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978-0-521-12021-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry

Edited by Jane Dowson

Excerpt

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## I

JANE DOWSON

## Introduction

The best women's poetry may be still unrecognised if, as I suspect, we have not yet understood how to read it.

(Germaine Greer, 2001)<sup>1</sup>

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, three inter-dependent questions evolved: who are the women poets? What is the persona of the woman poet? What is the aesthetic, that is, the distinctive 'voice', of women's poetry? In this Introduction, I briefly summarise where these concepts have taken scholars, critics and readers; I then attend to Greer's above challenge that Alice Entwistle and I cited in the Afterword to *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (2005) and that stimulates this volume: how do we talk meaningfully about poetry by women? In other words, how do we find a vocabulary that can distinguish and evaluate, that frames illuminating connections between poets and that neither ignores gender nor reduces a poem to merely a gendered artefact? How do we conserve the century's canons of poets, not simply by a roll-call of names but by identifiable practices that do not just *keep* pace with but also *set* the pace for critical and literary studies? The approaches that follow pertain to the selected poets in each chapter and are transferable to their predecessors, contemporaries and successors across national boundaries.

Since around 1980, revisionary scholarship and publishing have unearthed the forgotten, reread the neglected and reclassified the misrepresented writers of previous centuries. There is now a firm sense of a line of women poets stretching from Sappho to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> With lists of over one hundred female British and Irish poets, the emerging narratives of the twentieth century are beginning to crystallise through poetry collections and critical overviews. Fleur Adcock's *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (1987) whet readers' appetites for the British and American writers she introduced, and has been followed by Deryn Rees-Jones' extensive and refreshing selection in *Modern Women Poets* (2005). As listed under 'Selected Reading' at the end of this *Companion*, other anthologies have a broader or narrower timespan ('Contemporary', 'New', 'the 1930s' or 'War'), or are confined by sexual/biological identity (such as lesbian or motherhood) or nationality (Indian,

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African, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, black) and women have been well represented in the anthologies of the century that were published around the millennium.

One consensus finds the distinctive 'voice' inextricably wrought from the cultural ideologies of gender with which the poet negotiated. Thus, as in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, edited by Christianson and Lumsden (2000), or DeCaires Narain's *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry* (2001), the aesthetic is primarily conceived through a writer's specifically female experience of her national/racial identity. The other branch of criticism foregrounds writers' circumventions of the devaluing epithets 'poetess' at the start and 'woman poet' at the end of the century. As I concluded in *Women, Modernism and British Poetry: Resisting Femininity* (1992), 'the cohering aesthetic is in women's problematic relationship with both male and female traditions'.<sup>3</sup> The necessary cultural empowerment and imaginative liberation achieved by claiming ground both in and out of male-dominant traditions inform the essays in Vicki Bertram's influential *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (1997) that scrutinize poets' reconfigurations of literary conventions. In *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, we mine the best practices that are often discernible by a gender-conscious avoidance of the 'personal', namely androgyny, modernist impersonality, disruptive lyrics and the ventriloquising of social voices. We also draw attention to where poets write boldly in politically creative ways, such as public commentary, linguistically innovative consciousness-raising or combining science with myth. The woman poet's imperative to shrug off cultural idealisations of femininity is taken up by Rees-Jones in *Consorting with Angels* (2005). With reference to Virginia Woolf's famous injunction to 'kill the Angel in the house' and Judith Butler's treatise on gender as a performance of difference,<sup>4</sup> Rees-Jones showcases how women poets, from Edith Sitwell to Jo Shapcott, mask or meddle with reductive essentialising assumptions about the poet as subject, through such performative strategies as the dramatic monologue, multivocality, surrealism and intertextuality. In *Poetry off the Page: Twentieth-century British Women Poets in Performance* (2004), Laura Severin traces theatrical devices that unsettle a page/stage divide and that contiguously deconstruct gender prescriptions, by pairing Charlotte Mew with Anna Wickham, Sitwell with Stevie Smith, and Liz Lochhead with Jackie Kay. In *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary Women and Men Poets* (2004) Bertram's interrogation of masculinity alongside femininity and men along with women poets signals what Susan Stanford Friedman coins as the shift from 'binarist ways of thinking' to a unifying

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'geopolitics of identity' that allows for differences to be multivalent, global and contextually specific.<sup>5</sup>

As the millennium recedes, we view the previous century with increasing distance and clarity, through the lenses of accelerating globalisation, the collapsing distinction between private and public spheres and the confused terminology of 'post everything'. With the twenty-first century's drive for both innovation and recycling, the labels post-feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism and post-nationalism are neither dispensed with nor simply preserved as fixed entities, moments or movements. We maintain their usefulness for rebranding concepts in order to destabilise binary polarities of gender, culture and race. The following chapters were written in a zone where the materiality of libraries, hardcopy books, desks, chairs and computers merge with the virtual reality of the World Wide Web. Not surprisingly, they exhibit contemporary discourses about borderlands that maintain and cross boundaries. Thus we revive or hyphenate existing categories and propose new ones, such as 'interculturalism', 'mid-Atlantic imagination', 'new confessionalism' or 'post-pastoral'.

Recognising that contextual signification is crucial to poets' literary practice and reception, the chapters are loosely arranged in order of the century's major poetic categories: Modernism, the world wars, the Movement and multiculturalism. We show that women poets are not 'also-ran' to these dominant trends but participants who establish and pioneers who change literary terrains. Within the chapters, however, we link political impulses and stylistic features across strict historical periods in order to consolidate alternative models of poetic practice that run through the decades. Similarly, while respecting the delineations of national identity (most obviously British and Irish), the contributors foreground poets' self-conscious textual activities that extend and sometimes unsettle critical orthodoxies. Collectively, the chapters converse about lyric, narrative and dramatic representations in terms that frequently centre female poetic expression yet dislodge binary conceptions of male and female creativity. Friedman charts this 'both/and' dialogue of differences as 'beyond gender', meaning beyond 'fundamentalist identity politics and absolutist poststructuralist theories as they pose essentialist notions of identity on the one hand and refuse all cultural traffic with identity on the other'.<sup>6</sup> The frames of interpretation that follow correspondingly set up discursive spaces that overlay and dissolve such oppositional binaries as the verbal and visual, seriousness and play, nature and culture, war and peace, the local and global.

Whereas in *Kicking Daffodils* critics notice how women use their position outside the tradition to kick at the male prerogative in a metaphor that

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indicates restriction, anger, playfulness and freedom, the emphasis in these chapters is on women's flexible strategies that weave the established with the radical. They frequently write about the tradition as if it is theirs to manoeuvre. William May moves towards paradigms of women's ekphrastic poetry that not only deal with the painterly tradition of men objectifying and fixing their female subjects but also with the poets who control the artistic practice itself, as illustrated in Alexander Pope's 'Epistle to a Lady' or Shelley's 'On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci'. Stevie Smith, Lynette Roberts and Liz Lochhead, all artists as well as poets, boldly manipulate and tease the similarities and differences between 'this sketch' and 'a simile'. In Alice Entwistle's discussion of 'Post-pastoral perspectives', poets as various as Anne Stevenson, Gillian Clarke and Eavan Boland evoke and bypass the conventions of pastoral and anti-pastoral in ways that also disrupt the binary opposition of a feminised nature and a plundering masculine culture. Poets across the British Isles, such as Kerry Hardie, Moya Cannon, Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie and Zoë Skoulding, respond to the political devolution of the United Kingdom. The boundaries between landscape and culture are supplanted by what Terry Gifford calls a more holistic 'vision of the natural world that includes the human'.<sup>7</sup>

Friedman's 'geopolitics of identity' accounts for the multicultural, international and transnational configurations of race and gender that Lee M. Jenkins explores. Whereas postcolonial theories, along the continuum between 'writing back' and transnationalism, have embedded race-based critical approaches, 'interculturalism' opens up a border zone where, as Gloria Anzaldúa suggests, everyone lives.<sup>8</sup> We find Imtiaz Dharker, Patience Agbabi, Jackie Kay and contemporary Irish poets engaging with differences within and connections across cultures; collectively, they indicate that feelings of displacement are a shared condition. Agbabi's sonnet about meeting with Wordsworth on the London Eye exemplifies their skilful manipulations of literary traditions that explode monolithic notions of canonical heritage. As demonstrated here, poets who are born or settled in Britain and Ireland are included in our canon of writers.

Extending Homi Bhabha's yearning for a 'third space of enunciation',<sup>9</sup> Anglo-American women poets also traverse rigid demarcations of nationality and the attendant polarities of formal traditionalism and experimentalism. In their 'mid-Atlantic imagination' poets who migrated between Britain and the United States harmonised the preoccupying disjunctions of being somewhere and nowhere; such a psychological liminality can describe the itinerant lives of poets and readers through and beyond the

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century. Combining the feminist poststructuralism of Julia Kristeva with the Marxist philosophy and sociology of Henri Lefebvre, Melanie Petch examines how the poem is an imaginative sphere with a contingent materiality that fosters community; thus it offers the potential to appropriate and change the social spaces in which writers and readers find themselves. In chapter 5, 'Towards a new confessionalism', connections between Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Jennings bridge American enthusiasm and British disdain regarding the 'confessional'. As Isobel Armstrong observes in *The Radical Aesthetic*, psychoanalysis had become the 'primary discourse of emotions this [the twentieth] century' and is the obvious discourse for the poets' reworkings of mental illness.<sup>10</sup> I prefer Jung's insistence on reading symbols as signs of a *poetic* consciousness to Freudian assumptions about the authors' psychological neuroses. Moving from the benchmark of 'authenticity' presumed and demanded by social practices of confession, I stress how the poetic act self-consciously marks and compensates for what cannot be fully spoken.

When it comes to history, women are agents against reductive orthodoxies: they intervene in the record-making that has too easily been biased by male and/or nationalist agendas. In an invigorating rebuttal of imperial narratives about the two world wars as mere punctuation marks in twentieth-century British history, Claire Buck favours Paul Virilio's theory that the threat of violence infiltrates the consciousness of daily life at all times. With an instructive overview of publications and their critical reception, she details how women's poems present the integration and interaction of peace and war, of the domestic space and war zones. Starting with Edith Sitwell's *The Song of the Cold* (1948) about atomic bombing and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Opus 7* (1931) (modelled on George Crabbe's anti-pastoral), she assembles a huge number of poets who include Denise Levertov, Heather Buck, Smith, Plath, Nancy Cunard, Ada Jackson, Roberts, Sheila Wingfield, H.D. and Mina Loy. In common, they often recast the elegy and other conventional forms to make personal experience a public matter. Tackling the Irish history wars, Catriona Clutterbuck argues that women face how history is mediated; furthermore, they are instrumental in hinging the crude and inflammatory polarisations between revisionism and counter-revisionism. Her probing readings of Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin can apply to the many other poets they represent who 'challenge[s] the categorisation of women's history and national history as automatically at odds'.

The emanating power and pleasure of poetic language keep the reader and critic alert to what poetry can offer that other artistic forms do not. The French feminists' theory of 'écriture féminine', the semiotic ruptures of

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symbolic language, is problematic for essentialising female writing but enlightens the innate function of poetic expression:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine [poetic] practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.<sup>11</sup>

As indicated in my parenthesis, we could substitute 'feminine' with 'poetic'. Thus it makes sense to suppose that in writing poetry women especially address and transgress available means of expression. So we look for shifting pronouns, customised metaphors and defamiliarising syntax that configure not one 'voice' but the self-reflexive processes of speaking. In chapter 2, 'Post/Modernist rhythms and voices', Ian Gregson foregrounds sound effects that 'evoke a self-consciously problematic sense of a speaking voice' and disrupt routine patterns of meaning, with reference to Kristeva's emphasis on the interplay between semiotic rhythms within language that approximate to pre-linguistic sound effects: 'Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation, it is musical, anterior to judgement.'<sup>12</sup> The feminine self-parodying of Sitwell and Smith, manifest in deceptive ingenuousness and confrontational satire, mocks masculine assumptions about its own rational authority and prepares the ground for the frolicking carnivalesque ironies of Jo Shapcott and Selima Hill at the end of the century. Read thus, the poets link to the caricatural methods of painters such as Hogarth and writers from Dryden to Dickens; they also dialogue with each other as identifiably postmodern practices. With a glance at earlier models of experimentalism, by Warner, Mew or Laura Riding, Linda A. Kinnahan celebrates the feminist politics of language innovation in the 1970s, arguing for women's influence on all British experimental poetry in that period and after. Wendy Mulford's deconstructive lyrics, explicitly influenced by the theories of Lacan, Cixous, Irigaray, Derrida and Foucault, were accompanied by Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Denise Riley and then followed by Caroline Bergvall.

Several chapters step into the twenty-first century where the zeitgeist and poetic birth pangs at the end of the twentieth are more visible. Brian Caraher finishes the *Companion* with an account of how Carol Ann Duffy and Medbh McGuckian rupture the poetic line, meaning literally the metres, metaphors and idioms of poetic orthodoxies as well as the genealogy of poetic traditions. These poets' literary revisions and transgressions, such as Duffy's appropriations of Shakespeare's dramatic verse or McGuckian's regendering of war's 'front line', refresh received poetic

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expression to comment on the states of contemporary Britain and Ireland and set up new linguistic moulds for posterity to recast.

As Caraher's detailed readings demonstrate, one prevalent poetic device that women favour is the conversational construction and examination of dialogue. Dialogue, mostly internal, avoids the fixed lyric subject, negotiates between private and public spaces and allows for a sense of self-in-relation through what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'hidden dialogicality': 'The second speaker is present invisibly, his [*sic*] words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker.'<sup>13</sup> Two or more voices reinforce, counter or expose social and personal power relations, as Duffy, renowned for her 'thrown voices', provocatively constructs in 'The Dummy', where a stooge answers back to his/her ventriloquist: 'Just teach me / the right words.'<sup>14</sup>

All the chapters remind us that every poem is arguably in dialogue with literary tradition and implicitly with the reader. Duffy is also an exponent of the way in which poetry semiotically carves a distinct world of its own – love is 'not there, except in a poem' – yet poetry also urges us to let it transform how we live: 'Away and see the things that words give a name to.'<sup>15</sup> Such maintenance of the distinction yet interaction between life and art is emblematic of this *Companion's* approach to poetry that does not deny differences – whether stylistic, cultural or historical – but finds meeting points, crossings and crossovers that launch new evaluative ways to talk about them.

## Notes

- 1 Germaine Greer, 'To the reader', in *101 Poems by 101 Women* (London: Faber, 2001), p. ix.
- 2 See Robyn Boland (ed.), *Eliza's Babes: Four Centuries of Women's Poetry in English, c. 1500–1900* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005) or R.E. Pritchard (ed.), *Poetry By English Women* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990).
- 3 Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry 1910–39: Resisting Femininity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002), p. viii.
- 4 Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for women', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Harcourt Inc., 1942) delivered as a lecture in 1931; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; London: Routledge, 1999).
- 5 Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 147.
- 8 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987; San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

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- 9 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 37.
- 10 Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 18.
- 11 Hélène Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1. 4 (1976), 875–93.
- 12 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 26.
- 13 Mikhail Bakhtin (1963), in Pam Morris (ed.), *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 108. For a full exposition, see Ian Gregson, *Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).
- 14 Carol Ann Duffy, 'The Dummy', in *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 36.
- 15 Carol Ann Duffy, 'Love Poem', in *Rapture* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 59; 'Away and See', in *Mean Time* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1993), p. 23. For discussion of Duffy's line between the expression and deconstruction of meaning see Stan Smith, 'The things that words give a name to: the "New Generation" poets and the politics of the hyperreal', *Critical Survey* 8. 3 (1996), 306–22.



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## Post/Modernist rhythms and voices: Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith to Jo Shapcott and Selima Hill

There is a strand of twentieth-century women's poetry that foregrounds sounds and rhythms and uses them to evoke a self-consciously problematic sense of a speaking voice. Michael Schmidt emphasises the structural importance of rhythm for both Edith Sitwell (1887–1964) and Stevie Smith (1902–71),<sup>1</sup> and quotes Sitwell as saying that rhythm is 'one of the principal translators between dream and reality', and that the *Facade* poems are 'patterns of sound'.<sup>2</sup> He says that the 'most striking characteristic' of Stevie Smith's work 'is the rhythm, a speech rhythm slipping naturally into metre and out again, a rhythm so strong that it overrides considerations of syntax and punctuation and – in releasing language from its formal structures – finds new forms, new tones'.<sup>3</sup> Sitwell helped to initiate a female tradition in which poetic sound and rhythm are privileged and so wielded as to disrupt routine patterns of meaning. Smith continued in this vein and extended a caricatural tendency already present in Sitwell but pushed further, in combination with Smith's discordant music and a deceptive ingenuousness, to achieve a confrontational satire which at times is self-consciously childish. The experimental heightening of poetic sound, in these earlier writers, combined with their use of the playful yet angry and even contemptuous imagery of caricature, has influenced more recent poets in the creation of an identifiably feminine postmodernism. The silliness and shrillness of the music of Sitwell and Smith – which turns feminine self-parody into satire of masculine assumptions of its own rational authority, and derisive questioning of masculine dismissiveness towards what it regards as feminine inchoateness – prepares the way for the dancing and demented cows of Jo Shapcott (b. 1953) and Selima Hill (b. 1945), the uproarious sing-song of their flaky carnival.

The best way to achieve a more general understanding of this strand of women's poetry is by reference to Julia Kristeva's distinction between the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic' and her emphasis on the importance of the latter in poetic language, which is thereby infiltrated by the pre-linguistic.

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She illustrates it, in particular, by reference to avant-garde poets such as Mallarmé and Lautréamont. Her linked idea of the 'chora' 'precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm'. So she refers to the 'semiotic rhythm within language':

Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation, it is musical, anterior to judgement.<sup>4</sup>

The semiotic can never exist separately from the symbolic, but only in interaction with it: it can never be fully retrieved, but its traces persist and disrupt the patriarchal and legal order of the symbolic. Some feminists, such as Jacqueline Rose,<sup>5</sup> have complained that the theory is essentialist, but the complaint arises from a false emphasis on the 'priority' of the semiotic when the semiotic and the symbolic must above all be understood as in dialogue with each other.<sup>6</sup> It is this point which also suggests why the semiotic can be usefully applied to modern British poetry. Kristeva's theory already privileges poetry as the key cultural site of the semiotic, but its emphasis on the dialogic further indicates why it is an appropriate theoretical model for explaining a recent tradition which is thoroughly polyphonic and novelised, and whose devices include nursery and nonsense rhymes, deliberately prosaic and bathetically flat-footed rhythms, incongruously mingled registers, *faux-naïve* onomatopoeia and verbal/visual cartoon.

### Edith Sitwell: the semiotic and the caricatural tradition

The paradox of the semiotic is that it describes a language that self-consciously evokes the unselfconsciously pre-linguistic, which articulates the inarticulate and the bodily. For this reason it constructs an expression in which signifiers float free from the signified, in which the purely physical nature of the sign is allowed a life of its own. Few poets, in their poetic practice, have made sound effects as prominent as Edith Sitwell. In the opening six lines of 'Hornpipe', for example, which are very short, she rhymes 'come', 'drum', 'dumb' and 'glum', and then in the seventh, which is the first long line, she rhymes internally on 'courses', 'horses' and 'Glaucis'.<sup>7</sup> And few poets, in their accounts of their writing, have focused as extensively upon the free-floating signifier, and especially upon the sound of poetry, as Sitwell, whose 'Some notes on my poetry' gives the impression that rhythm, rhyme and assonance are the most shaping motive forces behind her composition.<sup>8</sup> This obsessiveness leads to her associating linguistic sounds with emotional states, as when she analyses 'The Bat', from *Facade*: