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Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt (review)

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Bennett, Paula Bernat, ed. 2001. *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. \$29.95. lx + 195 pp.

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In the Introduction to *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* (1998), Paula Bernat Bennett claims that the “heart” of nineteenth-century American women’s poetry lay “not in the poet but in the poem. I discovered,” she writes, “that while there might be very few major poets in the field, there were many, many ‘major’ (or, at any rate, very fine) poems” (xl). Bennett’s anthology, which includes selections from thirty-eight individual authors and over one hundred additional poems published in nineteenth-century periodicals, does indeed focus on the poem itself, methodically reconstructing a tradition of American women’s poetry. Yet the text also challenges scholars of nineteenth-century American poetry and women’s writing to focus on the poet as well as the poem. If the recovery of women writers is to truly alter our understanding of nineteenth-century American literature, then our exposure to these writers cannot be limited to five or ten pages in an anthology, no matter how good or thorough that anthology may be. Imagine attempting to understand the importance of Emily Dickinson, for example, based on such a small selection of her poetry! Yet Dickinson, some might argue, is the only female poet worthy of extensive attention. In answering her own challenge and publishing *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, Bennett proves such an assumption wrong, and will certainly push many readers to wonder what other such treasures are waiting to be similarly recovered.

Sarah Piatt is, in fact, no Emily Dickinson. Unlike Dickinson, Piatt married in 1861 and was eventually mother to six surviving children. Born in Kentucky, she lived in Washington D.C., Cork, and Dublin during her married life. She traveled to New York, Boston, London, Edinburgh, and Paris. According to Bennett, Piatt wrote more than 600 poems, and published 350 of these poems between 1854 and 1911 in 18 books as well as 37 different periodicals. 153 of these poems are reproduced in Bennett’s collection. “Indeed,” Bennett writes, “because of the extraordinary circumstances of her life, and the long span of time over which her poems appeared, Piatt was able to refract in her poetry the principal social, national, and artistic concerns of over 50 years of American culture and American women’s history” (xxvii).

Piatt is no Dickinson because her life was so very different, yet the differences between the two can only bring us closer to understanding nineteenth-century women's poetry and the woman poet herself. Despite the amazing work done by scholars like Cheryl Walker, Gary Williams, and Bennett, we unfortunately need to be constantly reminded that there is more than one.

As it is represented in Bennett's collection, Piatt's poetry is both thematically and stylistically intriguing. She is clearly a participant in nineteenth-century sentimental culture, yet she also questions that culture sharply, thus highlighting the complexities of sentimentalism. Like many nineteenth-century women poets, for example, Piatt often writes about the mothering of living children as well as the dead. These poems are often some of her most moving, and yet also her most religiously skeptical. In "No Help," the grieving mother of a dead child insists that she does not want "a little Angel. No,/I want my Baby—with such piteous pain,/That were this bitter life thrice bitter, oh!/I could not choose, but take him back again./God cannot help me, for God cannot break/His own dark Law—for my poor sorrow's sake" (85). Like Julia Ward Howe and Frances Osgood (both of whom are featured in Bennett's anthology), Piatt also writes extensively on courtship and marriage, frequently questioning the societal construction of womanhood. "Shapes of a Soul," for example, critiques the sentimental images of women as flowers and birds; presumably addressing the man who courts her, the speaker suggests that at times, her soul resembles a tiger, a snake, and "[y]et fiercer corms and viler" (8). Poems like "Mock-Diamonds" and "Giving Back the Flower," which feature women looking back on scenes of courtship, are among Piatt's best.

Yet Piatt's work is not limited to what we might traditionally think of as "feminine" subjects. Her Civil War poetry easily rivals that of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, and is, like the fiction of Rebecca Harding Davis, most interesting for the way in which it reveals Piatt's "borderland mentality" (xli). A Southerner, who spent the Civil War years in Washington D.C. and lived most of her life in the North, Piatt does not settle for easy conclusions about slavery or the war. While poems like "A Hundred Years Ago" and "Over in Kentucky" lament the loss of a particularly Southern way of life, to which slavery is integral, Piatt never allows herself to forget "how fierce the master's hold,/Spite of all armies, kept the slave within" (37). In much of her Civil War poetry, Piatt focuses on the aftermath of the war, particularly as seen from a woman's perspective. This focus complements the battlefield poetry of Whitman and Melville, giving readers a more complicated view of post-war life in the recently reconciled United States. Piatt's experience with war and the loss of the South of her childhood also affect her later poetry about

Ireland, written with great sympathy for the Irish people and their struggles with poverty and hunger. Throughout her career, Piatt addressed the private as well as the public, the national as well as the international, in a body of political poetry whose importance we are only just beginning to grasp.

Stylistic analysis of Piatt's poetry will inevitably complicate our understanding of nineteenth-century women's poetics and will hopefully help critics break out of what remains a simplistic stereotype of the sentimental poet. Bennett's collection highlights the stylistic complexity of Piatt's work, especially what she calls Piatt's use of "dialogue based realist lyrics" (xxxv). What Bennett is referring to is Piatt's tendency to incorporate multiple voices into her poems, as in the delightfully complex "Beatrice Cenci." In this and other poems, the dialogue between a mother and her child provides the background for the mother's thoughts on her own past and women's societal roles. In poems such as "Mock-Diamonds," Piatt's voice is completely displaced by that of the speaking persona, who recalls her youthful courtship with a man who rejected her for a woman he imagined was wealthy. "Beatrice Cenci," "Mock-Diamonds," and other poems such as "The Grave at Frankfort" also reveal an amazing use of time; in these poems, Piatt shifts back and forth between multiple time frames, thus demonstrating the inability to escape or ignore the past. "The Grave at Frankfort," for example, moves between four different time periods in just five stanzas, and plays on Piatt's relationship to her "old, rude kinsman," Daniel Boone.

In the Preface to this collection, Bennett acknowledges the fact that much work remains to be done on Piatt and her poetry. She calls her own book only "the culmination of the first phase of Piatt's recovery." "Like her life, Piatt's oeuvre is one of great complexity even at a technical level, and much still remains to be done before the full dimensions of her literary achievement and its significance can be assessed" (xviii). Hopefully Bennett won't be the only one to respond to this challenge.