

FROM THE GUARDIAN BOOKS BLOG

Jo Shapcott asks whether there is such a thing as 'female' poetry

Many of the poems in my next book are influenced by the artist Helen Chadwick, whose early work made much use of images of her own body - until a change in the late 1980s. She wrote: "I made a conscious decision in 1988 not to represent my body... It immediately declares female gender and I wanted to be more deft." I think I am in love with the word "deft", which seems to me to describe exactly how a poet should be - but apart from that I was intrigued by the idea of art that might not declare gender. When I applied the idea to poetry I saw how prescriptive we can be - particularly as readers - in our assumptions about the influence of gender on writing.

A related question has been knocking around in my head for the past few weeks: do women genuinely write different poems from men and, if so, what could be said to characterise the "female" poem? The occasion that prompted the question happened when the Aldeburgh poetry festival and the Poetry Society combined to host an event called The Female Poem, which I chaired, and which boasted a distinguished panel of writers: Maureen Duffy, Annie Freud and Pascale Petit. It was so popular that it sold out in minutes and had to be moved to a larger hall, which suggests the subject is urgent - and not just to women; our audience was mixed.

The other mem-

bers of the panel had been equally haunted by the question. We realised that for our own day-to-day writing it was perhaps more important not to let thoughts about gender dominate, certainly not at first, so that the language can lead us into places, characters and identities we can't always anticipate. It was pretty clear that such thoughts are not expected of men, though: their poetry is set as a kind of default mode, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's idea that "man is defined as a human being and a woman as female". So while women readers are happy to devour anything that is good, male readers are sometimes nervous of poetry books by women - those with editorial experience among us had noticed it was difficult to get men to review women's books, as if a different, specialised expertise was necessary. Or, that the kudos was less?

But there are advantages: the panel was convinced that a poet ought to be an outsider. The edge, the discomfort, makes for clearer vision. Duffy reminded us of the audacity and courage of Aphra Behn in this regard. Virginia Woolf pinpointed the feeling of an outsider beautifully in *A Room of One's Own*: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in."

And we all relished the freedom of shifting boundaries; the extreme polarity of male/female doesn't necessarily fit who we are and how we write. The poet can be moved along a continuum of femininity and masculinity in poems to produce the effects or characters needed. We immediately thought of poets who do

this, such as Keats, or Dickinson. As you might guess, there was no final agreement as to whether there is a distinctly female poetic sensibility: some thought that you could pinpoint a unique openness to the world and the body in women's writing, others thought these were exciting options for any writer, just as territories that might be seen as particularly masculine are open to everyone.

CJ Underwood: As far as I'm concerned, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and so on have no impact on the nature of a poem. All that matters is that the work has something valid and interesting to say, not who or what is saying it.

degrus: But everyone has an age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality (or two) and so on, and we experience them all the time. We are never not experiencing our age, gender, etc. Are you saying that poetry comes from - or ought to come from - somewhere that has nothing to do with our actual, everyday, breathing experiences? That the origins of *echt* poetry lie, somehow, in some way, outside us? That to allow our age, gender, etc, to show in our poetry is to contaminate something that ought not have anything to do with such ordinary - even vulgar - things? That poetry shouldn't describe what it is like for us, saddled or armed with our particular gender and so on, to go about the business of living?

Billy Mills: There are women poets whose voice is inescapably female: HD and Plath, say. Then there are others who address gender-related topics in a verse that is, in most respects, indistinguishable from their male counterparts (Mary Barber and her contemporaries among them). But could you really tell the gender of Marianne Moore (*pictured*) by reading "The Steeple-Jack", or even "Marriage"? The problem with this discussion is that there is no single answer; poets are individuals, and, despite the constraints of both social and literary convention, the best ones manage to find voices that go way beyond any narrow definition of who they are. If they are good enough, their works may survive long past a time when any idea of their personal identity has evaporated.

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