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Mediating women's suffrage literature

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Synopsis

Although cultural productions of the women's suffrage campaign have received increasing attention, the literary, historical and political issues raised by this body of material remain contentious. This article examines why suffrage literature has often been regarded as 'insignificant', and proposes new ways in which the body of writing can be understood from a literary perspective. Secondly, it addresses the problematic relationship between work produced by historians of suffrage and the perspective of cultural analysts, suggesting again that this dynamic raises questions about the politics of literary form. Thirdly, it suggests ways in which the organisation of material through new media archiving and research would enable new and more fruitful ways of reading across and interpreting the range of women's writing.

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Literary material—fiction, poetry and drama—produced within the context of the women's suffrage campaign has received increasing critical attention in recent years and has, through various publishing projects, become accessible to a wider readership. The considerable historical attention which the suffrage campaign has been given, in terms of its politics, strategies, and role within a wider feminist framework, is beginning to be matched by an interest in its aesthetic expression and cultural context.¹ Nevertheless, those critical studies which focus on early twentieth century women's political fiction demonstrate a certain unease in situating and justifying it as an object of both literary and political study: its location and identity within literary history seems less secure, for example, than its elder sister, the New Woman fiction of the 1890s. Paradoxically, anxieties have also emerged from some historians about the effects of an overemphasis on cultural constructions of the suffrage campaign which fails to engage fully with its politics. This article presents fresh literary contexts in which suffrage writing might be understood but also explores the relationship

between literary and historical approaches to the women's campaign. The imaginative energy and innovative deployment of culture in political struggle exemplified by the women's suffrage movement presents a key arena for debate around the politics of form.

It is something of an intellectual curiosity that the literature prompted by the British women's suffrage movement has received little critical attention from feminist literary theorists of the twentieth century whose championing of women's literary discourse has been founded on the political. Without attempting to take away from the significance of their sustained efforts and their effects upon the practice of literature today, it is nevertheless worthwhile asking why feminist theorists find it hard to incorporate committed feminist literature into the formulation of literary theory. For example, one of the most exciting developments of feminist theory on the revolutionary aspects of language—écriture féminine—entirely ignores literature with political commitment. In Modernist and Postmodernist terms, the texts which offer subversive political signification are

characterised by properties that assail dominant forms and it is now a commonplace to conflate literary feminism with formal experimentalism on the basis of their common opposition to established 'patriarchal' norms. As Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs advocated, in one of the earlier studies of this kind, ellipses, open-ended sentences, multiple climaxes and non-linear narratives—in other words textual characteristics that are Modernist, 'undermine patriarchal forms and help fulfil the prophesy of a truly feminine discourse, one practised by women' (Friedman & Fuchs, 1989, p. 4). Quite aside from the point that it is impossible to make a convincing case for the claim that there is anything inherently radical or feminist in experimental writing per se, equating Modernist style with an ideology of the feminine as something quintessentially marginal is of little help in evaluating the historically specific position of women's writing. Moreover this model is unable to offer a framework for understanding the pragmatic political value of explicitly feminist texts written in the realist mode. Rather than providing opportunities for grounding theory in historically concrete manifestations, feminist theory has set the terms of debate where it is easy to condemn suffrage discourse as merely topical, dogmatic or reductive. In a reconsideration of suffrage literature, one would have to begin by first acknowledging that it falls under this considerable shadow of Modernist aesthetics and to think of ways of illuminating the field in its own right, while at the same time linking it to the more established contexts for study of this period.

Inevitable difficulties are presented to the suffrage reader who, either implicitly or explicitly, has to negotiate with the habitual reading practice that places Modernist forms of writing at the top of a hierarchy, such is the power of Modernist aesthetics as an interpretive paradigm. One way of mediating suffrage literature has been to highlight the novelists who were writing in formally experimental modes, so as to incorporate suffrage production under the umbrella of Modernism. Experimentation in the work of May Sinclair, Djuna Barnes and Dora Marsden, for example, has illuminated debates surrounding the 'gender of Modernism' but although such studies have undoubtedly contributed enormously to demonstrating the rich fabric that was suffrage discourse, the evaluative premise remains, and their 'exceptionalism' silences the rest whose diversity is surely one of the most interesting aspects of suffrage literature. Yet another method has been to focus on the suffrage activism of canonised Modernist writers such as Lawrence, Woolf, Yeats, and Wyndham Lewis, who were involved in the

suffrage movement. Such studies do little to illuminate neglected writers; furthermore, as all the Modernist writers discussed were resolutely ambivalent about suffrage, their inclusion in a body of writing labelled 'suffrage literature' casts an unrepresentative light on the movement, while at the same time reinforcing hierarchies between a reflective 'high' art and the politicised agendas of popular discourse.

Some feminist critics have attempted to salvage something from the formative era of suffrage literary production by settling for an interpretive framework in which suffrage fiction is seen as a precursor to Modernist literature. To take one example, Jane Eldridge Miller, in her study *Rebel Women* (1994), attempts to situate suffrage writing in a larger pattern of development within twentieth-century women's writing, tracing its challenging relationship to the romance quest, and stressing the relationship of an emergent feminism to the developments of modernism. Of suffrage novelists in particular, she writes:

Although they were not interested in formal experimentation in and of itself, these writers found that the traditional narrative structures and modes of characterization they had inherited were based upon and perpetuated the very social structures they wished to change. As a result, they were forced to be formally innovative in order to tell their stories about suffragettes and the suffrage movement. (Eldridge Miller, 1994, p. 161)

Eldridge Miller interestingly relates the narrative forms used in some suffrage fiction—which by no means were predominantly 'indeterminate' in structure—to the strategic context in which the writers operated; nevertheless, her analysis walks a fine line between defending and apologising for their lack of 'formal experimentation.' From a rather different body of material and perspective, Barbara Green, in *Spectacular Confessions* (Green, 1997), uses a Foucauldian notion of confessional writing as a 'ritual of discourse' unfolding within a power relationship, to claim that the 'confessional' nature of suffrage autobiographies are in themselves a challenge to conventional divisions between public and private spheres as they are manifested in hierarchies of literary forms and notions of genre. But, she suggests, links with modernism can again be discerned: 'The technologies of the modern city, modernist spectacle, and movement through space were taken up and transformed by suffragettes in their collective performances' (Green, 1997, p. 182).

In both cases, critics appear to seek signs of innovation in these texts, identifying formal experiments

which justify literary interest; the texts are thus pulled away from the 'merely' political and presented in a renegotiated context which validates their high literariness. This approach, however, can invite the understanding that women's political literature, written in the non-modernist mode, was the poor relation of the superior Modernist sisters, thereby reaffirming the hierarchy leading to dismissal and exclusion of the writers who were originally the focus of research, thus contradicting the premise of the investigatory rationale by hinting at the relative 'inadequacy' of the suffrage texts. As Angela John (1996, p. 230) reviewing Miller's book notes 'her analysis both elevates and diminishes them [suffrage writers] by evaluating them in the light of how they anticipated or fell short of the innovations of modernist fiction'. A tension thus emerges between a desire on the part of literary critics to validate such texts through the discovery of 'experimentation' and a recognition that such texts may not provide us with such formal innovations; as a result, our writing displays a compulsion to defend but also to apologise for our interest in this material. Certainly most critics of suffrage fiction appear compelled to address the question whether the text needs justification on the basis of its political expediency or literary innovation, with literature and politics constructed as separate and distinctive categories. Emphasising Modernist tendencies in suffrage literature can be understood as an attempt to overcome such divisions but the problem is created from the outset by categorical division and mutual exclusivity.

This tension created by the construction of literature and politics as separate categories is given a further inflection in debates around the issue of representation which highlight differences in approach between cultural analysts of the suffrage movement and historians of the women's campaign. In the *Journal of British Studies*, Nym Mayhall (2000) has suggested that new research into the cultural productions of the women's suffrage campaign appears to have superseded, in terms of output at least, the work of historians of the women's movement. Nym Mayhall, in an article which works to situate militant action within the political culture of Edwardian Britain, perceives a problem with such productivity:

Perhaps the most striking development in recent scholarship on suffrage, however, has been the proliferating discourse on militancy among literary critics, a development with which few historians have engaged. Yet while militancy has spawned a

veritable subfield in literary studies, continually generating new articles and books, these accounts portray the phenomenon in similarly reductive terms. (Nym Mayhall, 2000, p. 340)

The challenge offered by Nym Mayhall's essay, in itself part of her project of contextualising the movement within a broader radical tradition and citizenship debates (Nym Mayhall, 2003), reinforces the need for reflection on the broader issues raised by cultural analysis of the suffrage campaign and assess their validity. She argues that much work on the cultural productions of suffrage campaigners has served to perpetuate particular and (in the light of recent historical research) outmoded and oversimplified ideas about the relationship between constitutional groups and militant suffrage activism, centralising the role played by the WSPU and overlooking more complex manifestations of militancy in other organisations. Secondly, she comments that this research—heavily influenced by the work of Martha Vicinus and Lisa Tickner—has stressed the symbolic significance of suffrage activism at the expense of a developed understanding of its sophisticated stratagems, apparent once their tactics are seen in the context of other forms of political action. She concludes her essay by stating an example of this misreading: 'militancy cannot be reduced to the representation of women to women. Militancy's primary purpose was not to build community among suffragettes, although that may have been one consequence of its practice' (Nym Mayhall, 2000, p. 370). Clearly uneasy with an attention to 'representation' that she perceives as characteristic of a cultural studies or literary approach and that obscures the finer significance of 'Deeds' as the stuff of real politics, she implies that the complexities and context of suffrage militancy have been underestimated. More seriously, a focus on cultural productions of the suffrage campaign has, it would appear, pulled attention away from both an understanding of suffrage politics and a political reading of suffrage activities.

Nym Mayhall's perception of an implied divide between cultural production and politics is, however, difficult to reconcile with a campaign in which, in order to achieve political representation, writers drew constantly on 'representations' of femininity which would reinforce their claim for the vote, just as anti-suffrage campaigners, equally insistently, offered versions of womanhood which would deem them unfit for the franchise. In this context the 'politics of representation' carries both a practical and cultural significance. Nym Mayhall's article, and her criticism of a cultural

emphasis, points nevertheless to an anxiety around the 'historical' understanding of cultural activity and its impact.

This interplay of political agitation and artistic production epitomised by the suffrage campaign also, however, poses a problem for literary critics, confronted with literature which was clearly aimed to have a particular effect on an audience, which deliberately used specific historical detail, and which directed itself towards accessibility rather than ambiguity: all literary characteristics which enjoy scant interest in a post-modern world. Indeed, in recent studies of suffrage writing it is precisely the issue of 'representation', and in particular that of a mimetic nature, taking conventional, non-experimental forms, which has also caused anxiety for those writing specifically about the cultural productions of the suffrage campaign. Far from being an attractive and exciting locus for literary analysis, it produces tense, intense, and often convoluted theorising as critics attempt to engage with the dynamics between politics and aesthetics. The central question therefore again arises as to why suffrage literature should prompt such unease? The obviously 'political' impulse behind the writing appears to be what leads to its literary marginalisation. Offering a sense of 'felt actuality' achieved through engaging directly with political events, it cannot be 'read' in conventional literary terms: suffrage literature gives little opportunity for the critic seeking to unpick ambiguities or puzzle over linguistic niceties. The implied assumption that in such overtly political writing content predominates over any interest in form and therefore makes it unsuitable for textual analysis creates a pressure which resonates in the work of critics writing about women's cultural productions from the period, even when they seek to challenge it.

We are at a stage therefore where we need to think carefully about what is involved in reading suffrage cultural productions. One possibility is to turn from the production of representations and think more about their consumption. Such a project would involve further research into the readers of suffrage texts—their responses, if recorded, their purchasing patterns their allegiances and interests—and also further work on modes of publication and distribution of material. Is there evidence, for example, about writers agreeing upon or debating their textual strategies; how did they assess their own political efficacy? In other words, we need to know more about the market for suffrage creativity, the contexts of reception and production. An on-line archive, for example, which allows scholars to read across a range of print cultures (journals,

advertising, political pamphlets, posters) and which makes available the necessary contextual information might go some way in this direction, both enhancing knowledge of the materiality of suffrage literature in its time and constructing a wider discursive arena in which the normative and the innovative or unusual might be more finely distinguished.

Secondly, we might seek to find new ways of categorising and defining suffrage literature in relation to the terms of existing literary models but without endorsing a naturalism/modernism divide. One such method would be to classify suffrage literature through the organising principle of genre. Generic diversity is one of the most salient and significant aspects of the literature of this period: political narratives that seek to convert, educate and inform (either for or against); or those that seek to reflect and portray in the classical tradition; or those that attempt to express the author's convictions, energy and commitment' all mingle and overlap with the Bildungsroman, Romantic fiction, anti-romance, problem-plays, New Woman novels, sensational fiction, adventure narratives and roman-a-clefs. Suffrage texts are essentially hybrid. Charting the process of evolution, transformation or hybridization of genres would demonstrate the unprecedented scale of literary activities of the period, which is difficult to get across when placed in the realist/modernist straitjacket; it would also illustrate the sheer scale of women's writing in the two decades, after the decline of the three-decker novel and before the outbreak of the First World War. An online archive that maps the diversity of genres in suffrage literature and which places them in generic and genealogical contexts would thus also make apparent the flourishing and wide-reaching scope of women's literary activities, removing anomalies and gaps, thereby dispelling the erroneous notion that this was an insignificant phase in women's history and recognizing this literary output in its own right.

A further broadening of the context in which suffrage literature might be read could emerge from a more detailed examination of the ways in which it employed existing tropes and conventions that surrounded, competed with and influenced the novels. For example, in most suffrage narratives we find recurring devices, set-scenes and preoccupations: the Houses of Parliament, the female undergraduate, the Country House, Trafalgar Square, a suffrage march, Royal Holloway and The Trade Hall, all of which a narratologist might call 'morphemes'. If we take the Country House in suffrage narratives, both Monk Lawrence in Mrs Humphry Ward's *Delia Blanchflower* and Flank Hall in Arnold

Bennett's *The Lion's Share* (among many others) offer instances of this motif which could be read as a reflection of the wider Edwardian (or English) preoccupation with landed property. The list of country houses in Edwardian fiction is extensive: *Howards End*, *Overdene*, *Friar's Pardon* and so on. But immediately when *Flank Hall* or *Monk Lawrence* is placed in the context of *Howards End* or *Friar's Pardon*, one can see that the Country House in suffrage narratives occupies a very different location, symbolising not stability, continuity and sanctified tradition but rather an oppressive place from which to escape or in some instances, to burn down. Obviously this was not a straightforward case of politically motivated novelists setting out to demolish literary conventions through their work. But it does illuminate how a radical political ideology impacted on and transformed the semiotic codes with which the novelists are trying to communicate. There are a great many recurring signs employed by suffrage novelists of which the above example is but one.

'Mediating' suffrage literature with this approach would open up opportunities for a detailed textual analysis which would dissolve the boundaries between suffragette and suffragist, political and non-political, high and popular art. For example, an investigation into the semiotic code of suffrage processions would include not only *The Convert* by Elizabeth Robins but Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. The ebbs and flows of women's literary production do not necessarily converge with those of canonical history and attempts to appropriate existing literary models to women's writing and to discover women's contributions to major literary movements leave intact the criteria which exclude and misrepresent more significant and fundamental points in women's literary history. With fresh opportunities for re-classifying literature granted by technological advances, such as an electronic database, the divisions that have plagued and obscured women's political writing need no longer have relevance. We are suggesting therefore that an electronic resource archive, as proposed as part of the 'Feminisms and Print Culture 1830s–1930s' project, which emerged out of the *Multimediating Women's Voices Conference* (Hamilton, Canada, 2004), might contribute to fruitful developments in the politics of reading and address the tensions identified above.

From access to a wider range of, and contexts for, women's writing a more theorised awareness of reading practices in suffrage texts might emerge whereby we can confront strategies of representation in such a way that, however much we are hailed into the specifics of the

text, wider possibilities—of political significance in themselves—are also indicated. In the case of suffrage fiction we might, for example, begin to develop a more sophisticated perception of representation itself and of the ways in which actions are perceived, understood, 'constructed'. For suffrage literature constitutes writing characterised by a degree of knowingness, an awareness of our confrontation with strategies of representation, not played out through an opposition of deeds and words, but through a complex understanding of the relationship between actions, acting and performance.

This can be seen very clearly in a short story such as "Ope" by Colmore (1913), ostensibly a tale of transformation and conversion. It depicts two moments in time, a 'before and after' scenario: the first shows 'Maggs' the drunken woman who will 'give us the suffragette' to please the pub crowd, a turn involving playing the harridan, shrieking and shaking in a state of disorder to shouts of laughter from her audience. Maggs disappears for some time then returns, won over to the Cause, a figure of dignity and pride: a 'real' suffragette but also, she insists, a real 'woman':

You're a ignorant lot, you 'ere; same as me when I used ter come an' carry on. I didn't know nuffin—no more'n you do now, an' that there Suffragette bus'ness o' mine was rotten. You tyke an' look at me now, as I stan' 'ere, with me 'air tidy an' me 'at straight, an' if yer wants ter know wot a suffragette's reely like, yer'll begin ter 'ave a notion. (Colmore, 1913, p. 261)

Her account of conversion renders the whole pub silent with astonishment. This is very clearly a narrative concerned with performativity and could be read within Green's (1997) argument on the spectacular. It also, however, offers some insights into the complexities of the reading process. While the cause may restore her 'womanhood' to Maggs as the story 'represents', the 'representation' of her 'doing the suffragette' in mimicry is an equally powerful negotiation of gender and identity, a parodic enactment of the male gaze, a carnivalesque breaking of female silence but simultaneously a demonstration of dependency on an audience. Moreover, the reader is placed as 'audience' to that performance on so many different levels—watching her with the men, watching the men mock her, sharing their astonishment at conversion but also her recognition of an 'authentic' identity—that it is virtually impossible to ignore this dimension. In reading the story we cannot help be aware that we are participating in the dynamics of theatre. "Ope" might therefore be seen as a story in which the object

of 'representation' is representation itself. This is not to argue that the piece of writing is of interest because of a specifically metafictional consciousness, nor to claim for it a modernist self-reflexivity; rather it is to suggest that while actions may be understood symbolically—as Nym Mayhall (2000) rather regretfully suggests they have been, and at the expense of political understanding—that is not the whole story. The symbolic, of course, participates in 'action'. Indeed in these texts it might be argued 'symbolism' itself becomes symbolic of the processes of representation. The business of 'representation' is not an act of mimesis but becomes a counter-discursive strategy: as readers are tied into the specifics of the text they are also led to understand it as part of a battle of representation which is in itself a political struggle. To use Rita Felski's terms: 'writing should be grasped in this context as a social practice, which creates meaning rather than merely communicating it' (Felski, 1989, p. 78). The representation of 'representation' is the key to such texts; it presents a way of seeing them which does not lead us to claim a proto-modernism in them, nor to move into a 'reductive' mode by claiming that they operate on a symbolic level; rather the battle which is waged within these texts, as with militant activism in itself, comes directly from a political impulse, but it is a different, although related, fight.

What we might gain from the developments in perspective we are suggesting here, and what would be further enhanced by an electronic archive which brings together material from a broad spectrum of positions and national contexts, is a way of acknowledging the full complexity of these texts. We might develop a means of reclaiming suffrage fiction as an object of literary interest—and importance—without resorting to the justification that the novels are 'experimental.' Instead, through placing this material not only alongside other fiction but in juxtaposition with a wider range of non-fictional materials, such as pro- and anti-suffrage journalism, popular women's magazines and autobiographical writings, they can be read within a broader literary framework in which alternative models of form and genre may be identified. Furthermore, the process of 'representation' can be read and understood in terms of a political impulse, an act of participation in the arena of social contestation, which in itself offers a way of reading that is different from an opposition of the literary and the political: representation might thus be understood as a form of action in itself. Rather than seeing these texts as naïve in their aesthetics we can understand them as a knowing form of literature, a literature operating with a sophisticated sense of the

dynamics of the reading process and with a complex relationship to literary traditions and conventions. Within this context the formal and the political qualities of suffrage writing cease to be mutually exclusive. Further research into the specifics of suffrage literature would therefore not only enhance our understanding of feminist campaigning but also contribute to debate on the relationship between political action and cultural production.

The collaboration created through the Multimediated Women's Voices conference, and enhanced in the production of this article, has already led to the development of new perspectives on suffrage fiction. The material is still, however, relatively unavailable. An electronic archive would not only offer wider access to the range of suffrage fiction but also bring together a community of scholars who could introduce different perspectives from their knowledge of a broad range of print culture and situate it further in relation to their own national and cultural contexts. The Feminisms and Print Culture project would therefore provide new and concrete opportunities for mediating suffrage literature: the wider questions suffrage fiction raises, however, about the relationship between text and history, literature and politics, still remain a challenge.

Endnote

¹ The conference 'Suffrage City! Women's Suffrage and Cultural Representation', University of Wolverhampton, November 2000, was a manifestation of this growth in interest.

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