FEMINIST AUDIENCES FOR JOYCE

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We have talked of women, about women he seems a bit disinterested. Were I vain I should say he is afraid of them, but I am certain he is only a little sceptical of their existence.¹

This essay considers how James Joyce’s texts entered and helped produce a range of feminist audiences for ‘modern literature’ and ‘modernism’ and how diverse feminist reading practices have been articulated around Joyce’s fiction. I want to consider not only how feminists have read Joyce but also how their interests and reading strategies have incorporated or associated with Joyce’s fiction, beginning with the feminist readerships into which Joyce’s fiction arrived. Using The New Freewoman and The Egoist, Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf, as exemplary of this context for Joyce, we can locate some common interests among Joyce’s feminist audiences which have both persisted and changed over the course of the twentieth century. Taking Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva as exemplary sites for the formation of feminist theories which emphasised the importance of modern literature, the second half of the essay then moves on to consider the ways in which readings of Joyce’s fiction have been used to catalyse debates in feminist studies.²


² This essay is not a survey of feminist Joyce criticism, which would be a much larger project, but a consideration of relations between Joyce and feminist reading practices. Many writers and texts that should be mentioned in such a survey are not directly discussed here. I am particularly indebted to the work and support of Bonnie Kime Scott.
Joyce’s texts belong to a vital moment in the history of feminism, and Joyce has been a significant term of reference for feminist analysis, particularly in relation to psychoanalysis, to literary theory, and to redefinitions of the categories ‘woman’ and ‘feminist.’ This significance drew initially on the complexities of Joyce’s representation of women. Even before the serialisation of *Ulysses* which made them notorious, Joyce’s representations of women and femininity had been subject to critical discussion. Since then, the figure of Molly Bloom in particular has been a central point of reference in debates over the representation of women. But these debates are not necessarily feminist. It remains necessary to ask what makes a reading or an audience feminist? Criteria other than interest in how women are or should be represented is needed; nor is being a woman a necessity or a qualification for feminist reading practices. A feminist audience must produce readings that interrogate the institutionalisation and repetition of sexist patriarchal culture. This does not, however, imply any kind of consensus within or between audiences as to how feminist readings are produced or understood, and it is in relation to changing models of feminist reading that Joyce’s texts have played a more crucial role than might have been anticipated when his work was first published.

**From *The Freewoman* to *The Egoist***

During that period, feminism was not only an object of public and specialised discourses on modern women, but itself formed an influential discourse on modern women and their reception. The interaction of modernism and feminism in the series of little magazines following *The Freewoman* might be seen as exemplary of some of the tensions and engagements between these discourses, and this particular engagement has been preserved and discussed in part because of its association with Joyce’s work. *The Freewoman* claimed to be both a radical venue for modern literature and a “feminist review.” Dora Marsden wrote as editor of *The Freewoman’s* first issue, in November 1911, that “We find our chief concern in what [women] may become. Our interest is in the Freewoman herself, her psychology, philosophy, morality, and achievements, and only in a