

**THE DEFIANT MUSE:
FRENCH FEMINIST POEMS
FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO
THE PRESENT: A BILINGUAL
ANTHOLOGY**

Edited by Domna C. Stanton. New York: The Feminist Press, 1986.

Marie-France Silver

This anthology devoted to French-speaking women poets is the second in a four-volume series of feminist poetry (in Spanish, French, Italian, and German) planned by the Feminist Press. In each volume the poems appear both in their original language and in English translation, so that texts which might otherwise have remained unknown are made accessible to a wide public.

This volume contains poems by 37 francophone women, from the Middle Ages to the present. Many of them are well known, but others will be new to most readers. Commenting in her introduction on the criteria for her choice of poems, Domna Stanton, a professor of French and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, makes clear its decidedly combative bias. "This volume began," she writes, "with the determination to exclude poems that privilege *Kinder, Kirche* and *Küchen*, extol conjugal bliss, passively bemoan seduction and abandonment and seek escape into transcendental saintliness or the beauty of flora and fauna." Thus, this collection is a deliberate repudiation of what has been considered for some time the standard book of French feminine poetry, Jeanine Moulin's *Huit siècles de poésie féminine* (first published by Seghers in 1963). Moulin (whose name, by the way, Stanton constantly misspells), finds the essence of feminine poetry in the very themes avoided here.

The selection here is purposely restricted to poems which, in Stanton's words, are "first and foremost a condemnation of the patriarchal institutions and attitudes that oppress women." Hence, this book excludes a number of great women poets, such as Louise Labé in the 16th century, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore in the 19th, and Anna de Noailles and

Anne Hébert in the 20th. In that respect Moulin's *Huit siècles de poésie féminine* continues to be irreplaceable.

However, if we accept Prof. Stanton's purpose in making her selection, that is, to retain only poems which are "feminist in content," then we have to accept such deliberate omissions and admire the care, scholarship and talent reflected in the choice, presentation and translation of these works.*

From the pages of this volume an image emerges of strong, clever, erudite, passionate women: women wanting to be heard; women challenging male prejudices and institutions; women claiming their rights to education, to an intellectual and political life; women denouncing the bondage of marriage, maternity, and love; women screaming their hatred of men and of an unjust society; women singing the pleasures of wine or of erotic love, the joys of lesbian love.

One of the great merits of this volume is that it reveals an effort to create a female literary tradition and a desire to bring out the poetry in women. One is moved by the tenderness these poets manifest toward members of their own sex, as they celebrate the qualities, capacities, and accomplishments of women. And one seems to witness the emergence through the centuries of a sisterhood, which becomes evident in the 19th and 20th centuries with poets such as Bélot, Viven, Goll, Vannier, Calmis, etc.

The Defiant Muse is an important book of feminist literature. It focuses on poetry, a genre either overlooked by feminist scholarship or discussed only when it is written by contemporary American women. It brings forward, as Stanton says, "female poets from other places and ages [who] have remained unexplored, unknown, silenced like Homer's Penelope."

**The following poem, written by Andrée Chédid and translated into English by Mary Ann Caws, is a good example:*

**FEMMES DE TOUS LES
TEMPS**

Ancestrales et pourtant fraternelles
Lointaines et pourtant proches

Elles viennent à notre rencontre
Ces Femmes d'un autre âge

Dans la pulpe éphémère de leurs corps
Dans la beauté d'un geste périssable
Dans les brefs remous d'un visage
neuf ou vieilli

Ces Femmes immémoriales
à travers argile et pierres
écartant les écorces du
temps

Se frayent un passage jusqu'ici.

Hors du tréfonds des siècles
délivrant l'esprit

Non plus *femmes-objets*
Mais objets devenus Femmes

Elles lèvent échos paroles
et questions d'aujourd'hui.

WOMEN OF ALL THE AGES

Ancestral and still fraternal
Distant and yet near

They come to greet us
These Women from another age

In the ephemeral flesh of their bodies
In the beauty of a gesture bound to
perish
In the brief swirls of a face new or
aged

These Immemorial Women
through clay and stones
parting the husks of time
Clear a path to the present.

From the subsoil of centuries
delivering the spirit

No longer *women-objects*
But objects become Women

They raise echoes words
and questions of today.

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