

Review of Bethany Hicok, Degrees of Freedom: American Women Poets and the Women's College, 1905-1955

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This is a study that has long been overdue in Plath criticism, and Hicok has written it well. This book examines the effect on the lives, thought and work of Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath of attending an elite women's college. Hicok devotes two chapters to each poet. In each case, she deals in the first chapter with the poet's time and writing at college, and in the second with the influence of this college experience upon her mature work. In this way, the book sets out to "reconsider the cultural history of women's poetic production as emerging from the women's college experience" (20).

The study is organized chronologically, but I will begin here with the final pair of chapters, on Plath. Perhaps the most valuable study thus far about the cultural influence of Smith College on Plath's work has been Langdon Hammer's "Plath's Lives".¹ Hicok develops Hammer's work from a more explicitly gendered perspective. She does so with detailed archival and historical research, establishing the nature of Plath's college experience in order to re-read her work in the light of this experience. It is this research – in the chapters on Plath, and throughout the book – that constitutes Hicok's most valuable contribution to our understanding of all three poets.

In her chapters on Plath, she reads the discussions in the Smith college newspaper (first called *Scan*, then re-named *The Sophian* during Plath's time there) on the women's college curriculum debate. Lynn White's book, *Educating Our Daughters*, is often cited in Plath criticism in this context; here Hicok adds much less familiar material from the college newspaper. In doing so, she re-contextualizes Plath's well-known journal entries on marriage and a career. She points out that, in May 1952, as reported in this newspaper,

¹ Langdon Hammer, "Plath's Lives: Poetry, Professionalism and the Culture of the School," *Representations* 75 (2001): 61-88.



Smith president Benjamin Wright gave a baccalaureate address in which he argued that, in American democracy, “women have an important role to play as housewives and mothers.” In the same month, Plath wrote one of her longest journal entries on marriage and career. As Hicok points out, it “could easily have been a critique” of Wright’s speech (135). In a similar way, she reads one of Plath’s most well-known lines of poetry, “Every woman adores a fascist,” in the light of her college studies. It was in reading Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*, Hicok shows, through a reading of Plath’s essay on this text, that Plath first found that fascists could be the object of adoration. She does considerable work on contemporary discourse on lesbianism in order to read the relevant episodes in *The Bell Jar* and Plath’s poem “Lesbos”. A particularly valuable avenue of study that Hicok opens up in these chapters is Plath’s relationship to her closest college friend, Marcia Brown. The definitive study of Plath’s friendships remains to be written, but Hicok begins this work here. Her reflections on Plath’s unpublished poem “Marcia” are especially useful.

The pairs of chapters on Moore and Bishop are also illuminated by Hicok’s archival research. Her account of the response to the patriarchy of the medical institution developed by Marianne Moore and her mother in their letters while Moore was at Bryn Mawr is of particular interest to readers of *The Bell Jar*. One of Moore’s college friends left Bryn Mawr on the advice of S. Weir Mitchell, the physician to whom Charlotte Perkins Gilman responded in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and Moore herself was given similar advice by a female doctor. Hicok shows, through a reading of Moore’s letters, that she and her mother shared a bond strong enough to respond to the pseudo-science of the day, which held that women were not strong enough for sustained mental work. In these letters, Moore cites statistics provided by M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr’s feminist president, which belie this science. Furthermore, her mother’s letters, in a brilliant metaphorical discourse, re-write the meaning of intellectual work for her daughter. As Hicok shows, “Mrs Moore equates creativity with mothering, an intellectual and creative process, rather than with childbirth, a biological process” (34).

In her chapters on Bishop, Hicok focuses on the experimental magazine *Con Spirito*, of which Bishop and her group of friends at Vassar published three issues in 1932-33. She reads a parodic play about D.H. Lawrence and his circle by Frani Blough,

which appeared in the second issue, as an example of a concern with gender as performance shared by Bishop's story "Seven-Days Monologue," published in the same issue. Hicok then considers Blough's portrayal of Aldous Huxley in the play in the light of Mary McCarthy's dismissive review of Huxley in the previous issue of the magazine. She argues, "The responsive echoing of these writers...reinforces the collaborative structure of the enterprise" (96), a structure she shows Bishop to pursue throughout her writing life.

In the second of each pair of chapters in particular, the book begins to focus more on female community in general than on women's colleges in particular. When Hicok reads the poets' mature work in the light of the college contexts she has established, it is clear that thematic parallels exist between this work and the author's experiences at college. It is not always clear, however, that the college experience is the paradigm, or the direct cause, of issues in the mature works. Sometimes this case is made well, as with Moore's poem "Marriage." Sometimes it is made less well, however, as with Plath's bee poems. While Hicok shows beyond a doubt that the bee poems deal with issues of women and community, I do not see it rigorously established that they deal with these issues *because* of Plath's experience at a women's college.

Hicok traces three points on the arc of the history of women's writing and women's college. There remains room for a detailed account about the relations between these points. The definitive study of the relationship between Plath and Moore, for example, remains to be written. The contrasts the reader of Hicok's book will draw from her studies of Moore and Plath will form an indispensable part of this study. The differences between the two poets' places in discourse on marriage, for example, are made strikingly clear. Hicok shows well how the valence of chastity has changed between Moore's choice of a writing career over against marriage in the 1910s and her reflection upon this choice in a 1958 essay. She does not enter into a detailed examination, however, of Plath's own responses to these issues. In a similar way, Hicok's reflections on the history of women's colleges in her introduction and on the issues facing them today in her coda are informative and timely, and I would like to hear more of them.

This book opens up a crucial perspective upon Plath's work, and upon American women's writing, with illuminating, informative and detailed historical research. The



accounts of the poets' time and work at college are unsurpassed. It is the definitive treatment of this period in the lives of all three, and scholars of each one of them need to read it.