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**Cheryl Lawson Walker**

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## Sex, Drugs, and Mingling Spirits: Teaching Nineteenth-Century Women Poets

It hasn't always been easy to teach nineteenth-century women's poetry to my students—smart young women in twenty-first-century southern California who know more about life than I did when I was their age. Some have complained that these poems are too distant from them, too alien, but other students have been all too ready to transform themselves into Victorians, without a clue that the world of these women was in important ways different from ours. These responses are problematic in different ways, but they share a failure to connect to history that prevents students from encountering the poetry on anything like its own territory.

I often try to alleviate this difficulty by assigning groups of poems—for example, poems that concern sex, drugs, and the otherworldly, topics that have some resonance with today's youth. It comes as a surprise to many students that women in the nineteenth century wrote passionately about sexuality, that drug use was fairly widespread among women of the middle class, and that religious feeling was beginning to express itself in less doctrinal and more ardently mystical terms. To give students some background about these matters, I have put several historical sources on reserve, assigning individual students to read parts of them and then give brief five-to-ten-minute reports about what they have found. This method

has two advantages. The reports put the class on notice that the world of Victorian America was not quite as straight-laced as they might think. Furthermore, the students who have done the outside reading now have an investment in making sure that the poems are interpreted in accordance with the historical record. They are therefore more likely to want to get involved in the discussion.

Before I move to the texts we read, let me make some preliminary observations. The assignments suggested here might best be addressed in one long (two-hour) class or two short (one-hour) classes. My model is the American literature survey, but other kinds of courses can also accommodate these insertions. I have included Emily Dickinson in my groupings, but of course Dickinson's work deserves at least one class of its own. The suggestions I offer are not meant to be in any sense exhaustive. Other poems, other topics, and other historical works would do just as well, but these following clusters have been used successfully. Finally, I usually order the anthology I edited, *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, so most references in this essay are to this text. But the extracts can sometimes be found elsewhere, and in all cases I provide a few other sources. Dickinson, for example, is not included in my anthology, so her work is always supplementary.

## Sex

It is not a bad idea to begin with sex. Despite what used to be said about the prudish Victorians, sex, as we know from many historical sources, was widely discussed in nineteenth-century periodicals, advice books, and literature—and not always negatively. Among social problems, prostitutes and unwed mothers were frequent topics of concern. Unwed mothers were often represented as likely to become prostitutes. Stories of seduction (one might think of the late example of Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, but one could also cite William Hill Brown's 1789 novel *The Power of Sympathy*) typically focused on a rake who takes advantage of an innocent young girl, causing her downfall while he escapes unscathed. Though much of this literature was moralistic, designed to warn young girls not to risk their reputations, some of it took a quite different tone, providing salacious entertainment for those who were not so interested in upholding bourgeois Victorian standards.

In *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, David S. Reynolds, exploring the "subversive" genre of sensationalist literature about sex, writes:

Although reliable primary evidence of antebellum sexual habits is frustratingly scarce, enough evidence survives to explode the long-standing myth that there was an all-powerful cult of domesticity that governed daily behavior and kept America a prudish, highly moralistic culture. True, such a conservative outlook was promoted in popular ladies' magazines and etiquette books. But the cult of domesticity was itself, like conventional fiction, an ideological response to reading habits that were far more inclined to the scabrous and illicit than is commonly supposed. (211)

Students who read the chapter "The Erotic Imagination" in Reynolds's book will discover that the 1840s, a formative period for many women poets in my anthology, saw the full expression of many anti-Victorian attitudes and practices. "In this decade," Reynolds claims, "the awakening recognition of sexual desire was waging a titanic struggle against the residual repressiveness of the Puritan conscience" (222).

Popular literature, such as that written by George Thompson, focused on women's powerful sex drive. In his nearly one hundred novels, women are portrayed as nymphomaniacs; adulteresses; and partakers of many varieties of illicit sex, including incest. George Lippard's "voyeur style" made his novel *The Quaker City* infamous as "the immoral work of the age" (216). Yet he had a large readership. His heroines, the "animalistic" Dora Livingstone (217) and the virginal Mary Arlington, are treated to highly suggestive descriptions filled with sexually charged metaphors. Both writers contested the Romantic view of women as purer and more morally elevated than their male counterparts. In fact, if anything, the women in this popular and subversive literature were made to seem fiercer in their sexual demands than the men.

Though cult-of-domesticity literature—in which women are presented as pious, pure, domestic, and submissive—was also widely available in the nineteenth century, the very fact that so many advice manuals focused on the negative consequences of women giving vent to their passions suggests that female purity was in large part a patriarchal construct designed to keep women in their place rather than a generally accurate description. In 1846 Mary Gove Nichols, a sexual reformer, gave a widely publicized speech in which she declared that many women engaged in masturbation because they found it more satisfying (and safer) than relations with men.

Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Re-reading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* is a more carefully researched history of nineteenth-century attitudes, and it picks

up where Reynolds leaves off. Less interested in literary works, Horowitz deals more with social movements, such as the free-love crusade of Victoria Woodhull. Her study of obscenity trials over the course of the century allows her to chart changes in attitudes toward sexuality. She too finds the century multivalent in its attitudes about sex, she too notes the popularity of erotic materials and racy books, and she too mulls over the concern with masturbation in medical handbooks and obscenity trials. As more than one social historian has noted, public discourse became more repressive after the Civil War and “legal suppression, especially after 1873, had a powerful effect on what could be published about sex at that time” (14). Students would do well to read the introduction and then read around in the rest of Horowitz’s book in order to find material specifically relevant to the poems.

I found two chapters particularly useful: “Placing Sex at the Core of Being” and “Sex Talk in the Open.”

Karen Lystra’s chapter “Secrecy, Sin, and Sexual Enticement” in *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* also confirms the appetitive nature of female sexuality. She writes:

Contrary to stereotype, American advisers from enthusiasts to restrictionists recognized the sexual appetites of women as well as men. Though post-Civil War sexual and moral advisers were much more explicit than their antebellum colleagues, there was considerable unanimity in guidebooks through the Victorian period that both men and women had a natural sexual urge. (102)

Lystra does caution, however, that in some of the most prominent medical manuals, women were represented as “less passionate than men, slower to be aroused, less knowledgeable, or shyer” (117).

Material from these historical sources can provide interesting and helpful background for the study of a cluster of nineteenth-century women’s poems about sexual desire. The poems I often assign here are Dickinson’s “Wild nights—Wild nights!” (poem 269) and “In winter in my room” (poem 1742), Frances Osgood’s “The Cocoa-Nut Tree,” Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s “The Tiger,” Julia Ward Howe’s “The Soul-Hunter,” and especially the poems of Rose Terry Cooke—for example, “A Story,” “Captive,” “Monotropa,” “Semele,” and “In the Hammock.” Except for Dickinson’s poems, all these are contained in *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*.

Howe's "The Soul-Hunter" is a powerful poem whose imagery may well have influenced Crane's portrayal of Maggie's fate at the hands of a monstrous figure who "hunts so late, so dark." In any case, it, like Cooke's "A Story," corresponds in many ways to the monitory works that were addressed to young women who might be inclined to listen to the blandishments of a seducer. "The Soul-Hunter" is specifically addressed to a "maiden," and the poet tells her that she should drown herself, throw herself into the fire, or lock herself living in the tomb before listening to this evil man "who lures thee like a bird." It is impossible to miss the sexual overtones of the threat posed by this figure:

He hath such promise, silver sweet,  
 Such silken hands, such fiery feet,  
 That, where his look has charmed the prey,  
 His swift-winged passion forces way,  
     Who hunts so late, so dark.  
 (C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 152)

Whatever it is that he hides under his cloak, it suggests the potent virility that the poem presents in such terrifying terms. The poem therefore accords well with Dickinson's fantasy "In winter in my room" and Wilcox's "The Tiger."

Dickinson's poem is particularly responsive to Freudian interpretation. The worm, "pink lank and warm," becomes a snake "In feature as the worm before / But ringed with power." When the snake "to a Rhythm *Slim* / Secreted in his Form / As Patterns swim / Projected him," the speaker runs as fast as she can in the opposite direction (*Poems*, poem 1742). Given the fear of sexuality that some nineteenth-century texts seemed meant to evoke in young women, it is not hard to understand why Dickinson herself might find the fantasy of male sexuality so disturbing (it has been suggested that her proclivities were mainly lesbian [see M. Smith, "Belle" and *Rowing*; Bennett, "Pea"]), though it must be said that in both the famous "man of noon" letter (*Letters*, letter 93) and in "In winter in my room" the specter of male lust is also strangely attractive.

Some poems reflect this ambivalence, whereas others seem blithely unconcerned about the power dynamic that made and still makes heterosexual relationships different and more dangerous for females than for males. Osgood, for example, gives us the overtly phallic "Cocoa-Nut Tree" as an enticement, "With its stately shaft, and its verdant crown, / And its fruit in clusters drooping down" (C. Walker, *American Women*

*Poets* 111). As I discuss in more detail in my book *The Nightingale's Burden* (40–41), like the Indian maiden who is imagined as lying beneath it, the speaker is clearly attracted to this symbol of male eroticism: “O, the lovely, the free, / The cocoa-nut tree, / Is the tree of all trees for me!” (C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 111).

Cooke (whom I overlooked in *The Nightingale's Burden*) offers some of the most salacious fare, and it is anybody's guess how she got away with the quite un-Victorian sentiments expressed by her speakers while remaining such a pillar of respectability. For example, “Semele” is striking both because it is unusually passionate and because its torrid address is so openly antimoral. One could assign a student to research the Greek myth, in which Semele, who has been badly advised by a disguised Hera, asks Zeus to appear to her in all his radiant divinity; when he does so, she is consumed by the fire of his lightning.

Cooke's “Semele” differs from the Greek version because she already seems to know the consequences of her choice:

Burn, as the leaping fire  
 A martyr's shroud;  
 Burn, like an Indian pyre,  
 With music fierce and loud.  
 Come Power! Love calls thee,—come, with all the god endowed.  
(266–67)

Though one might well discuss the influence of literary Romanticism on this poet, the poem is better understood in the context of nineteenth-century reformist medical literature in which women are granted sexual appetites or in Reynolds's context of the popular sensationalism that gave prominence to the lustful woman. In this demon-lover poem much of the imagery is sexually charged: “persuade the bud to flower,” “come, with all the god endowed,” “in dread and glory rise,” “the altar waits thy torch” (266–67). One could even call this work, in contrast to the much more benign “Cocoa-Nut Tree,” a poem of satanic phallus worship.

Cooke married the much younger Rollin Cooke: she was forty-six, he thirty. The marriage seems to have brought an end to her experiments with sexually subversive literature, yet only a few years earlier she had published in the *Galaxy*, a respectable journal, a poem entitled “In the Hammock” that was a startling departure from conventional middle-class mores. The speaker of the poem is swinging in a hammock and thinking about her love life. “I'm a hang-bird in her nest, / All with scarlet blos-

soms drest, / Swinging where the winds blow free" (275). This young Latina contrasts herself with her more religious acquaintances, who spend their time in church. Though she has plenty of lovers—seven are tall; two are crooked, rich, and old—there is one with cold blue eyes who attracts her the most, possibly because (though small) he is the most indifferent. Obviously influenced both by the popular genre of dramatic monologue and by the new works coming from the West by such writers as Bret Harte and Ina Coolbrith, "In the Hammock" tells a racy story in a delicate but innovative form. Its heroine, who receives no moral indictment, explicit or implicit, from the poet, toys with ten lovers, mocks the Bridegroom provided by the convent, and fantasizes an illicit encounter with an earthy lover. She is indolent, self-indulgent, and unrepentant. In her scarlet regalia, she swings away in very immodest fashion. The ghost of masturbation hovers near: her cheek is pale, her eyes shine.

There will be plenty to talk about if students are asked to provide historical background about attitudes toward women and sexuality in the nineteenth century. This background provides a good basis for discussing both conventional and unconventional poems. Cooke's "A Story" is conventional: it offers a moral fable in which a lovely flower (a gentian) has an encounter with a bee (a conventional figure for the lustful male). She is foolishly responsive to his entreaties and then deserted by him. Dickinson's bee poems, such as "Did the harebell loose her girdle" (poem 134), "Could I but ride indefinite" (poem 1056), and especially "A bee his burnished carriage" (poem 1351), provide excellent opportunities for comparison.

The range of attitudes in these poems about sexuality should help students resist the temptation to generalize about the past. It should be possible to get them to talk about their own attitudes, which are also likely to represent a range. Professors who have read some social history can provide contextual material to keep the discussion on track.

## Drugs

While sexuality (both sublimated and overt) is an important issue in many nineteenth-century women's poems, drug use is much less central. Nevertheless, there are some interesting works that do focus on this matter. It will come as a surprise to many students that most of those addicted to opiates in the nineteenth century were women, many of them from the middle class. In *Substance and Shadow: Women and Addiction in the*



*United States*, Stephen Kendall writes, "For much of the twentieth century addiction has been known as a 'man's disease,' yet the majority of morphine and opium addicts in the nineteenth century were women" (14).

David Courtwright claims that before 1900 "opium and morphine addiction was primarily an upper-class and middle-class phenomenon" (40), though Kendall argues to the contrary, that the physicians who treated such women tended to serve a more advantaged clientele. In any case, the quantitative data that we have available from the nineteenth century give us a picture of broad use among the privileged classes. In 1871 Alonzo Calkins described the typical addict as a high-toned lady "idly lolling upon her velvety fauteuil and vainly trying to cheat the lagging hours that intervene ere the 'clockwork tintinnabulum' shall sound the hour for opera or whist" (qtd. in Kendall 16). Though some women became addicted to opiates because of medical conditions for which such drugs were prescribed, boredom seems to have been a crucial catalyst for women seeking an escape from their humdrum lives. One anonymous lady admitted:

I am the last woman in the world to make excuses for my acts, but you don't know what morphine means to some of us, modern women without professions, without beliefs. Morphine makes life possible. It adds to truth a dream. What more does religion do? (qtd. in Courtwright 59)

Several comments might be made about this set of statements. In the first place, students should be aware that in the nineteenth century such drugs were legal for a long time, so this woman is not confessing to a crime. Even after drugs became regulated in some states (in the 1870s), it was easy enough for women to obtain a prescription, as Lily Bart does in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*. Nervous women were given morphine with nearly the same frequency that women today are prescribed Prozac. Secondly, this anonymous woman comes close to admitting that her desire for drugs comes from boredom. She has nothing to claim her attention, neither a job nor a passion for religion. Finally, she vacillates between suggesting that she has her morphine addiction under control (unlike other women she could name) and calling herself "morphine mad." She claims to have enough will power to keep herself from going beyond her daily allowance. But Lily Bart, who dies from an overdose in the end, also makes this claim.

This woman likely belonged to the upper middle class, but women in rural areas, not so well off, isolated and lonely, also sometimes found relief by taking drugs such as laudanum. In 1872 F. E. Oliver published a report concerning the drug use of Massachusetts women, claiming that they had recourse to opium because they were

doomed, often, to a life of disappointment . . . and in the smaller and more remote towns, not infrequently, to utter seclusion, deprived of all wholesome social diversion . . . opium being discreetly selected as the safest and most agreeable remedy. (qtd. in Kendall 16)

Though prostitutes were another group who used drugs, the women who frequented opium dens, along with “the Chinaman, the laborer, and ‘longshoreman,’ the young man in society” (18), were usually women of high standing.

In his more statistical account of drug use by women in the nineteenth century, Courtwright tells us that housewives constituted the largest group of female addicts. Most became addicted between the ages of 25 and 45 and chose opiates because they could be used at home; that way others, even husbands, would not know about their secret vice. Opium and morphine addicts were disproportionately white, native born, and Southern, though drug use was also well-known in New England, Philadelphia, Chicago, and among the Chinese in the West. Courtwright estimates that between 150,000 and 300,000 women were using opiates at any given time during most of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, he asserts:

The majority of nineteenth-century female addicts were married and therefore stayed at home. Unmarried female addicts were observed among domestics, teachers, actresses, and especially prostitutes. Another type, mentioned as early as 1832, was the harried society lady, who downed opium or morphine to steady her nerve and enhance her wit. (40–41)

The material on women and drug addiction in the nineteenth century should help students find a context for such works as Maria White Lowell’s “An Opium Fantasy” and Mary Tucker Lambert’s “The Opium-Eater,” both in *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*. (Although Lambert is included in the Schomburg Library collection of black women’s poetry, recent criticism has discovered that she was not the author of the poems included there; the actual author is Mary Eliza Perine Tucker Lambert, who was born in Alabama in 1838 and educated in New

York.) After her father and first husband lost their property in the Civil War, Lambert returned to New York, successfully selling her poetry and journalism (see J. Gray, "Passing"). "The Opium-Eater" clearly exemplifies the relief from the misery of their lives that some women found in opium. Its first-person narration contains no moralistic commentary about this practice, although in the second stanza the speaker raises a question about "inward sin":

Life's pathway to me is dreary,  
I am ill, and cold, and weary;  
Would my lonely walk were done,  
And my heavenly race begun.

Once all things to me were bright,  
Things that now seem dark as night:  
Is the darkness all within?  
Dark without from inward sin?

(C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 310)

The answer implied is no, since the speaker points to age; to problems with her feet (corns), head, and teeth; as well as to her dismal prospect for the future.

This section, however, is preceded by the phrase "before taking a dose." The second part of the poem—"after taking a dose"—describes the transformation effected by the drug:

Ah! now I sit in bowers of bliss,  
Soothed by an angel's balmy kiss!  
Delicious languor o'er me stealing  
Is now my only sense of feeling. (311)

Each of her past miseries now reappears in a different guise. Her gray hair "is not so very grey," her teeth cause her no distress, and even her corns are nothing to make a fuss about. Students will no doubt see a degree of false optimism in the last line of the poem ("I know I'll never weep again" [311]) and may well want to talk about the insidious sense of confidence that attracts people even today to the roseate high of cocaine or ecstasy.

Like "The Opium-Eater," Lowell's "An Opium Fantasy" puts more emphasis on the pleasures of opium than on its harmful effects:

Soft hangs the opiate in the brain,  
And lulling soothes the edge of pain,

Till harshest sound, far off or near,  
 Sings floating in its mellow sphere.  
 (C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 196)

Because Maria White was married to James Russell Lowell, we know more about her than we do about Lambert. She was well educated and grew up in an intellectual, middle-class family. Her life was far from easy, however, and she died at the age of 32 after having seen each of her four children die before her. Though Maria was active in several nineteenth-century reform movements, including abolition and temperance, she does not seem to equate the use of opium with intemperate behavior. If anything, Lambert raises more questions about it than she does. One suspects that Maria's ill health may have drawn her to the use of opium.

In any case, Lowell's poem demonstrates a more sophisticated use of language than Lambert's. There are memorable lines and images that may have influenced Dickinson, as I have argued elsewhere ("Dickinson" 189–93). Like Dickinson, Lowell renders her experience impressionistically:

What wakes me from my heavy dream?  
 Or am I still asleep?  
 Those long and soft vibrations seem  
 A slumberous charm to keep. (196)

In the context of opium use, "those long and soft vibrations" could easily refer to the drug experience itself, but since Lowell mentions the owl as the prince of poppies in later stanzas, they might also refer to the call of the owl. The most memorable lines are those in the third stanza, where time seems to be stopped and distance (space) unrolls "Like silver balls, that, softly dropped, / Ring into golden bowls" (197). Here Lowell captures the disorientation that drugs often induce; at the same time she creates a mysteriously compelling analogy that carries us beyond the physical effects of the opium into the realm of the aesthetic.

### **Mingling Spirits**

Nineteenth-century women poets wrote many passionate poems about the convergence of human and divine energies, some quite mystical and others more traditional. Since many students in my classes have an interest in religion, I often include explicitly religious poems. Indeed, all the

poems considered in this essay are in some sense about ecstasy—emotional, sexual, narcotic, spiritual—so one might also offer a section on nontraditional religious expression and its foundation in Catholic, evangelical, liberal, Jewish, and Native American cultural contexts. A selection of poems that feature such expression might include the following: Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "Strength from the Hills," Rose Terry Cooke's "Schemhamphorasch" and "An End," Emma Lazarus's "The New Ezekiel," E. Pauline Johnson's "Shadow River, Muskoka," Louise Imogen Guiney's "Borderlands," and Ella Wheeler Wilcox's "As by Fire." In her anthology *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*, Karen Kilcup lists works by topic, including "Literature of the Spirit," and these readings also might help students develop a sense of context.

The two books that I sometimes place on reserve are Catherine L. Albanese's *America: Religions and Religion* and T. J. Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture*. Albanese's chapter "Original Manyness: Native American Traditions" will help students understand some of the background to Johnson's poem. I find that many students are interested in Native American culture, but Albanese is also a good resource for American Judaism (see Cooke's "Schemhamphorasch" and Lazarus's "The New Ezekiel") and liberal religious traditions such as those that influenced Oakes Smith and Wilcox. Lears is helpful as a background to the work of Guiney. His chapters "Medieval Vitality: The Erotic Union of Sacred and Profane" and "The Medieval Unconscious: Therapy and Protest" are useful for a consideration of the poems by Guiney and Wilcox. The remarks he makes, earlier in his book, about Guiney's militaristic vitality are not particularly relevant here.

Several of these poems are written in the voice of a woman who feels what Lears calls a "feverish yearning" for an encounter with the divine (161). Oakes Smith perfectly embodies the nineteenth-century woman Lears describes who longs to be freed from the tasteless actual. She had a strong mystical streak and believed that she could sense events before they happened. In 1887 she spent a year as a practicing minister to an independent congregation in Canastota, New York. Her "Strength from the Hills," though it does not emphasize its religious underpinnings, can be read as part of the liberal Protestant movement that sought to breathe new life into the Puritan spirit of American culture. It recalls the Psalms, especially 95 and 121 ("I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help" [King James Vers.]). Oakes Smith claims that in the hills

God comes near, cleansing and reinvigorating the spirit that feels stagnant in bourgeois society:

Yet come unto the hills, the old strong hills,  
And leave the stagnant plain;  
Come to the gushing of the newborn rills  
As sing they to the main;

And thou with denizens of power shall dwell,  
Beyond demeaning care;  
Composed upon his rock, mid storm and fell,  
The eagle shall be there.

(C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 76–77)

According to Albanese, “One early sign of what liberalism would come to embody” was the universalist transcendentalism that clearly influenced Oakes Smith and Lazarus. Albanese writes:

For the Transcendentalists, intuition—the inner voice—became the key to the discovery of revelation; and nature, as the sacred space that evoked the inner perception of truth, was likewise privileged. Hence, both the inner space of the mind and the outer space of nature suggested for them the presence of a God who was immanent. (129)

Guiney’s “Borderlands” also imagines the convergence of human and divine energies as occurring in nature, but her short poem, written in the 1890s, exemplifies a far different strain in nineteenth-century poetry, that of Catholic mysticism. It imagines a walk in the evening that seduces with “a too divine alluring”:

Yet in the valley,  
At the turn of the orchard alley,  
When a wild aroma touched me in the moist and moveless air,  
Like breath indeed from out Thee, or as airy vesture round Thee,  
Then was it I went faintly, for fear I had nearly found Thee,  
O Hidden, O Perfect, O Desired! O first and final Fair!

(C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 405)

A Catholic and an amateur medievalist, Guiney found an audience among those who looked to Catholicism (and medieval Catholic mysticism) for the intensity of feeling that Protestantism seemed to lack. Lears describes this late-nineteenth-century pursuit of psychic regeneration as highly

eroticized. It especially drew female adherents: "Impatient with the stodginess of bourgeois virtue, many Americans imagined an ecstatic medieval piety—soaring to summits of spiritual exaltation, dropping to abysses of self-abasement, burning always with a white-hot flame" (161).

Wilcox's "As by Fire" is by contrast far more Puritan, especially in its emphasis on spiritual perfection as achieved by will or, as she puts it, "what we have resisted." Yet Wilcox, too, like the medieval vitalists whom Lears describes, uses the imagery of fire. At first, this fire is associated with her body: "This vigorous frame with healthful fervor burning" wages war with the spirit. However, in the end the image is elevated to the ranks of spirituality:

The very fire which seems sometimes so cruel  
Is the white light, that shows me my own strength.  
A furnace, fed by the divinest fuel  
It may become at length.

(C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 346)

Lears's "white-hot flame" seems especially relevant here.

One could play Guiney's vitalist "Borderlands" off against the more Protestant poem of spiritual renewal by Wilcox. But another late-nineteenth-century poem that provides similarity (in its themes of spirituality and nature) but also difference (in its cultural context) is Johnson's "Shadow River, Muskoka," recently republished in Kilcup's *Native American Women's Writing* anthology. It begins:

A stream of tender gladness,  
Of filmy sun, and opal tinted skies;  
Of warm midsummer air that lightly lies  
In mystic rings,  
Where softly swings  
The music of a thousand wings  
That almost tones to sadness. (217)

As Kilcup points out, Johnson, of Mohawk descent, drew from both white and Indian literary traditions: "With a superb family library, well-educated and relatively affluent parents, and famous orator grandfather, Johnson was able to acquire a broad understanding of traditional English and Iroquois literature" (55). Students should find the discussion of Native American religious traditions in Albanese helpful. But in addition to representing Indian beliefs about the natural world (the "mystic rings" of summer air, for example), this poem is reminiscent of the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne, a British poet very popular in the late nineteenth

century. The languorous sensuality, the multiple sequential rhymes, and the use of expanding and contracting line lengths are all Swinburnian.

Judaism in America also needs to be explored in a transnational context. Both Lazarus's "The New Ezekiel" and Cooke's "Schemhamphorasch" (in Axelrod, Roman, and Travisano) address the rites and traditions of the Jews as they were conserved in the Diaspora. Albanese's chapter "Israel in a Promised Land: Jewish Religion and Peoplehood" emphasizes the conservative nature of Jewish practices as a defensive strategy against threats to the community. But she also suggests powerful connections between Jews and Americans, who saw themselves as people of a covenant, and between Jews and Native Americans, who were sometimes seen as descendants of the lost tribes of Israel.

"Schemhamphorasch," as the anthology note tells us (Axelrod, Roman, and Travisano 511–14), stands for the mystical name of God that cannot be spoken except by the angels. Though a Congregationalist, Cooke here longs for the key to the universe that the Talmud says was given by the angel Michael to Pali and by Pali to Moses:

If I could read Schemhamphorasch,  
My brain would burn with such a fire  
As lights the awful cherubim;  
My heart would burst with woe and ire,  
My flesh would shrivel and expire;  
Yea, God himself grow far and dim. (513)

But the speaker admits that she lacks the capacity to incorporate such knowledge, "For could I live, or love, or pray, / If I could read Schemhamphorasch?" (514). Thus she finds the mystical traditions of Judaism both tempting and intimidating. But she is not above appropriating some of its ideas for her own work in a manner familiar enough to us now but much more ecumenical than typical Congregationalism of her day.

"The New Ezekiel," by Emma Lazarus, also situates itself in Jewish culture, but Lazarus was born into a Sephardic Jewish family, and her poem expresses, unlike Cooke's, a personal sense of wrongs committed against Jews. Though she wrote, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free. Wherever we are free, we are at home" (C. Walker, *American Women Poets* 333), "The New Ezekiel" can be read as an early document of Zionism, dreaming as it does of Israel as the true Jewish home:

The Spirit is not dead, proclaim the word,  
Where lay dead bones, a host of armed men stand!



I ope your graves, my people, saith the Lord,  
 And I shall place you living in your land. (340)

This poem (and others by Lazarus) should appeal to students who long for poetry as a passionate expression of political views. People may also wish to discuss the poem from a contemporary perspective that includes both Jewish and Palestinian claims. It could be juxtaposed with Lazarus's "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport" and Longfellow's "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport."

### **Compare and Contrast: Is This Enough?**

I do not believe that comparing and contrasting are enough. Clearly there is not time in one semester (let alone a quarter) to provide adequate context for reading these poems and to discuss their language, imagery, and meanings. But this difficulty is no excuse for ignoring history entirely. Through women's history, national history, cultural history, and literary history students can be encouraged to see poetry as one form of representation that carried significant weight in the nineteenth century, more weight than it carries now. Giving students some sense of these issues invites them to think in more complex ways about both poetry and the past. If you are planning to assign a research paper due at the end of the term, you can suggest that students investigate one of these poets and her cultural context in greater detail. All three of the anthologies I have suggested here include contextual material as well as bibliographies of works that are appropriate for such research.

We are always pressed for time, making the best of a bad bargain, hinting at some things, passing over others too quickly, and never fully covering all those issues we meant to make clear to our students. Adding some history, however inadequate, to the literary conversation encourages students to reflect on the ways in which we are all historically constituted, and this contextualization should make them more aware of the similarities and differences between us and our forebears. In the end, the poem of history, endlessly revisable and revised, is no less interesting than the poem of art.