

## Introduction: Slaves, Spheres, Poetess Poetics

Man's Poetry teaches us Politics; Woman's, Morality.

—FREDERIC ROWTON, *THE FEMALE POETS OF GREAT BRITAIN*, 1848

A patriot is a citizen trying to wake  
From the burnt-out dream of innocence . . .

—ADRIENNE RICH, *AN ATLAS OF THE DIFFICULT WORLD*, 1991

The Latin word for elsewhere is *alibi*.

—JANE MARCUS, "REGISTERING OBJECTIONS:  
GROUNDING FEMINIST ALIBIS," 1994

"Political Poetess": this is the presence, point of convergence, and catalyst whose power grounds these pages. Why do we need to study the Poetess? Why do we need to study Poetess performance? Because, this book proposes, the Poetess and Poetess performance invite us, precisely through their mythic, absolute identification with "separate spheres," into the vulnerable, violently structured, racially haunted hearts of our own inherited dreams of private innocence.<sup>1</sup>

"Political Poetess": oxymoron and open secret, all at once, this is a category that flickers, like the Poetess herself, between history and myth, shock and cliché. For the mythic Poetess, in stepping forth, above all, as a creature of "separate spheres," stakes her claims at a peculiar—and peculiarly powerful—intersection between scholarship and popular political culture.<sup>2</sup> Victorianized, if never exclusively Victorian, hers is a figure for our own time, fit for a moment when veil and crinoline, stays and garters, still serve deep communal fantasies, clothing brides and soft porn stars alike. Where femininity at its "purest," like feminism at its most contested, takes on nineteenth-century costuming, Victoriana sells; and the Poetess helps.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even within our textbooks, classrooms, and scholarship, the Poetess often retains her role as sole surviving Angel in the House of Literature. Poised (and posed) as acknowledged agent and embodiment of a purely conventional, sometimes comic, "Victorian feminine poetics," she continues, even there, to stake the ambiguously historical claims of an increasingly implausible "private" or "domestic sphere";<sup>4</sup> a fantasy space of "impossible purities" whose "heart" remains, by definition, safely sequestered from the workings of "Politics," writ large.<sup>5</sup>

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At the same time, as I will stress here, to speak or write “Poetess” is, in practice, also to invoke a more disturbingly, even intransigently, “Victorian” figure as well. For as nineteenth-century readers knew, and as we ourselves have never quite forgotten, to strike a pose—even, and indeed, perhaps, especially, a histrionically apolitical pose—as if from the imaginary “heart” of “the private” or “the domestic sphere” has long been, by definition, to speak as if from the “heart” of nation and empire.

“Poetess”/“Politics”: these terms’ intimate connection matters, I will argue here, not least by right of lengthy, continuing histories of highly charged, often racialized denial. Drawing our attention to forms and forces moving not only through, but beyond the realm of “nineteenth-century femininity,” *Political Poetess* considers such histories in light of the workings of an insistently archaic, yet ongoing dream poetics of “separate” spheres: one whose racialized effects, even now, structure, haunt, and challenge not only our long-standard national literary histories, but also our most strenuous debates over democratic theory, and even our everyday lives. Fractured and intersectional, in ways that we have never quite forgotten, yet still not yet entirely faced, the bitterly contested conceptual spaces of such poetics have come to emerge among my deepest subjects here.<sup>6</sup>

Through the process of such emergence, what began as a chronological exploration of strains of political verse, running from Felicia Dorothea Hemans through Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to Frances E. W. Harper, now stands before you as a far more unpredictably historicized project: a series of polemical reception histories, interspersed with explorations in sentimental reading and “unreadings.”<sup>7</sup> Snatches from G.W.F. Hegel’s account of the *Antigone*, both in his *Phenomenology* itself and in debates among subsequent democratic theorists; modernist explorations of post-Victorianism, whether in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* or Elizabeth Bishop’s “Casabianca”; Second Wave Poetess fictions, culminating with Alice Walker’s *Meridian*; workplace domestic mourning rituals, as enacted by the *New York Times*’ volume *Portraits: 9/11/01; The Collected “Portraits of Grief”*: these now join poetic texts by Hemans, Barrett Browning, Harper, and hitherto undistinguished Crimean War “poetess” Dinah Mulock Craik, to form an archive whose claims have become revelatory rather than representative.

This having been said, *Political Poetess* remains above all a study of poetics and of poetic texts. For if we are to engage with our own inherited investments in the raw, reiterative, often surprisingly crude poetics of separate spheres, as I believe we must, to what better resource might we turn than to poetry itself? When, then, in the pages to come, I urge more ambitious, intimate engagements with the precise poetic unfoldings of specific poems, including “terrible” sentimental poetic texts—when I linger, over and over, on the details of such verse, framing readings intensified, at points, by the sort of rigorously chronological literary historical analysis with which this project began—I do so, now, with an intense sense of larger political as well

as disciplinary urgency. Who needs the political Poetess? We do; and “we,” I have come to think, may be far more numerous than I could initially have imagined.

With all this in mind, then, Readers: let me introduce the Poetess—or rather, *my* Poetess—whether she comes to you as a new acquaintance or as a possible companion to already developed Poetess figures of your own. A mythic, composite presence defined by “acceptance” of the “doctrine of separate spheres” (Mellor, “Distinguishing,” 64), that Poetess thrives in a realm of shifting literary (and, of course, political) open secrets, uneasily located between the unspeakable and the all-too-familiar.<sup>8</sup> She emerges, most famously, within the poems, introductions, and interstices of volumes by the popular likes of Felicia Dorothea Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon; Adelaide Anne Procter and Eliza Cook; Lydia Huntley Sigourney and Lucretia Davidson—and, for that matter, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other authors, most but not all female. That she takes form within criticism is a given; that she lives on through fiction seems at least as clear. As students of nineteenth-century literature now learn, after all, hers is a dangerous, part-fictional heritage—and, in this, a heritage of great power. “Poetess”: within the nineteenth century, for an actual writer to take—or, for that matter, be aggressively assigned—this title, was, by definition, to step forth as heir or counterpart to a whole range of figures. Sappho, whom most of the nineteenth century read as hauntingly insubstantial, famously suicidal;<sup>9</sup> the raped and mutilated sister who reveals her suffering through secret art, in the “nightingale” myth of Philomela and Procne;<sup>10</sup> the doomed, glamorous heroine of Germaine DeStaël’s *Corinne, or Italy*: as historical points of Poetess origin, these figures claim critical precedence.<sup>11</sup> Still, as the nineteenth century progressed, they came to be joined by a host of more immediate counterparts. Mocked as Miss Briggs or Lady Emily Sheepshanks in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*;<sup>12</sup> comically immortalized as Emmeline Grangerford in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*;<sup>13</sup> mourned by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman; and embodied, more ambitiously (and, perhaps, ambiguously) in fictional successors to *Corinne, or Italy*, from Maria Jane Jewsbury’s “History of an Enthusiast,” to Christina Rossetti’s *Maude*, to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Poetess figures help shape not only nineteenth-century literature, but that literature’s post-Victorian criticism.<sup>14</sup> How could we hope, in our own time, to address critical Poetess mythologies without invoking Virginia Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare, who, subject to “the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body,” famously “killed herself one winter’s night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle?”<sup>15</sup>

I speak of “the Poetess”; but, in fact, I have come to believe there is no such thing. Less a heroine than a heritage, the Poetess is, as Yopie Prins memorably puts it, “the personification of an empty figure,” “a trope, ‘available for occupancy’ yet also advertising its vacancy.”<sup>16</sup> To sign “Poetess” is, then, to practice

signature as a form of erasure: it is to sign “Nobody.”<sup>17</sup> For ultimately, Poetess performers do not pretend to speak even with the voices of “women,” much less of individuals. Rather, they step forth to “sing” as Woman, enacting a naturalized art performed as if flowing through them, most often without great effort and at points almost without volition. As Glennis Stephenson writes with respect to Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Poetess performers “present themselves as fountains, not pumps” (102). Calculation, skepticism, passionate idealism, despair: actual nineteenth-century Poetess performers’ precise individual (and no doubt infinitely subtle and unpredictable) subjective negotiations with the demand for the signature of a silent abstraction are lost to us, along with those living poets themselves. What remain are emphatically, even histrionically, citational performances: performances of “the secrets of the poetess, secrets everyone knows” (Margaret Linley, “Dying,” 296). In their explicit claim to voice the generic “genius of Woman,” moreover, such performances inevitably fail. For however energetically any particular historical author may respond to the cultural call to perform “‘woman’ as a personified abstraction whose personal agency is suspended,” such interpellation as Poetess may—indeed, must—be incomplete (Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 210). Even if any given living writer’s claim to speak purely as “Woman” were not, by definition, indefensible, after all, by many nineteenth-century accounts, Woman at her most poetic is silent.<sup>18</sup>

Whether in creative or critical terms, then, Poetess performance as we know it best is thus committed to invocations of “infinitely repeatable loss.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, if the mythic Poetess does anything gloriously, it is to fail; if she belongs anywhere, it is on the edge of dissolution.<sup>20</sup> (One graduate class, challenged to imagine a conference on the Poetess, chose as emblem a graceful, leaning figure who turns on her cliff in sudden irritation, saying, “How dare you interrupt me while I’m falling silent?”)<sup>21</sup> How better to explore the fantasy of inhabiting the impossible site that constitutes femininity, than to rehearse, yet again, Sappho’s famous leap into “the abyss of female authorship”? (Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 184).

Loss, however, could be gain: “sorrow,” as Cheryl Walker’s *Nightingale’s Burden* suggests, could be “literary capital.”<sup>22</sup> Public performances of Woman’s intimate, desirous suffering notoriously founded many a successful career; and precisely because such performances were understood to be generic, they could partake at once of the sacred and the profane, the Pythian shriek and the striptease.<sup>23</sup> “Lovelorn and suicidal” (Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing*, 3), the “paradigmatic poetess” thus offers herself up for consumption both as “lyric voice” and “sacrificial body” (Susan Brown, “Victorian Poetess,” 183). Secret sorrow is her speciality (Walker, *Nightingale’s Burden*, 88–99); and “‘the secret sorrow’ is an open secret.”<sup>24</sup> Poised on “a fragile boundary between kitsch and tragedy” (Svetlana Boym, *Death*, 199), the Poetess thus markets herself as once as erotic commodity and sanctifying, antiworldly aesthetic object.

Nor were popularity and economic profit the only benefits to writing as both a “personified abstraction” and an abstraction “whose personal agency” was “suspended” (Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 210). Perhaps, as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have suggested, the Poetess is “not the content of her own generic representation; not a speaker, not an ‘I,’ not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self.” Perhaps she is, instead, a means of performing “lyrical reflections on the conventions of subjectivity attributed to persons and poems.” If so, she may even help us imagine the “possibility of lyric outside the terms, or boundaries, of subjectivity.”<sup>25</sup> For female poets, then—as, for that matter, for male writers including William Sharp (aka “Fiona Macleod”) or Tennyson, say, in his lyrics for *The Princess*<sup>26</sup>—Poetess performance may well have represented an intriguing aesthetic challenge, as well as a means of staking significant, if circumscribed, claims to cultural authority.<sup>27</sup>

If the Poetess is a vacancy, then, she is a specific vacancy, and one already possessed of an impressive history. Still, I wondered, in beginning this project, what of her future? Outside studies of nineteenth-century poetry, after all, the historical good sense, utopian energies, and activist echoes of “No More Separate Spheres!” were already making themselves felt; and the powerfully transformative, long-overdue interdisciplinary resonance of this Americanist proclamation scarcely seemed to bode well for Poetess studies.<sup>28</sup> Everywhere the familiar Poetess went, after all, her “sphere” was sure to go. Even in the most startling contexts, among committed historicists, to address Poetess poetics was still to risk invoking a “generic” nineteenth-century femininity: a femininity so pure, so sequestered—indeed, so privileged—as to remain innocent, by definition, of any involvement in the public political conflicts, not to mention the crimes, of “masculine” nation-states.<sup>29</sup> Where else but in the context of Poetess poetics, could even ambiguously historical female writers appear as free to address those national crimes and conflicts, only by mounting politically innocent “criticisms both of masculinity and of the havoc wrought by men within the public sphere”<sup>30</sup> Who but the Poetess could inspire even the most ambitious explorations of the complex, often riven cosmopolitanism of actual nineteenth-century female poets to proceed in tacit reliance on the always dubious, now decades-old assumption that “as long as women’s lives have been less concerned with commerce and the state than with a certain predetermined set of domestic expectations, their poetry has recognized affinities extending across national boundaries” (Cheryl Walker, *Nightingale’s Burden*, 27)?

Surely, I thought, in conceiving this project, it was past time to begin asking how long “women’s lives” *had* been thus sequestered. What of Phillis Wheatley, for example? Inexorable, brutally intimate, hers had been defining relations to “commerce and the state.”<sup>31</sup> Poetess: if this was indeed, as I was coming to suspect, a figure neatly festooned with metaphoric labels reading “Woman” and “No XXX need apply,” why not set it aside, at least for the moment—having first added a third label: “Archaic”? Certainly my own

developing focus on patriotic poetry seemed to suggest the wisdom of some such move. For as seemed increasingly clear, the history of nineteenth-century poetry—including, not least, the poetry of nineteenth-century women—was, among other things, one of patriotic performance.<sup>32</sup> In the United States, grade school classes might no longer perform Felicia Hemans’s “Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers” in Thanksgiving pageants, as my own once had. Still, even now, what lines of nineteenth-century American poetry could claim greater currency than the opening of Julia Ward Howe’s (antislavery) lyrics to the “Battle-Hymn of the Republic”? “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses”: in US schoolrooms, children who had yet to hear of Byron, Browning, or Whitman were, I knew, already chanting their lines from Emma Lazarus.<sup>33</sup> Once I began connecting these sorts of dots, moreover, others quickly appeared. How many singers of the beloved US patriotic ballad “America the Beautiful,” for example, knew that this song’s lyrics had been composed by woman-loving poet, English professor, and editor Katharine Lee Bates (1859–1929)?<sup>34</sup> Who, indeed, was studying the career of Edna Dean Proctor? That Proctor’s poetry scarcely parades the sorts of anguished, gendered performance we associate with the “nightingale’s burden” was, for me, part of her appeal. By the time Proctor died in 1923, at age ninety-five, her *New York Times* obituary could celebrate a long career of public, often patriotic verse: one that began with antislavery writing, extended to well-received poems on topics ranging from American Indian rights to Crimean War cemeteries, and was even “said to have influenced” Russian “revolutionaries.”<sup>35</sup> Closer to home, Proctor’s “Columbia’s Banner” had become “familiar to thousands”: as part of “the official national program” of the 1882 “celebration of the discovery of America,” Proctor’s poem had been “recited in every public school in the United States,” along with the brand new “Pledge of Allegiance.”<sup>36</sup> By privileging the Poetess and Poetess performance as access points for studies of women’s poetry, I wondered, had we not risked discounting careers like Proctor’s—and with them whole gendered histories of nineteenth-century poetic practice? “Close thy ‘Poetry of Woman’; open thy poetry by *women!*”: why not, I wondered, try out some such suitably citational, modestly comic motto? Why not call for sidelining Poetess studies, that is, if only temporarily, as a means of opening up conceptual space for the messier, richer—and, to my mind, more exciting—work now most immediately at hand: work, that is, on the composition, material production, circulation, and reception of actual nineteenth-century texts? “Close thy Poetess!”

As the intervening years have made clear, no such motto was even necessary. Even without it, Poetess studies have, to some degree, tapered off, as richly specific, historically detailed engagements with individual poets’ public writing have emerged, almost exponentially.<sup>37</sup> Ambitious and revelatory, the resulting body of scholarship and pedagogy, traces of which appear in these pages, considers richly various poetic histories of complex, conflicted public engagement. Sharply defined, often idiosyncratic, the subjects of such studies



dramatize increasing willingness to confront poetic texts' active investments in cultural struggles around, say, slavery, class, ethnicity, religion, "race," erotic and/or romantic affiliations, and the formal, sometimes martial politics of nation-states. Although, in many quarters, even now, "nineteenth-century women's poetry" remains a politically and theoretically contested category, more expressly than ever before, studies within this field now register the claims of texts—and careers—explicitly given over to energetic explorations of the demands of public, if only because publicly problematic, identities.

Ironically, however, even in supporting such changes, I found that beyond a certain point, in its attempt to "Close thy 'Poetry of Women,'" my own patriotic poetry project was breaking down. That Carlyle's original "Close thy Byron" had been bad advice I had always known; that "Close thy Poetess" would, in the end, prove no less impracticable, I had long suspected. As an agent of a phantasmatic "pure" femininity, after all, the Poetess presented, in effect, nothing tangible to close. What proved shocking, however, was how thoroughly and even dramatically my attempt to bracket off the Poetess, in the name of exploring patriotic poetic histories, revealed itself as requiring the bracketing off of such histories themselves.<sup>38</sup> How, for example, could I even hope to gesture toward the reception of Phillis Wheatley, without acknowledging that Poetess scholar Laura Mandell traces the first critical emergence of the very category of "poetess" within the United States back to Wheatley's patriotic poetry?<sup>39</sup>

"Who made the Poetess white? No one; not ever": in the pages that follow, this question, this answer, will emerge as refrains; and they will do so, in part, as reiterated reminders of long-standing, contested, and ultimately failed histories of seeking to privatize the figure of Poetess—and with her, that of "Woman" herself. "Black Poetess": through this figure's central, grounding claims, we may begin to connect many sorts of dots, beginning with histories, mysteries, and open secrets of literary reception. Once we have registered Wheatley's claims as "Black Poetess," for example, what is there to prevent us from acknowledging Wheatley's explicit current-day heirs? To say "*The Poetess*," in rap and hip-hop contexts, after all, is to call to mind not Felicia Hemans, but singer-songwriter, music journalist, radio personality, educator, and community organizer Felicia Morris. Through songs like "Love Hurts" and "Making Change," Morris, as author/performer of the 1992 Warner CD *The Poetess: Simply Poetry*, steps forth as express heir and inspiration to a vibrant mode of African American poetic performance. Morris demands Poetess studies' attention: for her, the category of "political Poetess" bespeaks ongoing, vital traditions of political performance: passionate, explicit "Black Poetess" art.<sup>40</sup>

"Black Poetess" / "Political Poetess": to insist on pairing these is thus to remind us of three things. First, in popular terms, the public import (and impact) of nineteenth-century women's patriotic poetry has never really been in question. Next, as previous generations recognized, even the most apolitical claims

of “Poetess” performance—and, indeed, of “separate spheres”—stand in primary relations to “Politics,” as practiced by nation-states. (Defining, separating, policing the innocent, domestic fantasy “hearts” of nations: what processes could be more public, more political—and, in this, more likely to prove deeply contested?) And finally, as we shall see, both Victorian and post-Victorian traditions of attempting to obscure these first two points draw, frequently, if not necessarily, on attempts to negotiate (or, of course, dissemble or evade) ongoing conflicts around the histories of slavery and the meanings of “race.”

“Poetess”: to enter this search term, even today, on the World Wide Web, is to confront, beyond question, a category whose explicitly national claims often point toward global political histories. Still, pain, nation, transatlantic slavery: in current influential accounts of the Poetess, the first stands as fundamental; the latter two, as acknowledged, perhaps, but bracketed off. Why? In part, I believe, for reasons that later chapters will need to address; yet in part, too, I have come to suspect, through the workings of what I now call “Poetess parallax.” Always, at most, a flickering, unstable figure, the Poetess has come, in recent years, to appear in her most clearly defined form to those not looking directly at her.<sup>41</sup> Serving, within increasingly fragmented fields, either as a rhetorically convenient “mere” or “conventional” figure,<sup>42</sup> or as cultural presence safely confined within strikingly rigid historical bounds,<sup>43</sup> she has emerged as a privatized point of critical and scholarly stasis, in part precisely by remaining almost out of sight. “Step right up!” I now imagine us calling, across divides of nation and period. “Have a look at the Genuinely Interesting Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet: that is, the one *I* study. See her subtle, ambitious work; note her splendid cultural figure. Here, my friends, is the apotheosis of poetic negotiation with the demands of pure femininity! . . . Pay no attention to that shadowy form behind the curtain. That’s only the Mere Poetess. Pure conventionality, that’s what *she* has to offer: mere (fill in the blank: eighteenth-century / Romantic period / mid-Victorian / British / American) ideology. Don’t worry! We’ll have her offstage in no time.” And thus, foil to all and focus to none—obliquely seen, though never actually quite offstage—the privatized Poetess has attained a nearly magical staying power, quietly performing on behalf of separate spheres (and with them of racialized national sentimentality), even as controversies over feminism, literary theory, historiography, and philosophy have exploded around her.

The preceding history is, of course, both sweeping and intentionally provocative: its playfulness can’t pretend to do justice to decades of books and essays, many of which move in very different directions. Still, I believe its larger outlines hold. If specialists are to restore full critical focus to the Poetess, then, we will need to counter Poetess parallax, setting aside boundary disputes in the process. Luckily, we seem poised to do so: for indeed, however adamantly abstract Poetess definitions might seem to have foreclosed explorations of openly public writing, foregrounding “private” domestic, artistic, or erotic suffering instead, already long-standing traditions of ambitious individual readings of



specific—and often problematic—texts of feminine (and/or feminist) political poetry have, nonetheless, long told stories of other kinds—stories, connected, sometimes explicitly, to histories of Poetess performance.<sup>44</sup>

As, indeed, how could they not be? Julia Ward Howe, after all, was known as a “poetess”—as was Emma Lazarus, or, for that matter, Edna Dean Proctor, if the *New York Times*’s 1923 obituary is to be believed.<sup>45</sup> “Writer, Arabic scholar and Oriental Secretary to the High Commissioner of Iraq”; “huntress, poetess, explorer, and traveler”: within the lifetime of Gertrude Bell, such a list of achievements seems to have made perfect sense.<sup>46</sup> When late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century journalists said “poetess,” then, what did they mean? Not “Sappho-Corinne,” perhaps. And yet—if Poetess mythologies trace back, as we say they do, to Germaine de Staël’s fictional Corinne, who is crowned as “Italy” at the Roman capitol, why should we doubt the claims of, say, Sarojini Naidu, as Corinne’s Poetess-heir? “The Indian National Congress met today,” a December 27, 1925, *New York Times* article matter-of-factly notes, “under the Presidency of the Nationalist poetess, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, who received an ovation from the large crowds which greeted her on her arrival from Bombay.”<sup>47</sup>

Who cares about the Czars of Russia? “The great poetess, Orzesykowa” did, as a September 17, 1911 *New York Times* article reported; she was “the soul of” the suffrage “movement among Polish women” (“Czar’s Sister-in-Law”). So, too, as it turns out, did both mid-Victorian poet Dinah Mulock Craik and Frances E. W. Harper herself. When *Mulock’s Poems, New and Old* appeared in 1883, that volume’s fifth poem was “The Dead Czar”; when the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*’s sixteenth volume appeared, among its pages was a Harper poem entitled “The Vision of the Czar of Russia.”<sup>48</sup> If we find it strange to conceive of the figures of Czars as meeting points between turn-of-the-century African American political poetry and mid-Victorian British Poetess texts,<sup>49</sup> this response may reveal more about our time than theirs. For Craik, whose works include the 1858 *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women*,<sup>50</sup> and Harper, whose essays extend to many forms of meditation on African American womanhood,<sup>51</sup> both performed, at least at moments, as Poetess figures—which was to say, within the terms of their own times, as writers deeply invested in elaborating visions of the intimate, personal implications of international affairs.

What is true of individual historical Poetess performances, moreover, may be no less so for Poetess mythologies. Influential critic and anthologist Angela Leighton’s “Sappho-Corinne,” for example,<sup>52</sup> remains a figure who can hardly escape the Isle of Lesbos’s association with eroticized (and interrupted, mournful) fantasies of separatist female creative community. The (unstable) Second Wave feminist dream of a “Lesbian Nation” begins here.<sup>53</sup> In *Corinne, or Italy*, too, what Staël’s title does not already make clear, her heroine’s opening and closing scenes dramatize. First glimpsed enroute to crowning at the Roman capitol as an embodiment of Italian national genius, Staël’s secretly

half-English protagonist, shortly before dying for love of a fickle “English” Scot, apostrophizes her country of affinity as that “liberal nation,” which does not “banish women from your temple, . . . you who always applaud the soaring flights of genius, that victor with no vanquished” (401). Most striking of all, perhaps, critical histories of stressing violated, anguished sisterly creativity notwithstanding,<sup>54</sup> we must still know, in tracing the Poetess back to Philomela and Procne, who it is that these sisters murder and feed to his rapist father: that is, the married sister’s son—and presumably, the potential heir to the throne. (Good luck finding an innocent domestic space here.) “Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—”: thus, finally, the narrator of Virginia Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare story instructs her readers, slyly pointing back, through omission, to the third “Mary” of the folk ballad: Mary Hamilton, who bears—and kills—a child by the “highest Stuart of all.”<sup>55</sup> “State rape”—the legally authorized violation of women by kings, slaveholders, and even husbands—this, too, runs as undercurrent within privatized Poetess criticism’s most resonant myths of feminine poetic creation. When, then, we imagine the mythic Poetess as poised, metaphorically, in contemplation of the Sapphic leap, we may want to reconceive national identity as one cliff from which even the most conventional Poetess narratives can never quite leap far enough.<sup>56</sup>

Who made the Poetess white? Not, as it turns out, Germaine de Staël. In 1795—twelve years before the appearance of her *Corinne, or Italy*—Staël published “Mirza, ou Lettres d’un Voyageur.” Set off the coast of Senegal, this Poetess fiction opens with a scene that echoes fairytales, even as it suggestively prefigures *Corinne* itself (not to mention Tennyson’s ambiguously patriotic, militarist “Maud”). Here, Staël’s manly narrator Ximéo, hunting on unfamiliar ground, finds himself caught up short by the sound of a “remarkably beautiful” woman’s voice singing “hymns” that fill him with a “rapturous admiration.” Their subject? “The love of freedom, the horror of slavery.” Their singer? Mirza, a young Jolof poet whose studies with a self-exiled Frenchman have taught her “the knowledge that” Europeans “misuse and the philosophy whose lessons they follow so poorly.”<sup>57</sup> To know *Corinne* is to guess the rest. Neither Mirza’s goodness nor her genius (both extraordinary) will protect her from love of the noble, melancholy, and fickle Ximéo. After betraying her for his fiancée, a more beautiful, though less gifted, woman of his own tribe, Ximéo is captured by slavers. Considering her own life already at an end, Mirza offers herself in his place. So deeply (and improbably) moved is the colonial governor by this act of nobility, that he frees Ximéo, leaving Mirza herself at liberty—to die of grief.

As an “African” Enlightenment precursor to *Corinne*, Staël’s Mirza presumably acts to prove the capacities of both her people and her sex; and in this, she speaks to the merged fantastic and historical origins of nineteenth-century Poetess performance in Africanism and abolitionism.<sup>58</sup> As an imaginary antislavery hymnist and potential slave, however, Mirza also points back

toward Wheatley, and with this, toward key questions. What might it mean to conceive of the Poetess as always, at least potentially, a figure whose origins trace back to Africa: one who may even write while actually or potentially enslaved? To assert and explore a primary relationship between “nineteenth-century femininity,” separate spheres, and the history of transatlantic slavery? These are large questions: in aiming at foundational understandings of sentimentality, patriotism, “Victorian femininity,” and “Victorian poetry,” they may land, as they began, in clichés. Still, the task seems worth the risk.

At issue here, in part, are questions of literary study. “Black Poetess” / “Political Poetess”: to insist on these figures’ primary, revelatory connection, breaking through Poetess parallax, would require that we join forces, not so much in setting Poetess studies aside, as in pursuing such studies from new standpoints. For if the Poetess’s pretensions to instantiate a “pure” nineteenth-century femininity have served, in the past, to help divert our attention from the energy and near-omnipresence of national writing in the oeuvres of nineteenth-century poets, including female poets, those same pretensions now position both the Poetess and Poetess performance as rich, promising resources for exploring what we have so long addressed only at some remove: that is, the complex, continued, often explicitly racialized national and imperial functions of a poetics of separate spheres. It is time, then, to rethink the mythic Poetess—and in so doing, and to look more closely—uncomfortably closely, even—at actual Poetess performance itself. For open secrets remain, in some sense, secrets; and we need to do more talking.

Who, however, are “we”? In the past few pages, I have spoken, most immediately, to students of nineteenth-century literature. In opening, however, I suggested that disciplinary concerns were only the beginning here: that, indeed, confrontation of larger questions might reveal apparently specialized engagement with poetic texts as invested with far broader interdisciplinary urgency. With such assertions in mind, let me return, then, to this chapter’s epigraphs, beginning with Frederic Rowton’s 1848 *The Female Poets of Great Britain*. “Man’s Poetry teaches us Politics; Woman’s, Morality”: straight from Rowton’s great midcentury anthology of nineteenth-century British women’s poetry (xxxix), this claim invites reading—and rereading—as a classic expression of “separate spheres ideology.” Man marries woman; Politics marries Morality: thus, it seems safe to assume, Rowton’s heteronormative pairing must work. “Politics,” that is, like a good Victorian husband, thus enfolds and subsumes the existence of “Morality” within his own. Such literary equivalent to the law of *coverture*, we have tended to assume, thus privatizes, as well as domesticates, the poetry of “Woman.” Still, does it—entirely? Not, I would propose, in nineteenth-century terms. If Woman’s poetry teaches “us” Morality, after all, it does so by making a home for all of “us,” of no matter how public, powerful, or masculine “we” may be. Indeed, does “Woman’s Poetry” not make a home, too, even for that “Men’s Poetry” that teaches “us” “Politics”? How might we conceive of a Poetry capable of such a feat? As one, I think, that

“abjures politics”—as a Poetry whose “antipolitical politics” stake their claims “on behalf of a private life protected from the harsh realities of power”: that is, to draw on the work of Lauren Berlant, as a Poetry of national sentimentality.<sup>59</sup>

“Binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars”: these achievements, which Edmund Burke famously hoped might spring from cultivation of the “public affections,” make up the ideal functions, both of the idealized early nineteenth-century middle-class home and of much patriotic poetry, perhaps especially by women.<sup>60</sup> Write of the “domestic affections,” in Burke’s terms, and you cultivate the “public affections” as well: though this is a belief that many nineteenth-century cultural productions, even beyond sentimental poetry, worked to articulate and underscore, it is one we have tended to occlude, in part for reasons I will discuss in chapters to come.<sup>61</sup>

“Without presenting herself in ‘explicitly political terms,’” Yopie Prins has noted of Caroline Norton, “the poetess has the implicitly political function of representing public concerns as if they were private, demonstrating the ideological work of lyric as well as the ideological work of gender in mid-Victorian England. To become ‘an articulate spokesperson in the public sphere,’” Prins continues, citing and complicating an earlier reading by Mary Poovey, a figure such as Norton is thus transformed, “not *from* but *into* ‘the private sufferer.’”<sup>62</sup> The Poetess, then, performs public issues as if they were private: the point is crucial and demands extension. By speaking, for example, as a “voice of England”—or Ireland, Wales, or Scotland (or, for that matter, Canada, India, Australia, or the United States)—might certain patriotic poets engage in similar performances?<sup>63</sup> Might they step forth to perform the lyric work of nation and empire? Certainly this seems to be the case in Hemans; and though it may also be true of a writer like Rudyard Kipling, still, the project of offering up patriotic writing as the more or less spontaneous overflow of a nation’s private sorrow seems to mobilize highly particular gendered longings, calling up particularly “pure” fantasies of a transcendently innocent private heart at the center of public national and imperial subjectivity.<sup>64</sup>

Here, I present such fantasies as structured, both in the nineteenth century and in our own time, so as to constitute the Poetess, and with her, Poetess performance, as privileged access points to the workings of a “private sphere” conceived—and, indeed, expressly modeled—simultaneously as innocent, traumatized, racialized, broken, and perhaps irreversibly haunted: a fantasy sphere whose very structural instabilities help ground its service as an amazingly resilient, portable vessel for dreams of heartfelt, apolitical pacifism. “No More Separate Spheres!”: here, reframing my earlier echo of this cry, let me offer, instead, a counterpoint. Suspend separate spheres! Arrest their imaginary movements, to begin with—and while they stand thus

frozen, momentarily cordoned off from “common sense,” begin asking: How big *are* “Victorian separate spheres”? Are they both the same size? How, precisely, are they shaped? What separates them, and how?

Awkward, even crude, and far from new, such questions make even me uneasy; and that is part of their point.<sup>65</sup> “*What* ‘separate spheres?’” The phrase is far from self-explanatory, after all: though we largely assume we need not literalize the spatial metaphors of our critical explorations “within, without, or around” gendered spheres, our grounds for doing so have never been quite clear (Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, *No More Separate Spheres!*, 5). Might we be acting, in Michael Warner’s terms, to treat general distinctions between the public and the private as if they were “preconceptual, almost instinctual, rooted in the orientations of the body and common speech,” assigning “separate spheres” to a realm of hegemonic common sense that seems to us not “theoretical at all” (23)? Perhaps.<sup>66</sup> (That turns to “separate spheres” as “doctrine” or “ideology” can still call on such spheres’ “merely theoretical” status, in deflecting skeptical historicist challenges, probably says something about the complex energies of cliché.)

If, as Caroline Levine has suggested, “powerful attempts to order and re-order bodies, concepts, and objects” render “politics . . . inextricable from the question of form”—and if, as she further proposes, “the concept of separate spheres” offers “an especially unmistakable formal” instance of such inextricability—why should we content ourselves with dismantling such spheres’ claims when we might go straight for the imaginary forms of those spheres themselves?<sup>67</sup> Central to *Political Poetess*, then, is the call to suspend separate spheres, first by setting aside those imaginary laws, hostilities, and active acts of (dis)belief that such entities still seem to require, and next, by taking the crude, perhaps counterintuitive move of conceiving those spheres, quite literally, as structures of feeling.

Drawn (or, some might say, hijacked) from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “spheres,” as I model them here, will take form through an ongoing, strenuous, and even violent process whereby the “public sphere” of the State wrests the “private sphere” into itself, holding that smaller sphere forcibly suspended within its own bounds, so as to assure the smaller sphere’s subjection to the rule of mortal, martial, military communal law. At the same time, the “public sphere” will emerge as itself a bounded space, held suspended, as history itself is here, within a larger, universal realm of transcendent, irreducibly individual, familial law: a realm, indeed, whose power actually lives on, temporarily subjected yet still sacred, within the captive “private sphere” itself.

Rigidly defined yet continuously reconstituted; static, yet incessantly recreated through active, strained, and even violent material processes, “suspended spheres,” thus conceived, rely on State-sponsored trauma for their very (imaginary) existence; yet they serve, even in so doing, to consecrate the domestic “heart” of that same State as sacred to the values of nonviolence. For if, as Jane Marcus reminds us, in one of this introduction’s epigraphs, “the

Latin word for elsewhere is *alibi*,” then the “private sphere,” in the suspended spheres model, serves as the ultimate “elsewhere,” the ultimate alibi space, of the abstract military nation-state itself (“Registering Objections,” 187). Sustaining this redemptive alibi space; confirming the claims of the transcendent, pacifist law of irreducible, irreplaceable individual love: these are the duties of a femininity conceived, in Hegel’s unforgettable formulation, as the constitutive “internal enemy of the State.” “Mother/home/heaven”: this familiar sentimental triad thus speaks directly to the twofold task of women, conceived as agents of such femininity. As guardians of space ruled by higher, transcendent law, women must never fail to resist the rule of mortal, martial, masculine law. Mourning, protesting, and even condemning the departure of their fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands, and sons for battle, they must never cease to resist—and never cease to fail. Still, should their beloved family members fall, they must step forth as custodians of divine law, definitively reclaiming the military dead—corpse and soul. For though, within history, the State can and must exert force to suspend the authority of divine law within itself, at the point where history ends, femininity, as internal enemy of the State, must claim dominion. The State, if it is to survive, must recognize that dominion, acknowledging its own ultimate suspension within a larger element where love, and love alone, rules.

Within this model, then, the “private sphere” is not the “feminine” sphere. It is, rather, a mortal, masculine, martial refuge, held sacred by the labors of feminine custodians; and as such, it teaches a Morality that takes form, both as temporarily contained by, and as redemptively, transcendentally in excess of, Politics writ large. Here, then, to perform privacy, to perform a politics without politics—indeed, to condemn politics altogether—is to perform a deeply patriotic and, in this, deeply political service to the State. The Poetess’s symbolic power—the symbolic power of Woman, within this model—is always, by definition, public and patriotic—all the more so, precisely when it is most insistently, even histrionically, privatized. “Political Poetess”: if, according to certain current definitions, this phrase appears as an oxymoron, that appearance is part of what helps render it to some degree redundant.

To build any imaginary model is, of course, to invite scenarios of breakdown; and as we shall see, this model is no exception. Even at its most abstract, national sentimentality, as imaginatively structured here, already plays out as a potentially gothic mode. This is, however, only the beginning. How, after all—to return, as starting point, to the story of Antigone herself—can we accept, in even the most remotely historical terms, the claims of such a privatizing account? Even if we are willing to cast the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta as fit model for feminine privacy—a stretch in itself—what shall we make of that moment in Sophocles when, protesting Creon’s refusal to bury her rebellious brother, Antigone insists that Polynices was “not some slave”? That so many democratic theorists still find it easy to invoke Antigone’s “private sphere” as definitional, without registering how explicitly that same



sphere remains haunted by the presences of female figures who cannot possibly serve as innocent internal enemies—beginning with Antigone’s slaves—suggests a great deal, I suspect, about the occlusion of questions of race and servitude within our own period’s figurations of femininity’s relations to the State: occlusions inseparable from the ongoing life of the privatized Poetess.

Obviously, none of this begins with the nineteenth century. Still, as immediate historical point of origin and, in this, as critical access point, “Victorian femininity” stakes central claims here. Open secret: although, until fairly recently, most Victorianists have not tended to stress the point, when nineteenth-century “Britons” voiced patriotic pride, they did so on behalf of a nation and empire self-positioned as a home—if not, indeed *the* home—of “freedom.” Moreover, especially early in the century—between 1833 and about 1840 in particular—they did so in reasonable expectation that such claims would seem far from abstract. It was, after all, more or less precisely as the “Victorian period” we all know best began, that the world’s most powerful slave-trading empire definitively reversed course. Britain’s self-transformation into the world’s first ongoing, official antislavery empire was stunning—not least, as historians now stress, in its degree of reliance on a massive political movement driven, in great part, by extraparliamentary agitation, including unprecedented organizing on the part of women. “Victorian femininity”; “Victorian feminine influence”; “Victorian patriotism”—even, to a greater degree than we have acknowledged, “Victorian poetry”: these and other categories, it seems, came to stake their early claims in part by drawing on what historian Christopher Leslie Brown has termed the “moral capital” of early nineteenth-century British antislavery successes.<sup>68</sup> That such capital’s power initially derived both from individual, fleshly histories of liberation and from commitments to such literal, corporeal liberation’s extending global future, will matter deeply here. Why should writers on womanhood, especially in the early decades of the century, *not* have believed that the formally disenfranchised could definitively shape affairs of state? Why should sentimental poetry, conceived as emanating from the symbolically sequestered domestic national (and imperial) heart, not have seemed capable of helping channel a force that could move nations, pumping freedom out across the globe? As students of the “Woman Question” (or, for that matter, “philosophy and Harry Potter”) now learn, antislavery organizing was a training ground for midcentury feminism.<sup>69</sup> Yet it was also, surely, a foundation for “Victorian femininity” itself. Indeed, if, as Elizabeth Langland rightly underscores, the “ideology of the domestic Angel in the House” plays out in relation to its “ideological Other (the Worker or Servant)—or, one might add, “the Slave”<sup>70</sup>—so, too, does the “private” moral authority of the domestic Angel play out, by right of the public achievements of those female reformers whom historian Linda Colley terms “angels of the state.”<sup>71</sup>

That such patriotic moral capital came to be drained over time by histories of controversy, disillusionment, shame, infighting, and scandal, as the

century progressed, is, again, a point that has only very recently begun fully to register.<sup>72</sup> (Another open secret, on which these pages will dwell: within the historical periodization of a self-proclaimed antislavery empire, entry into a “post-Abolition” or “post-Emancipation” time can never be more than local. Global post-Abolition time has, even now, after all, yet to begin.) How might such developments have brought understandings of feminine patriotic power—or, for that matter, of poetics—into crisis? Why should we imagine such crises might be at an end? Assuming that they are not, it may be time to expose ourselves, more directly and ambitiously, to poetic engagements in and with the processes of suspending spheres: for here, if anywhere, the claims—and costs—of such spheres’ continued imaginative instantiation seem to make themselves almost literally felt.

Generations of feminist critics have, by now, articulated the gendered implications of that “predictable critical squirming,” which so long accompanied conventional critical refusals to engage with sentimentality: resistance coded in part as aversion to the “gush of the feminine.”<sup>73</sup> Here, even in extending those critiques, I’d like to focus on patterns of critical and popular response, whereby dramatic, even histrionic shying-away from sentimental verse presents itself as a healthy response to texts conceived as contagious, fleshly bodies of bad faith—indeed, as the outward and visible signs of inward ethical and political no less than critical failures of integrity. Surely, after all, we know that deployments of satire, say, need not prove any more tough-minded, thoughtful, or even sophisticated than those of sentimentality. Why, then, do we accept critical training in condemnation of “tear-jerking,” without even seeking language for the queasy feeling of having been “laugh-jerked”?

Complex and overdetermined, this critical question seems to point, nonetheless, toward my concerns here. For it was, of course, sentimental poetry and not satire whose force came, most immediately, to be associated, first with the triumphs and then with the unfulfilled promises of early nineteenth-century antislavery triumphs.<sup>74</sup> Brief and euphoric, the period of early British antislavery victories—the period, say, of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Defense of Poetry”—must have seemed, in many quarters, to formalize the power of patriotic calls, including and perhaps especially poetic calls, on the national heart. To proclaim Britain’s claims as ever-expanding “home” of “freedom”: this was, for a few years, a move whose justification could hardly have seemed more pragmatic—or, in senses that prove crucial here, more literal. What wonder if, over time, such patriotic language, such poetry—and, potentially, by association, such claims for Poetry itself—should have come to be haunted by the material specificity of those promises of literal liberation which had once seemed to be their very source of glory? Increasingly difficult, embattled, and even ironic, the joyous claims of early antislavery culture may well have come, in many quarters, to seem at once inescapable and unbearable.

Did sentimental poetry come, over time, to act as generic scapegoat, bearing the symbolic burden of what had been, in practice, multigeneric dreams

of heart-driven, liberating global power? My suspicion is that it did—and, indeed, to some degree, still does.<sup>75</sup> If so, then the task of working through and beyond the sentimental squirm, which now strikes so many students of poetics as among the most exciting disciplinary projects of our time, may also claim to be invested with a more than disciplinary urgency.

Here, then, taking inspiration from Isobel Armstrong's suggestive envisioning of critical consent to the "terrors" of the sentimental text, I try to consider, in her terms, how poems "think" ("Textual Harassment," 102)—in this case, above all, about the process and project of suspending spheres. Turning, in part, to Garrett Stewart's account of "death sentences," with its stress on textual "turning points" in narrative prose, I propose that students of poetry, too, experiment with seeking, not skimming, those moments at which sentimental "cliché" comes to be "pitched back (not over) into revelation," as "idioms and colloquialisms" begin to "sharpen to a deadly edge."<sup>76</sup> In attempting to address the gothic energies (and, indeed, the gothic groundings) of such sentimental moments in more expressly poetic terms, moreover, I propose an alternative critical trope: the trope, that is, of the "click of the cliché." *Cliché*: in its historical, onomatopoetic links to the reiterated sound of molten metal striking a stereotype plate, the very word helps remind us how repetitive and, even in this, controlled, noisome, and potentially deadly the "gush," conceived as process, can actually be. With its crossing of linguistic barriers; apparent redundancy; and invocation of intensely physical, temporally focused experience, then, "click of the cliché" directly invokes reproductive print technologies. Above all, perhaps, even as it incorporates, while recorporealizing, the language of late nineteenth-century critical dismissal, this bilingual, reiterative phrase insists on reading clichés in terms of acts, of processes, rather than of "stock," stable, static "things."

Clichés may click anywhere. Still, those that matter most here play out within poems of patriotic feeling: texts shaped by explicit, intimate engagements with, if not necessarily straightforward elaborations of, the very process of suspending spheres. For if, as Virginia Jackson suggests, "there is nothing more sentimental than sentimental poetry" (*Dickinson's Misery*, 211), perhaps one of the best ways to confront the open secrets of our own period's continued susceptibility to the larger premises (and promises) of national sentimentality is to approach these through poetry: to explore, that is, the force of "separate" spheres' precise imaginary structurings of patriotic terror and desire in their rawest, most revelatory, and, as it turns out, often most familiar forms. ("Do not try this outside your own home": having shaped generations of poetics pedagogy, such tacit advice remains active, in trace form, as we shall see, even today.)

Hemans's notorious "Casabianca" is my key case in point. Structured so as to induce effects of intellectual and political, no less than affective, vertigo, "Casabianca" offers a particularly rigid, inextricable fusion of opposites: a dizzying doubling that presents itself, aggressively, as all surface—where

surface is understood, that is, as anything but simple (and indeed, perhaps even anything but graspable). Where does “Casabianca” stand? As we shall see, this question is at once compelling and ultimately unanswerable. Militarist and pacifist all at once, Hemans’s poem works as a form of political Möbius strip: a taut, static, tightly strained loop of emotional and ideological turn and return. At first, “Casabianca” may seem easy to grasp. Choose either the demands of femininity or masculinity, of family or the state, of “divine” or military law, of pacifism or militarism. Grasp the poem’s outer edge, firmly, at one remove: one side of each dichotomy will stand to the fore. The catch is, however, that a slight shift in perspective must reveal the *other* edge as the foreground. Which value triumphs now?

Akin to, and yet, in key respects, radically distinct from, Isobel Armstrong’s “double poem,” which commits itself to the “sophisticated exploration of new categories of knowledge” through that “formal ploy in which the uttering subject becomes object and the poem reverses relationships not one but many times” (*Victorian Poetry*, 16–17; see 12–21), a poem like “Casabianca” enacts a rigid, almost ritualistic fusion of eruption and containment, collapsing and exploding such familiar categories as pacifist critique and militarist celebration in the process. (I say “a poem like ‘Casabianca,’” knowing that, in one sense, there is no such thing, yet suspecting, simultaneously, in another sense—perhaps in company with Elizabeth Bishop—that there may be many such poems.) Armstrong’s double poem offers its active reader access to “that play of possibility in which meaning can be decided”; it demands participation in the “struggle of the lyric voice” (16, 17). Hemans’s “Casabianca,” in contrast, refuses such access, drawing consenting readers, perhaps, in part, into what Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have termed “the unbearable possibility of lyric outside the terms, or boundaries, of subjectivity” (“Lyrical Studies,” 523). Whichever way you turn this text—or turn with it—young Casabianca must die, and die horribly. Here, as abstractions take—and lose—flesh, diametrically opposed claims fuse and explode, rendered traumatically, unthinkably indistinguishable. No wonder, perhaps, that so many critics have declined to get too close; no wonder we have shied away from the challenge to engage, fully and intensely, in (part-affective) investigations of how national sentimentality “thinks.”

Intensity of engagement: what this requires, among other things, I think, are disciplines of slow, reiterative, and insistently, even crudely literalizing reading. I hope readers will be prepared to go along with me on this. Indeed, I hope this strongly enough to have taken the unusual steps, not only of reprinting most of my poetic texts in full, but also of citing lines I have just reprinted, as a means of engaging with these in deliberately uncomfortable (even excruciating) detail. This is, of course, the act of a poetry specialist—and perhaps even more immediately—a poetry teacher. Yet it takes form, too, as interdisciplinary invitation. In asking readers to join me in exploring processes of consent to sentimental patriotic poetry, I hope to offer occasions for

registering, on multiple levels, the degree to which unreadings of supposedly “cheap sentimentality” may help occlude the workings of a sentimentality that stakes its affective claims, in part, precisely by *being* costly. By working through the rich, messy, conflicted—and yet often, in the end, grotesquely static—unfoldings of these particular poetic texts, I hope we may come to grasp how disciplines of reading nineteenth-century sentimental poetry, in particular, may help us think both through and beyond spatialized, racialized fantasies of national innocence: fantasies that may, in the end, scarcely need “Victorian femininity” in order to survive.

#### LEAPING AND LINGERING: CRITICAL MOVES

Structured as a series of polemical speculations on critical and cultural histories, interrupted and complicated by close analyses of poetic texts, *Political Poetess* seeks to move, like those folk ballads on which popular patriotic poetry so often draws, through a process of “leaping and lingering.”<sup>77</sup> (“Leaps” here are undertaken not so much in Sapphic terms as in spirit of serious play: Think hang gliding.) In keeping with this effort, I have attempted to shape an emotive, multilayered series of arguments: arguments framed in language whose apparent simplicity has been hard fought. Experimental in tone no less than in structure, this is, in many ways, a sweeping polemic; and because sweeping comes hard to me, it has been a long time in the making. Still, among the luxuries polemics afford is the opportunity to signal particular forms of modesty. I would like to be right, then, about the connections that follow; I have tried to be. Yet even more than this, I would like to open up conversations—if necessary, irritated or angry conversations. For to read the Poetess as I believe she should be read, we will need to take chances, to risk indecorousness as well as mistakes.

“We,” I say, deploying here, as elsewhere, a pronoun that invokes the dream of a (lively, scrappy) community of scholars, even as it admits my own incapacity to fulfill such a vision alone. Like this book’s playfulness and its relative informality of tone, the “we” here seeks to be more invitational than coercive. At the same time, it can and should grate. “Count me out—and here’s why”: this is one of the responses I expect and even hope to receive. For indeed, in leaping, sometimes wildly, across the often difficult intersections of British, American, African American, and European literary studies, I hope to inspire readers’ productive impatience, leading them to articulate and insist on complex, perhaps foundational, distinctions and premises over which I have, necessarily, seemed to ride roughshod.<sup>78</sup> As catalyst and resource, *Political Poetess* seeks, above all, to help spark and sustain transformative debate. This is, of course, a leap in itself: a leap of faith. Yet it is one grounded in histories of generous reading, often on the part of those very colleagues whose previous publications (and, perhaps, long-past operational assumptions) I most clearly challenge here. Feminism’s Second Wave changed and continues to change

my life, not only by catching me up in the alien, compelling, and often infuriating history of “Victorian femininity,” but also by cultivating a taste for joyous and generous, if often difficult, argument. *Political Poetess* takes form, in part, as a personal experiment in translating invitations to such argument onto the page.

To the extent that this experiment works, it will allow *Political Poetess* to speak, at least to some degree, to my beginning students no less than my closest colleagues. It may allow separate spheres to take form in all our minds, *as* spheres—and to emerge, in this, as constantly caught up, by definition, in haunted, traumatic processes of suspension that can never quite hold. It may help us all to respond to patriotic poetic references to “slavery” or “liberation,” however abstract, as if these were immediately marked and haunted by remembrance of the lost, irreducible, fleshly bodies of those who have been and are enslaved—and with this, by remembrance of the unfulfilled (and in certain respects unfulfillable) promises of a sentimental “politics without politics.” In so doing, it may also push us to remember that whatever else “home” may mean, that word has become inseparable, even in our own time, from racialized imaginary spaces: haunted spaces whose insufficiency, either as protectors or redeemers of national innocence, has long been an open secret. Finally, to the extent that this experiment works, it will do so as much through readers’ generous patience in the face of a mixture of sweeping gestures, minute details, and general disorientation as through my own attempts to shape a book that will, as Marge Piercy once put it, “be of use.”

#### LEAPING AND LINGERING: SECTIONS, CHAPTERS

*Political Poetess* works through a triad of tightly framed, two-chapter sections: the first, focused primarily on racialized Poetess reception and performance; the next, on negotiations with the forms of “spheres” and of sentimental poetry; and the third, on transatlantic readings building on previous sections’ points. Each section works toward placement through displacement; each continuously loops through time, exploring a “nineteenth-century Poetess” who shifts, flickers, and mourns through the nineteenth century, the 1930s, the 1970s, the 1990s, and beyond.

Taking student responses to Felicia Hemans’s 1825 “Bride of the Greek Isle” as springboard, section 1’s first chapter draws on emerging pedagogical and scholarly revolutions in studies of nineteenth-century British relations to slavery, considering histories of disciplinary reticence tracing back in part to the Victorians themselves. The increasingly iconic histories of the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention and of J.M.W. Turner’s scandalous *Slave Ship*: these serve as grounding points for explorations of mid- to late-Victorian attempts at self-distancing from triumphalist (and literalist) early antislavery promises. Here, I attempt to link racialized late-Victorian revisionist engagements with earlier antislavery poetics to our own inherited traditions of resistance,



whether to reading sentimental poetic texts or to considering the famous mid-century political crises of Victorian poetry in racialized terms.

Turning to Elizabeth V. Spelman's *Fruits of Sorrow*, I consider how that feminist philosopher's reflections on current controversies play out, in part, through a scenario of nineteenth-century writing: one in which a representative white female abolitionist, having begun by attempting to imagine the corporeal sufferings of the literally enslaved, slips into writing of her own metaphoric "slavery" instead. At play here, Spelman proposes, is an ongoing conceptual practice: that of "changing the subject." For by presenting herself "as occupying the same experiential territory as slaves," Spelman's abolitionist writer actually works to efface "signs of the slaves' occupation of that territory" altogether.<sup>79</sup> "Changing the subject," adapted and writ large, enters *Political Poetess* as shorthand both for Victorian and post-Victorian moves to invoke terms like *freedom* or *slavery* as if these could be fully detachable from historical corporeal referents. (Often, though not always, such moves seek to draw on patriotic moral capital originally accrued through antislavery victories, while effectively effacing corporeal awareness of the human subjects of slavery, whether remembered or embodied in the still living, still suffering flesh of the as-yet unemancipated enslaved.) *Liberty; slavery*: what if, I ask, we experimented in (re)literalizing such words? In addressing that possibility, I explore the discipline I term "ethical refocalization": a reading discipline, that is, committed to continuing to honor a given narrative's overt emphasis on particular characters' perspectives, even while simultaneously insisting, against the grain, on reading through the perspectives of characters whose presence may register, then be set aside. Sappho still leaps, in such a reading; and we still watch. Still, "leap," for us, must now invoke, too, cultural memories of the deaths of Phillis Wheatley's lost compatriots, drowned in the Middle Passage. In closing, I explore such disciplines of refocalized reading by turning to three celebrated, parallel scenes of interrupted Poetess performance, in Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*; EBB's *Aurora Leigh*, and George Eliot's *Spanish Gypsy*. Each proves, in the term of our own time, startlingly racialized. I say "our own time," because in Eliot's case, such antislavery reading has already been anticipated by no less a critic than Frances E. W. Harper herself. That Harper sees hope, where Eliot sees haunting, proves worthy of note.

Returning to a moment when African American and nineteenth-century British studies converged, chapter 2 explores struggles to define relations between "Victorian femininity" and racialized Poetess reception as developments of more recent origin. Here, revisiting foundational Second Wave feminist texts from Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* to Cora Kaplan's *Salt and Bitter and Good*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, Erlene Stetson's *Black Sister*, Cheryl Walker's *Nightingale's Burden*, and Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* and beyond, I explore how

early strains in Second Wave thinking, responding in part to that privatizing (and, somewhat more surprisingly, racializing, Victorianizing) critical process, which Jacqueline Rose so resonantly terms the “haunting of Sylvia Plath,” came to define feminist criticism itself as a politicized mode of crisis intervention. Revolutionizing readings of a long-standing target of modernist mockery, such criticism now invested the figure of the lost or endangered Poetess with the urgency of a movement even now rendering the “personal” as “political.”

“Who made the Poetess white?” “Whose death matters?": to register such questions' convergence, in part through readings of “Victorian femininity,” is to link unaddressed disciplinary histories to battles over the subjects of feminism itself. For indeed, early in the Second Wave, an influential strain of criticism, caught up in the dramatic claims of “the personal,” conceived as a category only now *becoming* (sexual-)“political,” began undertaking what was, effectively, a racialized task of affective policing. Aimed at maintaining the bounds of “spheres,” so as to ensure full focus on the potentially fatal, newly politicized “personal” agonies and ambivalences of “private” (read: relatively privileged) femininity, such policing sought to define the subjects of feminist poetics along lines that elided whole categories of “public” poetry by women, whole categories of female poets. Shaped, in part, by such moves, the Hemans who now reenters serious literary criticism thus appears less as the author of “Casabianca” than as a lost, artistically suicidal proto-Plath. Elizabeth Barrett Browning emerges, in turn, above all as author of “A Curse for a Nation” and, as such, to be celebrated for her inspirational capacity to voice (while displacing) intimate sexual-political rebellion. Finally, Frances E. W. Harper now comes to be barred, explicitly, from the category of “poetess.” Too public, too confident, and too “free” from (privileged) self-torment, Harper is now banished, along with Wheatley, from the company of those who bear the “nightingale’s burden.”

Uneven and self-haunted, such policing was also bitterly contested. Who made the endangered Poetess white? Not those African American feminists whose early, eloquent challenges clearly anticipate—and, indeed, inspire—this project’s own calls for ethical refocalization. (“You want to save the next Judith Shakespeare? Fine. What about the next Phillis Wheatley?”) Indeed, to seek out early, explicitly racialized meditations on the loss of African American Poetess figures, I note, is to draw together some of the most passionate, ambitious critical and creative writing of a generation of scholars and critics, of public intellectuals, novelists, and poets. (It is also, intriguingly, to grasp that African American readings of Tennyson are not an entirely new subject of concern.) Unfortunately, as I note, by the time African American studies began to come of age, however, the privatizing stasis of Poetess parallax had begun to set in. Without the category of “Political Poetess,” why should students of Harper not set Poetess studies aside? That we ourselves might now want to deploy that category, even in looking back toward the 1970s, is a point

brought home, in closing, through a brief turn toward Alice Walker's extraordinary 1976 Poetess novel *Meridian*.

With section 2, "spheres," and with them, the national sentimental fantasies they help structure, take literal form. Proposing a precise, spatialized model of "separate spheres"; exploring that same unworkable, haunted, racialized model's striking post-Victorian resilience; experimenting with forms of reading—and rereading—as interdisciplinary resources: these projects unite chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3, having once modeled suspended spheres, I suggest that the revelatory power of these imaginary objects' relations, in mythic terms, may be matched only by their capacity to help figure otherwise mysterious acts of political, intellectual, historical denial. Building on Bonnie Honig's critique of current democratic theory's willingness to accept what she terms the "Antigone effect," I ask: what histories of evasion might help explain current democratic theorists' apparent willingness to keep positioning Antigone as heroic figure for femininity's relations to the State, without ever asking about Antigone's slaves? What forms of analysis—what reading experiences—might help expose and denaturalize the allure of suspending spheres, the satisfactions of continuing to pretend race plays no role within the maintenance of even the most abstract "State-free zones?"

In considering this, I turn to three Crimean poems by hitherto undistinguished "poetess" Dinah Mulock Craik. To read Craik's Poetess performances as those of a constitutive "internal enemy" of the State—to read these texts as caught up in the continuous, agonizing, seductive process of suspending spheres—may be to begin grasping the full promise of the model of suspended spheres as tool for revealing the full force and complexity of supposedly "unreadable" sentimental verse. At the same time, to commit to serious reading of poems like Craik's may also be to risk revelatory self-exposure to the troubling, intimate force of the imaginary process of suspending spheres itself. Irreconcilably mournful; obsessed with futility; and frank, to a surprising degree, about the psychic and intellectual costs of the (a)political performances they offer, Craik's patriotic poems also prove suggestively resonant with that greatest of all modernist critiques of Victorian patriotic sentimentality, Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*.

"Virginia Woolf, Poetess": where *Three Guineas* is concerned, this title is, oddly enough, not unprecedented. With its notorious, ultimately ambiguous assertion that "As a woman I have no country" and its attempt to explode faith in the redemptive, pacifist claims of the "Victorian private home," *Three Guineas* long stood as a definitive feminist pacifist text. Here, through a reading of Woolf's work as deeply concerned with, if not obsessed by, Victorian poetry, I read that polemic, as, above all, a meditation on the barely post-Victorian cultural lives both of "Victorian femininity" and of the fantasy of suspended spheres. A world without Victorians—a world, even, without "women": these seem to be in play for Woolf. Can even she envision a military nation whose far-off hopes for pacifist redemption dispense with the

suspended space of the “private sphere,” however? Here, the answer seems far less clear. Still, if we do seek to interrupt the (racialized) “Antigone effect,” I note, we might take Woolf’s partly Victorianized Antigone—who faces off, metaphorically, against Tennyson; who stands shoulder-to-shoulder with late-Victorian reformer Josephine Butler; and who seems haunted by memories of female public figures’ struggles over Boer War concentration camps—as a good place to start.

Even as Woolf closes chapter 3, she opens chapter 4, through “The Works of Mrs. Hemans,” an unpublished story draft whose protagonist, the tellingly named, university-educated textbook editor “Mr. Hume,” can’t bring himself either to read Hemans or to stop fantasizing about (reforming) a woman who does. To open even the 2014 edition of that classic poetics primer *Sound and Sense*, I note, may be to recognize Mr. Hume’s dilemma as oddly contemporary. For even after decades of revision, this still-standard text continues not only to present learning to unread sentimental poetry as an educational rite of passage, but also to encourage the cultivation of part comic, part courtly, part anxious visions of naïve and sentimental readers: readers whose beloved texts must surely be protected from the unkindness of critical scrutiny. Such time-honored pedagogy, I note, surely earns the double-edged name of “sentimental criticism.”

Confronted with the prospect of metaphoric immersion in what he thinks of as the “jungle” of Hemans’s verse, Mr. Hume flees. Inspired, as noted, by Isobel Armstrong’s call for experimental self-exposure to the “terrors” of poetic texts, I attempt the opposite move: temporary immersion, that is, in the metaphorically messy, visceral, “gushing,” excessive language of a poetry clearly given over to the “click of the cliché.” Rude parodies of Hemans’s “Casabianca,” I note, might well awaken sympathy for Mr. Hume: for as these suggest—and as Elizabeth Bishop’s “Casabianca” underscores—Hemans’s language, precisely at its most decorous, does indeed incite acts of grisly imaginative corporealization. Even before Bishop names him, after all, Hemans’s Casabianca is a burning boy. Indeed, consent to the patriotic Poetess terrors of Hemans may well serve as prerequisite for rendering the terrifying critical and political as well as poetic achievement of Bishop’s modernist elegy fully legible. Devoid though it is of reference to “Victorian,” or perhaps even to feminine, domesticity, the *New York Times*’ volume *Portraits: 9/11/01; The Collected “Portraits of Grief”* closes this chapter, in some respects as a counter to Bishop: for if Bishop does and undoes the suspension of spheres, *Portraits* demonstrates that in this national sentimental Möbius strip, the transformation of “America” into national sentimental “Poem” requires neither lowercase poetry nor Poetess.

In section 3, converging transatlantic readings open through a chapter-long engagement with that great poetic “manifesto” of Second Wave criticism, EBB’s “A Curse for a Nation.” Here, after noting that poem’s strange recent history of pedagogical truncation, I explore how reflections on “changing the

subject” might help illuminate the cultural life (and excerpting) of “Curse” within its own time—or times. Accompanied by a byline in its first appearance in the 1856 radical Garrisonian abolitionist *Liberty Bell*, “Curse” enters this chapter as an occasional poem: an angry, explicit response to the proslavery, imperialist national sentimentality of the American “Ostend Manifesto” of 1854. In its composition, no less than its initial appearances, whether in *The Liberty Bell* or in the author’s 1860 Risorgimento *Poems before Congress*, “Curse” appears here as a text set into circulation through and beyond the boundaries not merely of Britain, the United States, and Italy, but also of what I term “Abolition time.” Read thus, “Curse” emerges as a pointed demonstration of how, through closer attention to transnational temporality, altered readings of antislavery poetics might help reframe not only understandings of individual poems, but now-familiar conceptions of nation and periodization.

Shifting periods, the second half of this chapter develops an intensive reading of “Curse” itself, adamantly conceived as grounded in a scene of (anti)sentimental antislavery pedagogy: as a poem, that is, whose complex, recoiling midcentury engagements with antislavery poetics structure an explicit drama of “reading”—and writing—“white.” Building on women’s studies educator Peggy McIntosh’s influential trope of the “knapsack” of white privilege, I propose that EBB’s poem, once confronted as an act of conflicted, racialized ethical refocalization, might (re)emerge, in our own time, as an irreplaceable convergence point for Victorian studies, feminist theory, historical poetics, and critical race studies. Indeed, read both as registering and reflecting on acts of “changing the subject,” “Curse” might help open up new understandings of the powerful (self-)haunted workings of a metaphoric tool that we might term, following McIntosh, a “loudspeaker” of white privilege.

My sixth and final chapter documents how, from her early invocation of the specter of the Poetess on the auction block; through her grisly commodity-gothic dream-visions of children’s “filed,” bloody, rocking hearts; to her late replacement of earlier “heart” tropes with the figure of Harriet Tubman’s bruised hands, Frances E. W. Harper deploys Poetess performance as a powerful, if ultimately insufficient, resource for articulating poetic visions of globally aware, politically ambitious African American intellectual culture. Building on the author’s own self-depiction, in an 1870 *Christian Recorder* notice, as “our most celebrated poetess and oratrix” (“Bundle of Facts”), I draw on contemporary reports of Harper’s stage performance and Poetess writing in the African American periodical press, as well as on intensive readings of Harper’s poetry and prose, to argue both that students of the Poetess need Harper, and that students of Harper, whether as poet or orator, may need to consider the Poetess.

In seeking to explore the strenuousness and virtuosity of Harper’s engagements with “separate spheres,” I turn, as a matter of course, to her famous narrator Chloe Fleet, exploring how, through the “click of the cliché,” Harper corporealizes that character’s well-known challenges to slaveholding

domesticity. Yet I focus, too, no less, on the narrator of “The Fugitive’s Wife”: a figure whose bitter narrative energy must remain largely illegible, unless recognized as central to a forceful, explicitly racialized critical challenge to contemporary readings of the logic of patriotic suicide poems, including and especially Hemans’s “The Switzer’s Wife.” (Harper; Bishop: as readers of Hemans the political Poetess, these meet.) To read Harper as Poetess performer, I suggest, may actually be to rehistoricize her reception: a point brought home here, in striking fashion, by recontextualization and reconsideration of that most famous contemporary account of Harper’s oratory, antislavery Poetess performer Grace Greenwood’s depiction of the poet as “bronze muse.”

In its most gothic, as well as its most unflinching critiques, Harper’s political writing does strain against Poetess performance, I note, in ways that seem to intensify over time—and that resonate, perhaps with two late occasional pieces that constitute this book’s final readings. The first, “Do Not Cheer, Men are Dying,” celebrates mourning for wartime enemies’ suffering on the part of men in battle; the next, “The Vision of the Czar of Russia,” celebrates the acknowledgment of war resistance as a matter of international policy. Both poems, I demonstrate, seek to break the bounds of haunted, suspended spheres. Still, even in their expansive, forward-looking visions, both “Do Not Cheer” and “The Vision of the Czar” serve, nonetheless, in part, to dramatize the dangerous attractions of the project of suspending spheres: a point that links them both not only to Poetess histories, but to our own incompletely post-Victorian moment as well.