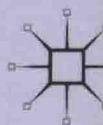
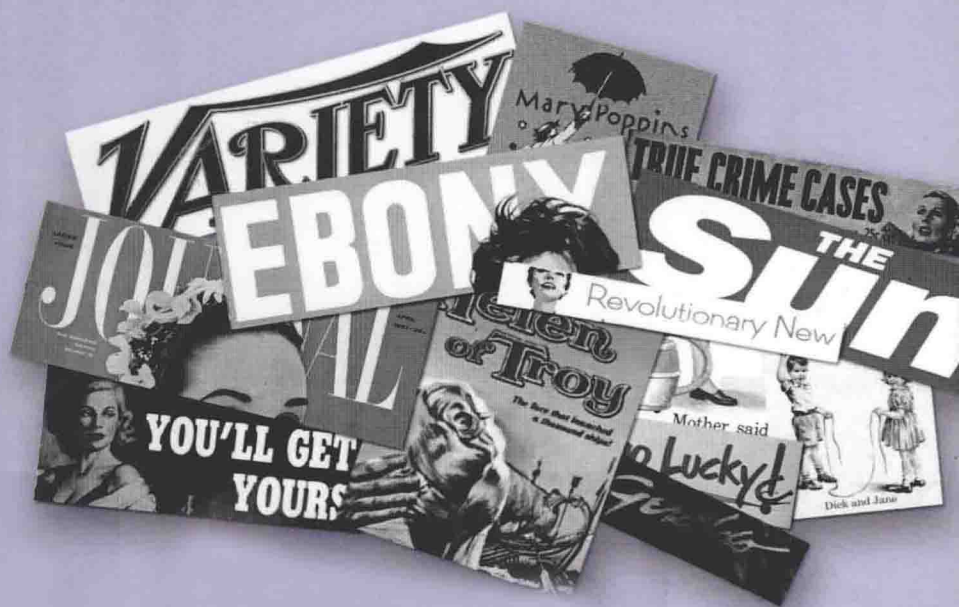


Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

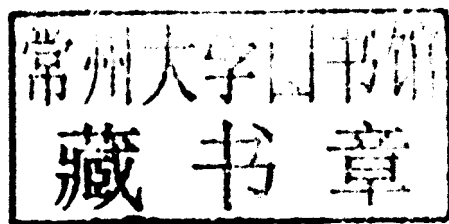
WOMEN'S POETRY AND POPULAR CULTURE

Marsha Bryant

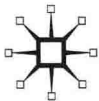


Women's Poetry and Popular Culture

Marsha Bryant



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Early work on a part of chapter 5 appeared in *College Literature* as "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising" (2002), and is expanded here with the journal's permission.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction: Key Signatures, Signature Styles

An opening or disclosure, a *key* is also a pitch, tone, or style. I begin with the figure of the *key signature* to reconfigure our sense of how popular culture shapes modern and contemporary women's poetry. In music, a key signature is not the music itself but the point of reference for sounding its notes. Marking the home key with its pattern of sharps or flats, the key signature orients the hand and voice along each line before the music happens. Yet it also ushers in the unexpected, the accidental notes that embellish the lines and detour the music from its initial default settings. This break from expectation need not be experimental, but can come from repertoire. At such moments we often detect key elements of an artist's signature style.

This book proposes that popular culture functions as a key signature for locating women poets' signature styles. Indeed, some of the very materials that would seem to push the poets toward the margins can serve as counterintuitive means of innovation. Historical epic film inflects some of H.D.'s most compelling reinventions of Helen, and tabloid journalism underwrites some of Carol Ann Duffy's dexterous diction. Popular culture does not necessarily place women poets in a position from which they must answer back—even when it engages conventionally feminine subjects such as romance and domesticity. The screen siren does not always become a straw woman, children's books do not always demand

counter-narratives, women's magazines do not always require rejection. Contrary to popular belief, women poets who incorporate popular culture do not always compose parodies or critiques—although they may choose to do these things. Women poets may choose to do a little of both while tapping popular forms to invent, to mimic, to add depth and scope. Such effects enable them to write from the cultural center as *insiders*. Rather than transgressing a dominant or patriarchal culture, these popular registers transgress our usual sense of women's poetry as an oppositional aesthetic, a counter-discourse.

Key Signatures 1

Since women's poetry emerged as an academic field in the 1970s, the counterintuitive use of popular culture has been a key signature hidden in plain sight. It was lost when second-wave feminism and women's studies brought popular culture into the academy for a necessary and ongoing critique, identifying sexist representations of women. In parallel fashion, the vital project of feminist literary criticism located ways that even established women writers such as H.D. and Edna St. Vincent Millay were systematically marginalized in literary history, countering this serial neglect with a women's canon. Addressing the poets' status as canonical *outsiders*, foundational scholars of women's poetry stressed its subversive aspects to challenge institutional practices that systematically excluded women. Louise Bernikow distills this imperative for transgression in her anthology *The World Split Open* (1974): "A woman poet, authentic and in rebellion, is subversive of standard economic, political, social, artistic, and psychic orders" (9). In the 1990s, feminist-psychoanalytic critics transposed the outsider model to the unconscious and female subjectivity, identifying unique rhythms and tonalities in women's writing that departed from the symbolic (and patriarchal) order of language—and even from the signifying system itself. This approach drew from Julia

Kristeva's theory of semiotic language (the preoedipal infant's repressed, maternal rhythms that precede the symbolic order).¹ In women's poetry studies, Kristevan and other French feminist interpretations proved especially useful in revaluing the syntactic and sonic excesses of Gertrude Stein and Edith Sitwell, the matriarchal avant-garde of modernism. Yet the blind spot in feminist-psychoanalytic criticism was a tendency to impose a universal model of women's writing that wrenched it from demographic and other cultural contexts. This transposition of the woman poet-as-outsider also continued the field's emphasis on transgression.

Ironically, the key signature of popular culture and counterintuitive innovation was misplaced when cultural studies began to reconfigure literary analysis in the 1990s. Poetry was deemed antithetical to this new methodology because of its traditional "universalizing, taming, humanizing claims," Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains, and it consequently suffered a loss of cultural capital: "Poetry, most particularly the lyric, has generally been construed (in its university and critical reception) as opposite to society and its discourses" ("Social Texts"; *Genders* 8). Given the sheer amount of feminist inquiries on women writers' relationships to literary and popular culture, it is surprising that women's poetry has received so little attention from cultural critics. As early as 1975, anthology editor Cora Kaplan insisted that "women are at the front of a continuing effort to alter the elite relationship of art to the culture that produces it" (24); in other words, women's poetry is ideally suited for a cultural approach. The impetus for my study began in the late 1990s, when I offered my first women's poetry courses. Although the field's dominant key signatures of confession, critique, and subversion proved indispensable for charting thematic links across the syllabus, they sometimes proved less successful when discussing individual poems with Gen-Xers and Millennials. In particular, my students kept resisting the idea that women poets always countered popular culture—and backlash could not account for all of their objections.