Introduction

From the earliest colonial beginnings, American women writers have participated in an ongoing effort to record the varieties of experience of settlers and their descendants in the New World. In so doing, these “ink-stained Amazons,” as Nathaniel Hawthorne later described them, delineated in their writings many of the major themes that, to one extent or another, were to become staples of American literature. While their initial products today may seem unpolished and often overly didactic imitations of English modes, the writings of these women reflect a sensibility of America which places them in the mainstream of our literary history.

Emerging Voices: American Women Writers attempts to trace the movement of women writers in America from the margins of literary culture and industry to its center. The exhibition explores the substantial canon of works that begins with the homespun verse of Anne Bradstreet, the first volume of poetry published by any American, and closes with the appearance of Edith Wharton’s highly polished and sophisticated Age of Innocence, winner of the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for the best American novel.

The exhibition is intended as an overview of the works of authors who reflect both the historical concerns of women living in America and the distinctive emerging voice of the American woman writer. The list is not intended to be definitive. Some of the authors in the exhibition are still well-known; others were famous in their own time, but have since been forgotten; still others have been included because of their originality or because of one curator’s affection for the author. We were, of course, constrained by the amount of exhibition space available at the Grolier Club. We were also occasionally confounded by the apparent nonexistence of some of the books and manuscripts we would have liked to display, for example, the original manuscript of The Journal of Madam Knight, or the first edition of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative.
The process of organizing this exhibition has been long and interesting. In the course of discussions and research, commonalities among authors and of themes clamor for more attention than can be given in the necessarily brief labels. Some of these are, upon reflection, not too surprising. For example, minimal biographical research indicated that women who wrote and whose publications reached the marketplace often came from educated families, where as children they had access to libraries and were encouraged to read. Many emerged from what might be called the Sunday School tradition, where the convention of telling stories was supported by custom and the evangelical establishment. One can appreciate all the more the astonishing feat of those who were poorly educated, or whose home "libraries" consisted of a Bible and little else. It is also evident that, for a woman, legal and social strictures until the turn of this century meant writing was one of the few careers available when a husband died or deserted the family. The necessity of entering the economic marketplace and the difficulties encountered with a nearly all-male publishing world turned such writers as Sarah Parton, Mary Abigail Dodge, and Frances Hodgson Burnett into hard-headed business women. Groundwork for the success of writers like Willa Cather and Edith Wharton was thus laid in part by generations of women who quietly fought for the right to enter into contracts and earn a living by their pen.

Since the Grolier Club is organized by and for people who have an abiding interest in books as material objects, the curators would like to acknowledge their pleasure in gathering and putting on public display the actual books and periodicals in which these texts first appeared, as well as a sampling of the original manuscript drafts by these authors. Wherever possible, we have chosen works with inscriptions or autographs, to emphasize the relationship between authors and their public. Few readers today, including the many students who are bringing fresh perspectives to the study of American literature, have the opportunity to see these works as their authors first saw them. Time and loving use have taken their toll, but humble and grand bindings, embellished title pages, and stiff
frontispiece portraits all convey important information about literary culture in America.

The original idea for Emerging Voices, as well as much of the intellectual content, belongs to Iola S. Haverstick. She asked three other Club members, Jean W. Ashton, Caroline F. Schimmel, and Mary C. Schlosser, to co-curate. We four were helped at a crucial early period by Professor Joan D. Hedrick, Chairman of the Women's Studies Program at Trinity College in Hartford, who made wise suggestions about authors and books. While a portion of the works on view come from the curators' own collections, we are privileged to have been able to count on the generosity of other Club members, friends, and institutions. Eleanor Elliott and Robert H. Jackson have loaned from their private collections. The American Antiquarian Society, Barnard College, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Pulitzer office in the School of Journalism of Columbia University, The Library Company of Philadelphia, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the New-York Historical Society, the New York Public Library's Rare Books Division and Berg Collection of English and American Literature, the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, the University of Virginia's Alderman Library, and the Beinecke Library of Yale University have gone out of their way to make their treasures available. Additional thanks must go to Mildred K. Abraham, Georgia B. Earnhill, Virginia L. Bartow, Bud Clement, Ellen Dunlap, Rudolph Ellenbogen, Carol Falcione, H. George Fletcher, Claudia Funke, James M. Green, Margaret Heilbrun, Priscilla Juvelis, Jennifer B. Lee, Robert E. Parks, Rodney Phillips, Michael Plunkett, Jane Randall, Carol Rothkopf, Jane Siegel, Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., Margaret M. Tamulonis, Ann Thomas, John C. Van Horne, William D. Walker, and Patricia Willis. Essential to our success has been the work of Eric J. Holzenberg, Nancy Houghton, and the Grolier Club staff.

Production of this catalogue was made possible by donations from Jean Ashton, Iola Haverstick, Caroline and Stuart Schimmel, Mary Schlosser, and the Grolier Club.
Voices
in the Wilderness

For nearly 200 years, or until the later part of the eighteenth century, few writings by American women appeared in print. Those which did follow by and large the literary forms popular in England and on the continent, employing the familiar conventions of pious verse and sentimental fiction while trying to convey the less familiar experiences of the New World. In spite of their derivativeness, the best of these works are lively and distinctive, suggesting many of the themes that would appear in women's writing in the centuries to follow.

Anne Bradstreet's verses, for example, while following the conventions set by the metaphysical poets of her era in England, make strong use of domestic detail and the imagery of the family and the hearth. Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative was, like Bradstreet's poems, not initially published in America. It became the model for countless other tales of the confusing, frightening, but often ambiguous encounters between the indigenous inhabitants of the country and the European émigrés. Sarah Knight's vigorous and amusing account of her 1704 trip from Boston to New York, printed nearly 120 years after it was written, reminds us of how many energetic narratives lie buried within the colonial experience. The cautious introduction to Phillis Wheatley's uncommon poetry makes clear the double burden imposed by race and gender.

Abigail Adams adjured her husband to "remember the ladies" in formulating the laws of the new government. The writings of her close friend, Mercy Otis Warren, embodied one of the ladies' interests that would run through the writings of her female successors until the enactment of the suffrage amendment—a concern for the body politic and a willingness to contend with political and