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"REVIEWING THE RITES PROPER TO CANONISATION": NEW WOMAN NOVELS AND NEW CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CANONICITY

By Galia Ofek

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES THE ways in which New Woman novelists and their critics negotiated and revised Victorian literary canons in the 1880s and 1890s in light of the controversial publications of the Higher and feminist critics of the Bible. It explores the relationship between nineteenth-century literary and religious canons and the ways in which New Woman writers both drew on and intensified contemporary debates on canonicity. While literary canons are often perceived as allowing the possibility of adding new or re-evaluated works whereas biblical canonization seems final and definitive, nineteenth- century discoveries of early, non-canonical Christian writings and fragmentary gospels such as *Pistis Sophia* and the *Gospel of Mary* profoundly problematized late-Victorian understandings of the process of canonicity.[1] The growing recognition of the historical significance of such fragments, as well as fierce theological debates in the leading magazines of the day, highlighted canonization as a political procedure which enforced internal coherence and unity at the expense of cultural diversity. Many writers suggested that canonization involved a repression of ideological controversies and a marginalization of competing narratives, a process which was both dramatized and redressed in New Woman fiction. The scholarship that turned to the era before the biblical canon had been sealed explored the conditions which made it final and unassailable, enabling feminist novelists to examine canonicity imaginatively and critically. By drawing attention to the essentially historical and political forces that governed processes of canon formation, New Woman writers sought to expose the narrowness and the limitations of the literary canon within and against which they worked.

Responses of Victorian feminist writers to contemporary discoveries about the Bible and its origins oscillated between two perceptions.[2] One saw canon-formation as a unifying process which eliminated contradictions with mainstream, traditional, and patriarchal structures. The other, while acknowledging the canon's homogenizing influence, still highlighted the survival and inclusion of subversive elements, pointing out the multiple traditions which were juxtaposed in the same final corpus even after earlier, and more radical versions were excluded. While the former group called the readers' attention to newly-found

evidence of censorship, seeing canonization as a process that silenced dissenting voices and stories, the latter emphasized the canon's multivocality, pointing out that even the canonizers of the Bible allowed for different truth claims and showed a "respect for friction," leaving "traces" which invited and even demanded "interpretation" in Geoffrey Hartman's words (*Midrash and Literature* 13). Both attitudes could be found side by side, vying with or complementing each other, prompting the readers not so much to choose as to reconsider the biblical heritage as a complex cultural construct. The study of its formation was presented as vital not only to the reconstruction of the past but also to the process of imagining the future of the Judeo-Christian civilization and women's role in it.

The question whether canons could be objective and universal as opposed to historically and politically determined preoccupied New Woman writers, who both described and shaped the identity of the modern woman. Their novels, in one contemporary critic's words, were "written by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman" (Stead 64). They explored the contexts, functions, and consequences of various canons and experimented with topoi, plotlines, forms, and aesthetics. The original meanings of the word "Canon" in Greek were "the selection of authorities for writing history, philosophy, and rhetoric, the organisation of time into significant units of measurement, and the framing of patterns to regulate the behaviour of human beings" (Gorak 9). The Judeo-Christian tradition extended the regulative authority of canons to civic frames of reference, providing a binding interpretative mode which was deployed and revitalized by turn-of-the-century feminist writers and critics.

Many late-Victorian women acknowledged their indebtedness to modern biblical criticism: "A critical study of the Pentateuch is just now agitating the learned classes in Germany. Bonn is [the] stronghold of theological learning, and . . . its famous university ha[s] recently exhibited a courage in Biblical criticism and interpretation . . . they declared [the biblical stories] to be 'a series of legends' . . . This radical outbreak of criticism and interpretation has aroused considerable attention" (Stanton 56). The question of how the Bible should be read – as myth, legend, great literature or ancient historical records – deeply affected and troubled Bible-readers. A growing sense of historical conditioning and relativity informed feminist critics such as Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, whose literary criticism of the Bible suggested that its "varied according to the spirit of the age in which it is attempted . . . If we apply to our Sacred Books the same rules of literary criticism that we would apply to Chaucer's poems, we find unexpected revelations contained within the old forms" (54). The interpretative process could not be contained by dogmas since scriptural meaning varied according to the changing character of the reader and the age.

Under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, feminist critical assessment, translation and interpretation of the Bible gained momentum. Women scholars – "the revising committee" – were invited to write *The Woman's Bible* (1895–98) as an alternative to the King James Bible (KJB). Stanton's project challenged the KJB ideologically, lexically, structurally, and formalistically: it focused on women's roles in the Bible and, in many instances, discussed apocryphal rather than canonical works. Similarly, there was no attempt to conceal its multiple authorship and the various views of its female editors, who signed under the different entries which they contributed to the text. The project was even more remarkably anti-canonical when viewed against mid-Victorian attitudes which pushed the "idea that the KJB should be a standard for language" to "its apotheosis: the KJB is more than the standard, it is perfection" (Norton 303). The editorial board of *The Woman's Bible*

stressed that the KJB translators were not infallible: "great as were the liberties which the jews took with Genesis . . . the English translators . . . greatly surpassed them" (17). Deliberate manipulation and innocent errors meant that women's roles and positions in the Bible were misrepresented. Stanton concluded that the Judeo-Christian canon was used by men to secure their political as well as cultural hegemony: concepts like "the canon," "Creeds," and "codes" were all "wholly human in their origin and inspired by the natural law of domination," rather than by divine law, she assured her readers (7–8).

The progressive periodical *Shafts* had published feminist commentary that bore the marks of a new tentative, relativist, and historicist view of the biblical canon well before Stanton chose it as a vehicle through which to disseminate her alternative exegesis. In 1892 an anonymous writer observed: "until recently woman indeed received no education which could qualify her to judge of such matters, and accepted all or any of the teachings of the Church as . . . final. Men occupied the pulpits, wrote the prayer-books . . . from which woman was invariably banished" ("Womanhood" 7). The banishment of women from religious instruction and interpretation was dramatized in *Red Pottage* (1899), where Mary Cholmondeley described Reverend Gresley as "a preacher in the twin pulpits of church and home" (120; ch.18).

Cholmondeley seems to have responded to feminist criticism in the periodical press of the 1890s by fictionalizing the recurrent claim that the biblical canon has been monopolized by male scholars and priests for too long. The author establishes a clear analogy between women's exclusion from the realm of theological discourse and New Woman writers' exclusion from the literary canon through her rendition of a priest who destroys a New Woman manuscript which he finds sacrilegious. By burning the manuscript, Reverend Gresley ensures its exclusion from the literary canon shortly after eradicating all traces of "freethinking" from it in order to secure the stability of the religious canon. As Ann Ardis claims, "[t]rained as a cleric, Gresley assumes religious rather than secular standards of value," yet his response to the novel is "of a piece with the many adverse judgments offered in journals like the *Athenaeum* . . . of 'real' New Woman novels" (*New Women* 163). Cholmondeley's detailed description of Reverend Gresley's response to the New Woman text – as a reader, a critic, and a clergyman – dramatizes the process of canon-making on both religious and literary levels. It underpins the inextricable links between religious and literary value-judgements in an age which increasingly adopts secular and scientific habits of thought.

Further, Reverend Gresley's unauthorized and unwelcome emendations and addenda to the New Woman text follows contemporary feminist criticism that stressed the corrupting power of patriarchal practices of canonicity. As various *fin-de-siècle* writers, following the Higher critics, pointed out, the biblical canon, while being compiled, was "open to interpolations and alterations before it became fixed. Were those facts honestly acknowledged by that class of persons – the priests – who regard themselves as the custodians of such writings, and the privileged interpreters of all they contain, the world would be far more enlightened . . . than it is now" ("Womanhood I" 7). Moreover, some feminist critics suggested that narrow and restrictive readers like Reverend Gresley were the ones who shaped the biblical canon: their editorial corrections were "unhappily, notwithstanding their palpable inconsistencies," accepted. "What was easier in the times when such writings were dependent for their circulation on copyists and manuscripts than to change and amend before they were pronounced '*canonical*' as seemed best to befit the interests of a growing Church?" ("Womanhood II" 20)

Cholmondeley's choice of a patronizing priest as the man who corrupts the heroine's New Woman text and attempts to silence her dissenting and innovative forms of faith and interpretation is particularly resonant in its cultural-historical context. It should be read in view of the contemporaneous eminence of the documentary approach in scientific biblical investigation, which singled out P, the Priestly strand of authorship, as a detached, patrician, and ceremonial narrator or editor, who promoted and dwelt on laws, rules, and procedures, changing and modifying various parts of the Pentateuch to suit the demands of his own institutional power and priestly concerns (Kugel, *Read the Bible* 298–99). The idea that many religious restrictions originated not with God but with self-seeking priests who, in fact, perverted His Word, gradually percolated through to many feminist readers and writers. Sarah Grand, for one, expressed this view in *The Beth Book* (1897): "that is not God . . . that is the ultimate of the priest. And the priest is the same at all times, in all ages, beneath all veneers of civilisation. His credit depends upon a pretence to power. He is not a humble seeker after truth, but . . . an impudent time-server" (501; ch. 50).

However, as the title *Red Pottage* suggests, Cholmondeley is equally preoccupied with the formation of literary canonicity. While the title evokes biblical inheritance, it also refers to one of the most controversial novels of the time, Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), thus bringing the issue of literary and cultural heritage to bear on the New Woman, her demands, and their fictional representation. Allen's heroine, Herminia Barton, vows not "to be false to [her] sex," nor to become "a traitor to [her] convictions"; never "to sell [her] kind for a mess of pottage . . . or even for thirty pieces of silver . . . as other women have sold it" (30; ch.3). As *Red Pottage* testifies, the New Woman author's mission is often articulated in ways which mesh religious and literary vocabularies, suggesting that the sensibilities that Bible reading and modern novels require and cultivate are as interconnected as the biblical canon and the literary one. Another manifestation of this link is the analogy that New Woman authors draw between the characters' response to sermons and their receptivity to tales and narratives. While Cholmondeley examines Hester's reactions to the "preacher in the twin pulpits of church and home," Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883) observes various responses to its preacher and story-teller, Bonaparte Blenkins. His unashamedly exploitative use of the Bible is presented as more malevolent and manipulative than Reverend Gresley's conventional narrowness and this difference allows Schreiner to explore the ramifications of yielding to such a false masculine and religious authority without questioning. Schreiner's characters are preoccupied with reading, understanding, and interpreting Holy Writ in a traditional canonical context which predates the feminist commitment to an approach which encourages "theological reflection on why certain texts were chosen" and how different passages or readings could lead "to the articulation of alternative principles" (Yarbo 4). Their literal and unifying reading traditions determine, to a great extent, their choices and fortunes through dogmatic, predetermined responses to new hermeneutic challenges.

Bonaparte's Sunday sermon – like his made-up personal history – is designed to impress a patroness whose credulity would enrich him. His ostentatious faith (groaning loudly "at the end of each line," and "twice at the end of every verse,") and his fire-and-brimstone manner are juxtaposed and contrasted with the two protagonists' tormented and silent preoccupation with the Bible and its conflicting messages (36; ch. 1.5). A similar contrast is discernible between their distrust of his self-aggrandizing tales and the community's awed acceptance of these stories. Bonaparte's self-serving exegesis insists on the dangers of love even as his sanctimonious tones deliberately cater to Tant' Sannie's predilection for punitive morality.

Sannie's susceptibility to superficial sermonizers is vital to Bonaparte's success as a suitor, but no less important to Bonaparte is Uncle Otto's naïve interpretation of the New Testament, which leads to his unquestioning acceptance of Blenkins's own saintliness and miracle stories. This kind of literal faith encourages Otto to see Bonaparte Blenkins as a local Christ figure, eventually bringing about the old farmer's downfall and death and the disintegration of the farm. Blenkins's success thus critiques the interpretative community which hosts and nourishes him at the expense of the more questioning mind of his victim, Waldo. As Clayton argues, Tant' Sannie "embodies the suspicion and conservatism of the upcountry Boer" toward all literature outside the Bible that Schreiner observed around her as she grew up (13; ch. 1.2). No stranger to religious questioning and struggles with faith and disbelief, Schreiner rendered the reluctance to engage with hermeneutic difficulties in critical terms.

Further, her critique underlines the characters' overarching narrowness of prospects. The scope of the sermon and of the audience's understanding of it is determined by a limited acquaintance with the Bible and a presumption that the preacher knows best. "Was Jeremiah ever in love, or Ezekiel, or Hosea?" asks the preacher. For Bonaparte and his audience, the question is rhetorical, and the answer is a resounding "no" (38; ch. 1.5). But Hosea is the very prophet whose tormented love for a "wife of harlotry," Gomer, the unfaithful spouse/people, is an enduring focal point in the Minor Prophets whose teachings Blenkins oversimplifies in his sermon. Although early parts of the text that describes Gomer's adulteries are vitriolic and vengeful, love as the generous forgiveness of sexual/ religious infidelity or transgression is later reasserted as a parable of divine redemption (Hosea 2.14–20). This kind of love is particularly relevant to Schreiner's protagonists, who are forever struggling with want of faithfulness, unkindness, and faltering religious faith. The constant wavering in religious and human purposes and relations is perhaps the most marked feature of the novel. Thus the lasting effect of the reference to Hosea in Bonaparte's sermon is the undermining of the male preacher's authoritative claim to "testify in your ears of Him" (34; ch. 1.5). Blenkins's sermon is presented not only as disingenuous but also as fundamentally flawed in its ignorance of the diverse traditions within the Bible. This ignorance at once responds to and is fostered within the community of believers, exerting a stultifying and inhibiting influence on the protagonists who seek human and divine love without ever finding it.

As a counter-example to such limited traditional communities of interpretation, New Woman authors consistently consider learning, listening, and reading as hermeneutic acts and present their heroines as knowledgeable women who follow religious debates in the press and display a solid grounding in biblical criticism. This example is partly modelled on their own impressive acquaintance with the Higher critics' writings and their implications. Olive Schreiner's letters to Havelock Ellis, for example, describe the influence of critics such as Ernest Renan and David Friedrich Strauss on her perception.[3] Sarah Grand's Ideala (1888) reads the latest essay on religion in the *Nineteenth Century* and discusses it with her friends (29–30). These modern heroines, informed by the latest commentary from Germany, read and respond to the Bible as literature or as history, and analyze its stories as narratives which can and should be interpreted in various ways. Grand's later protagonist, Beth, is a spirited young lady who astonishes a teacher at a conventional finishing school:

> It happened when Miss Crow was hearing the girls their Scripture lesson one morning, the subject being the escape of the children of Israel from Egypt, and the destruction of Pharaoh's hosts in the Red Sea. "I know a man who says the whole of that account has been garbled," Beth remarked . . . meaning

> Count Gustav Bartahlinsky . . . But Miss Crow saw in her attitude a dangerous tendency to scepticism, and expressed strong condemnation of any one who presumed to do other than accept Holy Writ in blind unquestioning faith. She talked to Beth with horror about the ungodly men who cast doubt on the unity of the Bible, called its geology in question, and even ventured to correct its chronology by the light of modern scientific discoveries. (304–05, ch. 31)

Sarah Grand's reference to the Bible's questionable chronology testifies to her acquaintance with Bishop Colenso's incendiary *The Pentateuch Critically Examined* (1863) and contemporary arguments about the dating and historicity of the canon. Such open and challenging debates were fairly new: in April 1848, for instance, students at Cambridge University were asked for "the date of the Deluge," and the correct answer was "2348 BC, or 1656 after the Creation" (Pinnock 17, 248). That Grand chose to locate the conflict between the New Woman's (pupil's) thirst for knowledge and the Old Woman's (teacher's) insistence on ignorance in a typical Victorian girls' finishing school is hardly incidental. What is being repeatedly asserted and emphasized in New Woman novels is the need to re-examine and reformulate women's religious education, or, in the words of the wrathful *Shafts* writers, women's "Religious Mis-Education." This demand is often realized through the fictional projection or embodiment of the idea of canonicity as a standard reading list.

Schreiner was the first to attack the canon through its figuration as a canonical textbook which symbolizes a useless and damaging education. Waldo is troubled by the constant ticking of a clock which, according to Joseph Bristow, is an allusion to William Paley's highly influential *Natural Theology* (1802), itself a compulsory reading on university syllabuses (xiv). The tract, which opens with the image of a timepiece, represents the divine ordinance of the universe, offering the watch as a metaphor for God's design and presence in an organized harmonious world. As opposed to the taught image of God as an accurate clock-maker, Waldo's watch represents the exact opposite: the confusion and puzzlement which attend a realization that the universe is in fact chaotic, disharmonious, and unjust. This figuration of an incongruous and outdated syllabus reflects a reality of growing alienation from a canon whose modern readers are disaffected. The poet Arthur Clough, for example, fell into doubt and was advised by Provost Hawkins of Oriel College to read *Natural Theology* in order to become convinced of the existence of God, but in vain.[4] Schreiner thus challenged one of the main aspects of "the canon," whose original Greek meaning – "rod" – came to signify, among other things, "a list of . . . recommended books" whose extraordinary privilege as inside books was vital to the making and understanding of canonicity (Kermode 604–05).

The insufficiency of canonical religious teaching is underlined with particular emphasis in the fictionalization of female education. Schreiner's novel recurrently alludes to Ecclesiastes, where "vanity" or "a vain effort or strife" often describes the quest for knowledge and truth. The protagonists Waldo and Lyndall may be said to represent the questioning agnostic mind of Schreiner's generation, which finds early echoes within the canon itself: "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecc. 1.18). But Schreiner makes the point about knowledge particularly poignant by showing how inaccessible it is to girls in conventional finishing schools. Lyndall, who returns to the farm after four years of an unstructured and unproductive search for wisdom, describes her frustrating quest to Waldo. The latter, inquiring "Have you learnt much?" (151; ch. 2.4) is clearly referring to Lyndall's previous determination to know "everything" under the sun. However, the phrase "under the sun," with which the novel is punctuated, is also

an allusion to the most prominent refrain in Ecclesiastes. The repetitive phrase in both texts becomes critical to our understanding of Lyndall's reply, that she has learned only little: "I have discovered that of all cursed places under the sun, where the hungriest soul can hardly pick up a few grains of knowledge, a girls' boarding-school is the worst" (151; ch. 2.4). The logical loop of rejecting a religious education in biblical terms encapsulates a sense of entrapment that the New Woman heroine experiences as a free woman and a free thinker.

The pervasive preoccupation with women's religious education was also a response to topical comparisons between English and German models of religious learning, which surfaced as pedagogues and cultural critics such as Arnold and Huxley became concerned with Victorian practices of Bible reading. It thus made sense that Grand's Beth learned to read the Bible from a German Count – the German background being an obvious reference to contemporary debates.[5] The phrase "the Bible as Literature" was first coined by Matthew Arnold, who in the 1870s was examining literary and cultural aspects of bible-reading in the light of a growing recognition that some aspects of the taught biblical canon should be revised. As an inspector of schools at the time when Forster's Education Bill of 1870 attempted to establish state schools free of sectarian religious teaching, he became concerned that the removal of major parts of the Bible from the curriculum might result in cultural anarchy. He saw only "one great literature for which the people have had a preparation: the literature of the Bible" ("A Bible Reading for Schools" 7: 500). Professor Huxley advocated the reading of the Bible but claimed that only German teachers and scholars could pass an unprejudiced and well-informed judgement on its facticity and composition. New Woman authors took an active part in these debates, sensing that a revised school curriculum, alongside the scientific reformulation of the Judeo-Christian canon, offered them new opportunities to define their position in relation to it.

Ella Hepworth Dixon focuses on the heroine's transition from an unenlightened reader to a well-informed one in *Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), where Mary exchanges her Bible for Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863). As a child, Mary reads the New Testament and is touched by its tales (which Renan describes as "legends"), but subsequently, she develops a more critical and questioning attitude that Hepworth Dixon expresses in cultural, spatial and geographical terms. Her heroine can no longer "find room for her Testament" on the shelf, since Renan's volumes take up "so much space" (57; ch. 3). Dixon sends Mary to Germany, the cradle of Higher criticism, where she befriends a girl who smokes cigarettes, reads Strauss (one of the main German philosophers who influenced Renan), "and announce[s] herself a determined agnostic" who mocks "the apostolic legend of the Annunciation" (59; ch. 3). No wonder that when the heroine returns to England she reads the New Testament text "in German letters," that is, in German critical terms rather than sentimental or religious ones. Reading the verse "Come unto Me, all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11.28–30) cannot offer her any consolation or hope (123; ch. 13). The ensuing disenchantment typifies Mary's commitment to realistic and responsible choices which are based on knowledge and clarity that come at a price.

While an unreserved analogy between literary canons and the Judeo-Christian one may seem inaccurate, several writers in the 1890s imagined canon-formation as a process of decision-making that was exercised by a select council of fathers and sages who knew – or presumed to know – which texts should go in or stay out. This critical strand was not entirely new, as Matthew Arnold's evaluation of Heine through an evocation of Matthew 22.14 testified: "there is so much power, so many seem able to run well, so many give

promise of running well; – so few reach the goal, so few are chosen. *Many are called, few chosen*" ("Heinrich Heine," 3: 132). In 1895, Edmund Gosse stated that Sarah Grand "err[ed] grievously against taste," and lamented a past when the exercise of taste was "concentrated in a narrow circle" of wise men (116). But this kind of advocacy of an elite circle of literary critics who would banish New Woman or other novels became increasingly complicated and problematic as the century drew to an end, and dissenting voices of critics such as Macneile Dixon grew louder. The latter protested against what he called in 1895 "the critical literary judgment of the latter half of the present century." The self-appointed group of critics and anthologizers presented themselves as natural arbiters of literary taste, but their verdicts "presuppose[d] numberless critical acts." The religious connotations which Macneile Dixon evoked in his critique pointed out the convergence of literary and biblical value judgements: "Dare we flatter ourselves and Mr Palgrave by believing . . . that ours is the age whose critical representative has just won his way to the just canons of a final and unassailable criticism?" (402) Dixon's reservations about a fixed "canon" were underscored by his portrayal of Francis Turner Palgrave, the editor of the highly successful *Golden Treasury*, as "the high priest who perform[ed] the rites proper to the canonisation" of literary works (406).

Macneile Dixon protests against a belief in "some valid test which may serve between the wise and the foolish in matters of literature, between the initiated and the uninitiated . . . [in] pursuit of an indiscoverable . . . Shibboleth" (405). His choice of the term is illuminating in the negotiation of canonicity: as Jacques Derrida observes, the word polices "those linguistic borders where . . . only those who know how to pronounce *shibboleth* are granted crossing and, indeed, life" (307). The term has "the value of a password," as well as that "of membership and political watchword." Jephthah, who defeated the Ephramites, knew that they were incapable of pronouncing correctly the "shi" sound, and required that each person wishing to cross the Jordan river pronounce it, in order to sift the Ephramaites from his people, and deny them the right of passage (320). For Dixon, as for Derrida, the word "shibboleth" means, "in the broadest extension of its generality or its usage," "any insignificant, arbitrary mark . . . once it becomes discriminative and decisive, that is, divisive" (322). "Shibboleth" thus turns into a cipher for an arbitrary standard which blocks free access to a certain border, threshold, or a coveted linguistic or literary domain. In Dixon's observations on the nature of canonicity there are insights which anticipate Derrida's understanding of "the *double edge* of every *shibboleth*": the "mark of an alliance, it is also an index of exclusion, of discrimination, indeed of extermination" (346).[6]

That canons, often defined as the "accepted standards" for inclusion, equally operate as a set of strict standards for exclusion, is explored by Hepworth Dixon in *Story of a Modern Woman*. The author spent the formative years of her life in Heidelberg, where she was taught by a German professor (Fehlbaum 18–19). Dixon also placed her heroine Mary in an old German University town, possibly Tübingen, where she is sent by her intellectual, scientist father to acquire advanced liberal education. The Tübingen School and Ferdinand Christian Bauer, its leader, became "legendary in England" (Chadwick 68) for their examination of the New Testament for evidence of internal divisions and conflicts. They believed that heterodoxy was firmly rooted in the beginning of Christianity, but that it gradually gave way to a homogenizing synthesis – the canon – that was achieved through conflict, compromise and exclusion. Hepworth Dixon probably knew that when the gospels multiplied and their authority dwindled, it became pressing to agree on a list of accepted works, and the final

canon emerged only at the end of a series of bitter internal disputes when, around 367, Athanasius sealed the list of twenty-seven canonical books (the New Testament).

Elaine Scarry claims the Judeo-Christian scriptures as the main formative influence on western civilization (197). New Woman writers understand this point and therefore encourage a reconsideration of the socio-cultural costs of this pervasive and definitive power in their civilization. Hepworth Dixon dwells on a nameless woman whom she calls "Number 27" (153), a "fallen" woman who tries to commit suicide after being seduced and then betrayed by a successful surgeon. By choosing to locate the "fallen" woman within the canon, and name her as its last article, "number twenty-seven," Dixon underlines the interplay between social, religious, and literary terms of inclusion and exclusion. The last words of the dying girl prove pivotal as she exposes the eminent surgeon who is the New Woman protagonist's suitor. Hepworth Dixon suggests that the girl's informal and reluctant testimony, which is both heard and heeded by Alison – the New Woman – must and should be attended to no less than the more "authoritative" but misleading voice of the surgeon who silences her. Claiming a position of authority for an underprivileged and abused woman within the biblical and literary canon as well as within the social structure that ignores her, Hepworth Dixon encourages readers to revise not only literary and religious canons, but also social ones. In the penultimate chapter, "In Which Civilisation Triumphs," the relationship between canonization and civilization is investigated as the story of Dr Dunlop Strange's seduction and betrayal of his dying mistress is unravelled. He chooses to define "number twenty-seven" as "a martyr of civilisation." Another physician, Dr Danby, protests: "there is something wrong somewhere . . . with our boasted civilisation. It's all unnatural . . . Not fit for girls" (144; ch. 17). By implication, suggests Hepworth Dixon, the canons through which civilization defines itself are not natural: they are constructs that express and perpetuate existing patterns of power. She and her fellow writers should continue to challenge them if they wish to redefine civilization in less exclusive terms.

As New Woman authors make regular forays into such religious and pedagogic controversies, the contemporary reception of their engagement with the Bible and Higher criticism can be examined as a complex dialogic discourse on wider issues of canonicity. This process can be exemplified in the critical responses to Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage*. The novel itself mimics late-nineteenth-century objections to the feminist literary preoccupation with biblical tropes through the character of a typical critic, who ridicules "the 'new woman' with [her] stupendous lopsided opinions on difficult Old Testament subjects" (20; ch. 5). It is only fitting, then, that the reception of the novel and its motto, "After the red pottage comes the exceeding bitter cry," was "interspersed by sneers and irony": readers who could not locate the origin of the motto claimed that it was mistaken, and "add[ed] in their desperation that it did not matter, anyway, where the motto came from, and that they had serious doubts as to its having been derived from anywhere save Miss Cholmondeley's imagination" ("Books and Authors" 12). Thus the author's unique representation of conflicts between feminist-liberal readings of the Bible and conventional teaching was resolved by literary critics who presented such alternative readings as unsubstantiated or, indeed, imaginary. Only in 1900 was the motto traced back to a sermon by Dean Farrar, entitled "on Selling the Birthright," from 1887. Even upon validating the source, critics blamed Cholmondeley for the delay: "considering the numerous and enthusiastic followers that Dean Farrar is known to have in this country, but possibly – no, this can[not] be so, for it is said that everybody has read or is reading *Red Pottage*" (12). This slighting remark is, in itself, characteristic of contemporary

critics' tendency to conflate religious and literary canons by belittling New Woman writers' contribution to both. It is difficult to imagine that Cholmondeley would have chosen her motto from Farrar unless she had identified with his commitment to combine a Christian worldview with scientific thought: it was Farrar who caused controversy by blaming English clergy for being "the enemies of science." It was also he who wrote the best-selling biography of the late-Victorian age: *Life of Christ* (1874), a biography which was informed by his learning of the Higher criticism (Chadwick 27, 67). Cholmondeley followed in his footsteps as the controversy and the negative publicity "given to a pulpit condemnation" of *Red Pottage* actually speeded sales of the novel, so that "all 8000 copies of the first impression [were] cleared out in a fortnight" (Waller 1015).

The transience of literary value judgements is addressed by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who suggests that the very need for canonization stems from the structural instability that cultural impermanence implies (5–39). Since cultural value is fluid, its variability calls forth attempts at "standardization" from members of socio-cultural elites whose fixed standards encourage the rejection of anti-canonical or "low" culture. The latter is perceived not only as a threat to the supremacy of hierarchical points of view but also as a challenge to the authority of the groups whose preferences are canonized and perpetuated, and hence, viewed as a threat to the socio-cultural structure, its cohesion and unity. Smith suggests that as a result, the non-canonical works are branded as "irregular," "unsuitable," "substandard," or "outlandish" (22). The members of the canon-forming group think of those who compromise its standards as "suffering from crudeness of sensibility, diseases and distortions of perception, impoverishment of background-and-education, cultural or historical bias, ideological or personal prejudices, and/or undeveloped, corrupted, or jaded tastes" (22).

And indeed, New Woman novelists were often accused of all the above: their experimentation with form, structure, and style posed a challenge to many critics' notions of aesthetic worth. The novels were decried as lacking in unity, conformity, and regularity: their endings were unsatisfactory; their organization was "wanting" or "lack[ing] in proportion," "chaotic," and "haphazard," since each part was not "vitally connected with every other" ("Recent Novels" 395–96); the "various details" did not amount to "a satisfying unity," but rather made the readers "feel more intensely how heterogeneous and disjointed they [we]re"; the plot had "no main current," or displayed "a tangle of themes and counter-themes" ("Review of the *Heavenly Twins*" 374–5); the style was "Accumulation, not selection" (Payne 78); the writing was "artistically vicious in its crudity" and the books were "a heterogeneous conglomerate of interests" ("The Author of *Babs*" 347; Saunders 4447). Such comments betrayed the critics' preoccupation with issues of canonicity, as the open-ended and heterogeneous nature of the novels, their loose structure and unorthodox style were defined in opposition to the image of canonical works as "finished," focused, coherent, homogenous, unified, and conclusive.

That unstable religious, social, artistic, and literary creeds were becoming increasingly associated with the unsettling effects of the feminist movement is clear. When Eliza Lynn Linton was railing against the New Woman in the 1890s, she described her as practising "spiritual and religious crazes of every kind and description . . . smok[ing] in public . . . [and] offend[ing] against all the canons of good taste," thus meshing religious, ideological, and aesthetic standards of judgement (460). She was not the only critic who conflated New Woman authors' artistic deficiencies and stylistic shortcomings with problematic or

disturbing messages. Many critics noticed the interrelations between New Woman novels and controversial elements in nineteenth-century political, religious, and cultural thought. They kept referring to New Woman novelists in terms that emphasized the authors' tendency to proselytize, presenting them as "preachers" whose "sermons" disseminated "heresies" ("Mere Man," rpt. Heilmann and Forward, eds. 180). Until the end of her career, Grand had to contend with reviewers who said that her "transgressions" against "certain literary canons" were "almost beyond pardon" (rpt. Heilmann and Forward, eds. 1: 10), and she never lost her conviction that modern aesthetic perceptions and preferences were largely determined by "the Fathers of the Church" and ecclesiastic institutions.[7]

Particularly acerbic was William Barry's response to *The Heavenly Twins* ("The Strike of a Sex," *Quarterly Review* 179 (1894): 295–305). After taking Grand to task for her inadequate style and language, Barry associated the "discordant" notes of the novel with its religious commentary: he found fault with the "prophetess" Ideala's assertion that the "true spirit of God is in us women," and compared Grand to Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), the "hysterical subject" who "founded a religion" (rpt. Heilmann and Forward, eds. 444). From a canonical point of view, this comparison did not bode well for Sarah Grand. As Fiona Robertson claims, "the rhetorical and personal consequences of exclusion are nowhere clearer than in the [case of Southcott] . . . the greatest religious phenomenon of her age" (xxxiii). Southcott was explicit in her defence of women's equal spiritual status within the priesthood of believers.[8] She developed a feminist theology which often met with ridicule by the established church, and which was particularly challenging in an era when the pressure mounted on the Anglican establishment by Dissenters was redoubled in the political arena with demands for more civic liberties.

In this context, then, Barry's evocation of Southcott, the Shakers, and other heretical sects that had faith in a female Messiah brought New Woman fiction into a threatening and chaotic moment in the history of the Church and the state. This moment could recur now at the *fin de siècle*, re-enacted by Southcott's spiritual daughter and abetted by feminist campaigners. The idea of female divinity, suggested Barry, was as central to Grand and "the New Woman" movement as to earlier heretics, and it was a false and misleading faith: "To Mr. Arnold, the deity worshipped by Philistines was a magnified, non-natural man," but to Grand and her followers it was rather "a magnified, non-natural woman" (445). Like Southcott before her, Grand's gender, as well as her religious and social background, did not grant her any position of authority, and her sense of calling was likely to be as abortive as Southcott's pregnancy with Shiloh, the new Messiah. Like her female predecessors, Grand was not to fulfil her promise, and her "sermons" – or novels – would not be included in the canon. Shifting almost imperceptibly from Grand to "the New Woman," Barry returned to the familiar accusation that for woman, "religion [was always] feeling," and "never knowledge," but framed it in the new historical context of an agnostic, doubtful age: "we cannot know for certain . . . who shall say? . . . to the New Woman it is never a dogma, for in the Christian sense of the word she believes nothing" (446). In this review, the New Woman in general, and Sarah Grand in particular, is cast in the somewhat conflicting roles of a sworn agnostic and a fervent if false prophetess.

New Woman authors were not oblivious to these charges, and in response, self-consciously investigated the textual status of their own works in relation to both religious and literary canons. Even a cursory glance at the intertextual references in these novels indicates that their heroines typically read and criticize male masterpieces as inadequate,

immoral, or corrupting. Evadne is dissatisfied with Fielding's *Tom Jones* in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), while Mary Erle resists the temptation of the double standards in Dickens's *David Copperfield*. New Woman narratives are set in opposition to these male canonical texts ideologically as well as structurally, encouraging readers to imagine alternative structures and possibilities, to confront a representation of "real" disorder, unresolved tensions, questions, and conflicts not only in fiction but also in private lives and in the current state of socio-political and religious change. Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, which was described by several contemporary critics as the "Bible" of the suffrage movement (Ardis, "Organizing Women" 191) is a good example. At least some of its readers appreciated its lack of formulaic design, and approved of Schreiner's departure from traditional literary scripts. A reviewer for the feminist periodical *Shafts* said of the novel: "the book is deeply, intensely life-like, with its people who come and go, who differ so much from each other, who fit not into each other's lives, make not each other's happiness, mar each other's aims" ("Review of *The Story*" 55). Choosing experimentation and friction over smooth, orderly, and predictable formats, Schreiner refrained from resolving tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties, and instead accentuated them on thematic, stylistic, and structural levels. She rejected Chapman and Hall's demand to end the novel on a happier note by arranging a marriage between the two lovers. In the preface to the second edition of her book, she claimed that there was a sense of satisfaction and order in following "immutable" literary conventions and methods, as it provided the readers with "certainty" and "completeness." She however decided to reject them in favour of "the method of life we all lead. Here nothing can be prophesied . . . Life may be painted according to either method: but the methods are different. The canons of criticism that bear upon the one cut cruelly upon the other" (qtd. in Fehlbaum 41).

The critical study of the biblical canon was to prove most instrumental in New Woman novelists' struggle to push the boundaries of "the canons of criticism" and literature of their age. They had not only incorporated contemporary biblical commentary into their books, but actually replicated, reproduced, and used its insights and methods to promote feminist and artistic agendas. For instance, historical-critical approaches generated the hypothesis that Genesis-Deuteronomy should be read, not as five discrete books, but as the interweaving of four separate, older sources, J, E, D and P, with four distinct, separate theological outlooks. Most critics "made no attempt to integrate these into any larger whole. To the question 'What is the Pentateuch?' they answered 'The amalgam of J, E, D, and P'" (Barton, "Historical-critical Approaches" 10).[9] Such a disintegrative approach was picked up on by late-nineteenth-century feminist critics whose own commentary, in turn, may have informed the disjointed economy of New Woman fiction. The German critic Julius Wellhausen had first established in 1878 that the discrepancies between the two versions of creation in Genesis resulted from the fact that they were produced by at least two different sources: J and E, one identifying God as [J]Yahweh and the other as [E]Elohim. Wellhausen contended that the theological unity that many readers sought and found in the canonical Scriptures concealed a politically unstable situation in which there was no one but several competing versions of Yahweism. In 1895 Elizabeth Cady Stanton recommended Wellhausen's findings to her female readers: "The most important thing for a woman to notice, in reading Genesis, is that . . . [it] contains two entirely separate, and very contradictory, stories of creation, written by two different . . . authors. Modern theologians have . . . entitled [the two creation stories] the Elohisitic and the [J]Iahoistic stories . . . My own opinion is that the second story was manipulated by some Jew, in an endeavour to give heavenly authority" to the subjection of

women (16–18). For Stanton, the first version was the only acceptable one, since it described the creation of man and woman as a simultaneous and unified event, in a non-hierarchical account, as opposed to the second version, which positioned woman as second to man in the order of creation.

Sarah Grand echoed these debates in *The Beth Book*, where she made the eponymous heroine notice "the discrepancy between the first and second chapters" of Genesis (305). For Grand, highlighting the discrepancies between the two versions of creation was a deliberate attempt to question the validity of traditional justifications for the existing power-relations between the sexes. William Barry protested against the Heavenly Twins' "pleasure in showing the . . . contradictions everywhere in the sacred writers" (450–51). But he and Zangwill were missing the point when they denounced Grand's "self-contradictions" while arguing that it was no use "criticising *The Beth Book* as art" since its author would "not accept the canons of art" (rpt. in Heilmann and Forward, eds. 493). In fact, its author started revising the canons of art in the light of the already advanced revisions in the field of the biblical canon. If the sacred writings contained unresolved contradictory reports and juxtaposed various versions, so could her own writings challenge the readers. Moreover, according to Heilmann, internal contradiction became one of the features that typified Grand's praxis as a whole: "Far from being unaware of her self-contradictory statements, Grand seems to have enjoyed the indeterminacy of her shifting positions" (Heilmann and Forward, eds. 5).

Colliding, disharmonious narrative strands are also an integral part of *Story of an African Farm*, whose recurrent allusions to Ecclesiastes are telling, as it is distinctive for its "inconsistencies," prominent among which are "extremes of piety and scepticism" which challenge a hermeneutics of harmonious and coherent messages about belief (Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* 78). The spirit of Ecclesiastes is particularly notable as Waldo struggles to understand and come to terms with Lyndall's death. Alternative accounts and explanations of this loss succeed each other, but none has the upper hand and no version silences the others. The voice of "the nineteenth-century Christian" says: "Christ arose . . . God is love. You shall see her again" (257; ch. 2.13). The "Transcendentalist" inquires: "What have you to do with flesh?" (258; ch. 2.13) The agnostic voice cries: "Your immortality is annihilation, your Hereafter is a lie" – Lyndall is irrevocably lost, and they shall not meet again (258; ch. 2.13).

As the juxtaposition of these various versions of one event suggests, like Grand, Schreiner defied the concept of one monolithic and final text. John Barton shows that the Higher critics analyzed the Synoptic Gospels "much the same" as they did Genesis. They concentrated on the 'Synoptic Problem': "how are the overlaps and divergences among the three synoptic Gospels to be accounted for," rather than how they should be reconciled (Barton, "Historical-critical Approaches" 10). Waldo in particular is aligned with the Higher Critics on account of his German ancestry and since, as Lyndall says, he keeps asking "why": "you Germans are born with an aptitude for burrowing; you can't help yourselves" (163; ch. 4). Waldo articulates the disjunctions of the Synoptic Problem as he points out the discrepancy between the accounts of the Gospels of Mark and Luke: "Why did the women in Mark see only one angel and the women in Luke two? Could a story be told in opposite ways and both ways be true? Could it? Could it?" (32; ch. 1.4) This vexed theological issue was hotly contested between Professor Huxley and the Very Reverend Dr. Henry Wace over the pages of the *Nineteenth Century*. In a response to Huxley's challenging question whether he believed in the version in Mark or Luke, because in "the former there is one possessed man, in the latter

there are two . . . [and even] the most unabashed of reconcilers cannot well say that one man is the same as two, or two as one," (713) Wace said: "My answer is that I believe both . . . St. Mark and St. Luke may have thought that the only important point was the nature of the miracle itself, and not the number of possessed men who were the subjects of it . . . the greater number includes the less" (713). While critics discussed the "palpable inconsistencies" in the biblical canon, New Woman writers incorporated them into their fiction in an epistemological and hermeneutical manner, asking with Waldo: "could a story be told in opposite ways, and both ways be true?"

Ideala, Grand's 1888 eponymous heroine, certainly demonstrates that this is a possibility. She writes and publishes anonymously the religiously evocative poem "The Passion of Delysle," which describes a forbidden love affair between a woman and a monk. But she later disparages its sensuousness, and sets about writing an alternative poem, "The Choice" (50–68), which describes the same events and ends on a similarly tragic note with the lovers' death. While both poems mesh religious and romantic/erotic love in their images of passion, the two versions differ in their choice of emphasis, morals, and style, as Heilmann observes (*New Woman Strategies* 49–51). Ideala thus tells the same story in opposite ways. Her doublet calls attention to the reduplicated yet different versions of events in the gospels, which tell the story of the original Passion. Non-identical repetitions of the same biblical story foster, according to David Richter, "a suspicious mode of interpretation" in the readers, who are invited to assess whether the different accounts are an attempt "to reconcile contradictions" or vice versa, to "defy any usual mode of reconciliation" (290). Reverend Wace chooses to resolve the tension between non-identical gospel doublets by reading them as the true history of events which "happen once, but are narrated multiple times in inconsistent ways," so that the scriptures "include alternative versions of most of the significant events" (290). In some respects, historical and literary pluralities are written into the interest in redaction which typified much of the nineteenth- century biblical scholarship: "even in descriptions of one and the same event, different narrators relay different stories, each told from a particular historical and cultural location that lends a different interpretational spin to the basic story" (Helmer 13). Unwilling to exclude one version by choosing another as more authoritative, the redactor – and, by the same token, the New Woman author – refuses to decide "which of two accounts may be the true one," creating a "disorderly" narrative that "allows" the inclusion of both, without concealing the contradictions between them, inviting readers to consider the two alternatives in relation to each other and the wider canon.

As Gorak's etymological study of the word "canon" shows, the "organisation of time into significant units" is one of its original meanings (9). Canons, by definition, "have a certain permanence and timelessness that bypass the problems of cultural gaps" (Barton, *Reading Old Testament* 88–90). However, in 1895, when examining literary canonization in relation to time, Macneile Dixon perceives a problem: "[t]he history of criticism" is, in fact, "a chronicle of reversed judgments" since "Time" often proves a "slow workman," the effects of whose labours would unfold and develop for many years, and are difficult to foresee (401). Thus there is always a cultural as well as temporal gap between the contemporary assessments of a novel and its final place in our civilization. At the turn of the century the problem of the temporal dimension of canonicity was exacerbated by German scholarship: although canons were predominantly defined by timelessness, by the 1870s, critics had become immersed in the dating, periodization and historical background of the Scriptures. Their findings complicated the common dichotomy between texts which were written for

posterity and those written to attract contemporary attention and accommodate urgent needs. The biblical canon itself was thus subjected to a context-specific examination rather than read as a timeless narrative. When biblical criticism was emerging as a serious science which examined historical relativity and contextualization, anti-canonical protests of literary critics such as Dixon could not be underrated.

Feminist exegetes of the Bible were as concerned with timing as the Higher critics, but from a different perspective. Since female commentators were committed to urgent contemporary political campaigns, they often linked biblical stories to pressing issues and presented some parts of the Bible as topical and relevant to current affairs, while others were dismissed as expressing outmoded attitudes that were the product of specific historical conditions which no longer existed. Some of them even dated the demise of the "true spirit of Christianity" back to its canonization: "its death-warrant was sealed with the decrees of Constantine . . . and the various councils from which women were excluded" ("Womanhood II" 20). Moreover, temporality was often at the core of the feminist argument that now was the time to reinterpret the Bible, to present alternative readings, to speak, and to act. Women involved in new missionary societies often viewed and presented themselves as participating in a "second Pentecost," and saw the end of the century as a time of a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit: the "latter days" had come. Josephine Butler, whose campaigns and speeches were much admired by Sarah Grand, was determined to show that it was high time women spoke out and demanded equal civil rights. She believed and preached that, far from irreligious, this mission was an urgent divine calling. In an 1898 appeal for a true, liberal, and divinely-inspired leadership, she pleaded for its speedy arrival "in these days . . . O God, for Christ's sake, create and send to us now, speedily, in these days, prophets and prophetesses" (4). But while stressing the immediate exigency of female spiritual and political leadership, Butler had to consider time in religious terms, since only when a New Dispensation was inaugurated could the Prophet Joel's words come true: "Upon the servants and the handmaidens I will pour out my Spirit; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2.28). Urging that now was the time for women to reinterpret the Bible's teachings and be recognized as inspired speakers, Butler had to establish that the New Dispensation had already begun. Looking for signs that heralded it, she found in the Apostle Peter's words a confirmation of "the great inauguration of the Dispensation under which we are now living – a Dispensation of Liberty, Life, Equality, and Justice" (5).

Grand captured Butler's sense of urgency and privilege by invoking in her fiction an unprecedented and unrepeatable moment in the history of womankind. In her "Proem" to *The Heavenly Twins* she described time as ripe for opportunities and pregnant with change: "In these latter days, however, it began to appear as if the supremacy of the great masculine idea was at last being seriously threatened . . . the spirit of pure love, Elohim, mistranslated in the Book of Genesis as 'He' only, but signifying the union to which all nature testifies, the male and female principles," is announced at last. Grand was referring not only to the socio-political and legal reforms which were set in motion after a long struggle, but also to another distinctly modern and timely privilege: the opportunity to read and benefit from feminist criticism of the Bible. This particular passage refers to feminist claims from the 1890s that the translation of the creation stories in Genesis was inaccurate, and that "in our own image" meant a divinity in whom the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented. Similarly, some feminist critics maintained that in the early days of Christianity, such a union was actually embodied in Jesus himself, who owed his power to this "dual

condition – an example of the strength which resides in the human being who manifests the qualities of the woman and the man" ("Womanhood II" 20). These mixed qualities, or dual condition, are of course represented in the novel by the "heavenly twins" themselves: a boy and a girl who are not meant to be separated by social conventions yet are forced to part ways. On a self-reflexive level, Grand's allusions to time may be read as an evocation of the earlier stages of Christianity as her fellow feminists saw them: a window of opportunities, an era before the final sealing of the canon, and thus an urgent plea for women to enrich and diversify Victorian literary canons before they, too, become fixed.

New Woman authors, who were influenced by the Higher critics on the one hand and by Butler and other forerunners of the feminist movement on the other hand, were bound to be preoccupied with temporality, its fictional representation, and its literary and political implications. But their representations of time had an additional, slightly different edge, too: their fiction was framed in a certain period, and many critics regarded it as the product of its socio-historical context, both arising out of and limited by the "Woman Question" debates. Derrida has defined this hermeneutic problem in the following terms: the text as a product of one moment in history "must efface in itself some stigma of singularity in order to outlast . . . what it commemorates" (318). The text that becomes relevant to generations of readers is both "due its date, due to its date, owes itself to its date as its own inmost concern," but it also "absolves itself of its debt [to the date] so that its utterance may . . . make it readable and audible beyond its singularity" of date, like the Bible (311). According to Derrida's definition, products of their times they may and should be, but in order to become timeless, texts need to be perceived as transcending the boundaries of a certain time and place, rising above the specific conditions of their production, and retaining a continuing universal appeal.

From its inception, New Woman literature was perceived as topical, closely associated with the women's movement and with a certain moment of historical change, and in this respect, it was never going to have an easy or smooth path to canonicity. Many literary reviews, then as today,[10] attest to what seems to be a clash between the status of this fiction as timely or topical and its aspiration to address a timeless audience, to reach canonical transcendence. "Women's books," complained Sykes in a review of New Woman fiction for the *Westminster Review*, "What is it that makes them temporarily so successful, and eternally so wanting?" (397) Similarly, an anonymous reviewer for the *Athenæum* said: "books of this class . . . have, not unnaturally, a commercial success, and for the moment they are belauded . . . but there are . . . signs that the present outburst . . . will give way before long to the recognized masters of English fiction" ("Review of George Egerton" 375). In all these reviews an antithesis is established: New Woman fiction as the evanescent and feminine literature of the moment and for the moment on the one hand, and classical, solid, eternal canons of literature written by respectable male authors, or "Masters," on the other hand.

The dialogic character of the debates on New Woman fiction involved the feminist/ New Woman camp in responses to claims that the novels were only ephemeral. A *Shafts* reviewer wrote of *The Heavenly Twins*: "this book will take its place among that deathless company; it will accomplish the work for which it has been sent forth . . . with immortal power" (rpt. Heilmann and Forward, eds. 411). Grand herself considered the issue of textual evaluation against time and discussed it at some length in 1898, concluding that the truly classical books were those which "have influenced public opinion and been epoch-making in the history of nations . . . mak[ing] a lasting impression . . . becom[ing] a power for good or evil" (rpt. in

Heilmann's *Journalistic Writings* 1: 78). *The Heavenly Twins* was vindicated when reissued after the war, with the statement that although it had a "stormy reception," "Time tests the spirit of a book, whether it be of God or of the devil; and time has decided that this book" would last for good (rpt. Heilmann and Forward, eds. 1: 397).

Patricia Murphy has contended that "time became a covert but potent means of naturalizing repressive definitions of female subjectivity in response to the threatening New Woman . . . in the century's waning decades" (2). However, New Woman writers found in critical readings of the Bible a means to protest against and transcend such "naturalization" of cultural repression. An analysis of temporality in Schreiner's novel must take into account her extensive allusions to Ecclesiastes and to the complex relationship between time and canonicity that is evoked there. The first chapter of the second part of *African Farm* opens with an epigraph that paraphrases Ecclesiastes ("And it was all play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for. A striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing") and its title, "Times and Seasons," is a direct quotation of it (101; ch. 2.1). In this part of the novel, Schreiner points out that time and its passage, regulated and organized as they are in the Christian calendar, often do not match personal phases of growth, or do not synchronize with periods of transition and change in human life. She presents time as a very subjective experience, so that any external imposition of progressive linearity through the Christian teachings only highlights the clash between regulated temporality and individual growth: "The soul's life has seasons of its own; periods not found in any calendar" (101; ch. 2.1). Her own litany of times and seasons culminates with the time for doubt: "Whether a man believes in a human-like God or no is a small thing . . . no relation between cause and effect, no order, but a blind chance sporting" (100–15; ch. 2.1). As the progressive linearity of time is contrasted with the regressive linearity of faith, life becomes a gradual transition from learning to believe to coping with disbelief and doubt.

Schreiner's rendition of temporality testifies to her highly nuanced and complex understanding of Ecclesiastes, which, as a central frame of reference, enables her to escape the pitfalls that Murphy identifies as Christian and masculine narratives of progression. As James Kugel observes, Ecclesiastes "shows very little . . . consequentiality," and is dominated by elements of cyclical thought. The book has become identified with temporal ordering due to its litany of the "right times" in chapter three, which Schreiner quotes: the poetic enumeration of the right seasons to do or refrain from doing certain things. Yet the framework of this litany, which Schreiner paraphrases in several ways, undercuts the notion that such cosmic order would benefit the individual, be governed by his or her choices, or ever be comprehensible to humans. Placing human labour, ambition, and strife for knowledge within the context of biblical, societal, and cosmic cycles, Schreiner – following Qohelet, the speaker in Ecclesiastes – doubts that much comfort can be gained from them, as the thematic and repetitive pronouncement "Vanity of vanities . . . vanity of vanities; all is vanity" may suggest.

Nevertheless, as Kugel points out, cyclic models of history (evident in Ecclesiastes) have always co-existed alongside linear ones in biblical texts. They suggest that "all that is real partakes of the returning and the repeating" ("Two Introductions" 85); that, indeed, reality is made of routines and repetitive acts and events, which in the long term count more than unique and rare occasions. Cyclical temporality could serve New Woman authors to transform the domestic, daily and seemingly insignificant "feminine" routines into a new understanding of the consequences and long-term effects of such routines on their civilization.

Repetition can prove momentous in socio-cultural terms, not least because the repetition of certain biblical allusions and textual references can expand or change an existing canon. New Woman authors who chose to engage with and participate in the negotiation of religious and literary canons could contribute to their reformulation through the re-reading and re-presentation of biblical themes, particularly those that had been discussed by fellow woman writers. Since "books contained within the canon" are read intertextually, and the association "with another text of similar authority clearly presupposes a canon," they could even claim their own share in canonicity (*Literary Guide* 610). Ella Hepworth Dixon's representation of time is certainly a case in point. As Fehlbaum notes (128), she admired Schreiner and her *Story of an African Farm*, so by choosing to call her novel *Story of a Modern Woman*, she may have paid homage to Schreiner's achievement. Time and order, social and religious, are central to Dixon's exploration of canonicity in relation to modern women in general and modern women writers in particular. Echoing and responding to Schreiner's representation of the clock and of the Ecclesiastes litany of times and seasons, Dixon structures her book quite rigidly, dividing the text into twenty-four chapters which reflect the structure of time that regulates daily routines and highlights the ways in which civilization imposes order on individuals, not least through religious canons: the Old Testament comprises twenty-four books and the Greek alphabet – Alpha to Omega – has twenty-four letters.

Hepworth Dixon suggests that women's time and men's time are quite different. Women are strangers to time since they are not expected to work, earn money, or engage in "meaningful," civilization-making activities, whereas men are inherently linked to time because they inhabit the public sphere and perceive and present themselves as builders of Empire and Culture. Mary is forever watching the clock, waiting for letters and visits from false lovers who never arrive and always find unconvincing excuses to account for their disregard of her time. Yet male figures – false lovers and undeserving brother and friends – are remarkably unproductive, and none of their actions or promises ever comes to fruition. Dixon thus presents women as bound to time-keeping rather than time-making, while men merely use and waste time to excuse themselves from household chores or truly timeless and unselfish endeavours. The novel concludes with Mary's tormented self-questioning, which echoes that of Qohelet, Lyndall, and Waldo in *African Farm*, thus building on a tradition of religious and cultural self-examination: "Who am I? Why am I here? . . . Human life is but a moment in the aeons of time, and yet one little human lifetime contains an eternity of suffering" (189; ch. 24).

The functions and workings of time are as ambiguous here as they are in Schreiner's text. The novel begins in the spring and ends in springtime, but, as Fehlbaum claims, this harmonious circle only emphasizes the heroine's entrapment in universal and societal cycles. Years have elapsed from the opening to the concluding spring, but Mary still has not found a husband, has not published her novel, has not attained any artistic or literary recognition, and has not been able to fulfill her dreams. Female helplessness against time is then highlighted from a different perspective, as Hepworth Dixon echoes the clock scene from *African Farm*, intensifying the antithesis that Schreiner drew between the orderly passage of time and the chaotic nature of human life and death. Waldo found the clock unbearable: "It never waited; it went on inexorably; and every time it ticked *a man died*!" (3; ch. 1.1) Hepworth Dixon, by comparison, juxtaposes her heroine's eternal state of waiting in anticipation of fulfillment with the sudden understanding that time does not wait at all, that it is, as Waldo cries, inexorable. As Mary's best friend, Alison, lies dying, she watches the clock, and the sudden

stillness of Alison's heart is contrasted with "the pert click of the little gilt clock on the mantelpiece ticking, ticking, ticking glibly away" (173; ch. 22).

The analogy between the wasted, undervalued time in women's private lives and the refusal to grant women authors any considerable contribution to "public time" – the canonical timelessness – is clear. Hepworth Dixon's references to what was regarded as a key text in women's literature may have been an attempt to establish a solid female lineage and an enduring feminist literary canon by calling attention to a book which was received as the New Woman's "Bible" a decade earlier. But her preoccupation with temporality also reflects Dixon's realization that the relationship between enduring literary fame and time was still a pressing, unresolved issue for women writers who pushed the boundaries of orthodox canonicity. The discourse of temporality represents, on a meta-fictional level, concerns about cultural longevity, and the fear of disappearing from communal memory. On a political level, time reminds us that hard-won achievements are both urgent and transient, and that woman is condemned to eternal self-postponement unless she releases herself. The transcendent timelessness of male masterpieces as vehicles for bridging the gaps between past and present, present and future, is countered by a feminine model whose cyclical nature stresses that the past is both the present and the future. According to Julia Kristeva, this circuitous temporality "renders explicit a rupture, an expectation, or an anguish which other temporalities work to conceal" (446). Kristeva's "Women's Time," however, restates the point made by Kugel in relation to Ecclesiastes and biblical time cycles, as she links female subjectivity and authority to "monumental" or "cosmic" time and eternal procreation through creative repetition: "female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations" (445).

In their rejection of linear narratives of time as departure, progression, and conquest, New Woman modalities of temporality implied an endless journey through time but also durability, renewal, regeneration, or resurrection which were fundamental to the conceptualization of canonicity. In their references to a shared biblical canon and to their own re-reading and re-interpretation of its teachings in each other's novels, New Woman writers showed that their works were enduring and authoritative, standing the test of time. Their contribution to the negotiation of canonicity in the last decades of the nineteenth century illuminated, complicated, and enriched existing canons. Their engagement with the Bible and biblical scholarship asserted and validated their active participation in political, theological, and cultural debates. It enabled both female authors and readers to situate themselves in relation to a public, communal, and timeless tradition which they envisioned as a continuously unfolding, evolving, and expanding civilization.

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

NOTES

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1. *Pistis Sophia* had been investigated since the 1850s, and its translation into English began in 1890. In 1896, a German Egyptologist, alerted by previous publications and speculations, bought in Cairo

a manuscript that contained the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene). For more details on *Pistis Sophia* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and later discoveries of the Nag Hammadi library and other gnostic gospels, see Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* and Mead's *Pistis Sophia*.

2. Nineteenth-century feminist critics of the Bible and historical-critical scholarship of the Bible had much in common: both challenged the doctrines of divine inspiration and the inerrancy of scripture as an absolute, timeless revelation. Furthermore, the historical, contextual perspective that was developed and practiced in Germany became crucial in opening up and discerning new prospects for exegesis. Yet the two schools cannot be conflated, and the differences between them should not be ignored. One of the significant differences is in the purpose and aims of biblical study. The historical critics valued objectivity and disinterestedness above all, a priority which did not necessarily typify the feminist commitment to interpreting the Bible in the service of the women's movement toward social reform.
3. See, for example, Schreiner's letter to Ellis on 8 April 1884 (Rive 36–37).
4. See the account of Clough's doubts in Chadwick 1: 539.
5. See, for example, English and German models discussed in the Wace-Huxley debates, "Christianity and Agnosticism" (Wace 700–19).
6. Of interest, in this context, is Hélène Cixous's thoughtful response to Jacques Derrida's "Shibboleth." Cixous examines "shibboleth," or the sharp "line of poetry," as an invisible door that, while signifying "a border" or "a bound" may still mark a point of potential passage, a door that sometimes "stands aside" so as "to let pass . . . over into infinity." Cixous claims that the "bursting of doors," which enables the movement "to go farther than far," is allowed through acts of "elemental love" and passion (on linguistic, cultural and literary planes, among others) where a "fine, tender separation" opens up "a common country" or passageway to a rich, hidden, interior domain. She concludes with the suggestion that it is the writers' mission to find the ways and possibilities to force the invisible door open. Hepworth Dixon's treatment of canonicity through the figure/ character "number 27" highlights a similar interest in and desire for inclusion or, in Cixous's words "border passage." See Cixous 57–83.
7. See, for example, Sarah Grand, "Morals of Manners and Appearance" (rpt. Heilmann and Forward, eds. 19–21).
8. See Barbara Taylor 160–65 for more details on Southcott.
9. Modern scholarship maintains that there are two sources or strands, the Priestly and the Yahewistic.
10. In recent years, the question of evaluation in literary studies has been opened by feminist critics who have sought to effect a transition from orthodox aesthetic axiology towards an alternative reformulation of perspectives, structures, and analyses that would acknowledge divergent systems of value and meaning. Yet even amongst feminist critics there is some disagreement on issues of canonicity in relation to New Woman fiction. Elaine Showalter, while protesting against the "Great Tradition" of literary criticism that excluded, or at best "reduced and condensed the extraordinary range and diversity of English women novelists to a tiny band of the 'great'," contends that *fin-de-siècle* "feminist writers were not important artists" (7, 31, 215, xxv-xxvi). If Showalter resurrected the scholarly interest in New Woman novelists, she did not claim any aesthetic or artistic value for their works, while Ardis regards the whole discourse on canons as self-perpetuating, restrictive, and misleading: "critics mystify the production of literary value when they want to preserve the illusion of objectivity, of ahistorical universality" (*New Women, New Novels* 175). It is, therefore, important to note that issues of canonicity, and the question whether canons could be objective and universal as opposed to historically and politically determined preoccupied many New Woman writers themselves.

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