

In the Manner of Amy Lowell

THIS three-part literary portrait of the renowned poet Amy Lowell in light of her lesbian relationship with Ada Russell, her lifetime companion, lover, supporter, and muse—whom Lowell lovingly called “the lady of the moon”—breathes new life into Amy Lowell’s stature and significance. We first encounter a selection of Lowell’s love poetry to Russell, followed by a scholarly essay by Lillian Faderman that gives historical context to the intersection of Lowell’s work and her “outlaw” lesbian marriage. The volume concludes with a 27-sonnet sequence by Mary Meriam written in the voice of Amy Lowell, detailing the most significant moments in Amy and Ada’s relationship (the dedication uses their first names), a breathtaking testament to the book’s subject and her continuing inspiration.

This is a book that Lowell would have loved; she prized her relationship with Russell as her greatest treasure. Having to hide the lesbian nature of their relationship, however subtly, went against her nature as an open person and an outspoken

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Lady of the Moon

Poems by Amy Lowell
and Mary Meriam


Essay by Lillian Faderman

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proponent of freedom of expression. Faderman explores this further, showing how Lowell wrote “the most explicit (as well as eloquent and elegant) lesbian love poetry to have been written between the time of Sappho and the 1970’s.” Not all her work was of equal power; her love poems to Ada outshone others written less openly given the social climate of the time. That she wrote poems openly and honestly profess-

ing her love for another woman is the very reason her work has endured: the best art must be always genuine.

Exhibit A might be this poem, titled “Aubade,” whose imagery brings us a multiplicity of meanings: “As I would free the white almond from the green husk/ So would I strip your trappings off./ Beloved./ And fingering the smooth and polished kernel/ I should see that in my hands glittered a gem beyond counting.” Lowell’s critics branded her as “overweight and unmarried,” and her work, in the words of one critic, as “an effort to hide ... the empty chambers of her heart.” Such utter blindness to the poems themselves reveals the force of social prejudice, to which this book responds as a tour de force. Lowell’s very popularity in this sense validates the universality and authenticity of her work.

Meriam’s sonnets successfully incorporate imagistic elements from Lowell’s own poems—moon, flowers, garden, water imagery, night—as well as her natural sense of “cadence.” Meriam is especially adept at expressing the sensual details of intimacy, as in this excerpt: “To touch you deeper, on the second floor./ To climb the staircase to my bed, and there/ Untwist the hesitations more and more./ Undressed in holy half-light, wholly bare:/ To turn from outer to the deepest space/ And kindle kisses in the fireplace.” Or, using these typical Lowell-esque images: “O moon, old moon./ I have forgotten you for this tall flower/ Swaying in midnight air within my arms.” This unabashed sensuality would have thrilled Lowell, who would also have loved to know that her legacy would rise above the mean-spirited critics and the exhausting effort to hide, inspiring future generations of poets to become a feminist voice for freedom of expression. 



Siham Karami, a writer based in Florida, has contributed to The Comstock Review and American Arts Quarterly.

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