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Review of: Tricia Lootens, THE POLITICAL POETESS: VICTORIAN FEMININITY, RACE, AND THE LEGACY OF SEPARATE SPHERES, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017

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Tricia Lootens,
*THE POLITICAL POETESS: VICTORIAN FEMININITY, RACE, AND
THE LEGACY OF SEPARATE SPHERES,*
Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017, 344 pages.

In recent years critical attention has often turned its focus to the cultural trope of the “Poetess”. Studies applying historical recontextualisation and close textual analysis have recovered the work of Victorian women poets, who, despite their popularity in the nineteenth century, had long been relegated to the margins of the dominant narratives of literary history. These reconstructions have frequently revealed that Poetess writings on emotion and domesticity can probe complex questions of a wider ideological nature.

Tricia Lootens’ *The Political Poetess* is a notable contribution to both this ongoing project of revisionist literary and historical criticism and to wider aspects of feminist theory. Lootens extends her explorations to Victorian women’s poetry analysed in *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (1996), while also developing arguments presented in some of her earlier publications on political poets.

The Political Poetess is far from an easy read; written for specialists in the field of British and American poetry and women’s studies, it assumes significant knowledge, both of the women poets under discussion and the critical contexts in which they have been

placed. Lootens’ emotive, provocative and politically engaged language, which directly addresses her readers and often resorts to a metaphoric and hermetic style,¹ increases the difficulty in clearly understanding her positions. From a structural perspective, presenting material “through a process of ‘leaping and lingering’” (19), her words for the choice of a “multilayered” reading that juxtaposes fragments and passages lifted out of different periods and disciplines, might indeed help “connect many sorts of dots” (7) but is liable – despite her hopes to the contrary (19-20) – to distract the reader.

Taking her cue from Yopie Prins, the author views the Poetess as a form of cultural “heritage” (3), connected with erotic loss, artistic suffering and depersonification, and investigates different aspects of her performance

¹ For example, see p. 123: “How might reproduction of the already all-too-familiar itself play out as potentially revelatory drama? Might even the very sentimental poetry machine – predictable; static; contained; commodified; comfortably, if implicitly, gendered and sexualized – look different, once metaphorically confronted with the instabilities of a potentially scarifying or toxic ‘gush’? Certainly tear-jerking might.”

and reception. The analysis, throughout the book's three sections, develops around two central questions forming the connecting axes of the various texts being considered. The book's principal virtue lies in the exploration of these questions; something that becomes sharper when Lootens concentrates on close readings of particular poems.

The first question concerns the assumed "whiteness" of the Poetess; the second addresses her ability to write patriotic poetry from an imaginary apolitical domestic position. Lootens exhorts her readers to challenge the doctrine of "separate spheres" as a historically biased construct: the private realm cannot be purely feminine, overshadowed as it is by the imperatives of the patriarchal state and the empire. Instead, Lootens undertakes to demonstrate women's patriotic verse as revealing a space of "suspended spheres", conceived as a conflicted feminine moral space. Accordingly, she proposes a new reading of this poetry's sentimentality with the aim of eliciting its troubling negotiations with "fantasies of national innocence".

The book's first section examines episodes in the history of the reception of the Poetess, illustrating its racial bias. Revisiting second-wave feminist criticism, Lootens suggests that, following Sylvia Plath's suicide in 1963, her elevation to an emblematic model of the misfit female creator, together with critical emphasis on the element of inner self-torment, shaped interpretations of the Poetess as being private, free and white. According to Lootens, the essentialising critical discourse on

the "slavery" of the female condition culminated in "changing the subject" (21), persistently overlooking the political engagements of Poetess texts with chattel slavery and abolitionist discourse, not to mention the socio-political production of nineteenth-century black poetesses, such as Frances E. W. Harper, whose national poetry was deliberately directed towards a public audience. Felicia Hemans' poem "The Bride of the Greek Isle" (1825) is now framed in the dual contexts of late eighteenth-century narratives concerning suicide among slaves during the Middle Passage, and its Victorian reception as an antislavery text. This recontextualisation offers an exemplar of the complex political implications of Hemans' sentimental verse, ignored by previous criticism that focused exclusively on her life and social situation.

In the second section, using rigorous readings of poems by the lesser-known Dinah Mulock Craik, Hemans and Elizabeth Bishop, Lootens pursues questions regarding the relationship of Victorian femininity with dreams of national innocence. Bishop's "Casabianca" (1936) provides her with the opportunity to reveal insights into its uncanny invocation of Hemans' popular poem of the same title; a poem instrumental for decades in shaping schoolchildren's perceptions of national identity in English-speaking countries. Bishop's poem resonates with the earlier poem, in ways exposing and deriding the pervasiveness of patriotic rhetoric. Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) was also written against a backdrop of 1930s politics (and burgeoning fascism).

Lootens daringly reframes the work as a “post-Poetess project” (103), highlighting the assault by Woolf’s narrator on Victorian womanhood’s pacifist values and her troubling reflections on the relationship between gender, militarism and violence. Vaulting ahead to the twenty-first century, the author next examines the *New York Times* volume *Portraits: 9/11/01* as a polar example of the “continued [...] force” (147), well beyond the Victorian era, of sentimental apolitical treatments of the nation.

Lootens’ analyses here are prefaced by an extended engagement with Hegel’s writing on Antigone in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* together with later critical responses. Conceived as a symbol of femininity’s preoccupation with familial happiness and the divine law surviving in the interstices of the state, resisting its militaristic laws and thus constituting “the eternal irony of the community”, Antigone personifies a powerful mode of conceiving femininity’s relation to the state. Her treatment by Hegel serves as a springboard for Lootens to present a “spatial model” of “suspended spheres”, within which femininity safeguards the ideal of kinship in “temporary custody” (86).

Nevertheless, this tormented excursion seems superfluous; doing little to enhance the reader’s understanding of the texts discussed in the following chapters of this section or inspire them to take on board the implications of slavery. For instance, Craig’s and Hemans’ conflicted patriotism, their ambivalent postures as both supporters and critics of state-sanctioned violence, are evident in Lootens’ analysis of the poems themselves (let alone considerations of Hemans’

romanticism), without requiring extensive reference to theoretical conceptions of Antigone.²

The third and final section of the book examines texts whose political concerns, intertextual connections or circulation histories show the transatlantic mediation of ideas about nation and nationhood, which, as Lootens correctly points out, require consideration when discussing individual Poetess performances.

In the first chapter of this final section, the analysis focuses on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s widely discussed “A Curse for a Nation” (published twice, in 1855 and 1860), revisiting it from a perspective insisting on the poem’s antislavery focus. Grounding “A Curse for a Nation” in its contemporary historical context of the proslavery Ostend Manifesto (1854), Lootens examines how Barrett Browning mobilises a new antislavery poetic, attributing a wider significance to her poem’s polemics, encompassing the multiplicity of forms of enslavement existing in Britain, Europe (Italy) and America. The poem’s central political import is the need for liberal action by both the writing I and her country. As Lootens suggests, reading the angel’s request to the poet-narrator – “Some women weep and curse, I say, [...] / And thou shalt take their part to-night,

² That said, the more concise presentation of Hegel’s views in Lootens’ earlier analysis of Hemans’ grieving patriotism (“Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine ‘Internal Enemies,’ and the Domestication of National Identity”, *PMLA* 109/2 (1994), pp. 238-253) is more effective.

/ Weep and write” – in awareness of the full range of its connotations, the white poet is invited to adopt the language of black women suffering in slavery (173). Consequently “A Curse for a Nation” becomes an important poem of poetics reshaping its own tradition of sentimental poetry; both by denouncing positions of apolitical privacy, and problematising the nature of the Poetess as a white person.

In the final sixth chapter of the third section, Lootens illustrates how the African American writer and abolition activist Frances E. W. Harper draws on and challenges the basic themes of the British Poetess performance. The emergence of the plantation home in Harper’s *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872) as a space of intense racial division subverts notions of the home as a domestic realm isolated from the public arena, as well as undermining concepts of apolitical patriotism. Developing arguments advanced in her earlier essay “Hemans and Her American Heirs: Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry and National Identity”,³ Lootens elaborates the intersections of Harpers’ “The Fugitive’s Wife” (1854) with Hemans’ “The Switzer’s Wife” (1826; 1828), arguing that the “bitter heroism of life” (189), chosen as an ultimate patriotic act by the enslaved wife in Harper’s poem, transforms her predecessor’s romantic conception of female heroism as suicide. Nonetheless,

this notion applies only indirectly to the courageous, free-minded Alpine wife in Hemans’ poem, who sends her husband off to fight for their family.

In later poems, according to Lootens, Harper’s political critique becomes more acute, working against the Poetess performance. She cites the perplexing case of “Do not Cheer, Men are Dying” (1900), where the anti-war domestic mourning of the Poetess has given its place to a “Yankee” officer’s call to his men in the battlefield to grieve for their defeated enemies’ suffering. In the same chapter, Lootens proceeds to explore the interconnections between Harper’s double life as both poetess and orator, indicating how she deploys tropes and elements of the Poetess performance to lend dramatic impact to her speeches. Attention to Harper’s poetic figuration also helps in reassessing aspects of her contemporary reception, as with Grace Greenwood’s account (1866) of Harper’s oratory, where the historical speaker has been supplanted by her mythic portrait as “bronze muse”.

In all these ways, the *Political Poetess* becomes integral to the revisionist history of the female literary tradition emphasising national anxieties – primarily a consciousness of slavery – which haunted mid to late-Victorian sentimental poetry by women. Lootens opens up spaces for critical inquiry as she exposes the racial elements covertly traumatising the assumed apolitical domesticity of the Poetess. She reads with acumen and diligently researches the historical circumstances of poetic production; underlining the crucial public role of the black Poetess

³ In *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, 243-260.

within African-American life, while also extending her discussion into the twentieth century and highlighting threads that connect the Victorian tradition with later poetic texts. There remain reservations that her central argument on the political connotations

of sentimental and patriotic poetry would have profited from an extended, rather than selective, coverage of Victorian women's poetry as well as from a fuller consideration of meanings of the political – aside from race and empire – in this poetry.

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