

INTRODUCTION

THE POET'S VISION

The *Once and Future Muse: The Poetry and Poetics of Rhina P. Espaillat* charts the literary trajectory, salient themes, aesthetic accomplishments, and critical reception of a major American poet whose work conveys a compelling message to our troubled world. The study also takes advantage of the chronology corresponding to the life of the poet to illustrate meaningful paradigmatic shifts in the production and consumption of literary texts in the United States after World War II that have indelibly marked the way subsequent generations would write, read, share, and discuss the art of literature.

We understand that our choice of title, one that hearkens back to *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), the fifteenth-century epic prose narrative by Thomas Malory (?–1471), may elicit a measure of perplexity. What connection could there be between the work of Malory, an English author active over five centuries ago, and the oeuvre of our contemporary Caribbean-descended American poet? Malory wrote his book while behind bars after a public life that started out with his receipt of knighthood before 1442 and service in the Parliament of 1445 but degraded into

violence and crimes of various sorts to end his days in London's historic Newgate Prison (Baugh 305). On the other hand, Rhina P. Espaillat is a woman who has led a relatively quiet life. A brilliant and unassuming poet, she has spent her eighty-six years observing, reading, writing, teaching, looking after offspring and elders, building literary communities, and subtly conveying the gospel of poetry across the country. However, we trust that any perplexity prompted by the appearance of her name in the same paragraph as Malory may dissipate in the pages ahead.

With her feet firmly planted in the immediate reality of her historical moment while imaginatively claiming kinship with diverse members of the human tribe beyond it, Espaillat has an uncommon literary career that spans the 1940s through the second decade of the twenty-first century. Her voluminous poetic output reveals her to be a first-rate artist steeped in the intricacies of her craft, aware of the expressive possibilities of language, sensitive to the gamut of human yearnings, and trustful of the salutary role that art can play in bridging borders of difference within the fractious realm of social relations. Espaillat's verse exhibits a desire to observe her surroundings carefully, extracting meaning from the minutiae of ordinary existence. Her poems converse with artists or public figures from centuries ago and visualize the continuance of life after her own. Rooted in today, cognizant of the world that preceded her, and cautiously in awe of all that is to come, Espaillat stands out as a "timely" poet in all senses of the word. Her thematic range encompasses an array of broadly resonant foci: the power of nature and the mysteries of the cosmos; the complex fissures of the mind and soul; chance versus choice; and the temptation to quarrel with the divine in the face of widespread misery on earth.

Poems considered in this study will treat various salient topics. Espaillat often explores music and painting, plumbs the nuances of family life, and braids lived experience with Greco-Roman myths while dissecting her Dominican ancestry and Hispanic heritage. Love, misogyny, and the mysteries of life amid sickness, the nature of perception, the significance of place, and the precariousness of that which we might call fair play fall within her purview. Her foreign birth and Caribbean roots enter seamlessly into an inclusive US American identity. Similarly, an overarching desire to understand others comprises her ethics of compassion. Her veritable cornucopia of topics and themes blend into a striking harmony that resists homogenizing impulses and predictable outcomes.

Espaillat's compassion manifests itself as a willingness to empathize across time, space, race, culture, creed, and even species. Poet Roy Scheele comments upon "the breadth and depth" of her subject matter as well as her "unusual treat-

ment” of it, which he illustrates by means of her poem “Retriever.” In this text, the speaker unexpectedly assumes “the perspective of the dog instead of its master” (Scheele 36). Responding to Scheele’s observations, Espailat speaks of her tendency “to think [her]self into other heads whether the heads are those of animals or of other people,” including “inanimate objects.” She adds, “If I look at something long enough behaving as it behaves, whether it’s an animal running or a tree blowing in the wind, I become it” (37). She sees poetry as well suited for that sort of self-transport into others insofar as it “allows you not only to move backward and forward through time but also through what’s around you, with your imagination, so that you *become* things that you are not and can never possibly be” (37).

The transformative worldview that sustains this expansiveness, we would argue, hangs on Espailat’s freedom from deterministic narratives and all-encompassing paradigms of the kinds that normally split heritages, civilizations, branches of the human species, belief systems, aesthetic orientations, or literary practices into the garden-variety *us versus them*. In this dichotomy, the *us* is almost invariably representative of the supposedly superior option, the one more deserving of respect and admiration even at the wholesale expense of *them*. In the words of former president George W. Bush, spoken in July 2016 as he joined then president Barack Obama at a memorial for five police officers gunned down in Dallas, we tend “to judge other groups by their worst examples while judging ourselves by our best intentions” (Harris and Landler). Espailat invites us to transcend such one-sided judgments through her practice of upholding a decentered view of human culture that envisions an empathic experience of the whole species and well beyond it.

Espailat poignantly conveys her outlook on identity when answering a question about whether her poetry has benefited from bilingualism, that is, her having retained the Spanish language of her birthplace despite arriving in the United States as a toddler and receiving all her formal education in English. She suggests that the dual-language experience “severs an intimate”—though perhaps delusional—“connection we have with language” as monolinguals. We typically experience our one language as if it were “all there is,” the rest seeming “mere translations of it” (Scheele 36). This response corresponds to Espailat’s critique of the nativist rhetoric that has long impugned immigrants and their ancestral languages. We witnessed, for instance, the anti-immigrant voices that expressed public indignation at marchers during a 2006 national Hispanic immigrant rally in Washington, DC, for “disrespecting” “The Star-Spangled Banner” by singing it in Spanish near the US Capitol. Such expressions of antipathy toward a sec-

ond language have frequently recurred in US history. That singing the national anthem in Spanish should strike some patriotic citizens as disrespectful suggests that the fundamentalist view of American identity, with its abhorrence for cultural difference, has remained vibrant in some sectors of the population. By the same token, the obduracy of English-only ideologues has seldom failed to elicit ridicule from critics who ascribe to them the type of epistemic dysfunction illustrated by the remark, “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it ought to be good enough for the children of Texas”—attributed, perhaps apocryphally, to two-time Texas governor Miriam A. Ferguson (1875–1961) (Cárdenas; Zimmer).

Given the role of translation in spreading the Christian doctrine from one geographical realm or cultural context to another, it seems that the Lord has not cared much about the language spoken by those preaching the Word. King James I (1566–1625), who authorized the first English settlement of North America in 1607, sponsored the translators who worked from scriptures composed originally in various other languages to produce an English translation of the Bible. The king was free of the impediments encountered centuries earlier by the English theologian John Wycliffe (1330–1384), who had led the effort to produce an English translation. This infraction earned him much condemnation by church and political authorities alike even though his work had drawn from the Vulgate version (382 AD) of the Bible popularized by Saint Jerome (342–420 AD), itself a Latin translation of the Hebrew original, as well as the *Septuagint*, the version of the Old Testament available in Koiné Greek since the second century BC. The 1611 King James Version of the Bible would eventually become the standard source for Anglophone Christians to learn the word of the Lord.

Attributing to the advocates of monolingual public school education the claim that “English was good enough for Jesus Christ” bitingly mocks the idea that sacred national values (or even religious values) are diminished when expressed in a language other than English. Some see English as the only “real” language, with all others being, in Espaillet’s words, “mere translations” of it. Espaillet harbors no metaphysics of language as it relates to identity or the sacred, appreciating it rather in accordance with its situational contingency. Convinced that the divine has no linguistic preference, Espaillet observes that a potential narrowness of perception may be deleterious to monolingual speakers. They take the words in their language as the “real” ones because in childhood they had “the illusion that when [they] say ‘tree’ [they] are naming something.” Bilingualism thus “breaks” that Adamic illusion (Scheele 36). When we are able to step outside of a single linguistic framework, we become

“undeceived of that, and [we] understand that all language is arbitrary, that there is no language that reality speaks—reality is mute” (36). “Each language,” the poet maintains, “is as valid as all the others—and as useless, in the long run, because not one of them captures the whole of what we’re looking for” (36).

Espaillet’s bilingual upbringing has conferred upon her the capacity to enter on more equal terms a larger number of discursive spaces occupied by others who speak different languages. Likewise, whether connected to her view of language or not, her empathic imagination recognizes the multiple creative tools that poets have at their disposal. Not a poet to be pigeonholed into any one aesthetic or interpretive template circulating in literary criticism today, Espaillet advocates openness to all the manners of communication that language and the poetic art have allowed throughout the vastness of the world’s expressive traditions. She asks of artistic communication only that it remain truthful, arguing that with so little time available “to communicate fully,” it seems pointless to “waste a minute of it telling lies,” especially since “you can’t get those moments back” (Fox 137). She celebrates the truthfulness of Stanley Kunitz, whom she admires greatly for having deliberately turned to free verse after a stellar literary career as a formal poet. Kunitz engaged in the latter as devoutly and with similarly admirable results as when practicing the former. Espaillet dismisses as silly the idea that the working tools used to craft one’s poems determine their social or political values. She contends further that one can find retrograde free verse practitioners and progressive formalists in equally bountiful numbers (Kang 181).

The Once and Future Muse plots a course through Espaillet’s work from 1947 to the present. Significantly, the sequence of her books, as dated by year of publication, does not offer a reliable clue to her growth as an artist, the metamorphosis of her outlook from youth to maturity, or the evolution of her poetic thought over seven decades. She has, from early on, displayed a tendency toward thematic promiscuity in the sense of covering disparate subjects almost simultaneously. She has admitted that she does not sit down to write with the sole objective of producing book-length collections (Scheele 43). Given her copious productivity and the “lateness” of her decision to start publishing volumes of verse, she has had plenty of completed work to choose from when the occasion to compile another book has arisen. At those points, she has simply assembled “piles” of those poems “that seem to be speaking to each other as part of the same theme,” with “no qualms about putting together the old and the new” (Scheele 43). However, even with the ostensibly accidental chronology of her collections, one might still discern something of a conceptual evolution. Her choosing texts

that speak to one another around a particular theme results in distinct emphases for each of the volumes. In that sense, her choices communicate aspects of her existential disposition at the time of the assemblage irrespective of the composition date of the individual texts.

Whether or not one can consider the sequence of emphases a development or an evolution, they do correspond to meaningful states of mind that have prevailed in her work at various stages of her literary career. Espaillat herself would grant that in her early poems of the 1940s and 1950s, her gaze seemed focused on the present, one “full of personal observations of my own corner of the world,” which she does not at all regret, since lyric poetry typically captures “the voice of the individual, after all” (Scheele 44). But in subsequent decades her writing “has had more to say about what we share, our common experiences, and it takes a longer view into the past and the future, as well as into other lives than mine.” In her later work she has meditated at great length on the inevitability and trials of aging, along with its ultimate consequence: “Mortality has been on my mind, especially, because the last few years have brought the deaths of many old friends and members of my family and my husband’s. When your generation begins to grow sparse all around you, you take stock of your situation and begin to imagine—or ‘rehearse’ the absence of those you still have, and eventually your own” (44).

The writer admits to this “elegiac thought” that permeates the later volumes, beginning most prominently with the collection *Rehearsing Absence* (2001). This volume features “a lot of reappraisal of what you thought was yours for good, a lot of leave-taking” (Scheele 44). But the acknowledgement of life’s evanescence and contemplation of death—*thanatopsis*, as examined in our chapter six—has not diminished her “sorrow for those lives that are impoverished by the lack of so much that [we] think of as ordinary.” While she feels it “impossible to be conscious at all without sorrow over huge ‘unfixables,’ both past and present,” she remains resolutely aware of the inexorable continuance of life (44–45). Questioning the logic of physicians and other professionals who may prognosticate fixed limits to life, she has increased her engagement with the mysteries and potential of the future, one that belongs to generations to come. She believes that the future “doesn’t need any of us specifically,” hence her concomitant interest in all that will stay behind: “I am turning my attention to those things that will outlive me, and thinking of them with a pleasure and satisfaction that I can’t explain even to myself” (45).

Espaillat also finds it necessary “to get that grateful acquiescence down on paper, that affection for unexceptional things that I hope will be part of the lives of my grandchildren’s generation and beyond, as they were part of my grand-

parents' lives, and of mine, I mean the natural world, human creativity, thought, ordinary relationships, the common pleasures of the body and mind" (45). A signature poem expressing concern for the well-being of those future generations appears in her collection *Where Horizons Go* (1998), namely, "For My Great-Great Grandson, the Space Pioneer." In this piece, she "wanted to tell that mythical young man in the future that it's important to hold on to the earth, not to lose it, not to subvert it, not to corrupt it—to love it as it is, because it's like the body of an ancestor" (35–36). This strikingly conservationist ethos is gravely pertinent at a time when the United States, the leader of the capitalist world and the model that the countries within its sphere of influence eagerly emulate, finds itself at war with nature. This country, like other powerful industrialized nations, seems trapped in a scheme of economic advancement that requires the ongoing pollution of the Earth's soil, air, and water, the reengineering of flora to alter their natural reproductive capacities for the sake of accelerated growth controlled by corporations, the destruction of wildlife habitats such as rainforests and oceans, and the steady onslaught of greenhouse gases and other toxic emissions. Near-sightedness and shortcuts have become part and parcel of modern industrialized life, even as mighty corporate sectors, their allies in government, and their de facto spokespersons in the various legislatures apply themselves methodically to denying or underplaying negative outcomes, including climate change (Baxter). Espaillet's concern over whether future generations will have a planet on which to spend their lives comfortably while searching for meaning strikes a chord of utter and plangent urgency.

This poet's oeuvre imaginatively links the present, the future, and the past in ways that recall the legacy attributed to King Arthur by Malory. After the day of destiny arrives and the beloved monarch must meet his Maker, the narrator of *Le Morte Darthur* finds a way to relay the message that the exalted king remains among his subjects still. The engine of longevity runs on the faith of many throughout the kingdom who believe their magnanimous ruler will return: "Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had [been conveyed] by the will of our Lord Jesus into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I would say: here in this world he changed his life. And many men say that there is written upon the tomb thus: HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS" (Malory 873).¹ The inscription on Arthur's tomb,

1. We have modernized the spelling of English words in this quotation.

as rendered through hearsay by Malory's narrator, has become familiar in the abridged form used by T. H. White (1906–1964) in the title of his Arthurian novel *The Once and Future King* (1958).

Our title *The Once and Future Muse* intentionally echoes White's usage. We have meant *Muse* to denote not only Espaillat the person but also the composite ethos that has nourished her body of work, a creative corpus that convinces us of its enduring appeal. We take it that, the unexemplary course of his life notwithstanding, Malory wished for readers to see in the signified of the phrase "rex quondam rexque futurus" not a mere individual of flesh and bone but the legacy such an individual bequeathed to us, which would have to live on because of the humane values informing it. Espaillat's vision of humanity and her desire for the preservation of the Earth so that both human and nonhuman species may continue to flourish, is part of a timeless yearning that the fifteenth-century Britons conveyed in the desire to save Camelot from impending doom. The preteritness of *Le Morte Darthur* correlates with Espaillat's futurity in that it transports us to a time prior to rampant colonialism, the advent of capitalism as an economic system that holds almost nothing sacred, and the wholesale abuse of the natural environment for profit over the past five centuries.

Besides linking this Caribbean-born poet to the Arthurian legend, thereby associating her with the mythic domain of medieval Britain, our title also alludes to the first volume of Anglophone verse published by a resident of England's colonies on the Atlantic coast of North America. *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650), penned in Massachusetts by Puritan immigrant poet Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672), herself a devoted wife and mother just like Espaillat, stands as a foundational text of American poetry. As Espaillat did in the twentieth century, Bradstreet in the seventeenth had endeavored to navigate the tension between her domestic duties and the demands of her art. She walked the delicate line between respecting tradition and asserting her aesthetic individuality; likewise, she resolved to embrace the new land as home even as she remained attached to affairs in her land of birth. We thought that a title with the semantic potential for drawing these historical parallels would seem appropriate for this book-length study of the poetic legacy of Espaillat.²

2. Espaillat does write prose in addition to her verse, but our study focuses on the poetry. We hereby acknowledge Leslie Monsour's *Rhina Espaillat: A Critical Introduction* (2013), a useful overview consisting of two critical essays, a short biography, an original interview, and a selected bibliography.

COVERAGE

Espaillet occupies an ambivalent place in American literature today. She has accrued numerous laurels for the humane vision of her work and her exceptional artistry, but she does not enjoy a national fame comparable to that of Richard Wilbur, Donald Hall, or Robert Pinsky, to name only three prominent American poets of her generation. Few would venture to claim that these better-known practitioners surpass Espaillet in terms of merit as a literary artist. Since her lesser centrality in the country's literary scene has to do primarily with events in her personal history, we have selected a "life and works" approach that seeks to provide as much of the poet's biography as is necessary to contextualize our critical assessment of her oeuvre.

We have thus undertaken a sustained study of the poetry and poetics of an artist whose work we admire, including her versatile translations as well as her experience teaching, mentoring, engaging with other wordsmiths, and winning new readers for the art. As the book will reveal, we have sought to maintain a balance between the social and the aesthetic. We have pursued this balance with the belief that the political intervention by a literary text convinces most readily when enabled by the artistic resources that sustain it and that, conversely, craft reaches its ultimate triumph when it succeeds at touching human beings in a salutary, illuminating way. As such, the reader will find in these pages a balance between a close reading of poetic texts and a scholarly effort to explain the contexts in which these selfsame texts achieve their immediate significance. We cover the poet's trajectory, focusing on details of her biography, family history, ancestral heritage, and literary education, in addition to tracing the artistic sensibility that could explain her early inclination to embracing classical English prosody as her chief arsenal of poetic modes. We have approached her poems with an eye on what they say as well as how they say it; in other words, we seek to dissect the complex partnership of content and form.

We begin this book with several chapters describing Espaillet's life and the trajectory of her career since her early years in the Dominican Republic and New York City. The first chapter offers an overview of her biography and pivotal moments of literary formation. It also identifies a wide range of salient features in her work so as to suggest a breadth of themes, topics, and registers appreciably greater than our book alone can cover. The second chapter charts the poet's rise as a young literary star in 1940s New York. The discussion visits her first encoun-

ters with poetry as a child and her auspicious educational beginnings in Manhattan. Chapter three explores sites of belonging that opened for Espaillat upon her return to literary visibility postretirement—among others, as a practitioner of her craft, as a writer in dialogue with literary traditions, and as a cultural broker via her translation work. Even as she asserted her Hispanic Caribbean ancestry, she became a builder of poetic communities among people of other ancestries in New York and Massachusetts, earning recognition from colleagues nationwide. Following this, chapter four outlines the ethnic compartmentalization of American literature that had taken place by the time Espaillat repositioned poetry at the center of her life. The discussion also examines her acquisition of the label “Latina” to locate her poetry in relation to ancestry, and the implications therein for how her legacy would be configured and acknowledged. Overall, using Espaillat’s case as an example, the chapter tells the story of how social movements from the 1960s onward transformed the way Americans would read their country’s letters.

The volume then shifts to a closer analysis of particular themes in Espaillat’s oeuvre. Chapter five interrogates the poet’s personal mode of feminist literary praxis. In doing so, it considers the gender implications of the thirty-year interruption in her literary career, a period when she privileged spousal, parental, and occupational responsibilities over active immersion in her craft. It then fleshes out the analysis by offering close readings of her Adam-and-Eve-themed pieces. These versatile texts provide the stage for the poet to dramatize the tension between artistic individuality and commitment to others. Chapter six undertakes a close reading of pertinent poems to explore the narrative contours of the aging body. Sickness serves as a thematic anchor for Espaillat’s understanding of life, physical suffering, medical prognostications of death, and some more-than-human deviations from the reality of our mortal end.

The final two chapters take stock of Espaillat’s critical legacy, reflecting both her own perspective and the reception of and engagement with her work by critics and peers. Chapter seven offers a compendium of responses to Espaillat’s oeuvre broadly and to individual poems by critics, scholars, reviewers, editors, and fellow poets who have attested to the impact of her work. It also illustrates the remarkably varied facets of her vision by showcasing the multiple agendas that critics, scholars, anthologists, and editors have sought to advance through inclusion of her poetry, namely, celebrating distinct forms, exploring moral quandaries, revisiting classical myths, representing the spirit of particular regions, writing back to the great male poets, or simply advocating for the art of poetry, among

others. Finally, chapter eight explores her poetic philosophy in the context of the “poetry wars,” gauges her position relative to free verse and formalist factions, and analyzes her opinions on the failings and virtues of other bards.

Espaillet’s richly inclusive messages about art, nature, empathy, compassion, and the future of our species prove particularly relevant to these turbulent times. Confident that her life and work will be of interest to nonacademic readers in the general public, we have made a sustained effort to explain cultural references and to locate authors, artists, or other historical figures in their corresponding chronologies and contexts. We have provided basic background information on poetic forms, styles, schools, social movements, literary histories, political events, and cultural debates relevant to the study of the poet. We hope to offer all that may be needed for any reader, whether seasoned or raw, to become acquainted with and proficient in the contributions of this major American poet. Concurrently, we anticipate fellow scholars will find in these pages enough enticements to teach the works of Rhina P. Espaillet to their students or to identify aspects and areas that we have left insufficiently examined that they might wish to take on as part of their own research endeavors.