

Lee Upton: On "Women"

If a body of work could be said to contain a culprit, "Women" is Bogan's most perversely seductive culprit. Readings of the poem have contributed to a calcified presentation of Bogan's poetics as inimical to women. In a number of ways, the poem refuses a stable position, accounting for a plethora of contradictory readings. The poem has been seen as a burlesque of gender, a broadside of self-hatred, a celebration of difference, a critique of culture, a disguised rebuttal to men, and a savage criticism of women. No doubt the poem retains its power because it holds such possibilities in tension, refracting its conceptual hues broadly for each reader. Unfortunately, the poem is seldom acknowledged as a conceptual victory, even though it proves a remarkably accomplished appropriation of a censorious cultural voice in its surface dynamics. The poem is especially compelling for its aesthetically sustained framing of the assignment of women's and men's roles in culture and, more specifically, in its externalization of male presence. In the poem Bogan achieves the inverse of the internalization of male values that a number of her critics decry, for her poem, however critical it may be of women's accommodations to patriarchy, renders extraneous to women those forces that may appear to circumscribe them.

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"Women"--with its distancing use of the third person *they* and its seemingly accusatory parallels--has been cited as symptomatic of Bogan's adoption of masculinist assumptions that denigrate women. Pope finds the poem "devastating" and argues that Bogan puts forward "the utterly bleak proposition that women are by gender unable to love, to move, to be free, that it is neither landscapes, partners, nor roles, but women's very selves that are ultimately 'the body of this death.'" Elizabeth Frank asserts that the poem depicts women as "by nature tinged with defective wills" and cites the poem for "its obvious envy of maleness." Taking a different approach altogether, Ronald Giles argues for an ironic reading, noting that Bogan's speaker, "appearing to itemize attitudes and attributes of womanhood, . . . actually reveals, in a tone of cynical understatement, the masculine imperfections from which men take such perverse satisfaction." The speaker shows women to be "provident, sentient, benevolent," and "more sophisticated" than men. Giles's reversals call attention to the poem's ostensible values ("If men can think of 'so many crops to a field' or of 'clean wood cleft by an axe,' so what?"). While Giles's essay opposes critics who present the poem as representative of Bogan's sympathies with patriarchy, his reading strains the poem's rhetoric and largely overlooks its genuine denunciation of women's acculturated status.

Although the poet's position as a woman problematizes our reception of the poem, her gender does not annul her actual uneasiness with women's status. Bogan is indeed an accomplished ironist, yet objections to women's strategies of accommodation to male privilege inform the poem and provide for much of its critical power. In the logic of the poem, women occupy an internal realm, men an external one. Ironically, as the poem's assumed "other," men, like women, "have no wilderness in them," for their activities revolve around rural domestication; they tend cattle, plant fields, chop wood. Although superficially representing her central gender as "content in the tight hot cell of their hearts," Bogan portrays women's discontent and restlessness: "they hear in every whisper that speaks to them / A shout and a cry." The

object of their love (presumably men) cannot satisfy, for men's love is the origin of "an eager meaninglessness." The references to maleness (Is men's love the "dusty bread" women eat in their cells? Are men simply to be "let ... go by?") are specific only in regard to men's avoidance of generosity: Women "use against themselves that benevolence / To which no man is friend" (emphasis mine). The one quality explicitly repudiated by men, benevolence, is placed in critical focus. Characteristically, Bogan indicts cultural ideology that leads to women's self-sacrifice. She repudiates traditional cultural expectations of women's kindnesses--kindnesses that women have traditionally been discouraged from practicing toward themselves. If employed against selfhood, such negative benevolence allows any "life" to enter, even that which should be rejected. At the conclusion, men are expelled from the site of the poem, presumably as "life" that should be "let go ... by."

"Women," then, is an overt critique of women's acculturated behavior and an implicit critique of men's. In particular, Bogan explores the physical and psychological constriction of women and the externalization of men in regard to women's intimate concerns. Even should men physically enter women's realm rather than be "let ... go by," in the poem they are experienced by women as a curious absence. Justifiably, the poem is one of Bogan's best known, for it challenges the reader's desires for harmony and affiliation. Its conceptual separations are conceived in the dramatic terms that generate Bogan's characteristic oppositional posture in her early career.

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