

**A Critical Review of María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed. 2019.  
*Remaking the Literary Canon in English: Women Writers, 1880-1920*. Granada: Comares. 128 pp. ISBN: 978-84-9045-748-1**

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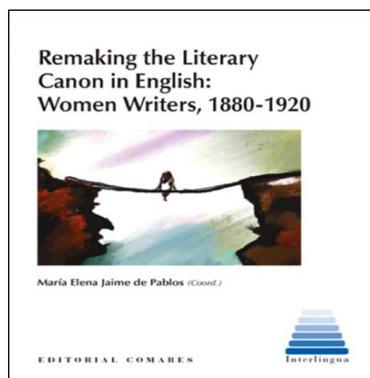
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In the midst of ever-growing debates calling for a revision of the Literary Canon in English, it is vital to question and engage with what has been traditionally tackled, and what still lies at the margins. By recovering voices from oblivion, *Remaking the Literary Canon in English: Women Writers, 1880-1920*, edited by María Elena Jaime de Pablos, attempts to reclaim *exocanonical*<sup>1</sup> women writers whose works span between 1880 and 1920. The end of the Victorian period and the arrival of the New Woman movement can be seen to mark a transition to a new epoch that resonates with contemporary concerns, though it was still an era in which women were economically dependent on men, and even socially punished if they “step[ed] too far outside [their] accepted gender role”

<sup>1</sup> *Exocanonical* is a term first coined in Spanish by Daniel Escandell (2017) to refer to those authors and works traditionally placed outside the literary canon.

(Birch 2019, 352). *Remaking the Literary Canon* aims to reassess a time both challenging and prolific for women writers, who started to instigate debates about their place in society, the concepts of femininity and masculinity, their right to be independent, their intellectual capability to produce and be in charge of their literary and artistic production, and the necessity to construct an identity for themselves free from any patriarchal and imperial ideologies. The modernity of the book, therefore, lies on its engagement with women writers, their gendered and colonial experiences, and the ways in which their writings attest to new ways of apprehending the world, resulting in literary and philosophical enquiry and experimentation that has, ironically, often been inherited and made acceptable by male writers inside the Canon.

Seeking to vindicate as well the remarkable works and lives of neglected Irish writers, together with the reasons for their fall into oblivion, the first four essays discuss women that made revolutionary examinations into science, literature, politics, religion, and female desire. The first contribution, by María Elena Jaime de Pablos, reclaims the figure of Emily Lawless, whose garden diaries held a very modern idea of combining scientific and literary thought in the search for knowledge from what can be now deemed an ecofeminist perspective. In the second article, Mary Pierse discusses how Rosamond Jacob's novel *Callaghan* (1920) touches on religion, gender, marriage, class and nationality, reflecting on notions held by its author. Pierse highlights Jacob's contribution in creating a new fictional heroine in Frances Morris that is even more transgressive than the heroines cited in L.A.M. Priestley's *The Feminine in Fiction* (1918), a work that gathered the dynamism of heroines that were modelled after the New Woman Movement. Marriage and gender are also central themes in Edith OE. Somerville and Martin Ross's *The Real Charlotte* (1894). By examining the manuscript for the first time, Julie Anne Stevens finds further clues about the inspiration the authors took from a real like woman, Mrs. Frank Leslie, and her international marriage to William Charles Kingsbury Wilde. Their fictional heroine, Charlotte Mullen, matches Leslie's "story of re-inventing herself" (33), acting on her passion and becoming a self-made business woman. Stevens most extraordinarily dwells on the power dynamics of middle-age female desire, which further connects *The Real Charlotte* with the New Woman mentality, as it asserted women's right to sexuality (Cruea 2005). In line with the involvement of Irish women writers on political issues, María Amor Barros del Río intends to make visible the voice of Julia M. Crottie and her experience with The Great Famine in "Julia M. Crottie's *Neighbours: A Critical Portrayal of Rural Ireland and Migration*." Barros del Río delves into the peculiarities of Crottie's writing, and how the author captures in her fiction an insider-outsider perspective that is complicated by being herself a

woman that defied a “gendered system where women were subject to a rigid and patriarchal scheme within the limits of the farm and the household” (46), and which was based on her own experience as a migrant.

Equally surprising is the work of Dorothy Richardson, whom Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka recognises as the “mother of modernism” (51) in her essay “Dorothy Richardson, Mother of Modernism: From the New Woman Reform Movement to the Modernist Revolution.” In her heroine Miriam Henderson, we find the first example of the *stream of consciousness* method, as well as the archetype of the *flanêuse* (57), the urban female wanderer that was left out by Walter Benjamin. Her writings, setting out a patten for modernist fiction due to its unprecedented use of punctuation, rhythm, and plot, along with its radical feminism and strangeness, might have played a decisive part on its dismissal. It seems particularly striking how Richardson has been silenced after having direct influence on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s novels. What is more, Richardson’s recovery shows how women writers and their gendered experience were integral to the conception of Modernist fiction. As Bonnie Kime Scott maintains, those who insist that Modernism first appeared around 1910-40 are “missing an important transition, 1880-1910” in which women’s entry into mass culture played a pivotal role (2007, 12-13). In a similar way, Miriam Borham Puyal highlights in “Quixotic Pioneers: Portraits of Sentient and Intellectual Women in Mary Hays’ Work” how Mary Hays’ heroine in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) expresses her own “radical views on education, reading, and female creativity, as well as a deep reflection on women’s sexuality and how they must experience it in the midst of a repressive patriarchal society” (65). Through her writing, Hays changes “the needle for the pen” and gives voice to her sexual and existential thoughts and desires, which were traditionally reserved for men, opening the way for subsequent women writers who would inherit her portraits of radically modern women.

In “Art and Autonomy: The Female Writer in Florence Wilford’s *Nigel Bartram’s Ideal*,” Katherine Mansfield approaches Florence Wilford’s Marion Hilliard as a ground-breaking female figure in conflict with her artistic ambitions and the social expectations of middle-class women, particularly the idea of femininity that her husband imposes on her. Mansfield puts forward how “unlike her New Woman counterparts (and Wilford herself), Marion succeeds in harmonising her two identities” (83). Another issue that Mansfield remarks about Wilford’s novel is the focus on Marion’s body. As she puts it, “the focus on Marion’s body implies that it is only through a disassociation from external social prejudices and attention paid to her authentic desires that she will be able to recognise the possibility of individual agency” (79). This idea of disassociation

and its implications in the gendered experience of women is taken to its heights by Margarita Estévez-Saá in her essay “Uses and Functions of the Trope of the Ghost in Women’s Short Stories: From Mary Shelley to Elizabeth Bowen.” Tracing the origins of this phenomenon, Estévez-Saá argues that it is with the popularisation of Gothic literature that women writers started to use this trope to denounce these concerns and to make use of “the disruptive and subversive potential of ghosts and ghost stories” (90). Moreover, Estévez-Saá dwells on the liminal position associated with the condition of women, and the use of ghosts as literary mechanisms to call attention to their position at the threshold and their disassociation from social and cultural impositions.

In the second to last contribution, Maria Micaela Coppola discusses Katherine Mansfield’s approach to the concept of empathy in her short stories, an empathy that is more of a feeling *with* than a feeling *for*. This is worth being differentiated, for as Coppola argues, Mansfield’s desire to be “a child of the sun” (102) expresses her intention to know herself and be all that she might be capable to become. Empathy and writing become the realm of knowledge as well as possibility—an experimentation that transforms her as an individual and frees her from the patriarchal voices that intend to limit her story as a woman. Finally, in the last essay of the collection, Jorge Diego Sánchez and Antonia Navarro Tejero illustrate how Toru Dutt and Rokeya Hossain constitute two different ways of being anti-nationalist. As they put it, Dutt’s poetry offers an approach that combines her experiences in Britain and India in a way that pioneeringly “rejects a single cultural/national label, . . . opposes the imposition and the orientalist vision of the British Empire over India and . . . is able to recognise the systems of cultural and economic difference that operate in India and that appal her” (110). In that respect, it can be said that her liminal position as a migrant and colonised woman provides her with a privileged standpoint in which she is able to discern the two systems. Hossain, on the other hand, stands as a figure whose feminist defence of Muslim women lead her to challenge traditional Islamic interpretations, calling for a joint solidarity of women of all religions to overthrow British rule. As Ellen Brinks observes about Anglophone Indian women writers between 1870 and 1920, these women present a paradigm in which not only they cease to be objects of Western culture, but also arise as highly engaged and critical “wielders of discourse themselves” (2016, 5).

In the same way that Dorothy Richardson’s production is educative of how the Woman Question and the gendered experience transformed fiction by making it experimental in its search for a new language, Diego Sánchez and Navarro Tejero demonstrate how literary inheritance is also a product of women writers during colonial times who held anti-imperialist perspectives. Dutt’s assertion that they “like to read novels [...] because novels are true, and histories are

false” (Das, 1921, as cited in Diego Sánchez and Navarro Tejero 2019, 112) resonates with the whole book. Using their writings as a beacon of knowledge and freedom, all of the discussed women writers contribute one way or another “to a renewal of language, identity and history” (113). Thus, *Remaking the Literary Canon* is concerned with calling attention to the fabricated nature of history and the Canon whilst highlighting the relevance of women writers whose *liminal vantage-point* played a crucial role in the literary developments occurring around 1880 and 1920. Each essay succeeds in illustrating how “writing about women’s writing, then, is an unfinished disciplinary, sociological, and political project, as well as a literary and historical one” (Looser 2012, 221). It is in this vein that these essays set out to cover the lives and works of Irish, British and Indian writers whose contributions were shockingly overlooked, and whose diverse interests and achievements constitute a compelling and decisive learning journey for 21<sup>st</sup> century readers.

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