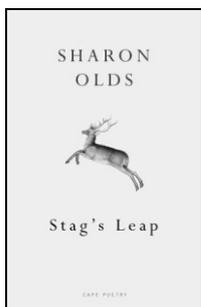


REVIEW: MYRA SCHNEIDER ON SHARON OLDS

Stag's Leap, Sharon Olds, Jonathan Cape, 2012. £10, ISBN 978-0-2240969-4-2



“The burning need to express the hidden and painful matter of her childhood was Olds’ starting point...”

photo © Brett Hall Jones

Sharon Olds won last year’s T S Eliot Prize with her collection, *The Stag’s Leap*. She has won many other awards and often been adulated but opinions about her are divided. Michael Schmidt devoted most of an editorial in *PN Review* (Volume 39, Number 4, March to April 2013) to quoting articles which demolished her work. I have heard and read many other comments which are either very strongly for or against Olds and this book in particular. These extreme reactions seem to me to mask the strengths and weaknesses of her poetry.

The burning need to express the hidden and painful matter of her childhood was Olds’ starting point and I think her shorter earlier, controlled poems are among her strongest. Later poems explore her relationship with each parent in adult life and seek for reconciliation. Some of these are also extraordinarily powerful but similar material is continually returned to, often at length, which for me weakens the work. She has also written about her early adult life, her husband and children. Now and then she has tackled issues outside personal experience but I find these poems have less charge. The poems about her husband and children in *The Well Spring* didn’t convince me either because the relationships struck me as idealized (I suspect to compensate for her unhappy childhood).

Stag’s Leap traces the stages of Olds’ marriage break up and its aftermath. The poems read as writing to survive. There are many passages which are fully realized as poetry. In the title poem the image of her husband as a stag leaping over a precipice to escape the marriage is triggered by a drawing on the label of their favourite bottle of wine:

...When anyone escapes, my heart
leaps up. Even when it is I who am escaped from,
I am half on the side of the leaver. It’s so quiet,
and empty, when he’s left. I feel like a landscape,
a ground without a figure.

She then mentions, “a drypoint of someone / tiny being crucified / on a fallow deer’s antlers, I feel like his victim, / and he seems my victim.” The complex of feelings is poignant and the sustaining of the original image is deft throughout the first part of the poem. A few lines on: “I was vain of his / faithfulness as if it was / a compliment, rather than a state / of partial sleep,” is piercingly honest but the last sixteen lines of the poem unnecessarily elaborate the original image which takes away from the main thrust.

Known To Be Left describes feelings of shame:

...to be known to be left
by the one who supposedly knew me best,

each hour is a room of shame, and I am
swimming, swimming, holding my head up,
smiling, joking, ashamed, ashamed,
like being naked with the clothed...

The moving confession must echo what many have experienced. Indeed the explicit expression of distressing personal feelings, often drawing on everyday matter and body detail for imagery, is the great strength of Olds' work. It is this which communicates to many people. She then admits: "In me now / there's a being of sheer hate, like an angel / of hate." This is almost the only time that Olds allows anger about the break up of the marriage to surface. The next ten lines offer an image of the angel of hate in a burst of mixed metaphors which over-extend the poem. In *Love* interwoven images of the room as a bridge of a ship over the harbour and herself in "a bowl-of-cream bed purring" don't seem to me to fuse and in this poem, as in others, I am tantalized by a glimpse of her husband as a person with his own difficulties but she only hints at these because she is absorbed in portraying him as the person she has to learn to live without. The layout of this poem seems arbitrary as it does in several others.

Many will relate to Olds' way of coping with her trauma: holding onto her husband by writing about memories of his body, their parting and the finding of a way through to a new state of being but in a book of 89 pages the obsessional repetition of similar material for me lessens the book's impact. Dilys Wood looked at this kind of problem when she reviewed Selima Hill in *ARTEMISpoetry* Issue 10.

Other poets who have been through crises find completely different ways to present distressing subject matter. At the opposite end of the pole from Olds Louise Glück in *Meadowlands* writes poems which are dramatic monologues in the voices of the couple who are at the point of parting and counterpoints these with monologues in the voices of Penelope and other characters from the Odysseus myth. Sylvia Plath, who was labelled confessional like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, writes about painful feelings sometimes with detail of personal experience and there is often an obsessional undertone in her work but Plath's range subject matter, tone, approach and her masterly technique are extraordinary. Think of the different ways in which she expresses herself in *The Bee Meeting*, *Poppies in October* and *Sheep in Fog*.

Sharon Olds is a truly confessional poet. I don't think the poems in *The Stag's Leap* are as achieved as work in some of her earlier books. However, in this sequential collection there is much potent writing and it further marks her as poet significant for the way she addresses the minutiae of personal experience and the exposure of her own naked feelings.

Myra Schneider