

Editorial

Contemporary Women Poets

My aim in compiling this issue of *Feminist Review* has been to produce a series of articles that are accessible and informative to a non-specialist reader. With this in mind, I commissioned essays on broad themes, rather than opting for the more detailed discussion of individual poets that is common in literary studies. *Feminist Review* has a multidisciplinary readership, and I wanted to address this audience explicitly. I also hoped to show that, contrary to common assumptions, a society's poetry is extremely closely connected to its values, beliefs and political debates. I thus chose to focus on aspects of contemporary poetry that either directly engage with, or indirectly raise some of the preoccupations that are evident in recent feminist thought. All the contributors currently live in Britain (which is not to suggest they regard themselves as 'British'); as a result, these articles reflect the present situation in poetry from that geographical position. But poetry crosses borders, and I hope the international origins of those represented in these pages, as well as the wide relevance of their subject-matter, will resonate with poets and critics from other parts of the world.

In the early 1980s, at least five anthologies of poetry by women appeared, published at first by the women's presses, later by mainstream publishers who realized there was money to be made.¹ Despite some lukewarm reactions, this burst of activity probably played an important part in encouraging more women to write. Today most commentators acknowledge the presence and achievement of a large number of women poets; some even suggest that more women are being published than ever before. Personally, I have anxieties about the permanence of these writers' impact and reputations. Research suggests that, in their own time, women have often been extremely successful poets, but they slip out of literary history, rarely making it into the official canon of 'great' literature. However, there are certainly lots of talented and determined women writing, publishing and performing poetry today – cause for great celebration. As a result, there is some feeling, which echoes that more generally abroad, that the 'battle'

has been won. With women in positions of power and influence (publishing, giving readings, winning prizes), why keep talking of inequality, or the significance of gender?

My own feeling is that women are now visible participants, but the poetry world's institutions (both those overseeing the editing and publishing of collections, magazines and journals, and those institutions producing academic debate about poetry) – its codes of interpretation and evaluation – remains unaltered and largely unaffected by their presence. Women poets want to be judged by the same standards as their male colleagues; there is great – understandable – fear of special treatment, because it has traditionally meant relegation to the women's poetic sphere, associated with sentiment(-ality), personal feelings and narrowness in range and daring. Bold declarations made in the 1980s about the need for a new, feminist aesthetic never resulted in any clear outline or example, and this is a vacuum that, as Jane Dowson suggests in her essay here, urgently needs filling. As a result, the profoundly gendered workings of poetry creation, reception and interpretation remain concealed.

A decade ago, I think that such initiatives were widely misunderstood. It was assumed that critics who urged the need for new aesthetic criteria intended to junk literary tradition and abandon conventional attentiveness to, and respect for language, form and rhythm.² A lot of the poetry published expressed attitudes and experience validated by the Women's Movement, and there was a clear political impetus behind the act of publishing it: women speaking out publicly, and breaking into previously male arenas like the small and elite world of poetry. Several high-profile poets distanced themselves from this work, and therefore from any effort to articulate a female poetic tradition, or to group poets on the basis of sex. As a result of this stalemate, the term 'feminist poetry' emerged, and with it the unhelpfully reductive implication that a feminist critical approach to poetry entailed a narrow and literalist focus on subject matter, accompanied by complete indifference to any other aspect of the poem.

Most general surveys of twentieth-century poetry now include a well-intentioned chapter on 'women poets', but it does not go much beyond a rather tame listing of themes.³ This is thin progress when female names are almost entirely absent from the whole of the rest of the book, and when 'general' anthologies – *The New British Poetry* (Bloodaxe, 1993); *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (1998) – still select an insultingly small number of women. We need critiques that explore poets' use of personae, form and figurative language; that consider the lyric's ancient tradition alongside its present pre-eminence, and that attempt to revive other subgenres like narrative and epic poetry.

The articles that follow, as I have already indicated, are more general in approach. The influence of poststructuralism in poetry is acknowledged in Harriet Tarlo's introduction to experimental language poetry, non-representational writing that makes imaginative use of recent feminist theoretical work as well as of Modernism's neglected legacy. Liz Yorke finds that the idea of a lesbian poetics is as troublesomely complex as all identity politics today. Tensions in cross-generational relationships between women poets form an important theme in Jane Dowson's examination of literary history and women's curious absence from it. There is a long round-table discussion with Jean Binta Breeze, Patience Agbabi and Jillian Tipene. Poetry in performance has become very popular recently, generating big audiences and often marking a fruitful cross-fertilization between African, Caribbean, English and American traditions in both music and poetry. The work of poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean Breeze has been extremely influential, but very little has been published about it. In the transcript of this meeting, specially commissioned by *Feminist Review*, fascinating details emerge about the politics and economics of working as a poet. As well as covering poets and poetry, I also wanted to include some recognition of the therapeutic value of the genre. I was impressed by Survivors' Poetry, a national organization supporting workshops and performances by and for survivors of the mental health system.⁴ Gillie Bolton's article gives a sense of the potential offered by poetry-writing within therapeutic contexts, and also of the range of initiatives currently underway in the British Isles.

Finally, poet Sarah Maguire revisits an influential essay published by Irish poet Eavan Boland in 1986. Boland, like Adrienne Rich, identified a tension between the role of poet and that of woman. Rich located it in a potential clash between 'the energy of creation and the energy of relation'; Boland described a 'psychosexual pressure'. While Maguire argues that much has changed, she also suggests that women poets' work 'is still inflected (and infected) by inequalities and by our objectified subjectivity'. To me, there is a further (related) issue: confidence. This involves the necessity for self-belief; taking one's art seriously, making time for it, keeping faith with it and in it, through times of rejection and silence. Contemporary feminist debate seems to avoid this issue, as if it is too simple, or embarrassingly dated; as though none of us have faltering confidence any longer. In addition, the role of the poet, and its associations with authority, with the position of spokesperson, may create more difficulties. Partly, I suspect, as writers women may find that role inappropriate or uncomfortable; and in terms of poetry's reception, I think many men (and probably many women too) are instinctively resistant to the idea of accepting a woman speaking on their behalf, as their spokesperson. It is easy to accept her if

she speaks for a community of women, but for society, for everyone? As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ a female voice is not easily accepted as ‘universal’, ungendered (or, as is usually the case, male but ostensibly sex-neutral). The only way to tackle this is to get women’s voices alongside men’s, so they are not in a minority, and can no longer appear aberrant or partial.

Finally, a word on the poems. I wish there were more; there aren’t because I chose to include a very long poem about her daughter by Mimi Khalvati. I like the idea of such large-scale projects, and wanted to encourage women to undertake them – to venture out of the brief lyric, to try something bigger. To me this is – once again – to do with laying claim to importance and suggests greater confidence.

So a mixture of joy and scepticism. Women are out there at performances and readings; they attend conferences, workshops and festivals yet, in my experience, they stay very quiet in mixed company. We urgently need women editors. We also need women readers and critics. Not because ‘women’ form a cohesive group in any easy way; not because such a thing as ‘women’s poetry’, with its unhelpful implications of uniformity, exists, but precisely because we don’t and it doesn’t. If this issue of *Feminist Review* encourages any of these activities, it will have performed the most useful service I can imagine.

Vicki Bertram
School of Humanities
Oxford Brookes University

Notes

- 1 See ‘Poetry and the Women’s Movement in Postwar Britain’ by Claire Buck in Acheson and Huk (eds) *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (State University of New York, 1996), 81–112; also ‘Anthologies of Women’s Poetry: Canon-Breakers; Canon:Makers’, by Jane Dowson, 237–52, and ‘Women Poets and “Women’s Poetry”’: Fleur Adcock, Gillian Clarke and Carol Rumens’ by Lyn Pykett, 253–67, both in Day and Docherty (eds), *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art* (Macmillan, 1997).
- 2 See Eavan Boland’s ‘The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma’, first published in *Stand* (1986), reprinted in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time* (Vintage, 1996). Also, see Carol Rumens’ introduction to *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-feminist Poetry, 1964–84* (Chatto & Windus, 1985).
- 3 Examples include Alan Robinson, *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*

(Macmillan, 1988) and Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* (Routledge, 1999), which is heavily dependent on Robinson's account.

- 4 Survivors' Poetry is funded by the Arts Council and the Mental Health Foundation. They have regional groups across the country, and support training, networking and publication ventures. They are based at Diorama Arts Centre, 34 Osnaurgh Street, London NW1 3ND; tel: 0171 916 5317.
- 5 See 'Postfeminist Poetry? "one more word for balls"', 269–292 in Huk and Acheson, *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (SUNY, 1996).