

Review: Celia Marshik, Allison Pease, 2019: Modernism, Sex and Gender

Díaz Pérez, Cristina

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Cristina Díaz Pérez

Celia Marshik/Allison Pease, 2019: *Modernism, Sex and Gender*. London: Bloomsbury. 194 pages. £ 19.79

Modernism, Sex and Gender is a prodigious and inspiring compendium of Modernist Studies on sexuality, masculinities and femininities and politics of identity since the 1970s from a feminist perspective. Celia Marshik and Allison Pease have thoroughly examined Modernism and its theories to provide a compelling account of the striking evolution of the ever-growing modernist literary theory. They attempt to provide answers to the reasons behind the shifts and changing attitudes of theorists as a respond to social and cultural events, but they also identify potentialities and their possible drifts.

The way researchers look at Modernism has dramatically changed due to the expansion and influence of Gender Studies and Cultural Studies and the trend towards intersectionality. The authors employ the idea of the palimpsest to disentangle the intricacies of Modernism and to unravel the different layers of meanings that have been built upon it over the years. *Modernism, Sex and Gender* is divided into four chapters that enlighten the readership about the gender questions that have shaped and still define the field. The authors intend for all chapters to provide examples of the artists and texts that support their theories.

The first chapter, “Feminine Difference”, introduces how feminists, but also non-feminists, have rediscovered female Modernism since the 1970s from two different approaches: focusing on the retrieval of differences between the writing of men and women, and then recovering the works around femininity. Celia Marshik and Allison Pease indicate that the first project of the recovery was twofold: expanding the canon including long-forgotten female artists, by focusing on their biographies, while also creating a female literary tradition in the form of an extended compendium. They suggest that the authors pondered how gender has shaped Modernism, but also modernity, though; some artists were highly idealized in the process of recovery.

“Overt interest in sexuality is one of the defining features of the modernist period” (p. 51), as it has been extensively discussed by theorists. The second chapter focuses on how the evolution of the history of sexuality went hand in hand with the evolution of the study of Modernism as regards sexuality. This monograph shows how critics thought that speaking about sex was a sign of liberation until critics such as Kate Millet and Judith Butler located sex as a social discourse that implies power relations and notions of queerness entered the arena. They added new perspectives to the study of Modernism, creating some of the canonical books as regards Modernism and sexuality: *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981) and *Fashioning Sapphism* (2000).

As a consequence of the influence of sexuality and women to the study of Modernism, the question of power has emerged. Masculinity Studies have gained importance since the 1980s to discuss the shifts regarding hegemonic masculinities and peripheral ones, in particular, in relation to women and gender. Researchers have provided power-

ful insights pertaining to the reasons behind aspects of gynophobia underlying some modernist texts, while they also pinpointed the different constructions of masculinities that are portrayed in the texts. *Modernism, Sex and Gender* focuses on reactionary masculinities, soldiers, imperialists, cowboys and those who were racially regarded as non-European in an attempt to respond to the visibility of women that supposedly posed a threat to men. The third chapter can be viewed as a critique to some of the dogmas exposed in modernist texts, but it also supposes the questioning of the interpretation of texts and how the ideologies behind theoretical texts can transform them and provide new layers of the ‘palimpsest’ of Modernism.

The final chapter is entitled “Sex, Politics and Law” and deals with how political and legal structures regarding censorship and sexuality have defined literary Modernism, but also influenced the perceptions of people concerning sex. Researchers establish that fear of knowledge of sex among women have played a significant role in books that have been banned. However, censorship was not only a way of suppressing discourses, it surprisingly became the best marketing campaign that some authors could dream of. Celia Marshik and Alison Pease indicate that the treatment of modernist texts within legal procedures responded to the social momentum of an increasing visibility of women in society and the advent of fascism and imperialism. They are positioning sexuality as fundamental to understand other realities and discourses not related to literature.

Along this major work of modernist theory, the authors highlight several aspects that I deem as important to mention because they denote how valuable this work is and will become for Modernist Studies and those interested in gender, identity and literary processes. Celia Marshik and Allison Pease point out that despite the research about texts written by those who have been traditionally excluded from the canon, “the major writers have remained major and most minor writers have remained minor in the New Modernist Studies” (p. 31). Besides, they indicate the transnational and multidisciplinary turn of Modernist Studies, while they are capable of summarizing and finding the gist and connections of the books that deal with sex and gender to respond to the social and cultural role of Modernism. Finally, they provide a fascinating and numerous representation of key texts in the history of modernist theory to help you navigate this alluring momentum.

Author’s details

Cristina Díaz Pérez, Predoctoral researcher at the University of Oviedo, Department of English, French and German Philology. Research focus: the history of sexuality, English literature, sex manuals.

Contact: University of Oviedo, Department of English, French and German Philology, Amparo Pedregal s/n 33013, Oviedo, Spain

Email: diazcristina@uniovi.es