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A Feminist Realist Aesthetic at the *Fin de Siècle*

Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle: The Influence of the Late-Victorian Woman's Press on the Development of the Novel. Molly Youngkin. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. 216 pp.

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<1>Molly Youngkin's book is an exciting new addition to the growing field of New Woman studies. Youngkin here presents the results of her archival research into hitherto mostly untapped primary texts of late Victorian feminism, thus adding a new dimension to our knowledge of the British *fin-de-siècle* feminist milieu. Specifically, Youngkin draws our attention to *The Woman's Herald* (also called *Women's Penny Paper* and *The Woman's Signal* in various stages of its history) and to *Shafts*, two progressive women's weeklies founded in 1888 and 1892 respectively. What distinguished *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* from the rest of the *fin-de-siècle* women's press, according to Youngkin, was their consistent interest in "literary representation as a method to advance the cause of women" (7), as well as the "systematic reviewing apparatus" (7) these periodicals developed in their approach to the contemporary woman-centered novel. Youngkin terms this reviewing method the "feminist realist aesthetic," and her book traces the development of the aesthetic on the pages of *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*.

<2>According to Youngkin's research, *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviewers looked for books that focused on representing the cultural conditions that underwrote the subjection of women, and they were particularly interested in reviewing novels that sought to balance this kind of representation with depictions of heroines who managed to overcome unfavorable circumstances. For the critics who applied the "feminist realist aesthetic," a successful representation of a feminist heroine was one that combined a depiction of three indices of "woman's agency": raised consciousness, spoken word, and action. Youngkin further articulates three narrative strategies that correspond to these methods of agency-assertion and that

were foregrounded by *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviewers: internal perspective, dialogue, and descriptions of the characters' actions. The affirmative aspect of the *fin-de-siècle* feminist press becomes apparent through Youngkin's repeated observation that while the complete implementation of the aesthetic was preferred, a successful (or even an attempted) depiction of any of the three types of "woman's agency" tended to win praise from *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald*.

<3>The reconstruction of the *fin-de-siècle* "feminist realist aesthetic" and of the ways in which contemporary feminist periodicals helped shape the agenda of the New Woman novel is a particularly noteworthy accomplishment on the part of Youngkin's book. To my knowledge, this kind of a consistent focus on what the progressive women's press was saying about New Woman novels as they were being published is unprecedented. Readers of *Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle* gain insight into the thus-far-unrecognized affirmative space that late-Victorian feminist periodicals created for New Woman writers, whose work was otherwise often ridiculed and lambasted in the mainstream press. In this respect, Margaret Shurmer Sibthorp (the founder and editor of *Shafts*) and Gertrude Kapteyn (a regular reviewer for *Shafts*) emerge as two new names that would deserve more attention from future scholars of *fin-de-siècle* British feminisms, as well as from those interested in mapping the history of the genre of the feminist literary review.

<4>The second part of Youngkin's thesis is that by emphasizing women's increased consciousness more consistently than did previous critics, late-Victorian feminist reviewers helped to reshape realism into a literary technique that placed stronger emphasis than traditional realism did on subjective experience. In this way, *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviewers and novelists contributed to the transformation of the Victorian novel into the Modernist novel. Youngkin's claim of insufficient scholarly investigations into late-nineteenth-century forms of realism, including feminist realism, is unconvincing, but her subsequent overview of books dealing with precisely this topic is very useful. Youngkin traces two main strategies adopted by present-day New Woman scholars engaged in researching the New Woman novels' contribution to the move from literary Victorianism to literary Modernism. On the one hand, Sally Ledger's *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997) has foregrounded the anti-realist narrative techniques developed by *fin-de-siècle* women writers as helping to usher in the modernist novel. On the other hand, Ann Ardis' *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990), her *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (2002), and Lyn Pykett's *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (1995) broaden the traditional definition of realism, arguing that the kind of realism that developed on the pages of these novels, and

which engaged the inner life of women characters, contributed significantly to the transition from literary Victorianism to Modernism that happened at the *fin-de-siècle*. Youngkin joins Ardis and Pykett here, adding a new layer to our understanding of this process by focusing on the contribution of the *fin-de-siècle* feminist press to this transition.

<5>Youngkin's methodology is well articulated and applied consistently throughout the book. She first clearly defines what she means by the "feminist realist aesthetic," and she organizes the individual chapters of her book around each of the three kinds of "woman's agency" (and the corresponding narrative strategies) the *fin-de-siècle* feminist press wished to see depicted. As Youngkin discusses the individual New Woman novels selected as successful examples of each of the three strategies, she adopts and applies the "feminist realist aesthetic" formula herself. This methodology works particularly well when used to discuss those New Woman novels to which *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviewers themselves applied the formula systematically, such as the woman-centered novels by Sarah Grand, Thomas Hardy, and George Meredith. But the methodology does feel a bit forced on some other occasions (e.g., discussions of Mona Caird and George Gissing) where Youngkin perceives the contemporary reviewers did not apply the aesthetic as well as they could have and where she adjusts their readings of the novels to make them adhere to the formula. Nevertheless, where the methodology fits well, new readings of late-Victorian woman-centered novels emerge, ones grounded in the *fin-de-siècle* feminist aesthetic framework.

<6>Grand, for instance, received much praise from the *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* reviewers, who particularly appreciated the emphasis she placed on the development of her women characters' feminist consciousness. In Chapter One of her book, Youngkin explains why this feature was so highly valued by feminist critics at the time. As she points out, both *Shafts* and *The Woman's Herald* viewed "thinking as the first step in women's emancipation," and *Shafts* in particular emphasized that "*thought* had the potential to change the world" (35). Grand's work is then favorably compared with Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), viewed as texts less committed to a consistent focus on the female characters' internal perspective. When the "feminist realist aesthetic" is applied to *Tess*, Tess' failure to speak for herself at a decisive moment in the narrative can be explained in terms of her lack of increased consciousness that would have given her the necessary faith in her resistance. Still, Youngkin stresses the flexibility of the *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviewers, who did praise Hardy for his effort to expose the unfavorable circumstances women faced at the time.

<7>Chapter Two of Youngkin's book focuses on those New Woman novels that were celebrated by *fin-de-siècle* feminist critics for their successful use of dialogue as a method of resistance. Both Caird's *Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and Gissing's *Odd Women* (1893) received much recognition in this respect, although the reviewers were less impressed with Caird's and Gissing's characters' struggle/failure to translate the spoken word into action. Chapter Three concerns the emphasis the *fin-de-siècle* feminist press placed on literary representations of women characters' concrete actions to change the oppressive status quo. Meredith's work, particularly his *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), as well as lesser-known adventure novels by Ménie Dowie, are discussed here as exemplary in this respect, and Youngkin's reading of Meredith's exploration of physical (or emotional) absence as a possible strategy of resistance is particularly valuable. Finally, Chapter Four discusses the work of Henrietta Stannard and George Moore, focusing on the latter's *Esther Waters* (1894) as a novel most consistently admired by *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviewers for its successful incorporation of all of the three methods of agency-assertion.

<8>Youngkin's decision to study the New Woman novels through the prism of the *fin-de-siècle* feminist aesthetic is valuable, and it foregrounds a new reading approach to the New Woman novel. I did feel, however, that this approach could have been more fruitfully combined with a more consistent critique of the *fin-de-siècle* novels and the *fin-de-siècle* feminist reviews from today's post-colonial and intersectional feminist frameworks. I also missed a more systematic analysis of the kinds of issues and ideological takes the *fin-de-siècle* feminist press considered review-worthy. That said, the author's stated objectives—to articulate the *fin-de-siècle* "feminist realist aesthetic" and to demonstrate the role feminist realism played in transforming the late-Victorian novel—are well fulfilled, and the book marks an important contribution to our understanding of the kinds of narratives and the kinds of heroines late-nineteenth-century feminist critics recognized as plausible, believable, "realistic."