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Making it New: Persephone Books and the Modernist Project

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Abstract

This article articulates the significance of Persephone Books, an independent feminist publisher in London that recuperates lost modern writing. Persephone's 100 titles restore long-obscured continuities and connections in modern literature and arts; the unexpected success of this publishing venture illustrates modernism's continuing appeal to readers. The recuperative work of Persephone Books enables us to recast the modernist literary field so that we (1) understand canonical authors anew, (2) restore neglected authors to their places in modernist literary genealogy, and (3) further our understanding of modernist cultural production in the fields of literature, visual arts, textile and fashion design, and war propaganda.



MAKING IT NEW: PERSEPHONE BOOKS AND THE MODERNIST PROJECT

Urmila Sehagiri

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In 1929, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, delivered a stunning reproach to the universities, libraries, and museums of imperial England, institutions that had for centuries enshrined the masculine public sphere as the sole site and source of artistic integrity. If England continued to regard the feminine world of domesticity as inimical to creativity, Woolf argued, "the feelings of women in a drawing-room" (74) would yield nothing other than "insignificant" books. It is by now a commonplace that Woolf's career exposed the emptiness and violence of such attitudes: her radical, exhilarating literary experiments, her incisive political and critical writings, and her visionary work at the Hogarth Press advanced a modernist revolution that shunned the dead weight of a patriarchal literary past. Once the Angel in the House had been slain, Woolf prophesied, literary women would imagine "important" books anew, unbowed by the imperative to glorify war and debase drawing-rooms.

But seventy years after the publication of *A Room of One's Own*, the English writer and editor Nicola Beauman found undiminished

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