Fighting Forces, Writing Women

Vara Neverow

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 38, Number 3, 1995, pp. 400-405 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/366852/summary
whether it be religion, nationalism, or Arnoldeian liberalism." Yet if Joyce, in *Ulysses*, "made a virtue out of the ambivalence generated by an indeterminate 'Jewishness'," Eliot, in *Poems*, "constructed such semitic imprecision as a significant force preventing any understanding of the all-important relationship between the modern world and past tradition." And if Bloom/Ulysses "provided an essential conduit between a spiritually empty modernity and the past, Eliot's racialized 'Jews' are a force which prevent a specifically 'European' understanding of its 'own' history and tradition." Indeed, many of Eliot's poems, Cheyette concludes, include "a semitic discourse to signify a deep-seated spiritual confusion."

Cheyette's aim in writing *Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* is to "enable other literary critics and cultural historians" of the period "to think about the question of racial discourse" as "a routine area of inquiry" rather than as a subject of "interest only to its victims and a few concerned individuals." And Cheyette's discovery that Jews "were constructed at one and the same time both as embodying the aspirations of an enlightened State and as undermining the essential characteristics of a parpicularist nation," as embodying "simultaneously 'culture' and 'anarchy'," brings a degree of complexity and sophistication to the topic that may well contribute to realizing this aim. Replete with judicious close readings and detailed social and cultural contextualizations of the literary texts, and with an exhaustive bibliography, Cheyette's study is intellectual history at its best. My one and only criticism is that this book is repetitive in many spots and would have profited from a good pruning (which also might have brought down the book's price, affording it an even larger readership). But this minor problem in no serious way detracts from Cheyette's well-conceived, well-executed, eminently readable study.

Brian W. Shaffer
Rhodes College

**Fighting Forces, Writing Women**


THE COVER of *Fighting Forces, Writing Women* is a reproduction of a Red Cross recruitment poster depicting a female figure, clad in
flowing white robes with a Red Cross blazoned on her headgear; her face
is soulful and sorrowful and in her arms she cradles a tiny stretcher on
which lies a wounded soldier, heavily bandaged. This image is a superb
index to Sharon Ouditt’s compelling analysis of the ideological positioning
of British women during the First World War and “the ways in which
women negotiate with and even collaborate with, systems that might be
labelled merely or wholly oppressive.” As Ouditt points out, “the ‘fighting
forces’ of the title refer not only to the women who contributed to the
national effort to combat the enemy, but also to the women whose
subjectivities were the arena for a battle for power between socially and
historically located discourses.”

The study gracefully incorporates concepts drawn from both Anglo-
American and French feminist theory, especially the work of Julia
Kristeva. Lucid and virtually jargon-free, Ouditt’s argument ranges
from the specifics of wartime culture and the ideological agenda of the
time to the tensions of class and gender and the contradictions inherent
in women’s war work and social roles. Transforming Kristeva’s psycho-
analytic version of the Symbolic Order and the semiotic into tools for a
cultural analysis, Ouditt shifts the conventional binary focus “from a
simple male-bellicose/female-pacific opposition into something that
takes account of the relative positions of gender, class, race, political or
religious orientation in the context of the war—and allows for coalitions
and oscillations to occur.”

For the most part, Ouditt’s research is impressively thorough. As she
explains, the project involved “a great deal of archival research, seeking
out forgotten novels, reading journals, magazines, pamphlets and un-
published memoirs . . . to discover how women, at that historical
moment, related their gendered identities to their possible roles in war
time.” Ouditt’s analysis of culture even includes the uniforms designed
for women in various war work assignments and reveals the powerful
ideological significance of attire for, as she demonstrates, these uni-
forms were “read” by the culture as safeguards of an endangered
femininity. Challenging Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s reductive
reading in No Man’s Land of the First World War as a purely liberating
and exhilarating feminist overthrow of patriarchy, Ouditt teases out the
psychological effects of conflicting ideologies, exposes the manipulative
intentions of the patriarchal agenda and documents the post-war recu-
peration of women’s identity back into gender subordination. Ouditt’s
study (similar in methodology to Gilbert and Gubar’s work) is divided
into five chapters each of which focuses on a different aspect of women's wartime experience. Beginning with the most glamorous dimension of women's war work—service in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nursing corps—Ouditt makes plain from the start how class prejudices were used to control women's behavior and short circuit solidarity. Ouditt notes that Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth "has . . . been instrumental in shaping modern consciousness of women's part in the First World War . . . [and] directly reproduces some of the less palatable ideologies that helped make the VAD institution successful." As Ouditt argues, "[c]lass is used by . . . Brittain as a platform from which to disparage women who are attempting to establish public recognition of their professional status as nurses. Set against each other . . . the independent lady and the trained nurse both lose out to patriarchy through an inability to band together and establish a power base" with the outcome that "most women at the end of their four years [returned] to their point of departure: the home."

In addition to her analysis of archival, popular, and unpublished materials, Ouditt also offers illustrative material from fiction of the period. In this first chapter, for example, she provides excellent cultural and literary analyses not only of well-known publications like Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth but also of less recognized works such as Evadne Price's 'Not So Quiet' . . . Stepdaughters of the War, Lesley Smith's Four Years Out of Life, Olive Dent's A VAD in France and Enid Bagnold's A Diary Without Dates.

Unfortunately, Ouditt gives only glancing attention to Radclyffe Hall's "Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself" and The Well of Loneliness and devotes only a few pages to the literary depiction of lesbians in wartime. For the most part, Ouditt concentrates on the identities and experiences of heterosexual women but she is very conscientious in noting that heterosexuality is only one of several options (including celibacy). No study can be absolutely comprehensive and address all issues adequately and Ouditt's project explicitly focuses on the ideology of heterosexual romance, the mystique of marriage, and the patriarchal control of motherhood. One might also note that Ouditt makes no mention at all of the circumstances of women disabled in the war (what became of them remains a mystery).

In her second chapter, Ouditt shifts to the less celebrated aspects of women's war efforts—the experiences of the Land Army and the munitions workers. Here, Ouditt examines the comparative failure of govern-
ment efforts to place women as agricultural laborers: “the national organisation of women’s land work . . . was initially slow, chaotic, and deeply unglamorous in comparison with that of the VADs.” Ironically, for many women working on the land, despite extremely hard physical labor (“[f]or a week I was black and blue with stiffness and bruises”) and low wages, the war years took on an idyllic, pastoral aspect because of the rural settings and the abundant harvests, as indicated by quotations from wartime memoirs: “We picked raspberries, gooseberries, blackcurrants, plums and apples, climbing tall trees with baskets tied around our waists.”

For munitions workers, war work was far riskier even though the pay was much better. Not only were munitions factories important military targets—the working conditions were extremely hazardous. For example, workers exposed to TNT were called “canaries” because of the change in skin color induced by handling the toxic material. Instead of improving workplace health and safety, the factory owners and the government troped these women’s injuries as “token war wounds” casting munitions workers as “soldier-women” who nevertheless did not have to face “the ‘real’ danger zones” at the front. In Irene Rathbone’s We That Were Young, the author “describes in graphic detail a worker’s hair being ripped out by a drilling machine . . . and another worker having her finger torn off, ‘the white muscles hanging like strings.’” Ouditt quotes from an unpublished memoir in which a munitions worker writes of a dreadful fire at her factory:

the fire spread . . . rapidly and soon huge explosions shook everything. There was quite a lot of panic as the twelve foot high gates remained closed. The police on the gates were never permitted to open them . . . [people tried] to climb the gates while the police tried to hold them back . . . We were shut in with those explosions for several hours . . . We never knew how many died.

These graphic descriptions are countered by novels of the period intended primarily as propaganda. Mrs. Alec-Tweedie’s Women and Soldiers is “avid to demonstrate the fiery patriotism and majestic competence of (the right kind) of women” and ignore the grim realities munitions workers experienced. Other works by women discussed in this chapter include Berta Ruck’s The Land Girl’s Love Story, May Sinclair’s The Romantic and Winifred Holtby’s The Crowded Street.

The third chapter deals with the women who as wives and mothers were expected to keep the home fires burning and who were offered counsel by popular publications: “weekly chats” in Woman’s Own and
“My Straight Talks to Sweethearts, Wives and Mothers of the British Empire” in Woman’s World encouraged women to be stoical and cheerful, suppressing all dread and grief, as their particular contribution to the war effort. The novels Ouditt examines in this chapter includes May Sinclair’s The Tree of Heaven, Rebecca West’s The Return of the Soldier and Sylvia Thompson’s The Hounds of Spring. Ouditt points out that Sinclair, though a noted feminist and modernist, was one of the many writers, including Bennett, Galsworthy, Wells and Hardy, who responded to an urgent appeal sent out by C.F.G. Masterman, head of the British War Propaganda Bureau. These writers agreed to generate various and sundry “pamphlets, articles, and books, specially commissioned then distributed by commercial publishers in an effort to win the war.” This chapter is particularly interesting because it provides an analysis of the ideological pressures used to enforce traditional roles in a time of social upheaval.

The penultimate chapter is perhaps the most ideologically intricate. It grapples with the work of such suffragist pacifists as Helena Swanwick, Catherine Marshall, and Sylvia Pankhurst and novelists including Mary Agnes Hamilton, Rose Macaulay, Olive Schreiner and Vera Brittain. Contemporary feminist activists, “caught up in an early twentieth-century epistemology that prioritised motherhood in women at the same time as it mythologized it, . . . manipulated the image in a complex, if precarious, political move” and “effected a remarkable transformation: with the help of tactful argument and passionate belief, a conservative essential became a political ideal.” Their basic contention was simply that “women know the cost of human life as they are responsible for bearing it.” Thus, “[i]n the context of a feminist internationalist pacifism, the presence of a vast, collective mother was summoned which had to negotiate its way out of sentimentality into universal sorrow and then into the political arena.” As Ouditt concludes, “the symbolism of the mother as a new, humane, non-violent, progressive power . . . [offered] a radical alternative to legalized slaughter in the affirmation of life through the potent emblem of motherhood.”

The final chapter focuses exclusively on Virginia Woolf, with specific attention to her novels Jacob’s Room, Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse. Ouditt’s discussion of Woolf’s novels is perceptive and convincing. The only problem is that she writes about Woolf in a critical vacuum, making only a few references to other Woolf scholars. Nevertheless, Ouditt’s study authoritatively locates Woolf’s work in its cultural, his-
torical and ideological matrix. Woolf herself would have approved of this achievement for, as she emphasizes in *A Room of One's Own*, “masterpieces are not single and solitary births—they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experiences of the mass is behind the single voice.” Indeed, Ouditt explains in her introduction that she began the project precisely because, having recognized that Virginia Woolf’s works constituted a “literary and political critique of [the “Great” War] from a stance of radical female alterity,” she became intrigued with Woolf’s “political and literary sisters [who were also] challenging (obliquely?), criticising (wryly?), undercutting (amusingly?) a symbolic order that had suffered—in both senses—one world war and was heading for another.”

Ouditt’s work, which carefully and accurately reconstructs the milieu from which these literary works have, over the decades, been dislodged, is crucial to those contemporary literary critics who focus not on texts as isolated phenomena but on texts as components of a historical and ideological process. Overall, Ouditt’s book is a major achievement and will be of enduring value to feminist researchers, Woolf scholars, and those interested in peace studies.

Vara Neverow
Southern Connecticut State University

**English Studies: Problems of a Discipline**


JOSEPHINE GUY AND IAN SMALL are extremely skilled in the arts of analysis and argumentation. Their book is a densely argued inquiry into what happens when people within English studies come to the conclusion that all literature is political, and that all judgments about literature are political as well. Guy and Small claim that the entire discipline of English studies is disabled—in effect, puts itself out of business—if the epistemological consequences of political theories of literature are taken seriously. They attempt to reveal the professionally debilitating consequences of such literary theories as Marxism, feminism, multiculturalism, and cultural studies. (They also attack structuralism and deconstruction, but on other grounds which I shall explain later.) Obviously, this isn’t a book that sets out to win any popularity