Introduction

POE'S CIRCLE

In 1845, at the height of his career, Edgar Allan Poe asked popular "poetess" Frances Sargent Osgood to write a poem "equal to my reputation" that he could present at the Boston Lyceum (*EAP* 286). The request presumes Osgood's ability to emulate his work so closely that her poem could pass as his own. The mimic powers of poetesses intrigued Poe, and he was not above imitating them. That Elizabeth Barrett's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" was a rhythmic prototype for "The Raven" is commonly known, but there are many other unacknowledged occasions when women's poems inform his work. Soliciting his attention, poetesses also imitated Poe, writing tributes in the style of "Israfel" and "The Raven." While this fluid exchange of copies renders the project of identifying an original questionable at best, critics have persistently credited Poe with the powers of innovation and the force of genius, even in recent studies that place him within the context of antebellum mass and print culture. The "poetess" tradition, on the other hand, has long been associated with the generic repetition of feminine forms that silence women's attempts to speak as anyone in particular. This study of a male genius figure who impersonates women poets, and women poets who personify mimesis, offers a way to understand the collusion of genius and mimicry in the nineteenth-century lyric and its legacies. I aim to show that seemingly opposed poetic modes are inseparable aspects of a process of cultural transmission; that men's and women's literary traditions are overlapping and interdependent, though not identical; that the gendering of poetic practices is far more fluid and complex than has been previously portrayed; and that the poetics of creation are inseparable from the poetics of reception.

This project returns to the scene of Poe's creation, the literary salons and ephemeral publications of New York City, where he publicly staged his performance of tortured isolation in collaboration with prominent

women poets – Frances Sargent Osgood, Sarah Helen Whitman, and Elizabeth Oakes Smith – whose work he both emulated and sought to surpass.[1] Drawing extensively on archival research, I re-evaluate the work of this circle of writers, and of nineteenth-century lyric practices more generally, by interpreting poems in terms of their circulation within social networks in a period when the "whole tendency of the age is Magazine-ward," in the words of Poe (*ER* 1414).[2] All four writers succeeded in an antebellum literary culture that valued poets as performance artists and celebrities as well as geniuses. While salons and genteel periodicals portrayed authorship as the domain of uniquely gifted individuals, they also fueled the rise of a celebrity culture that placed "geniuses" and "poetesses" in close conversation. Publications such as *The Home Journal*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, and *Graham's Magazine* both published the poems, sketches, and stories of the New York literati and reported on their social activities. Literary gossip conveyed scenarios of intimate exchange among authors through ever-expanding, increasingly impersonal print networks.[3] These depictions encouraged readers to interpret poems as acts in interpersonal dramas that mediated spiritual, erotic, and conversational exchanges among poets, rather than as autonomous expressions of individual thought and feeling. Readers imitated these intimate models of public exchange when imagining their relation to writers they had never met: they wrote fan letters, offered proposals of marriage, confided secrets, and composed tributes in the style of their favorite poets. This contagious quality of the poet's work built literary reputation, for the greater the number of imitators, the farther-flung the poet's inspirational "presence."[4]

While all four poets earned significant measures of celebrity, in large part due to their dramatic collaborations, "Poe" has come to stand as the sign of the poet to which the poetesses' practices are ascribed, and this study inquires into the riddle of remembered and forgotten names. The reflexive intimacy of their exchanges makes it impossible to extricate genius from mimicry, or expression from quotation, in any of these authors' work. Poe's readings of poetesses became the poems he wrote; and poetesses' readings of Poe became the poems they wrote. In reading poetesses, then, Poe wrote himself, and in reading Poe, poetesses wrote themselves. While the process was fully transactional, however, the results were not symmetrical. For in writing themselves, poetesses wrote Poe into cultural memory, whereas in writing himself, Poe wrote poetesses into the dustbins of history. Because gendered understandings of poetry in the antebellum period and beyond have attributed distinct practices and capacities to male and female poets, Osgood, Whitman, and Oakes Smith circulated as literary commodities

and consumers regardless of how much poetry they produced; and Poe circulated as a literary producer regardless of how much women's poetry he consumed, or how extensively he commodified himself. This is not to say that readers have conspired to bury talented poetesses, but rather that the terms of reception so shaped the terms of poetic production that the poetesses had to render their work ephemeral, even against their will, because existing conditions required it.

In spite of the asymmetry of these exchanges and their legacy, writing as one's "self" under these conditions meant writing as the other. For this reason, celebrating these writers for being "themselves," or condemning them for not being able to find or transmit their "true voices" misses the point in a way that fundamentally misreads nineteenth-century poetic culture. By championing particular voices as authentic, we rescue individual figures at the expense of understanding a literary culture in which voice is not easily attributable. Paradoxically, the search for authentic women's voices has rendered the cultural work of poetesses largely illegible, and has significantly limited readings of Poe and other nineteenth-century American poets.[5]

I will argue that Osgood, Whitman, and Oakes Smith have been forgotten not, or not only, because twentieth-century critics have discriminated against women's voices, nor because a modernist sensibility has supplanted an earlier sentimental aesthetic that the critic must recover and render comprehensible. Rather, the uncanny affinity between poetesses and lyric media marked them as vehicles of cultural transmission. Instead of inscribing their future reception under their proper names, the poetesses grounded their "fictions of form" in ephemerality, self-dissolution, and ventriloquy.[6] While erasing the author's signature, these disappearing or indecipherable forms nevertheless served as powerful transmitters of ideas. Indeed, the practices of poetesses became so wholly identified with the genre of poetry that their influence lives on anonymously, not as canonical poetry's opposite, but as its generic underpinning.[7] Poe stood among the women writers as one who sought to harness their receptive powers and upstage their popular success by performing a more authentic relation to feminine traditions of mediumship, one that was at once more estranged and more derivative. By establishing his imitation of the feminine as superior to women's own impersonations, Poe's literary survival comes at the expense of his female contemporaries, but their work nevertheless lives on in his name.[8] While this *is* a book on Poe, then, I understand "Poe" to be a reversal or mirroring of the type of the poetess; he is a figure to which the transactions among a circle of poets is ascribed, and through which poetic conventions of romantic exchange survive in a crystallized form.

Although Poe criticism frequently centers on the figure of the dead woman, ubiquitous in his poetry and fiction, and although Poe biographies explore in sometimes fanciful detail his personal relationships with women – his marriage to his tubercular young cousin Virginia; the possibility of a scandalous affair with Frances Sargent Osgood; his fleeting engagement to Sarah Helen Whitman; his friendship with Elizabeth Oakes Smith – the crucial impact of women's writing practices on his own has received minimal attention.[9] This oversight is surprising considering the extent of Poe's interactions with women poets, who appeared frequently in both the journals that he edited and those to which he contributed, who hosted the salons that he attended, and who inspired his romantic interest on more than one occasion. Many of Poe's later reviews, moreover, were devoted to women's poetry. The persistence with which this large body of criticism is dismissed as mere flattery suggests that Poe's place in the canon depends upon a negation of his connections with poetesses, a negation that foregrounds his physical attraction to women writers at the expense of his interest in their words. I argue, to the contrary, that in Poe's poetry the force of erotic attraction towards women's bodies stands in for and suppresses a stronger attraction and reaction to their mimic strategies of poetic embodiment. Replicating and extending this logic, traditions of Poe criticism deny women's influence and sacrifice Poe's feminine-identified poetry to his prose in order to maintain his tenuous canonical status. Examining this tradition of critical advocacy helps to explain the erasure of these once prominent women poets from cultural memory.

I am less interested in exposing the peculiar contradictions of a particular male author's engagements with a collection of poetesses than in elucidating the complex gendering of American romantic lyricism in the nineteenth century. Though feminine receptivity was a crucial trait in delineations of male genius – a trait associated most powerfully with the lyric in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century – the influx of women poets onto the American literary scene in the early part of the nineteenth century caused male poets defensively to redefine ideas of creative process.[10] If the "feminine" was a key component of genius, and women had a greater concentration of it, then how could men retain a claim to poetic primacy? On the other hand, the resemblance between profiles of romantic genius and of ideal womanhood emboldened women to identify a renewed sense of poetic vocation. The following chapters demonstrate the ways in which male writers worked to codify and thus to stabilize the relations between gender and poetics to their advantage. By contrast, the

poetesses took up postures towards the feminization of the poetics of reception that were simultaneously more direct and more oblique. Because most studies of nineteenth-century American women's poetry have charted a separate women's tradition, the cultural dissemination and appropriation of their work has fallen outside of the scope of these earlier projects. Myra Jehlen's warning that feminist critics "have been, perhaps, too successful in constructing an alternative footing" so that "our female intellectual community . . . becomes increasingly cut off even as it expands" remains trenchant particularly for the study of nineteenth-century women's poetry.[11] Here I track the ways that the work of poetesses is overtly dismissed by, but nevertheless implicitly informs, canonical literary tradition.

Poe's circle of poetesses serves as a particularly useful place to explore these processes of cultural transmission because, as Jonathan Elmer has argued, Poe's work foregrounds to an unusual degree the inextricable relation of individual and mass forms of expression. His oscillation between the two poles has generated a reception history in which critics have pronounced Poe's work both wonderful and horrible, original and derivative, sublime and ridiculous. Because Poe is such an equivocal figure, the critical labor invested in making him into an autonomous, self-enclosed genius is more defensive, more extensive, and therefore more easily traced than other canonical writers.[12] Writing on Poe's "unauthorized" circulation in his time, Meredith McGill argues that "there remains a potent instability between the underinscription of the author's name in antebellum periodicals and the overproduction of the apparatus of attribution in twentieth-century criticism, an imbalance that works more as an engine for attribution than as a spur to thinking about the difference between these two literary regimes."[13] Poe criticism is by now so well established that the difference made by reintroducing his circle of poetesses is immediately and dramatically evident. These women writers were so closely associated with mass culture that extricating Poe in order to stabilize his literary authority necessarily entails erasing his connections to them. But the labor is never permanently successful. Poe's connections to poetesses are so obvious and extensive that they perennially arise and must be repeatedly discredited in critical acts that mimic Poe's own response to his female peers. Analyzing the production and reception of poetry within his circle allows me to trace the ways that interpersonal exchanges and cultural transactions come to be received as internal processes of gifted individuals. The model of literary and cultural production that emerges is inter-subjective and interactive and cannot be fully attributed to anyone in particular.

LYRIC CIRCULATION: MEDIUMS AND MEDIA

Recent studies of gender and sentiment in nineteenth-century American literature and culture have largely anchored their claims in readings of the novel and other narrative forms. I argue that poetry played a crucial but neglected role in engendering personality and sociability in the period. In contrast to the novel, lyric was associated with the capacity for unmediated personal expression. Its brevity also lent it a superior ability to circulate broadly through epistolary and print networks. While the novel carried, constituted, and influenced a range of competing social discourses, it did not serve as an active medium of social exchange in the same way as poetry.[14] Poetry served as a communicative form that enabled the exchange of ideas among individuals, within social groups, and between arenas coded as private and public.

Reading lyric in terms of its circulation, then, has the potential to expand and revise understandings of the function, location, and limitations of gendered forms of literary expression in the nineteenth-century public sphere.[15] Lauren Berlant has argued that women's sentimental fiction created a "a safe feminine space, a textual habitus" through which women could both acquiesce to and critique the patriarchal public sphere that dictated and constrained their forms of expression.[16] Berlant's analysis of "the female complaint," characterized by "a collaboration between the commodity form and the stereotype on behalf of a feminine counter-politics," has crucially informed this study, which traces the ways that gendered conventions both limit and enable gender critique in poetic form (432–433). When attending to lyric, however, I find that delineating a female counter-public sphere is largely impossible. Instead I assert that poetesses – in connection with Poe and other male poets – *constituted* a lyric public sphere through exchanges in which gendered poetic convention is distinct from the author's gender. The circulation of lyric in print renders gender conventions mobile, flexible, and transferable in a way that the corporeal presence of the author disallows. Because the relation between men's and women's poems is reciprocally imitative, it is impossible to separate out strains of male and female poetic practice. In fact, the constant traffic between gendered forms and values ensures that antebellum fictions of segregated genres – which hold that the author's sex determines the contours and content of lyric expression – operate in the service of gender exchange. Because there is no separate feminine "textual habitus," there is no distinct ground from which to launch a counter-cultural critique.

There is moreover no way to recover or represent historically particular women or men within the public economy of forms that are only generically personal. Berlant identifies a "counterstrain" of sentimentality, developed by writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern, "which aimed critically to distinguish 'women' in their particularity from 'woman' in her generic purity" (434). The idea that women might find a way to represent their historical particularity in the printed lyric, however, extends the logic that Berlant critiques, for nineteenth-century conventions of reception coded women's lyric writings as embodied vocal expression. Most nineteenth-century poetesses are today found lacking because they did not achieve the impossible: they could not make print speak as if it were a living woman's voice. In other words, a literal reception of generic conventions of female presence has erased the generic contributions of historically particular women poets. Though speaking in print is impossible, women's generic writings are not void of expression, nor are they entirely identical with the writings of men, nor are they politically or aesthetically neutral. The poetess' lyric is an involuntary mode of transport for multivalent cultural messages, which is nevertheless marked, albeit indirectly, by individual agency.

Because the cultural field of nineteenth-century lyric is less familiar than that of the novel, it is worth reviewing some of the ways in which poetry circulated through genteel social spaces – especially the salon and the magazine – in the service of conflicting but mutually constitutive impulses of democratic exchange and social discrimination. Occupying a place at the threshold between domestic and public urban arenas, the literary salons that sprang up in American cities in the 1830s and reached their peak in the '40s and '50s were key locations for the performance and dissemination of intimate models of lyric transaction (fig. 1). An extension of parlor gatherings, which had long provided family circles with inexpensive home entertainment, literary salons promoted interchange among a larger, more impersonal group of distinguished guests.[17] In a lecture entitled "The Salon in America," writer and reformer Julia Ward Howe identifies three main uses for the institution: "to make people better friends"; "to enlarge individual minds by the interchange of thought and expression with other minds"; and to employ "certain sorts and degrees of talent which would not be available either for professional, business, or educational work, but which, appropriately combined and used, can forward the severe labors included under these heads, by the instrumentality of sympathy, enjoyment, and good taste."[18] According to Howe, the gatherings render boundaries between individuals and social sectors permeable, promoting the circulation and

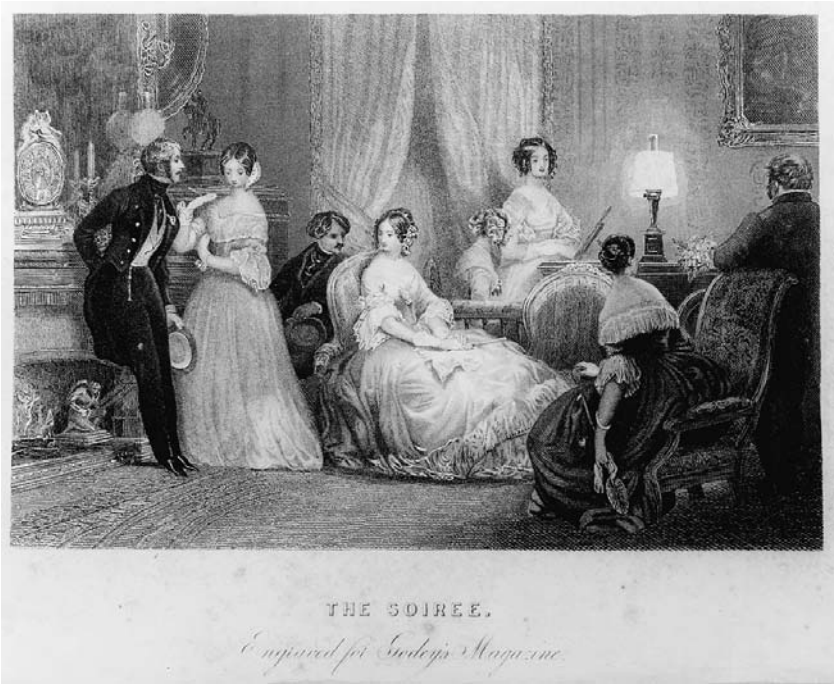

Fig. 1: "The Soirée." Unsigned. *Godey's Lady's Book*, vol. 30 (January–June 1845).

reception of ideas even as they reinforce the contours and limits of white, middle-class gentility. In this setting, as people become intellectually receptive and socially adhesive, individual knowledge becomes the semi-public property of a broader, but still exclusive, or "discriminating" (Howe's word), community.

Howe casts the American salon as a key component of a democratic system of "power and social recognition" that is fluid, metamorphic, and diffused. Whereas she imagines European systems to be static, stable, and centralized, she claims that "in our own broad land, power and light have no such inevitable abiding place, but may emanate from an endless variety of points and personalities" (129). Because America's "boundaries should be elastic, capable even of indefinite expansion," its survival and growth depends on maintaining the proper circulation of "intelligence and sympathy" through myriad, node-like "centres," "each subordinated to the governing harmony of the universe, but each working to keep together the social atoms that belong together" (120). Howe does not wish to dispense

with "social discrimination"; rather, the salon affords a decentralized form of social control that organizes the circulation of thoughts and feelings through highly permeable identic boundaries, but nevertheless wards off the indiscriminate mixing and cultural homogenization – the massing – that could result: "'What then!' will you say, 'shall society become an agrarian mob?' By no means. Its great domain is everywhere crossed by boundaries. All of us have our proper limits, and should keep them, when we have once learned them" (119). According to John Kasson, "established codes of behavior have often served in unacknowledged ways as checks against a fully democratic order and in support of special interests, institutions of privilege, and structures of domination."[19] Howe's comments suggest that salons were one arena where polite standards of behavior were instituted and practiced as a form of social control.

Because salons operated in the service of cultural transmission, it is not surprising that poetesses frequently hosted salons and personified their aims and principles. Prominent antebellum hostesses included Ann Lynch, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Lydia Sigourney, Stella Lewis, Emma Embury, and the Cary sisters.[20] The salon hostess was supposed to elicit the creative facets of guests and blend disparate individuals into a harmonious, cohesive group. According to A. C. Bloor, who published a memoir of Lynch:

> the woman of society forms and maintains the salon which gathers within its walls the cream of her entourage, and forms an exchange not for the coarser – if essential – commodities of the field and the mine, but for those gifts of intellect, breeding, and courtesy which, to the highly trained man or woman, are such essential elements to happiness, and which so largely contribute to refine and sweeten everyday life.[21]

A version of the commodities trader, the hostess traffics in cultural rather than material goods. She "forms an exchange" that promotes civility by circulating ineffable "gifts" through the medium of her home and, even more intimately, her bodily presence.

Participants appreciated salons and their hostesses for promoting cosmopolitan cultural exchange within the bounds of "fashionable society." Oakes Smith recalls: "I had my well-attended receptions like Dr. Dewey, and many others, but those of Miss Ann C. Lynch . . . became of wide celebrity. She had all the tact of a French woman – was an author of no small merit – was personally pretty, with a glow and repartee quite charming" (*HL* 270). Emerson hailed Lynch's New York salon, which figures as one of the backdrops for this study, as the "house of the expanding doors."[22] Lynch's doors expanded to include visitors that literary history has sifted into distinct categories: Bronson Alcott, William Cullen Bryant,

the Cary sisters, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Frances Sargent Osgood, Poe, R. H. Stoddard, Bayard Taylor, H. T. Tuckerman, Sarah Helen Whitman, and N. P. Willis. Foreign visitors included the violinist Ole Bull, the Swedish novelist Frederika Bremer, and the actress Fanny Kemble. Guests recited poetry, played musical instruments, donned costumes, exchanged valentines, and discussed the current political and cultural scene at home and abroad. They cultivated personalities as art forms; fashionable self-presentation was a notable achievement, and conversation had as much aesthetic value as poetry.[23]

Fostering the interplay between hermetic self-enclosure and public display, Lynch's salon provided a place where "isolated" genius and promiscuous popularity mingled in a contingent, mutually constitutive, and even interchangeable relation. Famously alienated later in his career, the young "Melville, with his cigar and his Spanish eyes, talked Typee and Omoo just as you find the flow of his delightful mind on paper." Promoting a poetess' genius, "Poe led a lively discussion on the worth of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's narrative poem, 'The Sinless Child,' insisting that it was one of the best long poems in the language."[24] Oakes Smith recalled a valentine party when Margaret Fuller – singled out today as an exceptional, iconoclastic female intellectual, and criticized by other women in her time for her sense of superiority – expressed frustration at Frances Osgood's talent for attracting admirers:

> I remember Mrs. Osgood and I ran up to the dressing room with our hands full of tributes; Fannie had more than us all. As we neared the landing I heard a very heavy sigh, almost a groan, and, looking up, saw Miss Fuller looking over the balustrade. Putting my hand on her arm, I said: "You do not care for trifles like these; your one was better than all others." "It leaves me alone as I always am," was the reply.[25]

In Oakes Smith's strategic description – one that arguably contests Fuller's claim to genius in order to advance her own – Osgood's triumph of seduction sets Fuller's solitary intellectual suffering in relief. Osgood's success at trifles trumps, in this moment, Fuller's ascetic singularity, her "one." Both are social performances – the hands full of tributes, the heavy sigh of loneliness – that accrue meaning through dramatic contrast. Wanting valentines, Fuller publicly displays her tortured isolation at the balustrade in a bid for sympathy. Her lack claims the compensatory attention that Oakes Smith bestows. Fuller had a right to be disappointed, for these trifles commanded a public readership; on such occasions valentines were published in the *Home Journal* and elsewhere, confirming that Osgood and