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Dora Marsden's Feminism, the "Freewoman", and the Gender Politics of Early Modernism

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# Dora Marsden's Feminism, the *Freewoman*, and the Gender Politics of Early Modernism<sup>1</sup>

BY CAROL BARASH

It is one of the quirks of women's history that a woman's name change through marriage can make her, seemingly, disappear. Along with a family name, important papers can also disappear. The early records of the *Freewoman* and the *New Freewoman*, feminist journals published in London between November 1911 and December 1913, were temporarily lost to view through just such circumstances.

A problem in the history of early modernist literature led to their rediscovery. According to a well-known story, Ezra Pound was responsible for transforming the *New Freewoman's* concerns "from feminism to literature" when he placed Richard Aldington as the journal's literary editor in the fall of 1913.<sup>2</sup> Doubting the story's veracity, I went in search of information about the two years prior to Pound's takeover,

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Council for European Studies for providing a grant to complete research in England, and to Mrs. Elaine Bate who allowed me to read the papers of Dora Marsden and the *Freewoman* group in her personal collection. I would also like to thank Victoria Glendinning; Jane Lidderdale; A. Walton Litz; Dr. Peter MacNiven, John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester; Ellen Shipley, University of Arkansas Library; Elaine Showalter; Ann Van Arsdale, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library; and Marjorie Wynne, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is from Louis K. MacKendrick, "The *New Freewoman*: A Short History of Literary Journalism," *English Literature in Transition*, Vol. 15 (1972), pp. 180-188. See Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), especially Chapter 5; James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Sanford Schwartz, *A Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot and Early Twentieth-Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) for information about modernism's relationship to larger intellectual shifts; and Sandra Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," in Elizabeth Abel, ed., *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 193-219, for the subtext of gender politics.

and about the eclectic group of feminists whose energies produced the unorthodox *Freewoman* and its offspring, the *New Freewoman* and the *Egoist*. My search stopped at the door of Dora Marsden (1882–1960), who was by all accounts the driving force behind the *Freewoman*, but who had dropped out of sight after the publication of her first book, *The Definition of the Godhead*, in 1928.

Marsden, who lived much of her adult life with Grace Jardine, suffered an emotional breakdown in the 1930s, and lived in various rest homes in the Lake District from then on. What had become of her papers? Jane Lidderdale and Mary Nicholson's *Dear Miss Weaver: Harriet Shaw Weaver, 1876–1961* discussed the *Freewoman* papers and correspondence as being in the personal collection of Dora Marsden's niece, Elaine Dyson.<sup>3</sup> But Miss Dyson was nowhere to be found. It was not Dora's marriage, but rather her niece's—and her family's reticence about their eccentric former suffragette of an aunt—that put primary documents relating to the early *Freewoman* temporarily out of reach.

As it turned out, Elaine Dyson had married Captain Reginald N. Bate. With the help of Jane Lidderdale, I found Mrs. Bate in Prestatyn, North Wales, her aunt Dora's papers tucked away in a small wicker trunk on the second floor. And it was there, through the kindness of Elaine Bate, and interspersed with discussions about her stubborn and reclusive aunt, that I first read Dora Marsden's papers, which now join a distinguished collection of letters and manuscripts at Princeton University relating to early 20th-century literature and culture.

The Marsden Collection dovetails with several other major manuscript holdings already in Princeton University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. With letters to and from Richard Aldington, Storm Jameson, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Rebecca West and others, the Marsden Collection further details the history of early modernism drawn from Princeton's Sylvia Beach Collection. Letters to Marsden and Jardine expand our knowledge of Harriet Shaw Weaver (a.k.a. "Josephine") and Sylvia Beach, the bold women who fought government censors and a hostile public to see the writings of Ezra Pound, James Joyce and other modernists into print.<sup>4</sup> A 71-page

<sup>3</sup> Jane Lidderdale and Mary Nicholson, *Dear Miss Weaver: Harriet Shaw Weaver, 1876–1961* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 466. Their book draws extensively on the Sylvia Beach Collection at Princeton University.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Noel Riley Fitch, *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation: A History of Literary Paris in the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983).

fragment of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with Pound's annotations is included in the new collection. Finally, Marsden's papers enlarge the story of early 20th-century British and American feminism told in the Miriam Holden Collection of books, periodicals, and manuscripts, which has its own catalogue and reading room in Firestone Library.

In the process of setting up the *Freewoman*, Dora Marsden corresponded with a wide range of political and literary figures, including Arnold Bennett, Theodore Dreiser, Havelock Ellis, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Katherine Mansfield, and H. G. Wells.<sup>5</sup> Many contemporaries considered Marsden a visionary, and most believed her unique combination of feminism and individualism would make a permanent contribution in the field of metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> Marsden's papers show her battle of wills, first with Christabel Pankhurst, leader of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), then with Rebecca West and other younger feminists who joined the *Freewoman* collective, and finally with Ezra Pound, who eventually took over the *Freewoman's* off-shoot, the *New Freewoman* and turned it into the well-known modernist little magazine, the *Egoist*.<sup>7</sup>

The story of how and why Dora Marsden has been written out of early modernism is part of a larger history of the relation between feminism (in the practical sense of work toward social and economic equality for women) and early modernist literature. Indeed, the real strengths of the Marsden Collection, for scholars of early 20th-century politics and letters, are in the letters back and forth among the numer-

<sup>5</sup> Enoch Arnold Bennett (1867–1931), English novelist, playwright and critic, best known for his novels of the “Five Towns,” including *Hilda Lessways* (1911), which the *Freewoman* reviewed; Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), American journalist and novelist, who realistically portrayed the brutality of city life in novels such as *Sister Carrie* (1900); Henry Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), one of the founders of modern sexology with his 7-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897–1928); Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1934), American socialist feminist, author of fictional works which include *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and the utopian *Herland* (1915) and theoretical works such as *Women and Economics* (1898) and *Man Made World* (1911); “Katherine Mansfield,” pseudonym of Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp (1888–1923), one of the foremost developers of the early 20th-century Chekhovian short story in English; and Herbert George Wells (1866–1946), Fabian novelist, historian, and social critic, author of numerous books, including the New Woman novel *Ann Veronica* (1909) and *The New Machiavelli* (1911), a roman à clef about the Fabian Society.

<sup>6</sup> Correspondents repeatedly refer to Marsden and her work in religious terms, calling her “inspirational” and her writing the “new gospel.”

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine, A History and Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 22–23, consider the *Egoist* the prototypical “little review” of the early 20th century.

ous, opposing factions of English feminism in the period just before World War I. In showing the relationship between this feminist history and the history of early modernism, the Marsden papers are truly unique.



The *Freewoman* arose out of a period of conflict and reorganization among London's feminist community. It was felt by many feminists around 1911 that the WSPU was becoming authoritarian, no longer interested in what other women said or desired. Furthermore, the WSPU and its supporters were victims of intense public hatred. Dora Marsden believed that suffragettes were intentionally martyring themselves when they set themselves up to be carted off to jail by violent police officers, and she claimed that such martyrdom reinforced Victorian conceptions of women as weak. Thus the *Freewoman* began in opposition to suffragettes' bold public acts of civil disobedience, claiming that feminist violence had taken on a life of its own, separate from the reality of the campaign to win votes for women and the more complicated problem of what would constitute modern women's freedom.

Numerous other feminist organizations were formed in London just prior to World War I. Those which sought to join forces with the *Freewoman* usually favored socialist reforms in the workplace and the home: equal wages for working women, collective housekeeping, and eugenics. In contrast to many other feminist coalitions of this period, the *Freewoman* is striking for its comprehensive approach to public policy issues, and its encouragement of debate around a wide range of feminist concerns.

The *Freewoman* featured articles about the period's most controversial topics (birth control, homosexuality, wages for mothering and housework), emphasizing women's abilities to choose and, in spite of differences in their individual capacities, to demand and create social change. In order to foster discussion and the development of theory around these issues, the *Freewoman* used its readers' correspondence as the core of a passionate "Notes and Letters" column, which often staged battles between contributors and subscribers who had never met. Here we find, for instance, a group of women "discussing" whether passion is good for the female psyche; and doctors, lawyers,

and community specialists debating various aspects of the relationship between prostitution and marriage, as both institutions keep women economically dependent on men.

Demanding truth in art, as in journalism, the *Freewoman* claimed that a radical restructuring of literature—as well as the role literature plays in society—was key to creating a new feminist culture. The *Freewoman* favored experimental forms of writing, anything that broke through confining Victorian conceptions of the sexes as tragically and sexually at odds. The woman dramatist held a central place, as one who dared to speak new cultural truths on the public stage.

With this diverse set of political and literary goals, it is not surprising that the *Freewoman* attracted a coalition of feminists, theologians, socialists, and anarchists—poets, critics, and theorists who rarely agreed on editorial policy. Even Marsden and Mary Gawthorpe, the two editors originally listed on the masthead, were at odds about the purpose and strategy of the magazine. Both of them had been jailed for their civil disobedience on behalf of the militant suffrage campaign and both had hunger-fasted,<sup>8</sup> but they disagreed fundamentally about everything from the efficacy of militant violence and feminist self-sacrifice to the proper language and audience for their new journal.

A fiery, lower-middle-class teacher from Leeds, Mary Gawthorpe grew up in the Labour Church and considered socialist politics “the new religion of practical Christianity.”<sup>9</sup> She chose not to marry, making both a career and a family out of Labour politics. An outspoken community organizer involved in a local Fabian study group, vice-president of the Independent Labour Party in Leeds, and editor of the women’s column of the *Labour News*,<sup>10</sup> Gawthorpe was just the kind of dynamic and committed personality the Pankhursts attracted to the WSPU. Gawthorpe first joined the WSPU when she was 13. She proved a dynamic public speaker on behalf of women’s rights, most adept at controlling her opponents with verbal repartee.<sup>11</sup> When Labour organizers attempted to diffuse Gawthorpe’s concern for the plight of

<sup>8</sup> E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette* (Boston: Woman’s Journal, 1912), pp. 160, 367; and discussions with Elaine Bate.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, Maine: Traversity Press, 1962), p. 220. See also Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, “One Hand Tied Behind Us”: *The Rise of the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (London: Virago, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Though slightly more well-to-do than the “radical suffragists” studied by Liddington and Norris, Gawthorpe shares their background in community organizing and politics; see Liddington and Norris, “One Hand Tied Behind Us,” pp. 11–18 and 211–230.

<sup>11</sup> Pankhurst, *Suffragette*, pp. 98–99.

working *women* into a socialist agenda that lacked a significant response to gender oppression, they actually catalyzed her movement towards the WSPU. Gawthorpe had been speaking for the WSPU in Wales, when in 1906 Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, one of the national organizers for the WSPU, invited her to join the national group in London.

Gawthorpe's autobiography, *Up Hill to Holloway* (1962), ends shortly after this event, partly because it was so clearly the major transition of her adult life, but also because the rest of her life was part of official suffragette history, an account she never challenged in her public writing. With her skills as a speaker and organizer, it is not surprising that Gawthorpe moved up WSPU ranks quickly. Almost immediately after joining the organizers in London, Gawthorpe became an editor of the Pankhursts' journal, *Votes for Women*, as well as a regular on their nationwide speaking circuit.<sup>12</sup> In 1906 Gawthorpe was the first suffragette to address the public from the lobby of the House of Commons, a good example of her leadership within the WSPU, and of her ability to shape WSPU strategy so long as she did not challenge Christabel Pankhurst head-on. Although Gawthorpe confided to Marsden her growing concern that WSPU propaganda reinforced constraining Victorian images of women, Gawthorpe also believed that women's public martyrdom had potent symbolic value and that because WSPU members were really suffering—in the streets and in jail—their policies should not be attacked in print.

Gawthorpe wanted others to carve out new feminist strategies without directly contesting the WSPU. She and others believed that Marsden was a woman capable of working out "the philosophy of the women's movement . . . in terms of everyday life."<sup>13</sup> Gawthorpe was in Devon, recovering from injuries suffered in demonstrations and from pneumonia, and near emotional collapse. One of her means of maintaining contact with the feminist community was by writing long, passionate

<sup>12</sup> Lidderdale and Nicholson, *Dear Miss Weaver*, pp. 53–58 and passim; Pankhurst, *Suffragette*, pp. 98–99 and passim; and Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), for Gawthorpe's background in the early suffrage movement. See also *Votes for Women*, 1 (October 1907) and subsequent issues, for descriptions of Gawthorpe's illness and recovery and her speech-making for the WSPU. In 1906, Gawthorpe was one of the first to question the WSPU's break with the Labour Party and to challenge Christabel Pankhurst's seemingly authoritarian control of WSPU strategy (Rosen, p. 71).

<sup>13</sup> Letter from the Society for the Promotion of the Economic Industry of Women to Dora Marsden, Marsden Collection, suggesting that they join forces. Unless otherwise noted, correspondence cited is from the Marsden Collection at Princeton University.

letters to her friends. In addition, to establish a vehicle for feminists as a community to consider the larger ramifications of the vote, Gawthorpe lent Marsden £500 to start the *Freewoman*. This money was drawn from wsfu funds intended for her own convalescence. Gawthorpe later wrote: “I have always been acutely concerned with the maintenance of free speech, free opinion and free thought and was ‘for’ Dora and anyone else on these terms.”<sup>14</sup> But like most financial backers of the early *Freewoman*, Gawthorpe believed she should be allowed some editorial sway, and this became a source of friction; Marsden became livid when expected to accept anything less than full control herself.

Although Marsden and Gawthorpe were both teachers and only a year apart in age, their approaches to feminism were quite distinct. Marsden seems at times to have taken women’s communities for granted, and had little sense of their importance to so many of her feminist contemporaries. She was concerned with feminists—men as well as women—as individuals. On the other hand, Gawthorpe, who worked to support her family after her father became an alcoholic, found both emotional and financial relief in the women’s community of the wsfu and was therefore more dependent upon the wsfu, and upon women’s communities generally.

In their correspondence Gawthorpe addresses Marsden as a younger sister: “Little One,” “Love,” “Little Sister.” Marsden has predictable ambivalence about this loving and unself-conscious condescension. College-educated, self-supporting, and ferociously single-minded, Marsden was of a different class of women from “lovey Mary.”<sup>15</sup> From 1900 to 1903 she studied modern history and philosophy in the Department for Women at Owen College, then part of Victoria University, in Manchester. Like the women’s colleges described by Martha Vicinus in *Independent Women*, the Department for Women was founded in the 1880s, providing both education and community for its students.<sup>16</sup>

Many forms of feminist activity—everything from team sports to debating and community service—were in full-swing at Owen College

<sup>14</sup> Mary Gawthorpe, response to Suffragette Questionnaire, Museum of London Suffragette Collection, Group C., Vol. I. I am grateful to Judy Greenway for this reference.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase is Rebecca West’s; see Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 121–162.



when Marsden arrived in 1900. Among Marsden's classmates that first year were both single and married women, many of them Labour organizers, including Christabel Pankhurst, Rona Robinson, and Teresa Billington.<sup>17</sup> Marsden's politics were shaped in this intellectual context, not in the Labour Church of Mary Gawthorpe and other working-class feminists. Marsden took her classmates' ideas seriously, considered them on a par with the leading thinkers of her day. It is indicative of Marsden's dual sense of purpose and audience that her first appeal for contributors to the *Freewoman* was sent both to her friends from Owen College—Amy Haughton, Nellie Hargreave, and Florence Hindshaw—and to controversial public figures such as Edward Carpenter, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and H. G. Wells.<sup>18</sup>

Before starting the *Freewoman*, Marsden had cut her feminist teeth with the WSPU. On 30 March 1909, her first major public appearance as a suffragette, Marsden was the standard-bearer for a march on Parliament. The women were attacked by the police before they ever reached the House of Commons. Marsden and others were jailed for a month, during which time she went on a hunger strike.<sup>19</sup> In October of the same year, Marsden and Rona Robinson wore their academic robes to the official opening of a new chemistry lab at the University of Manchester, in order to demand legal rights equal to their education. The women were promptly escorted to jail.

Principal of Altrincham Preparatory School for women teachers before becoming full-time WSPU coordinator for Southport in 1909, Marsden was accustomed to running her own show.<sup>20</sup> She was an expert in the sphere of militant pyrotechnics, even suggesting a "political shooting gallery" where feminists could take shots at pictures of the men who refused to grant them the vote. As WSPU organizer for Southport, Marsden coordinated numerous fairs and speaking tours and

<sup>17</sup> Like Gawthorpe, author and scientist Rona Robinson was a major figure in the early WSPU who became disillusioned with the Pankhursts' leadership around 1911; she also worked for a time as editor of the *Freewoman*. Teresa Billington (-Greig), who never wholeheartedly supported the WSPU, wrote about women and the law. Information about the Department for Women comes from material in the archives of the John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester, notably the class records and scrapbook kept by Edith Wilson.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), author of *Toward Democracy* (1883), *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) and numerous other books about socialism, free love and homosexuality; for Gilman and Wells, see note 5, above.

<sup>19</sup> Pankhurst, *Suffragette*, p. 367; and clippings in the Marsden Collection.

<sup>20</sup> C. E. Creech, "The Feminist Movement in Manchester, 1903–1914," M.A. Thesis, University of Manchester, 1971, p. 64.



Arrest of Miss Dora Marsden outside the Victoria University of Manchester, October 4th, 1909. Photograph from Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette*.

once hid all night on the roof of the Empire Music Hall, drilling a small hole to sneak through the next day and disrupt a speech by Winston Churchill.<sup>21</sup> Although Churchill agreed to listen to Marsden and her companions, the women were treated violently by male stewards and dragged off to jail for the night. It was perhaps this experience that finally suggested to Marsden the irrational nature of the forces opposing the wSPU's elaborate symbolic strategies and led her to pursue a more intellectual version of feminism in the *Freewoman*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Pankhurst, *Suffragette*, p. 446.

<sup>22</sup> Another suffragist, Ray Strachey, believed that the hatred leveled against the wSPU and the organization's response were neither rational nor about things that could be reasoned ("*The Cause*": *A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* [London: G. Bell & Sons, 1928], p. 304 and passim). See also Vicinus, *Independent Women*, pp. 262-280, for the symbolic strategy of suffragette martyrdom.

Although Gawthorpe continued to support the WSPU, she agreed with Marsden that the Pankhursts' commitment to votes for women, at whatever cost, was politically short-sighted. Gawthorpe's letters to Marsden suggest major conflicts between the Pankhursts and even their staunchest adherents. On WSPU stationery Gawthorpe sent letters to friends, describing the forthcoming *Freewoman* and seeking articles and contributions: "The journal is . . . to be essentially a thinking organ and will afford expression for all phases of feminism—not being politically inclined merely."<sup>23</sup> The veiled phrase "not . . . politically inclined merely" is used by many of the *Freewoman*'s supporters to suggest issues other than the vote, an agenda separate from the WSPU's control of public images of feminism. Marsden went even further: Her growing philosophy of feminist individualism led her to attack the WSPU's religious rhetoric about women as a monolithic group.

By 1911 many suffragettes doubted the efficacy of symbolic martyrdom. Solidarity nevertheless grew around their shared victimization, and Gawthorpe urged Marsden not to attack this sense of community. In a letter to Marsden written several months before the *Freewoman*'s first issue, Gawthorpe urges Marsden not to take a public stand in opposition to the WSPU: "The WSPU will do its own work and it will do work that you don't intend touching. See the moral in the N.A. [the *New Age*]. It can only do what it does by being independent of every movement."<sup>24</sup> Marsden, in contrast, wanted Gawthorpe to join her, in name if not in deed, in direct attacks on the WSPU. Gawthorpe refused: "I agree that this is the next step: *judgment and responsibility*. Your view that the right way of attempting this end is by way of undermining others' judgments is not however an intellectual judgment of the same class."<sup>25</sup> Gawthorpe's idea that Marsden's journal should be distinct from feminist "politics"—that is, separate from rather than attacking the WSPU—is echoed in letters from many other feminists.

It took Marsden nearly a year to get the *Freewoman* going, and by the time it appeared she had infuriated Gawthorpe. Because Gawthorpe was convalescing at a distance from London, Marsden often made decisions without contacting her. Whenever she wrote to WSPU members about the paper, she used Gawthorpe's name along with her own.

<sup>23</sup> Drafts of several of Gawthorpe's letters, written in early 1911, are in the Marsden Collection, Box 2, Folder 1.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Gawthorpe to Dora Marsden, 18 June 1911.

<sup>25</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, 4 June 1911.

Gawthorpe was a major figure in the suffragette movement, her name one that would be recognized immediately. Marsden wrote, unabashedly, to Gawthorpe: “What we wanted was the use of your name to give [the *Freewoman*] a preliminary and quite artificial kick-off.”<sup>26</sup> This was exactly what Gawthorpe didn’t want: to make it seem that she was rejecting wsfu “high command” before she had a chance to resign officially. On 15 November 1911, just eight days before the first *Freewoman* was to appear, Gawthorpe wrote to Marsden, “No, I could not consent to be co-editor.”<sup>27</sup> Three days later she repeated, “I could not accept [editorship] from you before my committee accepts my resignation.”<sup>28</sup> Several times Gawthorpe’s letters arrived too late to stop Marsden’s plans, but more often Marsden ignored them. Gawthorpe’s name appeared below Marsden’s on the original masthead.

For its first year, the *Freewoman* emphasized discussion of women’s sexual and economic subordination. Most often, a socialist understanding of women as a subordinate class rests uneasily beside a Darwinian model of the individual’s moral evolution. A *Freewoman* proves herself free by acting free; she is slave to no law save her own evolving morality: “if she is an individual she *is* free, and will act like those who are free.”<sup>29</sup> Marsden believed that women’s economic independence was the only means to her moral liberation:

The Women’s Movement then is the movement amongst women towards the acquirement of property—not as an end in itself, but as the moulder of destiny. A woman wants property as a sculptor wants a chisel—to realise her soul by means of it. She seeks to become a complete human being. . . . As a complete human being she becomes her own master, master of her own free will, independent and free to make her own alliances and her own co-operations.<sup>30</sup>

Woman’s struggle to “find her place among the masters” often put her in conflict both with the established order and with men. The *Freewoman* challenged all opponents equally. To open almost any issue of

<sup>26</sup> Marsden to Gawthorpe, 24 September 1911.

<sup>27</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, 15 November 1911.

<sup>28</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, 18 November 1911.

<sup>29</sup> [Dora Marsden], “Bondwomen,” *Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1911), p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> [Dora Marsden], “The Woman Movement and the ‘Ablest Socialists,’” *Freewoman*, Vol. 2, No. 41 (1912), pp. 281-285.

# THE FREEWOMAN

A WEEKLY FEMINIST REVIEW

No. 16. VOL. I.

THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 1912

THREEPENCE

[Registered at G.P.O.  
as a Newspaper.]

Joint Editors:

DORA MARSDEN, B.A.  
MARY GAWTHORPE

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## MR. WELLS TO THE ATTACK: FREEWOMEN AND ENDOWMENT.

WE have very great pleasure in bringing to the attention of our readers Mr. Wells' reply to our challenge on "Woman: Endowed or Free?" We hope that the attacks on the *Freewoman's* position in this matter will increase and not decline. We hope that there will be no backwardness among Endowmentists. As nothing less than the establishment or disestablishment of a serious goal of endeavour is at issue, the matter is worth strenuous backing on the part of its supporters. Next week we shall reply. We have prefaced our own questions to Mr. Wells' answers:—

To the Editors of THE FREEWOMAN.

THE FREEWOMAN is too bright and intelligent a paper to indulge in wilful misrepresentation of a position she doesn't approve of, but she is rather wickedly wrong about what she calls, begging the question to begin with, the State Endowment of Mothers. It's the State Endowment of Motherhood she's thinking of, which is a very different thing. It's not human beings we want to buy and enslave, it's a social service, a collective need, we want to sustain.

Here are the answers to her questions, from one who has staked his poor reputation for intelligence on the State Endowment of Motherhood:—

1. Does State endowment of mothers mean an adequate subsistence grant to mothers—say, £100 a year or so? or is it a dole to mothers—perhaps 5s a week?

1. It means an adequate subsistence for the

child and for the mother so far as the child needs her. "How much" depends upon the standard of life prevailing in the community and upon the resources available.

2. Endowing the mother, does the State propose to make her subsistence grant sufficient for the child also, and, if not, on whom does the cost of maintenance of the child fall?

2. See answer to 1.

3. For what period before birth is the grant to be in operation—nine months, six months, three months, or one?

3. A matter of common sense and convenience. Six months perhaps.

4. If the child lives, how long is the grant to continue—one year, three years, or seven years, or what?

4. The payments will be made to the mother as first and principal guardian of the child so long as it needs a guardian.

5. If the child dies, is the mother to continue to be endowed, or, being deprived of her child, is she to lose her endowment as well?

5. The payments only concern the child, and cease with its life.

6. If the period during which endowment is fixed extends through a number of years, will not women be able to earn their livelihood by continuously giving birth to a small number of children?

6. I presume that the payments will be a pretty complete maintenance for both mother

the journal is to find socialist arguments about cooperative housekeeping and Endowed Motherhood<sup>31</sup> beside discussions of divorce, “sexual morality” and “Uranianism,” the contemporary word for male homosexuality. Rather than advocating a single position on any of these issues, the *Freewoman* fostered public debates by publishing articles and correspondence from all sides.

The *Freewoman* was a forum for much debate, but in a crunch it was Dora Marsden’s peculiar blend of political and epistemological strategies that guided the journal. In the entire history of the *Freewoman* and the *New Freewoman*, Marsden never signed her name to her articles, but in the feminist community people knew they were hers.<sup>32</sup> Ezra Pound believed that many people bought the *Freewoman* solely for Marsden’s writing.<sup>33</sup> Marsden’s strategies as a polemicist, and her inability to shape a cohesive, feminist community are both related to the collapse of the *New Freewoman* into the *Egoist* in 1913.

Marsden challenged lies and hypocrisy from all sides, attempting to keep the Left attentive to feminist concerns, and feminists from sliding to the Right politically with the approach of war. When feminists were attacked by “avant-garde” men, Marsden could defend them brilliantly. For example, when A. R. Orage, editor of the socialist *New Age*, printed a come-on—“We challenge any of the women’s leaders (!) or thinkers to define in intelligible language the particular system or grievance, as distinct from men’s, from which they desire to be emancipated”—Marsden took the opportunity to respond. She contends that if such a challenge had been printed in the *Freewoman*, “we make bold to assert it would have been unanswerable.” But Orage has posed the question in the context of his own “slip-shod” and anti-feminist thinking:

While, very inconsistently, he maintains that there exists no distinction of cause, he proceeds to prove it by declaring men and women to be born different, having different out-

<sup>31</sup> Endowed Motherhood was a Fabian Socialist policy favoring economic support of motherhood by the state, a policy not taken up by the Labour Party until after World War II; see Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State* (London: Tavistock, 1977). I am indebted to Polly Beals for this insight.

<sup>32</sup> There are numerous letters between Gawthorpe and other feminists discussing Marsden’s writing; when feminists had ideological differences with the *Freewoman* their correspondence was addressed to Marsden.

<sup>33</sup> Ezra Pound to Amy Lowell (a letter trying to convince her to buy out the magazine), in D. D. Paige, ed., *The Letters of Ezra Pound* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 33.

looks upon life, different activities, and different goals. According to him, industry is man's natural sphere, as marriage is woman's.<sup>34</sup>

According to Marsden, it is just such assumptions which must be discarded if women are to become "concerned with the development of Personality . . . [the] exercise of free will." Marsden calls socialism the "Man Movement" because its leaders make no attempt to offer women access to the whole range of wage labor and thus deny women the chance to move beyond economic necessity to develop their souls. Marsden supports WSPU members against Orage's attack, as she had defended them against Sir Almroth Wright's charge of "militant hysteria" several months earlier: "There is no moral argument against a 'governed' class of human beings using force, even violent force. Morally, they may use any means available until the governors cease to govern."<sup>35</sup> Under pressure from and in response to radical men who claimed to be her allies, Marsden shows how strongly she could still defend the militant cause, although the majority of her own essays stressed "internal" rather than legal liberation.

However, Marsden alienated many of her women readers with her equally harsh criticism of the WSPU's "hypocrisy" and "herd instinct." Marsden's abstract, philosophical language, coupled with her tendency to reject everyone else's position without posing an alternate model or even addressing the possible *strengths* of their ideas, often left her readers angry and bewildered. Many friends wrote to Marsden asking her to write more simply, to give more concrete examples: "Some of the articles begin about nothing, twist and turn through a maze of words, and when I come to the end I wonder for what purpose it was written."<sup>36</sup> "The fact is," Rebecca West wrote, "people were in a state of tumult when your 'Ablest Socialist' leader appeared, and you must give them a lead now."<sup>37</sup> Marsden did not come up with such a lead; she left coalition- and policy-building to others, and eventually gave the *New Freewoman* over to her opponent Orage's friends.

Like Christabel Pankhurst, Marsden was strongest when, fired by

<sup>34</sup> Marsden, "'Ablest Socialists,'" *Freewoman*, Vol. 2, No. 41 (1912), pp. 281-285.

<sup>35</sup> See the *Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 20 (1912), pp. 392-394, for a reprint of Wright's notorious "Militant Hysteria" letter to the *Times*, and the *Freewoman's* response.

<sup>36</sup> Bessie Hayes to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 28 November 1913.

<sup>37</sup> Rebecca West to Dora Marsden, no date.

her vision of moral superiority, she could attack others' flawed ideas. Unlike Christabel, however, she made no appeal to women as women. The first subscribers were vehement that in attacking other feminists the *Freewoman* had simply gone too far, too soon: "The criticism of the policy of Miss Pankhurst [is] permissible, though it would always [seem] regrettable that it should appear in the very first number."<sup>38</sup> Most rank and file feminists never forgave the *Freewoman* for those initial attacks. Marsden seriously underestimated the power of the militants' symbolic martyrdom, as well as the extent to which many women—even women who disagreed with the Pankhursts—would support the WSPU as long as they perceived innocent women to be suffering at the hands of a ruthless government.

In attempting to produce a high-brow, politically radical weekly, Marsden took on an enormous project. Her supporters urged her to publish less often and to replace her pugilistic style with something more appealing and accessible to the middle-class reader, something less likely to appear libelous. Rebecca West realized early on that attacks on the Pankhursts would cause the demise of the *Freewoman*:

Can't we stop attacking the WSPU? The poor dears are weak at metaphysics but they are doing their best to revolt, and the discussion concerning the parish pump could be no duller than the discussion of the Pankhurst soul. It will plunge us into . . . interminable quibbling . . . particularly as your facts concerning their employment of Emily Davison [the suffragette who threw herself in front of a horse at Derby] are not strictly accurate. . . . You have your constructive work before you, it seems a pity to waste the paper on Mamma P.<sup>39</sup>

Havelock Ellis withdrew his support from the *Freewoman* because he felt not only his ideas but his career under attack: "The *Freewoman* has displayed her vigour by attacking causes which I have advanced."<sup>40</sup> But the more Marsden felt besieged the more she stuck to her own principles. Between January and May 1912, Marsden found the printers tampering with her articles; she was enraged with "your deletion of my

<sup>38</sup> Annie Dawson to Mary Gawthorpe, 17 March 1912.

<sup>39</sup> West to Marsden, no date.

<sup>40</sup> Havelock Ellis to Marsden, 23 July 1913.



copy [and] the unwarranted insertion of other matter,” but ultimately powerless. As the printer would have been the party charged in a libel suit, he felt justified in deleting any questionable material.<sup>41</sup>



From the beginning the *Freewoman* had emphasized drama in both its content and its form. The *Freewoman* saw its own age as one particularly dramatic, and thus one in which the arts played a central role even as they were being redefined: “It is an age of tragedy since it is an age of conflicting ideals.”<sup>42</sup> When the *Freewoman* came under attack both from the conservative press, which condemned articles on sexuality, and from their own printers, who feared a skirmish with the WSPU, West urged Marsden to pursue a more explicitly literary bent in order to survive: “A literary side would be a bribe to the more frivolous minded in London, and I don’t see why a movement towards freedom of expression in literature shouldn’t be associated with and inspired by your gospel.”<sup>43</sup>

Marsden agreed, and in the later issues of the *Freewoman* and the first of the *New Freewoman* Marsden and West pursue different aspects of the same problem: the creative woman at odds with the monotony of social routine. Marsden finally rejects the Women’s Movement, replacing it with the moral development of the individual, Nietzschean woman:

For fear of being guilty of supporting the power of another ‘empty concept,’ we hasten to add that the term ‘Woman Movement’ is one which deserves to go the way of all such—freedom, liberty and the rest—to destruction. Accurately speaking, there is no ‘Woman Movement.’ ‘Woman’ is doing nothing—she has, indeed, no existence. A very limited number of individual women are emphasizing the fact that

<sup>41</sup> Marsden to Charles Granville, 5 January 1912. For the changing nature of English libel laws in the 1910s, see W. V. Ball, *The Law of Libel as Affecting Newspaper Journalists* (London: Stevens & Sons, 1912), pp. 3-24; Alec Craig, *The Banned Books of England* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), pp. 21-45 and 127-135; and David M. Walker, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Law* (Oxford: Clarendon-Oxford, 1980).

<sup>42</sup> Charles J. Whitby, “Domesticity,” *Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1911), p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> West to Marsden, no date.

the first thing to be taken into account with regard to them is that they *are* individuals and can not be lumped together into a class, a sex or a 'movement.' . . . The centre of the Universe lies in the desire of the individual, and the Universe for the individual has no meaning apart from their Individual Satisfaction. . . . The few individual women before mentioned maintain that their only fitting description is that of Individual: Ends-in-themselves. They are Egoists.<sup>44</sup>

West's fiction and reviews similarly reject women's self-denial in favor of the symbolism of individual desire:

On the Castilian heights above Burgos there were trees of gold. They thrust shining leaves into the quivering, cloudless skies, and their slim trunks were of the glowing metal itself. They shivered in a wind that came down from the snow and the light throbbed through their bodies. The secret of their beauty was a lichenous growth that gnawed inwards as it glowed outwards. Yet they were better, so gilded and diseased, than the healthy tree whereof they cut the mischievous cross of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Although West was at the time writing for several other papers in order to support herself, she often sent the best of her early fiction to the *Freewoman*.<sup>46</sup>

It is clear from H. G. Wells' correspondence in the Marsden Collection that he tried to seduce Dora when she boldly sought his advice for her new publication.<sup>47</sup> Marsden used West to solicit articles from Wells and to goad him to find financial backers among his socialist friends. West was fascinated with Wells, and wrote hilarious letters about him:

<sup>44</sup> [Dora Marsden], "Views & Comments," *New Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1913), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Rebecca West, "Trees of Gold," *New Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1913), pp. 6-7.

<sup>46</sup> The Marsden Collection reveals stores of information about the early career of Rebecca West. Cicely Fairfield was 17 when she began writing for the *Freewoman*, and she met her first lover, H. G. Wells, through the *Freewoman* collective. Fairfield took the pseudonym Rebecca West from Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* to spare her family embarrassment and to assert her independence from them. See Glendinning, *Rebecca West*, for further information about West.

<sup>47</sup> There are several flirtatious letters from Wells in the *Freewoman* papers; unfortunately we do not have Marsden's side of the story.

Wells expatiated at length the other day on your sweetness and brilliance. I think he misses the *Freewoman* very much and appreciates you better now he has to do without you. . . . I told him I was writing an article about him and was not quite sure about certain facts. He wrote back telling me to send him the proofs at a certain address in Switzerland. . . . The next thing was that one morning when I was in my bath my mother knocked on the door and said—"There's a telegram for you." I told her to read it to me. There was a long pause and then she read, icily, "No hurry about the artichoke. Wells." She had also disapproved of the acquaintance and this "chops and tomato sauce" message was the last straw. Of course it should have been "article" not "artichoke." I must say I like Wells. He hasn't made love to me and it is fun watching his quick mind splash about in the infinite.<sup>48</sup>

West's family had good reason to worry. As West resurrected the *Freewoman* as the more artistically self-conscious but still feminist *New Freewoman* in the summer of 1913, she was also beginning an affair with H. G. Wells.<sup>49</sup>

During that same summer, Marsden isolated herself further and further from the larger feminist community, and the American expatriate Ezra Pound arrived on the scene, seeking journals in which to publish his own latest work and that of his friends. West first introduced Pound to the *Freewoman* circle. Sharing the *New Freewoman's* desire to unsettle Victorian "sentimentalism," Pound offered West his own writing in exchange for access to one page per issue to attract other young, avant-garde writers. Pound, whom West later described as an "arrivist American poet who intended to oust me,"<sup>50</sup> found another American expatriate, John Gould Fletcher, to pay the new contributors. This money was not recorded in the *New Freewoman's* account book, which was kept scrupulously by Harriet Shaw Weaver; it went directly from Gould to Pound to other writers, who with the exception of Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) were all male.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> West to Dora Marsden and Grace Jardine, no date.

<sup>49</sup> Glendinning, *Rebecca West*, pp. 45-49. See *H. G. Wells in Love* (London: Faber, 1984) for his interpretation of the affair with Rebecca West.

<sup>50</sup> West, "The Freewoman," *Time and Tide*, Vol. 7, No. 27 (1926), p. 649.

<sup>51</sup> John Gould Fletcher, *Life is My Song* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), pp. 59-

Pound's letters to Marsden in the new Princeton collection show Pound at his saucy and pugnacious best. For a long time, West and Marsden wanted Pound to take a position vis-à-vis "individualism," their new, psychological theory of feminist art and social change. Pound begins typing them a letter:

The seven minutes at my instant disposal is hardly enough to define my philosophical credentials adequately.

I suppose I'm individualist. I suppose I believe in the arts as the most effective propaganda for a new sort of individual liberty that can be developed without public inconvenience.<sup>52</sup>

Pound then breaks off into pencil, attempting to address what is the real issue behind their debate about individualism: "I don't want to 'boss' but if I am to make the page efficient, I must follow my own scheme. I can't work it if 'diluted' with chance stuff of a different sort."

The Marsden Collection includes several early and informal expressions of Pound's imagist scheme, a doctrine of precise, elemental language in poetry, as in West's sensually glowing "trees of gold." Pound always ended these letters of philosophical agreement with Marsden and West with flourishes of blame; he used the women's misgivings to organize, to claim, and finally to control the *New Freewoman*: "I become more convinced than ever that good prose can only be about things about which one is wholly indifferent. . . . However, 'you done it.' You axed [sic] me questions. And I'm not through yet."<sup>53</sup>

The 15 August 1913 issue of the *New Freewoman* was the pivot. Here West introduced the "Contemporaria of Ezra Pound" and the first installment of Remy de Gourmont's *Horses of Diomedes* with a short description of "Imagisme":

Poetry should be burned to the bone by austere fires and

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77; Lidderdale and Nicholson, *Dear Miss Weaver*, p. 67 and note; and S. F. Damon to John Gould Fletcher, 11 April 1935, John Gould Fletcher Collection, University of Arkansas Library, describe the same arrangement. Fletcher fudges the story a bit in his autobiography; before he met Pound he had sent his own poems to Marsden for inclusion in the *Freewoman*.

<sup>52</sup> Pound to Marsden, no date.

<sup>53</sup> Pound to Marsden, no date.

10 Church Walk  
Dear Mrs. Marsden,  
"He labbed  
of green fields".  
Here's the second  
"lab":  
I became more  
convinced than  
ever that good  
poese can only be

Photo: Clem Fiori

about things ~~but~~ ~~one~~ about  
which one is wholly  
in different. Then we can  
stop to make nice phrases  
to be amusing.  
However, "you done it"  
you asked me questions  
and I'm not through  
yet.  
Yours sincerely  
E. Pound.

Letter from Ezra  
Pound to Dora  
Marsden, no date.  
Manuscript  
Collections,  
Princeton  
University Library.

washed white with rains of affliction: the poet should love nakedness and the thought of the skeleton under the flesh.

From the beautiful, stark bride of Blake [poetry] has become the idle hussy hung with ornament kept by Lord Tennyson.

Just as Taylor and Gilbreth want to introduce scientific management into industry so the *imagistes* want to discover the most puissant way of whirling the scattered star dust of words into a new star of passion.<sup>54</sup>

Although West figures poetry as a woman in relation to male poets, the structure of the 15 August 1913 *New Freewoman* is just the reverse: Pound's poems follow West's prose and are, in effect, the "new star of passion."

By September 1913, Pound's one page had expanded to five. Although he was involved in few of the day-to-day hassles with printers and distributors that wore the original editors ragged, he was treating the magazine as his own. He wrote to Harriet Monroe:

I'm sending you our left wing, *The Freewoman*. I've taken charge of the literature department. It will be convenient for things whereof one wants the Eng. copyright held. . . . Orage [editor of the *New Age*] says he has written giving grounds for declining to exchange [articles with American journals]. . . . Will tell *The Freewoman* to exchange. They will.<sup>55</sup>

West was the first to realize that Pound and his friends meant to squeeze the founders out. She wrote to Marsden, "Richard Aldington, isn't it? That set has a sweet intention of buying us when our money runs low, getting rid of *me* and then of *you*."<sup>56</sup>

After two years of planning and running the journal, Marsden was exhausted; she wanted to return to her own metaphysical writing, "her ether of speculation" as West called it.<sup>57</sup> West resigned from the *New*

<sup>54</sup> West, "Imagisme," *New Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (1913), pp. 86-87.

<sup>55</sup> Paige, ed., *Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> West to Marsden, no date.

<sup>57</sup> West, "Freewoman," p. 649. In *Dear Miss Weaver*, Lidderdale and Nicholson discuss

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Editor:  
DORA MARSDEN, B.A.

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THINKING AND THOUGHT.

IT is strange to find searchers coming here seeking thoughts, followers after truth seeking new lamps for old, right ideas for wrong. It seems fruitless to affirm that our business is to annihilate thought, to shatter the new lamps no less than the old, to dissolve ideas, the "right" as well as the "wrong." "It is a new play of artistry, some new paradox," they reflect, not comprehending that artistry and paradox are left as the defences of power not yet strong enough to comprehend. If a man has the power that comprehends, what uses has he left for paradox? If he sees a thing as it is, why must he needs describe it in terms of that which it is not? Paradox is the refuge of the adventurous guesser: the shield of the oracle whose answer is not ready. Searchers should not bring their thoughts to us: we have no scruple in destroying their choicest, and giving them none in return. They would be well able to repair the depredations elsewhere however, for nowhere else, save here, are thoughts not held sacred and in honour. Everywhere, from all sides, they press in thick upon men, suffocating life. All is thought and no thinking. *We* do the thinking: the rest of the world spin thoughts. If from the operation of thinking one rises up only with thoughts, not only has the thinking-process gone wrong: it has not begun. To believe that it has is as though one should imagine the work of digesting food satisfactorily carried through when the mouth has been stuffed with sand. The process of thinking is meant to co-ordinate two things which are real: the person

who thinks and the rest of the phenomenal world, the world of sense. Any part of the process which can be described in terms unrelated to these two—and only two—real parties in the process is redundant and pernicious, unnecessary by-product which it would be highly expedient to eliminate. Thoughts, the entire world of ideas and concepts are just these intruding and irrelevant excesses. Someone says, apropos of some change without a difference in the social sphere, "We are glad to note the triumph of progressive ideas." Another, "We rejoice in the fact that we are again returning to the ideas of honour and integrity of an earlier age." We say, leprosy or cholera for choice. Idea, idea, always the idea. As though the supremacy of the idea were not the subjection of men, slaves to the idea. Men need no ideas. They have no use for them (unless indeed they are of the literary breed—then they live upon them by their power to beguile the simple). What men need is power of Being, strength in themselves: and intellect which in the thinking process goes out as a scout, comparing, collating, putting like by like, or nearly like, is but the good servant which the individual Being sends afield that he may the better protect, maintain and augment himself. Thinking, invaluable as it is in the service of Being, is, essentially, a very intermittent process. It works only between whiles. In the nadir and zenith of men's experience it plays no part, when they are stupid and when they are passionate. Descartes' maxim "Cogito ergo sum," carried the weight it did and does merely because the

Photo: Clem Fiori

Page from *The New Freewoman*. Rare Books Collection, Princeton University Library.

*Freewoman*, pregnant with Wells' child and furious that Pound was assuming complete control of the literary side of the journal. Marsden, living outside London for a rest and often too preoccupied even to read others' contributions to the *New Freewoman*, replaced West with Aldington without consulting anyone else.

Finally, in a letter to Marsden drafted by Richard Aldington and signed by Aldington, Pound, Allen Upward, Huntley Carter, and Reginald Wright Kauffman,<sup>58</sup> a group of male contributors urged:

We, the undersigned men of letters who are grateful to you for establishing an organ in which men and women of intelligence can express themselves without regard to the public, venture to suggest to you that the present title . . . causes it to be confounded with organs devoted solely to the advocacy of an unimportant reform in an obsolete political institution. We therefore ask with great respect that you should consider the advisability of adopting another title which will mark the character of your paper as an organ of individualists of both sexes.<sup>59</sup>

“Respect” and “gratitude” were no part of the “literary men’s” agenda. Allen Upward, for instance, believed that women’s sexuality got in the way of social harmony: “Can I find women who will be able to live with men without upsetting harmony under the influence of sensual attractions or repulsions? Or must we fall back on the old rule of celibacy and separate life?”<sup>60</sup>

The name change to the *Egoist* coincided, finally, with the *New Freewoman*’s move toward specifically nonfeminist concerns, a switch that A. R. Orage and others had been advocating among themselves ever since Pound got his foot in the door in June 1913.<sup>61</sup> Although Pound

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Marsden’s movement away from feminist concerns and a life-long struggle to complete her philosophical writing.

<sup>58</sup> Allen Upward and Huntley Carter were regular contributors to the *Freewoman*, even before Pound’s arrival; Reginald Wright Kauffman was the author of the sensationist novel *Daughters of Ishmael*.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Lidderdale and Nicholson, *Dear Miss Weaver*, p. 79; see Chapters 4 and 5 for their account.

<sup>60</sup> Allen Upward to Mary Gawthorpe, 10 January 1911.

<sup>61</sup> Letters in the John Gould Fletcher Collection, written 1915–1917 between Fletcher and Amy Lowell, confirm that Pound always acted as if the *New Freewoman* and the *Egoist*



and Marsden shared an elitist contempt for the middle-classes,<sup>62</sup> Pound had the backing of a larger “modernist” coalition that was hostile to feminism, and often to women as well. Marsden resigned as editor soon after Richard Aldington became the assistant, and the replacement of the *Freewoman*’s original founders was complete.



Dora Marsden continued to work on her metaphysical writing, and published two parts of a proposed trilogy, *The Definition of the Godhead* (1928) and *The Mysteries of Christianity* (1930). *The Definition of the Godhead* retrieves the feminine symbolically, as the source of all religion and language:

To  
The Great Name  
Hushed Among Us For So Long  
Of  
Her,  
Heaven,  
The Mighty Mother  
of  
All. . . .  
The Rock of Ages  
The Ark and Covenant of God  
God’s Promise  
The Logos  
The Cross and the Crescent in One

*The Definition of the Godhead* argues against dualism: All oppositions point to the same original Being. One rather friendly review of Marsden’s opus serves well as her epitaph: “[She is] courageous almost to a

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were his journals, and that everyone he paid treated him as boss. Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), pp. 140-146, tells a somewhat different story, one much easier on Pound. See also Wallace Martin, *The New Age Under Orage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), pp. 179-180.

<sup>62</sup> James Longenbach, “The Secret Society of Modernism: Pound, Yeats, Olivia Shakespeare, and the Abbé de Montfaucon de Villars,” *Yeats Annual*, Vol. 3 (1985).

fault . . . if she would be content to try something of a more moderate compass, she would do much better work.”<sup>63</sup>

Marsden’s women friends, however, took her work as seriously as she took it herself. As Harriet Shaw Weaver supported T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and others, she financed Marsden’s books and saw them into print. Storm Jameson considered Marsden’s philosophy the backbone of intellectual modernism: “I can’t, I simply can’t think that anyone for one moment could suppose that the work of James Joyce is comparable in value with yours. It is too absurd.”<sup>64</sup> And again, Jameson writes, “It is clear even to me that [*Godhead*] must dwarf everything done in philosophy since the era begun by Newton.”<sup>65</sup>

But Rebecca West’s early assessment was essentially correct: Modernist men wanted the fever of feminist debate without having to contend with women as equal subjects either in literature or in day-to-day life. A bad poem printed in the *New Freewoman* makes the larger problem explicit:

#### THE EGOIST

“She has no soul.  
Her almond eyes diminish to a spark  
And change the sun to amber.  
When she looks at me  
I draw without myself and pass, unwilling,  
The strange lids of her eyes, and seem to enter.  
  
A garden that knows no laws,  
Sowed with imaginations like a god’s.  
I enter and become  
Another self, drunken  
With new thoughts and hot-pulsed danger.  
  
I long to sing, to prove my madness,  
Dancing away from habit,

<sup>63</sup> A. T. S. James, review of *Definition of the Godhead*, quoted in a letter from Jimmie (i.e. James Dyson) to Dora Marsden, 1 April 1929.

<sup>64</sup> Storm Jameson to Dora Marsden, 26 September 1928.

<sup>65</sup> Jameson to Marsden, 8 December 1928.

Responsibilities and the grave laws of soul.  
The woman has no right to perilous thoughts.  
She has no soul, and O,  
I lose my own, and all my satisfied past,  
Desiring her.”<sup>66</sup>

The male modernist defines himself by looking into the nothing of the female soul. He renders her nothing by looking solely for himself. But by bringing women like Dora Marsden and Rebecca West back into the modernist circle, we see how much practical and ideological struggle lies behind works like Yeats’ *A Vision* and Pound’s *Cantos*, works which must repeatedly approach and symbolically overcome the feminine. We also see, from the Marsden Collection, how Marsden and West resisted at first, but due to ideological shifts, financial mishaps, illness and exhaustion, eventually participated in granting the Egoist (and the *Egoist*) a male Ego after all.

<sup>66</sup> Horace Hollay, *New Freewoman*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (1913), p. 118.