



A COMPANION TO

AMERICAN POETRY

EDITED BY
MARY MCALEER BALKUN
JEFFREY GRAY
AND PAUL JAUSSEN

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**MARY MCALEER BALKUN, JEFFREY GRAY, AND PAUL
JAUSSEN**

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This edition first published 2022

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John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Balkun, Mary McAleer, editor. | Gray, Jeffrey, 1944- editor. | Jaussen,

Paul, author.

Title: A companion to American poetry / edited by Mary McAleer Balkun, Jeffrey Gray, and Paul Jaussen.

Description: Hoboken, NJ : John Wiley & Sons, 2022. | Series: Blackwell companions to literature and culture | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021053028 (print) | LCCN 2021053029 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119669685 (hardback) | ISBN 9781119669722 (paperback) | ISBN 9781119669746 (pdf) | ISBN 9781119669227 (epub) | ISBN 9781119669760 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: American poetry--History and criticism. | LCGFT: Literary criticism. | Essays.

Classification: LCC PS305 .C66 2022 (print) | LCC PS305 (ebook) | DDC 811.009--dc23/eng/20211220

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021053028>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021053029>

Cover image: © Linda Grebmeier www.paintsong.com

Cover design by Wiley

Set in 10.5/12.5pt Garmond3LTStd by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry, India

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Introduction

Mary McAleer Balkun, Jeffrey Gray, and Paul Jaussen

In his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot observed that the creation of a new work of art necessarily changes those that preceded it: “The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (1920, para. 4). In the case of poetry, new work changes the way we look at Emily Dickinson’s fascicles or modernist images, for example, or indeed what we decide to call “American” poetry. Like works of art, critical paradigms can refine methods, broaden contexts, and reorganize the field of poetics, transforming what scholars value or understand about poems. The New Criticism, for instance, raised the profile of the lyric poem in the early twentieth century, an elevation that was later challenged, first, in the late twentieth century by the New Historicism, which restored the elements of identity and context and privileged narrative over lyric, and more recently by the “new lyric studies,” which questions the critical stance toward this genre over the past century, one that has often ignored the diversity of poetry and its historical dimension. The twenty-first century has seen a growing interest in documentary and archival poetry, a further remove from New Critical impersonality. As a result of changes in both poetic practice and critical paradigms, often in a reciprocal relation with one another, the study of poetry has evolved at a rapid rate.

This volume was conceived and written during a period of accelerating global instability, with the re-emergence of authoritarian political regimes, the increasingly obvious

effects of climate change, and, in the final years of writing and editing, the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges highlight the dynamism between present concerns and the ways in which the past helps us understand those concerns. In the development of the *Companion to American Poetry*, we have tried to broaden our critical map so as to address the fact that our American pasts often entertained very different ideas of the poet and of poetry's place and purpose. We solicited essays that both took those historical concepts on their own terms but also, crucially, reconceptualized the past in dialogue with the present. Not only is the past unstable, but it changes according to the questions we ask of it. In this volume, we sought to pose new questions that respect long-standing concerns of American poetry and criticism as well as recast those questions according to our present lights. How, for instance, has the inescapable experience of death and dying been transformed through the decades by the poetic imagination? How has American poetry staged the struggles over language and nation in the wake of US settler colonialism? How have queer and trans voices used poetry to articulate identities that have been otherwise repressed in the United States? Where do we see poetry engaging "nature" as a transcendent concept and the anthropocene as a material activity of planetary destruction? How does the very term "American poetry" become redefined when read through the forces of globalization? Questions such as these express critical and poetic continuities—traditionally at the heart of a volume such as this one—but also demonstrate important *discontinuities*. These include poetry's relationship to other genres and other fields, the way conceptions of the poem itself have changed, and the way poetry responds to contemporary events and trends.

The challenge for such a project is not only its scale but also the demands of portraying American poetry as a whole. Instead of offering a singular narrative, as we developed this *Companion to American Poetry* we committed to two principles: first, to highlight new approaches, unexplored research areas, and emerging practices within American poetry and poetics writ large; and, second, to prompt a wide-ranging discussion about the expanding edges of poetry scholarship. The *Companion* brings together a group of scholars and scholar-poets, from those in the early stages of their careers to more established voices, and with expertise in a cross-section of historical periods and forms: from the time before there was an “American” poetry to the present day, and from the traditional to the experimental. These essays reflect a poetry that is broadly conceived and that acknowledges the porousness of boundaries, whether cultural, temporal, or generic.

While each chapter presents an individual argument, we have organized the volume according to clusters of concerns. Each section title gestures toward earlier paradigms in American poetry criticism while also attempting to widen our definitions of those conceptual frameworks. We begin with “Poetry before ‘American Poetry,’” calling attention to the problematic definition of “America” through chapters on pre-colonial writings, indigenous politics, and the role that poetry played in forming the early national imaginary. We follow this with “Poetry and the Transcendent,” considering the flourishing of nineteenth-century poetry in dialogue with transcendentalist philosophy while also exploring the ongoing role of experiences of the sacred and epiphanic in contemporary writing. Acknowledging that the “experimental/traditional” divide is both operative and problematic in many accounts of American poetry, our third

section stresses “experimentalisms,” whether in modernist and contemporary poetry or in experimental critical practices, such as philosophical readings or digital fabrications. Sections four and five examine the related topics of identity and nation, with essays that take up queer, transgender, and transnational concerns. Section six expands the field of poetry’s relationship to other arts and media, with reconsiderations of ekphrastic and cinematic poetics, along with chapters on bio art and rap music. Section seven exemplifies our commitment to moving between past, present, and future through readings of the various ways that ecology, nature, and the anthropocene have shaped our vision of planetary existence. In our final section, we gather a diverse collection of essays on poetry that engages with public struggles: over borders, war, capitalism, or racial inequality.

Some scholars claim that shifts in literary critical practice, notably the rise of New Historicism and various reactions to it, have led to the sidelining of poetry in favor of narrative. However, as we can see from the intellectual diversity and depth of this volume, the death of poetry has been greatly exaggerated. The 37 essays in *A Companion to American Poetry* demonstrate the continued relevance of poetry and poetics for broader fields that animate literary scholarship today, including indigenous studies, queer and transgender studies, diasporic and Black studies, maker methodologies, science and technology studies, and visual cultural studies, among others. We hope these essays not only offer new understandings and perspectives but also speak to the ongoing vitality of American poetry, as well as its important, always timely, contributions to American and world culture.

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SECTION 1

**Poetry before “American
Poetry”**

2

Worldmaking and Ambition in History Poems by Early American Women: The Examples of Anne Bradstreet and Sarah Wentworth Morton

Tamara Harvey
George Mason University

Arme, arme, Soldado's arme, Horse, Horse, speed to your
Horses,

Gentle-women, make head, they vent their plot in Verses;

They write of Monarchies, a most seditious word,

It signifies Oppression, Tyranny, and Sword:

March amain to *London*, they'l rise, for there they flock,

But stay a while, they seldome rise till ten a clock.

R.Q. (Bradstreet, 1650, n.p.)

The humor in R.Q.'s prefatory poem to Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse* (1650) is neither original nor subtle, which may explain why it was the only prefatory poem to be dropped from *Several Poems* (1678).¹ And yet its representation of both monarchy and literary gentle-women epitomizes the broad trends in scholarship on the poem R.Q. would seem to have in mind, Bradstreet's "The Four Monarchies." Bradstreet renders Sir Walter Raleigh's² five volume *The Historie of the World* in over 3500 lines of iambic pentameter couplets. According to Gillian Wright, Bradstreet's poem is a "politic history," a subgenre of early modern verse history that uses condensation and an epigrammatic style to render its subject (p. 85). At times

this yields pithy epitomes of long, scholarly discourse, though just as frequently the effort to turn Raleigh's prose into poetry leads to confusing inversions and other infelicities. Modern readers, it is fair to say, don't love this poem. To make sense of it, scholars have read it as a reflection of extratextual concerns that resonate more readily with modern interests, situating Bradstreet politically within transatlantic Puritan concerns during the English Civil War and literarily as a woman writer who must work against broad characterizations of women's abilities and nature. How the poem fails and how it treats failure is a frequent focus of these approaches. Bradstreet herself attributed faults in the poem to her gender and personal circumstances: "To fill the world with terrour and with woe,/My tyred brain leavs to some better pen,/This task befits not women like to men" (1678, p. 185).³ In this poem, written during the English Civil War and published in the year following the beheading of Charles I, Bradstreet also repeatedly demonstrates that "Royalty no good conditions brings" (1678, p. 172), but falters in concluding the poem in ways that may be attributed to her unwillingness to imagine political solutions that fully reject monarchy.⁴

In this chapter, I argue that attention to the concept of worldmaking *and* its attendant failures provides useful grounds for comparing women writers across time. I expand on recent readings of Bradstreet's longest and most neglected poem, "The Four Monarchies," and then consider *The Virtues of Society* (1799), one of three long history poems written by Sarah Wentworth Morton during the early US republic. My goal is to suggest that understanding the ways these poets engage the intellectual project of imagining and theorizing the world at moments of significant global transformation provides insights into their work individually as well as providing a framework for

examining the work of other early women writers. In each case I focus on the poet's representation of a heroic woman situated in world-historical space, Semiramis and Lady Harriet Ackland, respectively, in order to explore their engagement with historical genres, learned debates, and depictions of exceptional women.

Though both personal and political approaches to literature are relevant and revelatory, they often sidestep the manifest purpose of a poem such as Bradstreet's—to tell the history of the world. Recent attention to worldmaking and a rapidly changing global imaginary during the early modern period provides a more robust framework for reading Bradstreet's ambitious attempt at a universal history. Ayesha Ramachandran describes early modern "worldmaking" as "the methods by which early modern thinkers sought to imagine, shape, revise, control, and articulate the dimensions of the world," synthesizing fragments into a comprehensive whole (pp. 6–7).

Understanding Bradstreet's poem as a form of worldmaking helps us better appreciate her literary ambition. It also helps us account for her evident failures in this poem without attributing them solely to her gender and personal circumstances or the responses of New England Puritans to the English Civil War. "[T]he great secret of the early modern system-makers," Ramachandran explains, is that "worldmaking is possible, even necessary, because of the insurmountable gap between our fragmentary apprehension of the phenomenal world and our desire for complete knowledge of it" (p. 10). Early modern worldmaking frequently drew on metaphors of the body to imagine the world (Ramachandran 2015, p. 23 ff.). Bradstreet's apology that "my Monarchies their legs do lack" (1678, p. 191) is as much a gesture toward the worldmaking design of the poem as it is a confession that it, like all such projects, fell short of that design.

While shared marginalization, female embodiment, and the experience of being writers whose authority is automatically doubted are understandable grounds for comparing women across time, history poems are seldom subjects for this kind of comparison. Perhaps this is because they seem too impersonal for comparisons of embodied experience while also emerging from specific historical contexts that get in the way of comparative analysis based on genre and political engagement. By attending to the worldmaking design of these poems, I build on scholarship on women's engagement of politics in poetry and their self-consciously ambitious attempts to represent global space and world history. Wright observes with regard to Bradstreet's "Monarchies," "What matters in the 'I' of politic history is not the biographical baggage which he or she (overtly at least) brings to the task, but rather the qualities of discrimination, political judgement and apt expression which are manifest in the narrative" (p. 88). Insofar as it is possible, I focus here on qualities of discrimination and design rather than on their personal circumstances to compare these writers. One challenge, of course, is that their approaches to history differ in important ways. Bradstreet's worldmaking is a form of universal history that was a generation old when she was writing the poems that make up *The Tenth Muse*, while Morton's neoclassicism draws on the epic and her more complete knowledge of the globe, centering America and, eventually, the United States, geopolitically in ways that Bradstreet and her peers could not yet have imagined. Still, we gain some important insights that allow us to deal more substantially with the content of these poems by attending to the poets' own ambitious representation of world history, the scholarly gestures of these works that are important components of their literary and intellectual ambition, and how exactly these poets imagined the globe. Acknowledging and appreciating the grand design in

women's history poems as well as the inevitable flaws in those designs can help us move away from attributing faults and expressions of failure to the rhetorical exigencies placed on women writers as well as their insecurities and limited educational opportunities.

“She for Her Potency Must Go Alone”: Anne Bradstreet’s Semiramis

Since the start of the twenty-first century there has been a small surge in scholarship on Bradstreet’s “The Four Monarchies” that better accounts for the context and aims of this long poem by either exploring her vision of the world or situating her poem among other political works by English women writers during the seventeenth century. Jim Egan and Samuel Fallon have developed readings of Bradstreet’s worldmaking that find in her elegies a fulfillment and refinement of ideas explored in the “Monarchies.” Egan uses Bradstreet’s comparison of Alexander the Great and Sir Phillip Sidney in her elegy on Sidney to make the case that her extensive treatment of Alexander in both works was meant to connect New England to the East. Fallon distinguishes between space and time in Bradstreet’s worldmaking, and his reading of the “Monarchies” identifies a tension between the totalizing project of the history and the present time of poetic address evident in her apologies (pp. 107–108). As he explains, “Worldmaking in such moments is not a matter of charting global space, but something more modest: the careful tending of a fragile intimacy” (Fallon, p. 103). For Egan and Fallon, the elegies fulfill what is only begun in the “Monarchies” through the comparisons and identifications that this lyric genre invites. But in stressing the subtlety of Bradstreet’s “rhetorical sleight of hand” (Egan 2011, p. 23) and her modest “tending of fragile intimacy” (Fallon 2018,

p. 103), both critics redirect our attention away from the naked ambition of Bradstreet's longest poem. Scholars who focus on Bradstreet's poem as an instance of political writing, including Susan Wiseman (2006), Mihoko Suzuki (2009), and Gillian Wright (2013), pay more attention to Bradstreet's literary ambitions in "The Four Monarchies" as well as her complicated representation of monarchy.

Anne Bradstreet's treatment of Semiramis in two works, "The Four Monarchies" and the elegy "In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory," provides an opportunity for thinking about politics, worldbuilding, and genre.⁵ This notorious queen was known both as an empire builder and as a licentious manipulator. She is rumored to have had her husband Ninus killed in order to gain the throne and then to have had an incestuous relationship with her son, Ninias, or to have dressed as him in order to rule in his place. In the elegy, Bradstreet uses these qualities to raise Queen Elizabeth in comparison:

But time would fail me, so my tongue would to,
To tell of half she did, or she could doe.
Semiramis to her, is but obscure,
More infamy then fame, she did procure.
She built her glory but on *Babels* walls,
Worlds wonder for a while, but yet it falls.

(Bradstreet 1678, p. 212)

Bradstreet's use of the inexpressibility topos in this passage builds on Semiramis' accomplishments as the known quantity, which serves to elevate Elizabeth's greatness while also striking a warning note about the decline of past empires.

Bradstreet's treatment of Semiramis in "Monarchies" illuminates the ways in which the aims of her longest poem differ fundamentally from those of her lyric elegies. Following Raleigh, in this poem Bradstreet focuses on the extent and grandeur of her building projects, not their fall, and foregrounds mythmaking and competing interpretations through repeated references to "reports," "aspersions," and what "poets feigned." As a poem, it is both less nationalist and less feminist than the Queen Elizabeth elegy. While in the elegy Bradstreet seeks to underscore both Semiramis's personal infamy and the inevitable fall of Babylon in the service of demonstrating that Elizabeth I is more virtuous and more powerful, in the "Monarchies" she is far more interested in praising what Semiramis accomplished and more conflicted in treating her rumored licentiousness. For example, while in the elegy Bradstreet sets infamy and fame in opposition in order to draw a distinction between Semiramis and Elizabeth, in the "Monarchies" she frames this kind of opposition as a contradiction that at times is attributed to Semiramis's character ("She like a brave *Virago* playd the *Rex*/And was both shame and glory of her Sex") and at other times is attributed to the bias of historians ("That undeserv'd, they blur'd her name and fame/By their aspersions, cast upon the same") (1678, pp. 71-72).

Both Bradstreet and Raleigh refute the charge of Semiramis's licentiousness, but while Raleigh's observations about the risks taken by conquerors underscore both his own acumen in judging others and his "labour and hazard" in the service of the crown, Bradstreet dwells more on sexed dichotomies that "blurred [Semiramis's] name and fame." For Raleigh, Semiramis's success stands as evidence that calumnies against her are the work of "envious and lying *Grecians*" (Raleigh 1652, pp. 183):

For delicacy and ease doe more often accompany licentiousnesse in men and women, than labour and hazard doe. And if the one halfe be true which is reported of this Lady, then there never lived any Prince or Princesse more worthy of fame than *Semiramis* was, both for the works she did at *Babylon* and elsewhere, and for the wars she made with glorious successe....

(Raleigh 1652, p. 183)

Bradstreet follows Raleigh in stressing Greek lies and Semiramis's power, though with subtle differences that speak to how she is exercising judgment and claiming authority:

She flourishing with *Ninus* long did reign,
Till her Ambition caus'd him to be slain.
That having no Compeer, she might rule all,
Or else she sought revenge for *Menon's* fall.
Some think the Greeks this slander on her cast,
As on her life Licentious, and unchast,
That undeservd, they blur'd her name and fame
By their aspersions, cast upon the same:
But were her virtues more or less, or none,
She for her potency must go alone.

(Bradstreet 1678, 72)

Unlike Raleigh, Bradstreet does not argue that voluptuaries are rarely as successful as Semiramis was; rather, she suggests that Semiramis' "potency" must speak for itself. This is a subtle difference and one that can be attributed in part to the epigrammatic style of Bradstreet's poem. But while Raleigh takes pains to demonstrate that he has the

experience and judgment to evaluate the character of rulers, Bradstreet reports on and then questions several salacious rumors, never fully putting them aside but instead keeping the scholarly debates in play. We might read this as a reflection of her concern with what is said about authoritative women as well as her favorable opinion of female monarchs. However, in her elegy on Queen Elizabeth, Bradstreet takes a stronger, more feminist line: "Let such as say our Sex is void of Reason,/Know tis a Slander now, but once was Treason" (1678, p. 213). In "The Four Monarchies," she catalogs and evaluates interpretive disagreements without resolving them.

Raleigh demonstrates what he knows about the globe and military endeavors, and his praise of Semiramis leads to his positive evaluation of her military might. He devotes a full section of his work to her campaign in India, enumerating at great length the reported size of her army, including the numbers of footmen, horsemen, chariots, camels, raw hides, galleys, and soldiers. He concludes, "These incredible and impossible numbers, which no one place of the earth was able to nourish, (had every man and beast but fed upon grasse) are taken from the authority of *Ctesias* whom *Diodorus* followeth" (Raleigh 1652, p. 183). Bradstreet condenses this section significantly as the conclusion to her section on the Babylonian queen:

An expedition to the *East* she made
Staubates, his Country to invade:
Her Army of four millions did consist,
Each may believe it as his fancy list.
Her Camels, Chariots, Gallies in such number,
As puzzles best Historians to remember;
But this is wonderful, of all those men,
They say, but twenty e're came back agen.
The river [*Indus*] swept them half away,
The rest *Staubates* in fight did slay;
This was last progress of this mighty Queen,
Who in her Country never more was seen.
The Poets feign'd her turn'd into a Dove,
Leaving the world to *Venus* soar'd above:
Which made the *Assyrians* many a day,
A Dove within their Ensigns to display:
Forty two years she reign'd, and then she di'd
But by what means we are not certifi'd.

(Bradstreet 1678, 73-74)

While Raleigh's prose demonstrates familiarity with the logistics of war befitting a wise counselor, Bradstreet instead amplifies that which is confusing and unknowable in referring to historical "puzzles" and insists that Semiramis died "by what means we are not certifi'd." She also elevates the "last progress of this mighty Queen" and Semiramis's final transformation into a dove, "Leaving the world to *Venus* soar'd above." Raleigh stresses learned

citations and evaluates logistics according to his experiences in the field; Bradstreet navigates the problems of fame and infamy, foregrounding interpretive puzzles before elevating Semiramis as she soars out of the picture, ending with a summation of her reign as a monarch.⁶

I would argue that this poem is not only or even primarily a Puritan reflection on the failings of monarchs. Just as Raleigh wants to demonstrate his abilities as a judicious counselor with experience of the world, Bradstreet wants to demonstrate that she can compass the world imaginatively. The fact that she includes so many lines of poetry that repeat Raleigh's judgment of prior historians is telling (they could have easily been cut, to good effect). She's not just taking issue with monarchs; she is signaling her own authority and scholarly interest. And in condensing them, she draws our attention to myths and arguments. When in "The Prologue" she undermines her own contention that the muses stand as evidence of women's poetic abilities with the line "The Greeks did nought, but play the fools & lye" (Bradstreet 1678, p. 4), this is not just a retreat from classical exempla back into the orthodoxy of Puritanism. Judging "lying Greeks" is part of her project; the cultural distinctions she draws are as much about her scholarly judgment as they are about distinctions among nations and civilizations.

"The Four Monarchies" is an ambitious work recounting the successes and failures of ambitious people, and charting global space is certainly an important part of this undertaking. In mapping the globe, enumerating military forces, and weighing the merits of historical interpretations, Raleigh used his *Historie* to demonstrate his membership in "an early modern European community of learned counselors who deployed historical analysis to produce prophetic advice" (Popper 2012, p. 74). Though Bradstreet had no hope of serving the government, in

“Monarchies” she limned the bounds of empire, recounted great architectural feats, and highlighted interpretive disagreements in order to assert her power as a poet and an interpreter of history. Bradstreet embraces both her own ambition and her judgment more fully in the “Monarchies” than she does in either “The Prologue” or her elegies.

“Or Round the Pictured Orb Instructive Trace”: Sarah Wentworth Morton’s Lady Harriet Ackland

Like Bradstreet, Sarah Wentworth Morton foregrounds scholarly citation and judgment in an ambitious engagement with world history and global space that we risk overlooking if we chiefly associate either her episodic approach to epic or the “various imperfections” for which she apologizes (1790, p. viii) with gendered marginalization. Morton published three long poems in the 1790s, *Ouâbi, or The Virtues of Nature* (1790), *Beacon Hill. A Local Poem* (1797), and *The Virtues of Society. A Tale Founded on Fact* (1799), which offer different glimpses of poetic ambition as expressed through poems that engage world history. All three are framed as “American” and situated with respect to both a European present and a classical past. As she entreats in her introduction to the first of these works, *Ouâbi, or The Virtues of Nature* (1790), “I am induced to hope, that the attempting a subject wholly American will in some respect entitle me to the partial eye of the patriot” (p. viii). In each of these poems, Morton recenters world history in the United States, generally through the yoking of European cultural achievements with North American vitality. This vitality is figured through rugged and sublime natural prospects, racial heterogeneity, and the transportable ideals of post-revolutionary Liberty. It is also evident in a thoroughgoing Eurocentrism that in