

For Jim and Richard

SALLY LEDGER

The New Woman

Fiction and feminism
at the *fin de siècle*

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INTRODUCTION

The New Woman of the *fin de siècle* had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement. Textual representations of the New Woman (particularly unsympathetic representations) did not always coincide at all exactly with contemporary feminist beliefs and activities. The current study focuses on New Woman writers of prose, on discursive constructions of the New Woman in fiction and the periodical press and, to a lesser extent, on feminist activists, in late Victorian Britain. A good deal of material, and a great number of writers, have necessarily been excluded. Concentrating on popular New Woman novelists such as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner and George Egerton, as well as on male novelists such as Henry James, George Gissing, George Moore and Thomas Hardy, all of whom reacted to the New Woman phenomenon in the 1880s and 1890s, I have left any discussion of New Woman poets such as Amy Levy and 'Michael Field', or of the feminist playwrights of the suffrage era such as Elizabeth Robins and Cecily Hamilton, to other scholars working in the field. The very weight of source material available supports the underlying thesis of this book, which is that the figure of the New Woman was utterly central to the literary culture of the *fin-de-siècle* years.

The New Woman was very much a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon. Contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism, she was part of that concatenation of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880s and 1890s. And yet in recent years the title of the New Woman has been rather more loosely applied to proto-feminists in literature, and more particularly to women writers, from Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand in the 1880s and 1890s right through to Edwardian and modernist novelists such as Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf. Late twentieth-century feminist literary history has constructed a genealogy of first- and second-generation New Women: the first living and writing in the 1880s and 1890s, the second in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ At the same time, the literary parameters of the New Woman topos have been stretched so as to include actual historical figures, with feminist historians using the term to describe late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists.²

Feminists of the early twentieth century regarded the New Woman as an enduring cultural icon, identifying the earliest of their literary sisters in the middle of the nineteenth century. A writer for the *Bookman* in 1913 reflected that 'the New Woman has been in poetry and drama and fiction for close to sixty years', and acclaimed Ibsen's Nora (the heroine of *A Doll's House*, 1879) as an early model: 'a woman "new" enough to do *The Freewoman* criticisms of H. G. Wells's latest novels!'.³ This extract confirms the New Woman's continuing cultural significance in the early twentieth century: she continued to be applauded and reviled in the periodical press well beyond the turn of the century. Many mainstream (now-canonical) novelists wrote about the New Woman in the first twenty years of the twentieth century: Bennett, Wells, Conrad, Lawrence and Woolf all responded in their fiction to the New Woman and her concerns.⁴

Looking with a backward glance at the earlier part of the nineteenth century, a case could of course be made for including such writers as George Eliot in a study of the New Woman: the Woman Question so-called had, after all, been a substantial area of social debate since the mid nineteenth century. *Middlemarch*'s nebulously ambitious Dorothea Brooke and *Daniel Deronda*'s sexually recalcitrant Gwendolen Harleth could both be construed as embryonic New Women.⁵

Despite the generous critical latitude that has prevailed, the chronology of the New Woman is actually more precise than the wide literary and historical sweep I have outlined above would suggest. The New Woman was not 'named' until 1894, in a pair of articles by Sarah Grand and Ouida, and, as David Rubinstein has remarked, by the end of the decade her name was invoked rather less often.⁶ My own starting-point for an analysis of the 'New Woman' phenomenon is 1883, with the publication of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. Lyndall, the heroine of Schreiner's novel, is unmistakably a prototype New Woman, and the novel was to earn Schreiner the title of 'The Modern Woman *par excellence*, the founder of the modern school'.⁷ Gender was an unstable category at the *fin de siècle*, and it was the force of gender as a site of conflict which drew such virulent attacks upon the figure of the New Woman. These attacks were, in turn, closely related to the high profile of the Victorian women's movement in the late nineteenth century.⁸

This study will focus on the 1880s and 1890s, when the New Woman had her heyday. Towards the close of the book, I will project forward and include some general discussion of the interconnections between the 'first generation' New Women, with whom I am concerned, and their 'second generation' sisters who were writing in the twentieth century.

The New Woman had manifested herself in multifarious guises in fiction and in the periodical press throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The

'wild woman', the 'glorified spinster', the 'advanced woman', the 'odd woman'; the 'modern woman', 'Novissima', the 'shrieking sisterhood', the 'revolting daughters' – all these discursive constructs variously approximated to the nascent 'New Woman'. As she was apprehended at the end of the nineteenth century, the New Woman was predominantly a journalistic phenomenon, a product of discourse. The epistemological status of this semi-fictional New Woman, the precise nature of her relationship to the lived experience of the feminists of the late nineteenth-century women's movement, will be a recurrent topic of debate throughout this book.

I want to argue that what writers and readers at the *fin de siècle* thought the New Woman was, the way in which she was constructed as a product of discourse, is just as 'real' and historically significant as what she *actually* was. Not all historians would agree. Deborah Thom, for example, has differentiated between those feminist historians who 'look at the endless minutiae of [the] material existence' of women, and those who focus on the historical construction of discourses of gender. On balance, Thom prefers the former approach on the basis that the latter is impaired by a narrow academicism which leaves it only weakly aligned with the project of feminism. Her admonition to the advocates of history-as-discourse is to 'look at what women think and do, not only what is thought about and done to them', the implication being that to examine only textual configurations of women in history is to deny them political agency.⁹ Michael Mason, in an attack on Judith Walkowitz's exemplary history-as-discourse study of late Victorian London (*City of Dreadful Delight*), also objects to this kind of approach on the basis that 'One's understanding of a given Victorian image may be seriously impoverished if one fails to measure it against the reality'.¹⁰

My own position is that textual configurations of the New Woman at the *fin de siècle* are as significant historically as the day-to-day lived experience of the feminists of the late Victorian women's movement. Written texts are just as much 'events' as are petitions to parliament; as Lyn Pykett puts it, 'they are just different sorts of events, discursive events'.¹¹ To a certain extent, the history of the New Woman is only available to us textually, since the New Woman was largely a discursive phenomenon. Heeding Thom's warning about the denial of agency to the women of the late nineteenth century, though, I do not altogether reject a realist epistemology, that is to say a belief in historical events and actualities which had a life apart from texts and discourses. Whilst I have found the Foucauldian theorisation of 'dominant' and 'reverse' discourses very helpful as a way of understanding how the New Woman phenomenon was mediated textually, I would by no means want to convert history

into discourse in a full-blooded way. The relationship between textual configurations of the New Woman and the beliefs and practices of feminist women was, undoubtedly, dialectical. There was, as numerous feminist historians have documented, a large body of feminists at the *fin de siècle* to whom the New Woman was a literary and journalistic response. My claim is that it is the task of the social historian to retrieve the historical details of the late Victorian feminist movement as 'realistically' and truthfully as possible, and that it is the task of the historian of culture – and in this case of literary culture in particular – to retrieve the discursive constructions of womanhood which prevailed at the time. As Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight* so eloquently exemplifies, the two tasks need not be mutually exclusive: whilst my emphasis is on the topos of the New Woman, where appropriate I will draw on social historians' accounts of women's lives and the women's movement at the end of the nineteenth century, as it is my conviction that wholly to rely on fragmented textual accounts of the past, none of which has any absolute claim to 'truth', can be politically disabling for a feminist project such as this book is.

The significance of the crisis in gender relations at the *fin de siècle* has not been understated by feminist critics. Most notably, perhaps, Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* explores the sense of imminent anarchy within gender relations which characterised the 1880s and 1890s. Hers is an immensely illuminating study, but is none the less limited by her virtual exclusion of socio-cultural discourses adjacent to those pertaining to sexuality and gender. Whilst acknowledging that sexual difference was only one of the ideological battlegrounds of the *fin de siècle*, citing the rise of trade unionism, fears of colonial rebellion, urban poverty and homelessness as other destabilising factors, Showalter's book focuses almost exclusively on gender relations.¹²

My aim here is to open up and extend the parameters of Showalter's commentary on gender relations at the *fin de siècle* by considering the rise of the New Woman in her relationship with other social and cultural movements of the period. One striking aspect of the New Woman – and it is this which makes her so central to an account of *fin-de-siècle* culture – was her entanglement (whether as feminist activist, woman writer or textual construct) with such cultural phenomena of the 1880s and 1890s as decadence, socialism, imperialism and emergent homosexual identities. New Womanish figures such as Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner were also involved in socialist politics, so that their work can properly be understood only through a socialist as well as a feminist critical lens. And Schreiner – perhaps the most central figure in my account of the New Woman – was a South African colonial writer at the same time as being

an inspiration to the English feminist movement: her and other women's investment in the imperialist project at the *fin de siècle* can tell us a great deal about the turn-of-the-century feminist movement in England.

The New Woman materialised alongside the decadent and the dandy, and although they had surprisingly little in common, they were repeatedly linked in the flourishing periodical press of the 1890s. The New Woman and the decadent writers both overtly challenged the dominant sexual codes of the Victorian era, which is why the otherwise unholy alliance of *Dorian Gray*, *Dracula* and *The Heavenly Twins* are considered in a single chapter in this study. By juxtaposing such disparate texts, my aim has been to illuminate the damaging antagonism between two sexually radical groups of writers at the turn of the century who in other circumstances may have been able to form a more productive strategic alliance. The New Woman's perceived association with decadence meant, after the Wilde trials of 1895, that she also became associated with homosexuality. And yet same-sex friendship between women in New Woman fiction by women writers of the 1880s and 1890s never proceeds beyond the romantic friendships familiar to novel readers throughout the nineteenth century. It is New Woman figures in novels of the period by *men* who are pathologised as sexual inverts, and this fact reveals one of the main sources of the panic provoked by the New Woman: there was a very real fear that she may not be at all interested in men, and could manage quite well without them.

A consideration of the New Woman's complex relationship to decadence, socialism, imperialism and emergent homosexual identities gives a cultural breadth to this study which I think is missing from previous literary-critical accounts. I have also contributed, in the final two chapters, to the growing body of work on the gendering of modernity and modernism at the turn of the century. The 'newness' of the New Woman marked her as an unmistakably 'modern' figure, a figure committed to change and to the values of a projected future. Along with many other self-consciously 'new' phenomena of the late nineteenth century, the New Woman positioned herself in the modern vanguard. As Rita Felski has remarked, the culture of the *fin de siècle* was positively saturated with the idea of the modern,¹³ and nowhere was this more the case than in writings by and about the New Woman. Felski's dazzling study of *The Gender of Modernity* at the *fin de siècle* emphasises the significance of 'woman' and 'femininity' in modern culture, and it is her book which has inspired the last two chapters of this study. In the penultimate chapter I examine the role of the New Woman in the public life of the modern metropolis, which had fully established itself by the end of the nineteenth century. In the last chapter I consider the aesthetic relationship

between the New Woman and nascent modernism in the 1890s. Important studies by Ann Ardis (*New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*) and Lyn Pykett (*The Improper Feminine: Women's Sensation Novels and the New Woman Writing*, and the early parts of *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century*) have posited the New Woman writers as early modernists; my study differs from theirs in that I have placed rather more emphasis on the New Woman's concomitant association with mass culture as well as insisting on the *heterogeneity* of the cultural forms deployed by feminist writers at the *fin de siècle*. Many New Woman novels were hugely popular best-sellers (Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* and Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, for example), and whilst George Egerton used the proto-modernist form of the short story, Eleanor Marx's New-Womanish concerns (for example) were mediated through political essays and literary-critical work. Olive Schreiner deployed a multitude of literary forms – the political tract, the realist novel, allegories, dreams and utopias – in order to give voice to her feminism. The New Woman's experimentations with literary form, and her significance in relation to early modernism, constitute one (but not the only) aspect of her modernity: her engagement with public political life and with mass cultural forms are other, equally significant, aspects.

The New Woman was an emphatically 'modern' figure; but this does not mean that she or her correlates in the women's movement always offer a particularly attractive model for late twentieth-century feminism. On the one hand she was regarded as sexually transgressive, as heavily implicated in socialist politics, and as a force for change; on the other hand New Woman writers of the *fin de siècle* were usually (although not always) stalwart supporters of heterosexual marriage, they had little or no conception of female sexual desire (let alone lesbian sexual desire), and often had a considerable investment in eugenic and other imperialist discourses. Some of the most prominent New Woman figures – Olive Schreiner, Eleanor Marx, Mona Caird and Sarah Grand – were heroic feminist pioneers. My aim in the book, though, has not been always to champion the New Woman, but rather to listen to what she had to say, as well as to what was said about her by her contemporaries. I have attempted both to listen to the voices of the past and to maintain a critical and historical distance. Very often I have found that the concerns of the New Woman have an extraordinary resonance with the concerns of the late twentieth-century women's movement: employment and education opportunities for women; the competing demands of wage-earning work and motherhood; sexual morality and 'freedom'; the feminist interrogation of socialism and other political creeds – all these issues speak as loudly to us today, it seems to me, as they did one hundred years ago.

Notes

- 1 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg for example includes Henry James's Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer in the category of 'first generation' New Women, fictional representatives of an emergent femininity which was 'heedless of social conventions and social consequences' and whose pioneers 'announced [themselves] captain[s] of [their] own destiny'. Among the 'second generation' Rosenberg includes Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes, two latter-day heroines of feminism's revisions of modernism. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman 1870–1936', in Martin Baum Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey (eds), *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 264, p. 275. For a short general introduction to the New Woman phenomenon see my essay 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism', in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Fuller accounts of the New Woman can be found in: Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) and *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Edward Arnold, 1995); Gerd Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures: Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel 1880–1900* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978), and *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury 1991); and Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman in the Victorian Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1978).
- 2 See for example Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992); Lucy Bland, 'The Married Woman, the "New Woman" and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s', in Jane Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics, 1800–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 'Marriage Laid Bare: Middle-Class Women and Marital Sex c.1880–1914', in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 123–46, and *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).
- 3 Edna Kenton, 'A Study of the Old "New Woman"', *Bookman* 37 (1913), p. 154.
- 4 See Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (1908; repr. London: Dent, 1962); Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (1907; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) and *Chance* (1913; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London: Duckworth, 1915) and *Night and Day* (London: Duckworth, 1919); and D. H. Lawrence, *The White Peacock* (1991; repr. London: Heinemann, 1955).
- 5 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1872; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). For a study of Dorothea Brooke in relation to the Victorian 'Woman Question' see Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986). For Gwendolen Harleth see

Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Gwendolen Harleth and the Girl of the Period', in Anne Smith (ed.), *George Eliot: Centenary Essays and an Unpublished Fragment* (London: Vision, 1980).

- 6 See Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *North American Review* 158 (1894), pp. 270–6; Ouida, 'The New Woman', *North American Review* 158 (1894), pp. 610–19; and David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. 20.
- 7 W. T. Stead, 'The Book of the Month: The Novel of the Modern Woman', *Review of Reviews* 10 (1894), pp. 64–74, p. 64.
- 8 For the late nineteenth-century women's movement see: Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860–1914* (1987; repr. London: Routledge, 1990); Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880–1939* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public: The Women's Movement 1850–1900* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979); Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage* (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1911); Josephine Butler (ed.), *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture* (London: Macmillan 1869); Jane Lewis, *Women in England, 1870–1950* (1984; repr. Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1986); Martha Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1977; repr. London: Methuen, 1980).
- 9 Deborah Thom, 'A Lop-Sided View: Feminist History or the History of Women?' in Kate Campbell (ed.), *Critical Feminism: Argument in the Disciplines* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992), pp. 25–51, see especially pp. 45–7. For a fuller discussion of the debate between empirical feminist historians and those feminist historians whose focus is on the historical construction of discourses on gender see L. Gordon's and J. Scott's reviews of each other's books in *Signs* (summer 1990), pp. 848–60.
- 10 Michael Mason, 'Questions of Chic', *London Review of Books* 15, 6 (19 August 1993), p. 19.
- 11 Pykett, *Engendering Fictions*, p. 5.
- 12 Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*.
- 13 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 9.

1

Who was the New Woman?

The naming of the New Woman

The New Woman was 'christened' in 1894. Although multitudinous articles on the Woman Question had appeared in the periodical press throughout the 1880s and early 1890s, it was Ouida who extrapolated the now famous – and then infamous – phrase 'the New Woman' from Sarah Grand's essay 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question'.¹ Ann Ardis has argued that the 'naming' of the New Woman in the periodical press was something of a disaster for the late nineteenth-century women's movement. By naming and defining the New Woman, she claims, her critics were able to narrow the parameters of the debate on the Woman Question, so that the New Woman novel, and not the 'real' New Woman (that is, late Victorian feminists) became the centre of controversy.² I would agree with Ardis to the extent that many of the textual configurations of the New Woman were partisan, and were deployed as part of an attempt to undermine the late nineteenth-century women's movement and to limit its influence. A particular class (male and bourgeois) held power at the *fin de siècle*, and the ideological discourses on the New Woman were undoubtedly promoted in order to ridicule and to control renegade women.

As a counterpoint to Ardis's stance, though, David Rubinstein's claim that 'never before had literature and fiction contributed so much to the feminist movement as it did at the *fin de siècle*' also needs to be considered.³ For by 'naming' and thenceforward largely ridiculing and attacking the New Woman, the editors and hacks of the periodical press unwittingly prised open a discursive space for her, a space which was quickly filled by feminist textual productions sympathetic – not antagonistic – towards the claims of the New Woman and her sisters in the late nineteenth-century women's movement. Michel Foucault has argued in his *History of Sexuality* that the appearance of a dominant discourse

automatically invokes its other, and makes possible an articulation of hitherto suppressed voices. He puts it thus: 'We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.' Foucault uses the example of the discourses on (and more particularly against) homosexuality in the nineteenth century:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphroditism' made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.⁴

The same can be said of the *fin de siècle*'s dominant discourse on the New Woman. The widespread attacks on the New Woman – which included claims that she was a threat to the human race, was probably an infanticidal mother and at the very least sexually 'abnormal' – were anti-feminist in design and may well have had the effect of undermining and controlling feminist women. At the same time, though, in Foucauldian terms the hostile dominant discourse on the New Woman made possible 'the formation of a "reverse" discourse': the New Woman began to speak on her own behalf. So that to this extent the 'naming' of the New Woman in 1894 was feminism's triumph, not its Armageddon.

In the remainder of this chapter I will concentrate firstly on the dominant discourse on the New Woman as it manifested itself in the periodical press of late nineteenth-century Britain; I will then go on to examine the 'reverse' discourse of the New Woman, illuminating its own internal contradictions and limitations as well as its considerable feminist credentials.

The dominant discourse on the New Woman

The New Woman as a category was by no means stable. Whilst medico-scientific discourse, for example, focused on reproductive issues, emphasising the New Woman's supposed refusal of maternity, antipathetic fictional discourses on the New Woman concentrated instead on her reputed sexual licence. The New Woman writers themselves did not always agree on who or what the New Woman was: whilst Sarah Grand

championed sexual purity and motherhood in *The Heavenly Twins*, Mona Caird's attack on motherhood in *The Daughters of Danaus* is devastating. Grant Allen's heroine in *The Woman Who Did* is a champion of free love, in contrast to the more sexually circumspect heroines of Grand's novels.⁵ The elusive quality of the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* clearly marks her as a problem, as a challenge to the apparently homogeneous culture of Victorianism which could not find a consistent language by which she could be categorised and dealt with. All that was certain was that she was dangerous, a threat to the *status quo*.

In January 1894, Blanche Alethea Crackanthorpe caused an uproar with an article published in *Nineteenth Century*. Crackanthorpe's argument in 'The Revolt of the Daughters' was that an unmarried girl had a right to be considered 'as an individual as well as a daughter'. She should be able to travel freely, visit music halls and enjoy better education. She deserved the option of a future other than as a wife and mother, and Crackanthorpe professed support for the professional training of women on the basis that not *all* girls could marry. She put her case quite modestly: 'Marriage is the best profession for a woman; we all know and acknowledge it; but, for obvious reasons, all women cannot enter its strait and narrow gate.'⁶ Despite Crackanthorpe's protestations to the contrary, and despite the avowed support for marriage of a number of New Woman writers (not least Sarah Grand), one of the defining features of the dominant discourse on the New Woman at the *fin de siècle* was the supposition that the New Woman posed a threat to the institution of marriage.

The perceived challenge to traditional marriage needs to be understood in a broader historical context. Women's civil rights in relation to marriage had improved somewhat between the middle and the end of the nineteenth century. The Married Women's Property Act of 1882 was the first comprehensive piece of legislation to give property rights to married women, and in 1891 an Act was passed which denied men 'conjugal rights' to their wives' bodies without their wives' consent.⁷ By the 1890s, then, married women, at least, enjoyed certain improvements in their legal position, and this in itself may have been regarded as a challenge by traditionalists. At the same time, since the middle of the nineteenth century there had been concern at the considerable number of so-called 'surplus' or 'superfluous' women, and this concern no doubt partly derived from a fear that the existence of large numbers of unmarried women would threaten the image of women as dependent and protected. The census for 1891 indicated that there were just under 2.5 million unmarried women in a total population in which there were approximately 900,000 more females than males.⁸ Crackanthorpe's and

others' quite reasonable response to such a 'surplus' was to argue for proper education and employment opportunities for women who might well have to fend for themselves,⁹ but the voices of the establishment preferred to suggest that women should emigrate to provide wives for British men in the colonies.¹⁰ Those women who persisted in the belief that the unmarried woman should be enabled to lead a full and independent life as man's equal were the New Women most vilified in the periodical press during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Eliza Lynn Linton, one of a number of anti-feminist commentators at the end of the century who were reacting to considerable advances made by the Victorian women's movement throughout the second half of the century, wrote in 1891 and 1892 a series of articles in which she characterised the 'Wild Woman' (an unmistakable prototype for the New Woman) as a creature who opposed marriage, who vociferously demanded political rights, and who sought 'absolute personal independence coupled with supreme power over men'.¹¹ The perceived threat to marriage was exacerbated by the appearance in 1895 of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, notable for Sue Bridehead's vehement opposition to legal marriage, and of Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*, whose heroine similarly refuses the legal tie between man and woman. Writing in the wake of these novels' publication, Margaret Oliphant attacked what she called 'The Anti-Marriage League', figuring Hardy's Sue Bridehead and Allen's Herminia Barton as the leaders of the New Women against marriage. She launches into a diatribe against the New Woman's alleged support of 'free love' relationships, lamenting that 'Faithfulness is bondage in her eyes. She is to be free to change her own companion if she discovers another more fit to be loved. And if one, also another no doubt, and another.'¹²

The establishment's desire to defend marriage as an institution was underpinned by a belief that, without conventional marriage and domestic arrangements, the social fabric upon which Victorian society was based would begin to crumble. Walter Besant, in a polemic against the New Woman writers in 1890, averred that 'the preservation of the family is at the very foundation of our social system. As for the freedom of love which you want to treat in your books, it strikes directly at the family. If there is no fidelity in marriage, the family drops to pieces', concluding sternly that 'we will have none of your literature of free and adulterous love'.¹³

It was the putative association between the New Woman and 'free love' that led to the labelling of the New Woman as a sexual decadent. Margaret Oliphant deplored 'the disposition to place what is called the Sex Question above all others as the theme of fiction' in English novels of the 1890s,¹⁴ claiming that sex is 'the subject matter which has been

proved to be the most damaging in the world as a subject for thought and for the exercise of the imagination'.¹⁵ Citing *The Heavenly Twins*, Sarah Grand's best-selling novel from 1893, and George Egerton's *Keynotes* and *Discords* from 1893 and 1894, James Ashcroft Noble, writing in the *Contemporary Review* in 1895, complained that the 'fiction of sexual sensualism which has lately made itself such a nuisance to ordinarily decent and wholesome readers' distorted reality, presenting us with 'a series of pictures painted from reflections in convex mirrors', which unnaturally promotes 'the sexual passion' as the mainstay of all social action. Ashcroft Noble's characterisation of Sarah Grand as a 'sensual' writer was wide of the mark – Grand was a distinctly puritanical feminist – but it was Egerton's more sexually explicit short stories which most dismayed him. He deplored the way she presented 'men and women as merely or mainly conduits of sexual emotion' and described the parading of sexuality in the 'new fiction' as 'sickening'.¹⁶ In the same vein, the *Cornhill Magazine's* 'Character Note' on the New Woman in 1894 presented her as a 'fast' woman pursuing an unwilling male prey,¹⁷ and there are shades here of the New Woman as vampire – a topic for debate in my chapter on the New Woman and decadence. The most vociferous of all the attacks on the New Woman was probably Hugh Stutfield's 'Tommyrotics' in which he constructs a highly sexualised 'emancipated woman' who:

loves to show her independence by dealing freely with the relations of the sexes. Hence all the prating of passion, animalism, 'the natural workings of sex', and so forth, with which we are nauseated. Most of the characters in these books seem to be erotomaniacs. Some are 'amorous sensitives'; others are apparently sexless, and are at pains to explain this to the reader. Here and there a girl indulges in what would be styled, in another sphere, 'straight talks to young men'.¹⁸

The putting-on of 'masculine' attributes (having 'straight talks to young men') was thoroughly characteristic of the textual New Woman, but this was not what most offended her critics. Even W. T. Stead, a pioneer of the new journalism who did much to publicise, and generally felt favourable towards, what he called 'The Novel of the Modern Woman', singled out George Egerton's *Keynotes* for his severe disapprobation, lamenting that the stories only 'present one side, and that an unpleasant one, of the modern woman', a side which he euphemistically describes through references to 'passages in *Keynotes* that suggest anything rather than an English matron'.¹⁹ He similarly censures Emma Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* (1894) because of the prominent sexuality of the heroine who asks her peasant lover – 'in a barely veiled proposal' – to anticipate

their marriage ceremony. 'Here', Stead laments, 'we see woman levelling down to the man's level with a vengeance, and even below it' (p. 68).

It was Grant Allen's novel *The Woman Who Did* which precipitated the most rabid denunciations of the New Woman as an apostle of 'free love'. Published in 1895, it gained fame and notoriety almost overnight. The narrative focuses on a young, beautiful and intelligent woman, who makes it her mission in life to strike a blow for feminism by living in a 'free union' with a man rather than marrying. But far from being a sensual woman of the kind that abounds in George Egerton's short stories, and which was associated with 'free love' as a concept, Herminia Barton is presented as a thoroughly spiritual woman who defines her mission to her partner, Alan Merrick, thus: 'Think how easy it would be for me . . . to be false to my sex, a traitor to my convictions; to sell my kind for a mess of pottage . . . I know what marriage is . . . by what unholy sacrifices it is sustained and made possible . . . and I can't embrace it. I can't be untrue to my most sacred beliefs.'²⁰ Herminia is constructed as a misguided saint throughout the novel, mistakenly imagining that her 'free union' can exist outside of other social relationships, considering it to be 'a personal matter of the utmost privacy' (p. 72). Immediately she falls pregnant she has to compromise: she travels to Italy with Alan for her confinement as 'Mrs Merrick' and on her return to England has to call herself 'Mrs Barton' in order to acquire decent accommodation for herself and her child. Allen's presentation of the way in which Victorian society treated those who openly flouted its socio-sexual codes is brutal but probably not unrealistic. Merrick dies in Italy leaving Herminia pregnant, penniless and socially outcast. Although feminist critics have found much to blame in Allen's treatment of his heroine,²¹ he does none the less expose the notorious 'double standard' which enabled ostensibly 'respectable' Victorians to turn a blind eye to prostitution. Equally, mistresses were tolerated as long as they were not made visible in 'genteel' society, and Allen highlights the moral paucity and hypocrisy of such a situation:

If [Alan] had continued to 'live single' as we hypocritically phrase it, and so helped by one unit to spread the festering social canker of prostitution, on which as basis, like some mediaeval castle on its foul dungeon vaults, the entire superstructure of our outwardly decent modern society is reared, his father would no doubt have shrugged his shoulders and blinked his cold eyes, and commended the wise young man for abstaining from marriage until his means could permit him to keep a wife of his own class in the way she was accustomed to. The wretched victims of that vile system might die unseen and unpitied in some hideous back slum, without touching one chord of remorse or regret in Dr Merrick's nature. (p. 100)

Herminia's story ends in unmitigated woe. Her daughter, discovering her illegitimacy, rejects her and, heartbroken, the mother commits suicide – the ultimate fate of several fictional New Women, as will emerge during the course of this book. The wholesale defeat of Allen's heroine implies a limited sympathy towards her. Her point of view is ultimately overridden by that of the narrator who endorses, at various points in the novel, dominant Victorian definitions of womanhood. He essentialises 'man' and 'woman' in much the same way as Ruskin and the Social Darwinists did before him, arguing for example that 'Deep down in the very roots of the idea of sex we come on that prime antithesis – the male, active and aggressive; the female, sedentary, passive and receptive' (p. 83). In an attack on women's education (Herminia, like so many New Women, has been educated at Girton) Allen asserts that his heroine discovered her true 'mission' in motherhood: '[Herminia] knew that to be a mother is the best privilege of her sex, a privilege of which unholy man-made institutions now conspire to deprive half the finest and noblest women in our civilized communities' (p. 145).

Allen was no friend to the women's movement – in private he espoused anti-feminist views²² – and as a eugenicist he was unlikely ever to have had much sympathy with those feminist women who were looking for more in life than the bearing and rearing of children. It is interesting, though, that what feminists such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett objected to in *The Woman Who Did* was not Allen's brutal treatment of his heroine, nor his promotion of motherhood and traditional female roles, but, rather, his presentation of 'free love' as a feminist concept. Fawcett wrote of Allen that 'He is not a friend, but an enemy [of the women's movement], and it is as an enemy that he endeavours to link together the claim of women to citizenship and social and industrial independence with attacks upon marriage and the family'.²³ Fawcett's antipathy is not altogether surprising. Although the New Woman was constructed in fictions such as Grant Allen's as an apostle of 'free love', firmly opposed to marriage, such a construction did not accurately reflect the position of the bourgeois women's movement in the late Victorian years. Millicent Garrett Fawcett and her cohorts had their sights set on constitutional, civic and economic rights rather than on the sexual liberation of women. In a broader context, too, it would be a mistake to attach too great importance to 'free love' in a survey of the socio-sexual climate of the *fin de siècle*: acknowledged supporters were few, even though free unions in emancipated sections of the middle class and among the urban poor were of course not new. Having said this, it is worth mentioning that the Legitimation League, the original aim of which was to demand equal rights for children born out of wedlock, was formed in 1893. It was founded by Oswald

Dawson (a wealthy Leeds Quaker) and his common-law wife, Gladys Heywood, who had a child. The League moved to London in 1897, and its objectives now included an aim 'To educate public opinion in the direction of freedom in sexual relationships'.²⁴ Several other couples in the League lived openly as stable, unmarried partners. This piece of historical evidence does suggest that there were some – if rather minimal – grounds for the establishment's fear that marriage was under threat at the *fin de siècle*. One major reason for the small scale of the 'free love' movement must surely have been the considerable social, legal and economic disadvantages that accrued to those women who opted for a 'free union' as opposed to legal marriage. As one contemporary commentator put it: 'Without regulations founded on the principle of permanent and life-long unions, the woman in a large number of cases would be deserted at the moment she became unattractive to her husband, and after she had spent her beauty and her youth in the bearing and bringing-up of his children.'²⁵ A woman who rejected the marriage-tie had to run the risk of sharing Herminia Barton's fate as a poverty-stricken unmarried mother and social outcast. W. T. Stead, one of Grant Allen's reviewers, argued that 'From the point of view of the fervent apostle of Free Love, this is a Boomerang of a Book', in as much as that, contrary to the initial purport of the novel, the final impression is that 'even if marriage is a failure, concubinage is much worse', and Stead seems to be correct in his view that in the final analysis *The Woman Who Did* promotes rather than undermines marriage.²⁶ Grant Allen's novel is very much a part of, rather than a response to, the dominant discourse on the New Woman.

The New Woman as a concept was, from its inception, riddled with contradictions. Whilst moral decadence and sexual licence were supposed by some critics to be her hallmarks, elsewhere she figured in discourse as a 'mannish', asexual biological 'type'. The illustration from an 1895 edition of *Punch* (Figure 1, p. 98) is entirely representative of one of the ways in which the New Woman was represented in periodical literature of the *fin de siècle*. Severely dressed, wearing college ties, and smoking, the women in the illustration are presumably discussing the books which are on the table whilst the man of the house escapes to the servants' hall for a cup of tea and a gossip. Here, as elsewhere, the specificity of the New Woman as a product of the middle and upper classes is clear, a subject I will return to in Chapter 2 in my discussion of the New Woman and socialism.

In describing the 'Wild Woman' who preceded her 'New' sister, Eliza Lynn Linton had no doubt of the masculinisation of the type, defining her as 'a woman [who] does anything specially unfeminine and ugly ... A woman who smokes in public and where she is forbidden, who

dresses in knickerbockers or a boy's shirt, who trails about in tigerskins, who flouts conventional decencies and offends against all the canons of good taste.'²⁷ The 'Character Note' on the New Woman written for the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1894 similarly identified a certain masculinity in 'Novissima's' 'somewhat aggressive air of independence which finds its birth in the length of her stride', the anonymous commentator also reflecting that her dress is 'always manly' and that she is educated, the product of 'cheap education'.²⁸

It was new practices in the education of women which were blamed by many enemies of the New Woman for her supposed masculinisation. Hugh Stutfield claimed that 'the New Woman, or the "desexualized half-man" ... is a victim of the universal passion for learning'.²⁹ The New Woman was frequently figured as a 'Girton Girl' in texts of the period – Grant Allen's Herminia Barton was a graduate of Girton College, for example – and the higher education of women certainly posed something of a challenge to bourgeois male hegemony at the turn of the century.

The debate over the education of women and girls was not new: the demand for girls' education, and in particular for secondary and higher education, had begun in earnest in the 1860s.³⁰ During the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s many new secondary schools for girls were founded, all committed to high academic standards, examinations and trained teachers. By 1898, 80,000 girls over the age of twelve were attending secondary schools. It is true that most of these pupils were in privately run establishments: in 1896, seventy per cent of girls at secondary level were in private schools.³¹ Nevertheless, it is true to say that the principle of secondary education for girls had been firmly established by the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The same was true of higher education. Like the secondary schools, higher education colleges for (middle-class) women expanded significantly between the 1860s and the 1890s. The basis for women's higher education had been laid down by the establishment in London in 1848 of Queen's College, which was founded by F. D. Maurice and the Governesses' Benevolent Institution to provide training for governesses to enable them to obtain higher salaries. By 1897 there were, in all, nine women's colleges, based in the universities of London, Oxford and Cambridge with, altogether, 784 students in them.³² Although such a figure represents only a tiny and highly privileged minority of the female population, the New Woman was largely associated with this élite group and, as Stutfield's and other commentators' responses demonstrate, she was deemed to be a regrettable by-product of women's new 'passion for learning'.

Anti-feminist commentators deployed pseudo-scientific biological discourses against those women who vied for educational achievements,

warning that women's reproductive capacities would be damaged by traditionally masculine academic pursuits. In 1874 the eminent medical man Henry Maudsley made a claim which would be repeated against the New Woman and her followers in the 1890s:

It will have to be considered whether women can scorn delights, and live laborious days of intellectual exercise and production, without injury to their functions as the conceivers, mothers and nurses of children. For it would be an ill thing, if it should so happen, that we got the advantages of a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled, and sickly race.³³

Charles Harper put the case more strongly in 1894, again figuring education as a masculine endeavour which would blight women's biological mechanisms. His threat to the New Woman was that:

nature, which never contemplated the production of a learned or a muscular woman, will be revenged upon her offspring, and the New Woman, if a mother at all, will be the mother of a New Man, as different, indeed, from the present race as possible, but how different, the clamorous females of today cannot expect . . . [There is] the prospect of peopling the world with stunted and hydrocephalic children . . . and ultimate extinction of the race.³⁴

The eugenic current of thought which marks both Maudsley's and Harper's commentaries formed a significant strand within the dominant discourse on the New Woman. *Punch*, as usual, had something to say in this context, warning that the New Woman 'made further development in generations to come quite impossible'.³⁵ That such fears should have been given voice at the exact moment when Britain's interests abroad seemed to be increasingly under threat, when there was a question mark over Britain's imperial supremacy, was no coincidence. The feeling was, amongst supporters of the establishment, that Britain's women urgently needed to raise up a strong British 'race' in order to sustain the nation's (supposed) supremacy, and the New Woman was construed (or constructed) as a threat to this national need.

In such a context, the repeated assertion that the New Woman rejected motherhood had a profound political significance at the *fin de siècle*: such a rejection was regarded by some not merely as a rebellious whim but as a threat to the English 'race'. This partly explains the vitriolic tone with which critics such as the anti-feminist novelist Ouida denounced 'the contempt with which maternity is viewed by the New Woman'.³⁶ Hugh Stutfield even went so far as to accuse the New Woman of infanticidal tendencies. Referring to an article in an 'American Magazine' concerning 'the unwelcome child', Stutfield portentously remarks

on 'a very new woman, a German unit of the angelic portion of humanity, [who] has suggested a highly effective method of dealing with the intrusive little stranger – chloroform'.³⁷ The tone of the 'Character Note' on the New Woman in the *Cornhill Magazine* in the same year is satirical, but equally venomous, the writer noting that 'an interest in children' is one of several 'gentle weaknesses of which Novissima is conspicuously innocent'.³⁸

If the New Woman was constructed as a threat to women's role as the mothers of the British Empire, then she was also, more generally, regarded as a threat to the economic supremacy of bourgeois men in Britain, and this was certainly another factor which contributed to the spite with which she was condemned. Rightly or wrongly, the New Woman was repeatedly associated with the rise of the first socialist parties at the *fin de siècle*, with one commentator portentously announcing in 1889 (the year of the great Dock Strike) an intimate connection between the rise of feminism and 'the stirrings and rumblings now perceivable in the social and industrial world, the "Bitter Cries" of the disinherited classes, the "Social Wreckage" which is becoming able to make itself unpleasantly prominent, the "Problems of Great Cities", the spread of Socialism and Nihilism'.³⁹ Eliza Lynn Linton similarly associated her 'Wild Women' with radical social disruption, likening them to the Parisian revolutionaries, and noting more generally that they were a threat to well-established class barriers.⁴⁰ The extent to which the New Woman was associated with the broader forces of modernity is quite clear in Linton's reactionary diatribe.

If the association between the New Woman and socialism was often overstated, her threat to the economic *status quo* was quite real. Women had worked outside the home throughout much of the nineteenth century – the idea of the domestic angel was from the start to some extent a Victorian myth – but their employment had largely been in low-paid factory work, sweated labour or domestic service. At the turn of the century new employment opportunities were rapidly evolving with the advent of the typewriter, with the expansion of metropolitan department stores and with the professionalisation of nursing and of the teaching profession.⁴¹ Moreover, pioneers such as Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Sophia Jex Blake had established that women could occupy jobs traditionally reserved for men (they were Britain's first female medical doctors),⁴² and it was clear towards the close of the century that women were becoming competitors in the more privileged sections of the economic marketplace to an extent that had never before been apparent.

To the extent that she posed a social and economic threat to the *status quo*, the dominant discourse on the New Woman had some

correspondence with historical actuality. But although it was largely intended to undermine the credibility of the women's movement, the dominant discourse actually provoked, and prised open a space for, alternative views on the New Woman, paving the way, to use Foucault's terminology once again, for a 'reverse discourse'.

The reverse discourse on the New Woman

The 'Woman Question' so-called was one of the major topics of debate in the periodical literature of the *fin de siècle*, and yet the supporters of the New Woman occupied decidedly fewer columns in the periodical press than her detractors. Whilst feminist newspapers of the 1890s such as *Shafts* and the *Woman's Signal* persistently gave voice to the New Woman's concerns, such voices were heard only sporadically in more mainstream journals. Nor did the supporters of the New Woman do much to extend the discursive parameters of the agenda set by her enemies. The preoccupation with the institution of marriage which constituted a major part of the dominant discourse on the New Woman at the *fin de siècle*, was a preoccupation shared by the New Woman writers themselves. The fixation with heterosexual relations persisted in novels by women up until Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, even though lesbian prototypes and strong attachments between women featured in fiction from the 1880s and 1890s such as George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, Henry James's *The Bostonians* and George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin*.⁴³

Whilst a supposed antipathy to marriage was emphasised by the dominant discourse, the article which sparked off the *fin-de-siècle* debate on the New Woman had sought not to undermine the institution of marriage but rather to reform it. In 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', an article which appeared in 1894, a year after the runaway success of her best-selling novel *The Heavenly Twins*, Sarah Grand emphasised the moral superiority of the new type of woman whose mission it was to hold out 'a strong hand to the child man', insisting 'but with infinite tenderness and pity, upon helping him up'.⁴⁴ The impetus for the article was the double standard in bourgeois Victorian marriage whereby sexual virtue was expected of the wife but not of the husband. The new type of woman, well educated and determined not to acquiesce in the *status quo*, would demand that marriage should be freed from the contamination of male sexual licence. Written amidst the furore surrounding the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and amidst fears concerning the spread of syphilis which were current in the 1890s, Grand's article condemned men for their sexual profligacy, and equally condemned those

'cow women' (bovine domestic creatures) who helped to perpetuate moral inequality between the sexes by turning a blind eye to their husbands' philandering.⁴⁵ Not once, though, did Grand condemn marriage *per se*, arguing, on the contrary, that 'True womanliness is not in danger, and the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honourably performed when women have a reasonable hope of being wives and mothers of *men*'.⁴⁶ The moral squalor of men meant that they lacked manliness, and these men needed to be reformed rather than abandoned.

If Sarah Grand's all too conventional stance towards marriage and sexual politics is disappointing to late twentieth-century feminists, the views of many of her literary sisters are not. For if Sarah Grand did not perceive the New Woman as a challenge to the institution of marriage, many other New Woman writers did. The most polemical feminist intervention in the 'marriage' debate was Mona Caird's essay 'Marriage', published in John Chapman's radical quarterly, the *Westminster Review*, in 1888.⁴⁷ Caird's essay is startlingly modern. Her opening gambit is that marriage as an institution is a relatively recent, post-Reformation phenomenon, dating from the age of Luther 'when commerce, competition, the great *bourgeois* class, and that remarkable thing called "Respectability" also began to arise' (p. 186). Her insistence on marriage as an historically situated social form implied that it was not necessarily a permanent, unmalleable institution. One of the problems facing those who might wish to challenge the marriage-tie, though, was that women had been complicit with its demands, indeed eagerly seeking domestic bondage, and Caird likens such women to a chained dog who 'has not been used to liberty or happiness, and he cannot stand it' (p. 188). If Caird deemed marriage to be only a temporary social form, then so too was the ideal of female virginity at the marriage altar. This too she derided as a post-Reformation, bourgeois phenomenon which 'has attained its present mysterious authority and rank through men's monopolizing jealousy, through the fact that he desired "to have and to hold" one woman as his exclusive property' (p. 193).

Whilst she was a strong critic of marriage, Caird was quick to recognise that in the late nineteenth century women were faced with a demoralising choice between a 'mercenary marriage' or penury as a single woman trying to earn a living (p. 195). Such a choice rendered almost impossible her ideal of marriage which, 'despite all dangers and difficulties should be *free*. So long as love and trust and friendship remain, no bonds are necessary to bind two people together; life apart will be empty and colourless; but whenever these cease the tie becomes false and iniquitous, and no one ought to have power to enforce it' (p. 197). For such freedom in marriage the 'economic independence of woman'

was the primary condition, and the battle for such independence was only very slowly won, persisting in varying degrees even today.

Mona Caird was a virtually unknown thirty-four-year-old when she wrote 'Marriage', an article which for a short period catapulted her to some eminence as the most notorious feminist in England. Had the essay been left quietly to languish in the pages of the *Westminster Review*, which after all was largely read by the literate middle classes, it might not have provoked such an outcry. But languish there it did not. The *Daily Telegraph*, struck by the leading ideas of the article – that marriage was a 'vexatious failure' and that 'the man who marries finds that his liberty has gone, and the woman exchanges one set of restrictions for another' (p. 197) – decided to run a letters column entitled 'Is Marriage a Failure?'. Responses to Caird's 'Marriage' were published daily, and in all 27,000 letters were received from the public on the subject. The significance of the *Daily Telegraph* debate was that it opened up the 'marriage' question to a much wider cross-section of the population than Sarah Grand's article, for example, had reached. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette has put it: 'Women who didn't go to see Ibsen's plays or buy the literary journals or George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, who didn't think of themselves as culturally advanced, could be caught up in this debate.'⁴⁸

Although she had been set up as an anti-marriage, radical feminist harridan, one important facet of Caird's article went unnoticed, that facet being that even she was not anti-marriage *per se*. Caird sustained a belief in male/female partnerships and spoke of 'free' marriage rather than of no marriage at all. Her ideal was that marriage should be a private agreement rather than a bourgeois contract. She was none the less a good deal more radical in her critique of marriage than Sarah Grand was a few years later, and for this reason it is she rather than Grand who should be regarded as the most significant foremother of modern feminism at the *fin de siècle*.

Many other articles on the marriage question appeared in the late 1880s and 1890s, and many of the more feminist of these were marked by a simultaneous recognition of the institution of marriage and of its decline. The popular New Woman novelist Ella Hepworth Dixon, for example, whilst herself affirming that 'the modern feminist movement' is not anti-marriage, conceded all the same that 'Women are ceasing to marry'.⁴⁹ The reason for such a phenomenon, she thought, was that advances in education for women, better employment opportunities, and a gradual acceptance of unescorted single women in towns and cities, meant that women did not need to marry in order to leave their parents' home. Dixon, writing in 1894, was somewhat more sanguine about the opportunities for single women than Caird had been six years earlier:

If young and pleasing women are permitted to go to college, to live alone, to travel, to have a profession, to belong to a club, to give parties, to read and discuss whatsoever seems good to them, and to go to theatres without masculine escort, they have most of the privileges – and several others thrown in – for which the girl of 20 or 30 years ago was ready to barter herself to the first suitor who offered himself and the shelter of his name. Then again, a capable woman who has begun a career and feels certain of advancement in it, is often as shy of entangling herself matrimonially as ambitious young men have ever shown themselves under like circumstances.⁵⁰

An article which had appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1888, called 'The Glorified Spinster', largely supported the emergent class of single women identified by Dixon, acknowledging that, like it or not, the number of her kind would grow, asserting that 'the class treated of in this paper [is] destined in future to become very large'.⁵¹ Whilst the New Woman had not been 'invented' by 1888, she is clearly identifiable here as a single woman; she is defined by her marital status, her challenge residing in the fact that having 'tasted the sweets of liberty and independence, [she] would be very loth to relinquish them'.⁵²

Because the 'marriage' agenda emphasised by the dominant discourse on the New Woman was not, by and large, challenged by those commentators who were sympathetic to feminism's aims, the challenge they posed was self-limiting and this is a classic feature, I would suggest, of reverse discourses, whose talent it is to subvert rather than to overthrow. The inability to think beyond heterosexual marriage as the only available route to happiness and fulfilment for women also explains the pessimism of most New Woman novels which reach an impasse on the marriage question.

At the same time as confirming the centrality of the marriage question in the New Woman debate, supporters of the New Woman frequently appropriated the vocabulary of the dominant discourse in order to put forward an opposing point of view. One very interesting example of this kind of appropriation is the deployment of an evolutionary-inflected discourse which insinuated itself into writings both for and against the New Woman. The commentator referred to earlier who presaged 'nature's' 'revenge' upon the 'learned' and 'muscular' New Woman⁵³ was matched by a more positive application of Social-Darwinistic principles in an 1894 article by M. Eastwood. Eastwood regarded the New Woman as a product of evolution, as a 'higher' type. Quite explicitly, this supporter of the New Woman manipulates the discourse of evolution for feminist ends, crucially ignoring Darwin's own claim, some twenty years earlier, that women share the faculties and characteristics of 'the lower races, and

therefore of a past and lower state of civilization'.⁵⁴ Unabashed by the far-from-feminist tendencies of Darwin's thought, Eastwood asserts of the New Woman that 'Far from being unfitted for the world in which she lives, she is adapting herself with marvellous rapidity to its altered conditions. And why should she not? Why should the strong current of evolution which bears all else before it, leave woman alone behind?'⁵⁵ This is of course in tune with Sarah Grand's characterisation of the New Woman as a 'higher' type. In *Woman and Labour*, by contrast, Olive Schreiner tackled Darwin on his own terms. Whilst not contesting Darwin's account of 'woman' as possessing the faculties of a past and lower state of civilisation, Schreiner demanded that women should be permitted to progress from that 'lower state'. She argued that if it were true that 'after her long upward march side by side with man', up through the evolutionary scale, the modern woman had now somehow reached a point of evolutionary arrest, doomed to be a 'parasite woman on her couch, loaded with gewgaws, the plaything and amusement of man', then this would hinder the development of the entire human race. The evolutionary arrest of woman, the denial of intellectual activity and traditionally 'masculine' pursuits, would sound a death knell for human evolution. As mothers of the human race, the evolutionary development – bodily and intellectual – of women was, for Schreiner, crucial.⁵⁶

Biological, medical and evolutionary discourses were generally deployed against the New Woman, but are also a hallmark of a great many New Woman novels.⁵⁷ Such an appropriation of the language of the dominant discourse had both benefits and limitations, and in the final part of this chapter, in which I will discuss one of the most radical New Woman novels from the 1890s, a focus on these benefits and limitations will form part of my analysis.

Notes

- 1 For the naming of the New Woman see Ellen Jordan, 'The Christening of the New Woman', *Victorian Newsletter* 48 (spring 1983), p. 19. For Grand and Ouida see Introduction, note 6.
- 2 Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 12.
- 3 David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. 24.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, tr. Robert Hurley (1976; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 101.
- 5 Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, 3 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1893); Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (London: Bliss, Sands and Foster, 1894); Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did* (London: John Lane, 1895).
- 6 B. A. Crackanthorpe, 'The Revolt of the Daughters', *Nineteenth Century* 35 (1894), pp. 23–31.
- 7 English and Welsh husbands' immunity from prosecution for marital rape persisted well into the twentieth century, however; such immunity was finally lifted by the House of Lords in 1991.
- 8 Figures taken from tables in Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 293–4.
- 9 See also Jessie Boucherett, 'How to Provide for Superfluous Women', in Josephine Butler (ed.), *Woman's Work, Woman's Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1869), pp. 27–48.
- 10 See for example W. R. Greg, 'Why Are Women Redundant?' *National Review* 15 (April 1862), p. 436.
- 11 Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Wild Women as Social Insurgents', *Nineteenth Century* 30 (1891), p. 596. Other articles in the series were 'The Wild Women as Politicians', *Nineteenth Century* 30 (1891), pp. 79–88, and 'The Partisans of the Wild Women', *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892), pp. 455–64. Linton is also noteworthy for her earlier anti-feminist articles, 'The Girl of the Period', *Saturday Review* (14 March 1868), pp. 339–40, and 'Modern Man-Haters', *Saturday Review* (29 April 1871), pp. 528–9.
- 12 Margaret Oliphant, 'The Anti-Marriage League', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 159 (1896), pp. 135–49, p. 146.
- 13 Walter Besant, 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review* 2 (1890), pp. 6–9, pp. 7–8. Quoted by Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, p. 22.
- 14 Oliphant, 'Anti-Marriage League', pp. 136–7.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 16 James Ashcroft Noble, 'The Fiction of Sexuality', *Contemporary Review* 67 (1895), pp. 490–8, p. 494. The *Contemporary Review*, founded in 1866, covered religious, political and literary subjects.

- 17 'Character Note: The New Woman', *Cornhill Magazine*, ns, 23 (1894), pp. 365–8. Founded in 1860, the *Cornhill Magazine* was a major literary journal which specialised in the serialisation of novels.
- 18 Hugh Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', *Blackwood's Magazine* 157 (June 1895), pp. 833–45, p. 836.
- 19 W. T. Stead, 'The Book of the Month: The Novel of the Modern Woman', *Review of Reviews* 10 (1894), pp. 64–74, p. 68. Subsequent page references to this and other publications referred to will appear in the main body of the chapter.
- 20 Allen, *The Woman Who Did*, p. 39.
- 21 See for example Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Ponnate to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978), pp. 184–5.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 185n.
- 23 Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'The Woman Who Did', *Contemporary Review* 67 (1895), p. 630.
- 24 *The Adult* 1 (1898), pp. 98–9. Quoted by Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 45.
- 25 Mrs H. D. Web, 'Marriage and Free Love', *Free Review* 4 (1895), p. 548.
- 26 W. T. Stead, 'The Book of the Month: The Woman Who Did', by Grant Allen', *Review of Reviews* 11 (1895), pp. 177–90, p. 177, p. 190.
- 27 Lynton, 'Partisans of the Wild Woman', p. 460.
- 28 'Character Note: The New Woman', p. 365, p. 367.
- 29 Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', p. 837.
- 30 Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong Minded Women and Other Lost Voices From Nineteenth-Century England* (1982; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 195. For the growth of girls' education in the nineteenth century see also: Gillian Avery, *The Best Type of Girl: A History of Girls' Independent Schools* (London: Deutsch, 1991); Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 40–78; Josephine Kamm, *Hope Deferred: Girls' Education in English History* (London: Methuen, 1965); and Vicinus, *Independent Women*, pp. 121–210.
- 31 Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 166.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 125. The 1870s were a particularly significant decade in the history of women's education: Newnham College was established in 1871; Girton in 1872; Lady Margaret Hall in 1878; and Somerville in 1879.
- 33 Henry Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and Education', *Fortnightly Review* 21 (April 1874), pp. 471–2.
- 34 Charles G. Harper, *Revolted Woman: Past, Present and to Come* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1894), p. 27.
- 35 *Punch* (24 November 1894), p. 249.
- 36 Ouida, 'The New Woman', p. 616.
- 37 Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', p. 836. The German New Woman he refers to was Frau von Troll-Borostyani: see the *Quarterly Review* for October 1894.
- 38 'Character Note', p. 365.
- 39 'The Apple and the Ego of Woman', *Westminster Review* 131 (1889), pp. 374–82, see especially p. 377.
- 40 Lynn Linton, 'Wild Women as Politicians' and 'Wild Women as Social Insurgents'. See also Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, p. 24.
- 41 The engagement of women in the Savings Bank Department of the Post Office in 1872 led to 'almost a riot', and the forty new female employees were dismissed. But when in the following year eleven vacancies for women were advertised there were two thousand applicants. See Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928; repr. London: Virago, 1988), p. 228. I owe this reference to Marion Glastonbury.
- 42 See Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public: The Women's Movement 1850–1900* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 49–50, and Horowitz Murray, *Strong Minded Women*, p. 312, for further details concerning women's entry into the medical profession in Britain.
- 43 George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (1893; repr. London: Virago, 1980); Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1886; repr. London: The Bodley Head, 1967); George Moore, *A Drama in Muslin* (1886; repr. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1981).
- 44 Grand, 'New Aspect of the Woman Question', p. 273.
- 45 For a discussion of the Contagious Diseases Acts, see Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); for the late Victorian fear of syphilis, see Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, chapter 10, 'The Way We Write Now: Syphilis and AIDS'.
- 46 Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *North American Review* 158 (1894), pp. 274–5.
- 47 Mona Caird, 'Marriage', *Westminster Review* 130, 2 (August 1888), pp. 186–201.
- 48 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, 'Afterword' to Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1989), p. 495.
- 49 Ella Hepworth Dixon, 'Why Women are Ceasing to Marry', *Humanitarian* 14 (1899), pp. 391–6.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 394.
- 51 'The Glorified Spinster', *Macmillan's Magazine* 58 (1888), pp. 371–6, p. 376. *Macmillan's Magazine*, founded in 1859, published both critical and creative pieces, on politics, travel and literature.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 374.
- 53 See note 34.
- 54 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871), vol. 2, pp. 326–7.
- 55 M. Eastwood, 'The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact', *Humanitarian* 5 (1894), pp. 375–9, p. 377.
- 56 Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), pp. 132–3. The political downside of Schreiner's appropriation of Darwinism was her unabashed acquiescence in racial hierarchies. See Chapter 3 for a further discussion of this aspect of her writings; see also Rita Felski's chapter on 'Visions of the New: Feminist Discourses of Evolution and Revolution' in her book *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 57 The anti-feminist deployment of evolutionary and medical discourses against women's advancement in education and employment has been well documented. See for example Paul Atkinson, 'Fitness, Feminism and Schooling', in Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (eds), *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 92–133; Flavia Alaya, 'Victorian Science and the "Genius" of Woman', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (1977), pp. 261–80; Joan Burstyn, 'Education and Sex: The Medical

- Case Against Higher Education for Women in England, 1870–1900', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 117 (1973), pp. 79–89; Lorna Duffin, 'Prisoners of Progress: Women and Evolution', in Delamont and Duffin, *The Nineteenth Century Woman*, pp. 57–91; Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, especially chapter 4, pp. 115–38; Brian Harrison, 'Women's Health and the Women's Movement in Britain: 1840–1940', in Charles Webster (ed.), *Biology, Medicine and Society 1840–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 15–71; Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality', in Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (eds), *Nature, Culture, and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 42–69; Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) especially chapters 5 and 6, pp. 149–243; Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). I owe these references to Kate Flint's excellent study, *The Woman Reader 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 58 Review of *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays, Shafts* (February and March 1898), p. 24.
- 59 For the critical reception of the novel see Gullette, 'Afterword' to *The Daughters of Danaus*.
- 60 See note 19.
- 61 See Gullette, 'Afterword' to *The Daughters of Danaus* for further details.
- 62 Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (London: Bliss, Sands and Foster, 1894), p. 249.
- 63 Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 474.
- 64 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 1.
- 65 Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book* (1897; repr. London: Virago, 1984).
- 66 See note 3.
- 67 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Women 1870–1936', in Martin Baum Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey (eds), *Hidden from History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 264.
- 68 For a useful introduction to late Victorian theories of 'fitness', see William Greenslade, 'Fitness and the *Fin de Siècle*', in John Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 37–51.
- 69 Mona Caird, *The Wing of Azrael* (London: Trubner and Co., 1889).