lang., by noticing things that daily routines pass over, or by reminding readers of what it means to be alive. But much of the public seems content with a world in which the poet has no place at all.

The lack of any well-defined social role might be regarded, even so, as a peculiar advantage. If poets are outsiders, they are free to examine and challenge all the assumptions that other people usually take for granted. One model of the poet was put forward in the 15th c. by François Villon, whose popular ballads traded on his exploits as a ruffian and thief. Four centuries later Charles Baudelaire explored the creative possibilities of evil, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud devoted themselves to breaking rules and laws in poems, and Oscar Wilde linked criminals and poets—an association that rappers and other performing rebels still make the most of. But the freedom of poets from social constraints and conventions can also inspire a more positive mission, a resistance to the empty formulas of those in power. When others are afraid to speak, the poet sometimes bears a special burden. In the former Soviet Union, when the government brooked no opposition and suppressed any unauthorized publication—"Poets, we are—and that rhymes with pariahs," Marina Tsvetaeva wrote in "Poets"—a small core of outcast writers, whose poems circulated in secret or by word of mouth, seemed to represent the conscience of the nation. Osip Mandelstam paid with his life for "anti-Soviet" verse, and Anna Akhmatova bore witness to the suffering of her people. Such poetry broke a terrible silence; many readers knew those poems by heart. And poets have seldom been more revered. (In the relative freedom of Russia today, some writers complain, poetry matters less.) Yet the mandate to serve as watchman and witness has not lost its force. Amid the troubles of times and places where free speech is throttled, disdained poets around the world have managed to defy authority and scorn injustice. That social or antisocial role has honored the name of the poet.

Yet most countries tolerate poets. Insofar as the modern poet does have a voice, it tends to be the still, small voice that lingers in the mind when someone has turned off the busy hum of mass-market diversions. A memorable phrase or two—"the still small voice," "the busy hum"—can alter perceptions. Hence, poets take on the special task of ministering to lang., refining its rhythms, preserving or transforming its stock of words and expressions. Ever since Stéphane Mallarmé, some theorists have claimed that the poet is foremost a maker of lang., giving "a purer sense to the words of the tribe" ("The Tomb of Edgar Poe"). The power of poetic lang. to mold ideas, or even to inspire fresh ways of thinking, had earlier moved P. B. Shelley to declare that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World"; they create the words and ideals that will govern the future. Lately, more skeptical theorists have sometimes reduced the poet to a captive or special effect of lang., a medium in which all human beings are submerged and that dissolves any illusion of a unique personality. Yet somehow that special effect of lang. has survived long after the tongues that first gave rise to it have passed away. The maker of golden worlds and the maker of poems still represent the possibility of making something new. The poet, as R. W. Emerson said, is "the Name, or Language-maker" who converts the world into words, and that process links the distant past to those who make poems today.

See INFLUENCE, ORIGINALITY, POÈTE MAUDIT, POETESS.


L. LIPKING

POÈTE MAUDIT. A phrase that reflects the widening gulf in 19th-c. France between the gifted poet and the public on whom his survival might depend. It was given currency by Paul Verlaine's Les Poètes maudits (1884), a collection of essays on poets hardly known at the time, such as Tristan Corbière, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé. A half century earlier, Alfred de Vigny's Stélio (1832) had developed, in successive tales about Nicolas-Joseph Gilbert, Thomas Chatterton, and André Chénier, the idea that poets ("the race forever accursed [maudits] by those who have power on earth") are envied and hated for their superior qualities by society and its rulers who fear the truths they tell. Thereafter, a sick, impoverished, or dissolute poet of significant but generally unrecognized talent came to be seen in these terms as doubly victimized by a hostile and insentient society.


A. G. ENGSTRÖM

POETESS. The Poetess is a generic figure with a long and various history, often connected to popular poetry with broad national and international circulation and reaching its height in the 19th-c. verse culture of Eu-
POETESS

... and the U.S. Tracing the use of poetess back to the 16th c., the OED defines the term simply as "a female poet; a woman who composes poetry," but it has also been used in more complex ways since the 18th c. to celebrate or denigrate popular women poets writing within a Poetess trad. (hence, the capital letter, to indicate that trad. at work). After rising to fame, the figure fell into obscurity in 20th-c. crit. until the emergence of second-wave feminism (ca. 1960–90), producing several generations of feminist critics who have contributed to the recovery of "lost" women poets and the reconstruction of "Poetess poetics" from different historical and theoretical perspectives. The Poetess is now understood to be an important figure within lit. hist., as a shifting aesthetic category that is closely linked to historical transformations in mod. reading practices.

In the Middle Ages, the *trotaires of Occitania and the female *trovères of France were women poets associated with *song, but they were not Poetesses in the mod. sense of the term, nor were Christine de Pizan, Louise Labé, or most other mod. early mod. female poets. We should not assume that all women poets wrote in a Poetess trad. Rather, such a trad. is highly selective and often involves poets and readers of one era celebrating both antecedents and contemporaries in an act of identification. One recurring prototype for the Poetess is Sappho (fl. ca. 600 BCE), the ancient Gr. poet invoked as "the tenth muse" in antiquity and idealized over the centuries as a woman singing her poems at the origins of a "lyric trad." Educated women poets were often named "a Sappho" or "the Sappho" of their era: Katherine Philips (1632–64) was celebrated as the English Sappho in the 17th c., and by the 18th c., the compliment could also be reversed, as it was by Alexander Pope in a poem addressed to Anne Finch (1661–1720): "In vain you boast Poetick Dames of Yore, / And cite those Sapphoes wee admire no more." Looking toward the future rather than the past, Mary Robinson (1757–1800) sought to legitimize women's poetry in the name of Sappho: in 1797, she published "Sappho and Phaon: A Series of Legitimate Sonnets" with a preface urging her "illustrious country-women" to write for posterity like Sappho, who "knew that she was writing for future ages."

As a detachable figure that exceeded the work of any actual woman poet, the Poetess became a repeatable *tropo, a *personification, performed by female poets (and indeed by some male poets, as in the early poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, or E. A. Poe's mimicry of poetesses in his circle). Available for occupancy but also advertising its vacancy, this personification was used for multiple and often contradictory purposes, determined by particular historical contexts but also overdetermined by larger cultural patterns of production and reception in an expanding literary market. The Poetess became common currency in early 19th-c. England and the U.S., when women's verse was increasingly commodified through publication in newspapers, periodicals, musical broadsides, anthols., annuals, decorative eds., and other forms of print.

Among the first to capitalize on this market were Felicia Hemans (1793–1835) and L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon, 1802–38). Through the frequent reprinting of poems in *Records of Woman (1828) and *Songs of the Affections (1830), Hemans became one of the very few of the popular Brit. Poetess whose character seemed "strongly impressed upon her writing," as noted by L.E.L. in "On The Character of Mrs. Hemans's Writings" (1835). What made Hemans a vivid figure was less an individual self than an idea of national character defined through the domestic ideology of her poetry. The poetry of L.E.L. was an even more elaborate print production, so broadly marketed that it caused speculations about the promiscuous circulation of her literary character. Laman Blanchard's poem "On First Seeing the Portrait of L.E.L." (1841) recalls how she was revealed to the curious public, an anonymous figure first identified only by three magical letters and then transformed into "this dainty little picture" that encouraged readers to read L.E.L. as a personification of the Poetess.

Projecting the Poetess simultaneously into and out of her writing is a convention at the heart of 19th-c. sentimental reading (see *sentimentality). According to a review of nine "Modern English Poetesses" in the Quarterly Review (1840), the difference between the "I" who writes and the "I" who reads is blurred as "the eye swims too deep in tears and mist over the poetess herself in the frontispiece." Yet what seems most personal in this moment of sympathetic identification proves most abstract, as the poetess in the frontispiece (so often glimpsed in 19th-c. volumes of women's verse) is not "the poetess herself" but a reflection on her personification: not a person but the figure of a figure. The recognition of the figurality of this figure, simultaneously empty and infinitely productive, is a characteristic feature of Poetess poetics, played out in many different versions that proliferated in the course of the century. The anthropologizing of women poets was a logical extension of Poetess poetics, in numerous 19th-c. anthols., ranging from Alexander Dyce's *Specimens of British Poetesses (1825) and Rufus Griswold's *The Female Poets of America (1848) to Eric Robertson's *English Poetesses (1883) and Alfred H. Miles's *The Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century (1907).

The paradigmatic career of the Poetess embodied in her verse was sufficiently familiar for Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61) to narrate in *Aurora Leigh (1856). Beginning with the tautology of "I, writing thus," the character of Aurora develops as a reflection both of and on the poetic conventions that make her into a Poetess. This generic autobiography could be read back into the poetic career of Browning, whose "novel poem" consolidated her reputation as exemplary Poetess for other women poets to imitate, on both sides of the Atlantic. The Poetess had already become a vehicle for transnational circulation, esp. through Hemans who served as model for the French *poétesse Amable Tasut (1798–1885), the German *Dichterin Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797–1848), Lydia Sigourney (1791–1865) who was widely known as the American Mrs. Hemans, and the Af. Am. Frances Harper (1825–1911),...
who performed a complex relation to the racial politics of this cultural category. Later, Mrs. Browning took the place of Mrs. Hemans for aspiring Poetesses, as Emily Dickinson (1830–88) famously wrote: “I think I was enchanted / When first a somber girl / I read that Foreign Lady.”

By the end of the century, the Poetess went into global circulation as a domesticated version of “that Foreign Lady,” carrying a wide range of ideological implications within different national discourses. Even before the 19th-c. consolidation of the Poetess for the identification of (and with) white bourgeois femininity, Phillis Wheatley (1753–84) had already been read as America’s “African Poetess,” demonstrating the malleability of a category that could signify what was both familiar and foreign, performing “whiteness” as well as racial “otherness.” The “Indien Poetess” Toru Dutt (1856–77) came to be read in England as an exotic figure, celebrated by the critic Edmund Gosse to represent an alien homeland. Later, Gosse also introduced Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) to Eng. readers who identified with (and the poetess in the frontispiece of her early volumes of verse, pub. in London before she returned to India to become their new “national” poetess (see INDIA, ENGLISH POETRY OF). The international circulation of the Poetess is evident as well in the work of Pauline Johnson (1896–1913), who moved between England and Canada to perform the role of a “Mohawk Indian Princess” identified with a lost nation. The words of the Jewish Am. writer Emma Lazarus (1849–89), famously inscribed on the Statue of Liberty as a personification of a homeland calling out to all immigrants, is another performance of the Poetess as a generic figure.

While the Poetess may seem an obsolete designation (and according to some, a denigration) of the mod. woman writer, we encounter permutations of Poetess poetics well into the 20th c. In 1922, Amy Lowell (1874–1925) published “The Sisters” to reflect on a poetic lineage that includes Sappho, Dickinson, and Browning (“we’re a queer lot, / We women who write poetry”), thus acknowledging the Poetess as a vehicle for women’s poetry. The Poetess continued to be a mobile figure for mod. women poets (e.g., Angelina Grimké [1880–1958], Edna St. Vincent Millay [1892–1950], Gertrud Kolmar [1894–1943], Marina Tsvetaeva [1892–1941], Bing Xin [1900–99], Sylvia Plath [1932–63]), and this generic category also mobilized critical reading, perhaps most obviously in a renewed impulse to anthologize women’s poetry toward the end of the 20th c. Along with selected trans. of women’s poems from many langs. for the Defiant Muse series (pub. by The Feminist Press), and popular collections such as Cora Kaplan’s Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poets (1977), anthols. organized by historical period or nationality are part of an ongoing project to recover women poets, not only in books but in digital archives and other technologies for making their poetry available on line.

Yet, as Lootens argues in her ongoing account of the Poetess trad., the more we try to make the Poetess visible the more she seems to dissolve before our eyes. The primary challenge for the emerging field of Poetess studies is not to treat the figure as a stable object of recovery but to trace the loss of the Poetess as the very means of its literary transmission. One reason for the disappearance and reappearance of the Poetess is that she is not the content of her own generic representation: not an “I,” not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a “voice, not a “persona, not a self. This has proved a controversial claim among critics whose rhetorical reading of poems as the personal testimony of women poets comes into conflict with the historical recognition that they cannot be recovered from the idealized abstraction of the Poetess that is performed again and again in their poetry. Rather than reading the Poetess expressively, as the expression of a female subject, a more productive approach would be to read the figure even more rhetorically as historical reflection on the very conventions that made it possible for the Poetess to circulate so widely.

Sot. See FEMINIST APPROACHES TO POETRY, GENDER AND POETRY, POET.

POETIC CONTESTS are formal, agonistic exchanges in verse that display some or all of the following characteristics: (1) two or more poet contestants, (2) physically present to each other, (3) in a public setting before witnesses, (4) engaging in a verbal duel or debate that (5) treats a conventionalized or stipulated subject matter (often of an ad hominem variety), (6) undertaken for the sake of a prize, material or spiritual, and (7) resolved through appeal to external judgment. Since all seven elements seldom obtain in a single work, the class of poetic contests is heterogeneous, encompassing several subgenres and defying precise circumscription. Indeed, the poetic contest itself is not a genre at all but rather the verbal expression of a general mode of human interaction—the aggressive and agonistic—whose roots extend deep into biology and psychology. The distinction between "real" and "imaginary" (or, more precisely, extratextual and intra textual) poetic contests is fundamental though not inviolable. Historically, actual contests (such as the Athenian dionysia) may occasion the composition of poems that contain no contestual elements; fictional contests (such as the Canterbury Tales), on the other hand, may be dramatized in poems that were not themselves products of a contest. Yet the line may be blurred, as when a real poetic contest results in poetic works with contestual elements recognizable only by audiences who knew the original performance setting. Poetic contests are usually rooted in the world of orality that assumes greater interdependence between poem and presentational context than is customary in the poetics of highly literate societies. When speaking of a poetics of poetic contests, scholars note the various thematicizations of competition, such as reference to metaphors, riddles, and puzzles, and religious vs. lay discourses. In these versions of the contest, the poet defines himself or herself through a conflict-based literary structure, which can include metaphors of war and violence as a mode of self-expression. In this sense, one might view poetic contests as producing an agonistic aesthetics bound up with a bodily performance against a competitor and before a judge and audience (Kellner and Strohschneider).

Verbal contest forms akin to poetic contests flourished in ancient civilizations. Ancient Gr., Ar., and Celtic legends feature poet-magicians whose satirical verses could produce a range of woes from the raising of blisters to death; occasionally, such versifiers match off in supernatural contests. In heroic poems such as the Iliad, Mahabharata, Beowulf, and the Chanson de Roland, warrior pairs hurl boasts and insults before battle. In such exchanges, the spoken word poetically cast is perceived as an extension of the vital energy, martial prowess, or moral worth of the speaker. The poetic contest emerges spectacularly into the forefront of Western lit. hist. in the great dramatic festivals of cl. Athens (5th c. b.c.). While this contest setting is not directly reflected in the content of Gr. *tragedy, Aristophanes made it the subject of The Frogs, where Aeschylus and Euripides compete posthumously before Dionysus for the laurel crown. From Hellenistic times, singing matches begin to make their appearance in *pastoral poetry, first in Theocritus’s Idylls, later in the *eclogues of Virgil and Ren. Eur. poets. Some of the verse *satires of Horace and later writers in the satiric trad. are cast in argumentative, dialogic frames.

It is in the Middle Ages, however, that contests both fictive and actual are most abundantly represented. Med. Lat. poems of *conflictus feature alternations between character types or allegorical *personifications such as summer and winter, wine and water, body and soul; rustics and clerics; or among a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian, subjects that recur in several vernacular lits. In the 12th c., love emerges as a major topic, as in the Altercatio Phyllis et Florae. In the same period in Fr. and Occitan lit. emerges the *tenso, in which *troubadours debate in alternating *strophes on matters of politics, morality, poetics, or, above all, love and women. Perhaps derived from the *sirventes, a political or satirical diatribe, and incorporating such subgenres as the *partimen, the tenso is the dominant med. verse debate form, although debate elements appear in other genres as well, such as the *pastorell, the Ar. *lauda and contrasto, and the 13th- to 15th-c. Galician-Port. *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer and the Sp. *pregunta. The purest and most dramatic med. poetic contest is the 13th-c. MGH *Wartburgkrieg, in which five poets are pitted against a magician in a riddling competition with death as the penalty for losing. Several Eddic poems feature verbal contest between such adversaries as Thor and Odin. ME produced a classic *débat in the late 12th- or early 13th-c., *The Owl and the Nightingale; Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales represents a full-blown peregrine contest with some 30 contestants, a judge, and a prize. The flamboyant *flyings of 15th- to 16th-c. Scotland feature volleys of fantastic *invective and abuse between noted contemp. poets, possibly as court entertainment.

The scope and longevity of these forms should be taken as an index of the wide popularity of verbal contesting in the Middle Ages in circles both courtly and popular. Rival troubadours and Minnesingers such as