

Introduction

As the end of this century approaches and we look over what has taken place and how our society has developed and with it the literature which reflects it, one cannot help but realize that, as far as western literature goes, the apparition and increase in the numbers of notable women writers, female literary critics, women's studies and feminism, in all their variety, has constituted one of the truly important elements of the literary history of this century.

A literature which reflected a society based on male values, vision and tradition was slowly permeated by a number of women writers during the first two decades of this century, giving way to the possibility of using literary works to explore those visions *of* women and *by* women which had been virtually nonexistent up to then.

Within the literary genres, poetry, with less pressures from the publishing world and its tradition and with its basic echoes of analysis and exploration of inner life, emotions, desires and fantasy, gave women writers a field in which to revise traditional images of women, to question the validity of established values, norms and rules of behaviour, and to posit alternatives which envisioned a better world, a more equitable society, in which the patriarchal structure would be replaced by a new kind of human relationships in which the struggle for equality, with its inevitable consciousness-raising and criticism would erode, and finally replace, those elements in our society which discriminated in terms of gender, race, class, religion and sexual orientation.

When I was invited to guest-edit an issue of the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, I decided to dedicate it to American women poets of this century, not only because it has been my main area of study, research and tuition for the past eighteen years but because I was sure that the outcome would give us a large enough view of all these issues which I have mentioned above, highlighting different approaches to a literature in which the canon seems to have spilled over to cover and include more marginal writers which no doubt will eventually produce (I personally think it has already done so, although the test of time will have the last word) a less waspish canon, richer because of the inclusion of other views, from women writers in the

margins, the borders, outside the establishment, and because of the revisions of those views traditionally accepted as virtually immutable. That is the main reason for the general title of this issue of the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*: “Centered Revisions, Decentered Visions: Twentieth-Century American Women Poets.”

The response to my invitations to contribute, both personal and general, was astounding and I am happy to be able to bring together essays by researchers and critics not only from the United States, but also from the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia, covering alternative ways of looking at the work of more canonical writers such as Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Mina Loy, Gwendolyn Brooks or Margaret Walker, and the exploration of the work of Native American women poets, both from the United States and Canada, Asian American, Chicana and African American women poets; women poets whose left wing political stances have kept them outside the most important anthologies and studies, and recent innovative women poets who are exploring new techniques in an attempt to expand the reaches of poetic language.

The collaborative work of Stefanie von Berg and Hartmut Lutz analyzes the work of Native women poets, their history of publication, and the topics they deal with in their continuing struggle for decolonization. Nancy Berke revises the poetry of a social and political stream of American women poets largely forgotten by contemporary critics and anthologists, poets for whom issues of class were of recognized importance. Melba Joyce Boyd illuminates a virtually unknown section of African American history related to the Black Arts Movement through the connections and activism of four African American women poets and their role in the creation of several seminal institutions and publishing houses of great importance for the African American community. Susana Chávez-Silverman explores the work of three Chicana poets linked by what the author terms *fronterótica*, the transgressional, playful ambiguity and refusal to be marginalized from the eroticism present in their life and work. María Herrera-Sobek’s most innovative approach uses eco-feminism as a tool to analyze the work of four Chicana poets and their concern for both environmental and social health. Susan J. Hubert examines the poetry of Rich and Lorde in a discussion of what constitutes “lesbian” poetry and its power for personal and social transformation. Mary Jane Leach-Rudawski questions the placing of Mina Loy as an American modernist and argues the possibility of self-exile based on the objectives of her poetry and her refusal to conform. Philip McGowan defends the idea that Sexton’s poetry uses a coded language which arises from “female systems of silence, lying and concealment and male forms of textual domination” which needs to be disclosed. Ann Vickery examines sexuality, language, desire, motherhood and violence in the poetry of Rae Armantrout and Fanny Howe under the light of the social and spiritual philosophies of Simone Weil. Cheryl Walker offers a totally different approach to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop by reading her work from a religious point of view and attacks the generalized dismissal of this kind of approach to modern poetry. Laura Wright analyzes the many senses of “play” in the work of Carla Harryman and how, through them, she manages to challenge traditional concepts of meaning, genre and narrative. Liz Yorke inquires into the nature of lesbian identity by examining Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems” and analyzing how Rich has developed towards a “more inclusive politics of radical complexity.” Finally, Zhou

Xiaojing explores the work of three Asian American women poets in an attempt to show how the issues of gender, race, and ethnicity are more relevant in the poetics of Asian American women poets than other questions of poetic influence or alternative traditions of women's poetry.

Those changes which all these essays in particular, and American women's poetry in general, mention have not been achieved in full but, as the song goes "time is on our side." I hope that by the end of the next millenium those issues will be matters long left far behind.