Introduction
Making History: Thinking about Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry

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In July 1837, the noted Quaker writer, minister, and reform advocate, Joseph John Gurney, left his native England and made a series of trips to Canada, the West Indies, and North America. During his time in the United States, Gurney visited southern and northern cities alike, speaking widely upon prison reform, the abolition of slavery, and religious disunity in the Quaker church. On Gurney's departure from Philadelphia, a group of Quaker women presented him with a friendship album titled "The American Offering" as a gift for his seventeen-year-old daughter Anna, who had been left behind in England during her father's journey.[1] The album has 134 gold-edged leaves, and Anna's name is printed on its cover and title page. [Fig. 1] The rest of the pages contain approximately 100 poems, interspersed with prose excerpts and illustrations. While the selections are handwritten, the compilers also clearly had the conventions of print in mind, as they carefully inscribed the titles of poems and often added a relevant illustration.[2]

The opening poem, signed by Elizabeth Lloyd and titled "To Anna Gurney," declares that the album contains "a wreath" of the "native flowers" of the United States to serve as a "uniting bond" between Anna Gurney and her fellow Quakers. While "The American Offering" itself contains prose and illustrations as well as poetry, Lloyd indicates that it is the poetry in particular that will create and sustain this transatlantic "bond." In the final stanza, Lloyd marks exactly what Anna can expect to find in this collection of this "country's poesy":

> We will not twine in this bouquet, our country's gayest flowers:
> But the purest and the sweetest ones, that bloom in her bowers.
> There are no rare exotics here! Oh no – we only bring,
> To thee – an unpretending – simple – native, Offering!

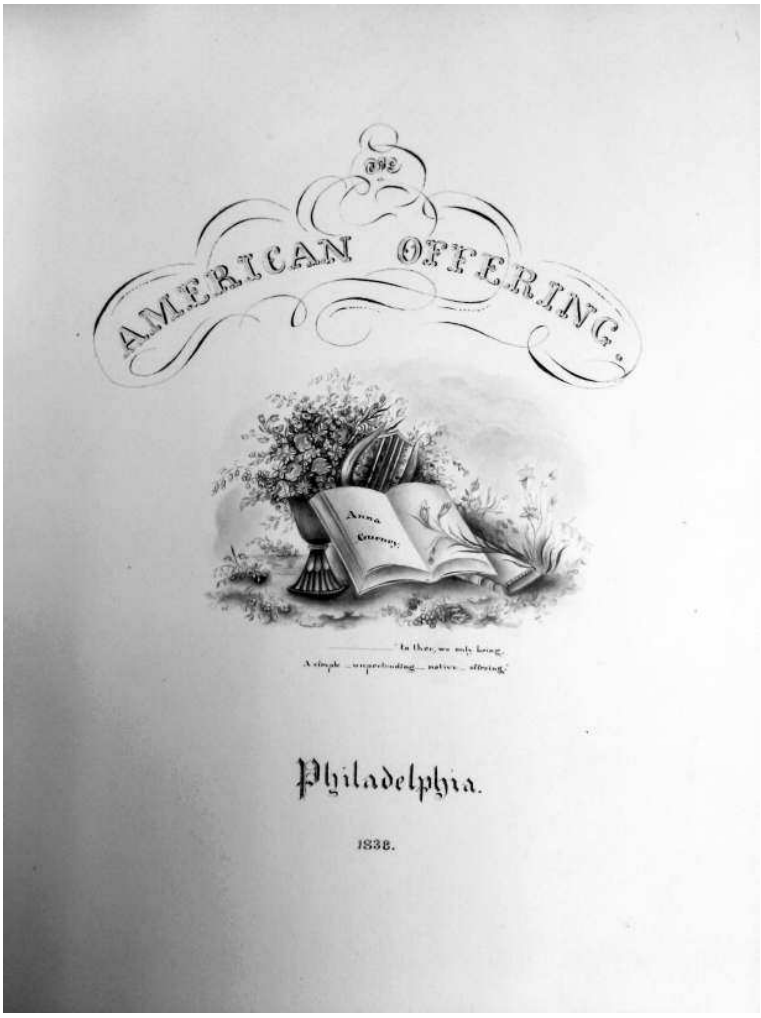

Figure 1. Title page of the friendship album "The American Offering," 1838. Courtesy of The Winterthur Library.

Lloyd makes clear that this poetry is not remarkable because it is the "country's gayest," but because it is its "purest" and "sweetest." This purity and sweetness is referenced again, yet put differently, in the final line, where she marks the poems as "unpretending" and "simple." What accompanies this characterization is the insistence that the poems are wholly

American – they "bloom in her bowers," are "no rare exotics," and, most simply put, are "native." By employing the language and logic of flowers here, Lloyd suggests that while imported flowers/poems might distinguish themselves in external ways, it is the native ones that will smell the sweetest. What follows, then, are poems by the best-known American women poets of the day.

We open *A History of Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* with this material artifact not to highlight, as Lloyd did, that nineteenth-century American poetry by women is "simple," nor to disagree with her, but to call attention to this community's act of compiling, framing, and implicitly narrating an emerging history of American poetry in which women writers play a vital role. While the poetry by women that is included in this album is interspersed with that of their male peers, women's poetry is clearly central to the compilers' project of representing the nation's creative output and moral standing in the world. The compilers of "The American Offering" were preceded in their historicizing of American poetry by Samuel Kettell's *Specimens of American Poetry* (1829) and George B. Cheever's *The American Common-Place Book of Poetry* (1831), both of which acknowledge the popularity and influence of women poets. Unlike these volumes, though, "The American Offering" devotes approximately half of its pages to the work of women, thereby quietly critiquing the history of American poetry as it is being constructed in American print culture. Lloyd's opening poem makes it clear that this volume represents a different kind of history, one shaped by women readers' and writers' sense of ownership over their "country's poesy."

When we look, more specifically, at how this community went about making this book – in other words, where they gained access to the poems by the women poets they included – we can see that they were culling from a variety of print sources. Two of their primary sources were anthologies of British and American women's poetry that had been recently published in America in 1837: Sarah Josepha Hale's *The Ladies' Wreath: A Selection from the Female Poetic Writers of England and America*, and D. F., Jr.'s *Selections from Female Poets: A Present for Ladies*. The compilers were not content, however, with only these selections and so turned to popular annuals (*The Atlantic Souvenir* and *The Token*) as well as local periodicals (*The Philadelphia Album and Ladies' Literary Portfolio* and *The Friend*). They also included poems by Quaker poet Elizabeth Chandler, which had been printed in *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler: With a Memoir of her Life and Character* (1836). These Philadelphia Quakers, in other words, clearly had access to a substantial amount of women's poetry

and they were reading widely in the sources that printed this poetry. Yet they were not simply passive readers of this material: they were claiming it as their own and making editorial decisions about selections and transcriptions.

While the compilers of "The American Offering" seem confident in their efforts to set down poetry that "will never be forgot," we know now just how wrong they were about the future life of these poems. This forgetting – the cultural erasure of the work of numerous popular and influential women poets whose poems pervaded nineteenth-century America – has had a lasting impact on the shape of nineteenth-century American literary studies. Up until very recently most scholars of American literature would have claimed that a history of nineteenth-century American women's poetry was unnecessary, or perhaps even impossible. Nineteenth-century American women poets have long been regarded as too sentimental, too conventional, too popular – an undifferentiated mass not worthy of scholarly attention. This is, in part, a result of the ways in which they were framed in their own time. While women's poetry was widely published in nineteenth-century America and was read in the same context as the work of the male counterparts with whom these women poets were engaged (both in the marketplace as well as in the intimacy of the salon), this did not prevent contemporary critics such as Rufus Wilmot Griswold from distinguishing between them. Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America*, published in 1842, consisted primarily of the work of male poets, but it also contained biographical sketches of and selected poems by twelve women poets (with additional women included in a back section titled "Various Authors"). Yet his publication of *The Female Poets of America* six years later enabled him to remove many of these women poets from the next edition of *The Poets and Poetry of America*, thus drawing attention to them while at the same time removing them from conversation with the larger field.

Women poets were, Griswold contended, capable of emotional depth and expression unavailable – and, indeed, unnecessary – to men. Women's innate morality and spirituality, Griswold asserted, rendered them capable of "mirror[ing] in dazzling variety the effects which circumstances or surrounding minds work upon [their spirits]," but not of the "power to originate, [or] even, in any proper sense, to reproduce."[3] Such a reinforcement of gendered norms shaped later nineteenth-century approaches to this body of work, with Griswold's successors dismissing the idea that women poets of the early to mid-nineteenth century had anything of value to offer to a rapidly solidifying literary canon. Add to this

both the early-twentieth-century New Critical reading practices that radically isolated poetry from the contexts in which it was written and consumed *and* the rise of Emily Dickinson to a position of exceptional prominence, and you quite quickly have a deeply entrenched perception of nineteenth-century American women's poetry as unsusceptible to study.[4]

The problem of Dickinson is worth addressing upfront, and readers will surely notice that while Dickinson appears in some of the essays collected here, we have deliberately assigned her space at the very end, where Mary Loeffelholz expertly tackles the conundrum that Dickinson has long presented for the construction of this field. Throughout most of the latter half of the twentieth century, Dickinson was widely regarded as writing against the work of her female peers, refusing to publish in order to avoid the compromises that even the very best of them were apparently forced to make. In recent years, however, scholars have reconsidered this approach. Initially, they reframed Dickinson scholarship so as to allow room for the ways in which her work was both embedded in the literary culture of her time and engaged in conversation with her peers.[5] As these "other" nineteenth-century American women poets began to constitute a field of their own, Dickinson's position was continually shifting. Should she inhabit the center and set the so-called standard by which her contemporaries might be judged? Should she hover as an ethereal presence, no longer dislodging these women poets from their places in literary history but bearing down on them nonetheless? Must she be excised entirely in order to give these women their due? While one might once have seen this critical conundrum as an impasse through which the field could not progress, the field has, in large part, been borne from it, as such questions have provoked a sustained evaluation of the historical, cultural, and literary significance of women poets who were once deemed, in the face of Emily Dickinson, to be wholly insignificant.

The recovery of this body of work began slowly, in part due to a lack of access to primary sources and in part due to its position in relation to women's fiction of the period. While women's fiction had received significant scholarly attention by the late 1980s and early 1990s, resulting in editions of the work of writers such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Louisa May Alcott, university presses were notoriously reluctant to reprint the work of relatively unknown women poets. It was only in the final years of the twentieth century that several anthologies of nineteenth-century American women's poetry were published, finally providing scholars and students access to this work – access that would later

increase exponentially by the twenty-first century's user-friendly digital archives of books and periodicals.[6] Editions of work by individual poets and reprints of nineteenth-century volumes by women poets remain relatively rare, but in recent years scholarly editions have been published of the work of Lydia Sigourney, Sarah Piatt, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Adah Isaacs Menken, and Emma Lazarus.[7] While much of the work being done with women's fiction (and, to some extent, nonfiction) seemed to lend itself to the study of women's poetry, most critics focused entirely on fiction *or* poetry, rarely allowing the insights of one body of work to inform the other. Scholarly work on the sentimental novel, for example, was clearly relevant to women's poetry, given the central role of sentimental rhetoric in the work of many nineteenth-century American women poets, yet poetry often served as a foil for the woman's novel, representing a sort of excess of emotion that the novel was often purported to subvert or at least to use to more complicated ends. Similarly, although women's authorship and their negotiation of the nineteenth-century American literary marketplace were receiving scholarly attention, this work focused almost entirely on prose writers.[8]

As the field progressed beyond a state of dismissal, one of the most important (and contested) critical frames to emerge was that of the "poetess," a label often used to describe any woman poet writing and publishing in the nineteenth century. Early discussions of the poetess returned to primary sources, most notably to Griswold's *The Female Poets of America*, to reconstruct the way in which many women poets were received and read in the nineteenth century. Some scholars embraced the label of the poetess, demonstrating women's self-conscious but nonetheless often sincere adoption of its attendant expectations and conventions, a move that allowed women to succeed in a literary marketplace that had been otherwise hostile to them. Reading the figure in this way often led to the critical acknowledgment of the power of these literary and cultural contexts. Other critics, however, found the term unsuitable. They demonstrated the existence of a body of work that clearly did not fit into the stereotype that the label invokes – political poems, for example, or erotic verse – and often argued that the women poets most worthy of study (or the poems most worthy of study within a poet's larger body of work) only ever deployed the poetess figure subversively, making use of it as a mask of sorts for their "real" work. In 1999, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins cut through the terms of this debate by usefully connecting the "poetess" to a form of twentieth-century lyric reading in which women's poetry had become construed, incorrectly, as the very articulation of subjectivity. Instead, the poetess, they argued,

"circulates from the late eighteenth century onward as an increasingly empty figure: not a lyric subject to be reclaimed as an identity but a medium for cultural exchange."[9] While the recovery of individual poets is important, they acknowledged, scholars' continued insistence on reading for subjectivity negates the equally important recovery of genre and convention. In a later development of this argument, Jackson insisted on the mutability of the poetess over the course of the nineteenth-century, asking "How could the Poetess of 1832 be the Poetess of 1891, when everything else about poetry (including the definition of the word itself) had changed in those seventy years?"[10]

The study of nineteenth-century American women's poetry began to thrive in the early part of the twenty-first century, with three book-length critical studies: Paula Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800–1900* (2003), Eliza Richards' *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (2004), and Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (2004). These studies represent crucial interventions in the study of nineteenth-century American women's poetry, as they drew on rich archives of previously untouched primary sources to demonstrate the rich potential of the field, to indicate the error of past neglect, and to point to the potential for future scholarship. Each of these scholars made deep cultural, political, and literary contextualization central to the recovery of and subsequent scholarship on American women's poetry and, as their essays in this volume prove, they continue to shape the field.

Given this evolving body of materials and scholarship, it certainly seems time to construct a history of sorts, one that can be used to provide a framework for this rapidly expanding field of study. Yet we recognize that to do so is to risk "making history" in a way that precludes new approaches to the field. Just as the histories made by anthologists, editors, and critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in part contributed to the forgetting and neglect of American women's poetry, our focus on the poets, poems, topics, and approaches present in this book may prevent, for a time, those that we cannot yet see. We attempt this history here knowing that the process of recovery and recontextualization is far from complete. Revisions are both inevitable and welcome.

A History of Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry could have been organized in a variety of ways, one of which would have been to solicit and group essays under single-author categories. But readers of this collection will find that while certain poets continue to emerge across essays – there are more references to and treatments of Sigourney, Piatt, and Harper

than to any other poets – there is no sustained argument for the recovery of any individual poet above the others. Neither will readers find stand-alone treatments of individual poets out of the context of their social and cultural surroundings. This was intentional. Guided by the proposed title of the volume, with its focus on "poetry" and not "poets," we solicited essays that would complicate an author-centered approach. Doing so allowed us to highlight the incredible diversity of these communities of poets, and therefore of the field itself. Due, in part, to the dearth of African American, Native, working-class, and southern women included in the nineteenth-century anthologies, and then to the twentieth century's critical focus on a singular upper-middle class woman poet from Amherst, this field has long been associated with well-off, northern, white women. Scholars have also tended to devote attention to writers who produced a significant body of work in print, thereby rendering unworthy of study those poets whose economic circumstances or racial identity precluded sustained creative output or access to publication venues. The privilege that has often been assumed to accompany the time and resources to write and publish poetry is challenged by an approach that puts genres, topics, and venues – instead of authors – at its center. Mary Louise Kete's focus in this volume, for example, on Lucy Terry Prince is a perfect example of the kind of scholarship that is facilitated by such an approach, as very little is known about Prince's life, her work was primarily oral, and only one poem, "Bars Fight," is extant. In a collection that highlighted authors, these facts would preclude any scholarly approach other than that which acknowledged Prince's existence as Phillis Wheatley's contemporary.

By highlighting a diversity of contexts for the production, circulation, and consumption of poetry, we include in this history women who were writing poetry from what we might otherwise call the margins: Native boarding schools, the factory, the plantation, and Bohemian communities, among other places and spaces. In their essay, for example, Joanna Levin and Edward Whitley argue that Bohemian circles offered women poets a location in which they might imagine their lives outside of – and often counter to – the mainstream. Jennifer Putzi shows how the space of the factory allowed female operatives access to print in *The Lowell Offering*, thereby enabling working-class women poets to position themselves as part of a much larger tradition of women writers. Outsider poets such as these become, in many ways, our insiders, as it is their stories that fill these pages.

Our focus on non-author-centered approaches also allowed us to acknowledge the diversity of material contexts within which this poetry was produced, circulated, and consumed. From the beginning of the

century, Tamara Harvey explains, women poets were engaging in both manuscript and print cultures, often simultaneously, using their work to help shape a new American literature distinct from that of England. The essays that follow take into consideration this wide variety of material contexts, looking at manuscript sources as well as print sources, periodicals as well as gift books and anthologies. In doing so, they examine the ways in which context shapes composition and circulation for both amateur and professional writers. Michael Cohen, for instance, examines the importance of "scribal poetic cultures" in nineteenth-century America, looking specifically at the inscription of poetry in albums and the subsequent circulation of these albums among groups of young women. Elizabeth Petrino examines the work of Lydia Sigourney within the context of the gift book, arguing that Sigourney capitalized on both the technological advances that made gift books possible and the gift book's romanticization of preindustrial cultures. Michelle Kohler's work on *The Dial* also highlights the importance of publication venue, as she reconstructs a community of Transcendentalist women poets, focusing on the way in which editor Margaret Fuller enabled the publication of her own poems as well as work by Elizabeth Peabody, Caroline Sturgis, Ellen Sturgis Hooper, and Eliza Thayer Clapp.

This panoply of material contexts for women's poetry prompts questions about the long-held assumption that the single-author book was an important – in fact, was *the* important – kind of publication for any nineteenth-century poet. As Eric Gardner's essay on the circulation and publication of poetry within activist abolitionist circles indicates, such poetry is only visible to scholars the further they move away from "the venues that modern critics have valued and drawn from most." That does not mean that scholars should ignore the single-author book. As Faith Barrett's reading of Phoebe Cary's *Poems and Parodies* demonstrates, the space of the book allowed Cary to organize and present her poems in such a way that the conventions of sentimentality are laid bare. This exposure is crucial to Cary's rethinking of the ideologies that accompany poetic genres.

Barrett's interest in parody as a poetic genre calls attention to another concern of this book. Throughout these essays, scholars reveal a whole host of genres that were not just alive and well in nineteenth-century America, but that women writers took seriously *as genres*. As Kerry Larson's essay demonstrates, women writing poetry during this period were thinking critically about their relationship to poetry (or "Poetry") and their role as poets. They did so, however, in a variety of different genres. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Larson argues, used the sonnet to express her sense of

a "conflicted, often anguished relation to poetic form and the promises it seemed to hold." Whether they were writing sonnets, elegies, hymns, parodies, dramatic monologues, or epics, these poets registered that they were thinking about the history and conventions of the various poetic genres on offer, not collapsing them all into one monolithic "Poetry." And it is through attention to these genres that women writers often expressed praise, leveled critique, and contemplated the very nature of their work. For instance, in her essay on the friendship elegy, Desirée Henderson writes that it was through engaging with the tradition, history, and conventions of the elegy that these poets laid claim to the friendship elegy, "a subgenre of the elegy that demonstrates how generic conventions could be leveraged to promote the status of women's relationships and women's writing." Similarly, Jess Roberts examines what she calls the "doubleness" inherent to the dramatic monologue – "the subjective/internal and objective/external dimensions of the poem" – a characteristic of the genre that Sarah Piatt used to consider how "as mothers and daughters, as readers and writers, women possess and might exert agency to maintain or disrupt the things that restrict them."

A focus on the material circumstances of composition and circulation as well as on the history of the genres with which these women were engaged points out just how steeped in convention this poetry was. That's not to say it was "conventional," as that term has received a bad reputation over the course of the twentieth century. But it is to say that these women often took up the conventions available to them and used them to their advantage. This did not, as most narratives of convention want to espouse, always result in either complete capitulation or the articulation of a wholly subversive agenda or poetics. In fact, a deep and sustained engagement with these conventions often produced the very visibility – and, by extension, viability – that these women sought for their poems. What they did with these conventions – however they developed, warped, or reinstated them – is of great interest in these essays. Take, for example, Eliza Richards' treatment of flower poems, "a tradition spanning centuries" that nonetheless greatly attracted the nineteenth-century American woman poet. By taking a comparative approach to northern and southern women's poetry before and during the Civil War, Richards explores the different results of this "shared literary inheritance." Paula Bennett examines the way in which southern women poets fused a Gothic sensibility to the conventions of sentimental poetry in order to express their own apprehensions about race and gender, romance and reality.

Unsurprisingly, many of the essays here weave in and out of all of the issues explored above. Claudia Stokes' work on the hymn, for instance,