Mathematics and Poetry

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I have loved poetry since girlhood, but mathematics offered the scholarships. So, I studied mathematics (which I also loved) and eventually became a math professor. While a professor I discovered ways that math-poetry links can enrich classroom learning.

In the late 1980s I wrote a poem about Amalie "Emmy" Noether, "My Dance is Mathematics" (*Math. Mag.* 68, no. 5 [Dec. 1995]: 376–377). It speaks of the discrimination she faced and ends with:

> Today, history books proclaim that Noether
> is the greatest mathematician
> her sex has produced. They say she was good
> for a woman.

When I retired, I wanted to share my collection of math-related poems. In 2010 I created a blog, "Intersections: Poetry with Mathematics" at *PoetryWithMathematics.blogspot.com.* It now has almost 1,000 poems (a few by me, most by others).

What follows is a sampler—excerpts from some verses I've collected about mathematical people.

Poems about Math People

Mathematician and scientist Émilie du Châtelet explained Newton's physics but was not as remembered for her own work as she should have been. Here are lines from Voltaire's "The Divine Émilie."

> Here's a portrait of my Émilie:
> . . .
> She has, I assure you, a genius rare.
> With Horace and Newton, she can compare.

Mathematician William Rowan Hamilton wrote a sonnet to the memory of Joseph Fourier (Robert Perceval Graves, *Life of Sir William Rowan Hamilton* [Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1882], 596). It begins:

> Fourier! with solemn and profound delight,
> . . .
> I gaze upon thy glory and grow bright:
> As if irradiate with beholden light;

Jonathan Holden opens his poem "Ramanujan" (*UR-Math,* [State Street Press, 1997], 24–25) with:

> This modest, mousy little boy from India
> could reel off pi's digits to any
> decimal place his classmates dared him to.

In "A Mere Girl," Brian McCabe wrote of Sophie Germain (*Zero* [Polygon, 2009], 53):

> you warmed your mind with calculus,
> cut your hair and dressed as a man,
> replaced a drop-out from the Academy.

Jo Pitkin wrote in "Bird, Moon, Engine" of Ada Lovelace (*Raising Lilly Ledbetter: Women Poets Occupying the Workplace,* ed. Caroline Wright, M. L. Lyons, and Eugenia Toledo [Lost Horse Press, 2015], 94):

> By age five, I could plot the arc of a rainbow.
> I could explain perpendicular and parallel.
> In my mind, I heard the wind in wild weeds.

Some poems are about everyday mathematicians. Cathryn Essinger writes with humor about her brother in "You Are Right" (*Strange Attractors: Poems of Love and Mathematics,* ed. Sarah Glaz and JoAnne Growney [A K Peters/CRC Press, 2008], 152).

> In your super-logical,
> analytical,
> bumbling way . . .

Here is a very different portrait, from mathematician Sherman Stein's poem "Mathematician" (*Humanistic Math. Network J.* Iss. 13, Art. 7 [1996]):

> In truth, she is not here
> In this room, bound by these walls.
> She journeys beyond the moon,
> the sun, the stars, out of our galaxy . . .

Ronald Wallace has fun with math words in "Mr. Glusenkamp," which celebrates a geometry teacher (*Long for This World: New and Selected Poems* [Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2003], 64). Here are a few lines:

> No one could have been squarer,
> and nothing could have been plainer
> than his geometry.

Visit my blog to find these poems; poems about other mathematicians, such as Benjamin Banneker, Janos Bolyai, Lewis Carroll, René Descartes, Leonhard Euler, Caroline Herschel, Hypatia, Katherine Johnson, Sofia Kovalevsky, Lillian Lieber, Benoit Mandelbrot, Florence Nightingale, Pythagoras, Vera Rubin, Norberto Salinas, and Alan Turing; and many poems about mathematics.

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