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978-0-521-12141-5 - A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry

Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

'There aren't enough models of women writing poetry, so when we encounter the tradition we have to find a way to completely engage with what's gone before, a way to possess it.'

(Jo Shapcott, 2000)¹

The chief impetus for this book has been to consolidate a sense of a separate 'tradition' unavailable to most twentieth-century British women poets: as Jo Shapcott suggests, the scarcity of positive female models both results from and conspires in women's uncertain relation to 'English' poetic history. Exploring how the cultural and socio-political circumstances of women's lives intersect with both their literary works and their critical reception, feminist critics before us have done much to explain how and why women's writing has been undervalued in the annals of literary history. Yet the twentieth-century British woman poet's struggle to stake a claim on the poetic map – against obstacles often highly specific to her literary profession – has never been properly contextualised.

In her introduction to *The World Split Open: Women's Poetry 1552–1950* (1979), Louise Bernikow remarks: 'The woman poet constantly pits herself against cultural expectations of "womanhood" and "women's writing"'.² In negotiating with (in Shapcott's words) 'what's gone before', British women poets have similarly been forced to work against both social and poetic grains. What often emerges in their work, especially in the early decades of the century, is a curious split between the strong egalitarian impulses manifest in their social action or private and non-fiction writing, and the self-concealment or self-dramatisation staged in their poetry. Partly for this reason, the gender-consciousness discernible in both familiar and lesser-known 'names' demands distinct critical frameworks.

Throughout the century, women write and publish poetry without critical recognition, hampered by the double bind which mocks them for

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writing poetry as themselves, but castigates them for challenging their male counterparts on their own terms. Invariably, they end up torn between the political and cultural benefits of a gender-identification in which they find company and context, and portmanteau labels which threaten to obscure and devalue their variousness. Lady Margaret Sackville's Introduction to *A Book of Verse by Living Women* (1910) provides an early account of the dilemma. Looking back to the predecessors she most admires, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Proctor and Michael Field, Sackville considers how their work and status relates to her own: 'It is not a question of intellectual values – probably in this respect the women writers of then and now are equals – it is a question of the influences which have gone to the making of their work . . . women are not yet by any means quite free from the old (for poetry) disastrous influences . . . There is still in this country a perhaps healthy tendency to snub women for doing things because they are women.'³ In 'Woman and Artist', Anna Wickham dismantles the debate poetically:

If a woman is to be an expressor
And avoid most desperate confusion,
She, more than any, must compass Soul's exclusion.
There's no excuse for expression from a woman
Unless she be a representative human.

If an artist must suppress sex too much is lost;
The product, thought, is purchased at too high a cost.
The singer must stand proud alone
And claim a little eminence that is her own.

Yet woman will confuse and vex
If she is dominant in things of sex.
The intellectual hermaphrodite
Must stand unified and subject for delight.

In this there is great strain
And sore irreconcilables for one poor brain.⁴

With hindsight, Wickham's separatism is unusual; more poets resist an identification which, in harnessing craft to gender, seems to compromise rather than confirm the individuality on which their professionalism insists. In an article 'Some Observations on Women's Poetry' in 1925, Edith Sitwell reveals how acutely she felt the absence of helpful models when it came to finding the right form. She attempts to work through the difficulties of not identifying with the conventions associated with either masculine or supposedly feminine lines of poetry: 'Women poets will do

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best if they realise that male technique is not suitable to them. No woman writing in the English language has ever written a great sonnet, no woman has ever written great blank verse. Then again, speaking generally, as we cannot dispense with our rules, so we find free verse difficult.⁵ At the end of the century, Carol Rumens admits to a similar dilemma about women's appropriation of traditional forms, 'asking, each time I gave birth to a sonnet, "Is it a boy?"' ('A Bookshop Revisited').⁶ Ironically, she both maintains and mimics the debilitating preoccupation with whether to disguise or proclaim a gendered perspective:

Women are often glad to be one of the crowd
And not special cases.
But some would argue there's still a place for proud
Self-proclaimed poetesses.
...
Poet or poetess, we've surely known times
We sat up all night
In our Yeatsian masks, like good little androgynes,
And couldn't write.

The polished poem of course answers the concluding self-deprecation. This parodic repudiation of Kingsley Amis's 'A Bookshop Idyll' and John Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' cleverly claims a creative territory which mediates between male-associated literary paradigms and female experience. In 1998 Rumens speaks for many in deconstructing, rather than explicitly denying, the gendering of poetic difference: 'Sometimes it doesn't worry me; sometimes I think perhaps I'm writing differently because I'm a woman, so I'm a woman poet – but so what? I'm also writing differently from any other poet, so it's not a very meaningful description.'⁷ However, as Rumens, Sitwell and Wickham prove, the psychological and emotional tension involved in the persona of the 'woman poet' energises the imaginative and linguistic fabric of their compositions. Jane Holland's 'Pulse' signals the gender-negotiation and pluralism we emphasise: 'I'm not a woman poet./ I'm a woman and a poet./ The difference is in the eyes.' In the 'difference' on which Holland puns, the female 'eye'/'I' overwrites the disempowering effect of the male gaze traditionally inscribed in lyric poetry. Jackie Kay enforces the point: 'What [women poets] need is to be able to come together on the basis of our differences and not on the basis of our similarities.'⁸

The dynamic of 'difference' has much to do with our decision to include non-British poets who have settled, or have simply been published, in Britain, and whose work can be shown to have particular resonance in their

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contemporary literary-critical environment. Above all, this has enabled us to register the ways in which women's poetry contributes to the porosity and pluralism of twentieth-century so-called 'British' culture. For example, while the premise of the book has partly been to spotlight a company of writers overshadowed by their American contemporaries in critical discourse, nevertheless the richness of British/American cross-currencies and dialogues down the century is implicitly recognised throughout. We therefore integrate the prominent Anglo-Americans H.D., Laura Riding, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath and Anne Stevenson whose critical coverage in Britain often seems arbitrarily patchy. In this context, the still-compelling figure of Plath (whose posthumous lionisation, though suggestive of establishment support for women's poetry, deflects critical attention from a generation of deserving names and has arguably done Plath herself few favours) remains one among many. After the Second World War, the dynamics of cultural duality became increasingly relevant for the many black and Asian-British women poets. Along with their Welsh and Scottish counterparts, their opportunities for publishing in Britain noticeably opened up from the early 1980s. Towards the end of the century, the example of the Irish poets (Northern and Southern) who negotiate confidently with their complex literary history particularly infiltrates the British literary consciousness.⁹ Although several poets can be positioned across crude social, as well as national, boundaries, Ethel Carnie at the beginning and Elizabeth Bartlett towards the end of the century are regrettably rare in their working-class origins.

The book's structure is designed to provide a comprehensive and evaluative critical record while orienting the more significant figures in relation both to each other and to the developments of British poetry. The Chronology emphasises how debates and legislation about gender equality characterise the century's social history and impact on its cultural forms. We indicate some of women's literary initiatives and include a suggestive, if far from exhaustive, register of formal awards. This gesture is not without the uneasy recognition that conservative literary establishments may prefer the innocuous and linguistically claustrophobic woman like Stevie Smith's 'Miss Snooks', who 'went on being awfully nice/And took a lot of prizes'.¹⁰ To date, no woman has been offered the double-edged honour of Poet Laureate, although nominees and serious contenders have included Alice Meynell, Vita Sackville-West, Kathleen Raine and more recently Carol Ann Duffy. In an array of less controversial initiatives over the decades, women involved themselves energetically in publishing, setting up presses and literary magazines. From the Second World War on, increasing

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numbers edited anthologies, while most of the leading postwar names (Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Jennings, Patricia Beer, Anne Stevenson, Fleur Adcock, Carol Rumens, Gillian Clarke, Ruth Padel, Jo Shapcott, Deryn Rees-Jones, Kate Clanchy and Sheenagh Pugh, to name a broad cross-section) worked as reviewers and/or columnists on a range of mainstream and specialised publications. In the closing decades of the century, women poets became much more visible on an expanding circuit of literary festivals, competition panels and creative writing courses.

Our three chronological sections (1900–45, 1945–80, 1980–2000) can be identified with three major developments in the history of twentieth-century British poetry (modernism, the postwar Movement and postmodernism) and the three so-called waves of the women's movement (suffragism, Women's Liberation and 'power' feminism). Organised under loosely periodised headings, each part's Overview records and reviews the names which largely, but not exclusively, appeared in leading periodicals, key anthologies or other literary records. At the same time, we have necessarily reassessed existing or neglected critical treatments. We briefly indicate and suggest ways in which the chief figures positioned themselves in relation to the broader canonical norms inscribed in the mainstreams of British poetry.

Typically, we foreground the generative potential of women's poetic practice by drawing attention to works which investigate conventional poetic attitudes or vocabularies. Inevitably, there are many writers and works deserving of more consideration than we have been able to give.¹¹ The works we discuss can be cross-referenced against the List of Published Works (included at the end) which details the publishing records of almost all the writers mentioned. Dwelling on the major poets, the chapters explore the more period-specific issues or themes noted in each of the three introductions. Groupings are connected by literary or public context, such as modernism or war, by culturally relevant concerns, stretching from 'home' to social or sexual politics, or by practice, notably the ironic manipulation of voice in the dramatic monologue. Finally, the treatment of the lyric is returned to throughout.

If it is not possible to trace a neatly linear developmental path by women poets as a collective, we can, however, detect a shift from a limiting wariness of female affiliation at the turn of the century to the welcome sense of role models at the end. The four chapters of Part I circle and are inflected by the poets' deep-seated suspicion of a gendered voice. In quite distinct ways, some of the outstanding figures – Alice Meynell, Charlotte Mew and Sylvia Townsend Warner – move between ungendered pronouns

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and more woman-centred explorations of female psychology and experience. Highly gender-aware in their personal and critical documents, Mina Loy and Edith Sitwell only appear to evade the issue altogether by sinking their energies into a radical literary prospectus. Anna Wickham's subversion of modernism is highly expressive and dramatic, most happily in rhyming free-verse monologues. In Part II, war having served to sharpen debates about gender-relations, the tensions between women's enlarging public lives and unchanging private commitments are betrayed in their ambivalent treatment of domesticity and motherhood. Other poets' growing political purpose is manifest in the consciousness-raising feminist protests of the 1970s but the linguistically progressive work of a new avant-garde, represented by Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley, proves a more stimulatingly transgressive strand of activity. Stevie Smith, the only poet who has a chapter of her own, is a conduit between modernist and postmodernist principles of representation. Her crafty interplay between parody and pastiche draws attention to the socially loaded language of expression while the human drama of her poems insists upon the poet's role as cultural commentator. Notoriously unclassifiable, she exemplifies the ways in which women oscillate between high culture and their experiences; how they muddle or dispense with the oppositions between spoken and literary language; how they interrogate and revise stereotyping cultural myths.

Along with the Irish-born, English-educated Eavan Boland, Carol Ann Duffy is the major poet of Part III. In the century's last two decades, grouping the still-emerging number of published poets across four generations and diverse cultural locations has to be provisional and flexible. The complex interrelation of language, identity and 'place' helps to animate daring negotiations between expressive and closed linguistic strategies. Women most often participate poetically in the postmodern multiplicity of contemporary life, which takes them from global warfare to family breakdown, with dramatisation, dialogic personal testimony and ingeniously defamiliarising metaphors. The chapters appraise their restive use of voices and imagination; these voices present and exchange differing cultural perspectives in the colloquial, the vernacular and dialect. Distinctively in this period, many incorporate and scrutinise the dynamic vocabularies and forms of science, new technologies and media. Like the book's cover illustration, the final chapter on the 'renovated lyric' registers the freedom of women to articulate a pluralised, connected, but not fixed, female first person pronoun.

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PART I 1900–45

Overview

INTRODUCTION

During the first half of the twentieth century, two world wars, the culmination of women's suffrage in the vote and the widening of both literary and mass cultures reshape ideas about what it means to be masculine and feminine along with what it means to be British. In the early decades, one striking aspect of women's poetry is the disparity between the transformations concerning women's rights and the self-concealment in many poems. Stifled by iconographies of the 'poetess', diverse poets negotiate with the dual demands to write as distinctly 'Woman' while avoiding implications of the 'personal'. In order to win acceptance from male literary individuals and institutions, on whom they depend for publication and esteem, they frequently avoid gender identification by means of initials or pseudonyms and indeterminate pronouns. Avoiding charges of 'sentimentality', they prove their intellectual muscle with rigorous prosodic principles associated with the high literary forms of 'masculine' writing. As the century progresses, however, women with economic independence become producers of poetry, initiating printing presses, bookshops and literary journals. They write and deliver talks on literary criticism. They edit anthologies, pioneer poetry broadcasts, give readings and win prizes. Steadily, but not uniformly, women develop a more self-assertive colloquial voice, frequently through dramatised monologues and dialogues. They enforce the modernist concept of the 'persona', the masked identity of the poet on the page, in their dramatisations of male and female identities and relations. An outstanding few centralise women in their poems; they confront stereotyped femininity head on with parodic imitations and subversions. Drawing on the new terminology for exploring the unconscious, the boldest poets are distinctly twentieth-century in their depictions of complex female psychology.

Poetry by women both holds its own in and unsettles the terms of orthodox literary categories. This Introduction is organised chronologically

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to provide some notion of development in relation to women's literary negotiations with social imperatives. The three parts, 1900–15, 1916–29, 1930–45, accommodate the common stylistic classifications of Edwardian, Georgian, modernist, and 1930s 'movements' along with poetry of the two world wars. However, the stylistic and ideological associations of these groups are never straightforward. As for historical delineations, modernist practices can be taken back to at least 1910 with the Post-Impressionist exhibition or to the start of Imagism in 1912 and then forward into the 1930s and even the 1940s. Also, individual poets, most notably Edith Sitwell, cut across crude time delineations. What does come through in the anthology introductions, as in the burgeoning literary criticism of this period, is the sense of poetry's capacity to accelerate or counter cultural change. Camilla Doyle's 'The General Shop' poem encapsulates the kind of widely read poetry printed in conservative papers and popular anthologies: 'Yet smart new stores are dull compared/To this which always stays the same.'¹ This kind of 'general-shop' poem is relegated for the very reason that it leaves things unchanged.

If canons are largely set by contemporary anthologies and reinforced by subsequent ones, the period's leading poets are: Alice Meynell (1847–1922), Charlotte Mew (1869–1928), Anna Wickham (1884–1947), Frances Cornford (1886–1960), Edith Sitwell (1887–1964), Dorothy Wellesley (1889–1956), Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962), Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978), Lilian Bowes Lyon (1895–1949), Ruth Pitter (1897–1992), Stevie Smith (1902–71), Kathleen Raine (1908–2003) and Anne Ridler (1912–2001). Retrospective literary criticism, such as it is, tends to concentrate on Smith, Mew and the native Americans Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), H. D. (1886–1961), Marianne Moore (1887–1972), Edna St Vincent Millay (1892–1950) and Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901–91). Notable among the overlooked poets are Margaret Sackville (1881–1963), Muriel Stuart (1885–1967), Elizabeth Daryush (1887–1977), Nancy Cunard (1896–1965), Mina Loy (1882–1966), Lynette Roberts (1909–95) and Sheila Wingfield (1906–95).

1900–15

The death of Queen Victoria and accession of King Edward VII in 1901, along with uncertainty about the effects of the new sciences and industrialisation created mixed moods of nostalgia, optimism and apprehension. The death of Edward in 1910 was followed by the reign of George V, which was overhung by the Great War (1914–18). This war, along with the influence

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of America through film, the radio and magazines, the impact of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud when their translations became available, the first wave of feminism, the development of literary criticism and an increasingly literate public effected cultural transformations, particularly in relation to the concepts of nationalism and gender.² Inevitably, these transformations were accompanied by reactionary backlashes, especially against women's emancipation. Theories of innate sex difference, which continued to be validated by medical and scientific discourses, collided with literary women's preoccupation with the social and creative constructions of masculine and feminine natures and functions.

Looking back, W. B. Yeats saw 1900 as the year when poets got 'off their stilts'.³ High diction was discarded in preference for colloquial idioms, albeit metrically regular and rhyming. While much poetry was formally conventional, whether based on classical forms or the more democratic ballad and narrative, the creeping vocabulary of psychoanalysis made way for the controversial *vers libre* and informed other modernist disruptions of linear syntax and narrative. The reaction against tenacious traditionalism was also manifested in the small but significant progressive groups of Vorticists, the English version of the Italian Futurists, who circulated their ideas and art in *Blast* (1914–15), and the Eiffel Tower group, who from 1909 met weekly in a Soho restaurant of that name. The newly literate public extended the market for books but inflamed concern about the erosion of literary standards. Advances in literacy were aided by increasing public libraries and printing. Literary papers shared a concern to safeguard value and taste from contamination by mass culture.⁴ The *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) was the major voice and particularly influential in establishing an atmosphere of the male club; it excluded women not only from its echelon but also from 'Poetry' by feminising their writing. The Poetry Society's *Poetry Review*, which started in January 1912, was also proudly reactionary and had a wide international readership.

Intellectual women who developed alongside suffragism more often than not stifled any directly personal perspective in their poetry, especially in the first fifteen years of the century when the concept and activity of emancipation was at its most intense. Some were active in the cause of equal rights or expressed their opinions in correspondence and journalism. Their participation in literary production also registers their emerging psychological, sexual and economic independence.⁵ In June 1908 the Women Writers Suffrage League began and supported various suffrage journals. The literary paper *Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review* (1911–12), which became *The New Freewoman* (1913–14), circulated and strengthened

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women's resistance to universalising prescriptions about their nature and role. From 1914 *The New Freewoman* became *The Egoist*, subtitled 'an individual review', which was outspoken on issues such as women's sexual needs or how to be unmarried and happy.⁶ Its stated aim, 'Our war is with words in every aspect: grammar, accident, syntax', indicates the editors' recognition of the interdependence of remoulding literary conventions and achieving social liberation.⁷

Contradicting women's longed-for social equality, poets, editors and critics relentlessly enforced binary divides between male and female character and creativity. In a special edition of *Poetry Review* on 'Women-Poets', May 1912, the editor contrasted women's activities for emancipation in law with the essentialised female nature which was the substance of much traditional poetry:

It is a truism that the great poet is neither man nor woman, but partially each. He has represented Woman so adequately in poetry that there seemed scarcely any call for her to represent herself. Now at last, however, some change is taking place. Woman, late though it be, is becoming conscious of herself. Her awakening begins in a startled blinking of her eyes, an exclamation: 'What am I?' It proceeds in the helpless call: 'I am no worse than Man. I am no longer his slave'; then she throws up wild arms, and smashes windows. This is lively, but it is not logical; her call is 'I am a woman': she must reveal that she is Woman indeed. In the poetess, perhaps, chiefly, this revelation is becoming apparent. It begins with Christina Rossetti, and it continues to-day in many graceful lyrics of motherhood; charmingly turned, rare and intimate expressions of quiet thought, strength and courage. Despite all emancipation, Woman still lives in a garden and we must receive her verses gift-wise, as we might some fine broiery. She will play with a fancy as lovingly as with a child; she enjoys delicacy in her verse, and soft light shades: she loves especially a gentle hopefulness. Her poetry is the expression of personal moods, or of the mystical and apparently supernatural: it is remarkable how seldom she may be reckoned a whole poet.⁸

This lengthy extract indicates the acute gender consciousness initiated and maintained by the critics, even though, as here, they may seem to argue for artistic androgyny. The parodic portrayal of wildly smashing windows cunningly opposes both logic and a 'natural' womanhood which is rooted in the privacy of home, not the public domain. The universalising capitalisation of 'Woman' and the connection with her nineteenth-century predecessors homogenises women's poetry by the idealised qualities of gentleness and modesty. The editor is probably Harold Monro who in fact was a champion of women poets.⁹ In this article he identifies the need to distinguish the literary poets from the 'delicate' feminine conformists who were the most readily published and promoted precisely because they