

Ann Ardis

*New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989. Pp. 217

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

This book extends the feminist recovery of women writers by focusing on the "New Woman" fiction of the 1890s. Ardis's starting point is her contention that her predecessors in this area, especially Elaine Showalter (in *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977) and Patricia Stubbs (in *Feminism and the Novel*, 1979), were too blinded by the aesthetic of high modernism to be fair to these late nineteenth-century texts. Showalter, she argues, dismissed these books too quickly, lumping them together as having only one story to tell, while Stubbs, finding these writers too preoccupied with female sexuality to be truly feminist, credited male writers (James, Bennett, Lawrence) with developing new approaches to gender. Taking her cue from Barbara Herrnstein Smith's call for a non-canonical theory of value, Ardis sets out to examine these marginalized texts in relation to a political rather than an aesthetic agenda. Her study, she hopes, will reveal "the practical politics of modernism" (8) and will also encourage reflection on the omissions and exclusions of "gynocriticism." Ardis thus joins other recent writers whose tribute to the feminist critics of the 1970s takes the form of interrogation and correction.

After outlining her project in a short introduction, Ardis provides a useful first chapter, "Naming the New Woman," reminding us that Ouida coined the name, and summarizing the attempts of Elizabeth Lynn Linton and others to protect the institutional structures which were threatened by the New Woman's emergence. The next five chapters are organized by topic, so that a given novel is frequently discussed in several chapters. Ending on a personal note, Ardis describes the genesis of her book, and enunciates the practical issue at stake: is the current antifeminism descended from the wave of opposition to women's rights nearly 100 years earlier, and "are we doomed to repeat this history because we have forgotten it?" (175).

Ardis skillfully traces the "disruption of the symbol system" (27) of Victorian culture in a wide variety of novels. She shows how the new realism confronted Victorian stereotypes in two ways: by correcting the representation of women in the old realism, as Hardy did in his portrait of Tess, and by interrogating it, as Olive Schreiner did in *The Story of An African Farm*. Ardis fascinatingly documents the struggle between the radical writers, with their questioning of essentialism, and the cultural guardians, female and male, who feared that the new fiction would precipitate a second Fall instigated by a new Eve. She demonstrates that the New Woman's fictional protests ranged from the more timid to the more strident. Among the conservative are Iota's *The Yellow Aster*, whose heroine discovers her sexuality through maternity (although with an eroticism which was itself threatening to many of its readers) and others which allow their characters a degree of autonomy outside the home, only to defeat their efforts by "boomerang" endings which return them to patriarchy. More daring are those which challenge cultural assumptions by constructing a new sexuality. Quoting a passage in George Egerton's "A Cross Line," in which the heroine's dream vision of female power transports her beyond Victorian culture, Ardis shows that Egerton crosses two

lines, moving from culture into nature (and, in turn, exposing nature as a cultural product), and breaking the circle which contained women's lives. Other books go further, making "history, not nature, the site of their representations" (101): Netta Syrett's *Roseanne*, which rejects naturalistic determinism, symbolized by the portrait of the heroine's sexually corrupt mother, and Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, which shows a woman refusing the romance plot in order to protect her "self." In these novels and others like them, the fictitious nature of socially constructed femininity is exposed. Ardis finds here the eroding of two Victorian concepts—of a "female nature," mysterious but ultimately discoverable, and of a coherent self. Their achievements are extended in another group, which goes beyond representation to figuration, positing new creativity for women in politics, art, and sisterhood. Examples are Gertrude Dix's *The Image-Breakers*, which envisions a socialist collective, and Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage*, which images, first, a new maternity which is literary not biological, and second, a love between two women which breaks the barriers dividing the public from the private sphere. The story does not end here. however: the penultimate chapter outlines the New Woman's partial disempowerment at the end of the century.

The reservations of Ardis's more traditional readers will, I think, stem from her exclusions. Her selective references to earlier nineteenth-century fiction take the monolithic nature of "the old model of the 'pure woman'" (114) too much for granted. As well, her parameters forbid consideration of language, perspective, and voice. While fully describing the breaking of the predictable narrative sequence, which Virginia Woolf praised in the fiction of her invented novelist Mary Carmichael, Ardis gives no attention to the extent to which the New Woman novels moved toward breaking the sentence, a process which Woolf saw as inseparable from the rejection of the romance plot. Nor can Ardis explore—as she had originally planned to do—the work of modernism in further destabilizing notions of gender. But she has succeeded in showing how irretrievably—in the image used by the same reviewer who in 1889 warned against the power of the new Eve—the genie of the New Woman was out of the bottle.