

The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de Siècle Feminisms

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The New Woman in Fiction and Fact marks a new departure in literary and historical studies of a fin-de-siècle icon. Scholarship on the New Woman has traditionally explored her status as a controversial figure whose unconventional behaviour signified, for some, the promise and for others, the bane of modern civilisation. Despite all of the ink spilled on the subject in recent years, the New Woman herself has remained an elusive figure representing sometimes contradictory ideas to different audiences. Angelique Richardson's and Chris Willis' collection makes this diversity of meanings into a virtue by drawing together essays that call into question the possibility of whether any cultural symbol with as much influence and staying power as the New Woman can have only one true identity. By placing the New Woman within her broader economic, cultural, and imperial context, these essays when taken together describe how the representation of this powerful cultural symbol in popular and literary texts can speak to broader fin-de-siècle concerns regarding race, gender, and nation.

Many of the fourteen essays included in this book represent revised versions of papers originally presented at The New Woman Conference held at the Institute for English Studies at the University of London in 1998. A wide range of scholarly voices build on recent research findings in order to uncover the multiple meanings of the New Woman as both reality and symbol.⁽¹⁾ In terms of organization, the editors might have provided a stronger thematic structure for the collection, in order to better clarify internal connections. As the contributors confirm, fin-de-siècle feminists eagerly appropriated the term to affirm their modernity, while fictional representations of the New Woman often served to question her status as heroic liberator. Exciting new interpretations from established scholars in the field such as Ann Ardis and Gail Cunningham appear alongside a number of interesting essays from a new generation of New Woman researchers.⁽²⁾

Although this lends an unevenness to the contributions, the collection successfully challenges the notion of the 'New Women' as a static rather than evolving and contested identity.

The opening essays revisit the question of how the New Woman first emerged as an important cultural symbol. An introductory essay situates the New Woman debates within the context of nineteenth-century British feminism. Richardson and Willis give ample attention to the popular, literary, and political representations of the New Woman in order to trace her larger historical significance. After the painstaking effort of the introduction to trace the evolution of the New Woman, the reader may be surprised by Talia Schaffer's opening question in her lead essay, "'Nothing but Foolscape and Ink': inventing the New Woman". Schaffer provocatively asks, 'Did the New Woman really exist?' (p. 39) The claim that the New Woman existed only in 'foolscape and ink' does not diminish her importance as a powerful invented symbol. (p. 50) Contesting Ann Ardis' claim that the fictional New Woman found herself marginalized as a radical symbol, Schaffer asserts that 'Fictionalizing the New Woman does not seem to relegate her to a safely marginal space.' (p. 44) Rather, her fictional status enables the New Woman to emerge as a symbol that represents multiple political goals to a variety of constituencies. Exploring Sarah Grand's and Ouida's debate over the identity of the New Woman within the popular press, Schaffer argues that the New Woman's revolutionary potential lies in her literary origins.

Discussion of the origins of the New Woman continues in the following essays by Chris Willis, Sarah Wintle and Sally Ledger. In "'Heaven defend me from political or highly educated women!': packaging the New Woman for mass consumption', Willis argues that commercialized popular literature on the New Woman ensured 'her a prominent and lasting place in popular culture.' (p. 64) This occurs despite this genre's depiction of her as a conventional fragile heroine forced to sacrifice her principles to gain acceptance. The widespread popularity of the New Woman as a subject for comedy-romance and detective fiction provides for the early dissemination of an easily recognizable and lasting image for this female rebel.

According to Sarah Wintle, technology deserves some credit for the making of the New Woman as a thoroughly modern figure. The New Woman in her narrative emerges alongside the development of new modes of transportation such as the bicycle. In 'Horses, bikes, and automobiles: New Woman on the move', Wintle contributes to the extensive literature on the connection between physical mobility and personal freedom by historicizing the changes in transport options for women. Her essay explores the different potential of the horse, bicycle and automobile for promoting female liberation. Wintle convincingly argues that the car, unlike the horse and bicycle, did little to promote women's physical independence due to women's limited access to mechanical training, a skill necessary to ensure the success of all drivers.

Sally Ledger's 'Ibsen, the New Woman and the actress' asks the reader to look for the origins of the New Woman in Ibsen's writing. By reading the 'fictional' New Woman of Ibsen's plays alongside 'actual' New Women such as American actress Elizabeth Robins, Ledger reads Ibsen as an unwitting feminist who provided new opportunities for actresses such as Robins to portray characters on stage who embody the hopes and desires of real women. When taken together these essays, all loosely concerned with the origins of the New Woman, make a strong case for the idea that many factors contributed to her birth. However, they also leave the reader wondering whether certain factors might have played a more significant role than others in the making of this cultural icon.

Two of the strongest essays in the collection explore the relatively little-studied relationship between masculinity, male sociability, and the New Woman. Gail Cunningham's "'He-Notes": reconstructing masculinity' understands the New Woman as constructed within a binary system that privileged a masculine voice. By focusing on two authors who wrote at the end of the New Woman novel craze in the late 1890s, Méné Muriel Dowie and George Egerton, Cunningham demonstrates that the gender inversion depicted in these texts created a 'crisis in masculinity.' (p. 105) Although these heroines appropriate male Victorian sexual norms, their radical potential was thwarted because neither of these books attracted as much attention as the more popular 'doom-laden' novels of Sarah Grand and Mona Caird. Ardis' contribution to this collection, 'New Women and the New Hellenism,' examines the way New Woman novelists such as Olive Schreiner and Ethel Arnold contributed to a critique of (male) Hellenism, the late- nineteenth-century

movement that idealized male love and education in the Greek tradition. Ardis asks 'Does the 'New Hellenism' enable or discredit female intellectuality?', in order to understand whether or not this movement 'carved out a cultural space for female homorelativity.'(p. 108) Like Cunningham, Ardis successfully explores the limits of female agency in creating new radical possibilities for the New Woman.

Subsequent essays by Ann Heilmann and Laura Marcus continue the discussion of women's resistance to the constraints of masculinized fin-de-siècle discourse by positioning the New Woman within the context of Freudian notions about female hysteria. Heilmann's 'Narrating the hysteric: fin-de-siècle medical discourse and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*' suggests that the New Woman novelist, by challenging medicine as a masculinized discourse, offered an early critique of what Freud would later call the female hysteric. In 'Staging the 'Private Theatre': gender and the auto-erotics of reverie', Marcus explores the question of female autonomy by comparing Grand's *The Beth Book* to Freud's analysis of Anna O.. New Woman novelists responded in their writings to Freudian constructions of an untamed inner life. Marcus confirms the findings of other scholars, demonstrating that feminism and hysteria both emerged during this period as protests against women's lack of personal freedom.

Switching thematic directions considerably, Rebecca Stott and Carolyn Burdett follow the recent trend in British studies toward uncovering the relationship between colony and the metropole as they consider the New Woman's role in the imperial project. Stott parallels the monstrous, feminized images of Africa with similar images of the New Woman in "Scaping the body: of cannibal mothers and colonial landscapes'. Her analysis offers an interesting challenge to the findings of scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt who depict static feminized images of Africa as a virgin waiting to be taken by Europeans.⁽³⁾ Instead, Stott sees a country represented as an 'unnatural woman'. The trope of the 'cannibal mother' to describe Africa, according to Stott, emerged as a result of new evolutionary theories and the New Woman controversy that depicted British women as 'unnatural women'. Burdett's article, 'Capturing the ideal: Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man*' turns to Schreiner's unfinished novel to show how she reassesses feminism within the context of colonial South Africa. Although the notion that Schreiner sees the struggle of womankind as universal is interesting, there seems to be little evidence that the work disrupts the colonial hierarchy by connecting the situation of the white protagonist with that of other non-white female characters. That the novel remains unfinished signals for Burdett Schreiner's ambivalence about modernity and its role in limiting female autonomy.

Other writers in this collection also work to disrupt the notion of a fixed and stable British identity by arguing that the New Women and the fiction that they inspired contributed to a rethinking of ideas about the future of the British nation. Angelique Richardson explores one New Woman novelist's critique of the eugenics movement in "'People talk a lot of nonsense about heredity": Mona Caird and anti-eugenic feminism'. Comparing Caird's work to the more popular novels of Sarah Grand, Richardson persuasively argues that her attacks on biological determinism and her defence of women's personal rights make her the New Woman novelist most dedicated to a feminist liberal tradition. Matthew Beaumont's 'The New Woman in Nowhere: feminism and utopianism at the fin-de-siècle' argues that other novelists tried to imagine an expanded role for British women as citizens. His reading of Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's 1889 utopian feminist novel, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future*, posits that understanding the feminist utopian vision of this New Woman novel provides a window into the imagining of late-nineteenth-century utopian ideals. Lesley A. Hall's lively study of the controversial advocate of women's sexual freedom, Stella Browne, examines how feminist writing provided an enduring critique of male sexual institutions. Connecting the twentieth-century feminism of Browne to earlier Victorian ideals embodied in the New Woman enables Hall to make a convincing case for the continuities between nineteenth- and twentieth-century radicalism.

Regenia Gagnier's essay, 'Women in British aestheticism and the decadence' provides a final look at the multifaceted identity of the New Woman. Intended to serve as an epilogue, Gagnier's examines the New Woman's critique of decadence in order to better understand the role of women as (re)productive citizens. On its own, the essay provides a fascinating look at women's participation in debates over nineteenth-century aesthetic concerns related to consumption and production, sex and pleasure.

However, the questions raised by Gagnier do not bring together the many threads of this collection. The book would have greatly benefited from a concluding essay that directly explored the more controversial implications of the initial claims of Richardson and Willis regarding the continuities and discontinuities embodied in the New Woman as symbol. If it is indeed true that we can no longer speak of *the* New Woman but rather *New Women*, how does this change our understanding of this symbol or of fin-de-siècle culture? Does a symbol risk losing its potency if it is appropriated by different interests for their own use? Overall, *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact* makes an important contribution to unpacking the multiple origins and identities of the New Woman. Whether it is possible to determine the larger historical and cultural implications of the meaning behind this multifaceted icon is left for the book's new audience of fin-de-siècle readers to decide.

Notes

1. See for example, Nicola Thompson, ed., *Victorian Women Novelists and the Woman Question* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999); Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*, (Macmillan; Basingstoke, 2000); and Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, 'Inventing the New Woman: print culture and identity politics during the fin-de-siècle', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 31 (1998), 169- 82.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (Rutgers University Press; New Brunswick, NJ, 1990) and Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (Macmillan; London, 1978).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge; London, 1992).
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