



# Recovering Feminist Criticism: Modern Women Writers and Feminist Periodical Studies

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## Abstract

The new periodical studies offers material for those interested in feminist criticism and the study of the modernist woman writer (or those interested in early twentieth-century women's writing defined more broadly). Modern periodicals such as little magazines, women's magazines, feminist papers, literary reviews give us access not only to understudied or little known modern women writers but also, in book reviews and critical essays, give us examples of a feminist literary criticism devoted to understanding the problem of the woman writer.

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Recent conversations concerning the limitations of the “recovery” model associated with the early stages of academic feminist literary criticism echo to a certain extent conversations that took place in conferences and in print during the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Thus Jane Elliott's suggestion that we seem to be frustrated with feminist theory's “repetitive” nature is doubly pertinent, pointing as it does to a tendency in feminist studies to circle back to nagging questions and to embark upon fairly regular periods of self-questioning. Elliott challenges us to think again about the “repetitive” quality of feminist inquiry when she points out that our discomfort with the perhaps over-familiar nature of some of the central questions and methodologies of feminist studies says more about our interest in “the production of the new as a signal intellectual value,” an interest, moreover, that “can be used to dismiss uncomfortable insights,” than about the ability of feminist theory to innovate (1700). Similarly, Toril Moi has recently argued that the central issue for late twentieth century feminist literary criticism – the question concerning the meaning of the category “woman writer” – has never adequately been resolved (and thus is far from becoming passé) (*Not a Woman Writer* 262). These two scholars encourage us to view the current project of considering the future of the study of modernist women writers—or the future of the study of early twentieth century women writers and the cultures of modernity, to cast the net more broadly and I think more usefully—as yet another step in a longer (and still ongoing) project of self-scrutiny in feminist studies.<sup>2</sup>

For example, when Toril Moi recently approached the question of the woman writer, she turned, not unsurprisingly, to two key texts that have formulated the problem of the woman writer for twentieth century academic feminists working in the humanities, especially for those invested in literature or feminist theory – Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Both texts have been foundational for feminist theory and literary criticism, and both, in their complex treatment of gendered identity, have generated decades of reading and rereading. Moi suggests that these texts are useful because they pose the dilemma or question of the “woman writer” as a response to a challenge: to speak of oneself as a woman writer is a “defensive speech act” (*Not A Woman Writer* 265). When women writers confront the thorny category of

“woman” it is as an answer to a provocation, whether that provocation be an assertion on the part of a male critic that her philosophical claims only reflect her femininity, as in the case of Beauvoir, or whether the provocation be a series of exclusions and removals – from the grass, from the library – as in the case of Woolf. Both authors, though in different ways, address the unsolvable dilemma that presents itself when one (rightly or wrongly, simplistically or not) is “taken to be a woman by someone else” (266).

Moi traces the thorny theoretical problem of the “woman writer” through Woolf and Beauvoir’s meditations, and through the late twentieth-century’s intense interrogation of both the concept of “woman” as a category and the idea of the “woman writer” as a coherent entity. Despite recent tendencies to move away from the category “woman writer,” Moi encourages us to consider the question of the woman writer as unsolved, rather than settled. I want to bring Moi’s effort to recover the question of the woman writer to the emerging and vibrant field of modernist periodical studies, where recovery projects and the “woman writer” meet new methodological challenges and opportunities. In book reviews, biographical sketches, interviews, notes and paratextual materials such as advertisements, the idea of the “woman writer” was defined and debated at the turn of the last century. A “feminist dialogics” emerged in early twentieth-century periodical culture as various strategies for understanding the modern woman writer, and varied efforts to develop a form of literary criticism that could take gender into account, were measured and tested in book reviews and other forms.<sup>3</sup> To “recover” an emergent feminist literary criticism in the pages of modern periodicals is not, of course, to define the category “woman writer” once and for all. Rather than finding a shared set of assumptions regarding the woman writer in early twentieth century periodicals, we discover that the category “woman writer” was easily as unstable and marked by complexity as we find it today. Yet, despite anxieties and uncertainties regarding its meaning and usage, for many modern women journalists and reviewers, the category “woman writer” was one they could not do without.

The complex and varied periodical culture of the early twentieth century – little magazines and literary journals, daily papers, socialist papers, women’s and fashion magazines, feminist papers, mass market and mid-market magazines, “slicks” or “smart” magazines, and other venues – provides a rich resource for discovering the variety of early twentieth century approaches to the woman writer. Certainly these materials support and encourage the recovery of lost or underread women writers. In fact, these materials usefully remind us how narrow our frame of reference sometimes is when we trace the outlines of a “woman’s modernism.” Even a cursory glance at early twentieth century periodicals, say a perusal of the digital editions housed on the Modernist Journals Project (MJP), should reveal to most of us a collection of writers now little known who were consistently read and reviewed alongside current household names. A good bit of new scholarly work on modern periodicals has turned our attention to now forgotten journalists, editors, reviewers, and critics, though much of this recent scholarship does not present these findings under the mantle of “recovery.”<sup>4</sup>

My interests here, however, do not lie with the many individual woman writers who might be recovered from the pages of the periodical archive, but with the conversations concerning women writers also located there. Familiar figures circle through the examples I draw from here, not to deny the importance of an on-going recovery project, but to draw our attention to other discoveries concerning the “woman writer” that recovery projects might bring. Woolf’s own *A Room of One’s Own*, to stick for a moment with a quite familiar rather than newly rediscovered example, was briefly drawn into a heated conversation regarding the question of the woman writer and the representation of

women in literature conducted in the pages of *Time and Tide* in 1930. Theodora Bosanguet reviewed the book in *Time and Tide* on November 15th, 1929, and two excerpts of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* were published in the journal on November 22 and 29th of that year. In 1930 *Time and Tide's* editor, Lady Rhondda, wrote a series of articles on the representation of women in the work of George Bernard Shaw (a series of articles on gender and the work of H.G. Wells followed). Her discussion of the ways in which Shaw's work imagined women as "conduit pipes" sparked a dialogue between Shaw and Rhondda that spilled into the letters column. Rhondda's assertion that Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, Lord Birkenhead, and "nearly every man writer" shared a belief that "whilst a man may be the Conduit Pipe of the Holy Ghost for any purpose that It may choose, and that the man himself is allowed to have some choice, or to believe himself to have some choice, in the matter, a woman – a normal woman – may be a Conduit Pipe for one purpose only – the physiological one. Hers never directly to make, but only to make the men who make" (854). Rhondda held that women writers, presumably even those women writers reviewed in *Time and Tide*, were themselves limited by this view:

Read eighty per cent of the moderately good modern novels by women to-day, and you will find in them the echo of the beliefs of D. H. Lawrence, of Lord Birkenhead, of *Man and Superman*. Women, they seem to be telling you all the time, must rest every hope they have on personal relations. No wonder the novels are gloomy! One could mention dozens of them, full of hungry, feverish emphasis on personal relations, resting entirely on two implications which every reasonably intelligent adult, including, in their saner moments, the authors, knows to be entirely unsupported by facts: (a) that purely personal love is an end-in-itself ... (b) that if the particular person on whom the heroine has set her feverish, emotional claws could return in full force her excited, unbalanced, lop-sided abortion of sex-hunger, she would sbe completely happy for so much as two weeks. (856)

Her discussion of Shaw sparked a conversation in the letters page regarding the status of the woman writer that referenced both Woolf's text and her example; the dialogue imagined the "woman writer" as, variously, non-existent, fully arrived, or emergent.

On one level, the conversation resulting from the juxtaposition of Woolf's excerpts, Shaw's comments, Rhondda's response, and the sharp exchange of views in the letters to the editor column goes to prove Toril Moi's point. The category "woman writer" circulated in the letters to the editor in response to a "provocation," first the views of Shaw and others as interpreted by Rhondda, and then a charge from one of *Time and Tide's* readers, John Collier, that "our excellently equipped women writers fail to produce really first-class work" (895). What becomes evident, though, is how quickly the question of the woman writer became entangled with questions of the representation of women in literature, the development of "woman writer" as a *professional* category, and feminist understandings of women's changing roles in both the public and private arenas. Composer and former suffragist Ethel Smyth and middlebrow author and *Time and Tide* contributor E. M. Delafield responded to Collier by providing counter examples (Austen, Bronte, Woolf herself) and by envisioning a future in which women writers weren't guided by their adherence to the value of personal relations. As Delafield put it, "[s]ome of us, perhaps, know better than to believe it now [the idea that women 'rest every hope they have on personal relations'], but to believe and to feel, are two different things, and not until feeling, as well as belief, has come into line with fact, shall we have the really first-class woman writer" (929).

As we consider the future of recovery projects and the future of the category "woman writer," we benefit from exploring the complicated ways in which a "modern" articulation

of feminist literary criticism emerged alongside efforts to consider the “woman writer” as a professional and meaningful category. Both of these – efforts to describe the “woman writer” and efforts to consider “woman writer” as a professional category – have longer histories than this, of course. But late nineteenth-century linkings of New Women and New Journalism generated a vocabulary for considering the woman writer in general and the woman journalist in particular in relation to both the crises and the possibilities of the “modern” era.<sup>5</sup> Careful study of modern periodicals reveal the ways in which efforts to think through the relation of gender and writing were inflected with this twinning of women writers and modernity, as well as revealing how considerations of the “woman writer” were entangled with emerging discourses concerning the literatures of modernity (experimental, middlebrow, socialist and more).

Additionally, exploring reviewing practices in early twentieth-century periodical culture reveals what a slippery category “woman writer” was at the beginning of the last century: even as it is asserted, the solidity of the category disappears from view. In a review of Rebecca West’s *Harriet Hume*, Naomi Royde-Smith pointed out that a “famous” woman writer could be both celebrated and unknown:

If the man in the street, or rather, that less talked of but more powerful entity, the man in the newsroom, were asked to make a list of the six most famous living women, he would without a doubt include on that list the name of Rebecca West. If asked why he did so he might be hard put to it for an answer. Rebecca West is neither actress nor channel swimmer. She has not stood for Parliament nor driven any record-breaking piece of machinery. She did not fill the Albert Hall with her violin-playing as a girl, nor exhibit at Burlington House at the age of ten. She is just one of many famous women writers. And even as a writer, she is not pre-eminent – as the man in the newsroom judges eminence – though it is true that her vivid reviews still dazzle the small but discerning public in the pages of the most exclusive weeklies. (1148)

In Royde-Smith’s eyes, the “celebrity” of the woman writer, her status *as* woman writer is measured against the celebrity assigned to spectacular women in an emerging modern mass culture. That celebrity is also complicated by the ways in which reputation is understood within a segmented periodical culture and is further modified by the continuing practice of anonymous, pseudonymous or collaborative modes of publication. West is recognized, but when questioned regarding her fame, her audience might be “hard put to it for an answer.”

Since the periodical imagines the “author” as, variously, unknown or anonymous, pseudonymous, collaborative, or performative, the term “woman” in periodical culture’s “woman writer” is easily both as unstable and as necessary as feminist theory has taught us it should be. Laurel Brake has stressed the ways in which “periodicals ... subvert the dominance of the notion of the author as individual genius, a notion which is a construct of ideologies interested primarily in the romantic individual” (167). Ann Ardis has described the performative play of Beatrice Hastings in the pages of the *New Age* whose use of multiple pseudonyms contributed to public debates concerning literature and the arts that has become that particular periodical’s signature (Dialogics). Margaret Beetham has drawn attention to the ways in which editors and journalists played with the relationship of signature to gender categories (through gender-bending and strategic use of pseudonyms), so that “the space provided by anonymity or pseudonyms was used to rework gender” if only “within constraints not just of the material but also of ideological power” (Periodicals 239). Such work highlights the parallel between the periodical’s occasional disinvestment in anchoring the signature to a secure (gender) identity to contemporary theories of gender performativity. Such manipulations also encourage us to

think again of *what it is* we might be recovering as we rediscover the “woman writer” in periodical culture.

Equally important are those moments when the category “woman writer” or feminist criticism itself is rejected. Rebecca West’s early journalism published in periodicals such as the feminist avant-garde publication the *Freewoman* (and its second iteration, the *New Freewoman*), and the socialist papers the *Clarion* and the *Daily Herald*, among others, reveal the emergence of a biting and savvy feminist literary and cultural criticism that brought a careful analysis of the workings of gender as a knowledge category to public, literary, and social spheres. In a critique of Christabel Pankhurst’s series of articles on venereal disease published in the *Suffragette* in 1913, West pointed toward the unhappy juxtaposition of Pankhurst’s articles and the announcement of a proposed new series of articles on women and fiction: “These articles contained but bluff and hearty assertions of the undoubted facts that most men are immoral at one time or another, and that it is horrible to be a prostitute and – a rather irrelevant QED – therefore women ought to have votes. However, it does no harm to rub these facts in. Underneath was more good news. ‘We have to announce, in addition to the articles on venereal disease and its prevention now appearing, a new series of articles on Women in Fiction...’ Art and hygiene hand in hand” (204). Attention to the placement of discussions of the woman writer in relation to other materials, the periodical’s bibliographic code, reveals the various feminist debates that linked the analysis of women writers to other contemporary (and often feminist) investments.

“Recovery projects” and the category of the “woman writer” have both been subject to numerous challenges and modifications in past few decades, of course, challenges that have forever eliminated the understanding of “woman writer” as a coherent or simple category. These challenges have not, however, removed the need to keep the question of the woman writer under scrutiny. More than a decade ago, first in a paper delivered at the 1999 meeting of the British Women Writers Association and then in a piece expanding upon that talk for the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Mary Poovey conducted an experiment, to “recover” at random the work of a woman writer previously unknown to her, in this case Ellen Pickering, and to explore whether there is “any point in recovering a writer’s work, just because the author belongs to a category – in this case, the woman writer – that we and our students consider important” (438). Poovey’s examination of the continued viability of feminist recovery projects, and her answers to Margaret Homans and Jill Campbell who were invited to respond to her essay, turned on methodological questions regarding the “theoretical incoherence of our discipline” and the difficulty we have in justifying training in the liberal arts.<sup>6</sup> Pointing out that “new critical tools evolve from reading new texts as well as from the social milieu in which the scholars who devise them live,” Homans picked up the thread of Poovey’s own self-conscious interrogation of methodology and urged that we bring new methods to those unfamiliar materials that have traditionally anchored “recovery” projects. In short, Homans called for a constant renewing of older tools in the face of new objects of study (459).

In a similar vein, I’ll suggest that the challenge to the recovery project that comes from periodical studies is dual: a challenge to the idea of “author” on the one hand, and to our understanding of what it is that we are recovering, on the other. Feminist periodical studies – if by that we mean not only a interest in gender and feminist periodical culture but also a blending of feminist approaches with the interest in material culture that accompanies periodical studies – insists upon “recovery” as a key method while invigorating and reworking that familiar and indispensable feminist tool. Recovering the work of women writers and discussions regarding the “woman writer” from the pages of

periodicals of all sorts certainly “thickens” our understanding of the literary culture of the early twentieth century – in part because of the complex intersections and associations that linked discussions of modern literary and social experiments to discussions of feminist ones. Recent collections of critical essays attending to modern periodical culture, as well as efforts to bring little read periodicals and surrounding ephemera such as advertisements back into circulation via digitalization projects, have both deepened and challenged our conceptions of the period, the challenge often requiring a decentering of “literary modernism” as a key term. As Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo put it, describing their explorations into early twentieth-century feminist periodical culture, “modernism” is “too selective and distorting a framework through which to ‘map the next frontier in material historical research in publishing and new media forms between 1880 and 1940’ ” (49). Similarly, scholars of “middlebrow modernism” have mapped a vibrant alternative literary culture. In addition, scholars working in the field of periodical studies have traced the heated debates that associated “modernism” with a constantly changing set of qualities rather than a coherent set of characteristics. “Modern,” as term of value, was attached to a wide range of diverse practices, many lying far outside experimental modernism. Within this context, then, attention to materials such as book reviews or letters to the editor that explore the category “woman writer” or bring gender as a category of investigation to the analysis of literary texts shows us a complex and buried history preceding academic deliberations regarding feminist literary criticism and the category of the woman writer. Just as the study of periodicals works to revitalize modernist studies in general, so it can offer a similar set of opportunities and challenges to feminist studies of modernism and approaches to the modern “woman writer.”

In addition, the study of modern periodicals and the feminist debates that often appeared within them strengthen efforts to deepen our understanding of modern media technologies and the material contexts within which texts were produced and consumed in the early twentieth century. And at the same time, study of modern periodical culture expands our discussion of the literature and culture of the modern period by noticing the ways in which texts and ideas circulated in a global network: “One element of early-twentieth-century transnationalism that bore heavily on literary modernism” write Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, “was the development of novel technologies for transmitting information: telegraph, radio, cinema, and new forms of journalism not only reconfigured culture’s audiences but also helped speed manifestos, works of art, and often artists across national and continental borders” (742). Countless examples worthy of scholarly investigation come to mind, from the travel writings of Jessie Fauset for the *Crisis* to the international coverage of *Time and Tide*. We have only begun to explore the ways in which a study of periodical networks might enhance our efforts to imagine a global modernism.

The archive of early twentieth century periodicals offers new ways of understanding the figure of the author, the category of the woman writer, the project of feminist literary criticism. Periodical culture encourages us to recover not the single woman writer, but the network, the dialogue, the conversation. Thus, stepping back to consider an early phase of feminist criticism’s more distant past may give us a way of reimagining certain elements of its future and seeing recovery as a tool that though admittedly well-worn, is also highly adaptable to new projects and purposes. My interest here has been on the question of what new work in periodical studies can contribute to the question of the recovery of underread women writers considered in both the realms of feminist studies and modernist studies (or studies of early 20th century literature). In recovering an early twentieth century discussion of women writers carried out in periodicals, we uncover

potentially useful considerations of the author as embedded in networks of production, circulation and reception. While the material made available to us in these periodicals often rhymes nicely with current or familiar theoretical preoccupations—the play with pseudonyms to answer our gender performativity, an uncertainty regarding the category “woman writer” to answer our own skepticism – we should also be attentive to the particular predicament we currently face. Poovey’s difficult questions regarding methodology remind us to be aware of the larger framework in which we work through our methodological investments. While academic feminist criticism’s first set of recovery projects worked alongside and in support of academic institution-building projects such as the creation of Women’s Studies programs and publishing efforts to put women writers back into circulation, this cluster’s return to the category of the “woman writer” occurs at a time when some Women’s and Gender Studies programs and departments are under stress and when the energy in publishing houses has generally drifted from activities such as locating and reprinting the works of “recovered” women writers. Periodical studies have been supported by the creation of innovative digital archives such as the MJP co-directed by Robert Scholes and Sean Latham and similar projects devoted to the study of modern women’s writing such as the Orlando Project which stretches into the twentieth century (Orlando: Women’s Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present, an electronic textbase for research). With such endeavors will come new opportunities for rethinking recovery as well as the new methodological tools and questions that will insure a lively future for the study of modern woman writers.

### *Short Biography*

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### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> More recent discussions of the present and future of both feminist literary studies and studies of the “woman writer” have noticed variously, and sometimes unhappily, that feminist literary studies and feminist theory have come to be associated with “repetition” rather than newness; that feminist theory and feminist studies have grown away from the study of literature or the employment of literary or cultural criticism to the employment of other models and methodologies adopted from science and related disciplines; that feminist studies, feminist theory, and feminist literary criticism have moved toward smaller niche or sub-disciplinary explorations while explorations of gender have become fully absorbed by other investigative frameworks; that a new generation of scholars and/or students are disinclined to identify with feminism or as feminists; that the recovery work of earlier generations of feminist scholars and the term “woman writer” are no longer relevant so that “books and essays on women writers begin with a series of apologies” (Moi Not Woman Writer 264); and that economic pressures on both the job market and on academic publishing houses make publishing scholarship on recovered women writers or the republication of “lost” texts by women writers no longer as feasible or attractive as in former years. See, for example, Elliott, Garrity, Marcus, McDermott, Moi “I Am Not a Feminist” and “I Am Not a Woman Writer.”

<sup>2</sup> I take this point from Toril Moi, who traces conversations regarding the status of the “woman writer” through two sets of conversations held in 1981 and 1989 between Peggy Kamuf and Nancy Miller (261). For a study that takes a long view of the evolution of feminist literary criticism, see Felski, *Literature after Feminism*.

<sup>3</sup> My term “feminist dialogics” borrows from the work of Ann Ardis who has explored a “modernist dialogics” both in the relation of early twentieth-century periodicals to one another and in the internal debates that

characterize efforts to define modernism within the pages of a single periodical. See her essay “The Dialogics of Modernism.”

<sup>4</sup> For example, Catherine Clay’s work on *Time and Tide*, both in her book *British Women Writers* and in a recent essay on the relationship of feminism and modernism in the *Key Words Journal*, rediscovers a large group of female journalists and artists who gave the publication its identity first as a feminist weekly with roots in the suffrage movement and then as a weekly increasingly interested in the arts. In its early years, the journal made visible the work and criticism of now familiar and unfamiliar figures such as Naomi Mitchison, Kate O’Brien, Valentine Ackland, Frances Cornford, Stella Gibbons, Winifred Holtby, Sylvia Lynd, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mary Butts and others. Similarly, Jean Lutes’s *Front-Page Girls* presents us with girl stunt reporters such as Nellie Bly and Djuna Barnes cheek-to-cheek with Henry James’s representations of the female reporter.

<sup>5</sup> Both Margaret Beetham and Margaret Stetz have considered the relationship between late-nineteenth century views of the new woman and the new journalism (Beetham, *Magazine*, 115–30; Stetz, “New Woman”).

<sup>6</sup> Poovey’s answer, in the case of this woman writer, was a quite definite “no”; and her refusal of those methods that had informed her early work was accompanied by a rigorous questioning of our ability to explain and justify the work we do as literary critics. For another response to Poovey’s challenge, see Ann Ardis “Landscape.”

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