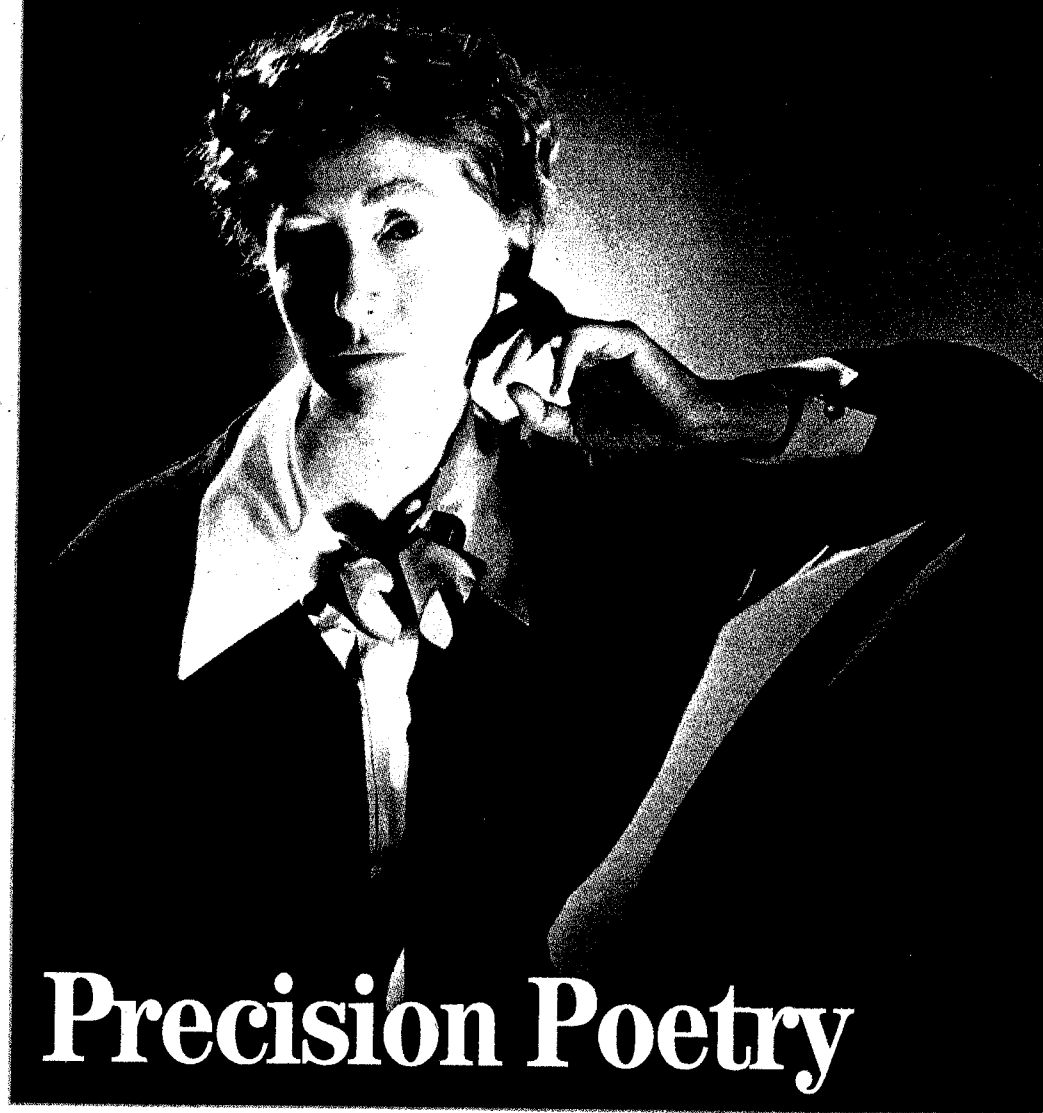


Marianne Moore's keen-eyed verse was inspired
by animals, old books, carrots and sports pages



Precision Poetry

THE POEMS OF MARIANNE MOORE. Edited by Grace Schulman. Viking, 449 pp., \$40.

BY ANDREW EPSTEIN

The great modern American poet Marianne Moore was famous — notorious, really — for revising, altering and even disowning her poems long after they first saw print. As with other infamous tinkers, such as Wordsworth, Whitman and Auden, Moore chronically fiddled with her work, continuing to improve or mar (depending on one's taste) poems published decades earlier.

The most flagrant example is her late pruning of one of her best-known poems, "Poetry" (which begins, with characteristic wit and candor, "I, too, dislike it"), from 35 to just three spare lines. This radical whitening is symptomatic of the general surgery

she practiced on her work as a whole: For 60 years, Moore shaped and reshaped her own oeuvre each time her work was collected and published, in the process winnowing out some very accomplished and important poems. Consequently, Moore left behind an almost comically byzantine publishing history and a maddeningly unstable, incomplete canon.

In 1967, five years before she died, the 80-year-old Moore put together an edition of her poems that she named "The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore" — until now the only edition of her poetry available — insisting that this gathering contained all the poems she wished to preserve. Anticipating protests from her dismayed readers (and they were legion), Moore rather bluntly made her case in the book's tart epigraph: "Omissions are not accidents."

But Moore's admirers have tended to disagree with her on that score, lamenting and questioning her exclusions. Nearly everyone concurs that the title of "The Complete Poems" is a deceptive misnomer, especially ironic given Moore's lifelong artistic commitment to "exact perception" and "relentless accuracy."

This is where Grace Schulman's long overdue gold mine of an edition comes in. Schulman, a celebrated poet and critic who knew Moore personally, has taken on the daunting task of collecting all of Moore's poetry under one cover and once again making the balance of her work accessible to readers who aren't likely to hunt down rare editions and yellowed literary journals in library archives. Of course, this sort of project inevitably raises difficult ethical and literary questions, and Schulman acknowledges as much in her surprisingly personal and illuminating introduction, where she explains the painful decisions she needed to make: "I was torn between wanting to follow my friend's last editorial wishes and the driving need to represent her work." Ultimately, Schulman gave in to the latter impulse, and on seeing the abundant benefits and charms of this edition, it is hard to blame her.

What does Schulman's edition add to Moore's "Complete Poems"? First, a bevy of poems that Moore chose not to embalm for posterity, amounting to almost half of her entire body of work. The new book contains more than 100 additional poems, including many early pieces written while at college (some slight, some highly polished and memorable, many foreshadowing her later predilections). Schulman's edition also contains a considerable number of hard-to-find gems, restoring to Moore's canon such long-admired, inexplicably purged poems as "Melan-

thon" (a complex, elephantine addition to Moore's famed menagerie of animal poems, one that the ever-astute critic Randall Jarrell ranked among her dozen or so finest poems) and "Radical" (a stunning portrait of a carrot as a "wedge-shaped engine with the / secret of expansion"). Also resurrected are the revealing meditation on beauty and femininity titled "Roses Only" ("your thorns are the best part of you"), the powerful, never-before-collected "Old Tiger" and the wonderfully vivid poems "Dock Rats" and "Half Deity."

Second, Schulman's edition at last presents Moore's work chronologically. Until now, to get even a vague sense of how her poetry evolved, one had to hopscotch around "The Complete Poems" with the aid of some other scholarly reference. For example, rather than beginning, like the previous collection, with "The Steeple-Jack," a poem written when Moore was 45 and at the height of her powers, this edition moves from the compressed, arch epigrams of her youth to the more expansive, descriptive and masterful poems of her maturity, letting us observe how Moore's work changes as it grows even

more sophisticated and original.

Of course, none of this would matter if Moore weren't a dazzling, essential writer, which she undoubtedly is. By almost any measure, she stands firmly alongside the towering modern American poets T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost, all of whom were ardent admirers and supporters of her daring, innovative work. Although she is a major contributor to the broad movement known as Modernism, Moore's work is defiantly idiosyncratic and unique. By turning against conventional notions of beauty and lyricism, by composing collages filled with quotations from her vast and quirky reading, Moore radically expanded what materials and forms could be suitable for literature. Insisting everywhere on the virtues of grace, restraint, precision and attentiveness, she celebrated the poetry found in the most unlikely places — in the peculiar attributes of exotic animals, in natural history books, in sports pages, "business documents and / school-books," and in the words of "plain American which cats and dogs can read."

Although one does not turn to Moore for emotional avowals of the poet's personal experience, lush or romantic language, traditional lyricism or straightforward narrative, in her best and most famous poems, such as "The Steeple-Jack," "The Frigate Pelican," "Critics and Connoisseurs," "A Grave," "The Fish," "Marriage" and "The Pangolin," one finds a poetry of "unpompous gusto" — alive with fierce intelligence, understated humor and pathos, unforgettable imagery and wry moral insight.

Radiating a contagious enthusiasm for the dizzying variety of the world around us, these poems, like the kind of art she professes to admire, are "lit with piercing glances into the life of things." And they seem to give us, as the poet John Ashbery said of Moore's work, "the feeling that life is softly exploding around us, within easy reach."

While this book may not be the exhaustive variorum edition Moore scholars have longed for, and while it may only complement rather than replace "The Complete Poems" — one would hate to do without some sense of the integrity of her individual volumes, some idea of how Moore worked her work to appear — it is an indispensable collection. With it, a much more accurate portrait of one of the most brilliant, distinctive American poets can emerge.

To be sure, enjoying Moore's poems is an acquired taste for some, like relishing good, strong olives, but once one has discovered them, there is no going back. It is a great pleasure to be in the presence of her ample, discerning mind, to watch it develop across the course of a career and to find it flashing once more in long-buried triumphs. ■

BY CELIA WREN

You need an apple, you need a mirror, you need a dwarf," Gregory Maguire says earnestly as he sits in the lobby of a Manhattan hotel discussing the origins of his new novel, "Mirror Mirror" (HarperCollins, \$24.95). "If you have an apple, a mirror and a dwarf in any story, there are going to be overtones of 'Snow White.'" A soft-spoken, bearded man with black wire-framed glasses, the Boston-based author is taking an hour from a busy New York visit — preparing, in part, for the Broadway opening this weekend of a musical based on his 1995 novel "Wicked" — to chat about "Mirror Mirror." An incantatory fantasy about 16th century Italy and the infamous Borgia family, "Mirror Mirror" reconnoiters landscapes far removed from the "Snow White" most of us know — no color-saturated Disney landscapes here, no tiny men with names like Grumpy heigh-hoing off to work. But Maguire shrewdly points out that, by writing in a thematically loaded apple, mirror and dwarf — or eight dwarfs, to be exact — he has given fairy tale associations to his chronicle of paternal love, corrupt aristocrats and Renaissance-era skull-duggery.

Ever since "Wicked," a brilliant retelling of "The Wizard of Oz" from the Wicked Witch of the West's point of view, the author has dazzled readers with his talent for refracting familiar children's stories through an imaginative prism, generating provocative adult tales that scintillate with poetic language. Four years after "Wicked," he produced "Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister," a variation on the Cinderella narrative set in 17th century Holland during the legendary tulip craze. His 2002 novel "Lost," a mystery freighted with allusions to Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," lingered in contemporary reality, but with "Mirror Mirror," he returns to his earlier vein.

It was a step he took, at first, with misgivings. "The truth is that I work hand in hand with my editor, Judith Regan, who is very savvy about publishing books," the 49-year-old Maguire confesses cheerfully, "and she was more inspired by the idea of 'Snow White' than I was." He recalls telling Regan, "I don't want to be known as the grown-up writer who rewrites children's stories for adults."

Not that he's dismissive of children's stories. The founder and co-director of the 17-year-old nonprofit Children's Literature New England, Maguire also writes for kids; his book of comic fables, "Leaping Beauty," comes out next year. But with a PhD in English and American literature and a stint of college teaching in his background, he found that pondering Snow White-related motifs increased his enthusiasm for the project. Since the apple in the story proves nearly toxic, he researched the history of poison, an investigation that led him swiftly to Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519), who becomes the evil stepmother figure in "Mirror Mirror." A Christian relic — rumored to be a fruit-laden branch from the Garden of Eden's Tree of Knowledge — fills the apple requirement, and, in the novel's most original and unsettling touch, the dwarfs turn out to be indistinct, protean beings so unanthropomorphic that they resemble thinking stones.

Maguire has no trouble infiltrating the consciousness of his oddball personages, and "Mirror Mirror" slips into the minds of the dwarfs; of the dastardly Lucrezia; of the nobleman Vincente de Nevada, ordered by the Borgias to steal the apples from a Greek monastery; and of Vincente's daughter Bianca, who befriends the dwarfs. It is no accident, the novelist says, that female characters like Lucrezia and Bianca

A writer of fables for
began his new book w
poisoned red apple. M
his tale of a wicked g
is on the Great White



should loom so large in the book. characters, and women in general, are shrouded in ambiguities and complexities of interpretation," Maguire says. "The fiction is based on interpretation and makes sense to me that women choose to write, because they'd be curious about the same kinds of things as men."

His most memorable heroine, a green-complexioned revolutionary, "Wicked," worked so well, in fact, that Maguire is currently making her debut on Broadway in a musical scored by Stephen Schwartz. "That 'Wicked' should have transferred to stage at all may seem surprising," the book paints an epic canvas, a strange and yet familiar Oz in a social, racial, sexual and spiritual context. "I conceived of the book as 'Gone with the Wind' set in Oz," he says, and proclaims himself "thrilled" with the dramatization. "I've seen several times. Happy to be in a musical — even though that's a long way from his Massachusetts and his partner have three young boys, and he wants to 'hang out' and make sure the posters are up, and make sure the glass is clean and the glass is clean and the glass is clean."

There are, after all, some particularly successful novelists. "As I said," the writer explains, "I'm not going to be 'White in Duluth or Snow White in Snow White in the Dakotas. I'm Snow White in Tuscany, because I'm in New York and have it as a tax write-off."

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