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Scholarly Collaboration for a Feminist New Age in Jane Harrison's and Jessie Weston's Alternative Histories⁽¹⁾

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<1> Jane Ellen Harrison and Jessie Laidlay Weston were exact contemporaries (1850-1928), and led strikingly parallel lives. Respected scholars and leaders in their fields—ancient Greek religion and art, and Arthurian literature, respectively—they were well known for putting forth controversial theories of the origins of religion in matrilineal, goddess-worshipping societies. Each brought new anthropological approaches to the study of art and literature with the aim of illuminating the history of religion: Harrison most famously in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912), and Weston in *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). Even their afterlives continued on parallel paths: following their deaths in 1928 their theories were discredited within academia (with the exception of the American school of myth-ritual criticism). At the same time, their work was embraced by worshippers in New Age religions, feminist theologians, and other counter-cultural figures.⁽²⁾ In literary studies, their writings are best known as source-texts for modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and H.D.

<2> Despite these parallels, there is no record that Harrison and Weston ever met. Perhaps this is not so surprising: the two women had divergent experiences with institutionalized learning. While Harrison had been among the first students at Newnham, one of the two women's colleges founded at Cambridge in the nineteenth century, and later returned to be the first research fellow there, Weston was never affiliated with a university, but rather pursued her scholarly work among amateurs, enthusiasts, and continental scholars in Paris and London. But in 1919, their lives and work intersected in a heretofore unacknowledged encounter via a major institution of learning, the Cambridge University Press. The letters that attest to this encounter, held in the Press archives, are the only evidence of contact between the two scholars. That year, the Press—which had published Harrison since 1903 and would be publishing Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* in 1920—put the two women in contact. Or rather, it first put Harrison in contact with Weston's work: the Secretary to the Syndics of the Press, A. R. Waller, sent proofs of a chapter of Weston's book to Harrison for correction, without first telling Weston. I don't know how you would feel if your editor did this, but Weston professed to be delighted, and encouraged

Waller to send Harrison more of her work. An institutionally mediated correspondence between Harrison and Weston ensued during October 1919.

<3> In this article, I argue that this encounter between the two prominent women scholars offers an instance of a new kind of relationship among women writers—that of scholarly collaborators for whom collaboration signifies a distinctly modern practice made possible by women’s changing relationships to institutions of knowledge production. Harrison’s and Weston’s was not the collaboration combined with an intimate personal relationship most familiar from nineteenth-century British literature.⁽³⁾ It was more akin to the relationship of “exteriority” among women writers at the British Library Reading Room theorized by Susan David Bernstein in *Roomscape*.⁽⁴⁾ Bernstein defines exteriority as “the productive shifting between private and public” encouraged by institutions such as the Reading Room, in which writers worked alone but with the vivid consciousness of a larger community to which they belonged and encountered one another easily in and around the Museum. But Harrison’s and Weston’s collaboration is distinct from this relation, too, in its exclusively mediated quality. Harrison and Weston did not meet during this correspondence, and all their communications passed via Secretary Waller. Their exchange is further distinguished by their professional interest in collaborative intellectual work. Both Harrison and Weston theorized and practiced forms of collaboration that celebrated what by the late nineteenth century were seen as feminized modes of knowledge production grounded in social experiences. Moreover, they consistently and vehemently presented their theories and practices of collaboration as ideals of scholarship, not as lesser approaches. To them, collaboration was essential to creation and discovery—it constituted the most advanced scientific practice. Finally, and crucially, their collaboration via Waller at the Press was not only mediated, but also impersonal: it was not between Harrison and Weston personally, but between Harrison’s and Weston’s professional—and specifically, scholarly—*personae*.

Collaboration and Scholarship in the Long Nineteenth Century

<4> Criticism on collaboration and modes of collective authorship in the long nineteenth century has focused primarily either on writing for the periodical press or on literary collaborations grounded in close personal relationships.⁽⁵⁾ But the special relation of collaborative authorship to scholarly writing in this period has not yet been explored. Now, scholarship in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain was paradoxically both collaborative (marked by the clubby, masculine conviviality and multiply authored periodicals of learned societies), yet also individualistic, celebrating the male genius and his solitary labor. It was particularly fraught with debates over specialization, an approach to study characterized by depth in a single subject rather than breadth in many, and linked to the proliferation and professionalization of emerging disciplines. But scholarship at this time was further marked by an influx of women: the first women’s colleges at Cambridge and Oxford had opened in the 1860s and 1870s (though without university membership), while London and provincial universities were enrolling, and even hiring, women. However, “[w]ithin nineteenth-century culture, ‘scholarship’ was widely perceived as an essentially masculine activity” (Bellamy 7).

<5> But while scholarship was seen as fundamentally masculine, there was a recognized feminine version, too. As Bonnie Smith has shown, women’s scholarship had strict generic conventions. In

particular, there was a sense “that women did not specialise, and were essentially generalists” (Delap 234). This was linked to the widely held belief that even university-trained women were not capable of the rigor of specialist study. Following a tradition of Victorian amateur scholarship, women saw collaboration as a way to work beyond such individual limitations. But such collaboration from constraint was regarded as an inferior mode of knowledge production. In contrast, Harrison and Weston, who saw themselves as involved in collaborations and often framed such practices in gendered terms, valorized collaboration as an advanced scientific methodology.

<6> Harrison and Weston conceived a feminist modernity that not only found women to be increasingly prominent agents in the world, but also regarded conventionally feminized practices—especially those tied to collective work—as coming into greater prominence, power, and esteem. “The present time,” Harrison wrote in 1915, “is unmistakably one of the emergence of women to fuller liberty and increased influence” (“Scientiae” 135). Moreover, for Harrison, the prominence of women is connected with the centrality of the social. She and Weston called for and engaged in collaborative practices that grounded themselves in approaches to inquiry associated, dismissively, with women’s social experiences, in contrast to solitary practices associated with the heroic labor of male scholars. They used these methods to tell alternative histories that rejected great men in content as well as in approach. In their accounts of ancient Greek religion and the grail legend, Harrison and Weston located the origins of these apparently western cultural products among women and Europe’s conventionally feminized “others”—folk practitioners, colonized peoples, and populations from “the East” (*Ritual* 71).

<7> Harrison’s and Weston’s alternative feminist histories further embrace an alternative feminist historical practice in their call for, and modeling of, interdisciplinarity *avant la lettre*. At a time when professional disciplines were first emerging, Harrison and Weston saw themselves as fighting against too-narrow specialization, and counted themselves among, as Weston wrote, “scholars who labor in a wider field”—specifically, comparative religion (ix). In their work, interdisciplinarity and collaboration are linked endeavors that promise a thrilling experience of knowledge in which phenomena distant in time and space are revealed to be intimately connected. Repeatedly, Weston claims to have united such diverse phenomena as “the extant practice and belief of countries so widely separate as the British Isles, Russia, and Central Africa” (113). And in contrast to the stereotype of the reductive nature of professional, and especially specialist, scholarship, Weston claims that studying such connections increases one’s pleasure in them, rhapsodizing, “The more one studies this wonderful legend the more one discovers significance in what seem at first to be entirely independent and unrelated details” (183). Moreover, Harrison’s and Weston’s embrace of the interdisciplinary field of comparative religion signaled a feminist investment in something other than great-man history, as well as an engagement with a period associated with the idea of women in power. By the late nineteenth century, theories that mankind’s earliest communities were matrilineal or matriarchal, promulgated by J. J. Bachofen, Friedrich Engels, E. B. Tylor, among others, made the history of religion notably hospitable to theories of prehistoric goddess-worshipping societies.

Theories and Practices of Collaboration: “small and strange” groups

<8> Although Harrison was an authority on ancient Greek art, archaeology, and religion, she felt excluded from the ranks of specialists on account of her inadequate training in philology, for which she faulted her woman's education. But at the same time as she bemoaned her lack of specialized knowledge, she pointed to the constraints of specialization. In her correspondence, she criticizes "the specialists" who "grub up the facts but don't see the relations" (Newnham 15). The solution to the limitations of specialization was her "ideal" university, in which specialists encounter one another, broadening their work. She desires a "new academic spirit that sees and feels its own specialism in wider, indeed, in world-wide, relations" (Review 132). Just as Harrison's anthropological method compared ancient Greek customs with those of tribes in colonized nations, connecting her subjects of inquiry across the globe, her ideal university forged a sense of global connection among the producers of knowledge, in which specialized ideas are connected as part of a larger whole across vast expanses.

<9> For a time, Harrison found her ideal university at Cambridge, especially in the learned societies there. For Harrison, such groups were a modern phenomenon. While in contemporary civilization "[t]he tribe is extinct, the family in its old rigid form moribund," new social forms had emerged: "the social groups we now look to as centers of emotion are the groups of industry, of professionalism and of sheer mutual attraction. Small and strange though such groups may appear, they are real social factors" (*Art* 242). Such "small and strange" groups are especially suited to modern life—they are linked by affinity and communal activities rather than by "moribund" family ties. Harrison participated in many "small and strange" learned societies, such as the Cambridge Heretics. She also fostered more informal scholarly coteries, both among her students and among her peers, most famously with a group of male scholars that has come to be known as the Cambridge Ritualists.⁽⁶⁾ Harrison was in constant correspondence with these men: they read each others' work; they dedicated books to one another and coordinated contributions to edited volumes; most strikingly, two of them contributed entire chapters to Harrison's book *Themis*.

<10> However, while men were major players in Harrison's collaborative work, she believed women had an especially significant role to play in the new era of "small," "strange" groups. According to Harrison, women, whether by training or nature, were more suited to social forms of knowledge production than men, and thus better able to pursue knowledge at the present time: "Our present age is an age of co-operation, marked not so much by individual emergence as by interdependent, collective advance, and for this pre-eminent genius is not essential. The great geniuses and, by parity of reasoning, the great criminals may yet remain men. We need not fret about it" ("*Scientiae*" 122-123). For Harrison, the age of men and genius was past; the age of women and "collective advance" was at hand. Moreover, she devalued the figure of the genius, associating it not with the hero, but the criminal, and presenting it as so insignificant that "We need not fret about" its vestigial persistence.

<11> Weston, too, was frustrated by specialization and found hope in social forms of knowledge production. In *From Ritual to Romance*, she declares her interest in a scholarly approach that involves a neo-generalist interdisciplinarity. She laments "the modern tendency to specialize which is apt to blind scholars to the essential importance of regarding their object of study as a whole," maintaining that "this method of 'criticism by isolation' has been, and is, one of the main factors which have operated in retarding the solution of the Grail problem" (67). Inquiry must assume a whole, and continue until it has

shown how all the elements of a question are interconnected. In order to perceive this totality, scholarship must be more collaborative. This frustration with specialization was a familiar criticism of scholarship in the late nineteenth century; but notably, Weston, like Harrison, critiqued specialization not out of nostalgia for *belles lettres*, but to push for new methods in scientific history. By redefining a maligned and feminized generalism as the modern, scientific approach that will allow Arthurian studies to progress, Weston makes generalism an active, prestigious choice, not a condition necessitated by inadequate training associated with women's education. Finally, by introducing herself in the preface to *From Ritual to Romance* as one of the "scholars who labor in a wider field" alongside Harrison and other writers on comparative religion, Weston claims a particular scholarly *persona*—an avant-garde generalist working in concert with like-minded professionals.

Collaboration via the Cambridge University Press

<12> While they did not set out to collaborate, Harrison and Weston were brought into an intellectual and professional relation by the Cambridge University Press that benefited them both. Weston had long admired Harrison's scholarship from afar, but the two women worked in different circles. Harrison had her Oxbridge coterie, while Weston mixed with other amateur scholars at the Quest Society in London, and with German, Swiss, and French scholars in Paris.⁽⁷⁾ But they were finally brought into contact by their publisher late in their careers. This institutionally mediated collaboration gave them a sense of common purpose from which Harrison in particular drew authority to make public controversial claims that she had previously relegated to private correspondence. Moreover, she presented these claims as grounded in work by women scholars, most prominently Weston, explicitly publicizing the collective authority she found through other women scholars' complementary work.

<13> By 1919, Weston already had a sense of such a shared intellectual purpose: she saw Cambridge University Press as hospitable to the kind of collaborative scholarship she admired, and Harrison's work in particular as offering support to her own. As she wrote in the Preface to *From Ritual to Romance*, "I felt that I had gained, as the result of Miss Harrison's work, a wider, and more assured basis for my own researches" (viii). When she submitted *From Ritual to Romance* to the Press, she cited in her cover letter its publication of monographs by Harrison and Harrison's Oxbridge collaborators (1). The Press swiftly introduced Weston to this group, sending proofs of a chapter of *From Ritual to Romance* featuring Greek terms to Harrison to correct (12). And while Harrison herself had male colleagues correct her Greek quotations in proof, she corrected Weston's. Weston was pleased, even claiming she would have asked Harrison herself, asserting a "personal[...]" connection: "You were quite right in sending the proofs to Miss Harrison—I was only waiting till I had a spare proof of Chap. XI. to write to her—we know each other personally."

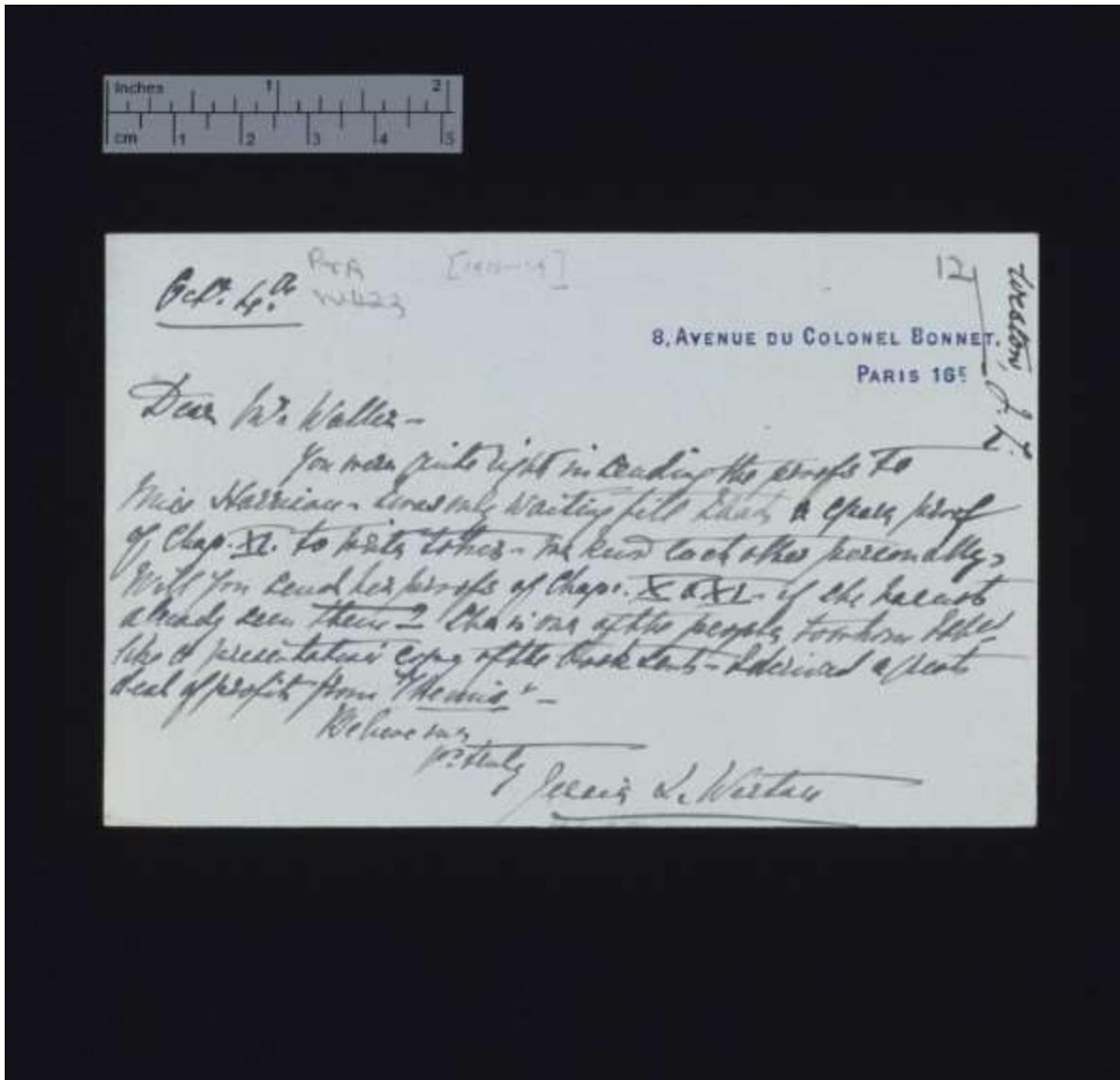


Figure 1. Letter from Jessie L. Weston to A. R. Waller (October 4, 1919). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

But, tellingly, she continued the correspondence via Secretary Waller and in the context of the Press, rather than pursuing it directly—and thus more “personally.” In her next letter, Weston asked Waller to send Harrison her short story, a “reconstruction” of the grail ritual that she hoped would help Harrison better comprehend her theory (13). Waller mediated further contact between the two women, similarly forwarding an off-print from Harrison to Weston at Harrison’s request (14), and a letter from Harrison to Weston, which Weston asked if she could keep (16). He also sent a presentation copy of *From Ritual to Romance* to Harrison, who in turn wrote to request he send a presentation copy of her *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921) to Weston.

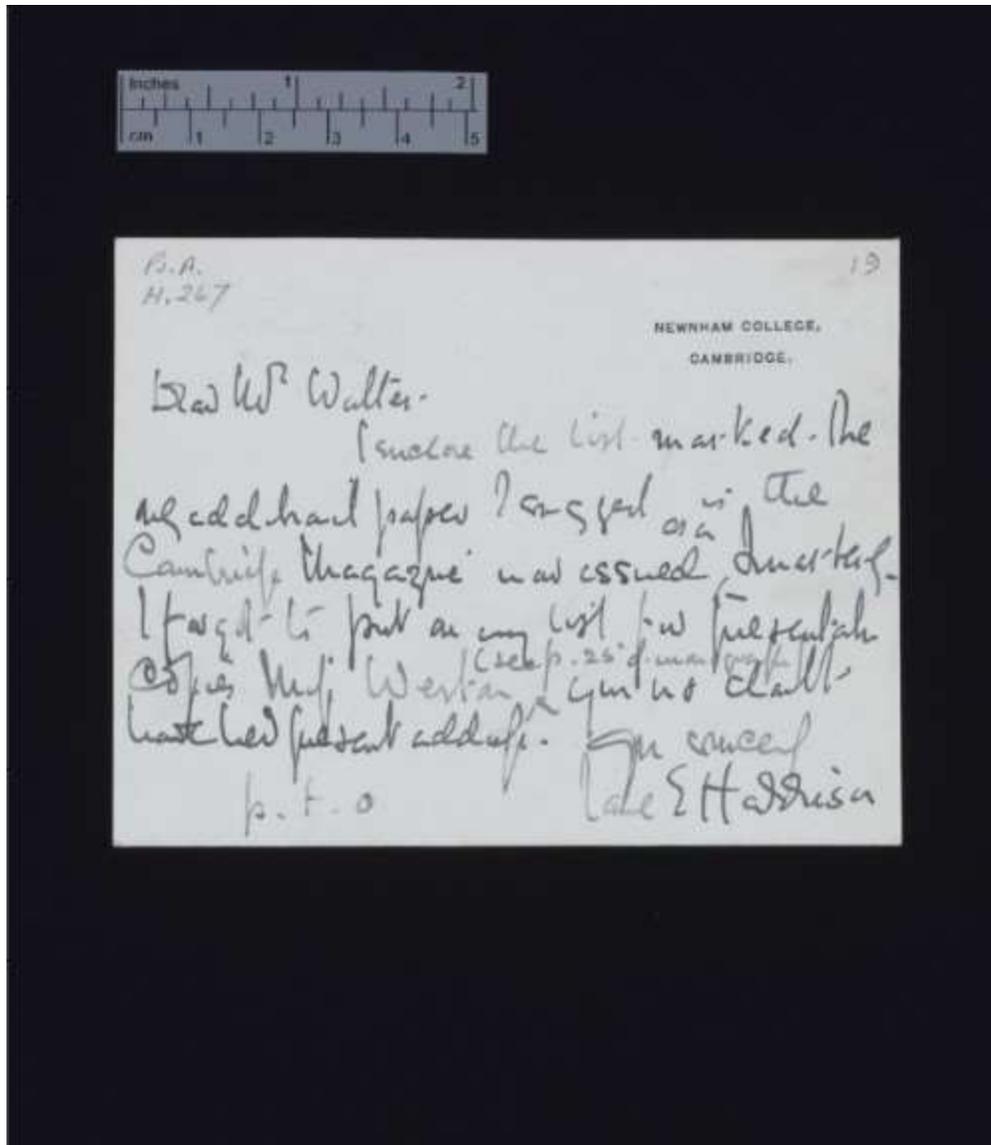


Figure 2. Letter from Jane Harrison to A. R. Waller (n.d., [1919]). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

<14> Through Waller, as the representative of their shared institution, Harrison and Weston interacted in a professional network. As Bernstein describes Richard Garnett in the British Museum Reading Room, Waller was a “nodal point” in the network of Harrison and Weston (102). But the private/public dynamic in Waller’s correspondence with Harrison and Weston differs from the “exteriority” in which Bernstein implicates Garnett. Where Garnett and the women writers who frequented the Reading Room not only corresponded but also met at the catalog table, in hallways, and at tea rooms, Waller, Harrison, and Weston interacted at a distance. Their network was constructed entirely out of texts—letters, off-prints, books—and in this way was particularly limited to their scholarly authorial *personae*.

<15> When Harrison returned Weston’s corrected proofs to Waller, she took the opportunity to further expand the network of women scholars involved in the correspondence. She loaned him a copy of

Renaissance scholar Janet Spens's study of the folk origins of Shakespeare's plays, a monograph that drew heavily on Harrison's theories (14). In the letter accompanying the book, she asks Waller to send Weston a copy she provides of "the last-word of my controversy with Prof. Ridgeway," another CUP author, whose Euhemerist theory of drama she and Weston each vehemently rejected. Ridgeway was a notorious anti-feminist who at various times engaged in heated debates with Harrison and Weston in published essays and, in the latter's case, in a series complaints to the Syndics of the Press about her criticism of his work in *From Ritual to Romance*. Harrison's request to Waller to send Weston her own criticism of Ridgeway suggests her use of the Press to form an alliance of women scholars against the curmudgeonly Ridgeway. In this one letter from Harrison to Waller, she uses the Press both to try to bring yet another woman scholar into her professional network and to strengthen a tie with Weston against a scholarly foe. Importantly, all these are impersonal connections—or rather, connections among *personae*. Harrison was a great fan of Spens's work before she ever met her, and while Ridgeway and Harrison disagreed on fundamental matters, theirs was not, at least for Harrison, a personal enmity. In 1913, by which point her "controversy" with Ridgeway was well established, she gladly contributed an essay to a 1914 festschrift for him. In introducing Spens's work to Waller and asking Waller to pass on her support to Weston in her battle against Ridgeway's theories, Harrison was not doing favors for close friends or acting against a personal enemy; rather, she was enlisting the power of the Press to marshal like-minded scholars against wrong-headed ones for the sake of creating and disseminating her theories about myth and ritual.

<16> While Weston was already in scholarly conversation with Harrison's published work by the time she was writing *From Ritual to Romance*, the Press's facilitation of their correspondence introduced Harrison to Weston's work. Harrison read *From Ritual to Romance* and in a letter to a colleague pronounced it "very satisfactory" at a time when she was beginning to take an interest in modern survivals of ancient ritual forms, tracing them not only up through ancient Greek religion and art, but into later European folk traditions, from bull fighting to the legend of Don Juan (Newnham 21). Her judgment of "very satisfactory" thus suggests both an approval of Weston's scholarship, and also that Harrison was "satisfied" by Weston's confirmation of her instincts about the persistence of ancient ritual forms in later European art.

<17> Indeed, when Harrison published these speculations in her 1921 monograph, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, she cited Weston in support. Bringing together recent scholarship on the ritual origins of art, including work by another woman, Bertha Phillpotts, on the Icelandic sagas, she called special attention to Weston's study, even quoting it directly: "Of recent years research over the most widespread areas has brought to light in very singular and convincing fashion the tenacity and vitality of the Folk-Play [...] perhaps most strangely of all it has recently been shown that the legend of the Holy Grail has a like ritual foundation. In the Grail literature 'we possess a unique example of the restatement of an ancient and august Ritual in terms of imperishable Romance'" (24-25). In this endorsement of Weston's theory and summary of support for her own hypothesis, Harrison's emphasis on "research over the most widespread areas" recalls her earlier ideal of scholarly inquiry that is aware of its position "in world-wide [...] relations." And in citing Phillpotts and Weston, Harrison highlighted the prominence of women scholars in these relations. Of the five footnotes on the page, two refer to Harrison's close

male collaborators, one to her own previous work, and the other two to Phillpotts and Weston. By constructing a network of women scholars in her footnotes—suggesting the combined power of those quite literally on the margins—Harrison drew on the collective authority of their linked scholarly *personae* to make her boldest claims about the persistence of ritual forms.

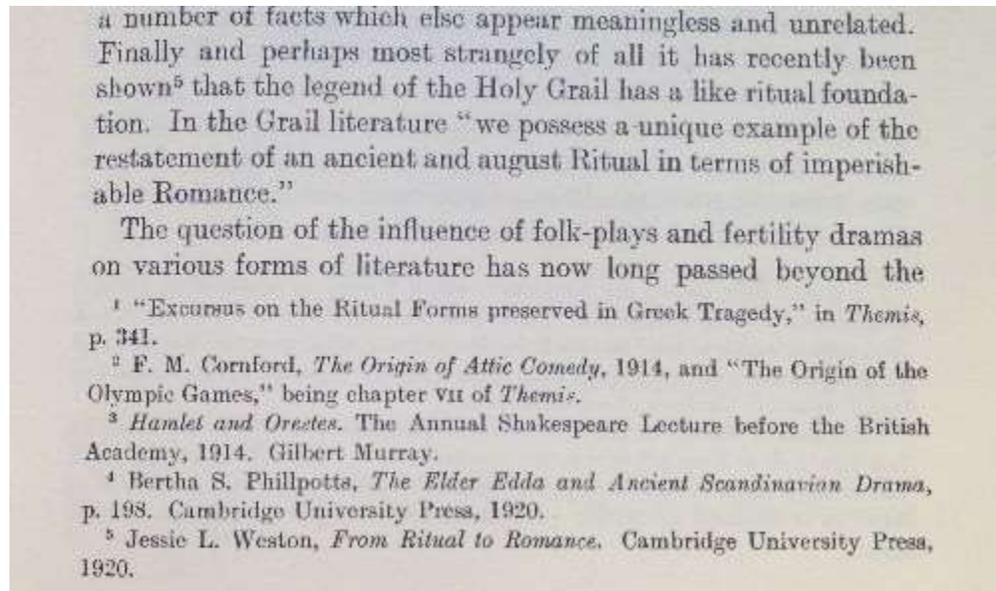


Figure 3. Jane Harrison, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1921), p. 25.

<18> My account of Harrison's and Weston's alternative historiographical practice and the alternative histories they constructed with it offers additional support to Bernstein's claim that exteriority "promoted speculations about others ways of knowing" beyond conventional intellectual and academic approaches (179). In turn, Bernstein's account of exteriority suggests the importance of scholarship to turn-of-the-century women's writing practices more broadly. Scholarly work appears to have been a significant model for the writing practices of the poets Bernstein discusses. As she notes, poets in the British Museum Reading Room "created networks of friendship, found mentors and publishers, inspired and encouraged one another in their literary careers, and perhaps most surprisingly, did research" (76). But perhaps women poets doing research is not so surprising. Research in the British Museum provided a way for women writers to enact working not only as professional writers, but as scholars—to experiment with scholarly *personae*. Scholarly work appears to have been a particularly influential model for women writers at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries looking for the authority and community that would allow them to produce and disseminate creative work and new knowledge. This holds true for those including Amy Levy who attended colleges newly open to women, as well as those such as Christina Rossetti, who were never affiliated with a university. The research activities of the poets of the 1880s and 1890s that Bernstein describes attest not only to the felt necessity of research to inform even poetry, but also to the value of the kind of scholarly *personae* Harrison and Weston adopted for poetic as well as academic authority.

Conclusion: Scholarly Collaboration and the Feminist New Age

<19> Harrison and Weston's encounter via the Cambridge University Press illuminates their related theories and practices of scholarly collaboration. Their mutually informed scholarship on religion is grounded in their theories about the social production of knowledge and makes visible their own modern social group of women scholars, with its network of interacting *personae*. At a time when women were increasingly active in the public sphere and specifically within academia—a time, in Harrison's view, defined by the “emergence of women to fuller liberty and increased influence”—Harrison and Weston cultivated public scholarly *personae* both in their published writings and in their interactions with learned institutions such as the Cambridge University Press. While writing women and other figures relegated to minor status in nineteenth-century historiography into the center of world history, they also used their relation to the Press to increase their own authority in connection with each other and other women scholars. Importantly, men were involved in this project, but only in their role as members of institutions, whether the “small and strange” modern groups, like Harrison's coterie of classical scholars, or the Cambridge University Press itself, where A. R. Waller facilitated the only extant correspondence between Harrison and Weston. By changing the usual roles of men and women in knowledge production, and in particular by valorizing conventionally “feminine” social knowledge practices, Harrison and Weston not only wrote alternative feminist histories, but developed an alternative feminist historiographical practice that saw itself as responding to and shaping the advent of a feminist new age.

Endnotes

(1) My thanks to Carolyn Williams, Michael Martel, the Montrose Circle, and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies'* anonymous reader for their engagement with this article. I thank Livia Woods, Meechal Hoffman, and Julia Fuller for creating the venues that have allowed me to share this work. For their guidance, I thank Rosalind Grooms, Cambridge University Press Archivist, and Anne Thompson, Archivist at Newnham College, Cambridge. I thank the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for their permission to use images from their archives, and Grant Young for his essential help in that process. I thank Jenny Hyst for crucial advice and conversation about scholarly practices, and Kate Nichols for sharing my excitement when I first found the correspondence that has occasioned this article. (▲)

(2) The radical Catholic theologian Mary Daly cited Harrison in her own alternative feminist histories (94). Neopagan writers such as Z Budapest claim Harrison as a “main source” for tenets of feminist spirituality (Acknowledgments; Hutton 125). In a different countercultural vein, *From Ritual to Romance* makes a cameo appearance on Kurtz's nightstand in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). (▲)

(3) See, for example, the relationships chronicled in Jill R. Ehnenn's *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture* (Ashgate, 2008), which include Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thompson, Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville and Violet Martin), and Elizabeth Robbins and Florence Bell. (▲)

(4) Susan David Bernstein, *Roomscape: Women Writers in the British Museum from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh UP, 2013).^(^)

(5) Work on Victorian women's literary collaborations in particular has shown how such practices subverted conventions of gender and subjectivity (Ehenn). Studies of collaboration in periodical culture, which include book-historical criticism that takes the journal or book as an object created within personal and commercial networks, emphasize the diversity of nineteenth-century authorial roles (Jewell, Klimaszewski). Rachel Sanger Buurma has shown the importance of recognizing Victorians' own "strong models of collective agency and authorship," and particularly "a fin-de-siècle conception of intellectual collectivity very different from our own" (19).^(^)

(6) The Cambridge Ritualists consisted of the Oxford classicist Gilbert Murray, a prolific translator of Greek drama and Regius Professor of Greek; Francis Cornford, a classicist and historian of philosophy; and Arthur Bernard Cook, a classicist and the author of the magnum opus *Zeus* (Ackerman). For a critique of this designation, see Beard pp. 116-117 and Robinson.^(^)

(7) There was some interaction among these groups as well: Weston visited Newnham to give a lecture in February of 1914, though there is no record of her and Harrison having met then. And Harrison too lived for periods in Paris and knew many scholars there. Moreover, both women appear to have belonged at various times to the community of women writers working at the British Museum Reading Room that Bernstein chronicles in *Roomscape*. Harrison was a regular lecturer at the Museum in the 1880s, and Weston was consulting medieval manuscripts and other materials there by the late 1890s.^(^)

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