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Jane Stevenson, Peter Davidson, eds. *Early Modern Women Poets: An Anthology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. lii + 585 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-924257-3.

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Uncovering the

Uncovering the "Fetter'd Muse"

This vast anthology, the culmination of many years of hard work for its editors, represents a very welcome and valuable contribution to the ever-increasing corpus of early modern women's writing made available to the modern reader. The editors' insistence, in the introduction, on their "main principle of inclusion, which is to demonstrate the range and variety of women's verse in early modern England" (p. xxix) distinguishes it from its recent rivals, the anthologies compiled by Marion Wynne-Davies (London, 1998) and Paul Salzman (Oxford, 2000), which include the writings of only twelve and eleven women respectively. The sheer amount of poetry collected in the Stevenson and Davidson anthology (294 poems by 187 women writers) is obviously the anthology's greatest strength: the collection represents the writings of women from all social classes, religious beliefs, and often marginalized linguistic groups (Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Irish). The desire for inclusiveness and historicised representativeness obviously overrides literary selection criteria, so that the collection includes obscene doggerel (for instance Honor Strangman's slanderous poem insinuating that one Mary Lawry "alwayes doth bedue her sheats her flood hatch it is broken, / and the streame of it runneth through the brooke as shee lies sleeping," p. 173) no less than the most sophisticated poetry, including the Latin verse of Anne Bacon and others. From vehement defences of patriarchal authority to mystical individualism and to fierce defences of women's right to an education and a public voice, the anthology creates a vivid picture of the sheer diversity of women's writing in the period. At the same time, however, the anthologists' "particular interest in poems which reflect directly on the experience of being a woman, or a woman writer, and in poems from one woman to another" (p. xxxi) carries the risk of distorting the picture of early modern women's poetry, suggesting that these poets were more concerned with gender issues than would be borne out by an investigation of all their writing.

The anthologized poetry is preceded by a 24-page introduction that is subdivided into four main sections. The first of these is concerned with the editors' selection criteria, methodology, and organization of the volume.

Wisely, the editors choose to arrange the poets chronologically, so as to set each author in context. As the editors are aware, this does create problems with poets whose lives and work are hard to date, and the anthology does, to some extent, seem relentless and unstructured in its accumulation of two hundred years' worth of women's poetry. However, this is far preferable to a more artificial structure (e.g., classification according to literary genres or groups of interrelated poets) that would have obscured broader historical developments and relationships.

While the editors' scrupulous discussion of their methodological difficulties in dating is refreshingly honest, their attempt at distinguishing between genuine women writers and male infiltrators who might be responsible for certain poems written in a female persona is fraught with barely acknowledged difficulties. The stated rationale is that poems "in which a woman speaker condemns herself out of her own mouth as 'bad' ...can be reasonably assumed to be written by a man," as can poetry "in a woman's voice which expresses her joy in chastity, silence, and obedience, or dwells narcissistically on her own physical beauty." Only "verse which strikes out in a different direction from either of these stereotypic and male-centred positions" can apparently qualify as being potentially written by a woman (pp. xxxiv-xxxv). The issue here is whether there is such a thing as an identifiable *Ã©criture feminine*. The most eloquent refutation of the anthologists' methods in identifying impostors comes from within one of the poems contained within the anthology itself, for as "Philo-Philippa" notes:

If Souls no Sexes have, as 'tis confest / 'Tis not the he or she makes Poems best: / Nor can men call these Verses Feminine / Be the sense Vigorous and Masculine (p. 404).

As much as women can write verse that is "Vigorous and Masculine," men and women surely can write "feminine" poetry of all kinds, from the most submissive to the most assertive polemics. The editors' imposition of criteria based on stereotypical assumptions about gender positions runs the risk of undermining the anthology's stated aim of diversity and range through the very stereotypical notions of femininity that the editors seek to overthrow.

A final problem raised by this section of the introduction is that of naming. The policy adopted is to identify the poets by the surname of their first husband. Again, the editors are obviously aware of the problematic nature of this choice, which leads to absurdities such as Lady Jane Grey appearing as "Lady Jane Dudley," or the Scottish poet Isobel Gowdie appearing as "Isobel Gilbert" even though Scotswomen did not take their husband's name and Gowdie was never known as "Gilbert." More serious than this understandable attempt to "impose order" on the chaos of early modern women's multiple names is the editors' subsequent tendency, in the biographical notes that precede each section of poetry, to refer to the women by their first names only, while their husbands are invariably referred to by their surname. This practice has the effect of perpetuating the very gender hierarchies which the anthology is presumably aimed at balancing out.

In the second section of the introduction, the editors helpfully discuss the writers' social backgrounds, their engagement with political or religious events, their awareness of other women writers, and their modes of publication and/or manuscript circulation. Equally unproblematic, though brief, is the third section, which draws the reader's attention to the scarcity of early modern women's poetry surviving in manuscript rather than print.

The last part of the introduction, finally, is dedicated to a "necessarily very brief survey" historicizing poets writing from the geographical and linguistic margins of the Gaeltacht and Wales (p. xlix). This part of the introduction and the corresponding non-English language poems and their translations are clearly one of the strongest points of the anthology, giving the modern reader access to works that have been hitherto neglected for reasons of both gender and language. I only want to pick up on three problems relating to this aspect of the anthology. Firstly, the editors' endeavour to introduce a considerable number of writers from different regions, languages, and cultures forces them to make generalisations that can appear to be self-contradictory. Thus the assertion that "[s]ince poetry was thus a profession, akin to, and of equal status with, law, it is hardly surprising to find that it excluded women" (p. xliv) is contradicted on the following page by the statement that "*Banfilid* (female poets) were not unknown in Ireland, either in literature, legislation, or life" (p. xlv). Secondly, it is somewhat ironic that, having condemned Elaine Showalter's lack of recognition of class diversity at the beginning of their introduction, the editors now comment that "a set of oppositions governed language-use in early modern Wales, whereby English cames [sic] to be perceived as forward and outward-looking, while Welsh was perceived as retrospective and directed inwards towards the family and the cultural traditions of the past" (p. xlix). This sentiment is applied to an almost entirely mono-

lingual Welsh-speaking population that would scarcely have seen English as unequivocally "forward-looking." While it is true that the nobility did see a certain sophistication in writing English, this does not apply to the rest of the population. Finally, when I asked a Welsh speaker, Laura Davies, to check the translation of a randomly selected poem by Elen Gwdman (number 92), it emerged that at least one of the translations provided in the volume is inexact: line 14, "A'I sadrwydd oedd yn peri" does not translate as "His virtues appearing like snow" but as "And his steadiness was consistent." This highlights the lack of comments, in either the introduction or the notes on individual sections, about the translations, methods, and potential translation difficulties. In a volume whose editors are mostly exemplary in their scrupulous scholarship, who make a point of admitting to gaps in their historical knowledge and their difficulties in methodology, and who claim that "almost every text ... has been examined afresh in its primary state by one of its editors" (p. l), this is a surprising omission.

These flaws in the introduction should not, however, detract from the valuable historical and cultural background provided by the editors and their intelligent, detailed, and sensitive scholarship. The introduction successfully prevents the nature of women's writing from being reduced to a generalization, and its methodology reflects a refusal to iron out the tensions and contradictions of its subject.

The poems anthologized are of unequal literary, though often great cultural and historical, interest. The anthology's greatest strengths, its inclusiveness and rigorous scholarship, repeatedly prove to be its greatest weakness: the detailed biographical notes provided for each author at the beginning of her section, while providing an often superb introduction to the poet in question, are at times far longer and of greater interest than the sometimes poor poems themselves. Indeed, the notes often have little bearing on the poetry. For example, the reader is told what Baptina Cromwell's husband's debts, mortgage, and landed income were in 1649, but absolutely nothing about Cromwell's poem. Virtually no literary information is offered, though at times, as for Isabella Whitney's "Will and Testament," the editors do briefly set the poem within its generic context. Indications about, for example, the sources for the Countess of Pembroke's psalm translations or of the scholarly nature of her work would possibly be more helpful for the reader unfamiliar with her psalms than much of the biographical information provided. The problem seems to lie in an uncertainty about the anthology's implied reader: different degrees of academic knowledge are presumed of the reader at different times. While the endnotes at the end of each poem are generally helpful and comprehensive, the editors do fail to gloss words like "standish" (inkstand) that are glossed in the Salzman and Wynne-Davies anthologies. For longer poems, the endnote format could furthermore helpfully have been replaced by footnotes.

These caveats, and a vague feeling that the collection would have been the stronger for a more rigorously "literary" selection, ought not to detract from the fact that the anthology is an ideal reference work for anybody wanting an introduction to women's poetry of the period. The range of the material allows the anthology to function as a literary reconstruction of history, and one that proved very successful when I worked through sections of the volume in the classroom. My students seemed to enjoy the unusual emphasis on historical contextualization and to appreciate being exposed to non-canonical authors as part of their work for a paper on early modern literature. For scholars, the wealth of previously inaccessible primary texts will prove invaluable.

Particularly rewarding are the links and relationships between poets that gradually emerge in the course of perusing the collection. Such links can be familial or social (the Tixall poets, or Jane Chayne's homage to her grandmother, the formidable Bess of Hardwick, spring to mind), but they can also take the shape of poetic homages by one woman to another. Thus Aphra Behn and Katherine Philips emerge as authors who were explicitly seen by their contemporaries as models to be praised and emulated. In fact, the anthology allows the reader to trace a development from the relative isolation (and, often, conformity) of women writers at the beginning of the period to stronger networks between women and more assertive proto-feminist stances towards the end of the seventeenth century. Anne Finch's "Introduction" to her first manuscript collection of poems possibly provides the best example of the combination of an awareness of social constraints on the female poet with a stylistic surefootedness that demonstrates the absurdity of these constraints:

Alas! a woman that attempts the Pen, / Such an intruder on the rights of men, / Such a presumptuous Creature, is esteem'd / The fault, can by no vertue be redeem'd.

They tell us, wee mistake our sex, and way, / Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play, / Are the Accomplishments wee should desire, / To read, or write, or think, or to enquire, / Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time, / And interrupt the Conquests of our

prime.

Whilst, the dull manage of a servile house, / Is held by some, our utmost art, and use (p. 459).

The editors have done us–general readers, students, and scholars alike–a great service in uncovering, if not liberating, so many formerly "fetter'd Muse[s]" (p. 406).

Note

This review was revised with students from St Anne's College, Oxford: Victoria Barkas, Olivia Bustion, Laura Davies, Mark Greaves, Elaine Hake, Rebecca Heller, Amanda Kent, Jonathan Lewsley, Daisy Robinson, Emma Rowley, Sarah Scougal, Edward Witcomb, and Florence Ung.

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