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PORTRAITS OF LADIES IN MARIANNE MOORE
AND ELIZABETH BISHOP

During the second decade of this century, the modernist poets, partly in concert with the painters of their day, brought new life to the traditional portrait of a lady. Ezra Pound’s “Portrait d'une Femme” was part of his Ripostes of 1912; Gertrude Stein’s “Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia” appeared in the 1913 issue of Camera Work that followed the Armory Show of new painting (Dijkstra 16); T. S. Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady” was published in Others in 1917, the same year in which William Carlos Williams brought out “Portrait of a Woman in Bed” in Al Que Quiere, after reading this poem at the Independents Exhibition of painting (Dijkstra 35). Perhaps one of the most interesting aftermaths of this decade of re-visions of ladies is the variety of informal, unlabelled “portraits” of women that appear in the work of those poets of this century who happen also to be women. I would like to take a preliminary look at such unannounced portraiture of women in the poems of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop—preliminary in the sense of gathering, clarifying, and naming what we see, without trying to choose too quickly or finally among the many psychological and feminist implications that will naturally arise.

Moore and Bishop differed from one another in many ways, and with one another on many subjects, during the thirty-eight years of their friendship (from March of 1934, when they met, till Moore’s death in February of 1972). But on at least one subject they appear to have been in implicit agreement: while defending and living by feminist principles, both poets expected their work to be read and judged in the larger arena of art beyond any issues of gender. Their depictions of women will inevitably be of special interest to feminist readers, since their images of feminine life are vivid and authoritative. But against the background of their many passing and recurrent images of
women, two full-length portraits stand out--Moore’s “Those Various Scalpels” and Bishop’s “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”--each of which commands attention first as an original approach to portraiture per se and then as a study of the lady in question, both as a work of art and as an artist. The two poets’ depictions of women are quite different from one another in range and emphasis, just as their experiences and characteristic feeling tones differed; and yet their portraits of the lady as an artist bear certain startling similarities that are central to their shared vocation and sensibilities.

It is probably due as much to historical moment and generation as to temperament that in Moore’s published poems the images and portraits of men vastly outnumber the images and portraits of women. An easy example is “The Hero,” who “look[s] / upon a fellow creature’s error with the / feelings of a mother--a / woman or a cat,” and in which Martha Washington and the sightseeing hobo-poet are outnumbered by the hero himself, Jacob, Joseph, Cincinnatus, Regulus, Pilgrim, the frock-coated Negro, “General Washington,” Moses, Pharaoh, and El Greco (MM 8-9). And Moore’s frequent portraiture in her Carlisle poems (published between 1915 and 1917, while she was living in Carlisle, Pennsylvania) is focused almost exclusively on male subjects--“To a Man Working His Way Through the Crowd,” “To William Butler Yeats on Tagore,” “To Disraeli on Conservatism,” “To Browning” (later retitled “Injudicious Gardening”), “To Bernard Shaw: A Prize Bird,” “Blake,” “George Moore,” and “To the Peacock of France” (Moliere). This strain of her early work was a kind of appropriation-by-judgment of the inherited cultural world in which she envisioned herself working. Given the patriarchal tenor of this world, her two to three dozen poetic portrayals of women have a predictably narrow range and yet an intensity and often a quality of fierce defiance.

The range of Moore’s female figures includes roughly four main types—the ornamental, the maternal, the temperamental, and the artistic. The ornamental ladies often appear in descriptive vignettes in which they are literally or virtually one more item in a catalogue. Even their educated minds can be perceived as simply part of the furnishings of “People’s Surroundings”—“Chinese carved glass, old Waterford, lettered ladies” (MM 55). The fragility and compliance that perpetuate the woman’s decorative role appear in this same poem in
... the acacia-like lady shivering at the touch of a hand
lost in a small collision of the orchids--
dyed quicksilver let fall
to disappear like an obedient chameleon in fifty shades of
mauve and amethyst. (MM 56)

The elegance of this thoroughly feminine beauty appears in
a more robust form in the catalogue of "A Carriage from
Sweden":

... And how beautiful, she
with the natural stoop of the
snowy egret, gray-eyed and straight-haired,
for whom it should come to the door--

of whom it reminds me. The split
pine fair hair, steady gunmet-clear
eyes and the pine-needled-path deer-
swift step .... (MM 131-2)

However, the word and concept of "lady" itself could also
have decidedly negative connotations for Moore, as in "To
Statecraft Embalmed" she addresses the ibis:

... you wind

snow
silence round us and with moribund talk,
half limping and half ladyfied, you stalk
about. (MM 35)

The "Novices" "... write the sort of thing that would in
their judgment interest a lady; / curious to know if we do
not adore each letter of the alphabet that goes to make a
word of it" (MM 60).

It is against this backdrop of ambiguous beauty
that Moore constructs her far more frequent positive
portraits of feminine figures. One of the strongest of these
is, not surprisingly, the mothers, almost all of them in
animal form, who appear in Moore's poems of the thirties
and forties after her early interest in the male artists as
subjects had abated. Moore lived with her mother all her
life until Mrs. Moore's death in 1947, and this was a mother
of uncommon intellectual gifts and all-too-common
possessiveness. Part of the hero's character includes this
animal quality in "the feelings of a mother--a / woman or a
cat" (MM 9). There is the "mouse with a / grape in its hand
and its child / in its mouth" in "Camellia Sabina" (MM 17),
and in "He 'Digesteth Harde Yron" the ostrich who

... watches his chicks with
a maternal concentration--and he's
been mothering the eggs
at night six weeks--his legs
their only weapon of defense. (MM 99)

This spirit of maternal protection is one place where Moore's female figures come into the full strength of their fierce devotion. One of her very few wholly narrative poems, "Bird-Witted," depicts the feeding and defending of three fledgling mockingbirds by their mother. Her enemy in the final lines, the "intellectual cautious- / ly creeping cat," can easily upstage the interesting central drama of the poem, which is the transformation of personality brought on not only by the approaching danger of the cat but also by motherhood itself:

... What delightful note
with rapid unexpected flute
sounds leaping from the throat
of the astute
grown bird, comes back to one from
the remote
unenergetic sun- 
lit air before
the brood was here? How harsh
the bird's voice has become. (MM 106)

The mock heroic "bayonet beak" and "cruel wings" of the bird defending her brood, a seriocomic scene that Mrs. Moore could surely appreciate, are modulated to a quieter kind of strength in "The Paper Nautilus," a study of reciprocated maternal love. Within the "thin glass shell" constructed by the nautilus, the "glass ram's-horn-cradled freight / is hid but is not crushed" (MM 121). This distinction between protection and injury was clearly an important one to a poet living creatively within her mother's house. The chosen aspect of this arrangement on Miss Moore's part, to continue to read autobiographically for the moment, is the affirmation with which the poem ends, the offspring's reciprocal holding on to the shell,

round which the arms had
wound themselves as if they knew love
is the only fortress
strong enough to trust to. (MM 122)

Moore's embodiment of maternal behavior in animal figures not only affirms the instinctual nature of such behavior in general but also reflects (and to some extent explains) the ever-present animal kingdom of pet-names by which the Moore family members expressed their attachments to one another. In the overall picture of woman, however, maternal strength is but one outstanding example of the strong
temperament, the mettle that informs Moore’s portraits both of women in general and of the woman as an artist.

Probably Moore’s most overtly feminist poem is “Sojourn in the Whale,” a piece that was apparently composed around the time of the poet’s first serious literary foray to New York City. This trip in December of 1915, on which she met future friends and editors like Alfred Kreymborg and visited Alfred Stieglitz’s studio “291,” was described in a letter to her brother as a “Sojourn in the Whale.” The poem’s opening theme of attempting the apparently impossible—“Trying to open locked doors with a sword” (MM 90)—suggestive of the young poet’s attempt to gain entry to the literary world, is met with the conventional expectation: “There is a feminine temperament in direct contrast to ours / which makes her do these things. . . . compelled by experience, she will turn back; / water seeks its own level” (90). The poet’s response to this challenge in return is as coolly and solidly defiant as we have in literature:

and you have smiled. “Water in motion is far from level.” You have seen it, when obstacles happened to bar the path, rise automatically. (90)

The image of water moving and rising against an obstacle is one which Moore used repeatedly to convey a human (not just female) strength. In “The Fish,” where the living meets the dead, “The water drives a wedge / of iron through the iron edge / of the cliff” (MM 32), and even more explicitly in “What Are Years?”,

...He

sees deep and is glad, who accedes to mortality and in his imprisonment rises upon himself as the sea in a chasm . . . . (MM 95)

The “feminine temperament” Moore celebrates is a human strength within human limits, not a special response to the presumed limits of gender.

Our most fully developed and finely tuned portrait of this feminine temperament appears in Eve in the poem “Marriage.” What makes this poem’s portrayal of both Adam and Eve so tantalizing is surely their tragicomic blend of the ideal and the real. Woman as she would like to be—“so handsome / she gave me a start, / able to write

simultaneously / in three languages” (MM 62)--mingles in one breath with woman in her patriarchal original sin--“the central flaw / in that first crystal-fine experiment” (63). She is temperamental--“equally positive in demanding a commotion / and in stipulating quiet” (62); “the ladies in their imperious humility / are ready to receive you’ ” (67); and she is ornamental--“a statuette of ivory on ivory” (68). This Eve is balanced by an Adam who is equally implicated in the fall—he is “something colubrine” or snake-like (63)--and equally temperamental and ornamented. This blend of ideal and real, the balance of male and female figures, the mixture of comic, heroic, and sentimental values is the theme of the poem, for its electric charge comes from the meeting of opposites “opposed each to the other, not to unity . . . Liberty and union, now and forever” (69-70). The portrait of Eve is conditioned throughout by this balance, this progressively rebalancing accumulation that is the poem’s procedure and imitation of its subject.

The woman as artist, however, stands in a special relation to this balancing tendency of gender. Two of Moore’s three portraits of the artist include both male and female elements. In “The Frigate Pelican” the artist is a man, but art itself is implied to be feminine: “. . . impassioned Handel”--who was meant for a lawyer and a masculine German domestic career—clandestinely studied the harpsichord and never was known to have fallen in love. . . . (25)

And the central figure in “Style,” framed by a number of thumbnail sketches of male athletes and artists, is the flamenco dancer Soledad--“black-clad solitude that is not sad . . . bamboos with fireflies a-glitter” (MM 169). There is a certain splendid solitude about the artist, “this most romantic bird” (MM 26), and indeed Moore’s full-length portrait of a lady displays her as embodying the whole world in herself.

“Those Various Scalpels,” published in 1917, portrays a woman as both artist and work of art, and while Marianne Moore is not normally given to flights of overstatement, there is an element of hyperbole, even inflation, in the perceptual play of the poem. The speaker addresses a female figure whose extravagant appearance straddles the line between beauty and ostentation and whose ambiguous magnificence is echoed in the exotic figures of the poetry itself. If we may forget for a moment the frame,
the opening four and closing six lines, and concentrate on
the picture itself, we find that the body of the poem, the
body in the picture, is presented in one long, descending
series of appositions without any main verbs. The verbal
action is all within the realms of the metaphors for each of
the sculptured, painted, and architectured parts: "... your
hair, the tails of two / fighting cocks ... your eyes, flowers
of ice and snow ... your raised hand, / an ambiguous
signature ... your cheeks, those rosettes of blood ... your
other hand ... your dress, a magnificent square / cathedral
tower ..." (MM 51). Like the cathedral, this portrait
encompasses all orders and geographies, animal, vegetable,
and mineral, land and sea, past and present (Holley 32-3).
As an artist of the work of art that is herself, this lady
contains countless possibilities; in fact, she almost
disappears behind the veils of compounding metaphors. She
is difficult to perceive, because she is larger than one single
figure, as the formal and sensuous resonance of each detail
reaches beyond itself; she is one kind of poem, bristling with
metaphor and implication.

Within the stasis of this catalogue, Moore
explores and embodies the purely exterior and fabricated
elements of the ornamental femininity that appears briefly
in the "acacia-like lady" of "People's Surroundings," the
"snowy egret" of "A Carriage from Sweden," and the
"statuette of ivory on ivory" of "Marriage." The exteriority
is part of the painterly quality in its leaps without transition
from one plane of vision and one dimension to the next.
The traditional painted portrait's inherent tension between
figure and ground comes out reversed, in a sense, in the
interplay between each feature and its metaphors: the lady
is a bit in the background as her actual hair, eyes, hands,
and dress are upstaged by the many dramatic metaphors
that both specify and obscure her. The frame, then, ends up
questioning both the lady and the poet herself, both of
whose "rich instruments... dissect destiny with
instruments / more highly specialized than components of
destiny itself" (MM 52). The lady in the portrait is the
counterpart of the poet and also of the poem, and the
inflation of the figures (as opposed to the figure singular) is
an expression of the dimensions in which Moore conceived
her art.

Elizabeth Bishop was one generation younger
than Moore. She was brought up, as far as one can
generalize such things, in a world of assumptions
conditioned by the First World War and its aftermaths, and
her relationship to women throughout her life, beginning with the early loss of her mother to mental breakdown, was fundamentally different from Moore's. Therefore it is not surprising to find that, for the most part, Bishop's poetic portraits of women differ quite radically from Moore's. This can perhaps be most clearly shown by looking in Bishop's work for those main types that appear in Moore's. The ornamental, the maternal, and the temperamental types present a vivid contrast, while, also not surprisingly, the portrait of the artistic woman reveals a deeply shared understanding and a certain continuity of technique.

Moore's ornamental "acacia-like lady" is not so much absent as dead in Bishop's work. The little dancer of "Cirque d'Hiver" with her "artificial roses" and "linsel bodice" (EB 31) is the empty part of the toy, as if to announce at the opening of North and South in 1946 that the pretty, the elegant, as an attribute of the human female is not a factor to be concerned with in this otherwise riotously pretty and often elegant oeuvre. What Bishop does do, however, is to make the brief appearances of women in her extensive catalogues into intense and suggestive vignettes. Women as part of the "scenery" of the public world walk on as both types and individuals. Two contrasting types appear side by side in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance."

The Englishwoman poured tea, informing us
that the Duchess was going to have a baby.
And in the brothels of Marrakesh
the little pockmarked prostitutes
balanced their tea-trays on their heads.... (EB 58)

We get a brief glimpse of Miss Breen from Glens Falls, New York, the fellow passenger in "Arrival at Santos":

... about seventy,
a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression. (89)

In "The Riverman" we catch glimpses of Luandinha, the river spirit, "a tall, beautiful serpent / in elegant white satin / with her big green eyes," (EB 106) who blew cigar smoke in the man's ears and nostrils--an archetypal enchantress. There is the auntie of "The Burglar of Babylon," the mulata "carrying water on her head" (113), and the "Women with market baskets" who

Stood on the street corner and talked,
Then went on their way to market,
Cazing up as they walked. (116)
"Under the Window: Ouro Preto" depicts "Women." "Women!" as part of a long catalogue of human and mechanical traffic that gathers "here where all the world still stops" (EB 153). The voice of the daughter blends in with "Women in red dresses / / and plastic sandals, carrying their sandals, carrying their almost / invisible babies" (153). And of course there are the women "In the Waiting Room"—Aunt Consuelo, Osa Johnson, and the "black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with string / . . . and those awful hanging breasts" (EB 159-61). Accumulation and variety are the dominant effects of these catalogues, and the diversity of the women in appearance and roles is a major, exuberant part of Bishop's colorful world.

The maternal is neither a large nor a positive category in this poetic world. The lullaby in "Songs for a Colored Singer" shows us how "The shadow of the crib makes an enormous cage / upon the wall" (EB 49). The daughter "Under the Window" in Ouro Preto complains, "When my mother combs my hair it hurts," (EB 153) and in "Squatter's Children" there is a "Mother's voice, ugly as sin" (EB 95). Nor has Bishop tucked the maternal role into such animal embodiments as Moore was drawn to: the white hen of "Trouvée" is disturbingly just that dead creature, and the "grand, otherworldly" creature of "The Moose" is part of a much larger theme than gender.

In fact, the most interesting and fully developed kin to the maternal in Bishop's work is her pair of portraits of black women as caretakers in "Cootchie" and "Faustina, or Rock Roses." Here the feeling tone turns at least positive enough for the play of ambiguity, and the relationship of the attendant and the helpless has a resonance of depth and ultimacy. "Cootchie" is a kind of sketch in black and white, the black servant lying in white marl: "The skies were egg-white for the funeral / and the faces sable" (EB 46). The artificial roses that flagged emptiness in "Cirque d'Hiver" take on pathos here in the "pink wax roses" that "mark Miss Lula's losses," and the light and darkness of the final lines become emotional opposites:

Searching the land and sea for someone else,  
the lighthouse will discover Cootchie's grave  
and dismiss all as trivial; the sea, desperate,  
will proffer wave after wave. (46)

The sense of loss and grief, though still beyond Miss Lula's comprehension, are present everywhere in the poem.
A fuller portrait appears in "Faustina, or Rock Roses," again in black and white, and again colored by the leitmotif of roses. The faceless, crazy "white woman" with "fine white hair" lies in "white disordered sheets / like wilted roses," her mental condition displayed in the background:

Clutter of trophies,
chamber of bleached flags!
-- Rags or ragged garments
hung on the chairs and hooks
each contributing its
shade of white, confusing
as undazzling. (EB 73)

The face that matters above all in the scene is Faustina’s:
"Her sinister kind face / presents a cruel black / coincident conundrum" (73). And the poet does not resolve the question of whether what this face brings is

freedom at last, a lifelong
dream of time and silence,
dream of protection and rest?
Or is it the very worst,
the unimaginable nightmare
that never before dared last
more than a second? (73-4)

The only answer is that "There is no way of telling. The eyes say only either" (EB 73-4). The white woman’s madness is a magnifying glass through which she and we see Faustina’s face. And the "sinister kind face" of the black nurse takes on the precarious uncertainty of any human being on whom another depends: its response to helpless need could bring either safety or disaster. Faustina is both a figure of death and a figure of ministering reassurance. And the visitor’s "rust-perforated roses" (74) are real at last, a pathetic irrelevant offering that bears the whole mystery of generation and beauty into the midst of this crazy house. In these two portraits, both titled with personal names, Bishop’s portrayal of female figures enacts a dark drama of loss and fear that is lit nevertheless by the poet/visitor’s illuminating eye

discovering the concern
within our stupefaction. (72)

It is this concern, the tenderness we find within the stunned onlooker, that makes these two poems moving.

The undertone of grief is a recurrent one in Bishop’s work, and where Moore affirms the defiant and
assertive strength of the "feminine temperament," Bishop seems often concerned to embody in her longer portraits of women those painful emotional tides that deepen and pull against the humor and affirmation permeating her work. The "Songs for a Colored Singer" move through the exasperated and angry moods of daylight into a terrible lullaby: "At sea the big ship sinks and dies, / lead in its breast" (EB 49). The dream-like fourth song reveals the night world of the singer:

What's that shining in the leaves,
the shadowy leaves,
like tears when somebody grieves,
shining, shining in the leaves? (50)

But as the tears or dew begin to roll down the leaves to the ground, she sings, "That is not a tearful sound," and the song then, as if transcending its own sense of grief, turns toward the growth of something new:

See it taking root like weeds,
faster, faster than the weeds,

all the shining seeds take root,
conspiring root,
and what curious flower or fruit
will grow from that conspiring root?

Fruit or flower? It is a face.
Yes, a face. (50)

Grief is not an end point for Bishop but a passage, a seemingly necessary one, into a new phase of life.

The two sustained portraits in a domestic setting, "Sestina" and "House Guest," each gather this transforming grief into a tentative step in the direction of portraying the artist as a young woman. Echoing relentlessly through the sestina form, the grandmother's "equinoctial tears" (EB 123) seem as seasonal and unavoidable as the storms that stir the Atlantic at every equinox. The hidden tears are multiplied and metamorphosed through every stanza on formal cue as "the teakettle's hard tears / . . . on the hot black stove" and "her teacup full of dark brown tears" then appear in the child's drawing of "a man with buttons like tears" (EB 123). In the penultimate stanza, the motif from "Songs" of tears becoming seeds appears again:

the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in front of the house. (124)
Bishop has given us a vivid portrayal of the germinal role of grief, the transmutation of the unspoken, half-hidden feeling of the older woman into new forms it the art of the child. The child's art seems allied with the grandmother's singing, each of them an appointed season of preparation:

*Time to plant tears, says the almanac.*
*The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove*
*and the child draws another inscrutable house.* (124)

The absent mother and the amplification of tears in the rain press the feeling in the poem strongly against its equally strong formal composure, the relentless turning and returning of the sestina.

A more humorous and in some ways more desperate portrait of a woman as maker appears in "House Guest," a poem which blends into an artful marriage of opposites its picture of the pathetic "sad seamstress . . . small and thin and bitter" and the voice of her energetic and exasperated host (EB 148). The utter inability of this cheerless creature, her face "closed as a nut" (149), to do anything for herself, take any pleasure in her surroundings, outdoes the speaker's every effort to inspire and share: "We say, 'Come see the jets!' / We say, 'Come see the baby!' / . . . Nothing helps" (148). In detailing all those things which this maddening house guest fails to enjoy, the speaker inventories all those everyday sights and small pleasures that are the stuff of her own gusto and enjoyment of life. The suggestion that the seamstress is perhaps "one of the Fates . . . / Clotho, sewing out lives / with a bony little foot," implies also that the speaker's exasperation derives from her sense of freedom, of not being trapped by fate into passivity and sullen resignation at once having been crossed. And this attitude of "No hope" in the end has its effect on the seamstress's product: "Her sewing / is decidedly mediocre" (149), as if excellence is somehow bound up with caring and it *not* being "all the same" to us. The poem presents two portraits in contrast with each other, both of them leading up to the pointed final question of whether this passivity, or more sadly this crushed bitterness, will be something we not only harbor in that house but also "nourish . . . in our bosoms" (149). The answer means everything to one's art, whatever that art may be.

All of these partial and darker portraits provide a context for Bishop's most exuberant and affirmative portrait of a lady as artist, her "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore." Bishop once remarked in an interview, "I lived in Mexico
for a time twenty years ago and I knew Pablo Neruda there. I think I was influenced to some extent by him (as in my 'Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore')” (Ashley Brown interview 290). It may be that the imaginative freedom and the swiftly paced catalogues of this poem owe something to Neruda’s example, but the choice of details, the perceptual surfaces, the sense of humor, and the balance of the mock heroic with the heroic seem to me characteristically Bishop’s own. Like Moore’s “Those Various Scalpels,” Bishop’s portrait is cast in the second-person, and like Moore’s, Bishop’s deliberate inflations and hyperbole grew out of the special relation she had created between the figure and its ground.

The first two stanzas of “Invitation” let the heroic and celebratory notes be struck by the sky and waters of Brooklyn and Manhattan:

In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals,
please come flying,
to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums
descending out of the mackerel sky
over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water,
please come flying.

Whistles, pennants and smoke are blowing. The ships
are signalling cordially with multitudes of flags.... (EB 82)

To this theatrical sense of fanfare and salute, audience and applause, Bishop adds a deliberately stagy touch--

Enter: two rivers, gracefully bearing
countless little pellucid jellies
in cut-glass epergnes dragging with silver chains. (82)

It is as if the East River skyline is being re-imagined both through Moore’s own eyes and in her honor. Into this setting flies, in Bishop’s wishful vision, the black and delicately highlighted figure of the poet

...with the pointed toe of each black shoe
trailing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capecul of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat.... (82)

From the fourth stanza on, the figure of Miss Moore and the background of Manhattan are interwoven: her “slight censorious frown” is answered promptly by the assurance that “Manhattan / is all awash with morals this fine morning,” and Moore is portrayed as listening “simultaneously” to the horns and sirens of “taxicabs and injustices at large” and to “a soft uninvented music, fit for
the musk deer" (83). Each item of the setting enacts its properly deferential role for the poet,

For whom the grim museums will behave
like courteous male bower-birds,
for whom the agreeable lions lie in wait
on the steps of the Public Library,
eager to rise and follow .... (83)

And finally the speaker places herself in the scene in a series of sentimental, trivial, and poignant possibilities:

We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,
or play at a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore .... (83)

This mode of blended play and pathos, the light-hearted that is weighted by a deep earnestness, is one of Bishop's characteristic sensibilities, a way of bearing up the heaviness--her "grammar that [like Moore's] suddenly turns and shines" (83).

Just as "Songs for a Colored Singer" turns towards something germinal and new at its close, the black-clad figure of Moore in stanza three also "turns and shines" by the poem's end:

Come like a light in the white mackerel sky,
come like a daytime comet
with a long unnebulous train of words .... (83)

The twelve repetitions of the refrain, "please come flying," bind the multitude of images together in a litany of urgency, expectation, and tenderness. Where Moore used the physical appearance of an unidentified woman as the focus of her meditation in "Those Various Scalpels," Bishop's "Invitation" both invokes and contains the whole personality of a very public figure. But the effect on the visualized boundaries of the self is similar in each case: the human figure no longer stands out against its background but rather includes, and at moments vanishes into, its own background. The figure in each of these portraits alternately encompasses and dissolves into its ground. Each poem presents the portrait of a fluid, dynamic, and world-relational self that is both addressed by and reflective of the artist.

Ultimately this is the primary import of studying these images of women--each picture makes its own statement and reveals its own assumptions about the human personality, both within and beyond its gendered nature. And as the mediocre writing of the "Novices" and the
crooked hems of the sad seamstress in "House Guest" attest, one's conceptions of self and others are inevitably what one enacts and embodies. Within the general typology, Moore's elegant ornamental ladies, her fierce animal mothers, and her defiant feminine temperament contrast rather strongly with Bishop's variety of women catalogued in public spaces, her black caregivers and helpless white charges, and her grieving mother and child surrogates. The contrast includes but also goes beyond what one might attribute to a difference in generation (and therefore expectation); it is a contrast that is echoed and confirmed in the two poets' treatments of many other subjects.

The whole axis of weakness and strength and therefore the whole emotional tenor is different in each poet's work. The fragility of Moore's "acacia-like lady," of the "frail vessel" and "charming creature" that interested Henry James in his Portrait of a Lady ("Preface" to The Portrait of a Lady xii-xiii), is counteracted by the defiant strengths of the brutal "Bird-Witted" maternal beak and the spirit's rising waters. The inflations involved in Moore's outrageously decorated lady of the "Scalpels" help to turn the traditional passivity of the elegantly attired lady into images of something far more assertive, something like weapons or instruments of inquiry. There are virtually no vestiges of the "charming creature" in Bishop's work. The images of weakness are images of abandonment (Miss Lula), fear (of Faustina), and the paralysis of unassimilated grief (the seamstress). The strengths that answer these conditions are acquiescent rather than defiant--they are the tears of "the colored singer" that turn grief into growth, the grandmother's tears that spill and metamorphose until she sings.

The great mutual affection of Moore and Bishop surely thrived on these differences as much as on their similarities. Their long friendship provided, in a sense, a literary daughter for Moore and a literary mother for Bishop, with all of the sponsoring concern and independent-mindedness that such friendships can encompass. In the long run, the differences in their two works probably far outweigh the similarities; and yet they will always be appropriately part of one another's lineage. Their poetic worlds comment on and complete one another, just as, another generation later, they comment on and complete our own experience.
WORKS CITED


