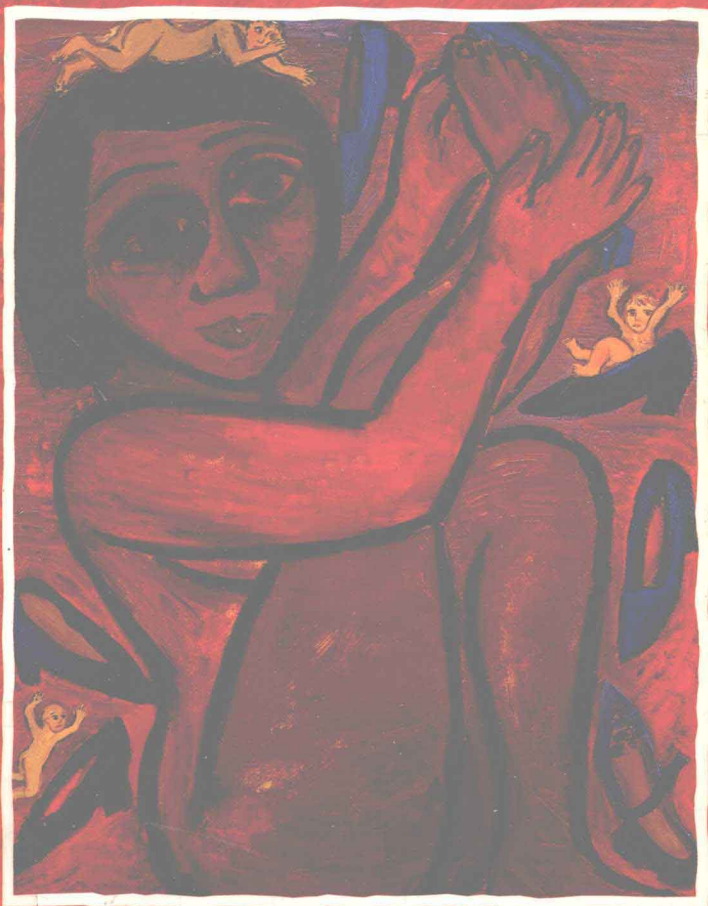


FEMINISM AND POETRY

LANGUAGE, EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY IN WOMEN'S WRITING



'AN IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE STUDY' *FEMINIST REVIEW*

JAN MONTEFIORE

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WOMEN'S WRITING

Jan Montefiore



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FEMINISM AND POETRY

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The subtitle of this book is 'Language, experience, identity in women's writing'. I might also have added 'tradition', since the transformation and appropriation of tradition is its constant theme. Since it was first published in 1987, feminist writers and critics have vigorously continued the work of revaluing traditions and transforming the accepted canon. Changes have been particularly significant in two areas: women's writing before 1800, and post-colonial writing. The map of English literary history now looks quite different after the rediscovery and publication of the writings of women from 1500 onwards, a process which is still continuing – and not in English studies alone. *Feminism and Poetry* was never intended to be a comprehensive survey of women poets writing in English, and I have not tried to theorize the continuing process of canonical transformation in this second edition; the book's scope remains generally twentieth century (though I have taken advantage of the republication of the eighteenth-century poet Mary Leapor).

Post-colonial writing is another matter. The past decade has seen a marvellous flowering of poems, novels and autobiographies by men and women of the countries once dominated by Europe, including the nations once belonging to the British Crown; within this global context, the achievements of feminist post-colonial writers are particularly striking. At the same time, post-colonial literary theory, with its formidable combination of intellectual

energy and powerful ethical critique, has become increasingly important for literary studies in general and feminist criticism in particular. Black and post-colonial critics – and imaginative writers – have effectively challenged the false universalism of an approach which celebrates a tradition of ‘women’s writing’ without enquiring about the exclusions and injustices underpinning that tradition. It seems to me that to engage with this post-colonial critique is a necessary act for feminist critics, unless we don’t mind being almost as insensitive to our own assumptions of privilege as the patriarchs whom we attack.

In order to try to take account of this post-colonial critique of identity and tradition, I have written a long last chapter on feminism and post-colonial poetry. I have been aware during its writing that the critiques of tradition made by these feminist poets (and by novelists) are easily as subtle as the literary theorists’, as well as usually being more direct and satisfying, but I did not feel that the poetry would be best served by close-reading alone. It is necessary to set up the theoretical model (which is generally implied by the poems themselves) in order to interpret their complexities. The last chapter therefore uses the same format as the others: a theoretical exposition which is then worked through close readings of a series of poetic texts, including a discussion of one sequence by the Irish Eavan Boland and one by the Guyanese–British Grace Nichols. I have also inserted some additional references into the end-notes and have brought the bibliography up to date.

Chapter 6 was written during a period of study leave from the University of Kent, spent as a Visiting Researcher at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.; I am very grateful to the Departments of English and of Women’s Studies at Georgetown for their warm welcome, and I especially thank Leona Fisher and Kim Hall for their practical kindness and intellectual generosity. I also thank Carol Gangnath for typing up the notes. I owe much to conversations with Laura Marcus and Claire Buck, and with

Abdulrazak Gurnah, Sue Wiseman, Denise Decaires Narain and especially Lyn Innes at the University of Kent: I thank them all. And of course I thank Patrick too, for all his help and kindness.

Jan Montefiore 1993

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is about women's poetry and the ways in which feminist criticism reads and theorizes it. I am concerned throughout with two opposed but related topics: first, the question of what is specific to women's poetry, and second, the ways in which women poets engage with the masculine discourses by which poetry is normally defined, which at once do not and don't include women. I begin with a discussion of women's experience in poetry; after that, the first part of the book is concerned with the subject of women in tradition; that is, both the ways in which women poets negotiate their own relation to English poetic tradition, and their creation of a tradition of their own. In the second half of the book I develop the subject of specifically female experience and language into a discussion of women's identity in poetry, drawing extensively on the concepts of identity developed by psychoanalysis, especially the work of Jacques Lacan on the concept of Imaginary identity and of Luce Irigaray on women's alienation in language. Much of this material is necessarily complex and difficult, but I have tried to avoid jargon and to make the arguments clear for the non-specialist reader.

Because this book is not a survey of women poets in general, or even of women poets writing in English in the mid-to-late twentieth century, but rather an attempt to theorize both the problems of women's poetry and some of the solutions, I have had to be selective in my choice of

the poetry to be discussed in detail. Each chapter begins with a theoretical exposition, which is then worked through detailed criticism of the work of particular poets, who are mainly though not exclusively American and English women writing in the twentieth century, with Americans slightly predominating. I have consciously tried to focus on poems which have had little – and in some cases no – previous critical attention either from ‘mainstream’ or feminist criticism: many of the texts discussed may be new to readers. Women’s poetry is much richer and more various than has been generally recognized: this book, though not a survey, does attempt to bring to readers’ notice some of the unknown or unfamiliar work by women. For the same reason, I have devoted relatively little space to women poets whose work is already widely known, like Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath (though my extensive discussions of Adrienne Rich are obvious exceptions to this rule). All this selectivity has inevitably led to omissions which I regret. There are women poets whom I admire but whose work I have not mentioned (notably Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Mina Loy and Marianne Moore) and others whom I discuss only briefly or in passing (such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Charlotte Mew and Sylvia Plath). I am also aware that Black women poets, except for Audre Lorde, get little coverage. If I had had more time for research, this book would have been more inclusive. I hope, however, that one good result of these gaps will be to make clear that this book is intended to open debate, *not* to be an ideally comprehensive last word on women’s poetry.

I am grateful to the Board of English and American Literature at the University of Kent for giving me a term’s study leave in which to draft part of the book, and a year’s leave of absence which has enabled me to edit and

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Portions of Chapters 1 and 2 first appeared as articles: 'In Her Own Image: Contemporary Women Poets', in *Poetry South-East* (Autumn 1981), and 'Feminist Identity and the Poetic Tradition', in *Feminist Review*, no. 13 (Spring 1983).

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INTRODUCTORY: POETRY AND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

1 Poetry as experience: radical feminism

If this book does nothing else, it should make clear, first, that the range, scope and variety of women's poetry are thoroughly impressive, and second, that the question of women's 'difference' in poetry is an important and complex one. Defining a feminist poetics means, primarily, understanding the significance of women's poetry. This entails creating and defining the terms in which the poetry itself is to be understood, which also means taking a subject usually considered marginal as the centre not only of a study but also of an aesthetic: difficult exercises, both.

For to say that women's poems have only been granted a marginal status in poetry criticism is simply to state the obvious. As feminist scholars¹ have documented, women poets are frequently undervalued. If recognized, they are often misread – as with those studies of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath² which read their poems for evidence of the poets's eccentricity and/or neurosis; or they get dismissed because women are supposed to have produced few or inadequate 'great poets' (an assertion now relatively seldom made in print,³ but familiar in the classroom); or they are simply ignored – a phenomenon which I explore in some detail later in this chapter. More beguilingly, it is sometimes argued that women's poetry