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It is now over 30 years since Lloyd Fernando, Elaine Showalter, Gail Cunningham, and Patricia Stubbs, among others, first redirected the attention of scholars and critics to late nineteenth-century writing about and by the New Woman. Given the current energy and widening compass of New Woman studies, it is surprising to recall that most of the pioneering early studies focused on the treatment of the New Woman in novels by men, referring to female New Woman writers simply or mainly as part of the socio-literary context of this male-authored writing. Indeed, most of these early studies tended to be rather dismissive of the female New Woman writers. Cunningham’s *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (1978) regarded them, for the most part, as minor writers, who were merely or mainly polemicists, and Stubbs’s short chapter on late nineteenth‐century ‘Feminist Fiction and the Rejection of Realism’ in *Women and Fiction* (1979) concluded:

Most of the feminist writers… just were not good enough as writers to turn their material into an important challenge to the literary tradition. This meant that at the very moment when literature was beginning to break free from the moral stranglehold of Victorian sexual ideology, the novel was dominated for the first time, and quite accidentally by male writers. (Stubbs 120)

Even George Egerton and Olive Schreiner, whom Stubbs regarded as the most successful of these ‘feminist’ writers, were said to have ‘failed to develop as artists’ and their work was ‘flawed by lapses into rhetoric’ (Stubbs 117). This judgement chimed with that of Elaine Showalter, who, despite her valiant efforts to restore to women a literature of their own, found that the New Woman writers were confined by the ‘self annihilation of the female aesthetic’ (Showalter 240).
It was another book on a canonical male writer, Penny Boumelha’s *Thomas Hardy and Women* (1982), which really began to open up to critical view the importance of the proliferation of fiction by women at the *fin de siècle*, in an important chapter on late nineteenth-century gender ideologies and the contribution of women’s writing to the shaping of new directions for both the form and content of the novel. Gerd Bjørhovde’s *Rebellious Structures* (1987) also focused on the fictional forms of late nineteenth-century women writers in relation to what she described as a crisis in fiction. In addition to discussing Schreiner, Sarah Grand, and Egerton, who by then comprised the emerging canon of New Woman writers, Bjørhovde explored the work of the socialist writer Margaret Harkness, who published as ‘John Law.’ During and since the last decade of the twentieth century, this handful of books on the work of New Woman novelists and short story writers – their preoccupations, their chosen forms, and the contexts in which they wrote – has grown to become a subfield of *fin-de-siècle* studies: New Woman writers have been recovered and explored from numerous perspectives by literary and cultural historians and critics, and there has been a growing and important body of work on late nineteenth-century women poets and journalists and forgotten female aesthetes.

In the course of the last 30 years, not only have numerous forgotten or ‘under-read’ women writers of the late nineteenth century working in a range of forms and genres been restored to view, but their lives and works have also been explored in relationship to contemporary debates on feminism, socialism, social and sexual purity, eugenics, imperialism, class, urbanism, and theories of gender and race. Late nineteenth-century writing by women has been re-viewed through the lens of postcolonial criticism and theory – often with unflattering results. New Woman fiction has been re-examined in relation to late nineteenth-century debates about and developments in literary realism, while the aesthetic experimentation of some women writers of the *fin de siècle*, particularly their interest in seeking new ways of representing feminine interiority, has been viewed as an important strand in the development of modernism or a precursor of the late twentieth-century preoccupation with *écriture féminine*. Late nineteenth-century writing by women has also been re-read as both an extension of and in opposition to *fin-de-siècle* decadence and aestheticism.

In the early 1990s Ann Ardis in *New Women, New Novels* (1990), Lyn Pykett in *The Improper Feminine* (1992) and *Engendering Fictions* (1995), and Jane Eldridge Miller in *Rebel Women* (1994) sought both to revise traditional concepts of literary periodization and to reinsert the New
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Woman novelists into both the literary and cultural debates of the late nineteenth century and the genealogy of modernism, by showing how their questioning of traditional conceptualizations of gender and challenging of the romance plot led them away from stable models of characterization and into experimental forms of narrative that anticipated, and were subsequently overtaken by, the early twentieth-century reappraisal of realism. Focusing on the conditions of cultural production, including the decline of the three-decker and the advent of the New Journalism, Rita S. Kranidis’s Althusserian cultural history, *Subversive Discourse* (1995), explored the complexities of the ways in which late nineteenth-century women writers (both feminist and anti-feminist) negotiated the ‘specifics of late Victorian cultural subjectivity, notions of aesthetics and cultural production’ (Kranidis x), all of which worked to subordinate women as writers and social beings. Building on earlier work on the aesthetic diversity of the New Woman writers and welcoming some aspects of the attempt to reclaim them as proto modernists, Sally Ledger’s *The New Woman* (1997) argued that the wholesale importation of the New Woman writing into the dominant tradition of Anglo-American high modernism risked both occluding the historical specificities of its social and political contexts and content (socialism, feminism, anti-feminism, urbanism, imperialism, aestheticism) and excluding from view political essays, realist fiction, utopias, and allegories. Although focused on one author – the first single-author study of a New Woman writer – Teresa Mangum’s study of Sarah Grand, *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant* (1998), also situated the New Woman writing in relation to the specificities of the late nineteenth-century literary marketplace and feminist debates, paying particularly close attention to the role of eugenicist and degenerationist thinking in those debates.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century a new crop of literary and cultural historians continued what had become an increasingly detailed exploration of the lives and works of New Women in relationship to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates on feminism, socialism, social and sexual purity, eugenics, imperialism, class, and urbanism, as well as theories of gender and race. For example, Ann Heilmann’s thematically organized inter-disciplinary study *New Woman Fiction* (2000) analysed what its author described as the dialectical relationship between ‘first-wave feminist writing,’ the nineteenth-century woman’s movement and a developing female consumer culture. Carolyn Burdett’s *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism* (2001) sought to counteract negative accounts of Schreiner’s fictional practice by exploring it in relation to late nineteenth-century arguments about
evolutionary biology, the position of women, and the nature of progress. Importantly, Burdett also explored the complexities of Schreiner’s position as a writer who was formed by a colonial experience but who also wrote in and for the metropolis. Evolutionary thought and the imperial imaginary were also the contexts for Angelique Richardson’s *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2003), which explored the cultural contexts and meanings of the pro-eugenic writings of Grand, Egerton, Ellice Hopkins, and Jane Hume Clapperton, juxtaposing them to the anti-eugenicist liberalism of Mona Caird’s work.

The growing interest in the roles played by colonialism in the development of late nineteenth-century feminist thought and the New Woman movement was given a new impetus by Iveta Jusova’s *The New Woman and the Empire* (2005), which explored the ways in which four otherwise culturally, socially, and nationally disparate writers either supported or interrogated (or, in some cases, both supported and interrogated) ‘British imperialist ideology and colonial practices’ (Jusova 6). Through a close examination of the work of Grand, Egerton, Elizabeth Robins, and Amy Levy, Jusova sought to explore the role of the hybrid backgrounds, ideologies or locations of her chosen writers – Anglo-Irish (Grand and Egerton), Anglo-American (Robins), and Anglo-Jewish (Levy) – in shaping the ways in which they adopted or resisted dominant late nineteenth-century racial narratives. Like Richardson, Jusova explored the ways in which eugenicist thinking contributed to the obsession in Grand’s fiction with social purity and the policing of borders. She also examined the ways in which Egerton’s precarious social position and her Nietzschean feminism (see also Brown) led her to challenge ‘the bourgeois feminine ideal of woman’s ascetic self-restraint and imperial duty’ (Jusova 87), how Robins’s feminism indicted the biological determinism of Victorian science as applied to women but also tended to accept its racism, and how Levy’s use of irony sought to undermine the biological determinism, anti-Semitism, and misogyny of the evolutionary narrative.

Jusova’s interest in cultural hybridity and her attention to racial politics are shared by the contributors to *Feminist Forerunners* (2003), edited by Ann Heilmann, and *New Woman Hybridities* (2004), edited by Heilmann and Margaret Beetham, which explored the European, international, and multi-ethnic dimensions of the New Woman. Jusova’s exploration of the Anglo-Irishness of Grand and Egerton can also be seen, more specifically, as part of a revisionist postcolonialist Irish literary history that has sought to (re)claim some of the major New Woman writers as Irish. For example, John Wilson Foster included Sarah
Grand and George Egerton as Irish New Woman writers alongside Ella McMahon, Katherine Cecil Thurston, and Hannah Lynch in his contribution to the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2006). Wilson Foster’s subsequent study, *Irish Novels, 1890–1940* (2008), noting the role of the tenacity of the anti-colonial, anti-British ‘story of Ireland’ (Foster 15) in obscuring the Irishness of some key New Woman figures, claimed ‘the Ulster born’ Sarah Grand as Irish and suggested that ‘Irish literature has some claim’ (Foster 301) to the fiction of Egerton. Others have been less tentative in asserting the Irishness of both these writers: Scott McCracken has re-appraised Egerton’s *The Wheel of God* (1898) as ‘the writing of an independent feminine subjectivity’ that used ‘an Irish national identity to articulate that position’ (McCracken 140); and Tina O’Toole has explored Ireland as ‘The Terra Incognita of the New Woman Project,’ focusing on Egerton – as a writer who used ‘her Irishness as a subversive tool to disrupt the ideological matrix, holding both men and women in place’ (125) – and Grand – as a writer whose use of her early Irish experiences, particularly in *The Beth Book* (1897), is evidence of the effect of Irish social and cultural mores on her later political perspectives. O’Toole has also explored *The Wheel of God* as an example of ‘Irish Women’s Migrant Writing’ (‘Irish Women’s).

If postcolonialism became an increasingly important theoretical driver of the developing field of New Woman studies around the end of the millennium, French feminist theory also continued to be invoked with varying degrees of conviction and insistence. Pykett briefly noted how Egerton’s writing anticipated the version of the feminine celebrated by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and also engaged in a possibly subversive mimicry of masculine forms (*Improper Feminine*). Patricia Murphy, on the other hand, ‘repeatedly… invoke[d]’ (27) Julia Kristeva’s essay on ‘Women’s Time’ (1979) in her 2001 study, *Time Is of the Essence*, which explored the way in which novels by New Women (Grand, Schreiner, and Caird) as well as H. Rider Haggard’s and Hardy’s novels about the New Woman engage with a supposedly ‘natural’ order of time that is in fact profoundly gendered. Murphy argued that while *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) and *She* (1887) demonstrate how women’s lives are constrained by the disciplining force of the ‘natural order of time,’ the female writers variously demonstrate the complicity of temporal discourses in naturalizing sex-based presumptions of superiority and inferiority (Grand); juxtapose temporal and mythical paradigms to deplore time’s despotism over women’s lives throughout history (Caird); and use narrative and linguistic experimentation to attack a masculinized linear form and language (Schreiner). Murphy also used Irigaray and
Cixous as theoretical models because, she argued, they inform ‘both the essentialist and deconstructive aspects of the…thematic, linguistic and structural moves’ of her selected writers (27). Perhaps the most thoroughgoing attempt (to date) to read New Woman fiction through the ‘critical lens’ of French feminist theory is Heilmann’s *New Woman Strategies* (2004), which deployed the French theorists’ concepts of ‘mimicry, femininity, self-reflexivity, subversion, libidinality and performativity’ (*New Woman Strategies* 3) as well as (in the case of Grand) Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and the dialogic, in order to illuminate the performative discursive strategies that, she argued, were a hitherto neglected aspect of the New Woman fiction (*New Woman Strategies* 3). *New Woman Strategies* offered a detailed comparative analysis of Grand, Schreiner and Caird that sought to illuminate their works by using what its author claimed is ‘a distinctively new conceptual methodology’ that privileges ‘textuality over cultural-historical investigation’ (*New Woman Strategies* 3). The result is a revisionist cultural history that celebrates the way in which these three writers sought to redefine creativity as political activism, ‘revised and revolutionised, for a feminist framework…authoritative [i.e. masculine] cultural and aesthetic discourses’ (*New Woman Strategies* 7), and distanced themselves to varying degrees from such ‘high cultural’ movements as aestheticism and *fin-de-siècle* decadence. Like Heilmann’s earlier *New Woman Fiction*, *New Woman Strategies* also sought to reclaim New Woman novelists as the feminist foremothers of the women’s movement and popular feminist writing of the 1970s.

One of the defining characteristics of New Woman fiction, Heilmann argued, was ‘its challenge to and subversion of the conventional dichotomies between literature and political writing, art and popular culture’ (*New Woman Strategies* 1) and its establishing of ‘a tradition of feminist political literature written for and consumed by a female mass market’ (*New Woman Strategies* 2). While more empirical work on readerships remains to be done in order fully to substantiate this claim, there is a growing body of work on the intersections between the New Woman fiction and popular literary genres. Pykett in *The Improper Feminine* explored some similarities between the plots and rhetorical strategies of the New Woman fiction of the 1890s and the sensation novel of the 1890s, and also drew attention to similarities in the critical debates that surrounded them. Teresa Mangum also noted how ‘though situated in the increasingly contested tradition of “realist” fiction,’ Sarah Grand ‘imported the popular genres of melodrama, the adventure novel, detective fiction, the drawing-room drama, the idyll, even sensation
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ficiton’ (5). However, as Chris Willis has shown, the New Woman of much commercialized popular literature was usually ‘a far cry from her sensitive, suffering sisters in the polemic fiction of the best-known New Woman novelists’ (53). Highly intelligent, independent new women characters featured in romances, comic novels, and especially detective fiction, such as Catherine Louisa Pirkis’s *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1894) and L. T. Meades and Robert Eustace’s *The Detections of Miss Cusack* (1899–1900) – as is noted in other essays in the present collection.

The response of another popular genre – the colonial adventure novel – to the New Woman phenomenon has been interestingly explored in LeeAnne M. Richardson’s *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain* (2006), which revisited late nineteenth-century debates on gender and imperialism in order to examine what she argued is the dialogic relationship between New Woman and colonial adventure fiction. Richardson sought to show how these two apparently divergent ‘subgenres’ blend aspects of realism and romance, eschew the conventional marriage plot, reveal shared degeneration anxieties, and deploy evolutionary discourses. Although the focus is mainly on fiction by male writers, there is a particularly interesting chapter that offers a female-authored and feminist New Woman adventure novel, Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), as an example of a hybrid: a New Woman adventure novel that exposes the limitations of sexual and political imperialism.

If the first two decades of the work of recovery and revisionary re-reading of late nineteenth-century women’s writing were dominated by studies of New Woman fiction and feminist and gender politics, a significant development in the twenty-first century has been to bring back into view the work of women whose writings have been overshadowed by these preoccupations. The pioneering work on Victorian women’s poetry from the mid-1990s has been taken in new directions in the first decade of the twenty-first century by a growing body of work on the poetry and poetics of late nineteenth-century women poets. In her *New Woman Poets: An Anthology* (2001), Linda K. Hughes argued for the inclusion of poetry in studies of New Woman writing, and linked the work of such poets as Louisa Sarah Bevington, Mathilde Blind, Mary E. Coleridge, Olive Custance, Michael Field, Mary C. Gillington, Eva Gore-Booth, Nora Hopper, May Kendall, Amy Levy, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Dollie Radford, Mary F. Robinson, and Katharine Tynan to ‘a broad array of issues that are also featured in the works by New Woman novelists and essayists’ (*New Woman Poets* 1). In a subsequent
essay tracing the political engagement of New Woman poetry with the marriage question, Hughes explored the ways in which contemporary criticism recognized poets and New Woman writers and discussed some of the reasons for the failure of late twentieth-century academic criticism to do so (‘Daughter of Danaus’).

As well as opening up the category of the New Woman writing to include women poets, recent scholars have also sought to avoid the restrictions imposed by too exclusive a focus on the New Woman and gender politics and to reveal the range and variety of late nineteenth-century poetry by women. Thus, for example, in 2006 a special edition of *Victorian Literature and Culture* devoted to *fin-de-siècle* women’s poetry, edited by Marion Thain and Ana Vadillo, explored not only the New Woman poetics of such writers as Amy Levy, Edith Nesbit, Dora Sigerson Shorter, and Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), but also (*inter alia*) the various poetic modernities of A. Mary F. Robinson, Michael Field, and Levy; political critique in the aestheticist poetry of socialist poets such as Dollie Radford and Edith Nesbit; the decadent Darwinism of Mathilde Blind; and the cosmopolitanism or transnational poetics of Laurence Hope, Nora Hopper, Robinson, Sarojini Naidu, and Toru Dutt. The contributors to this special issue focused on the formal variety of *fin-de-siècle* poetry by women and situated their experimentations and innovations in the contexts of late nineteenth-century concerns about

- location and nation, Ireland, the empire, metropolitan and cosmopolitan spaces, the public and private sphere, and transatlantic transactions,…race, science, evolutionary thought, professionalisation of the writer, the market place, publicity and the press, periodical literature, religion, and sexual politics. (Thain and Vadillo 393)

The issue not only made a persuasive case for the importance of the contribution that women writers made to *fin-de-siècle* poetry, but also began to rewrite its history.

The tendency of the New Woman studies of the 1980s and 1990s to overlook poetry by women was accompanied by a tendency to focus on the ways in which late nineteenth-century women writers distanced themselves from aestheticism. Since the late 1990s, however, women writers’ relationship to aestheticism has been extensively re-thought. Several critics have identified and explored what they argue is a specifically female version of aestheticism. For example, Talia
Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades's co-edited collection of essays *Women and British Aestheticism* (1999) challenged traditional histories of aestheticism based on male writing and explored the ways in which women writers, working in a range of genres, constructed a different, more ‘inclusive’ form of aestheticism that ‘endorsed nature as well as art…bourgeois culture along with cosmopolitan bohemianism… and alternative sexualities in the context of historical or scientific study’ (Schaffer and Psomiades 1). Intriguingly (if not entirely persuasively), Schaffer’s own revisionary history of aestheticism in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* (2000) found the origins of the aesthetic novel in ‘of all places – women’s popular writing’ (Schaffer 122), and particularly in Ouida’s epigrammatic style and popularization of the glamorous world of aesthetic fashion and decoration. Schaffer also argued that it was the adoption and reworking of aestheticism that enabled Lucas Malet (Mary St Leger Kingsley Harrison) to help to ‘lead the transition from the genteel Victorian romance novel to the iconoclastic modernist experimental novel’ (Schaffer 199). Connecting this revisionary version of aestheticism with the renewed interest in late nineteenth-century poetry by women, in her book *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism* (2005), Ana Vadillo has shown how *fin-de-siècle* London women poets played a significant role in the formation of a specifically urban aesthetic modernity. On the other hand, in *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization* (2010), Regenia Gagnier brought together New Women, female aesthetes, and socialist individualists in order to demonstrate their contribution to the development of a late Victorian model of individualism based on autonomy and relationship rather than separateness.

Many of the female poets and novelists of the late nineteenth century were also journalists for the newspaper and magazine press and some of them also edited magazines. The work of late nineteenth-century female journalists, their contribution to the development of the feminist and socialist press and to the new journalism, is becoming increasingly well documented in studies of the press such as Barbara Onslow’s *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2000), in articles in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, and in biographies and literary lives of nineteenth-century women of letters. Similarly, there is also a great deal of interest in the representation of the figure of the female journalist in the *fin-de-siècle* novel and short story, for example Lorna Shelley’s recent essay on ‘Female Journalists and Journalism in Fin-de-Siècle Magazine Stories’ (2009). On a somewhat different tack, Molly Youngkin’s *Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle* (2007) sought to show the influence of the late
Victorian women’s press – and, in particular, the influence of fiction reviews in feminist periodicals – on the development of the novel.

In 1979 Patricia Stubbs asserted that ‘[o]bscurity is where we must go to find most of the topical but transient feminist novels of the “nineties”’ (117). The situation is quite different now. Since the late 1970s numerous forgotten or ‘under-read’ women writers of the late nineteenth century – poets and journalists as well as novelists – have been restored to view and placed in context in affordable modern editions from publishers such as Broadview, and in library editions such as Pickering and Chatto’s nine-volume collection New Woman Fiction, 1881–1899 (under the general editorship of Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, 2010–11) and Routledge’s History of Feminism series, which includes Heilmann’s The Late-Victorian Marriage Question: A Collection of Key New Woman Texts (1998), Heilmann and Stephanie Forward’s Sex, Social Purity and Sarah Grand (2000), and Lorna Shelley’s Female Journalists of the Fin de Siècle (2010). In addition, as this essay seeks to illustrate, there is now a substantial body of empirical scholarship and lively, theoretically informed critical debate on late nineteenth-century women’s writing and its place in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and culture. Since the advent of The Latchkey in 2009 (recently merged with The Michaelian, a journal of Michael Field studies) there is even an online journal devoted to the women writers of the fin de siècle. It is partly as a result of this work that we now no longer see fin-de-siècle writing as dominated by male aesthetes and decadents. Nor do we see the fin de siècle as the fag end of the Victorian age, or simply as ‘an age of transition.’

Notes


2. See, for example, Margaret Beetham (ed.), The New Woman and the Periodical Press and Linda Peterson, Becoming a Woman of Letters, as well as the following literary lives: Valerie Fehlbaum on Ella Hepworth Dixon, Linda K. Hughes on Rosamund Marriott Watson, Carolyn Oulton on Mary Cholmondeley, and two lives of Amy Levy, by Linda Hunt Beckman and Christine Pullen respectively.
Works cited


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The relief formed part of a frieze, adorning a room; an elaborate symbolic structure presenting the role of the king in a cosmic and political context. Contemplating the eloquent visual narrative of these panels, it becomes clear that the most remarkable feature of Semper's analysis is not so much what it includes as what it leaves out. Patiently examining the Assyrian stool in minute detail, Semper remained silent about the situation of which it was a part. He was obsessed with the.