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The Wanton Sublime

Poetry by Anna Rabinowitz

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The elliptical subtitle of Anna Rabinowitz's *The Wanton Sublime* says as much about the forthcoming poems as any explanation can: *A Florilegium of Whethers and Wonders*. In the Catholic Church, Florilegia are collections of patristic writings excerpted and compiled to serve either dogmatic or ethical purposes, but here Rabinowitz appropriates the form to serve her own poetic and metaphysical purposes. That is, she challenges the dominant patristic (read masculinist) vision of femininity, exploring the untold "whethers and wonders" of gender in the historical imagination of western culture. Rabinowitz begins her exploration in the image of Mary's face from Michelangelo's *Pietà*, appearing in extreme close-up, blurred, and earth-toned on the book's cover. Similarly, the poet herself blurs the idea of youthful feminine chastity that the

Virgin Mother has always represented.

In "from Thunder, Sweet Longing," Rabinowitz continues exploring notions of maternity and virginity, evoking the fifth Homeric hymn to mother of all mothers, Aphrodite, even preserving the rhythm of its dactylic line: "Love me loudly or in whispers, / love me so the long, deep night / is aware of me / and breaks / into day with a seamless song..." While the story of Aprodite's falling in love with the mortal Anchises is not explicit here, Rabinowitz does show us the moment when a thunderous, vengeful Zeus has cast "sweet desire" into the goddess' heart, knowing that sexual desire itself is fitting punishment for one who stirs such passions in others. Also fitting is that this short lyric snippet follows a surprisingly apt revision of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Instead of following Mary to school, the lamb "followed her to bed one day / It was against the rule / He urged the virgin stay and pray / Was Mary game or tool?" This odd choice (game or tool) seems particularly resonant in the context of the rest of *The Wanton Sublime*. That is, is a woman something to be toyed and played with for the sake of masculine pleasure? Or is her body something to be used as a tool, her womb simply a utilitarian vessel for the sake of procreation? In the end, the question "Why does the lamb love Mary so?" is still answered with "Why, Mary loves the lamb you know," but this does not satisfy Rabinowitz; the sheep's love cannot exist simply as a consequence of Mary's love for him. There is a mystery that cannot be explained away.

Later in the book, Rabinowitz makes more explicit her take on this mystery, quoting Gaimbattista Vico's famous *verum factum* principle: "what is true is what we have made true." While femininity is the subject of *The Wanton Sublime*, the lens through which she views it relies on an understanding of the constructed, transformational nature of language and art. Indeed, as these poems suggest, all meaning and knowledge itself must come from human creation and invention, even our notions of what it means to be a woman. So the poet has in mind a deeper, metaphysical

inquiry, denying Descartes' imperative that truth can only be gotten through observation. Like Vico, Rabinowitz seems to posit that all this rationality – heir as we are to the Enlightenment and the principles of the scientific method – leads to a kind of barbarism that is destined to lapse (happily so, perhaps) into an age of metaphoric and poetic meaning. The final line in the final eponymous poem, repeated a number of times throughout the collection, brings it home, offering a new feminine knowledge “not yet known by man,” resisting the too-neat equation of the light of the intellect with masculinity: “LIGHT BE NOT EXPLAINED.” —
Reviewed by J.D. Schraffenberger