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Abstract

**Feminist Realism at the *Fin de siècle*: The Influence of the Late-Victorian
Woman's Press on the Development of the Novel**

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This book engages a major literary problem: how did the novel develop from Victorian to modernist, and what role did the late-Victorian woman's press play in this development? I argue that feminist periodicals of the 1890s, particularly *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*, articulated a consistent literary aesthetic--what I call feminist realism--which advocated realistic representation of women in fiction, especially representation of the difficult cultural conditions women faced and the triumphs of women over these conditions. Through reviews of the works of important male and female authors of the decade--Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, George Gissing, Mona Caird, George Meredith, M^énie Dowie, George Moore, and Henrietta Stannard--these periodicals developed an aesthetic that drew on three aspects of woman's agency (consciousness, speech, and action) and emphasized corresponding narrative strategies (internal perspective, dialogue, and description of characters' actions). Still, the feminist periodicals privileged consciousness over speech and action, and, by doing so, encouraged authors to push the boundaries of traditional realism and anticipate the modernist aesthetic. By acknowledging the role of the woman's press in the development of the novel, this book revises our understanding of the transition from Victorianism to modernism, which often is characterized as anti-realist. Late-Victorian authors working within the realist tradition also contributed to this transition, particularly through their engagement with feminist realism.

Introduction

The Woman's Press at the *Fin de siècle*

In the introduction, I detail the publication history of *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* and lay out the principles for feminist realism, as articulated by these periodicals. I focus on how *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* discussed literature via the feminist realist aesthetic, and I show how their literary articles fit into a broader feminist agenda important to both periodicals. Neither *Shafts* nor *The Woman's Herald* was a strictly literary magazine; each had an overarching feminist agenda and ran articles about local political meetings and personalities within the feminist movement. Still, both periodicals placed stronger emphasis on the literary than earlier periodicals with similar agendas, such as *The English Woman's Journal* and *The Victoria Magazine*. There is a clear sense that the literary infused these periodicals and *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* saw literary representation as a political tool to further the cause of women's rights. With this relationship between literature and politics in mind, reviewers for these periodicals emphasized the three aspects of asserting agency and their corresponding narrative strategies in their reviews.

Chapter 1

"They are learning to think . . . for themselves": Consciousness Raised

For *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*, consciousness was key to transforming the cultural status of real-life women in the 1890s; in fact, increased consciousness about the cultural conditions women faced was the first step in embracing the feminist movement. As Margaret

Sibthorp, the editor of *Shafts*, put it in her first editorial column in 1892, *thought* had the potential to change the world (8). *The Woman's Herald*, too, emphasized the impact thought might have on culture, especially through literary representation. As M. H. Krout wrote in "Woman in Fiction," which appeared in *The Woman's Herald* in 1893, heroines who had brains as well as beauty, who were "learning to think . . . for themselves," were to be admired greatly (485).

This chapter shows how the *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* highlighted consciousness in their discussions of woman's agency, and it focuses on Thomas Hardy and Sarah Grand as representative examples of late-Victorian authors attempting to incorporate feminist consciousness into their novels. Perhaps the most recognized male and female writer of the 1890s respectively, Hardy and Grand were central figures in articulating the New Realism of the 1890s, and both wrote about previously taboo subjects regarding sex and gender. In their best known works of the 1890s--Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1898) and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895)--they incorporated feminist consciousness by focusing on the internal perspectives of female characters. While Grand's novels more often centered on female characters and their thoughts from the outset and was praised by *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* for doing so, Hardy also received praise for his commitment to representing woman's agency in part because feminist periodicals hoped to gain his support for their cause. The praise given to Hardy points to an important feature of the feminist realist aesthetic; it was as inclusive as possible, and, as long as authors made an attempt to represent woman's agency, they were appreciated by the reviewers of *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*.

Chapter 2 "What the Girl Says": The Spoken Word as Political Tool

Expression of agency through the spoken word was equally important to feminist periodicals, though such expression often occurred as a result of the first aspect of woman's agency, increased consciousness. In fact, *Shafts* chronicles the rise of women's voices via consciousness in a column titled "What the Girl Says," which promised to publish the "thoughts of the girl on any point" upon which she wished to speak (5). Likewise, *The Woman's Herald* set as its aim to "speak" for those women who had thoughts but could not express them. In its first issue, the periodical promised to "speak the truth without fear of consequences" and "reflect the thoughts of the best women upon all the subjects that occupy their minds" (1).

For some authors negotiating feminist realism, spoken word became the dominant mode for representing woman's agency. George Gissing, whose 1893 novel *The Odd Women* directly engaged feminist discourse through the intentionally single Rhoda Nunn, was praised by feminist periodicals for his use of the spoken word to express woman's agency. Mona Caird, whose *Daughters of Danaus* (1894) featured extensive philosophical debates about the rights of women, also was admired for her attention to the speech of the central female character, Hadria Fullerton. In this chapter, I examine how Gissing and Caird employed dialogue in their novels, and I argue feminist periodicals were correct to emphasize Gissing's use of dialogue rather than his use of internal perspective, since his attempts to represent woman's agency through internal perspective fall short of the feminist ideal. Caird strikes a better balance between consciousness and the spoken word in *Daughters of Danaus*, and *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* recognized Caird as the more successful author. Still, as was the case with Hardy, Gissing was given credit for his attempt to represent woman's agency, showing that the feminist aesthetic remained flexible and inclusive.

Chapter 3 Women at Work, at War, and on the Go: Feminist Actions

Expressions of woman's agency were not complete without physical action, and, in *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*, the commitment to action is most evident in their feature articles about women and work, which focused on the everyday actions of women. From the first issue, *Shafts* published a column titled "Influential Lives," which often featured working women. Likewise, *The Woman's Herald* ran articles meant to indicate that women could participate in a much wider range of work activities than previously allowed and working was one action that would help change the status of women, since it would redefine the role of women in Victorian culture.

Especially admired for his belief that women could *do* anything was George Meredith, author of *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) and *The Amazing Marriage* (1895). *Shafts* praised Meredith's ability to represent the actions of women and highlighted his work as a model for other authors, male and female, to follow. Meredith shared an interest in the physically active woman with Ménie Dowie, whose *A Girl in the Karpathians* (1891) and *Women Adventurers* (1893) also expressed the view that women were capable of any activity, including traveling the world. Though Dowie received less coverage by the feminist press than did Meredith, she was recognized for her work in the woman's press. Still, Meredith received more attention from *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* than Dowie did, in part because Dowie was seen as holding extreme views on gender issues, including eugenics, which put feminists in an uneasy position. Feminist reviewers recognized the realist aesthetic in Dowie's work from the early 1890s but not in her more well-known novel *Gallia* (1895), which pushed the boundaries acceptable for feminist content. In selecting only those works by Dowie which fulfilled their ideal, and in recognizing a male author such as Meredith as a model for other authors to follow, the feminist periodicals demonstrate that their aesthetic did not always favor women writers over male authors.

Chapter 4

"The Realistic Method in Its Best Expression": Successful Representations of Woman's Agency and Literary Reputations

Ultimately, both *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* looked for novels incorporating all three methods of asserting agency, and authors who fulfilled this ideal had the opportunity to capitalize on their success and improve their literary reputations. When George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894) was praised for fulfilling the ideal, Moore took specific steps, including writing a distinctly "woman-centered" preface to accompany his novel, to ensure his continued success and a place in the early-twentieth-century literary canon. On the other hand, Henrietta Stannard, who wrote under the pseudonyms "Violet Whyte" and "John Strange Winter," might have improved her literary reputation by more thoroughly engaging the feminist realist aesthetic in her novel *A Blameless Woman* (1894), which had some of the markings of a New Woman novel but ultimately did not fulfill the ideal entirely. While Moore's novel was reviewed by *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*, Stannard's novel was not. The lack of attention to this novel in feminist periodicals is surprising, since the staff of both *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* knew about Stannard's work and her commitment to at least some women's causes. Still, Stannard's moderate views about women's issues help explain why she did not embrace the New Woman novel more thoroughly. I examine why one author was successful in improving his literary reputation via feminist realism, while another was not.

Afterword

Engaging and Shaping Modernism

The feminist aesthetic articulated in *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* contributed significantly to the debate over realism at the end of the nineteenth century, since it advocated serious consideration of the representation of woman's agency. By laying out specific principles

for Hardy's idea, in "Candour in English Fiction" (1890), that the "relations of the sexes" should be represented in literature, feminist periodicals created a progressive yet flexible standard for late-Victorian authors to emulate. This standard, which praised authors for incorporating any of the three methods but saw the second and third as springing from the first, acknowledged consciousness more fully than previous realist aesthetics had. In fact, in an article titled "Is the Present Increase in Women Authors a Gain to Literature?," which appeared in *Shafts* in 1894, the author of the article identifies the ability to write about the "inner life" rather than outward detail as the "modern tone in literature" (240), and the author attributes the development of this tone to primarily women writers.

While women writers certainly contributed to the rise of modernism, I believe both women writers and male authors facilitated the transition from Victorianism to modernism by writing about not only the inner life itself but also the inner lives of women. Once woman's consciousness was represented in the novel, it was not an unreasonable leap to the thought-oriented aesthetic of the modern novel. Many of the authors discussed in this study went on to write novels that engaged and shaped modernism, and, in the afterword, I detail these contributions. Ultimately, the transition from Victorianism to modernism is more fluid than previously acknowledged and cannot be attributed to anti-realist narrative strategies exclusively. Rather, it can be attributed equally to the impulse to work within the realist tradition even as one transformed the tradition, as did authors who adopted the late-Victorian feminist realist aesthetic.