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IN THE YEAR of its publication, 1905, Elizabeth Robins's *A Dark Lantern* received an appreciative review by Virginia Stephen in the *Guardian*: "There can be no doubt that few living novelists are so genuinely gifted as Miss Robins, or can produce work to match hers for strength and sincerity."[1] Robins's other works, such as *The Convert* (1907), were similarly well received, and widely read. Yet academic responses to these novels have been neither frequent nor favourable: the major works of literary criticism on this period do not mention feminist novels, such as Violet Hunt's *White Rose of Weary Leaf* (1908) or May Sinclair's *The Judgement of Eve* (1907), despite their centrality to the suffrage era. Two of the most reputable feminist literary histories, namely, *A Literature of Their Own* and *No Man's Land*, have not been approving of suffrage literature. "The suffrage movement was not a happy stimulus to women writers" is Elaine Showalter's estimation in her landmark study of British women's literature.[2]

Showalter's evaluation is perhaps indisputable in terms of the "qualitative" literariness of the works produced. On the other hand, the mass of textual production prompted by the suffrage movement in the form of poetry, sketches, polemical essays, tracts, short stories, novels, farces, burlesques, and plays makes it possible to claim that the suffrage movement was an unprecedented stimulus to women writers. Not only did suffragism motivate many women to write for the first time, many women began to take an active role in production: publishing literature through numerous suffrage presses and distributing it in suffrage shops or on street corners. Ranging in price from a penny—the price of a postage stamp in 1918—to around one shilling and six pence, suffrage

literature, in *quantitative* terms, marked a new epoch in the socio-cultural context of writing for women. Showalter's account is so concerned with the quality of women's writing that the socio-cultural significance is overlooked; and suffrage literature is seen as nothing but a fallow period in women's writing, a transition between two significant eras—Victorian and Modern.

Gilbert and Gubar have settled for a generalization about suffrage literature, instead of pursuing more specific aspects. They focus on the empowerment of women writers in the modern industrial "no-man's land," and argue that although women's polemical writing waged war against men, fiction presented women either as victims or crafty manipulators of their enemy. Women's novels of this period are construed as "guilt-ridden" and marked by a "rhetoric of sacrifice."[3] But much suffrage fiction, such as Mabel Collins and Charlotte Despard's *Outlawed* (1908), Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (1911), Elizabeth Robins's *The Convert* (1907), to mention but a few, written to persuade and convince, defies this categorization.[4]

Suffrage fiction has also been dismissed by a different criterion. Since the advent of structuralism, the significance of the innovative and experimental potential of politically committed novels, written in the realist form, has been negated, on the basis that the conventional form contradicts and undermines the radical content. Structuralist and post-structuralist critics maintain that reconstituting the hegemonic discourse demands more than a "simple" change of content and symbols, and point out the contradiction between the realist narrative and radical content in political novels as a genre. Many feminist critics, caught up in this interpretative paradigm, tend to overlook the socio-cultural significance of the interventionist contents of suffrage novels, though they try to salvage something from this undoubtedly formative period in women's writing. Coming from a Modernist perspective, they look for, and find, the precursors of Modernism; and suffrage novels are evaluated as but a step in the evolution of truly radical, formally experimental texts of the women Modernists. One of the most recent of such interpretations has been made by Jane Eldridge Miller, who claims a place for suffrage fiction in the genealogy of Modernism by arguing that it was a "Modernism of content."[5] The assumption here that Modernist forms should necessarily supersede realist forms is problematic. There is also the danger in such interpretations that the enterprise will turn into an

apologia for the deficiencies and ideological naïvety of the realist forms that suffrage fiction employed.

In fact, the suffrage novelists were well aware of the implications of formal experimentalism, and some did indeed write Modernist novels.[6] Their use of realist forms was a deliberate choice, grounded in what they presented as an accurate reading of reality, rather than a result of limited literary sophistication. The popular appeal and impact of Edwardian feminist realist writing make it the very antithesis of post-structuralist ideas of feminist literature. The aims of the suffragist writers were radically different from those of the formally experimental Modernists in that they wrote their work to be consumed by the mass. The comedies of ideas, dramatic fiction and novel-plays they produced had immediate communication in mind. Thus they had to be aware of a commercial audience as well as putting across the polemical contents. The Modernists, such as Eliot, Joyce, Pound and Woolf, could be less dependent financially from commercial publishers as they had the backing of private presses. They could remain relatively independent of the mass market validation process of "what sells, survives." The lack of a commercial audience, and withdrawal from the commercial literary marketplace, impinged on their work in many ways, one of which was, as Terry Eagleton has argued, a paradoxical illusion of aesthetic autonomy and an intensification of fetishism.[7] The commercial validation process undergone by suffrage fiction was the polar opposite.

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The market into which suffrage fictions were launched differed from that of the previous century in both size and potential. The watershed year of 1870, when Forster's Education Act was passed, brought elementary education as a right to every child, and by 1891 school fees were abolished.[8] The education reforms of successive late Victorian governments dramatically increased levels of literacy in England.[9] But it was the dramatic acceleration in population growth, coupled with mass literacy, that provided new potential for the publishing industry. In the nineteenth century alone, the British population had almost quadrupled.[10] The political implications of the veritable explosion in the number of literate people have been noted by John Carey who calls it the "revolution of the printed text": literacy, he maintains, is what

distinguishes the nineteenth-century "mob" from the twentieth-century "mass."[11]

According to Joseph McAleer, trends in publishing, already favourable by 1870, accelerated dramatically in the early twentieth century, with the demands of the new post-Education Act public.[12] From the mid-nineteenth century, a growing market for reading had been created by changes in the environment, such as improved lighting and long railway journeys. Technological innovations in paper manufacturing and printing, which reduced the price of reading material, supplied this demand. A new generation of innovative publishers like Alfred Harmsworth, who saw that a mass industry was coming into being, began to segment their products. The *Daily Mirror* was launched in 1903 as the first newspaper devoted exclusively to women's interests.[13] Fiction was produced aimed at specific audiences: detective stories, westerns, thrillers, adventure stories, historical fiction, social problem novels, children's stories and romantic fiction. The Harmsworth-style publishers D. C. Thompson and Mills & Boon attempted various genres before focusing on a specific one: for example, Mills & Boon published suffrage literature such as Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women* before turning to romantic fiction.

Romantic fiction, a rather loosely-defined mass cultural genre, was in full boom by the early twentieth century and more than any other genre was specifically associated with women—the bulk of its writers and readers being women. James Haslam, a working-class writer who surveyed Lancashire reading habits in 1906, observed: "Romance, romance, romance, is their monotonous cry. Romance served up in penny batches; romance that depends upon nonsensical scenes, shallow thoughts, spurious philosophy, and unreal life, for its popularity."[14] Lower-middle-class and working-class women were the particular, though not exclusive, markets to which "low-brow" fiction such as romances were "targeted"—the same audience for which the WWSL members (Women Writers Suffrage League) were writing with conative aims.

Romantic fiction provided variations on the "rags to riches" plot, with ubiquitous happy endings, often involving lower-middle or working-class protagonists.[15] Elinor Glyn, a best-selling romantic novelist, whose *Three Weeks* sold two million copies after publication in June 1907, defined romance as "a spiritual disguise created by the imagination with which to envelop material happenings and desires and thus bring them

into greater harmony with the soul."[16] The generic structure of romance is set in the protagonist's fulfilment of material security, social acceptance and inner fulfilment, through the "spiritual disguise" of a heterosexual relationship. This plot is commodified in the sense that repetitive variations of it had a stable number of consumers, and the variations were produced to meet those demands. Changes in the economies of publishing were leading to aggressive marketing of highly formulaic products.

Suffrage fiction, popularly known at the time as "Votes For Women" novels, mostly centred around a plot of new brave heroines who were breaking away from conventional modes of behaviour presented in a romantic narrative. The suffrage novelists re-wrote and re-shaped novels that traditionally dictated that romances should be the dominant desire of female characters, and marriage their ultimate fulfilment. The heroines of suffrage novels invariably fall in love but suffer conflicting emotions as they reject the idea of domestic happiness based on confinement in the private sphere. Therefore their love lacks the certainty and self-recognition that is the formula of romantic novels. In suffrage novels, it is work, often symbolized by the vote, rather than love, that allows self-definition, as in the vice-president of the WWSL, Dr Margaret Todd's *Growth, a Novel* (1907), and Lady Henry Somerset's *Under the Arch* (1906). At the close of each novel, there is tension between love and the vote. Whereas romances conclude with the protagonist's achievement of a secure existence through love, as in many of the novels of Mrs. Henry Wood and Ethel M. Dell, the suffrage narrative ends with the protagonist's achievement of a secure existence through the "vote," as in Elizabeth Robins's *The Convert* and Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (1911).[17] The system of values in suffrage novels places love and the vote in a binary opposition, along with the terms unfeminist/feminist, reactionary/progressive, naive/informed. Critics tend to accept and reproduce such criteria, perceiving the romantic plots in feminist novels either as regressive capitulation to patriarchal precepts, or as a sentimental substitute for the "real" political narrative. However, one might see the romantic plots not as a mere distraction from the polemicals but as an understanding of the fiction market on the part of the writers, as well as a characteristic feature of the group of writers who were steeped in the popular cultural language. In either case romance functioned as an important vehicle to get political messages across on a mass level.

There are, needless to say, obvious and crucial divergences between suffrage fiction and romantic fiction, just as there are differences within anti-suffrage fiction and pro-suffrage fiction, but an alternative perspective reveals more shared assumptions between them than seems possible at first glance. One could even entertain the idea that romantic novels and suffrage novels are one and the same phenomenon, historically and culturally, in that both are highly-specialized forms, arising as a manifestation of, and response to, the conditions of women in the early twentieth century.

Both genres address a female reader, and a specific class of reader; and this assumption of a common readership structures their forms in parallel ways. In both, female characters set the narrative events in motion, and there is a process of reader-identification governed by a female point of view. Thus interpellation of the reader as a subject through woman-centred narratives and identifications is crucial and identical. The figure most often offered in suffrage fiction as a trope of identification was the virtuous virgin soldier, as embodied by Joan of Arc.[18] This figure offers symbolic identification by constituting the female subject as an enabling and empowering source of agency against the patriarchal order.

Novels with anti-suffrage themes offer an unsexed virago figure of a suffragette as a foil in the romance plot in which the feminine protagonist finds fulfilment of her desires in a conventional heterosexual relationship. Common to all these sub-genres, the protagonist, as in Adrienne Mollwo's *A Fair Suffragette* (1909), is almost without exception, young, beautiful, and is in precarious material circumstances. The beginning of the narrative presents her in an unstable situation: she is frequently orphaned or without protection. Sixteen-year-old Evarne Stornway in Irene Miller's *Sekhet* (1911) is "possessed of an arresting personality as well as a handsome face and figure" and orphaned. In most novels the central protagonist becomes aware of her own destiny, and her ambition to occupy a place in the world, at the same time as she discovers the social injustices that face women, to whom the initial route open seems that of romance. As a textual system, the structure of a suffrage fiction is parallel to that of a romantic fiction: a young girl coming to occupy a place in society, albeit a more precarious one than she would ostensibly achieve through marriage, by the means of a paid profession, thus attaining material independence and inner fulfilment. The social and psychological significance of the narrative is identical, be

love or the vote the final end, although the contents of the narratives differ. In both it is the ending that provides an allegory. The difference in suffrage fiction is that it allows women's desire to be predicated on something other than romance.

In order for suffrage fiction to reach a wide audience, and remain intelligible, it had to use the form most familiar to the majority of readers and avoid working within a tradition that could not be appreciated by the philosophically or literarily uneducated. Suffrage fiction was affected by the market in this sense. Thus the novels were experimental and radical in content rather than in form. In an increasing consumer culture, the commodification of the narrative was demonstrated through the formula of mass textual production. Cicely Hamilton provides an insight into what it was like to write in these circumstances:

> My literary . . . ambitions had to reconcile themselves for the need for earning a living, . . . hence, for some years, the greater part of my output took the form of contributions to cheap periodicals. . . . Sensation was their keynote: stories of bandits, pirates, savages, and detectives, preferably youthful detectives. For these there was a fairly constant demand, as also for narratives abounding in love interest, and ending in a literary equivalent of the "close-up" embrace of the cinema. . . . Personally, however, I never attained to this power of mass production; one thriller at a time was all I could manage to grind out.[19]

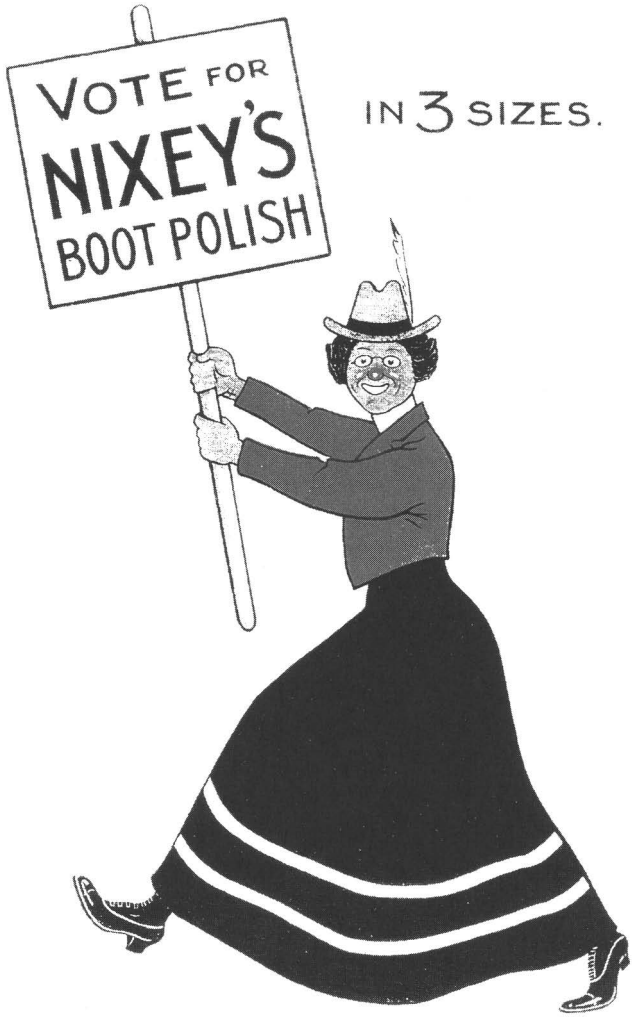
The merging of suffrage fiction and romantic fiction becomes more apparent in the former's marketing and recruiting techniques. Both suffrage publishers like the Woman's Press and popular publishers like Mills & Boon, established a year after the WWSL, adopted the policy of recruiting new women writers through advertisements on their covers. These advertisements highlighted the attraction for women of becoming cash earners without giving up the privacy of their place in their homes.

Not only were their methods identical, they show a subsumption of suffrage fiction to romance fiction. In other words, suffrage novels were not only marketed in the same way as romance novels, but marketed *as* romance novels. "The best Suffrage novel I have ever read," enthused Charlotte Despard, the president of the Women's Freedom League and the editor of *The Vote*, in her review of Constance Maud's *No Surrender* (1911). She quickly added, "But this story is not all suffrage. It is enlivened by a love episode."[20] The suffrage novel series published from 1913 and onwards provides another example. "Every Woman must read the 'Votes For Women' novels" was the catch-phrase that runs through

their advertisemen; also included was a statement by Annesley Kenealy, a committee member of the WWSL, and the author of the first novel in the series, *The Poodle Woman* (1913): "This series consists of strong, popular, and non-political love stories and industrial life dramas." The main caption in Methuen & Co.'s advertisement pamphlet for their "popular novels" series is: "Ask particularly for 'The Convert,' by Elizabeth Robins."[21] The advertisement continues: "Miss Robins . . . is giving her forthcoming story a strong feminist interest and most moving expositions of the limitations amidst which the sex, especially single women, have to exist that has yet been written. This will be Miss Robins' first *romance* since 'The Magnetic North.'"[22]

If the discourse of suffrage was affected by the commodification process and suffrage rhetoric used the language of advertising to further its cause, a reverse process was also at work. Many companies marketed their commodities in the language of the suffrage campaign. The frequent religious metaphors of suffragette rhetoric—WSPU's "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obediance to God" and "Truth Our Standard-Holy Our Cause," and frequent use of the crusade metaphor for the suffrage campaign—was appropriated by advertisers such as Burberrys who came up with "Burberrys—The ideal coat for pilgrimage." Selfridges appealed to the suffragettes by displaying purple, white and green colours in their windows along with the slogan, "Selfridges: The modern Woman's club store." Such marketing extended to small brands such as Nixey's boot polish.[23] The advertisements in suffrage magazines and the programmes of suffrage meetings tells us something about the sort of readership that they were expected to reach. Most were for soap, food, clothing, secretarial courses, acting classes, other suffrage magazines and suffrage literature; there were far fewer for lingerie, linen gowns, cosmetics, products for "glossy hair" or embroidery material—which accounted for the bulk of the advertisements in the anti-suffrage journals. Sometimes the advertisements ranged from typewriters to Dinghy punts and coals, depending on the editorial policy of the publication.[24] But a common trait that emerges despite various differences is that all suffrage literature was heavily dependent on commercial backing.

On the other hand, suffragism was also used as a means of sales promotion: "The Woman's Platform" pages in *The Standard* appealed to the "thinking woman" with the catch-phrase, "Every thinking woman and every chivalrous man will want to read, and to keep, 'Woman's Platform.'" The most frequent advertising ideas associated with suf-



If the suffrage rhetoric used the language of advertising to further its cause, a reverse process was also at work. Many companies marketed their commodities in the language of the suffrage campaign.

Advertising sheet, undated. John Johnson Collection, Suffragettes Box 4

fragism were "modern" and "intelligent"—the qualities which the advertisements suggest comes with the product. The language of suffragism and marketing were intermixed in this way.

The market of the commodity system is what, according to Fredric Jameson, makes "authentic" art possible. "Authentic" art, he argues, is "dependent for its existence on authentic collective life, on the vitality of the 'organic' social group in whatever form." Thus he maintains that the only authentic cultural production in late-capitalist society is that which can draw on the "collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life."[25] The suffragettes shared the "collective life" with unprecedented solidarity. Evelyn Sharp, a vice-president and founding member of the WWSL, said that the bond "with one's fellow suffragettes . . . [which] was only sometimes an intimate one, was nevertheless unbreakable."[26] There was a conscious attempt by suffrage writers to construct a political discourse. But from its beginning suffrage literature was commodified and based on repetition. It was market-driven: far from existing in a detached realm, it was produced at the centre of the market. Nevertheless suffrage fictions are not empty distractions of entertainment, but rather transformational work on the raw material of fundamental social anxieties, hopes, concerns and fantasies. Pierre Macherey has argued that texts are complete in their incompleteness: that texts are strategies, interventions, for encompassing and resolving certain questions that are put to them.[27] If one suspends normative criticism of suffrage fictions, one can see them not only as literary *texts* but also as historically situated socio-cultural *acts*. For the suffrage writers for whom writing was a form of a resolute political action, their texts were not only a means of describing the world or a way of expressing inner reality but also a way of taking up a position within it.

The ebbs and flows of women's literary production do not necessarily converge with those of canonical literary history. Attempts to appropriate the existing literary standards to women's writing, and to discover women's contribution to major literary movements such as Modernism, leave intact criteria which may exclude the more significant and fundamental points in women's literary history. This either silences women writers at an important stage in the development of women's writing or misrepresents what their writing was trying to achieve in a particular period.

The suffrage movement, arguably one of the most important phases in British women's history, engendered a shift in women's literary field.

The quantity and variety of what was written, as well as the self-image of those who were writing, make this an important period in women's writing. But suffrage writing was produced within many constraints. The language and style in which it was written had to be intelligible and popular to the mass audience that it was intended to reach, and ultimately to influence. In addition to the constraints of needing to work within accepted "social discourses" suffrage fiction had the constraint of the market-place. If suffrage fiction was to be a vehicle for political change, it had to respond to consumer demand. Suffrage fiction was not formally experimental but it was not, nonetheless, a misplaced and failed attempt at "truly" radical feminist writing. Rather, it can be understood as an authentic expression of a vital and challenging culture, driven by the twin engines of politics and consumerism.

Notes

I would like to thank Kate Flint and Mark Pottle for their helpful comments on this paper.

1. *Guardian*, 24 May 1905.

2. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1978), 236. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

3. Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land II*, 80.

4. In this article, "suffrage fiction" does not include novels that reflect the suffrage movement in oblique ways such as Marie Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger* (1913) or Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* (1919) but refers to the category of fiction produced with the aim of harnessing literary activity to political and social change. Many were written by the members of the Women Writers Suffrage League (1908–1919), whose members ranged from the "New Woman," like Sarah Grand (1854–1943) and Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), to "popular" writers such as Marie Belloc Lowndes (1868–1947) and Margaret Woods (1856–1945), and "experimental" writers such as May Sinclair (1863–1946). Others included the mystical poet Alice Meynell (1847–1922), bestselling author and playwright Beatrice Harraden (1864–1936), novelist and "society hostess" Violet Hunt (1866–1943), and Evelyn Sharp (1868–1955), a writer for the *Yellow Book* and a hunger-striking militant.

5. See Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women* (London: Virago, 1994), 7.

6. May Sinclair, who first employed the term "stream of consciousness" as a phrase relating to literary style in a review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pointed Roofs*, provides a case in point. She wrote twenty-four novels, some of which can be categorized as modernist, and some realist.

7. See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

8. The 1870 Act established in *principle* the right of every child to elementary education. In reality however there were not enough schools and attendance was only made compulsory by a further act in 1880.

9. According to Joseph McAleer, literacy in Britain was estimated at 98 per cent by 1900, though it should be noted that the criterion of literacy applied here was the ability to sign one's name. See Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 13–14.

10. See M. W. Flinn, *British Population Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

11. John Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 5.

12. McAleer, 7.

13. Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe (1865–1922) had started the *Evening News* in 1894 and went on to start the *Daily Mail* in 1896. In 1908 he became the chief proprietor of *The Times*.

14. James Haslam, *The Press and the People: An Estimate of Reading in Working-class Districts* (Manchester: City News Office, 1906), 15–16.

15. There were a fair number of novels and novelettes involving aristocratic and upper middle class heroines, providing, they offered "information" about how the upper classes lived.

16. Anthony Glyn, *Elinor Glyn* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), 341.

17. Mrs. Henry Wood was listed as the author most favoured by working-class men and women in Lady Bells's 1901 survey of Middlesborough, *At the Works*. Ethel M. Dell, who wrote the instant best-seller, *The Way of an Eagle* (1912) and *The Knaves of the Diamonds* (1913), was cited by *The Times* as "one of the most popular novelists in the English speaking world" in 1939.

18. Besides all the other women warriors in British and Celtic myths, why Joan of Arc should have gained the immense popularity that she did in the early twentieth century is a question that the scope of this paper will not allow. Before she was canonized in 1920, she was the patron saint of the WSPU and the icon of the suffrage movement. So popular was she with the suffragettes that in suffrage pageants there were feuds as to who would get the part. Not only was her image used by the suffragettes, but she became the topic of many books and articles by non-suffragist writers. See Douglas Murray, ed., *Jeanne d'Arc, Maid of Orleans, Deliverer of France, the Story of her Life, her Achievements, and her Death as Attested on Oath and Set Forth in the Original Documents* (1908); G. B. Shaw, *St .Joan* (1913); and V. Sackville-West, *Saint Joan of Arc* (1936).

19. Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant* (London: J. M Dent & Sons, 1935), 57–58.

20. *The Vote*, 9 December 1911.

22. The same pamphlet included introductory passages of twenty-five "popular" novels, all priced six shillings. Among the books are Ford Madox Ford's *An English Girl*, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and W. Pett Ridge's *Name of Garland*.

23. See the illustration. If the suffrage rhetoric used the language of advertising to further its cause, a reverse process was also at work. Many companies, both large and small, marketed their commodities in the language of the suffrage campaign. Advertising sheet, undated. John Johnson Collection, Suffragettes Box 4, Bodleian Library.

24. The differences between the suffrage magazines as revealed in the advertisements might be investigated further. For instance *Votes For Women*, a weekly magazine of the WSPU edited by Christabel Pankhurst, did not advertise other suffrage organizations' meetings, retaining its character as a party publication. Also the advertisements were mainly restricted to secretarial colleges and products such as fountain pens, typewriters, furniture, and sometimes hats. In contrast, the advertisements in the *Vote* were more varied, ranging from cosmetics and sartorial products, such as corsets, furs, underwear and shoes, to cooking and household goods. The articles were also aimed at raising consciousness and providing a wide range of information and detailed listings for the suffrage movement, not only promoting the WFL, but giving public comments from other leaders. This suggests a larger and more varied readership for the *Vote* than *Votes for Women*. The literary department of the *Vote* had a lending library, and also had a column called "On Our Library Table" where suffrage-related literature was reviewed and recommended.

25. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), 23–24.

26. Evelyn Sharp, *The Unfinished Adventure* (London: John Lane, 1933), 136.

27. See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).