Around 1910: Periodical Culture, Women’s Writing, and Modernity

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Periodical studies has emerged as an important subfield in modernist literary studies in recent years; the success of the Modernist Journals Project, the launch of the Journal of Modern Periodical Studies, and the rapid-fire publication of scholarly books and articles exploring the workings of little magazines, slick magazines, political organs, mass-market publications, women's magazines, and other periodical forms has marked modern periodical studies as an arena of great energy. This is an ideal time to begin to assess what this scholarly venture might mean for feminist criticism of women's writing. Foundational texts from the 1990s began to map the field of feminist periodical studies in relation to the central role women's magazines played in constructing ideas of modern femininity (often in relation to the identity of the consumer); two works in this vein worth mentioning are Margaret Beetham's A Magazine of Her Own? (1996) and Ellen Gruber Garvey's The Adman in the Parlor (1996). In addition, Jayne Marek’s take on modernist little magazines, Women Editing Modernism (1995), brought to light the formative work of women editors who contributed...
to the construction of literary modernism. As these texts illustrate, periodical studies rewards researchers with seemingly endless new territories to explore, forgotten authors to consider, new methodologies to adopt, and new questions that invigorate feminist literary practice.

The five books reviewed here, as well as this special Women and Anglo-American Periodicals issue of Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, extend our sense of what periodical studies can offer feminist literary criticism of women's writing (here broadly defined to include both literary texts and non-fiction prose). As these books are especially focused upon women publishing during the modern period, they also contribute to our understanding of the gendered print cultures of modernity (both modernist and not). “On or about December, 1910, human character changed,” Virginia Woolf playfully suggested, and these texts offer a significant view of that change.

In a kind of six-degrees-of-periodical-separation, these five books provide a thick description of the inner workings of the literary and political cultures that characterized the experience of modernity in Britain and the United States in the 1910s. When read together, these texts allow us to trace the paths of editors, contributors, and topics of concern within the complex networks of modern periodical culture. For example, in different ways, both Faith Binckes's Modernism, Magazines, and the British Avant-Garde: Reading “Rhythm,” 1910-1914 and Jenny McDonnell's Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace: At the Mercy of the Public explore Katherine Mansfield’s work with the little magazines Rhythm and the Blue Review in the early 1910s (McDonnell's work stretches beyond that period into the 1920s). The avant-garde feminist publication the Freewoman of 1911-12, which plays a starring role in Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap, and Lelia Ryan’s coauthored Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere, shared a publisher with Mansfield and John Middleton Murry’s paper Rhythm (1911-13), a connection signaled visually through an advertisement for Mansfield’s work that appeared regularly in the Freewoman. Rachel Schreiber's Gender and Activism in a Little Magazine: The Modern Figures of the “Masses” explores the workings of gender in the illustrations of the United States socialist little magazine the Masses (1911-17), a publication that circulated in similar reading communities as the avant-garde Freewoman. DiCenzo, Delap, and Ryan’s Feminist Media History, a detailed look at feminist periodical culture from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shares overlapping concerns with Mary Chapman and Angela Mills’s Treacherous Texts: U. S. Suffrage Literature, 1846-1946, an anthology of primary source materials, particularly those related to literary cultures, culled from the United States suffrage movement. Three of these studies bring the 1910s to the fore as a crucible of innovative periodical culture, while the two books devoted to feminist print culture situate the 1910s within a longer historical view. These five recent publications, of course,
do not exhaustively map the periodical culture of the early twentieth century, or even of the 1910s—these works do not include studies of the black press, mass-market publications, daily papers, women’s magazines, fashion magazines and ‘slicks,’ or trade publications. But collectively these five books hint at the many satisfactions of periodical studies, a field that offers a detailed look at the workings of particular cultural formations while also enabling an examination of how periodical communities relate to and intersect with other cultural groupings, movements, and organizations. They also allow us to trace the deep connections between the varied print cultures of modernity, and so, find links between socialist, avant-garde, feminist, and modernist writing communities.

Sean Latham and Robert Scholes have argued that as we shift our attention to periodicals as interesting objects of study in and of themselves, rather than as mere “containers of discrete bits of information,” we develop “new methodologies and new types of collaborative investigation” suited to making sense of the pleasing and perplexing diversity of periodicals. Since periodicals are mixed forms, they require interdisciplinary approaches; ideally these might come from the kind of cooperative scholarship that combines the specialized gazes of multiple pairs of eyes. Periodicals speak to various interests—and interest groups—at once, often juxtaposing editorial commentary, news reporting, literary material, visual material, advertising, cultural analysis in the form of book reviews, theater reviews, and more. Latham and Scholes call for “the creation of humanities labs” that would foster the kind of scholarly interaction capable of making sense of this rich textural world (p. 530). It is worth keeping the “humanities lab” model in mind when considering the recent contributions to the field of periodical studies reviewed here, since these books offer a range of approaches to periodical study (centered as they are, variously, around literary or visual materials, on periodical networks, and on the intersection of periodicals and feminist organizations). Furthermore, these books are supported by strategies borrowed from a range of disciplines including history, literary studies, print culture studies, media history, art history, and more. In addition to rewarding a range of interpretative strategies and encouraging cooperative strategies more generally, periodicals ask us to rethink some of the key critical concepts that have supported feminist literary criticism. For example, periodical study in general, and these works in particular, put pressure on the key concept of “author” so central to feminist criticism’s earliest recovery efforts.

Comparing the two views of Mansfield’s journalistic work in McDonnell’s Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace and in Binckes’s Modernism, Magazines, and the British Avant-Garde highlights the various ways in which periodical study treats the “author.” Laurel Brake has argued that “periodicals are by definition multi-author, collective forms of cultural
production,” which is one of the ways that they challenge the author-centric conventions of literary study. It is in this vein that Binckes’s *Modernism, Magazines, and the British Avant-Garde* dares to displace the author as a central or structuring feature. Instead, a full engagement with literary culture is provided through a study of the periodicals themselves during the period from 1910 to 1914 when Mansfield and Murry were at the helm of two literary experiments: the launching of the little magazine *Rhythm* and the subsequent creation of the short-lived *Blue Review* (which lasted a few months in 1913). Throughout, Binckes takes care to link the circulation of “modern” ideas, such as Bergsonism, with the “material condition of . . . texts, and their role in financial and publishing networks” (p. 13). Binckes’s detailed reading of these two important publications sheds new light on some of the central issues of modernist study, such as the relationship of art and commerce, the articulation of the “new,” questions of authenticity and reproduction, and the struggles of various groups, publications, and networks over a kind of market share in the modern marketplace. Central to Binckes’s thinking is the idea that most of our guiding notions about modernism collapse when held against the complexity of the variable, unsettled, and ever-changing periodicals themselves: “when looked at close up, periodicals tend to reveal the tangled skeins that make up the fabric of modernism, rather than its glossier, anthologized image” (pp. 11-12). The concept of the literary “movement” and even periodicity itself are called into question by the unruliness of print culture: “do even ‘movement-oriented’ periodicals support existing concepts of literary and artistic ‘movements,’ or do they alter them? Do periodicals, even little magazines, respect existing ideas of modernist periodicity?” (p. 5). Within this context, not only are Mansfield’s role as contributor/editor and Murry’s as editor decentered, but a reversal of the biographical approach reveals a strikingly counter-intuitive dynamic between publisher and publication:

*Rhythm* and the *Blue Review* were constitutive as much as constituted: if Murry and Mansfield shaped the magazines, the magazines also shaped them. During the early years of their relationship and of their respective careers these publications conditioned where they lived, who they met, and how they appeared on the literary scene in London and beyond. (p. 98)

This is an important thread developed throughout the project, so we begin to see how individual reputations and group affiliations were formed through “composite textual forms” such as the periodical (p. 176).

Binckes is also attentive to the heterogeneity of periodicals—their “bitextual” combination of visual and literary materials. *Rhythm* was conceived of as an “artist’s magazine” and was “absolutely saturated with images” that took the form of black and white illustrations, “specially designed headers and footers,” and advertisements (often in intimate dialogue with the visual art), so that “there were as many pictures included per number as
texts” (Binckes, p. 131). The monotone images of the publication engaged a “long-term transmutation of the status of reproduceable black and white,” and through an emphasis on “line” and “rhythmic’ images,” gained associations of exclusivity and status (pp. 144, 146). Though the publication became a venue for the articulation of avant-garde visual aesthetics through the circulation of international modern artists such as Picasso, it is the local cultures that get careful attention here. The vibrant debates about aesthetics and heated competitions for audience that comprised discussions of art in the 1910s in England gave Rhythm’s discussions of modern art their distinctive meaning. For example, not only was Rhythm in near constant combat with the New Age, a battle waged in part over debates concerning originality and imitation, but Rhythm was also noted for circulating a Post-Impressionism distinct from that identified with Roger Fry and Bloomsbury. The participation of a number of women artists in the Post-Impressionist project of Rhythm—for example, Anne Estelle Rice, Jessica Dismorr, and Marguerite Thompson—enabled a rich alternative to both Fry’s brand of modern art and the “‘anti-feminist’ Futurist aesthetic” that came to dominate the moment (pp. 132-33). One of Binckes’s large contributions in the chapter “Being Graphic: Post-Impressionism, Reproduction, and the Rhythmists” is recovering these women artists who have been largely overshadowed by Fry’s Post-Impressionism in modernist studies. The “fluid contours and brilliant colours” of the female Rhythmists, combined with their attention to the feminine form through “provocative, experimental” female nudes, suggested a revolutionary view of the body in line with the feminist revolts of the age (pp. 136, 165).

While Binckes traces the complex web of investments, competitions, compromises, and ambitions (or “volatile intersecting networks,” p. 170) that gave Rhythm its meaning, McDonnell puts Mansfield firmly at the center of her study through a methodology that remembers, while making new, some key issues and terms from the early years of feminist criticism, particularly those having to do with literary authority and the anxieties of authorship. It is Mansfield’s complex career in journalism that structures McDonnell’s study—from her early “sketches” in the New Age, to her longer and more innovative work done with Murry in Rhythm and the Blue Review, to her work with the Hogarth Press, the Athenaeum, and the London Mercury in the early 1920s. Issues such as the anxieties of authorship and questions of literary authority, when filtered through the lens of periodical study, are understood as produced through the interface between creative work and the sometimes harsh economic realities of the publishing industry. McDonnell finds the traces of both Mansfield’s anxieties and her ingenious marketing strategies where we might expect her to find them: in letters detailing her negotiations with Murry especially and in the complex history of her transactions with the periodicals and other venues that
published her work. Throughout the early years of her career, Mansfield shuttled back and forth between minority and more widely circulating venues, “experimenting with different ways of publishing that might enable her to address different audiences” (p. 89). In Mansfield’s strategic use of multiple pseudonyms to signal new relationships to her audiences, and in her (sometimes grudging) willingness to revise some of her more threatening texts, such as “Je ne parle pas français” (1920), for a more cautious audience, McDonnell finds modernism’s story of the constantly shifting relations between high and low, avant-garde and establishment, financial ruin and relative stability, written in detail. Throughout her career, Mansfield was searching for an “aesthetic approach that was simultaneously ‘modernist’ and commercially viable” (p. 89). McDonnell also finds the story of Mansfield’s negotiation of her authority in the language of the stories themselves, which “[enact] authorial anxieties of audience and production within the marketplace, as well as within the evolving modernist short story form” (p. 6). Close readings of her fictions show us how thoroughly infused Mansfield’s experiments were with the material conditions of their own composition and circulation.

The economics of the modernist marketplace are always in view in this study, which supplements Lawrence Rainey’s foundational exploration of the modernist publishing industry with an understanding of the difference that gender makes to this model. For example, the struggles over the republication of “Je ne parle pas français” in Bliss, a collection of Mansfield’s stories that emerged in December 1920, involved issues of censorship, perceptions regarding the differences between elite and popular audiences, and the marketing of Mansfield as a “woman” writer to an audience bifurcated along gender lines. The story was originally published in January 1920 as a very limited hand-printed edition by Murry’s Heron Press, a small press that developed as an alternative to and withdrawal from the mass market (p. 111). Yet Mansfield’s writings themselves, McDonnell argues, provide a critique of the assumption that audiences are “divided along the lines of ‘popular’ and ‘prestige’ publications” as well as a self-critique of Mansfield’s own prior publications in little magazines aimed at a coterie audience (p. 131). Told from the perspective of a bohemian artist, Raoul Duquette, who positions himself as avant-garde, this story undermines the legitimacy of the self-ascribed elite artist by “overtly casting the self-consciously ‘aristocratic’ artist as a pimp and a gigolo who lives entirely on credit” (p. 113). When the story’s sexual content (deemed too shocking by the publisher Michael Sadleir of Constable) was trimmed on Murry’s advice, Mansfield’s careful critique of the meanings of high and low was rendered mute. That silence, McDonnell shows, combined with a highly gendered marketing campaign—advertising short stories that “men will read and talk about, and women will learn by heart but not
repeat” (p. 134)—shored up the very categories of “high” and “low” that Mansfield wished to trouble.

At the same time that *Rhythm* and the *Blue Review* were circulating avant-garde literary and artistic experimentation in Britain, the *Masses* worked to promote an enlivening artistic culture in support of socialist movements and discourses between 1911 and 1917 in America. Launched as an articulation of a bohemian perspective on modern culture, the *Masses* published the work of socialist and left-leaning writers such as Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, John Reed, Mary Heaton Vorse, and artists such as John Sloan, Art Young, Robert Minor, and Stuart Davis. The magazine was “humorous, literary, and journalistic,” standing for “fun, truth, beauty, realism, freedom, feminism, revolution,” as editor Floyd Dell put it (qtd. in Schreiber, p. 4). Schreiber's *Gender and Activism in a Little Magazine* is interested in the visual culture of this radical publication and the ways in which the art of the *Masses* explored gender from the perspective of a “class-based criticism of American society” (p. 3). Artists associated with the Arts and Crafts movement or the Ashcan School in American Art, as well as career cartoonists, contributed illustrations that engaged a broad range of issues having to do with labor and everyday life in modernity. From the beginning, the editors of the *Masses* saw visual material as central to its identity and chose to present high quality graphics to secure its political message; they claimed, “The *Masses* will print cartoons and illustrations of the text by the best artists of the country, on a quality of paper that will really reproduce them” (qtd. in Schreiber, p. 4). They soon found that they were not reaching their intended audience of left-leaning workers, in part because such an audience could not afford the paper and in part because the paper’s tone was off. The paper was restructured in 1912 to reach its audience through lively and entertaining writing and images rather than preaching. Recognizing that the *Masses* had “never truly reached the masses,” the editors focused on an urbane readership composed of “bohemian literati” already invested in socialist viewpoints (pp. 9, 10).

Schreiber brings to the foreground the diversity of the perspectives on contemporary gender issues to be found in the pages of the *Masses*. Visual culture is central to the story of the paper’s commitment to debate and discussion; editors, board members, and contributors debated the relationship of propaganda to artistic freedom (differences of opinion finally led some artists to exit the project). These debates, along with a collaborative editing practice, placed images at the center of a cooperative process. Satiric images, for example, which gained meaning from the interaction of image and text, were sometimes suggested by editor Floyd Dell to artists; at other times an image was presented to the board without a caption, which was then developed collectively. Many of the paper’s illustrations that came out of this process highlighted gender issues, as well as those having to do with
labor, such as illustrations featured working women, downtrodden mothers (in a gesture that countered eugenicist philosophies of the period), and bachelor girls living alone. In a particularly captivating reading, Schreiber examines the significant number of illustrations that explored women’s sexuality. To point toward one example, she argues that the Masses’s imagery complicated conventional ways of thinking about prostitution by linking questions of sexuality to the critique of capitalism:

the Masses’ critique of commercial sex centered on its economic roots—certainly, greedy men profited from the traffic in women. But rather than seeing the prostitutes themselves as helpless victims of loose morals, the Masses posited that women turned to prostitution because of their limited economic choices. (pp. 101-02)

Schreiber argues that the Masses was at its most innovative in depicting the prostitute visually; in a culture obsessed with the topic of white slave traffic, women were usually depicted when threatened by the spectre of white slavery, rather than as engaged in prostitution as an occupation. The Masses, by contrast, published images by John Sloan that imagined prostitutes as working women, “actors in the urban landscape” (p. 106).

The least “literary” of these studies may well be among the most useful to literary scholars in terms of its novel methodology. While Habermasian methodologies have been crucial to the development of modern periodical studies and influenced such studies as Mark Morrisson’s The Public Face of Modernism (2001), the authors of Feminist Media History use social movement theory in order to make sense of the complexities of suffrage papers circulating in Britain during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The authors—Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap, and Leila Ryan—contest that notions of the public sphere are not flexible or subtle enough to fully illuminate either the external orientation of feminist periodicals or the complex inner workings of those publications. The authors notice a flattening effect in applications of Habermas’s formulations, so that “everything from communities, readerships, and audiences to political groups and social movements” get read as “‘publics,’ ‘counterpublics,’ or ‘alternative public spheres’” (p. 27). Similarly, they argue, “counterpublics” has become “too loose a term” for subtle analysis of dissonant voices (p. 27). Social movement theory, by contrast, provides a new and nimble framework for “understanding how participants in women’s movements used print media to organize, mobilize, disseminate ideas, and engage with the social and political groups and structures around them” (p. 29). With the tools provided by social movement theory, the authors are able to track “processes, methods, and change,” particularly the change of organizations and organs over time (p. 30). In separate chapters on suffrage papers by DiCenzo, on the Englishwoman by DiCenzo and Ryan, and on the individualism of the feminist avant-garde paper the Freewoman by Delap, the
authors attend to periodicals as lively “vehicles through which constituencies within the movement framed their grievances, mobilized support, challenged one another within the movement, and engaged externally with the larger ‘Public’” (p. 36). In this vein, Delap explores the new subjectivities offered to women by the avant-garde paper the Freewoman (which was to become the Egoist) and the complex ways in which those subjectivities were evaluated, altered, rejected, modified, or taken up by readers. Delap, like her coauthors, employs social movement theory to unpack the paper: for example, through the notion of “framing” devices that make particular grievances visible and easily described. However, the example of the paper also suggests to Delap the limitations of social movement theories that are not always able to “capture the different levels of intensity and emotional commitment found amongst suffragists, who ranged from the visionary to the apologetic” (p. 170).

The coauthors of Feminist Media History see their volume as engaging a number of fields at once: women’s history, cultural history, periodical studies, print culture studies, book history, and media history, which, they assert, is due the kind of field-changing intervention often provided by the new methodologies of feminist studies. The novel adoption of social movement theory illustrated here may well open new avenues for feminist literary criticism given the renewed focus on groups, movements, salons, clubs, and friendship circles in recent scholarship.

Digitalization projects are rapidly making more and more periodicals available to us—ideally in their entirety with advertisements intact. Fully searchable digitalization projects, such as the full run of Rhythm, the Blue Review, the Freewoman, the New Freewoman, and the Egoist now available on the Modernist Journals Project, allow for new studies of periodical networks and new views of the period. Such digitization projects, when properly done, are huge undertakings, requiring great commitments of time and substantial financial resources. Only a few of the many periodicals published during the modern period are currently available. While we wait, we are still in need of resources for research and teaching, and the anthology of primary source material continues (and will continue) to serve a key role. Happily, for scholars and teachers working in a variety of fields, Mary Chapman and Angela Mills’s anthology of primary source materials, Treacherous Texts: U. S. Suffrage Literature, 1846-1946, displays a range of writings that indicate the full variety of feminist literary production during the suffrage campaign: short fictions, poems, autobiographical texts, humor, drama, and essays. In order to capture a sense of the “more unusual forms of print cultural propaganda,” the editors also include ephemera such as suffrage valentines, banners, petitions, and cartoons that circulated in service of the movement. In addition, they draw our attention to or provide imagery suggesting other “creative forms of propaganda” beyond the world of
print, such as pageants, parades, songs and silent films (pp. 4, 2). Numerous volumes have made the literature of the British suffrage movement available in recent years, but the literature of the United States movement has been uncollected and relatively inaccessible. Experimentalists, avant-gardists, sentimentalists, western regionalists, African American authors, and more all wrote suffrage literature, and the wide range of materials juxtaposed in this volume gives a striking sense of the diversity of suffrage voices. Though this volume is not intended to serve primarily as a contribution to periodical studies, it is no accident that the text opens a window onto the vibrant periodical culture of the movement and the complex print cultural networks that linked movement papers with little magazines, daily papers, and women’s magazines:

Modern suffrage writers found a ready market for their work in mainstream newspapers and magazines greedy for content that would interest a growing female readership; many magazines—including The Crisis, Harper’s Weekly, Puck, Life, and The Masses—sponsored special issues on suffrage that incorporated creative works as well as polemical pieces. (p. 3)

In four sections, the editors sort this material chronologically, with special attention paid in separate sections to transnational feminisms and late contributions such as an excerpt from Gertrude Stein’s The Mother of Us All (1946). Helpful introductions to each section provide historical context and explain the workings of suffrage literature in relation to such issues as voice, dialogism, the reception of international feminism in the United States, the mobilization of ideas of the “new” and modern, the relationship of public to private, and the engagement with modern communication technologies. It has been suggested that anthologies tend to drain historical specificity from print cultural artifacts since a text is generally “stripped of any of its original bibliographic codings.” The contextual materials provided by the editors of Treacherous Texts do as much as possible to render the vibrant, chaotic, and loud world of the texts both visible and audible.

As these five exciting works demonstrate, periodical studies tends to make things messy by upsetting long-held truths with evidence of awkward alliances, last-minute compromises, and unsettled debates. In addition, the exploration of magazines both provides a striking reminder that the recovery projects of earlier decades are far from complete and offers exciting pathways for new work.

NOTES


9 Mansfield, “Je ne parle pas français” (London: Heron Press, 1920); the story was reprinted in Mansfield, *Bliss and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1920), 71-115. McDonnell outlines the cuts recommended by the more commercial press (pp. 107-38).


12 The Modernist Journals Project has plans to make the *Masses* available as well: http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp.