

Cary Nelson: On "Women"

This is the same poet who in 1923 also spoke in the harsh persona of Medusa and who six years later stood with Cassandra, declaring herself "the shrieking heaven lifted over men, / Not the dumb earth, wherein they set their graves." Yet in "Women," at least on the surface, it seems she writes a poem with which Pound would find himself comfortable. Certainly it seems to elaborate the same generic metaphors of female passivity and male vitality. In this case, however, a great deal depends on whether we credit the female signature above the poem; if we acknowledge that a woman wrote the poem or that the speaker can be considered female then the poem is less stable than it appears. Yet gendered authorship cannot actually constrain or guarantee the semiotic effects a poem can have. Actually, as long as any woman who attempts to read the poem aloud is not struck dumb, an unlikely eventuality, then the gender of the speaker is at least demonstrably reversible. And as soon as a woman reads the poem almost everything the poem says is proven untrue.

If a woman speaks "Women"'s lines, then the poem in most of its figures undoes all its apparent propositions and assertions. "They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass," the line that opens the second stanza, exhibits exactly the precise visually observed detail that the line asserts women cannot see. Moreover, the detail is sufficient to equip any reader--male or female--to imagine the scene it describes. Much the same is true of the sound of snow water in the lines that follow, lines that themselves paradoxically enact and enable the very capacity they rhetorically deny. Two stanzas later we read that women "cannot think of so many crops to a field / or of clean wood cleft by an axe." Yet here too the reader of either gender is provoked to visualize exactly what the lines describe--to enumerate the crops a field can grow, to imagine the fresh wood exposed by a sharp axe. Similarly, the opening stanza, which declares that women have no wilderness in them, speaks knowingly of the wilderness that it claims women do not know. And if their hearts are really "tight hot cells," then something of wilderness energy and watchfulness has found its way into the home. Indeed, if women "stiffen, when they should bend," then they are capable of resistance, not compliant, as a more conventional image would suggest. Finally, to hear "a shout and a cry" behind "every whisper" is not simply to be fearful but to recognize a hidden wild energy in every domesticated impulse.

This is not to say, however, that there is any perspective from which the poem is likely to seem unambiguously feminist in its assertions; it mounts every feminist claim as a counter-assertion, written against the grain of (and at work within) every patriarchal cliché about femininity. The poem is poised to reverse itself, and it powerfully demonstrates how every sexist utterance is undermined from within. The poem's subject is more properly understood not as "women" themselves but rather as masculinist discourses about women, the declarations about women that our culture habitually makes. Those discourses, the poem shows, inevitably contradict and disqualify themselves. Yet it also puts these discourses in circulation again and reminds us--with excruciating precision--of women's culturally imposed self-containment and self-denial.

Moreover, the poem finally leaves these matters to our intervention, to the work readers must do. And the last lines--with their ambiguous advice about letting life go by--remain irreducibly

open to multiple interpretation.

Bogan's bid to disentangle resistance from within prevailing commonplaces--a project I believe to be too rigorous in this poem to be unintentional--has often been misunderstood. But then misrepresentation and dismissal have been the fates of many of the radical modern rereadings of gender.

From "The Fate of Gender in Modern American Poetry," in Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt, eds. *Marketing Modernism* (University of Michigan Press, 1997).

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Louise Bogan [2]

Author:

Cary Nelson [3]

Poem:

Women [4]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/cary-nelson-women>

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