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Strange Partners: The Curious Dance of the New Woman and the Imperial Adventurer

New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain: Gender, Genre, Empire. LeeAnne M. Richardson. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. 181 pp.

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<1> The New Woman has traveled far and wide since the 1970s when she burst upon the scene in Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), Lloyd Fernando's *"New Women" in the Late Victorian Novel* (1977), Gail Cunningham's *The New Women and the Victorian Novel* (1978), and crucial reprint editions from Virago Press. Ann Ardis's groundbreaking study, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1991) positioned the New Woman novels even more firmly within literary history. And the rabble-rousing corpus of novels, plays, poetry, journalism, and travel literature associated with the figure of the New Woman has continued to inspire essay collections, monographs, and conferences (which will soon include the 2007 British Women Writers Conferences at the University of Kentucky hosted by the energetic editors of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*). By the end of our more recent fin de siècle the genre had successfully stormed library shelves and nineteenth-century syllabi.

<2> Since then, a flood of books (not to mention important articles) has provided illuminating contexts for studying New Woman literature. To offer just a few examples, Lyn Pykett highlighted unexpected connections between sensation fiction and New Women novels in *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Women Writing* (1992); Sally Ledger's *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997) tethered the New Woman to a series of political and social upheavals in the 1890s and after; and Ann Heilmann's *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (2000) focused our attention on politics and consumer culture. Patricia Murphy's *Time Is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender and the New Woman* (2001) and Angelique Richardson's *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (2003) aligned developments in New Women novels with transformations and tensions in the realms of science and technology, while Beth Sutton-Ramspeck's *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand and Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Ohio University Press, 2004), which is reviewed in this special issue, examined the shaping force of public hygiene and domestic science.

<3> Increasingly, the real and imagined spaces that gave rise to the New Woman—whether as living writer or activist, journalistic phantasm, or literary construct—have captured critical attention. Even as we pictured the New Woman plunging into the dynamic cityscape of late-century London, other incarnations of the figure sailed for more southerly continents in studies such as Susan Morgan's *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women's Travel Books* (1996), Carolyn Burdett's *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire* (2001), and, most recently, Iveta Jusová's *The New Woman and the Empire* (2005), and the book I focus on here, LeeAnne Richardson's *New Woman and Colonial Adventure in Victorian Britain: Gender, Genre, and Empire* (2006).

<4> Lyn Pykett's keen comparison of the New Woman genre with sensation fiction in *The "Improper" Feminine* and David Adams's instructive readings of early modernist adventure novels in relation to the epic in his recent *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel* (2003) demonstrate how fruitful the juxtaposing of genres can be. In *The New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain*, Richardson examines the gender dynamics of empire and the impact of imperial claims on gender relations. She concentrates on the psychological and social dynamics that drive the plots, characters, conflicts, metaphoric systems, and arguments in what are usually characterized as a liberal feminist genre and a reactionary masculine one. Her work systematically uncovers the ideological connections between "two competing subgenres that emerged in late-century Britain: New Woman novels, typically

featuring a professional woman (often a writer or artist) opposing the limits imposed by narrow-minded but powerful conventions; and colonial adventure fiction, focusing on a brave man encountering inferior but powerful vestiges of early human history" (1). This comparative approach allows her to demonstrate how and where "gender, empire, and genre strikingly and unexpectedly converge" (2), often in hybrid syntheses of these seemingly antithetical genres. As Richardson elegantly describes the relationship, the two genres revolve around one another like twin stars subject to mutual gravitational pull and influenced by a larger constellation of forces "from governmental action on emigration policy and property rights to personal attitudes toward race, nation, and motherhood" (4). She further complicates her analysis by occasionally inserting a third figure, the dandy, who threatens to undermine distinctions between femininity and masculinity crucial to both genres even as his presence mirrors desires at odds with conventional society embodied in the protagonists of each genre.

<5> Richardson's first chapter asks how gender came to dominate comparisons of realism and romance. She seeks answers in periodical reviews such as Andrew Lang's "Realism and Romance" (*Contemporary Review*, 1887) and Hugh Stutfield's infamous "Tommyrotics" (*Blackwood's*, 1895). Reviewers routinely aligned New Woman realist novels with the gritty eroticism of French naturalism while promoting "romances" of male adventure in Africa and India as a means of rejuvenating decadent, urban masculinity. Reading against the grain, Richardson finds evidence in the reviews themselves of similarities between the two genres: a tendency toward didacticism; feisty, smart, independent protagonists; anxieties about degeneration; and conclusions that dodge the closure of the marriage plot.

<6> One of the important contributions of this opening chapter is that Richardson challenges the ways the terms romance and realism were applied to New Woman and adventure fiction. She convincingly argues we must attend much more carefully to issues of genre if we want to understand how these groups of novels work—as literary or cultural texts. By focusing on genre, we become far more sensitive to publishers' assumptions about literary form, the frameworks that shaped Victorian socio-literary criticism, and the influence of readers on writers. This chapter also vividly illustrates how what we might call modes, such as realism and romance, together with genres, absorbed gender, class, and imperial biases, as when characterizations of naturalism (whether as a mode and/or a genre) shift from "masculine truth" to feminine atavism.

<7> Like many other scholars of the New Woman, Richardson is deeply interested in the ways a writer, character, text, and genre lay claim to social and cultural authority. The second chapter in her study argues that "discourses of domination" (33) are deployed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886) but also in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893). By attributing superiority to a particular group, both novels function to secure the authority of representative characters and ideologies, whether their focus is imperialism or feminism. As different as these novels are, in each "woman" is positioned "as moral center, as justification for male action, as provisional agent, as subject of discourse" (32). This potential feminine moral authority, however, is perverted into the service of various forms of oppression. As an example, Richardson discusses Marlowe's silence about Kurtz's terrible failure in the face of Kurtz's "Intended" and her will to believe in her lover's colonial mission. Thus, one of the chief strategies for masking the immorality or perhaps amorality of either *colonial* or gender dominance (as in the battle of wills in *The Odd Women*) is to justify lies, secrecy, and brutality in the name of *domestic* security.

<8> Richardson's third chapter shifts attention to the fascinating effects upon the two genres when the New Woman becomes a captive of masculinist adventure fiction. These strange hybrids include H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) and his less well-known *Mr. Meeson's Will* (1888) as well as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). These novels figure the New Woman and New Woman writers alike as forces of degeneration and destruction. Richardson convinces her readers (or, at least, this reader) that we must all immediately read *Mr. Meeson's Will*! She surmises that the female writer-protagonist, victimized by British publishers and humiliated by unsympathetic critics, serves as Haggard's authorial alter ego. In all of these hybrid novels, the potential New Woman is an invader who must be stopped, destroyed, or subjugated to men's will in every sense of the word.

<9> Contesting the critical reinforcement of this view of women, Richardson turns in her fourth chapter to the topic of "aboriginal" interventions. Having demonstrated that male writers and critics often argued that female New Women writers had more in common with primitive, atavistic "others" than with British (inevitably masculinist) culture, Richardson turns to a very different form of hybrid fiction here. In so doing, she takes on a number of critics in recent years

who have censured the lives and literature of British “memsahibs” who lived in the far reaches of Empire. Richardson offers an especially provocative analysis of Flora Annie Steel, who adapted the New Woman genre to both colonial adventure fiction and the historical novel. In *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), argues Richardson, Steel forges a space for the New Woman in the empire and in history, in this case the history of the uprising the Victorians condemned as the Indian “Mutiny.” Defying convention by representing the multiple perspectives of European and Indian characters on the events, Steel implicitly argued for continuities between the lives of British and Indian women caught up in the months of violence. More than most novels, Richardson suggests, *On the Face of the Waters* synthesizes New Woman and adventure tropes into the main character’s recognition of the ways race and gender can eviscerate an individual’s authority.

<10> Richardson’s fifth chapter captures the interplay of discourses and practices associated with property and possession which she highlights by comparing imperialists’ claim to land and with the New Woman’s struggle for literal self-possession. The chapter considers how marital and property law are challenged in Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus*, placing that novel in conversation with another Haggard work. *Allan Quartermain* (1887) projects male fantasies of possession onto an African female character who longs to become the property of a white imperialist. The conclusions drawn from this comparison are not quite so clear as the insights of earlier chapters. However, Richardson certainly shows how imperial fiction disguised the subordination of white women by displacing them with African women whose character could be demeaned on racial grounds as primitive, unreasoning, and incapable of self-possession.

<11> Richardson closes with a final chapter on Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells, and Virginia Woolf. She suggests how different literary history might be if we considered New Woman novels and male adventure novels alongside decadent literature, science fiction, and early modernist works written after the turn of the century.

<12> Together these chapters raise important questions not only for those of us fascinated by the New Woman phenomenon but also for literary studies more generally. My only quibble is that Richardson assumes we all agree on what “genre” is. Consequently, she offers little in the way of definitions or parameters despite the fact that her incisive analyses raise titillating questions about genre at every turn. Is a New Woman drama in the same genre as a New Woman novel? Can a character-driven form be a genre in a conventional sense? Should we distinguish genre from categories like realism, romanticism, and naturalism? Richardson delivers perceptive readings of the intertextual relations among many novels and exposes deep ideological connections amid their differences. She astutely unpicks threads that weave these categories into one cloth. But it would be interesting to know what remaining threads knit or knot these categorical distinctions together, however crazy the quilt.

<13> Finally, like Iveta Jusová, Richardson asks whether the patriarchal oppression New Women and their writers were challenging encouraged their sympathy for colonized people’s incipient resistance movements. Sadly, neither finds much evidence for women writers’ or characters’ ability to see beyond the white, middle-class sense of superiority that blinded their fellow Victorians. Those stories are left for us to tell. That vision of compassion and social justice is left for us to live.