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An Elusive “Modern Woman”

Ella Hepworth Dixon: The Story of a Modern Woman. Valerie Fehlbau. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005. xii + 203 pp.

Reviewed by [Linda K. Hughes](#), Texas Christian University

“[The masked ball] was like life . . . a crowd of people, and yet one wore a mask, and no one knew what one was really like.”

—Ella Hepworth Dixon, “Wyllie’s Wife,” 1891 (qtd. in Fehlbau 105)

<1> Eliza Hepworth Dixon (1857-1932), who leapt to prominence with *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), customarily wore a mask. For Dixon this was a matter of both personal and professional policy. As Valerie Fehlbau points out in *Ella Hepworth Dixon: The Story of a Modern Woman*, every book published by Dixon first appeared in periodicals, to which she also contributed reviews, causeries, and columns over a span of four decades. Shaping a mobile public persona independent of fixed opinions or political allegiances enabled Dixon to contribute to diverse periodicals on a broad range of topics and to avoid burning out or being dismissed as old-hat once the vogue of the New Woman had passed. Fehlbau captures Dixon in the act of self-fashioning in “My Faith and My Work” (*Woman*, 23 September 1896), in which Dixon sends up the title of her first book and implies that it was thrust upon her by publishers: “The booklet bore the egregious title (need I say a “publisher’s title”?) of *My Flirtations*, and had clothed itself, unbeknown to the author, in a cover of violet pink. . . .” Yet as Fehlbau points out, the work bore the same title when it appeared serially in *Lady’s Pictorial*, a journal that declared its commitment to chronicling “every movement and every incident of importance which makes for the progress of woman” as well as “that lighter, but equally important side of woman’s life” providing amusement (Dixon qtd. in Fehlbau 90; Alfred Gibbons qtd. in Fehlbau 77). Dixon’s mask is perennial: she divulged her professional relations rather than inward life in her memoir, *As I Knew Them* (1930), and left behind no personal papers. As Fehlbau concludes, “she appears to have re-read all her writing, selected what she considered relevant [for her memoir] and discarded the rest” (6).

<2>The strength of *Ella Hepworth Dixon* is Fehlbau’s ability to move beyond these barriers through careful, painstaking research to document Dixon’s working life and the distinctive qualities of her fiction, journalism, drama, and memoir. For example, Fehlbau taps the Chatto and Windus archives at Reading University to demonstrate the accuracy of Mary Erle’s experience of editors in *The Story of a Modern Woman*. A professional writer who supports herself after her father, a prominent editor, dies—just as Dixon’s father William Hepworth Dixon edited the *Athenaeum* from 1853-69 but died at age 56 in 1879—Erle is already suffering from overwork when her editor insists that she rewrite her novel because it treats marital infidelity too frankly: “I should suggest a thoroughly happy ending. The public like happy endings. The novelists are getting so morbid.”⁽¹⁾ Chatto and Windus had published *My Flirtations* (1892) but

lost Dixon’s best-selling novel to William Heinemann because it was unwilling to pay her more than £35 “in view of the somewhat pessimistic tone of the story” (Fehlbau 126). Fehlbau has also traced Dixon’s signed stories and columns in periodicals, though unsigned work necessarily eludes her grasp, and illuminates the shape and substance of Dixon’s career in far more detail than hitherto known. Fehlbau likewise documents Dixon’s revisions as she moved from serial to book. Characteristically, Dixon excised from the serial *Story of a Modern Woman* a chapter closely based on her own education in Germany.

<3>Beyond the control Dixon exerted over her public persona, Fehlbau identifies her distinguishing characteristics as humor (often self-directed), trenchant observation, ability to evoke complex social and psychological registers concisely, and avoidance of shrill rhetoric in favor of indirection and irony. Fehlbau’s chapters on Dixon’s memoir and journalism are



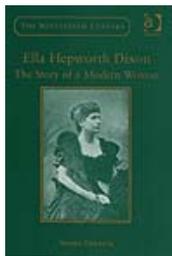
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especially original. Placing *As I Knew Them* in relation to nineteenth-century women's autobiography, Fehlbaum also exposes its link to journalism, which required brief, vivid sketches of precisely the sort Dixon serialized before gathering them into a memoir devoid of an overarching personal narrative. Fehlbaum deftly analyzes the two self-portraits Dixon affixed to her memoir, the frontispiece showing a "débütante" of "rather demure figure" when Dixon began her authorial career and the other "the 1930s writer" who "looks out of the page with the greater confidence and possibly the prescribed ironic detachment" of maturity (Fehlbaum 11). Fehlbaum reproduces them on facing pages, and the square-jawed, heavy-lidded woman who demands to be taken as she is contrasts tellingly with the tiny-waisted, curly-headed youth who bashfully glances aside. Dixon herself laughs at the latter, relating how a young man infatuated with the girl in the portrait called on her and fled when the real woman, "grubby with oil-paint . . . , dressed in an unbecoming black jersey," appeared (Fehlbaum 10).

<4>As a journalist Dixon contributed weekly columns to *Ladies' Pictorial* (1895-1921), *Ladies Field* (1898-1903), *Sketch* (1907-17), and *Westminster Gazette* (1921-28). These rarely covered strictly domestic topics, such as housekeeping, nor, though her *Sketch* column was entitled "Woman's Ways," was it confined to the woman's page. In fact, Dixon briefly covered the Boer War in *Ladies Field* from 3 March-19 May 1900. Fehlbaum's analysis of Dixon's "Pensées de Femme" column in *Lady's Pictorial* (1895-1906) is especially welcome. Dixon's wit and resistance to overdetermined womanhood emerge in her 13 July 1895 column:

I have lately risen from the perusal of [Cesare] Lombroso's pseudo-scientific work, 'The Female Offender', with the pleasing conviction that I contained in my own person all the physical and mental peculiarities of the born female criminal. I forget now whether I possessed more especially the characteristics of an epileptic murderess or merely those of an hysterical and cataleptic pickpocket. (Fehlbaum 31)

A week earlier she had shown her flair for incisive feminist critique:

Man, so far as one can judge, is an eminently practical being. . . . He has his own ideas – sufficiently bewildering ones – about what is fit and proper for woman to do. She may toil in a white-lead factory or at the pit's mouth, but not in a printing office; she may exhibit herself au naturel in living pictures or a glass tank, but she may not paint from the living model in art-school. . . . (Fehlbaum 79-80)

Such work deserves to be better known. Broadview Press has recently reissued Dixon's *Story of a Modern Woman* (ed. Steve Farmer, 2004) but includes no "Pensées de Femme" selections in the appendices. Hopefully these vibrant feminist commentaries will find a new audience by some other means.

<5>There is less to say about Dixon's drama than her work in other genres, since *Toyshop of the Heart* (1908) was a one-act play given a single performance at a celebrity benefit, though Fehlbaum documents its reception and context, including the other three plays sharing the bill. Fehlbaum's chapters on the New Woman and Dixon's fiction go over more familiar ground. Her analysis of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, for example, effectively identifies its New Woman themes and reception while also connecting its open-endedness to literary Modernism. Indeed, throughout her study Fehlbaum is more interested in claiming Dixon as a "Modern" than as a "New" Woman and sometimes does so by censuring Dixon's contemporaries: "she was far-removed from some of the excessively serious women writers such as Sarah Grand, or those like George Egerton who were writing in a more febrile, rather neurotic way" (83). Similarly Fehlbaum asserts that *Story of a Modern Woman* departs from other New Woman novels because "the reader is spared long theoretical discussions so common in other writers" (131). Yet the passage in which the dying Alison Ives beseeches Mary to stand by women itself seems "theoretical":

"Promise me that you will never, never do anything to hurt another woman. . . . I don't suppose for an instant you ever would. But there come times in our lives when we can do a great deal of good, or an incalculable amount of harm. If women only used their power in the right way! If we were only united we could lead the world. But we're not—we're not," she said, closing her eyes with a tired gesture.

"Ah!" said Mary slowly, "but we shall be by and by. All we modern women are going to help each other, not to hinder. And there's a great deal to do—" (Dixon 213-14).

<6>Fehlbaum devotes surprisingly little attention to gender politics in Dixon's short stories. In "The World's Slow Stain" the female protagonist asserts, "what's so funny is, that most 'good' men like us to be like that, ignorant, silly, helpless – even cheats. They think it pretty" (qtd. in Fehlbaum 109). Fehlbaum comments on the passage, "The image of woman as 'ignorant, silly, helpless' is precisely what many *fin de siècle* writers of both sexes were trying to dispel" (109), but she says nothing of Dixon's reference to masculine ascendancy predicated on female ignorance. Of the suitor Val Redmond in *My Flirtations* the female narrator remarks, "[Redmond] was curiously pretty, incredibly malicious, and indisputably 'smart,' with a nice house in Sloane Street, where he entertained a great deal, and a little following of young gentlemen who copied his neckties and buttonholes, and whom one saw giggling together in corners and calling each other pet names" (qtd. in Fehlbaum 97). A friend of Oscar Wilde, Dixon was presumably familiar not only with Wilde's "following" but also with the 1890 *Scots Observer* review of *Picture of Dorian Gray* that sought to link Wilde to homosexuality. Yet Fehlbaum merely sums up plot details after quoting the passage, nor does she probe the relation of this "effeminate" man to the protagonist's "masculine" assertion that she husband-hunts for "sport" (98). As a result Fehlbaum's portrait of Dixon as a "Modern" woman is also somewhat elusive because the relation of the Modern to the New Woman is not fully developed or resolved.

<7>*Ella Hepworth Dixon* remains an important contribution that illuminates the role played by periodicals in women writers' careers and an important New Woman writer of the 1890s and beyond. Valerie Fehlbaum has made it possible for Dixon's fiction to be newly assessed within a wider context and for significant other work by Dixon to come under scholarly scrutiny.

Endnotes

(1) Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894; rpt. London: Merlin Press, 1990), p. 183.(^)

