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978-0-521-87651-3 - The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century

Lucy Delap

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

In 1912, a leading British Catholic priest used six consecutive sermons to warn his congregation against the dangers of 'Feminism'. Respectable Catholic suffragists were incensed at the apparent slur on their character. In response, the priest explained that he was referring not to suffrage politics, but to a new grouping, those 'wicked, yea damned women who have created and written for "The Freewoman", . . . the paper whose object is to drag the souls of women down to hell'.<sup>1</sup> *The Freewoman's* editor, Dora Marsden, reported the comments with delight to a friend in America, where *The Freewoman* – the first British or American journal to describe itself as 'feminist' – was held to represent 'the doctrines not of feminism but of anarchy, a philosophy particularly repugnant to the legitimate feminist'.<sup>2</sup> From the early years of the twentieth century, when 'feminism' was just becoming current in political argument, through the challenges of suffrage, the growing prominence of modernist politics and culture, to the 'gender quake' of the war and its aftermath, there was an intense Anglo-American struggle going on over the scope and content of 'feminism'. The group of 'ultra-feminists' associated with *The Freewoman* and the political avant-garde acted as a high-profile 'lightning rod' for the controversy.

Edwardian commentators were clear that feminism was no unified entity, but should be divided into competing groups. A survey of 'modern feminism' produced in 1914 by a British-born feminist living in the United States, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, used the metaphor of an army to delineate the main body of parliamentary suffragists, the rear of municipal suffragists, a vanguard of 'advanced feminists', and an ultra-radical group of 'skirmishers'. This study is concerned with delineating the political argument, discourse and intellectual influences drawn upon by these last two groups, whose members referred to themselves as the feminist 'vanguard', 'advanced feminists', or 'modern feminists'. I examine the languages, the conceptual resources, the political argument available to feminists, gaining a

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sense not only of what they said, but how it was possible for them to say it, and the intellectual reception feminism had.

The term ‘feminism’ was relatively new to Edwardians.<sup>3</sup> It had been used in some late nineteenth-century British texts, but without a clear meaning or programme attached to it, and even the word was in flux. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence* (1904), for example, experimented with ‘feminist’, ‘feministic’ and ‘feminist’ to describe the women’s movement.<sup>4</sup> Before 1911, ‘feminism’ had been generally understood to be the French term for the women’s movement, and it signified a broader and less aggressive movement than the notorious British suffragists. As *The Times* put it, feminism was a more ‘charmingly feminine thing’ than English suffragism, though with essentially the same aims.<sup>5</sup> However, it quickly came to have an alternative, yet highly contested, meaning, first in Britain and subsequently in the United States. By 1908, ‘feminism’ was already taking on some avant-garde connotations, being used by ‘advanced’ women such as the writer Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) in her description of the parasitism of women. In July 1911, the London ‘radical-right’ periodical the *Eye-Witness* referred to ‘the “feminist” movement – as it is very absurdly called’. For many British and American Edwardians, ‘feminism’ was used as a ‘black-box’ term, able to stand in for a number of meanings. In popular (and denigratory) usage it represented the ‘sex war’, or modern woman’s new-found unwillingness to bear children. For others, it was indistinguishable from suffragism, and they greatly resented avant-garde usurpation of the term to describe other, more controversial positions. One concerned suffragist noted in the *New York Times*, ‘It sometimes happens that the good repute of a word, like that of an individual, is irreparably injured through the malicious innuendo of the evil-minded. Is this to be the fate of the word “feminism”?’<sup>6</sup>

Over the first ten years of the twentieth century, feminism came to occupy a similar space to the idea of the ‘new woman’ of the 1890s, signifying a radical, subversive grouping closely associated with the avant-garde and radical movements that flourished before World War One. It connoted rupture, and was emblematic of the aggressively new century that was so widely understood as a millennial turning-point. ‘Feminism is a movement born of a cubist and futurist age of extremes’, declared the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage in the United States.<sup>7</sup> The reach of this movement was never great. Self-consciously elitist, the ‘vanguard’ of feminism never stretched beyond a few metropolitan centres in the United States. In Britain, the sense of belonging to an ‘avant-garde movement’ was less clearly formulated than

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in the United States; there were fewer physical spaces identified with avant-garde groupings, and less consciousness of this as an identity. However, Britain was perhaps more open to the establishment of provincial 'avant-gardes'.<sup>8</sup> Beatrice Hale was doubtful as to whether feminists could be grouped together at all; she noted that 'Individual journalists in Paris, London, and New York, too isolated to form a group, are winning a brief celebrity by exploiting their own conceptions of life under the guise of Feminism'.<sup>9</sup> Others noted the sympathetic relations between 'corresponding small groups' of 'extreme and radical' feminists in every country.<sup>10</sup> It will be my argument that the extensive, frequently transatlantic, interaction between individuals and groups did constitute an intellectual formation, a feminist network that was highly influential in defining and shaping the politics of feminism for the entire twentieth century. In this study, this group will be contrasted with other developments within feminism; the latter groupings are (reluctantly) termed 'the women's movement' or 'moderate/mainstream feminism'. But this should not indicate that they were somehow 'less radical' than the 'avant-garde feminists' – the political valency of terms such as 'radical' are so indeterminate in this context that they are simply not useful. Nor can a 'left/right' political spectrum adequately convey the complexities of affiliation within Edwardian feminism.

This book traces a conversation that occurred within and between two groups – the 'advanced' feminists of Britain and the United States, chiefly concentrated in the metropolitan centres (London, Chicago, New York).<sup>11</sup> Historians have tended to explore these two groups separately, and this has meant that important avenues of intellectual exchange have not received adequate attention. Recent research has begun to uncover the enormous importance of transatlantic exchange in the fields of social policy, political philosophy, and suffragism.<sup>12</sup> This book argues that in its turn, feminism was not only an idiosyncratic, distinctive development in each location, but also a shared conversation that spanned the Atlantic and resulted in a firmly Anglo-American intellectual tradition. This focus on interaction should not imply that the two national contexts were identical or even similar; in some instances, the conversation diverged, or faltered and broke down. Two distinct intellectual contexts situated British or American feminist political arguments, leading occasionally to conflict over, or lack of interest in, developments in each country. But in the main, 'advanced' feminists on each side of the Atlantic read each other's work, commented on it, corresponded, and understood their intellectual circle to be a transnational one.

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The characterisation of Edwardian feminism as ‘avant-garde’ indicates the self-consciousness of this group of being ‘advanced’ and ‘ultra-modern’, as well as the sense in which these feminists formulated issues that have been turned to again and again throughout twentieth-century feminism. Their transnational conversation included an important literary and creative element; this study builds on the histories already available of what is often seen as the ‘core’ of avant-garde activity, within the creative arts.<sup>13</sup> While there may, from a literary perspective, be some apparent omissions in the people and ideas discussed in this book, the history of ideas approach which informs it, allied to its transatlantic perspective, can lead to a distinctive cast of historical actors, and some unexpected areas or investigation. This study proposes an extension of the remit of ‘avant-garde’ to include a more political understanding of its scope. I draw on an older, mid-nineteenth-century use of ‘avant-garde’ to describe a certain kind of revolutionary political radicalism.<sup>14</sup> ‘Avant-garde’, or, as Edwardians often termed it, ‘vanguard’, indicates a discourse or social imaginary within feminism, rather than a movement. It can be understood as a textual space, delineated by the shared discourses circulating within feminist periodicals and essays, rather than any kind of tightly drawn circle or site. Physical and social spaces – Greenwich Village restaurants and clubs, the London international suffrage shop, Clarion cycling outings, the Eustace Miles restaurant in Chandos Street, lectures in the Chandos Hall – were important, but ‘advanced feminist’ was an identity that could be selectively appropriated outside of these spaces. Like the ‘new woman’, ‘feminism’ was closely bound up with its representation in print – to be a feminist was very centrally a reading experience. Periodicals formed the site in which ‘feminism’ was most commonly enunciated and observed, and are thus a key source for this study.<sup>15</sup>

The history of Anglo-American feminism is, as Nancy Cott notes, littered with prefixes of ‘feminism’, some of which are of dubious analytic clarity.<sup>16</sup> ‘Avant-garde feminism’ is a heuristic device rather than a precise political affiliation. It loosely designates the interests of a number of thinkers who regarded themselves (in some contexts) as feminists. It certainly does not indicate that there was no disagreement within this grouping, which was marked by splenetic controversy. Without implying a coherent or conscious political grouping, ‘avant-garde’ usefully captures some characteristic features of feminist discourse: the idealisation of originality, rejection of forebears and sense of rupture with the past, the denial of essences and eternal truths, anti-conventionality, artistic experimentalism and so on. For the thinkers and activists included in this

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'avant-garde' realm, the term 'feminist' needed no prefix to indicate these concerns. By itself, 'feminist' had come to indicate an engagement with 'modern' concerns of the psyche, individuality and sexuality.<sup>17</sup> The 'avant-garde' prefix offers clarity, however, since 'feminist' has become an identity unhelpfully applied across the board to more or less any woman who entered public life. Perhaps as a result, recent feminist theory has identified an urgent need to reconceptualise the categories by which the history of feminism has been understood.<sup>18</sup> This study contributes to this critical academic undertaking: it demonstrates the many and varied strands of political and cultural thought in (what is commonly but simplistically designated) the 'first-wave' period of feminism.

Historians have provided a number of different narratives of 'feminisms' of the twentieth century. For some, feminism represented a development from moderate social reform or equality demands to a more radical suffrage agenda, sometimes described as a move from the 'social feminism' of the moral reform movements to the 'hard-core feminism' of suffragists.<sup>19</sup> Others have challenged the moderate/radical division that places suffrage demands as the most radical position. Certainly, many forms of 'radicalism', including that of avant-garde feminists, are obscured by this categorisation.

Overall, the historiography of twentieth-century feminism has failed to represent all aspects of feminist affiliation. Historians have tended to read into feminism past and present a collectivist and egalitarian orientation. They have also assumed that the main focus of Edwardian feminist politics was the acquisition of the vote. My reading of avant-garde feminism upsets these assumptions, and uncovers a distinctively individualist and elitist strand within feminism. This strand of feminism was not committed to attaining the vote, nor were avant-garde feminists' ideas of emancipation focused on the state and women's inclusion within the state. The direction of avant-garde political argument strongly challenged the politics associated with more conventional aspects of the women's movement, criticising what have been assumed to be mainstays of suffrage feminism – pro-statism, theories of rights, and equality. This suggests the need for a re-evaluation of the political discourses of Edwardian feminism. Historians have rightly pointed to the radicalism and breadth of the suffrage affiliation for Edwardians. Suffragists aimed to liberate women for wider social service and to implement social, emotional and sexual transformations. Despite this, it remains anachronistic to treat suffrage as coterminous with feminism. This tense and formative period can no longer be portrayed as one of united 'liberal-suffrage' politics, and must be seen as a time of division and conflict between ideas of women's emancipation.

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## EDWARDIAN SUFFRAGISM

The intellectual milieu of the avant-garde feminists was surprisingly distinct from that of the suffragists, though these categories can only clumsily represent the actual fluidity of affiliations held by individuals. At first glance, it is difficult to reconcile the ‘vanguard feminist’ stance with the predominantly pro-state, pragmatic focus of Edwardian suffrage-feminists. Politically, the avant-garde rejected state institutions, based on the moral-individualist grounds of the corruption of personality and the individual will. The focus of political argument was therefore on the individual, and not the group. In her 1913 book *The Future of the Women’s Movement*, Helena Swanwick (an active British suffragist, as well as a *Freewoman* reader and supporter) mocked the idea that ‘women are one in need, capacity and character, and that this eternal feminine has been once and for all dissected, understood and catalogued, and that all variations are merely caprice . . . women want as many different things as there are women’.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, many suffragists tended to appeal to unity amongst women, arguing against the saliency of class amongst women on the basis of their shared political exclusion.<sup>21</sup> While feminists stressed individuality, suffragists looked for sisterhood and unity.

The historian Jonathan Rose defines the British Edwardian period as characterised by a search for harmony, synthesis and unity. He charts this ‘habit of mind’ in many fields – attempts to reconcile the classes, religion and science, work and leisure, childhood and adulthood. The Edwardian women’s movement in some senses exemplifies this move to reconciliation; many believed that feminism, and in particular the suffrage question, united women. In contrast, the feminist avant-garde consciously opposed this trend, emphasising the divisions between women, the singularity and uniqueness of each. According to Dora Marsden, ‘there is no essential virtue in unity, especially amongst women. We are becoming more convinced that women will have to move apart the better to come together in a wide understanding.’<sup>22</sup> Even more subversively, ‘vanguard’ feminists sought to distance themselves from suffrage groups. The suffragists’ ideals of sisterhood and solidarity were rejected, and replaced by a new aim – the self-liberation of elites, through the cultivation of the will and personality. This was motivated by the desire to subvert the overarching category of ‘woman’, about whose sexual instincts or political interests so many generalisations were made. The concept of ‘the feminine’ was fragmented through the establishment of an ‘ethnographic’ hierarchy of *types* of women.<sup>23</sup>

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The 'typology' of women functioned in terms of their psychological make-up rather than external constraints such as legal and political status. Avant-garde feminists wrote of the women of 'the cold temperament', or the sexual characteristics of 'northern women', the 'woman of large sexual appetite', 'the intellectual woman', 'the spinster'.<sup>24</sup> The British writer Rebecca West wrote for an American periodical of the 'failed' types of women; 'the schoolmistress' or 'the woman without fortitude'.<sup>25</sup> West identified as an 'advanced' feminist, socialist and literary critic, and was strongly shaped by her early experiences with the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and as *The Freewoman's* assistant editor. This interest in the internal psychological features of women represents what I term an 'introspective turn' in feminism, a desire to seek liberation not through 'externals', such as rights granted by men, but through internal transformation of one's psyche and sexual being. Edwardian feminists, investigating not 'what women may acquire, but what they may become', sought to delineate those women who might form the vanguard of feminism through their possession of 'personality', and their ability to listen to and express their inner voice.

This introspective turn was not limited to avant-garde feminists, but was a more widespread feature of the Edwardian women's movement. Even those sceptical about the feminist 'vanguard' believed that 'the mental revolution' of feminism was 'infinitely the more important' of its effects.<sup>26</sup> Where the 'new woman' had sought experience and knowledge of life, feminists critically gazed inward at the psychological and sexual norms within which women and men established what we might now call gender. Feminists joined a trend which, according to historians, was a broad cultural feature of American life, and which this study suggests was also prominent in British political argument, in their intense interest in personality, as against moral character, political rights or values of equality.<sup>27</sup> A characteristic definition comes from an American writer Ellen Glasgow, for whom feminism was 'a revolt from pretence of being – it is, at its best and worst, a struggle for the liberation of personality'.<sup>28</sup> Both suffragists and 'advanced feminists' shared an interest in women's psychological transformation, often expressed in terms of moral character by suffragists, and in terms of will and personality amongst avant-garde feminists. It was widely accepted that ability to achieve female emancipation depended on an *individual's* will or character, that which historian Christine Stansell has called a 'willed equality'.<sup>29</sup>

The avant-garde feminist shift towards individualism explored in this study must be historically located within the framework of this existing

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interest in character, while also influenced by the contemporary rise of egoist and Nietzschean thought. This study situates feminist affiliations to versions of individualism, and discusses why this has been particularly hard to read as compatible with feminism. I suggest that avant-garde feminists were not isolated nor 'ahead of their time' in their individualist interests. Personal 'greatness', emancipation of and through elites, and even 'superwomen' were widely debated within feminist circles, though these concerns have been largely eclipsed from the narratives of feminism in the twentieth century.

The 'introspective turn' cannot be understood without the contextualisation provided by another area of change and experimentation in 1912, the shift to a new era in the arts, an era of 'wilful modernism'. Virginia Woolf had famously considered that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed'.<sup>30</sup> Yet the term 'modernism', or even 'early modernism' implies a more coherent movement than was actually the case in either Britain or the United States. The American 'modernist' commentator and journalist Floyd Dell described an ad hoc coalition of experimentalist groups, mostly in New York and Chicago. Their work spanned creative arts and lifestyle iconoclasm, and their associated politics ranged from elitist to anarchist. Historians have recently begun to understand 'modernism' as a broad range, rather than a collection of texts produced by artistic elites. It can be understood as a cultural imaginary that spanned 'high' and 'low' moderns, from Ezra Pound to H. G. Wells, using the techniques of 'mass market' print culture to construct new 'counter-public spheres'.<sup>31</sup> It was only later that 'modernism' became understood as a reactive cultural formation against the development of mass media and society (though these concerns did exist in pre-war 'advanced' circles). My reading of the ideas of the feminist avant-garde contributes to this historical project of reading 'high' and 'low' modernisms as a shared discourse, speaking to a shared audience. Texts of the feminist avant-garde such as *The Freewoman*, *The Masses* and the *Little Review* subvert the distinction between high and low modernisms, in their engagement with market techniques, their free-ranging use of eclectic intellectual resources, and their attempts to bring 'modernist' political arguments to mass audiences.

A recent important book by Elizabeth Francis has traced the tense yet ongoing relationship between feminism and modernism between 1910 and 1930. Francis situates feminism as occupying an ironic, paradoxical position in relation to modernism and modernity. Femininity itself seemed to be the 'other' of modernism, associated with Victorian sentimentality.<sup>32</sup> And yet,

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the modern woman has been in some senses not a threat but a vehicle or, as Francis puts it, a symbolic substitute for modernity. Feminism has been enormously attractive to modernist writers as a means of conveying a critique of feminine characteristics; for feminists, modernists provided them with an idiom to indicate their rejection of tradition, and subversion of bourgeois respectability. Rather than adding to the already substantial literature that examines the troubled inter-relation of the two, this study examines the political argument and social thought that grew out of their interaction in the first two decades of the twentieth century. While drawing on the literature of feminist modernisms, I aim to displace ‘modernism’ as the prime frame in which to understand feminist political argument, and situate feminism in a far wider intellectual field.

## HISTORIES AND NARRATIVES OF FEMINISM

American and British feminism has been historically located within a liberal, free thinking and radical tradition, with John Stuart Mill as a key intellectual forebear. Edwardian feminist political ideas in Britain, and to some extent in the United States, are commonly assumed to have been drawn chiefly from his work, and to have centred on claims for political rights.<sup>33</sup> As Brian Harrison has argued,

Edwardian suffragists . . . were too preoccupied with campaigning for the vote to spend much time on sketching out the shape of the new society, or on doing more than expose particular abuses and build up a following for the programme that J. S. Mill had laid down half a century before.<sup>34</sup>

However, Carrie Chapman Catt, the American suffrage leader, had in 1911 described Mill’s work as unfamiliar and unavailable to activist women.<sup>35</sup> In Britain, Dora Marsden of *The Freewoman* found Mill had little to offer: ‘The position occupied by the question is wholly different from that which it occupied at the time it was championed by men like John Stuart Mill’.<sup>36</sup> My reading highlights some alternative political commitments found among Anglo-American Edwardian feminist thinkers, specifically an individualistic and voluntaristic belief in self-development, conveyed through the idea of ‘expressing one’s will’ or ‘developing personality’. This goal was regarded as more significant, and more radical, than the attainment of liberal rights and freedoms.

This brief crystallisation of a strand of feminism has been difficult for historians to situate within narratives of feminist history. The ideas of

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'advanced feminism' have been read as part of a broader narrative of twentieth-century feminism at the expense of understanding their place within the contemporary intellectual milieu. This has meant that historians have simply labelled the 'feminist avant-garde' as 'eclectic', being unable to recognise it as formed by some distinctive elements of early twentieth-century political thought. Some commentators have focused on what seems to twenty-first-century readers to be the most explicitly controversial feature of the feminist avant-garde – their discussions of sex – and have marginalised their political argument, or read feminists as 'forebears' of 1970s feminists.<sup>37</sup> Others have assumed that the critical attitude towards capitalism expressed by avant-garde feminists identifies them predominantly as socialists. Many were indeed socialists, but this does not fully capture their political argument, which also included some unfamiliar or unexpected elements. Anti-Semitism, elitism, neo-medievalism, and 'the superwoman', for example, are important components of a more historically sensitive and diverse history of Anglo-American feminism.

These allegiances do not resonate with later conceptions of feminist thought; indeed, many would now be judged profoundly anti-feminist. The attention given in this study to different perspectives within feminism – particularly the individualist – serves to problematise the distinction between 'feminist' and 'anti-feminist', suggesting significant overlaps and common intellectual backgrounds between these two 'opposed' positions in the Edwardian period. A far richer, and more politically ambiguous, intellectual milieu, spanning the transnational interactions that shaped 'feminism', must be provided to narrate the origins of modern feminism.

Writing transnational history is a stimulating means of shedding new light on some old debates; some figures that appear marginal in one national context can seem very important as transmitters of ideas or practices between countries. Some voices that were derided as extremist in one country were unexpectedly listened to with great attention in another. Some figures that left few historical marks in their own country emerge as important interlocutors in another. Transnationality also offers challenges – the complexity of holding together more than one narrative of events, governments, etc. can make for a dense read. I have approached this problem of the two contexts by offering an account organised by themes rather than a chronological narrative. It is ideas that are given a history in this study – the idea of government by elites, for example, or of the individual as the key component in political argument. Each chapter explores a theme, aiming therefore to link feminism to a broad context of