

NOTES ON BEING A FEMALE POET



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I started sending out my poems to little poetry magazines when I was very young, I was about 14 or 15 years old. My poems were sometimes accepted for publication. This was very affirming for an apprentice poet. At first I published under the name P D Shuttle, so perhaps those very early poems were published because my gender was unknown. But a few years after that, I started to use my name as: Penelope Shuttle. I continued to be published, and gradually making my way to the pages of bigger-name magazines.

In those early years I don't think I gave any credence as to whether my gender had any effect on my poems being accepted or not. But now, as I look back, I realise that quite a number of doors were shut to me. Some editors, of course, will never take your work, never be on your wavelength. I realise now, however, that I was often not invited to put work into anthologies, or to give readings, and I believe the dice was weighted against women writers.

I remember Roddy Lumsden telling me once, when I bumped into him in the Poetry Library in London, that I was only the third woman (in 1972 or 1973) to receive an Eric Gregory award. That surprised me, but it should not have done. It made me think about locked doors. These awards, for a collection from a poet under 30 years of age, are a really important stage in a poet's career. It is an accolade that can open doors. Nowadays there is gender parity among those winning an award, but that was not so back in the early 1970s.

As a young woman poet I was aware of widely published and respected women poets such as Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, Denise Levertov, Kathleen Raine, E J Scovell, and H.D. Their work and lives made me feel that I too had every right to be published and to call myself a poet. When I look back at these closed doors I accept that my poetry might not have suited some male judges or editors temperamentally, but equally I think there was a lot of tunnel vision with male poets and editors regarding the inclusion of women poets, and I was, as I say, more excluded than I realised.

I count myself fortunate that for many years I had a woman editor, Jacqueline Simms, who took over the Oxford University Press poetry list in the late 1970s, with a remit to renew and refresh it with new voices. I learned so much from Jacqueline. I also had, in Jacqueline Korn at David Higham's Associates, a wonderful agent who fought my corner, and both of these Jacquelines were role models to me; they were very capable, highly-intelligent, well-read, and independent woman.

It is also very important to me that my publisher now is Bloodaxe, who publish a huge variety of women poets, and have done so since their earliest days. There will always be difficulties in the way of becoming and remaining a published poet. When we encounter a closed door, that door and the person who closed it, is seeking to silence you. Do not allow them to silence you!

Looking back over my writing years, I realise how driven I have been, and not been put off by setbacks, or not for long! We change the culture around poetry when we persist in our writing and our engaging with the poetry world. When encountering obstacles we need to redouble our efforts, remind ourselves that what we write is valid and important. It needs to be published and heard. Those open doors are there, to be found. If they are not open, we need to knock, loudly!

Penelope Shuttle

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