

AN  
ANTHOLOGY  
OF POETRY  
BY WOMEN

*Tracing the Tradition*

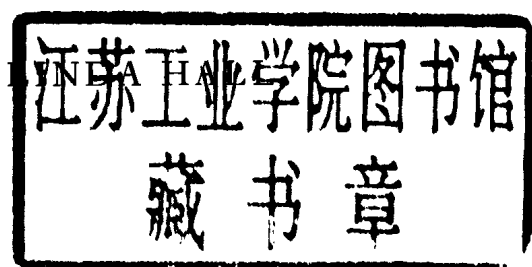
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*Linda Hall*

*An Anthology of  
Poetry by Women*



TRACING THE TRADITION



CASELL

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## *Introduction*

**T**HE poems in this anthology have been arranged under broad thematic headings. It will soon become clear, however, that many of them transcend such narrow groupings and could have readily been included in more than one section. It is not my intention to impose restrictions on these poems' possible meanings, so readers should feel free to discuss them under whatever heading seems appropriate. The form of a thematic anthology inevitably requires apparently arbitrary decisions to be taken about the placement of individual poems.

Within each broad, thematic section the poems are arranged into groups of two or three which contrast with or complement one another in some way. It is hoped that arranging poems in this way will provoke comment and make discussion easier. Some of the poems are very straightforward and accessible, others are much more demanding. The more challenging the poem, whether by way of unaccustomed style or complexity of meaning, the more comments and questions there are in the introduction to each section to help students make some headway with the poem.

The questions on each poem are not to be taken as part of a comprehension-type approach to poetry. They merely try to provide a 'way in', something to think about, to argue over or disagree with. In other words, they are stimuli for discussion and debate. They are intended to give students a purchase on each poem (especially the more challenging ones) and not to do their thinking for them. Once into a poem, students may go wherever they please. It is helpful, however, to consider factors like language, imagery, attitude, tone, diction, form, etc. and so the questions focus largely on these aspects.

The poems are deliberately drawn from all periods of English literature, including even the very earliest period, that of the Anglo-Saxons (AD 700–1000). They therefore offer clear illustrations of the different stylistic approaches that have prevailed in the writing of poetry in English during the last thousand years, though this was not the primary reason for their inclusion. Teachers may wish to highlight these different styles, awareness of which will help students when reading poetry in other, more conventional, anthologies.

Since the earliest recorded examples, English poetry has been written by women as well as by men, though few anthologies tend to reflect this fact. Even fewer reflect the wealth of material written by women over the centuries, material that has more than just curiosity

value. Women poets have produced some very fine poems which deserve a wider audience than they have received so far. This anthology sets out to make such poetry more widely known, while reminding readers that the few poems included here represent, of necessity, only the tip of the iceberg of women's poetic achievement.

Clearly, some topics, such as being a parent, interest women poets more than their male counterparts. On the other hand, subjects usually thought to be of more interest to men, such as war and death, can and do take on an unexpected slant when they come under a woman's pen. Women, like men, have written on a variety of subjects and in a variety of styles and forms. Women, like men, have written poems that are amusing or moving. They have produced poems that enjoyed immense popularity in the past and poems that capture our imaginations today. As we shall see, women can write poems that are striking for their beauty or their elegance or their strangeness.

This is an anthology of poetry written by women in English, though it is not confined to English women poets. It includes poems by American (both black and white), Canadian and West Indian women. However, translations from cultures other than those that are English-speaking have not been included. This is partly because one of the defining characteristics of poetry is that it cannot be translated without loss. It is also because the book's focus lies in trying to trace English literary, cultural and ideological traditions as they impinged on women in the distant and more recent past. It may be that despite some common themes it is not possible, given the differences of class, race and lived historical moment, to trace an actual tradition of female authorship in the sense of one poet being influenced by, and building on, the work of a female predecessor, though this does begin to emerge in the nineteenth century. I have used the term 'tradition' more modestly, simply to convey the only recently acknowledged fact that women have been writing and publishing poetry for very much longer than most anthologies have led us to believe.

Finally, as there has been a vast amount of poetry to choose from, many fine poems have been omitted simply because space is limited. If readers' own favourites do not appear, it is not that they are not appreciated, but that the rigorous process of selection and omission has resulted in some inevitable omissions. It is hoped, however, that the present selection may surprise readers with new poems by women poets already known, as well as introduce readers to some women poets they have not encountered before. There are certainly some remarkable poems and poets contained within these pages.

## *Love and Passion*

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**L**OVE and passion are such common experiences that it would be very odd indeed if they did not figure prominently in poetry over the centuries. As in life, poetry about love encompasses an enormous range of emotion and experience. The women poets in this section approach the topic with as much variety as male poets have done. Some are surprisingly forthright and independent, considering that until changes in the law in the late nineteenth century, love could be much more of a poisoned chalice for women than for men because of their legally inferior status, particularly as wives. Marriage annulled at a stroke women's rights to their own money, property and even children, and conferred them on their husbands. This may not have been a problem with a husband who was loving and fair-minded, but would have become a tragedy of entrapment for a woman whose husband turned out to be profligate, promiscuous or cruel. Love has always been a lottery. What is surprising, perhaps, is that despite the many legal and social inequalities between men and women in the past, love and marriage still flourished.

Among women poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning is the supreme example of the unqualified triumph of mutual love and devotion which, as her first sonnet makes plain, snatched her from the jaws of death. At the advanced edge of 40 and after almost a lifetime of ill-health, she fell in love and eloped with a fellow poet against the wishes of her father, who had forbidden his children to marry and leave him. She paid a high price for her love as her father never communicated with her again, spurning all her attempts at reconciliation. But the Brownings' love proved steadfast in adversity. Elizabeth even died in her husband's arms 15 years later. She gave unabashed expression to the intense feeling Robert Browning inspired in her in a series of sonnets where she attempted to disguise the personal element by pretending they were translations 'from the Portuguese'. Although informed by joy, these sonnets have a wide emotional range. Sonnet XXXII is about her sense of her own unworthiness. For what does she



praise her beloved in this sonnet? How does Sonnet XX differ? Is it self-critical, joyful, adoring? Look at the formal features of these sonnets. How do they break the mould of the male-dominated tradition of the sonnet form?

‘On Monsieur’s Departure’ reveals Elizabeth I to have been as passionately in love as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, though this was no pleasurable experience for the queen. The poem presents her predicament in a series of contradictory statements or paradoxes. Why is paradox such an appropriate device in this context? What picture of her emotional state does its use evoke?

Like Elizabeth I, who could not reveal her love, Eleanor Farjeon’s Sonnet XLII suggests that her true feelings for Edward Thomas, the poet, were deeper than the simple friendship between them allowed. Her sense of unrequited love is expressed in Sonnet XXXIII. These two sonnets differ markedly in style and expression. Both are technically Shakespearean in that they end with a rhyming couplet, but the first is very modern and the second more clearly follows the master. Can you say what features set them apart?

‘Cousin Kate’, like ‘A Man’s Requirements’ (page 44), involves the notorious double standard (and the betrayals it inevitably occasioned) by which it was perfectly permissible for men to have premarital or illicit sex but a disgrace for women to do the same. ‘Cousin Kate’ is the age-old story of a lowly bred girl being led astray by a titled landowner, but it has two unexpected twists in its plot. The poem suggests that there are other kinds of love that can exercise an important influence on life, not just the romantic and passionate. Try to pinpoint at least three kinds in the poem. Sylvia Townsend Warner’s ‘Fair, Do You Not See . . .’ similarly extends our idea of love beyond romantic/passionate bounds. What kind of love does she depict in this poem?

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu reacts quite differently to passing sexual desires masquerading as love. ‘An Answer to a Love-Letter’, like ‘The Lady’s Yes’, is about the rejection of male overtures, even a proposal of marriage. How do they differ? ‘The Lady’s Yes’ is a cautionary tale. What is Elizabeth Barrett Browning advising and why? Given that in the mid-nineteenth century there was no divorce, so that marriage was for life, do you regard the lady as fickle, overly fastidious or far-sighted?

In total contrast, the next two poems are about love’s intensity. Emily Brontë’s ‘Remembrance’ is one of the most powerful and passionate expressions of romantic love in the language. How would