

HOW TO BE AN EARLY AMERICAN WOMAN POET AND PUBLISH

WHAT narratives did a new publishing world have to offer women writers in the colonies? what stories did they read about themselves, what ideologies did they internalize, what in turn drove them to pick up a pen? the *querelle des femmes**, a renaissance notion, reentered the psyche of early american publishing. men who had the privilege to write freely and be recognized as authority, well-known male writers including john winthrop, often used the press to take down "the Poetess," or any woman who spent time doing anything other than cooking and cleaning, marrying and reproducing (this is how far back we go, and further still). misogyny pervaded the male domain of publishing. it comes as no surprise that most women writers paid little attention to audience outside of their family and close friends, and thus chose NOT to publish their poetry. from these "closeted" women poets, very little work (if any) remains; some even opted to destroy their poems as an act of self-preservation. the thought alone is shattering. but despite all this, **WOMEN DID WRITE**. women's pens were not stilled but **SHARPENED** when men printed tirades telling them to get back in the kitchen. women poets found inspiration and love in each other, and in those who paved the way before them. **WOMEN PUBLISHED THEIR POETRY**. but, it was not easy:

1

GET A MAN'S HELP

a male editor, or a male go-between, was almost entirely necessary for a woman to get her work published in early america. anne bradstreet and jane turell were among the women poets who had male editors that took their writing from manuscript to the press. women had no choice but to depend on men for access to the printers. not only would women poets have to rely on men to get their work printed, but they had to rely on men to get their work read & circulated. when a well-written poem was attributed to a female name, male readers became skeptical. john woodbridge prefaced anne bradstreet's *Tenth Muse* as such:

"The worst effect of his [the reader's] reading will be unbelief, which will make him question whether it be a woman's work, and ask, is it possible?"

anne bradstreet recognized this prejudice that readers had toward women poets, and criticized it in the way she knew best:

*the question of women, the debate about a woman's "nature," and for what purpose she existed. we know what the beliefs of the time were concerning the center of a woman's existence. women like turell, bradstreet, wheatley; they overturned the myth, proved it utterly and undeniably wrong. their resistance saw through the construct, but men couldn't accept that: it meant that everything that had put them on top was a LIE.

*"For such despite they cast on female wits:
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance"*

these male editors or other male "helpers" also allowed the women poets to keep a low profile; another key aspect of self-preservation in a time where women were attacked in the press for knowing how to write, and how to write well. without these male editors, some poets would remain without any work to show for their legacy, including jane turell, mary french, mercy wheeler, grace smith, and sarah goodhue. it's not exactly gratitude that pushes up your stomach like a swell of nausea when thinking of these men.

2

TAKE UP A PSEUDONYM

women poets, including judith sargent murray, often initially opted to take on pseudonyms when publishing their writing. these pseudonyms were either a man's name, or simply a name other than their own: it was, again, a mode of self-preservation to conceal their identity in the press. judith opted for the pen-name *Constantia*, sarah moorhead signed her printed works with her initials only, and mary pepperell's single poem was published anonymously. concealing one's identity, unfortunately, proved to be an almost necessary step for a woman to publish. oftentimes, a woman who published

HOW TO PUBLISH...CONT'D

prolific poetry, their authenticity was called into question. in fact, men were so incredulous that they often accused a woman of plagiarizing. poet martha brewster had to prove she did not plagiarize her poetry by translating a passage of scripture into verse before witnesses. when publishing ran the risk of public humiliation and a tarnishing of one's reputation, it's no wonder that many women poets who were brave enough to publish still took measures to hide their identities.

3

BE UPPER CLASS

in early america, the difference between mere literacy and the ability to write was stark - the difference between men who could write and women who could write was starker still. in 1760, 85% of men in new england could write, while only 46% of women could. women who had access to what was deemed a "male education" were often women whose families had a high social standing. how urban a woman's location was often contributed to her level of education, and went hand-in-hand with socioeconomic status. more often than not, if a woman was not privately tutored, a male family member taught her to write. anne bradstreet was tutored, while jane turell was educated by her father - as were both deborah prince and sarah gill. for those without a high social standing, like martha brewster, the geographic proximity to a public library (and there were very few available anyway) was key to their education, and to their eventual writing career. women who learned to write and became writers, more often than not, preferred poetry above all other forms.

4

BE WHITE

phillis wheatley, though an incredible poet with an incredible life, was certainly an outlier in the early american publishing scene. taught to read and write by her mistress, phillis quickly became a well-known poet. she was also a slave, and one of the few slaves given a comprehensive education. her work was widely circulated, but it was still crystal clear: without question,

the literary publishing world was, even more than a man's domain, a white domain. most slaves were not taught to read and write; white slave owners hoped to keep them utterly subordinate and to prevent any chance of rebellion. phillis, although educated, was not necessarily one of the "lucky ones"; slavery was slavery, and the all-encompassing white supremacy that our nation was founded on determined not only who was published back then, but also determined what the conditions are like even today. phillis did write in criticism of the institution of slavery in her poetry, but often expressed her gratitude toward being brought to christianity as well. she is credited as the first Black american poet.

5

DIE

it's rather jarring how common it was for a woman's poetry to be published posthumously. more often than not, it was a husband or a family member publishing the work of the deceased. both deborah prince and sarah gill were published immediately after their deaths. this phenomenon is often attributed to a woman's self-preservative reticence toward publishing while they were alive; thus, posthumous publishing was often against their wishes, and, despite the work we gained because of it, seems rather like a violation of privacy.

jane turell was one of the most prominent women poets whose work was published only after she passed at the age of 27. the very same year of her death, her husband collected her works, ranging from poems to personal diary entries, and brought them to publication. jane was not the type to keep her writing private; she was openly poetic, longed to "burn with Sappho's noble fire," and did wish to publish, and perhaps would have had her life not been cut short by illness. what is most striking and sad is what, of her legacy, was eventually published by her husband. jane, a well-educated and versatile poet, had written many humorous and witty pieces, which, had they been published, might have given a whole different aura to the collection she left behind. her husband, however, chose only to publish her works on graver subjects. all of jane's work that he did not publish has been lost.

DAME

annis boudinot's

first
meeting:
June 14
bring
poetry
&
prose



DISCUSSION
TOPIC:

women
+
the
Revolution

in early america, the best way for your manuscript to reach readers was through a literary salon, or a similar gathering of like-minded writers and artists. before print culture blew up throughout the colonies, getting work printed was no easy task, even more so for women than men, who had more access to just about anything those days. even more difficult for women was the risk of becoming notorious for publishing original written work. many men, and even many women caught up in the system, believed writing was not a woman's vocation. women, of course, wrote anyway: they turned to these salons to safely circulate work among friends and family, rather than seeking a larger audience through print. salons were a social sphere, generally attended and upheld by the upper class. it may have been a privilege to be a part of this salon culture, but salons were also a radical safe space for women to socialize and to write as they please.

annis boudinot was a well known hostess of her time; she often entertained literary salons in Morven, New Jersey. she was also considered by her close friends - and members of her literary posse - as a prolific writer; though much of her work was circulated in manuscript form, she was one of the first colonial poets published. some of her mutually respected female contemporaries included anna young smith, susanna wright, milcah moore, hannah griffitts, and elizabeth graeme fergusson.



elizabeth graeme fergusson is often credited with hosting the first american literary salon. both men and women mingled and presented material for her social gatherings. topics beyond literature, such as relevant politics and timely social issues, were discussed and debated and written on. predating widespread publishing presses in the colonies, these were the best spaces for a woman's rep as a prolific writer to flourish; many of them received recognition and acclaim by circulating their manuscripts and poetry among well-read and educated friends.