The Gender of Modernism

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Although Virginia Woolf, probably paraphrasing Thomas Hardy, once wrote to Sackville-West that she had just met “Charlotte Mew (the greatest living poetess),” critics have only begun to revalue the corpus so admired by Mew’s contemporaries—Woolf, Hardy, May Sinclair, Ezra Pound, John Masefield, Harold Munro, H. D., Rebecca West, Wilfred Blunt, T. E. Lawrence, and Siegfried Sassoon—and even by some followers, most notably Marianne Moore (Woolf, Diary 2:319 and n. 9; Letters 2:140). Val Warner’s 1981 reissue of Mew’s Collected Poems, accompanied by Mew’s complete prose, and Penelope Fitzgerald’s biography, Charlotte Mew and Her Friends, praised by Brad Leithauser in a kind but somewhat patronizing review essay on Mew in the New York Review of Books (“Small Wonder”), have brought her work back to light.

A number of critics, most notably Leithauser, have singled Mew out for her “indigenous originality” (25) and her distinctive voice. Nonetheless, they tend at the same time to censure her for her small, unoracular formalism—“her pitch is refined and her scale is modest” (31). When they do attribute to her some “nervy bravado,” they do so for the Hardyesque roughed-up rhymes, the ventriloquistic experiments with dialect, the perseverance of repeated rhyme that Marianne Moore would later make famous and acceptable.
(26). Additionally, in their haste to excuse her “measured and unspectacular” production beside the new form-shattering norm set by a masculinist “Modernism,” these critics fail to read beyond what they see as rhythmical familiarity and rhyme to a strikingly unconventional content.¹ The sexual frankness of Mew’s poetry has been overlooked even by feminist critics attuned to Mew’s revisionary impulses. Beyond her personal and idiosyncratic voice, beyond her only occasional generic daring, is a surprisingly radical politics and an erotic choice unexpectedly rendered in formal verse.

If, as both Georg Lukács and feminist critics have noted,² the radical poetics of canonized “Modernism” often masks a deeply conservative politics, might it also be true that the seemingly genteel, conservative poetics of women poets such as Mew, whose worth even feminists have overlooked, would pitch a more radical politics than we considered possible? The inclusion of Mew in this anthology calls into question the equation both conservative “Modernists” and radical theorists have made between radical form and radical politics. Even a critical theorist such as Julia Kristeva might co-conspire in a “Modernist” hegemony that fetishizes formal experiment.

If Mew’s case is to be heard and the annals of poetic “Modernism” duly revised, we must attend more carefully to the differences between rearguard and avant-garde modernism. If we listen to the more traditional meters of Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Alice Meynell, and Edith Sitwell (not to mention the five hundred or so British women who wrote strong war poetry during the years around 1914) as attentively as we now hear the daring verbal experiments of H. D., Gertrude Stein, and Mina Loy, we must renounce, salutarily, any hope for a unitary, totalizing theory of female poetic modernism. The situation of marginalized modernists such as Mew, Wickham, Townsend Warner, Meynell, and Sitwell has much to tell us, not only about the dispersive underside of the “Modernist” monolith but also about inadvertent feminist participation in the politics of canonicity.

Whereas Djuna Barnes’s lesbian eroticism, flamboyantly announced in the Repulsive Women “rhythms,” no longer provokes surprise, Mew’s lyric exploration of the same themes within the confines of meter and rhyme has been overlooked. “On the Road to the Sea” regrets that “I who make other women smile did not make you,” until the achieved smile at the end of the poem marks a climactic dying: “Reeling—with all the cannons at your ear.” In “The Fête,” female sexuality receives delicate but nonetheless explicit treatment:

At first you scarcely saw her face,
You knew the maddening feet were there,
What called was that half-hidden, white unrest
To which now and then she pressed
Her finger tips; but as she slackened pace
And turned and looked at you it grew quite bare:
There was not anything you did not dare:— (Collected Poems 6–7)
"Absence," perhaps more than any other Mew poem, evokes both delight in female sexuality and conflict over its homoerotic expression (see the poem, reprinted below). As anatomically suggestive of female anatomy as Sappho's imagery, Mew's adumbration of hooded female pleasures safe from the destructive beat of masculine hooves eases the traditional Sapphic concern for a lost maidenhead, trampled by shepherds until only a purple stain remains upon the ground.

In sheltered beds, the heart of every rose
Serenely sleeps to-night. As shut as those
Your guarded heart; as safe as they from the beat, beat
Of hooves that tread dropped roses in the street. (47)

But the cost to the poet-speaker of answering the call of her female lover's eyes is conveyed in the last stanza in an arresting image of silencing by the "scarred hands" of Christ "over my mouth."

Even more unsettling is the morbid but fascinating exploration of enveloping female eroticism in "The Forest Road" (20–22), a poem pronounced pathological by a contemporary physician. It is, no less than Shelley's Alastor, a quest for what the speaker thinks is other and learns is in fact the same. By the close of each, a binding love tryst gives over to death, as the poet-speaker confronts his or her own soul in the figure of the other. But whereas Shelley's poet's pursuit of an elusive maiden brings him to the grave, "The Forest Road" explores the contours of a female symbiosis that reads simultaneously as ecstasy and death: the poet knows she "could go free," if only she could separate from the other's enlacing hair: "I must unloose this hair that sleeps and dreams / About my face, and clings like the brown weed / To drowned, delivered things." Trying to quiet her female other, to "hush these hands that are half-awake / Groping for me in sleep," at the last she cannot separate from her. The image of double suicide which closes the poem marks a mutual female climax as well: as the "dear and wild heart" of the one has been broken in its breast of "quivering snow / With two red stains on it," the other determines to "strike and tear / Mine out, and scatter it to yours." In spite of its exploration of the danger of giving in to the "poor, desolate, desperate hands" of the other, the poem ends ecstatically: "I hear my soul, singing among the trees!" Although Mew's biographers agree that her love for women remained to the end of her days a locus of conflict and psychic pain, her appreciation of female sexuality, in both benign and threatening manifestations, is at the heart of her best poetry.

The violence of "The Forest Road" is balanced by the delicate evocation of autoerotic pleasure in Mew's magnificent "Madeleine in Church." These lines fairly exult in the capacity for female self-enjoyment apart from the determining sexual presence of an other.

I could hardly bear
The dreams upon the eyes of white geraniums in the dusk,
The thick, close voice of musk,
The jessamine music on the thin night air,
Or, sometimes, my own hands about me anywhere—
The sight of my own face (for it was lovely then) even the scent of my own hair,
Oh, there was nothing, nothing that did not sweep to the high seat
Of laughing gods, and then blow down and beat
My soul into the highway dust, as hoofs do the dropped roses of the street.
I think my body was my soul,
And when we are made thus
Who shall control
Our hands, our eyes, the wandering passion of our feet. (23)

This long poem of over two hundred lines, Mew’s best, written during her years of friendship with novelist May Sinclair, is composed of both varying rhyme schemes and stanza structures; each movement of this dramatic monologue is accompanied and marked by elaborate formal variation. In this dreamlike section in particular, the incantatory rhythms and the sexual content of the lines invite enormous variation in line length and emphasis, whereas other more conversational sections call for more regularity in line length and meter.

Aside from its formal ingenuity, “Madeleine in Church” should be viewed as the culmination of an entire genre, a revision of the Victorian Fallen Woman poem, which Mew appropriates to champion rather than punish female sexuality, a revision informed as much by her own sexual conflicts as by her impatience with traditional mythologies of the “pécheresse” (Mizejewski 283, 301): Mew gives her modern Magdalen both a voice—of which the canon, preferring to objectify her, had deprived her—and entitlement to full sexual enjoyment, autoerotic, heterosexual, or lesbian.

Not just the experimental female modernists, then, but a good number of those faithful to meter and rhyme wrote a poetry of marked sexual preference. Mew’s passionate attachments seem always to have been to other women. By middle age she wore frankly masculine clothing, always sporting a tweed topcoat and a “felt pork-pie hat put on very straight” (Monro, “A Memoir” viii). In a photographic frontispiece to the 1953 edition of the Collected Poems (also included in the illustrations in this anthology), she appears in full cross-dress.

Despite the spareness of her production (her first book appeared in 1916 when she was nearly fifty), Mew wrote overtly feminist poetry that was highly recognized in its day. Feminist attention to Stein’s, Loy’s, and H. D.’s linguistic iconoclasm should not eclipse Mew’s political analyses of femininity, prostitution, and war, a feminist politics that surfaces most compellingly and characteristically in her poetry. Next to Loy’s explorations of the decadent “Café du Néant” we should place Mew’s poems of France, among them “Pécheresse,” “Le Sacré-Coeur,” “Monsieur qui Passe,” and the Madeleine poem described above, all of which analyze the uses to which female sexual-
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ity is put: “Une jolie fille à vendre, très cher; / A thing of gaiety, a thing of sorrow, / Bought to-night, possessed, and tossed / Back to the mart again to-morrow” (31).

Mew also wrote a handful of war poems during the years 1915–1919, which number among the most passionate and feminist of that period. Rhymed, metered, divided conventionally into stanzas, “The Cenotaph” (reprinted below) and “May 1915” are pacifist hymns that re-member the “young, piteous, murdered face[s]” of the war dead by giving voice to grieving women, those “watchers by lonely hearths” who “from the thrust of an inward sword have more slowly bled” (35).

The inclusion of Mew in this anthology, a formal but feminist poet alongside other women writers whose politics took more radical poetic forms, is a step toward a rigorous comparativism between and among women writers which might save us from critical solipsism, a comparativism alert to the politics of exile and exclusion which still underwrites canonicity.

NOTES

1. My argument for including Charlotte Mew in this anthology includes a polemic for the dismantling of a monolithic “Modernism” defined by its iconoclastic irreverence for convention and form, a difference which has contributed to the marginalization of women poets during the period and even to division among them, a difference which I have taken care to signal by substituting the plural and uncapsitized modernisms for Modernism as a marker of such omissions and exclusions. It is my contention, as Susan Stanford Friedman put it, that “the presumed chasm between experimental and realist writing is misleading for the study of women’s writing” (2). I would also suggest that although a certain stylistic designation is lost if we open up “Modernism” to anything written between 1910 and 1940, we lose in at least equal measure if we restrict this literary critical marker of periodization to experimental writing alone. We lose, in short, all the other modernisms against which a single strain of white, male, international “Modernism” has achieved such relief.

2. I refer to Lukács’ “Ideology of Modernism” and Robinson and Vogel’s polemic against the detachment of culture from history in modernist art and for the study of race, class, and sex as factors of exclusion.

WORKS CITED


### Absence

Sometimes I know the way
You walk, up over the bay;
It is a wind from that far sea
That blows the fragrance of your hair to me.

Or in this garden when the breeze
Touches my trees
To stir their dreaming shadows on the grass
I see you pass.

In sheltered beds, the heart of every rose
Serenely sleeps to-night. As shut as those
Your guarded heart; as safe as they from the beat, beat
Of hooves that tread dropped roses in the street.

Turn never again
On these eyes blind with a wild rain
Your eyes; they were stars to me.—
There are things stars may not see.

But call, call, and though Christ stands
Still with scarred hands
Over my mouth, I must answer. So
I will come—He shall let me go!
The Cenotaph

Not yet will those measureless fields be green again
Where only yesterday the wild, sweet, blood of wonderful youth was shed;
There is a grave whose earth must hold too long, too deep a stain,
Though for ever over it we may speak as proudly as we may tread.
But here, where the watchers by lonely hearths from the thrust of an inward
sword have more slowly bled,

We shall build the Cenotaph: Victory, winged, with Peace, winged too, at
the column's head.
And over the stairway, at the foot—oh! here, leave desolate, passionate
hands to spread
Violets, roses, and laurel, with the small, sweet, twinkling country things
Speaking so wistfully of other Springs,
From the little gardens of little places where son or sweetheart was born
and bred.
In splendid sleep, with a thousand brothers
To lovers—to mothers
Here, too, lies he:

Under the purple, the green, the red,
It is all young life: it must break some women's hearts to see
Such a brave, gay coverlet to such a bed!
Only, when all is done and said,
God is not mocked and neither are the dead.

For this will stand in our Market-place—
Who'll sell, who'll buy
(Will you or I

Lie each to each with the better grace)?
While looking into every busy whore's and huckster's face
As they drive their bargains, is the Face
Of God: and some young, piteous, murdered face.