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Sisters of Avon: The Poetess in the World Economy of Letters

Mary Loeffelholz

This essay examines three women poets – Jane Ermina Locke, Lucy Larcom, and Amy Lowell – who together span American literary history from the 1830s through the emergence of international modernism. Locke, Larcom, and Lowell had a geography in common: all three are linked to Lowell, Massachusetts, one of the first industrial cities of the United States. They also had in common an interest in longer poetic forms, including what this essay calls “anthology form” – a loose, baggy poetic genre of the nineteenth century that Amy Lowell translated into the beginning of the twentieth – as well as an intense self-consciousness about the vexed relationship between their own writerly ambitions and the much-derogated figure of the poetess. Locke, Larcom and Lowell each used “anthology form” as a means of exploring both their individual social locations as women poets and the role of the poetess in the world economy of letters.

My topic in this essay stands at the convergence of two long-standing research interests: in American women poets, and in poetic form, especially the long poem or the poetic sequence. The “Sisters of Avon” in my title are three writers – Jane Ermina Locke, Lucy Larcom, and Amy Lowell – who together span American literary history from the 1830s through the emergence of international modernism in the first two decades of the twentieth century. All three of these women did some of their most interesting work in longer poetic forms, including what I will be calling here “anthology form” – a loose, baggy poetic genre of the nineteenth century that Amy Lowell translates into the beginning of the twentieth. Locke, Larcom, and Lowell also share a geography: all three of

these women are linked to Lowell, Massachusetts, one of the first industrial cities of the northeastern United States. The relationship between that geography and the genre of anthology form, I will argue, informs all three writers' self-consciousness about the place of the poetess in the world economy of letters

Amy Lowell's ancestors founded their textile mills by the Merrimac River in 1822, importing the latest British techniques to jump-start the American industrial revolution, and gave their name to the newly incorporated city of Lowell in 1826. In the early days of Lowell's industrialization, women and children from New England's hard-pressed small towns were recruited to labor in the mills; among them was the young Lucy Larcom, who moved to Lowell upon her father's death, where she at first helped her mother keep a boarding house for women factory workers and in 1835, when the boarding house failed to support the family, went to work in the textile mills. Jane Ermina Locke's husband, John Goodwin Locke, worked as a clerk in the Lowell textile mills for much of the 1830s; his middle-management position evidently afforded Jane Locke enough leisure, despite the care of her several children, to host a locally well-known salon during the years when Larcom was toiling in the mills by day and attending the workers' "improvement circles" by night. Larcom might easily have encountered Locke's poetry through her published books or in local newspapers, but if she did, we have no record of her reactions. If Jane Locke took an interest in the writing produced by Lowell's women factory workers in the 1840s, we have no record of that, either.¹ Meanwhile, the profits generated by Lowell's mills flowed back to the Lowell family coffers in Boston, where they nurtured poets of increasingly cosmopolitan ambition: James Russell Lowell in the nineteenth century, Amy Lowell in the early twentieth. As Jane Marcus observes, "[t]he exploitation of . . . the 'Lowell Mill Girls,' . . . was the underwriter of all the lives of the Lowell [family] poets, college presidents, astronomers and businessmen. . . . When Amy Lowell dreamed that the textile workers were rising up and marching . . . she had good reason to be afraid" (Marcus 195).

In their lifetimes, then, Locke, Larcom, and Amy Lowell were at once linked by geography and separated by class. All three self-consciously wrote poetry located in what Pierre Bourdieu calls "*socially ranked geographical space*" (*Distinction* 124, emphasis in original), a space moreover that signified intensely in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture. Lowell's "mill girls" famously posed for nineteenth-century observers fundamental questions about the humanity of

¹ Biographical information on Jane Locke is scant, but see LeBaron's "Memoir" and, on Locke's salon, Eno (223).

factory labor generally and the social implications of women's wage labor particularly. Lowell's proximity to Boston, on the other hand, posed the question of the relationship between what Bourdieu identifies as competing forms of capital: economic and cultural. In their most ambitious poems, Locke, Larcom, and Lowell all struggled with something like these issues. And all three of them, I believe, came to realize through their poetry that these questions were tied to one another – that women's work, including the increasingly professionalized work of women's writing, was a crucial site for thinking as well as living the transactions of cultural with economic capital.

Having claimed so much for the ambition of these writers, why attach their ambitions to the often derogated figure of the poetess? The short answer, as I will argue at more length below, is because they themselves did, and not uncritically. A more adequate answer would comprehend the influential recent work of critics like Patrick Vincent, Cheryl Walker, Eliza Richards, Yopie Prins, and Virginia Jackson on the poetess. As Patrick Vincent observes in his book on *The Romantic Poetess*, the poetess is "always derivative" (Vincent xviii) – always reworking learning and inspiration at second hand. She is a figure of transmission and translation, an "infinite series of substitutions" as Yopie Prins puts it in her study of Victorian Sapphos (179). For this very reason, the Poetess is an important figure in the world economy of letters. Indeed she is a figure *of* or *for* world literature, including the fundamental embarrassment – and hope – of the category. In U.S. literary scholarship, as David Damrosch points out, "world literature" represents deracinated knowledge for beginners, knowledge excessively mediated by translation and by pedagogical genres like the anthology (Damrosch 512, 521). Like the figure of the poetess, the category of world literature is overdetermined by its conditions of possibility in translation and transmission.

A similar concern for translation and transmission, mediation and overdetermination, links the poetic forms I am calling "anthology forms." "Anthology form" comprehends a wide range of nineteenth-century literary works and some of their modernist successors, that in one way or another assemble discrete, formally demarcated, and formally diverse shorter poems – lyrics or ballads, conventionally – within a longer narrative setting or into a sequence. Such poems almost by formal definition concern themselves with the cultural *situation* of lyric poetry. They dramatize the circumstances of lyric's production and, often, its reception; they formally map what Bourdieu famously calls the "field of culture." Such poems-within-poems provide my writers here with a formal means of reflecting on women's richly overdetermined identification with lyric poetry as a genre – which is to say, a formal means of

reflecting on the figure of the poetess and her circulation in the world economy of letters.

In 1846, Jane Ermina Locke anonymously published a long poem, forty-odd pages long in its small pamphlet format, simply entitled “Boston.” The little book went into a second edition, and Locke’s acquaintance, the journalist N. P. Willis, obligingly unveiled Locke in print as the anonymous pamphlet’s author and hailed the poem as “a map of the mind of the Athens of America.”² Locke had previously come before the reading public in her own person, having published her 1842 *Miscellaneous Poems* under the name of “Mrs. Jane E. Locke.” Her decision to publish “Boston” anonymously suggests that Locke recognized a difference between her earlier volume and the unadulterated public subject-matter of “Boston.” With “Boston,” Locke attempted a more conventionally masculine poetic role, staking her claim to the post of civic poet laureate of the emerging Boston-Lawrence-Lowell industrial axis.

Locke sets her homage to “Boston” in neoclassical rhymed couplets, and its Whiggish argument is for the mutual compatibility and indeed, as Bourdieu would say, the *convertibility* of economic and cultural capital. Locke’s twinned epigraphs to her poem perform this convertibility in terms of the familiar poetic *topos* that figures poetic fluency as flowing waters, a *topos* Locke maps onto the economic world of getting and spending: “’Tis well to garner up the good men do”; “Poet, thou hast a fountain within thee; ope, lave, / And send it gushing forth.” The poet’s job is to garner, then gush – which will also be the task of the philanthropic merchant elite of Boston, in the poem itself. This social rhyming of garnering and gushing, poet and merchant, finds its formal analogue in the poem’s rhymed couplets, both enjambed and end-stopped. There are no set-off lyrics in “Boston,” I will venture, exactly because the poem’s generic wish is to perform the symmetry and convertibility of poetic and economic getting and spending, rather than to set off poetry as a realm apart from civic life.

Yet something here fails to rhyme, starting with the epigraphs themselves. The elision of an agent for the verb in the first epigraph leaves reader to assume that the Poet is the agent shared between the two epigraphs, but does not actually specify that the Poet’s interior fountain is in fact externally derived from “gather[ing] up” other men’s goods. The Miltonic allusion pressing on the second epigraph suggests instead that the Poet owns a paradise within, happier – far happier, perhaps – than the polity of commerce, but in any case not derived from nor perfectly convertible with its goods. The twinned epigraphs hint at the poem’s half-buried tension between praising the perfect harmony of cultural

² Quoted in LeBaron (264).

and economic capital, on the one hand, and asserting the relative autonomy of culture vis-à-vis economic capital on the other. And this tension will come to a head when Locke's anonymously published poem confronts the problem of ambitious female poets within Boston's cultural polity.

Until that point, cultural and economic capital do almost rhyme in "Boston." The city's sea-going merchants send Boston's "name" out "on every reflux tide," and the same tide brings back "the diamond wealth that glitters on thy breast" ("Boston" 7). Locke's figuring of capital as a fluently circulating *name* marks the mutual commerce between the economic and cultural fields; thus

Thy merchants are thy princes, famed afar, . . .
 Not for the glitter of their gold alone; –
 But names like theirs deep graven on the stone, . . .
 Raise monuments to such, and did I say,
 Of brass or crumbling stone? – vain, vain display!
 Already they have reared on high their own . . . ("Boston" 10)

Boston's merchants, that is, anticipate the Horatian labors of their poets by making their own monuments more lasting than bronze – monuments that turn out to be Boston's fabled philanthropic institutions, among them the Perkins School for the Blind and McLean Hospital. Although Locke hails by name the great industrialists of Massachusetts, she represents them through the cultural rather than economic capital they ultimately generate. The great textile magnates Appleton and Lawrence Locke imagines specifically as patrons of education – and thus as creators of poets. Thanks to their bounty, orphan boys "freely quaff the student's precious lore" at Harvard, and return it in the form of writing:

Each stripling youth, whose ardent soul aspires
 To lofty seats, whose bosom learning fires,
 Can well repeat [the records of Boston philanthropy], and with ardor
 dreams
 He yet shall blend it with his college "themes";
 The poor return he would for thousands given,
 To grace these walls, his stepping-stone to heaven. ("Boston" 19)

Economic capital flows into the university as "thousands given" and re-emerges as cultural capital in the embodied form of the provincial "stripling youth" – who turns it into the linguistic *politesse* practiced first in his college themes and later in the civic-minded poetry by means of which he will make both his own name and that of his city.

The mutual convertibility of economic and cultural capital reaches its apogee but also its limit in the figure of the stripling poet, though, for however much economic capital he regurgitates as culture, he may not work the transformation in the other direction:

– the poet should be poor,
 Ay, must be ever in earth's glittering ore;
 For what would they with treasure of the earth,
 Who walk as spirits of celestial birth,
 Dim, in perspective, indistinct, alone,
 And fade as they, inexplicate, unknown. ("Boston" 20)

Behind this injunction murmurs Gray's "Elegy," with its "many a gem of purest ray serene" doomed to lie undiscovered in "the dark unfathomed caves of ocean" and flowers blushing unseen – the lines that William Empson famously glossed as referring to the absence, in eighteenth-century England, of a "scholarship system" or educational path to upward mobility for provincial stripling youths.³ Locke describes her "Boston," by contrast with Gray's eighteenth-century England, as a polity in which exactly such a scholarship system opens before young men from the provinces, courtesy of Boston's merchant elite who pour their thousands into its college walls. Yet the same stripling poet also marks the place in which economic and cultural capital cease their perpetual recycling into one another, with cultural capital congealing into a more absolute and stable sign of value: "Poor? – jewels are they [poets] set within thy crown / That give it lustre, beauty, and renown" ("Boston" 21). Locke's metaphor of poets as the jewels set in Boston's civic crown opposes the two modes of capital, cultural and economic, as being is opposed to having: poets may not have riches, but they are Boston's riches, not gems immured in "the dark unfathomed caves of ocean" but proudly displayed; they are a form of property not owned by any particular merchant prince, but rather by the entire Whiggish polity as benevolently administered by the mercantile elite.

The question that irresistibly follows for Locke is whether a woman poet can shine among these jewels set in Boston's crown. Women were ineligible, of course, for the educational patronage that brings the poem's thirsty orphan boy to Harvard; moreover, Locke's decision to publish "Boston" anonymously already implies her difficulties with its ambition. Dedicating "Boston" to the textile magnates Lawrence and Appleton, she insured that their names rather than hers would appear on its title page. The figure of the poetess makes trouble for Locke's

³ Empson 4; see also Guillory 93-96.

poem, interrupting what she idealizes as Boston's fluent but structured circulation of economic into cultural capital. Unlike the orphan boy at Harvard, the poetess

may not struggle for ambition's crown,
 She may not strive for honor or renown, . . .
 She hath a gentler mission to fulfil,
 To soften woe, and charm the power of ill;
 But yet she may, in the calm light of home,
 Sport jewels fairer than from ocean come;
 There may she garlands bind, — perchance ne'er worn, —
 Her lot to solace, oftentimes bitter, lorn,
 Or while the tedious evening hours away
 Her lord upon the mart prolongs his stay . . . ("Boston" 26-27)

Women may bind garlands at home, but not publish them upon the mart; they may wear poetic jewels in private, but since women themselves in the picture Locke sketches are normatively the private property of one or another particular merchant "lord," they may not aspire to the public and collective condition of property, of embodied cultural capital as being rather than having, that crowns the ideal trajectory of the strippling male poet from the provinces.

The woman poet thus forms a kind of embolus in the idealized commerce that defines, for Locke, Boston's civic sphere. Although Locke goes on in her poem to catalog some of the many actual women poets who were her contemporaries and well-known in Boston,⁴ the conceptual difficulty of imagining literary women into her poem's map of civic life remains, and it returns in force at the end of "Boston." This is the generic place for Locke to disclose her own ambitions with respect to the cultural territory mapped in the poem, and so she does, in a parting apostrophe to the city:

From infancy I've loved thy growing fame,
 And longed within thee e'er a home to claim;
 To wealth like thine my heart was ever bound,
 For I have viewed thy soil as classic ground. ("Boston" 44)

But she has already pointed to her gender as foreclosing such ambitions, and the poem bitterly concludes that

⁴ Wells, Chapman, Weston, Hale, Osgood, Follen, Brooks, among others; "Boston," 18.

. . . ruder spot shall be my place of rest,
 And pillow humbler than thy classic breast;
 Nought of thy honor shall my name e'er bear,
 Or glory thine my heart within me share . . . ("Boston" 45)

When Locke's poem finally turns its gaze back on Lowell she has no names for what she sees there except those of pastoral convention, which barely disguise her impatience with what she experiences as Lowell's rural idiocy. If the ambitious labors of the middle-class poetess are invisible in Boston's civic life, according to Locke's poem and to Locke's own frustration, still more invisible for Locke is the industry of her own Lowell. Like many another Whig poet, she could aestheticize mercantile exchange but not industrial labor, the ships setting out from Boston harbor but not the factories that produced their cargoes. Desperate herself to move from Lowell to Boston, Locke nevertheless could not expand her poetic map of "Boston" to show just how thoroughly Lowell's labor circulated into Boston and subtended the civic realm she so strenuously idealized.

Locke's love for Boston remained unrequited, at least on the ambitious scale she desired. It was her husband's successful courting of political patronage rather than Jane Locke's literary success that brought them to Boston in 1850. The move apparently left Locke still "athirst by bitter waters of the real," as she put it in her next and final volume, *The Recalled; in Voices of the Past, and Poems of the Ideal*, published in 1854. Locke's disappointment at not being able to write her way out of the provinces may well have contributed to the distinctly different flavor of this final volume, especially its long poem "Sisters of Avon." This poem, as signaled from its title forward, is overtly concerned with the problem of the poetess and her ambition. And the formal means Locke finds for exploring this concern in "Sisters of Avon" is a long narrative poem with interpolated lyrics – an entry in what I am calling "anthology form."

Locke motivates the interpolated lyrics in "Sisters of Avon" through the ancient plot of the singing contest – here, a contest between two women, one "a maid of figure slight," the other wearing "a matron grace" ("Sisters" 205). Their struggle takes place in a setting far removed from Boston's reflux commercial tides:

Deep in the wood the zephyrs slept,
 Where Avon's sluggish waters crept,
 And on its violet borders sweet,
 Pressed languidly light dainty feet;
 Till where its sparkling wavelets rest,

On a green valley's sheltered breast,
 They paused; and dimpling down the flowers,
 Pictured the glowing zenith hours.
 Two gentle loving hearts they bore,
 Along that glassy river's shore;
 And fairer forms no mystic tide
 E'er mirrored from its verdant side . . . ("Sisters" 204-5)

If Locke's "Boston" was "a map of the mind of the Athens of America," of what territory is this the map? This setting derives its significance exactly by virtue of its distance from Boston's world of circulation – as well as from the insistent Shelleyan resonance of the poem's imagery of light and veiling, floating and mirroring. Reading it in a psychological register, the problem with (and attraction of) this setting is its narcissism: the poem's "sluggish" Avon creeps to rest in a self-mirroring, self-kissing green bower. Reading this setting through the social geography of Locke's earlier "Boston," however, is still more suggestive: if "Boston's" ambition was to pay tribute to a civic polity in which economic and cultural capital freely circulated into one another, "Sisters of Avon" presents us with a self-enclosed world of female song – sluggish, languid, and sweetly pretty – in which no such circulation is imaginable. Let's call this world – as Pierre Bourdieu might call it, and as its own mirror imagery prompts us – the field of women's culture as "the economic world reversed" (*Field of Cultural Production* 29-73).

Further, as Bourdieu might also observe, "Sisters of Avon" by contrast with "Boston" locates itself in a cultural world of "restricted production," that is, production for other producers (*Field of Cultural Production* 115). Where "Boston" hoped to address itself to the merchant princes as well as the poets of its idealized polity, the audience for women's song in "Sisters of Avon" consists only of other women, indeed only of rival poetesses. Performing for an audience consisting only of one's competitors is the hallmark of the sphere of restricted production in Bourdieu's literary sociology; and for Locke, it is the unhappy antithesis of her imagined civic sphere for poetry in "Boston." In "Sisters of Avon," the poetic production of her two lyric competitors is still further restricted by subject matter as well as audience. Where can two poetesses, she asks, "twins of inner birth," find matter for rivalry? In being, each of them, "envious of the others woe":

Deeming her own had mightiest flow,
 Her own most rare and strange distress,
 Her bosom tenderest wretchedness.

Thus do some hearts in sorrow proud,
 Make their own grief a gorgeous shroud,
 Scorning the woe that others hide,
 While theirs needs giant strength to bide.
 Each thought her own the broken heart,
 Where Love had deepest flung his dart;
 And thus in accents wild and quaint,
 Each would outvie the others [sic] plaint. ("Sisters" 207-8)

The matter of women's poetic rivalry, as Jane Locke presents it here, strikingly anticipates Cheryl Walker's 1982 critical study of nineteenth-century American women's poetry, which identified "the secret sorrow" as the central matter of nineteenth-century American women's poetics. It seems to me that Locke is entirely cognizant of what Nina Baym complained of (in reply to Walker) as the "narcissism" of the poetess tradition (Baym 389). Unlike Baym, however, Locke in "Sisters of Avon" critiques this tradition by performing it in her two singers' rival songs, and so invites her readers to ask what determines these performances of expressive sorrow.

The first performance belongs to the "maiden," who "Flinging her night-like tresses back" offers up a "wild lay" of secret, frustrated love ("Sisters" 208). While the watching world has "deemed [her] glad" and gay (209), she has been carrying a torch for a man who played her false after she granted him her love. What her song demands in recompense is not exactly the concrete return or fulfillment of her love, but rather the pure speech of the other:

"I lighted my lamp, and I hied to the stream,
 And watched it afar o'er the idol wave gleam;
 Deep and dark were his wrongs, as that wild surging sea,
 Yet he came not to plead for forgiveness with me.

...

"I waited long moons, and again sought the stream;
 (Poor Hindu! thy Shaster hath shed a false gleam;)
 Burns his wrong on my heart, and my lamp on that sea
 Even yet – but he pleads not forgiveness from me!" (209-10)

The maiden's problem is indeed that of what M. H. Abrams famously called the mirror and the lamp: how can she know whether her love is for an "idol" mirroring her own desire back to her, or for an independ-

ent other? The resolution she imagines – hearing her lover’s plea for forgiveness when they finally meet again in death – cannot settle this question, since she has already so thoroughly scripted what he must say in that meeting, leaving him no place for original speech.

At the end of the maiden’s “wild lay,” the poem’s setting passes implicit judgment on the power of the maiden’s lyric performance:

The music ceased, while o’er the grass
The lulling breezes softly swept
And ruffled the clear river’s pass,
As o’er the rocks it sluggish crept;
While slowly down the occident
Apollo in his glory went. (“Sisters” 211)

The maiden’s song is a poetry, Locke implies, that makes nothing happen. And so the advantage in the contest shifts to the matron, who sings in her turn about female poetic vocation, in a lyric that will respond to the question of idolatry raised but not answered by the maiden’s lay.

The matron replies to the maiden with the story of a “wilderer dream” that came upon her in the shade of “a gorgeous rose-wreathed bower.” Summoned by the “weary void” in her own heart, a Shelleyan “mortal form – immortal – veiled in light” appears to her (“Sisters” 213). Like the “veiled maid” that appears in Shelley’s “Alastor,” the matron’s visiting spirit is himself a poet and sings to her in “the voice of [her] own soul” (“Alastor” l.154): “It seemed the wild refrain of my soul’s void / . . . Answering its longings strange, in consonant measures free” (“Sisters” 214). Asking herself how it is that a god could “so kneel to mortal form,” the matron realizes the visiting form’s identity: he is no less than her own “vision, drawn in youth, apart, – / My soul’s Ideal had my clear eye seen” (215). But her seeing, coupled with her realization of her seeing, both fixes and shatters the matron:

I stood a moment statue-like – as still,
Palsied, consuming with the unveiled sight;
Then rushed my idol worship but to fill
In the full maddening splendor of that light! (“Sisters” 215)

Blinded by the light of her own eye, the matron is transfixed by the flooding of her ideal with her idol, her singing “void” with its embodiment. In the aftermath of this “spirit-blow,” the matron reports,

every spot on which my faint foot treads
Shall gush the dark wave or the miry shroud.
Henceforth the raven’s beak my heart shall bear,

And the strange flapping of its ebon wings
 Fan my sad spirit to a deep despair,
 Wild as the "nevermore" it ceaseless sings. ("Sisters" 216)

If there were any doubts about whether the matron's vision were a scene of reading, these stanzas banish them, not only in their heavily overt inscription by Edgar Allan Poe but in their allusion once again to the Poet of Shelley's "Alastor," whose footsteps blight the "Bright flowers" and "green groves" he passes over ("Alastor" 537-38), as well as to the "shape all light" in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, whose light, kissing footsteps on the stream ultimately trample out "The thoughts of him who gazed on them" (*Triumph* ll.370-84). Blinded by the light of her own eye, fatally written over by her own idolatrous reading, the matron herself now goes about her enclosed pastoral bower imprinting darkness with her own metrical feet. Unlike the maiden, however, she knows what she's doing; it's the fall into that knowledge, rather than into literal sexual experience, that marks the matron's distance from maidenhood as well as the superiority of her song.

There is an autobiographical context for Locke's "Sisters of Avon": the poem records Locke's adoration for Poe, whom she entertained when he visited Lowell; her competition with other poetesses for his attention; and her eventual disavowal of her earlier passion. Long fodder for Poe's biographers, his entanglements with literary women like Locke have more recently become the subject of Eliza Richards' indispensable book on Poe and the figure of the poetess. What interests me here, though, are neither the biographical details nor Poe's side of the story but rather the fantastically intelligent blind eye that Locke in "Sisters of Avon" turns on her own predicament. As Patrick Vincent observes, "critics, readers, [and] sometimes even the poets themselves viewed the poetess as embodied in her work" (Vincent xvii). The anthology-structure of "Sisters of Avon" – lyrics contending within a narrative frame – provides Locke with a formal platform for at once embodying and scrutinizing both the figure of the poetess and the political economy of transatlantic women's culture as "the economic world reversed."

Some twenty years after Locke's "Sisters of Avon," Lucy Larcom published a novel-length autobiographical poem, *An Idyl of Work*, that also drew on anthology form to come to terms with the genesis of the poetess figure and its implication in Larcom's own life and writing. Like "The Sisters of Avon," only more so, *An Idyl of Work* centers on a col-

lective female protagonist. The main plot of Larcom's poem follows three young women who work in the Lowell mills – sober Esther, ethereal Eleanor, and flighty Isabel – from spring through fall of one year's time. In the opening of the poem, spring floods idle the mills' machinery and thus inaugurate the *Idyl* in a pastoral space of unaccustomed leisure for the young women. A few weeks later, visitors come to the mill from Great Britain and Boston, among them the Boston man who'll attempt to seduce Isabel. In high summer, Eleanor and Esther accompany their friend Minta on vacation to the New Hampshire mountains, where they befriend a wealthy woman, Mrs. Willoughby. In their absence from Lowell, however, they miss not only a threatened strike in the factories, but also Isabel's flight "up the Boston road" with her would-be seducer. Fortunately, as Esther finds when she rescues Isabel in Boston, the seducer – Mrs. Willoughby's wayward son, alas, also revealed as an embezzler – skipped town before taking Isabel's virtue; and so *An Idyl of Work* concludes for its main characters with Esther marrying a doctor, Isabel established in modest independence in Boston as a seamstress, and Eleanor anticipating a beautiful consumptive death in Esther's arms, overlooking the city lights.

Larcom uses these thoroughly conventional plots of marriage and seduction as the vehicle for her poem's real work, which is its mapping of poetry in the cultural field and its exploration of the gendered agency of literary culture in the making of class. The cultural field of *An Idyl of Work* is in fact two cultural fields: that of the mill girls in the early 1840s, when the poem's action takes place, and that of the post-Civil War Boston literary world in which Larcom writes *An Idyl of Work*. Larcom maps the 1840s cultural field throughout the *Idyl*, but most explicitly in her picture of the mill-girl Esther's cherished books:

The bookshelf swung between
Two simple prints, – the "Cotter's Saturday Night"
And the "Last Supper," dear to Esther's heart,
Though scarce true to Da Vinci. On the shelves
Maria Edgeworth's "Helen" leaned against
Thomas à Kempis. Bunyan's "Holy War"
And "Pilgrim's Progress" stood up stiff between
"Locke on the Understanding" and the Songs
Of Robert Burns. The "Voices of the Night,"
"Bridal of Pennacook," "Paradise Lost,"
With Irving's "Sketch-book," "Ivanhoe," Watts's Hymns,
Mingled in democratic neighborhood. (Larcom 43)

The pure canonical distillation of early nineteenth-century Anglo-American respectable dissenting vernacular literacy (no Poe or Shelley

here), this bookshelf poignantly sums up the shared cultural capital of the mill girls in Larcom's *Idyl*, as well as the cultural capital of Lucy Larcom's own girlhood.⁵

As the narrator's aside about the bad print of the "Last Supper" indicates, however, *An Idyl* revisits this 1840s vernacular literacy from a perspective distanced by both time and class. Within the 1870s cultural field of its publication, *An Idyl of Work* sustains conversations with a wider literary canon than might fit on Esther's cramped bookshelf: Tennyson's *The Princess*, with its three learned princesses and its debate over women's education; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, which Larcom sympathized with not only for its tale of the growth of a woman poet's mind, but for its skepticism about utopian socialist politics;⁶ Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the other great mid-century British blank verse poem of the growth of the poet's mind; and Louisa May Alcott's 1872 novel *Work: A Story of Experience*,⁷ to name only a few. *An Idyl of Work*, then, is a kind of poetic palimpsest that overlays the vernacular literacy of the 1840s Lowell mill-girls with the canons of high-literary 1870s Boston. While pointing occasionally in *An Idyl* to the dissonance between those worlds, Larcom more insistently wants to know what connects them. Not only is it vital to her own autobiographical self-understanding to see the one as the inheritor of the other; Larcom implies that something important for the continuity of "the spirit of our national life," as she puts it in her preface to the poem, lies in our sympathy with the books gathered "in democratic neighborhood" on Esther's bookshelf.

⁵ Larcom glosses her own memories of such bookshelves at length in "Among Lowell Mill-Girls": "Among children of the Puritans, the reading of good books was a matter of course. . . . With the Pilgrim's Progress many of us had been from infancy as familiar as we were with the road from our own door-stone to the meeting-house. . . . Milton also had the charm of a great story-teller; and the Paradise Lost, being a religious book, was to be found in most home libraries that contained more than a dozen volumes, a large number for those days" (604). The mill-girls' tastes ran to "Standard English works" rather than "the thickets of modern miscellaneous literature," since the standards "were almost the only books within reach" (605).

⁶ In "Among Lowell Mill-Girls," Larcom retroactively attributes *Aurora Leigh*'s rejection of utopian socialism to herself and her contemporaries in the mills in the 1830s and 1840s: "perhaps some of us dimly felt, with Aurora Leigh, that

"Your Fouriers failed,

Because not poets enough to understand

That life develops from within."

("Among Lowell Mill-Girls" 607)

⁷ Esther's bookshelf contrasts strikingly with the elite, though impoverished, transcendentalism registered on the romantic hero David's bookshelf in Alcott's near-contemporary *Work*: David reads Faust, Shakespeare, Browning, Keats, Coleridge, Plato, Milton, Montaigne (*Work* 174).

Like Jane Locke's "Boston" and "Sisters of Avon," *An Idyl of Work* maps its explorations of women's poetry in the mid-nineteenth-century cultural field onto the "socially ranked geographical space" of the Boston-Lowell axis. Larcom's *Idyl* orients that geographical space around a real river: not Locke's mystic Avon but the Merrimack river that powers Lowell's textile mills in which Larcom's protagonists labor. Figuratively, however, if not literally, Larcom's Merrimack, like Locke's Avon, flows into Boston – where all Larcom's main characters fetch up in the conclusion of *An Idyl*, and where Locke and Larcom both oriented their literary careers. And like "Sisters of Avon," *An Idyl of Work* accomplishes its mapping of women's poetry partly by the formal means of interpolating lyrics into a longer narrative poem. In fact, *An Idyl of Work* offers up a respectable anthology of Larcom's shorter poems by incorporating some sixteen of her own lyrics and ballads into the lives of her mill-girl protagonists – thus foregrounding for her readers how Larcom's own poetry spans the 1840s *mise-en-scène* of the characters and the 1870s scene of the poem's writing. Finally, *An Idyl of Work* along with "Sisters of Avon" is centrally concerned with the nineteenth-century female poetics of "the secret sorrow"; and like Jane Locke, Lucy Larcom uses the formal resources of her long poem to explore the cultural determinations of the poetess.

An Idyl of Work allocates its version of "the secret sorrow" to a secondary character named Ruth Woodburn, who enters the *Idyl* sitting by the Merrimack perusing an old love letter and who habitually carries an "old portfolio of verse" (85) about with her. The narrator's voice indulgently reproves Ruth's mode of lyric production – "'Tis no good place for songs," she says, "Dungeoned in self. Birds in a darkened cage / Stop singing" (86), but Larcom goes beyond moral reproof to ask where this poetry comes from. As in Locke's "Sisters of Avon," the poetry of the "secret sorrow" in Larcom's *Idyl* ultimately stems from a bad scene of reading; Ruth, it turns out, carries "a blurred text of chained books / in her heart's crypt" (*Idyl* 85). For Ruth, the fall into sorrowing song came with the acquisition of a specific kind of cultural capital in a specific educational setting: the private tutorial in the classics that is such a staple literacy narrative for nineteenth-century Anglo-American middle-class women. As Ruth recounts the story to Esther, who rescues and befriends her:

" . . . he [a schoolteacher] came,
And with old Virgil, made an Italy
Of cold New Hampshire. I, beyond the rest,
Prizing the Latin lore, we studied much
Together, in long evenings, by ourselves." (*Idyl* 89)

No sexual sin follows, only literary sins, as the teacher goes west and forgets about Ruth. Abandoned, she tries to instruct her mournful lyrics in forgetfulness and, ultimately, transcendence. “Even now,” she says,

“I dimly see why disappointment came,
To lead me upward to some grander height
Of hope and labor. Still the grinding wheels
Crush on, the red drops ooze. The Juggernaut,
Experience, never heeds its victim’s cry.” (*Idyl* 93)

Ruth’s individual moral character, as she already knows, will ultimately benefit from unlearning her romantic idolatry. But the wider suggestion that Larcom makes through her story is that the genesis of women’s “secret sorrow” poetry lies not just in personal romantic loss but in a particular – gendered and classed – relationship to culture.

If that is the social cause of “secret sorrow” female poetics, what is the cure, according to Larcom? It, too, lies on the bookshelf: Esther ministers to Ruth’s sorrow first by taking down her Wordsworth and reading his “Laodamia,” “with its heroic thoughts / Climbing sharp crags of sorrow with high faith” (35). But when Ruth protests that Wordsworth’s poem is “too hard, too hard!”, Esther sets it aside and takes up a homemade book from which to read her to sleep:

The one she chose
Was a strange medley-book of prose and rhyme
Cut from odd magazines, or pages dim
Of yellow journals, long since out of print;
And pasted in against the faded ink
Of an old log-book, relic of the sea,
And mostly filled with legends of the shore
That Esther loved, her home-shore of Cape Ann. (*Idyl* 36)

The poem Esther reads, a North Shore ballad titled “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage,” is one of the many lyrics of her own writing that Larcom inserts into the *Idyl*, the scrapbook in which she finds it is recognizably Larcom’s nostalgia-laden image for her own local-colorist poetic work. The sequence from Virgil to Wordsworth to this home-made writing suggests that the cure for what ails Ruth is a different relationship to cultural capital: one mediated by women as well as by men, one that would find capital in the homely vernacular as well as the classical tongues. The cure for Ruth’s punishing experience and its allied poetics of sorrow, administered by Esther and Eleanor particularly among the other women protagonists in the *Idyl*, will be native, spontaneous lyric song in happier keys, song that Larcom naturalizes in various ways through the

lyrics scattered over the course of the narrative: as church-going hymns that modulate into lighter songs, oral recitations for the girls' mutual pleasure, and so forth.

Patrick Vincent has suggested that the romantic poetess tradition is worth teaching because "The romantic poetess embodies hope, the ideal of an authentically liberal and cosmopolitan future" (Vincent 179). In light of his argument, it is worth asking ourselves what hope is embodied in Larcom's late-Victorian enactment of the poetess figure in *An Idyl of Work*. By contrast with Locke's "Sisters of Avon," Larcom's *Idyl* hopefully posits social solidarity rather than rivalry between contrasting women's poetics; it images women's writing as circulating rather than stagnant; it formally as well as thematically models how the inward turn of the poetess tradition can transcend itself without loss of women's expressive capacity. Larcom posits the same hope on a larger scale when (in the Mrs. Willoughby part of the plot) she figures poetry as a mode of cross-class solidarity among women, and on a still larger scale when, in the *Idyl*'s conclusion, she folds poetry into education as a means of socializing the immigrant waves that were furnishing factory labor to Lowell by the 1870s, displacing the New England-born young women of Larcom's days in the mills:

Like ocean-waves
Work-populations change. No rich, no poor,
No learned, and no ignorant class or caste
The true republic tolerates; interfused,
Like the sea's salt, the life of each through all. (*Idyl* 178)

Turning those "populations" into educated American workers is the hardly buried subtext of Larcom's *Idyl*. These lines accomplish that transformation by means of simile: like the waves they arrive, like the sea they are "interfused" with the life of all. Larcom's glance here towards Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," with its closing sense of human life "more deeply interfused," recalls Wordsworth's appearance among the books "Mingled in democratic neighborhood" on Esther's shelf earlier in the *Idyl* (43), and implies the more literal historical means by which Larcom's "work populations" would become human capital: through the establishment of an Anglo-American vernacular literary curriculum in the public schools of the United States, an effort in which Larcom and other poetesses played a significant historical role.⁸

An Idyl of Work asks whether the cosmopolitan liberal hope embodied in the figure of the romantic poetess can interfuse the class hierarchy

⁸ See Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon*.

of a maturing industrial liberal state. We may well be troubled to see that in Larcom's eyes this cosmopolitan hope entails substituting cultural solidarity for class solidarity: Wordsworth is quite literally Larcom's alternative to union-formation. And yet we have surely seen worse hopes than those for a state welcoming to emigrants and intolerant of caste, a state with an educational system capable of interfusing "the life of each through all" along with concrete economic opportunity. Perhaps we could recognize the hope for the liberal state that Larcom holds out at the end of *An Idyl of Work* as anticipating Bruce Robbins' recommendation that we "rethink[] cosmopolitanism . . . neither as ideal unplaceableness nor as sordid elitism, but as a way of relativizing and problematizing the scale and the units of democracy" (Robbins 211).⁹ The anthology form of *An Idyl of Work* – a novel-length blank verse poem enfolding a miniature anthology of diverse lyrics – "problematiz[es] the scale and the units of democracy" by problematizing the scale and the units of poetry, and foregrounding their circulation through the figure of the poetess.

Where the poetess is easy to find, both thematically and autobiographically, in Jane Locke's and Lucy Larcom's nineteenth-century long poems, a reader of Amy Lowell's "Towns in Colour," first published in her 1916 volume *Men, Women and Ghosts*, might easily not see the poetess figure at all in Lowell's modernist sequence. "Like many high modernist texts," Steven Gould Axelrod observes, "'Towns in Colour' represents scenes through objective but often sardonic description" – descriptions of, sequentially, a "shop-window," a lunch room in Grand Central Station, "An Opera House," a rainy afternoon in Boston's downtown State Street, and an urban aquarium (Axelrod 557). As Axelrod points out, "Towns in Colour" abounds in figures of "mediated vision [implying] emotional separation and ironic distance" (558): the urban streetscapes and interiors of Lowell's sequence are framed through proscenium arches, aquarium tanks, windows and bubbles. Only once, Axelrod notes, does the address of "Towns in Colour" break through the third-person frame of high modernist descriptive distance, when "Amy

⁹ Robbins observes that "twelve years of Reagan/Bush privatization, backed up by strong if hypocritical anti-statist rhetoric," remind his readers in the United States that "[t]hese days, we can take for granted neither the durable power of the state . . . nor its political malevolence, however comfortable for those who warm themselves in friction with it" (210).

Lowell's 'I,' at the end of the penultimate section," emerges in response "to the impersonality, the social disparity, and often the plain ugliness of the urban scene" to seek relief in "the suffusing, round brilliance" of a street lamp's globe (Axelrod 558-59).¹⁰ That relief found, the sequence "recovers from this moment of affective estrangement by turning its attention, in the final section, to the creatures and colors of the old South Boston Aquarium – and, in the very final lines, to the 'blue waves' of the sea beyond" (Axelrod 559).

Axelrod makes his case for the aesthetic value of "Towns in Colour" by reading it forward in time, to its influence on Robert Lowell's famous poem "For the Union Dead." My strategy will instead be to read "Towns in Colour" backward in time and, to some degree, against the grain of its modernism. Reading backward in time, how could we fail to see the figure of the poetess in the first section of "Towns in Colour," "Red Slippers"? If the poetess as an expressive, individuated speaking subject is nowhere to be found in this modernist scene of vision, nevertheless her metonyms are everywhere. The "row of white, sparkling shop fronts . . . gashed and bleeding . . . red slippers" ("Towns" 348) evokes every poetess who ever lived, her breast against a thorn, to bleed suffering ink onto waiting white pages; every "faint foot," to recall Jane Locke, in whose wounded, obliterating tread "gushes the dark wave"; every Cinderella "screaming" for attention and "jamming [her] crimson reflections against the window" ("Towns" 348) of the literary marketplace.

"Red Slippers" is conventionally read as an instance of high modernist commentary on commodity culture – as "a form of resistance to the visual commodification of the window display," in Andrew Thacker's words (113), a satire on "a culture in love with modernity, abundance, and economic hierarchy" in Axelrod's (558) – and of course it is that. But Amy Lowell herself is not in any simple way on the outside of this shop-window, looking in. As an editor who publicized the new modernist poetry in her several anthologies of Imagism, Lowell herself "worked to create relative commercial viability for little-known poetry out of thin air" (Marek 165).¹¹ As a sensationally popular lecturer and reader of her poetry, she danced, swung, and "plunge[d] the clangour of billions of

¹⁰ Axelrod quotes the ending of "Afternoon Rain in State Street" from the *Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*, where it reads "the suffering, round brilliance of its globe" rather than "suffusing, round brilliance" as in the poem's first printing in *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916).

¹¹ See also Melissa Bradshaw's excellent account of Lowell's career as a lecturer and poetic entrepreneur, "Outselling the Modernisms of Men"; Bradshaw observes that "As much as Lowell courts the general public and markets herself for a mass audience, she, too, [like Ezra Pound] violently disidentifies herself from that mass culture" (165).

vermillion trumpets into the crowd[s]" ("Towns" 349) that heard her. Erotically, too, Lowell's butch femininity (she was a 300-pound, cigar-smoking lesbian who lived with a former actress) seems drawn here to the feminine fetishistic drag of these extravagant shoes, at least by contrast with the more stereotypically feminine inertia of the "wax doll" in a cardboard lotus-bud box that draws passers-by further down the street. "Red Slippers" clearly recalls Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the "Red Shoes" – in which a little girl who lusts after red shoes receives a magic pair that compels her to dance, day and night, until she cuts off her feet – but Lowell rejects the fairy tale's sadistic moral about female ambition. The compulsiveness and prolixity attached to the dancing shoes in Anderson's story – qualities conventionally attached as well to the metrical feet of the nineteenth-century poetess – Lowell reframes as willful artistic performance.¹²

Notably, though, "Red Slippers" is cast in prose rather than in the free verse of the following four sections of "Towns in Colour," as if to contest the nineteenth-century overdetermination of the poetess figure by metrical form. Rather than foregrounding metrical variation, as did nineteenth-century anthology forms, the remaining sections of "Towns in Colour" are overtly distinguished by visual stylization, modulating from the "Red Slippers" to the "Study in Whites" of the Grand Central Station lunch room to the flagrant gold of the Boston "Opera House" to the rectilinear black, white, and gray gridlines of "Afternoon Rain in State Street" to, finally, the green-gray-silver-yellow "iridescence" of "An Aquarium." The shift from aural to visual stylization is of course one of modernism's canonical ways of defining itself against nineteenth-century poetics, but in other ways "Towns in Colour" continues some of the preoccupations of Amy Lowell's nineteenth-century Lowell precursors in anthology form. Like "Sisters of Avon" and "An Idyl of Work," "Towns in Colour" locates the prolixity of the poetess within the circulation of an economy of letters that expands, in "Towns in Colour," from the Atlantic worlds of Locke's and Larcom's poems to encompass, at least by implication, the globe.

"Globe," as I noted in passing earlier, is the final word of "Afternoon Rain in State Street," the penultimate section of "Towns in Colour." State Street is today, as it was in Amy Lowell's lifetime, the financial center of Boston. "Afternoon Rain in State Street" associates that center with the technologies of both the industrial revolution (its "tools," "bars of steel" and "low-gear'd engines" "slipping past each other with the smoothness of oil") and mass print culture (the "cross-

¹² On the association of the figure of the poetess with compulsion and metrical overdetermination, see Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon*, chapter 1.

hatching” of mass-produced engravings, the “slant lines” of rain echoing those of the type on the “crumpled grey-white papers / Blow[n] along the sidewalks”) (“Towns” 357-59). Against this scene, Lowell seizes upon the “suffusing, round brilliance” (359) of the street lamp’s globe. The final section of the poem, however, does not repudiate State Street’s nineteenth-century economy so much as it globalizes that economy. Everything solid in the nineteenth-century industrial and print economy dissolves in “An Aquarium”: State Street’s “bars of steel” return as the light rippling over fish “[i]n steel-bright tremors” (360), State Street’s “sombre escutcheon of argent and sable” reappears as the “crests laid horizontal on [the] backs” of undulate green eels (361), State Street’s dark slant lines of rain come back as “threaded light” that “prints through” onto the aquarium’s pebbles (361). Where Jane Locke conventionally idealized poets as the gems in Boston’s civic crown but fretted about women’s capacity to personify that cultural capital, Lowell’s more autonomous aesthetic of the modern I/eye draws “chrysolite and coral . . . green, pearl, amethyst irradiations” out of fish-scales (363).¹³ The globalizing eye of the twentieth-century poetess oversees an aqueous world driven by “[a] constant modulation of values” (362) – the world of accelerated commodity capitalism as well as artistic modernity. Invoking at a distance the China trade (in tea and opium) that capitalized Boston’s industrial revolution, the “Oriental fans” of Lowell’s fish-fins and the willow-tree that “flickers with little white jerks” outside her aquarium draw the eye, in the poem’s final lines, to the “long blue waves” that “[r]ise steadily beyond the outer islands” (363) of Boston harbor.

Jane Marcus, in discussing what she calls Lowell’s “Asian self-fashioning,” declares that “[e]mbracing the oriental was a liberating process for American women before and after the First World War.” Lowell’s Asian-inflected poetry, Marcus suggests, “creates a past in which the sea and the trade routes bring Asian arts to America, producing a hybrid flowering of the female voice” (Marcus 188). Here once again, the figure of the poetess – in Patrick Vincent’s words – “embodies hope, the ideal of an authentically liberal and cosmopolitan future” (Vincent 179). And here once again that hope, for Amy Lowell as it was for her sister poets Lucy Larcom and Jane Locke, is tied to the world

¹³ Amy Lowell’s catalog of “chrysolite and coral . . . green, pearl, amethyst,” still contains echoes of the nineteenth-century poetess, as Lowell here recalls and modernizes the ending of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. In Barrett Browning’s poem, the romantic heterosexual couple provides the secular translation of eschatology; Lowell sets a modernist aesthetic eschatology in the couple’s place. See also the ending of Larcom’s *An Idyl of Work* for another variation on *Aurora Leigh*’s ending (181-83), and Loeffelholz, “Mapping the Cultural Field,” 156.

economy of letters through the world economy of the Boston-Lowell industrial axis: the poetess figures the exchanges undergirding both world economies. The American poetess is thus, as I suggested earlier, a central figure not just *in* but *of* and *for* a certain ideal of world literature. Whether present-day readers find that ideal hopeful or hopelessly degraded is a question that will shape not only how we teach the works of bygone poetesses, but also how we imagine the future of English studies more broadly.

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