

HAMMERING ON THE DOORS JACQUELINE SAPHRA ON OLDER POETS



About fifteen years ago, I asked a well-respected poetry publisher to recommend early-career poets for The Shuffle, a reading series at The Poetry Café where we combined short readings from newer poets with longer ones from more established ones. I had remarked to him that there seemed to be very few novice male poets who would commit.

‘It’s so difficult to find male readers at that level. The scene is so overcrowded with middle-aged women’, he said.

photo © Naomi Waddis

Here, I’m going to put my head above the parapet and opine that in fact men very often self-define as more experienced than they are in all areas of life.

When I heard the publisher’s comment, I realised with a sinking feeling that as a woman poet really coming into my power in my late forties, I was going to be at a disadvantage. This came as quite a shock; I had thought of the poetry world as being ultimately fair and democratic. I honestly thought it transcended age, gender and colour too; I can’t continue with this essay without using the word ‘intersectional’ and just need to acknowledge the fierce grassroots work of older woman like Bernardine Evaristo and Natalie Teitler and countless others to redress the colour balance in poetry.

But who is championing ‘middle-aged’ and older women who begin to write, or pick up their writing later in life? Who wants to hear them? If we think of poetry as a tiny microcosm of the world at large, we will observe that young women poets are being singled out by major publishing houses, photographed by magazines (because looks matter even for poets especially women) and increasingly picked up agents (!) early in their careers. Of course they are the next generation and of course their future and the future of poetry matters. But that doesn’t mean we should ignore the creative output of those who went before them as if they didn’t exist. Great poetry endures on the page – or at least it should. I’m thinking of ground-breaking, inspirational and admired poets – older women like, Carol Rumens, Jackie Wills, Mimi Khalvati, Maura Dooley, Fleur Adcock, Jane Draycott, Penelope Shuttle, even the famed Selima Hill – all of whom, in my opinion are at the top of their game but whose collections rarely appear on prize lists. Even the late great Eavan Boland who died earlier this year was obituarised in only one major English newspaper. In a truly intersectional world, older women are generally marginalised just as they are marginalised in almost every sphere.

But where are we – or rather, and why not get specific, where am I in the mix?

Like many women, my writing career was put on hold through my thirties and most of my forties when I was bringing up four children. I had begun my creative life as a playwright and was working hard through my twenties on commissioned plays – in demand as a young woman playwright. Between children I studied screenwriting at The National Film School and spent intermittent years in development hell – one eye on the page and one eye on my role as mother. It was not until my early forties that I rediscovered poetry and realised a poem could be born in between cooking dinner, running a bath and doing the school pick-up, that it was perfectly possible to dwell on the placing of a comma while folding the washing and that family-related activities were a good time to allow the unconscious to work its magic and solve seemingly insoluble verse-related problems. This is not to say that poetry is not time-consuming. It is hard to make it a part-time pursuit; it demands the whole of your being to be fully actualised and often hours can pass at my desk working without me realising it. So I’m not saying poetry and motherhood are an ideal mix, just that it is POSSIBLE to get something down on paper – although not as much as a man who has a wife to take care of him. So progress and output are likely to be slow.

As Eavan Boland famously said, ‘When I was young it was easier to have a political murder in a poem than a baby’. And indeed many of my early poems focussed on the domestic – which had never been particularly popular in poetry. Kate Clanchy was considered a trailblazer with her book *Newborn* – a whole book about that unusual experience, motherhood and childbirth (!) and was not universally admired for her choice of subject matter – but of course Anne Stevenson and many others had been there before her. Now it is more of an accepted part of contemporary poetry: I’m thinking of Liz Berry, Olivia McCannon, Holly McNish for example.

Indeed I was astonished and happy to find that my own *All My Mad Mothers* was shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize despite its overtly female (and feminist) perspective. The book inspired much affection and has been widely read. I am especially pleased about that, because it represents three generations of women: my mother, myself and my grown-up children.

Now I have much more time to focus on my poetry and I’m writing more and better poems because I have time and focus without distractions. I’ve had time and headspace to write two sonnet coronas about women I admire; *A Bargain with the Light: poems after Lee Miller*, the photographer and *Veritas: Poems after Artemisia*. Both were books that entailed research and intense, prolonged concentration. Both were books about iconoclastic women artists, both mothers, who achieved greatness in their fields despite life experiences that might have crushed them.

Dad, Remember You Are Dead, a much darker collection, was informed by the process of writing about Miller and Gentileschi. This is a book filled with post-menopausal primal rage. This is a book in which I care more about telling the absolute emotional, intellectual truth than I do about being loved. This collection has inspired less affection and admiration than *All My mad Mothers* although it is, in my opinion, a stronger and braver one, daring more risks in both form and content. Even as I write that sentence, I wonder if I have the right to say this? And yet I feel it strongly; in a post MeToo world, following the death of my father and without the deep-seated fear of his disapproval and anger, I felt it was time to publish the poems I’d been withholding, and also time to write the poems I’d been afraid to write. It seems to be a book that people are less likely to endorse publicly, although they’ll often give me a private vote of approval.

I am not sure, though, the world – or at least the poetry world – is ready for divine rage, the kind of rage that ricochets down the centuries, takes the male canon to task and hammers on the doors of patriarchy.