Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 344 pp.

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The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres frames its larger inquiry with respect to the term *poetess*, one of the central points of investigation in transatlantic nineteenth-century poetry studies in recent decades. More provocatively, Tricia Lootens situates her argument with respect to the limits and failures of poetess scholarship, arguing that poetess studies have "tapered off" in favor of "richly specific, historically detailed engagements with individual poets' public writing" that have emerged "almost exponentially" (6). It is in the latter group that she grounds the present project. Focusing in the public arena of sentimental patriotic poems by women, she pushes back against routine (dismissive) ways of reading such poems and, indeed, against the idea of the cliché itself. Her titular alignment of the putative "poetess" with the adjective "political"—a conjunction she tactically calls an "oxymoron" (1)—intends to disrupt the very idea of the "poetess" as a figure constructed by way of woman's "separate sphere."

She situates her challenges to the very "privacy" of such an imagined (read: ideological) woman's sphere throughout her study in careful relation to the particularities and vocabularies of the robust scholarship on the "poetess." The well-known formulation of Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson in their essay "Lyrical Studies" that "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'" but a "means of performing" (5) is one Lootens respects, relies on, and repurposes. The book's introduction in particular might serve as a useful *vade mecum* for graduate students and for newcomers to this influential scholarly discussion of recent years.

Amid her respectful and detailed engagements with the work of her fellow scholars in poetess studies, she also identifies some of the strictures of these critical conceptions. As what she calls "access points" for studying women's poetry (6), such strictures have both opened and, more pointedly, closed avenues of inquiry. Her title word "legacy" thus also carries a double edge: it signals the book's ambition to disrupt both the historical and the scholarly "legacies"—distinct but related phenomena—that have shaped and defined how we think about women who write poems. Most essential to this project is a question she poses repeatedly throughout, as refrain: "'Who made the Poetess white?'" (e.g., 22).

More pointedly, and very welcome in our own moment (a presentist orientation she acknowledges as such at various moments [e.g., 179]), Lootens traces how constructions

of the poetess have hidden, ignored, obscured, and served to elide the hauntedness of that putative private sphere by the complex intersectional and global "histories of enslavement and race relations" (40). Her chapters resituate ideas of the poetess's privacy as indeed densely predicated on and interwoven with different and shifting historical and social points in Britain's arresting transformation from "the world's most powerful slave-trading empire" into "the world's first ongoing, official antislavery empire" (15).

For example, recounting Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous and resonant remark about her own West Indian slaveholding family that, had she believed in curses, she should be afraid, Lootens situates the "Victorian femininity" of Browning and other Victorian women amid the thick legacies of British (and transatlantic and global) slavery, antislavery, and post-Emancipation. Across six chapters divided into three sections—"Racializing the Poetess: Haunting 'Separate Spheres'"; "Suspending Spheres: The Violent Structures of Patriotic Pacifism"; and "Transatlantic Occasions: Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Poetics at the Limits"—Lootens pursues an approach she calls "a series of polemical reception histories" (2). These tales "unread" (214n7) the very idea of cheap sentimentality by recasting its operations within these urgent networks of representation.

Writing in a critical age when boundaries of nation and period have come under due scrutiny, Lootens frames her use of the term "Victorian" as "deliberately loose" (213n2). (Indeed, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Elizabeth Bishop play major roles in her discussion, motivated by her larger engagement with both poetess history and the complex legacies of "the Victorian.") But the book is not fully convincing in addressing the conceptual problems that arise from this particular looseness.

For example, she further specifies that she invokes "Victorian" to extend "well beyond references to a period of British history to encompass, at points, among other things, 'American Victorian Poetry' as an emerging scholarly category," citing the 2005 special issue of *Victorian Poetry* titled "American Victorian Poetry," edited by Virginia Jackson, as an example (213n2). Put most baldly, we might ask what it means to classify "American poetry" (a category that itself requires full and fully historicized articulation on a case-by-case basis) by way of a British monarch. A deeper engagement with the extensive body of primary and secondary sources on these decades in the US would have clarified the stakes. In short, all those historical and disciplinary complexities are not so easily subsumed under loose use of a British term.

For example, the lack of engagement with Americanist studies such as Paula Bennett's foundational *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800–1900*, published 15 years ago, signals a missed opportunity to begin to

answer some of these questions, even provisionally, especially given Lootens's opening embrace of "richly specific, historically detailed engagements with individual poets' public writing" (6). (Bennett's book appears in the bibliography, without further citation.)

This issue becomes especially problematic for Lootens because one of her major figures across the book is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Indeed, Harper appears early, continues as a thread among discussions of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Langdon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot (in a welcome discussion of Eliot as poet), and Dinah Mulock Craik, and centers the final chapter. Lootens situates her enthusiastic attention to Harper as woman/political/poet as a challenge to larger historical and scholarly "legacies" of the privatized female "separate sphere" as always already not only racialized but mired in whiteness. Granting that students of nineteenth-century British literature "should read Harper," she reciprocally asks: "why should students of Harper care about British Poetess performance?" (183).

But Lootens's interest in situating Harper in the arena of the "Victorian" poetess raises more questions than it answers. Her discussion of Harper's relation to women Victorian poets' work is illuminating, and here *The Political Poetess* joins recent Victorianist scholarship like Daniel Hack's excellent *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* in revealing such valuable intersections. But as Brian Sweeney's review of Hack in these pages points out, Hack's book tends "to imply British cultural priority . . . somewhat undermining [his] goal not to cast African American literature as derivative." Lootens's book evinces a similarly uneasy relation between its own critical orientation and the primary (welcome) role it affords Harper, who is clearly emerging as a poet that our larger culture is now (in long-overdue fashion) embracing as a major figure.

Lootens herself acknowledges her desire for "more complex demarcations" (158). She often coins her own terms and phrases as a workaround, and she shifts at times to a style that she calls "a larger, speculative mode" (30). For example, her phrase "Abolition time" (159) is meant to complicate definitive, linear notions of temporality—like the multilayered difference between emancipation as a legal change that took effect in the British West Indies at the precise designated moment of dawn on August 1, 1834 and the much more ambiguous history of slavery and freedom before and after (158). More tactically, she points out that "the 'post-Abolition' period is one that we ourselves have yet to enter, or, better said, achieve" (159).

Lootens herself acknowledges that it is not a revelation at this point to argue that the "separate spheres" were never separate to begin with (13). *The Political Poetess* continues to challenge the historical and scholarly "legacies" of this construct as she traces their

hauntedness by race and enslavement. And in pulling "the poetess" out of the private sphere, Lootens also brings her very much into our own present moment's urgent sociopolitics of liberation.