journal*. In her twenties, Piatt married John James "J.J." Piatt, a northern newspaper journalist and poet, and moved with him to southern Ohio just before the Civil War. In 1864, Piatt resumed her publishing career. Instead of local newspapers, Piatt now published her poetry in prestigious and nationally circulated literary monthlies. Piatt's access to this market came about largely through J.J.'s personal and professional connections; in 1860, J.J. coauthored a collection of poems with William Dean Howells titled *Poems of Two Friends*. Despite the professional benefits of her marriage, letters and family records suggest that Piatt's marriage to J.J. did not provide a stable and secure way of life. J.J.'s incompetency in all financial and business matters forced the family to move multiple times to Washington, D.C., Ohio, and, for eleven years, to Ireland. Despite J.J.'s failings as a provider, he never inhibited his wife's work as a poet. In fact, because of his connections to the elite literati of the Northeast, J.J. consistently promoted Piatt's poetry by circulating it to famous editors, including Howells and Edmund Clarence Stedman. J.J. continued to encourage her publication even after it was clear that editors preferred Sarah's poetry over his own. Piatt regularly used the money she made

from her poetry to pay for the education of her seven children. Similar to many women poets and writers of the nineteenth century, Piatt balanced economic and artistic motivations throughout her literary career.

A prolific and popular contributor, Piatt nevertheless drew mixed reviews from periodicals. Many reviewers praised her poetry that adhered to the tenets of the poetess tradition. For instance, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* reinforced Piatt's identity as a poetess when they admired her poems for "a certain simplicity [that] imparts a real charm to what does not claim to be in any sense great but only pleasant poetry" (Aug. 1871). While many periodicals lauded her for saying, as the *Overland Monthly* claimed, "some very pretty things very prettily" (Sep. 1874), the same periodicals also regularly expressed confusion and distaste when her verse deviated from the poetess persona. In commenting on Piatt's overzealous originality and obscurity, the *Independent* asserted, "she deals too largely in hints and innuendos, broken side lights which confuse the shadows upon which they are thrown, and explanations which leave us more bewildered than we were without them" (18 Dec. 1879). This critique of Piatt is characteristic of editors' general aversion to her complex poems that would leave readers "bewildered." Such reviews indicate that Piatt's poetry confounds the gendered categories that periodicals relied on to evaluate women's verse. We can see this confusion emerge in an 1871 review in *The Independent* of Piatt's first volume of poetry:

In quantity it is not a great book; but in quality, in delicacy, originality, artistic feeling, and power, no American poetess has given us a greater one—and here we say less than might be said of it. There is no page of its scant hundred and thirty which does not bear witness to her genius; and the expression is always as new as the thought is fine and sweet. [...] At



her worst she is obscure; at her best she writes poetry delightful for its music, its tender sentiment, its subtle thoughtfulness. (4 May 1871)

This review is striking for its contradictory terms that blur the divisions between men's and women's poetry. Her collection is marked by the traits of the poetess: "delicacy," "feeling," and "fine and sweet" verse. At the same time, Piatt's verse is also described with terms usually reserved for men's poetry: "originality," "power," and "genius." The reviewer qualifies his claim of Piatt's "genius" with the previous assertion that she is a great "American poetess." Hence, her genius is necessarily limited by her gender; the most Piatt can achieve as a female poetic genius is to perfectly embody the "tender sentiment" and other ideal traits of the poetess. The use of "genius" in this review suggests that Piatt's public reception in periodicals was defined by the overlapping discourses of the fine arts that centered on artistic ability and specifically the qualifications for artistic genius.

## I

In the second half of the nineteenth century, discussions of the fine arts, as well as specific artists and works of art, were regular features in periodicals that published Piatt's poetry.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the *Independent*, which published a significant number of Piatt's poems, devoted a section of every issue to the fine arts. Typical of most of the periodicals I surveyed, the *Independent* covered historically famous painters and contemporary American artists, national and international art exhibitions, new theories of art and different schools of art criticism. As Nancy Glazener has argued, periodicals like

the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly*, the *Galaxy*, and the *North American Review* presented their investment in the fine and written arts as part of a collective edifying goal to educate their readers in matters of art, literature, and culture. For example, in 1879, the year of the Centennial Exhibition, *Scribner's Monthly* characterized America's widespread fervor for the fine arts as a significant step in the nation's intellectual and cultural growth:

The spread of art and art ideas in this country has been accepted as a sort of new gospel. [...] A fresh significance has been given to life and in everything—in architecture, in painting, in sculpture, in pottery, in home decoration, in embroidery, [...]—there has been a great revival, or an absolutely new birth. Partly, this is the result of the Centennial Exhibition, and partly it is the result of a contagion that seems to swim in the universal air. The whole world is growing artistic. [...] Our own country, though it has been the last to awaken out of sleep, bids fair to run its new enthusiasm into a craze. (Jan. 1879)

This depiction of America's investment in the arts as “a sort of new gospel” highlights the pervasiveness of the enthusiasm that the writer believes America has for the arts in all areas of their lives. The title of the article, “Art as a Steady Diet,” represents art as a necessary element of the cultural health of Americans. *Scribner's* regularly contributed to this “steady diet” with articles like “Living American Artists,” “The National Academy Exhibition,” “The Royal Academy Exhibition,” “The Graphic Art,” “Sculpture,” “Art in our Homes and Schools,” and “American Art.”<sup>8</sup> Piatt's art poetry was printed alongside these encomiums of art as enhancing the American experience. This section address how Piatt enters the debates about the fine arts through her art poetry; it particularly focuses on how her art poetry critiques the following aspects of artistic genius: the popular assertion that a genius created art based on an imagined ideal

rather than a representation of the real, and the characterization of genius as an inborn quality that could not be taught. Notably, these are all tenets of Romantic idealism, which indicates the popularity of this literary and cultural movement throughout nineteenth-century America. Finally, because the discourse on artistic genius was not unilateral, I discuss how Piatt's poetic critiques of artistic genius intersect with literary realists' critique of it as undemocratic and anti-American.

Although artistic genius was a popular subject, periodicals struggled to define it in concrete terms, relying on the same vague adjectives to discuss it. James Russell Lowell, the first editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, captured the attractive but mysterious qualities of "artistic genius" in 1860: "We look upon artistic genius as the most wayward apparition among mankind. It cannot be predicated upon any of Mr. Buckle's averages. Give the census, you may, perhaps, say so many murders, so many suicides, so many misdirect letters (and men of letters), but not so many geniuses" (Feb. 1860). By stating that genius cannot be predicted, calculated or anticipated by rational, demographic or statistical methods, Lowell's assertion epitomizes other contemporary descriptions of genius. For example, a writer for the *Independent* claimed that the "cause" of genius was "too subtle to be detected by any superficial observer" (15 Jun. 1876). The term appeared particularly difficult to define with certainty because general and elusive definitions were the standard. *The Continental Monthly*, for instance, provided eight definitions of genius within two pages, identifying genius in one sentence as "intuitive and creative" and in another sentence as the marker of an "artistic soul" (Nov. 1863). Although these are

complementary terms, their number and vagueness reinforce Lowell's characterization of genius as a "wayward apparition."<sup>9</sup>

One of the most important markers for describing artistic genius, which dominated the periodical discourse, was the belief that true artistic geniuses worked to imagine an ideal image rather than represent it as it exists in the actual world. A writer for *The Continental Monthly* asserted, "Genius descends from the Idea to the Form—from the invisible to the visible" (Nov. 1863). In opposition to "genius," the writer argues that "talent [...] mounts from the visible to the invisible" (Nov. 1863). This statement establishes a hierarchy of genius over talent and, consequently, art based on the "invisible" over art based on the "visible." Taking their lead from John Ruskin, the preeminent authority on art and artistic truth in the nineteenth century, American periodical critics repeatedly associated truth with an imaginative ideal.<sup>10</sup> *Littell's Living Age* described the artist who painted from the real as "a copyist," a disparaging term, and reserved the term "genius" for those artists who painted from the ideal (18 Aug. 1866). Indeed, most of the articles surveyed conformed to this point of view, depicting art based on imitation of the real world, or the "visible," as secondary to art based on the artist's imaginative creation of the "invisible."<sup>11</sup> James Henry (not to be confused with author Henry James), writing for *The Crayon*, the first American periodical entirely devoted to the visual arts, affirmed Ruskin's point of view, stating, "imitation [was] inadequate for the purposes of art" (Jan. 1855). The *North American Review* references Ruskin's dislike for imitation because it is "a craft or a skill" rather than "art" (Jul. 1855). Critics often condemned artists who insisted on detailed and accurate depictions of nature and, in

contrast, praised artists who possessed the “transmuting power” to reach “the actual divine in their art” (*The Crayon*, Aug. 1855). By linking truth with the ideal, Ruskin privileged art that was “conceptive” rather than just “perceptive” (qtd. in Novak, 83).

For Ruskin and the periodical writers who endorsed his criticism, average artists may be able to perceive or imitate nature, but artistic geniuses possess the imaginative capability to “conceive” something higher. In 1855, *The Crayon* reprinted one paragraph on “the Ideal” from another periodical, the *Leslie*. In this short piece, the writer equates the Ideal with the type of high art associated with artistic geniuses:

The Ideal, I conceive to be not only the result of an inborn aspiration of all taste, but it is the sole condition of the very existence of Art; and, therefore, where there is no selection or where the selection is not under the guidance of judgment, there may be very good painting, as far as it is merely a copy but there can be no Art [...] the ideal is the poetic element by which, properly understood, and not by any classification of subjects, high Art is distinguished from low or ordinary Art. (Jul. 1855)

Within this paragraph, one can see the influence of the concept of the romantic genius on art critics: the *Leslie* writer’s use of “inborn,” the defining characteristic of the artistic genius, implies the interconnected nature between genius, “the Ideal,” and “high Art.”

The writer identifies not only “Art” but also its antithesis, explaining that “low or ordinary Art” is defined as a “good painting” that is “merely a copy” (Jul. 1855). In direct contrast to periodicals’ promotion of high art, Piatt regularly placed “low” or “ordinary Art” at the center of her art poems. In one brief example, Piatt’s “Made of Shadow” addresses the significance of a family portrait and its centrality to the family’s ability to remember a lost loved one. Also, in her poem “Marble or Dust?”, which I will discuss in more detail in section two, Piatt dramatizes a mother and son’s response to one

of the many statues of Lincoln that proliferated in America after the Civil War. In both these poems, Piatt employs a middle class portrait and a popularized statue as if they were famous works of arts, and effectively demonstrates how ordinary artworks can evoke equally philosophical and complicated thoughts in viewers as “high art.”

The invention of daguerreotyping in 1839 and the subsequent development of photography also fueled periodical writers’ desires to associate genius with an imaginary ideal, which a photo lens could not capture.<sup>12</sup> In an 1858 *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled “Something About Pictures,” H. T. Tuckerman writes:

The discovery of Daguerre and its numerous improvements, and the unrivalled precision attained by Photography, render exact imitation no longer a miracle of crayon or palette; these must now create as well as reflect, invent and harmonize as well as copy, bring out the soul of the individual and the landscape, or their achievements will be neglected in favor of the fac-similes obtainable through sunshine and chemistry. (Feb. 1858)

Tuckerman claims that the painter’s artistry, as it stands at the moment, is in danger of being replaced by a mechanical process. Six years later, *Atlantic* writer and co-founder, James Eliot Cabot, describes photography’s impact on the visual arts: “It is a very general opinion that photography has made painting superfluous,—or, at least, that it will do so as soon as further improvements in the process shall enable it to render color as well as light and shade” (Feb. 1864). In reference to portraiture, Cabot specifically claims, “No naturalist describes the defects of his specimens, though it may happen that all are imperfect” (Feb. 1864). Instead, Cabot contends that artists should aspire to the “ideal human form” (Feb. 1864). For Cabot, the “ideal human form” is not a lie, but rather represents the true individual. Tuckerman’s and Cabot’s articles raise a question for

nineteenth-century readers and artists: if photography can represent (material) reality more accurately than painting, then what is the purpose of painting? The answer to this question led many critics to describe the artist as one who must look for artistic truth beyond (material) reality. Rembrandt Peale claims, “It is necessary for the portrait painter to make his portraits not only as true but expressively more true than the daguerreotypes” (*The Crayon* Feb. 1857). Peale also argues that painting a portrait from an ideal is not untrue because the painter can capture his sitters “as they exist at a fortunate moment” (Feb. 1857). In “Something About Pictures,” Tuckerman echoes Peale’s charge to the artist to be “an interpreter of life” who “casts the halo of romance over the stern features of reality” (Feb. 1858). As a mechanical reproduction cannot accomplish this, the advent of the daguerreotype reaffirmed the alignment of the artistic genius, especially in portraiture, with an imaginative ideal.

The shift from portraiture being associated with “functionality” and realistic copies to being associated with the ideal and artistry is best represented in the poem “The Painter and his Sitter” by art critic and poet C. P. Cranch that appeared in *The Crayon* in 1855. In the poem we hear the sitter’s anxious thoughts as he watches the painter’s palette. The sitter’s speculation presents the artist as possessing a “philosophic eye” and suggests that “the Infinite Creator breathes through all his living breath” (Jan. 1855). The sitter’s use of lofty language to describe his own portrait-painting indicates the grandeur of what can be accomplished in portraiture. The final lines of the poem present portrait painting as a divine process:

But the Painter still is working—through these forms of sin and strife,

Out of all this seeming chaos, moulding fairer forms of life,  
And one day, the patient sitter, from the ARTIST'S point of sight,  
Shall behold his form transfigured, glowing in the perfect light. (33-36)

The "Painter" is transformed into an "ARTIST" in all capital letters. And, it is through the "Artist's point of sight" that the sitter will be able to glean his true form "transfigured" and "glowing in perfect light" (36). Portraiture becomes a transcendent experience in which the sitter comes to know his true self "through [the] forms of sin and strife" (33). Cranch constructs portrait painting as an individual creative process in which the Artist, inspired by God, paints the sitter's ideal self.

Piatt most clearly enters this debate between the ideal and real in "The Order for her Portrait," which indicates that representing the real can be just as creative as painting from an ideal. Published in the *Independent* in 1872, "The Order for her Portrait" presents a bourgeois woman unabashedly proud of her aged physical appearance, directing a commissioned artist on how to represent her actual appearance rather than to imagine her in a more favorable light:

"I say what Cromwell said,  
(Smile, gray-haired skeptic, if you think me bold),  
And that Italian count whose hair was red:  
His great will would not have it painted gold.

"Look at me, if you will  
Say youth is gone, or youth was never mine.  
I change not with the seasons. Cold and still,  
I wait before you—careless and divine.

"No, I am brave, not vain;  
Braver than he of Macedon, since I  
For Vanity's light sake would hardly stain  
Art and the awful future with a lie:



“You know that hand whose pride  
Within its hollow held one world, afar  
Reaching for others, raised itself to hide  
On pictured brows the glory of a scar.

“But paint me as I am,  
Whatever shape or color you may see:  
And do not fold the white fleece of the lamb  
About the yellow lioness for me.

“Aye, as I am. And then,  
No matter what you on your canvas find.  
It shall not shrink before the eyes of men;  
It shall be Truth—unless your soul is blind!” (1-28)

Unlike the sitter in Cranch’s poem, this woman does not want her portrait painter to “reach [...] after something higher” (19). Instead, she directs the painter to “paint me as I am” (21), asking for a portrait that is true to her actual appearance rather than a flattering ideal. Most importantly, the woman equates “Vanity” with a “lie,” and indicates that both “Vanity” and lies are antithetical to “Art.” In “The Order” we see Piatt capitalize specifically on the diversity of definitions for “vanity.” While synonyms for “vanity” include egotism, pride, self-importance, or conceit, vanity can also be defined as “unreality.” For the woman of “The Order,” “Vanity” is not just about egotism but also something that is “unreal” and disingenuous to her sense of self and her appearance. A concern about “vanity” can also apply to both the artist and the woman herself. After all, she cannot be too invested in her own vanity to desire an untruthful ideal portrait, and the painter must not be so vain that he paints an ideal image to fulfill his own artistic sense of self. Instead, the woman insists that there is “glory [in] a scar” (20), both in displaying it as a sitter and portraying it as a painter. In doing so, she positions herself as greater than

Alexander the Great, and the portrait painter as “braver” (24) than Alexander’s painters because, as the woman declares, his finished product “shall be Truth” (28). Piatt, in “The Order,” then, demonstrates a way in which painting a sitter “as she is” can be a source of artistic creativity and “Truth.” According to “The Order,” the real, or, as the woman says, “whatever shape or color you may see” (22), is more truthful than the ideal created for “Vanity’s light sake” (15), and requires just as much artistic ability to achieve.<sup>13</sup>

While she never states explicitly the purpose of the portrait, there is no indication that this is a purely functional portrait and, thus, the woman possesses high artistic aims. Her confident tone and intellectual acumen suggest that she is a member of the upper-middle class, which locates her outside the classes that would desire a realistic portrait that would function solely as family memorabilia. When asking the painter to “paint me as I am,” the woman does not ask for a “copy,” a term used to describe the inartistic properties of the lower arts, as in “The Ideal,” from *The Crayon*, in which the writer associates a “mere [...] copy” with “low or ordinary art” (Jul. 1855). Nor is she asking for the imitative qualities of a photograph, where the painter is reduced to providing an inartistic replication of the subject. Instead, she grants him artistic license to paint “whatever shape and color you may see” (21-22). In the final stanza, when the woman states, “No matter what you on your canvas find, / It shall not shrink before the eyes of men,” she depicts art as a creative endeavor that the artist must “find” on his canvas rather than paint from an ideal (26-28). By suggesting that the woman’s actual appearance can be a productive source for creativity and, potentially, genius, Piatt

critiques the dominant belief in fine arts discourse that the artistic genius must “transfigure” the real into an ideal.

The question of whether art should be based on the ideal or the real that Piatt addresses in “The Order” was inextricably intertwined with periodicals’ collective representation of genius as an inborn, imperceptible quality that could not be taught. In his study of genius, Raymond Williams describes the important transformation of the concept of genius from a “characteristic disposition” in the eighteenth century to “exalted ability” in the nineteenth century. This change marked a genius as “special kind of person” who possessed an inborn natural ability rather than “talent,” which could be learned (Williams xvi). A reporter for *The Crayon* represents the general cultural acceptance of this philosophy when he quotes from Sir E.L. Bulwer Lytton’s installation lecture at Glasgow University.<sup>14</sup> Bulwer states, “All men are not born with genius” (Oct. 1857), adding that all men can have “purpose” but only a few can possess “genius” (Oct. 1857). According to Bulwer, even though genius may be difficult to define or predict, it is, above all things, an ability that only a few men are born with. Similar to Bulwer’s assertion, Edmund Clarence Stedman, a major nineteenth-century American critic and anthologist, published an extended essay entitled “Genius” in the *New Princeton Review* in 1886 in which he examined the history of the term and also its current usefulness. Summarizing the most important quality of genius, Stedman states, “Here we again reach the primal attribute of what the world, in its simplicity, denominates genius: it is *inborn*, not alone with respect to bodily dexterity and the fabric of the brain, but in appertaining to the power and bent of the soul itself” (Sep. 1886). Stedman’s assertion not only

reinforces genius as “inborn” but also highlights the popularity of this perspective on genius, identifying it as “the primal attribute” that “the world” associates with genius (Sep. 1886).

Piatt addresses the cultural significance of this indefinable term in “Folded Hands.” In contrast to the popular assumption that genius is inborn, Piatt questions this assumption by portraying a “failed” artist who is treated as a failure precisely because he lacks the inborn ability to paint an ideal portrait of the Madonna. First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875, “Folded Hands” could be initially interpreted as a religious poem about how prayer can give purpose to a man’s life or a poem that celebrates the artistic genius of famous German artist, Albert Dürer. The poem focuses on an unnamed aspiring artist who works tirelessly on a painting of the Madonna. The religious focus of the poem is deepened not only by the Madonna’s image in the painting but also her spiritual presence as she watches the artist work on the picture. After laboring for days, the artist realizes that his painting is a failure and that he lacks the ability of a true painter. At this moment of complete despair, Albert Dürer enters the studio and shows the failed artist how he can find a new life purpose:

Madonna[’s] eyes looked at him from the air,  
But never from the picture. Still he painted.  
The hovering halo would not touch the hair,  
The patient saint still stared at him—unsainted.

Day after day flashed by in flower and frost;  
Night after night, how fast the stars kept burning  
His little light away, till all was lost!—  
All, save the bitter sweetness of his yearning.

Slowly he saw his work: it was not good.

Ah, hopeless hope! Ah, fiercely-dying passion!  
“I am no painter,” moaned he as he stood,  
With folded hand in death’s unconscious fashion.

Stand as you are, an instant!” some one cried  
He felt the voice of a diviner brother.  
The man who was a painter, at his side,  
Showed how his folded hands could serve another.

Ah, strange, sad world, where Albert Dürer takes  
The hands that Albert Dürer’s friend has folded,  
And With their helpless help such triumph makes!—  
Strange, since both men of kindred dust were molded. (1-20)

From the first stanza, long before the artist laments, “I am no painter” (11), the speaker’s interpretation of the painter’s work and thoughts implies that he lacks artistic ability. The picture is perpetually unfinished, the speaker indicates, because the subject’s eyes “looked at him from the air, / But never from the picture” (1-2), suggesting that the Madonna looking down from heaven cannot see her spiritual essence in the painting. By noting that the artist cannot get the “hovering halo” to “touch the hair” (3), the speaker suggests that what is lacking is the “transfiguring” power that transforms the painting into a spiritual or transcendent experience. Once the painter in Cranch’s poem “transfigured” his sitter, the “form” of the sitter “glow[ed] in perfect light” (36); the completion of the transfiguration process is literally represented by light radiating from the painting. In Piatt’s poem, the halo has the potential to function in a similar way. Yet, because of the painter’s inability to “transfigure” his subject, the halo does not illuminate the Madonna but merely “hovers” above her head. It is implied that the painter is aware of his lack of artistic ability, but we do not actually hear him speak until he concludes, “I am no painter” (11). This conclusion is preceded by the speaker’s interpretation of the painter’s

thought that the picture “was not good” (9). In the context of definitions of artistic genius, and the catalogue of evidence throughout the poem, the speaker’s conclusion appears self-evident even before the painter acknowledges it. Just as much of the speaker’s assessment of the painter’s failure is implied, periodical readers fluent in the discourse of artistic genius would likely unquestionably agree that the painter lacks true artistic ability. Furthermore, because readers would recognize Dürer as a famous artist, his entrance at the conclusion of the poem reinforces his friend’s failure as an artist. Piatt’s readers would connect Dürer’s presence in the poem with his famous engraving “Hands” (also referred to as “Praying Hands”), which suggests that the failed artist’s hands become the model for the true artist. There is also the religious dimension of the hands folded together in prayer position, suggesting that Dürer’s friend could also find purpose in religious devotion. In both cases, whether as a model for Dürer or a penitent Christian, it is evident that the failed painter possesses no future as a painter.

Piatt’s focus on Dürer in “Folded Hands” becomes more significant in the context of periodical culture that regularly identified him as an artistic genius. For instance, a biographical article on Dürer appearing in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1870 referred to Dürer’s place in art as “unquestioned” (May 1870). Dürer was such a popular figure in the nineteenth century that he became the source of numerous fictional portraits of his life and artistry. In 1849 a Boston publishing house reprinted Mrs. J.R. Stodart’s English translation of Leopold Schefer’s fictional work on Dürer’s life. A short story, “Albert Dürer’s Purchase,” translated from German by Mrs. H. C. Connant, appeared in the *Independent* on March 5, 1863. While there is no way of knowing with any certainty

if Piatt read this particular story about Dürer, she would likely have encountered it since she published 69 poems in the *Independent*, making it second in number only to *The Capital (Palace-Burner*, lv n18).<sup>15</sup>

“Albert Dürer’s Purchase” focuses on a man named Veit Gerhard and his thwarted dream to become a painter. It begins with Gerhard as a child accidentally encountering Dürer as a student in a studio; at a young age Dürer is already recognized by his teachers as an artistic genius. On seeing Dürer’s painting, Gerhard exclaims that Dürer must teach him to be a painter. Dürer agrees but never gets the opportunity because Gerhard’s grandfather, who wants him to become an armorer, sends Gerhard away with another tradesman. Years pass, and Gerhard’s dream to become a painter is never fulfilled. He becomes a colorist, coloring drawings for others, rather than a painter. The intense desire he possessed as a child remains, and he works so hard as an illusionist that he eventually goes blind. Despite Gerhard’s dedication to the profession, and his missed opportunity to train with Dürer, the narrator indicates that as a copyist Gerhard had reached his potential. That is, at no time in the story is it suggested that Gerhard’s artistic genius is thwarted; rather, it indicates that he only possessed the desire to be an artistic genius, not the qualities to be one. The true artist of the story is his daughter Susanna, who trains secretly with a fellow painter and eventually produces a great painting of Christ that wins her world fame. Dürer, passing through Gerhard and Susanna’s village, stops in at a studio where Susanna works and buys her painting. The studio owner, knowing of Gerhard’s obsession with Dürer, takes him to see Gerhard, who on seeing him slips into a “peaceful slumber” and dies (6). His death is portrayed as the

best situation since Gerhard's eyesight is so bad that he could not color pictures anymore. In the context of periodical conversations about artistic genius, Connant's story portrays Dürer, and Gerhard's daughter Susanna, as the true artistic genius, while Gerhard serves as the preeminent example of a man who possesses passion, talent, and an ethic of hard work but not the inborn quality of an artistic genius.<sup>16</sup>

Piatt's benevolent presentation of Dürer parallels Connant's portrait of him: both present him as ending the anguish of an aspiring artist who lacks the inborn ability to be a painter. The overwhelming self-assurance on the part of Piatt's speaker mirrors the tone of Connant's short story, which seems equally confident in Gerhard's lack of artistic ability and Dürer's status as the quintessential artistic genius. While periodicals repeatedly depict artistic genius as an inexplicable phenomenon that is difficult to predict, they assuredly mark Dürer as one. The speaker's certainty in identifying the unnamed painter as the failed genius seems to be tied to the recognition of Albert Dürer as "the diviner brother" (14). Even though we never see Dürer in the process of creation, the speaker assures us that Dürer was "the man who was a painter" (15). The poem, just like Connant's story, works under the premise that even though Dürer's friend has the passion and yearning, he is "no painter" because he cannot paint the Madonna in her ideal form.

On the surface, the poem appears to end on a positive note since Dürer's status as an artist is reaffirmed, and the failed painter acknowledges his lack of artistic ability. However, the poem, especially the final stanza, must be read through Piatt's irony. What ultimately differentiates the two painters is not a display of artistic ability, but rather, that one is unknown and one is identified as a famous and popular artist. Piatt's poem has



already revealed the difference in Dürer's established identity as a great artist and the failed painter's identity as "Albert Dürer's friend" (17). For Piatt it is a "strange, sad world" where artistic ability is decided for, and assumed by, readers. The poem presents two paths—for the artist and the failed-artist—which are supposedly equally purposeful and fulfilling. Yet, Piatt's repetition of "strange" suggests that it is not nearly as neat a resolution to the problem of a failed-artist's aspirations for greatness. The speaker's presumption, throughout the poem, is that an artistic genius is one who creates art that proceeds from the "ideal to the form," from the "invisible to the visible" (*The Continental Monthly* Nov. 1863). The failed artist does not accomplish this, but Piatt seems to question whether that should mark him as simply "Albert Dürer's friend" (17). At the conclusion of the poem, the speaker reveals a moment of uncertainty concerning the difference in artistic ability between the failed artist and Dürer. Similar to how the painter fails in his task, the speaker is incapable of identifying the significant difference between a failed artist and an artistic genius when both were "molded" in the same "kindred dust" (24). The speaker can only conclude that artistic ability is a mystery, or as Lowell writes in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "a wayward apparition" (Feb. 1860).

Piatt addresses another artist whose fame was almost universally recognized in nineteenth-century periodicals, when she composes a poem that dramatizes artistic philosophy of renaissance artist Raphael. Raphael was the subject of numerous periodical articles that educated readers on his life and work. For many fine art critics, Raphael was the model artistic genius, embodying the philosophy that great art came from the imagined ideal rather than the real world. For example, the *Atlantic Monthly*

quoted a “maxim” of Raphael, treating it as common knowledge: “the artist’s aim is to make things not as Nature makes them, but as she intends them” (Feb. 1864). In another instance, *The Continental Monthly* reported that when Raphael could not find an appropriate female model for a painting, he “worked from a certain Idea which [he] found in [his] own mind” (Nov. 1863). *Harper’s* reminded its readers that Raphael would often use prostitutes as models for his Madonna paintings, but would transform them into an ideal (May 1870). A writer for the *New Englander* described Raphael’s relationship to his models as follows: “Raphael, it is a familiar fact, took his most beautiful faces from those of the common Italian people who passed daily through the streets of Rome; but did he not do something more than this?” (Oct. 1865). The writer’s question implies that Raphael’s artistic genius is directly connected to his ability to “do something more” with his models than merely paint them (Oct. 1865). The conversations about Raphael, particularly the recurring assertion that Raphael modeled the perfect artistic genius, reinforced the direction in fine arts discourse that the best artist works from an ideal conception rather than from the actual world.<sup>17</sup>

Piatt takes on this popular artistic genius in her poem “Transfigured,” in order to expose the ramifications of the model of artistic genius and the association of artistic “truth” with an imagined ideal. First published in *Scribner’s Monthly* in 1879, “Transfigured” critiques the concept of artistic genius from a different vantage point than “Folded Hands.” Instead of interrogating the idea of artistic genius as inborn, in “Transfigured,” Piatt addresses the self-centered disposition that comes with the title of

the artistic genius. The poem presents renaissance artist Raphael in the act of genius, “transfiguring” an ugly woman into a beautiful saint:

Almost afraid they led her in:  
(A dwarf more piteous none could find);  
Withered as some weird leaf, and thin,  
The woman was—and wan and blind.

Into his mirror with a smile—  
Not vain to be so fair but glad—  
The South-born painter looked the while,  
With eyes than Christ’s alone less sad.

“Mother of God,” in pale surprise  
He whispered, “What am I to paint?”  
A voice that sounded from the skies  
Said to him, “Raphael a saint.” (1-12)

The fear that Raphael’s admirers express as they lead the model into his studio appears directly connected to the wretchedness of the woman. Not only is the woman a “dwarf” who was “withered as some weird leaf and thin,” but, the speaker adds after an emphatic pause, the woman was also “wan and blind”—all traits that possess a level of difficulty that seems to qualify her as an appropriate model for Raphael. In contrast to the ugliness that pervades the first stanza, the second begins with Raphael literally reflecting on his own beauty in the mirror; Bennett reminds us that Raphael’s self-portraits show him to be quite handsome (*Palace-Burner*, 173n68). Raphael’s “glad[ness]” and his immediate sadness upon seeing the woman initially reinforce the speaker’s assertion that Raphael is not “vain” since he is aligned with the sympathetic eyes of Christ. Despite his initial shock and sympathy, by the third stanza, Raphael is predominantly concerned with whether his artistic powers are great enough to, as the title suggests, “transfigure” a

woman so wretched. Rather than being figuratively inspired by the divine, the speaker presents Raphael as literally directed by the divine voice “that sounded from the skies” to paint “a saint.” The divine presence is similar to the Madonna in “Folded Hands,” who, in syntax that parallels “Transfigured,” watches the painter “from the air.” After receiving divine direction, Raphael paints the woman and reflects on his artistic ability:

She sat before him in the sun;  
He scarce could look at her, and she  
Was still and silent. “It is done,”  
He said. “Oh call the world to come and see!”

Ah, that was she in veriest truth—  
Transcendent face and haloed hair;  
The beauty of divinest youth,  
Divinely beautiful, was there.

Herself into the picture passed—  
Herself and not her poor disguise  
Made up of time and dust. At last  
One saw her with the Master’s eyes. (13-24)

While the poem does not offer a definite assessment of Raphael’s vanity over his physical appearance, it does present him as unequivocally vain about his status as a great artist. When Raphael finishes the portrait, he proudly asserts, “It is done,” and is so confident in his success that he desires his admirers to “call the world to see” (16). He deems the portrait a success precisely because he creates a painting that represents the woman in her ideal form with a “transcendent face and haloed hair” (18). Prefacing these qualities of the painting is the phrase, “Ah, that was *she* in veriest truth” (17). While the pronoun “she” could indicate the female model, it is more likely that it refers to the painted image of the woman, since it is the painting (not the actual sitter) that is beautiful.

The fact that Raphael possesses the ability to imagine and create the woman's ideal form parallels Cranch's depiction of a portrait-sitting in "The Painter and the Sitter." In Cranch's poem, "the patient sitter, from the Artist's point of sight, / Shall behold his form transfigured, glowing in the perfect light" (35-36), which represents the belief that portrait painting is a divine experience for both the painter and the sitter. Because of the success of the portrait, it is implied that the woman has a divine experience similar to the sitter in Cranch's poem. However, it is important to recognize that readers never actually know how the woman responds to her portrait; we only have Raphael and the speaker's assurance that the painting "was she in veriest truth" (17). The woman never speaks before, during, or after the sitting; instead, she is consistently "still and silent" (15). The most perplexing aspect of Raphael's interpretation of the woman's supposed transformation is that in the first stanza we learn that the woman is "blind" (4), indicating that she cannot benefit from any visual transformation nor can she evaluate whether she "herself into her pictured passed" (21). "Passing" into the portrait implies that some intrinsic qualities of the woman appear in the picture, and thus, it is unmistakably her. However, because she is blind, the woman could never know this. Rather, the woman, and Piatt's readers, must trust the speaker's interpretation of the portrait.

The speaker's interpretation rests entirely on Raphael's self-confidence in his artistic ability. Once he tells his admirers to "call the world to see," the speaker immediately declares that the portrait represents the woman's ideal self. Yet, because of the contrast that is established early in the poem, between the woman's ugliness and

Raphael's beauty, it seems as if the speaker's description of the portrait is more closely associated with Raphael's appearance than the woman's appearance. While Raphael can gaze at his own image in a mirror, when he is painting the woman's portrait it is revealed that "he scarce could look at her" (14). His inability to look at her as he paints suggests that his ideal portrait of the woman more likely resembles the Madonna (whose voice "sounded from the skies" earlier in the poem) than it does his model.

Piatt's poem is equally invested in exposing readers' inability to critically interpret or question art produced by proclaimed artistic geniuses. Similar to the way readers would likely follow the direction of art critics and immediately assume that Dürer was a genius in "Folded Hands," they would likely treat Raphael as a genius too. Just as the speaker and Raphael's admirers do not question his artistic ability or interpretation of art, periodical readers would be equally unlikely to question the genius of Raphael either. No one in the poem desires to hear the woman's reaction to the painting; it is enough for the speaker to imply that she is pleased by the portrait. Reassuring readers that the woman is content in her transfiguration in the final lines of the poem, the speaker states, "At last / One saw her with the Master's eyes" (23-24). This final line is quite ironic, given that the woman is blind and cannot see the portrait at all, and that "Master" conflates Raphael with God. To see the woman as Raphael sees her is to see her only as a means for Raphael to display his genius; in her actual life she remains a "piteous" dwarf. "Transfigured," then, offers a critique of an artist whom periodicals uniformly depict as a genius and illustrates how a genius, who is only invested in his status as genius, cannot see beyond his own vanity.

It is no coincidence that Piatt positions European artists as the model artistic geniuses, because her criticism of genius intersects with literary realists' critiques of artistic genius, which asserted "genius" was an undemocratic and anti-American concept. In "Folded Hands" and "Transfigured," Piatt uses Dürer and Raphael to represent "old world," aristocratic values, ones that seem incompatible with the modernity of American life, perhaps best embodied in "The Order for Her Portrait." It is important to recognize that Piatt's commentary on artistic genius was part of the counter-discourse to the fine art arts critics that praised the model of artistic genius. In Naomi Sofer's assessment of the use of "genius" in the post-bellum era, she concludes that some writings on the subject of genius reveal an "anxiety about its incompatibility with American values" (139). Similarly, Anne Boyd argues that as the movement of literary realism gained momentum in the years after the Civil War, proponents of realism portrayed the romantic genius as antithetical to American democracy, and claimed that it was primarily useful in depicting the selfishness of the artist (Boyd 138).<sup>18</sup> Most notably, these writers were concerned that the concept of artistic genius was antidemocratic. Anne Boyd argues that William Dean Howells and literary realists led the attack on genius in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In a summary of the history and contemporary use of "genius" for the *New Princeton Review*, Stedman distinguishes Howells as the central figure who argues that genius is undemocratic and, hence, anti-American. Stedman identifies the occasion for his essay as "the striking declaration of one whose original works, no less than his present occupancy of an official chair of criticism, makes him a conspicuous authority" (Sep.

1886). Stedman goes on to refer to the following statement from a lecture by Howells, whom Stedman describes as a “conspicuous authority”: “There is no ‘genius,’ there is only the mastery that comes to natural aptitude from the hardest study of any art or science” (Sep. 1886).<sup>19</sup> What Howells objects to most in using genius to identify the best American artists is that the term is elitist and does not align with essential American values. As Stedman notes, Howells recognizes “that something does exist, something by which great and original things are done,” but that “it is not genius” because “there must be no titles in the democracies of art, invention, statesmanship, actions, and affairs” (Sep. 1886). Boyd suggests that writers and critics, Ralph Waldo Emerson for instance, found a way to make “genius” more democratic by suggesting that the American genius can emerge from any class or region of America. This position was one that writers and critics readily adopted because it still allowed Americans to single-out the best artists but did not conflict with foundational American values.

Although Piatt’s art poetry aligns her with the realist critique of artistic genius, Piatt differs from the realist position by what she advocates as a replacement for the genius model. Instead of advocating a model of the great American artist who becomes great because of the American values of ingenuity and hard work, Piatt’s poetry advocates a model of artistry that focuses on the readers and viewers of art. As I will discuss in the next section, Piatt’s art poetry models an artistry in which the reader’s or viewer’s interaction with art takes center stage in the poem. By focusing on the social aspects of artistry, Piatt’s poetry displays her artistic agenda: to educate readers to actively interpret art for themselves, which frees them from their reliance on art critics.



## II

Piatt's artistic vision of a more democratic model of artistry and art criticism emphasizes the central role of women. However, in contrast to a novel like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* or Harriet Prescott Spofford long poem "The Pomegrante Flowers," which depict female artists in the act of creation, in Piatt's art poetry women are consistently positioned as viewers. Significantly, Piatt sees this as a vital role, and one that is active rather than passive. In her art poems, Piatt depicts the relationship between the viewer and art as central, omitting or downplaying the role of the artist. For Piatt, the artist's purpose is to teach readers to critically interpret art for themselves. This view of art bypasses the approval and ratification of both critics and artists, relying instead on the individual interaction between the reader or viewer and art. "Beatrice Cenci (In a City Shop-Window)" and "Marble or Dust?" address the role of the female viewer and model the reflexive and critical interaction Piatt desires her readers to have with art. What is ultimately significant about these poems, in terms of how Piatt envisions her readers' interaction with art, is that the central figure in the poem provides an ideal model of active engagement with art.

First published in the *Overland Monthly* in 1871, "Beatrice Cenci (In a City Shop-Window)" is one of Piatt's most complex dramatic poems, difficult because it plays with the multiple historical and fictional depictions of Cenci. Since Cenci was an infamous and popular figure in nineteenth-century culture, her name and story made regular appearances in periodicals; for instance, in one of its first issues, the *Atlantic Monthly*

reviewed F.D. Guerrazzi's fictional depiction of the tragedy of the Cenci family in *Beatrice Cenci: A Historical Novel of the Sixteenth Century* (Mar. 1858). While offering her own interpretation of the tragic and mysterious woman, Piatt's poem alludes to the historical Beatrice Cenci (put to death in the sixteenth-century for murdering her father, who was likely guilty of incest); to the famous portrait by Guido Reni that was frequently copied in the nineteenth century; to the heroine in Shelley's *The Cenci*; and to an imagined actress playing Beatrice Cenci in one of the many theatrical adaptations of Cenci's story (*Palace-Burner*, 165n15).

In Piatt's poem, a woman and her child stand outside a shop window looking at a copy of Guido Reni's portrait. Rather than describing the painting, Piatt depicts the complex process that the speaker goes through when she sees Guido's portrait in the shop window:

Out of low light an exquisite, faint face  
Suddenly started. Goldenness of hair,  
A South-look of sweet, sorrowful eyes, a trace  
Of prison paleness—what if these were there  
When Guido's hand could never reach the grace  
That glimmered on me from the Italian air—  
Fairness so fierce, or fierceness half so fair? (1-7)

After encountering the portrait, the speaker imagines, what if the "sorrowful eyes" and "prison paleness" were there at the same time when Guido was painting with a hand that tried, but never could capture, "the grace that glimmered on me from the Italian air." Most noticeable in the speaker's assessment of the painting is that she imagines herself *as* Cenci sitting for Guido; she refers to the "grace that glimmered on *me*" (5-6, emphasis mine). Piatt asks the reader to ponder how the speaker reaches the point of complete

identification with the painted Beatrice. From the opening lines, the speaker is “suddenly” startled by the painting, and first identifies with its sadder features. The focus on Beatrice’s “sorrowful eyes” and “prison paleness” leads the speaker to question Guido’s ability to capture the true essence of Beatrice (3-4). The speaker not only questions Beatrice’s “fairness” and “fierceness” but also identifies with Beatrice because the speaker believes she is beautiful and fierce as well. This questioning of what “Guido’s hand could never” (5) accomplish allows the speaker to imagine herself as Beatrice and ponder whether Beatrice embodied a fierce beauty or a beautiful fierceness. It is this type of immediate critique, questioning, and identification with a piece of art that frees the speaker to imagine herself as both the Beatrice of Guido’s painting and “some Actress” playing Beatrice on the stage (9).

The speaker’s engagement with the portrait allows her to see not only the truth of her buried passion for artistry and theatre, but also the truth of this ambition in the context of motherhood. As the poem continues, the child frequently disrupts the mother’s image of herself as the painted-Beatrice and the actress-Beatrice. The child’s first interruption is fully articulated in the poem, and the mother responds in a stereotypical understanding manner: “‘Is it some Actress?’ a slight school-boy said. / Some Actress? Yes.—” (8-9). By the child’s second interruption, the mother’s response reflects a kind of fierceness that contrasts the earlier motherly patience: “Hush! For a child’s quick murmur breaks the charm / Of terror that was winding round me so. / And at the white touch of a pretty arm, / Darkness and Death and Agony crouch low / in old-time dungeons” (16-20). Here, the boy’s question is not even included in the poem,

indicating that the mother likely did not hear the question—instead the emphasis is on the interruption. The mother’s response to the interruption and her recognition that “a child’s quick murmur breaks the charm / of terror that was winding round me so” (16-7) suggests that she realizes not only her aspirations for the stage but also the disruption of this dream by motherhood.

While actress-Beatrice may be “crouch[ing] low” in “Darkness and Death and Agony” in “old-time dungeons” (19-20), the speaker also seems to recognize, figuratively, the similar fate that motherhood has impressed upon her; her son’s constant questions become literal impediments to the speaker’s creative imagination. The “terror” is the real life of a mother who finally succumbs to a child’s questions. The poem ends with a litany of questions by the child: “Tell me, (is it harm / To ask you?): is the picture real, though?— / And why the beautiful ladies all, you know, / Live so far-off, and die so long ago?” (21-24). The son’s questions silence the speaker and halt her identification with the various Beatrice Cencis, effectively ending her access to her creative energies. What is important about “Beatrice Cenci” in terms of how Piatt envisions her readers’ interaction with art is that the speaker provides a model of active and critical engagement with art. Piatt creates a kind of analogy between the reader and the speaker. If the reader were to interact with the poem “Beatrice Cenci” as the speaker interacts with the picture of Beatrice, sans a child, the reader would be able to possess the opportunity for self-exploration with the same clarity that the speaker gains from her interaction with the painting in the shop window.

Piatt models a similar type of active and personal interaction with art in “Marble or Dust?”, printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871, the same year “Beatrice Cenci” appeared in the *Overland Monthly*. “Marble or Dust?” captures the scene of another mother and son as they gaze at a statue of Lincoln and ponder the statue’s immortality. Whereas the speaker’s engagement with the picture of Beatrice Cenci reveals her longing to be an artist and her distaste for her role as a mother, in “Marble or Dust?” the speaker’s interaction with the statue reinforces her maternal love for her son. In the opening stanza the son simply states, “He [the statue] / Was made of marble: we are made of dust” (3-4). The mother then explores the philosophical consequences of his statement as the child stands unaware. This situation is similar to the conversation between a mother and son in Piatt’s most studied poem, “The Palace-Burner,” in which a son’s innocent comment on a newspaper picture plunges the mother into a deep self-analysis of her ability to literally be brave enough to “burn palaces” for a political cause. In “Marble or Dust?” the mother does not question her own bravery, but rather whether she desires the statue’s immortality.

For Piatt, the mother’s personal interaction with the statue is more significant than the artwork’s purpose or the artist’s talent. That is, the artist’s ability to sculpt Lincoln’s likeness is not the focus of the poem. Nor does Piatt address the expressed purpose of a public statue, to revere a national leader. Instead, Piatt focuses specifically on the mother’s reaction to the child’s observation and her individual interaction with the statue, which allows her to evaluate her role as a mother in a new light. She first imagines that it would be pleasant to be unencumbered with the problems of mortals, or the “creatures

formed of slighter stuff” (13). Then, by asking the question, “Do I forget the stone’s long loneliness?” (21), the speaker realizes she would prefer her life as a mortal to the eternal solitude of the statue. Most important in her realization that she prefers mortality is her desire to love her son. Speaking directly to him, the mother unequivocally states, “No, boy of mine, with your young yellow hair, / Better the dust you scatter with your feet / Than marble, which can see not you are fair,— / Than marble, which can feel not you are sweet” (25-8). In contrast to the opening line where the speaker identifies her son as only “a child” who makes a statement about a statue (1), in this stanza we see the mother reestablish her love for her son by speaking to him and verbally naming him as “my son” (25). Moreover, she connects her desire to be mortal with a desire to “see” her son’s youthful beauty and “feel” his loveable qualities. The mother’s interaction with the statue, then, allows her to understand her role as mother in a way that permits her to see the boy not just as a “child” but as “her son.” Similar to the analogy that Piatt establishes in “Beatrice Cenci” between the speaker and the reader, we can understand the speaker in “Marble or Dust?” modeling for the reader how to be a better mother. If the reader were to interact with the poem as the mother interacts with the statue, then the reader could learn to reestablish her love for her child. In this way, Piatt suggests that art can facilitate maternal love. Pondering poetry, just as the speaker ponders a statue, has the potential to teach the reader to be a more endearing mother to her child. While readers can glean different types of edifying lessons from “Marble or Dust?” and “Beatrice Cenci,” what is consistent between them is the method of learning, which depends on an individual and active interaction with art.<sup>20</sup>

Piatt's privileging of the viewer's and reader's role is repeated and revised in her crucial poems that explicitly address the art of poetry. Piatt rarely directly addresses the subject of writing and interpreting poetry in her poems. Therefore, "An-After Poem" and "Inspiration and Poem" are particularly essential to articulating how Piatt conceives of the role of the Poet and how she defines the purpose of art. When read in the context of her poetry about the fine arts, Piatt's poetry about the written arts provides the clearest articulation of her artistic agenda. As an artist, Piatt presents herself as invested in writing artful poetry but not in being enshrined as an artistic genius. Instead, in "An After-Poem," Piatt erases the presence of the poet, and focuses on the reader's ability to critically interpret art.

Published in 1871 in *The Capital*, "An After-Poem" offers Piatt's clearest articulation of her poetic project.<sup>21</sup> The title "An After-poem," with its unusual grammatical structure, is worth exploring in greater detail. The word and hyphen "after-" was used but not common in the nineteenth century. While there is no specific definition for "after-poem," *The Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of "after-" can help us understand Piatt's use of the term. In reference to nineteenth-century usage, the *OED* defines the term as "in the time after" and "common or existing after" and explains that the use of the hyphen as "being mainly syntactical, *i.e.* to show that the grammatical relation between *after* and the following word is something else than the ordinary one of preposition and object."<sup>22</sup> Although it does not use the exact phrase "after-poem," we can see one example of the usage of "after" followed by a hyphen in an 1894 *Atlantic Monthly* article on John Greenleaf Whittier's life and work. The author writes that

Whittier “united with the persecuted and obscure band of abolitionists, and to this course he attributed all his *after-success* in life” (700, emphasis mine). In this example, the use of “after-success” implies a typical temporal usage, as in Whittier’s success after his union with the abolitionists. What would normally be a phrase, such as the success after encountering the abolitionists, becomes one hyphenated noun that denotes a long-term state of success. Piatt’s application of “after-” to “poem” suggests that she takes full advantage of the slipperiness and multiplicity of the term. In a somewhat dizzying temporal construct, then, “An After-Poem” is both the poem itself and potentially something that only comes into existence after the poem.<sup>23</sup>

“An After-Poem” is about training readers to see counterintuitive truths in art and the world around them. Piatt accomplishes this by the constant repetition of “you,” which allows her to visibly include the reader into the actions and decisions in the poem:

You will read, or you will not read,  
That the lilies are whitest after they wither;  
That the fairest buds stay shut in the seed,  
Though the bee in the dew say, “Come you up hither.”

You have seen, if you were not blind,  
That the moon can be crowded into a crescent,  
And promise us light that we never can find  
When the midnights are wide and yellow and pleasant.

You will know, or you will not know,  
That the seas to the sun can fling their foam only,  
And keep all their terrible waters below  
With the jewels and dead men quiet and lonely. (1-12)

The repetitive declarative statements, “you will read,” “you have seen,” and “you will know,” demand that the reader choose what she “will” and “will not know.” Within this



oppositional structure, Piatt constructs the reader's choice as one between counterintuitive truths and falsities that appear instinctively correct. For instance, in the first stanza the reader has a choice to either "read" or "not read" that the lilies are most beautiful ("whitest") after they are dead rather than when they are alive. The poem emphasizes the counterintuitive truths by providing explanation of them in the poem and leaving the seemingly natural assumption that the prettiest lily is alive as assumed rather than stated. In the context of periodical discourse on the real and ideal, Piatt requires readers to consider the counterintuitive notion that the dead flower is more beautiful than the ideal form of a live one because the dead flower is an accurate representation of a lifeless lily in the real world. Just as artistic "Truth" in "The Order for her Portrait" is found in an accurate representation of the woman's appearance, truth in "An After-Poem" is located in the realistic representation of the dead lily. The revelation that the poem provides is both unusual and depressing, but also truthful. Readers who "read" the blooming lily as most beautiful are grounding their conception of the flower in an ideal image.<sup>24</sup>

To further understand the poem as one about truth, I want to highlight the repetition of metaphors of the moon in "The Order" and "An After-Poem." In "The Order," published just a year after "An After-Poem," the speaker asks, "And could the round moon shine / without the crescent somewhere?" (10-11). This rhetorical question, posed to the painter who wants to paint an ideal portrait, suggests that the moon's fullness also means that there is a crescent "somewhere" ("The Order" 11). That is, the "Truth" of the moon is that it is simultaneously a full moon and a crescent depending on one's

perspective. “In “An After-Poem” the reader should “have seen,” and preferred, the less attractive perspective of the dimly lit crescent over the bright moon that “promises us light we never can find” (6). The implication is that readers are deceived if they prefer the brightness of the moon when it is “crowded into a crescent,” and when the night sky is most “pleasant” (8). The second stanza is structurally different from the first in that it is in past tense: “you *have seen*, if you *were* not blind” (5, emphasis mine), which indicates that readers should already “have seen” the truth of the deceptive moon shine. While it may be difficult for readers to “read” the poetic truth of the lilies, Piatt indicates that even without guidance, they should “have seen” that the moon only creates an illusion of light, not light itself. The presence of “us” and “we” in the second stanza is also significant because it is a point in the poem where Piatt and the reader are united. Rather than singling herself out as a divinely inspired artistic genius who possesses *the* truth, Piatt uses the first-person plural to identify with readers. Unlike in “Folded Hands,” where readers are enveloped into the speaker’s vague interpretation of the failed painter’s work and uncritical celebration of Dürer, Piatt presents herself as a poet-speaker who is not intellectually or artistically superior to readers.

In the final stanza of “An After-Poem,” Piatt returns to the future tense and depicts the knowledge of those “who know” the underlying truth of the sea’s “terrible waters” (11). On the surface, seas look pleasant as they “fling their foam” to the sun, but in actuality seas are essentially graveyards “with the jewels and dead men quiet and lonely” (12). The sea, like the moon, is never what it appears to be at first glance. While the ideal image of the sea is tranquil, the poem reminds readers that a representation of

the actual sea reveals the “terrible waters” just beneath the surface. Above the water, the sun illuminates only the insubstantial foam and cannot help readers see beneath it. Piatt suggests that without the literal ability to look beneath the surface readers will “not know” what lies beneath the thin layer of sea foam. Ironically, Piatt’s use of the future tense forces readers to “read” and “know” the truth merely through the act of reading the poem at all. That is, by the end of the poem, they would have literally “read” each line of the poem and at least superficially pondered the puzzling observations in the poem. “An After-Poem,” then, places the reader in the position of looking for counterintuitive truths in both art (the poem as a piece of art) and the real world (the natural images portrayed in the poem), and finding connections between the two. Reading art critically, in this case reading for truths that counter popular ideas of art in periodicals, will give readers the tools necessary to reevaluate instinctual and unquestioned truths in their own world. While passively reading may permit readers to reinforce intuitive truths about beauty, actively interacting with art trains readers to see their world as it is rather than through an imagined ideal.

Piatt critiques artistic truth based on the ideal in her later poem, “Inspiration and Poem,” published in *The Bookman* in 1897. This is one of her only poems, besides “An After-Poem,” in which Piatt places the subject of poetry in the title. The focus of the poem is the source of “inspiration” for poets. For Piatt, the end result of inspiration is painful and morbid:

Within the brain we feel it burn and flit  
And waver, half alighting. Say who can,  
Would not the glory on the wings of it

Strike blind the eyes of man?

We lift the eager hand, again, again,  
Dreaming to catch it. (Surely it will fly!)  
And, lo ! a worm, stung with a freezing rain  
Of tears, crawls out to die. (1-8)

The first stanza is remarkably similar to Emily Dickinson's meditative poetry on the brain ("The Brain—is wider than the Sky"). Much like Dickinson, poetic inspiration for Piatt is both a physical and mental experience, in that poets can "feel it burn and flit / And waver" (1-2). The tone of the second stanza is both serious and ironic. The stanza confronts the image of poetic inspiration as a beautiful and pleasant winged object that "will fly" as the inspiration transfigures into a poem. Yet, instead of a glorious transfiguration from inspiration to poem, Piatt presents the reader with the harsh reality that emerges from that inspiration: "a worm, stung with a freezing rain / Of tears, crawls out to die" (7-8). One way to read this poem, in which the worm is not the end result of the inspiration, is to see that nothing came of the inspiration and that in this instance the poet failed. For those readers who see poetry in terms of beauty, the ugly and morbid image of the worm could not be the result of the inspiration in the first stanza. Yet, this reading is only convincing if readers interpret the worm as the failure rather than as the result of the inspiration. The poem's title suggests though, that it includes both an "Inspiration" *and* a "Poem," indicating that the final image comes from inspiration. Furthermore, while at first it appears that this final image is tragic and unwelcome, consider what Piatt values in her other art poetry: the "Truth" of a speaker's aged appearance in "The Order," "the veriest truth" of a deformed woman in her wretched

state in “Transfigured,” and lilies “after they wither” as well as the “terrible waters below” in “The After-Poem.” Given the pattern of Piatt’s preference for the counterintuitive and unpleasant “Truth” of the real world—the image of what comes from inspiration in “Inspiration and Poem” is tragic but descriptive of the real world and Piatt’s poetics—it is a dark and painful process.

Even though “Inspiration and Poem” is about poetic inspiration, Piatt does not make it exclusively about, or for, poets. Her use of “we” throughout the poem works to actively include the reader in the process of artistic creation. Rather than displaying her own artistic process for a passive reader, which she could have done with the use of “I” instead of “we,” Piatt structures the poem so that the reader is an active participant in the artistic process: “Within the brain, *we* feel it burn and flit” and “*we* lift the eager hand, again, again” (1, 5, emphasis mine). By actively engaging the reader in the process of artistic creation, Piatt demystifies the artist’s creative process that most cannot identify or understand. Furthermore, by encompassing both poet and reader in the “we” Piatt omits the necessity of a third party to interpret the poem for the reader, and places readers in an unmediated relationship with the art. By downplaying the poet’s and speaker’s importance and elevating the reader’s significance, in “An After-Poem” and “Inspiration and Poem” Piatt desires her readers to actively engage art.

### III

Piatt’s engagement with the discourse of fine arts and artistic genius reveals a poet who consistently and actively debated the purpose of art and the role of the artist in

society in her poetry. For Piatt, a reader-centered model of artistry promotes the reader's and viewer's, interaction with art, and trains readers to critically interpret art for themselves.<sup>25</sup> Her primary artistic agenda was to train readers to become active, rather than passive readers. In the process, I argue that we can observe how Piatt challenges and co-opts her identity as a poetess. Her art poetry contradicts some of the most important traits of the poetess: that women are natural producers of simple and pleasing verse and that they could, at their best, write spontaneous and emotional poetry. As periodical reviewers regularly noted, Piatt's poetry is marked by too much thought (*Independent*, 18 Dec. 1879). *Scribner's Monthly* encapsulated Piatt's affront to her femininity and her inability to be a proper model for women poets when they described her as "studied, and hard, and more dramatic in intention than her subject warrants" (May 1877). Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that Piatt completely rejected the poetess persona because, for one reason, Piatt wrote a huge number of poems that outwardly conformed to the standards of the poetess (*Palace-Burner* xxxiii). More significantly, though, Piatt's artistry incorporates some of the key traits of the poetess. Namely, as poetesses are instructed to do, Piatt's artistic agenda involves a lesson for her readers. Even though her poetry teaches women how to be active readers, it still teaches. In addition, Piatt's artistry focuses on feminine subjects and figures of women, specifically the roles and lives of wives and mothers. Hence, Piatt's model of artistry demonstrates how she finds value in elements of the poetess persona, even if she eventually rejects it as a productive model for a woman artist.

What is most interesting about Piatt's model for the woman poet is that even though she rejects the poetess model, she does not aspire to the male model of artistic genius. Piatt's rejection of the model of the individualized romantic genius provides an alternative to recent scholarship on nineteenth-century women authorship that addresses how women authors consciously thought of themselves as artistic geniuses and pursued the ideals of high art.<sup>26</sup> My chapter, then, places Piatt's model of the artist in opposition to authors like Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Sarah Orne Jewett, who aspired to the status of artistic genius.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Piatt's reader-centered model aligns her more closely with authors like Rebecca Harding Davis, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who rejected author-centered models of authorship. Piatt offers her female readers different avenues by which they can access male-dominated discourses on art and artistry. She also presets models of how to interpret art that do not recapitulate the gendered hierarchy inherent in the discourses. This chapter has demonstrated how her artistry is also in touch with fine arts, realist, and nationalist discourses in the second half of nineteenth-century America. The variety of "touchstones" for Piatt's artistry ultimately suggests that her poetry has much to offer not only scholars of poetry but also scholars of American literature in general, since it is in her poetry that these discourses come together.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Bennett's introduction to the *Palace-Burner* for more information about the diversity of Piatt's periodical oeuvre. Briefly, as Bennett's exhaustive research details, the three periodicals that published the highest number of Piatt's poems include: the *Capital* (72), the *Independent* (69), and *Atlantic Monthly* (30). Although these three periodicals printed approximately one third of her oeuvre, the remainder two thirds of her poems were printed across 34 other American, British and Irish periodicals. This is all to demonstrate that Piatt's presence in periodicals was exceptionally prolific and diverse.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Giordano's reading of Piatt as a periodical poet, and Bennett's interpretation of Piatt as a public and ironic poet in *Palace-Burner* (2001) and *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), see the following recent scholarship on Piatt. Janet Gray's chapter on Piatt in *Race and Time: American Women's Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity* (2004), Mary McCartin Wearn's "Subjection and Subversion in Sarah Piatt's Maternal Poetics" (2006), and Susan Grove Hall's "From Voice to Persona: Amelia Welby's Lyric Tradition in Sarah M. B. Piatt's Early Poetry" (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Within the field of literature, interart criticism has explored the influence of a work of art on an author, the connections between written and visual arts in a specific historical period, and how the genres of poetry and fiction rely on formal elements of the visual arts. From foundational works by scholars like W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan, ekphrasis has been the center of interart criticism. More recently, scholars have expanded interart studies to address the social aspects of artistry. I define ekphrasis as James Heffernan does in *The Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (1993), as "the verbal representation of a visual representation" (3). I found the following foundational studies helpful: Jean Hagstrum's *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (1958); Jeffrey Meyers's *Painting and the Novel* (1975); W. J. T. Mitchell's *The Language of Images* (1980), *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), and *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994); John Hollander's *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (1995). For studies of ekphrasis and literary theory see: Murray Krieger's *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992) and Mack Smith's *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (1995).

<sup>4</sup>For additional interart criticism on the British Victorian era see: Murray Roston's *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* (1996); Nancy Armstrong's *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (1999); Caroline Levine's *The Serious Pleasure of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (2003).



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<sup>5</sup> For an American counterpart to Losano's study see: Deborah Barker's *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature* (2000), and Gustavus Stadler's *Troubling Minds: The Cultural Politics of Genius in the United States, 1840-1890* (2006).

<sup>6</sup> On a practical level, scholars must look to Piatt's poetry to identify her self-conception as a poet because she left very little written record of her life and work (or, at least little has been found in the recent recovery effort). As far as scholars can find, Piatt never published a nonfiction piece on poetry. Bennett's exhaustive research yielded very few letters by Piatt herself and only a handful more by her husband, J.J., in which he discusses his wife's poetry. See Bennett's introduction to *Palace-Burner* for a detailed account of her methodology and a finding aid for Piatt archival materials.

<sup>7</sup> This section is based on my survey of sixteen periodicals and approximately 100 articles, reviews, and other pieces on the fine arts spanning from 1855 to 1890. I selected periodicals in which Piatt frequently published her poetry, such as *Scribner's Monthly* or the weekly New York newspaper the *Independent*. I also chose periodicals that were specifically invested in the fine arts, such as *The Crayon* (the first American periodical devoted to the visual arts), and ones that held significant cultural capital in America during the time period, such as *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Galaxy*. The time period roughly spans Piatt's periodical publications. Although Piatt publishes poetry after 1890, most of her art poetry is composed and published between 1860 and 1890. The list of periodicals consulted includes: *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Continental Monthly*, *The Crayon*, *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature*, *Galaxy*, *Harper's Monthly*, *Independent*, *Knickerbocker*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, *Littell's Living Age*, *New Englander*, *New Princeton Review*, *North American Review*, *Overland Monthly*, *Putnam's Magazine*, and *Scribner's Monthly*.

<sup>8</sup> A representative sampling of *Scribner's Monthly* articles on the fine arts: "Living American Artists" (May 1871), "The National Academy Exhibition" (Jul. 1871), "The Royal Academy Exhibition" (Aug. 1871), "The Graphic Art" (Aug. 1872), "Sculpture" (Sep. 1872), "Art in our Homes and Schools" (Feb. 1873), and "American Art" (Nov. 1876).

<sup>9</sup> For more examples of the use of "genius" in periodicals see: "The Humanity of Nature" (*The Crayon* Aug. 1855); "The Comprehensiveness of Art" (*The Crayon* Sep. 1857); J. Brownlee Brown's "Genius" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1864); "Genius" (*The Continental Monthly* Dec. 1864); "The Relation of Art to Nature" (*Littell's Living Age* 18 Aug. 1866); F. H. Hedge's "Characteristics of Genius" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1868); John Burroughs' "Before Genius" (*Atlantic Monthly* Apr. 1868); "Fine Arts" (*Putnam's Magazine* Feb. 1869); Anthony Trollope's "The Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne" (*The North American Review* Sep. 1879); C. P. Cranch's "Talent and Genius" (*Atlantic Monthly* May 1880); and Grant Allen's "The Genesis of Genius" (*Atlantic Monthly* Mar. 1881).

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<sup>10</sup> For a book-length study of Ruskin's influence on American culture see Roger Stein's *John Ruskin and aesthetic thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967). For examples of nineteenth-century periodicals writings about Ruskin see: "John Ruskin" (*Atlantic Monthly*, May 1856), "Art V: *Modern Painters. Of Many Things.*" (*The North American Review*, Apr. 1857), "10. *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures delivered at Manchester in 1864.*" (*The North American Review*, Jan. 1866), "John Ruskin" (*The Galaxy*, May 1867), and "John Ruskin" (*The Galaxy*, Feb. 1872).

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Novak reaches a similar conclusion in her study of the "real and ideal" in nineteenth-century culture in "Some American Words: Basic Aesthetic Guidelines, 1825-1870" (1969). For a sampling of discussions of the real and ideal in art criticism see the following articles: "The Ideal" (*The Crayon* Jul. 1855); "Perception" (*The Crayon* Aug. 1855); "Man and Nature" (*The Crayon* Aug. 1855); "Imitation of Natural Material" (*The Crayon* Oct 1855); "On the Appreciation of Truth in Art" (*The Crayon* Nov. 1855); E. D. Palmer's "Philosophy of the Ideal" (*The Crayon* Jan. 1856); "Ruskin's Writings" (*Atlantic Monthly* May 1856); H.T. Tuckerman's "Something About Pictures" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1858); J. Eliot Cabot's, "On the Relation of Art to Nature: Part I" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1864); "Article II.—Principles of Art" (*New Englander* Oct. 1865); "The Conditions of Art in America" (*North American Review* Jan. 1866); "Aristotle—His Works and Philosophy" (*The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* Oct. 1868); J. Jackson Jarves's "Museums of Art, Artists and Amateurs in America" (*Galaxy* Jul. 1870); "Sculpture" (*Scribner's Monthly* Sep. 1872); and Munsen Titus Coan's "Critic and Artist" (*Lippincott's* Mar. 1874).

<sup>12</sup> For an extended discussion of the intersections of the Daguerreotype and American fiction see Susan S. Williams' *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (1997).

<sup>13</sup> Piatt would almost certainly be familiar with Robert Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," which first appeared in *Dramatic Persons and Lyrics* in 1845. In *Palace-Burner*, Bennett notes Piatt's admiration for Browning as well as the similarities between Piatt and Browning's poetry. The situation of "The Order for Her Portrait" resembles Browning's poem, in that both poems present a figure commanding to be remembered in a particular way. However, the similarities end there, in that stylistically and thematically the poems are very different. The speaker of Piatt's poem is portrayed as a powerful and knowledgeable patron rather than a weak dying priest concerned about besting his predecessor as in Browning's poem. Also, Piatt's speaker is in control of the situation—financially as well as artistically, unlike the Bishop who is not in control. Furthermore, while Browning critiques his speaker, Piatt seems to support her speaker.

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<sup>14</sup> Bulwer was, in his day, a famous and respected English novelist, playwright, poet, and politician. For more information see: L. G. Mitchell's *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* (2003).

<sup>15</sup> For other representative articles on Dürer see: H. T. Tuckerman's "Something About Pictures" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1858); "The National Academy Exhibition" (*Scribner's Monthly* Jul. 1871); "Sculpture" (*Scribner's Monthly* Sep. 1872); and "Fine Arts" (*Putnam's*, Feb 1896).

<sup>16</sup> At the conclusion of the story, it is revealed that the story comes from an excerpt from Dürer's diary, which states, "Master Gerhard, Illuminist in Antwerp, has a young daughter, some 18 years old, Susanna by name, who painted a miniature, a Christ, for which I have paid 1 gulden. It is a wonderful work for a little wench!" (*Independent* 5 Mar. 1863).

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of Raphael's influence on American art and culture see Neil Harris's Chapter three, "The Burden of Portraiture," in *The Artist in American Society* (1966). For periodical references to Raphael see: "Ruskin's Writings" (*Atlantic Monthly* May 1856); "Art V: Modern Painters. Of Many Things." (*The North American Review* Apr. 1857); H.T. Tuckerman's "Something About Pictures" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1858); "The Representative Art" (*Atlantic Monthly* Jun. 1860); "Reason, Rhyme, and Rhythm." (*The Continental Monthly* Nov. 1863); J. Eliot Cabot's "On the Relation of Art to Nature" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1864); "Our First Great Painter and his Works" (*Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1865); "Article II.—Principles of Art" (*New Englander* Oct. 1865); "Fine Arts" (*Putnam's Magazine* Feb. 1869); "The National Academy Exhibition" (*Scribner's Monthly* Jul. 1871); and "Greatness in Art" (*Scribner's Monthly* Aug. 1878).

<sup>18</sup> Also see, Lammon Smith's "Howells and the Battle of Words over 'Genius'" (1980).

<sup>19</sup> This statement is no doubt a precursor to his 1892 publication of *Criticism and Fiction* in which Howells heavily critiques "genius" as an anti-democratic concept:

[...] The whole belief in "genius" seems to me rather a mischievous superstition, and if not mischievous always, still always a superstition. From the account of those who talk about it, "genius" appears to be the attribute of a sort of very potent and admirable prodigy which God has created out of the common for the astonishment and confusion of the rest of us poor human beings" (87-89).

After addressing the impracticality of this "mischievous superstition, Howells concludes his book with the following recommendation for American writers:

In fine, I would have our American novelists be as American as they unconsciously can. Matthew Arnold complained that he found no "distinction" in our life, and I would gladly persuade all artists intending greatness in any kind among us that the recognition of the fact pointed out

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by Mr. Arnold ought to be a source of inspiration to them, and not discouragement. [...] The talent that is robust enough to front the every-day world and catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face, need not fear the encounter, though it seems terrible to the sort nurtured in the superstition of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished, as the things alone worthy of painting or carving or writing. The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art; and the reproach which Arnold was half right in making us shall have no justice in it any longer; we shall be “distinguished” (138-9).

<sup>20</sup> For a more lengthy discussion of Piatt’s poems about mothers and motherhood see Wearn’s article on Piatt’s maternal poetics. In it, Wearn argues that Piatt “initiates an alternative discourse of motherhood that explores the maternal role as a potential site of both subjection and subversion” (164-5) and focuses principally on Piatt’s genteel poems. Where I differ with Wearn is that I find in “Marble or Dust?” that Piatt is not interrogating the role of mother but rather using motherhood to train readers to interpret art critically. Thus, in “Marble or Dust?” at least, maternity is not the object of Piatt’s critique.

<sup>21</sup> This poem has received almost as much critical attention as “The Palace-Burner.” Bennett argues that “An After-Poem” is about irony and that readers “will or will not read” the irony inherent in Piatt’s verse. Giordano addresses the poem in relationship to issues of reception in periodicals, claiming that the poem reflects Piatt’s awareness of potential misreadings of her poetry.

<sup>22</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the following explanation of “after-”:  
[After-] is used in various relations prepositional, adverbial, and adjectival, not always easy to separate, and in various senses. In some of these the combination is very loose, the use of the hyphen being mainly syntactical, *i.e.* to show that the grammatical relation between *after* and the following word is something else than the ordinary one of preposition and object. Cf. ‘After consideration I resolved to decline’ and ‘After-consideration has shown me that I was wrong.’ ‘I should know him after years had passed’ with ‘I know not what after-years may bring.’ Otherwise it is unnecessary, as ‘the events of after years.’ (“After-”. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press. The Ohio State University Library, Columbus OH. 20 July 2007 <<http://www.library.osu.edu>>).

<sup>23</sup> The term, and the poem, takes on greater significance, when we realize that Piatt uses it again seventeen years later in “A Queen’s Epitaph,” published in *Bedford’s Magazine* in 1889. In this poem, Piatt presents the image of “the sad after-poet” as well as, for the first time, a parenthetical definition of the “after-poet” as one whom “(dream[s] through /

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The shadow of the world, as poets do)” (7-8). Piatt’s casual parenthetical use of the term, especially since it is not the entire focus of the poem, suggests that Piatt is familiar with it; while readers may not fully understand its meaning, her use of it suggests that she does.

<sup>24</sup> The symbolism of the lily adds another level of meaning to this stanza that Piatt’s readers would almost certainly have recognized but that is not directly essential to my reading of the poem. Nineteenth-century readers were intimately familiar with “the language of the flowers,” which writers would use to communicate in a coded language (albeit a well-known language) about romance, love, and sexuality. Beverly Seaton, in her comprehensive study of nineteenth-century floral symbolism, finds that multiple nineteenth-century books on flowers state that white lilies symbolize purity. Because the language of the flowers was often used to communicate socially taboo meanings, particularly in relationship to female sexuality, Piatt’s nineteenth-century readers would likely interpret the first stanza as being about female sexual purity and impurity (Seaton 192-3). If lilies are representative of female sexual purity, then Piatt’s poem suggests that women are purest after sex, after they have “withered.” Considering the lack of open discussion of young women’s “budding” sexuality, perhaps Piatt redefines purity as knowledge. In a poem explicitly about “know[ing],” Piatt implies that the “whitest,” or purest, knowledge is found by disregarding conventional wisdom about flowers and female sexuality. In considering the poem’s title and the need for her readers to “read” the lily, Piatt seems to be addressing poetic purity as well. In relation to the purity of artistic purpose, Piatt suggests that purpose must come from the unconventional, from what lies beneath the surface. For an extensive discussion of floral symbolism in the nineteenth century see Seaton’s *The Language of the Flowers: A History* (UP of Virginia, Charlottesville: 1995).

<sup>25</sup> My own work is heavily informed by Sharon Harris’ *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* (1991) and Carla Peterson’s “*Doers of the word*”: *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North* (1995); both Harris and Peterson identify models of authorship that are more reader-centered than artist-centered. Thus, their studies explore how authors like Davis, Harper, and Stowe did not seek to become artistic geniuses like some of their female peers.

<sup>26</sup> This is the general trend that we can see in the following scholarship: Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991); Richard Brodhead *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993); Anne Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2004); Naomi Sofer, *Making the “America of Art”: Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2005); Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading*

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*Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004). Susan Williams, in *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850-1900* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006), recognizes this trend in criticism as well and works to “recover the multiple terms under which female authorship was defined and practiced in the nineteenth century” (4).

<sup>27</sup> Alcott's aspirations to become an “artistic genius” remain a point of contention in scholarship. Like Piatt, Alcott seemed to balance artistic aspirations with her desire to write books that would sell so that she could help her financially strapped family. See: Naomi Sofer's chapter on Alcott in “*Making the America of Art*” (2005) and Stadler's chapter on Alcott in *Troubling Minds* (2006).

## CHAPTER 4

### CELIA THAXTER AND THE REGIONALIST POETICS OF AN *ATLANTIC MONTHLY* POETESS

As a daughter of a lighthouse keeper and lifelong inhabitant of the Isles of Shoals, islands off the coast of Maine, Celia Thaxter developed a literary career that was bound to the desolate coastal wilderness that terrified and mesmerized her. From her first published poem in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861, which explores the confines of this lonely life, Thaxter's public image was that of the New England sea poetess. In a letter to a friend in 1874, Thaxter described how she struggled to find moments of joy in the foreboding and isolated environment of Appledore, the island of her family home and summer hotel:

Nobody knows how precious a word of kindness is, coming across the bitter sea to this howling wilderness of desolation, one lives so much on "the weather" here; and when all out of doors turns your deadly enemy, it is hard to bear. Oh, what do you think! On the 25<sup>th</sup> of February I saw our song sparrows! Yes, really! I could hardly believe my eyes! I heard the cry of a bird and I listened, thinking it was the snow buntings whose sad, sad cry often makes lonelier our loneliness, but it was repeated, and I said to myself that cheerful chirp can belong to nothing but that dear brown bird I love. [...] I send you two or three thoughts of God out of the great, rough, fierce Atlantic. Who would think its bitter wrath and tumult could hide such delicate and tender fancies!" (19 Mar. 1874)

In contrast to the "bitter wrath and tumult" that overwhelms the island, Thaxter captures the pleasurable experience of finding the song sparrows, an early sign of spring. Her ability to locate and describe these moments of "delicate and tender fancies" from within

“the great, rough, fierce Atlantic” not only was a coping mechanism for a life in the “howling wilderness of desolation,” but also became a defining feature of her poetics, one that helped her develop into the most popular poetess of the *Atlantic Monthly*. The image of Thaxter’s writing as emerging “out of the great, rough, fierce Atlantic” can also serve as a metaphor for her relationship with the *Atlantic Monthly*, the periodical that was responsible for ushering Thaxter onto the literary stage and crafting her image as a poetess. That is, in conjunction with the Atlantic Ocean, the *Atlantic Monthly* was a powerful touchstone for her artistry. Even though the periodical was not “rough and fierce” like the Atlantic Ocean, it was a singularly powerful force in Thaxter’s career, responsible for providing her with a rich poetic culture upon which she drew throughout her lifetime. In what follows, I consider how Thaxter’s artistic identity is interwoven with her reading of, writing for, and identity within the *Atlantic Monthly*, specifically within what I will identify as the two most important trends in the *Atlantic*’s poetic culture: the concept of the poetess and regionalism.

As the final case study of this dissertation, this chapter features Thaxter because she is a periodical poet who stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Emily Dickinson. In contrast to Dickinson, who published only ten poems in her lifetime, Thaxter, in the second-half of the nineteenth century, was the emblem of a popular woman poet, publishing more poetry in the *Atlantic Monthly* than any other woman poet (Mandel 1). In the twenty-first century, Dickinson’s complex, ironic, formally innovative poems are canonized as the best representation of nineteenth-century women’s poetry, while Thaxter’s seemingly simple, emotive, and moralistic poems are virtually unknown



and classed as the work of one of many now-forgotten poetesses. I demonstrate in this chapter how Thaxter's self-conscious and complex artistry, which emerges in tandem with her public identity in the *Atlantic Monthly*, can be equally as fascinating a case study as Dickinson's poetics.

From its inception in November 1857, the *Atlantic Monthly* maintained an active poetic culture in the nineteenth century through its poetry, poetry reviews, and feature articles about poetry. By surveying its poetic culture we can observe two major trends emerge: first, the periodical's emphasis on confining women poets to their proper sphere through the concept of the poetess, and second, its promotion of regionalism in poetry.<sup>1</sup> On one level, Thaxter's identity as a woman poet is defined by the traits of a regionalist and a poetess equally, or, what I have identified as a "regional poetess." Her popularity with editors and reviewers can be at least partially attributed to her ability to exemplify the characteristics of the poetess and regionalism so well. On another level, even as she composed poem after poem that fulfilled the tenets of a regional poetess, her poetics can be equally defined by critiques that challenge and redefine these two artistic models. Hence, I argue that her investment in regionalism and the identity of the poetess is not merely a public posture she puts on for readers; it is fundamental to her sense of self as an artist. Thaxter fulfills the roles the *Atlantic Monthly* demanded of her *and* revises the models of the poetess and regional artist, exploiting reader expectations of those models and redefining them.

By situating Thaxter's poetics within the *Atlantic Monthly*'s poetic culture, this chapter introduces poetry into two areas of scholarship where it is noticeably absent: the

field of criticism on the *Atlantic Monthly* and women's regionalism. Enriching our scholarship on the poetic culture of the *Atlantic Monthly* is essential to the recovery of women poets, particularly Thaxter, because, as Glazener convincingly argues, the *Atlantic* was a kind of literary and cultural "flagship" for postbellum periodicals. As a flagship, the *Atlantic* articulated and enforced poetic standards for nineteenth-century poets. Glazener's decision to focus exclusively on the *Atlantic*'s fiction reinforces a common assumption in American literary scholarship that restricts the literary movement of realism and its sister movement, regionalism, to a single genre. As I will discuss in the second section of this chapter, when we examine regionalism in the poetic culture of the *Atlantic*, we see how editors and reviewers employ the language and standards of regionalism to praise and critique poets and their poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Regionalist scholars' emphasis on prose is particularly perplexing when we examine the case of Thaxter, because she is a central figure in critical work on regionalism. As was the case with scholarship on Charlotte Forten, regionalist scholarship focuses almost exclusively on Thaxter's nonfiction prose and downplays the importance of her poetry. For example, in her essay, "Theorizing Regionalism," Judith Fetterley examines Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals* as a way to define and describe how regionalist writers wove their theories of regionalism specifically into their fiction and prose, but Fetterley ignores Thaxter's poetry. Scholars such as Marcia Littenberg and Leah Blatt Glasser also discuss *Among the Isles of Shoals* in terms of regionalism but only make passing references to Thaxter's career as a poet.<sup>3</sup> *Among the Isles of Shoals* represents Thaxter's only major prose publication, appearing in the *Atlantic* and

subsequently in book form. In contrast, Thaxter published over 50 poems in the *Atlantic* alone and over 300 in other periodicals, authored five collections of poetry, and wrote to numerous family and friends about her career as a poet. Thus, despite recent critics' desire to portray her as a prose writer, Thaxter, herself, and nineteenth-century literary culture understood her as a poet first and foremost. In response to James T. Fields's request to write essays for the *Atlantic*, Thaxter wrote, "Verses can grow where prose cannot," and explained that "the rhymes in my head are all that keep me alive, I do believe, lifting me in a half unconscious condition over the ashes heap, so I don't half realize how dry and dusty it is" (25 Oct. 1862). Thaxter's explanation suggests that she preferred poetry not only because the genre was amenable to the endless housework, but also because poetry gave her emotional relief and spiritual vitality.

Thaxter's identity as a regionalist is rooted in her lifelong residence on the Isles of Shoals; like many periodicals, the *Christian Union* described her as "the poetess of Appledore" (3Aug. 1881). She moved to Appledore as a child because her father became the lighthouse keeper on the island. In *Among the Isles of Shoals*, Thaxter remembers a childhood marked by extreme loneliness mingled with the grim realities of lighthouse work. She recalls helplessly witnessing shipwrecks, vividly illuminated by the lighthouse as well as collecting deceased birds that were crushed against the lighthouse due to the high winds. Within this lonesome wilderness, Thaxter seemed most affected by the lack of female companionship. Besides her mother, Thaxter was almost entirely surrounded by men. At the age of sixteen, Celia married Levi Thaxter, her former tutor, and had three sons early in life, one of whom was mentally disabled. Letters between Thaxter and

her friends reveal an incredibly unhappy marriage. Mandel explains that Levi was jealous of his wife's literary prestige and in a contradictory way both encouraged and thwarted her career. Even though her domestic duties, coupled with caring for Karl, their mentally disabled son, were overwhelming, Levi forbade Thaxter from hiring a maid. In a letter to a friend in 1873, Thaxter wrote that she had to return to the island to care for her mother because "our family is so destitute of women it is really forlorn! No sisters, daughters, aunts, cousins, nothing but a howling wilderness of men" (50). It was likely a result of this family life that Thaxter cherished her friendships with Annie Fields and Sarah Orne Jewett, both of whom Thaxter corresponded with throughout her adult life. These literary friendships emerged as Thaxter's popularity as a poet increased throughout the 1860s, and, consequently, she became a central figure in Boston literary culture. Some of her strongest memories were of the summer artist retreats that she would hold at her family's hotel on Appledore for Boston literati such as John Greenleaf Whittier, James and Annie Fields, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Dean Howells, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Lucy Larcom.

## I

Thaxter's central place in Boston literary culture was, in part, due to her continued association with the *Atlantic Monthly*. In fact, Thaxter was so closely linked to the *Atlantic Monthly* that other periodicals regularly identified and advertised her as an *Atlantic Monthly* poetess. For instance, in 1872, *Scribner's Monthly* begins a review of Thaxter's poetry with the following statement: "Mrs. Celia Thaxter has not been much

known outside the circle of readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*. But for many years her name has been the signature of some of the very sweetest and most graceful and most spontaneous song which has been printed in America” (Jul. 1872). Similarly, in summarizing the January *Atlantic*, the *Independent* stated that readers will be pleased to see another “Song” from Mrs. Thaxter, “whose tender cadences form a sharp contrast to the see-saw of Dr. Holmes’s verses. They are full of soft shadows, violet and rose, and closely twilight—the even song which Mrs. Thaxter sings always so sweetly” (2 Jan. 1873). What we see from these representative examples is that periodicals not only associated Thaxter with the *Atlantic* but also associated her with a particular type of *Atlantic Monthly* poet, a poetess. According to *Scribner’s*, Thaxter writes the “very sweetest and most graceful” poetry (Jul. 1872). Contrasting Thaxter’s poetry to the “see-saw verse of Dr. Holmes,” the *Independent* states that her poems are characteristically full of “soft shadows” that “are violet and rose” (2 Jan. 1873). These descriptions are significant, then, not because they are unusual but because they are representative of how nineteenth-century periodicals wrote about and reviewed Thaxter’s poetry; she was treated as a model poetess, and she became the *Atlantic*’s best representative of the ideal woman poet.

Even as the *Atlantic* praised Thaxter because her poetry embodied the best of a poetess, the magazine also associated her with the mass of women poets who wrote, as one *Atlantic* reviewer described, “minor poetry” (Mar. 1887). Within the *Atlantic Monthly* itself, reviews commended Thaxter for exemplifying the traits of the poetess but also questioned her potential greatness as a woman poet. For example, a review of *The*

*Cruise of the Mystery and Other Poems* described Thaxter and her verse in the following manner:

Her verses have their own virtues: there are grace of thought, tenderness of feeling, and purity of faith in the poems of bereavement and sympathy, and the practiced strength and firmness of an old hand when she narrates an incident or presents a powerful emotional situation. But these are not uncommon qualities of minor poetry, and, on the other hand, the breath of nature blows more free and the thought seems more instinctive in those poems to which her love of the ocean brings some tribute. (Mar. 1887)

The reviewer is ambiguous about whether Thaxter is entirely successful in rising above the fray of minor poets. Even as the reviewer extols the “grace,” “tenderness,” and “purity” of Thaxter’s poetry, he also associates her with the mass of female poets who write “minor poetry.” Interestingly, the reviewer ends by revealing his preference for Thaxter’s poems about the ocean that bespeak a refreshing originality in which “the breath of nature blows more free and the thought seems more instinctive.” The reviewer may be responding to, even unconsciously, Thaxter’s deviation from the traditional sphere of the poetess. The ambiguity we see in this review typifies the reviews of Thaxter’s poems. Over ten years earlier, a reviewer, likely Howells, offered a favorable review of Thaxter’s first volume of poetry. Even within this overwhelmingly positive review, Howells described her poetry as unexceptional, stating: “The strings of this shell are few and the tones are not many” (Dec. 1874). To qualify, Howells added, “What gives such poetry its charm is its unfailing truthfulness within its narrow range” (Dec. 1874). Hence, part of what the review preferred about Thaxter seems to be her ability to stay within the acceptable limits, the “narrow range,” and “truth” of her sphere.

Although “narrow range” might imply negative connotations, Laura Wendorff reminds us

that the poetess was lauded for naturally limiting herself to feminine subjects and forms (Wendorff 112).

On the surface, Thaxter's poems outwardly exemplify the traits of the poetess, which we saw in the review of *The Cruise of the Mystery*. Her ability to construct her identity as a model poetess likely led to her immense success in the *Atlantic*.

Significantly, though, just as the 1887 review noted a more uncontrolled feature—"more free" and "more instinctive"—of her sea poems, Thaxter consciously manipulates the acceptable limits of the poetess by exaggerating its key traits. In fact, Thaxter's first published poem in the *Atlantic*, "Land-Locked," establishes her desire to confront and alter the poetess persona as a foundation for her poetics. The poem functions as an early but powerful poetic manifesto in which Thaxter demands the artistic freedom reserved for men in nineteenth-century America.

Thaxter's periodical career began much like Dickinson's brief and sporadic one in that "Land-Locked" was shepherded into print without Thaxter's knowledge. Family lore states that one of Thaxter's brothers gave her poem to then *Atlantic* editor James Russell Lowell (Mandel 45). Likely impressed by the spontaneous emotion of the poem, a trait ascribed to the work of the nineteenth-century poetess, Lowell "christened it," as Thaxter later described his selection and publication of her poem in a letter (23 Sep. 1861), and printed it in the March 1861 issue of the *Atlantic*. Jane Vallier, one of Thaxter's biographers, reads this poem as being about a woman's physical imprisonment, but I find it more compelling to interpret it as a meta-poem. "Land-Locked" begins as a nature

lyric suggestive of John Keats's "Ode" and develops into an articulate expression of repressed artistic desire:

Black lie the hills; swiftly doth daylight flee;  
And, catching gleams of sunset's dying smile,  
Through the dusk land for many a changing mile  
The river runneth softly to the sea.

O happy river, could I follow thee!  
O yearning heart, that never can be still!  
O wistful eyes, that watch the steadfast hill,  
Longing for level line of solemn sea! (1-8)

The poem opens with a picturesque description of the sun setting behind the vast open landscape, which establishes the poem as a pleasant rumination on the natural end of a day. The calmness of this first stanza, though, contrasts the outpouring of emotion from the speaker when she directly addresses both the river, which she envisions as her pathway to freedom, and her body, which suffers from excruciating restraint on land. The speaker desires a type of freedom that she used to possess, and thus, her "yearning heart" that "never can be still!" is a result of prior knowledge. After this emotional outburst, the speaker attempts to regain control of her emotions:

Have patience; here are flowers and songs of birds,  
Beauty and fragrance, wealth of sound and sight,  
All summer's glory thine from morn till night,  
And life too full of joy for uttered words.

Neither am I ungrateful; but I dream  
Deliciously how twilight falls to-night  
Over the glimmering water, how the light  
Dies blissfully away, until I seem

To feel the wind, sea-scented, on my cheek,  
To catch the sound of dusky flapping sand  
And dip of oars, and voices on the gale



Afar off, calling low—my name they speak!

O Earth! Thy summer song of joy may soar  
    Ringing to heaven in triumph. I but crave  
    The sad, caressing murmur of the wave  
That breaks in tender music on the shore. (9-24)

After telling herself to “have patience,” the speaker lists the items characteristic of the sphere of the poetess: “flowers,” “songs of birds,” “beauty and fragrance,” “summer’s glory,” and “life too full of joy for uttered words.” Through this list of joys that land can offer her, Thaxter describes objects notable for their role in women’s poetry of the nineteenth century. The beauty of domesticated nature is a safe subject, appropriate for a woman poet who should write within her “narrow range.” Yet, because this is a meta-poem, just as the speaker is called toward the excitement that is beyond her reach, as a poet, Thaxter is equally drawn to freedom for her artistic creativity that does not want to be confined by the metaphorically simple “flowers and songs of birds.” At this point, the speaker suddenly realizes the brazenness of her exclamation and is consumed by a moment of guilt; she admits, “Neither am I ungrateful” (13). This feeling of remorse quickly passes, and the remainder of the poem offers a vivid description of what the sea and freedom mean for the speaker. This extended reverie is mature in that the speaker does not imagine the sea will provide her with endless joy. Instead, the speaker desires the freedom to hear the “sad, caressing murmur of the wave” (23). As a poet, writing about the confines of the identity of a woman poet, Thaxter ends her poem by rejecting the sweet and graceful “summer song of joy” (21) the land represents, and in the final lines, “crave[s] / the sad, caressing murmur of the wave / that breaks in tender music on

the shore” (23-24). Here, Thaxter displays a nuanced and sophisticated artistic agenda, one that can only be “heard” at sea, not on land describing “flowers” and “songs of birds.”

Vallier interprets “Land-Locked” as an expression of Thaxter’s personal feelings of entrapment by her husband Levi. It was widely known that Celia and Levi had an exceedingly miserable marriage, even by nineteenth-century standards, and Thaxter composed this poem during a ten-year period in which she and her husband resided in Watertown, Massachusetts. By reading this poem as biographical, Vallier adopts one of the central assumptions of the poetess at work during the nineteenth century that I discuss in the introduction: a poetess’s poetry was a literal translation of the poet’s life and experiences. To extend Vallier’s interpretation, I suggest that Thaxter’s poem may be more than a record of experience as a wife and mother; it may also discuss her role as an artist. Through a conceit about the sea, Thaxter expresses her dissatisfaction with the limitations placed upon not only the nineteenth-century woman, but also the metaphorically “land-locked” woman poet. She offers readers profusions of strong emotions, but she does so to express a poet’s longing for artistic freedom that is embodied in the sea. Thus, in her first published poem, we can observe how Thaxter extends a trait of the poetess, an emotional confession of private feelings, to a subject traditionally reserved for male poets: a self-conscious lament of, and meditation on, *artistic* longing. Whether Thaxter intended it or not, since she did not send this poem to the *Atlantic*, her first published poem comes to define her artistic career because she continues to push the boundaries of the poetess throughout her literary career.

Following on the heels of the immensely successful “Land-Locked,” Thaxter published “Off Shore” in the September 1862 issue of the *Atlantic*. An extension of “Land-Locked,” “Off Shore” presents another passionate expression of intense emotion, yet this emotion centers on romantic desire. In “Off Shore,” Thaxter fulfills an important trait of the poetess: she seems to provide readers unfettered access to her private emotions and directs these emotions toward a thoroughly appropriate subject for a poetess: love. According to Wendorff, a poetess’s poetry was thought to arise from a feminine and less momentous version of what Wordsworth’s described as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (116). Thus, Thaxter not only fulfills the expectations for a poetess, but also exaggerates them, offering more of her feelings and emotions as an artist than was expected of the poetess. In “Off Shore,” a woman (and perhaps her lover) floats in a small boat in the coastal waters while soliloquizing on the beauty of her surroundings:

Rock, little boat, beneath the quiet sky!  
Only the stars behold us, where we lie,—  
Only the stars, and yonder brightening moon.

On the wide sea to-night alone are we:  
The sweet, bright, summer day dies silently;  
Its glowing sunset will have faded soon

Rock softly, little boat, the while I mark  
The far-off gliding sails, distinct and dark,  
Across the west pass steadily and slow [...]

The waves are full of whispers wild and sweet;  
The call to me; incessantly they beat  
Along the boat from stem to curved prow.

Comes the careening wind, blows back my hair  
All damp with dew, to kiss me unaware,—  
Murmuring, “Thee I love,”—and passes on.

Sweet sounds on rocky shores the distant note.  
Oh, could we float forever, little boat,  
Under the blissful sky drifting alone! (1-9, 22-30)

Thaxter establishes the poem as a private reverie on the ocean in which “only the stars behold us” (2). The poem can be interpreted as a romantic lyric about a quiet moment between two lovers floating peacefully on the ocean. However, with lines such as “Comes the careening wind, blows back my hair / All damp with dew, to kiss me unaware” (25-27), Thaxter employs natural imagery to describe sexual desire and passion. Interestingly, as Vallier notes, Thaxter’s language and tone echo Dickinson’s “Wild Nights—Wild Nights!”, which is acknowledged by scholars as one of her most erotic verses (Vallier 52). As an epitome of the production of a poetess, “Off Shore” offers readers a voyeuristic glance into the poetess’s private romantic rendezvous between herself and nature. Readers likely would not have assumed that Thaxter lived this experience, but rather that it embodied her imaginary fulfillment of unsatisfied desires. As I will discuss momentarily with Thaxter’s “A Tryst,” passionate romantic lyrics about secret meetings were a common feature of periodical poetry, particularly that of the poetess.

On one level, “Off Shore” is provocative because it establishes Thaxter as a poetess willing to expose her deepest desires for a public audience. On another level, it is provocative because the desire she expresses is likely not for another lover but for herself. It takes a conscious act on the reader’s part to place another person in the boat with the speaker because throughout the entire poem the speaker addresses the boat

directly. Thaxter does not give any indication that there are two individuals in the boat. Rather, the “we” of the poem seems to describe the speaker and the boat. If we read the speaker as alone in the boat and speaking to it, not another lover, the poem yields a very different interpretation. The poem exudes a sense of isolation, but the woman appears serene and happy in the solitude of the ocean, and the sea mirrors the woman’s peacefulness. In the final three stanzas of the poem, Thaxter brings the woman physically together with the sea. It is the waves that whisper “wild and sweet” things to the speaker and create an “incessantly” constant beat upon the boat (22). In addition, it is the wind, not a human lover, that “blows back [her] hair” and whispers “Thee, I love” to the speaker (25-27). The final lines articulate the speaker’s utmost desire, to “drift” in solitude “under the blissful sky.” As an autoerotic poem, the speaker’s joy and passion become self-focused rather than devoted to another individual.<sup>4</sup> This poem, then, becomes one about self-gratification and, at the same time, satisfies the voyeuristic impulses of readers. Instead, in another early public articulation of her artistry, Thaxter plays on the conventions of the poetess in order to publish an autoerotic poem about a self-satisfied woman, alone with nature, and a self-satisfied female artist who uses women in natural settings as a powerful mode of inspiration.

The theme of love continued to be an important subject for Thaxter throughout her career as an *Atlantic* poetess. Yet, as “Off Shore” indicates, Thaxter’s approach to the love poem was undeniably unique. If we turn to Thaxter’s “A Tryst,” first published in the *Atlantic* in August 1872, we can observe perhaps Thaxter’s most important treatise on love poems, one that engages with a fascinating subgenre of love poetry from the

nineteenth century in which all possess the same title: “A Tryst,” or “The Tryst.” In titling her poem “A Tryst,” Thaxter’s poem joined over 60 other poems with the same title published in periodicals between 1850 and 1900.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of Thaxter’s poem, all of the poems titled “A Tryst” or “The Tryst” are love poems, often about secret lover rendezvous, and usually include veiled allusions to sexual encounters. For example, *Harper’s Bazaar* printed “The Tryst,” a poem that tells the tale of a woman sneaking off to meet her lover, which begins, “My heart will find out where my feet are going,” and ends by emphasizing the secret nature of her destination: “But the secret is safe from others knowing / The breeze will not gossip that moves in the lane” (17, 19-20). Tryst poems epitomized the appropriate type of poetry for the poetess, mostly because they exuded strong feelings of longing for an absent lover, and these feelings could easily be assumed to be that of the author. In addition, most of these poems often provided a lesson in love or a moral about the virtue of patience. Alice Cary, one of the nineteenth century’s most popular poetesses, published “The Tryst” in *The Albion*, which tells the story of a young maid who continues to mourn and honor her lost lover (9 Nov. 1850). As I discussed in my introduction, the traits of the poetess were often found in women’s *and* men’s poetry; both sexes could achieve the “graceful and pleasing” verse that defined the love poem of the late nineteenth century. One of the best examples of this is Edmund Clarence Stedman’s “The Tryst,” which appeared in *Putnam’s Monthly* in February 1869. In this short two-stanza poem, a male speaker dreams of his absent lover:

Sleeping, I dreamed that thou wast mine  
In some ambrosial lovers’ shrine.  
My lips against thy lips were pressed

And all our secret was confessed;—  
So dear and near my darling seemed  
I knew not that I only dreamed.

Waking, this mid and moonlit night,  
I clasp thee close by lover's right.  
Thou fearest not my warm embrace,  
And yet, so like the dream thy face  
And kisses, I but half partake  
The joy, and know not if I wake. (1-12)

Stedman's poem highlights perhaps the most important quality of "Tryst" poems: possession. Often thwarted by others, male lovers repeatedly long for the physical possession of their beloved ones. It is unclear whether Stedman's speaker pines for a lover who returns his affection or whether he has not even confessed his love yet. Similarly, it is ambiguous whether the speaker awakens in bed with his beloved or if he remains in a dream state throughout the poem. If the speaker is lying in bed with his lover, then the question of possession becomes more complex since he would prefer to possess her in the dream rather than in reality. The final line indicates that the speaker is still asleep and longing for this passionate possession of his beloved. One can see the theme of possession appear repeatedly throughout "Tryst" poems. In some it manifests a quiet, gentle longing to possess a familiar lover. Other times it is a heated desire for an unattainable lover. Or, it is a passionate expression of unrequited love, as is hinted at in Stedman's poem.<sup>6</sup> However, it was never, until Thaxter published her poem, a story of a violent and tragic rendezvous between a ship and an iceberg.

Thaxter's "A Tryst," then, illustrates how her artistry is rooted in playing with conventions in periodical poetry. By taking men and women out of the poem, and

placing nonhuman entities in their stead, Thaxter changes the dynamics of the tryst poem subgenre, challenging her readers to understand these deviations as purposeful and not accidental. In Thaxter's "A Tryst," we can observe how the poem can be interpreted as the emotionally charged tragic story of a shipwreck, perfectly appropriate for a poetess, and, at the same time, how it can be read as critiquing its own subgenre. By offering a much darker "tryst" than most tryst poems describe, Thaxter's poem does not follow the standards of the subgenre by presenting an overly optimistic portrait of love and romantic relationships. In her tryst poem, Thaxter displays the inequality between the sexes in romantic relationships and suggests that "trysts" benefit the male pursuer and not the female object of pursuit. The published poem is prefaced with a quote from John Weiss, a contributor to the *Atlantic* to whom Thaxter once addressed a letter.<sup>7</sup> In his lecture on fate, Weiss stated, "The iceberg slowly floating down into the path of traffic, to keep its fatal appointment with the ship." On a philosophical level, Thaxter's poem is a meditation on fate, death, violent and devastating shipwrecks, much like the Weiss quote that frames it. The poem begins after the epigraph:

From out the desolation of the North  
An iceberg took its way,  
From its detaining comrades breaking forth,  
And traveling night and day.

At whose command? Who bade it sail the deep  
With that resistless force?  
Who made the dread appointment it must keep?  
Who traced its awful course? (1-8)<sup>8</sup>

The beginning of Thaxter's poem immediately evokes the tenor of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Yet, rather than interpreting "A Tryst" as a weaker version of



Coleridge's masterpiece, we should read her poem within the "tryst" genre in order to fully appreciate the purpose and effect of this poem. What is interesting about Thaxter's translation of Weiss's quote into her poem is that she grants the iceberg an element of free will, one that Weiss does not allow. Thaxter personifies the iceberg as a man "breaking forth" from his fellow "comrades"; he is independent, powerful, and frightening as he "took [his] way" (2-3). Thaxter then poses the question: "At whose command?" (5), but does not provide any answers, which indicates that the iceberg is at no one's command. Within these questions, Thaxter presents the iceberg as a powerful entity that possesses "resistless force" (6). If we consider Thaxter's personification of the iceberg as male in the context of the "tryst" subgenre, we can see how Thaxter uses a double-layered metaphor, in which the story of the iceberg and the ship is a metaphor for fate *and* for a romantic tryst between a man and a woman. In the following lines, Thaxter personifies the ship as a young maiden out on her first excursion into the world:

To the warm airs that stir in the sweet South  
A good ship spread her sails;  
Stately she passed beyond the harbor's mouth,  
Chased by the favoring gales.

And on her ample decks a happy crowd  
Bade the fair land good by [sic];  
Clear shone the day, with not a single cloud  
In all the peaceful sky.

Brave men, sweet women, little children bright,  
For all these she made room  
And with her freight of beauty and delight  
She went to meet her doom. (9-20)

On its first voyage, the speaker describes it “spread[ing] her sails” (2). The ship carries innocent passengers who represent the best of their sex; the men are “brave,” the women “sweet,” and the children are young and “bright” (17). By the end of our first description of the ship, Thaxter presents the ship as literally carrying the “freight of beauty and delight” (19) and metaphorically embodying young maidenly purity.

In contrast to the maidenly virginal innocence of the ship, the iceberg takes on additional masculine qualities of a pursuing lover, in that Thaxter depicts the iceberg as hunting and stalking the ship. As the ship draws nearer to the iceberg, Thaxter describes a kind of unconscious seduction that culminates in the meeting of the trysting place:

“Like some imperial creature, moving slow / Meanwhile, with matchless grace, / The stately ship, unconscious of her foe, / Drew near the trysting place” (45-8). The iceberg has become “imperial” but also a “creature” while the ship remains “unconscious of her foe.” In the final five stanzas, the question of fate becomes almost entirely absent as the romantic tryst reaches its climax:

There came a night with neither moon nor star,  
Clouds draped the sky in black;  
With straining canvas reefed at every spar,  
And weird fire in her track,

The ship swept on, a wild wind gathering fast  
Drove her at utmost speed;  
Bravely she bent before the fitful blast  
That shook her like a reed.

O helmsman, turn thy wheel! Will no surmise  
Cleave through the midnight drear?  
No warning of the horrible surprise  
Reach thine unconscious ear?

She rushed upon her ruin; not a flash  
Broke up the waiting dark:  
Dully through wind and sea one awful crash  
Sounded, with none to mark.

Scarcely her crew had time to clutch despair,  
So swift the work was done;  
Ere their pale lips could frame a speechless prayer  
They perished, every one! (61-80)

In these final stanzas, Thaxter's describes the shipwreck, the "tryst," as a violent attack on an innocent woman. The iceberg, a clear phallic symbol, in conjunction with the storm, produces a "fitful blast" that "ruins" the innocent ship (7). The description of the "fitful blast / that shook her like a reed" while at the same time the ship submits to the "wild wind" matches the sexualized rhetoric in "Off Shore" (67-8, 65). However, "Off Shore" offers a positive sexual experience, one in which the speaker controls her own sexuality, while "A Tryst" presents a violent sexual encounter in which the woman is a passive object who submits to the will of the iceberg: "Bravely she bent before the fitful blast / that shook her like a reed" (67-8). In this moment we see how she literally breaks like a reed, losing her innocence in the most violent way. After the ship "rush[es] upon her ruin" (73), Thaxter briefly refocuses on the human figures, who have warranted little attention throughout the lengthy poem. However, the ship's crew functions more as a symbol of innocence, in that Thaxter's poetic energies focus intensely on the destruction of the feminized ship. If we step back and consider the subgenre to which Thaxter responds, we can observe how Thaxter criticizes the carefree description of love, lust and particularly unrequited male love. Thaxter offers an alternative understanding of a lovers' "tryst"—one that portrays sex and romantic relationships as dangerous for

women. As Thaxter's "A Tryst" suggests, her artistry responded to the literary market demands for "graceful and pleasing" women's poetry but did not allow these demands to restrict her poetics. She used her status as a public figure as an opportunity to explore her identity as *woman* poet and to critique inequalities between men and women in the social and artistic realms. Significantly, though, for Thaxter, her identity as a poetess was interwoven with another layer of her artistry: that of regionalist poet.

## II

Mrs. Thaxter's early life was passed on a singularly isolated island on the New England coast, and her whole heart is wedded to the sea. Every song she sings has the under-tow in it. Every picture she sees has the horizon line of one who has looked out perpetually over far waters. She is next of kin to all lonely winged things which dwell among the waves and rocks. (*Scribner's Monthly*, Jul. 1872)

In this review of her first volume of poems, *Scribner's* weds Thaxter to her sea islands and represents how periodical reviewers regularly interpreted her "song[s]" as expressing the "under-tow" of her coastal life. Even as her poetry encouraged the connection with regionalism, Thaxter related to this identity critically. Thus, her regionalist poetics offer a critical look at New England culture. Thaxter's poetics displays how she self-consciously constructed a public identity that emerged from redefining both her identities as a poetess and regionalist.

The presence of regionalism within the *Atlantic's* poetic culture may seem surprising, given that, for so long, scholarship has resolutely associated regionalism exclusively with prose. For example, Fetterley and Pryse's theorization of regionalism

includes an explanation of why prose is the appropriate form for regionalism. Yet, even as we acknowledge the power of Fetterley and Pryse's argument we cannot discount the wealth of poetry and poetry reviews in the *Atlantic* that are intricately tied to literary regionalism. In 1991, Caroline Gebhard stated that the study of regionalism was years behind realism and naturalism, particularly because it was considered a predominantly women's movement (42). Nearly twenty years later, scholars have made significant inroads into the field of regionalism, which has developed in two general directions: regionalism as a female literary tradition and regionalism as a response to market demands. The former is persuasively argued by Fetterley, Pryse, and Josephine Donovan who posit regionalism as a distinctly female literary tradition. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Richard Brodhead contends that regionalism developed not out of a collective vision of women writers but in response to market demands for literary tourist pieces. He argues that an essential regionalist figure like Sarah Orne Jewett did not produce a distinctly feminine form of writing in conversation with other women writers; instead, she wrote a type of literature that was highly desirable at this period in American literature. Hence, Brodhead finds regionalism to be part of the popular fascination with literary tourism rather than an organic movement of women writers.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, the commonality between these two portraits of regionalism is that they are both firmly associated with prose. Exploring Thaxter's identity as a regionalist poetess is an opportunity to reconcile these two scholarly paths, as her poetics balanced the market demand for regionalism in the *Atlantic* and her own emphatically women-centered aesthetic.

In terms of my understanding of how Thaxter fits within the regionalist movement, I consider regionalist writing to be both geographic and cultural. That is, the physical landscape is just as important as the humans who inhabit it. Fetterley and Pryse focus on the cultural aspects of regionalist writing, most importantly the relationship between place and human consciousness and the critique of hierarchies rooted in gender inequalities (Fetterley and Pryse 7-8). Regionalist writers acknowledge and write about “the very power structure that regionalized their characters and their writing” (Fetterley and Pryse 7). Because Fetterley and Pryse argue that regionalism is a female literary movement that has less to do with geography and nature and more to do with “the consolidation and maintenance of power through ideology” (7), they prefer the term “regionalism” over “local color.” While many scholars prefer “local color” because the term was employed by writers and critics in the nineteenth century and thus possesses historical accuracy, others, notably Fetterley and Pryse, argue that “local color” is too broad and that it erases the important differences between tourist writing by outsiders and writing by life-long residents of a particular region.<sup>10</sup> Although I recognize the importance of this debate about terminology, I do not abandon the term “local color” altogether because of its prevalent use throughout the period of Thaxter’s career. Furthermore, many writers of the nineteenth century discussed local color in a way that parallels Fetterley and Pryse. In one instance, James Lane Allen, writing for *The Critic* in 1886, highlights the importance of geographic and natural descriptions to this poetry that he calls “local color.” Allen writes: “the aim of local color should be to make the picture of human life natural and beautiful, or dreary, or sombre, or terrific, as the special

character of the theme may demand” (Jan. 1886). Similar to Fetterley and Pryse’s contention that regionalist writing must be treated as more cultural than geographical, Allen’s treatise on local color emphasizes that geographic and natural descriptions are not an end in and of themselves, but that they, too, connect to “human life” (Jan. 1886). Because of my emphasis on the periodical discussions of regionalism, for the purposes of this chapter, I follow Susan K. Harris’s lead and use “regionalism” and “local color” interchangeably (Harris 330).

Even though scholarship has separate literary histories for realism and regionalism, in my discussion of regionalism, I will draw on the *Atlantic*’s language about realism because the periodical did not separate the literary movements as much as scholars do today. While nineteenth-century writers did identify meaningful distinctions between realism and local color, the *Atlantic Monthly* did not stress those distinctions in the poetry reviews and, therefore, consistently conflated realism and regionalism. Poets who were identified as a “local colorist” were equally praised for their “faculty for observing real life” (Mar. 1861). What most interests me in these reviews is not whether the poetry is “realist” or “regionalist,” but rather that it is identified as one or the other because scholars have suggested that both these movements belong to the realm of fiction. A survey of the poetry reviews in the *Atlantic Monthly* challenges this long-held assumption in scholarship.<sup>11</sup> Even though there were plenty of reviews that discussed poetry based on its “sentiment,” as was the case with a very early review of Anne Whitney’s *Poems* (Dec. 1859), there were a significant number of reviews that called for

poets to depict “life seen,” as was the case of a review of Lucy Hamilton Hooper’s poetry (May 1871).

The poetry reviews in the *Atlantic Monthly* illustrate that the magazine was clearly invested in using the language of realism and regionalism to describe and critique poetry. In an 1861 review of Rose Terry Cooke’s *Poems*, James Russell Lowell praises her “faculty for observing real life” (Mar. 1861). He also expressed his dislike for this particular volume because “Miss Terry seems [...] to have sought refuge from the real in the ideal, from the jar and bustle of the outward world in the silent and shadowy interior of thought and being” (Mar. 1861). Cooke does not garner a positive review, and, significantly, because Lowell imagines the best poetry as realist: the kind that exists in the “real” and “the jar and bustle of the outward world.” At the conclusion of the review, Lowell praises Cooke’s “Frontier Ballads” because they “have the true game-flavor of the border” (Mar. 1861), indicating more specifically an early preference for poetry that is set in a particular region.

*Atlantic Monthly* reviews, particularly during the years Howells was assistant editor and editor of the magazine (1866-1881), heavily emphasized poetry and poets connected to a specific locale. Perhaps most well known to literary scholars is Bret Harte, who was extremely popular in the nineteenth century. In 1871, Howells celebrated the fact that Harte’s poetry offered an instance in which popular readers and critics could agree. Howells asserted that Harte’s poems “represent real persons and actual states to fine effect [...], as a group of character-paintings, vigorously and clearly done, they have very great value” (Mar. 1871). In an 1872 review of Harte’s poetry, the *Atlantic Monthly*



referred to him as “local California poet” who has the ability to craft “grotesque local figures” (Jan. 1872). As a counter-example to Harte, a review of Joaquin Miller demonstrates that writing about a region did not elicit automatic praise; there were standards that poets needed to attain. Although Miller wrote his *Songs of the Sierras* about the southwest, Howells did not identify Miller as a local color poet or an “Arizona poet” because, according to Howells, Miller did not represent his characters realistically. Although Howells acknowledged, “when Mr. Miller will consent to forget himself and admirers, he can paint a striking picture,” Howells concluded that Miller’s worst poems “have the misery of a dreary unreality” (Dec. 1871). Miller’s attempt to self-identify as a local color artist failed, for Howells at least, because Miller’s “unreality” falsified the connection to a specific place. Whereas Harte was able to convincingly develop characters in his poetry, Miller lacked this ability. Complex and believable characters, rather than simplistic ones, were traits that the *Atlantic Monthly*, particularly Howells, associated with regionalism.

The *Atlantic*’s promotion of regionalism spanned the gender-divide in poetry, in that women were encouraged to use regionalism and criticized for not doing so. In an 1876 review of Mrs. Preston’s poetry, the reviewer said there was a strong similarity between her and Harte, stating that like Harte, she uses “real incidents” as the basis for her poetry (Mar. 1876). Two years earlier, Howells criticized Mrs. Hudson’s fugitive slave verses because the scene of the main poem was not “laid in some place known to the gazetteer” (Jul. 1874). Of Hudson’s narrative poem, Howells stated, “It is in the first place a story, and the employment of the poet’s mind with the details of incident [...]

Then the ground, if not new is good, and is the ground of enough actual experience to make it very real; it only, indeed, wants localization” (Jul. 1874). Here, we see Howells establish regionalism as the bar by which he measures Hudson’s poetry; since her poems lacked “localization,” even if they were based on “actual experience,” Howells concluded that her poems were an example of what happened when American poets “strive to transport our American realities into the atmosphere of books we have read” (Jul. 1874). Hence, in this moment, we can observe how Howells conflates realism and regionalism and describes these categories as one national literary movement that could be employed to differentiate the United States from its European counterparts.

Realism and regionalism were so important to the *Atlantic*’s poetic culture that the magazine clearly marked poetry that did not embody either realism or regionalism with the terms “unrealism” and “unreality.” These terms first appeared in Howells’s review of Jean Inglow’s poetry in 1867, which described it as “an unusually dreary copy of the unrealism of Mr. Tennyson’s ‘Idyls of the King’” (Sep. 1867). Here, Howells identifies Inglow’s poetry as the antithesis of realism. “Unrealism” appeared again in 1871, and again in connection with Tennyson, in an anonymous review of Richard Stoddard’s *Book of the East and Other Poems*, in which the reviewer stated, “Mr. Stoddard seems for a poet of our time, when nearly all verse is flavored with sweet Tennysonian syrups, and made to taste of the common chemical base, to have kept an unusually large share of the savors of nature. Not but that he can be artificial too, if he likes; there are as tiresome bits of unreality in this little book as an enemy could find” (Nov. 1871). In this tepid review of Stoddard’s poetry, the reviewer used “Tennysonian syrups” as a marker of

what the *Atlantic* disliked about contemporary poetry. As may be surmised from these examples, Howells was one of the central reviewers who used local color and realism as points of praise for poets and points of weakness for those poets who did not attend to their own lived experience.<sup>12</sup>

When Thomas Bailey Aldrich took over as editor after Howells resigned in 1881, the emphasis on realism and local color became significantly less prominent in reviews (Sedgwick 183). When realism and local color did appear it was presented as a negative feature of poetry. For example, in an 1882 review of Harriet Prescott Spofford's *Poems*, assistant editor George Parsons Lathrop wrote that, "Mrs. Spofford is more of a colorist than a master of outline and form" (Apr. 1882) and then goes on to dismiss her poetry as tedious. In this fairly mild review of Spofford's poetry, identifying her as a "colorist" implies a double meaning; a colorist was a common term for an occupation held by women who "colored" in an artist's work and the literary movement of local color. Through the use of the double meaning, the review demonstrates how the traits of local color no longer hold the same prominence it held in Howells's poetry reviews. Instead, marking Spofford as a "colorist" was just one of the many ways that Lathrop described the unexciting qualities of her poetry. Thus, the frequency with which the language of regionalism appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, particularly when it appears as praise in the 1860s and 1870s—the formative years for Thaxter's work—highlights its importance for Thaxter's artistry.

In reviews, the *Atlantic* consistently framed Thaxter as a regionalist, describing her poetry as possessing "unfailing truthfulness" (Dec. 1874). One reviewer asserted of

her poetry, “Never a false note is struck; neither ship nor ocean is painted, but an air fresh and pure and wholesome breathes from the very sea as you read” (Dec. 1874). Perhaps most notable concerning the relationship between Thaxter and regionalism, a reviewer described *The Cruise of the Mystery and Other Poems* as “bright with local color and the familiar loveliness of the sea-coast to which [Thaxter] is attached” (Mar. 1887). This review concluded, “Celia Thaxter is never so vivid, so strong, and at the same time so fresh, with that novelty, directness, and spirit which compose the element of originality in her work, as when she is looking off from the Isles of Shoals upon the real or imagined world, or hearing the ebb of the tide on the sands” (Mar. 1887). By 1887, *Atlantic* reviews so clearly tied Thaxter’s “originality” to her locale, that periodical culture at large followed the *Atlantic*’s lead and characterized her as a regionalist. *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health*, a lesser-known periodical, offered an analysis of Thaxter’s facial features and then stated, “Mrs. Thaxter’s poems and other writings bear so much upon the scenery and life of the Isles of Shoals, among which she has spent almost her whole mortal career, as far as it has extended, that she might well be named their poet and historiographer” (Nov. 1880). In coming to this conclusive statement, *The Phrenological Journal* lists Thaxter’s poems that were all first published in the *Atlantic*, including one of her most popular poems, “The Wreck of the Pocahontas.” From these representative examples we can observe how periodicals unanimously marked her as a regionalist poet, so much so that it allowed *The Phrenological Journal* to christen her the Isles of Shoals’ “poet and historiographer” (Nov. 1880). The fact that other periodicals echoed the *Atlantic*’s portrait of Thaxter as a

regionalist is significant if we recall from chapter three that periodicals, even under the direction of the *Atlantic*, could never reach a consensus about the quality of Sarah Piatt's poetry or her artistic identity. In contrast, throughout Thaxter's literary career, her identity within periodicals was seamless: American periodicals consistently characterized her, like her poetry, as "bright with local color" (Mar. 1887).

When we interpret Thaxter's public identity as a regionalist with her other equally noteworthy identity as a poetess, we can understand how she embodied—in one poet—two of the most attractive and marketable characteristics that the *Atlantic* could desire. Furthermore, Thaxter's most important prose publication, *Among the Isles of Shoals*, was essential to cementing her identity as a regionalist and simultaneously fueling interest in her personal life as a poetess. From the discussion of the poetess in the introduction, we recollect that in the public sphere a poet's biography regularly overshadowed her poetry. As Wendorff states, "One of the most defining characteristics of the poetess was the assumption that woman *as* poet was more significant than the poetry she wrote" (111). Echoing critical responses to Thaxter's poetry, a review of *Among the Isles of Shoals* depicted it as an emblem of regionalism: "It is a succession of exquisite studies of the island scenery and the character, actual and traditional, of the islanders; the local legends and the tragedies of tempest and shipwreck which give the Shoals their dark, romantic memories" (Jul. 1873). Published in four parts between August 1869 and May 1870 in the *Atlantic*, *Among the Isles of Shoals* was so well received that she published it in book form just three years later, adding stories about her personal life on the islands.

The interest in Thaxter's personal life is directly connected to her identity as a regionalist and a poetess, or, what I have identified as a "regional poetess." Hence, Thaxter's public identity as a regional poetess served her own interests and those of the *Atlantic*. Outwardly she was a properly feminine poetess, who wrote within her "narrow range" about her unusual life in a remote locale, which would be foreign to *Atlantic* readers. Thaxter's ability to satisfy the *Atlantic*'s desires—combined with her savvy critiques of those desires—suggests that she understood the capital that "regionalist" and "poetess" granted her. As a regional poetess, Thaxter was granted room to explore and define an artistic identity that ultimately included social and political critiques, and that which exaggerated, challenged, and ultimately reimagined the categories of "regionalist" and "poetess."

In "The Wreck of the Pocahontas," Thaxter employs a first-person speaker, inviting readers to see the poem as the life experience of a regional poetess. Even though the poem was published anonymously, by April 1868, when the *Atlantic* published the poem, Thaxter's identity was well known in literary circles. On the heels of the success of Thaxter's "The Wreck of the Pocahontas," Whittier wrote to Thaxter to congratulate her on her popularity: "I suspect thee are in the predicament of the man who says he 'waked up one morning and found himself famous.' But, I hope thee will still recognize thy old friends when thee meet them. [...] But soberly, the poem in the *Atlantic* is liked by everybody" (29 Mar. 1868). The title of the poem, which refers to an actual shipwreck, establishes the historical and autobiographical context. While the name "Pocahontas" appears periodically throughout newspapers' shipping news from the 1830s

to the 1870s, the poem refers to a particularly devastating hurricane in 1839 off the north Atlantic coast. From an 1840 book entitled, *Awful calamities, or, The shipwrecks of December, 1839*<sup>13</sup> we learn that the ship the Brig Pocahontas, under the command of James G. Cooke, was destroyed in a violent hurricane. It recounts how people on shore witnessed the ship's destruction without any way to aid the crew, paralleling Thaxter's version in "The Wreck of the Pocahontas." Although Thaxter was only four years old at the time of the wreck, this particular shipwreck left an indelible mark in her memory, and likely her family and community's memory, too. In *Among the Isles of Shoals*, Thaxter describes the surprise her family experienced as the hurricane descended upon the islands and the ship:

“We were startled by the heavy booming of guns through the roar of the tempest,— a sound that drew nearer and nearer, till at last, through a sudden break in the mist and the spray, we saw the heavy rolling hull of a large vessel driving by, to her sure destruction, toward the coast. It was as if the wind had torn the vapor apart on purpose to show us the piteous sight; and I well remember the hand on my shoulder which held me firmly, shuddering child that I was, and forced me to look in spite of myself. What a day of pain it was! [...] We learned afterward that it was the brig Pocahontas, homeward bound from Spain, and that the vessel and all her crew were lost” (143).

In this prose version of the story of the Pocahontas, she emphasizes the communal tragedy of the loss of the ship and the crew as well as her memory of witnessing the ship's destruction as a child. She depicts the process as a moment of personal growth, one that was forced upon her likely by her father. Even as she trembled in fear, her father compelled her to watch the hurricane destroy the ship. In the prose version of events, Thaxter offers little commentary on her childhood experience and scant other information

about the wreck or its impact upon her. After narrating the story of the Pocahontas in a matter-of-fact tone, Thaxter moves on to describe other shipwrecks. She does not suggest a deeper level of meaning or that readers should interpret the shipwreck as anything but a tragedy.

When Thaxter conveys the story of the Pocahontas in poetry, she complicates a straightforward story of personal loss and community tragedy with an intricate metaphor for power dynamics among men, women, and nature. As a regional poetess, Thaxter grants readers access to her private emotions and a narrative that holds communal significance for islanders. Much like Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of Pointed Firs* (1896), Thaxter's poem describes a defining experience that is unique to the local community on the Isles of Shoals. In addition to fulfilling the expectations of a regional poetess in "The Wreck of the Pocahontas," Thaxter also embeds in her poem a critique of men's violence against women and nature. Reminiscent of Jewett's character Sylvie in "A White Heron," Thaxter's poem unifies women with nature and presents them as victims of men. In doing so, Thaxter performs a critique of hierarchies rooted in gender inequalities, which Fetterley and Pryse identify as a key trait of regionalism (7). The long narrative poem, 112 lines in all, begins on the eve of the hurricane with the speaker's lighting the lighthouse lamp:

I lit the lamps in the light-house tower;  
For the sun dropped down and the day was dead;  
They shone like a glorious clustered flower,  
Ten golden and five red.

Looking across, where the line of coast  
Stretched darkly, shrinking away from the sea,



The lights sprang out at its edge,—almost  
They seemed to answer me! [...]

O warning lights, burn bright and clear,  
Hither the storm comes! Leagues away  
It moans and thunders low and drear,—  
Burn till the break of day! (1-12)

The speaker describes the task of lighting the lamps in past tense and, hence, narrates this story from a retrospective point of view, just as she did in the prose version of the tale.

Fetterley argues that for Thaxter the lighthouse represents “human efforts to intervene and control violence and exists in tension with a recognition of the futility of such effort” (49). I would qualify Fetterley’s assertion to say that it represents a *woman’s* attempt to intervene. As the speaker “lit the lamps,” she imagines the lights as a “glorious clustered flower” (1, 3), a natural feminine symbol for beauty, delicacy, and safety. The speaker does not just admire the lighthouse’s purpose but identifies with its lamps, interpreting the reflection of the lights on the dark horizon as “answer[ing]” her (8). She and the flower-like lights, unified together as potential protectors, become significant as the storm reaches the coastal waters that the lighthouse illuminates:

A mournful breeze began to blow,  
Weird music it drew through the iron bars,  
The sullen billow boiled below,  
And dimly peered the stars;

The sails that flecked the ocean floor  
From east to west leaned low and fled;  
They knew what came in the distant roar  
That filled the air with dread.

Flung by a fitful gust, there beat  
Against the window a dash of rain:  
Steady as tramp of marching feet

Strode on the hurricane (17-28)

As the storm approaches, the speaker describes the effect in romantic language with “the mournful breeze” and “weird music” (17, 18). Even as the speaker identifies as the protector of the ships in the beginning, when the storm arrives, she becomes a victim of the hurricane. The hurricane is first heard by a “distant roar” and it arrives like a soldier who “strode” onto the scene with “marching feet,” conveying a sense of power and masculine bravado. Usurped from her identity as protector, the speaker and the lighthouse remain unified but become wounded as rain “flung by a fitful gust” of the hurricane “beat[s] / against the window” (25, 26). When the hurricane reaches its full intensity, Thaxter invokes the damage it inflicts through violent sexual imagery:

It smote the waves for a moment still,  
Level and deadly white for fear;  
The bare rock shuddered,—an awful thrill  
Shook even my tower of cheer.

Like all the demons loosed at last,  
Whistling and shrieking, wild and wide,  
The mad wind raged, and strong and fast  
Rolled in the rising tide.

And soon in ponderous showers the spray,  
Struck from the granite, reared and sprung,  
And clutched at tower and cottage gray,  
Where overwhelmed they clung

Half drowning, to the naked rock;  
But still burned on the faithful light,  
Nor faltered at the tempest’s shock,  
Through all the fearful night. (29-44)

The speaker moves from uniting herself with the lighthouse early in the poem, to also identifying with the sea and land. The hurricane “smote the waves” that were “level and

deadly white for fear” (29), and the “bare rock shuddered” under the force of the storm (31). The “spray” of the storm “sprung and clutched” the tower (lighthouse) and cottage, which “clung / Half drowning, to the naked rock” throughout the night (37-41). While it seems logical for the sea to be inflicting some of the damage upon the lighthouse, Thaxter is careful to present the sea as another victim of the storm, unable to control its own actions. By uniting her speaker, which readers would likely have interpreted as Thaxter herself, with the lighthouse and the land and sea, Thaxter effectively personifies the lighthouse and nature collectively as a female victim of “an awful thrill” by a man (31). Vallier interprets the destruction of the ship, “itself a feminine and life-sustaining” entity, as a “symbolic rape” (65). Ironically, though, in a poem titled “The Wreck of the Pocahontas,” Thaxter spends almost the entire poem depicting not the shipwreck but rather the violence inflicted upon the woman, nature and the lighthouse. The speaker and the lighthouse “shuddered” as the hurricane attacked “like all demons loosed at last” (33). Although the lighthouse illuminated the ship’s destruction in perfect light, the climax of poem comes as the hurricane attacks the lighthouse, the rocks, and the waves. Only after the height of the hurricane passes does Thaxter depict the shipwreck of the Pocahontas. When she shifts to the morning after the hurricane, she also switches to a first-person plural narrator, at which point the poem becomes the community’s story:

Into each other’s eyes with fear  
We looked, through helpless tears, as still,  
One after one, near and more near,  
The signals pealed, until

The thick storm seemed to break apart,  
To show us, staggering to her grave,

The fated brig. We had no heart  
To look, for naught could save. [...]

And when at last from the distant shore  
A little boat stole out, to reach  
Our loneliness, and bring once more  
Fresh human thought and speech,  
We told our tale, and the boatman cried:  
“ ’T was the Pocahontas,—all were lost!  
For miles along the coast the tide  
Her shattered timbers tost.” (57-64, 73-80)

The use of “we” provides readers the emotive laments about the destruction of the “fated brig” (63). Thaxter grants readers the opportunity to identify with the isolation of life on the Isles of Shoals, since we learn that it is “weeks after” (69) that a boat can even make it to shore, at which time the locals have the opportunity to tell their tale to a larger audience. Through Thaxter’s poem, readers gain access to a community’s private grief, effectively lifting the veil on a remote locale. In the final stanzas of the poem, Thaxter’s speaker attempts to rationalize the loss of life but cannot. Speaking to God, she asks, “Are we naught to Thee? / Like senseless weeds that rise and fall / Upon thine awful sea, are we / No more then, after all?” (89-92). By imagining God’s response, Thaxter attempts to leave her readers with a moral:

And like a voice eternal spake,  
That wondrous rhythm, and “Peace be still!”  
It murmured; “bow thy head, and take  
Life’s rapture and life’s ill,

“And wait. At last all shall be clear.”  
The long, low, mellow music rose  
And fell, and soothed my dreaming ear  
With infinite repose.

Sighing, I climbed the light-house stair,

Half forgetting my grief and pain;  
And while the day died, sweet and fair,  
I lit the lamps again. (101-112).

Although God articulates a moral for the speaker, she does not appear entirely satisfied with it. She goes to light the lamps again but must “sigh[ ]” before she climbs the stairs and has only “half-for[got her] grief and pain” (109-110). The reader seems to get “half” a resolution as well. The hurricane has passed, the community has grieved for the loss crew, but the speaker, our central figure in this narrative, seems plagued by philosophical questions of the futility and violence in life and death. We could interpret the speaker lighting the lamps again as an act of pious perseverance in the face of tragedy. Yet, from the beginning of the poem, in which the speaker identifies with passive and stationary objects, she has displayed little ability to control her own actions. Instead, she, the lighthouse, and the natural world were forced into submission by the violent hurricane. When we get to the conclusion of the poem, the speaker’s actions appear to be motivated by compulsion instead of free will. She is incapable of separating herself from the lighthouse despite the horrors she experiences. In the end, she remains committed, despite her personal safety and the futility of her efforts, to protecting innocent victims illuminated by the lighthouse. Ultimately, Thaxter’s poem conveys her rage and helplessness against the god-like power of men. After all, when the speaker appeals to God for a way to interpret the tragedy, the speaker is told to be quiet and patient—she finds this soothing in the moment, but ultimately it is an inadequate resolution. Ironically, then, as a poetess, Thaxter grants her readers access to private fears and emotions, but her private emotions are inappropriate for a poetess. By exposing her fear

for innocent victims of men's wrath, Thaxter exaggerates the notion that the poem is a "guide to her character" (Wendorff 111). The strong emotions Thaxter expresses in "The Wreck of the Pocahontas" appear in her letters, as she passionately defends innocent victims of nature. In 1863, Thaxter describes the pain she experiences when her husband and sons go hunting, describing it as "murdering" and contrasting it with her "woman's way," a view that privileges protecting nature rather than destroying it (24 Apr. 1863). Thaxter regularly understood her husband's actions as cruel, from murdering birds for sport to hindering her literary career by refusing to allow her to hire a maid to care for their home (Vallier 40). Thaxter's personal statements speak to "The Wreck of the Pocahontas" in that they demonstrate how Thaxter identified with nature as victims of cruelty in the "howling wilderness of men."

Thaxter's belief that women and nature were kindred spirits led Marcia Littenberg to label her an early eco-feminist. To counteract the "howling wilderness of men," Thaxter not only identified with nature and its creatures, she also cultivated relationships with women, particularly her long-term friends Annie Fields and Sarah Orne Jewett. As a founding member of the Audubon Society, Thaxter held a dear place in her heart for birds. Her identity was so linked to them that Jewett and Fields called Thaxter "sandpiper." In Thaxter's poem, "The Sandpiper," first published in the children's magazine *Our Young Folks*, she joyously describes the innocence of "one little sandpiper" who "flits" along with her (Feb. 1865). The tone of the children's poem is light, as Thaxter describes how solitude on the beach with the sandpiper produces feeling of safety and serenity:

I watch him as he skims along,  
Uttering his sweet and mournful cry.  
He starts not at my fitful song,  
Or flash of fluttering drapery.  
He has no thought of any wrong;  
He scans me with a fearless eye,  
Staunch friends are we, well tried and strong,  
The little sandpiper and I. (17-24)

The speaker adopts the sandpiper's carefree nature. In the final stanza, the speaker momentarily worries about what will happen to the sandpiper when the storms come but these are distant fears and Thaxter's poem exudes a sense of pure innocence for the sandpiper and speaker, as well as a complete understanding between the two. Hence, "The Sandpiper" offers a kind of joyful poem of a regional poetess, since it is a natural lyric about the sea islands, but it also expresses Thaxter's personal feelings of identification with nature, and specifically, in this poem, the sandpiper. In contrast, "Imprisoned," written for the *Atlantic*, addresses the potential of women's unique ability to identify and understand nature (Jul. 1873). Specifically, the poem suggests that women can comprehend and translate the language of the sea. The poem narrates the story of two women standing on the shore, one of whom asks the other to hold a "luminous shell" to her ear because the shell "has a tale to tell, / Spoken in a language [she] may understand" (3-4). When the woman listens, she hears "another speech!" of "melancholy whispers low and sweet" (9, 16). Thaxter indicates that it is the uniqueness of women's lived-experience that allows them to identify with and thus comprehend the tale of the "prisoned wave" (17). In the final stanzas, the woman holding the shell to her ear speaks directly to the waves with empathy:

O prisoned wave that may not see the sun!  
O voice that never may be comforted!  
You cannot break the web that Fate has spun;  
Out of your world are light and gladness fled. [...]

Inexorably woven is the weft  
That shrouds from you all joy but memory;  
Only this tender, low lament is left  
Of all the sumptuous splendor of the sea. (17-20, 25-28)

In translating the language of the sea, the woman identifies with the futility and sadness of the imprisoned waves. Speaking with confidence, the woman tells the sea that although “light and gladness” flee from it, it cannot escape its fate (20). She suggests that its essence has fated it to an existence that is defined by a “low lament” (27). Most of all, the speaker conveys empathy and complete understanding. Both the sea and the woman express a sense of relief and comfort in their shared, if undesirable, fates. By interpreting “Imprisoned,” a poem expressly about language, as a meta-poem, we can see how Thaxter’s artistry is intricately tied to her ability to “hear” nature in ways that men cannot. Her poetics becomes a union of nature’s language with what Thaxter called “a woman’s way.” As an artist, Thaxter herself seems comforted by the communion she experiences with women and nature. Although both are “imprisoned,” they possess the ability to carve out moments of joy and a shared language. Through her public image as a regional poetess, Thaxter was regularly directed to conform to the gendered standards of artistry. Yet, because she recognizes the power of her identity as a regional poetess, she manages to fulfill the strictures of it as well as communicate vital truths that lie just beneath the surface; these truths are, like the speaker in “Imprisoned” realizes, “spoken in a language” that kindred souls “may understand” (4).



By rooting her poetics in what we might term—to borrow from her letter—Thaxter’s “woman’s way,” she redefines her title of regional poetess. For Thaxter, “a woman’s way” does not imply the simple and pleasing verse and a conventional understanding of the poetess, but a poetics that is entirely grounded in both the relationship between place and human consciousness *and* the critique of hierarchies rooted in gender inequalities (Fetterley and Pryse 7-8). Hence, we can observe how Thaxter’s poetry—not her prose—embodies one of the most important traits that Fetterley and Pryse use to characterize women’s regionalism, indicating the relevance of Thaxter’s verse, and potentially poetry in general, to the study of regionalism. By crafting her identity as a regional poetess on her own terms, Thaxter’s artistry is best described as a sophisticated manipulation of the artist models available to women poets in the nineteenth century, balancing gendered hierarchies and market demands of the *Atlantic* with her own principles as an artist. Cultivating this balance ultimately gave Thaxter the space and confidence to continue to explore and reinvent her artistry and extend her artistic agenda to subjects that existed beyond the confines of her island life and the sphere of the poetess.

### III

Depicting gender inequities, and their effects on women and nature, is the most pervasive theme throughout Thaxter’s oeuvre; however, in the 1880s, her artistry extended, surprisingly for a New England poetess who had never written explicitly about race, to the issue of slavery. In the final section of this chapter, I want to address an

important moment in the evolution of Thaxter's artistic identity in which her artistic agenda becomes explicit rather than implicit. In "The Cruise of the Mystery," Thaxter addresses slavery, a subject that was on the national stage throughout the postbellum era but was not a common subject in local color literature of New England. On a political level, Thaxter's poem demands that New England acknowledge and remember its role in the Atlantic slave trade. On an artistic level, Thaxter uses this poem to revise her public identity as a regional poetess in order to correct what she finds as a limitation of this identity: namely, that it dislocates her from national issues. In doing so, Thaxter's artistry fruitfully merges the national and the local, suggesting that she does not see them as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, she openly defines her artistry beyond the "narrow range" of the poetess to a subject that does not personally impact her. While scholars have emphasized the political significance of women's poetry, in the case of Thaxter, I contend that foregrounding Thaxter's artistic agenda is fundamental to fully understanding her politics. For Thaxter, manipulating and redefining her dual identities as "regionalist" and "poetess" allowed her to develop her redefinition process further so that she transitioned from writing poems implicitly about personal and local gender politics to writing poems explicitly about national political issues. In essence, her artistry and politics extend beyond the "narrow range" that periodicals delineate for a "regional poetess" like Thaxter.

Even though "The Cruise of the Mystery" is her only poem that addresses slavery in any form, it was such a significant poem for her that it became the title for her 1886 poetry collection. The *Atlantic* review of *The Cruise of the Mystery and Other Poems*

locates the title poem within the genre of regionalism and provincial ghost tales: “The title-poem of the collection, which she has just made, ‘The Cruise of the Mystery,’ is the story of a spectral slave-ship; composed in the vein common to all the legends of the New England coast which make so large a proportion of our provincial poetry” (Mar. 1887). Despite the *Atlantic*’s characterization of Thaxter’s poem as “common to all the legends of the New England coast,” the poem extends beyond the conventions of “provincial” New England legends. In fact, Thaxter uses this collection to critique both the region that she has represented and the literary genre within which she has written for over thirty years.

When the *Atlantic* reviewer identifies “The Cruise of the Mystery” “in the vein common to all the legends of the New England coast” (Mar. 1887), he connects it with the genre of local color and numerous sea tales published in the *Atlantic*. The majority of the *Atlantic*’s poems about sea-life depict the sea as a site for adventure, pleasure, and relaxation. For instance, Longfellow’s “Daybreak” describes the sea as a pleasant presence in the poem: “A wind came out of the sea / And said, ‘O mists, make room for me!’” (1-2). John Trowbridge’s “At Sea” depicts a sailor at peace on his ship and his calmness is mirrored by the sea. In “Tacking Ship off Shore,” Walter Mitchell describes how life on the stormy sea invigorates a sailor. Finally, the *Atlantic* published Whittier’s “The Dead Ship of Harpswell,” a gothic—but not terrifying—poem about a ghost ship that haunts the coastal town of Harpswell.<sup>14</sup> The tone of Whittier’s poem corresponds to other sea-themed poetry in the *Atlantic* in that they all offer adventure ballads, variously expressing harmless fear, pleasurable descriptions of life at sea, and moral tales that

model lessons learned on a sea voyage.<sup>15</sup> Just as Thaxter revised and critiqued the subgenre of “tryst” poems in “A Tryst,” she performs a similar revision and critique of regionalist legends from the *Atlantic* in “The Cruise of the Mystery.”

Unlike the artistic subtlety of the “A Tryst,” Thaxter makes her artistic revision explicit in “The Cruise of the Mystery,” namely, because it showcases the issue of slavery. The political nature of slavery precludes it from being an appropriate subject for Thaxter; it is both beyond her regional concerns and beyond the acceptable scope of the poetess. Thaxter’s decision to compose a poem overtly about slavery indicates a conscious choice to display her artistic methods for the public. While a poem like “The Wreck of the Pocahontas” can outwardly fit the conventions of a regional poetess by being read as simple shipwreck ballad, “The Cruise of the Mystery” resists such a simple interpretation by focusing on a slave-ship. In “The Cruise of the Mystery,” Thaxter revises the conventions of regionalism and, particularly, pleasurable sea tales of the *Atlantic* in order to connect New England with the legacy of slavery.

Thaxter’s ballad, then, literally locates slavery in the cultural and physical landscape of New England and integrates it into her identity as a regional poetess. The occasion for the necessity of this act comes at the beginning of the poem where the grandchildren know nothing of the tale of The Mystery. In the poem, as the grandchildren gather drift wood on the shore, a boy points to a “yonder ship / That sails so fast and looms so tall!” (5-6), to which the grandmother responds with fear and woe that this ship “was no mortal sail” (11). Readers cannot but help to adopt the position of the expectant children, waiting anxiously for an ominous gothic story of a ghost ship.

Because the grandmother identifies the ship as a slave-ship early in the poem, Thaxter integrates the legend with New England's historical connection to America's "trade of human woe" (27). The grandmother then relates the story of *The Mystery*, a slave-ship "from the tropic coast," and its villainous captain. By placing readers in the position of the listening children, Thaxter's poem shows her intention to haunt her readers. The poem allows Thaxter to remind her readers that the New England region has many dark stories to tell, many of which are significant politically rather than simply entertaining.

Thaxter's poem implicates New England in the legacy of slavery as much as the ship's captain, who was directly involved, and the crew, who merely followed the captain's orders. In the middle of one of many voyages, the ship becomes trapped in a hurricane, at which time the captain locks the slaves below deck:

Sprang, like a wild beast from its lair,  
The fury of the hurricane,  
And sent the great ship reeling bare  
Across the roaring ocean plain.

Then terror seized the piteous crowd:  
With many an oath and cruel blow  
The captain drove them, shrieking loud,  
Into the pitch-black hold below. (33-40)

We learn that by trapping the slaves in the "pitch-black hold below" (40), the captain has condemned them to death. The next morning when the crew opens the hatchways, they find the slaves dead, at which time the captain instructs the crew to "pitch the dead into the sea!" (54). The gothic climax of the poem arrives when the ghostly figures of the slaves return for revenge upon the captain, while they let the crew escape in the lifeboats. Notably, although the slaves seem to direct their rage only towards the captain, in the

remainder of the poem, Thaxter extends responsibility to the region. Once we learn the crew is saved by another ship, the poem ends with a commentary about the fate of the ship and how its presence off the coast of New England continues to impact those on shore:

And they were rescued, but the ship,  
The awful ship, the Mystery,  
Her captain in the dead men's grip,—  
Never to any port came she;

But up and down the roaring seas  
For ever and for aye she sails,  
In calm or storm, against the breeze,  
Unshaken by the wildest gales.

And weresoe'er her form appears  
Come trouble and disaster sore,  
And she has sailed a hundred years,  
And she will sail for evermore. (129-140)

Even though the slaves enacted their revenge against the captain, it does not resolve their anger; they continue to sail the coastal waters. Significantly, Thaxter does not end by returning to the frame story, but rather, ends the poem with the image of the slave ship haunting the New England coast for “evermore” (140).

When *The Cruise of the Mystery and Other Poems* was reviewed, reviewers repeatedly noted how the title poem differed from the rest of Thaxter's oeuvre. For example, *The Literary World* encapsulated their commentary on the poem by calling it “a weird ballad” (Dec. 1886). Indeed, the political subject matter must have puzzled reviewers and readers since Thaxter had, for so long, written poetry that outwardly adhered to her public identity as a regional poetess. *The Literary World* reviewer must

have wondered where Thaxter's poems about coastal wildlife and musings on lost loved ones had gone. In the conclusion, the reviewer focused on the other poems in the collection that conformed to proper subjects for a poetess: "music, love delights of field and flower, and the mysteries of death and immortality" (Dec. 1886). Similarly, the *Atlantic Monthly* review emphasized Thaxter's poems that reinforced her identity as a poetess and regionalist: "The remainder of the volume is filled with verses various in motive. [sic] and ranging through many moods of friendship, lovers' vows, and reminiscent grief, and often bright with the local color and the familiar loveliness of the sea-coast to which she is attached" (Mar. 1887). The desire to downplay the title poem because it deviates from Thaxter's established public identity and emphasize poems that reinforce the poetess persona is evidence of the supremacy of the categories of "regionalism" and "the poetess" for periodical culture. Thaxter's successful literary career indicates that she understood the value of her public identity, even though, as her poetry demonstrates, she was not confined by it.

As my discussion of "The Cruise of the Mystery" indicates, Thaxter's artistry was intricately connected to her politics. Yet, by foregrounding Thaxter's artistry, rather than her politics, I contend that we can observe how her political commentary on New England's role in slavery emerged out of years of exaggerating, challenging, and reimagining the categories of "regionalist" and "poetess." Thaxter adopted the models available to her as an *Atlantic Monthly* poetess and redefined them to craft an artistic identity that included revising literary genres and political critiques. In connection to the other women poets of this dissertation, because Thaxter's artistry is intricately tied to her

identity as a poetess, we should understand her poetics as not contradictory to the poetess persona but fundamental to it. As I will discuss in the conclusion, just as Thaxter redefined her identity as a poetess—one that balanced artistic and market concerns—scholarly understandings of the poetess need to adapt to account for the complex and critical ways that Thaxter and other nineteenth-century women poets interacted with the poetess persona.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These conclusions are based on my research of all poetry reviews and essays about poetry in the *Atlantic* from its inception in 1857 to 1890, which roughly corresponds to Thaxter's periodical career.

<sup>2</sup> In important studies of the *Atlantic Monthly* that preceded Glazener, scholars Anne Boyd and Susan Coultrap-McQuin focus exclusively on fiction. Significantly, though, they provide well-researched counter arguments to Ellery Sedgwick's *The Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1909: Yankee Humanism at the High Tide and Ebb* (1994) and Josephine Donovan's *New England Local Color Literature* (1983); both Sedgwick and Donovan claims that the *Atlantic* was friendly towards women writers. Boyd "'What! Has she got into the *Atlantic*': Women Writers, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the Formation of the American Canon" (1998) and Coultrap-McQuin's *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (1990) each explore the complicated and trying relationships women held with the *Atlantic* and its editors. Perhaps most importantly, Boyd argued that the *Atlantic* limited what women could achieve in the magazine because editors thought of women's writing as "filler or leavening" that was "meant to bolster the *Atlantic Monthly*'s revenues not its reputation" (10). Thus, Boyd explains precisely how *Atlantic* women writers were excluded from the high culture status that male *Atlantic* writers possessed. In all these studies of the *Atlantic Monthly*, poetry is almost entirely absent even though it was an essential part to each issue of the magazine. For additional scholarship on the *Atlantic Monthly*, see: Nina Baym's "Early Histories of American Literature: A Chapter in the Institution of New England" (1995); Richard Brodhead's *The School of Hawthorne* (1986); William Charvat's *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (1959); Helen McMahon's *Criticism of Fiction: A Study of Trends in the Atlantic Monthly, 1857-1898* (1952).

<sup>3</sup> For critical biographies of Thaxter, see: Norma Mandel's *Beyond the Garden Gate: The Life of Celia Loughton Thaxter* (2004); Jane Vallier's *Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Work of Celia Thaxter* (1982); Rosamond Thaxter's *Sandpiper: The Life and Letters of Celia Thaxter* (1969). Also, refer to the following article-length studies of Thaxter: Marcia Littenberg's "From Transcendentalism to Ecofeminism: Celia Thaxter and Sarah Orne Jewett's Island Views Revisited" (1999); Judith Fetterley's "Theorizing Realism: Celia Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals*" (1997); Perry Westbrook's "Celia Thaxter: Seeking the Unattainable" (1964); Richard Cary's "The Multicolored Spirit of Celia Thaxter" (1964). Thaxter appears briefly in other literary studies, such as Richard Brodhead's *Culture's of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993, 151-2) and Lawrence Buell's *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (1986, 193-5).

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<sup>4</sup> In writing what can be considered an autoerotic love poem, Thaxter joins other women poets of the second half of the nineteenth-century. See Paula Bennett's "'Pomegranate Flowers': The Phantasmic Productions of Late-Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Women Poets" (1995) for a discussion of prevalence of autoerotic poetry by women poets.

<sup>5</sup> I identified this subgenre by searching the American Periodicals Series Database and the Making of America Online Database. In my search, I located over 60 poems that possessed "tryst" in the title. Nineteenth-century poets who composed "tryst" poems did not, of course, invent a new genre, but capitalized on a long poetic tradition of love poetry. For a study of British love poetry of the nineteenth-century, see: Kerry McSweeney's *Supreme Attachments: Studies in Victorian Love Poetry* (1998); Antony H. Harrison's *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry* (1988). For scholarship on love poetry from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, see: Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth's edited collection, *Renaissance Discourses of Desire* (1993); Albert James Smith's *The Metaphysics of Love: Studies in Renaissance Love Poetry from Dante to Milton* (1985); Lu Emily Hess Pearson's *Elizabethan Love Conventions* (1933).

<sup>6</sup> Occasionally, poets besides Thaxter played with the form and content of tryst poems. For example, *The Saturday Evening Post* printed "The Tryst," in which the headline read "A Pleasant Ending" (25 Aug. 1860). At the end of the poem, we learn that the tryst is between a dog and a wolf, thus offering a humorous version of the tryst poems. Other notable examples of "tryst" poems: Elizabeth Stoddard, "The Tryst" (*Scribner's Monthly*, Dec. 1879); Harriet Prescott Spofford, "The Tryst" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1890); and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "The Tryst" (*Current Literature*, Feb. 1901).

<sup>7</sup> In 1874, Thaxter composed a letter to John Weiss in 1874, asking, "Tell me, is your sermon in answer to Tyndall's address (which, by the way, I have just got hold of in the *Popular Science Monthly* and haven't read yet) to be published anywhere? And if so, won't you send it to me, please?" (26 Sep. 1874). Weiss was a well-known clergyman and abolitionist who preached in Watertown, Massachusetts during the years Thaxter resided there.

<sup>8</sup> Thaxter's poem is reminiscent in subject and theme as Herman Melville's own poem about an iceberg, entitled "The Berg (a dream)." Much like Thaxter, Melville wrote about the indifference of nature, the working of fate, and trapped humans in events they cannot control. We can see further similarities between the two poets if we compare Thaxter's "Leviathan" to Melville's "The Maldive Shark." While we cannot know if Thaxter read any of Melville's poetry, particularly because he published his poetry in small individual printings and circulated them among friends, she was aware of his writing. Her awareness of Melville's writings led Thaxter to begin *Among the Isles of*

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*Shoals* with Melville's "The Encantadas" (1854); Fetterley argues that Thaxter contrasts local regional descriptions with Melville's tourism (42-3). Also, Howells reviewed Melville's *Battle Pieces and the Aspects of War in the Atlantic* in February 1867. These initial connections between Thaxter and Melville point to a potential new direction for both Melville and Thaxter scholarship.

<sup>9</sup> For additional scholarship on regionalism see: Jane Gebhart Auten's "Parental Guidance: Disciplinary Intimacy and the Rise of Women's Regionalism" (2001); Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer's edited collection *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regionalism* (1997); Diane Dufva Quantic's *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (1995); David Jordan's edited collection *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field* (1994) and Jordan's *New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas* (1994); Norman Page and Peter Preston's edited collection *The Literature of Place* (1993); Elizabeth Ammons' edited collection *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (1992); Lawrence Buell's chapter "The Cultural Landscape of Regional Poetry and Prose" in *New England Literary Culture* (1986); Emily Toth's edited collection *Regionalism and the Female Imagination: a Collection of Essays* (1985).

<sup>10</sup> For scholars who use the term "local color" see: Donovan's *New England Local Color: A Woman's Tradition* (1983); Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy's anthology *American Local Color Writing, 1880-1920* (1998).

<sup>11</sup> Regionalism is traditionally considered to occur in the 1880s and 1890s, but Marjorie Pryse's "Origins of Literary Regionalism: Gender in Irving, Stowe, and Longstreet" (1997) argues that this time frame does not capture the long and varied literary movement. In the poetic culture of the *Atlantic Monthly*, we can see how editors and reviewers emphasized regionalism since the periodical's inception.

<sup>12</sup> In *Reading for Realism*, Glazener explicitly wants to distance scholars' tendency to associate realism with Howells. Yet, in surveying the poetry reviews, in which it is possible to identify most of the reviews Howells authored while he was assistant editor and editor (1866-1881), he appears to be the major advocate for realism and local color in poetry. Furthermore, Howells seemed to have been particularly influential when it came to Thaxter's poetry. Under Fields' editorship, the *Atlantic* published 18 of Thaxter's poems (12 after Howells became assistant editor). From 1871 to 1881, when Howells was editor, the *Atlantic* published 31 of Thaxter's poems. Finally, during Aldrich's editorship, 1881-1891, the magazine published only two of Thaxter's poems.

<sup>13</sup> The full title of this work is: *Awful Calamities: Or, The Shipwrecks of December, 1839, being a full account of the dreadful hurricanes of Dec. 15, 21 & 27, on the coast of Massachusetts: comprising also a particular relation of the shipwreck of the following vessels: Barque Lloyd, brigs Pocahontas, Rideout and J. Palmer, and schs. Deposite,*

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*Catharine Nichols and Miller : and also of the dreadful disasters at Gloucester* (Boston: Press of J Howe, 1840).

<sup>14</sup>Whittier's poem, first published in the *Atlantic* in June 1866, was based on a local legend; interestingly, it is a legend that has survived into the twenty-first century. The Harpswell Historical Society recounts the legend at <http://community.curtislibrary.com/hhs/students/book/deadship.htm>.

<sup>15</sup>Thaxter's sea poems have much more in common with Helen Hunt Jackson's "Tidal Waves" (*Atlantic Monthly*, Aug. 1881). Jackson's poem offers a dark portrait of the sea and seems to mirror the gender politics that Thaxter uses in her own poetry. For instance, Jackson describes "women's souls" as "ghastly stranded wrecks" (11, 14).

## CONCLUSION

### A NEW AFTERLIFE FOR THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY POETESS

“Had American women written no original poetry, or had they said nothing important, or had they followed no special course, a book such as this would be unnecessary.”

Thus opens Emily Watts’s foundational study, *The Poetry of American Women: From 1632-1945* (1977). Over thirty years later, I conclude my study of American women poets by returning to the first comprehensive and sustained study of American women’s poetry. Watts’s statement describes the occasion and purpose of her book with such clarity that I wish to adapt it for my own project: Had women poets not written their artistic agendas into their poetry, a project such as this would have been unnecessary. Like Watts’s monograph, the primary motivating force of my project has always been a desire to understand the artistry of nineteenth-century women’s poetry on its own terms.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that nineteenth-century American women poets were deeply and self-consciously invested in the artistry of their verse. In examining the periodical culture that they wrote for, about, and within, I have contended that women poets’ sense of artistry emerged from a periodical culture that was bound by gendered conceptions of artistry, conceptions that paradoxically helped advance female artistry. Women poets were forced to contend with the most popular model, and often the only viable one, for a female poet: the poetess. Although the poetess persona

appeared to confine women to their proper poetic sphere, I have argued throughout this project, that the poetess persona actually contributed to the artistry of women poets. The women poets of this dissertation demonstrate how the poetess tradition actually provided women with the space and motivation to craft their identities as self-conscious literary artists. When read carefully and within the context of periodical discourses of the time period, a woman poet becomes more than an amateur verse-maker producing “graceful and pleasing verse” that articulates emotion within the accepted “narrow range” for women writers. Instead, she becomes a skilled artist experimenting with generic categories and crafting meta-critical poems that both encourage and resist simple interpretations. Most importantly, periodical culture facilitated the nineteenth-century woman poet’s interrogation and reinvention of the poetess persona.

It would be logical, then, for this project to conclude that these women were not “poetesses” and to further argue that the term “poetess” no longer accurately represents the sophisticated artists that I have studied. Initially my dissertation developed from the idea that scholars must discover new terms to articulate the artfulness that was present in women’s poetry. My original goal was to “recover” or “rescue” these women from the poetess persona that had usurped their artistry. As I studied these women poets and their relationship to periodical culture, I learned that we should not separate these poets from a persona that was such an integral part of their artistry. As I read their poetry in the context of periodical culture that championed the concept of the poetess, I have discovered that the poetess persona was not merely something for these women to rebel against or reject. Thus, my project engages in an important scholarly debate about the

terminology used to describe American women poets and how these women imagined themselves within this terminology.

As a point of entry into scholarly discussions of the “poetess,” I want to address a little known essay on Emily Dickinson and a response to it as a way to illustrate the continued importance, power, and relevance of “poetess” for the study of women’s poetry. In 1972, Elsa Greene wrote an essay titled “Emily Dickinson Was a Poetess” for *College English*’s special issue, “Women, Writing and Teaching.” Greene’s essay begins with a statement: “Most people who appreciate Emily Dickinson’s poetry are offended by the reminder that she was a ‘poetess’” (63). Greene argues that critics prefer to separate Dickinson from her female peers and from her identity as a woman. Greene remarks that in the nineteenth century and in scholarship, the term “poetess” “expressed the general feeling that female nature lacked qualities essential to the creation of great poetry” (63). Furthermore, Greene is critical of scholars who promote “exceptional women poets, such as Emily Dickinson to the rank of ‘poet’” because this “terminology still implies the nineteenth-century ideal that femaleness limits poetic capacity” (63). Most scholars today would likely agree with Greene’s statement. In 1972, however, Dickinson was, as Greene contends, completely “de-sexed” (70) in scholarship.<sup>1</sup> According to Greene, scholars divided the study of Dickinson between biography and poetics, so that “Emily Dickinson the poetess becomes part Emily, the Woman, and part Dickinson, the poet” (65). Employing the term “poetess” became a way for Greene to argue that Dickinson’s experience as a woman in the nineteenth century impacted her poetry, and, furthermore, that scholars could no longer extract her from this identity.

While Greene's essay, and particularly her use of the "poetess," is fascinating on its own, it becomes more so when we read the passionate response it evoked from another scholar. Don K. Pierstorff was so enraged by Greene's assertion that "Dickinson was a Poetess," that he sent the following response to *College English*, which the journal printed in its following issue:<sup>2</sup>

I have always liked the fact that the editors of *CE* include humor in the journal occasionally—it breaks up scholarly tone sometimes—and I especially applaud the October 1972 laugh, Elsa Greene's "Emily Dickinson Was a Poetess." Well, yes, it's true that Professor Greene doesn't drop her mask as well as some other satirists, but we no longer pillory people for that. She did pull off the fun, and after all, that was the purpose of the article, wasn't it? (217)

Incidentally, it was not intended for "fun" and Pierstorff woefully misreads Greene's essay. His two-page response continues in the spirit of this quote: hostile and condescending towards Greene's thesis. Pierstorff's main complaint is that he found Greene's focus on Dickinson's status as a woman not only obvious but also insignificant to the study of Dickinson's poetry. So outraged by the potential implications of referring to Dickinson as a "poetess," Pierstorff mocks Greene in a most unprofessional way—quoting her out of context and misrepresenting her argument. What he seemed incapable of addressing in his response was the most important idea from Greene's essay: Dickinson was a poetess and scholars should acknowledge this aspect of her identity when they discuss her artistry.

"Poetess" struck a chord for both Greene and Pierstorff. Pierstorff understood "poetess" as a kind of gateway that would lead into future unnecessary studies of authors' subject positions. Clearly grounded in the tradition of New Criticism, Pierstorff argued



that the author's identity was immaterial to studying the work itself. Underlying Pierstorff's sarcasm is the assumption that Dickinson's status as a "poetess," including her identity as a woman and her implicit femininity, could never be important to understanding Dickinson's genius. Although Pierstorff's response is extreme, his essay articulates the majority of criticism on Dickinson's poetry prior to the 1970s—scholarship addressed Dickinson's poetry without focusing on her identity as a woman. Greene's essay indicates that she knew that using "poetess" to describe Dickinson would evoke a potentially unwelcome response. Yet, for Greene, "poetess" was an avenue to connect Dickinson with her subject-position as a nineteenth-century woman who was heavily influenced by the gendered culture of her New England genteel existence. Whether scholars were influenced by Greene's essay or the more general recovery work of feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, scholarship began to address Dickinson's identity as a woman in relationship to her poetics.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Dickinson scholars, who likely desired to avoid the negative connotations of the term, continued to distance themselves, and Dickinson, from "poetess." Scholars might emphasize her connections to her female peers but also qualified this connection, noting Dickinson's exceptionality.<sup>4</sup> In short, criticism suggests, Dickinson was a woman poet, but she was not a poetess.

The stakes of the critical history of the term "poetess," represented by the Greene and Pierstorff essays, became particularly clear to me at the 2009 Society for the Study of American Women Writers Conference in Philadelphia. I participated in a panel entitled, "19<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry vs. the Poetess," which the Call for Papers advertised as addressing "female poets writing from the center of the nineteenth-century American tradition of

poetics [who had] a vexed relationship with the poetess tradition—either because they [were] defined as poetesses, or because they [were] not.”<sup>5</sup> Many scholars of American women’s poetry who have figured prominently in my project attended the panel.

Although each paper offered a reading of a particular poetess, including Maria Gowen, Frances Osgood, and Celia Thaxter, the majority of responses during the question and answer period centered on questions about the panelists’ use of “poetess.” How does using the term “poetess” impact the recovery of women poets? Should “poetess” be claimed or rejected by feminist scholars? What were the stakes of using “poetess” versus “woman poet”? Responses to these questions elicited an unexpected level of discussion. Although tempered and more respectful than Pierstorff’s response to Greene’s essay in 1972, the panel discussion at the SSAWW conference suggested that the term continues to evoke a vigorous debate among scholars.

The responses to the questions raised at the panel mirror the two major trends in current scholarship on women’s poetry. The first camp of scholars, many of whom initiated the study of American women authors during the era of second wave feminism, expressed concerns about the negative connotations of “poetess.” For the first group of scholars, the poetess forever invokes the image of Mark Twain’s Emmeline Grangerford or the nineteenth-century domestic “angel of the house” who wrote pleasing verse that entertained and never offended her readers. Furthermore, these scholars assert that American women poets at the center of recovery projects were not Emmeline Grangerfords or simplistic domestic angels; they were politically and socially active writers of the nineteenth century. During a conversation with one scholar after the panel,

this scholar stated that she had spent her entire career trying to rid “poetess” from critical usage because of its overwhelmingly negative connotations. In response to this first wave of women’s poetry scholarship, the second camp of scholars insist that the term “poetess” is important precisely because it was used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, therefore, scholars need to study it within its specific cultural contexts. The first wave of scholarship was invaluable in helping me articulate my ideas about women poets and enabling me to come to my own position in the second camp.

I began this project by studying the ways in which the poetess image constrained women poets but then came to understand that it possessed an important historical significance. As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, periodicals provided one important context in which to trace the usage of the word. The term’s popularity in periodicals gave Dickinson, Forten, Piatt and Thaxter the motivation and space to develop their artistic identities. For Dickinson, the poetess was a character that she played for various acquaintances and audiences and it was something to discard in her poetry that critiqued the *Republican*’s unilateral celebration of mass communication. For Forten, the poetess persona was an integral part of her conflicted identity as a Black Victoria who desired to write political verse to aid the abolitionist movement but could not separate herself from the apolitical verse of the poetess tradition. For Piatt, the poetess represented an artist model at the other end of the spectrum from the male artistic genius. In negotiating these two models, Piatt was able to articulate a democratic, reader-centered artistic identity rooted in realism. And, for Thaxter, the poetess persona served as an entrance into high culture, gave her relative economic independence, and provided

her with an artist model that allowed her to communicate her love of nature and her critique of men that threatened it. As this project has demonstrated, these poets represent the wide spectrum of the poetess identity. Their poetry captures their active engagement with the poetess tradition and illustrates the necessity of their personas as poetesses to their artistic identities. Whether their artistry incorporated, mocked, interrogated, or ironized the poetess persona, it undeniably influenced them.

An example of the payoff to studying the usage of “poetess” in the nineteenth century, one that complements the work of my dissertation, is The Poetess Archive Database, an online archive of popular British and American poetry compiled and edited by poetry scholars.<sup>6</sup> The editors of the Poetess Archive acknowledge the problem that the term represents for the scholarly community. Laura Mandell, general editor for the Archive, writes:

The term “poetess” has been shunned by women writers and feminist literary critics for so long because the diminutive “ess” is grammatically unnecessary in English and thus is added to belittle the women poets it names. Moreover, the term uncritically embraces “the feminine,” an idea rightly interrogated by feminists.

By acknowledging the complex critical history of the term, the editors of the Poetess Archive have integrated debate and disagreement about the term into the collection. Mandell, in describing the wealth of material available to scholars, states, “The Poetess Archive Database now contains a bibliography of over 4,000 entries for works by and about writers working in and against the ‘poetess tradition,’ the extraordinarily popular, but much criticized, flowery poetry written in Britain and America between 1750 and 1900.” The material in The Poetess Archive has the potential to give scholars new

avenues to explore the expanses and limits of the poetess tradition, avenues that do not quell criticism of the term. However, I contend that we cannot use “poetess” only to define a type of *poetry* written during a period. Instead, my dissertation argues for the necessity of recognizing and investigating how the term was applied to and used by specific individual poets since “poetess” embodied a specific persona or character that women (and men) had to confront in order to negotiate their identities as poets. At a time when feminist scholarship is an established field and when print culture studies allows us to situate the term in the history of material texts, now is perhaps the moment when scholars can productively and critically engage the concept of the poetess.

As a contribution to this critical engagement, my project asks scholars to acknowledge the poetess persona as a significant aspect of women poets’ artistry, not only in terms of how it restricted them but also how it became the origin of their poetics. In addition, there is much work left to be done in the area of men’s relationship to the poetess tradition. Similar to their female peers’ negotiations with the poetess persona, male poets were defining their work potentially within and against the poetess tradition. For this unexamined avenue and others yet to be articulated, I contend that “poetess” is (and will continue to be) a productive term for scholars. Instead of relying on a definition that scholars dislike and that, significantly, does not reflect the actual practices and identities of women poets, I argue for redefining the “poetess” just as women poets did in the nineteenth century. One part of this process is to study and understand the historical definitions and uses of the term in nineteenth century literary culture. Moreover, scholars must understand how nineteenth-century women poets related to it, worked within it, and

defined it so that it articulated their artistic visions. Redefining the poetess to reflect the artistic intensity of women poets gives scholars the space to revisit women poets who have been valued only for their political or social value as well as poets whose identity as fiction writers overwhelms their poetry. Poets such as Emma Lazarus, Maria Lowell, and Harriet Prescott Spofford, for instance, all wrote poetry that contradicted the traits of the poetess—yet, at various moments all were identified as model poetesses. When we redefine “poetess” to incorporate the diverse artistic, political, and social range of women’s poetry, we see how these traits are intricately tied to the term. As more women poets are recovered, the characterization of the poetess as a “simple amateur verse-maker” will hopefully dissipate to a point where we can readily acknowledge and explore the artistry of the poetess.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Richard Chase's *Emily Dickinson* (1951). Also, see chapter 1, note 2, for references scholarship that avoid Dickinson's identity as a woman in their studies of her poetry.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that *College English* printed his response, since it does not represent the scholarly tone consistent with the rest of the journal.

<sup>3</sup> For scholarship that address Dickinson's identity as a middle class nineteenth-century woman see: Barbara Antonia Clarke Mossberg's *Emily Dickinson: When a Writer is a Daughter* (1982); Wendy Martin's *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich* (1984); and Elizabeth Phillip's *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance* (1988).

<sup>4</sup> See Paula Bennett's excellent study *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (1990), in which she addresses how Dickinson's "public personal embodied the poetess" (9), but her poetry did not (9-10). Bennett argues that Dickinson "saw herself as a woman poet but a woman poet of a different kind" (18). See also Elizabeth Petrino's *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885* (1998), in which she argues both for Dickinson's similarities to her female peers and Dickinson's exceptionality.

<sup>5</sup> The panel included the following presenters and papers: Chair: Kristen Keller, Washington State University; Amber LaPiana, Washington State University, "Pre-Poetess: Maria Gowen Brooks and the Female Subjectivity of 'Judith' and 'Esther'"; Kirsten Silva Gruesz, University of California-Santa Cruz, "Maria Gowen Brooks, In and Out of the Poe Circle"; Shannon Thomas, Ohio State University, "'My Rose, my book, my work, I see them all': Celia Thaxter and the Politics of the Poetess"; Mary De Jong, Pennsylvania State University-Altoona College, "'Sing Away': The Vocation of Frances Osgood, Poetess"; and respondent: Elissa Zellinger, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about The Poetess Archive Database or to search its contents visit the website: <http://www.poetessarchive.com/>.

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