Women's poetry in the enlightenment: the making of a canon, 1730–1820

Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Eds.); (Macmillan, Basingstoke and London and St. Martin's Press, New York, 1999, £42.50, ISBN: 0-333-69151-2 (Hbk))

This collection of essays came out of a conference on women's poetry in 1995 and partners a volume by the same editors covering 19th-century women's poetry. Seven years on, much of the work still looks interesting and in some cases adventurous. The editors look back to Roger Lonsdale's landmark Oxford anthology of 18th-century women poets, whose publication in 1989 made many poets available to modern readers for the first time. Lonsdale declared he had selected material likely to appeal to modern tastes – entirely understandable, but it leaves the tricky question of what about material that doesn't? The question 'is it any good?' is still around: how does it get tangled up with gender in the study of the 18th century which prized some kinds of writing not in favour now? Lonsdale's anthology was of poets, not poetry: how useful is biography in returning women to literary history? How far does the figure of the woman writer need to be understood in a material context?

The essays in this collection pick up these questions in varying ways. The editors have grouped them into sections covering minds and bodies; the feminist political project; protest and patronage; genres and subjectivities and finally a lone essay (by Elizabeth Eger) on how 18th-century women poets were culled by anthologists of the time, but were also present and influential in ways that have been overlooked even by feminist critics. The editors set up the essays in terms of challenging binaries between mind and body, public and private, patron and working-class writer; mostly the essays demonstrate convincingly that these categories should not be used too simply. Friction between chronological terms is less resolved in that different contributors use different labels for the period and its divisions: the editors argue for 'Enlightenment' as a term that gets away from the false binary of 18th-century and Romantic, but some contributors seemed not to have noticed. The subtitle too is left to drift a little: although questions of canonicity are picked up by different contributors, there is patchy consideration of canonicity as it suits women's studies. The cast list of poets discussed includes some names who are now canonical: Ann Finch, Elizabeth Carter, Mary Leapor, Ann Yearsley, Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith; and some less familiar names – Mary Seymour Montague (presumed female author of *An Original Essay on Woman*, published in 1771, an answer to Pope's *Essay on Man*), Mary Chandler, Martha Sansom, Charlotte Richardson, Susannah Harrison and others.

Most of the essays offer something to specialists and more general readers: for instance, Roger Sales' informative account of Charlotte Richardson, kitchen-maid, schoolteacher and poet, outlines her relationship with Catherine Cappe, who became her mentor, biographer and friend; Cappe's encouragement of Richardson's

writing was much less troubled than Hannah More's relationship with Ann Yearsley, showing that patronage need not be domineering. Mary Waldron challenges readers not to simplify Yearsley, in a lucid essay that argues that we should see Yearsley outside the frame of working-class poet or victim of patronage. However appealing the tag of 'milkmaid poet' might be, it misleads us about Yearsley's life, which was partly spent as a self-employed trader, and distracts from her poetry that engaged with educated conventions assertively and confidently. Kate Lilley's essay about the verse epistles of Martha Sansom, Constantia Grierson and Mary Leapor shows how these women used georgic as a genre, playing with its discourses of cultivation, improvement and value so as to create a space in which poets who also happened to be women could rewrite roles. Her close reading of several epistles teases out ways in which women distinguish themselves from 'bad' georgic, where men are dull and women are matrons, and offers instead a vision of 'good' georgic in which wordly women, whether left in town or stuck in the country, appraise men critically and celebrate female friendship.

Two of the best essays reconsider a spread of women writers. Margaret Doody explores the theme of sensuousness, arguing for its importance to 18th-century women poets and their readers. In doing so, she makes poetry I thought was simply clogged with adjectives look much fresher, exciting even, and she ties it to a discussion of the relations between humans and animals, birds and insects which women were particularly well qualified to examine, since misogynists were always placing women among lower life forms. These are wonderful readings that open up an important discourse. Stuart Curran's wide-ranging essay also picks up on sensuousness as a way in which women poets inscribe the self; he reinforces this by interleaving quotations from Cixous to catch the sense of writing as rising, insurrectionary dough, in her phrase. Even better, the texts he reads include acrostics (in which the name of the poet is spelled out by the first letter of each line) — physically a coded way of inscribing the self, metaphysically an elliptical yet powerful way of insisting on identity. These poems are semi-enigmatic — readers familiar with the genre know where to look for a name — but have been bypassed by academics who have preferred to take up more obvious manifestations of the female writing subject. Along the way Curran, like other contributors, notes that in spite of tensions between women of different classes, poetry provided a bond. Women writing tributes to Charlotte Smith showed no anxiety of influence. Such nuanced readings of women's literary history in relation to each other, and to male poetry of the period, make this an inspiring essay collection.

Clare Brant

doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400108