

3

The “Odd Couple” Constructing the “New Man”

Bloom and Mellors in *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

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Gender issues, a common element in Joyce’s and Lawrence’s writing, deserve further attention in these two writers’ most (in)famous novels, *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Having conceived of exploring Leopold Bloom and Oliver Mellors as the focus of gender issues, I returned to Zack Bowen’s essay, which I had read when it appeared a generation ago. I discovered to my chagrin that Bowen had opened up the very territory I assumed I would be the first to explore. After beginning his essay dramatically with a sampling of the unpleasant comments Joyce and Lawrence made about each other’s novels, Bowen moves on to his real concern: an extensive survey of how much their writing shares in common, especially *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Ulysses*. Bowen briefly notes that Bloom at one point is identified as the “new womanly man” (*U* 15.1798–99), and that Mellors admits that he has been told he has “too much of the woman” in him (*LCL* 344), generalizing that Mellors and Bloom reveal “female as well as male sensibilities” (Bowen <00>). By implication at least, these characteristics, traditionally considered “womanly” or “feminine,” appear in a context where such identification calls into question the manhood of Bloom and Mellors.

My project is to revisit Bowen’s brief gender assessment of these two literary figures and to bring to bear on gender identification some of the relevant theoretical writing that has appeared in the intervening decades. I propose to locate Bloom and Mellors along the spectrum of gender to which most of us have become accustomed in thinking about these issues. In this context, femininity and masculinity represent less the traditional binary of mutually exclusive poles than a continuum within which gender unmoors itself from its older ties to sexual or biological identifications. At its extreme, this exploration opens

out into the possibility that at the beginning of the last century Lawrence and Joyce found in the much-touted “New Woman” the license to offer in Bloom and Mellors a “New Man,” characters not bound by nineteenth-century notions of masculinity or manhood.

It needs to be noted at the outset that this heuristic effort to explore similarities between two central figures in the banned novels of two major modernists is obviously appropriating the indeterminate term “New Woman” to coin yet another, “New Man,” as a means of focusing attention on the transcoding of elements in traditional gender identifications. Although neither Lawrence nor Joyce would have been likely to subscribe to such “labels,” in large part because both Mellors and Bloom are more complex literary constructions than the term “New Man” can connote, the value of provoking a re-viewing of Bloom and Mellors is sufficient to tolerate the term’s looseness. Furthermore, the term “New Man” borrows some of its agency here from Joyce’s own term “new womanly man,” as Bloom is satirically denoted in the “Circe” chapter.

The logical place to begin this examination of Joyce’s and Lawrence’s contributions to the notion of a New Man is *Ulysses* and Leopold Bloom, largely because Joyce began to construct Bloom by 1915, more than a decade before Lawrence began to think about Lady Chatterley’s lover, Oliver Mellors. Although the *Little Review*’s March 1918 issue began the serialized version of *Ulysses*, it is unlikely that Lawrence would have read any of Joyce’s novel before it appeared as a book, six years before *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928). Much as Lawrence was aware of the notoriety of *Ulysses*, how much he was aware of the novel itself is a matter of speculation.

What Lawrence read, he did not like. He wrote: “Joyce wearied me: so like a schoolmaster with dirt and stuff in his head: sometimes good, though: but too mental” (4L 275). Lawrence *was* willing to acknowledge there was something “good, though” in his rival’s scandalous novel. The Lawrence biographer David Ellis indicates that when Lawrence’s publisher Thomas Seltzer suggested he might want to publish “brief, off-the-cuff remarks” about *Ulysses*, Lawrence demurred at first: “Do you really want to publish my James Joyce remarks? No, I don’t think it’s quite fair to him” (4L 345). Those remarks did finally appear, however, in Lawrence’s essay “Surgery for the Novel—Or a Bomb,” in which he lumps Joyce together with Proust and Dorothy Richardson as writers whose novels he finds excessively “mental.” Lawrence spoofed that annoying “mental” self-absorption of Joyce and Co: “‘Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn’t I?’ asks every character of Mr Joyce or of Miss Richardson or Monsieur Proust” (STH 151). Lawrence read enough of *Ulysses* to call it a “filthy book,” but we

can only guess how extensive his reading was. Like Virginia Woolf, Lawrence saw Joyce as a "competitor [. . .] on another track," not because of similarities in their approaches to narrative, as was the case in Woolf's disparagement of Joyce, but in their investments in representing sexuality, particularly the hitherto underrepresented sexuality of women.

However much Lawrence read of *Ulysses*, the scandal of its being censored must have encouraged him to recall his own novel *The Rainbow* (1915). It, too, was banned for its representation of female sexuality, even though Lawrence's novel did not use the full range of the English language Joyce did in his provocative novel. In 1915, it might be noted, Lawrence was still working in the context of publishing firms supplying lending libraries such as Mudie's, which had no willingness to risk offending their patrons with graphic sexuality or colorful English. Even so, Lawrence dared to allow *The Rainbow's* Anton Skrebensky, in an early sexual encounter, to implore his lover Ursula Brangwen, to let him "come." Perhaps Lawrence's editor was unfamiliar with the word's non-standard English deployment as a synonym for reaching orgasm or expected few "ladies" a century ago to understand its predominantly male currency.

The background of Joyce's awareness of the New Woman is easier to document than Lawrence's because it was extensively explored by feminist critics decades ago. As Bonnie Kime Scott explains in *Joyce and Feminism* (1984), Joyce came to maturity in a Dublin where the larger movement for Irish independence had subsumed the women's movement, whose goals included not only suffrage but access to higher education and the professions. The resuscitation of the women's movement after the Second World War elevated Joyce to a position of high prominence among writers/theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva as well as American academics such as Marilyn French in *The Book as World* (1975), Margot Norris in *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake* (1976), Carolyn Heilbrun in *Women in Joyce* (1982), and Scott in *Joyce and Feminism*.

Scott extensively explored Joyce's attraction to the New Woman, as well as the hostility to much of the women's movement among his young Irish contemporaries. That "hostility" found its center in the "purist" impulse of the movement represented by Joyce's friends/colleagues such as Francis J. C. Sheehy-Skeffington and the Sheehy Sisters. Joyce was appalled by the purists who considered sexuality merely a necessary evil for procreation, one they would have gladly eliminated, even within marriage.¹ Scott reminds us that although Joyce was romantically attracted to Mary Skeffington, he found the country girl Nora Barnacle more appealing because she was very much *not* one

of these upper-middle-class women whose obsession with “purity” had turned her against sexuality. Given the puritanical view of sexuality evident in the women’s movement, Joyce undoubtedly knew he could anticipate cold comfort in the marriage bed, while in Nora he found a “good girl” who also made it clear that she understood the reality of sexual desire. The first time Joyce and Nora “walked out together”—to Ringsend, where “An Encounter” is set—Nora opened Jim’s flies and masturbated him to orgasm (*SL* 182). Nora may not have been a New Woman in the conventional sense of an intellectual agitating for women’s suffrage, but sexually she was light-years from the feminist Margaret Cousins, who was unsettled by the rigors of performing her “wifely duties.”

Similarly, although he concurred with his fellow Irishman, or more precisely *Anglo-Irishman*, George Bernard Shaw, in his support of the New Woman, Joyce found the dramatist’s rendition of the construct unacceptable. Like Joyce’s friend Sheehy-Skeffington, Shaw was hardly a fan of sexuality in the New Woman, or in any woman—or, for that matter, any *man*. It was no coincidence that Shaw was a virgin until he was twenty-nine. His marriage to the suffragist Charlotte Payne-Townsend was, at her request, never consummated. To Shaw, sexuality was merely a vehicle of the Life Force, moving the species toward the “Superman.” Indeed the portrayal of Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman* is scarcely flattering, as Shaw depicts her as a predatory womb hungering for the semen of a visionary realist such as John Tanner to help her produce what could be the *Übermensch*.

Even more than Shaw’s work, the writing of the dramatist Henrik Ibsen encouraged Joyce to find the New Woman an attractive figure. Scott prefaces her comments on Joyce’s high regard for Ibsen by noting the efforts of Joyce scholars, such as Richard Ellmann, to diminish the role of Ibsen’s female characters in the construction of Joyce’s response to the New Woman. Scott respectfully disagrees with Ellmann, offering evidence of Joyce’s interest in not merely Ibsen’s technique as a dramatist and his commitment to representing the “truth” but also Ibsen’s feminism. She cites Joyce’s rebuke of Arthur Power, often quoted by feminists: “The purpose of *The Doll’s House*, for example, was the emancipation of women, which has caused the greatest revolution of our time in the most important relationship there is—that between men and women, the revolt of women against the idea that they are the mere instruments of men” (qtd. in Scott 47–48).

The first readers of *Ulysses* would have found Bloom an unconventional male for 1904. “Mr Leopold Bloom” steps on stage in the kitchen of 7 Eccles Street, performing domestic chores conventionally assigned to women: feeding