

**“IF IT IS SINCERE, IT WILL ROUSE HOSTILITY”: *THE FREEWOMAN*, FEMINISMS, AND PRINT  
CULTURE IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLAND**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an examination of *The Freewoman* (1911-12) as a feminist publication, and its editor Dora Marsden's (1882-1960) particular role in the journal. It examines periodical culture and feminisms, and the possibilities that periodicals open up for feminist thought and politics through the characteristics of this publishing genre. These include a focus on the emotional community created in and through *The Freewoman*, as well as its self-reflexive grappling with its role as a periodical. Using *The Freewoman* and archival collections and life-writing related to it, this dissertation asks: how did periodicals function as sites for articulating feminist thought in ways that reached beyond the limitations of formal politics like suffrage? How did they foster the diversification and expansion of feminism in progressive directions? How might attention to the emotional aspects of periodicals and the communities created in and through them enrich the historical narratives of first-wave feminism, and feminisms more broadly? And what possibilities does a reflexive and intentional use of the capacities of a medium and genre (in this case the independent periodical) open for feminist politics?

This dissertation highlights the importance of dissent and conflict to feminism, through *The Freewoman*. I argue that the periodical contributed to the diversification of early-twentieth century feminism not only through its subject matter but importantly through insisting on dissent, conflict, and difference as essential to the progress, if not the very existence, of feminism. Using the characteristics of the periodical as a publishing genre, *The Freewoman* created a space and a community that were intensely political, while allowing for the expression of opinions and emotions that were perceived as 'destructive'. It is in the alternative space that *The Freewoman*

created, I offer, that its uniqueness and importance lie. Through its resistance of ‘artificial unity’ and its emphasis on dialogue and conflict as a constant state, rather than a troubled moment that should be resolved, I see *The Freewoman* also as creating a ‘queer’ space or counterpublic, in the sense of challenging normativity in a range of areas.

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## Introduction

On 23 November 1911, the first issue of *The Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review* was published. Already at this early stage, its editor, Dora Marsden (1882-1960), distinguished it from other journals dedicated to “the freedom of women.” As she put it: “They deal with something which women may acquire. We find our chief concern in what they may become. Our interest is in the Freewoman herself, her psychology, philosophy, morality, and achievements, and only in a secondary degree with her politics and economics.”<sup>1</sup> This statement captures one of the features that made *The Freewoman* a unique presence in the landscape of the women’s movement in early twentieth-century Britain. Rather than advocate for women’s rights related to formal politics, *The Freewoman* emphasized the changes in consciousness that could transform women’s lives and notions of gender in more radical ways. *The Freewoman* ceased publication after less than a year, its last issue published on 10 October 1912. It was the first British or American periodical to call itself ‘feminist’, indicating, much like the statement quoted above, interests that went beyond the predominant concerns of women’s political organizations of the period, chief amongst them the vote.<sup>2</sup> Through its content and style, as well as its editorial philosophy and practices, *The Freewoman* became a site for theorizing and debating feminism as an emergent politics and identity in the early twentieth century.

*The Freewoman* affords researchers a unique lens into the process of constructing feminist identities and politics in this period. This dissertation is an examination of *The*

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<sup>1</sup> “Notes of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Delap, “Individualism and Introspection,” 165.

*Freewoman* as a feminist publication and Dora Marsden's particular role in the journal. Such an examination affords a view of the connection between periodical culture and feminism, and the possibilities that periodicals open up for feminist thought and politics through the characteristics of this publishing genre. These include a focus on the emotional community created in and through *The Freewoman*, as well as its self-reflexive grappling with its role as a periodical. Looking at Dora Marsden opens up questions of biography and life-writing, and the complexities of a messy creation like *The Freewoman* that is both collective and individual. As the story of *The Freewoman* cannot be separated from the life of Dora Marsden, I will begin with a short historical description of Marsden and the periodical as a way of framing this analysis.

## I

Dora Marsden came from an impoverished working-class family in Marsden, West Yorkshire, and was raised by her mother, Hannah, after her father Fred left the family for the United States around 1890. She was trained as a teacher through the pupil-teacher scheme, which allowed students to complete their studies and train as teacher simultaneously. Marsden received a Queen's Scholarship which covered her tuition and a maintenance allowance at Owen's College, Manchester, where she was enrolled in the teacher training course and studied for a BA, still an uncommon feat for women in 1900, and even more so for working-class women.<sup>3</sup>

It was in Manchester that Marsden first encountered a group of suffrage activists and became interested in the fight for enfranchisement. While she likely was involved in suffrage

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<sup>3</sup> Les Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882-1960* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990), 8–12.

activism earlier, her name first appears in Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) reports beginning in 1908, when she was working as the headmistress of a teacher training college in Altrincham. In 1909, she resigned from this position, and went to work full-time as a paid organizer for the WSPU, taking a significant pay cut for her political beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Marsden was involved in some of the WSPU's more militant activities, and gained celebrity for her daring and dedication to the Union and to the fight for suffrage. She was arrested and imprisoned for a month at Strangeways in Manchester, and possibly forcibly fed, though this detail is not entirely clear.<sup>5</sup>

Marsden established *The Freewoman* after several years of intense involvement in the WSPU and two years of work as a paid organizer. This zealous activity ended with her resignation in January 1911. The trigger for the resignation was her growing difficulty with the autocratic leadership style of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, the mother and daughter who headed the WSPU, and the control they exercised over all aspects of the organization, which left very little of the decision making to the organizers. The WSPU indeed never claimed to be a democratic body; it had a clear hierarchical structure and its leaders spoke of the organization using military metaphors, expecting the members to follow orders. The Pankhursts made no secret of their belief that “[t]hose who cannot follow the general must drop out of the ranks,” especially given the often illegal, guerrilla-style nature of the WSPU's activities.<sup>6</sup> Marsden was

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup> Garner and Delap differ on this point; Garner suggests that Marsden did endure forcible feeding, while Delap claims she did not.

<sup>6</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 179.

progressively discontented with this approach, and particularly with the decision of the leadership to deny her and other organizers permission to attend a demonstration in June 1910. Her final clash with the WSPU was over the organizing of an exhibition or bazaar in Southport, where she was living and working at the time. This resulted in an acrimonious exchange between Marsden and the WSPU leadership, and eventually in Marsden's resignation in 1911.<sup>7</sup>

No less important than this incident in accounting for Marsden's resignation from the WSPU was her disillusionment with the suffrage campaign on a more fundamental level. She began to see the vote as a very limited goal, perceiving a discrepancy between what she saw as the insufficient aim of the franchise and the militant suffrage movement's tactics.<sup>8</sup> While no organization saw the franchise as the sole goal of the women's movement, it was understood by many to be key to effecting change in other realms of women's lives. As well, the demand for the vote gave the women's movement cohesion, and its members a sense of collective identity. Marsden would increasingly think and write about the ineffectiveness of enfranchisement in changing women's conditions, while at the same time calling for the vote to be granted to women as a means of protecting the weakest among them, or in order to "remove this incubus of crude politics which has threatened to settle upon the women's movement."<sup>9</sup> What is evident in both these formulations is that, to Marsden, formal or parliamentary politics were not the arena from which profound changes in women's lives would develop.

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<sup>7</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 30–46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–48.

<sup>9</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3; *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 64.

Marsden believed that she was not alone amongst WSPU members in feeling exasperated with the organization. Several years after her resignation, this was how she described the group of suffragettes (the term commonly used at the time to distinguish WSPU members, who were generally more militant, from other suffrage activists) of which she was part:

Long years ago – five perhaps – there existed in Manchester a colony of suffragettes, real ones, faithful of the faithful, who sped to do Mrs. Pankhurst's will before she had well breathed it forth. And at the very kernel of the community was a tiny group which in its intimate moments and as an unholy joke called itself the S.O.S. They were Sick of Suffrage, and meant nothing more than a scarce-whispered weariness at the interminable reiteration of threadbare arguments and probably a definite wearying of the unending donkey-work of the gutter and pavement.<sup>10</sup>

As Lucy Delap suggests, Marsden was also not a lone voice advocating feminism and expressing a loss of faith in suffrage; Marsden's articulation of this position was one of the earlier ones, but "avant-garde feminists" as Delap terms them, both in the UK and in the US, were expressing opinions along similar lines.<sup>11</sup> Through *The Freewoman* and the connections Marsden established in her suffrage years and after, she was one of the people who influenced avant-garde feminism; her unique position as the editor of a periodical and her particular style and explicitness had certainly made her a loud and prominent voice.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Egoist*, June 15, 1914, 223.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

After leaving the WSPU, Marsden sought a political and intellectual home for her critical ideas and thoughts about feminism beyond suffrage. Her first attempt was with the Women's Freedom League (WFL), the suffrage organization established in 1907 by Charlotte Despard, Teresa Billington-Greig, and Edith How-Martyn, following a split from the WSPU. The WFL was more moderate in tactics than the WSPU, and though it was committed to the attainment of the vote, it also foregrounded broader concerns. In her writing, Despard made connections between women's status and labour. She was also a theosophist who emphasized the relation of spirituality to the women's movement.<sup>12</sup> The WFL leadership was openly critical of the WSPU, mainly for its undemocratic structure. These spiritual, intellectual, and class-conscious inclinations, as well as the explicit criticism of the WSPU, were likely what made Marsden believe that she would find a place in the WFL, and she proposed an intellectual feminist supplement to the organization's paper *The Vote*, as part of its reorganization.<sup>13</sup>

In a note outlining her proposal, now part of the Dora Marsden Collection at Princeton University, Marsden stated the policy of the supplement, highlighting the need for the cessation of "toy militancy", "[a]n allowance of an influx of ideas, from minds outside the movement, & consequently an independent platform," and the need for the WFL to be prepared that such a supplement "be the cause of dissensions etc. [*sic*]."<sup>14</sup> It is not entirely clear what Marsden envisioned when referring to a 'platform,' but whether she intended for it to become a separate

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<sup>12</sup> Despard, *Theosophy and the Woman's Movement*.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Gawthorpe to Mrs. Hastings, March 31, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>14</sup> U.d, Box 4, folder 7, Dora Marsden Collection.

paper or an independent political body, it was to be financed “by the league & its friends.”<sup>15</sup>

Marsden worked for *The Vote* briefly, but the WFL was not willing to support her more ambitious plans for the feminist supplement, and she eventually resigned. Here again, as with the WSPU, the relationship ended bitterly, with the WFL treasurer Constance Tite commenting on Marsden’s attitude towards the organization, and her questionable use of its funds: “I am of course sorry that it has not been possible to secure your work for the League but I am not in the least surprised. Not only could I see that you knew nothing about the spirit of the League but you evidently never had the least intention of adapting yourself to it. Your account partly shows this, no true Freedom Leaguer would ever spend 2/6 on lunch.”<sup>16</sup>

Through her experiences with the WSPU and the WFL, it became clear to Marsden that suffrage organizations and their official papers were not the right venue to realize her ideas. There was some discussion with the Fabian Society in the attempt to connect the independent platform with it, but this was unsuccessful as well. It appears that Marsden was at that point pondering the establishment of a movement separate from suffrage, one that would allow for a much freer exchange of opinions and debate than was possible within suffrage organizations. When she initially presented the idea to her close friend and former colleague, WSPU organizer Mary Gawthorpe, the response was mixed. Gawthorpe suggested that what Marsden should do to promote her ideas is establish an independent journal, unconnected to a political organization. Marsden took the suggestion, and Gawthorpe, who was still employed by the WSPU (though not

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Constance Tite to Dora Marsden, April 26, 1911. Box 1, folder 29, Dora Marsden Collection.

active due to her ill-health) became nominal co-editor.<sup>17</sup> She accepted the position reluctantly, asking Marsden in one of her letters: “Can you do without me in an official sense as co-editor? Can you do without my name if I consented to be a regular contributor?”<sup>18</sup> By some accounts Gawthorpe, still recovering from health problems caused by her imprisonment, agreed to take on the position only after pressure (which Les Garner, in his biography of Marsden, says amounted to bullying) from Marsden.<sup>19</sup>

However hesitant Gawthorpe was, she did connect Marsden with her acquaintance A.R. Orage, the editor of the independent literary and intellectual review *The New Age*, which was published by the New Age Press, thinking that he might be able to help. Orage did not offer his support to the initiative, claiming that “there are not enough writers who understand feminism to run a paper and there are not enough to keep it going.”<sup>20</sup> While this comment can be read as snide, it does shed light on the context in which Marsden was operating; feminist thought that was independent from or oppositional to suffrage organizations was new, and Orage could be seen to express an understanding of it as requiring knowledge and expertise on the part of both authors and readers, which few at the time had.

Following the rejection by Orage, Marsden contacted Charles Granville, owner of the British publishing house Stephen Swift & Co. It is not entirely clear how the connection happened, but Granville was a friend of Orage’s and a contributor to *The New Age*, which makes

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<sup>17</sup> *The Freewoman*, March 14, 1912, 323.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Gawthorpe to Dora Marsden September 15, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 57–59.

<sup>20</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 56 There is no indication as to whether Gawthorpe envisioned the periodical being published by the New Age Press.



it possible that Gawthorpe knew him, or that Orage introduced Marsden and Gawthorpe to the publisher.<sup>21</sup> There is not much material about Granville, whose birth name was Hosken, or about Stephen Swift & Co.<sup>22</sup> Granville published authors such as Arthur Ransome (*Oscar Wilde: A Study*) and Katherine Mansfield (*In a German Pension*). For a period of five months in 1912 the firm published *Rhythm*, a monthly art, music and culture magazine, the only periodical it published aside from *The Freewoman*. In his biography of Arthur Ransome, Hugh Brogan describes Granville as “a mysterious literary operator,”<sup>23</sup> and Ransome claimed in his memoir that the reason Granville established his press was to have a publisher for his own poetry.<sup>24</sup>

It does not appear that Granville had a particular interest in feminism before publishing *The Freewoman*, but he was involved both as a writer and publisher with modernist and socialist circles, which might explain the allure of Marsden’s proposed project. Later, however, Granville became a participant in the Freewoman Discussion Circle established by the paper’s readers and contributors in London (the Discussion Circles are discussed in chapters 2 and 4). The appeal for Marsden may have been Granville’s “knack ... for making his authors feel that they were sitting at the center of the universe,” but on a more pragmatic level, the prospect of a steady income would have been an important factor.<sup>25</sup> Stephen Swift & Co. published *The Freewoman* for the whole time the periodical ran under this title, from November 1911 to October 1912, with

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<sup>21</sup> Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>23</sup> Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Chambers, *The Last Englishman*, 60. While there are no surviving agreements between Marsden and Stephen Swift & Co., and therefore no details of her income, Granville paid Ransome and Mansfield, and probably Murry as editor of *Rhythm*.

different sub-titles: first *A Weekly Feminist Review*, and from May 1912 *A Weekly Humanist Review*. In October 1912 Granville fled England, fearing arrest and trial over an old bigamy case, and the publishing company was liquidated. He was eventually arrested, charged with embezzlement, and imprisoned for bigamy.<sup>26</sup>

When *The Freewoman* ceased publication in 1912, Marsden was clear that she wanted to restart the paper, and a search began for a publisher, a printer, and most importantly perhaps, for funding. After several months of attempts to raise the necessary funds through a “Thousand Club” intended to guarantee 1,000 financial backers in the US, attempts which were eventually unsuccessful, the paper was published fortnightly as *The New Freewoman: An Individualist Review* from June to December 1913. The financial support for the new publication came from Harriet Shaw Weaver, a former *Freewoman* subscriber who inherited a considerable amount of money. She was keen on using it to support writers, most notably James Joyce, publishing his *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man* in 1914-15 as a series in *The Egoist*, the successor to *The New Freewoman*, which Weaver edited, before being published as a book in 1916. Weaver supported the publication of *The New Freewoman* and *The Egoist*, and established in London the Egoist Press, which published works by some of the latter journal’s contributors, including Marsden. She put money into these publishing endeavours, which were not covering their costs, thus enabling Marsden to keep her position and salary as editor. Weaver would later support

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<sup>26</sup> Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, 82; Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, 149–50.

Marsden personally, paying for her residence in Crichton, a mental institution in Dumfries, Scotland, where Marsden spent the last twenty-five years of her life.<sup>27</sup>

## II

*The Freewoman* has been studied from different angles, generating scholarly interest for its connections to some of the key figures of literary modernism and its place in relation to the women's movement, providing rich archival sources for both in the Dora Marsden Collection and the Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers, as well as the periodicals that Marsden was involved in. Literary modernism is a topic that is addressed minimally in this dissertation, for several reasons: firstly, and most importantly, since this study is interested in the role of *The Freewoman* in expanding feminism, the focus is on the politics of feminism and the contribution of the periodical to its diversification. While individuals were active in both movements and there were exchanges and influences between them, the goal here is to not treat feminism as secondary to a literary movement. Secondly, of the three periodicals edited by Marsden, literary modernism was a topic mostly discussed in *The Egoist*, and was peripheral to *The Freewoman*, and therefore lies outside the scope of this study. Finally, the contributions that Marsden, Weaver, and others made, through the magazines and the Egoist Press, to the development of literary modernism have been studied quite extensively; the biography *Dear Miss Weaver* (1970) deals in great detail with Harriet Shaw Weaver's relationship with modernist writers, especially James Joyce and

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<sup>27</sup> Lidderdale and Nicholson, *Dear Miss Weaver*; Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*.

Ezra Pound, and although its focus is on Weaver it explores in depth Marsden's involvement in the magazines.

More recent work has also explored *The Freewoman* in the context of modernism. Bruce Clarke's book *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism: Gender, Individualism, Science* (1996) places Marsden within the context of early modernism more broadly. Clarke emphasizes her uniqueness in developing an individualism outside the masculine version that was the mainstream at the time, influenced by the egoist philosophy of Max Stirner.<sup>28</sup> Mark Morrisson's *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920* (2001) connects periodical studies with modernism. Morrisson devotes a long chapter to the complex relationship between modernism and journalistic and advertising strategies in *The Freewoman*, *The New Freewoman*, and *The Egoist*. He finds not a rejection of mass-media advertising techniques, but rather a partial appropriation of them into the material published in these periodicals, especially poetry. The vast majority of the examples in this chapter come from the two later magazines, and though *The Freewoman* is seen as their predecessor and the origin of some of the attitudes in them, it is secondary to the argument.<sup>29</sup> Cary Franklin examines *The Freewoman* in relation to modernism in her thesis on this topic (2002).<sup>30</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism: Gender, Individualism, Science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 84–132.

<sup>30</sup> Cary Franklin, "Freewoman: Dora Marsden and the Politics of Feminist Modernism" (University of Oxford, 2002), <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/pqdtglobal/docview/301618424/5BC276C7F994C17PQ/3?accountid=15182>.

(2009) studies the transition from *The Freewoman* to *The New Freewoman* and eventually to *The Egoist* in the context of literary modernism.<sup>31</sup>

Studies examining the relationship of *The Freewoman* to the women's movement of the time have generally focused on the complex connections between the periodical and the suffrage movement, mainly the WSPU. Lucy Delap explores *The Freewoman's* criticism of the suffrage movement's agenda as overly reliant on traditional gender roles, and the ways in which the journal served as a venue in which the façade of the suffrage organizations was dismantled and their rhetoric and ideology deconstructed, as their activities were "separated out and recognised to be sometimes working against each other's interests."<sup>32</sup> Carol Barash highlights Marsden's rejection of the overgeneralized notions of gender that many suffrage campaigns utilized, largely basing argument for enfranchisement on women's presumably innate tendency for service. Barash shows that Marsden instead promoted an individualist strand of feminism, seeking to focus on individual women's merits.<sup>33</sup> Cary Franklin (2002) has examined the relationship between Dora Marsden and the suffrage movement through the use of Marsden's suffragette

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Gender and Modernism: The Freewoman (1911-12), The New Freewoman (1913), and The Egoist (1914-1919)," in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 269–89.

<sup>32</sup> Lucy Delap, "'Philosophical Vacuity and Political Ineptitude': The Freewoman's Critique of the Suffrage Movement," *Women's History Review* 11, no. 4 (2002): 620.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Barash, "Dora Marsden's Feminism, The Freewoman, and the Gender Politics of Early Modernism," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 49, no. 1 (1989): 31–57.

background in *The Freewoman*.<sup>34</sup> Maroula Joannou (2002) has studied the shifts in Marsden's ideas about feminism in the transition between the periodicals she edited.<sup>35</sup>

Les Garner has studied *The Freewoman* in the context of feminist thought within the suffrage movement in his book *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty: Feminist Ideas in the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1900-1918*. Garner presents *The Freewoman* as highly critical of the suffrage movement, but at the same time as working to expand feminism through critique of the suffrage cause and strategies.<sup>36</sup> Marsden's criticism of the suffrage movement and its roots in her experiences with it are taken up in much more detail in *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, Garner's biography of Marsden mentioned earlier.

Though there have not been in-depth studies of *The Freewoman* in relation to the history of sexuality, the periodical has proved a productive source for work on Edwardian sexual politics. In this area, too, scholars have differed in their view of the periodical and the sexual politics it was promoting. One of the earlier works to address *The Freewoman* and sexuality was Sheila Jeffreys' *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (1985). Jeffreys presents the writing in favour of women's sexual activity and liberation in *The Freewoman*, especially by Stella Browne, as promoting a mainstream, male-dominated agenda. According to Jeffreys, spinsters were represented as grotesque in the periodical, reflecting

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<sup>34</sup> Cary Franklin, "Marketing Edwardian Feminism: Dora Marsden, Votes for Women and the Freewoman," *Women's History Review* 11, no. 4 (2002): 631–42.

<sup>35</sup> Maroula Joannou, "The Angel of Freedom: Dora Marsden and the Transformation of the Freewoman into the Egoist," *Women's History Review* 11, no. 4 (2002): 595–611.

<sup>36</sup> Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty: Feminist Ideas in the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1900-1918* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1983).

heteropatriarchal ideas about women's sexuality.<sup>37</sup> Shannon McMahon, however, analyzes the debate about spinsters with closer attention to its stylistic and discursive features, particularly Marsden's irony. McMahon concludes that the outcome of the debate was the appropriation of the term 'spinster', distancing it from the common pitiable image and reclaiming it as an empowering signifier of sexual freedom and subjectivity.<sup>38</sup>

Susan Kingsley Kent's *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (1987) looks at the suffrage movement and its connections to discourses of sexuality. Kent contends that the underlying goal of the suffrage movement was the creation of a different, feminist, sexual culture, though this idea was understood differently by different individuals and organizations. Though Kent's study is not dedicated to *The Freewoman*, she still discusses it quite extensively, presenting it as aligned with the overarching goal of the suffrage movement, even if it engaged in discussions that were seen as potentially harmful for 'respectable' politics.<sup>39</sup> Other scholars, such as Lucy Bland, Deborah Cohler, and Lesley Hall, have portrayed *The Freewoman* as part of the advanced camp in various emerging discourses of sexuality, such as birth control and women's sexual agency.<sup>40</sup> Hall has also written about *The Freewoman* and the discussions about sexuality in it, focusing on Stella Browne's contributions, in her biography of Browne.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> Shannon McMahon, "Freespinsters and Bondspinsters: Negotiating Identity Categories in the Freewoman," *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 60–79, doi:10.5325/jmodeperistud.6.1.0060.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists* (New York: New Press, 1995); Deborah Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change in Britain Since 1880*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Lesley A. Hall, *The Life and Times of Stella Browne: Feminist and Free Spirit* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

A significant aspect of the literature dealing with *The Freewoman* is the role of Marsden in the periodical and her centrality to its approach. Some authors treat *The Freewoman*, *The New Freewoman*, and *The Egoist* as one periodical that changed titles, sub-titles and foci over the years.<sup>42</sup> This probably has more to do with Marsden's involvement in all of them – she edited the first two for the entirety of their run, and the last for several months – than with continuity in themes or approach. Indeed, the Modernist Journal Project, which digitized and archived the full runs of all three publications, introduces them jointly as 'The Marsden Magazines.'<sup>43</sup> One of the problems with understanding these three papers as a single entity is that Marsden's role was different in each of them, and especially so in *The Egoist*, where she became gradually less central, and arguably less interested, until finally resigning as editor in June 1914, not very long after the periodical began publication.<sup>44</sup> She did, however, continue to contribute articles until its very last issue. *The Freewoman* and its successors, then, have a complex publication history, which also complicates the discussion of their approach to feminism; *The Freewoman* and *The New Freewoman* devoted considerable space to topics that can be understood as feminist, while *The Egoist* was more of a literary review. With the transition from *The Freewoman* to *The New Freewoman* there was already a movement away from the explicit concern with feminism that characterized the former, but the break with feminist topics happened with the transition to *The Egoist*. The changes in titles and sub-titles reflect to a certain extent the topics that were seen as important, but it is probably more accurate to say that they are indicative of the changing

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<sup>42</sup> Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*.

<sup>43</sup> Scholes, "Introduction to the Marsden Magazines."

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of Egoist Directors' meeting, March 4, 1914. MS 57358, Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers.



interests of the editors. Readers often had different ideas than the editors about the direction the periodicals took and those they thought they should take.

A crucial aspect of thinking about *The Freewoman* is its relationship to gender and periodical literature. *The Freewoman*'s contribution to the diversification of early twentieth-century British feminism, and specifically the way the generic traits and conventions of the periodical were used towards that end, has to be understood in light of the history of women's magazines and the press in Britain. The centrality of women to the periodical press both as consumers and as producers was not new when *The Freewoman* was established. As early as 1709, *Tatler* addressed women specifically as an important part of its readership, and magazines by and for women were published in Britain since the mid-eighteenth century. As Margaret Beetham shows, *Lady's Magazine* and *Lady's Monthly Museum or Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction* (both 1770-1832) established the magazine as the primary periodical form for women, marked by a variety of material and the absence of news. Magazines were targeted to a middle- and upper-class readership, and assumed the interests and lifestyle of these classes in their choices of material and in the ways they addressed the readers.<sup>45</sup> The periodical press in the early twentieth century was slightly more diverse, and cheap publications of various types were more readily available, though the material resources and the time necessary for writing to periodicals, publishing them, and even reading them, were still harder to come by for the working classes.

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<sup>45</sup> Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914* / (Routledge, 1996), 1-10.

Women were involved in the newspaper press as well, and the rapid increase in the number of newspapers, along with the possibility of writing anonymously and from various locations, had distinct advantages for women.<sup>46</sup> The professionalization of journalism meant that some women could enter the profession, though here the option of sending in material and writing anonymously, at the same time as they opened the door for women, also posed limitations on them.<sup>47</sup> There were also initiatives by women to use the power of the periodical press to advance causes such as women's education, employment, matrimonial rights, and suffrage. In the early 1860s the Langham Place Circle, a group of women including Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes, established a school to teach women printing, among other trades, and Emily Faithfull promoted women printers through her Victoria Printing Press, which was staffed entirely by women.<sup>48</sup> Members of the Langham Place group also edited and published the *English Woman's Journal* (1858-64), which explicitly advocated for women's rights to paid employment, education, and political participation. Beetham sees it as a venue for readers to discuss "the theoretical and practical problems of early 'feminism' (that is the middle-class, liberal feminism of the Langham Place Circle)."<sup>49</sup> Despite these limitations, the *English Woman's Journal* was still the more radical counterpart to the other women's magazine addressing women's social and political positions at the time, the *Englishwoman's Review (and Drawing Room Journal of Social Progress, Literature and Art)*, published between 1857-59. The

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<sup>46</sup> Michelle E Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Victorian Britain* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2005), <https://www.library.yorku.ca/find/Record/2206456>.

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Macmillan Press, 2000), 9–12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 156; 173-74.

<sup>49</sup> Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 170.

*Englishwoman's Review* saw women's occupation as a major social problem, but, not wishing to "prate of 'women's rights'" its definition of 'occupation' consisted of "usefulness and kindness."<sup>50</sup>

Another aspect of women's magazines that is significant to our understanding of *The Freewoman* as a feminist periodical, is the role of these magazines in constructing femininity in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Britain. As Beetham notes, these magazines assumed the gender of their readers, but the femininity the magazines assumed was simultaneously a given and an identity in the making. Women's magazines "assumed the tidy coincidence of gender and sexuality with the embodied self," a coincidence which, as feminist and queer theorists have argued "far from being natural is only accomplished by powerful social, linguistic and psychological forces." These forces operate through various means, among them media, and women's magazines played an important role in promoting ideas of gendered and sexual propriety and normalcy.<sup>51</sup> As we shall see, *The Freewoman* challenged these ideas, as well as the notion that promoting them is or should be part of a periodical's mandate.

### III

Though the main focus of this thesis is a periodical, *The Freewoman*, Dora Marsden's life, and the life-writing related to her, are also important to this study. An obvious point in this regard is that *The Freewoman* was the creation of Marsden and her personal approach made an

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1–4.

enormous mark on *The Freewoman*, even if one thrust of that influence was to make *The Freewoman* a periodical that was open to debate around feminism, rather than reflective of a singular perspective, or, to put it a different way, that openness to debate was Marsden's singular contribution. But there are also elements to Marsden's life and to the life-writing associated with her that deepen our understanding of *The Freewoman*, and this raises important theoretical and methodological questions. After providing a very brief biographical overview of Dora Marsden, I will discuss some aspects of the use of life writing in historical research, and what it adds to our understanding of *The Freewoman* as a feminist political project. The overview provided here is intended to contextualize Marsden's thinking and activism, to point to some connections between her milieu and lived experience and her thinking and writing about feminism. It does not purport to cover the entirety of her life, or to treat any part of it in detail.

One point is that with respect to the history of women and feminism, life-writing or biography is an important source. In her introduction to *Essays on Life Writing* (1992), for example, Marlene Kadar argues that a broad sense of life-writing as a genre that includes fragmentary narratives, oral testimonies, non-literary and non-professional sources opens the door to the recuperation and study of women's personal writing and narratives because they challenge a more androcentric tradition of biography. Kadar also suggests that paying attention to life-history and biography may help us understand the relationship between writers and readers.

Life-writing and biography also affords the opportunity to reconstruct particular worlds. In search of what makes biography especially valuable for historians, Alice Kessler-Harris suggests studying the individual's life not as a subject in itself, but as a path into the past, with

the historian's task being placing the individual in the social and political world in which they lived. Valuing the individual actor and their subjective standpoint is beneficial not so much for the individual's actions, but for "what his or her thought, language, and contests with the world reveal." Therefore, the life of an individual can help us see not only into events, but into social, cultural, and political processes.<sup>52</sup> Life-writing thus offers the opportunity of new perspectives on women's history as a way of a deeper understanding of particular historical moments. 'Life and Times' is an older idea of biography, but it gets at the possibility of reconstructing formerly neglected lives and moments.

There are also more specific insights life-writing can illuminate. Life-writing allows access to what Kessler-Harris calls "emotional truth" in history; in the case of her research on playwright Lillian Hellman, 'emotional truth' refers to what the judgements against Hellman suggest about the social atmosphere in which they were uttered, specifically in regard to a woman's success.<sup>53</sup> But emotional truth may also be thought of as evidence of individuals' engagement with discourses surrounding them. In other words, the emotional aspects of people's lives can give us a glimpse of how they take up, question or resist beliefs, values and knowledges. It is therefore significant to the understanding of readers' interactions with periodicals, which becomes visible through various forms of life-writing as well as the periodicals themselves. In chapter two, I discuss the notion of an emotional community that was constructed by the producers and consumers of *The Freewoman*. What can complement an

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<sup>52</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 626.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 630.

understanding of emotional communities is a comprehension of the emotional experience of particular individuals, such as Dora Marsden and her contemporaries.

Another important advantage of thinking about life-writing in relation to the history and importance of a periodical is a methodological and theoretical one. In the example of both *The Freewoman* and Dora Marsden, the archival sources are partial. The reason for this is, predictably, the usual unevenness of historical archives. “In the Archive,” Carolyn Steedman has written, “you cannot be shocked by its exclusions, its emptinesses.”<sup>54</sup> There is a particular point here with regard to the archives dealing with women’s lives. As Helen Buss reminds us, archives are never neutral sites, as assumptions dictate both which documents are valued and preserved, and what researchers bring with them to the reading of the archived material. This characteristic of archives impacts women’s archival collections in ways that are both unique and particularly relevant to this study.<sup>55</sup> Gendered (and other) assumptions can determine the very existence of archival collections of individuals or organizations, including the perception of women’s work, writing, and art as too ‘trivial’ or mundane to be worthy of preservation. A quote about women's material and archiving from a 1939 World Center for Women’s Archives (WCWA) pamphlet shows that the women who created the material often did not see their own work as important enough to preserve: “... women themselves were inclined to destroy their own documents while carefully preserving the letters or other materials of their father and brothers. And women who had been active in public affairs of all kinds were inclined to destroy their own records, believing

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<sup>54</sup> Steedman, 68.

<sup>55</sup> Helen M. Buss, “Introduction,” in *Working in Women’s Archives: Researching Women’s Private Literature and Archival Documents* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 1–2.

them of no account to others or because of modesty."<sup>56</sup> The question of what material created by women is perceived by the authors or by others as worthy of archiving, is potentially also an entry point into a discussion of the narratives of feminism, what Clare Hemmings refers to as 'storytelling.'<sup>57</sup> It raises questions about how questioning archives, what is and is not in them, can change the stories we tell, and what an understanding of periodicals as archives can add to these stories.

Questioning the absences and silences in archival material can productively complicate our understanding of historical narratives. In the archival collections related to *The Freewoman* there are some notable absences, which paradoxically we only know of since they do leave a trace in or outside of the archive, so that the absence is never complete.

But in the case of *The Freewoman* and Dora Marsden, there is a specific problem here. No archival collection holds Marsden's autobiographical notes. It is not clear if these notes ever existed, but they were certainly not part of the collection that was sold to Princeton in 1986, and there is no evidence of them being sold, donated, or auctioned to any other person or institution.<sup>58</sup> This is also a problem in reconstructing the life of another feminist radical, Stella Browne, who similarly lived on the margins and whose literary and historical legacy was perhaps more fragile than more mainstream figures.<sup>59</sup> Making this more complicated is the active

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 35.

<sup>57</sup> Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> Gabriel Swift, Reference Librarian, Special Collections, Princeton University Library, personal conversation, June 9, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> See Lesley Hall, *Stella Browne*.

destruction of Marsden's papers. A critical part of that archive comprised Marsden's letters to Harriet Shaw Weaver. But a note from 1944 in the Weaver Collection reads: "I destroyed the bulk of Dora Marsden's letters to me – and in particular the more personal ones."<sup>60</sup>

The complexity of the archives relating to *The Freewoman* and Marsden's life are revealed in the major biography dealing with Marsden, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882-1960* (1990) by Les Garner, and one dealing with Weaver, *Dear Miss Weaver: Harriet Shaw Weaver 1876-1961* by Jane Lidderdale and Mary Nicholson. The absence of sources has special implications for Garner's biography, which attempts to paint a picture of Marsden's personal life and writing and their connection to her public, philosophical, and political writing and activity, including the periodicals she edited. A telling detail, for example, is the nature of the access Garner had to Marsden's 'autobiographical notes'. Though Garner relies on these notes throughout the book, he notes at the beginning: "These were written many years later in the 1950s ... I have not seen them myself but Mrs E. Bate, Dora's niece, kindly took some notes for my benefit."<sup>61</sup> What is available to us, then, is a work that is based on partial sources, some of which are of questionable reliability given that the author has never seen them.

There is also a question of the suppression of source material, the shaping of material or opinions after the fact, as well as the destruction of sources. The role of Jane Lidderdale and Mary Nicholson as authors of *Dear Miss Weaver* is intriguing for reasons that are not visible in the book itself, for example, but are rather 'behind the scenes' of the biography, in the collection

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<sup>60</sup> Harriet Shaw Weaver, March 1944, MS 57354, f.1, Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 13 n.7.



of Jane Lidderdale's papers. The book is presented as an 'objective', linear account of Weaver's life with an emphasis on her contributions to modernist literature through her connections with James Joyce?, Ezra Pound, and other writers. These connections were established in the period when Weaver provided much of the financial support for *The New Freewoman*, and later became the editor of *The Egoist* and established The Egoist Press. However, Lidderdale's letters to Weaver's contemporaries Rebecca West and Storm Jameson suggest a somewhat different story. Lidderdale herself was Weaver's relative, which she mentions in passing in the introduction to the biography, and was also her goddaughter, which is only stated in the letters.

The biography, as becomes evident from the letters to West and Jameson, was written at the request of Weaver's family, which in itself calls into question the unbiased façade of the published volume.<sup>62</sup> In addition to this, the way in which Lidderdale requested material – especially from West with whom she corresponded extensively – and selected from it, results in a negative slant, particularly as regards Dora Marsden's character. Jameson and West paint in their letters to Lidderdale strikingly different pictures of Dora Marsden; Jameson recalls a feeling of respect and admiration towards Marsden, referring to her as “that remarkable woman.”<sup>63</sup> In one of the letters she asked Lidderdale to change a paragraph in the biography which implies that Jameson encouraged Marsden: “‘showing confidence’ in Dora's work sounds very presumptuous. My respect for her was so profound that I must surely have avoided anything that

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<sup>62</sup> Jane Lidderdale to Dame Rebecca West, July 16, 1962. Folder 2, Papers of Jane Lidderdale; Jane Lidderdale to Margaret Storm Jameson, April 19, 1964. Folder 1, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

<sup>63</sup> Margaret Storm Jameson to Jane Lidderdale, u.d. Folder 1, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

suggested she needed confidence to be shown in her.”<sup>64</sup> Rebecca West, on the other hand, presented Marsden as increasingly mentally unstable, demanding, and amenable to manipulation. West portrays herself as staying on the *New Freewoman* editorial board to support “poor Dora,” despite Marsden’s behaviour which for West was encapsulated in her referring to West as ‘sub-editor’ rather than ‘assistant editor’.<sup>65</sup> From Lidderdale’s replies to Jameson and West, it is quite clear where her sympathies lie. She notes in a letter to Jameson that “DM [Dora Marsden] was in a very frustrated and depressed state and (your second point) in need of encouragement.”<sup>66</sup> Writing to West, Lidderdale notes that she corrected “DM’s stupid reference to RW [Rebecca West],” and confides in West that she “very soon sensed that you and Harriet were the only sensible people in that strange group!”<sup>67</sup> Indeed with respect to Marsden the tone of the biography is in a similar vein to West’s remarks, while the parts that involve Jameson do not mention the positive features she ascribes to Marsden, and instead emphasize Jameson’s acting as an unpaid agent to a demanding Dora.<sup>68</sup> That scholars have not engaged critically with the Lidderdale Papers makes the biography and Marsden’s representation in it all the more significant, as it is one of the only points of access we have to the personal aspects of her life (which are of course not entirely distinct from the political).

The destruction that we know occurred is that of the majority of the letters sent from Dora Marsden to Harriet Shaw Weaver. Weaver wrote in 1944 that she destroyed most of the

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<sup>64</sup> Margaret Storm Jameson to Jane Lidderdale, August 23, 1969. Folder 1, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

<sup>65</sup> Rebecca West to Jane Lidderdale, March 8, 1967. Folder 2, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

<sup>66</sup> Jane Lidderdale to Margaret Storm Jameson, August 25, 1969. Folder 1, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

<sup>67</sup> Jane Lidderdale to Rebecca West, March 3, 1967. Folder 2, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

<sup>68</sup> Jane Lidderdale and Mary Nicholson, *Dear Miss Weaver: Harriet Shaw Weaver, 1876-1961* (London: Faber, 1970).

letters, particularly the personal ones, but says neither whose decision it was to destroy them, nor for that matter what she counts as personal. At the time Marsden was still alive, but there is no indication that the documents were destroyed on her request. Les Garner suggests some reasons for Weaver's discarding of the material: "She probably did this in an attempt to disguise her gifts to Dora and *The Egoist*, but also, I suspect, to hide some of the differences, possibly even rows between them."<sup>69</sup> These reasons are not unlikely, and if Weaver was trying to hide financial gifts to Marsden, it would be in keeping with Storm Jameson's strategy when she was trying to help the two sell Marsden's book, as she recalls in a letter to Lidderdale: "... of course, I had no intention at any time of acting as agent in the sense of taking as agent's commission – whatever I may have said to a proud Dora."<sup>70</sup> Perhaps this was part of an attempt to paint a picture of the periodicals as initiatives that originated in a cohesive perception of feminism, and functioned with minimal disagreements, a perception that this dissertation contests.

The plausibility of these explanations notwithstanding, other reasons come to mind which may account for such an act on the part of someone who otherwise left an extensive record. It might be that Marsden's mental health was deteriorating, and that this was becoming evident in the letters to such a degree that Weaver thought it better to eliminate the documents to maintain a certain image of Marsden. Another topic that could have moved Weaver to destroy the materials is sexuality, a subject that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3. Not much is known about Marsden's own sexuality, except that she had not married nor had children.

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<sup>69</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 152 n. 52.

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Storm Jameson to Jane Lidderdale, August 23, 1969. Folder 1, Papers of Jane Lidderdale.

Certainly the deepest, most meaningful intellectual and emotional connections she formed were with women, especially those who were also engaged in political and intellectual work with her, and her mother.<sup>71</sup> However, in her writing and editing career Marsden gained notoriety for discussing sexuality “loudly and clearly and repeatedly, and in the worst possible taste.”<sup>72</sup> Could the letters have contained details about Marsden’s sexual life or ideas about sexuality that Weaver did not want to come to light? It is conceivable, but we will never know for sure. A comment by Derrida, though he is concerned with the psychoanalytical and metaphorical notion of the archive, rather than the actual institution, applies here: “we will always wonder what ... every careful concealer may have wanted to keep secret.”<sup>73</sup>

In the case of Dora Marsden’s life and writing, the destruction of material can also be perceived as a *silencing*, a deliberate act not only of ensuring that certain documents will not be read, but also of policing the subjectivity of their author, or at least the image left of that subjectivity. The elements that are silenced could have (maybe, we will never know) given us a more intimate understanding of “what subjectivity was for an actual subject in a given historical moment,” which for Helen Buss is the main question guiding the researcher in their work in women’s archives, which she terms “ideological reconstitution”.<sup>74</sup> But the work is ideological even when recuperation per se is not the intention of the researcher, and it is not only the archival

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<sup>71</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Rebecca West, “The Freewoman,” *Time and Tide*, July 16, 1926, 649.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 101.

<sup>74</sup> Helen M. Buss, “Constructing Female Subjects: A Reading of Three Versions of One Woman’s Subjectivity,” in *Working in Women’s Archives: Researching Women’s Private Literature and Archival Documents* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 23.

collections that are gendered, being those of women, but also the reasons guiding the decisions made about the material. If the archive for Derrida, as Carolyn Steedman notes, is the expression of state power, in the case of Dora Marsden's papers the archive reveals the exercise of power not by the state, but by individuals.<sup>75</sup> However, these individuals are guided in their decisions by the norms and discourses of their own time and place.

Thus, the biography of Dora Marsden underlines an important point: that archives are often fragmentary, whether because of particular actions or due to something less active, but no less profound. In writing about scholars' failed searches for women subjects in the archives, Carole Gerson describes a common course of (in)action: "Researchers, frustrated by futile quests for materials that should have been placed in archives but have disappeared, seldom attack the question directly; after all, we can scarcely replace missing papers from the past."<sup>76</sup> The documents one would expect to find in the archive indeed cannot be replaced. However, questions regarding archives and archival collections, the absences and silences in them, and the relationship between archives and periodicals, can still be 'attacked directly', and I will in this dissertation touch upon some of the issues arising from working with archival sources, particularly women's archives, and the relationship of these sources to periodicals.

The limitations actively placed on the possible stories of early-twentieth century feminist thought, protect a specific narrative of feminism, one that is cohesive, easily understandable in terms of mainstream notions of democracy, equality, and rights. It is through

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<sup>75</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Gerson, "Locating Female Subjects in the Archives," 7–8.

the absences and silences in the archives that we can become privy to some of the mechanisms of creating and controlling the narratives of feminism; through what was once there and is no longer, through the unknowns, we witness parts of the process of constructing feminisms and feminist subjects. *The Freewoman*, read in conjunction with archival material, and thought of as an archive, allows a unique view into these meaning-making mechanisms, and into a variety of perspectives that sought to challenge the narrative and write new ones. Thus, an insight from life-writing can illuminate a wider theoretical and methodological problem.

#### IV

In this dissertation, I explore Marsden and *The Freewoman* to make an intervention in our understanding of the relationship of periodicals to political movements such as British feminism, and to the role of individuals like Marsden in this relationship. The dissertation is keenly interested in the culture and dynamic of early feminism; *The Freewoman* and Marsden illustrate this focus very well.

In addition to studies that focus on *The Freewoman* and the people connected to it, and to those that use the periodical as a source on various topics, this dissertation also draws on historical and theoretical works in media and periodical studies, history of emotions, cultural studies, and archives theory. Central to the arguments of this dissertation is an understanding of the periodical as a publishing genre, theorized most notably by Margaret Beetham. Beetham has argued that the complex relation of periodicals to time, their simultaneous transience and

continuity, gives them the potential to be used for both progressive and conservative political purposes; they hold the capacity to democratize access to knowledge, but they are also commodities, and their regularity is crucial to their economic survival.<sup>77</sup> In later work, Beetham also points to some similarities between periodicals and new media such as blogs and social networks, connections that inform, to some extent, my thinking about the relevance of an initiative like *The Freewoman* to twenty-first century feminisms and other movements.<sup>78</sup> The works by Latham and Scholes and by Pykett are also important in laying the groundwork for periodical studies as a field, and the study of periodicals as a genre.<sup>79</sup>

Cultural studies and the history of emotions are both significant in this study to the understanding of *The Freewoman* as countercultural. The framework for this understanding is set primarily through Raymond Williams' concept of 'culture'. Williams sees culture as containing both everyday practices and forms of art traditionally understood as 'high culture', and emphasizes the importance of the conjunction of the two.<sup>80</sup> These ideas are fruitful for an analysis of a periodical like *The Freewoman* which sought to change culture (in both senses) and consciousness. Scholarship on the history of emotions and emotional communities is central to understanding the politics of *The Freewoman*. Attending to the emotional components of writing

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<sup>77</sup> Margaret Beetham, "Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre," in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (London: Macmillan, 1990), 19–32.

<sup>78</sup> Margaret Beetham, "Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29, no. 3 (2006): 231–40.

<sup>79</sup> Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, "The Rise of Periodical Studies," *PMLA* 121, no. 2 (2006): 517–31; Lyn Pykett, "Reading the Periodical Press: Text and Context," in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (London: Macmillan, 1990), 3–18.

<sup>80</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 10–24.

in and responses to periodicals, which includes attention to the historicity of emotions and the discourses about them, allows us to analyze the connection between periodicals and their readers. The idea of emotional communities, a category in which Barbara Rosenwein includes textual communities, helps expand our understanding of the political beyond formal politics and into the emotional norms and cultures of different communities.<sup>81</sup> Lisa Sigel's *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (2012) examines the ways in which sexual identities and communities were formed and given meaning in the interwar period. Sigel emphasizes the centrality of writing of various types (letters, novels, magazines, and medical and sexological texts) to the formation and negotiation of subjectivities.<sup>82</sup> In this sense, the book brings together some of elements that are also at the basis of this dissertation, as it connects texts, identities, and communities. I use these works together as a lens through which to examine the attempts at articulating a feminist subjectivity and politics in *The Freewoman*.

Centering the cultural and emotional contexts in which *The Freewoman* operated challenges us to think about and study the impact of periodicals in ways that go beyond sales, subscriptions, or longevity, which often belie the resonance of these publications for their readers. One way to move past the numbers is to think about the social, emotional, and discursive networks of which these periodicals were part, the different publics that formed

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<sup>81</sup> Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2011); Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, First edition, Emotions in History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–45, doi:10.1086/ahr/107.3.821; Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600 - 1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Lisa Z. Sigel, *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).



around and through them, and the connections among them and between them and other communities. For counterculture generally, and feminist periodicals especially, it is appropriate to use methods and theories that correspond with their politics. In this dissertation, I use the notions of cultural citizenship and counterpublics to think about citizenship as a cultural and emotional category, not merely a political one in the formal sense.

Drawing on scholarship in various fields and using *The Freewoman* as a case study, this dissertation asks: how did periodicals function as sites for articulating feminist thought in ways that reached beyond the limitations of formal politics such as suffrage? How did they foster the diversification and expansion of feminism in progressive directions? How might attention to the emotional aspects of periodicals and the communities created in and through them enrich the historical narratives of first-wave feminism, and feminisms more broadly? And what possibilities does a reflexive and intentional use of the capacities of a medium and genre (in this case the independent periodical) open for feminist politics?

This dissertation is as much about the importance of dissent and conflict to feminism as it is about *The Freewoman*. I argue that the periodical contributed to the diversification of contemporary feminism not only through the subjects discussed in it, but through insisting on dissent, conflict, and difference as essential to the progress, if not the very existence, of feminism. Using the characteristics of the periodical as a publishing genre, *The Freewoman* created a space and a community that were intensely political while allowing for the expression of opinions and emotions that were perceived as ‘destructive’. It is in the alternative space that *The Freewoman* created that its uniqueness and importance lie. Some of the resistance to and condemnation of *The Freewoman* read eerily familiar over a century after they were written,

despite the different terminology and changed sensibilities. This suggests to me that we have not gotten much better at dealing with conflict and difference in a meaningful way, one that can truly see it as productive and act on that vision, rather than embrace difference on paper and sweep conflict under the rug. I should say right now that this dissertation does not offer solutions to this problem, but does highlight an attempt to create these discourses and politics, partial and (as some would argue) ultimately failed though it might be.

One of the main contributions of this dissertation is its emphasis on *The Freewoman's* construction of 'negative' politics – one based on emotions commonly understood as negative, and on ongoing debate and conflict, as a viable alternative to the mainstream focus on unity, particularly for feminism. It was not only a 'feminist' rather than 'women's' or 'suffrage' periodical, it also saw 'feminist' as an identity in the making, and therefore sought to expand its potential meanings. This attempt at a different political culture is intimately connected to the medium and genre of the periodical. The attention to this connection and its significance for *The Freewoman* as a publication that displays its editor's and contributors' awareness to the genre and its potentials is another element that this work adds to the discourse. The discourse on sexuality, though touched upon in other works, and certainly not covered in its entirety here, is another area in which this dissertation expands upon existing scholarship. Periodicals, being miscellanies as they are, allow a view into the processes of making meanings and creating identities. The debates about sexuality in *The Freewoman* show some of the ways in which contemporaries grappled with sexual identities and practices, and how they connected them to feminist politics and subjectivity.

The idea of *The Freewoman* as an emotional countercommunity, which this dissertation offers, adds to the relatively new scholarship on periodicals and emotions, and affective engagements with periodicals. The notion of ‘counterpublic’ has been used to understand *The Freewoman*, and feminist and other progressive periodicals in general. I see the periodical as positioning itself counter to the suffrage press, which is sometimes treated as part of the counterpublic along with it, and importantly doing so at the level of style and emotions, not only views on formal politics and strategy. *The Freewoman*’s resistance to “artificial unity” and emphasis on dialogue and conflict as a constant state rather than a troubled moment that should be resolved, were evident in the periodical on various levels. Using scholarship on queer counterpublics, I suggest that *The Freewoman* created a ‘queer’ space or counterpublic, in the sense of challenging normativity in a range of areas. In the conclusion, I offer an understanding of periodicals as archives, and *The Freewoman* specifically as an archive of feminisms in its period, affording a view into the multiplicity and messiness of feminisms, challenging the narrative of first-wave feminism as unified and cohesive.

*The Freewoman* serves as a case-study for this dissertation, and therefore also as its main primary source. The full run of the periodical is digitized and accessible freely through The Modernist Journal Project, a joint initiative of Brown University and the University of Tulsa.<sup>83</sup> In addition to *The Freewoman* itself, this dissertation also uses the extensive archival collections associated with the journal and figures connected to it, such as Marsden and Weaver. It also draws on published life-writing sources, mainly two biographies: Les Garner’s biography of

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.modjourn.org/>

Dora Marsden, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882-1960*, and a biography of Harriet Shaw Weaver, *Dear Miss Weaver: Harriet Shaw Weaver 1876-1961* by Jane Lidderdale and Mary Nicholson. Most of the archival material related to Marsden, her political activism, the periodicals she edited, and the books she published, is housed in the Rare Books and Special Collections Department of the Princeton University Library. The Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers in the British Library also contain some material relating to Marsden. The Women's Library Collection at the London School of Economics is home to an extensive collection of primary sources on suffrage and women's activism, and holds papers of individuals and organizations, as well as periodicals related to women's activism. The Women's Library also holds the Papers of Jane Lidderdale, a small collection consisting of the correspondence between Lidderdale and authors Rebecca West and Storm Jameson, conducted while Lidderdale was writing *Dear Miss Weaver*.

Chapter 1, "*The Freewoman* and Feminisms, 1911-12" places *The Freewoman* in the context of feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, taking up questions of terminology and subjectivity.<sup>84</sup> It examines the influences on British feminisms at the time of

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<sup>84</sup> Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1990); Karen M. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Denise Riley, "*Am I That Name?*": *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988).

discourses on socialism,<sup>85</sup> sexuality,<sup>86</sup> and suffrage.<sup>87</sup> The chapter then examines *The Freewoman*'s complex relationship with contemporary feminisms, and how it was envisioned as both a challenge to and expansion of them.<sup>88</sup> The chapter explores the establishment and trajectory of *The Freewoman*, and the political and print context in which it operated, as well as providing information about Dora Marsden and other individuals connected to the periodical. The correspondence around the establishment of the periodical is mostly available through archival material collected in the Princeton University Archives, the Women's Library at the London School of Economics, and the British Library. In addition, *The Freewoman* itself and contemporary periodicals show both the process of articulating feminism in *The Freewoman*, and its reception.

Chapter 2, "'Intellectual Acid': Cultural Resistance, Cultural Citizenship, and Emotional (counter)Community in *The Freewoman*" analyzes *The Freewoman* through three main concepts of culture and community: cultural resistance and counterculture, cultural citizenship, and emotional countercommunity. Examined through Raymond Williams' general framework of 'culture', these aspects of *The Freewoman* are central to its feminist politics, and

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<sup>85</sup> Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>86</sup> Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 1995; Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, *Women in Culture and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>87</sup> Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*; Laura E. Nym Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); June Purvis, "Gendering the Historiography of the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Britain: Some Reflections," *Women's History Review* 22, no. 4 (April 8, 2013): 576–90, doi:10.1080/09612025.2012.751768.

<sup>88</sup> Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*; Lucy Delap, "Individualism and Introspection: The Framing of Feminism in *The Freewoman*," in *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere*, by Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap, and Leila Ryan (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2011), 159–93; Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*.

yet have not been examined in depth.<sup>89</sup> The chapter uses the notion of counterpublics and cultural resistance,<sup>90</sup> as well as writing about anarchism,<sup>91</sup> to examine the position of *The Freewoman* in relation to the culture of contemporary feminism, and to ideas about democracy. Works on cultural citizenship,<sup>92</sup> and on gender, feminism, and consumer culture,<sup>93</sup> are used to explore the alternative models of citizenship *The Freewoman* offered women and other feminists. The last part of the chapter focuses on the emotional community created in and through *The Freewoman*, which functioned as a countercommunity that challenged the emotional-discursive norms of the women's movement at the time. It draws on scholarship on periodicals and affect, and some elements of queer affect,<sup>94</sup> as well as the history of emotions,<sup>95</sup> to show the connection between the emotions and modes of emotional expression promoted in *The Freewoman* and ideas about feminist subjectivity.

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<sup>89</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*; Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary."

<sup>90</sup> Stephen Duncombe, ed., *Cultural Resistance Reader* (London, New York: Verso, 2002); Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

<sup>91</sup> Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1910); Matthew Thomas, *Anarchist Ideas and Counter-Cultures in Britain, 1880-1914: Revolutions in Everyday Life* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>92</sup> Elisabeth Klaus and Margareth Lünenborg, "Cultural Citizenship. Participation by and through Media," in *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship*, ed. Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 197–212; Nick Stevenson, "Cultural Citizenship: Questions of Consumerism, Consumption and Policy," in *Cultural Theory: Classical and Contemporary Positions*, ed. Tim Edwards (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 255–73.

<sup>93</sup> Barbara Green, "Feminist Things," in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. Ann L Ardis and Patrick Collier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 66–79; Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>94</sup> Fionnuala Dillane, "Forms of Affect, Relationality, and Periodical Encounters, or 'Pine-Apple for the Million,'" *Journal of European Periodical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 5–24, doi:10.21825/jeps.v1i1.2574; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

<sup>95</sup> Frevert, *Emotions in History*; Plamper, *The History of Emotions*.

Chapter 3, “Creating a Queer Space: *The Freewoman* and Sexuality,” examines the discussions about sexuality in *The Freewoman*. Relying primarily on articles and correspondence from readers, this chapter focuses on homosexuality and single women’s sexual activity as two of the topics that set *The Freewoman* apart from mainstream feminism. The chapter provides some context regarding discourses about sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily those related to sexology<sup>96</sup> and non-normative sexualities.<sup>97</sup> It also discusses the way the women’s movement, particularly the suffrage organizations, engaged with those ideas in advocating for women’s rights.<sup>98</sup> It then looks at articles and correspondence in *The Freewoman*, focusing on the treatment of non-normative sexuality and gender, through discussions of homosexuality and spinsterhood.

The debates about homosexuality in the periodical used the terminology and conceptual frameworks available at the time through the work of Edward Carpenter, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and others, but they were also uniquely connected to the feminist politics of *The Freewoman*.<sup>99</sup> Spinsterhood was a topic of lively debate, especially in the correspondence section, and it afforded an opportunity to discuss single women’s sexuality. There are different approaches as to whether the periodical on the whole was progressive in its attitude towards spinsters,

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<sup>96</sup> Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 1995; Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change*; Chris Waters, “Sexology,” in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. Harry Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 41–63.

<sup>97</sup> H. G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the Nineteenth Century* (I.B. Tauris, 2003); Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2000).

<sup>98</sup> Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain*; Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*.

<sup>99</sup> Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1908); Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (Verso, 2009).

emphasizing different elements of discourse.<sup>100</sup> The chapter is concerned less with making those determinations, and more with highlighting the complex ways in which sexuality functioned in *The Freewoman*, and the way this positioned it as a feminist periodical, and as a queer space of sorts.

Chapter 4, “‘A Blessing All Round’: The Periodical Genre and Feminism in *The Freewoman*,” uses histories and theories of media, print, and literary studies, to explore the connections between the periodical as a publishing genre and the policy and politics of *The Freewoman*.<sup>101</sup> Looking at the full run of *The Freewoman*, this chapter shows the periodical not only using the characteristics of the genre to advance its view of feminism, but also discussing this use, and positioning itself in relation to other publications. I see this, like the refusal to gloss over differences for political expediency, as a political choice, and similarly, too, a choice that had an impact on *The Freewoman*’s financial success and longevity. Taken in conjunction with some of the arguments of chapter 2, regarding the function of ‘negative’ or ‘destructive’ emotions and attitudes in a political context, this chapter suggests an understanding of *The Freewoman* as attempting to create a politics based in refusal or disidentification, through an intentional use of the periodical’s generic features. The chapter also suggests understanding periodicals as archives, adding the periodical, with its content, materiality and networks, into a potentially broadening definition of the ‘archive’ on which researchers draw.

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<sup>100</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*; McMahon, “Freespinsters and Bondspinsters.”

<sup>101</sup> Beetham, “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre”; Beetham, “Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities”; Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991).



## Chapter 1 *The Freewoman* and Feminisms, 1911-12

### 1.1 *The Freewoman* – Background and Context

This chapter looks at the relation of *The Freewoman* to feminism as a concept, an identity, and a politics in early twentieth century Britain. This was a relationship more complex than a simple rejection, or of a feminist matricidal rebellion against the older guard of the suffrage movement, as narratives of the history of feminism are often framed. As Marsden and the contributors to *The Freewoman* debated feminism, they envisioned reforms and (sometimes) utopian ideas, but were also inevitably drawing on and responding to their own contexts. Thus, the attempts at articulating feminism show both continuities and changes relative to the discourses available at the time. I will start by providing an overview of some of the background of *The Freewoman* and the contexts in which it operated. I will then present some of the key debates in British feminism in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the influences that the discourses of socialism, sexuality, and suffrage had upon its development.

As already mentioned, Mary Gawthorpe found Marsden's plan to establish a movement, prior to the inception of *The Freewoman*, to be "doomed to barrenness of result from the outset."<sup>102</sup> What Gawthorpe used as an example of a successful endeavour for Marsden to follow was not an organization, but a periodical. Presenting *The New Age* as a model, she explained: "See the moral of the N.A. [*New Age*]. It can only do what it does by being independent of every movement. I grant you a critical controversial paper like this would always be in order and

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<sup>102</sup> Mary Gawthorpe to Dora Marsden, June 1, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

would ultimately be a blessing all round; but a critical movement postulates a pretty problem in psychology. Work it out sweetheart and let me know. (The F.S. [Fabian Society] set out to be this you know).”<sup>103</sup> It is not clear if Gawthorpe was referring to the Fabian Society as a whole or to its Women’s Group, but it may have been an implication that there was some potential for ‘controversy’ or radical thinking that remained unfulfilled, leaving a void that could be filled by the proposed periodical.

The differences between *The Freewoman* and other feminist periodicals at the time were evident from its inception; it was labelled in the sub-title as a feminist weekly review, and was independent of any political organization. In its size (33 by 22.5 cm or 13 by 8.9 inches) and layout it resembled such periodicals as the independent *New Age*, more than it did the official organs of the suffrage organizations. Both papers ran twenty to twenty-four pages per issue, divided into two or three columns depending on the section, and contained few advertisements compared to suffrage weekly papers. A typical issue of *The Freewoman* contained an editorial leader, a ‘Notes of the Week’ section which combined news reports and editorial opinion, several articles, and an extensive correspondence section. Women and men contributed in nearly equal numbers, as far as can be determined from signed contributions. Some contributors were well-known figures at the time, such as Cicely Hamilton, G.B. Shaw and Teresa Billington-Greig, while others, most notably Rebecca West, would later become famous. Some issues featured poems and short fiction. For example, the second issue of *The Freewoman*, as can be seen in the Table of Contents (fig. 1), opened with a leader commenting on the previous week’s editorial

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

address. ‘Notes of the Week’ included both reporting and commentary on parliamentary debates, and responses by Marsden to comments made by readers. Several articles on topics ranging from the status of women in the Roman Empire to lodging houses were followed by a correspondence section, which included letters from readers and the editor’s response to some. More articles interspersed with a poem and a short story (“Hilda Lessways”) followed, and the issue closed with a report on women in India by Cicely Fairfield (Rebecca West). Later issues tended to feature less poetry and fiction, and have the topics of correspondence listed in the Table of Contents. When the Discussion Circles were established, reports from their meetings appeared in the journal.

THE  
**FREEWOMAN**  
A WEEKLY FEMINIST REVIEW

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No. 2. VOL. I.                      THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1911                      THREEPENCE

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

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*Joint Editors:*  
DORA MARSDEN, B.A.  
MARY GAWTHORPE

Fig. 1 Table of Contents (detail of first page), *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 20.

While *The New Age* sometimes featured images on its front page, *The Freewoman* was mostly text, with the exception of some advertisements that had images. The absence of images seems to be due to funding constraints, since towards the end of *The Freewoman*'s run, Marsden

noted: “Owing to the great kindness of G. C. Beresford, Esq., we are enabled to publish this week's supplement. We expect from time to time to publish other photographic supplements, and we hope that readers will find an added interest in sending the supplemented copies to friends who are not already subscribers to THE FREEWOMAN.”<sup>104</sup> As this note indicates, Marsden had no objection to having images in the journal or to their use for promotion. The suffrage organs were larger (*Votes for Women* measured 43 by 33 cm, and *Common Cause* 32 by 22 cm), divided into up to four columns, and featured more news stories and a significantly larger proportion of advertisements, interspersed throughout the issue. They also had caricatures and photographs related to current events on their front pages, and sometimes additional images on other pages (aside from the illustrations in advertisements, which were common and often quite large).

Priced at three pence, *The Freewoman* was a fairly expensive weekly for its time, which Marsden saw as appropriate considering the high quality of content in the paper. In anticipation of the criticism of the high price of *The Freewoman*, her response in the first issue was:

Our reply must be that if women's penny papers are wanted, these already exist in great numbers, and that we are not proposing writing for women whose highest journalistic needs are realised at a penny. The quality of each article we consider good enough to publish is far above anything that can honestly be expected in a penny journal.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *The Freewoman*, June 13, 1912, 64. Aside from this comment, there is no evidence of this or any other photographic supplement to *The Freewoman*. Sandra Bossert, Special Collections Assistant, Special Collections, Princeton University Library, personal communication, February 22, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3.

The connection between price and quality was made despite the fact that *The Freewoman* did not pay its contributors. It has been interpreted mostly as a reflection of Marsden's elitist view of the paper and of feminism more broadly, which seems to be supported by Marsden's comments about the intended audience of both *The Freewoman* and feminism. However, as will be discussed later, this apparent elitism could be indicative of a connection to other tendencies and traditions, especially to radical anti-capitalist periodical printing.<sup>106</sup> Whether elitist or otherwise, the price tag and Marsden's comment were certainly intended as a statement about the position *The Freewoman* held relative to the penny suffrage papers of the period, including the major official organs of suffrage organizations such as *Votes for Women*, *Common Cause*, and *The Vote*.

In their decisions about the style, content, and price of *The Freewoman*, its editor and publisher were clearly responding to the landscape in which it was operating, where print matter of all sorts, and particularly periodicals, abounded. The reasons for the burgeoning of the press in this period included the elimination of taxes, which resulted in lower paper prices, and higher literacy rates, especially amongst the working classes. Historian Mark Hampton notes that “[i]t would be difficult to overstate the importance and ubiquity of the press in Victorian and Edwardian Britain,” and while his account treats the British daily press, this holds true for women's and suffrage periodicals as well.<sup>107</sup> ‘Women's journals’ were of course not monolithic, and this category is here used in a broad sense to include periodicals edited by women, those

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<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print : Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>107</sup> Hampton, *Visions of the Press*, 19.

published with women as their intended audience, and ones that focused on social and political issues that were seen as particularly pertinent to women's lives, such as domestic concerns or suffrage. Periodicals, and especially ones published daily or weekly, were seen as a major source of influence on societal opinions and values, having the power to educate and instill ideas in the minds of people.<sup>108</sup> Hampton terms the two main ideas about the nature and function of the press the 'educational' and 'representative' ideals of the press. Although the two ideals are presented as distinct, one succeeding the other, there was some overlap in functions within the pages of different papers. The educational ideal is the view of the press as influencing its readers, educating them not only on world events, but also on the values they should hold. It was, in Hampton's construction, the prevailing ideal until the 1880s, and was clearly embedded in ideas about class, the assumption being that the readers were of the lower classes and therefore in need of education and betterment by the press and its upper-class contributors. From the 1880s, with the rise of 'new journalism,' this ideal started to yield to the representative ideal, which centres on the press' role as representing the readers' interests and tastes. While it seems to be more of a bottom-up model, Hampton suggests that for the most part, rather than letting their readers voice themselves through discussion or correspondence, the papers spoke on readers' behalf.<sup>109</sup>

Feminist historians of print and media have noted that this historiographic model and chronology does not apply when examining women's periodicals, broadly defined.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 8–10.

<sup>110</sup> DiCenzo, Delap, and Ryan, *Feminist Media History*; Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*.

Whichever category they fell into, periodicals were the most efficient means of mass communication, and thus were not only key to the dissemination of information and ideas, but were also at the heart of collective identity formation processes.<sup>111</sup> By the 1910s, the three main suffrage organizations – the WSPU, WFL, and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) – each had their official weekly organ, whose main function was reporting on the organizations’ campaigns and parliamentary news, and offering analyses of current events. Generally speaking, the official organs of suffrage organizations reflected the stated ideologies of these bodies, each promoting the analysis and tactics of the organization it represented.

The extent of uniformity of expressed opinion expected in each of these organs differed and there were, of course, dissenting voices within them. Yet they were predominantly ‘propagandist’ in tone, and contained little in the way of literature and art reviews (the exception being reviews of books and plays that had direct connection to suffrage or women’s rights), or philosophical and spiritual explorations. Intended to expand the reach of the suffrage campaign, these papers were priced at a penny, making them affordable to women beyond the middle and upper classes. Readers were also explicitly encouraged to leave their copies of suffrage papers in reading rooms, libraries, train carriages, and other strategic locations where they could easily be picked up by other potential readers.<sup>112</sup> But the suffrage periodicals were not limited to news coverage, and had published in them correspondence, classified ads, and advertisements for

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<sup>111</sup> Delap, “Individualism and Introspection,” 157.

<sup>112</sup> DiCenzo, Delap, and Ryan, *Feminist Media History*, 173.

various products. Some of the products advertised were directly connected to the suffrage organization whose paper the advertisement appeared in, such as the 'W.F.L. Hat' which was advertised in *The Vote*, the WFL's paper (fig. 2). Others were geared towards women as consumers in a broader sense, and included fabric, clothing, and even hair removal by electrolysis, and some advertisements emphasized women's intellect and interest in news, selling daily newspapers through their 'women's columns'. This miscellaneous content reflects the suffrage papers' role as tools for constructing identity and a sense of community among readers, based on a combination of the political goals of the organizations themselves, the consumption of certain goods, and connections with like-minded readers for accommodation or employment through the classifieds. All these functions, however, were secondary to their key role as political-educational instruments, meant to inform and convince their audience.





Fig. 2 “W.F.L. Hat,” *The Vote*, November 4, 1911, 21. Women’s Library, London School of Economics.

A notable exception to the rule of the suffrage press was *The Englishwoman*, which was strongly connected to and supportive of the suffrage movement, though not officially a suffrage organ. As Leila Ryan and Maria DiCenzo note, some historians treated *The Englishwoman* as a NUWSS paper, alongside its official organ *Common Cause*, but there is in fact little evidence to support or refute this. They present *The Englishwoman* as “occupying a peculiar position as both

a ‘suffrage magazine’ and a more generalist monthly review devoted to politics and culture.”<sup>113</sup>

As a monthly publication priced at one shilling, containing some 90 pages per issue and featuring a fancy red cover, it was clearly designed to provide a different reading experience from that of the suffrage papers, even if they shared a certain proportion of their readership. It was included in the *Times*’ monthly ‘reviews and magazines’ section and in that, as Ryan and DiCenzo put it, it “kept very different company than the official organs.”<sup>114</sup>

Not much scholarship exists on *The Englishwoman*, but Gemma Bristow’s article about the magazine posits *The Freewoman* as its “ideological rival.”<sup>115</sup> There is no indication, however, that *The Freewoman* was modeled after or in opposition to *The Englishwoman*, or that *The Freewoman*’s editors perceived a rivalry between the two papers. For one thing, the two differed in terms of price and style, *The Englishwoman* being much pricier, clearly geared towards an upper-middle class audience, and not a paper likely to be left in a reading room or train carriage. Another difference is that while both papers addressed issues beyond women’s enfranchisement, *The Englishwoman* declared itself a suffrage magazine, as it stated that one of its goals was to “reach the cultured public, and bring before it, in a convincing and moderate form, the case for the Enfranchisement of Women.”<sup>116</sup> Both the endorsement of suffrage and putting arguments forward in ‘moderate form’ were not part of the plan for *The Freewoman*. As mentioned earlier, *The New Age* was the periodical Gawthorpe looked to as a model, and though

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<sup>113</sup> Ryan and DiCenzo, “The Englishwoman: ‘Twelve Years of Brilliant Life,’” 121.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 125.

*The Freewoman* was always intended as a review, it was also crucial for Marsden that it be published weekly.

Although it was independent and despite its criticism of the suffrage goals and organizations, as Lucy Delap notes, *The Freewoman* was part of the “social movement field or ‘movement family’ represented by the women’s movement, of which suffrage was a part.”<sup>117</sup> Its position was complex, as will be explored in more depth in the discussion of the construction of feminism within *The Freewoman*, but nonetheless the way the paper modeled itself and the way it was understood by readers had much to do with the periodical landscape of which it was part, including the suffrage press. *The Freewoman* was positioned in relation to other periodicals not only through its relatively high price and its self-designation as a feminist review, but also through its participation in a network of periodicals.<sup>118</sup> Periodical networks include periodicals that address similar topics, share contributors and material, advertise one another, and exchange copies. As some of these practices are visible to readers, participating in a certain network was part of what created the expectations readers had of periodicals. For example, announcing a new periodical in a newspaper with certain politics generated assumptions and expectations as to the new periodical’s political allegiances.

The political slant of *The Freewoman* was not always clear or unambiguous, and its contemporaries as well as later scholars have interpreted its take on feminism in different, even contrasting ways. The way it dealt with feminism was certainly a departure from both the content

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<sup>117</sup> Delap, “Individualism and Introspection,” 160.

<sup>118</sup> Lucy Delap, “The Freewoman, Periodical Communities, and the Feminist Reading Public,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 61 (2000): 233–76.

and the style of mainstream women's periodicals, part of a 'vanguard' or 'avant-garde' branch of feminism, which included individuals and groups in Britain and the United States such as Françoise Lafitte, Guy Aldred, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Beatrice Hale, and members of the New York-based women's club Heterodoxy.<sup>119</sup> For her part, in keeping with this avant-garde approach, Marsden wrote about the ideas expressed in *The Freewoman* as not intended for the majority of women, but for the few who had the capacity to live according to those ideas – those women who were or could become *freewomen* (though there was ambiguity in Marsden's writing in the periodical even around the question of whether women could become *freewomen*, or whether it was an innate state). However, reading *The Freewoman* and the letters from readers suggest a different engagement with feminist ideas from the ones put forth by Marsden. Many of these readers likely did not fit into, and some explicitly did not identify with, some of the criteria that Marsden held. This also calls into question some of the assertions made by scholars about the elitism of the paper based on its price, as it seems the 'elitism' was related more to cultural and 'lifestyle' matters than to class, a point I will return to later in this chapter and in chapter 2.

Whether or not *Freewoman* readers and subscribers saw themselves as part of a select minority or vanguard, their numbers were not great. The extant undated list of subscribers to *The Freewoman* suggests that the paper had about 250 subscribers, mostly from the UK and the United States, but also from France, Jamaica, Italy, Canada, India, Switzerland, Belgium, South Africa, Holland, Cuba, Australia, Portugal, Sweden, and Falkland Islands. An additional list has the names of about 120 individuals, periodicals, and organizations in the United States who were

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<sup>119</sup> Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*, 30-35.

not necessarily subscribed to the journal.<sup>120</sup> Their relationship with *The Freewoman* is not clear – they may have been potential contacts at the time the editors were seeking to revive the paper in 1912-13, leading up to the publication of *The New Freewoman* in June 1913. But the names and locations on this list are an indication of the wide geographical reach of the paper and the people and organizations that were part of its network, or those the editors thought of as being part of it. They include magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and *Life and Labor* (the magazine of the National Woman's Trade Union League of America, based in Chicago), and organizations like the National Woman's Suffrage Association, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Marsden's correspondence with Harriet Shaw Weaver indicates that she was relying on the support of American readers to re-establish *The Freewoman*, and was optimistic not only about the number of supporters but also regarding their attitude towards feminism.<sup>121</sup>

Some scholars who have studied *The Freewoman* assumed that its readership was not much larger than this list suggests, and that readers were mostly middle- and upper-class. This is based on its subscription lists, the price and perhaps also on Marsden's own claims that the paper seeks to speak to a minority she regarded as having the capacity to be *freewomen*, rather than to a larger contingent defined in terms of gender. While *The Freewoman* was far from a mass-circulation periodical, and Marsden had no aspirations in that direction (as will be discussed in chapter 4), several points problematize straightforward conclusions about its readership based on these factors. Organizational subscriptions, exchange lists, copies left in libraries and reading

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<sup>120</sup> Box 3, folder 12, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>121</sup> Dora Marsden to Harriet Shaw Weaver, December 2, 1912 and January 12, 1913. MS 57354, Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers.

rooms, and copies that were shared or read out loud, make the actual readership of *The Freewoman* larger than the numbers alone account for, though it is impossible to know by how much. The letters sent to *The Freewoman* and its editors, both published and unpublished and archived, reveal a diverse group of readers, comprising both women and men, sympathetic as well as antagonistic to feminism (in its varying and shifting definitions), and from different locations and classes. Their letters give us a sense of the experience of contemporary *Freewoman* readers, how they encountered feminism through the paper, and in some cases their endeavours to expand its readership and with it the reach of feminism, or at least some aspects of it. These sources, along with surviving correspondence and published diaries and autobiographies, also provide insight into periodical reading practices more generally. Within the context of early twentieth-century feminism, these reading practices and experiences add another layer to our understanding of the significance of periodicals as a publishing genre to the development of feminist thought.

## **1.2 Feminism in the Mid Nineteenth and Early Twentieth century**

*The Freewoman* was established as a feminist review, the first British or American periodical to use this designation in a title. The term was not commonly used in English at the time, and it carried with it associations related to, yet quite different from, ‘women’s movement’ or suffrage. To understand the significance of the use of ‘feminist’, as well as the ideas expressed and debated in *The Freewoman*, I will first turn to look at the language used by those we might now term – somewhat anachronistically – ‘feminists’, and at their main concerns in the decades

preceding the establishment of *The Freewoman*.<sup>122</sup> After relating the general context of the feminist and women's movement in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and some of the main foci of the debates within it, the next section will centre on *The Freewoman*'s role in the diversification of feminism in the period.

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of campaigns across Europe as well as in Britain and the United States advocating for women's rights and access to education, property ownership, employment, political participation, and other issues. These efforts are often seen as marking the emergence of a women's movement, and some posit them as the origin of feminism or a feminist movement, though the relationship between women's rights and feminism is, as historians of feminism in this period acknowledge, much more complex than a simple equation.<sup>123</sup> One indication of this relationship is the gradual change in terminology which began to occur in Britain and the United States at the turn of the century, when 'feminism' entered the English vocabulary. Until that time 'the woman movement', 'women's movement' and 'women's rights' were used, and they continued to be popular even after the introduction of 'feminism'.

In her study of European feminisms from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, Karen Offen locates the origin of 'feminism' in the French *feminisme*, first used in 1870 by Hubertine Auclert and used in France at the time as synonymous to women's emancipation.<sup>124</sup> The term

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<sup>122</sup> Historians writing about this and earlier periods use 'feminism/feminist' even as they acknowledge it may be anachronistic (see Cott, Levine). I will follow their usage when referring to persons involved in the women's movement (understood broadly), while distinguishing feminism from other terms when specific political ideas and goals, such as suffrage, are discussed.

<sup>123</sup> Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*.

<sup>124</sup> Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950*, 19.

made its first recorded appearance in England in 1895, but in 1901 it was still equated with 'the woman movement' and it was only around 1907 that 'feminism' and 'feminist' became a part of British vocabulary as distinct terms.<sup>125</sup> For Offen, what distinguished feminism from other strands of activism related to women's lives was that it was larger than a single issue, and that it was concerned primarily with the social construction of women's lives and experiences. To be a feminist, according to Offen, one had to (at minimum) recognize the validity of women's own interpretation of their lived experience, be conscious of gendered institutionalized injustice, and advocate for the elimination of such injustice.<sup>126</sup>

In tracing the roots of modern feminism, historian Nancy Cott also points to the French language as the origin of the term and to the 1890s as the time of its introduction into English. She also notes that while 'feminism' was increasingly becoming a familiar term, it was used in a disparaging way into the 1910s and even later, mainly to denote "destructive theories" and "Continental doctrines."<sup>127</sup> Cott, concerned more with contemporary meanings of feminism than with its etymology, argues that the change in vocabulary marked an "embarkation on a modern agenda," and that with this new agenda, paradoxes were revealed, such as having both equality and difference as foci for the movement. In a move away from grouping women under the singular 'woman' or assuming that their interests may be represented by a 'woman movement,' 'feminism' offered terminology and understanding that could account for the heterogeneity of women's experiences and worldviews. Cott states that rather than undermining feminism, these

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>127</sup> Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 13–14.



paradoxes became the “defining elements of feminism in the twentieth century,” and it flourished not despite, but because of them.<sup>128</sup> The picture, however, was more complex than this depiction suggests; as Cott herself notes and as will be discussed later in this chapter, heterogeneity and paradoxes came up against political expediency and the need – whether real or perceived – for unity.

Different views on women’s rights and different lines of argumentation in support of these rights were not a novelty, as already in the nineteenth century some activists claimed rights for women based on their shared humanity with men, while others based their claims on women’s difference from men and the unique contributions they could make to the social and political spheres by virtue of that difference. The marked change was that many early twentieth-century feminists attempted to encompass, at least in principle, this “Janus face” handed down to them by their predecessors.<sup>129</sup> One of the consequences of allowing multiplicity to exist was a challenge to the classification ‘woman’, offering in its stead “a paradoxical group ideal of individuality.”<sup>130</sup> Cott sees the replacement of the singular ‘woman’ with the plural as an acknowledgement of the diversity of women’s experiences, and the introduction of ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’ into political parlance as opening the movement to men’s participation. This was significant beyond the increased support, since detaching feminism from an exclusive association with women also allowed for broader critiques of contemporary ideas about gender. Cott places both these features at the core of what gave early twentieth-century feminism its distinctly

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 5,8.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 8.

modern character, suggesting that subjectivity, and individual and collective consciousness, were key to the evolution of this political identity.

Similarly to Cott, feminist philosopher Denise Riley places a paradox at the very heart of feminism; the simultaneous emphasis on and refusal of the identity ‘women’.<sup>131</sup> Here not only ‘woman’ in the singular, but the plural identity ‘women’ as well is placed under scrutiny, its historical and philosophical roots studied, and the tension between its utility and limitations brought to the fore. From debates on whether the soul is gendered, through property ownership and women’s societal roles, to their political rights, Riley concludes that women are always defined in relation to other categories, such as ‘the body’ and ‘the social’, which themselves change over time.<sup>132</sup> She thus suggests “that ‘women’ is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation, and that feminism is the site of the systemic fighting-out of that instability.”<sup>133</sup> This formulation makes instability essential to feminism, animating it and driving changes in it, while the “fighting-out” of the undecidedness of ‘women’ is not presented as eventually leading to a resolution.

If the instability of the category ‘women’ enlivens feminism, and is arguably the very precondition for its existence, it also makes political organizing and work related to women’s rights and their oppression difficult. Both Riley and Cott point to this difficulty, noting that feminists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mostly opted for acting in solidarity at the expense of giving voice to the instability of feminist subjectivity and the diversity of the

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<sup>131</sup> Riley, *Am I That Name?*, 1.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2, 7.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

movement. After all, “[t]o fight for the rights and visibility of a group was hardly likely to make the tactic of deconstructing its mass a pressing one.”<sup>134</sup> Indeed, feminist campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century often invoked ‘women’ as an unproblematic grouping, even when activists had no illusions that they were representing all women, and were aware of the differences that divided women, if not always upfront about them. *The Freewoman*, as will be discussed in the next section, was rare in espousing a feminism that not only made explicit the diversity and conflicts amongst women, but questioned the desirability of solidarity or unity, and called into question feminism as a concept and identity, and the ultimate goals of the women’s or feminist movement.

A look at feminist activism in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth paints a picture of the main concerns of the movement, as well as conceptualizations of feminism that were available at the time. As feminist thought and activism were contingent upon national contexts, especially as regards laws and political traditions, attending briefly to the framing of feminism in Britain in the Victorian and Edwardian era will illuminate some of the specificities of British feminist discourse, and the interventions that *The Freewoman* sought to make in it. Both contemporaries and historians writing about the period agree that feminism addressed a broad range of topics, including education, labour, women’s legal rights, and enfranchisement. For some historians this comprehensiveness, and the

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 72.

connections between the private and public spheres made by Victorian feminists, are what merits the use of ‘feminism’ when writing about a time when the term was not yet in use.<sup>135</sup>

As Philippa Levine notes, the main issues around which feminists organized in Victorian England, and which were seen as interconnected, were education (both for the middle and working classes, though in different ways), employment for middle-class women, labour issues such as protective legislation, the organization of trade unions mainly affecting working-class women, divorce, state involvement in the sexual lives of women, and the parliamentary vote. On all of these issues there were differences of opinion on principles and tactics, but for the most part also a commitment to solidarity, or at least to a semblance of unity.<sup>136</sup> The exception in this regard, as we shall see later, was the suffrage campaign, particularly after the introduction of militant tactics. The arguments for women’s rights were mostly based on the perceived interests, nature and alliances of women, particularly their association with the category of the ‘social’. Denise Riley includes under the definition of the ‘social’ a range of voluntarist activities, such as charity, temperance, religious work, education, work relating to war and peace, and others. Riley sees this category as a blurred space between the private and the public, and as one that effectively kept feminists out of the political sphere by restricting the ‘political’ to government and the law, to which women had no access until well into the twentieth century.<sup>137</sup>

The identification of women with the ‘social’ reveals one of the paradoxes of Victorian and Edwardian feminisms. Claims in support of women’s rights in Britain relied more heavily on

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<sup>135</sup> Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, 1–3.

<sup>136</sup> Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*.

<sup>137</sup> Riley, *Am I That Name?*, 47–51.

individualist arguments, which held the individual as their basic unit of reference, rather than on relational reasoning, which treated the heterosexual couple as the basic unit and stressed women's companionate and complementary relationship to men, though the two were not neatly separated.<sup>138</sup> Yet even as this was the predominant line of argumentation, women's purported interest in care, their nurturing and moral nature, and their alliance with voluntarist initiative were invoked simultaneously. This resulted in puzzling formulations of the goal of feminism. For example, Ethel Snowden, a socialist feminist whom Offen terms one of the definers of British feminism, saw the freedom feminists were fighting for as the "freedom to serve."<sup>139</sup> Despite the efforts to achieve cohesion and stability within nineteenth and twentieth-century British feminism, it was, as Levine notes, typified by flux and inconsistency.<sup>140</sup> At the same time as feminism was based in women's positive identification with one another in a political context, it also shone a bright, sometimes harsh light on that which divided them.<sup>141</sup> The multiplicity of views within feminism can be seen through a number of its specific registers. I will here focus on the ones that had the strongest influence on Dora Marsden and *The Freewoman*, namely socialist feminism, feminist attempts to reform sexual relations, and the suffrage movement – particularly its militant iterations.

Some of the discussions of women's role in the home and the community, as members of households as well as labourers, had their roots in different strands of socialism. In the

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<sup>138</sup> Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950*, 21–22, 187.

<sup>139</sup> Snowden, *The Feminist Movement*, 247.

<sup>140</sup> Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, 177.

<sup>141</sup> Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900*, 14.

following I will briefly explore the two branches of socialism that are most pertinent to the development of early twentieth century British feminism: Owenite socialism and the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). While not purporting to offer a comprehensive analysis of either of these movements, this overview will provide some context to the work of the suffrage movement, and to the development of *The Freewoman's* theorizing on feminism. It is worth noting that both Owenism and the SDF were not socialist-feminist movements, yet each in its own way grappled with questions pertaining to women, contributing to an expanding feminist discourse.

Owenism, a socialist movement started by Robert Owen in the 1820s, sought to transform the economic, social, and cultural lives of people through the establishment of classless, co-operative communities. A project for the social transformation of the cotton mill in New Lanark, Scotland, which Owen owned, ended up transforming his own views on economy and society. Though a factory owner, Owen became a staunch critic of capitalism, whose goal was “to change the conditions of the people.” Capitalism, in Owen’s view, impacted not only the material conditions of people’s lives, but their hearts and minds as well. Life in Owenite communities, established by Owen and his adherents, was meant to counter this influence. Termed by Marx and Engels a ‘utopian’ form of socialism, Owenism was certainly far reaching in its vision, not least in its take on gender relations.<sup>142</sup>

Influenced by earlier traditions of radicalism, Owenism followed the majority of utopian visions up until the eighteenth century, which exhibited a commitment to some form of gender

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<sup>142</sup> Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, xi–xv, 21.

equality.<sup>143</sup> Barbara Taylor traces the roots of Owenite feminism to democratic sexual radicalism, and though this tradition is itself fragmentary and complex, it is clear that Owenite feminism (again, not a unified vision) offered a radical shift in gender and sexual relations. This included a critique of marriage, monogamy and the nuclear family, the separation of sexual pleasure from procreative functions, gender parity in the governance of the communities, and in some cases the abolition of the gendered division of household work.<sup>144</sup>

By the mid 1830s, however, the utopian vision of Owenism began to decline, and with its fading what started as a plan for all encompassing transformation became an increasingly narrow struggle in terms of class as well as gender.<sup>145</sup> Taylor points to the demise of Owenism as the juncture at which the ties between feminism and working-class radicalism were severed.<sup>146</sup> Though there were some attempts to re-establish this connection, including within the SDF, the Party was less thoroughgoing in its treatment of questions of gender than the Owenites were.

Unlike Owenism, which sought to abolish class and gender inequalities simultaneously, the SDF viewed class as the primary site of oppression, with gender as a derivative form of this original oppression. SDF members, following Engels and Bebel, used an analogy between class and gender to speak about the subjected position of women in the family under capitalism. Occasionally, though, this analogy was used to point a finger at men, equating them to capitalists and thus diverting the blame for the decline in the status of women at least partially onto them.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>144</sup> Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., xvi–xvii.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 263–64.

Though this analogy was never part of the official party line, it is evident that gender was part of the agenda. However, as Karen Hunt points out, women were largely marginalized from radical discourse from the mid-nineteenth century on (with Owenism being a notable outlier), and the SDF was no exception. Aside from maintaining the primacy of class, the goal of this peripheralization of women and discussion of gender in the SDF was to achieve unity and solidarity amongst its members.<sup>147</sup>

Though some in the SDF spoke of ‘sexual equality’, the understandings of the term varied; some thought of it as equality of opportunity, others used it to criticize the division of labour, and yet others (though a minority) argued that women simply could not be equal to men. Generally, the SDF saw feminism as a rival, both theoretically and organizationally, and the Party remained ambivalent in its treatment of the ‘woman question,’ not taking an official position on it.<sup>148</sup> This reluctance to take a clear stand resulted in women being cast out of the political sphere. Hunt describes the Party strategy on this issue as quite similar to that of other parties, by stating that it “made a virtue out of the political vacuum it created around women.”<sup>149</sup>

Women in Victorian Britain were also engaged in attempts to reform sexual relations, both publicly and privately, by fighting against policies governing sexuality as well as through discussions of sexuality and its meaning for men and women. Perhaps the most notable public struggle against government policy was the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts (1864, 1866, 1869) led by Josephine Butler. The CD Acts were intended to reduce the

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<sup>147</sup> Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, 37–46.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 48–50.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.



levels of sexually transmitted diseases among British soldiers and sailors, and gave police officers in port and garrison towns the right to arrest women suspected of being prostitutes, and to subject them to medical examination and imprisonment.<sup>150</sup> Josephine Butler, an upper-class evangelical who had been involved in relief work with prostitutes in Liverpool, initiated the campaign to repeal the Acts in 1886. It was, according to Judith Walkowitz, the first campaign to bring respectable women into the political arena.<sup>151</sup> Butler and other activists involved in the campaign protested against the CD Acts on two principal grounds. The first was the sexual double standard, which placed the blame and punishment on the women prostitutes, while the men were not held accountable. The second grounds for protest was the fact that women were denied rights to their own bodies, and were instead subjected to legal and medical authorities. Though the campaign was anchored in a firm belief in the evils of prostitution, it nonetheless saw men as responsible for the existence of prostitution, as their lack of sexual restraint created the demand. Butler sought to liberate women from men's sexual tyranny through the repeal campaign, one of the methods being frank public discussion of prostitution, men's sexuality and the danger it posed to women, and sexual diseases. The end goal was social purity, and in this sense, it was anti-prostitution, but not anti-prostitutes, as Butler used the figure of the 'fallen woman' not as culpable for men's diseases, but as the victim of their brutality.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> I use 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' throughout this dissertation, rather than 'sex worker' and 'sex work', as these were the terms used in the early twentieth century, and until recently by scholars as well.

<sup>151</sup> Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 23.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 88–92.

Discussions of sexuality and gender relations also found another, more private, venue, in the Men and Women's club, established in London in 1885 by Karl Pearson, a professor of mathematics at University College London. The club, with a membership selected by Pearson and comprising an equal number of men and women, set out to explore the relations between the sexes from a scientific and objective, rather than theological or subjective, perspective. It was unorthodox in discussing sexuality in a mixed-gender environment, even if in many other ways it reflected fairly conservative norms of engagement between men and women. The women members of the club also saw it as serving "the woman's cause."<sup>153</sup> Some of the topics the club explored were men and women's relative sexual drives and needs, sexual morality, marriage, contraception, prostitution, and gender relations in different eras and cultures. Under Pearson's leadership, the discussions were to adhere to the ideals of rationality and objectivity, and to be rooted in a socialist ideology and in eugenics, placing the good of the community – framed in racial and imperial terms – before the individual. Throughout the four years of its existence, club discussions followed a pattern of fairly clear divisions along gender lines. While women members saw the club as an opportunity to openly discuss male and female sexuality and sexual morality, the men for the most part treated women and their sexuality as the object of study, with an emphasis placed on women's reproductive role and its relation to the needs of the state and empire. Gendered differences were most evident around topics such as prostitution and contraception, which brought to the fore the potential of sexual victimization of women by men, including their husbands

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<sup>153</sup> Bland 5-7.

There was also tension in the club around modes of argumentation: the club's constitution stated that discussions will be from a scientific perspective, which to Pearson and the other men meant a reliance on evolutionary theory, specifically social Darwinism. Arguments based on feelings and emotions were dismissed, silencing women members who were generally unfamiliar with scientific discourse. Some of the women argued for the legitimacy of feelings, including religious ones, as the basis for speech and action, but since Pearson held sway over the tone of the club, these attempts to effect a change in discourse were futile.<sup>154</sup>

For many British feminists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the most effective means for bringing women out of the vacuum and into the political realm of was the vote. Indeed, the suffrage movement has become almost synonymous with 'feminism' in this period in popular accounts, and its centrality in the historiography of feminism is summed up by Nancy Cott, who asserts that "[t]he chronology of the suffrage movement has ... come to determine judgments about the rise and fall of feminism."<sup>155</sup> The British suffrage campaign started in the 1860s by women, many of whom were also engaged in other initiatives related to women's status and access, demanding to extend the parliamentary vote to women. Suffragists were organized under a number of local and regional societies, which merged in 1897 to become the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), under the presidency of Millicent Garrett-Fawcett.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Bland, 22-40.

<sup>155</sup> Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 3.

<sup>156</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 10-12.

Until 1905, the suffrage campaign relied on constitutional methods such as petitions and bills introduced before parliament by MPs who were supportive of the cause. But that year, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), an organization founded in Manchester in 1903 and initially connected to Labour, started employing different, more militant methods in its agitation for the vote, ranging from heckling politicians and posing questions about women's enfranchisement at public meetings, through marches and demonstrations, to window-breaking, arson, and bombings.<sup>157</sup> While the more violent acts of militancy were, by all accounts, carried out by a minority within the WSPU, these acts are significant in the amount of attention that they received from contemporaries and historians alike, as well as for the debates that they sparked within and outside the women's and suffrage movement.<sup>158</sup> While it is not my intention to provide a thorough overview of the suffrage campaign, I will highlight a few elements of suffrage, and specifically militancy, that featured prominently in *The Freewoman*, both in criticism leveled against the suffragettes, and in contributors' and readers' criticism of the journal's approach to the suffrage movement.

The aspect of the suffrage agitation that generated the most debate and political splits was militancy; opinions on the use of militant tactics at the time varied widely, as did the specific acts that were included under this title. Historians also differ in their views of the necessity and effectiveness of militancy. Martin Pugh is one of the leading voices claiming that the vote was all but won by 1900 through the use of constitutional methods, calling into question not only the

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<sup>157</sup> Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, 105–9; Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 171–76.

<sup>158</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 183.

need for militancy, but the impetus to engage in it as well. Pugh also highlights what he perceives as a discrepancy between radical methods and mainstream goals, a criticism that was voiced by contemporaries of the WSPU as will be explored later.<sup>159</sup> Pugh's analysis has been critiqued as a 'masculinist' approach to women's history, due to his dismissal of the suffragettes' behaviour as criminal and counterproductive, and his suggestion that the WSPU as a women-only organization was a form of pre-war lesbianism.<sup>160</sup> Pugh's analysis implied that WSPU activism was somehow not a 'serious' political campaign, but rather an outlet for women's repressed sexual energies. The connection between sexuality and political activism is not novel; it was made by sexologists contemporary to the movement, a topic I shall return to in chapter 3.

Laura Nym Mayhall offers a different view on militancy, focusing not on its efficacy but on its relationship to models of citizenship and modes of resistance. Mayhall's account connects the use of force or the threat of such use in militant suffrage to radical traditions, noting that the specter of physical force was raised as early as 1892.<sup>161</sup> Mayhall also emphasizes the "rational political calculus" at the heart of militancy, and the fact that it was a continuum that included violent and non-violent acts.<sup>162</sup> This highlights the diversity even within the militant branch of the suffrage movement, and the impossibility of a clear-cut distinction between it and the non-militants. Another key element of militant suffrage that Mayhall raises is its relation to models of citizenship; two conceptions of citizenship prevailed in this period, one based on

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<sup>159</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*.

<sup>160</sup> Purvis, "Gendering the Historiography," 580–82.

<sup>161</sup> Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, 23.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

service and duty, and the other on individual rights. In the mid-nineteenth century there emerged an understanding of government as deriving its legitimacy from the consent of the subject. Based in this conception, a third citizenship model appeared, most visibly after the South African War, which foregrounded individuals' right to resist a government that did not recognize them as citizens.<sup>163</sup> The core question underlying the suffrage campaign generally, from this perspective, was women's demand to be fully recognized as citizens, with a range of ideas about what this citizenship should be based on.

Susan Kingsley Kent suggests that a different issue lay at the heart of the suffrage campaigns, namely that of gender and sexual relations between men and women. What suffragists were demanding was not just the vote, but a transformation of women's lives: "They set out to redefine and recreate, by political means, the sexual culture of Britain."<sup>164</sup> The crux of the agitation was a 'sex war' having its origins in the separate sphere ideology that reduced women to sexual objects. Victorian and Edwardian medical discourse regarded women as controlled by their sexual and reproductive functions, while in political and social discussion they were treated as morally superior; both positions were commonly used to justify women's exclusion from politics and their relegation to the private sphere, whether due to incapacity or to the need to protect them from the 'contaminating' effects of politics. Feminists at the time argued against the perception of the private and public spheres as entirely separate, pointing to the influence of politics on the private, sexual, and gendered lives of citizens. Many of them used the

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 55-65.

<sup>164</sup> Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914*, 3.

discourse of women's moral purity and superiority, employing it to argue for the necessity of women's influence in the political realm.<sup>165</sup> They also maintained that the separation of private and public spheres hindered discussions between men and women.<sup>166</sup>

Claims about women's special moral qualities, however, came into tension with what Kent sees as another key goal of the suffrage campaign: the construction of a positive sexuality for women.<sup>167</sup> In the long term, she writes, the aim was to create a positive paradigm of women's sexuality, but the present was mainly focused on men and their impact upon women's sexual lives in such matters as venereal disease, prostitution, reproduction, and sexual relationships between partners. As a means of correcting the gender biases of the purportedly objective medical knowledge and discourse on women, women doctors were encouraged by feminists to study human sexuality. The sexual freedom most feminists sought was largely a freedom from sexual objectification and violence, and their vision of sexual equality was of a single standard for men and women, bringing men closer to the chastity expected of women.<sup>168</sup>

Whether Victorian and Edwardian feminisms are viewed as a series of single-issue campaigns and "ad hoc pressure groups," or as a movement which grasped and organized around the interconnectedness of the issues impacting women, their main concerns were women's rights to education, employment, political participation, as well as sexual and family rights.<sup>169</sup> *The Freewoman* engaged with these various concerns, but as we will see in the next section, it was

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 5-16.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 134-55.

<sup>169</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 7-8; Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1990).

unique in taking on the instability of feminism and, to an extent, the category of women. It did not eschew divisive matters, but rather strove to make them into one of the key features of its feminism, opening the term to multiple, sometimes contrasting understandings. If the women's movement was challenged by feminism's being, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote in the *Forerunner*, a movement "in more than one general direction," *The Freewoman* embraced this and ventured to take multiple directions at once.<sup>170</sup>

Socialism, suffrage, and attempts to reform sexuality such as the CD Acts repeal campaign and the Men and Women's club left particular inheritances for the nascent feminist movement and for feminist publications. They highlighted the centrality of economic independence and political representation for women at different levels of government, women's struggles for rights over their bodies and reproduction, and a desire on the part of many women to explore women's sexuality on their own terms – whether they used the language of morality, social purity, or sexual freedom – and not through men's priorities and discourses. All of these preoccupations are evident in *The Freewoman*, but its uniqueness lies in the attempts to theorize feminism as a politics and identity, the explicit discussions of sexuality, and its use of emotions and the periodical's generic characteristics. These features of *The Freewoman* are the focus of the next sections, and this study more generally.

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<sup>170</sup> Quoted in Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 48.



### 1.3 “A douche of cold criticism will do no harm”: *The Freewoman* and contemporary feminisms<sup>171</sup>

*The Freewoman* was envisioned from its very outset as different from, in some ways even oppositional to, the suffrage movement, especially the militant factions of it. But it also offered visions of feminism that are important for an understanding of early twentieth-century feminism, as well as feminist movements in later periods. Looking at the communication between Dora Marsden and the WFL regarding a supplement to *The Vote* that she was supposed to edit, and her correspondence with Mary Gawthorpe around the establishment of *The Freewoman*, it is hard to tell how well-articulated her idea of feminism was. However, it is evident that Marsden’s approach was different from the mainstream, one that Gawthorpe worried would be destructive, and at any rate difficult to realize. Using the correspondence between the editors, and between them and contributors and readers, this section examines what it was that *The Freewoman* sought to ‘destroy’, and what it proffered in the way of a theorization of feminism and a feminist identity.

Even before the idea of establishing an independent periodical came about, it seems that Marsden was interested in the intellectual aspects of feminism, and in dealing with its complexity. In 1911, she was negotiating the terms of her employment with the WFL in a position that was tentatively titled General Organiser for *The Vote*. What Marsden proposed to do in this position is unknown, but a letter from Edith How-Martyn, the organization’s honorary secretary, tells something about the direction: “... speaking for myself I feel sure that you can

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<sup>171</sup> “Ideas, or No Ideas?” *The Freewoman*, July 11, 1912, 143.

supply something the women's movement needs & it wd [sic] be a joy to me to work to make the W.F.L. the intellectual leader of the Suffrage Societies."<sup>172</sup> Apparently Marsden had progressive ideas about the movement and its future directions, and WFL members seem to have been generally accepting of them; another member, Margaret Nevinson (also wife of journalist Henry Nevinson), wrote to Marsden: "I left the W.S.P.U. at 'The Great Schism' because I felt I could not on principle support such a tyranny, and since that I have felt the truth that in spite of errors & mistakes that 'in the multitude of [counsellors?] there is wisdom'."<sup>173</sup> Nevinson's comment refers to the Pankhursts' autocratic leadership style, and 'multitude' reads as an argument for greater democracy in the movement, which Marsden's vision would presumably foster.

The plans Marsden had for *The Vote*, however, never materialized, and she eventually concluded that an independent venture would be the appropriate platform for her ideas. She consulted about these new ideas with Mary Gawthorpe, both as a close friend and as the future co-editor of the periodical. Gawthorpe was uneasy about some of Marsden's ideas, mainly her plan for a new movement, and was not convinced of their practicability. One of the concerns she expressed in her letters, though not referring specifically to feminism, gives some indication as to the direction in which Marsden saw her new enterprise going: "if you wish to associate destructive tactics with a movement then I say you're doomed to barrenness of result from the outset. No movement can destroy and build at the same time; that is the paradox of the W.S.P.U. It does not stand for a glorious advance amongst women so much as for stimulated (or irritated)

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<sup>172</sup> How-Martyn to Marsden, March 26, 1911. Box 1, folder 29, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>173</sup> Nevinson to Marsden, February 13, 1911. Box 1, folder 29, Dora Marsden Collection. Where I added the word 'counsellors', the original sheet is torn.

brain centres all round.” Gawthorpe proceeds to encourage Marsden to steer clear of the destructive: “theres [*sic*] so much to be done on the constructive side of ideas, and theres [*sic*] ground waiting too.”<sup>174</sup>

Gawthorpe saw ground waiting in the press rather than a political movement, and indeed between the proposed revamping of *The Vote* and the suggestions of simultaneous destruction and creation, we can already see some of the features that would characterize *The Freewoman*’s approach to feminism. In its search for the very root of women’s oppression, it focused on consciousness, rather than political and social rights. Marsden used the term ‘consciousness’ primarily when referring to women’s awareness of their oppression and its political meaning. The idea that to solve the problem women have to be conscious of their situation and understand it as a political rather than private matter anticipates the primacy of consciousness-raising in some branches of second-wave feminism. The emphasis in *The Freewoman* on consciousness, and its commitment to openness and dialogue, called into question fundamental assumptions about gender, sexuality, citizenship, and political movements.

The focus on consciousness distinguished *The Freewoman* from other feminist periodicals, and also caused tension between Marsden and suffrage supporters. As the correspondence between Marsden and Gawthorpe implies, the suffrage movement, and especially the WSPU, played a key role in the open and dialogical definition of feminism in *The Freewoman*, as it was developed partly against the backdrop of the agitation for the vote. Given Marsden’s experience with the Union and the timing of the publication of *The Freewoman*,

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<sup>174</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, June 1, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

which coincided with a rise in militant activity in late 1911, the prominence of the WSPU in the discussions leading up to the establishment of the periodical and in its pages is only to be expected.

The criticism of the WSPU is also one of the aspects of *The Freewoman* to which scholars have devoted much attention.<sup>175</sup> Marsden is generally viewed as being opposed to the suffrage movement, and by extension *The Freewoman* is often understood as anti-suffragist, or as “a kind of postsuffragist project.”<sup>176</sup> Marsden’s stance regarding suffrage was in fact more nuanced; she disagreed with the singular focus on the vote, partly due to her skepticism of the representative system, but more importantly because of her belief that radical changes in women’s lives and in gender relations can only come from a shift in consciousness. Yet many of the journal’s readers perceived Marsden as anti-suffragist, and were dismayed at what they understood as a betrayal of the WSPU and its leaders by two long-time activists. Hertha Ayrton, for example, wrote to Gawthorpe a few days after the first issue was published, condemning her for her “vile attack on Miss Pankhurst,” which Ayrton saw as a betrayal of a colleague.<sup>177</sup> Based on the writing in *The Freewoman* another reader, Catherine Corbett, inferred that “[t]o turn round and stab in the back those who have shown us all a thousand kindnesses may be the goal of a ‘Feminist,’ but will not be the ambition of the ‘Suffragette’.”<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> See DiCenzo, Delap, and Ryan, *Feminist Media History*; Garner, *Stepping Stones*; See, for example, Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*.

<sup>176</sup> Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 93.

<sup>177</sup> Ayrton to Gawthorpe, November 26, 1911. Box 2, folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>178</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 31.

However, as on other matters, the positions on suffrage expressed by the editors and contributors were more complex than these letters would suggest. Reading Marsden's writing, it is evident she did not think very highly of the Pankhursts, especially Christabel, and found their organization's operation tyrannical and an impediment to women's individual development, a view that some were rankled by, but others found quite accurate. She saw the militant agitation for the vote as pointless, devoid of political insight, and exhibiting a discrepancy between methods and goals. The WSPU's militant and illegal actions seemed to Marsden inconsistent with the demand for a constitutional right. She did, however, credit the suffragettes with generating a large non-militant movement.

Marsden's understanding of the significance of the vote, and the connection between it and feminism, was a different and more nuanced matter. To Marsden the suffrage was a "branch issue" to feminism, a limb severed from a body to the detriment of both. She did not see enfranchisement as integrally connected to the identity of *freewoman*, and yet she insisted that "considering the circumstances and conditions ... it is inevitable that feminists should insistently be demanding votes."<sup>179</sup> Some of the correspondents agreed, one of them writing: "Those of us who regard Feminism as the goal must naturally judge Suffragism by a Feminist standard. In other words, we support Woman's Suffrage simply because it is a step in the direction of Feminism."<sup>180</sup> The notion of feminism as necessarily including suffragism, but not vice versa, was held by other feminists of this period, though the qualification that suffrage is only a step,

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<sup>179</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3-4.

<sup>180</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 90.

and the fact that feminism as a goal is not defined here in terms of any specific political gains, reflect an idea of feminism that is uncommonly open-ended and fluid for the time.<sup>181</sup>

Central as the connections and distinctions between feminism and suffragism were in the process of constructing feminism as an identity and a political creed, what grabbed the attention of *Freewoman* readers was the criticism of the WSPU in the journal, which many of them perceived as unjust, hostile, and detrimental to the Cause. The reaction amounted, in Marsden's terms, to bullying, but Marsden was emphatic on the necessity of criticism. As she put it in a response to a letter from a reader following the first issue:

One correspondent wonders at our temerity still to uphold the right to form an independent judgement, and to maintain the indefeasible right to criticise openly the actions of a public body. She appears amazed that we have not been struck down with hopelessness in view of the oblivion which she implies has befallen an earlier critic. She appears not to understand that with people who think and feel and keep alive the last power to flicker out is the power to judge and criticise and to shape actions accordingly. We shall be very dead indeed when our powers in this direction are stayed.<sup>182</sup>

Mary Gawthorpe, who was a more prominent figure in the WSPU, and whose co-editorship of *The Freewoman* therefore aroused stronger feelings of betrayal among WSPU members, wrote an editorial addressed to the WSPU, insisting on the importance of space to voice criticism and dissent: "What member of the W.S.P.U. dare assert and defend, on higher

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<sup>181</sup> See Snowden, *The Feminist Movement*.

<sup>182</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 23.

grounds than those of immediate party advantage, that what a former colleague is prepared courageously to express and uphold shall *not* be expressed and upheld? ... I think it most essential that a vehicle for the expression of uncompromising and sincere opinions should exist.”<sup>183</sup> Both co-editors spoke to what they saw as the impetus to readers’ reactions; loyalty to the Union and its leaders, presumably resulting from a tyranny and “conscientiously directed affectional control” that stifled criticism and independent thought.<sup>184</sup> Denise Riley associates a growing antipathy towards “mass emotion” with the post-World War I era, arguing that it posed a serious risk to militant feminism.<sup>185</sup> As is evident from *The Freewoman*, distaste for the type of emotional engagement demanded by the suffragettes was present already before the war, though perhaps not expressed as openly as in later years. What provoked Marsden’s sometimes caustic responses (which of course had their own affective undercurrents) were both the ‘emotional’ and the ‘control’ aspects of the WSPU’s perceived emotional control; it was inimical to thought and to the radical democracy based in individual freedom that Marsden was aiming for without naming it explicitly.

That the atmosphere in the WSPU was un conducive to the development of feminist consciousness was one argument for the legitimacy and necessity of criticism; another was the value of criticism to the suffrage movement itself. In “Notes of the Week” in the second issue, Marsden pointed out that although the WSPU’s demonstrations were criticized, “its organisation and policy as a whole have never yet received adequate and well-intentioned criticism, and in

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<sup>183</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 41-42.

<sup>184</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 73.

<sup>185</sup> Riley, *Am I That Name?*, 60.

consequence it has become the happy meeting-ground of the sentimental and the unthinking.”<sup>186</sup> From her assertion that women’s enfranchisement is both inevitable and necessary, we can surmise that she saw the criticism put forth in *The Freewoman* as well-intentioned and possibly constructive. Though she emphasized that “it is not an essential part of our business as critics of a policy which we think wrong to supply an alternative,” Marsden did offer a concrete suggestion for the advancement of the suffrage cause – a pan-suffrage conference at which suffrage activists of all stripes will come to an acceptable agreement on an amendment to the Reform Bill which was being debated at the time.<sup>187</sup> Whereas many readers found the criticism offensive and divisive rather than constructive, WFL Treasurer Constance Tite wrote that while “[t]he furious letters in reply to your fearless criticism of the W.S.P.U. were, I fear, to be expected,” she was “grossly surprised that no one has as yet urged the value to the suffrage movement of frank criticism from convinced Suffragists.” She acknowledged the need for unity in the face of outside ‘enemies’, yet found it to have an adverse effect on the movement as a whole.<sup>188</sup>

The criticism expressed in *The Freewoman* about the methods and goals of the suffrage movement was also reflective of a fundamental divide at the level of identity and the meaning of citizenship. Suffrage activists agitated for the vote based on the perceived moral, emotional, and biological specificities of women, and on the notion that women’s common humanity with men

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<sup>186</sup> “Notes of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 23.

<sup>187</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 24.

<sup>188</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 90-91.



makes them entitled to the same rights. Marsden's vision of feminism, as will be explored below, stood in opposition to both these models, through her positioning of individual freedom as paramount, and the coining of the term 'freewoman' as an identity based on the special capacities of individual women.<sup>189</sup> Marsden's vision of feminism is close to the independent-radical model of citizenship, which foregrounds the right, even duty, of the citizen to resist a government that rules without the consent of its citizens.<sup>190</sup>

*The Freewoman's* conceptualization of feminism was not fixed; rather, it was constantly in the process of becoming. Examining it in itself, in terms of the definitions of and ideas about feminism offered in the paper, and their relationship to the identity of *freewomen*, as well as in relation to suffrage and citizenship, allows for an understanding of the ways in which it continued and also broke away from the main political discourse of the time. *The Freewoman's* feminism was also characterized by extensive writing about sexuality and sexual morality, a topic that will be expanded upon in chapter 3. Here I will touch on it inasmuch as it pertains to the definition of feminism in the journal. When looking at the various aspects of feminism in *The Freewoman*, it is apparent that Marsden's intention was to destroy or at least shake some of the fundamental ideas and identities on which much of the women's movement at the time was based, and to suggest paths or blueprints for new concepts, though they were partial, fragmentary, and unstable. In its content and style, *The Freewoman* embraced the fragmentary and changing nature of feminism, allowing these traits to be seen as constitutive rather than ones

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<sup>189</sup> Delap, "'Philosophical Vacuity and Political Ineptitude,'" 621.

<sup>190</sup> Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, 9–32.

to be overcome. Since feminism was still not a commonly used term in 1911 Britain, *The Freewoman*, labelling itself ‘a feminist review’, was engaged in exploring what feminism was, who it was for, and what it meant for individual and collective identities. These explorations were not always direct, and often operated through comparisons with suffrage, labour, and other women’s organizations. They also tended to be formulated and articulated through discourse amongst contributors, and between them and readers, both in the pages of *The Freewoman* and in forums such as the Discussion Circles. These intra- and extra-textual conversations were ways of embodying feminisms in different locations.

The fact that Marsden saw the paper as reflecting ‘the feminist movement’ implies that she thought of the movement as an already existing entity, if still a nascent one. But, however the movement was defined, *The Freewoman* was not intended as its organ, and Marsden was actually doubtful of the value of unity for women: “there is no essential virtue in unity, especially among women. We are becoming more convinced that women will have to move apart the better to come together in a wider understanding.”<sup>191</sup> In the context of the paper, this moving apart meant first of all opening up space for differing opinions, which was one of the main tenets of *The Freewoman*. An announcement of the new journal in *Votes for Women*, likely written by Marsden, states that

The editorial attitude will be taken upon the assumption that feminism has as yet no definite creed, and that even in respect of what would be regarded as its fundamental propositions the subject still bristles with interrogations ... In such circumstances,

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<sup>191</sup> *The Freewoman*, March 28, 1912, 377.

therefore, it has seemed that the next advance in the progress of feminism would be made through the encouragement of full and open discussion, and it is this encouragement which the new journal will provide.<sup>192</sup>

When this attitude garnered criticism from readers, the editors expressed their commitment, stating that “[u]nlike other journals which have an editorial point of view, we do not endeavour merely to secure opinions which support our own. We give direct encouragement to those who disagree with our views to state their case as openly as possible.”<sup>193</sup>

According to Marsden, feminism was an all-encompassing issue, or as she put it: “feminism is the whole issue, political enfranchisement a branch issue and the methods, militant or otherwise, are merely accidentals.”<sup>194</sup> It was a spiritual matter, concerned with the development of women’s consciousness, and intellectual freedom and individuality were fundamental to it. “Our journal will differ from all other journals devoted to the freedom of women,” Marsden noted in the first number; “They deal with something which women may acquire. We find our chief concern in what they may become.”<sup>195</sup> This emphasis on what women may *become* rather than what they may *acquire* creates a distinction between the equality that could be achieved in law, through the suffrage and other campaigns, and a more profound transformation. It was Marsden’s view that one of the most pressing needs for women, and the key to any type of freedom, was a shift in consciousness. Economic independence was central to

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<sup>192</sup> *Votes for Women*, November 17, 1911, 103.

<sup>193</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 55.

<sup>194</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

this change, mostly as creating the conditions for women to be separate spiritual beings, independently from men.<sup>196</sup> With women's periodicals at the time being mostly preoccupied with the struggle for the vote, *The Freewoman* was unique in being intellectual and feminist, as expressed by correspondent Mary Neilson Murray: "We who in some degree see what an infinitely greater thing it is that a woman should possess her own soul than that she should have the vote, look to THE FREEWOMAN for intellectual stimulus."<sup>197</sup> Another letter writer opined that "it is the first paper published in the name of women which has not been an insult to their intelligence."<sup>198</sup>

Feminism was also a sexual issue, on a number of levels. Women's reproductive capacities and rights, as well as prostitution and venereal diseases were discussed in *The Freewoman*, and were a topic of discussion in other circles and campaigns. But the paper also featured writing about sexual pleasure and on passion, sexual and otherwise, as a significant element in women's lives and development, indeed as integral to feminism. One of the contributors to *The Freewoman* describes feminists as "those who pay less attention to the securing of the vote—who are, indeed, not particularly anxious to vote at all—for the reason that their grievances are not of the economic but of the spiritual order ... They do not wish for economic freedom merely; but for sexual freedom."<sup>199</sup> And if some readers found the writing about sexuality excessive, Marsden defended it as only fitting for a paper that declares itself

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<sup>196</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 1-2; *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 21-22.

<sup>197</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 91.

<sup>198</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 51.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

‘feminist’: “We need to make a reference to an objection brought forward in a letter which we publish from a correspondent—i.e., the objection that our review is unduly concerned with the relationship between the sexes. It is an odd enough criticism of a journal which calls itself a feminist review. That it can be made arises from the difficulty of grasping the definition of Feminism, even when specifically defined.”<sup>200</sup>

Another key aspect of feminism in Marsden’s formulation was its provisional status, that of a stage in a process, not a goal in itself. As she understood it, feminism was concerned with the readjustment of the balance of sex relationships, which has been rendered necessary by the age-long acceptance of Masculinism, the present accepted, but not unchallenged, theory ... which acknowledges the domination of men in sex relationships and in all the various activities and spheres of labour ... It will thus be seen that we regard feminism, not as a final doctrine, but as a temporary theory of expedients and readjustments. Masculinism and Feminism are relative terms, and when one is strong enough to equate the other both will become merged in a common doctrine of Humanism.<sup>201</sup>

In May 1912 *The Freewoman* changed its subtitle to “A Weekly Humanist Review,” but the change was not accompanied by an explanation, and therefore it is impossible to know whether Marsden believed that masculinism and feminism had balanced each other out by that point. The tentativeness of the definition of feminism apparently frustrated some of the paper’s

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<sup>200</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 24.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

readers, who found its take on feminism simultaneously unclear and unsatisfactory. One such reader was Mary Higgs, who wrote: “Had I clearly understood what ‘feminism’ was supposed to stand for, I might have hesitated to contribute to the new magazine before satisfying myself as to its trend; I expected it to stand for a free and full discussion of the problems of womanhood, especially social problems.”<sup>202</sup>

In a letter to *The Freewoman*, designer and artist Eric Gill commented on the notion that gender should be as minor a consideration for women as it is for men: “May I offer you my sincere thanks for supplying, at last, a really clear definition of the meaning of ‘feminism’? You say: The Freewomen are those who consider ‘their sex just as much an incidental concern as men consider theirs.’ Now it is out, and the Virgin is dethroned! Now, she will be able to find time for intellectual attainments, for the mothering of the Son of God has been reduced to an incidental matter.”<sup>203</sup> This comment was likely sarcastic, reflecting both Gill’s religiosity (though this was prior to his conversion to Catholicism), and his belief that women should be primarily concerned with domestic matters and supportive of men, that they are poor abstract thinkers, and his ambivalence regarding ‘new’, unconventional women.<sup>204</sup> Nevertheless, it engaged with one strand of definitions of feminism, that which saw the ideal state of being as one that transcends gender. At the same time, it provides a glimpse of the anxieties around femininity and gender roles that feminism generated, and which were expressed in different ways in *The Freewoman*, largely through concerns about motherhood, declining birthrates, and the desirability of women

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<sup>202</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 52.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>204</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 51–73.

to men. The unease with the non-gendered human that some feminists envisioned as a desired development was evident in the writing of contemporary feminists, such as a note on language in Helena Swanwick's book *The Future of the Feminist Movement* (1913). Swanwick writes that while she refers to 'humans' in her book, "the common pronoun is non-existent and I have not used the neuter, lest it should alarm nervous persons. Perhaps when we have got over the panic fear of unsexing ourselves, we may find it safe to speak of a human, just as we do of a baby, as 'it'."<sup>205</sup>

Though the mainstream view at the time was of the sexes as distinct and complementary, the proposition that gender may be transcended, or that the attachment to clear-cut gender categories results from fear, was in circulation in some radical circles.<sup>206</sup> Edward Carpenter, for example, saw what he termed an 'intermediate sex' – those who transcended clear-cut gender distinctions and mixed male and female traits – as the leaders of the utopian Free Society.<sup>207</sup> Challenging notions of binary gender was compatible with Carpenter's notion of Larger Socialism, concerned principally with a holistic transformation of all the relationships between people.<sup>208</sup> Later, in the interwar period, Dora Russell advocated political transformation through sexual reform, stressing the political significance of birth control as well as sexual freedom and pleasure. Her ideas pointed to the possibility of personal and social transcendence through sex, bringing the body and its experiences into the realm of the political.<sup>209</sup> These

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<sup>205</sup> Swanwick, *The Future of the Women's Movement*, vii.

<sup>206</sup> Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950*, 187.

<sup>207</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 116–23.

<sup>208</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (Verso, 2009), 315.

<sup>209</sup> Stephen Brooke, "The Body and Socialism: Dora Russell in the 1920s," *Past & Present* 189, no. 1 (2005): 147–77.

thinkers saw the goal of feminism not as creating a politics rooted in strict ideas of gender distinctions and focused on the public sphere, but as transcending gender and class identities through a connection between the private and the public, politicizing corporeal and spiritual experiences. Marsden's understanding of feminism and masculinism as relative, and as being steps towards humanism, can thus be seen in this light not as a lack of commitment to feminism, but as trying to establish it on a different foundation. The notion of feminism separate from gender identities highlights it not as a singular political doctrine, but as a constant process of questioning and troubling, with the potential of multiple feminisms existing simultaneously.

Yet for many readers, *The Freewoman's* feminism, despite the blurriness of its parameters, or precisely because of it, came as a welcome addition to the political and discursive landscape. A reader named Florence Harris, for example, wrote that "THE FREEWOMAN supplies a need of which we feminists were only subconscious until its appearance."<sup>210</sup> She was not alone in relating a sense of a void that has been filled by the journal, even as the nature of this void remained unarticulated. Robena Nicholson, president of the North Middlesex Women's Suffrage Society similarly wrote: "The paper was badly needed, and it is a most satisfactory threepenn'orth ... It will be a real pleasure to help you. I feel so keenly that we must do all we can to further any Feminist movement in England and her colonies."<sup>211</sup> Marsden's own writing does not refer to feminism in a national or colonial context, but the fact that readers connected feminism to national and imperial ideologies shows the term to be open enough to be taken up in

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<sup>210</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 30.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*



a variety of ways.<sup>212</sup> Other readers, while expressing their disagreement with some of the editors' and contributors' views, still said that they had longed for a feminist paper, and one even stated that she hoped her disagreements will find "a vent" in the pages of *The Freewoman*.<sup>213</sup> Such comments were not uncommon in the first numbers of the journal, suggesting that there was desire, especially among women, for an open venue to communicate their views. This may also be related to women's not having the confidence to write to and for the socialist press, to which Karen Hunt points.<sup>214</sup> It is plausible that women found an intellectual and political review more accessible when it termed itself feminist and was edited by women.

Feminism in *The Freewoman* was closely connected to the identity of *freewomen*, and indeed although references to feminism and feminists were common in the journal, it was the term 'freewoman' that came to embody its emerging feminist ideology. And much like *The Freewoman*'s feminism, the *freewoman* herself was not a clearly defined being, which Marsden readily admitted in the very opening of the first number, acknowledging that people may ask: "Who are the Freewomen?' Where are the women of whom and for whom you write who are free? Can they be pointed out, or named by name? There must be, say, ten in the British Isles. The question is pertinent enough, but it is difficult to answer."<sup>215</sup> Marsden then pointed to theatre actress Ellen Terry as the one *freewoman* who can be named. The stated reason for choosing Terry was that as a public figure, her mention was 'impersonal'. But there are other aspects of

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<sup>212</sup> It seems that Marsden had no interest in feminism as part of an imperial endeavour purported to improve the lives of women in across the Empire. This view was expressed in fiction published in *The Freewoman*, but there is no indication that it was reflective of the editor's position.

<sup>213</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 28, 1911, 112.

<sup>214</sup> Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, 16.

<sup>215</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 1.

Terry's life that could explain the choice; the fact that Terry was a successful actress was probably significant to Marsden, as was her relative sexual and romantic freedom.<sup>216</sup> From this opening statement Marsden proceeded to expound on the characteristics of *freewomen* through a comparison to *bondwomen*. *Freewomen* were those who were individuals, or spiritually separate from men, the ones who had the capacity for freedom, though tautologically they were at one point referred to as the ones who were already free. The identity of the freewomen was further expounded on in the next issue, and from the description they emerge as financially independent, decidedly individualistic, unwilling to barter themselves for the protection of men, and having some level of "genius."<sup>217</sup>

In the first issue of *The Freewoman*, Marsden clarified what she meant by 'genius': "anyone who has an individual and personal vision of life in any sphere has the essential attribute of genius, and those who have not this individual realisation are without genius." The ultimate expression of this faculty was to be through art, although this was framed broadly as to potentially include philosophical and theoretical writing.<sup>218</sup> Although the definition was somewhat loose, it is clear that to Marsden, not all women were equal, not all had even the potential to be free. In some of her writing Marsden implies that the freewomen will be leaders, but it is not clear what kind of leadership this would be (i.e., political, spiritual, or other), and under what political conditions. From her correspondence with Gawthorpe several months before

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<sup>216</sup> Michael R. Booth, "Terry, Dame Ellen Alice (1847–1928)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/view/article/36460>.

<sup>217</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 1-2; November 30, 1911, 21-22.

<sup>218</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 21.

the paper was established it appears that the main tenet of this ‘personal vision’ was the capacity for judgement and critique, combined with responsibility. Gawthorpe was responding to Marsden’s complaint that the women who were involved with the WSPU had ceased to exercise their judgement, to which Gawthorpe countered that very few women have used their judgement before the WSPU, and offered her thoughts on Marsden’s plan: “I agree that this is the next step: judgement and responsibility. Your view that the right way of accomplishing this end is by undermining belief in other judgements is not however an intellectual judgement of the same class.”<sup>219</sup> While women at the time were increasingly involved in activism on social and political issues, public ridicule and social sanctions deterred many of them from expressing their critique publicly. For Marsden, what set the *freewomen* apart was the element of responsibility, including the willingness to endure these sanctions, and she therefore saw feminism and the life of a *freewoman* as a hard and demanding path rife with sacrifices.<sup>220</sup>

The references to *freewomen* as a select type of women who, whether innately or by virtue of choice and training, were capable of exercising their judgement and freeing themselves has led scholars to view *The Freewoman* as elitist, which is often supported by the relatively high price of the paper.<sup>221</sup> If the journal was elitist, it was so not so much in terms of class, but in its conception of women having different potentials, and of freedom as the province of those who are willing to defy social conventions, and assume responsibility for the repercussions. However, even within Marsden’s own writing there was a tension between an individualist view and a

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<sup>219</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, June 4, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>220</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 1-2; November 30, 1911, 21-22.

<sup>221</sup> DiCenzo, Delap, and Ryan, *Feminist Media History*, 164–65.

recognition of the influence of social and economic circumstances upon women: “we consider that so many women appear ordinary, not because they are born ordinary, but because they are bundled pell-mell into a sphere in which they can show no special gift; and because they are expected to be so bundled, they are deprived of that training which would enable ... to become artists.”<sup>222</sup> From published and unpublished correspondence we learn as well that the readers of the journal were a heterogeneous group, who varied in class and educational background no less than in political opinion and in approaches to feminism. In a letter addressed to Grace Jardine which was not published, a reader and a friend of Jardine’s from Chorlton, a suburb of Manchester, wrote that she “liked the first copy very well, it [*sic*] rather learned for one of the unelect like me. But as long as it doesnt [*sic*] get any worse I’ll manage it.”<sup>223</sup> The use of ‘unelect’ here likely indicates not belonging to an elite, perhaps to those of working-class background who, like Marsden and Gawthorpe, had a chance to get a university education. She did, however, identify with the aims of the journal and supported it, despite the difference she perceived between *The Freewoman*’s ideal reader and herself. When other readers who wrote to the paper referred to their class background, the majority of the times it was to indicate that they were working class, and they sometimes accompanied this by apologies for not being sophisticated or educated to a standard that they perceived to be expected by the editors, though this did not deter them from consuming and contributing to *The Freewoman*. Despite its presumed elitism, the paper actually kept a strong socialist bent, consistently highlighting the

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<sup>222</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 21.

<sup>223</sup> N.A. to Grace Jardine, November 27, 1911. Box 2, folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

connections between gender and class oppression, and maintained connections in labour, socialist, and anarchist circles.

What is understood as an appeal to a select group of unique women, based on the identity of ‘freewomen’ and on its editors’ statements, has caused *The Freewoman* to be viewed not only as elitist, but also as anti-feminist. However, I see the fact that it did not purport to speak for or to all women as an approach that allows for more diversity within the feminist community. Not trying to impose a standard or group all women together is a recognition of differences and their political significance. I offer that contrary to Bruce Clarke’s portrayal of Marsden’s focus as essentially more individualistic than feminist; the two were not conflicting but mutually constitutive in the conceptualization of feminism *The Freewoman* put forth.<sup>224</sup>

Another reason for the mixed interpretations of Marsden’s stance on feminism is her writing style, which was often ironic and sarcastic. In “Bondwomen,” for example, she presents the current state of women, employing the same arguments used by anti-feminists against the women’s movement. But Marsden explained in the same issue that this was a rhetorical device rather than a reflection of her own opinion.<sup>225</sup> Bruce Clarke sees this style as part of a technique for generating debates in *The Freewoman*, which he describes as “an extreme, provocative declaration on a given issue, generating some surprise, some shock and resistance, followed by reflection, redefinition and dialectical development of the issue.”<sup>226</sup> Clarke’s analysis presents Marsden’s polemical style as an entirely calculated rhetoric, but while it is evident that Marsden

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<sup>224</sup> Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 56–57.

<sup>225</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3.

<sup>226</sup> Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 58.

was being deliberately provocative in her writing, her style is also reflective of the tentative state of feminism at the time. It is also worth noting that this rhetoric was not unique to Marsden; expressing contempt for women in their current state was common in the feminist circles of her time on both sides of the Atlantic, and was used before her by Mary Wollstonecraft, and later in the century by Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>227</sup> Both the content and style are in keeping with Marsden's feminism, speaking to a minority, seeking to raise objections and debate, and exemplifying the disdain that *freewomen* were subject to. The editors were themselves ridiculed by readers, and in some instances published the derisive comments, sometimes with their response. One correspondent referred to Marsden and Gawthorpe as "monstrous and horribly cantankerous young cats."<sup>228</sup> Contempt came not only from men but from other women, including those committed to women's rights. Nina Boyle, a WFL activist and later one of the pioneers of the women's police force, shared in a letter to *The Freewoman* her thoughts on the periodical and on feminists:

*Please go on! You cannot have any idea how funny you all are. I haven't laughed so much since I was young. No one would ever have dreamed that people of such portentous intellectuality could be so supremely—and quite unconsciously—diverting. And as it doesn't seem to have struck you, I am sure you will be very glad to be told of it ... What I am wondering is, whether the doctrine of 'feminism,' when finally disentangled ... from the sensational columns of THE FREEWOMAN, will result in a heavy crop of*

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<sup>227</sup> Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*, 87; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>228</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 91.

‘superwomen?’ Also whether ... they will cherish so lofty a disregard for the ordinary facts of human life, for a sense of humour, and for ideas of proportion, as the heralds of their advent, the editors?<sup>229</sup>

Despite the accusations on this and other occasions, the editors did not lose their sense of humour about feminism; in fact, Bruce Clarke notes the “insurrectionary humor” in Marsden’s writing.<sup>230</sup> Their response, coming most likely from Marsden’s pen, was: “Miss Boyle's hilarity is infectious! Although at a loss for a reason, we are drawn into sharing her mirth. We hope it will similarly infect our readers, or, as Miss Boyle describes us all, ‘the dull dogs.’ It is Christmas, and at such times the dogs should not be dull!”<sup>231</sup>

The impatience with the current state of women was also related to the focus that Marsden placed on feminism as a process, and on the identity and personality of *freewomen* as being in constant change. Riley’s comment on ‘women’ as a category holds true for *freewomen* as well: “If ‘women’ can be credited with having a tense, then it is a future tense.”<sup>232</sup> With the paramountcy placed on what women may become rather than what they may acquire, this feminism alluded to a constant process, an ever-changing identity, perhaps towards an entity that transcends gender, perhaps towards a different end-goal. Marsden never stated clearly what she saw as the goal of feminism; this could indicate that it was unclear even to her, but is more likely a way of keeping the concept of feminism fluid, not only in that it was not fixed *as yet*, but also

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>230</sup> Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 10.

<sup>231</sup> *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 92.

<sup>232</sup> Riley, *Am I That Name?*, 47.

that it was not meant to be fixed. This concept of feminism highlighted the non-fixity of women's character, and by extension of gender categories, and generated a fair amount of commentary that reveals an anxiety about the implications of feminism for femininity, gender relations, and sexuality.

Even if the new vocabulary and identities of the early twentieth century marked, as Nancy Cott suggests, feminism's embarkation on a modern agenda, still not all activists for the various causes related to women identified as 'feminists', and even those who did often used the term to denote a wide range of beliefs and attitudes.<sup>233</sup> This multiplicity was perceived as a threat to the solidarity or unity that many believed was essential to the survival and success of feminism, whatever form it might take, and feminists found ways to balance the needs for change and solidarity: "A new understanding was needed, which Feminists proposed by making individuality and heterogeneity among women their principles yet holding these in abeyance by acting in sex solidarity."<sup>234</sup> *The Freewoman* diverged from this pattern, as it embraced, even actively amplified, the complexity and heterogeneity of feminism, the very elements that were potentially 'destructive'. The lack of faith in unity was interpreted by some as a disavowal of the values in whose name solidarity was usually sought and promoted, as evidenced by the way the left-wing *Daily Herald* announced *The New Freewoman*: "It is an intellectual acid, eating up the empty concepts which consume the energies of the workers to no purpose; Right, Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and the rest."<sup>235</sup> The use of the acid metaphor to describe *The*

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<sup>233</sup> Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 4.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>235</sup> *The Daily Herald*, December 6, 1913, 6.



*Freewoman*'s successor underlines the power and potential corrosiveness of the intellectual work of both papers. Yet more than leaving a void, resisting unifying values opened the possibility of basing politics, culture, and activism on ever-changing grounds. While this instability posed challenges or even threats to feminism, Marsden attempted to make it into a constructive force, a fertile ground for shifting consciousness through dialogue and debate, and through opening up and leaving open a multiplicity of feminisms.

Marsden saw herself and the *freewomen* to whom she thought feminism should appeal as a vanguard, and in many respects their views on women's state and gender relations were indeed advanced, constituting the uniquely modern agenda to which Cott refers. The attempt not only to define feminism, but to theorize it in a holistic way in writing, was itself a relatively new endeavour, for as Philippa Levine points out, Victorian feminism was not without a theoretical basis, but it was a theory in doing rather than writing.<sup>236</sup> However, Levine's cautioning about the treatment of certain groups of activists as vanguard is, I believe, relevant here as well. Treating a certain milieu as a "vanguard of awareness" runs the risk of submitting to a dualistic view that ascribes a correct or preferred form of resistance to a select few. "Notions of vanguard," Levine notes, "implicitly place a favoured group beyond ideology, beyond discourse, outside their culture."<sup>237</sup> *The Freewoman* was certainly not outside of the culture and discourse of its day, but rather shows continuities with and changes from the intellectual, political, and cultural context in which it operated. Part of this nuanced relationship with its environment was its use of emotions

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<sup>236</sup> Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, 10–11.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

and culture as a form of resistance, and the type of communication and discourse they allowed, as will be explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2 ‘Intellectual Acid’: Cultural Resistance, Cultural Citizenship, and Emotional (Counter)Community in *The Freewoman*

The exploration of *The Freewoman*’s definitions and theorizing of feminism and its relationship with the suffrage movement highlight a key feature of this periodical, namely its attempt to connect feminism to culture, and to construct feminism as a culture in itself. This chapter will focus on *The Freewoman*’s relation to culture, as well as its role as a countercultural periodical – one that resisted hegemonic ideas and styles – and on the creation of an emotional (counter)community. In referring to culture I follow Raymond Williams’ understanding of the word as having two senses: “a whole way of life – the common meanings” and “the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort.” Williams emphasizes that while some scholars use ‘culture’ in one of these senses, he insists “on both, and on the significance of their conjunction.”<sup>238</sup> Indeed, *The Freewoman* was cultivating a view of feminism as a way of life that encompassed both these meanings, as Marsden encouraged the expression of both traditional and novel perspectives, endeavouring to connect everyday life to a vision of a feminist, perhaps utopian, future. Under Williams’ general framework of ‘culture’, I will be looking at three main ideas of culture and community: cultural resistance and counterculture; cultural citizenship; and emotional countercommunity. These are, to my mind, aspects of this periodical that are central to its feminist politics, and yet have not been examined in depth. As

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<sup>238</sup> Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” 11.

mentioned in the introduction, literary modernism, which is often highlighted in studies about *The Freewoman's* connection to culture, will not be taken up here.

As well as the conjunction between the common and the creative, culture for Williams is also the name given to the interaction between patterns created in the individual mind and those created through relationships. Rather than seeing the individual and society as occupying either side of a binary, Williams discusses individuation as occurring within a “social process.” Individuals interact with this process differently based on their unique potentialities and history, but the formation of the autonomous self is always radically influenced by the social process, and the individual can in turn change or modify this process,<sup>239</sup> such that the relationship between the individual and society can be thought of as progressing in a spiral.

Similar ideas can be found in *The Freewoman* in relation to the development of feminist subjectivities. The stress in the periodical was on women's individuation process as a route to freedom, which physician, pioneer English psychoanalyst, and contributor David M. Eder<sup>240</sup> understood at the time as striving towards “an entity separate from all other entities, with relationships towards no other individual, associating with none, linked to no one, bound to nothing.”<sup>241</sup> Marsden, however, was clear that “[t]he word ‘freedom’ postulates relationships. It has no meaning apart from them. Alone on a desert island a person can neither be ‘free’ nor ‘not-free.’ Dr. [sic] Eder is thinking of ‘isolation,’ which we did not mention.”<sup>242</sup> Though Marsden's

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<sup>239</sup> Raymond Williams, “Individuals and Societies,” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 73–74.

<sup>240</sup> S Ellesley, “Eder, (Montague) David (1865–1936),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/view/article/61592>.

<sup>241</sup> M.D. Eder, “Doth a Man Travail with Child?” *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 33.

<sup>242</sup> “The Editors’ Reply,” *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 73.

writing about ‘freewomen’ and their role in society tends to be vague, it is clear that the idea was for such women to have an impact on social processes, perhaps in ways that would allow increasing numbers of women to become free. In this way, they are positioned as a sort of vanguard of change, even if their roles as such are not clearly defined.

‘Freewomen’, as described by Marsden, were those who had some type of genius, implying an original outlook on life and critique developed in the individual mind. But to impact their own and others’ lives, these unique features had to come into contact with others, as freedom would be meaningless in a state of isolation. Williams’ understanding of ‘culture’ as the name given to the relation between patterns created in the mind and those created through relationships is useful here, as it highlights the role of both art and everyday practices in the construction of subjectivity; culture in this sense mediates between individuals and society, but is also constitutive of both.<sup>243</sup> Williams also notes that between ‘individual’ and ‘society’ there are other levels of relationship, such as ‘community’ and ‘association’.<sup>244</sup> These relations – similar to ‘culture’ – are mediatory as well as formative, as will be demonstrated later in the chapter through the exploration of *The Freewoman* as cultural resistance, and as an emotional community.

An announcement appearing in *The Daily Herald* on 6 December 1913, as noted earlier, promised its readers that the current issue of *The New Freewoman* “contains a powerful interpretation of the insurrectionist movement,” labelling the journal “an intellectual acid,”

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<sup>243</sup> Williams, “Individuals and Societies,” 65.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

meant to consume such concepts as “Rights, Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and the rest.”<sup>245</sup> The metaphor of intellectual acid, suggesting an active, even violent, attack on values perceived as the basis of democracy, also captures something fundamental about *The Freewoman*. The view of *The Freewoman* taken here is of the periodical as a countercultural product and space, one that challenged many of the hegemonic values of its time, and acted as a catalyst for change in consciousness and norms. I will proceed to examine its function as a form of cultural resistance, the relationship between culture and citizenship created in the periodical, and the emotional countercommunity and (counter)culture created in and through it.

One of the features that distinguishes *The Freewoman* from many women’s and feminist periodicals of its time is precisely its focus on culture, in both senses that Williams suggests: the emphasis on the role of art and artists, and culture in the everyday sense.<sup>246</sup> Feminism in *The Freewoman* was connected to various art forms, but also to spiritual matters, marriage, sexuality, as well as quotidian issues like women’s employment and housework, seeing them all as pertinent to an emerging culture and consciousness. It also served as a venue for the expression of both traditional, common views, and more radical ones, highlighting not only the two aspects of culture, but also the political importance and potential of their conjunction.<sup>247</sup>

What made *The Freewoman* countercultural is that it positioned itself against many of the mainstream and hegemonic values of its time, both within and outside the women’s movement. The journal labelled itself from its inception in 1911 a feminist, rather than suffrage or women’s,

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<sup>245</sup> *The Daily Herald*, December 6, 1913, 6.

<sup>246</sup> Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” 3.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

journal, and was critical of the suffrage campaign, mainly of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). In their attempts to secure for women a say in parliamentary politics, suffrage organizations generally accepted the principles that Jürgen Habermas has identified as key to the public sphere: rational discussion of common interests among private individuals, who were assumed to eventually reach consensus.<sup>248</sup> *The Freewoman* called these principles into question, particularly the emphasis placed upon unity and consensus for the sake of political expediency. One of the paper's stated purposes was to bring to light the multiplicity of voices that constituted feminism, and Marsden was clear that this intention did not align with the principles of the WSPU: "Freewomen principles and the W.S.P.U. regime are denial one of the other. Also there is no essential virtue in unity, especially amongst women. We are becoming more convinced that women will have to move apart the better to come together in a wider understanding."<sup>249</sup>

Furthermore, Marsden fully intended to raise objections, and envisioned the periodical as an arena in which ideas could be contested and oppositional opinions were welcome, with no necessary attempt at resolution. This poses a challenge to the notion of consensus as desirable or necessary for the public sphere to function, central to common understandings of the public sphere, and to Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. In the second issue of *The Freewoman*, Marsden answered some of the objections raised by readers, summing up her commentary thus: "Probably these [the editor's] replies will raise more objections than those they were put forward

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<sup>248</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 27–30.

<sup>249</sup> 'Superficial Unity and the W.S.P.U.,' *The Freewoman*, March 28, 1912, 377.

to meet, but if such is the case it will be not merely what was expected, but what is *hoped*.”<sup>250</sup>

*The Freewoman* also resisted the dominant style of public engagement, which was based on the exclusion of women and behaviours deemed ‘effeminate’ from the public sphere. Fraser points to historical research identifying the style of public discourse in France, England, and Germany since the eighteenth century as austere, rational, virtuous, and ‘manly’.<sup>251</sup> *The Freewoman*, by contrast, gave centre stage to emotions and passions in both style and content, understanding the goals of feminism in terms of spiritual development, consciousness shift, and transcendence. The resistance was not only to the goals, tactics, and norms of discourse promoted by suffrage organizations, but also more broadly to the politics of the time. In “Notes of the Week” on 8 February 1912, for example, Marsden clarified her criticism of the representative system from the previous week, following a letter from a reader. The correspondent suggested that what Marsden intended to criticize was the party system, and not the representative system in general. To this Marsden responded by pointing to the fallacy that the system is founded on basic equality. As she saw it, the representative system “is based on the theory that one man is as good as his neighbour, whereas the truth is that one man, in the presence of his neighbour, *cancels out*. His neighbour gobbles him up, and if he ‘represents’ any others, these others are gobbled up with him.” She also noted the connections between capital and parliamentary politics, which distanced elected politicians even further from representing their constituents. The Notes ended with a view to a broader horizon for democracy, though its

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<sup>250</sup> ‘Commentary on Bondwomen,’ *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 22.

<sup>251</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 59–60.



exact parameters remained vague: “Democracy would seem to be at its tether's end. It need not be, for the Representative System, as we know it, and to which democracy has blindly trusted, is neither the first word nor the last word in real democratic progress.”<sup>252</sup> The anti-capitalist tone in *The Freewoman* became clearer over time, and Marsden believed that it was that, rather than any other controversial material, that made the periodical threatening to the point of being boycotted.<sup>253</sup> This may have been the case, and, if so, highlights an influence of capital on the press and public discourse that sounds eerily timely in the twenty-first century. But the reason for the boycott could also have been *The Freewoman*'s broad resistance to political and social norms, which extended into the realm of sexuality, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

## 2.1 Cultural Resistance and Counter-Culture

One aspect of *The Freewoman*'s being a countercultural periodical and placing itself in opposition to mainstream ideas of the public sphere, is its function as what Nancy Fraser has termed a counterpublic; a public existing contemporaneously with the hegemonic bourgeois public of Habermas's notion of a public sphere, and challenging it. A counterpublic proffers an alternative style of behaviour, and highlights the multiplicity of publics actually in operation despite the effort to constitute the bourgeois public sphere as the only one.<sup>254</sup> By doing so, counterpublics also stand as a reminder of the processes of marginalizing and silencing through which one public sphere becomes hegemonic. ‘Counter’ in this sense can also be used as a verb,

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<sup>252</sup> “Notes of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, February 8, 1912, 224.

<sup>253</sup> “Notice to the Readers of ‘The Freewoman’,” *The Freewoman*, September 5, 1912, 311.

<sup>254</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 61.

denoting a dynamic process of resistance rather than a static stance. In *The Freewoman*'s case this was in line with a view of feminism as a constant political, social, and cultural process, developing through debate and dialogue, having no predefined end-goal, or possibly no end-goal at all.<sup>255</sup> *The Freewoman*'s capacity to form a counterpublic and sustain its dynamism is also strongly connected to print and to periodicals as a genre, specifically to its status as an independent review.<sup>256</sup> Habermas links the birth and decline of the bourgeois public sphere to the rise and subsequent commercialization of the press in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The growth of the periodical press and the reading public may have led to more heterogeneity, and in that sense threatened the hegemony of the bourgeois public sphere.<sup>257</sup> However, intellectual and modernist publications had a complex relationship with the mass press, resisting some of its features and adopting others.<sup>258</sup> As Mark Morrisson notes, some believed "that inexpensive mass distribution magazines and new promotional techniques could foster counter public spheres."<sup>259</sup> Morrisson sees suffrage and feminist periodicals, which he groups together, as a counterpublic sphere, arguing that *The Freewoman* had difficulty surviving in it.<sup>260</sup> However, Marsden and other contributors saw *The Freewoman* as oppositional to the suffrage papers, whether or not they were seen as counterpublics themselves, positioning it as one public in dialogue and/or resistance to others.

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<sup>255</sup> Marva Milo, "The Freewoman: Feminism, Dialogism and Women's Education," *Feral Feminisms* 1, no. 1 (November 2013): 22.

<sup>256</sup> Beetham, "Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre."

<sup>257</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 181–82.

<sup>258</sup> Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism*, 5–8.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

*The Freewoman* was an evolving counterpublic, one that had the potential of developing in different directions and into different publics, through the interactivity of the periodical, and especially its extensive and lively correspondence section. Indeed, after several months it seems that readers had some difficulty determining in which direction the journal was going, as evidenced by this editors' announcement:

It has been pointed out to us by friendly critics that THE FREEWOMAN contains each week matter so highly debatable, and of such serious human import, that it is difficult to digest all that it contains, and to find one's bearings, in view of the many articles which express opposing points of view.<sup>261</sup>

The solution suggested was to establish "informal gatherings of men and women," which upon their establishment were named Freewoman Discussion Circles, that would use the weekly issue as a basis for discussion.<sup>262</sup> That these circles were open to both men and women was reflective of Marsden's view of feminism; she stressed from the start that the periodical sought both men and women as readers and contributors. The space created, then, was a feminist, rather than a women-only space, one defined by ideology or theory rather than by gender, recognizing men as feminists (not only supporters of women's struggles for rights), as well as the connection between gender-based oppression and other forms of oppression.

*The Freewoman* also became a form of cultural resistance; simultaneously a cultural product and a space in which passions could be explored and expressed, and politics could be

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<sup>261</sup> 'Freewoman Clubs,' *The Freewoman*, February 15, 1912, 244.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

created outside of formal mechanisms. It was a counterpublic created through essays, fiction, and the critique of art and culture, among other elements. In this sense, the journal embodies what Stephen Duncombe sees as the radical potential of cultural resistance to “provide a sort of ‘free space’ for developing ideas and practices.” In this space, freed from the restrictions of dominant culture, one can “experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance,” which can foster community building. Duncombe notes that cultural resistance can be a path into political activism, or function as political resistance in itself.<sup>263</sup>

*The Freewoman*’s opposition to many of the hegemonic ideas of its time has led to an understanding of it as an anarchist periodical, both in its own time and by later scholars. In 1912, an announcement in the *Herald of Revolt*, a monthly edited by Guy Aldred and subtitled “An Organ of the Coming Social Revolution” noted of *The Freewoman*: “The whole tenor of this excellent journal is Anarchistic, and we hope to draw attention to its editorial boldness at an early stage.”<sup>264</sup> More recently, Matthew Thomas has written about *The Freewoman* as an anarcho-feminist journal.<sup>265</sup> *The Freewoman*’s complex position in relation to the state and political mechanisms, especially as it pertained to women’s rights, as discussed in chapter 1, would make it inaccurate, in my view, to label it anarchist. The opinions expressed in it were at times supportive of the state, on labour issues as well as women’s enfranchisement, even if Marsden presented this support as intended to clear the way for more critical issues. Some

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<sup>263</sup> Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader*, 5–6.

<sup>264</sup> *The Herald of Revolt*, February 1, 1912, 13.

<sup>265</sup> Matthew Thomas, “Anarcho-Feminism in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, 1880–1914,” *International Review of Social History* 47 (2002): 1–31.

contributors were opposed to pro-anarchist opinions, mostly pointing to the necessity of government to ensure the safety of people, such as one correspondent, James Fowler Shone, who expressed concern over the risk of anarchy resulting in oppression based on brute force. He saw democracy as closest to the authority of the people as a whole, the best form of government given the unrealistic nature of “the dream of a perfectly wise and perfectly disinterested man (and the still wilder dream of such a woman!).”<sup>266</sup>

*The Freewoman* did not adhere to anarchist views, but it certainly had an ‘anarchistic’ bent, highly critical of the existing political system and its claims to being a democracy, and seeking a change of existing conditions. As time went on the periodical was increasingly critical of government, and while some utopian ideas, mostly along the lines of the ‘back to the land’ movement, were discussed, the emphasis was on individual consciousness. The connection of *The Freewoman* to anarchist ideas, then, shifted over time, and it is also difficult to generalize about it because of the multiple voices present in the periodical. If it did not put forth a clear statement of its vision for a new order, *The Freewoman* did reflect what its contemporary, anarchist writer Emma Goldman, saw as common to all anarchists – the belief that the solution to current evils “can be brought about only through the consideration of *every phase* of life,— individual, as well as the collective; the internal, as well as the external phases.”<sup>267</sup> In this sense, Goldman’s understanding of anarchism, which she also dubbed “the only philosophy which brings to man a consciousness of himself” is reminiscent of Dora Marsden’s view of feminism as

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<sup>266</sup> James Fowler Shone, “Anarchy, Democracy, and ‘The Freewoman’” (letter to the editor), *The Freewoman*, September 12, 1912, 328.

<sup>267</sup> Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 56.

all encompassing, related to the external circumstances of women's lives, but relying as a necessary component on a change of consciousness (in Marsden's case, specifically the consciousness of women, which was not Goldman's focus).<sup>268</sup> This shift was meant to be fostered by the community created in and through *The Freewoman*.

Counterpublic or countercommunity building in *The Freewoman* happened through the theorization of feminism, criticism of suffrage, and the construction of *freewoman* as an identity, as well as thorough emphasis on the role of art in feminist consciousness and politics more broadly. Contributors to the journal used art to speak about and criticize mainstream discourses, but they also sought in artistic works models and visions for social change, and a formative element in constructing a feminist identity. Henrik Ibsen's and George Bernard Shaw's plays, for example, were discussed as significant to feminism in their representation of the plight of women in a patriarchal society, as well as presenting alternatives. An article on Shaw's play *Getting Married* (1908), for instance, praised the diversity of views on marriage and gender relations the play portrayed, though critiquing the absence of spinsters from the cast of characters.<sup>269</sup>

Women authors and their works were discussed explicitly in terms of the impact they might have on women's consciousness. Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* (1911) was referenced by contributors and readers as an influential text in shaping their understanding of women's economic position – particularly the notion that so long as women are financially dependent they are living as 'parasites', and that women must be involved in all branches of

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>269</sup> G.R.S. Taylor, "The Gospel According to Shaw," *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 27.

labour.<sup>270</sup> Actress and playwright Cicely Hamilton was also referenced as an influential voice on matters related to feminism and suffrage; Shaw, for example, claimed to “follow Plato and Miss Cicely Hamilton” in his views on the vote as a means for establishing women’s citizenship,<sup>271</sup> and Hamilton’s 1911 play *Just to Get Married* was labelled by another contributor “the most typical feminist play of our day and generation.”<sup>272</sup> Danish author Karin Michaëlis’ novel *The Dangerous Age*, whose protagonist goes into the ‘sex trade’, was reviewed as a “sure diagnosis of the conditions under which woman exists, and an acute observation of the woman-soul, or character, which such conditions have produced.”<sup>273</sup> The reviewer used the novel to criticize the social mores that force women to repress their sexual desire, concluding that the lesson to be learned is that “women must be free—free to work and free to love,” with the end-goal being a mix of individual fulfillment and becoming better partners and mothers.<sup>274</sup>

Visual arts, though discussed less frequently in *The Freewoman*, were also part of the construction of feminist identity. A review of an Old Masters exhibition in the Grafton Galleries, though it did not directly connect the works to politics, still had a feminist angle. Discussing a portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, it referred to her as the “pioneer freewoman,”<sup>275</sup> connecting the identity of a *freewoman* to a figure that was highly controversial at the time because of her

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<sup>270</sup> See, for example, “The Drudge,” *The Freewoman*, February 8, 1912, 222.

<sup>271</sup> G.B. Shaw, “Mr. Asquith will Die,” *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 47.

<sup>272</sup> G.L. Harding, “Feminism and the Propagandist Drama,” *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 78.

<sup>273</sup> C. Gasquoine Hartley, “‘The Dangerous Age.’ A tract for the Times,” *The Freewoman*, March 7, 1912, 309.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>275</sup> ‘B.A.S.’, ‘Notes on Art’, *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 78.

personal and sexual life.<sup>276</sup> Contributors also stressed the importance of “propagandist drama,”<sup>277</sup> which posed a challenge to the primacy of ‘art for art’s sake’, itself a classed and gendered idea that feminist cultural production has long worked against. Feminist literary critic Barbara Godard has made the point that feminist periodicals contest the association of cultural value with political and economic disinterestedness, part of a broader rejection of the distinction between culture and politics.<sup>278</sup> Williams similarly referred to the blurring of boundaries between ‘literary texts’ and ‘general cultural discourse’ as part of the avant-garde project, and this blurring is seen in the way that literature and drama were connected to politics and to everyday life in *The Freewoman*.<sup>279</sup>

The inseparability of culture from politics was also manifest in experiments in *The Freewoman* with “ways of being,” to use Duncombe’s phrase. Individuals associated in different ways with *The Freewoman* made choices that defied social conventions and connected them to earlier and contemporary bohemians, living their personal resistance in their everyday lives. This was not usually made visible to readers, though some of them revealed aspects of their personal life in their writing, as some examples in chapter 3 show. Oppositional everyday practices are a way for members of society to contest its norms and values. Referring to the relationship between individuals and societies and the ways that these relations are mediated and constructed

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<sup>276</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>277</sup> G.L. Harding, ‘Feminism and the Propagandist Drama,’ *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 76-78.

<sup>278</sup> Barbara Godard, “Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value: The Canadian Context,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 25, no. 2 (2002): 211–13.

<sup>279</sup> Raymond Williams, “Language and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. Jim McGuigan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 292.



through culture, Williams argues that the patterns of a culture are congenial to most members of society. Some members, however, will not conform to these patterns, and within that group he terms the ones who present an oppositional position and struggle for a different society ‘rebels’.<sup>280</sup> For the people involved in *The Freewoman*, part of this resistance was displayed through a rejection of sexual mores: Marsden and some of the other women central to the periodical, for example, led a woman-centred life that could place them on the continuum of lesbian or queer existence.<sup>281</sup> Guy Aldred, a socialist and anarchist writer and editor who contributed to and strongly supported *The Freewoman*, lived a bohemian life, in a free union with fellow anarchist Rose Witcop. As he put it when inviting Grace Jardine (who was part of the *Freewoman* editorial group, though given official credit only in the last issue) to visit them:

if you came down here I think you would enjoy things. For we are all friends & live in Bohemia. ... my friend, Miss Witcop & myself, whilst believing in freedom & being chums rather than anything else, without being indifferent to each other live without restraint.<sup>282</sup>

Deborah Cohler notes that suffrage organizations, militant and moderate alike, promoted a conservative sexuality, and “worked hard to keep discussions of all but the most conservative and traditional sexuality out of their organizations.” She places *The Freewoman* as one of a number of renegade groups promoting alternative, queer sexual discourses and

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<sup>280</sup> Williams, “Individuals and Societies,” 72–78.

<sup>281</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–60.

<sup>282</sup> Guy Aldred to Grace Jardine, July 19, 1912. Box 2 folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

possibilities.<sup>283</sup> This is reflected in the lives of the people related to the periodical, and also in the type of emotional community it created (to be examined in a later part of this chapter).

Dora Marsden's decision to base a livelihood on writing, particularly writing on topics and from perspectives that were likely to be controversial, was itself a divergence from bourgeois norms. Marsden left a well-paying and respectable position as a headmistress of a teacher training school to join the WSPU, then left to start an independent feminist periodical. Her later years saw her become increasingly isolated, until her eventual hospitalization in a mental institution.<sup>284</sup> This trajectory also entailed growing financial strains and declining health, both, as Virginia Nicholson has noted, not uncommon in bohemian circles.<sup>285</sup>

However, Duncombe contends that cultural resistance and counterpublics, along with what they have to offer as alternative ways of engaging in dissenting politics, can also be an escape from politics. The creation of a community that lives outside of and in opposition to hegemonic culture may seem to its members sufficient, and eliminate the impetus for more explicit political resistance.<sup>286</sup> Fraser points to Habermas' distinction between two types of publics: 'weak' ones, engaging in the exchange and contestation of opinions, but not in decision-making, and 'strong' ones, that attempt to influence the hegemonic public sphere through political decisions. This distinction assumed separation between the state and civil society, and focused on the capacity to influence decision-making in the context of the state. However, Fraser

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<sup>283</sup> Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain*, 73–79.

<sup>284</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit* (esp. pp. 155-188).

<sup>285</sup> Virginia Nicholson, *Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living 1900-1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 1–22.

<sup>286</sup> Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader*, 6.

sees the blurring of the line between civil society and the state as a democratic advance, and offers a post-bourgeois conception of the public sphere, one that allows for hybrid forms of strong and weak publics, as well as a broad variety of relations between them.<sup>287</sup>

*The Freewoman* had no intention of influencing parliamentary politics. As noted earlier, much of the material published in it (editorials, letters, and essays, some of them signed) was critical of the state and the representative parliamentary system. Rather than attempting to influence government decisions, or even the demands made by suffrage and other women's organizations, its editors and contributors often suggested radical alternatives that may now be described as utopian. Teresa Billington-Greig, founder of the Women's Freedom League, though critical of some aspects of *The Freewoman*, still found it an appropriate venue for her critique of the democratic system. Seeing it as a system whereby a majority necessarily coerces the minority, she was explicit about not seeking an alternative governing machinery: "I am not prepared to substitute for the machinery I criticise destructively any personally devised alternative machine. I do not intend to make any concessions to those to whom the nakedness of a machineless land is an offence."<sup>288</sup> Focusing on the connection between the democratic system and women's rights, she concluded with an open question: "If government exists, women are of course entitled to share in it ... It is granted. The question at issue is ... whether some other movement outside politics, independent of the governing machine, would not provide a surer and a speedier way to full human liberty."<sup>289</sup> *The Freewoman* was a logical periodical in which to

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<sup>287</sup> Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 74–77.

<sup>288</sup> Teresa Billington-Greig, "Women and Government," *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 85.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

publish this “destructive” criticism, as it distanced itself from formal political aspirations, and espoused a broader view of the political often with an anarchist bent that emphasized associational relationships as the basis for society, even if Billington-Greig here refers to these kinds of associations as external to politics. In this sense, the periodical reflects the capacity that Fraser sees in the post-bourgeois public sphere, to “envision democratic possibilities beyond the limits of actually existing democracy.”<sup>290</sup>

The Freewoman Discussion Circles were similarly envisioned as spaces where members could determine the directions and possibilities, evidenced by their minimal initial guidelines. While some members saw the venue provided for open debate as a goal in itself, others, as noted in a report on the Discussion Circle, “expressed a strong desire for discussions ... leading to definite action. One member suggested the formation of a special ‘Actionist Group,’ a suggestion received with marked approval.”<sup>291</sup> There is no indication, however, that such a group was ever established. The intention of the periodical and the Discussion Circles then can be thought of as influencing consciousness and fostering a culture of open discussion, both of which are intimately connected to politics, even if not directly to formal electoral politics. As Fraser acknowledges, individuals’ membership within different publics often overlaps.<sup>292</sup> Thus, the opinions brought up and contested in *The Freewoman* and the Discussion Circles could have political influence through connections with other periodicals, organizations, and people. And while it is certainly possible for cultural resistance to become an escape from politics, culture

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<sup>290</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 77.

<sup>291</sup> Barbara Low “‘The Freewoman’ Discussion Circle,” *The Freewoman*, June 27, 1912, 115.

<sup>292</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 70.

exists in a complex relationship with the political, and the political itself encompasses a wide range of relations and associations. This allows cultural resistance not to be exclusively one of the options suggested by Duncombe, i.e., a path into politics (presumably synonymous with formal, electoral politics), a political act, or a form of political escapism. Formal political change was not one of *The Freewoman's* goals, but creating a shift in consciousness and culture around issues of gender, and centering emotions as political, was. A broadened understanding of the relationship between cultural processes and the realm of the political shows the paper's power in providing a space for envisioning different political possibilities. This expansion makes culture in its various forms, even private, everyday acts that were not intended as acts of resistance, into potentially political interventions.

## **2.2 Cultural Citizenship**

One way of understanding the connection between politics and participation in cultural processes is through the concept of cultural citizenship. It has been defined in various ways, but here I employ Klaus and Lünenborg's notion of cultural citizenship as "a set of strategies and practices to invoke processes of empowerment in order to subversively listen and speak up in the public sphere."<sup>293</sup> When looking at feminist media, this concept can be useful in articulating the connection between media, identity formation, and participation in the political, broadly conceived. It also foregrounds the connection pointed out by Raymond Williams, between individuality, creativity, and participatory politics, which we can see in the way freewomen were

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<sup>293</sup> Klaus and Lünenborg, "Cultural Citizenship. Participation by and through Media," 203-04.

discussed in *The Freewoman*.<sup>294</sup> I suggest in this section that *The Freewoman* offered feminists a form of citizenship that was not rooted in formal-electoral processes, but rather in cultural-political participation and contestation.

Attending to what Gunnarsson Payne calls “the ways in which gendered identities are transformed into *feminist* identities,” and to the intimate connection between identity formation and cultural resources, can illuminate the constitutive, rather than solely representative role of media. Cultural citizenship also touches upon questions of consumerism and participation in and through commercial activities, issues that are pertinent to the early twentieth century, and are connected in various ways to women’s and feminist periodicals.<sup>295</sup> It is important to note that cultural citizenship is used primarily in contemporary political and media contexts (e.g., globalization and migration; zines and online media), and not all its elements are applicable to early twentieth-century feminist periodicals. But considering the saliency of the question of women’s citizenship in the early twentieth century, the emphasis this formulation of cultural citizenship places on identity, media, and political participation makes it useful in this context.

Cultural citizenship can also account for the ways in which practices that are not necessarily considered ‘political’ are in fact central to participation in political processes, especially for marginalized groups. Shopping, for example, as Nick Stevenson notes, can be an empowering political act through the choices that consumers make, and for many marginalized

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<sup>294</sup> Williams, “Individuals and Societies,” 82–83.

<sup>295</sup> Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, “Feminist Media as Alternative Media? Theorising Feminist Media from the Perspective of Alternative Media Studies,” in *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship*, ed. Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 66 (emphasis in the original).

groups commercial culture is part of identity formation. This is not only because more formal political avenues may be closed to these groups, but also because shopping “has come to signify, increasingly within our culture, a domain of pleurability and identification.”<sup>296</sup> Though shopping in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century operated within a different context, its foregrounding of pleasure and its role as a path for women into public spaces and into the political was in many ways similar. Focusing on the ways that Victorian and Edwardian gendered identities were constructed through narratives about consumption, Erika Rappaport argues that public spaces and gendered identities were produced together.<sup>297</sup> This was done through several sites of consumerism, such as department stores, social clubs, and women’s magazines. Though the editors of *The Freewoman* did not see it as a women’s magazine, and it differed greatly in tone and style from contemporary mainstream women’s and suffrage periodicals, it did carry advertisements for products, services, and spaces that were part of the construction of feminist identity. As Rappaport points out, women’s magazines were sites of consumerism and of cultural production, generating identities while selling goods and lifestyles. At the same time, they were also venues where concerns about consumerism and its impact upon women could be expressed,<sup>298</sup> a duality evident in *The Freewoman*, as will be seen later.

Barbara Green sees early twentieth-century periodicals as mediators that allow a view onto “the theories of objects that organized relationships between their readers and the things

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<sup>296</sup> Stevenson, “Cultural Citizenship: Questions of Consumerism, Consumption and Policy,” 261–62.

<sup>297</sup> Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 5–12.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

surrounding them.”<sup>299</sup> Green focuses on suffrage periodicals as vehicles for the creation of feminist identity, examining “what attention to the ‘thinginess’ of suffrage culture can tell us about the special role the feminist periodical played in creating a feminist approach to the everyday.”<sup>300</sup> Though Green uses ‘suffrage’ and ‘feminist’ interchangeably in her account, as we have seen in chapter 1, the editors and many of the contributors to *The Freewoman* did not see these identities as one and the same. The periodical was clearly trying to create a feminist identity different from, and in some ways resistant to, the identity that the suffrage movement and periodicals sought to create, and its relationship with material and consumer culture is one of the aspects of this distinction. As Green notes, where material domains interact and become context for each other is often where we can learn how things acquire meaning.<sup>301</sup> Understanding suffrage periodicals as different yet related material domains to *The Freewoman*, they can be used to contextualize it, and the role that advertisements and material/commercial elements played in it.

The number and nature of advertisements in *The Freewoman* changed throughout its existence: it started with fewer smaller advertisements than the ones found in suffrage journals, and mostly without illustrations. Most of them were for books, including Dr. Allinson’s “Book for Married Women,” (fig. 3) which likely contained advice about birth control; the international suffrage shop (fig. 4); events like ju-jitsu classes and lectures (fig. 5); and some household products (fig. 6). Standing out in the first issues was an illustrated ad for Libraco Portable

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<sup>299</sup> Green, “Feminist Things,” 66.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



Shelving (fig. 7), that showed a woman assembling a bookcase. The text in the ad presumably addresses women, stating “This is the kind of shelving you are looking for,” and concludes with a statement from ‘a lady’ confirming that a woman can assemble it without help.<sup>302</sup> While the ad portrayed the woman in a domestic setting and with a girl, she was addressed not only as the consumer and decision maker, but also as one who is capable of the labour of assembling the shelves, which implies as well the possibility of women being independent of men financially and physically. These ads are notably different from advertisements in suffrage periodicals, which were mostly for suffrage merchandise, whether produced by suffrage organizations or by companies producing products in movement colours, like the WFL hat (fig. 2), or WSPU merchandise in purple, green, and white.<sup>303</sup> The Libraco ad, however, appeared only once, and one can only speculate about the reasons for its discontinuation.

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<sup>302</sup> *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 19.

<sup>303</sup> See Green, “Feminist Things,” 71–74.

## A BOOK FOR MARRIED WOMEN.

By DR. ALLINSON.

The information contained in this book ought to be known by every married woman, and it will not harm the unmarried to read. The book is conveniently divided into twelve chapters. The first chapter treats of the changes of puberty, or when a girl becomes a woman. The second chapter treats of marriage from a doctor's standpoint; points out the best ages for marriage, and who should have children and who not, and furnishes useful information that one can ordinarily get only from an intelligent doctor. The third chapter treats of the marriage of blood relations; and condemns such marriages as a rule. Chapter four treats of the signs of pregnancy. The fifth chapter tells how a woman should live during the pregnant state. The sixth chapter treats of mishaps and how to avoid them. The seventh chapter treats of material impressions, and shows that birth marks are not due to longings on the part of the mother, but rather to her poor health. The eighth chapter teaches how to have easy confinements. Certain people believe that women should bring forth in pain and trouble, but the hygienic physician says that confinements can be made comparatively easy if certain rules are obeyed; these rules are given. The ninth chapter treats of the proper management of confinements until the baby is born. The tenth chapter tells how to treat the mother until she is up and about again. The eleventh chapter treats of sterility; gives the main causes of it, how these may be overcome and children result. The last chapter treats of the "change," a most important article for all women over forty. The book is full of useful information, and no book is written which goes so thoroughly into matters relating to married women. Some may think too much is told; such can scarcely be the case, for knowledge is power and the means of attaining happiness. The book can be had in an envelope from Dr. T. R. Allinson, 381, Room, 4, Spanish Place, Manchester Square, London, W., in return for a Postal Order for 1s. 2d.

Fig. 3 "A Book for Married Women," *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 19.

## THE INTERNATIONAL SUFFRAGE SHOP.

A BENEFIT PERFORMANCE, in aid of the funds, will be given on **Sunday, 28th January,** at 8 p.m., including G. B. SHAW'S

**"THE MAN OF DESTINY,"**

MISS JEAN STERLING MACKINLAY IN OLD SONGS, and  
A New Anti-Armaments Play, **"THE CORONATION."**

All Seats must be booked before date. Prices: 1/- to £3 3 0, from  
15, ADAM STREET, STRAND.

ALL PIT AND GALLERY TICKETS SOLD.



Fig. 4 "International Suffrage Shop," *The Freewoman*, January 25, 1912, 196.

**MRS. EDITH GARRUD**  
 CORDIALLY INVITES ALL READERS OF  
**“THE FREEWOMAN”**  
 TO ATTEND A DEMONSTRATION  
 OF MODERN  
**JU-JUTSU,**  
 ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 26TH, AT 8.15 P.M.  
 THE ROOMS,  
 9, ARGYLL PLACE, REGENT STREET, WEST.

Fig. 5 Mrs. Edith Garrud’s invitation to Ju-Jutsu demonstration, *The Freewoman*, January 25, 1912, 189.

THE  
**“LADY” COMBINED KNIFE  
 and SCISSORS SHARPENER**  
Regd. 542,986.  
 FOR EVERY HOME.

*Sharpens Carving and other Knives and  
 Scissors. Simple to use. Will last a Lifetime.*

**PRICE . . . 6½d.**

**INSTRUCTIONS.**  
 Rest the Sharpener on the edge of the table, place Knife  
 alternatively in each end slot, and draw towards you, using  
 slight downwards pressure.  
 For Scissors use the central slot. Scissors require slightly  
 more pressure. Sharpen each blade in turn.


**THE SHARPENING WHEEL IS MADE OF  
 THE FINEST HARDENED SHEFFIELD STEEL.**

*The “Lady” Sharpener soon saves its cost.*  
 ASK YOUR IRONMONGER FOR IT.

**THE NATIONAL VENDORS’ SYNDICATE,**  
 55, CHANCERY LANE, LONDON, W.C.

Fig. 6 “‘Lady’ Combined Knife and Scissors Sharpener,” *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 34.

**Libraco**  
**Portable Shelving**  
Gives you book accommodation at  
**Less than 2d. per volume.**



This is the kind of book-shelving you are looking for. Simple in construction to enable you to build it up easily or take it down for removal or re-erection in another room. Shelves that can be placed at any height to suit the sizes of your books, so that you lose no book space. Inexpensive to instal or to extend.

*A lady writes—*  
 “I am quite pleased with the bookcase. A woman can put it together alone, without help, it is so neat and simple.”


Send for Descriptive Catalogue No. 24, post free.

**Libraco, Limited,**  
 60, Wilson Street, Finsbury Square, London, E.C.  
 95, Bridge Street, Deansgate, Manchester.

Fig. 7 “Libraco Portable Shelving,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 19.

It was several months before illustrated ads appeared in *The Freewoman* again, this time for Debenham & Freebody neckwear (fig. 8) and for L' Ideal Cie tailored suits, both featured in the journal on a weekly basis.

**NECK-WEAR NOVELTIES  
FOR EASTER.**



**The 'ASCOT'  
COLLARETTE**

*The craze of the moment, in fine quality. Two-tone Ostrich Feather and rich shot Taffeta Silks, exactly matching the feather; also in plain black and plain white, and in all the most fashionable combinations of colours.*

**18/9**  
*Sent on approval.*

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**Debenham & Freebody**  
Wigmore Street London W

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Famous for over a Century for Taste, for Quality, for Value

Fig. 8 "Neck-Wear Novelties for Easter," *The Freewoman*, March 28, 1912, 365.

These ads bore more resemblance to the ones in suffrage periodicals, and seem to be directed at middle-class women. While it can be assumed that the ads were mainly a source of revenue for *The Freewoman*, and it is not clear whether Marsden or the publisher saw them as indicative of a political stance, one reader at least connected the products being sold to feminist politics:

What is happening to the Freewoman just now? ... can't we do without those two advertisements of female gew-gaws? [*sic*] How many freewomen do Debenham & Freebody think likely to hanker after 'neck-wear novelties' as worn by the creature displayed with all that stifling rubbish tied round its neck. These advertisements make the paper look like 'Forget-me-not'. I trust that my deep interest in the 'Freewoman' may be accepted as an apology for the violence of this protest.<sup>304</sup>

Evidently, this reader saw the ads not only as a financial necessity, but as a reflection of the periodical's politics, and found them discrepant to what they understood as the feminist message the periodical should carry. The letter also implies a single, coherent, *freewoman* identity, one who would not (or rather should not) be interested in clothing of the sort advertised.

As this strong response to the products advertised makes clear, and as Green also points out in relation to suffrage periodicals as well as the goods advertised in them, objects in this context are more than themselves. They become excessive, signifying more than their material meaning; in the context of feminist and suffrage periodicals they can mark political allegiance, commitment to a cause, or belonging to a specific circle. Green holds that consumer objects were

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<sup>304</sup> Anon to Dora Marsden, April 13, 1912. Box 3, folder 11, Dora Marsden Collection.

used to foster collective desires as part of a lifestyle that was connected to a periodical.<sup>305</sup> While this cultivation of collective desires and identities through consumer objects was more developed and prominent in suffrage circles, there was at least a plan for a similar method for *The Freewoman*. At some point in 1912, Mary Gawthorpe wrote to Marsden with an idea and a rough design for a *Freewoman* calendar (fig. 9). It was meant either as an item for sale, or as Gawthorpe suggested in a letter to Marsden, better yet as a “unique, dignified, and legitimate form of advertisement if it could be afforded,” implying that it should, if possible, be sent out gratis. Gawthorpe saw “the completed article as welcomed in newspaper offices at home and abroad and a source of propaganda (for the paper I mean) in hundreds of homes etc.”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Green, “Feminist Things,” 71–72.

<sup>306</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, u.d. Box 2, folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

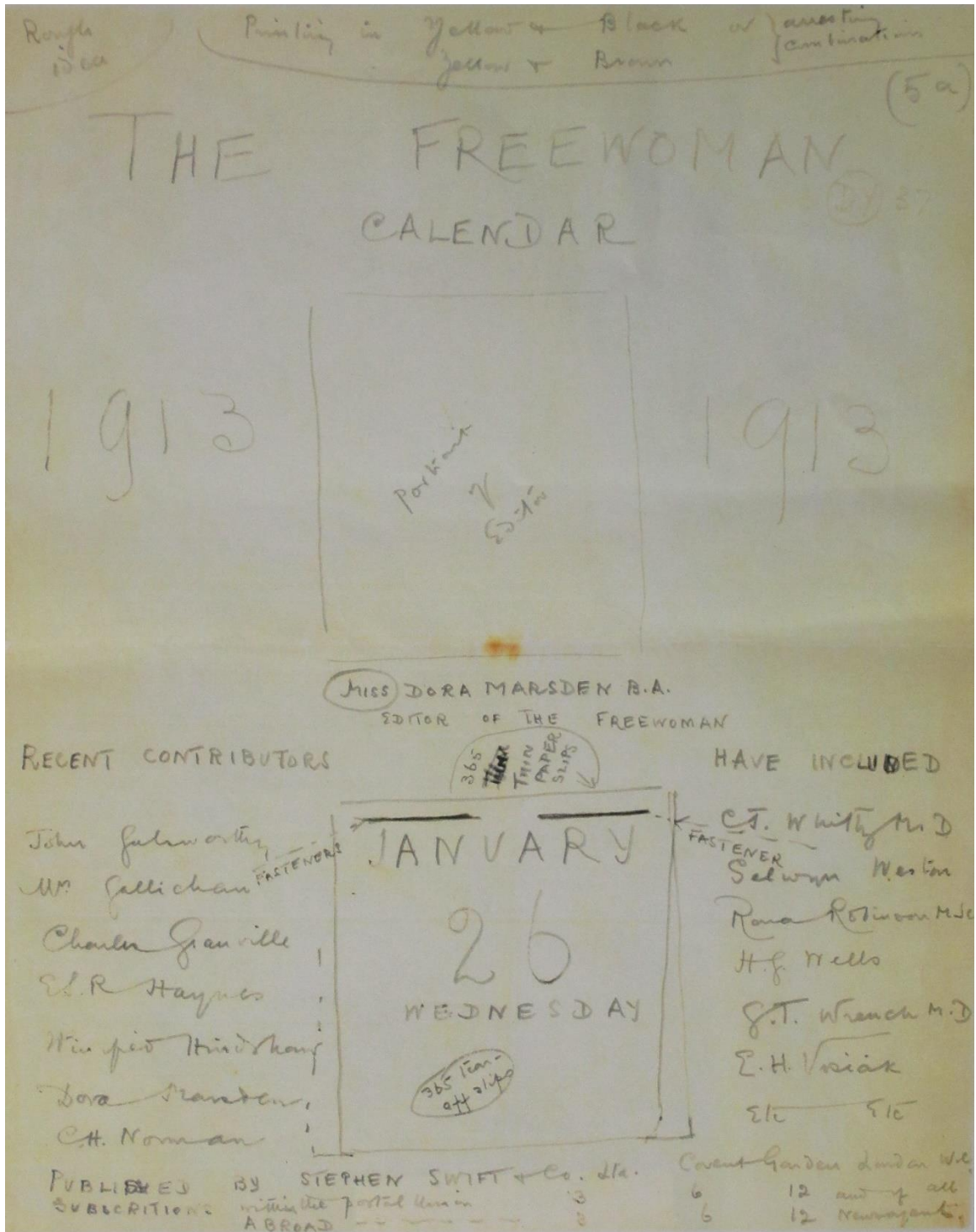


Fig. 9 *The Freewoman* calendar, by Mary Gawthorpe (u.d.). Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

The proposed calendar, containing 365 day-pages, each with a quote from *The Freewoman*, and a list of names of some of the recent contributors on the sides, was an attempt to advertise and gain subscriptions for the periodical. As Marsden noted in the final issue of *The Freewoman*, the periodical was in financial constraint throughout most of its existence, and finding new subscribers was crucial. Gawthorpe's vision of the calendar being welcomed "at home and abroad" echoes Marsden's belief that the prospects of new readers were better in what she saw as the more advanced U.S. feminist circles.<sup>307</sup> But the calendar was also a piece of merchandise designed to both construct and reflect a feminist political identity. Beyond its obvious role as an advertisement for *The Freewoman*, Gawthorpe's letter and the design for the calendar show an intention of creating a collective identity centered around the periodical, its editor and contributors, and its content and style. The cover of the calendar was to feature a portrait of Marsden, reminiscent of the merchandise produced by some suffrage organizations, such as postcards and bound collections of the organizations' periodicals.<sup>308</sup> The inclusion of the portrait and the addition of 'Miss' before Marsden's name – which Gawthorpe circled, perhaps to indicate a change from the way the name appeared on the periodical's masthead – may have been an attempt to appeal to a broader and more conservative audience. The result was a design for a product that was meant to promote a periodical that saw itself as (and in many ways was) radical, using methods that were common in the branches of suffrage so harshly criticized in *The Freewoman*, including the emphasis placed on the leaders – or in this case the foregrounding of

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<sup>307</sup> Dora Marsden to Harriet Shaw Weaver, December 2, 1912 and January 12, 1913. MS 57354, Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers.

<sup>308</sup> Green, "Feminist Things."



the editor. The calendar and the ads in *The Freewoman* exemplify the potential blurring of the line between radical and non-radical brought about by a countercultural periodical venturing into commercial culture.

The blurriness of the lines between the radical and the non-radical has been recognized by scholars such as Duncombe, Downing, and Atton in defining alternative media. These theorists have suggested that a more productive approach than a contemporary binary division would be attending to the content of radical media, as well as to the context in which they operate, and their modes of production and distribution.<sup>309</sup> Within the parameters of these theories, *The Freewoman* can be considered a radical alternative periodical. Alternative media are of key importance to cultural citizenship, particularly for marginalized groups, as they have the capacity to foster a participatory culture more accessible and supportive than the hegemonic one.<sup>310</sup> Indeed *The Freewoman* functioned, in much the same way that Drüeke and Zobl describe contemporary feminist media, as a space to “express opinions, experiences and political views – to actively construct meaning and make sense of the world – in which a critical and self-reflexive political education and a cultural citizenship could take place.”<sup>311</sup> Reflexivity was, quite literally, key to Marsden’s view of *The Freewoman*, presented in the first issue as a venue in which “[f]or the first time, feminists themselves make the attempt to reflect the feminist movement in the

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<sup>309</sup> Gunnarsson Payne, “Feminist Media as Alternative Media?,” 59–60; Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader*, 6–7.

<sup>310</sup> Ricarda Drüeke and Elke Zobl, “Introduction. Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship,” in *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship*, ed. Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 14.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

mirror of thought.”<sup>312</sup> It was through a cultural product, a periodical, that she envisioned this process of political education happening, through culture that women could become citizens in a sense that goes beyond formal rights.

This space was created through a combination of some of the features of the periodical as a publishing genre, especially its potential for openness and interactivity, also characteristic of some newer forms such as blogs and social media, which allow for the formation of communities based on disembodied communication.<sup>313</sup> In the case of *The Freewoman*, this was augmented by the decidedly dialogical character of the paper, evident in the way discussion proceeded within it, and stated explicitly in its editorial policies.<sup>314</sup> Marsden was upfront about the role of the periodical in allowing open debate; responding to a reader who suggested *The Freewoman* should take a more “constructive” and “affirmative” tone rather than “mud-throwing”, she stated her belief in the necessity of hearing all voices:

Light, and more light, we need, anyone's light, even though it be merely a flicker, and, welcoming all, we believe the candle flame will not need to be extinguished to prove the brighter radiance of the electric arc ... it is not fair to suggest that we should exclude the correspondence, ably put, of others. That, to us, is lamp-snuffing.<sup>315</sup>

But if the general tone of *The Freewoman* seems to show little interest in joining or reforming existing political mechanisms, what was the community in which it offered

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<sup>312</sup> “Notes of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3.

<sup>313</sup> Beetham, “Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities,” 236–37.

<sup>314</sup> Milo, “The Freewoman: Feminism, Dialogism and Women’s Education.”

<sup>315</sup> ‘Topics of the Week: On Affirmations,’ *The Freewoman*, February 15, 1912, 244.

citizenship? One answer to this is that those whom Marsden envisioned as having the capacity to be *freewomen* were the ones willing and able to live outside of societal norms, and pay the economic and social prices that such a life entailed. In this they were, in Nicholson's formulation, 'citizens' of Bohemia.<sup>316</sup> As we have seen, Guy Aldred saw himself and his partner as "living in Bohemia," using it as both a place and an identificatory marker. Even without mentioning Bohemia, feminism and the individual and collective identity of the *freewoman* were invoked and debated, creating a cultural and political community of which women (and men) could be members, or citizens of sorts. Margaret Beetham also emphasizes the possibility that periodicals open for 'disembodied' communication, that is the option of reading periodicals and writing to them without having to leave the house or travel, and without having to expose one's identity. Beetham points to disembodiment as one of the genre's liberating traits for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Barbara Onslow has shown it to be one of the factors that allowed women to write for and edit periodicals.<sup>317</sup> In enabling women to partake in a community even when physical connection with other members is not an option, periodicals thus challenge the distinction between the public and the private, showing the boundary between the two to be permeable. This boundary crossing also characterizes cultural citizenship, in that it is part of a circle of meaning production that is situated in an intermediate space, among other things between public and private, rational and emotional.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Nicholson, *Among the Bohemians*, xv–xvi.

<sup>317</sup> Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 9–12.

<sup>318</sup> Drüeke and Zobl, "Introduction. Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship," 16.

### 2.3 Emotional (Counter)Community

One of the important features of *The Freewoman* as a countercultural periodical and as a counterpublic is its centering of emotions and passion. This allowed for the construction of identity through style, which Fraser argues is one of the key functions of subaltern counterpublics.<sup>319</sup> *The Freewoman* thus created a countercommunity partly by insisting on the key role that passion, which could be sexual, artistic, political, or spiritual, as well as emotions, play in feminism. Indeed, when writing about feminism in August 1912, Marsden presented it as “At root ... a religious affair: something which has to do with an instinctive attitude towards Destiny in Life. It is concerned with the development of Personality; its objective is opportunity for exercise of free-will.”<sup>320</sup> This combination of spiritual devotion, ideas of individualism and personality, and political rights, places passion at the very centre of political consciousness. Fionnuala Dillane has foregrounded the importance of attending to the affective aspects of periodicals, and I would like to add to this discussion the communal facet of the emotional and affective experiences surrounding periodicals.<sup>321</sup> Readers’ emotional interactions with periodicals, much like the periodicals themselves, occupy an in-between position; intimately personal and private, but also public and communal, and the emotional intensity of encounters with periodicals is part of what gives them their political power and significance. Incorporating the history of emotions, as well as scholarship on social and communal ‘structures of feeling’ can

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<sup>319</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67–69.

<sup>320</sup> “The Woman Movement and the ‘Ablest Socialists’,” *The Freewoman*, August 29, 1912, 284.

<sup>321</sup> Dillane, “Forms of Affect.”

therefore produce a richer analysis of periodicals as counterpublics. Scholarship on queer counterpublic, which draws on queer affect studies, is also applicable in the case of *The Freewoman*, specifically ideas of the ‘modes of feeling’ related to these counterpublics (a connection I will touch on briefly in this chapter, and in more detail in chapter 3).<sup>322</sup>

As Ute Frevert notes, in modernity emotions have been regarded as strongly connected to one’s individuality, as well as having a central role in the shaping of the modern, bourgeois society. Since the eighteenth century “emotions have become the object of far-reaching projects for *education* and *discipline*. The bourgeoisie ... have an interest in lending emotions—in its dual function as marker of both individuality and sociability—a particular form, and regulating their expression.” Frevert adds that emotions also served as grounds for differentiation and hierarchization.<sup>323</sup> Emotions, then, were not strictly private or apolitical. Marsden certainly thought of emotions as central to individuality and subjectivity, and saw certain emotional states, mainly passion, as crucial to the development of consciousness in general and feminist consciousness in particular, and to the *freewoman*’s subjectivity. Some of the fine distinctions between the emotional states Marsden refers to in her writing, such as between passion, lust, and desire, may be lost on contemporary readers.<sup>324</sup> However, it is clear from her writing which emotions engender progressive resistance and are thus conducive to the development of feminist consciousness, and which leave women connected to mainstream views of ‘sentimentality’.

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<sup>322</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.

<sup>323</sup> Ute Frevert, *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700-2000*, Emotions in History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6, <http://www.library.yorku.ca/e/resolver/id/2556818>.

<sup>324</sup> See, for example, ‘The New Morality – II,’ *The Freewoman*, December 28, 1911, 101-02.

Marsden similarly deplored the way in which certain narratives that she presented as sentimental held power to impact people's political understanding. Writing about a coal-miners strike, she discussed the public's indifference to the strikers' claims, until a tragedy will potentially occur:

What does the 'public' care? To make it care the 'public' has to be made to feel. Then it *will* care. When some great tragedy fills its sky with a lurid sign ... then the scatter-witted 'public' drops its little concerns, looks up, and for the first time *sees*. And so leader-writers, fine ladies and gentlemen, for the first time see how greatly beholden they are to those grimy underworld people of whom they have heard. And they *see* because they have been made to *feel*.<sup>325</sup>

Marsden placed the word 'public' in quotation marks, indicating perhaps that she was referring to those members of the middle- and upper-classes who could be indifferent to the miners' demands, who were distanced from their plight by economic privilege, and who saw themselves and were seen by many as *the* 'public'.

The emotional state that has the most radical potential for Marsden is passion, as she explains in a leader titled 'A Plea for Psychology', where she discusses the price women pay in mental and physical health for the repression of non-normative passions. She then draws the connection between private passion and more public realms of life: 'We have a belief that, given sufficient emotional data, we shall find that all passion is one, whether passion of man for

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<sup>325</sup> "Topics of the Week," *The Freewoman*, March 7, 1912, 303.

woman, mother for child, friend for friend, devotee for faith, follower for cause—they are all one, in kind and essence’.<sup>326</sup>

Passion, for Marsden, was similar to lust, though the latter was less enduring, and connected more specifically to the physical aspects of sexuality. A Discussion Circle participant wrote to *The Freewoman* following one of the meetings, addressing the distinction between passion, which Marsden advocated, and sentimentality, which she rejected. The enduring nature of passion, and its connection to consciousness, was central to the distinction: “Is not spiritual passion simply continuous emotion, as contrasted with an ephemeral emotion, which may be termed sentimentality? ... continuous emotion, is evoked ... by the mental pictures ... formed and retained in the mind ... the ephemeral emotion is roused directly by ... immediate experience.”<sup>327</sup> This resonates with Frevert’s account of passion being perceived at the time as more enduring and therefore more dangerous than affect, particularly in the context of women and emotions like rage.<sup>328</sup> Love and sexual passion, for Marsden, were central to feminist politics, since they were necessary for the development of a sense of self and subjectivity, a gateway to spiritual transformation, and a precondition for freedom.<sup>329</sup>

If emotions were integral to the development of feminist consciousness, reading periodicals, much like novel reading in Frevert’s account, influenced the ways in which readers organized their emotional economy. Whereas the solitary nature of reading novels is one of the

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<sup>326</sup> ‘A Plea for Psychology,’ *The Freewoman*, January 25, 1912, 182.

<sup>327</sup> H.M. Pulley, Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, June 27, 1912, 118.

<sup>328</sup> Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 89.

<sup>329</sup> ‘The New Morality – II,’ *The Freewoman*, December 28, 1911, 101.

main reasons for the paucity of accounts of their reception by readers, including their emotional impact, the ways in which periodicals operate on an emotional level can be more visible. Both literary forms have been connected historically to concerns over women's reading, especially around their exposure to sexual knowledge through reading. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sexual ignorance was commonly understood to be essential to 'true femininity', and therefore women reading magazines, where they could gain sexual knowledge, was a threat.<sup>330</sup>

Jan Plamper emphasizes the importance of attending to the influence of the structural properties of media upon the production of meaning, which applies to the ways in which emotional meaning is generated as well.<sup>331</sup> Since people often read periodicals communally and wrote to the editors, we have a record of their emotional engagement with the material, which adds another layer to our understanding of the impact of the social and political ideas discussed in them. A letter from a friend to Grace Jardine, for example, tells of one such communal reading experience, including its emotional aspects. The author describes walking into a suffrage society office, where she

Heard a terrible buzz before I opened the door, & on doing so there was the room quite crowded, with one of the Russells sitting on the cupboard reading aloud to her people the editorial notes on Miss P.[Christabel Pankhurst]!! I've really never seen our crowd so excited & moved, a lot of them kept on its [*sic*] Mary Gawthorpe". & other no "its [*sic*]

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<sup>330</sup> Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 10.

<sup>331</sup> Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, 285.



that Miss Marsden”, oh how they did carry on I could not help laughing to myself ...  
They couldn't settle down to business at all that night.<sup>332</sup>

The shock generated by the first issue is evident from this description, as well as from the author's statement at the beginning of the letter: “Oh my dear Grace & co-editors, What have you been doing? If you only knew how the bombshell you planted down in quiet deep exploded, you might be surprised, or perhaps you meant to do it.”<sup>333</sup> The content of the first issue was shocking not only for the criticism of the WSPU; the author of the letter expressed concern that “after you've discussed marriage & the birth rate, what in the world else will you write about? I am afraid that will exhaust the modern topics.”<sup>334</sup> The surprise was intensified by the communal setting and the debate, likely based on style and rhetoric, over who wrote the piece, causing a frenzy that interfered with work for the rest of the night.

The editorial, it turned out later, was Marsden's work, and as evidenced by the response reported in the letter, it was effective in shocking and angering some of the readers, and generating emotionally charged discussions. Bruce Clarke sees the ‘shock tactics’ of *The Freewoman* as part of a process whereby the provocative introduction of an opinion or topic was followed by dialectical development.<sup>335</sup> What this depiction of a logical process misses, though, is the emotional basis and impact of Marsden's style, for as Barbara Rosenwein reminds us, “one cannot separate feelings from rhetoric.”<sup>336</sup> In this case the feelings of the author and the readers

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<sup>332</sup> N.A. to Grace Jardine, November 27, 1911. Box 2 folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 56–57.

<sup>336</sup> Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, 8–9.

alike were inseparable from the meaning-making process. Assuming that Marsden's rhetoric was calculated, we could ask what type of emotional economy it sought to create. She was often sarcastic, and sometimes employed the discourse of anti-feminists when writing about women in their current state, though her goal was to shed light on the societal structures that kept women in this state. Her writing was unapologetically angry, sometimes contemptuous, seeking to generate strong responses, in which she succeeded; the antagonistic ones, especially, were emotional, even visceral: Suffragist Agnes Maude Royden, for example, found *The Freewoman* a "nauseous publication"<sup>337</sup>; another reader thought it was disgusting, immoral, indecent and filthy,<sup>338</sup> while David Eder, after reading the editors' response to his piece referred to them as "monstrous and horribly cantankerous young cats."<sup>339</sup>

Turning to the 'structures of feeling' related to *The Freewoman* and the people involved in it, we can start to think of it as what Barbara Rosenwein has termed an 'emotional community'.<sup>340</sup> These communities are defined not by their membership or structure, but rather by the focus of the researcher studying them. Emotional communities are delineated by a focus on emotions they "define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others' emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore."<sup>341</sup> Rosenwein contends that an emotional community can be an aspect of any social

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<sup>337</sup> Agnes Maude Royden, *The Times*, June 22, 1912.

<sup>338</sup> Edgar Ansell to Dora Marsden, July 14, 1912. Box 2 folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

<sup>339</sup> M.D. Eder, letter to the editors, *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 91.

<sup>340</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128–35.

<sup>341</sup> Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," 842.

grouping, including textual communities, so that the emotional community in the case of periodicals could be an element within the imagined periodical community.<sup>342</sup> Lisa Sigel has examined the construction of a shared sense of sexual and national self through the dissemination of reading materials, amongst them magazines.<sup>343</sup> *The Freewoman* as a textual community positioned itself as an alternative to the dominant emotional culture surrounding it, doing so at least partly through emotional resistance.

The journal was not monolithic in its relation to emotions, but by and large Marsden's and other contributors' modes of expression and critique challenged the emotional culture of both the women's movement and the public sphere more broadly. Participants in public discourse – political, intellectual, and social – were expected to be rational, and to keep their emotions under control, a capacity that was associated with civilization, and therefore also with men. Indeed, by the 1930s historians were writing explicitly about emotions as destructive, warning of a revival of emotions which could lead to the decline of reason.<sup>344</sup> On the other side of the divide stood passions, emotions, spirituality, and the threat of anarchy, particularly spiritual anarchy which rejected scientific rationalism as a way to attain 'truth', turning instead to "human feelings, desires, mysticism and religious impulses" as key to understanding the world.<sup>345</sup> These tendencies explain some of the criticism of anarchy as infantile, and the understanding of it as a phase in the process of political maturation, corresponding with Freudian

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<sup>342</sup> Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, 68–70; Beetham, "Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities."

<sup>343</sup> Sigel, *Making Modern Love*.

<sup>344</sup> Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 27–29.

<sup>345</sup> Thomas, *Anarchist Ideas and Counter-Cultures*, 25.

ideas about civilization.<sup>346</sup> This rejection of the ‘masculine’ scientific rationalist discourse was connected by authors such as Robert Owen, Edward Carpenter and others to women’s liberation and sexual reform, and to the creation of a better society, founded on gender equality and embracing more open emotional and sexual expression.<sup>347</sup>

The concern with the destructive power of emotions was present in *The Freewoman* right from its inception. In fact, it surfaced even before it was entirely clear that it was to be a periodical, when Mary Gawthorpe, who co-founded and also co-edited the journal with Marsden for a short while, was still referring to Marsden’s initiative as a “movement.” From her letters, it is clear that Gawthorpe perceived Marsden’s attitude towards women’s and suffrage organizations, and her plans for advancing discussions on feminism, as destructive:

if you wish to associate destructive tactics with a *movement* then I say you’re doomed to barrenness of result from the outset. No movement can destroy and build at the same time ... a movement for the organisation of thought requires no irritating tactics.

Another thing: in public affairs straightforward and destructive tactic alone cannot cope with ‘invested’ personality.<sup>348</sup>

Gawthorpe uses the language of the expected behaviour in public affairs, suggesting that to be accepted and to have an impact, Marsden will need to give up the destructive tactics and discourse, which Gawthorpe connects to directness of expression, and accommodate to the

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 57–59.

<sup>347</sup> Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65–91.

<sup>348</sup> Mary Gawthorpe to Dora Marsden, June 1, 1911. Box 2 folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

norms of the public sphere. Considering the “bombshell” of Marsden’s first leader, and the tone of much of the writing that followed, accommodating to the style expected in public affairs was clearly not the intention. Author Rebecca West, for example, touched on the topic of ‘negative’ emotions in a review of Granville Barker’s plays. West decried the subdued tone of Barker’s later plays, which she connected to the influence of the reformist Fabian Society, but concluded that nonetheless, Barker “has given us a strong hatred, the best lamp to bear in our hands as we go over the dark places of life, cutting away the dead things men tell us to revere.”<sup>349</sup> Hatred here is not an emotion made unproductive by its supposed negativity, but potentially a force for change that could be superior to the gradualist, reform-oriented approach of a body like the Fabian Society.

As Rosenwein notes, one of the elements that make a group cohere into an emotional community is their approach to, and evaluation of, others’ emotions. In this respect, the analysis of the emotional economy of the WSPU in *The Freewoman* is particularly interesting. Marsden perceived the Union as operating through the exertion of “affectional control” on its members, and saw this as an example of the authoritarianism of the organization.<sup>350</sup> She saw the autocratic tendencies apparent in the WSPU’s strict hierarchy and militaristic rhetoric as manifested emotionally through the loyalty and devotion that members were encouraged to express towards the leaders, especially Christabel Pankhurst. Marsden saw the methods used by the WSPU to appeal to potential members as deceitful and exploiting the power of emotions: “the methods

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<sup>349</sup> Rebecca West, “The Gospel According to Granville Barker,” *The Freewoman*, March 7, 1912, 309.

<sup>350</sup> ‘Ed.’, response to reader’s letter, *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 73.

they use to secure some of their followers ... is [*sic*] nothing short of emotional seduction. They use the strongest emotional appeals of religion and revolution to make women and girls lose the thread of practical discretion, to get them to throw aside their work, to order a plan of campaign which will of necessity leave wounded on the field.”<sup>351</sup> Marsden perceived this emotional control as detrimental to women’s capacity for freedom, which required that they access and express their passions untrammelled by the conventions of society or an organization. In addition, she condemned the WSPU for abandoning members when they needed support. Marsden also criticized the emotional tactics employed by the YWCA for fundraising, and explicitly drew connections between this body and the WSPU.<sup>352</sup> In both cases organizations for and led by women are presented as exploiting women’s perceived emotional susceptibility, and stifling their individual judgment and development.

The insistence on individual emotional development was part of Marsden’s feminist politics, one that blurred the line between the personal and the political, and unsurprisingly garnered strong responses from readers. Some focused on the political effectiveness of unity, and on support for suffrage as a step towards women’s freedom, both potentially jeopardized by strong, critical emotional expressions. Anger and passionate criticism, these commentators implied, were counterproductive even if the WSPU was far from perfect, and in this they seem to agree with Gawthorpe’s understanding of Marsden’s approach as destructive. Others, however, centered their objections on what they saw as personal attacks on Ms. Pankhurst, and those

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<sup>351</sup> “Topics of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, March 14, 1912, 324.

<sup>352</sup> ‘Notes of the Week,’ *The Freewoman*, January 25, 1912, 183-84.

objections were emotionally charged. Readers were disappointed in Marsden – and even more so in Gawthorpe, who was very well known and much loved in the Union – for their perceived betrayal of the cause and the leaders. Hertha Ayrton, for example, wrote to Gawthorpe a few days after the first issue was published:

Your vile attack on Miss Pankhurst in *The Freewoman* fills me with amazement & disgust, too deep for expression. That you, *you*, who talk so glibly of seeking first & foremost TRUTH & LIGHT should follow a Mrs. Billington Greig in attacking a former colleague at the first opportunity – this is indeed a disillusionment ... Oh I am deeply ashamed of you; yes, & sorry for you too, for you must be ashamed of yourself to your heart's core.<sup>353</sup>

There was also criticism of the focus on passions and sexuality, which some *Freewoman* readers found excessive. The language and tone of these critiques point to a perception of the economy of emotions in *The Freewoman* as unbalanced; some emotional states are viewed as excessive, while others are lacking, a perceived imbalance that was understood as impeding political progress.

The modes of emotional expression promoted and criticized in *The Freewoman* also had a gendered aspect; while the journal criticized the rational rhetoric that can be seen as masculine, it also rejected the sentimentality and unquestioning loyalty of the WSPU, which were perceived as feminine. It strove perhaps for an emotional state that transcended the divides between public and private, masculine and feminine, constructive and destructive. In this sense, as well as in its

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<sup>353</sup> Hertha Ayrton to Mary Gawthorpe, November 26, 1911. Box 2 folder 25, Dora Marsden Collection.

discussions of sexuality, *The Freewoman* approximates Berlant and Warner's idea of a queer counterpublic, one that is constructed in opposition to heterosexual culture, with its implications for citizenship. As the authors note, "those conventions [of heterosexual culture] conjure a mirage: a home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict."<sup>354</sup> As mentioned earlier, *The Freewoman* did not have a uniform voice as an emotional community, a polyvocality that was in keeping with its general dialogical approach to feminism. It sought legitimacy in political discussion for 'counterproductive' or 'destructive' emotions, and recognition of their necessity within a reformed culture of political debate. It attempted to create an emotional countercommunity, or what Stephen Brooke has termed "a kind of emotional citizenship," upon which a different understanding of feminism, indeed of politics more broadly, could be built.<sup>355</sup> This countercommunity offered resistance to various aspects of hegemonic culture and politics, understanding these two categories broadly, and perceiving them as inseparable.

## 2.4 Conclusion

What does it mean for a periodical to be part of a counterculture, or to be a form of cultural resistance? Its content, style, or politics should in some way resist the mainstream, be it on a specific issue or as a way of being and understanding society more broadly. In *The Freewoman*, it was the rejection of values and notions that were associated with the bourgeois

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<sup>354</sup> Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 553.

<sup>355</sup> Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 84.



public sphere – those values that the periodical as a radical “intellectual acid” was intended to destroy. This rejection, however, was not complete, as the periodical partook in consumer culture in some similar ways to suffrage and women’s magazines of its time, albeit to a lesser extent.

To appreciate the power of *The Freewoman* – and periodicals in general – as counterculture, we need to think about their context, particularly about what would be considered normative or acceptable and what would be radical in their own time. *The Freewoman’s* treatment of culture as integral to feminist consciousness, and the notion of culture as a form of citizenship, set it apart from the feminist movement of its time. These radical ideas, as well as the emotional countercommunity that developed through the periodical made it in a sense a queer space – one that resisted normative and hegemonic modes of behaviour and feeling. The next chapter explores the ways in which this ‘queerness’ extended into the discussions of sexuality in *The Freewoman*.

### Chapter 3 Creating a Queer Space: *The Freewoman* and Sexuality

In 1926, reflecting on her involvement in *The Freewoman* and the merits of the journal, Rebecca West wrote: “[t]he ‘Freewoman’ mentioned sex loudly and clearly and repeatedly, and in the worst possible taste.” Though from the perspective of over a decade after the periodical’s demise West assessed the content of the discussions of sex in *The Freewoman* as “not momentous,” she still claimed it did an “immense service” in dispelling some contemporary romanticized views about women by its candour and “unblushingness.”<sup>356</sup> If from the vantage point of the mid 1920s the straightforward approach to sexuality in *The Freewoman* did not seem quite earth shattering, it was still one of the features that set it apart most significantly from the women’s and suffrage periodicals of its day. *The Freewoman* ventured into more radical areas, in discussing sexuality outside of heterosexual, reproductive relationships. And as Rebecca West’s description indicates, the open and straightforward style of *The Freewoman* was unique (for its time, at any rate), refreshing for some readers and shocking for others.

This chapter will analyze discussions about sexuality in *The Freewoman* by placing them in relation to the common topics and language used to address sexuality in the suffrage movement and press, and through the discussions of homosexuality and single women’s sexual activity, two of the topics that generated the most controversy and posed the biggest challenge to the sexual mores of the time. I will analyze *The Freewoman* debates on sexuality in relation to three main frameworks: suffrage, sexology, and discourse or knowledge. The suffrage movement

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<sup>356</sup> Rebecca West, “The Freewoman,” *Time and Tide*, July 16, 1926, 648-49.

used contemporary ideas about women's sexuality to support its arguments for women's right to vote. The discussions often drew on analogies between the nation and the home, and on connections between sexuality and morality, and suffrage organizations typically framed women within heterosexual family structures, where they could be presented as the (re)productive guardians of family morals. Sexology, which became increasingly popular in the early twentieth century, was a fairly new science devoted to the study of human sexuality, from both a physical and a psychological perspective. Much of the literature of sexology was written by and for medical professionals, and the sale of some of the texts was limited to authorized people. But there were also studies of sexuality in history, and attempts by people outside of the medical world to theorize sexual identities and relations. The medical-sexological discourse and discussions from other perspectives were important in providing terminology and theories which, as we shall see later in the chapter, were interpreted and appropriated selectively by different individuals.<sup>357</sup> This last point connects to the third framework this chapter uses, that of sexual knowledge and discourse. The way that people engaged with sexological ideas was evidence not only of emerging terms and identities, but also of struggles over knowledge. The discourse of the nineteenth century had norms as to who was able to produce and consume sexual knowledge, and who had the agency to speak and write about their own sexuality, rather than being spoken for and written about.

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<sup>357</sup> Rita Felski, "Introduction," in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

*The Freewoman*, when compared to these three frameworks, emerges as much more radical in its approach to sexuality. It was not the commitment to speak frankly about sex in itself that made *The Freewoman* radical, but rather the style and content of the discussions, as well as the contributors who partook in it openly. Consistent with the periodical's philosophy, it gave voice to opinions across the spectrum, allowing readers access to debates not only about sexual matters themselves, but also about knowledge, and the power to create, access, and disseminate it. Despite its short run, *The Freewoman* managed to discuss sexuality extensively, and the combination of subversive content with the unique style and self-aware use of the genre allowed it to expand the debate, engaging contributors from multiple sides. In a sense, *The Freewoman* was a kind of queer counterpublic space, one where normative ideas about gender and sexuality could be challenged, and where alternative ways of understanding and organizing sexuality could be connected to politics more broadly.<sup>358</sup>

### **3.1 Suffrage and Purity**

That *The Freewoman* was unique is not to say that sexuality was not discussed in women's and suffrage journals; it was, in fact, discussed extensively, and assumptions about women's sexuality and their differences from men in this regard served as the moral basis for some of the claims that suffrage organizations were making. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the suffrage campaign was really driven by sexual politics, with the vote becoming "both the symbol of the free, sexually autonomous woman, and the means by which the goals of a feminist

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<sup>358</sup> Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public."

sexual culture were to be attained.”<sup>359</sup> However, the discourse of sexuality within suffrage organizations was largely conservative, and specifically intended to portray women as morally superior to men and thus deserving the vote.<sup>360</sup> As such, women needed to be represented as either sexually ‘pure’, the victims of men’s excesses (in common discourses about sex-work at the time), or as sexual subjects only within the context of a heterosexual, monogamous, and procreative relationship. The discussions, then, were limited to conservative notions about gender and sexuality, which were seen as serving the campaign for women’s enfranchisement.

Sexual autonomy or sexual politics, broadly defined, were perhaps at the heart of the suffrage campaign, but the meaning of these terms, both theoretically and practically, was envisioned very differently by different feminists. The extent to which the feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was indeed working to create a new or feminist sexual culture, as Kent argues, depends on the way such a culture is defined. The suffrage movement drew much of its inspiration in these matters from the Contagious Diseases Acts repeal campaigns of the 1860s-80s, advocating for purity in the public and private sphere.<sup>361</sup> Though the movement was by no means monolithic, the various suffrage organizations called for the elimination of the double standard for men and women, and for the establishment of a single standard of chastity.<sup>362</sup> This idea was a challenge to the privilege that men enjoyed at the time, but was acceptable to most women (and some men) as it was based on ideas of women’s innate

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<sup>359</sup> Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 13.

<sup>360</sup> Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain*, 73–79.

<sup>361</sup> Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 122.

<sup>362</sup> Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 157–83.

moral superiority, not uncommon at the time. Their morality presumably made women naturally more inclined to chastity than men, as well as the natural upholders and purifiers of national morals.<sup>363</sup>

While the language of morality was still a major influence on the discourse about sexuality in the early twentieth century, the relatively new science of sexology was fast gaining prominence. Sexologists, many of them physicians, studied human sexuality, and based on a perception of sexuality as prone to pathologies, assumed the roles of classifiers of normal and abnormal sexual behaviours and desires. As it related to women, this new discourse of sexuality also served to explain their exclusion from the political realm, using the notion that women's sexuality was intrinsically pathological.<sup>364</sup> Though not quite mainstream – Chris Waters refers to it as an “esoteric science” at this point in time – sexology did set the tone of the medical debates on human sexuality. Sexologists were interested not only in the physiological aspects of sexuality, but increasingly also in the broad personality structures of ‘deviants’.<sup>365</sup> Freud's theories were still not widely known, and did not attain dominance until the interwar period, so that discussions about ‘sex psychology’ drew on the language of sexology (in both its physiological and psychological aspects), a tendency evident in discussions of sexuality in *The Freewoman*.

Though seemingly occupying two vastly different worlds, the purity campaign and sexology had much in common; as Lesley Hall notes, while some of the sexologists can be

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>365</sup> Waters, “Sexology,” 45–47.

thought of as sex reformers, their definitions of the sexual ‘problems’ of the time were not always antithetical to those of social purity activists, key among them venereal diseases, prostitution, and concerns about the size and perceived ‘quality’ of the population, largely influenced by racist, colonial, and imperialist ideologies.<sup>366</sup> As Frank Mort points out, the two groups shared not only the identification of the main issues, but also the belief in the importance of speaking and writing about sex, as purists saw open discussion of sex as necessary to effect moral change. There was, however, a difference in the intended audience of the two groups; sexological texts were perceived by many (most sexologists included) to be best reserved for professionals, mostly doctors, while purity campaigners wanted to spread information and with it ‘proper’ morality to as broad an audience as possible. Purity campaigns also drew on sexological and other scientific texts to validate their moral claims, appealing to the aura of fact and objectivity to support their positions on such topics as chastity, legal reforms, and eugenics.<sup>367</sup> Sexologists for their part, even if not campaigning for social purity, used their texts to advance a range of ideological positions supported by their studies on sexuality. Some, like Edward Carpenter’s were for the most part progressive, while other, such as Otto Weininger’s, were conservative, and all of them relying to a greater or lesser extent on racist, colonialist ideas.

As Michel Foucault has suggested, the Victorian period was far from silent about sex, and in fact saw a discursive ‘explosion’ on the topic. As discourse on sex increased in volume and in detail, it also became the site of struggle over the power to speak and write about it; as

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<sup>366</sup> Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change*, 78.

<sup>367</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, 87–89.

doctors and legal authorities exercised their power to define and classify normal and abnormal behaviours, desires, bodies, and subjectivities, activists were endeavouring to seize the power to speak for themselves and their communities, sometimes using the terminology coined by sexologists.<sup>368</sup> As Lisa Sigel notes, in addition to the professionalization of sexual discourse through the medicine, there was a gendered policing of the distribution of sexual knowledge. Books on sex were mainly directed to men (and one might add middle and upper class), distancing women from material that could be useful in constructing sexual subjectivity. But sexual knowledge was popularized and discussed in magazines, which offered much greater public access, and allowed for the different knowledges and perspectives of contributors and readers to shape new understandings.<sup>369</sup>

As Lesley Hall has noted, more discourse does not necessarily create more knowledge; she points to the need to attend to agnotology – the creation of ignorance – in relation to sexuality. While the creation of ignorance can be deliberate, “it can also be the inability to see various things and their connections at particular historical moments, or even the refusal of knowledge.” Hall gives as one example the impact that the requirement of sexual respectability for women had on the kinds of sexual knowledge they could obtain.<sup>370</sup> Ignorance can be created, among other methods, through the generation of copious amounts of detailed information, which make it difficult for people to actually gain knowledge of a subject. This is what Proctor

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<sup>368</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>369</sup> Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, 19–39.

<sup>370</sup> Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change*, 4.



discusses as ignorance as an active construct, deliberate and strategic, which can also be couched as “virtuous ignorance” in its resistance of knowledge perceived as dangerous.<sup>371</sup> In the case of sexuality, it is not so much a resistance as it is a silencing that can be presented as protective. The pretence of protecting women and people of the working classes from ‘dangerous’ knowledge was indeed used in some of the discussions of sex at the time.

The first decade of the twentieth century, as Mort notes, was marked by a polarization between social purity and sex radical activism, partly due to an increase in the extent of political activism more generally. Similar to Kent’s claim about the suffrage movement having as its goal the generation of a new discourse on sexuality, Mort argues that women drew on a variety of existing discourses – drawn from medicine, religion, social purity campaigns, and mysticism – to develop a critical feminist discourse.<sup>372</sup> The women’s movement in general, then, can be seen as working against agnotology, including the ignorance created as a result of a confusing abundance of details, by calling into question issues, perceptions, and norms relating to sexuality. Yet even if discussing sexual matters was not seen as in itself antithetical to the goals and methods of the women’s movement, the language, topics, and positions deemed acceptable by the mainstream of the movement were limited. These limitations, constituting in themselves a selective ignorance, meant that there was not necessarily less policing of discourse, but rather a struggle over who gets to police it. The limits of the debates determined what was perceived as potentially harmful

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<sup>371</sup> Robert Proctor, “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study),” in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, n.d.), 1–3.

<sup>372</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, 107-08.

to the political goals of the movement, as well as activists' concerns about how discussing certain matters might reflect upon perceptions of women activists' sexuality. As will be discussed later, some sexologists promoted the idea of a connection between women's involvement in politics and lesbianism, which could (or at least could be thought to) diminish the seriousness of their struggle and claims.

As noted above, *The Freewoman* set itself apart from the suffrage movement when it came to sexuality, both in its tone and approach, and in the topics discussed in it. Discussing matters like homosexuality, free love, illegitimacy, and sexual experience and pleasure for single women from a positive perspective was seen as a possible 'contamination' of the women's and suffrage movement.<sup>373</sup> Making these topics legitimate subjects of public discussion could undermine the claims to women's moral superiority, and their supposed lack of interest in sex beyond procreation within marriage. As many of the arguments of the suffrage movement rested on ideas of women's purity and on analogies between the state and the family, women as sexual subjects and as participants in sexual discourse were a risk. As we shall see, these views on what *The Freewoman* was calling for were not unique to its contemporary context, but were raised again in the mid-1980s.

From the very beginning, *The Freewoman* gave sexual matters prominence within its pages, drawing direct connections between women's freedom and their sexual freedom, with one contributor even making it part of the definition of feminists: "They do not wish for economic

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<sup>373</sup> Maria DiCenzo, Leila Ryan, and Lucy Delap, *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 183.

freedom merely; but for sexual freedom.”<sup>374</sup> The extent of references to sex was such that it brought about complaints from its own readers as well as other women’s periodicals. A week after the publication of the first issue, the *Common Cause*, while stating it was “all for plain speaking and clear thinking about women as about everything else,” also expressed hopes that “future numbers will show more variety in the subjects; to harp on the one string of sex will jar the nerves of readers in the long run.”<sup>375</sup> Some readers seemed to agree, as one of them wrote, in a letter given the title “Undue Emphasis on Sex”: “[t]he obsession with the vote (upon which your editorial comments have been severe) is surely less of an evil than the obsession of the sex question, and not a whit more limited.”<sup>376</sup>

Not all *Freewoman* readers shared this criticism. Some of them wrote to express their appreciation of the openness of the writing and multiple points of view. One correspondent claimed that “Men and women have *never* had an opportunity of discussing the sex question.” They praised *The Freewoman* for “doing incalculable service by throwing open its columns to sane, serious, searching discussion, not from a one-sided Feminist standpoint, but from a *human* point of view.”<sup>377</sup> This reader was perhaps equating the ‘feminist’ point of view with the suffrage movement, attributing to *The Freewoman* a broader ‘humanist’ attitude. Another reader saw the frank discussion of sexuality as what made *The Freewoman* so valuable: “Some of your readers have protested against the discussion of sex questions in your paper, but this to my mind, gives it

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<sup>374</sup> J.M. Kennedy, “The Psychology of Sex,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 14.

<sup>375</sup> *Common Cause*, November 30, 1911, 600.

<sup>376</sup> ‘A Reader,’ Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, February 22, 1912, 271.

<sup>377</sup> S. Skelhorn, “Why Do We Discuss Sex?” *The Freewoman*, March 28, 1912, 376.

its unique value, for ‘straight women’ as a rule, are deplorably ignorant.”<sup>378</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘straight’ in this period and context as “Of a person: Well-conducted, steady ... Also, of a woman: Virtuous, chaste.”<sup>379</sup> The reference to “straight women” here, then, might be implying freer sexual conduct among some women, and could also be a way of setting ‘straight women’ implicitly against other categories, perhaps ‘feminists’ or ‘freewomen’. It also has an air of pride in sexual knowledge, in defiance of social norms.

Other readers saw expanding knowledge about sex as part of increasing knowledge about human life in general, and presented the curiosity about it as a positive force driving society forward. One contributor, William Foss, shared his curiosity about people’s sex life, writing: “And, for my part, I should like to know, for instance, the Sexual Experience of Everybody. The autobiographical accounts collected by Havelock Ellis and Iwan Bloch are truly a revelation. I want to get at the point of view of a natural celibate; though, generally speaking, I would rather pick the brains of a prostitute than of the Bishop of London.”<sup>380</sup> Interestingly, Foss presents the publication of autobiographical accounts as one of the main contributions of sexology. It is not the scientific explanation that is central for him, but the insight into sexual subjectivity and diverse personal experience. Another reader wrote that they believed more knowledge of sexuality will lead to a greater human understanding. As the opening sentence of this letter suggest, this reader was writing out of an acute feeling of the impact of a repressive

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<sup>378</sup> Veturia, “The Remedy?” *The Freewoman*, April 4, 1912, 396.

<sup>379</sup> “Straight, Adj., N., and Adv.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/view/Entry/191142>.

<sup>380</sup> William Foss, “On the Importance of Being Human,” *The Freewoman*, March 28, 1912, 367-68.

atmosphere: “For one doomed to live in a small Swiss town, where the moral atmosphere is distinctly depressing, THE FREEWOMAN comes like a fresh breeze every week and bucks me up!”<sup>381</sup>

There were contributors who perceived curiosity and discussions about sexual matters as prurient. One letter writer, for example, wrote: “I do not believe there is a public demand for the continual discussion of such disgusting topics [venereal diseases and homosexuality]. Where there is such a demand it is a specific kind of that general appetite which usually gluts itself upon the divorce and crime columns of the Sunday press.”<sup>382</sup> It is quite clear that this estimation of the public’s interest was wrong, and one contributor pointed to the existence of *The Freewoman* as evidence of that: “Public opinion is also aching to amend the views of sex relations, as the very existence of THE FREEWOMAN shows.”<sup>383</sup> Another author, Walter Gallichan, wrote in an article on prostitution in favour of making sexual information more available. One of the reasons he gave in support of this position was that “[t]he withholding of the facts of sex and reproduction, with its inevitable risk of acquiring the knowledge by pornographic means, is another factor in the production of more than one social evil besides prostitution.”<sup>384</sup> Increasing the availability of sexual knowledge was presented here as conducive to ‘social purity’, but the acceptable sources of knowledge were still limited; ‘pornographic means’, which was a broad category, were not legitimate sources of information for Gallichan.

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<sup>381</sup> M.S., “On the Importance of Being Human,” *The Freewoman*, April 18, 1912, 437.

<sup>382</sup> Frank Watts, “The Discussion of ‘Moral Putrescence,’” *The Freewoman*, March 14, 1912, 332.

<sup>383</sup> W.B. Esson, “Mr. Upton Sinclair and Sex Institutions: A Criticism,” *The Freewoman*, February 1, 1912, 209.

<sup>384</sup> Walter Gallichan, “The Great Unclassed II,” *The Freewoman*, March 14, 1912, 326.

Some readers were critical of the medical profession, one drawing a connection in a letter between professionals and control over various sexual matters. Tallis Avis addressed “those poor creatures of organised human effort, generally with letters after their names to signify they have been in a reformatory, who have no belief except in the omniscient State, and who are always clamouring to have us trained and legislated for.” The author wondered “if they ever reflect how the State is constituted of permanent officials chosen (without training) ... who are to train us for fatherhood, and choose our wives for us.” In a periodical that was critical of the state on many levels, even if not an anarchist periodical per se, it is not surprising to find sexuality as one of the areas where some people were advocating for individual freedom and agency.

### **3.2 Uranianism**

One of the prime examples of *The Freewoman*'s radical interventions into the discourse on sexuality, and the space it offered for challenges to authorities on sexual matters, was the discussion of homosexuality in the periodical. Homosexuality was certainly one of the topics about which many thought it is best for the general public, and even professionals, to remain ignorant, perceiving silence to be the best method of dealing with it. Legal authorities in the late nineteenth century, when discussing cases involving sex between men, expressed relief at the lack of medical-legal knowledge on the subject.<sup>385</sup> In 1921, when attempts were made to criminalize sex between women on the same terms as sex between men under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, one of the opponents' arguments was that discussing lesbianism in any

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<sup>385</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, Themes in British Social History (Longman, 1981), 101.

way would ‘advertise’ it as an option, and might lead to an increase in lesbian activity.<sup>386</sup> Early works on homosexuality pointed to a connection between homosexuality, particularly in women, and antisocial behaviour. Richard von Krafft-Ebing saw ‘inversion’ (one of the common terms for homosexuality at the time) as acquired rather than congenital, and influenced by the abuse of the normal sexual instinct, primarily through masturbation. While offering ‘scientific’ explanations, Krafft-Ebing concluded that heterosexual monogamy is the basis of the moral society, and any deviation from this path leads to “functional degeneration.”<sup>387</sup> Kraft-Ebbing, much like social purity campaigners, used scientific language and appealed to its authority to support a conservative ideological stance, highlighting the blurriness of the boundaries between scientific and moral discourses on sexuality.

Kraft-Ebbing’s views, however, did not go unchallenged. German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who wrote extensively on homosexuality (or ‘the riddle of man-manly love’, as he put it in the title of his book), saw it as congenital, and resulting from a female psyche in a male body. His main goal in studying and writing about homosexuality was to protest against the persecution of homosexuals, and to advocate for legal reform. He saw male homosexuals (or ‘Urnings’, as he termed them) as constituting a ‘third sex’ and lesbians a ‘fourth sex’, having the body of one biological sex and what he understood, like many at the time, as the “sexual direction” of the opposite sex.<sup>388</sup> British sexologist Havelock Ellis also wrote about inversion as an innate

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<sup>386</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 113–15.

<sup>387</sup> Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women Since 1500* (Greenwood World Pub., 2007), 79–81.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

condition occurring naturally in a minority of the population, men as well as women, and which should therefore not be criminalized. Though admitting that female inversion existed, Ellis believed there needed to be an external catalyst to activate women's congenital lesbian disposition. He also subscribed uncritically to contemporary stereotypes about lesbians being manly and predatory in their display of sexual initiative, and as the rivals of men for sexual partners.<sup>389</sup>

Medical and legal discourses, despite gaining hegemonic status, were not the only ones shaping ideas of homosexuality. Authors such as John Addington Symonds and Edward Carpenter wrote about homosexuality as a historical and social phenomenon, drawing attention to the comradely connection between men, and the positive value of inverts for society. In his writing on ancient Greek culture, Symonds emphasized the acceptability of sex between adult and adolescent men, and its function as a rite of passage.<sup>390</sup> And, writing about artists belonging to an 'intermediate sex', Carpenter made the case for the existence of love and sex between men across historical periods and cultures, and drew connections between artists' 'intermediate' gender or sexual identity (the categories are not separated in these works) and their artistic genius. While downplaying the prevalence and centrality of sexual intercourse to the 'intermediate' identity, Carpenter nonetheless did not deny its existence or present it as wholly undesirable.<sup>391</sup> Carpenter was well known in feminist, socialist, anarchist, and other activist

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<sup>389</sup> Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 2002, 262–63.

<sup>390</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (Verso, 2009), 186–91.

<sup>391</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 15–40.



circles, which made his writing about sexuality in general, as well as about homosexuality, influential.

In his book *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), Carpenter drew on the sexological theories of different scholars, as well as earlier writing by Symonds and himself, to offer a theory of homosexuality. Carpenter followed Ulrichs in using the term Uranians (though he used ‘inverts’ and ‘intermediates’ as well), and in his understanding of homosexuals as people who had a body of one sex, and the soul or temperament of the opposite: “We all know women with a strong dash of the masculine temperament, and we all know men whose almost feminine sensibility and intuition seem to belie their bodily form.”<sup>392</sup> As can be understood from the language Carpenter uses, he emphasized the commonality of homosexuality, despite the need for Uranians to keep their sexuality a secret from society. In pointing to the preponderance of homosexual men among the world’s ‘greatest men’, especially artists and literary figures, Carpenter pointed to their unique sensibilities, promoting androgyny (though not femininity per se) as an ideal state. Inspired mainly by Walt Whitman, Carpenter emphasized the spiritual and comradely aspect of same-sex love, rather than the sexual: “[i]t would be a great mistake to suppose that their attachments are necessarily sexual, or connected with sexual acts. On the contrary (as abundant evidence shows), they are often purely emotional in their character.”<sup>393</sup> This statement was probably meant to counter the common perception at the time of the homosexual as sexually predatory and immoral, but was also reflective of Carpenter’s belief in the potential of love

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 26.

between men to transgress class boundaries. In Carpenter's theory, the question of attraction to the same sex finds its answer not in a pathological definition, or in the realm of sexual conduct, but in the individual soul, and its relation to the body. Sexuality and gender are not seen as entirely separate matters here, a perception not uncommon in earlier periods as well as in Carpenter's time.

Carpenter's theories, as well as the value of making sexology accessible to the general public, were among the issues debated in an exchange about homosexuality between two *Freewoman* contributors, activist Harry Birnstingl and physician Charles Whitby. The debate between the two authors spread across four issues, starting with an article by Birnstingl in the 4 January 1912 issue, titled "Uranians". I will offer a detailed discussion of this debate, as a way of thinking about how *The Freewoman* took up the topic of homosexuality. The debate also sparked lively discussions in the correspondence section, extending the conversation well beyond the four weeks of the exchange between Birnstingl and Whitby, and marking homosexuality as a central issue in *The Freewoman*. Birnstingl started by exploring the pejorative use of the adjectives 'effeminate' and 'masculine' as directed at men and women, respectively, and stated that despite social enforcement of a gender binary, he did not believe any absolute distinction could be drawn "between the qualities and attributes of the two sexes." Drawing on Carpenter's writing, Birnstingl suggested that "we have in our midst a class of people who hover, as it were, midway between the sexes, and their position in society is as yet undefined."<sup>394</sup> Birnstingl also stated, consistent with claims made by Carpenter, that many of the world's 'pioneers' had been

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<sup>394</sup> Harry J. Birnstingl, "Uranians," *The Freewoman*, January 4, 1912, 127.

Uranians, which was, to him, not surprising considering the combination of feminine and masculine traits they possessed, which placed them in a unique position to arbitrate between men and women.<sup>395</sup>

Birnstingl drew explicit distinctions between psychology and outward manifestations. He wrote that “it would be ... a complete fallacy to suppose that the delicate psychological differences of these persons must necessarily betray themselves externally,” reassuring readers that male inverts need not be “of the so-called effeminate type.”<sup>396</sup> He was also clear that Uranians were not necessarily engaged in sexual relations with people of the same gender. Whereas Carpenter stressed the spiritual and comradely nature of attachments between men, Birnstingl was clear that these attractions are “of a sexual kind – and there can never be a doubt in the mind of a participator as to whether an attachment is tinged with sexual desire or not.” Yet he did not see “mechanical” sexual acts as following inevitably from these desires, and in fact assumed that in the majority of cases they do not, particularly among women.<sup>397</sup> Here, similar to *The Intermediate Sex*, there is a distancing of a homosexual identity – explained in terms of desire, psychology, or spirituality – from sexual behaviour. This may be related to the illegality of sex between men at the time, and/or it could have been an attempt to create an image of homosexual men, especially, that would defy mainstream ideas of excess and debauchery, which were to an extent promoted through the Oscar Wilde trial.

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

Another topic taken up in this piece was the value to the public of literature dealing with homosexuality. Birnstingl mainly based his views in this article on *The Intermediate Sex*, but he opined that “[e]verything that helps people to understand themselves, at the same time assists them to guard against their weaknesses, and is therefore of good to mankind. Thus, the literature on this subject that is at present being written is doing a vast amount of good.”<sup>398</sup> Birnstingl, then, advocated making information more accessible, but this was not without a moralistic end, as self-knowledge was meant to lead to a greater ability to resist weaknesses, which seems to mean in this context acknowledging desire but avoiding acting on it.

Two weeks later, the physician Dr. Charles Whitby published a response to Birnstingl’s article, at the editor’s request. Since the paper, to Whitby’s understanding, saw no topic as forbidden, he thought it was inevitable that at some point homosexuality will be discussed. “The difficulty seems to be,” he wrote, “that homosexuality is one of those subjects which those who are competent to discuss would prefer to leave alone.” However, he was willing to discuss the subject, and saw himself as competent to do so by virtue of his medical training.<sup>399</sup> He stated that he felt he could not decline the invitation to respond particularly because Birnstingl based his arguments on Carpenter’s work, and, as Whitby put it, “frankly I don’t like that book.” The reason given was that because Carpenter was an anarchist and therefore believed that “everybody is as good as his neighbour,” proving the existence of homosexuals would be sufficient to show that they are “the salt of the earth.”<sup>400</sup> Whitby objected to this perceived claim, stating that

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Charles J. Whitby, “Tertium Quid,” *The Freewoman*, January 18, 1912, 167.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

“imbeciles, dwarfs and monstrosities also exist” but there would be, he believed, little objection that they cannot be productive members of society. He took the idea of a special societal role for ‘inverts’ to be an insinuation “that inversion or perversion is typical of genius,” a notion he rejected, claiming that “[g]enius is androgynous, but it is never homosexual.” He then drew a distinction between ‘femininity’ and ‘effeminacy’ in men, and ‘mannishness’ and ‘masculinity’ in women – both as spiritual states – whereby the first term in each set would fall within the realm of the normal while the second would constitute perversion.<sup>401</sup>

Whitby then went on to argue that homosexuals, for their own protection, should not be encouraged to “come out and flaunt their sexual vagaries as a token of superiority to the profane herd,” as the ‘philistine’ would admit in private that “such creatures ought to be shot at sight!” A further reason to conceal information about homosexuality from the public was Whitby’s belief that most cases of sexual inversion were not congenital, but the result of social conditions such as industrialization “and, above all, of suggestion and auto-suggestion.”<sup>402</sup> But even in cases of congenital homosexuality, which Whitby believed to be very rare, he claimed that individuals would benefit little from work such as Carpenter’s, since “[n]ot what we are born really signifies, but what we make of ourselves.”<sup>403</sup> This statement, though based on an understanding of homosexuality contrary to Birmstingl’s (at least in terms of its origin), resonates with the hierarchical distinctions the latter draws between “genuine cases of sex inversion” and those stemming from “excesses indulged in, simply in order to satisfy a morbid curiosity and a bestial

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

lust.”<sup>404</sup> The congeniality and consistency of inversion determined for both authors the ‘authenticity’ of a person’s homosexuality, while the individual’s capacity to not act on their desires was the measure of dealing with the condition ‘successfully’.

In his second article, Birnstingl first questioned Whitby’s authority to write about “the Uranian temperament,” based as it was on Whitby’s medical training. Birnstingl stated that his own competency is not based on reading *The Intermediate Sex*, “nor upon the fact that other people have proved the existence of Uranians, but from the fact that I myself know of their existence.”<sup>405</sup> Personal experience becomes through this statement as legitimate a basis for analysis as medical or other formal knowledge, if not even more so. This claim would have been especially significant in a periodical with a large women readership, for, as Lucy Bland has shown, it was partly women’s unfamiliarity with medical and scientific discourses that kept them out of spaces where they could articulate their own views on sexuality.<sup>406</sup> Similarly, the illegality of homosexual acts and the attempts to silence information about them, would have likely kept many individuals out of discussion pertaining to their own desires and identities. Birnstingl also hints at the personal and political investment that Whitby might have in the privileges that accrue to him by virtue of his status: “I see in Dr. Whitby’s article the attitude of a man proud of his virility and sex, possessing an ideal of womanhood – an ideal a little more advanced than that demanded and produced in the Victorian era.”<sup>407</sup> This attachment to ideas about masculinity,

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<sup>404</sup> Birnstingl, “Uranians,” 128.

<sup>405</sup> Harry J. Birnstingl, “Uranians II,” *The Freewoman*, January 25, 1912, 189.

<sup>406</sup> Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 2002, 25–27.

<sup>407</sup> Birnstingl, “Uranians II,” 190.

including the prerogatives to define women's sexuality and determine the boundaries of the 'normal' more broadly, undermines the purported objectivity of the scientist or medical man.

Despite challenging Whitby's authority and competency, Birnstingl was at least partially in agreement with the physician about the social status of "dwarfs and imbeciles," though not about the analogy between these groups and Uranians. While Whitby stated as common sense the notion that "imbeciles, dwarfs and monstrosities" cannot be desirable members of a community, Birnstingl found 'monstrosities' to be too abstract to be useful. As for the other groups, "dwarfs," which Birnstingl took to mean "misshapen individuals" could be productive members of a community, so long as it is not based solely on physical ability and strength. "Imbeciles," which presumably referred to people with mental illnesses, were a different story; they could not be desirable members of society, and furthermore their condition was indicative of "an evil condition, either as regards sin or ignorance, or both." Uranians, on the contrary, were useful members of the community "precisely by reason of [their] abnormality and aberration," as their condition resulted from qualities inherited from both sexes, not from sin or ignorance.<sup>408</sup> Moreover, Birnstingl states that "Uranians, by reason of their dual nature, which Dr. Whitby finds so deplorable, are especially suited to produce pioneers and men and women of unusual intellect."<sup>409</sup>

This argument shows Birnstingl subscribing to hegemonic ideas about normality and accepting homosexuality as an abnormality, perhaps a mental illness (as this might be one of the

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 190.

meanings of ‘aberration’), and in that sense, it could be akin to ‘imbecility’. What determines the ‘desirability’ of an individual here is that the condition be congenital and not influenced by adverse circumstances. It is not clear which conditions exactly Birnstingl was referring to, but clearly authors advancing views that in some respects could be seen as progressive were not immune to the discourse of eugenics and the ideologies behind it. Indeed, Birnstingl himself states at the end of the article that he and Whitby “only differ in a matter of degree,” namely that they draw the line of the acceptable level of femininity in men and masculinity in women at different points.<sup>410</sup> This was true inasmuch as both authors placed homosexuality on a hierarchical scale, but they differed not only in their views of this hierarchy, but also on the question of what constitutes the competency to speak on the matter.

Whitby, however, did not concur. “No, Mr. Birnstingl,” he began his second article – the fourth in the series, “the difference between us is not a difference of degree. It is either fundamental or nothing.” He then reiterated his belief that it is not the innate condition that matters: “That may be the awkward material served out to you by Nature: all that concerns us is what you make of it.”<sup>411</sup> The task of every person, as Whitby saw it, was to achieve individuality, which he understood as “harmony out of discord, unity out of multiplicity.” While every individual had contradictions, the more complex their ‘endowment’, the greater the danger of failure to achieve harmony, “[a]nd failure in this task involves nothing less than the collapse and disintegration of the personality.”<sup>412</sup> We can see in this pronouncement an example of

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>411</sup> Charles J. Whitby, “A Matter of Taste,” *The Freewoman*, February 1, 1912, 215.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 216.



physicians' preoccupation with the psyche of 'deviants', as Whitby here does not limit his analysis to physiology or heredity, but lays out the psychic perils of homosexuality.

As to the line between the normal and abnormal, or, per Whitby, between 'femininity' and 'effeminacy', this is defined by a man's behaviour. An effeminate man is one who "deliberately apes the sexual conduct ... of women ... all those practices by which women attract the sexual attention of men. Many of them are, even in women, distinctly pathological: in men they are abominable. I refer to such things as the abuse of cosmetics, tight-lacing, the wearing of high-heeled shoes, the affectation of a mincing gait." He saw this definition as leaving "a man perfectly free to indulge all his legitimate predilections," which included knitting and embroidery, assuming that some people are born with a knack for activities associated with the opposite gender. But there was a clear difference between activities and personality, as evidenced by Whitby's statement: "I shall not easily admit that a human being may be anatomically male and physiologically or psychologically female."<sup>413</sup>

Whitby did not answer directly Birnstingl's challenge to his authority, but rather made a case for his denouncement of effeminacy on the grounds of 'distaste': "it may be objected that this is too personal and superficial a standard. But I maintain that matters of taste may be of primary importance; and that to waive their significance is a sign of psychological ineptitude." He saw morality as "mainly, perhaps exclusively, a matter of taste," and expressed hope that the contemporary and ongoing process of revising traditional tastes will "stop short of disregarding those deep-seated instincts which warn us from the sloping edge of the abyss of vital dissipation

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 216.

and racial ruin.”<sup>414</sup> Clearly, the training in medicine that Whitby saw as granting him the competence to write about homosexuality, also gave him the authority to define the limits of psychological normality, as well as to opine on matters of morality based on his own taste, which he took to unproblematically stand for common values. This paragraph, which concluded Whitby’s article, exemplifies the blurry boundaries between medical and moral discourses, as well as the extent of their reliance on ideas based in a eugenic ideology. This, again, was common to both authors despite their difference of opinion on homosexuality, as Birnstingl grounded his arguments in favour of a distinction between Uranians and members of groups he saw as ‘undesirable’.

The exchange between Birnstingl and Whitby also generated response from readers in the correspondence section. One of these was from Frank Watts, who referred generally to the discussion of sex in *The Freewoman*, not specifically to homosexuality; however, the letter came after the first three articles had been published, and it is likely that they played a role in this reader’s mounting frustration. Watts first stated that morality needed to be rescued from ‘sex experts’, who see the world “as ‘this farmyard world of sex,’ and a very nasty species of farmyard world too.”<sup>415</sup> A healthy person, claimed Watts, when left to their own devices, would “seek out joys of the most enduring nature.” But since writing about sex focused on “the morbid and disgusting abnormalities of sex,” it ran the risk of contaminating public morality. He was also convinced that these discussions were not the material readers (at least women readers, as

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Frank Watts, “The Freewoman and Life Problems,” *The Freewoman*, February 1, 1912, 211.

the threat of moral contamination did not apply to men) desired, and that if they were, they needed male authority to protect their morality: “Surely, the women readers of THE FREEWOMAN do not want to read articles every week upon such subjects as Uranians, syphilis, and prostitution. If these are the subjects that attract freewomen, then it must be admitted by sane observers that man in the past was exercising a sure instinct in keeping his spouse and girl children within the sheltered walls of ignorance.”<sup>416</sup>

The editor replied to Watts’ letter by asking: “Does our correspondent imply that ‘morbid and disgusting abnormalities of sex’ have up to the present been discussed in THE FREEWOMAN?”<sup>417</sup> Marsden’s humorous response was followed by a letter from another correspondent, Albert Löwy, who called into question ideas about normality and the processes by which they become hegemonic. Löwy saw science, and especially the medical profession, as willing to make ‘human sacrifices’ in the name of ‘reason’ and ease of classification: “Reason declares that Intermediates are a ‘disturbing factor’ in the understanding of the human race; hence the scientist, intent on classification and ‘practical purposes,’ is concerned with eliminating those examples which obstinately refuse to be labelled.”<sup>418</sup> He challenged Whitby’s claims about the congeniality of homosexuality, and the influence that books might have on people’s understanding of themselves, writing sarcastically: “So the human race is made up of men, women, complete inverts, and a large number of deluded Intermediates, who are to be accounted for by ‘cruel books’ giving and asking for information on the nature of the

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> *The Freewoman*, February 1, 1912, 211.

<sup>418</sup> Albert E. Löwy, “The Intellectual Limitations of the ‘Normal’,” *The Freewoman*, February 1, 1912, 212.

peculiarity.”<sup>419</sup> As to the question of normality, Löwy believed that cases of complete heterosexuality (which he termed monosexuality) are rare, though slightly less so than complete inversion, invoking Kraft-Ebbing and his idea of human sexuality as existing on a continuum rather than a strict binary. The letter ends with a call for separating medical from moral authority, specifically as regards the question whether Uranians are superior. Löwy did not offer his opinion on the matter, but did remark that Uranians “might even be excused a certain sense of *superiority* when they are met on all sides with stupid, unintelligent criticism, which exhibits the undoubted *inferiority* of bigotry on the part of their critics. (The last remark is prompted by some personal experiences, not by anything Dr. Whitby wrote.)”<sup>420</sup>

A week later, another reader commented on the series, which they had read “with some interest.” They addressed to Dr. Whitby the question whether the “repulsive type of ‘effeminate’ Uranian ... is the *prostitute* of that category of the human race?”<sup>421</sup> Drawing on their experience travelling and meeting Uranians of the “higher type,” the author constructed a hierarchy based on sexual conduct, whereby those who are promiscuous (as “prostitutes” need not necessarily denote a monetary or other exchange) were deemed the lower types. The author of the letter also weighed in on the debate over the benefit of books such as Carpenter’s; this literature was useful for the ‘higher types’ among the Uranians, and was, the author opined, written for them rather than the ‘lower types’ in the first place. By seeking to limit the discourse on sexuality to ‘higher types’, this letter writer connected the right to access sexual information to perceived sexual

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> M.S., “Uranians,” *The Freewoman*, February 8, 1912, 232.

morality, arguing that the “prostitute type” should not access this information, as he is not interested in understanding homosexuality, but in “flaunting his vulgarity and sensuality in the eyes of the public.”<sup>422</sup>

Another correspondent, writing under the name ‘Scython’, said that they read *The Freewoman* principally because of its favourable treatment of “the Uranian question.” The letter addressed gender identity rather than sexuality, but as is evident from the articles and letters, the two categories cannot in fact be neatly separated in this context, as sexuality was very often defined in terms of gender identity and expression at the time, including in the discussions in *The Freewoman*.<sup>423</sup> Scython stated at the beginning of the letter that their account is based on personal experience, as they “belong to that class,” characterizing themselves – physical and psychological traits combined – as “about 80 F + 20 M.”<sup>424</sup> They proceeded to criticize “the disgusting generalisations” made by Whitby, claiming that they deny Uranians the virtues of chastity and modesty, which the author associates with women, therefore seeing Whitby as either denying women chastity, or denying Uranians their true identity as the author sees it. Scython protested against the notion that Uranians cannot be chaste, asking “[w]hy, because Providence has laid this cross on us, should we, one and all, be supposed to lack chastity ... which, speaking generally, so sharply divides women from men?”<sup>425</sup> The author clearly associates femininity with chastity and sexual ignorance, stating that the idea of sexual contact “no more occurs to me than

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change*, 49–51.

<sup>424</sup> Scython, “Uranians,” *The Freewoman*, February 22, 1912, 274.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

it would to a convent-trained girl,” but also with a quest for a measure of independence, which implicitly connects them to feminist struggles. As they put it: “we have the natural female preference for some individuality of our own, the mere idea of which seems to terrify the ordinary man.”<sup>426</sup>

Whitby responded by calling Scython’s claims “outrageous and libellous,” stating that he actually acknowledged the ‘heroic’ potential of Uranians. But he refused to enter into discussion with Scython, for “of what use would it be to bandy words with a person who imagines that a wild guess at his own or anybody's sex-formula has the slightest evidential value?”<sup>427</sup> Whitby denied Scython, and by extension anyone else, the agency to speak of their experience, and the validity of that experience as evidence. The refusal to engage in conversation with someone who was not basing their arguments on formal and purportedly objective knowledge foregrounds the value of personal experience and access to information, through literature and personal accounts, as one of the main points of the whole debate on homosexuality.

A more direct critique of the gender binary was presented in an article signed by T. Baty – barrister Thomas Baty, who was described by Delap as “a transgender lawyer,” and according to Alison Oram as also went by Irene Clyde.<sup>428</sup> Baty wrote about a new organization called The Aëthnic Union (the name, which Baty thought “perhaps barbarous,” derives from the Greek word denoting ‘race’), which “recognises that upon the fact of sex there has been built up

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Charles J. Whitby, “Uranians,” *The Freewoman*, February 29, 1912, 291.

<sup>428</sup> Delap, “Individualism and Introspection,” 183; Alison Oram, “Cross-Dressing and Transgender,” in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. Harry Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 276.

a gigantic superstructure of artificial convention which urgently needs to be swept away. And it does not see how it is to be swept away unless sex is resolutely ignored.”<sup>429</sup> Baty’s article was not explicitly connected to the exchange between Birnstingl and Whitby, but challenged the very basis on which their contrary opinions are founded. Speaking against gender distinctions as such – what Baty refers to as ‘ignoring sex’ – the Union aimed not to reform gender notions, but to do away with them altogether: “A fire is lighted in our midst ... on it are piled deadly branches and evil incense, which are spreading a poisonous miasma throughout the land. The Aëthnic Union is not hopeful of clearing the air by pulling out a few embers. Clearly and definitely, it aims at extinguishing the fire.” The Union’s stated aim was to liberate people from the “soul-murder” of imposed binary gender perception.<sup>430</sup> Notably, Baty did not paint an entirely clear picture of what a society or an individual unfettered by a binary gender system might look like, or how that state might be achieved. This approach called for resistance to, and the eventual dismantling of, gender distinction, opening up space for a certain degree of fluidity. One problematic feature of this fluidity, however, was that it existed only on a scale of androgyny, distancing it from feminine expression.

In her work on cross-dressing, Alison Oram has addressed the way the relationship between gender and sexuality was understood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She notes that “cross-dressing, gender dissidence and unconventional sexuality have a longstanding and complex interrelationship.”<sup>431</sup> At different times over the past 250 years in

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<sup>429</sup> T. Baty, “The Aëthnic Union,” *The Freewoman*, February 22, 1912, 278.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>431</sup> Oram, “Cross-Dressing and Transgender,” 256.

British society, cross-dressing may have been interpreted in various ways, depending on the notions of gender in operation at the time. Gender could be seen as a social role, as inherently stemming from biological sex, or as one's psychic sense of self.<sup>432</sup> The discussions about homosexuality in *The Freewoman* were concerned with gender mainly as regards its rootedness in biology or anatomy, and in the individual's psyche. As evidenced by Whitby's articles, the gender one was attracted to was taken to reflect their own 'authentic' gender identity to some extent, though this also had to do with the question whether they acted on their desires.

Birnstingl (following Carpenter), did not entirely differ from Whitby on this point, though he did present Uranians as a more diverse group, and rejected the negative value Whitby attached to them. Birnstingl and some of the correspondents challenged medical authorities' perceptions of normality, the indistinct boundary between science and morality, and the claims for the superiority of formal education over lived experience as a source of knowledge.

Though contributors acknowledged that there were women as well as men among Uranians, lesbianism was not discussed extensively in *The Freewoman*, certainly less than male homosexuality. This was consistent with the approach to lesbianism at the time more broadly; since sex between women was not illegal, lesbian acts were policed and discussed significantly less than those between men, and lesbian subcultures would only develop in the 1920s.<sup>433</sup> Yet the topic did have a small presence in the periodical: the two items referred to here, and an article on

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>433</sup> Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 105–15.



women and education that hinted at lesbianism.<sup>434</sup> Much like with male homosexuality, with lesbianism as well, the values attached to it by contributors varied widely. Birnstingl, in his article on Uranians, also referred to relationships between women, specifically in the context of women's political activism. Concerns over the impact that involvement in politics might have on women's sexuality were common at the time, and the idea of women becoming 'unsexed' was used as a means of deterring them from education, the professions, and activism.<sup>435</sup> Whitby, for example, saw industrial capitalism as producing "functionally sexless" workers, especially women, referring to non-reproduction, which could include sex between women.<sup>436</sup> Birnstingl drew a connection between women's activism and their sexuality: in his first article he noted that many have referred to feminists pejoratively as 'sexless', but raised the option that "[i]t apparently has never occurred to them that numbers of these women find their ultimate destiny ... forming romantic – nay, sometimes passionate – attachments with each other."<sup>437</sup> The connection here is reversed, implying not that public or political activity can turn women into lesbians (or otherwise 'unsex' them), but that it provides women with a chance to form a community that includes and accepts romantic and sexual relations, and perhaps also that

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<sup>434</sup> Helen Hamilton, "Spinsters in the Making Type I: The College Educated Woman," *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 66-67.

<sup>435</sup> A famous use of the term 'unsexed' was in a poem titled "The unsex'd females: a poem, addressed to the author of the pursuits of literature," written by Rev. Richard Polwhele in 1798. In this diatribe, Polwhele refers to Mary Wollstonecraft and other learned women as 'unsex'd', presenting them as women who have forsaken feminine virtue and become domineering and masculine. Of Wollstonecraft he writes: "See Wollstonecraft, whom no decorum checks,/Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex;/O'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim,/And slight the timid blush of virgin fame." University of Oxford Text Archive, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://ota.ox.ac.uk/text/3251.html>.

<sup>436</sup> Whitby, "Tertium Quid," 168.

<sup>437</sup> Henry Birnstingl, "Uranians," *The Freewoman*, January 4, 1912, 128.

sexuality has a role to play in political consciousness. Birnstingl not only challenged the common causal relation, but was also explicit in assigning a positive value to this connection: “It is one of the most wonderful things of the twentieth century, a century which until now has been full of wonderful things.”<sup>438</sup>

The other reference to lesbianism is in a letter from a reader, signing her letter as Marah, who related a story from her younger years, hinting that she was sexually pursued by a woman whom she terms “bi-sexual.” The woman, who was an artist, was older than the author, and had invited her to live in her studio when she was alone in the city. Marah provided no detail of what happened after she accepted the offer, but referred to the experience as “awful”: “It is very difficult for me to say now what I found out about this unhappy creature. I only understood it when I was older, and when it was all too late. This ... artistic woman was bi-sexual. On the third day of my stay at the studio I ran away.”<sup>439</sup> The letter was not a response to a discussion of homosexuality, but rather meant as a cautionary tale about women’s and girls’ ignorance and its perils, and to alert women to the existence of lesbians:

Long after ... I mentioned it to a doctor, the only living soul I breathed it to. He assured me that cases of this kind were *enormously on the increase!* For heaven's sake, FREEWOMAN, try and break down this shameful and dangerous ignorance ... I should never have written what I have if I didn't think good might come to others through

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Marah, “The Human Complex,” *The Freewoman*, April 18, 1912, 437.

knowing even of such a thing as this. I may add it has been an experience which has embittered my whole life.<sup>440</sup>

In this case, a conversation did not develop on the issue, but the fact that a reader found it necessary to ‘alert’ others to the existence and the purported increased incidence of lesbianism is telling of the perception of the subject as little known and discussed, and yet a danger that needed to be exposed. It also reveals a perception of women as being uniquely at risk due to a lack of sexual knowledge, though Marah does not advocate broadening that knowledge in any way except through her story. The choice of *The Freewoman* as the venue in which to publish this cautionary tale was not explained by the author, but she may have seen it as a way to reach an audience of young, single women, who were presumably vulnerable to the advances of lesbians. As she related a story about herself as a young woman struggling to sustain herself independently, perhaps a feminist periodical seemed like an appropriate choice. It may also be that by that point *The Freewoman* had already made a name for itself as a publication that welcomed taboo topics.

### **3.3 Spinsterhood**

Another topic through which the editor and contributors of *The Freewoman* discussed sexual and gender identity outside the framework of heterosexual relationship was spinsterhood and women’s sexual activity, particularly that of single women. These subjects often led to more general debates about gender roles, and especially women’s role as wives and mothers, but I will

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 438.

focus on writing about single women. ‘Spinster’ in the context of *The Freewoman* was used to denote single women, and the assumptions that contributors made about the reason for these women being single, and what that means in terms of their sexual activity, differed. Discussions about spinsterhood, then, were a way for contributors, in this case mostly women, to debate women’s sexuality and non-sexuality, as well as the political meanings of these categories, sometimes in ways that could be read now as attempts to construct asexual identities. These discussions were also a means for women to exercise agency over the discourse about their sexuality. As Frank Mort notes, the tendency in the medical discourse as well as in the writings of male sex-radicals was to sexualize all women, so that polemicizing spinsterhood was a form of resistance.<sup>441</sup> The resistance to sexualization is evident in the exchanges about spinsterhood in *The Freewoman*, but so is a resistance to the de-sexualization of single women, also using the figure of the spinster.

The discussions of spinsterhood in *The Freewoman* began with a piece written by Dora Marsden (though not signed<sup>442</sup>) in the first issue, which opens with “I write of the High Priestess of Society. Not of the mother of sons, but of her barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vestal under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, of the Spinster I write.”<sup>443</sup> The first half of the article lays out in an ironic tone the power the spinster holds despite her presumed weakness, and her meaning to society: “She, unobtrusive, meek, soft-footed, silent, shamefaced,

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<sup>441</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, 108.

<sup>442</sup> I follow Shannon McMahon’s identification of Marsden as the author of this piece. See McMahon, “Freespinsters and Bondspinsters.”

<sup>443</sup> “The Spinster. By One,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 10.

bloodless and boneless, thinned to spirit, enters the secret recesses of the mind, sits at the secret springs of action, and moulds and fashions our emasculate Society. She is our social Nemesis.”<sup>444</sup> But later Marsden indicted society rather than the spinster, and particularly the middle and upper classes. It was society that inculcated in women a sense that their purpose in life is to marry, and since women were led to expect not just any man, but the ‘right’ man, if that man did not turn up they were destined to become spinsters. Society is to blame for this, rather than the women themselves, and Marsden clearly criticizes notions of romantic love as a societal conspiracy: “Rightly or wrongly, the theory of the right man has been dinned into the consciousness of the ordinary middle-class woman. It may be merely a subtle ruse on the part of a consciously inadequate society to prepare its victims for the altar.”<sup>445</sup> Reader I.D. Pearce, in a letter responding to an article on marriage and motherhood, expressed similar views on society’s role in limiting women’s horizons: “So, with women, we tell them their place is the home, their duty, ordained by Nature, to be mothers and mothers only; but we show no faith in Nature's ordination, we act as if she cannot be trusted. Women, we say, must be *kept* in their place, for with fuller knowledge and freedom they will decline to remain there, and repudiate all home responsibilities.”<sup>446</sup>

In particular, Marsden spoke against the spinster as a necessarily non-sexual being, and rejected the idea that spinsters overcome their sex-drive. Rather, unfulfilled desires become a source of physical and emotional distress and disease: “Driven outward, denied its rightful

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>446</sup> I.D. Pearce, “Marriage and Motherhood,” *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 32.

ordained fulfillment, the instinct becomes diffused. The field of consciousness is charged with an all-pervasive unrest and sickness, which changes all meanings, and queers all judgments, and which, appearing outwardly, we recognise as sentimentality.”<sup>447</sup> As Marsden saw it, her contemporary spinsters had only two options – they could either have a sexual life and pay the social price for it, or forego sexual experience, which was tantamount to giving up on a part of their being. Marsden criticized these choices harshly: “This social slaughter can no longer pass without challenge, and they may remember for their comfort that if prurience has slain its thousands, chastity has slain its tens of thousands. In this matter, it remains for Society to justify itself.”<sup>448</sup>

Due to its polemical style and sarcastic tone, some readers did not understand Marsden’s article to be critiquing the status of spinsters, but as subscribing to and perpetuating stereotypes. One reader recalled the men who wanted to marry her – placing herself safely out of the category of involuntary spinsters – and ended her letter with a description of the benefits of an unmarried life, such as a fulfilling career, an independent income, and the company of her friends. For these reasons, she writes, “I still sign myself ‘Single, but Undismayed’.”<sup>449</sup> Another, signing herself ‘A Spinster’, wrote that “Old maids ... are unimportant, but they have their use,” countering Marsden’s portrayal of the spinster as a social nemesis, and possibly responding to the declining centrality of spinsters in various social causes in the 1910s, compared to previous

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<sup>447</sup> “The Spinster. By One,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 11.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>449</sup> ‘Single, but Undismayed,’ Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, November 30, 1911, 32.

decades.<sup>450</sup> This reader also took up the question of sex for single women: “As for the everlasting subject of sex, I cannot believe that all spinsters are in a perpetual state of inward moaning over an unfulfilled destiny.” Suggesting that single women should “put this aspect of life behind them,” she claims that this need not happen through violent suppression, but as a result of a supposedly common notion of propriety akin to the propriety of certain attire to certain ages: “Can they not think of such things as, at the age of forty-five, one would think of wearing a white muslin gown and pink ribbons?”<sup>451</sup> The editor responded with “[w]e have heard that there are women who can,” refusing to prescribe an ‘appropriate’ sexual behaviour for single women.<sup>452</sup>

The perception that *The Freewoman* was hostile to single women persisted in the late twentieth century; historian Sheila Jeffreys sees *The Freewoman* as dismissive of spinsters’ social role, and of the resistance to heteropatriarchy they offer through celibacy and a fight against passion, a view held by some suffrage activists such as Lucy Re-Bartlett. Jeffreys also represents Stella Browne, who participated in the debate over single women and sex, as ‘recruiting’ women to heterosexual intercourse, and *The Freewoman* as promoting sexual freedom at the expense of spinsters.<sup>453</sup> This reading resonates with the political climate of feminism in the mid-1980s, which was marked by a new ‘sex war’. On one side of this new war were feminists who opposed pornography and sex-work – some opposing sex with men

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<sup>450</sup> McMahon, “Freespinsters and Bondspinsters,” 65.

<sup>451</sup> ‘A Spinster,’ Letter to the Editor, *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 53-54.

<sup>452</sup> Editor’s response, *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 54.

<sup>453</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 91–98.

altogether – seeing them as part of a culture of violence against women. On the other side were ‘sex positive’ feminists who took a more nuanced approach to pornography and sex-work, and who saw the roots of gender-based violence in other political and social causes.<sup>454</sup>

Other readings of *The Freewoman*’s stand on spinsterhood, and indeed of the purpose of the discussion about the topic, have been suggested. Shannon McMahon has offered a different analysis, through a close reading of the articles and correspondence about spinsterhood in *The Freewoman*. She shows that Marsden’s goal in starting the debate, and importantly of starting it with an ironic article that could be read in different ways, served to unpack ‘spinster’ as an identity category. This was done through a process whereby, as McMahon puts it, “[e]ssentially, while the editors helped to put the term to death, readers sought to infuse the term with new life.”<sup>455</sup> This unpacking and complicating of the spinster category, McMahon suggests, brought about an understanding of single women as belonging to two broad categories, which she names “bondspinsters” – those spinsters who embodied the negative connotations ascribed to them by hegemonic institutions, and “freespinsters” – the spinsters “who demonstrated vitality and agency.”<sup>456</sup> I find McMahon’s reading of this debate compelling in its attention to the nuances of tone, humour, and social critique, rather than taking the text at face value.

One exchange that was central to the debate about spinsterhood, and the underlying issue of sexual agency, was between Kathlyn Oliver and Stella Browne, who signed her first few letters ‘A New Subscriber’ and later revealed her identity. Oliver was a socialist-feminist and the

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<sup>454</sup> Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 229–45.

<sup>455</sup> McMahon, “Freespinsters and Bondspinsters,” 61.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



former secretary of the Domestic Workers' Union.<sup>457</sup> In her letters she presented herself as celibate and rejected the notion that suppressing sexual desires and needs was harmful to women's physical health, though she conceded that it had adverse emotional effects: "these years of abstinence have not diversely [*sic*] affected my health, though they have affected my spirits. I become at times very morbid and depressed when I see life slipping by and youth going, going, going, and myself still loving, but unable to marry."<sup>458</sup>

Oliver also wrote firmly against the idea of holding women to the same standards as men, explaining that "As a suffragist and a feminist, I often talk of the equality of the sexes, but in sex matters it is surely indisputable that we women are miles above and beyond men."<sup>459</sup> This relates to arguments about women's moral superiority, evidenced by chastity. In a letter to the editor she wrote:

I do hope with all the earnestness of which I am capable that the new 'morality', which would permit for women the same degrading laxity in sex matters which is indulged in by most of the lower animals, including man, will be choked and crushed before it grows any stronger. How can we possibly be Freewomen if, like the majority of men, we become the slaves of our lower appetites? This is surely a strange method of advancement and emancipation, and I am not at all prepared to travel this road myself, thanking the new 'moralists' all the same.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 1995, 281.

<sup>458</sup> Kathlyn Oliver, "Chastity and Normality," *The Freewoman*, February 29, 1912, 290.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>460</sup> Kathlyn Oliver, "Asceticism and Passion," *The Freewoman*, February 15, 1912, 252.

In a later letter, Oliver criticized Stella Browne for suggesting that women should be the ones to make decisions regarding their bodies. Using the example of prostitution, often invoked in the discourse on sexuality in the women's movement as the ultimate example of women's victimization, Oliver asked about Browne: "As an advocate of 'individual liberty' and freedom, she wouldn't surely regard prostitution as an indecent means of livelihood? but would allow everyone the right to do as they pleased with their own bodies?"<sup>461</sup> It is not clear if the alternative to the apparently horrifying idea that the choice over an individual's body resides with the person themselves would be state monitoring of sexuality, or strict adherence to norms, or perhaps both.

Stella Browne saw Oliver's approach as puritanical and harmful. To Oliver's argument that sexual activity should be reserved for true love rather than lust, Browne replied:

I should like to know ... how Miss Oliver would distinguish between 'love' and 'lust'? There is, of course, an enormous difference—yet real love between the sexes (which I fully admit is extremely rare) contains physical desire as well as mental sympathy ... and *devotion*, which is affection raised to a very high power. Such really great love is an intense spiritual and physical experience, and is the privilege of comparatively few; most people are not sufficiently evolved to be capable of it. Are they, therefore, to be debarred from a lesser love?<sup>462</sup>

Browne was not entirely in disagreement with Oliver that lust was a lesser form of love, but saw it as a legitimate outlet for desire, whereas Oliver condemned it harshly. Browne ended

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<sup>461</sup> Kathlyn Oliver, "On the Loose Principle," *The Freewoman*, April 4, 1912, 399.

<sup>462</sup> 'A New Subscriber,' "Wanted – the Grounds for Differentiation," *The Freewoman*, April 18, 1912, 437.

the letter with praise for the pleasures of sex, and a call for individual freedom in sexual matters: “Let us admit our joy and gratitude for the beauty and pleasure of sex. And let those women who ... will not at least try to enjoy their elementary human rights, refrain from unmeasured public attacks on the others, who have the courage of their desires as well as their convictions.”<sup>463</sup>

This last sentence portrays sexually active women in terms reminiscent of those used in discussions of bohemianism at the time – referring to courage in the face of society and its norms. However, the resistance to societal mores had its limits; Browne’s letters also express a strong investment in the normalcy of heterosexual sex. In one of her letters she clarified that she used the word ‘normal’ not about Oliver, but: “with reference to physiological facts, e.g., to hetero-sexual intercourse in contradistinction to auto-erotism, and the habits of those ‘lower animals’ of whom Miss Oliver disapproves so much, and knows so little.”<sup>464</sup> The equation of heterosexual intercourse with normalcy is interesting with regard to Oliver, for three years later she wrote to Edward Carpenter about her realization that she belonged the ‘intermediate sex’, and inquired about organizations where she could meet other ‘Urnings’.<sup>465</sup>

Although Browne places ‘auto-erotism’ outside of the category of ‘normal’, she was also the one to discuss masturbation as a widespread practice for women. The letter in which she raised this issue also emphasized *The Freewoman*’s position in relation to the limits on sexual discourse:

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> ‘A New Subscriber,’ “Who Are the ‘Normal’?” *The Freewoman*, March 7, 1912, 313.

<sup>465</sup> Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 1995, 291–92; Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter*, 2009, 330.

There is just one other point I should like to mention, and your paper is the only lay publication in English in which it could be made ... Sexual abstinence implies absolute abstention from all forms of what Havelock Ellis terms 'auto-erotism' — thus including imaginative and psychic excitation in its various forms. How many single women have entirely refrained from these practices? I imagine that, if reliable statistics were obtainable, they would very much astonish our friends.<sup>466</sup>

Reading this debate not as a show of support by women for heteropatriarchal ideas of sexuality, but as an instance of grappling with emergent notions of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity, highlights the significance for women of inserting themselves into the discourse on sexuality. One of the problems with the way Jeffreys relates to the spinsterhood question in *The Freewoman* is the assumption that the term 'spinster' is necessarily used as an insult or a pejorative. This use of the term was indeed highlighted by some historians, but often to show the ways in which it was employed to deter women from activism.<sup>467</sup> Accepting the negative connotations of 'spinster' as the only possible meaning the word held for women and feminists at the time does not capture the political use of sexual terms, and the agency of feminists in appropriating and using them. For instance, creating discursive space for a sexually active spinster could allow single women who were sexually active not to be classified automatically in the category of 'prostitutes', in which they were often placed, and which could have negative

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<sup>466</sup> 'A New Subscriber,' "The Chastity of Continence?" *The Freewoman*, February 22, 1912, 270.

<sup>467</sup> See, for example, Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 10.

social implications.<sup>468</sup> Much like with the discussion about homosexuality, the use of similar terminology by people with differing, sometimes opposing, opinions, and the conversations that emerge on paper about these terms, show the process of meaning-making as it unfolds. It also exemplifies the editor's and contributors' belief in the power of language, and the agency to contest and shape it, to influence political, social, and cultural realities.

As the correspondence on this matter in *The Freewoman* shows, part of the debate was about ideas of gender and sexual 'normality', understood differently by contributors, and contested in the exchanges between them. *The Freewoman's* editor and contributors were clearly concerned with different perceptions of what constitutes 'normal' gender and sexual behaviours, desires, identities, and even interests and curiosity. In the arena it provided for discussions of the meanings associated with sexual desires, lifestyles, and acts, *The Freewoman* can be thought of as a queer publishing space, as already suggested in chapter 2. As Frank Mort puts it: "understood as part of a longer historical *durée*, the loose signifier 'queer' has re-focused a cluster of issues which have been incipient within dissident sexual cultures since the late nineteenth century."<sup>469</sup>

*The Freewoman* was queer not in the narrow sense of promoting a distinctive agenda with regard to homosexuality, but in touching on two the main themes that Mort identifies as part of this looser understanding of queerness: different understandings of normality and perversion, and the meanings attached to sexual desires, acts, and lifestyles. This use of queerness recalls

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<sup>468</sup> Hera Cook, "Demography," in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. Harry Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 31–32.

<sup>469</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, xviii.

Berlant and Warner's idea of 'queer' as not attached specifically to sex acts, but also to "queer zones and other worlds estranged from heterosexual culture ... the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture."<sup>470</sup> As the discussions explored above demonstrate, *The Freewoman* was not trying primarily to advance specific views on the matters debated (though Marsden did make her opinions known), but to polemicize these issues, and call hegemonic views and common meanings and assumptions into question. It was an attempt to create a 'queer space' where gender, sexual, and discursive possibilities outside the framework of the heterosexual couple and family could be raised and debated.

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<sup>470</sup> Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 547–48.

## ***Chapter 4 ‘A Blessing All Round’: The Periodical Genre and Feminism in *The Freewoman****

As already quoted in chapter 1, when Dora Marsden was seeking to start her own movement, Mary Gawthorpe encouraged her to consider establishing a periodical instead. Though I have quoted these lines from Gawthorpe’s letter before, I believe it is worth returning to them at the opening of this last chapter. Together with the context and the particular issues discussed in the previous chapters, they open up many of the questions that are at the heart of the relationship between periodicals as a medium and a publishing genre, feminism, and feminist politics at that time. And it is this relationship, more than anything, that is at the core of this study. Gawthorpe’s advice to Marsden was to “See the moral of the N.A. [*New Age*]. It can only do what it does by being independent of every movement. I grant you a critical controversial paper like this would always be in order and would ultimately be a blessing all round; but a critical movement postulates a pretty problem in psychology.”<sup>471</sup> Gawthorpe implied in her letter that controversy was desirable, perhaps necessary in that particular political moment, but that it could not be fostered within a movement. An independent periodical, one that was not an organizational organ, and perhaps more specifically an independent intellectual review (using the *New Age* as an example), could harness controversy to constructive ends.

What is it, then, that would make a proposed periodical “a blessing all round” in a way that a more structured, formal, political movement might not be able to achieve? Not to naively

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<sup>471</sup> Mary Gawthorpe to Dora Marsden, June 1, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

and unduly overgeneralize the merits of periodicals, the question should be ‘what is it that could make an independent periodical, specifically a weekly review, a potential “blessing all round” for the type of feminist consciousness and politics that Marsden was trying to promote’? To propose answers to this question, I will start with an overview of the unique characteristics of periodicals as a publishing genre, both as they have been theorized in recent years by scholars in media and periodical studies, and as they were discussed within the pages of *The Freewoman*. I will then examine the type of feminism that Marsden was trying to create in *The Freewoman*, as reflected in the overall style of the journal. Some of the debates about feminism in *The Freewoman* were explicit, as we have seen, taking up issues that contributors and readers deemed relevant to feminism at the time. But I would argue that some of them were implicit, demonstrated rather than stated, embodied in the authorial and editorial style of the periodical. I am especially interested here in the view of a feminism created and energized through conflict, difference, even destructiveness, which was central to *The Freewoman*. Two features that made *The Freewoman* stand out in the periodical landscape of its time will be discussed as also constituting part of this broader political view: readers’ letters, specifically their responses to the journal’s agenda and policies, and the Discussion Circles that were established as independent entities yet were inextricable from the periodical.

#### **4.1 The Periodical as a Publishing Genre**

Viewed as a publishing genre, periodicals raise questions that are key to understanding their relationship with political movements and ideas, and the possibilities that they afford for the development of politics (broadly defined). These connections and possibilities are embedded in



the characteristics unique to periodicals, and the norms and practices of engagement that stem from this genre. In her discussion of media and their historicity, Lisa Gitelman refers to the attendant protocols of different media – that is, the sets of norms that develop around media and guide the way they are used and understood. These protocols include both technical and semantic norms, and importantly, also a shared sense of genre that affects the process of meaning-making in different media.<sup>472</sup> One of the principal defining features of periodicals, and key to understanding the complex relationship between periodicals and their readership, is their temporality.

Indeed, in her article “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,” Margaret Beetham identifies periodicals’ relationship to time as pivotal to the genre. It is a complex relationship, marked by duality; periodicals are ephemeral – “Read today and rubbish tomorrow, each number of a periodical becomes obsolete as soon as the next comes out,” but are also characterized by seriality and continuity from one issue to the next, which implies some durability and consistency.<sup>473</sup> This continuity creates a form of reading that Beetham identifies as open, and in fact refers to as resisting closure, suggesting a more deliberate and potentially political perspective. This openness of reading is maintained through serialized articles and fiction, as well as through items in a given issue that respond to material appearing in previous ones, whether by the periodical’s regular contributors or by readers responding in letters.<sup>474</sup> In some cases this continuity is extended into the future, when articles or notices reference material

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<sup>472</sup> Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 5–8.

<sup>473</sup> Beetham, “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,” 19–20.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–27.

scheduled to appear in forthcoming issues. For the readers, as discussed in chapter 2, the open character of the genre makes reading an active process of meaning-making, rather than a single interpretive moment, and thus involves the readers in the creation of the whole run of the periodical.<sup>475</sup> However, Beetham stresses that periodicals are, at the same time, deeply marked by regularity – in the frequency and day of their appearance, style and layout, and the repetition of sections in some cases – which further complicates the relation of periodicals to time. Both seriality and regularity are also connected to the status of periodicals as consumer products, as the predictability of the stable features and the promise of continuity both keep readers coming back to specific periodicals.<sup>476</sup> The continuity and openness of the periodical coexists with closure, as “[e]ach number of the periodical is a self-contained text and will contain sub-texts which are end-stopped and marked by closure,” but these features do not factor in equal measures in all periodicals.<sup>477</sup>

*The Freewoman* was consistent in style and frequency of publication, a quality that readers responded to, as evidenced by this note from a group of subscribers: “For weeks past Thursday has been our red-letter day—it is the day of THE FREEWOMAN, and this generally means fresh fields for thought and discussion.”<sup>478</sup> Reader Helen Hamilton asserted that she has for the journal “so keen a veneration that, metaphorically speaking, I bow myself seven times before it every Thursday of the week.”<sup>479</sup> The rest of her letter is critical of *The Freewoman*,

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 26–27.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 26–28.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>478</sup> Lilian Anderson, Charlotte Hunter, Jane Craig and Elizabeth Cumming, “A Group of the ‘Fourth Party’,” *The Freewoman*, February 29, 1912, 291.

<sup>479</sup> Helen Hamilton, “The Devastating Freewoman,” *The Freewoman*, March 21, 1912, 352.

making it clear that the veneration was referred to with tongue firmly in cheek. However, Hamilton invoked the image of a regular, ‘devout’ reader, one for whom the arrival and reading of *The Freewoman* was not only a regularly recurring event, but a quasi-religious ritual. And while such expressions of devotion were likely an exaggeration, the dedicated reader whose week was (to an extent) structured by the appearance of a periodical was not necessarily an implausible image. Yet, the mix of openness and closure in *The Freewoman* leaned more heavily towards the open side, building on the time-extended and serial elements of periodicals, and the ambiguities of text and author in the genre. This had political implications, as it opened up certain potentialities, which will be explored further later in the chapter. Key amongst them, I argue, is ongoing conflict that amounts to refusal as a political stance.

The active participation of readers in the meaning-making processes of periodicals is central to the genre’s resistance of a clear delineation of production and consumption. While it is a central feature of periodicals as a genre, Gitelman reminds us that this blurring of producer/consumer boundaries is typical of all media when they are new.<sup>480</sup> When *The Freewoman* commenced publication, periodicals were not a new genre or medium – they had been in existence and popular for almost two centuries, though there is no indication that the editors had knowledge of earlier periodicals. But in its tone and content *The Freewoman* was unique in the contemporary landscape of women’s and feminist periodicals. It is because of the unique voice *The Freewoman* sought to create and the radicalness (and in some cases novelty) of some of the ideas discussed in it, that it is appropriate to apply Gitelman’s theory about new

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<sup>480</sup> Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 15.

media. Another characteristic of new media, according to Gitelman, and one that is especially pertinent to *The Freewoman*, is that they offer a view into how their ‘job’ gets constructed. To become authoritative, the medium itself and the protocols associated with it need to become transparent, Gitelman holds, but in the early stage of a medium’s formation those mechanisms are still visible.<sup>481</sup> Not allowing the medium to become transparent, exposing to the readers some of the workings and considerations of *The Freewoman* in ways that will be further explored in this chapter, was part of its political vision. As Jerome McGann states, “there is a sense in which any device that calls the reader’s attention to the constructed nature of texts contains an implicit or possible ‘mode of resistance to the literary work of art.’”<sup>482</sup> McGann is referring to literary works, whereas in *The Freewoman* it was not a literary but a publishing genre that was being challenged. Yet, as the reliance on transparency to generate authority applies to both, so does the potential for resistance in interrupting this transparency.

The transparency of media, as Gitelman notes, is vital to their success. Thinking specifically about periodicals, success can and does have different meanings for different publications. Financial sustainability, subscription figures, and (relative) longevity are often used as gauges, being relatively easy to trace, but factors like long- and short-term discursive, cultural, and political influence, which are much more elusive, are often more appropriate in that they are more in line with a periodical’s goals, as was indeed the case with *The Freewoman*. Its relation to financial viability was more complex than simply ignoring it; the periodical did have

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 5–7.

<sup>482</sup> McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 85.

advertisements in it, including some for large department stores and high-end retailers, and when it was becoming clear that its financial position would not allow it to last much longer, Marsden and others used the periodical and the Discussion Circles to implore supporters to subscribe to it. But the success or even survival of *The Freewoman* was secondary to its political vision, however vague that vision may have been at times. Despite readers' suggestions about topics to avoid, and the advisability of softening its tone, which probably would have increased its revenues from advertising and certainly would have prevented boycotts by newsagents W.H. Smith and the Manchester branch of the WSPU, the journal refused throughout its run to compromise. In the last issue, Marsden described the two possibilities facing the journal: "One was to keep THE FREEWOMAN alive from week to week—by dint of enthusiasm, compelling persons with means to minister to the paper's necessities; the other was to suspend publication for a time sufficient to allow the vital interest which the paper has aroused to define itself, and so enable it to owe its life to those who actually value it." She chose the second, seeing *The Freewoman* as existing first and foremost for its creed.<sup>483</sup> Marsden also stated clearly her view on the financial success of a controversial periodical: "there is no sanction in common reason for a paper which stands for a strenuous creed to believe it can put financial success in the first place. It cannot. Only papers with nothing to say can trust themselves to do so."<sup>484</sup>

For a periodical to become authoritative is not solely a matter of financial success. An element of the construction of authority that Gitelman does not explicitly discuss is the sense of

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<sup>483</sup> "Our Last Issue," *The Freewoman*, October 10, 1912, 401.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

authority emanating from a notion of the author as the source of the text. The extent to which a periodical chooses to construct or resist a singular, authoritative editorial and/or authorial voice affects the readers' engagement with it, and can be indicative of its politics. The blurry boundaries between producers and consumers, as well as the heterogenous material found in periodicals, undermine the development of such an authority, and as Beetham puts it, "[n]or can the disappearance of the author as the only source of the text be compensated for by substituting the figure of the all-powerful and creative editor."<sup>485</sup> This nebulosity of authorship in periodicals potentially opens room for questioning their authority, as well as affording contributors an opportunity to play with gender and authority, and to test and contest the connections between the two categories, which can impact publications differently, depending on their goals.<sup>486</sup> For Marsden, whose decision to establish a periodical stemmed partly from opposition to the authoritarian nature of the WSPU, this may have been one of the appealing attributes of the genre. This is not to say that she did not exercise editorial authority – indeed, reader Helen Gordon Clark complained about the changes Marsden had made to her letter (a critique which Marsden published): “A letter of mine appears this week in a mutilated form, without asterisks, having my signature interpolated eleven times, and the date omitted. It is further stated that it arrived ‘late.’”<sup>487</sup>

But the conscious attempt at, and outright encouragement of, debate and disagreement were also a way of inviting contributors and readers to question her authority. This was, after all,

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<sup>485</sup> Beetham, “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,” 25.

<sup>486</sup> Beetham, “Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities,” 236–37.

<sup>487</sup> Helen Gordon Clark, Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, December 14, 1911, 72.

the editor who stated in the first issue, when clarifying what was meant by an ‘open’ periodical: “We do not mean ‘open’ in the sense that we have no editorial point of view, but ‘open’ in the sense that we are prepared not only to accept, but to welcome opposing points of view. We are compelled to recognise that the changes implied in the acceptance of the theory of the Freewomen are so momentous that they may pass unchallenged on the authority of none.”<sup>488</sup> Marsden presented oppositional opinions and the questioning of authority as not only beneficial, but essential when bringing forth a new and radical political agenda. When subscribers wrote in letters ‘not for publication’ to say they decided to cancel their subscriptions following discussions about sex work in Japan, Marsden suggested it was better to discuss the matter openly than to withdraw support from the journal.<sup>489</sup> In a later issue, the policy of *The Freewoman* was criticized by several of its readers, to which Marsden responded: “That is as it should be. It remains for us to reply to this challenge.”<sup>490</sup> And she did not shy away from the challenge, answering the critics at length, to which I will return shortly.

Some readers, even when disagreeing with the editorial policy, still appreciated this strategy, even as they pointed out what they saw as Marsden’s limited and selective practice. One reader, for instance, wrote privately to the editors, criticizing and hoping to “modify an attitude which I felt could not but harm our common cause.” The publication of the letter which was intended as private correspondence, left this reader feeling that she “only helped to embitter that attitude.” Despite this, she closed her letter with “congratulat[ing] the editors on a fine

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<sup>488</sup> “Notes of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, November 23, 1911, 3.

<sup>489</sup> *The Freewoman*, June 13, 1912, 76.

<sup>490</sup> “The Policy of ‘The Freewoman’,” *The Freewoman*, September 5, 1912, 301.

attempt to broaden the sphere of feminism,” while at the same time challenging the editors to acknowledge “that they have deserved some resentment, or, at any rate, might have taken it more patiently.”<sup>491</sup> This example shows a reader who seems to be willing to take a personal affront for the sake of open discussion, and who relies on the declared policies of the periodical to hold the editor accountable to her own standards.

The multiple authorship of periodicals relates to another question in theorizing and studying them as a genre – that of the periodical (as) text. Defining the periodical text is not a clear-cut matter, as Beetham recognizes in her article, since any unit from the single item, through the issue and the volume, to the entire run of a periodical can be seen as the text.<sup>492</sup> Any or all of these units can be used for different purposes, opening a variety of analytical and interpretive possibilities. Beetham, however, points to another option, which is to look not at units but at the process of reading itself, specifically the productive nature of reading a periodical; “[i]t is this dimension of the periodical which I have in mind when I describe it as a ‘text’.”<sup>493</sup> This view of the reader as part of the process of creating the text also allows for an understanding of the text as constantly changing, echoing McGann’s notion of the text coming into being under particular conditions, and then entering into a process of ceaseless change. “But texts do not simply vary over time,” McGann notes, “Texts vary from themselves (as it were) immediately, as soon as they engage with the readers they anticipate.”<sup>494</sup> One might add that

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<sup>491</sup> E. Jacobs, Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, January 4, 1912, 131-32.

<sup>492</sup> Beetham, “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,” 20–21.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>494</sup> McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 9–10.



texts can also vary in many and different directions when they encounter the readers they *do not* anticipate, like unexpected supporters or critics – certainly a type of interaction that animated some of the discussions in *The Freewoman*. Looking at periodicals through the lens of their interactivity as a text and their changes over time is particularly fruitful in highlighting tensions and contradictions, and foregrounding conflictual features.

#### 4.2 *The Freewoman and the Periodical as a Genre*

Stepping back from looking at specific articles or themes in *The Freewoman*, and trying to take the entire run of it as the text, in addition to a focus on its self-reflexivity as regards its function as a periodical, can change our understanding of its relation to feminism. The idea of the entirety of a periodical as a single text is not a new one. Scholes and Wulfman quote British journalist Charles Whibley referring to *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1917 as “a single work, conducted by a single mind, for a single purpose.”<sup>495</sup> While Scholes and Wulfman find Whibley’s claim to be overstated, they see the idea it puts forth as productive for the study of modernist magazines. Despite Marsden’s strong personality and her identification with the journal, no such claim to being produced by a single mind for a single purpose has been made about *The Freewoman*, and Marsden in fact strove to sustain and centre its polyvocality. But it is because of, not despite this polyvocality, that I now suggest looking at the full run of this periodical as the text. For, seen this way, *The Freewoman* is not just a venue for the debate of different perspectives and ideologies via stand-alone items put into conversation or juxtaposed. It

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<sup>495</sup> Quoted in Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 143.

can be understood as itself “an autonomous print object,” crafted by the editor,<sup>496</sup> embodying its ‘creed’ in its content, style, change over time, and its relation to its readership (or perhaps failing to embody this part of the time). I will examine how the style, content, and statements in *The Freewoman* reflect the periodical’s goal and philosophy, focusing on the last issue, in which Marsden addressed the policies and ‘creed’ of the periodical directly. I shall return to the notion of the periodical as a text to explore how this perspective can influence our understanding of Marsden’s approach to feminism.

One of the elements that become very visible when looking at the run of *The Freewoman* as the text is its unique approach to conflict. This is related to its dialogical nature, and in that sense intimately connected to the characteristics of the genre, but it also goes beyond an emphasis on dialogue or debate; it shows a strong belief in difference and conflict as valuable in themselves, ongoing states of being rather than destabilizing forces that need to be silenced or resolved. This is a distinctly different reading of *The Freewoman*’s strategy from that offered by Clarke, who sees it as a thesis-antithesis-synthesis process, and it also moves the spotlight away from Marsden as a witty editor with a penchant for arguments and unresolved issues with the suffrage movement. Instead, conflict and difference become essential parts of feminism, their existence rather than their abolition seen as vital to a movement’s capacity to effect change. Marsden expressed her belief that human difference is the basis of society, and though in this

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<sup>496</sup> Latham and Scholes, “The Rise of Periodical Studies,” 528–29.

instance she highlighted these differences as an argument for simple, minimal, governance structures, she saw them as a permanent and presumably positive feature.<sup>497</sup>

In an exchange before *The Freewoman* was established, Gawthorpe commented on what were probably goals that Marsden set for the movement or periodical she was planning: judgement – which was a term used often in *The Freewoman* synonymously with criticism – and responsibility, strongly connected to self-consciousness and the perception of oneself as a subject. As Gawthorpe put it: “I agree that this is the next step: judgement and responsibility. Your view that the right way of accomplishing this end is by undermining belief in other judgements is not however an intellectual judgement of the same class.”<sup>498</sup> It is not clear from this correspondence whether Marsden espoused a certain belief and sought to undermine others, but the way *The Freewoman* operated was based on ‘undermining’ all beliefs, or at least calling them into question, not allowing any one perspective to achieve the status of absolute truth.

This process of questioning ideologies and perspectives, mostly by placing them in conversation within the periodical, was a conscious one, which moreover was reflected on in the material published in the periodical. *The Freewoman* was in general a self-reflexive publication, and contained from the start editorial comments, articles, and discussions about its goals and style. As Maria DiCenzo notes, self-reflexivity was not uncommon in feminist periodicals in the nineteenth century, whose editors often explained and justified their decision to publish in the

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<sup>497</sup> “The Policy of ‘The Freewoman’,” *The Freewoman*, September 5, 1912, 304.

<sup>498</sup> Gawthorpe to Marsden, June 4, 1911. Box 2, folder 1, Dora Marsden Collection.

face of probable financial hardship.<sup>499</sup> In *The Freewoman*, much of the reflection was directly or indirectly about the periodical as such, its place in the broader periodical landscape, and the hoped-for relationships between it and the readers. These comments ranged from discussions of the relatively high price of the journal (as mentioned in chapter 1) and what it meant in terms of the desired readership, through notions of success, to expressed hopes of raising objections. There were also explicit statements about the goals of *The Freewoman*, and eventually, towards the end of its run, the aforementioned issue largely dedicated to the periodical's policy. In response to a reader who suggested that *The Freewoman* adopt a more constructive, affirmative tone, Marsden's response was:

Affirmative of what? There's the rub. Our dogma or yours? Neither, yet a while, an [*sic*] it please you ... For what other is our existence than to take the tangled skein of life and, where the knot is closest, carefully to take the strands apart? Affirmation and Denial made absolute have no interest for us, as we hoped would have been clear from our own limited measure of affirmation.<sup>500</sup>

If this statement on 'affirmations' was slightly vague and philosophical, other editorial comments were much more straightforward, such as this reply to Mrs. Mary Higgs, a Lancashire campaigner for homeless women,<sup>501</sup> who complained about the advanced opinions predominant in *The Freewoman*: "Unlike other journals which have an editorial point of view, we do not

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<sup>499</sup> Maria DiCenzo, "Pressing the Public: Nineteenth Century Feminist Periodicals and 'the Press,'" *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* 6, no. 2 (2010): para. 12.

<sup>500</sup> "Notes of the Week," *The Freewoman*, February 15, 1912, 243.

<sup>501</sup> Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter*, 2009, 358.

endeavour merely to secure opinions which support our own. We give direct encouragement to those who disagree with our views to state their case as openly as possible.”<sup>502</sup> Some readers did not agree with this strategy, and letters from readers who were otherwise supportive of *The Freewoman* expressed concern about allowing certain subject matter and tone to be published. Dorothy Leete, for example, cautioned the editors after the publication of a letter from Eric Gill the previous week: “It seems to me a great pity that the tone of your admirable and *necessary* publication should be in any way lowered, which in such a paper is the danger, to be expected—and avoided.”<sup>503</sup> The potential ‘lowering’ of the periodical did not shake Marsden’s resolve: “Personally, we consider that these deep rages are best exposed to the genial air of publicity. It keeps them healthy. We prefer, therefore, to publish such expressions whenever their terms will allow of publishing.”<sup>504</sup>

The encouragement to discussion was not reserved to those who identified an editorial point of view they disagreed with. Another reader in the same issue, Mary Murray, wrote in support of *The Freewoman*, stating “I think it is the first paper published in the name of women which has not been an insult to their intelligence.” She did, however, find some points that she felt called for further discussion.<sup>505</sup> The editor’s response shows not only awareness, but encouragement of the fluidity between consumers and producers, inviting Murray to raise those debatable points in the periodical’s columns.<sup>506</sup> For some readers, it seems that the interactive

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<sup>502</sup> “The Editors’ Reply,” *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 55.

<sup>503</sup> Dorothy G. Leete, Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 92.

<sup>504</sup> Ed. *The Freewoman*, December 21, 1911, 92.

<sup>505</sup> Mary N. Murray, Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 51.

<sup>506</sup> Ed., *The Freewoman*, December 7, 1911, 51.

potential of the periodical was an integral part of their reading experience, present at least as a future possibility as they engaged with the material in it. At the end of a letter about Christabel Pankhurst, reader Sophy Gudini, who identified as “an obscure member of the W.S.P.U.,” offered her opinion about *The Freewoman*, indicating she might contribute to it: “I had been longing for an English feminist paper, and I find yours stimulating, although I do not find myself quite in harmony with the editorial attitude ... However, perhaps it is too soon to judge, and I prefer to keep my opinions until they are digested, and perhaps later on you will allow me to give them a vent.”<sup>507</sup>

*The Freewoman*'s engagement with the political possibilities opened by periodicals did not stop at an encouragement of open discussion; it included writing about the role of the press more broadly, where *The Freewoman* stood in relation to different approaches of and to the press, and detailed explanations of its goals and policies, up to and including the very last issue. As we have seen in relation to discussions about sexuality, Marsden and some of the contributors to *The Freewoman* saw its role as challenging the production and dissemination of information, and the limitations placed on it. In this capacity, it included articles about censorship, notices of boycotts on *The Freewoman* itself, and advertisements for banned and partially-banned books, like August Strindberg's *The Confession of a Fool*, Remy de Gourmont's *A Night in Luxembourg*, and Reginald Wright Kauffman's *The Daughters of Ishmael* (the first two were banned, the latter partially banned). All issues of the periodical had the last page dedicated to advertisements for books by Stephen Swift & Co., *The Freewoman*'s publisher, but some of the

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<sup>507</sup> Sophy Gudini, Letter to the Editor, *The Freewoman*, December 28, 1911, 111-12.

later issues had either the entire page or a section of it titled ‘banned’, listing books that were fully or partially banned by libraries.<sup>508</sup> Another issue featured a notice of the play “The Lapse” by Selwyn Weston, censored by the Lord Chamberlain, including contact information for those readers interested in “particulars.”<sup>509</sup> The promotion of banned and restricted cultural products is, to my mind, another aspect of its creation of a queer publishing space. This is not only because publications were often banned under obscenity laws, but because of the broad view of politics in *The Freewoman*, which included culture, emotions, and sexuality. This makes advertising banned books and plays part of the creation of a space for non-normative content, and the challenge it poses to hegemony.

The dialogical nature of the periodical also allowed readers access, though indirectly, to information that was otherwise limited to medical professionals. For instance, it carried a notice to readers on where Havelock Ellis’ books, which were censored, could be purchased.<sup>510</sup> Another case related to sexual information was of a woman who signed her letter ‘Northerner’, and identified as a teacher. She wrote to inquire about birth control, as she was about to marry but for economic reasons she and her partner “simply dare not marry, for I cannot run the risk of stopping my work and wage-earning capacity through becoming a mother for at least the next five years.” The letter made clear that other avenues for obtaining knowledge on contraception were unavailable to her: “Of any scientific, safe method of sterilisation such as your correspondents seem to have in mind I cannot obtain any information, nor do I know to whom to

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<sup>508</sup> See, for example, September 5, 1912, 320; September 12, 1912, 340; September 19, 1912, 360.

<sup>509</sup> *The Freewoman*, June 6, 1912, 54.

<sup>510</sup> “The Publications of Havelock Ellis,” *The Freewoman*, August 8, 1912, 239.

apply in order to obtain it ... It is with a hope that some help may be within reach that I write, your paper being, I believe, the only one in which such a letter as this would be published.”<sup>511</sup>

The question was referred to Charles Drysdale, secretary of the Malthusian League, and Northerner was informed, via Marsden, “that the League, while most desirous of seeing a general knowledge of the hygienic methods of family limitation extended to all adult persons, has found it necessary to abstain from circulating any written information on the subject” due to legal attacks. A physician, however, agreed to provide information to the reader, who was advised to write directly to Drysdale.<sup>512</sup>

Some readers used the correspondence section as a place to seek advice or to exchange knowledge and information with others. Some of them asked questions that were not addressed specifically to the editor, contributors, or other readers, but which the writers believed might be answered by someone in this periodical community, based on the topics discussed in *The Freewoman* and the style in which they were discussed. A reader who identified as ‘Hospital Matron’, for example, wrote to share her dilemma, saying at the opening of her letter: “I wonder how many of us have the ‘pluck’ to carry out the theories many of which hundreds of us think right and reasonable?” She was engaged but was hesitant to marry since she was convinced the hospital board will not grant her request to continue working as a married woman.<sup>513</sup> Marsden replied that though it is difficult to comment on personal matters, if the writer is convinced that she will be fired, she should not marry. “Corporate bodies who do not recognise natural impulses

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<sup>511</sup> Northerner, “Knowledge Wanted,” *The Freewoman*, May 2, 1912, 476.

<sup>512</sup> *The Freewoman*, May 2, 1912, 476.

<sup>513</sup> Hospital Matron, Letter to the editor, *The Freewoman*, January 11, 1912, 151-52.



cannot expect their subordinates to recognise conventions.”<sup>514</sup> Using the correspondence section as an advice column of sorts, though not addressing the question to a specific person, was perhaps an expression of readers’ feeling of belonging to a community, though disembodied, where topics like those could be discussed. It was also a way in which the periodical, though in small ways, could have a concrete impact on people’s lives, here empowering a reader to have the ‘pluck’ to live by her beliefs.

Some of the direct references to the role of periodicals appeared as part of discussions about other topics, such as an article on male chastity by radical lawyer E.S.P. Haynes. Haynes observed that

[t]here is still a lamentable tendency to burke all serious discussion of sex problems ... and any attempt at free discussion is stigmatised in the *Times* as an attempt to teach anarchy, profligacy, etc., etc. It does not occur to writers like Mrs. Humphry Ward that a newspaper may not be set on ‘teaching’ certain doctrines, but may be content to foster discussion and trust to some useful results coming of it.<sup>515</sup>

This account shows the double role that periodicals can play, both setting the hegemonic tone of conversation, here represented by the *Times*, and embodying the potential for open discussion, not bent on teaching (or indoctrinating) its readership. Rejecting the idea of the periodical as an explicit educational tool also implies bringing the editors, contributors, and

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<sup>514</sup> *The Freewoman*, January 11, 1912, 152.

<sup>515</sup> E.S.P. Haynes, “Male Chastity,” *The Freewoman*, July 4, 1912, 126.

readers closer, removing the first two from an assumed position of authority, from which they could teach the latter.

In an earlier number, Marsden took on the issue of censorship of ‘obscene’ books, specifically a suggestion by the editor of the *Spectator* that periodicals should refuse to advertise and review them, assuming that they would not risk their existence “for the sake of a few books.” Noting that this proposal would not be news to most readers of *The Freewoman*, Marsden explained the reason for devoting a generous amount of space to it:

We do so because we feel it represents one of the most dangerous features of our national life to-day ... In reviewing the effects which such words as those uttered by the Editor of the *Spectator* are likely to have ... we speak with personal feeling, in view of our indirect knowledge that ... the police—have expressed themselves of the opinion that a certain journal in whose welfare we are intimately interested has been travelling progressively ‘nearer the line.’<sup>516</sup>

As we have already seen, *The Freewoman* did not subscribe to the notion that periodicals should put their financials before their politics, and continued to advertise, review, and facilitate access to banned and censored material. This led, towards the end of the periodical’s run, to a boycott by newsagents W.H. Smith. Marsden announced this in a notice to readers: “During the last few days the difficulties which have beset THE FREEWOMAN from its start, which are inseparable from the life of a free organ, have been increased in a highly hampering degree by the boycott of Messrs. W.H. Smith and Sons, newsagents.” Despite W.H.

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<sup>516</sup> “Notes of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, February 1, 1912, 202-03.

Smith's claim that it was the nature of the material published in *The Freewoman* which caused them to boycott it, Marsden believed it was the anti-capitalist stance of the periodical which was the real issue. She pointed specifically to tensions within the periodical press as the cause: "Since the *Times* and the *Morning Post* devoted their leading columns to discussion of THE FREEWOMAN, it has been quite clear that the paper had created enemies which it did not rouse in the beginning of its career, enemies who would be powerful enough to involve it in legal expenses which would further hamper our efforts to keep going."<sup>517</sup>

This representation of the boycott points to two major newspapers as upholding a hegemonic capitalist agenda, and therefore pushing for the marginalization of an independent publication. The accusation was not new; as Lyn Pykett has shown, historians of journalism in the nineteenth century criticized parts of the press for reproducing the ideology of the ruling classes in order to survive financially.<sup>518</sup> It does, however, highlight the tensions between two types of periodicals and their political allegiances and potentials. The concern over 'obscene' content is portrayed here as a cover for a deeper matter – the freedom of a "free organ" to publish controversial contents being inseparable from its resistance of hegemonic structures, including capitalism, as well as the intimate connections between capitalists and newspapers. The political differences between *The Freewoman* and the daily press, and the hegemonic status of the latter, were noted by one reader, who suggested the establishment of a halfpenny daily "free paper," which would "afford us just light on the world's happenings by superimposing the

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<sup>517</sup> "Notice to the Readers of 'The Freewoman'," *The Freewoman*, September 5, 1912, 311.

<sup>518</sup> Pykett, "Reading the Periodical Press: Text and Context," 13.

complementary news sheets which already exist, but in politics give us the open column, where we may find some common ground along which to retrace our steps towards freedom from the growing tyranny of the State.”<sup>519</sup>

Marsden did not respond to this proposal, but when the idea of publishing a fortnightly instead of a weekly paper was brought up, Marsden rejected it, insisting that being published weekly was crucial for the work of *The Freewoman*. One of the reasons for this may have been the regular and continuous communication between the periodical and its readership that a weekly affords. *The Freewoman* used this communication in different ways, but one example of it is the address to readers when the W.H. Smith boycott was announced: “We put the case, then, to our readers. The fate of the paper *is entirely in their hands*.” The readers were then encouraged to get *The Freewoman* from alternative sources, subscribe rather than buy issues individually, and get others to subscribe as well.<sup>520</sup> But the conversation here was not one-sided, as readers had their own ideas about how best to support the periodical; some of them wrote to say that they would subscribe and encourage others to do the same. But others disagreed that subscriptions were the best way to go, advocating instead for the purchasing of single issues. Reader Helen Fox, for instance, wrote that she had sent a letter to W.H. Smith, and noted as well “I am not sending you a subscription, because I find it a good way of advertising a paper to buy it through a newsagent, but I promise to buy a copy of THE FREEWOMAN as long as it is in existence.”<sup>521</sup> For a reader to write and say that they disagree with the editor on her strategy to

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<sup>519</sup> Tallis Avis, “The Servile State,” *The Freewoman*, May 16, 1912, 517.

<sup>520</sup> “Notice to the Readers of ‘The Freewoman’,” *The Freewoman*, September 5, 1912, 311.

<sup>521</sup> Helen Fox, “The Bann [*sic*] on ‘The Freewoman’,” *The Freewoman*, September 12, 1912, 331.

increase circulation, the open and dialogical character of the periodical must have been felt deeply. But this instance also points to a moment of refusal on the part of a reader exercising her judgement, which is in a sense taking a political stance.

It was largely through instances such as these that *The Freewoman's* policy was presented to the readers, as well as through comparisons – explicit or implicit – between its policy and that of other periodicals or organizations. Upton Sinclair, for example, shared with readers a change of policy he suggested to the editor of the WSPU's *Votes for Women*, noting that she: “declined with the statement that ‘it suggests a new policy, and our policy is fixed.’ Now it is all very well to have a policy so fixed that you won't change it; but to have a policy so fixed that you are not willing to hear any arguments about it is to be in a very dangerous state indeed.”<sup>522</sup> For the readers of *The Freewoman*, not much more was needed to draw the differences between the two publications.

But the most extensive direct discussion of *The Freewoman's* policy appeared towards the end of the periodical's run, in its forty-second number (of a total 47). It consisted of Marsden's responses to several letters from readers, with the letters appearing in full in the correspondence section, and the responses as the lead article of the issue. H.G. Wells criticized, as Marsden put it, “the lack rather than the presence of a policy in THE FREEWOMAN.” She later added to this that Wells criticized the journal for not having “constructive theories,” to which she answered: “One can ‘construct’ with bricks and blocks of wood, but not with living trees, and not with living men. One can have no ‘constructive’ scheme for a patch of lilies. They

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<sup>522</sup> Upton Sinclair, “Note by the Author,” *The Freewoman*, July 4, 1912, 126.

can only have their ground space, with air and water and light. And that is all that can be done with men.”<sup>523</sup>

Marsden then brought up other potential meanings of ‘constructive’, writing against them as well. If Wells meant that the policy was not positive but rather mere criticism, “we can only protest that it is not true ... We affirm a religion, we affirm a morality, an economic, social order ... What more could be asked in a positive way?” If the critique was that the scheme was not complex enough, Marsden argued that it should not be, and later in the article explained that the base of society, namely “human difference” cannot support complex governance mechanisms.<sup>524</sup> Reader Rachel East criticized the idea of living off the land as a solution, partly due to what she saw as an imposition of one way of life on all, and the rejection of science. Marsden contended that the current state of affairs was on the verge of imposing a single lifestyle on all, and criticized the perceived achievements of science, presenting a simple, agriculture-based life as preferable, if not perfect. Marsden’s assertion that “Freedom cannot do everything for man; it can only make everything possible,”<sup>525</sup> along with her emphasis on change in the response to Wells, are emblematic of *The Freewoman*’s policy – creating space and condition for discussion and exchange, rather than coming to conclusions for the readers, and seeing the ideas and people both as living, changing entities.

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<sup>523</sup> “The Policy of ‘The Freewoman’,” *The Freewoman*, September 5, 1912, 301-02.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-04.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-03.

The policy discussion was structured in some ways like a conversation, though the order in which Marsden chose to organize it positioned the participants differently in terms of power (more so than they would have been anyway, given that one of them was the editor); readers who followed the order of the items in this issue would have read Marsden's response before being exposed to both the detailed content and the style of the letters that prompted that response. This is another instance, like the letter which Helen Gordon Clark complained about, where the open, supposedly democratizing possibilities of the periodical, as well as statements to that effect from Marsden herself, are in discord with the reality of the periodical. This is not to say that it failed entirely in its intention to maintain conflict and dialogue as ongoing features rather than disruptions to be overcome. But in the same way that *The Freewoman* exposed its own and other periodicals' mechanisms, it showed in these examples and others its limitations, though this was likely not Marsden's intention. There was no escaping the fact that editorial power is itself a form of machinery, for the very placing of the contents within the publication is making choices and creating meanings, mediating the world to the reader. However, even if periodicals were 'machines' in a sense, many of them could operate by simultaneously voicing different opinions and holding different policies. The dialogue between periodicals, created by editors, contributors, and readers, meant that no single voice became absolute.

In the final issues of *The Freewoman*, Marsden returned to the policies and goals of the journal, in an attempt to clarify both its financial position and its outlook. She said about the periodical: "It is not adaptable: it is insistent. It splits up the equanimity of the people whose tendency in life is as aimless as that of a person lost in a maze." In describing the readership of periodicals in general, she split them into those who support the creed of a publication, those

who object to it, and the majority who “are startled and shocked at the approach of anything vital and sure. They feel roughly handled, and beg that they may be left alone.” Periodicals who seek financial success cater to the latter group.<sup>526</sup> A publication like *The Freewoman*, however, operated under a different set of considerations: “A paper with a creed must be backed by people who recognise that its creed is first, and its reason for existence. If it is sincere, it will rouse hostility as naturally as a living man breathes, but for every *real* opponent it will make two real friends ... to fight is the law of existence for a living creed, and it should be with hostility in view and not with peace that such should seek its backers.”<sup>527</sup>

Though Marsden was discussing the policy of the periodical both in issue 42 and in the last one, there seems to be some ambiguity as to whether she is also talking about a movement. She had once previously referred to “the Freewoman movement,” stating that it “stands for both [masculine and feminine], but holds that if one must be absent, it had better be the logical, the masculinist; the feminist, the intuitive, is more vital, more fundamental, and can best save itself.”<sup>528</sup> This sole reference explained to some degree the movement’s stance on the feminism vs. humanism question, but did not give any sense of who and what this movement includes. The Discussion Circles, which were the only group to grow directly out of the periodical may have been part of the movement, and if that is so, they highlight one of the two central elements of both *The Freewoman* and the feminism advocated in it, namely open-endedness. After the first meeting in London, the Circle’s secretary Barbara Low reported in the journal that the

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<sup>526</sup> “Our Last Issue,” *The Freewoman*, October 10, 1912, 401.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>528</sup> “Topics of the Week,” *The Freewoman*, May 16, 1912, 504.



surprisingly large audience (80-90 people) emphasized the need for open discussion “if we would find a way out for ourselves.” Very few preliminaries were decided on in the meeting, which seems to have been deliberate, leaving “us free to develop in whatever directions are most desirable.”<sup>529</sup> This openness was maintained throughout the existence of the Circle, with members suggesting discussion topics, and sub-groups forming and meeting in different locations to discuss issues of particular interest.

The other element that was central to *The Freewoman*, and which was the main reason for Mary Gawthorpe to suggest that it should be a periodical rather than ‘a movement’, was its commitment to conflict and hostility. This tendency brought one correspondent, Edwin Herrin, to open his letter thus:

I apologise in advance for writing you a letter that doesn't attack you. I know your weakness for the fighting attitude. You have no welcome for one who does not come sword in hand. I have sworn no oath to have your blood. I am in the positively odious position of wanting to say nice things about your paper ... If only it were possible to say something lashing, something that would bite like scorpions, something, in short, that would win its way to favour.<sup>530</sup>

While the apology was humorous, there was a kernel of seriousness to it, as Herrin went on to express his astonishment at the virility and vigour of women and the women’s movement. And contrary to the common use of ‘virile’ at the time, as a pejorative referring to women as

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<sup>529</sup> Barbara Low, “The Discussion Circle,” *The Freewoman*, May 2, 1912, 464.

<sup>530</sup> Edwin Herrin, “Virility in Women,” *The Freewoman*, August 1, 1912, 216.

mannish and possibly lesbian, here it carried a positive meaning. Conflict and hostility, then, were not reserved for the antagonists, but were a strategy and a philosophy that at least some readers of the periodical found empowering and potentially fruitful.

### 4.3 Conclusion

Looking at the full run of *The Freewoman* shows the periodical not only using the characteristics of the genre to advance its view of feminism, but also openly discussing how it uses some of those features, and where it saw itself in relation to other publications. Much like the refusal to gloss over differences for political expediency, this is a political choice. And, like the rejection of “artificial unity” it is a choice that had an impact on *The Freewoman*’s financial success and longevity. If, as Gitelman holds, the success of media depends on their protocols becoming transparent or self-evident, then for a periodical to make the choices that *The Freewoman* made has profound consequences.<sup>531</sup> One of the outcomes of giving such prominence to discussions about the periodical and to readers’ voices and opinions, was that the process of becoming transparent was not allowed to happen (to the extent that media ever succeed in becoming entirely transparent). Moreover, this seems to have been done deliberately, and indeed Marsden cared little about financial success or prestige, seeing them as means for *The Freewoman* to do its political work rather than goals in themselves.

This refusal of an illusion of transparency, of a supposedly-straightforward dissemination of information, parallels in some ways the rejection of the organizational politics

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<sup>531</sup> Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 5–6.

of the suffrage movement, particularly the WSPU. One can only speculate, but this might be what Gawthorpe meant when she cautioned Marsden about destructiveness and undermining beliefs – espousing refusal as a basis for politics goes against much of the values upon which the women’s movement at the time based its arguments. This made sense for a movement that was largely focused on formal rights and electoral politics. But the adoption of ‘negative’ or ‘destructive’ ideas, of modes of operation that open questions more than they provide answers, works to expand the political, and in this case, it is through the use of a genre’s capacities. If in other examples one can see how this was attempted through a turn to everyday matters such as sexuality or emotions, here it is done through contesting the very elements that serve as the basis for the formally political, namely consensus, representation, rights, solidarity, etc.<sup>532</sup>

This is also in keeping with the increasingly anti-state tone of *The Freewoman*, resisting the machinery of formal or electoral politics. For both the push for the “nakedness of a machineless land” as a political solution and the emphasis on the ‘machinery’ of the periodical – reflected in the amount of space dedicated to these discussions, and even to seemingly minor issues like a printer’s error – rely on a conscious exposure of mechanisms, political or communicational, for political purposes. In both cases, it is through revealing the mechanisms that power can be questioned, challenged, and resisted. This tendency makes *The Freewoman* impossible to place in either of Mark Hampton’s ideals of the press; it is not representative, which Hampton presents as the newer ideal emerging following the decline of the educational

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<sup>532</sup> For discussion of women’s “everyday issues” in the correspondence columns specifically, see Barbara Green, “Complaints of Everyday Life: Feminist Periodical Culture and Correspondence Columns in *The Woman Worker*, *Women Folk* and *The Freewoman*,” *Modernism/Modernity* 19, no. 3 (2012): 461–85.

ideal. And though it does have some of the characteristics of an educational periodical, it resists that role at least partly, constantly creating and undermining its own authority.<sup>533</sup> And it is perhaps this difficulty of placing *The Freewoman* firmly within any single press ideal or political creed that best encapsulates its feminism.

In a sense, Marsden's notion was of feminisms, rather than a single feminism implying one correct version of feminist politics or way of being a feminist. Though there was no concrete discussion of a political or social movement growing out of the periodical, it may be seen as a blueprint for a (perhaps utopian) movement. With open debate, difference, constant change, and a certain degree of messiness as its cornerstones, it is doubtful that such a movement would survive. Yet it would have been an apt reflection of this period when terms and relationships were being defined and redefined, and possibly, too, a fitting tool for shaping and directing these changes. Marsden's view was of a whole that could hold conflicts and differences, rather than forcing them into unity. This whole would have to be held together by a flexible membrane that can shift and develop, one whose conceptual boundaries are constantly erased, renegotiated, and redrawn.

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<sup>533</sup> Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 13.

## Conclusion

For the roughly five years that I have been engaged on this project, one comment or question has been a recurrent feature in almost all my conversations about it. Supportive mentors and skeptical colleagues alike would listen to the longer or shorter versions of my research, and respond with “Oh, cool: what makes it relevant now?” Invoking the need to study the past seemed like a platitude, and did not really account for the reasons I thought the material studied here mattered, but I still couldn’t quite articulate what these reasons *were*, though I knew – and at times felt acutely – that they existed. At some point, I half-jokingly conceded that it really did not have any bearing on the present, and claimed to be hiding in 1911-12. But then came 2016, and many things that have been right in front of me for so long suddenly came into clear view. World politics brought social movements into the spotlight again, emphasizing their inseparability from technology, and women’s marches opened up conversations about intersectionality in mainstream and alternative media. Debates about the media or the press, whether it could be free, and what role it plays and should play became a daily matter, and the social and political significance, even necessity, of independent media was centre-stage. And of course, there was feminism and its relation to other political and social issues. Reading *The Freewoman* in this context made for many moments of frustration and hopefulness; frustration at how relevant debates that took place over a century ago still felt, and hopefulness for what we can learn from them.

*The Freewoman* ceased publication in October 1912 amidst financial difficulties, a boycott, and its publisher’s legal and financial problems. Marsden looked for a way to restart the

periodical, and eventually managed to secure the funds from Harriet Shaw Weaver to publish *The New Freewoman* from June to December 1913. This was followed by *The Egoist* (1914-1919), at first with Marsden as editor, succeeded by Weaver after her resignation. These two later periodicals, and especially *The Egoist*, were focused on literary modernism rather than feminism, and the establishment of the Egoist Press by Weaver solidified that connection, as it published works by James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and other key modernist authors.

Marsden eventually left London for the Lake District, where she lived from 1920 to 1935, experiencing increasing poverty and declining physical and mental health. She lived with her mother Hannah (joined by a cat named Sara in 1926) in two neighbouring cottages they rented in Seldom Seen, near Ullswater. Dora led a relatively isolated life there, maintaining contact with her family and neighbours, and with Harriet Shaw Weaver who continued to write, visit, and assist her financially. Marsden worked on research projects about spirituality and science, which resulted in the publication of two books: *Definition of the Godhead* (1928) and *Mysteries of Christianity* (1930), both published by Egoist Press. The books' sales did not cover the cost of publishing them, and beyond their mention in writing about Marsden, there has been no scholarship on them. It is known, however, that Marsden saw these two books as part of a seven-volume series.<sup>534</sup>

In 1935, after a suicide attempt that left her with pneumonia and a fractured pelvis, Marsden could no longer cope on her own, and certainly not take care of her ageing mother. She was admitted as a patient to the Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries, the mental institution

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<sup>534</sup> Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, 155–80.

where she would stay until her death in 1960. Garner describes Marsden in the 1930s as realizing “at times that her work was not going to achieve the acclaim she felt it deserved; 1935 marked the end of her aspirations.”<sup>535</sup> Yet she continued to work and write, leading a reclusive life at the hospital and absorbed by her manuscript, to the point of denying herself food and sunlight for periods of time, and by the nurses’ reports she held her work in very high esteem.<sup>536</sup> Though she was increasingly depressed and isolated, she published her third book, *Philosophy of Time* in 1955, again with Weaver’s support. After Marsden’s death in 1960 her papers were left to her niece, whose family eventually sold them to the Princeton University Special Collections, as noted in the introduction.

*The Freewoman* did not bring about the revolution in feminist consciousness that Marsden had hoped for, and in the short term at least did not even take women’s enfranchisement off the top of the list of political aspirations for many feminists. But the years after *The Freewoman* ceased publication were eventful for women’s rights. World War I was seen by some of the suffrage organizations as a political opportunity, a moment for women to contribute and express patriotism, with the WSPU taking on the most nationalist tone of the suffrage groups. Women were granted partial suffrage in 1918, and the right to vote on equal terms with men in 1928, winning what for some had been a life-long struggle. The interwar period also saw the development of artistic and sexual countercultures, and gay and lesbian subcultures. Though connections between the content and style of *The Freewoman* and those

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 184–85.

later countercultures can be drawn, it is not clear what direct influence (if at all) the periodical had on them. But even if by some standards *The Freewoman* could be considered a failed feminist political initiative, it still has much to teach us about the past and present of feminisms, and their future potentials.

What made *The Freewoman* stand out in its own time, and what caused people to have strong opinions and emotions about it is what makes it so valuable still today. The notion of shifts in consciousness, and political and social progress, stemming from constant change, contest, and multiplicity that Marsden advanced was a radically different perception of politics. It highlighted the fact that consensus and unity, and in some sense democracy under a representative system, could only be achieved at the cost of silencing and marginalizing certain groups. It was an attempt, perhaps also an invitation, to create a new kind of politics, one that would thrive on open questions and ever-changing identities, that would truly welcome critique and use it and the debates that arise from it to expand. It can be thought about as politics based in what José Esteban Muñoz has termed “disidentification” – the process through which, rather than assimilating some aspect of the other and being transformed after their model, a subject cannot identify. In his work on queer performers of colour Muñoz claims that “what stops identification from happening is always the ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site.”<sup>537</sup>

White British women in the early twentieth century cannot be unproblematically substituted for queer people of colour, and yet the idea of a creation and expression of political

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<sup>537</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7.



views through a refusal to identify can be useful for understanding *The Freewoman*. For as Muñoz notes, disidentificatory identity performances can be (in his study are) identities-in-difference which “emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere. Their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere.”<sup>538</sup> *The Freewoman*’s harsh criticism of the suffrage movement and the system of government to which it sought access for women, can be seen as a refusal to assimilate, and it is from that basis that *The Freewoman* could function as a counterpublic. What Marsden offered instead of the mainstream model was the ‘destructive’ ideas and style she put forth in *The Freewoman*, emphasizing not only an inability, but an active resistance, to identifying with the individuals and the systems that were hegemonic.

*The Freewoman* functioned as a nexus for a cultural and emotional countercommunity, giving prominence to topics and emotions that were impermissible or dismissed in many other forums. The periodical and the Freewoman Discussion Circles were queer spaces of sorts (one printed, the other physical), both opening up possibilities for the articulation of non-normative identities, practices, and desires. They thus allowed participants to challenge normativity in a range of area, and explore the political meanings of such challenges. *The Freewoman* was also ‘queer’ in its rejection of what Berlant and Warner refer to as an illusion, rooted in heterosexual conventions, of a prepolitical state and a future after political conflict.<sup>539</sup> In giving prominence to

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<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 553.

culture in its everyday sense, and in encouraging conflict, the periodical fostered a conversation that was constantly political. No less important, I think, was the centering of ‘negative’ or unacceptable emotions in *The Freewoman*, making a case – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – for the constructive role they have in political activism. The passion, anger, lust, disgust, rage, and other emotions in the texts by supporters and critics of the periodical tell us much about the mindsets of the people behind these texts that would be lost in emotionally-appropriate versions. These emotional expressions also show that on this matter, like with the ideology of a movement, a unified façade can only be maintained through the repression and silencing of those who diverge from it.

Attending to the emotional economy of periodicals can give us a view into aspects of acts and mindsets in the past, which are often lost otherwise.<sup>540</sup> This becomes all the more significant when thinking about the voices of working-class feminists, like the one who wrote to Grace Jardine about readers’ shocked responses to *The Freewoman*’s first issue, and of other women who would not have had their writing published outside of the periodical community. Considering emotions seriously as part of the workings of periodicals allows us also to think about them in a feminist activist context; it reminds us not to neglect the various affective states of the people and texts that we study, however elusive they may be, and not to fall into the dichotomy of public vs. private, rational vs. emotional.<sup>541</sup> Rather, we should find ways to think about emotions, including ‘negative’ ones, as constitutive to feminist periodical communities.

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<sup>540</sup> Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 10.

<sup>541</sup> Dillane, “Forms of Affect.”

This might require going back to the more nuanced language of emotions, before they were grouped together in ways that make distinctions more difficult. It is outside the scope of this study to address this in depth, but would be an invaluable addition to the emerging scholarship on emotions, affect, and periodicals.

The disavowal of emotions is still prevalent in feminist politics today, where ‘negative’ emotions are considered excessive and disruptive, out of line with the presumably rational discourse of politics, labels that are laden with racism, classism, and ableism. Creating spaces for behaviours and expressions that do not fall within the framework of mainstream, formal politics is crucial for feminism (and other social and political movements) to stay relevant and thrive. The parallels that Margaret Beetham identifies between periodicals and new media pertain not only to their interactivity, but also to the affective, emotional, and political possibilities they open.<sup>542</sup> It is therefore crucial, both in the context of *The Freewoman* and of our own time, to highlight the role of media in diversifying the possibilities of political participation, including their connection to various emotional expressions. This focus allows us to integrate countercultures broadly conceived, including the production and critique of culture, and engagement with it in the everyday, in quotidian interactions, lifestyle choices, and social circles, into our understanding of feminist politics.

*The Freewoman* was subversive partly because of Marsden’s and other contributors’ awareness of the characteristics and potentials of the periodical as a publishing genre. Using them to foster debate, while making editorial policies and practices explicit, was a rejection of an

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<sup>542</sup> Beetham, “Periodicals and the New Media: Women and Imagined Communities.”

illusion of transparency, of a seemingly direct dissemination of information. This is very much in line with the way the organizational politics of the suffrage movement, particularly the WSPU, were treated in *The Freewoman*, the critique that was seen by some as destructive and undermining beliefs. Opening questions rather than providing definitive answers, and venturing into areas that others avoided, may not have been an expedient choice for a political movement aiming for changes in legislation and rights. But *The Freewoman* sought to change consciousness and to expand the realm of the political into a more holistic view, one that could account for the interconnections between ‘public’ and political, and ‘private’ everyday matters. This was attempted through a turn to ‘everyday’ matters such as sexuality or emotions, and through contesting the very elements that serve as the basis for formal politics, such as consensus, representation, and solidarity. Marsden saw the genre as integral to her goals, as the amount of discussion on the matter and its explicitness make clear. These direct statements and discussions in *The Freewoman* afford an opportunity to think of its relation to genre not only from the vantage point of a century later, but to see how it engaged with perceptions of the genre in its own time.

Attention to the periodical as a publishing genre brings forth the complexity of periodicals, their characteristics as a genre that are sometimes contradictory. And it is this focus on the genre, this complexity, that opens up a variety of methodological avenues, some of which have been explored in this study, and some others only hinted at. Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, in their article on the emergence of periodical studies as a field, quote media scholar Judith Yaross Lee’s argument that scholars studying periodicals must realize “that periodicals differ substantially from other publications and that these differences call for new approaches to

publications' history and criticism—approaches distinct from operations conducted as literary criticism or journalism history.” The authors agree that new methodologies should be developed for the study of periodicals, and that the best way to achieve that is through collaborative, interdisciplinary work.<sup>543</sup>

Studying periodicals with attention to their genre can also open the possibility of thinking about the periodical itself *as* an archive. In the next pages, I explore how this view of periodicals might disrupt our understanding of historical moments, as well as alter the ways in which we think about periodicals.<sup>544</sup> As a first step, this calls for an expansion of the realm of material usually considered to constitute the archive, similar to the way that ‘life writing’ has been broadened to include ‘non-personal’ texts. Conceived of as an archive broadly defined, periodicals pose a challenge to the idea of a quest for origins, that desire which the archive as a metaphor (and to an extent as an institution, too) is meant to fulfil. For the periodical reveals not the origins, in this case of feminism or a feminist movement, but a constant process, that is, as a repository it is one that highlights the ‘taking place’ of the archive, rather than its stability.<sup>545</sup> Periodicals, through their complex temporality and sometimes in their deliberate use of other generic features, not only challenge the idea of origins, but also expose the processes by which concepts take on and change meanings. They also turn meaning-making into a process in which the reader can participate, rather than a single interpretive moment, through interactive reading practices.

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<sup>543</sup> Latham and Scholes, “The Rise of Periodical Studies,” 529.

<sup>544</sup> Meagher, ““Can We Really Expect to Function Like This?” Making and Sustaining Heresies.”

<sup>545</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1.

One key element through which periodicals expose the processes of meaning-making and narrative construction is their correspondence sections. Though the publication of letters is controlled and mediated by editors, they still allow a view into the way ideas are taken up, debated, and contested. *The Freewoman* made the correspondence section one of its central features both in size and in the amount of attention it got from the editors, giving some of the letter titles and listing them in the table of contents. As we have seen, readers addressed in their letters questions about the meanings of feminism and the place of sexuality in feminism (among other topics), presenting a wide range of views and concerns, debating with other correspondents and contributors, and contesting the views of the editor.<sup>546</sup> What emerges is a conversation that calls into question the common historiography of first-wave feminism as a fairly unified movement with a clear understanding of its goals and methods. If, as Kate Eichhorn states, the historiography of feminism through the analogy of waves “runs the risk of reifying particular narratives about feminism that fail to account for both the specificity and complexity of feminist activism,” then thinking of the periodical as an archive may open up the possibility of understanding and writing this history differently.<sup>547</sup>

Another way in which the periodical can be thought about as an archive is through periodical networks. As Eichhorn notes, writing in a “networked” world is in itself being in an archive, and while she is referring in her work to a world that is networked through the internet, by extension this notion is pertinent to periodicals as well.<sup>548</sup> Hardly any periodical operates

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<sup>546</sup> Jane Craig, L.L.A., letter to the editors; A.H.T., letter to the editors, *The Freewoman*, January 25, 1912, 192.

<sup>547</sup> Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 148–49.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

outside of a network, created through shared publishers, contributors and readers, advertisements and exchange lists, and the republication of material. In this sense, periodicals function as archives for one another, preserving content, tracking the movement of ideas, and revealing allegiances and disagreements through the presence or absence of notices of new publications, and the commentary of one periodical appearing in others.

The comments about *The Freewoman* in anarchist and suffrage papers, for instance, tell us something about its (perceived) position in these worlds; *The Herald of Revolt* praised *The Freewoman*, associating it with anarchism: “The whole tenor of this excellent journal is Anarchistic, and we hope to draw attention to its editorial boldness at an early date.”<sup>549</sup> For reasons that were likely very similar, *The Common Cause* greeted the newcomer differently: “We hope that future numbers will show more variety in the subjects; to harp on the one string of sex will jar the nerves of readers in the long run.”<sup>550</sup> The notable absence of an acknowledgement of *The Freewoman* in *The Englishwoman*, the only other women’s or feminist paper at the time to term itself a review, could be an attempt by the established *Englishwoman* to distance itself from *The Freewoman*, which belonged to the same genre but had a very different style and politics. These allegiances and acts of distancing are often not found in the archival collections associated with periodicals and their editors, assuming that the documents are even archived, which makes the periodical all the more valuable as a repository.

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<sup>549</sup> *The Herald of Revolt*, February 1912, 13

<sup>550</sup> *The Common Cause*, November 30, 1911, 600.

Periodicals like *The Freewoman* highlight what Eichhorn terms “the political efficacy of the scrap heap;” the value to feminist politics and thought, in the past as well as the present, of failed political projects, those that may not have achieved great things during an often short lifespan, but are significant in their afterlife.<sup>551</sup> At the level of individuals, periodicals may give us access to the writing of people whose documents may not be deemed worthy of archiving, or who may not have written letters or kept diaries. The periodical under study here was a venue for the expression of voices that were sometimes dissenting, marginalized, utopian, or otherwise did not fit into the mainstream discourses of feminism at the time. If we accept Derrida’s idea that “[w]hat is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way,” then the periodical, by offering a different way of archiving, also opens up new possibilities for writing about a period.<sup>552</sup> It has the potential to unsettle our understanding of a historical moment by exposing it as a process rather than a stasis. It is also an archive in which the researcher is not an intruder and the letters are not purloined; it is intended from the outset as a public object. However, the researcher reading a periodical now may not be the intended audience, and is likely not reading in the way the material was intended to be read by the authors and editors. The reading itself, then, can become a boundary crossing, which raises questions about the responsibility of the researcher, particularly with feminist periodicals, not unlike those which arise with regard to women’s archives.

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<sup>551</sup> Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 41–43.

<sup>552</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 18.



Of course, suggesting that the periodical can be understood and used as an archive is not to suggest that it replace more ‘traditional’ archival documents and collections. It is rather to propose adding the periodical, with its content, materiality, and networks, into a potentially broadening definition of the archive on which we draw. Periodicals can and often do blur the boundary between the private and the public, calling them into question especially as they relate to politics. Eichhorn suggests that “[t]he archive, in a myriad of ways, opens up the possibility of being in time and in history differently.”<sup>553</sup> *The Freewoman* allows a view into attempts to be in a historical moment differently, and as part of the archive and as itself an archive, also opens a range of potential contemporary relations to history, and the possibility of different historiographies.

Thinking of the periodical as an archive means approaching an archive that is immensely complicated, arguably one that cannot be studied wholly without drawing on knowledge and resources from multiple disciplines. *The Freewoman* is an archive of a moment in feminist history, but also of a process of articulating feminism. It documents within its pages and in the related correspondence thought processes and feelings, discourses and their contestations, and the relationships between individuals and collectives. It is personal and political, intellectual and emotional, a work of many and yet intimately connected to Dora Marsden as a person. *The Freewoman* was a messy creation, and one of its most powerful features as a complex archive is that it maintains that messiness, allowing us a view onto the unevenness of change and the fraught processes by which it is achieved. The periodical can be

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<sup>553</sup> Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 8.

read as an archive of feminisms in its period, highlighting the multiplicity and instability of feminisms, features that are often not taken up in accounts of first-wave feminism. Like all periodicals, it stands alone and is at the same time part of various networks comprised of periodicals and other publications, individuals, groups, and organizations. Taking up some of these aspects in this study adds pieces to the puzzle of *The Freewoman* and the networks it was part of, and further complicates our narratives of first-wave feminist thought and politics. The more significant and potentially fruitful among these interventions are the idea of the periodical as an archive, the use of life-writing in periodical studies, and the exploration of emotions and emotional discourse in and about periodicals.

*The Freewoman* has been studied quite extensively, and used in scholarship in different fields; literary modernism, feminist and women's history, media studies, and biography. And yet much remains that can be done, especially with technological developments like the tools of digital humanities. Mapping the names and locations of international subscribers could reveal connections to networks not yet studied, and more work can be done on ideas that appear in *The Freewoman* and are developed further in later publications. One example of this would be the periodical *Urania*, established by Thomas Baty, which advanced notions of non-binary gender, stating that "there are no men and women in Urania." As noted in chapter 2, I did not take up the nuanced emotional and affective language in *The Freewoman*, which is part of a broader discussion on emotions and politics, or emotions in politics. More could be done in the direction of thinking about the periodical and the related archival collections through the lens of life-writing, particularly around the tension between published and unpublished texts, and the silences and absences in each of them.

The list could go on, this epilogue, in true *Freewoman* fashion perhaps, opening more than it concludes, and more possibilities for follow-up projects are lying around in computer files, notebooks, and loose pieces of paper from the last few years of work on this project. This attests to what is for me one of the most appealing features of this periodical: its interest not in what women could acquire but in what they could become is reflected in it as an object of study. The notion of a constant ‘becoming’, of subjectivities, ideas, and emotions as all being part of an ongoing process, always in flux with no necessary defined goal, is what makes *The Freewoman* still relevant and powerful today, even if not quite the shocking “douche of cold criticism” it was in 1911.

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