

Linda A. Kinnahan: On "The Young Housewife"

Williams's poetry at this time also shows him working against the conventional paradigm of the male creator, a paradigm encouraged by Ezra Pound and the poetic tradition alike. Often Williams undercuts the masculine claim to mastery and control he presents in "Romance Moderne," and in reading his works alongside Loy's vehement satires of masculine authority, the often discussed sexuality of his poetry opens into a larger issue of gendered power informing his most radical cultural visions. Williams consciously downplays what Loy had called the "indisputable male voice" of the artist, and moreover, Loy's example provides Williams with a way of recognizing his own participation in a culture that privileges male authority. This recognition characterizes a number of his poems about women that focus upon female vulnerability to forms of masculine power while signaling his own culpability within these culturally encoded dynamics. Through such self-revelation, Williams exposes himself to judgment rather than acting as judge, deliberately rendering his poetic voice vulnerable and sabotaging his (male) poetic authority. Both "The Ogre" and "Housewife" demonstrate the destabilization of poetic authority on Williams's part, unsettling traditional authority by questioning the broader implications of the power of dominance.

. . . [E]mphasizing itself as a constructed fiction, "The Young Housewife" (Others 1915) demonstrates a self-conscious manipulation of metaphor through an overt display of the poet's figurative mastery over his subject: . . . The poet is mobile, while the woman is associated with the house. He associates himself with a mechanical form of power?the car and its "noiseless wheels" that crush the leaves?which separates him from the world he observes. The woman is also separated while within the walls of her "husband's house" (recalling the recurrent male boundaries that limit the women of Loy's poems); however, she ventures with full vulnerability onto the streets, where she becomes the unwitting object of another form of masculine mastery?the poet's gaze and the poet's representative possession of her?as the poet's metaphor-making again places her within defined boundaries. As a result, the poem ends on a chilling note, and deliberately so, I would argue. The poet's metaphor-making is foregrounded as he states, "and I compare her / to a fallen leaf," an emphasis partially attained through the careful enjambment of these lines. What becomes important in these last five lines is not that the woman is like a fallen leaf but that the poet's claim to mastery is shown as a form of destruction. While recognizing in himself the pull to mastery, Williams enacts a critique of a poetics, and ultimately of a cultural ethos, that chooses mastery over contact. The act of representation, of metaphor-making, is recognized within the poem as an act of violence within gendered frameworks of power.

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