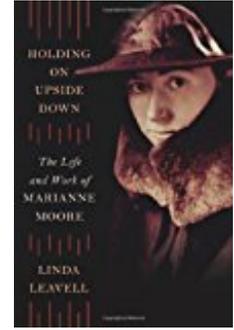


Hindered to Succeed: The Great American Spinster Poetess Marianne Moore

For most of their lives, Marianne Moore and her mother, Mary, slept in the same bed. Together with Moore's brother, Warner, the family had many nicknames for each other: two favorites were "Mole" for Mary and "Rat" for Moore. In referring to her daughter, Mary usually used a masculine pronoun. Linda Leavell's new biography, *Holding on Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore*, provides a rich, complex portrait of an artist against a vividly drawn backdrop of the modernist era. Her book's greatest achievement, however, is her nuanced, sensitive, and revelatory depiction of surely one of the most intensely destructive/productive mother-daughter relationships in literary history.



In 1923, when Moore was thirty-six and living with her mother in the West Village at Fourteen St. Luke's Place in a one room, low ceilinged, dimly lit basement apartment with no kitchen, a neighbor gave them a kitten. They named him Buffalo, which soon became Buffy, and they regularly included reports of his adorable antics in their extensive correspondence. Then one day Buffy was dead.

"Mole got chloroform and a little box and prepared everything," Moore wrote to her brother, "and did it while I was at the library Monday... But it's a knife in my heart... a seemingly comfortable life in a shut up room would not be good for any cat so we were kind, but having had him so long as we had made the deed seem foul... We tend to run wild in these matters of personal affection but there may have been some good in it too."

"I never speak of Buffy to Rat," Mary wrote to Warner some time later. "His grief drove me frantic."

A common criticism of Marianne Moore's poetry, especially her early work, is its apparent lack of emotional availability, all feeling deeply buried behind and within her armor of poetic language, image, rhyme, and meter. T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.D., and many other modernists perceived this powerful absence as one of her greatest strengths as a poet. When Mary euthanized their cat, Moore justified the act but produced a poem entitled "Silence," which includes the observation:

The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint.

Born in Missouri in 1887, Moore grew up in rural Pennsylvania. Her father, an eccentric philanderer, suffered from mental illness and soon disappeared from the family's life. Mary, highly intelligent, an English teacher, had a strict Presbyterian code of personal ethics. She also had an ambiguous sexuality -- she had a long affair with another woman while Moore was growing up. Though Warner remained very close to his mother and sister, he escaped the suffocating domestic menage through marriage, much to his mother's horror. The letters exchanged among the three -- sometimes more than once a day -- provided Leavell with a bountiful, fertile source, along with other previously unavailable materials furnished by the Moore family archives.

While at Bryn Mawr, Moore discovered she was "possessed to write" and "a demon needing wild horses to drag me from the diabolical profession." A few years after graduation, she and her mother moved to New York City, where they would live together for nearly thirty years until Mary's death in 1947. Everything Moore did, everything she wrote, was subject to her mother's intense scrutiny. Mary did all she could to hinder her daughter's healthy, prolific existence while also devoting herself to Moore's success in body, soul, and literary vocation. She committed herself so fully to Moore's thwarting she often became an invalid herself, suffering from "nervous exhaustion," which forced Moore to become her nurse. Moore's only place to be alone was in her poetry: she relentlessly pursued syllabic meter, unsentimental topics, searing irony, quirky stanzas with odd line breaks, and an inscrutable language in an effort to keep her mother out.

Moore's poetry includes scraps of overheard dialogue, phrases from advertisements, newspaper and magazine articles, descriptions of random artifacts -- all arranged in her uniquely fashioned stanzas -- where she introduces then suppresses a rigorous pattern of rhyme and syllables so that they become nearly silent. Her first mature poem, "Critics and Connoisseurs," published in *Others* in 1915, begins:

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious
Fastidiousness.

Over the following decade Moore tentatively submitted her poetry to journals and magazines and was mostly rejected. What she did publish was immediately noticed and championed by the glitterati of her day -- Eliot, Pound, H.D., William Carlos Williams -- but for decades Moore remained a kind of secret genius among the cognoscenti. She was an excellent conversationalist with a surprisingly wide range of interests who consistently made unpredictable and "diamond hard" observations.

"The frailest bit o' bones that could presume to be 'a man'" is how Mary described her daughter, and Leavell speculates that Moore's chronic low weight -- she probably suffered from anorexia -- may have contributed to her total lack of sexual interest. Pound flirted heavily with her, as did many artists, writers, editors, and patrons both male and female; but Moore's amorous indifference was profound and unwavering. Besides, as her poem "Marriage" suggests, for all intents and purposes she was already faithfully married to her mother and would do nothing to upset, much less betray, that formidable bond.

This mysterious, uncompromising attachment in which Mary masculinized Moore, at least on a linguistic level, became a source of great power. Throughout her life, in her subversive fashion that at once circumvented and celebrated her mother, she cultivated her own considerable power: "To be understood" is "to be no / Longer privileged." And in "Marriage": "men have power / and sometimes one is made to feel it." In a book review, she wrote, "Love is more important than being in love"; and in her poem "The Paper Nautilus," she described a mother's love as "the only fortress / strong enough to trust to."

Furthermore, in a letter Mary wrote to Warner after he had offered her daughter what he deemed constructive criticism of her work, Mary reveals her sensitivity to Moore's needs as a creative artist: "Write him a bit of commiseration, or perhaps I should say praise -- or something that's grateful and comforting. He knows he is a 'slight man' -- and that cheer of spirit would carry him over his bridge, and he beats himself continually for his 'oppressed' spirit..."

Moore's star began to seriously rise when T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound became her champions. Eliot, reviewing an anthology that included a number of her poems, singled her out, placing Moore in the company of Pound, Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis. He called her work "akin to nothing but language which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas." By 1935, Eliot was calling her "the greatest living master of light rhyme." Both Eliot and Pound would do much to promote her work for years to come. Eventually, Moore became a West Village legend and an inspiration to poets.

In 1925, Moore became the editor of *The Dial*, a job she thrived in until the magazine closed in 1929. During her tenure, she promoted young writers, including Hart Crane, Stanley Kunitz, and D.H. Lawrence. She also worked with poets she greatly admired -- Yeats, Joyce, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein -- and introduced Rainer Maria Rilke and Azorín to the journal. She famously rejected a story by Ernest Hemingway. She never liked the work of Dos Passos, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, or Katherine Anne Porter. Later, she became Elizabeth Bishop's mentor and life long friend.

By the 1950s, her mother was dead, and Moore had shed her cloak of obscurity, donning instead her signature black cape and tricorne hat. In the meantime, she'd become a widely published world famous poet who had won the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and the National Book Award, was the recipient of numerous honorary degrees from top universities, and was regularly published by *The New Yorker*. Moore was no longer writing poetry "to say what is boiling within me," or expressing "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without." Rather, observes Leavell, Moore's late period works "show the poet as performer -- appearing in person or in print to fulfill her campy, colonial-patriot role as unofficial poet laureate."

Moore's prominence among America's major modernists is clear, yet "her rightful position as the major woman poet of her generation between Dickinson in the nineteenth century and Bishop in the late twentieth -- is still far from secure." Leavell's thorough, engaging study of Marianne Moore should go far in assuring the prominence of, as Mary called her, "Rat... the cheerfulest discharged beast the sun ever shone on."

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