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Review of Celia Marshik, British Modernism and Censorship

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be much left to say about British imperialism that hasn't already been said, Kucich has something new to offer a scholarly audience.

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Modernism & Censorship

Celia Marshik. *British Modernism and Censorship*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xii + 257 pp. $85.00

WITH THIS BOOK, Celia Marshik makes a significant contribution to the growing critical literature on the interrelations between censorship and sexual representation in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century British literature. Shifting focus from the obscenity trials discussed in books such as Edward de Grazia's *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (1993) and Adam Parkes's *Modernism and the Theatre of Censorship* (1996), Marshik attends not only to the impact of official government censorship but also to the effects of social purity groups such as the National Vigilance Association and press campaigns such as William T. Stead's sensationalistic (and at least partly fraudulent) investigation in 1885 of London's underground trade in girls and young women. Presenting a more thickly described moral climate than studies that focus on direct confrontations between literature and the law, Marshik is able to demonstrate the frequently subtle entanglements of censorship, self-censorship, and literary production in the work of a diverse range of representative authors—not only celebrated targets of official repression such as James Joyce and George Bernard Shaw, but also writers whose work avoided prosecution such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, and Jean Rhys.

As this brief overview of the book indicates, Marshik's account of "modernism" is wide-ranging, comprehending, at opposite ends of the temporal scale, an important precursor—Rossetti—and Jean Rhys, an author who, in the 1930s at least, was commonly regarded as representing the fag-end of an era of formal and narrative boundary pushing. The breadth of Marshik's historical purview allows her both to illustrate signal continuities in the sexual representation of British literature and to elaborate an arc of cultural transformation that moves from the shocked reception of Rossetti's "fleshly" poetry, through the public scandal—but critical success—of *Ulysses*, to the "tolerance indistinguishable from neglect" that was accorded Rhys's novels of the London demimonde. Marshik's point about changing mores is nicely

illustrated by her quotation from a review of Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) that "if Miss Rhys had written this book in the 'nineties, she would be a famous writer at this moment. Her subject is less of a novelty now, and a post-Joyce world is no longer shockable."

The same reviewer also praised Rhys's "brilliant" "treatment" of her subject, "but speculated that Rhys's style derived from that of Ernest Hemingway." The quotations, both of which point up the putative belatedness of Rhys's project, suggest a connection between innovations in treatment and subject, or form and content. But for the most part this connection is hinted at rather than fully elaborated; symptomatically, the quotations about treatment and subject from the Rhys review are placed alongside one another rather than meaningfully related. Marshik provides a deft account of the continuities and changes in sexual topoi from the 1870s to the 1930s; most notably, she traces recurrences and modifications in the work of her five chosen authors of the topos of prostitution—often the hallmark, as she demonstrates, of sexually daring material. But when it comes to the formal specificities of this literature and how these might be connected to daring content, Marshik is less sure and her argument less expansive.

The uncertainty with regard to issues of literary form is collateral with the lack of a strong account of what *modernism* means. While the vexed issue of exactly what constitutes literary modernism has of course been ventilated endlessly in innumerable other scholarly contexts, it is nevertheless rather surprising that the book does not include any framing discussion of the characteristics of the modernist work. Marshik makes some interesting claims about how one of the dominant features of the writing that she examines, irony, is not infrequently a reaction to censorship and social purity. She proposes that, as a consequence, "high modernism is polemical and didactic [about sexual morality] in ways that seem at odds with traditional understandings of modernism as primarily an aesthetic movement." But the kind of witty irony leveled against censors and social purity movements that Marshik identifies in Shaw and Rhys does not seem that qualitatively different from the kind of social satire to be found in, say, Dickens (though the target is, of course). And Marshik's claim that "modernism … owes many of its trademark aesthetic qualities—such as self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and indirection—to censorship" goes largely undemonstrated. The lack of rigor with regard to the definition of modernism is particularly evident in the chapter on Shaw. While Shaw was certainly an icon of modernity for many of his contemporaries, his sta-

tus as a modernist artist is less certain; and Marshik's argument that he exemplifies a "modernist position as alienated from society" that "developed out of his experience of censorship" does little to demonstrate in what ways his *texts* might be understood as exemplars of formal experimentation.

The chief conceptual tool with which Marshik develops her study is "the censorship dialectic." Marshik uses this term in the first instance to indicate that censorship had both repressive and productive effects upon literary production. While the state, lobby groups, and moral convention often worked to dictate sexual representation, writers also adopted strategies of dissimulation or indirection to get around these strictures, frequently with the happy side effects of formal innovation and aesthetic improvement. But as I've indicated, the specific nature of these innovations and improvements is generally not Marshik's chief concern. And indeed the claim that censorship might have a productive effect, although a salutary corrective to the general impression that modernist writers constituted a heroic vanguard against an outmoded "Victorianism," is not perhaps the innovative argument that Marshik sometimes suggests. That repression and production may work dialectically is an idea with which critics of both Freudian and Foucaultian bents would concur; and as Marshik herself acknowledges, her own attempt to provide an historically detailed analysis of this phenomenon is informed by the more general work of Donald Pizer and Michael Levine on censorship and self-censorship in literature.

It is in fact in its restoration of vital elements of the historical context to our understanding of the connections and tensions between literary production and censorship, rather than in its demonstration of a thesis about the enabling effects of interdiction, that the book's value lies. Marshik's archival research and her carefully contextualized readings of published texts afford many intriguing nuggets of information. To take a couple of instances: she turns up information that Woolf's *Orlando* was the source of an anonymous complaint to the Home Office in spite of a general critical view that Woolf's use of humor in that book enabled her to flirt successfully with obscenity; and she makes convincing claims about joking references to Stead and other social purity reformers in *Pygmalion*, revealing how Shaw's "'pleasant play' concealed polemical thoughts beneath its comedic surface" (one of the incidental interests of the book is its identification of the persistence of one of the lurid details of Stead's campaign—the girl who can be bought for

five pounds; the detail is invoked not only in Shaw's play, but as late as Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*).

The most compelling achievement of this meticulously historicizing book, though, is Marshik's ongoing argument about the role that interaction with the forces of censorship played in the development of authors' public personae. Unconventionally, Marshik includes within her notion of the censorship dialectic a third term—self-fashioning—which is not, strictly speaking, a synthesis of the repressive and productive aspects of censorship on texts, but a supplementary effect of the efforts of censors; the conceptual awkwardness is evinced in Marshik's inelegant locution, "the dialectic among artistic transgression, self-censorship, and self-fashioning." Awkwardness and inelegance aside, Marshik's discussion of the shaping force of censorship on the author's projected image affords some of the book's most arresting insights. Beginning with Rosetti's polemical response to Robert Buchanan's attack on "the fleshly school of poetry," Marshik shows how the writers she examines consistently attempted to "'manage [their] own affairs'" (Rossetti's phrase) in dialogue with resistant publics and critics. She shows how Buchanan's attack inspired Rossetti's various defensive poetic manifestos, how Shaw's and Joyce's engagement with campaigns to suppress their work helped these authors produce themselves as heroes for cultured minorities, and how the complications of gender effected more ambivalent, less grandstanding responses to censorship in the cases of Woolf and Rhys. In this account of authorial self-fashioning, as well as in the many demonstrations of the impact of the moral climate upon individual texts, Marshik enlarges our understanding of a period in which can be recognized the beginnings of contemporary preoccupations with obscenity, social purity, and censorship—despite our own period's ostensibly more "permissive" cast.

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Modernism & Democracy

Rachel Potter. *Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900–1930*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 198 pp. $74.00

THE CONFRONTATION of the concepts of modernism and democracy in the title of this book seems an obvious one, especially considering the fact that the two movements came into being simultaneously and were famously considered to be at odds with one another for most of the twentieth century. At the same time, however, the two terms