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Yael Shapira, Miranda M. Yaggi

Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas, Volume 8,
Number 2, June 2010, pp. 229-234 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0174>



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Introduction. Notes on a Margin: British Women Writers and Acts of Annotation

Yael Shapira
Bar-Ilan University

Miranda M. Yaggi
Indiana University, Bloomington

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's narrator asks us "to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people's hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters WOMEN AND FICTION" (23). Unlike the university-trained fellow sitting nearby, who fills his notebook with "the neatest abstracts, headed often with an A or a B or a C," the narrator finds the pages of her own notebook quickly covered in "the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings" (30). As she wades through tome after learned tome that men have written about women, seeking an answer to this baffling question of "women and fiction," the exhausted narrator suddenly pauses: "Here I drew breath and added, indeed, in the margin, Why does Samuel Butler say, 'Wise men never say what they think of women'? 'Wise men' never say anything else apparently" (29).

One cannot go far in a conversation or text devoted to the history of women's writing without stumbling onto the concept of the margin. In what has by now become the commonplace critical usage of this figure, to be "at the margin" is to be secondary, excluded, restricted: the very idea of a margin denotes the workings of power, the forceful imposition of relative locations — spatial, social, aesthetic — onto a fluid reality. Yet the margin is also the outpost, the frontier, the cutting edge, the envelope to be stretched; to be at the margin is to be out front and ahead rather than enclosed and behind. Most of the essays in this special issue, which is devoted to the work of British women writers, originated as presentations at the sixteenth annual 18th- and 19th-Century British Women Writers Conference (BWWC), held in 2008 at Indiana University in Bloomington. Declaring its theme to be "Female Marginalia: Annotating Empire," the conference prompted a subtle recalibration of focus, shifting attention away from the margin as merely an indicator of status and

toward the intellectual work that occurs within it. While the relation of “margin” to “center” articulates the position that women authors have historically occupied vis-à-vis a male tradition of literary creation (a hierarchy to which Woolf gestures with her university-trained young man and his neatly headed columns), the margin is also an arena of intellectual exchange — a consecrated space that ostensibly lies outside writing and yet, in its very presence, invites further comment and commentary. Staggering under the weight of a misogynous textual legacy, Woolf’s narrator dutifully records its essence on the pages of her notebook; but it is the margin that provides her the literal and symbolic space to question this legacy, to challenge it, and to begin advancing her own answer to the question of women and writing.

The function of margins not as boundaries but as dynamic sites can be seen in Sylvia Plath’s energetic annotations throughout her copy of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, a rare and lovely book which resides in the Plath collection at Indiana University’s Lilly Library and which inspired the 2008 BWWC conference theme.¹ While Mill’s text has already had its say, the margin invites Plath — still a teenager at the time — to have hers. She extends his ideas, adding to his critique of social custom: “intelligent deviation from custom is better than a blind and simply mechanical adhesion to it.” Where she agrees with him, she applauds vocally with scattered exclamation points and the occasional all-capitalized “BRAVO.” Where she disagrees or finds his language imprecise, she asks skeptically, “where is the boundary?” or “is distinction valid — doesn’t everything an individual does influence society?” At other times she banters with Mill, labeling his attack on crowd mentality the “gospel of individuality.” Next to his insistence that the swearing of an oath on the Christian bible disregards the fact that “a large proportion of infidels in all ages have been persons of distinguished integrity and honor,” she playfully scrawls in cursive, “*moi aussi?*” As a precious library artifact, this annotated copy of *On Liberty* illuminates the way significant conversations can emerge from the interaction between “main” text and “margin,” as well as the way literary history can eventually transform marginalia into a “main” text in its own right. What renders this particular book fascinating and valuable, worthy of preservation and study, is not the venerable philosopher’s argument but, rather, the exchange between his comments and Plath’s, those ink traces left behind by a woman poet who

¹ For their tireless support, we would like to thank Becky Cape, Breon Mitchell, and the rest of the outstanding staff at the Lilly Library.

has since herself become the object of passionate commentary. As Plath's book exemplifies, issues of power resonate just as strongly in marginalia as they do in the idea of the margin: the words scrawled on the outskirts of an existing text (like our own scribbles in the margins of our students' writing) may be those of authority, seeking to master the sentences they surround, encircling them and even running over them; or they may be quizzical, apologetic, deferential, sometimes neatly filling the space with "an A or a B or a C," or at other times overwhelming the space with "the wildest scribble."

By comprising such a range of meanings — from status and space to discourse and defiance — "margin" and "marginalia" offer a theoretical frame capacious enough to contain the contradictions and dilemmas of the ongoing critical investigation into women's writing. It is appropriate, then, that our opening essay, "Women as the Sponsoring Category: A Forum on Academic Feminism and British Women's Writing," is itself an exercise in ongoing annotation, the result of a year-long electronic exchange between four feminist scholars — Ann Cvetkovich, Susan Fraiman, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Miranda M. Yaggi. Their dialectical assessment of Women's Studies today addresses the gradual gravitation of the field from the periphery of academic disciplines into the mainstream, a process that has come with its share of paradoxes: one concern discussed by the forum's participants is, in Susan Stanford Friedman's words, "the perception of Women's Studies — and, more specifically, the study of women writers — as *passé*, retro, old-fashioned, even 'taboo': in short, as no longer 'hot.'" Their conversation maps out the new directions taking shape in the field of Women's Studies, while also raising issues of particular relevance to scholars of women's literature: for example, Ann Cvetkovich calls "for a revitalization of the links between the study of women writers and feminist theory" even as she and her collaborators question the continued use of "women writers" as a meaningful category. Pointing out that "epistemologically speaking, what held this work together was the concept of women — or subsets of women — as an oppressed group," Friedman proposes ways of revising the rationale behind this term so as to maintain its validity. Emphasizing the liberating potential of such revision, Susan Fraiman insists that the scare quotes around "women" can now finally fall away, allowing us to "assume, without having continually to assert, that the category 'women' is internally differentiated and necessarily provisional."

The essays that follow treat a range of literary forms which span nearly two centuries of women's writing, and yet they all share an interest in

the conversant acts performed along and across margins — be they the boundaries that separate genres, the borders that define and contain the nation, or the internal fault lines of a stratified society. Celia Rasmussen’s “‘Speaking on the Edge of my Tomb’: The Epistolary Life and Death of Catherine Talbot” takes as its subject the familiar letter, an eighteenth-century genre traditionally seen as ancillary to the period’s “real” literary activity — a view that, as Rasmussen notes, has been subjected to a necessary rethinking. Focusing on Catherine Talbot’s correspondence with her close friend and fellow Bluestocking Elizabeth Carter, Rasmussen demonstrates how this “marginal” conversation touches on, and arguably even traverses, the radical abyss that separates the dead from the living. Talbot’s death supposedly marks the outer limit of the two women’s shared textual activity, yet it elicits not Carter’s silence but her further commentary: “Talbot’s is always a voice from the past, from memory, from the margins, and that voice serves an important function: it becomes a way for Carter to represent the unrepresentable, death.”

Christina Davidson’s “Conversations as Signifiers: Characters on the Margins of Morality in the First Three Novels of Frances Burney” shifts the focus away from the intimacy of women’s conversant exchanges to chart the significance of eighteenth-century public dialogue. Echoing contemporary attempts to codify and regulate conversational behavior, Burney dramatizes the challenge of correctly “reading” conversation as an index of character, and she incorporates this vital lesson into her narratives of young women’s social initiation. As Davidson notes, however, while Burney’s novels resonate with prescriptions generally advanced by eighteenth-century conduct manuals (a genre of powerful marginality), “the staging of conversation in the specific context of delicate social situations actually identifies conduct literature’s blind spots.” As a result, the novel — a genre that, like its eighteenth-century female creators, labors under a burden of self-legitimization — ends up quietly annotating the authoritative discourse it evokes and even underscores its limitations.

The generative nature of the margin as a space for new kinds of discourse is also evident in the essays by Monica Smith Hart and Julia Kent. Smith Hart analyzes *The Emigrants* (1793), where, in contrast to the predominantly personal focus of her earlier lyrics, Charlotte Smith turns to the human and social costs of political upheaval. Written against the backdrop of the turbulent events in France, her poems adopt the figure of the exile as a poetic persona whose outsider status provides her with insight and authority. Drawing on her “actual expatriation in France, as well as what she characterizes as a kind of continual financial and social

estrangement within Britain,” the poet crafts a “much more direct and aggressive voice, one that employs an exilic experience to critique the body responsible for that exile: the modern European nation.” Kent’s “‘Making the Prude’ in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*” considers the temporary expatriation of Lucy Snowe as providing a somewhat alienated but illuminating vantage point on British gender ideology. While Brontë’s novel reflects the conventional Victorian contrast between a stable, virtuous English womanhood and a theatrically false French womanhood, it also glosses this normative stance as oppressive by “recogniz[ing] theatricality as a more reflexive and comprehensive mode of observing the self.”

Religious, social, and sexual forms of marginality overlap and collide in another site of proliferating discourse, nineteenth-century women’s narratives of Protestant martyrdom, which Miriam Elizabeth Burstein analyzes in “Reinventing the Marian Persecutions in Victorian Britain.” Burstein examines fictional and historiographical representations of Mary Tudor’s reign as a textual corpus that emerges in the shadow of Victorian anxieties about the resurgence of Catholicism. Explicitly and referentially layering John Foxe’s famous martyrologies with their own fictional annotations, “Protestant authors,” Burstein argues, “warn their audiences that violent martyrdom may well be on the brink of an ugly return.” Interestingly, these works use female bodies as vehicles for both demonization and beatification: juxtaposed against the saintly female bodies sacrificed “in witness to the truth of Protestant faith” is the body of the queen herself — female yet infertile, “monstrous” yet vulnerable. This image, as Burstein demonstrates, lends itself to varied ideological commentary by authors as they advance a range of religious and intellectual agendas.

The two last essays of the issue consider the complex literary and discursive effects of cultural location (or, as it turns out, *dislocation*) in women’s writing that reacts to the historical upheavals of the twentieth century. In “Dorothy Sayers and the Case of the Shell-Shocked Detective,” Ariela Freedman reads Sayers’ popular novels as a subtle commentary on the medical discussion of shell shock during and after World War I. Sayers weaves her crime-solving fictions around a detective who is himself still grappling with the psychological aftereffects of the “Great War,” and this choice, Freedman argues, allows her to “ta[p] into a contemporary nexus of shell shock, detection, and criminality, not without challenging her contemporaries’ fears of shell-shocked soldiers and their impact on post-war society.” Finally, Bernard Schweizer’s “Rebecca West and the Meaning of Exile” offers an interesting counter-position not only to Monica

Smith Hart's essay, but to the concern of the issue as a whole with marginality as a location that enables discourse. Whereas many Modernist contemporaries of novelist and journalist Rebecca West believed that "cultural transplantation offers opportunities for positive change, occasions for expanding one's horizons, and invitations to reinvent oneself," Schweizer argues, West herself "viewed any form of expatriation . . . as a prelude to loss of identity, a draining of artistic vitality, and a gradual sapping of the life-force."

Bringing our inquiry full circle, the five books reviewed at the close of the issue offer a range of interesting and surprising answers to the forum's opening questions regarding the use of "women writers" as a meaningful category — from new twists on the old alliance of oppression and embodiment, such as Devoney Looser's illustration of ageism and Elizabeth Sabiston's reading of separate spheres, to new models of desire, including Elizabeth Kraft's identification of an "ethics of desire," Mary Jean Corbett's investigation of domesticity and incest, and Jill R. Ehnenn's recovery of queer collaboration.

As Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath so elegantly and whimsically remind us, margins need not signal the fixed, stable nature of an earlier text by surrounding it with a white frame of respectful silence, nor need "marginal" stand as an overly simplified concept of second-rate status. The margins offer those who exist or work within them vocal potential. In an 1844 article titled "Marginalia" Edgar Allan Poe writes, "I have been always solicitous of an ample margin; this not so much through any love of the thing in itself, however agreeable, as for the facility it affords me of pencilling suggested thoughts, agreements and differences of opinion, or brief critical comments in general" (484). Marginalia, Poe insists, have "a distinct complexion" different from other sorts of commentary, for it is there, in the margin, "deliberately pencilled," that "the mind of the reader wishes to unburthen itself of a *thought*; — however flippant — however silly — however trivial — still a thought indeed" (ibid). We hope that the present collection of essays may inspire readers with — as Poe suggests, and Woolf demonstrates — a *thought* and challenge them to "add, indeed in the margin" their own "deliberately pencilled" response.

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