

Down to Earth, Up for Democracy

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Gregory, Elizabeth. *Apparition of Splendor: Marianne Moore Performing Democracy through Celebrity, 1952–1970*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2021. 264 pages. ISBN 9781644531969. Hb. \$34.95.

Cross-dressing as George Washington in a tricorne hat and black cape in her late phase, Marianne Moore appears solid and serene, gazing introspectively beyond the boundaries of the book cover, a photo taken by George Platt Lynes in 1953. Any reader who is familiar with Moore would immediately recognize her at the sight of this “transvestite cosplay” (15), which also expresses the democracy she advocates, the equality of Americans of diverse classes and identities. The dramatic effect that her costume creates attracts the attention of varied audiences and offers her an entry into more public engagements.

In *Apparition of Splendor: Marianne Moore Performing Democracy through Celebrity, 1952–1970*, Elizabeth Gregory explores how actively Moore used her celebrity persona during her final two decades in the 1950s and 1960s to invite more readers to contemplate what democracy means in their daily lives, with regards to gender, race, social class, or age. According to Gregory, the poem “Apparition of Splendor” (1952) marks the beginning of Moore’s late stage, and the poetic character “apparition” in it “seems linked to the emerging public persona” (29), which may explain the title of Gregory’s study.

Marianne Moore’s poetic career has long been divided into two separate parts. Her early poems are highly regarded in literary circles, while her late poems, widely read during her last two decades, have become largely forgotten since her death, with few critics and scholars inclined to engage in their close-reading and reappraisal. Gregory argues against this split in

the critical assessment of Moore's work and explores why she—as a celebrity poet and active performer in the final two decades of her life—turned to composing accessible poems. The book celebrates Moore's attempt to involve a cross-brow audience of Americans by extending her democratic values and an anti-hierarchical ethics through her celebrity image. As the author herself claims, “[t]his is the first book in decades to take these later poems seriously as a group, and the first to explore why the brilliant, highly skilled Moore would take this down-market route into accessibility” (3).

Elizabeth Gregory, the director of the Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies Program and the Institute for Research on Women, Gender & Sexuality at the University of Houston, investigates both American modernist poetry and women's work and fertility. Being an avid Marianne Moore scholar, she is also an essential figure of the Marianne Moore Digital Archive, where she recently published her transcription of *Moore's 1961–1970 Poetry Notebook*. In her discussions of several of Moore's early poems and more than fifty undervalued post-1951 poems, Gregory does more than referencing materials from Moore's archive, unlike previous scholars. She also aims to “track the associative processes that connect elements within the poems (documenting Moore's own associations, and associations contemporary readers might also have made) and to explore Moore's edits and the logic behind them (particularly in relation to her evolving sense of audience) as they played out across versions of the work” (203). This exceptional effort makes Gregory's research more enlightening and interactive.

The subtitle of the Introduction, “Democracy, Celebrity, Poetry,” presents the three keywords of *Apparition of Splendor*, which is divided into five chapters. Chapter one deals with Moore's conversion to a public performer, arguing that Moore's eccentric public appearances, comic onstage performance, and humorous poems showcase her endeavor to involve audiences of all brow levels as well as to blur gender boundaries and soften social divisions simultaneously. Gregory suggests that Moore's hilarious Washington impersonation on public

occasions also functioned as social critique, as it “actively destabilized the gender line, [and was] part of a queer performativity challenging received ideas of and boundaries to identity” (23), similarly to her masculine childhood outfits. The author also explores the comic elements of Moore’s performance that few researchers have ever touched on. She demonstrates that Moore’s onstage delivery is integral to her poetry since poetry is a form of performance visually presented in a variety of shapes and forms. As Gregory points out, “[h]er poems’ extravagant designs flung across pages and their intensely innovative prosody constituted radical performances—both visual and aural” (9).

While most of Moore’s early poems were published in literary magazines of established reputation and elite readers, between 1953 and 1958, she started to publish also with such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Gregory argues that this transformation is not due to Moore’s incompetence to compose high-quality poems, instead, it demonstrates her effort to engage diverse topics and audiences, in accordance with her role as a democracy advocate.

The next four chapters, respectively, explore four vast topics of Moore’s late-stage poems: sports, culture, love, and age. As a fan of sports, Moore composed numerous sports-related poems, in which she “furthered her exploration of who deserved celebration and of the roles of race, gender, and identity politics in both sports and American democracy more broadly” (51). For example, in “Blue Bug” (1962), as Gregory proposes, Moore achieved the goal of reaching mixed-brow readers by writing about polo, an elite sport, with the inspiration of a pony snap in a sports magazine which was not typically regarded as great art, and by celebrating the success of a pony with the poetic form of odes. Moreover, Moore identifies herself with her non-human characters as well as those excluded from mainstream values, inviting participation from diverse audiences, along with their reflection upon the democratic social structure.

Followed by the analysis of Moore's avid attention to the sports field, chapter three illustrates that Moore also links art and democratic politics in her later poems, with "Style" (1956) subtly alluding to the anti-fascist cause and "Combat Cultural" (1959) explicitly referring to Cold War diplomacy, in an effort to engage Americans who have made a commitment to democracy to support the anti-fascist cause.

Gregory compares Moore's highly restrained early-year poems with her later love poems in the ensuing chapter, arguing that Moore took an unexpected turn to write sentimental love poems in an overt way, including the topics of emotion, friendship, patriotism, romance, and even her own personal life. Despite the fact that this transformation seems to clash with her early dismissal of the perception that women tend to write sentimental poetry, it secured audience growth by offering them emotional access and satisfying their curiosity about celebrities' lives through which she could publicize her advocacy for equity in sexual politics.

In the last chapter Gregory probes into Moore's last individual volume, *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics* (1966), which covers a wide range of subjects including aging, death, and mortality. In 1986, Moore was invited to write a poem to raise funds for an ailing tree, and she took the opportunity to appeal to readers of all classes to consider their own standing as United States citizens by utilizing her renown. Being frail and old in her eighties, Moore compares herself to a sick tree in "The Camperdown Elm" (1986), inviting "reflection upon the mechanisms of artistic and personal survival—across a career, a life, and the posthumous future" (172).

Gregory convincingly maps how Marianne Moore attempted to expand her readership with more accessible poems, trademark costumes, and comic performances. By associating herself with non-dominant characters, recording shared experiences with readers across the broad spectrum, drawing on materials from both high and popular literary sources, adapting various poetic forms and rhymes in her late-phase poems, and transforming herself into an

amusing public figure, Moore managed to engage audiences of all ranks and advance “democracy by speaking her mind innovatively” (185) through her celebrity persona.

Apparition of Splendor serves as an important academic resource for Moore’s researchers as well as an enjoyable introductory reading for new readers. Gregory offers a brief introduction to Moore’s early life and also sheds light on her early writing techniques in the “Appendix” for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the poet’s life and works. It is also a valuable groundwork for Moore’s scholars, especially for its thought-provoking critical reappraisal of the later period of her oeuvre.

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