

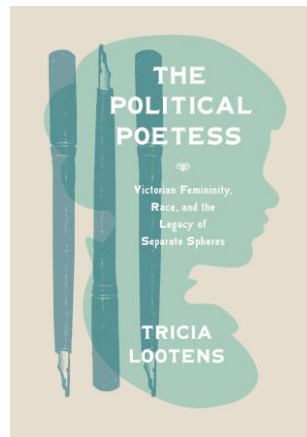
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Special Issue:

Making Masculinity: Craft, Gender and Material Production in the Long Nineteenth Century

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‘Who made the Poetess white? No one; not ever.’

[*The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres*](#). Tricia Lootens. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 344 pp.

Reviewed by [Clare Stainthorp](#), Cardiff University

<1>Tricia Lootens’s book opens with reflections on the ‘political poetess’, interrogating the phrase and its constituent parts, encouraging the reader to engage and re-engage with their assumptions and those of Victorian studies writ large. The ‘political poetess’ is a concept that forces us to dismantle any gendered notion of separate spheres if it is to be considered seriously. It forces us to confront how the shifting, contested, mythic, fractured figure of the nineteenth-century poetess is haunted by notions of femininity and feeling, nation and empire, purity and power. In *The Political Poetess*, Lootens asks, ‘Who made the Poetess white? No one; not ever’ (7). This refrain chimes throughout, refocusing readers’ attention at crucial moments on the revisionist task at hand.

<2>This impressive book makes space for slippages and complications. ‘Let me introduce you to the Poetess – or rather, *my* Poetess,’ Lootens writes. On the same page she tells us that ‘I speak of “the Poetess”; but, in fact, I have come to believe there is no such thing’ (3). The poetess is deemed a dissolving figure, ‘less a heroine than a heritage’ (3), characterized by vacancy,

erasure, and loss. Lootens is interested in the silence of women in creative and critical terms. The reader is addressed directly and compelled to engage in a conversation with Lootens that challenges assumptions about this private, domestic, shadowy figure. Over the course of six chapters (split into three distinct sections) Lootens reconfigures poetess performance through the lenses of race and slavery, the legacies and resonances of separate spheres, and the broader politics of gender and poetics.

<3>Scholars are taken to task for their dismissal of the poetess to make space for ‘women poets,’ an elision that has historically divided the kinds of women and kinds of poetry that do and do not deserve sustained critical attention. Lootens pulls no punches:

‘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 / study [...] 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 [...] Don’t worry! We’ll have her offstage in no time.’ (8)

The Political Poetess thus politicizes manoeuvres made by writers in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, provoking scholarly readers to reassess the *status quo*, encouraging those working on women poets to cast their nets wider. The book is pitched by Lootens as ‘a series of polemic speculations on critical and cultural histories, interrupted and complicated by close analyses of poetic texts’ (19). Thus, she acknowledges it to be an active experiment, and it is an experiment that is largely a success.

<4>Lootens’s engaging, often conversational tone is balanced by highly complex figurations that weave together multi-layered ideas, displacing the figure of the nineteenth-century poetess, identifying legacies, echoes and re-articulations across the last two centuries. Lootens does not do this seamlessly, but nor does she wish to; points of contact between time and place are signposted as moments of ‘leaping and lingering’ (19). Linger is facilitated by printing several poems in full. Thus, Lootens emphasizes the centrality of these women’s voices and gives poems room to breathe. By reproducing key texts, she enforces emphatic pauses and reflection amid a sometimes-frenetic critical prose style.

<5>As outlined in Chapter One, ‘Anti-Slavery Afterlives: Changing the Subject / Haunting the Poetess’, there is a commitment in *The Political Poetess* to reading against the grain to ‘chang[e] the subject back’, ‘to read words like slavery and freedom as directly invoking the irreducibly individual, corporeal presences of those who have been, or are, enslaved’ (41-42). Central to Lootens’s methodology is the literalization of abstract or metaphorical uses of these words, resisting the critical tendency to displace the black subject in favour of the white female experience. Felicia Hemans, Germaine de Staël, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot are each discussed in relation to anti-slavery poetics and racializing discourses. Lootens writes that in conversation with Helena Michie she has come to see these interventions as ‘ethical

refocalization' (42). The success of her argument, as sustained over this monograph, demonstrates that more research needs to take on this challenge and apply this approach.

<6>Chapter Two, "'Not Another 'Poetess'": Feminist Criticism, Nineteenth-Century Poetry, and the Racialization of Suicide', turns our attention to the ways that Second Wave feminist writings and more recent literary scholarship have defined the poetess voices deemed lost and found. Critical mythmaking comes in for scrutiny as Lootens presents 'narratives of origin' that led to the 'emergence of the privatized Poetess, conceived as a passionately contested, always incomplete, and, in many ways, revealingly self-haunted *process* of attempting to "change the subject"' (my emphasis, 55). To conceive of the Poetess as a performative process rather than a personage re-orientates the issue at hand. Lootens brings into focus Frances E. W. Harper, a figure distanced from Victorian Studies because critical assumptions surrounding privatized domesticity have resisted the figure of the black Poetess.

<7>Section Two focuses on what Lootens terms 'The Violent Structures of Patriotic Pacifism,' renegotiating the concept of 'spheres' and reconceiving what is termed 'sentimental' poetry. Chapter Three considers the suspending of spheres, moving across and between places and times. Lootens carefully unpicks Dinah Mulock Craik's *Crimea* poems (1883), that are usually dismissed as sentimental and unworthy of sustained critical analysis. She then alights on Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) as a 'barely post-Victorian' (115) text haunted by spheres and servants. Throughout, Lootens reads readers as much as writers, demonstrating how perspectives on race and gender have been shaped by the way in which texts have been classed and critiqued as the work of a poetess.

<8>Felicia Hemans's 'Casabianca' (1826) and its many afterlives (including Elizabeth Bishop's 1936 poem of the same name) come into focus via virtuoso close readings in Chapter Four. By 'Reading over and over, at uncomfortably close quarters' (130) Hemans's poem is made unfamiliar, its gothic violence brought to the fore. This is Lootens's test case for convincingly arguing that to unlearn the tendency towards dismissing sentimental poetry, we 'need to develop even more explicit sustained conversations about the precise sorts of critical discipline that openly critical sentimental reading might require' (121). We are encouraged to work through literal and metaphorical readings of feminine clichés like 'the gush' and 'tear-jerking' (121) to consider how, when applied to women's writing, these figurations can transform sentimentality into corporeality.

<9>The final section 'Transatlantic Occasions: Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Poetics at the Limits' extends and applies what has come before. 'Salt, and bitter, and good' becomes a refrain as Lootens reconsiders the antislavery poetics of Barrett Browning's 'Curse for a Nation' (1856) in Chapter Five. Lootens introduces the crucial concept of 'Abolition time' (154) to restructure time and space, shifting zones within and against which to read. She engages closely, combatively, and playfully with existing critical approaches – bouncing them off one another and building on them by interrogating their assumptions. *The Political Poetess* is thus

characterized by slow reading and persistent rereading that exposes new sides of familiar poems and figurations.

<10>Ultimately, 'Curse' is shown to be an anguished, ironic, passionate anti-slavery poem that *cannot* work. Lootens's commitment to moments of reflection grounded in pedagogy strengthens this conclusion. She describes how teaching certain Victorian texts has affected her critical readings by exposing and interrogating the intersections of white privilege, pedagogy, and Victorian studies. Towards the end of the chapter, Lootens introduces the concept of the 'loudspeaker of privilege' (178) as a culturally naturalized tool of oppression. In terms of white privilege, this manifests as 'an expectation of being able to speak on all matters of race, race relations, and ethnicity, in dominant cultural contexts, with unearned authority' (179). Crucially, 'through that loudspeaker, the "right" thing – the thing, that is, that could be spoken without negatively "taking" the "part" of people of color, in EBB's terms – simply cannot be said' but this is, she argues, 'no grounds for silence' (179).

<11>Lootens concludes by turning the spotlight on African American political Poetess performance. Chapter Six, 'Harper's Hearts: "Home Is Never Natural or Safe"', opens with a claim for *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) as 'required reading for students of "separate spheres," "Victorian femininity" [... and] nineteenth-century British poetry' (183). Labelled by the *Christian Remembrancer* as 'our most celebrated poetess and oratrix' (qtd. 189), Lootens asks how far Harper's abolitionist lectures were conceived of as a form of Poetess performance. A climactic discussion of corporeality in 'The Triumph of Freedom – A Dream' (1860) focuses on how gothic descriptions of piles of bleeding hearts belonging to brutalized slaves transform 'the gush of the feminine' and abolitionist rhetoric into something forcefully, viscerally horrifying (198).

<12>Lootens assures the reader that her use of 'we' throughout *The Political Poetess* 'seeks to be more invitational than coercive. At the same time, it can and should grate' (19). She expects that her book will be met with resistance as its pace and scope can sometimes blur edges rather than provide clarity. Lootens is challenging, in all senses of the word, and those who have invested much in tracing precise contours within Victorian studies may find some elements of *The Political Poetess* a leap too far. Nonetheless, it deserves to be lingered upon. Lootens has written an urgent book and it should be read as a matter of urgency by those who research and teach nineteenth-century studies.