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SMASHING THE MOLD STRAIGHT OFF:
FEMINIST POETRY NOW

No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets. Edited with an introduction by Florence Howe. New York: Harper-Collins, 1993. 488 pp. \$15.00 paper.

In the last twenty years, the feminist movement and the parallel emergence of feminist poetry, together with similar political movements and poetries of people of color and gays and lesbians, have utterly changed the landscape of American poetry. These movements have coalesced with such speed and force that mainstream critical and literary journals are still catching up with them, and remain at the beginning in understanding the changes they have forced. What is considered “appropriate” for a poem, particularly one by a woman writer—the range of subject matter, language, the point of view allowed or expected—has changed to an extent that was almost unimaginable twenty years ago. We have new subject matters for poetry now, new languages to use in making poems, new perspectives and angles of vision to take into account on both literature and life. In 1973, when the first edition of *No More Masks!* was published, the book came as a revelation; it was part of a revolution; it was huge, immense, a thing not to be denied. It took its title from Muriel Rukeyser’s dictum, written in the revolutionary year 1968, “No more masks! No more mythologies!” That charge, as applied to women, was a new opening and challenge. The first *No More Masks!* did what the very best anthologies do: it changed the way we look at things, the way we look at poetry. It created a new space for work by women that had been ignored, or minimized, or misapprehended. It “smashed the mold straight off,” in Adrienne Rich’s phrase. There was nothing else like it; it was a necessary book.

And yet, coming as it did in 1973 (the year of *Roe v. Wade*), at the beginning of what were to be profound and long-lasting changes among women, and thus in American politics and culture, it could not chart (or know) the exact nature of changes that were to come. In fact, by presenting women readers with a host of new possibilities and perspectives, the book itself helped to precipitate and crystallize some of the change that came. Women were gaining and defining a consciousness

of themselves *as* women (“women *qua* women,” the position papers said), and when that consciousness developed and expanded, it changed not only personal relations, but also forced major changes in the polity. Because poetry, too, is part of life, all this is reflected in the last twenty years of poetry written by women.

So many important writers, particularly women of color, were not yet published, or were just beginning to publish, or were out of print, when the first *No More Masks!* was published in 1973. In 1973, Adrienne Rich published *Diving into the Wreck*, one of her early explorations in feminist poetry. How much further her work has moved after that book! She has published fourteen books since. Audre Lorde had published *The First Cities* and *Cables to Rage* with small publishers, and was about to publish *Coal*, her first major collection, with Norton in 1976. Marilyn Hacker won the Discovery Award in 1973, but her first book, *Presentation Piece*, did not appear until the following year. Judy Grahn had written and published *Edward the Dyke* and *The Common Woman* poems, but these did not appear in trade editions with major distribution until 1978. Lucille Clifton had published three books by 1974, beginning with *Good Times* in 1969; she has published five more volumes of poetry since. Irena Klepfisz published her first, *Periods of Stress*, in 1975; her great poem, “Bashert,” did not appear until *Keeper of Accounts* in 1982. Carolyn Forché won the Yale Younger Poets Award with *Gathering the Tribes* in 1976, but her reputation as a mature poet came with *The Country Between Us* in 1981. Pat Parker published *Child of Myself* in 1972, *Pit Stop* in 1973, but it was not until *Movement in Black* in 1978 that she became widely known. Olga Broumas won Yale with *Beginning with O*, which appeared in 1977; she has published four volumes since. Susan Griffin published *Dear Sky* in 1973, but it was not until *Like the Iris of an Eye* (1976) that she became well known beyond the West Coast. Rukeyser’s *Collected Poems* were published in 1978, but have been out of print ever since; her work is being brought back again this year. June Jordan had published her first poetry, *Who Look at Me*, in 1969; but it was her selected *Things That I Do in the Dark* (1977) that established her reputation solidly as a poet. Minnie Bruce Pratt did not publish any full-length collection until the eighties; neither did Rita Dove, Jane Kenyon, Jane Miller, Joy Harjo, Cheryl Clarke, Jorie Graham, Mary Jo Salter, Naomi Shihab Nye, Sharon Olds. In short, so many of the poems we think of that define women’s poetry now either did not yet exist in 1973, or were not widely known or available. Now these poets have their works in print, they have developed over years, and we have their mature voices widely available in many volumes, bookstores, and libraries. In response to this massive development, Florence Howe, one of the original editors of *No More Masks!*, was asked to compile a new edition.

An up-to-date *No More Masks!* is invaluable, for those who are already familiar with contemporary women’s poetry, to use for quick and easy reference; to those who are new to poetry or to women’s poetry in particular, to have a comprehensive introduction easily available in one volume; for the young, to discover the range and richness of women’s voices they might never have

encountered before, and to begin to learn a sense of history. For all these reasons and more, Florence Howe has done poetry a great service by bringing this important anthology up to date and making it available again.

Probably no new edition could hope to have the impact of the first, for times have changed; the widespread feminist fervor of the seventies, of which the original *No More Masks!* was part, has been tempered by years of backlash and resistance. It is not that feminism is over, or become “post-feminism;” that’s a mythos of conservatives. Instead, the problem is something else: the purpose served by the original anthology, to “smash the mold” of allowable discourse about women, about poetry, about *women’s* poetry, has been well begun in the last twenty years. Women have begun to say more fully who we are, what we want, how we feel, and to publish it. And because poetry has never been a luxury to women or to other marginalized or oppressed groups, women poets find numbers of willing and eager readers. The critical attention that changes the canon has followed; some poets (Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Rita Dove, Louise Glück, others) are being admitted to the canon, taught, anthologized, prized. Women’s poetry has been and is a stunning success.

Not that there is nothing new left to do, either in feminism or poetry. Feminism remains an unfinished revolution, and its boldest poetry is still often silenced by one means or another. This new edition of *No More Masks!* can be both a celebration of advances made and a continuing challenge for the future. Its poetries can chart the next set of issues, continuums, problems, questions, and conundrums for women in the *next* twenty years. And yet the new anthology fails in this regard. It reads as a curiously static thing; it is framed as a volume that looks back rather than forward.

An anthologist does two things of substance: she chooses the poems to be included, and she writes an introduction. On both scores, Florence Howe’s emphases seem rooted in the seventies rather than the nineties. Her introduction, with its search for common “themes” among women poets and its efforts to define female “identity,” ignores most of the important feminist criticism of the last twenty years, from which we have learned, precisely, that there is no such thing as a final, defining, or overarching female identity or female anything-else. There are as many themes, ways of handling them, and identities as there are poets; and, since most of us juggle many identities in one and the same person, there are more, an almost infinite variety. If we have learned anything in feminism in the last twenty years, it is to acknowledge the extraordinary diversity among women, which is not to be subsumed under a too easy commonality.

Howe’s view also leads her to choose poems for inclusion in the anthology in a surprisingly narrow way. The subject matter of the chosen poems deals heavily in the “stages” of a woman’s life, particularly those in which the female body is central: menses, first sexual awakening or early experience, marriage, pregnancy, the act of giving birth, raising children, aging, illness, death. Experiences of rape, incest, or abuse are commonly addressed, as well as loving relationships with men. Less frequently, relationships with women are treated, usually in a “sisterly” way. In

order to demonstrate an “ethic of caring” among women, there are also poems about race relations, war, and the fate of the earth. One feels that the chosen poems tend to be those that could clearly be conceived of as in some way “womanly,” rather than, simply, the most powerful poems by women. This approach strikes me as more or less essentialist, and mistaken. Further, the form of the chosen poems is rather narrowly prescribed: it is usually linear narrative or free verse lyric, not too complex in structure, language, or general approach. It is “accessible” in a reductionist way, and does not demand much of the reader. Making the book accessible to students, or to general readers who may not be especially trained in the complexities of modern poetry, need not involve this much dilution or watering down.

Poetry is also an art, not only a politics. The editor’s selections and omissions raise the question: How did she decide what to include or omit? Was she searching for the best poems by women? the most feminist? What politics/poetics were applied? Since Howe’s introduction says almost nothing about the criteria she used to choose or omit poets or poems, it is hard to know what ideas were at work (except that the selections and omissions themselves show a kind of voting with the feet). Howe does say in her introduction that, in order to be included, a poet had to have published at least two books. This rule is by itself a mistake (although I realize that other anthologists also use it). It permits the omission of genius. If two published books are the rule, then an anthology of nineteenth-century poets would omit both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Is that an anthology worth reading? Such a rule evades the anthologist’s essential task, which is to choose the best. There have always been well-published ignoramuses and minimally published geniuses. The anthologist must separate wheat from chaff, and rules like the two-book minimum will not help her to do that. Finally, the *feminist* anthologist ought to recognize that the two-book rule would tend to penalize working class or poor writers, women of color, younger and older writers, lesbians, and so on—all the people who for reasons *other than* the quality of their work, might find it more difficult to write a great deal or to be published. Here is a list, made at random, of poets excluded from the anthology, either because of the two-book minimum or for other unknown reasons: Dorothy Allison, Robin Becker, Judith Barrington, Chrystos, doris davenport, Tory Dent, Mari Evans, Jan Freeman, Ruth Forman, Suzanne Gardinier, Elsa Gidlow, Sandra Gilbert, Janice Gould, Jewelle Gomez, Isabella Gardner, Barbara Howes, Sybil James, Laura Jensen, Jane Kenyon, Faye Kicknosway, Joan Larkin, Deena Metzger, Judith Minty, Karen Mitchell, Jane Miller, Josephine Miles, Honor Moore, Lisel Mueller, Katha Pollitt, Kate Rushin, May Sarton, Martha Shelley, Adrien Stoutenburg, Susan Sherman, Susan Stewart, Shirley Anne Williams. . . .

On the other hand, Howe singles out Adrienne Rich as the one great writer in the anthology (“probably the best poet writing today in the United States”), and gives her special placement and a large selection. Although Adrienne Rich *is* a great writer, and a great *feminist* writer, and a writer who has been and remains enormously influential, she is not the *only* great writer in an anthology that spans this entire century. Why must we be limited to one? Rich herself, perhaps, would

not be pleased with this kind of tokenism and denial of the continuity of genius among women. In an odd, rather contradictory way, too, Howe seems to refuse to make judgments about the quality of a poet's work, giving minor poets like Hazel Hall or Genevieve Taggard as large a selection as major ones like Sylvia Plath. Why do the selections for very popular poets, like Sharon Olds or Marge Piercy, tend to be longer than for poets who are certainly as accomplished or important, such as H. D., Olga Broumas, or Louis Glück? And, when Howe does have an important poet on her hands, like Audre Lorde or Ruth Stone or Marilyn Hacker or Rich, she tends to choose the less important, or less complex, poems from the available work. Ruth Stone, for instance, is represented by a less important recent work ("Father's Day") while her great, much more radical poem, "Translations," is omitted. The selection for Marilyn Hacker, who is best known as a formal poet and as a lesbian erotic poet, cuts out the eroticism, and the extraordinary formal skill, in favor of less bold and rigorous selections. (In general, Howe seems afraid of too much lesbianism, as if the charge "you're alla buncha dykes" has to be primly disproved. And she perpetuates invisibility, as for instance by calling Amy Lowell "a spinster"; Amy Lowell lived with her woman lover, Ada Dwyer, for many years. This sort of misinformation is bad for the young.) Even the selections for Rich tend to dilute her complexity and diminish the force of her lucid interrogations. It seems to me, then, that the choices made by the editor are too often erratic, questionable, or wrongheaded.

Yet, Howe's material is so rich that she can't help but hit the nail on the head some or even much of the time. In spite of the anthology's limitations in terms of what has been left out, the poetry in it still speaks out eloquently about women's lives. By choosing a series of poems by various hands dedicated to Elizabeth Bishop and Audre Lorde, the editor illuminates a sense of the on-going dialogue among women poets, the continuity of inspiration among them, both poetical (in Bishop's case) and political (in Lorde's). May Swenson's poem to Bishop, "In the Bodies of Words," is an elegy written in the form of a letter to the recently dead poet, and it insists on the perpetuation and multiplication of the poet's vision "in the bodies of words." Joy Harjo's ironic, bitter, and wonderful poem to Audre Lorde, "Anchorage," echoes Lorde's words in telling "the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival / those who were never meant / to survive ..." (440). These are among many poems that suggest that women *listen to each other* with a vivid attention, initially born, perhaps, of the need for survival under conditions of oppression, and then, later, for the pleasure of learning from each other. This process of listening and learning is evident in Susan Griffin's "I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman," which is such a pleasure to see again—the first line, which repeats the title, makes me instantly happy—and then again, differently, in Denise Levertov's poem dedicated to Alice Walker and Carolyn Taylor, "The Long Way Round." Griffin's poem is a meditation about Harriet Tubman's example of resistance and struggle; Levertov's poem provocatively retells lessons learned about white racism. There is an abundance of poems dedicated to Audre Lorde, which may reflect the fact that the anthology was being prepared around the

time of her death. High permission fees and limited budgets forced the editor to limit Lorde's selection to three poems, an unfortunate circumstance; but Howe has ensured Lorde's presence in the anthology by including many poems written by others to her or under her influence. An effective solution. In any case, the poems taken together constitute a collective elegy for this great poet, who needs to be listened to still. It is in these dialogues among women, in the embeddedness of its texts, its "intertextuality," that the anthology makes its best and most interesting contribution.

"Who are the Shelleys and Wordsworths of our time?" Florence Howe asks in her introduction—and answers in her text, "Rukeyser and Rich." But Rukeyser and Rich make only one pair of many possible framing voices for the book. By framing her questions too narrowly, by being too constrained in her approach to women's poetry, and by failing to be as bold as she could have been in her selections of poets and poems, Howe has missed an opportunity here. The new *No More Masks!*, with the wealth of material that was available to it, could have covered a range of new territories that earlier women's poetry only touched on. It could have responded to Rukeyser's title challenge with a range of ferocious and tender voices in which "the fragments join" to make new "music." It could and should have been both more provocative and more satisfying than it is. But it is *there*, and, despite its limitations, still an invaluable collection of women's voices, a bunch of white and women of color talking. It is more important than ever that they be heard.