The title of “Spenser’s Ireland,” December 1941: Scripting a Response announces its key elements of concern: the rhetoric of war, public “warspeak”, and (elocutionary) scripting. In an essay enlivened by energized prose and complex layering of history, archives, and poetic readings, Edward Allen presents Marianne Moore through the lens of the political decade of the 1930s and early 40s, intersected with radio as a new medium in her household and in politics. Invoking Franklin Delano Roosevelt as “an exemplary media strategist” and beginning the essay with an analysis of Roosevelt’s December 8 invocation to Congress to declare war (or to recognize that war had existed since the attack the day before), Allen argues that Moore’s own 1941 What Are Years sees an emergence of the poet as “media strategist” and considers the “nature of these poems’ relation to their political environment” (454-455). This figure of the strategist weaves together wartime debates over American and Irish involvement, Moore’s own attachment to a “hybrid” Celtic heritage, and the poet’s elocutionary scripting of “Spenser’s Ireland” for a radio performance. Allen’s deft balancing and weaving of elements proffers a profoundly new “read” of Moore’s “voice,” as considered through modern technologies of sound and the mediation of sound technologies in the circulation of both political and poetic discourses.

Bridging politics and performance, Allen’s lucid but complex contribution to Moore scholarship joins a myriad of fascinating readings and archival recoveries emerging over the past decade or so. New work on Moore has taught us to think much more complexly about her late works, particularly by considering the personal and public histories, archives, and contexts attending the stylistic changes of these years. Allen importantly cites Heather Cass White in noting that “Spenser’s Ireland” marks a stylistic juncture “between two kinds of praxis in Moore’s midcareer verse, between ‘polysemous complexity’ on the one hand and ‘didactic simplicity’ on the other.” For Allen, performance enables this juncture, motivated in part by new cultures of sound performance in the 1930s (radio, recording) and the appropriation of such technologies for political and wartime discourses. Turning to “Spenser’s Ireland,” he argues that the performance script for the studio recording evidences the poem’s (and the poet’s) “frustration” with Ireland’s neutrality, marking a “sea change in Moore’s thinking about interventionist politics” from an earlier support for neutrality. In considering the audio archives (script and recordings), Allen thus encourages us to read Moore’s stylistic shifts in relation to performativity as offering a way of “radicalizing the most unassuming of lyrics” (455). Gesturing toward a larger argument, this exploration of Moore’s performance of “Spenser’s Ireland” in a sound studio, resulting in a subsequent LP, insistently questions the “prestige and status we ascribe to her printed works” and encourages “more ephemeral kinds of instantiation and rendition that characterize a work in progress” (467).

Allen carefully delineates the momentous circumstances that coincidentally are shown to ally with the “work in progress” of “Spenser’s Ireland” when the stages of sound recording and elocutionary preparation are taken into account as part of the “progress.” On December 8, 1941, President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare that war had existed between the US and the Japanese Empire since the previous day’s attack on Pearl Harbor.
Introducing the essay with Roosevelt’s six-minute radio broadcast, Allen distinguishes between a presidential declaration of war (which is how FDR’s speech is often read) and the appeal to Congress to “exercise their own illocutionary powers” to declare that war already exists (which is how Allen reads it, 452). Allen traces FDR’s preparation, revisions, and amendments made to the brief but important speech before its broadcast, demonstrating the president’s attention to the performative quality of this address. While considering it likely that Moore heard the broadcast, and while speculating on this listening event and her general radio habits, Allen makes the larger point that sound technology alerted Moore to elocutionary style in new ways that influenced her poetry from the 1930s forward.

To this end, Allen asserts that Moore’s 1941 What are Years stands as a “pivotal collection,” and that the ‘poems’ relation to their political environment . . . has to do with their refashioning in 1941 as sound events” (455). In the same week as the attack on Pearl Harbor and FDR’s response, Moore recorded “Spenser’s Ireland” after giving a talk at Harvard, which was revised and published in 1949 as “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto”. On the same evening, after the talk and dinner, she recorded several poems in the Woodberry Poetry Room, guided by the “resident specialist in rhetorical and performance arts” Frederick Packard Jr., who produced the record label Harvard Vocarium, “well known in poetry circles on both sides of the Atlantic.” Allen charts Moore’s correspondence with him over the period of the production of the record (some three years later), discovering dual ways in which she thinks about the labor of the recording: Packard’s labor as a sound engineer and her labor as a sound poet developing “her own repertoire of vocal gestures and execution” (457).

Without ever abandoning the political contexts that interest him (or Moore –World War II, Irish nationalism, and debates over Irish neutrality), Allen usefully acknowledges the challenges, resources, and benefits in talking about Moore’s entry into the new “performance culture” of radio and sound recording. Recordings, he notes, are “apt to smooth over the contours of vocal difference” that Moore’s customary collaging of quotes promotes on the page (459). However, turning to the “audiotape archive” as an important part of a poet’s work (citing Charles Bernstein), Allen’s retrieval of the sound studio recording done at Harvard in 1941 and the LP issued several years later honors the sound archive’s place in reading a poet’s work. Further, Allen analyzes the “performance script” as a “new way” to “appraise the sound event of ‘Spenser’s Ireland’.” Replicated in the essay, this script shows the poem with Moore’s notes, underlines, stresses, arrows, slashes, and bridging marks. Allen describes the “Breath marks, slurs, inflections, caesuras” that “riddled” the typescript as “elocutionary aides-mémoire, many of which Moore will have gleaned from Packar’s pre-performance tutorial” and instruction on “elocution” (461). He also speculates that Moore’s ideas about the performance of poetry “antedate” this particular instance and seep into prior correspondence (with Bishop, for example) and the speech she gives that afternoon at Harvard.

The essay’s analysis of the performance script promotes nuanced considerations of Moore’s vexed and changing politics about Irish neutrality, particularly in relation to Moore’s early claim to “Celtic” heritage and a notion of “hybrid” nationality evidenced most
clearly in “A Sojourn in the Whale” (1910s). For Allen, the performance script’s “stress points” belie a reading of “lyric nostalgia” regarding Ireland. These visual markings constitute “compositional gestures that are too apt to slip away in the flurry of textual revision” and reveal connections to “a pivotal moment in foreign affairs” that the print page obscures.

This bringing of sound studies to Moore, here and with other recent critics, keenly insists on poetry’s materiality and circulation beyond the printed page and, importantly, focuses attention on affective networks of meaning linking poetry with other spoken discourses. At the same time, interesting questions that customarily haunt archive studies arise here (who has access to the archives? What difference does that make about the production of knowledge?). Including a visual image of the elocution script, the essay expands our access to this archival object and to its layers of connection to more public forms of elocution at the time. The somewhat private moment of the sound studio is made to resonate with political speech in Allen’s capacious attention to a performative Moore, on the page, in the studio, and in the world.