

Biting the Hand: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound's Responses to Women in the Literary and Publishing World, 1900-1930.

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Abstract:

During the careers of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as writers and publishers they relied heavily on female patrons for financial support. However, when examining their letters, the work they produced, and historical evidence, their response to women in general in this period was one of dismissal and disdain. This article will examine the reasons for their response and how it relates to Lewis Coser's theory of the publisher as a gatekeeper, as well as how the theory of gatekeeping applies to gender issues in the publishing sphere.

Keywords:

T. S. Eliot; Ezra Pound; Modernism; Publishing and Gender; Gatekeeping; Patronage.

Introduction

The involvement of women in the book trade, both as consumers and active members contributing to book production, increased dramatically in the 19th century leading up to the early decades of the 20th century. Prior to the education act of 1870, in 1840, literacy rates among women were one-half of the female population compared to two-thirds of the male population (Stone 1969, 119). Whereas, by the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, “illiteracy had been virtually eliminated throughout all England and Wales, for women as well as men” (125).

One crucial impact of this change was that women became an increasingly important market for books. As Paul Delaney writes, “almost all young women were literate by 1900, and they now comprised a larger share of the market for popular fiction” (2002, 103). As Delaney implies, the key significance of the rise of literate women for the publishing trade was that they became a large proportion of the consumers. Moreover, their involvement in the production of books increased as well.

Although there were exceptions, such as Hannah More (Feather 2006, 146), who were involved in publishing, women remained hidden in a male-dominated industry (52). However, after this time the number of female authors rose dramatically, as well as the number of women being involved in editing and the running of journals. Journals such as *Poetry* (founded 1912), *The Little Review* (1914-29), and *The Dial* (revived 1918; run by Marianne Moore, 1925-29), (Marek 2007, 226) and Virginia Woolf’s *Hogarth Press* were at least in part run by women, and in Britain by 1900, “many women were fully professional writers” (Feather 2006, 147). This level of involvement, particularly in the middle and upper classes who had the resources and time to contribute fully, had an enormous effect on culture. As Delany states, it enabled “the feminization of culture that male Modernists would find so disturbing” (2002, 103).

This article will focus on the aspects of women as patrons of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and female editors, publishers and writers. However, it is important to note the general increase

of the presence of women in the book world as mentioned as it contributed to Eliot and Pound's responses to this shift in culture.

The male Modernist response to the involvement of women in the literary and publishing world was clearly not entirely homogeneous; however, a prominent reaction can be seen as one of dismissal, and at times, outright hostility. As Gilbert and Gubar write, "masters - among them Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence - [...] responded even more censoriously to what they perceived as the old primal hate of vampire women who seemed to want to usurp not only the literary marketplace but even high cultural authority" (1994, 274-5).

Demonisation, hatred and dismissal are what Gilbert and Gubar claim male Modernists of the early 20th century felt towards this feminisation of literary culture. However, many critics also claim women were intrinsic to the survival and success of writers such as Eliot and Pound. Delany writes, "the long roll-call of women who supported Modernism financially or morally makes it evident that, even as male Modernists decried the influence of female culture, they were profoundly indebted to it, sometimes even for their very survival as artists" (2002, 151).

Delany has illustrated an interesting relationship between the attitude of the Modernist toward women and the crucial role women played in supporting their efforts. By effectively biting the hand that fed them, writers such as Eliot and Pound indicate the importance of gender in the publishing world, and how that corresponds with the theories of gatekeeping and cultural production. By increasing their presence in the book world, women seemingly began to assert themselves as cultural figureheads, and thus started to change established societal discourses. This idea will be further discussed in this article, as this historical backlash is considered, and question what it means for publishing and culture as a whole.

T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound

The Modernist views of Eliot and Pound can be best understood through the theory of the publisher as a gatekeeper presented by Lewis Coser, "publishers stand at a crucial crossroads in the process of production and distribution of knowledge in any society. They

are in a position to decide what is “in” and what is “out” of the marketplace of ideas” (1975, 14). Coser is arguing that publishers have the power to influence culture, or the “marketplace of ideas” to a great extent by filtering and selecting what is to be placed into the public sphere.

As more women were involved in publishing, either through being writers themselves, or running journals, it meant shifts in culture were inevitable. Moreover, Randall Johnson, in the introduction of *The Field of Cultural Production* states, “Bourdieu argues, especially in *Distinction*, that systems of domination find expression in virtually all areas of cultural practice and symbolic exchange’ (1993, 2). The idea of systems of dominion is key here; as previously mentioned, the publishing world reflected an almost entirely patriarchal perspective, yet with greater active involvement of women, this system would naturally begin to change.

T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were figureheads that exemplified a key Modernist reaction to women in the literary and publishing world in the early 20th century. Their interactions with or regarding the women with whom they worked were often highly dismissive and misogynistic. As Jayne E. Marek writes, they are part of “an often misogynistic male Modernist tradition” (2007, 270). The fact that Marek uses the word “tradition” illustrates how widespread and customary their discourse was.

In a letter to Pound in 1917 T. S. Eliot writes, “I thought too many women- it lowers the tone” (The Letters 2011, 221), while of Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, he wrote “the two women that run *The Little Review* know nothing about business matters, they are wholly lacking in tact and what I once called the minor amenities of life [...] they have no business sense and no judgment” (The Letters, 2011, 305).

Two forms of misogyny that are relevant to the publishing industry are identifiable here. The first is the implication that women do not possess appropriate or good enough taste, either in that they “lower the tone” or have “no judgment”. By suggesting this, Eliot begins to deliver the idea that they are not worthy gatekeepers in the publishing industry, and cannot

be trusted to appropriately contribute to a cultural society. Secondly, by implying from a practical point of view that women fall short when it comes to the appropriate traits to succeed as publishers by lacking business sense, he is again suggesting they cannot perform their roles correctly.

Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar adeptly exemplify their attack on women in their field as writers, as they write, “raging against Lowell’s transformation of imagism to ‘Amygism’, Ezra Pound labelled the cigar-smoking New Englander a ‘hippopoetess’, while T. S. Eliot defined her as the ‘demon saleswoman’ of poetry and called Edith Sitwell ‘Edith Shitwell’” (1994, 66).

Through their use of animalistic, demonic or generally insulting imagery and phrases, they display their contempt for women writers. Even female publishers, many of whom publish the work of Pound and Eliot receive a similar treatment: “*The Egoist*, he told his mother in one letter, ‘is run mostly by old maids [...] and to his father he explained that, as an assistant editor of that journal, ‘I struggle to keep the writing as much as possible in Male hands, as I distrust the Feminine in literature’” (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, 67). As is evident from their scathing remarks, many female publishers were viewed by them as incompetent at best, and an evil that needed to be kept away from the cultural sphere.

Fear of a usurpation of patriarchal discourse in the literary and publishing world is present in *Canto 29*. Ezra Pound writes, “the Female is a Chaos” (Wilson 2014, 119). As we have seen from his letters, a negative portrayal of women is normal for him, but the idea of “chaos” clearly delivers an idea of revolt against order and tradition. Peter Wilson writes of this line that “the ‘chaos theory’ of woman can arise as part of a masculine backlash against perceived feminist threats to patriarchal arrangements” (2014, 119). Wilson concisely explains the reason for both Pound and Eliot’s reactions to the presence of women in the book trade, as it threatened the status quo, the “system of domination” (1993, 2) as Bourdieu describes, which they were used to and which benefitted them. Just as in their letters, their response is crucial for understanding the importance publishing (and all

associated acts) has for culture and society, as those in control of what is published and what is written have deeply lasting effects.

Eliot and Pound's Reliance on Women

Despite their dislike of women in the literary and publishing world, many women were crucial in supporting Eliot and Pound through their careers, and in several cases, making their career possible. James Delany writes, "the long roll-call of women who supported Modernism financially or morally makes it evident that, even as Modernists decried the influence of female culture, they were profoundly indebted to it, sometimes even for their very survival as artists" (2002, 151). This point illustrates how important women were for these writers and Modernism itself, and how without them, they would have found it difficult to write and publish their material.

The patrons acted as publishers in that, just as in Coser's theory, they were the gatekeepers deciding who was worthy of their patronage and who was not. By deciding to support one artist, it gave them their seal of approval and entered the chain of production themselves by financially enabling the authors to further their voices in the cultural sphere. But the fact this approval now came from a female source was disconcerting for the Modernist poets. Yet, as Delany states, "within the sphere of the market they had little power to resist it" (2002, 103).

Not only were male Modernists reliant on women to support their work, but there was often no alternative road to publication. However, this indebtedness may have been the cause of so much of the resentment the Modernists felt towards their female supporters: "most of Modernism's patrons were women, although this did not inhibit male Modernists from biting the hand of the gender that fed them" (Delany 2002, 149). Although they received support, by using the phrase "biting the hand" Delany illustrates the resentful and embittered attitude towards their female advocates; the female presence also threatened the undermining of their own agency and patriarchal authority in the literary and publishing world.

Eliot displays their reliance on women in a letter to Raymon Fernandez in January 1928, Eliot writes, “during December *The Criterion* was on the point of being stopped altogether as Lady Rothermere suddenly decided that she wished to withdraw her capital from the enterprise” (The Letters 2013, 5). As Eliot states, *The Criterion*, a magazine run by Eliot, received its funding and support from Lady Rotheremere, and clearly her willingness to contribute had a defining factor in the survival of the publication. Just as Delany previously stated, they were indebted to her, and women like her, in order to continue publishing and writing.

In a letter to James Vogel in November 1928, Pound described his female patrons and publishers as “rich, fat ladies. *Don’t* try their intelligence” (The Selected Letters 1971, 220). Furthermore, in a letter to Eliot in 1922, Pound writes, “do not be disturbed by Lady R., consider the course of the moon, watch the day of the month on which her frothings occur [...] never treat with the female client, save in the presence of the male relative [...] for three days in every month is every woman a stark raving lunatic” (The Letters 2011, 783-4).

By using derogatory and demeaning language to discuss his patrons, Pound shows the disrespect and dismissal he felt towards them, rejecting any complaints or disagreements they had as part of the “course of the moon” and suggesting their lack of intelligence and reason demanded a male presence at their meetings. By seeking to bring another male figure into this exchange, Pound shows his desire to bring the publication of books back into patriarchal hands, bypassing and dismissing the involvement of women. Yet, as Eliot has shown, these women were heavily important to ensure their survival as writers and editors.

This attitude is interesting considering in a letter to John Quinn, Pound writes, “if a patron buys from an artist who needs money, [...] the patron then makes himself equal to the artist: he is building art into the world; he creates” (*The Selected Letters* 1991, 23). Here, Pound is addressing one of his male patrons, and he proposes that a patron is just as significant as a writer in producing a cultural artefact. However, in a letter to James Vogel in 1980, he discusses another of his patrons, a “Mrs S.” He writes, “money won’t do a damn

thing in the arts by itself. It can't. The essential is inside the artist. Don't forget that. He really has the whip hand." (*The Selected Letters* 1950, 220).

The difference between these two statements illustrates his hypocrisy and suggests his derision of female involvement stems from the changing of the gatekeeper, rather than a dislike of patronage. In his eyes, a male patron is as equal as the artist, whereas the female is merely a monetary source, while the writer holds the true power. This evidently displays Pounds patriarchal anxieties, as he must assure himself as the "master" with the mention of the "whip" and thus, to himself, ensures his own power. Therefore, through the language both Eliot and Pound use to discuss the women around them, it is evident that Coser's theories of gatekeeping are key here, as women infiltrating the cultural sphere of literature threaten a more feminine form of discourse, which is what the male Modernists revolt against.

Effects on Modernism and the Early 20th Century Publishing

The effects of both the increased presence of women and the Modernists reaction to them can be seen in publishing and what was being published. The disagreement and frustration Eliot and Pound felt at having to rely on women in order to write and be published can be seen in the work they produced and in the presses they ran. Delany writes, "the Modernists routinely produced work of *ressentiment* against the milieu that sustained them: generic satires like Eliot's *Portrait of a Lady* or Pound's *Portrait d'une Femme*" (2002, 150).

Similarly, Eliot uses ideas of "the Fisher King to articulate [his] patriarchal anxieties" (Squier 2007, 592). These actions are critical because they illustrate the relevance and importance of Coser's gatekeeping theories. Here Coser's theory shows that the women involved in publishing posed a real threat against the male Modernist's cultural authority, so much so that they felt they had to react against it in their work.

Furthermore, not only did they react against women in their work, but they also responded negatively to any forms of feminisation of culture, even by the hands of other men. Gilbert and Gubar write, "twentieth-century male artists reacted not only against what they saw as

the ‘feminisation’ of the literary marketplace but also against what they feared was the ‘effeminacy’ of some male predecessors” (1994, 60). Modernist writers became hostile and dismissive towards Romanticism, seeking to distinguish their work against it as they found it to be too close to the femininity they feared and despised. T. E. Hulme placed the fault of women writers on Romanticism, as he claimed their new, more feminine discourse, paved the way for women writers: “Imitative poetry springs up like weeds, and women whimper and whine of you and I alas, and roses, roses, roses all the way” (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, 3).

Pound and Eliot agreed with this perspective, as Robert Whol writes, “Pound, Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis, in particular, see a Modernist style, characterized by precision, the refusal of rhetoric and sentimentality, and visual imagery, as a form of ‘armour’ against the female ‘drift of desire’ and sensual indulgence. By doing so [...] they put a politics of gender at the very heart of their developing preoccupation with declining forms of authority” (2002, 582-3). The quote from Whol exhibits the crux of this argument: that gendered gatekeeping was at the heart of publishing in the early 20th century. It is their fear of the female presence and the decline of male authority which governed their decisions as writers and publishers, and displayed their responses to the women who enabled them to do so.

This effect can also be seen through the actions of Eliot and Pound as publishers and editors themselves. In a letter to John Quinn in 1915, Eliot writes, “no woman shall be allowed to write for this magazine [...] most of the ills of American magazines [...] are (or were) due to women” (Taylor 2001, 31). Here, Eliot actively seeks to bar women from taking part in the production of magazines and therefore adding their voices to literary culture. Furthermore, in a letter to John Quinn, Pound writes, “you will see that I have included hardly any feminine names. I think active America is getting fed up on gynocracy and that it’s time for a male review” (The Selected Letters 1991, 41). In the same way as Eliot, Pound is using his position as a publisher to bar women from contributing to the literary world. Despite the fact there was not a real threat of “gynocracy”, the fears behind this sentiment, and the active revulsion against it display Pound’s anxieties toward the involvement of women.

Both of their fears are unfounded for many reasons, but largely because not only were

female patrons undervalued, but female writers and editors were largely dismissed as well.

As Gilbert and Gubar write:

Male Modernist poets were emphatically not swept away by the witches' brooms they may have associated with some of their female contemporaries. On the contrary, although in her own day Millay functioned as a kind of American Poetess Laureate, it was her achievement, along with the accomplishments of the women constellated around her, which was rapidly dismissed by the canonizing judgement of the time. (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, 68).

As the work these women produced was not recognised on the same culturally valuable level as their male contemporaries, women did not then pose a significant threat to the legitimacy of the work of Eliot and Pound. If Pound and Eliot's backlash did not stem from a well-founded fear of usurpation, then it came perhaps from the fact it was women producing this work. As Marek writes, "gender issues are gatekeeping issues" (2007, 225). Again, the theory of gatekeeping is shown to be relevant, as Eliot and Pound's reaction came from the fact that the patriarchal gatekeeping position men like them held was being threatened as women became elemental to the survival of these men, or began to be gatekeepers themselves by becoming writers, editors and publishers.

Conclusion

This article has examined T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound's antipathy to women's involvement in the literary and publishing cultural world in the early 20th century. As discussed, their resentment largely stemmed from their loss of independent patriarchal authority as gatekeepers of culture and literature. This was due to their reliance on female patrons to both produce their own work, and to act as publishers themselves. Moreover, their anxieties extended to them actively excluding and demonising women from the publishing world through their own roles as publishers and editors. They achieved this by belittling or criticizing their female contemporaries, or by questioning their ability to fulfil the publishing role. The idea that this was due to their fear of women in the role of gatekeepers is shown through their rejection of any feminine literature, including Romanticism, as well as the

rejection of female publishers and editors and their derision of their female patrons. This article has overall displayed the importance of Coser's theory of the publisher as a gatekeeper, as the effects of this role were the crux of the anxieties these poets felt as women entered the chain of production of books, and thus threatened the usurpation of the male cultural authority.

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