# The First Professional: The Women Writers' Suffrage League

Sowon S. Park

In 1908 Britain saw the formation of its first professional organization of women writers: the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL). The league attracted some of the most distinguished writers of the day, but its membership was not restricted to them. That it was a writers' group and not a literary society may indicate how it differed in nature and scope from other contemporary groups, such as the Imagists (1910–18) and the Vorticists (1912–15). Whereas literary societies were founded on the idea of a text as the expression of a highly gifted individual and conceived of themselves as exclusive collectives of authors, or poets in the high romantic sense, the WWSL welcomed writers of every ideal and level; it defined a writer simply as one who had sold a text.[1] That women writers formed a group is perhaps not so remarkable, for the idea of a woman writer was nothing new. But a writers' group comprising women of all classes, against the background of class-riven Edwardian society and, more pertinently, an increasingly "high" literary culture, offers a fresh perspective on the early-twentieth-century literary landscape, which is too often dominated by modernism.[2]

[1] According to the WWSL prospectus, published as a leaflet in 1909, the criterion of membership was "the publication or production of a book, article, story, poem, or play for which the author has received payment" (Elizabeth Robins, *Way Stations* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913], 106). A subscription to the league cost 2s. 6d., which in 1908 would have purchased one popular novel or two suffrage booklets; in 1992 it was equivalent to about £4 10d. (*The Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* [London: n.p., 1913], 134–7).

[2] Many aristocratic women, such as the duchess of Newcastle and Lady Winchilsea,

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The formation of the WWSL marks a significant point in the professionalization of British women writers, but it was by no means through sheer chance that the suffrage movement led to the league's organization.[3] The suffrage movement had politicized thousands of women of all classes, and women's organizations proliferated nationwide in many professions and along regional and political lines. Goaded by antisuffragism as well as carried forth by the spirit of activism, women artists developed a new degree of professionalism through such organizations as the Artists' Suffrage League (1907) and the Suffrage Atelier (1909). The thousand-member Actresses' Franchise League, a "happy marriage" of the theater and the suffrage movement, effected a dramatic improvement in actresses' working conditions.[4] Just as it spurred women in the theater to action, the suffrage movement prompted women to write, publish, and read. The WWSL provided a base within which women writers could raise issues, bring isolated problems to collective awareness, and construct a sense of female agency by giving public voice to communal problems.

Amid widespread suffrage agitation, Cicely Hamilton, already a well-established author and playwright, with *How the Vote Was Won* and

had written before the seventeenth century, and many middle-class women earned their living as writers in the nineteenth century. However, writing was a profession little practiced by working-class women before the twentieth century. *Modernism*, an omnibus term, here denotes a literary movement, including the Imagists and the Vorticists, from 1890 to 1930.

[3] The Society of Authors, founded in 1884 by Walter Besant, with Lord Tennyson as its first president, to promote the interests and defend the rights of authors, was another writers' group. Its members have included Shaw, Galsworthy, Hardy, Wells, Masefield, Forster, T. S. Eliot, and A. P. Herbert. The establishment of the Society of Authors, as well as of the Publishers' Association and the Booksellers' Association in the 1880s and the 1890s, marks a key moment in the professionalization and specialization of the British writing industry as a whole.

[4] Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 42.

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*Marriage as a Trade* behind her, formed the league.[5] Hamilton, who felt that transforming the public interest aroused by the spectacular suffragette campaigns into feminist commitment needed more effective media than ephemeral speeches, now sought strategic ways to raise the public's consciousness of political gender inequality. Encouraged by the journalist and playwright Bessie Hatton, Hamilton announced that the WWSL's aim was an equal franchise and that its method would be the one "proper to writers—the use of the pen." Its members would produce suffrage literature to "ensure ventilation of the subject in such ways as are open to them—by writing articles, taking part in newspaper correspondence" (Robins, 106–7). They would focus on journalistic work to steer quickly changing public opinion: the emerging popular newspapers had already shown the potential of mass communication, and an article on a force-fed suffragette could be front-page national news. Elizabeth Robins, the league's first president, observed in 1911 that "the permeation of journalism, as well as of the less evanescent forms of literature, by Suffragist views has been an element in the propaganda so quiet as to find a way unchallenged into many Anti strongholds, yet so steady as to show its widespread result only in the retrospect" (225).

The repudiation of "androcentrism"—repeated in similar fashion in the second-wave feminism of the sixties and seventies—was a staple of suffrage writing. The bulk of it was revisions of well-known poems, sections from plays, novels, and familiar narratives, such as fairy tales. Suffrage writers also parodied conventional myths and reread famous antifeminist works. The political, class, gender, and literary diversity of the league's members made their writing admissible to different circles. Along with contributing to the more obvious publications, such as the *Vote*, the *Common Cause*, the *Suffragette*, *Votes for Women*, *Women's Suffrage News*, the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, *Women's Suffrage*, *Women's Franchise*, *Women's Dreadnought*, and the *Independent Suffragette*, they attempted to reach the unconverted by engaging in public debate in the conservative newspapers, which were unmistakably antisuffrage in

[5] Hamilton drew up the WWSL's constitution early in 1909; she was the chairman of committee and Robins the first president. Robins was reelected president on 15 October 1917 and held office until 24 January 1919, when, having achieved its founding aims, the WWSL was formally dissolved.

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editorial tone. Robins became famous for her defense of the cause against the arch-antisuffragist Mrs. Humphry Ward in the *Times*.[6] Many WWSL publications were quick responses to widely read newspaper articles. For example, May Sinclair's *Feminism* appeared on 31 March 1912 as a refutation of a three-column letter published in the *Times* three days earlier by the influential Sir Almroth Wright, who claimed that the suffragettes suffered from "the hysteria bacillus," a symptom of spinsters.[7] Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Female of the Species," which appeared in the *Morning Post* of 20 October 1911, elicited a succession of responses. Reply poems such as "The Species of the Female," by Sidney Low, and "The Mother of the Man," by Hall Caine, were widely distributed by suffrage presses, and many articles, including one by Christabel Pankhurst, filled the columns of newspapers and journals.[8]

The whetstone of antisuffragism such as Kipling's sharpened the rhetoric of suffrage. But the WWSL did more than repudiate antifeminist men writers. In conjunction with the Actresses' Franchise League, it gave innumerable matinees of plays and pageants, some to pay tribute to Shakespeare for portraying the varied qualities of women. In *Shakespeare's Dreams*, an arrangement by the best-selling author and playwright Beatrice Harraden and Bessie Hatton, Portia, Viola, Perdita, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, Kate, Beatrice, Puck, Ariel, and Cleopatra each appear before the sleeping poet, saluting him, offering him flowers, and reciting their best-known lines.[9]

[6] Robins, letters to the editor, *Times*, 7 and 14 March 1912, 27 July 1912. For a full listing of Robins's writings on women's suffrage in the *Times* and elsewhere see Angela V. John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life, 1862–1952* (London: Routledge, 1995), 246–7.

[7] Sinclair, *Feminism* (London: Women Writers' Suffrage League, 1912); Wright, letter to the editor, *Times*, 28 March 1912. A copy of Sinclair's pamphlet may be found in the Bodleian Library.

[8] Christabel Pankhurst (1880–1958), the inventor of militant tactics for suffrage, founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) with her mother, Emmeline Pankhurst. She edited a weekly suffrage journal, the *Suffragette*, and was a charismatic leader of the movement. Many suffrage novels have portrayed her, most notably Elizabeth Robins's *Convert* and Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Delia Blanchflower*. Low's poem, which appeared three days after Kipling's, carried the satiric inscription "Suggested by Mr. Rudyard Kipling's delicate Tribute to 'The Female of the Species'" (*Standard*, 23 October 1911, 13). Caine's poem appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*, 7 November 1911. Both poems were reproduced widely.

[9] *Shakespeare's Dreams* was performed on 9 February 1912 at the New Prince's Theatre in London.

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The WWSL's most outstanding feature was its inclusiveness; provided they were pro-suffrage, writers not only of every class and literary ideal but of both genders and of every political persuasion were welcome. Debates as to where to draw the line were frequent. For example, Marie Belloc Lowndes, a vice president of the league, expressed strong doubts about the admission of the writer of *Letters from a Flapper at the Durber* and other "pornographic" novels: "Any woman who has disgraced herself professionally should not be asked by us."[10] But the principle of exclusion, by which most societies worked, was usually defeated, inasmuch as the league sought to harness literary activity to political and social change and therefore to have as immediate and widespread an influence as possible. League membership ranged from the "New Woman," such as Sarah Grand (1854–1943) and Olive Schreiner (1855–1920); to "popular" writers such as Lowndes (1868–1947), Harraden (1864–1936), and Margaret Woods (1856–1945); to "experimental" writers such as Sinclair (1863–1946). The mystical poet Alice Meynell (1847–1922); the novelist and "society hostess" Violet Hunt (1866–1943); Evelyn Sharp (1868–1955), a writer for the *Yellow Book* and a hunger-striking militant; and Ivy Compton Burnett (1884–1969), a dame commander of the British Empire now regarded as a postwar novelist, were all members also. The categories into which these writers are placed today held little significance at the height of the suffrage campaign, when they were united, albeit temporarily. Their camaraderie is difficult to conceive in the late twentieth century, when feminism itself is variegated, but their intense affinity for one another comes through strongly in most of their autobiographical writing.[11]

The active participation of men, as honorary associates of the league, also differentiated the WWSL from late-twentieth-century fem-

[10] *Diaries and Letters of Marie Belloc Lowndes, 1911–1947*, ed. Susan Lowndes (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), 35.

[11] Other committee members included Alice Abadam, Lena Ashwell, Elizabeth Banks, Nina Boyle, Mrs. Havelock Ellis, Mrs. E. Rentoul Esler, Elizabeth Gibson, Bessie Hatton, Margaret Hope, Annesley Kenealy, Dr. Arabella Kenealy, Mrs. Waldemar Leverton, Edith Walderman Leveston, Mrs. Archibald Little, Mrs. Darent Little, Mrs. Eileen Mitchell, Mrs. H. W. Nevinson, Alice Perrin, Mrs. Baillie Reynolds, Mrs. C. Romanne-James, Madeline Lucette Ryley, Lilian Sauter, George Paston Symonds, E. M. Tait, Dr. Margaret Todd, Sarah Tooley, Gertrude Warden, Peggy Webling, and Edith Zangwill. Over four hundred other members actively wrote for the league.

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inist literary groups. H. N. Brailsford, Laurence Housman, John Masefield, and Ramsay MacDonald, then household names, frequently gave speeches and produced suffrage literature as members. Other well-known men who appeared and spoke at WWSL meetings and wrote for the cause included Joseph Clayton, Rev. C. Hinscliffe, Frederick Pethick Lawrence, Saleeby Read, Pett Ridge, Richard Whiteing, and Israel Zangwill. More than half the contributions to the "Woman's Platform" pages of the *Standard* were penned by men.[12]

As for the WWSL's tolerance of political difference, Robins recorded in 1911 that the league embraced "Conservatives, Liberals, and Socialists, women of Leisure and women who toil for their daily bread, members who are militant and members who are non-militant. The League therefore did not and could not, as a body, take part in the more active political demonstrations. Its members expected to be left free, and were left free, to serve the Cause in whatever way individual opinion and opportunity made fitting and practicable" (225). The diversity of membership and work contradicts frequent descriptions of the WWSL as an "auxiliary" of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, a union of nonmilitants, since many prominent members were affiliated with the militant WSPU and the Women's Freedom League.[13] As stated in the launch pamphlet, the WWSL was "entirely independent of any other suffrage society; at the same time it was formed with the intention of assisting every other suffrage society by the methods proper to writers" (Robins, 106).

The WWSL's method may have been "the use of the pen," but its strategies, like those of other suffrage organizations, included the

[12] The "Woman's Platform," begun as a daily two-page section dedicated solely to suffrage news, was increased to three and at times four pages by popular demand. It provided detailed reports of meetings, deputations, debates, articles, and letters on the suffrage question. The advertisement that launched the "Woman's Platform" stated that it was "for a ventilation of all women's interests. It is open to all men and all women in the land, of every class and party, and all shades of opinion, who desire to help the interests of women" (*Standard*, 2 October 1911, 1). Similar advertisements had been running daily for a week.

[13] See, e.g., Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 218; and Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914–64* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 135.

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drama of marches and public protests. The "Great Demonstration," organized by the WSPU on 21 June 1908, was watched by a quarter to a half million people.[14] The *Times* described an exuberant contingent of more than a hundred WWSL members, all wearing scarlet-and-white badges transfixed with quills.[15] Marching behind a dramatically appliquéd black, cream, and gold velvet banner designed by Mary Lowndes were the league's leading figures: Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, Gertrude Warden, Alice Meynell, May Sinclair, Flora Annie Steel, Edith Zangwill, and Mrs. Havelock Ellis. It is interesting to see the women the WWSL chose to celebrate as role models in its elaborately embroidered banners, for time has little changed the preference: Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Fanny Burney, George Eliot, and Mary Wollstonecraft.[16] The WWSL also participated in the suffrage processions of July 1910 and June 1911, under a new banner designed by a staunch male supporter, W. H. Margetson.[17]

The WWSL sent delegates to conferences held jointly with other suffrage organizations and hosted its own drawing-room "at-homes," in hotels and offices as well as in members' homes, at which the league's literary positions and aspirations were articulated and dis-

[14] *Times*, 22 June 1908, 1. The impact of the march and the beauty of the banners seen in it were reported in the *Standard*, the *Daily News*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Chronicle*, 22 June 1910.

[15] *Times*, 22 June 1908. The color schemes of the individual organizations subsumed in the suffrage movement were very successful: the NUWSS, red, white, and green; the WFL, green, gold, and white; the Artists' League, blue and silver; the Suffrage Atelier, blue and orange; and the WSPU, purple, green, and white. That only purple, green, and white caught on nationally, in advertisements for merchandise as diverse as bicycles and soap, and that it came to represent the suffrage movement as a whole illustrate the WSPU's powerful impact.

[16] Other distinguished figures in the arts and society were commemorated—Vashti, Boadicea, Black Agnes of Dunbar, Queen Elizabeth I, and Queen Victoria—as well as two astronomers, Caroline Herschel and Mary Somerville, and Jenny Lind and Sarah Siddons, representing music and drama. Two living persons, Florence Nightingale and Marie Curie, were honored.

[17] The banner had "WRITERS" across the top, a black crow with a quill above it in the center, and "LITERA SCRIPTA MANET" below. Described by Lisa Tickner as "the most striking of all suffrage banners," it was carried in turn by Cicely Hamilton, Evelyn Sharp, Sarah Grand, and Beatrice Harraden (*The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–14* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1987], 260).

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cussed. It provided speakers and sold suffrage literature at public meetings. There were also authors' readings, exhibitions, and book fairs, costume balls and dinners, cake and candy sales. The WWSL's fund-raising, advertising, and marketing were remarkably sophisticated and successful. One bookstall at the WSPU women's exhibition at the Prince's Skating Rink in Knightsbridge, where autographed books donated by such suffrage sympathizers as John Galsworthy were sold, made seventy pounds, equivalent to about three thousand pounds in 1995. The league also held literary contests for the best suffrage fiction and plays—mostly, though not exclusively, open to first-time writers—awarded prizes, and recruited women to write, as well as provided the means for publishing.[18]

Suffrage literature—fiction, sketches, plays, poems—was mainly written for the implied common reader of the entertainment market. But its writers also meant to exploit its potential to bring about social change. To many writers steeped in the language of popular culture, it was the most natural form of literary production. Therefore the documentary-like naturalism that the suffrage writers employed was at once a political choice, directed at their conative aim, and a market-dependent one.

With the advent of the Great War the WWSL, like most other suffragist organizations, turned its attention to aiding the nation on the home front. An obvious form of service was to provide reading material for wounded soldiers, and Elizabeth Robins, Bessie Hatton, and Beatrice Harraden set up a library in a military hospital in Endell Street, London. Reflecting the inclusiveness of its membership, the league circulated all types of fiction, including the popular and the sensational. Harraden, after surveying the wounded soldiers in 1917, wrote that "our wounded warriors have surely earned the right to amuse themselves with the books that please them most, and to be free from the kind of officious pedantry that would seek to thrust upon them literature of a class and type for which they have, as they themselves would say, 'no use.'"[19] Popular literature spoke a language meaningful to a far wider cultural stratum than literature "of a class and

[18] E.g., Violet Pearn was awarded a ten-pound prize for her essay "Will and the Power" on 7 December 1911 (*Vote*, 9 December 1911).

[19] The soldiers' favorite authors were Nat Gould, Charles Garvice, and E. Philips Oppenheim (Harraden, *Life of Florence Barclay* [London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921], 251).

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type." League members who had been writing plays for the Actresses' Franchise League continued to produce them for the Pioneer Players.[20]

The WWSL was formally dissolved on 24 January 1919, within a year of the passing of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which enfranchised eight and a half million women. Although the league had not realized an equal franchise, its work was substantially done, and its members moved on to make feminist contributions to other organizations.

Although the WWSL is here distinguished as a writers' group, as opposed to a literary society, it did not disavow the principle of talented individuals producing exceptional literary texts. On the contrary, it made good use of celebrated names to promote itself; moreover, many of its members had their own literary aspirations and achieved admirable standards. But as a writers' group the WWSL had a far wider scope than any society centered on particular literary values. A writer's prestige or distinction had to have a use for gender politics if she or he were to contribute to the league. In this sense suffrage literature, if it can be said to constitute a discourse, was unlike the literature of other early-twentieth-century movements, whose members, according to Dennis Brown, "virtually 'canonised' each other, as prophets of the New."[21] Elitist notions of cultural aristocracy were burgeoning among the modernists, and the idea of the supremely achieved individual was reaching new heights. The uniquely particular was the aim of many a modernist—T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and W. B. Yeats, to name but a few. Paradoxically, the same authors sought cosmic forces beyond the individual and tended toward the "impersonal" in their literary ideals. In contrast, the WWSL writers had little interest in acquiring prestige and distinction through their suffrage literature.[22] Yet despite their commitment to collective expression, col-

[20] The Pioneer Players was founded on 8 May 1911 by Edy Craig, a suffragist and the daughter of Ellen Terry, to promote a political theater. In the organization's ten years Craig produced 150 plays.

[21] Brown, *Intertextual Dynamics within the Literary Group—Joyce, Lewis, Pound, and Eliot: The Men of 1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 5.

[22] Needless to say, their disinterest did not extend to their other nonpolitical writing.

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laboration, and anonymous publication, many suffrage writers placed great importance on achieving authentic individuality, as the vast number of suffrage autobiographies attest. Just when the "cultural aristocrats" eschewed the personal, the suffragists seemed to embrace it. But the "social" had no place in the modernists' desire for the impersonal, which for them did not imply a collective, especially not a specific collective as mundane as disfranchised women. The individuals celebrated by suffragists, on the other hand, formed a specific group, held up as role models for all women.

Nor did the WWSL writers take the "literariness" of a suffrage text as its aim, unlike the modernists, whose elevated ideas of authorship and creative processes were normative ideals. To use Roman Jakobson's six-element paradigm of communication, suffrage writing was less an "emotive" act (the expression of a given author) or a "poetic" act (focused on language itself rather than on what it said) than a "conative" act (concentrated on effect).[23] Thus it was interventionist and pragmatic, using whatever tools were at hand.

The WWSL's concern that society should appropriate its texts helps explain the suffrage writers' relative indifference to individual ownership of them. Rhetoric mattered more than authorship and style. As Elizabeth Robins observed in 1911, "A vast amount of the most effective work done by the Writers has been anonymous" (225). Some suffrage articles and sketches were even marked "specially not copyrighted." The writers' detachment is rooted also in the history of bourgeois individualism. In a market economy in which married women could not own property until 1882, and indeed functioned *as* property, the social persona of an author, a proprietor, and its psychological underpinnings may have posed special difficulties for first-time women writers from nonliterary backgrounds.

In addition, anonymity, though not so frequently resorted to as in the nineteenth century, provided cover from the still unfavorable social implications of authorship. Many women writers, most notably Cicely Hamilton, wrote anonymously for the same reasons that the Brontës had written under pseudonyms. In her autobiography Hamil-

[23] Jakobson, *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, vol. 3 of *Selected Writings* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981).

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ton recalled that stage managers had warned her to conceal her sex "until after the notices were out, as plays which were known to be written by women were apt to get bad reviews."[24] Elizabeth Robins, in Jane Marcus's view, faced similar problems: she "did not kill the angel but directed the angel's energies into a service of a cause. It was easier to see oneself as a vessel of historical consciousness than to deal with the guilt aroused by declaring oneself as an artist. Self expression was social sin."[25] Suffrage writing did not force one to assume the persona of an artist; thus it presented few psychological barriers to women who were beginning as writers. Margaret Homans speculates that the strong romantic tradition of the poet, who was clearly male, made it difficult for the aspiring woman author to ignore her sexual identity while writing.[26] The WWSL, unrestrained by such notions, helped women consolidate and affirm in writing their isolated and haphazard sense of reality.

The work of the WWSL might be defined, in Antonio Gramsci's words, as "functional literature," based on a preestablished social course.[27] Robins characterized it as "educational" (225). The WWSL's aims, like those of the suffrage movement itself, went beyond the equal franchise. While the movement contested the ideology of femininity, the league sought to demystify the production of literature, oppose its "androcentricity," and use it to raise the public's consciousness of gender inequality. By holding up role models like Jane Austen and George Eliot, the WWSL hoped to open up writing to all women.

With the thrill of discovery, Robins told the WWSL membership in 1911, "There she stands—the Real Girl!—waiting for you to do her justice."[28] The idea of the "Real Girl" as an objective reality, "waiting" to be truly depicted, expresses the central tenet of the league's approach

[24] Hamilton, *Life Errant* (London: J. M. Dent, 1935), 60.

[25] Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 129.

[26] Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[27] Gramsci, "Functional Literature," in *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 129.

[28] Robins, "The Women Writers," in *Way Stations*, 236 (speech given to the WWSL at the Criterion, London, 23 May 1911).

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to literature.[29] Although its members held diverse views about how to depict the "Real Girl," they were united in their belief that language, as an independent and instrumental entity, could capture, and ultimately change, reality. One of the WWSL's most prolific exponents, Robins conveyed the tremendous excitement of standing at the portals of "true femininity": "Fellow-members of the League, you have such a field as never writers had before. An almost virgin field. You are, in respect of life described fearlessly from the woman's standpoint—you are in that position for which Chaucer has been envied by his brother-poets, when they say he found the English language with the dew upon it. You find woman at the dawn" (235–6).

Robins's note of exhilaration indicates not so much women's actual as their perceived silence in literary history.[30] It is ironic that literature by women who urged the need for women's writing to be visible and accessible fell victim to silencing and was forgotten.[31] Robins, like many of her contemporaries, bemoaned the scarcity of literature on women's experience, personal or professional. By the same token, she said of suffrage fiction that "these [books], and books like them, are a foretaste of that library that waits to be written" (234). In her article "How It Strikes a Mere Novelist" May Sinclair, a vice president of the WWSL, wrote, "The coming generation will, I believe, witness a finer art, a more splendid literature than has been seen since the Elizabethan Age."[32] Sinclair cited the "spiritual certainty of women," which

[29] The WWSL's literary theory is traced here through a number of exemplary comments on writing by its members. This approach is limited, in that it presupposes that recorded authorial intentions explain the theory behind the writers' work, but it provides a starting point for research. Thus these comments are taken as evidence but are to be handled circumspectly.

[30] There were many women writing before the twentieth century; see the number of entries for early writers in Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, eds., *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Batsford, 1990).

[31] Not only their writing but the suffragettes themselves, who were at one time ubiquitous, vanished without a trace. The difficulty of piecing together the history of the WWSL lies in the lack of preserved information, attributable not only to accidents or carelessness but also to the reticence of many suffragettes who, writing in the antifeminist atmosphere of the postwar era, greatly underplayed their suffrage involvement in their memoirs and autobiographies. Cicely Hamilton's memoir, *Life Errant*, is a case in point.

[32] Sinclair, "How It Strikes a Mere Novelist," *Votes for Women*, 24 December 1908, 211.

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would "come through the coming revolution, by the release of long captive forces, by the breathing in among us of the Spirit of Life, the genius of enfranchised womanhood" (211). Cicely Hamilton agreed: "The women who write or paint will have an enormous pull for a generation or two over the men who write or paint, for the men will have only the old ideas to work on but they will be every one of them new to us."[33]

Similar ideas were later discussed by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), now considered the founding text of feminist criticism: "For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been."[34] Indeed, all the strands of feminist literary theory found in *A Room of One's Own* or in the more radical *Three Guineas* (1938) are readily found in the suffrage writings of the decades before. Hamilton's materialist theory of literary production in her best-selling *Marriage as a Trade* (1909) corresponds to Woolf's more famous question as to the lack of a woman Shakespeare. The patriarchal origins of militarism revealed in *Three Guineas* were explicated by suffragists Mary Sargent Florence and C. K. Ogden in *Militarism and Feminism* in 1915.[35] Articles published in *Jus Suffragii*, edited by Mary Sheepshanks, put forward the thesis that militarism implied the subservience of women.[36] The point is not that the preoccupations of Woolf's predecessors influenced her but that the sociocultural conditions of the early twentieth century were conducive to them and that these feminist ideas were very much in the air due to the suffrage debate.

The suffragettes, who shared the Edwardian fascination for selfhood, believed in a "true" self that could be found if the false "role" of femininity were discarded (Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade*, 195, 204; Robins, 7).[37] Concomitant with the hope for the true depiction of

[33] Hamilton, "The Spirit of the Movement," *Vote*, 14 January 1911, 140 (speech given at the Bijou Theatre, London, 3 January 1911).

[34] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth, 1978), 126.

[35] Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1909); Florence and Ogden, *Militarism and Feminism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915). Published as an anonymous pamphlet, *Militarism and Feminism* was widely reviewed, as in the *Times Literary Supplement.*

[36] Catherine Marshall published two articles on the same theme, in *Common Cause: Organ of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (1915) and in the *Labour Year Book* for 1916.

[37] See the section on "woman's instinct for the mask" in Robins, 1–17.

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women was the conviction that textual practice had, and should have, an immediate and significant influence on society. In the WWSL prospectus Hamilton had stated, "A body of writers working for a common object cannot fail to influence public opinion" (Robins, 106). Similarly, Robins recalled, "We must have known that one of the most important, most indispensable services to Social Reform would have to be undertaken by the Writers."[38]

The firm belief of these women in the power of the written word reflects the effect that it had had on them. Twenty percent of suffrage activists were university-educated, compared to only 0.2 percent of the female population aged twenty to twenty-four at the time.[39] In *Becoming a Feminist* Olive Banks claims that 62 percent of active "feminists" born between 1872 and 1892 had had higher education.[40] Even considering that the education available to middle-class girls in the 1890s had greatly improved—and suffragettes were predominantly of middle-class origins—the suffragettes were unusually well educated. Thus it is perhaps natural that suffrage writing should have been guided by an educational, conative aim.

However, suffragettes of all classes professed themselves subject to literary influences. In many autobiographies and memoirs women testified to the part that texts had played in their conversion to the cause.[41] Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, treasurer of the WSPU and coeditor of *Votes for Women*, emphasized the process of reading and identifying with literary models that had led her to political activism. In a WSPU pamphlet titled *Why I Went to Prison* she credited the novels of George Eliot, Irving's *Faust*, and Sir Walter Besant's *Children of Gibeon* with having formed and confirmed her vocation and stated in conclusion that she had gone to prison because she had "made a passionate resolve that when I grew up I would put myself between the helpless and the wronged and the wicked and cruel world."[42] Cicely Hamilton

[38] Robins, "To the Women Writers," in *Way Stations*, 110 (speech given to the WWSL at the Waldorf Hotel, London, 4 May 1909).

[39] Jihang Park, "The British Suffrage Activists of 1913: An Analysis," *Past and Present*, no. 120 (1988): 147–62.

[40] Banks, *Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of "First Wave" Feminism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 13.

[41] For a detailed analysis see Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 234–48.

[42] Lawrence, *Why I Went to Prison*, Museum of London Suffragette Files.

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wrote that from "very early in life my real interest was the written word" (*Life Errant*, 3). The belief in realism and the anticipation of a women's literature that would effect social change also reflected the experience of the WWSL's core members, mainly women in their forties and fifties who had lived through the 1890s and indeed had written the "woman-question" novels that had had an immediate and considerable impact.[43]

The emphasis on realistic portrayals of women was linked to the questioning of their social conditioning, to the problematization of their textual representation, and to attempts to redefine patriarchal language. Elizabeth Robins argued that gender bias was instituted by and in language; she recast history as the "record of the deeds of heroes—of men who fought against the great obstacles and overcame them" and society as "a place not only where all the great deeds are done by men—but a place where all the great qualities are said to be masculine" (231). "It is the business (the business as well as the high privilege) of men and women writers," she declared, "to correct the false ideas about women which many writers of the past have fostered" (110). Her solution was the "practically limitless power of suggestion," which

> has been pressed into the service of the education of men. From the time a boy is old enough to follow a fairy-tale, he is told how Jack killed the Giant. . . . When the boy is older he begins to take from history, from the classics, and from literature in general, the incentives and the cue for action. . . . The world will never know how much power to serve it has been killed in women's hearts by that old phrase, "only a girl." . . . Which, of all these books, tells about a girl's courage, good temper, wit, resourcefulness, endurance? Not one. . . . they had to wait for women to celebrate them. (231)

The WWSL recognized writing as a profession and attempted to organize women writers to speak with a unified voice. Though the core of the league comprised established authors, women without links to a literary coterie or educational credentials were actively encouraged to participate in its literary workshops and contests, at-homes, and public

[43] In 1909 the WWSL's committee members were Alice Meynell, 61; Sarah Grand, 54; Olive Schreiner, 53; Elizabeth Robins, 45; May Sinclair, 45; Beatrice Harraden, 44; Violet Hunt, 42; Marie Belloc Lowndes, 40; Evelyn Sharp, 39; and Cicely Hamilton, 36.

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meetings. Through the suffrage movement writing became a more accessible profession for many women, for whom the WWSL provided a potent base for collective identification and mobilization.

Nonetheless, it is a lamentable fact, not unrepresentative of feminism in general, that many suffragists expressed identical ideas in isolation and remained unaware of having a *tradition* of rebellion. Though they revered earlier women authors, they often stopped short of honoring their successes. The literary theory advanced by the suffrage novelists would have benefited greatly from the opportunity, largely missed, of studying and observing the feminist feats of the eighteenth-century women in writing.[44] Nor did the second-wave feminists of this century express an awareness of, or make use of, the tradition of feminist struggle. Their belief in the newness of their protest at every point assures us that they also considered themselves outside the mainstream of history. Combating this unjustified feeling of isolation is one of feminism's fundamental challenges. Despite immense changes, first- and second-wave feminisms and present-day feminism have had many struggles in common, and only through a sense of feminist tradition can there be any appreciation of progress.

[44] On the cyclical repetition of women's "new-found rebellion" see Dale Spender, ed., *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers* (New York: Pantheon, 1983). Spender writes of the process in which women's writing soon becomes peripheral and subsequently is consigned to oblivion because women's theory does not become general knowledge.

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