

**Constructing and Performing the Modern Woman of Letters:  
Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Mary Colum**

Scholarship in print culture and periodical studies has brought our attention back to modern forms of literary criticism and book reviewing as registers of early-twentieth-century debates regarding modernism. Although modernist scholarship grew up around some of these texts—T.S. Eliot's essays, Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, etc.—many essays, collections, and monographs that were considered crucial at the time have fallen out of view. Rebecca West's collection *The Strange Necessity*, for example, was an important investigation into art's nature and purpose. Likewise, the reviewer Mary Colum was known as "the best woman critic in America" and her critical monograph *From These Roots* a significant attempt to define literary modernism. In this project, I examine three texts that enrich our understanding of early-twentieth-century debates about modernism and carve out a space for the female literary critic.

Rebecca West's *The Strange Necessity* (1928), Mary Colum's *From These Roots* (1937), as well as Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) were perceived by their authors to be central to discussions concerning modernist aesthetics and politics in the modern period. Focusing on these non-fiction works, my dissertation analyzes the complex ways in which these writers sought to establish themselves as serious literary and social critics in an aesthetic environment that both trivialized women's writing and feminized promotional efforts. Woolf, West, and Colum used their unique understandings of criticism and its relationship to the literary marketplace to construct and perform personae through which they assessed modern culture. Woolf created a narrator who analyzes in letters to a male correspondent the social and political position of English women. West performed the role of a naïve reader coming to *Ulysses* for the first time to highlight the highly subjective nature of reading and writing. Colum theorized and assumed the role of "creative critic." Creative critics, she argued, were responsible for all the major developments of literary modernism. Around the same time that these writers performed these personae in their book-length works, they also published revised portions of these books as periodical articles. In my dissertation, I argue that Woolf, West, and Colum altered their performed personae in these recirculated versions to address problems they understood to be specifically associated with female authorship. The problem for Woolf was the censoring of women's work in periodicals while for West it was the gender bias of book reviewers. For Colum, it was the overall lack of accomplished female writers.

By attending to Colum and overlooked works by Woolf and West, I uncover a repeated use of remediation as a mechanism for managing female literary authority. Aaron Jaffe posits in *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* that modernist scholarship lacks a comprehensive understanding of "the full range and extent of the practices, conventions, and institutions that regulate modernist cultural production." My dissertation joins Jaffe's work on male modernists with Faye Hammill's and Catherine Keyser's on female middlebrow authors by analyzing how female critics sought to position themselves as highbrow intellectuals. In the process, I shed light on the workings of modern print culture by tracing the transatlantic circulation and recirculation of *Three Guineas*, *The Strange Necessity*, and *From These Roots* and by contextualizing these works within their English and American or Irish and American discourse networks. In addition, demonstrating the astute ways in which female critics manipulated modern publication networks enhances Lucy Delap's discussions of transatlantic feminist communities.

### **1. Establishing a Feminine Culture: Mary Colum's "Creative Critics"**

In *From These Roots*, Colum contends that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "creative critics," in an effort to develop cultural identities for their respective nations, originated and put in to practice traits that characterize modernism. A creative critic herself, Colum used the book's final chapter to diagnose the state of literature in the 1930s, concluding "[w]riting is no longer re-creating itself; it is simply repeating itself." While writing *From These Roots*, Colum translated her ideas about critics from a national to a gendered context. In various periodical articles, Colum performed the role of creative *female* critic to address the paucity of great female writers. Like culturally subordinated nations who insist on copying other cultures, she argues, women writers have an ingrained tendency to place a higher value on masculine literary culture. And just as national critics can "make [artists] stop swallowing whole other cultures," a female critic like herself can prevent female artists from imbibing the male artistic voice. Although Colum was certainly not alone in wanting to increase female aesthetic productions—most notably both West and Woolf meditated extensively on this matter—Colum's performance was informed by her Irish 'roots.' In this chapter, I argue that Colum's insistence that critics are artists, emphasis on the creation of cultural identities, and reliance on discourses of power stem directly from her involvement in the Irish Literary Revival and her first journalistic ventures at *The Irish Review*.

### **2. Defending Subjective Criticism: Rebecca West and her "Neurotic" Male Critics**

In her volume of essays on aesthetics, *The Strange Necessity*, Rebecca West performs the role of someone coming to *Ulysses* for the first time in order to develop a form of literary criticism organized around the problem of subjective response. Interpreting West's performance as a statement of her personal opinions, critics dismissed the essay and questioned her mental stability. In response, West publicly speculated about the impact of individual psychology and gender position on literary judgments, eventually theorizing in "Woman as Artist and Thinker" that literary critics are frequently male manifestations of what she calls a "neurotic" reader. This chapter traces West's increasing focus on the subjective and analyzes how this focus develops from *The Strange Necessity* to "Woman as Artist and Thinker." Situating West's writings *about* criticism within the context of her reviewers and other publications, I uncover an important intersection between twentieth-century debates about (dis)interested public spheres, discussions concerning psychoanalysis' applicability to literary criticism, and concerns about the assertion of female literary authority.

### **3. Staging (Self)Censorship: Virginia Woolf's "Women Must Weep"**

In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf's quasi-fictive narrator argues that the mainstream periodical press is yet another facet of the English "patriarchal system" that spawns dictators and promotes war. Ironically, Woolf chose to publish a revised version of *Three Guineas* in the American magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. In this version, entitled "Women Must Weep," Woolf enacts what her narrator describes as the inevitable censorship of women's work when it is published in a modern periodical. This chapter posits that Woolf used the serialization of *Three Guineas* as an opportunity to extend her critique of mainstream journalism. Archival letters indicate that Woolf carefully edited *Three Guineas* to create the *Atlantic* version. Nonetheless, "Women Must Weep" is characterized by fragmented prose and incomplete arguments. I argue that these 'mistakes' are another instance of Woolf's renowned textual play in that they dramatize a form of (self)censorship discussed in *Three Guineas*.