JEANNE HEUVING

GENDER IN MARIANNE MOORE'S ART:
CANTS AND REFUSALS

The poetry of Marianne Moore frequently has been more labeled through considerations of her sex and gender, but rarely has been elucidated through these terms. While critical response to Moore has varied considerably from the first enthusiastic reception by her Modernist peers, to the more mixed remarks by the New Critics, and to the often negative response of recent feminist criticism, Moore’s poetry most often has been viewed as an avoidance and suppression of her sexuality and “feminine experience.” Pound refers to her “spinstery aversion” (Letters 157), and while Eliot praises her “femininity,” one senses the praise is for a quiescence in the work and not an activity. After expending an entire review largely on the languages of Moore’s poetry, Eliot will conclude, “And there is one final, and ‘magnificent’ compliment: Miss Moore’s poetry is as ‘feminine’ as Christina Rossetti’s, one never forgets that it is written by a woman; but with both one never thinks of this particularly as anything but a positive virtue” (“Marianne Moore” 51).

Beginning with the New Criticism, Moore’s stature begins to diminish and a more explicit criticism of her presumably suppressed sexuality emerges. Blackmur in a frequently quoted article finds Moore’s poetry limited by a sensibility which “imposes limits more profoundly than it liberates poetic energy.” He establishes the cause of this limitation as the absence of sexuality: “There is no sex anywhere in her poetry. No poet has been so chaste” (84,85). More lugubriously, Jarrell remarks, “We are uncomfortable—or else too comfortable—in a world in which feeling, affections, charity are so entirely divorced from sexuality and power, the bonds of the flesh” (122). Curiously, while the New Criticism would urge an attention to the text, it is at
this time that the stereotype of Moore’s character as sexless and neuter becomes paramount in the criticism.¹

Until recently, the feminist criticism would seem largely to confirm this stereotype. Adrienne Rich denounces Moore as the woman most admired by the men in her generation, precisely because her “maidenly,” “elegant,” and “discreet” qualities posed no threat to her male peers (39). Suzanne Juhasz in attempting to see these attributes from Moore’s own perspective apologizes for Moore. Moore had to leave out her “feminine experience” “in seeking public recognition at this time,” for she had “to play by the boys’ rules” (4). Most telling of the pervasiveness of this stereotype of Moore is a recent article on women Modernist writers by Carolyn Burke, “Supposed Persons: Modernist Poetry and the Female Subject.” Although Burke urges a reconsideration of such Modernist writers as Mina Loy and Laura Riding, as well as Moore, suggesting the importance of the question of subjectivity itself to their writing, she concludes negatively about Moore’s poetic venture. “What happens,” she asks, “when the speaking subject—the T of the poetry—is textually conscious of itself as a producer of language (or as a point of view) rather than as a self seeking transcendence or attempting self-celebration?” (131). However, about Moore’s poetry, she can only find cause to remark:

Still, the range of “feminine” virtues seems limited if one’s taste runs to subjects other than celebrations of the attentive, imaginative mind’s conflict with nature and with the world of artifacts. Possibly the problem lies in Moore’s narrow range of feeling, her sense that the ‘feminine temperament’ is or has been circumscribed and therefore must adopt indirection and obliqueness as forms of limited self-expression. One senses that the obstacles in the path of this ‘feminine’ temperament outweigh its force and passion (141).

What this criticism has confirmed, then, is the stereotype of a woman poet lacking something, perhaps her womanliness, her sexuality, or necessary courage. And it has found this lack as manifesting itself directly in the poetry—as restraint, reticence, humility, self-effacement, sexlessness, emotionlessness, and powerlessness. I maintain that Moore’s position in the culture as a woman and her resulting poetry are far more complex than this criticism has indicated. The above criticism is concerned largely with the ways Moore either does or does not represent herself or her sexuality

¹ Taffy Martin in her article “Portrait of a Writing Master: Beyond the Myth of Marianne Moore” notes how the New Criticism instituted as fact the image Moore projected of herself as a “decorative oddity.”
directly in the verse, and to the extent that either is not represented directly, she is seen as writing an ungendered and sexless poetry. However, I argue that, although Moore’s poetry is not primarily concerned with subjects of sex and gender, this absence does not mean she writes a poetry according to the “boys’ rules” or even a neutral or a neuter poetry.

In order to understand the dimensions of Moore’s effort, the very terms of the discussion must be seen from her position as a woman in the larger culture. That is, before one can call Moore’s poetry so simply restrained reticent, humble, self-effacing, emotionless, sexless, and powerless, the terms themselves must be seen from the perspective of what it means for her to assume these attributes, if in fact she does.² To study Moore or any woman writer, the very terms of evaluation must be considered with respect to what possible postures and positions she can assume and still “mean” within the culture. By stressing how she can “mean,” how she can “make meaning,” I seek to call attention to the differences in postures and positions assumable by men and women.

For instance, a woman poet cannot take on the persona of a J. Alfred Prufrock or a Hugh Selwyn Mauberly and appear anything but ridiculous. That is, a woman bemoaning her lack of fit with her culture from a position as its universal representative approaches being an oxymoron. She can lament the culture from her position in it as a woman, as its secondary subject, but not as its primary subject. She can speak about the culture, but not as its representative.

Similarly, a woman cannot write portraits of a significant other that effect the same meaningful dynamics.

² At least two studies to date attempt such a perspective: Bonnie Costello’s “The Feminine Language of Marianne Moore” and Bonnie Tymorski August’s “Womanhood in Five American Poets.” In her one article which foregrounds Moore’s gender, Costello suggests that Moore’s “feminine qualities” take on “a special powerful meaning, quite inverted in value.” According to Costello, humility for Moore “keeps the world large” .... The end of humility is not self-protection for its own sake so much as ‘gusto,’ the spark released in the discovery of and enthusiasm for what is out of our control .... When associated with ‘sincerity,’ the principle of humility and restraint becomes an agent of ‘gusto’ by continually turning up a difference between the ways things are described and the way things are” (223-228). August comments, “Marianne Moore, who does not write poems about the feminine condition, but who embodies the traditional position of the outsider, takes the woman’s prerogative of appearing to be peripheral and exploits it brilliantly. Powerlessness becomes formidable power, and values are turned around” (4). Although I find both of these studies suggestive, I aim to radicalize the perspective even further. That is, while both Costello and Tymorski-August emphasize the inversions of values, I take issue with the very readability of Moore’s poetry outside of a context which does not question her position as a woman within her culture. While Moore at times does invert values, her response is importantly endowed with silences: forced upon her and elected.
as do his portraits of her. We have no Modernist Portraits of a Gentleman that fulfill the same function as do the Portraits of Ladies and the myriad representations of women by men in Modernist texts. We might note the improbability of a poem addressed to him (or even to a her) by her, which at once elevates him and establishes her dominance over him. She could not at once elevate him and establish her dominance over him, for by cultural standards he would no longer be a man to be elevated. In fact, an entirely different relation to others, an entirely different psychology, prevails in women’s writing. I would venture that men’s lyric poetry without her as ineffably meaningful, as a kind of sublime, would hardly be what it is—and most certainly Romantic and post-Romantic poetry, given its rejection of meanings based on traditional moralities and truths. Frequently, it is the “meaning” of this other upon which the poem’s coherence, heights, and closure depend.

Women’s poetry accordingly differs. That women poets cannot assume the position of a universal representative and of dominance over a significant other makes at the very outset their writing of poetry very different from men’s. In short, as feminist criticism and theory have repeatedly shown, women’s cultural realities are neither the same nor simple inverses of men’s. And in many ways these realities remain hidden, as evidenced here by the stereotypic labeling of a poetry as unstereotypic as Marianne Moore’s.

Certainly Moore herself did not make gender distinctions central to her poetic practice, but to assume that gender relations did not vitally affect her poetic production and that she wrote a neutral or a neuter poetry is to fail to understand her place in the sex-gender system, which is pervasive and permeating, not partial and elected. Moore as a profoundly engaged poet in her poetic medium surely could not escape these relations. Moore, as I hope we will see, isn’t so simply reserved, but writes with an end to leaving out “omissions are not accidents” (Complete Poems vii). For Moore, the practice of a reserve in the writing is undoubtedly bound up in both what she can’t say and what she refuses to say.

3. This psychology is, of course, the subject of extensive analysis and debate, focusing on the girl’s different relation to her mother and on her different relation to language and the real. Nancy Chodorow in The Reproduction of Mothering concentrates on the former and French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray in This Sex Which Is Not One, explore the latter in their disruptive readings and misreadings of Lacanian psychoanalysis.
I will now consider a relatively early poem by Moore—"Those Various Scalpels"—in order to show how an attention to what the poem can't say and refuses to say is crucial to an understanding of its imaginative activity. To establish what Moore's poem about a significant other can't say, I will briefly review those poems by her male Modernist peers addressed to significant others--Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme," Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," and Williams' "Portrait of a Lady." I will note the relationship of Moore's poem and the men's poems to the Renaissance poetic convention of the portrayal of the beloved through a depiction of her bodily parts. After establishing this initial context, I will then comment on what Moore is refusing to say and how her poem is an evasion rather than an avoidance of gender. I use the term "evasion" as Stevens used it—to stress how gender for Moore is not a reality to be denied, but evaded through imaginative activity. Indeed in "Those Various Scalpels" Moore presses back on a reality imbued with gender relations, with a violence from within that protects her from a violence from without (36).

In an essay commenting on the psychology underlying the Renaissance convention of the portrayal of the beloved through a depiction of her bodily parts, Nancy Vickers suggests the relation between a fear of castration and a projection of scattered parts onto a woman. Her scattering, in turn, convinces him of his entirety. "It is in fact the loss, at the fictional level, of Laura's body [in Petrarch's sonnets] that constitutes the intolerable absence..." (106). "Woman remains . . . the instrument by which man attains unity, and she pays for it at the price of her own dispersion" (102). 4

Although Moore's poem employs this Renaissance convention more noticeably than do her male Modernist peers, she remains outside its psychology whereas they inhabit it. While in their poems, their speakers may experience their own entirety at the expense of their femmes and ladies, Moore's poem concludes with a critique of the conventions of the Renaissance love lyric itself: "why dissect destiny with instruments which/ are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny itself?" (Poems 7). In the men's poems the woman is characterized by her parts and/or partial nature--Pound's "oddments," Eliot's "bric brac," Williams' "petals from an apple tree"—and she enables

him to experience himself as entire. That is, while the relation between self and other in these poems cannot be reduced to a simple act of domination, his domination over her allows him to define himself positively.

Both Pound's and Eliot's poems are written relatively early in their careers—at a time during which they are far more aware of what they are refusing in the poetic tradition than what they will contribute. In Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme," the partial and secondary nature of this "femme" made of parts is openly declared:

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
You have been second always.

The poem concludes:

and yet
For all this sea—hoard of decidious things,
Strange woods half so laden, and new brighter stuff:
In the slow float of differing light and deep,
No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.
Yet this is you. (Personae 61)

Pound may not be projecting his bodily parts onto his beloved, but his femme is certainly a projection of partial and somewhat worthless knowledges. In Eliot’s “Portrait,” the speaker assumes a general air of superiority over his lady, whose life "is composed, so much, of odds and ends.” But despite the “bric a brac” of this lady, she manages to compose the scene for him:

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do--
With “I have saved this afternoon, for you”;

While the lady may well represent Eliot’s dislike of a feminine vagueness found in turn-of-the-century poetry and perhaps of women themselves, his speaker has little at this point with which to truly oppose her music and questions himself as such:

Well and what if she should die some afternoon,
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
Doubtful, for awhile
Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon...
Would she not have the advantage, after all?
The music is successful with a "dying fall"
Now that we talk of dying--
And should I have the right to smile? (Collected Poems 8, 12)

However, even though Eliot questions his own superiority, the meaningfulness of this very possibility has created the dynamics for, and therefore the basic conditions for, meaning in this poem.

Williams, in his portrait, like Moore, utilizes the Renaissance convention of the beauty depicted by her parts:

Your thighs are apple trees
whose blossoms touch the sky ....

Your knees
are a southern breeze--or
a gust of snow ....

A h yea--below
the knees, since the tune
drops that way, it is
one of those white summer days,
the tall grass of your ankles
flickers upon the shore .... (35)

In the quixotic last line of the poem--"I said petals from an apple tree"--the speaker unequivocally asserts his presence over the parts, for it is he who "says" them (36).

In turning to Moore's poem, we might note initially that there is no relationship of domination between the speaker and the other she contemplates, nor is it entirely clear whether this other is male or female, fearful or fearsome. The poem flashes with scalpels, lances, and weapons. The body parts are depicted through metaphors which bring to the surface tearing and blood:

Those
various sounds consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes
struck from thin glasses successively at random--the
inflection disguised: your hair, the tails of two
fighting-cocks head to head in stone--like sculptured
scimitars re-
peating the curve of your ears in reverse order: your eyes,
flowers of ice

and
snow sown by tearing winds on the cordage of disabled ships: your raised
hand
an ambiguous signature: your cheeks, those rosettes
of blood on the stone floors of French chateaux, with
regard to which the guides are so affirmative:
your other hand

a bundle of lances all alike, partly hid by emeralds from Persia
and the fractional magnificence of Florentine
goldwork—a collection of half a dozen little objects
made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragonfly blue; a lemon, a
pear
and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a magnificent
square
cathedral of uniform
and at the same time, diverse appearance—a species of
vertical vineyard rustling in the storm
of conventional opinion. Are they weapons or scalpels?
Whetted
to
brilliance by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is su-
uperior to opportunity, these things are rich
instruments with which to experiment but surgery is
not tentative: why dissect destiny with instruments
which
are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny
itself? (Poems 7)

We might ask, then, whose projection is this—his or hers? Whose tearing—his or hers? The figure, if cruel, is also beautiful. And while Moore seems to be parodying the Renaissance convention of the portrayal of the beloved through the depiction of bodily parts, she also lovingly employs it.

Ultimately, Moore is confronting two figures in this poem: the figure cut in the stone floor and the poetic figure which cuts the body into parts. While Moore elects the wholeness of a destiny over the instruments which dissect it, to write her poem at all she has had to employ a method of dissection. Moore’s brilliance in the poem is that the figure is not merely depicted by bodily parts, but by the depictions that depict it. By making us aware of a “surgery” that “is/ not tentative,” the tearing and blood recounted in the metaphors seem the effect in part of the incision of the metaphors themselves.

What exactly compelled Moore to write this poem is unclear. It may have been that the examples of Eliot’s and Pound’s poems published a few years previously inspired her to try her hand at a portrait. In a review of

5. Pound’s “Portrait d’une Femme” was published in Ripostes (Personae) in 1912, and Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady” first appeared in 1915.
**Prufrock and Other Observations** in which she addresses Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," she is highly emotional and uncharacteristically inarticulate, referring uneasily to herself as "this hardened reviewer":

> The gentle reader, in his eagerness for the customary bit of sweets, can be trusted to overlook the un gallantry, the youthful cruelty, of the substance of the "Portrait." It may as well be admitted that this hardened reviewer cursed the poet in his mind for this cruelty while reading the poem; and just when he was ready to find extenuating circumstances—the usual excuses about realism—out came this "drunken helot"... with that ending. It is hard to get over this ending with a few moments of thought; it wrenches a piece of life at the roots. *(Complete Prose 35)*

While it is impossible to tell what exactly about this poem so affected Moore, the cruelty she notes in Eliot himself is present in her portrait as an aspect of the represented figure.

In comparison to the men's "Portraits," Moore's "Those Various Scapels" is far more complex and unresolved. What Moore *refuses* in this poem, then, is the portrayal of another as a reflection of herself. And she equally *refuses* to presume an advocacy for the other that would enact those subject-object distinctions through and by which domination occurs. Indeed Moore would seem to wish to instate the figure of the other, marked by those language conventions which articulate it in all its complexity and retrogressive pain, as the singular subject of her poem. In fully representing the reality of the other as other, Moore *evades* the subject-object duality and hierarchy upon which gender distinctions depend.

When "Those Various Schapels" was published in Moore's first collection of poems, *Poems*, Mark Van Doren commented in a review how it was one of the worst examples of the new poetry. It was "fastidiously" "highbrow" (482). I conclude quite the reverse—this poem is replete with "the bonds of the flesh"—a bondage that extends into the tissues of language and destiny itself. However, that it does not manifest an easily identifiable psychology attests to woman's and Marianne Moore's uneasy place as subject and as author within the existing system of representation.
WORKS CITED


