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Eudora Ramsay Richardson and the Evolution of Feminism After Suffrage

Andrea Ledesma

"Maybe you have a mental picture of a woman writer and lecturer as an unrouged, stringy haired creature. If you do you are in for a big surprise when you meet Mrs. Eudora Ramsay Richardson. For she is good-looking."

~New Sentinel, March 31, 1932

Feminists of the interwar period stood at a crossroads. The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 promised a flowering of women's social and political ambitions, yet the cultural backlash of the 1920s, coupled with the economic instability of the 1930s, interrupted this pursuit. In the midst of the Great Depression, the once outspoken women's movement suddenly found itself without a coherent voice. Many women were the "first orphans in the storm" that forced them out of the public sphere of politics and work and back into the home.¹ Those who continued to lobby

1 For a brief introduction to women's economic setbacks in the Great Depression, see: Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Robert McElvaine provides a more detailed account of the psychological effects of market failure in *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984). Those interested in gender discrimination present in New Deal Reform should refer to Alice Kessler-Harris's chapter "Designing Women and Old Fools: Writing Gender into Social Security Law," published in Linda Kerber, ed., *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

for female independence and power attracted harsh criticism. The nation no longer viewed feminism as a movement of sociopolitical progress, but as the radical agenda of troublesome, unkempt women. Both men and women avoided the campaign. Yet some feminists, like Eudora Ramsay Richardson, a well-known writer and activist of the interwar years, escaped these constructs and constraints. In this article, I explore how Eudora Richardson's political and literary work created and promoted a style of feminism that was fitting of the sociopolitical landscape of the interwar period and ultimately the bridge between the political themes of the suffrage movement and the cultural theories championed by flappers and "new-style" feminists. Using Richardson as a case study, I argue that the 1930s was not characterized by a lull in or absence of American feminism, but was actually a formative period for it.

Many historians have worked to make sense of the American women's movement of the twentieth century. Much of the literature has divided feminism between the suffragists of the 1900s, otherwise known as first-wave feminists, and the socially minded, second-wave feminists of the 1960s, with little development in between. Yet feminism and women's activism did not disappear between the two waves. Instead, the movements changed in appearance, method, and motivation after suffrage. By uncovering these transformations, recent scholarship has restructured the feminist narrative.

The literature on liberal feminism of the post-suffrage era emphasizes the role of exceptional women in collective uplift as the link between first- and second-wave feminism. Because the sociopolitical climate of the interwar period made it difficult—if not impossible—for a new women's movement to form, researchers argue that the work of prominent individuals such as first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and aviatrix Amelia Earhart proved essential in inspiring females. Women who doubted their own strength and skill in the 1920s and 1930s looked to these role models for support and inspiration. Nonetheless, most analyses of liberal feminism overstate the influence of public figures: the exceptional work of a few does not define a national movement.² Worse yet, most existing scholarship ignores the significance of the average woman. Placing liberal feminism

² The definition of a social movement in US history can be quite abstract. Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor provide a helpful frame in which to evaluate the influence, work, and figures of a movement (especially the women's movement) in their book *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press).

at the center of analysis helps to contextualize the experiences of the period's most visible female figures at best.³

Other historians have noted how the reform culture of the 1920s and 1930s moved forward without an explicitly gendered focus, and, in some instances, continued to discriminate against women. Reformers lobbied for a handful of measures originally associated with the women's movement, and women worked to advance so-called maternalist goals in federal, state, and municipal governments. But the far-reaching effects of the Great Depression and the New Deal pressed the nation to look beyond the interests of a single, female demographic. National relief efforts aimed to help all US citizens, men and women alike, though the latter often received sub-par benefits. Federal laws and social customs continued to regard women in a subordinate category separate from men. Interwar period reform became feminist in retrospect as contemporary historians reviewed the era to find the feminist themes and figures that inconspicuously supported public works. As historians such as Susan Ware argue, the era—and especially the New Deal—did the “same thing for [women] as it [had] for men. There [was] nothing feminist or antifeminist about it.”⁴

Finally, historians of interwar-period feminism looking for evidence of progress consistently segregate the personal from the political. In these studies, flappers and other supporters of the “feminist—new style” redefined work, love, sex, and beauty for the 1920s woman.⁵ Examinations of the 1930s, however, describe feminism

3 Two historians lead the discussion on liberal feminism. The first is Susan Ware, whose works include *Beyond Suffrage: Women and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) and *Partner and I: Molly Dewson and New Deal Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Second, Lois Scharf analyzes the relationship between feminism and economics to gauge the state of the women's movement in the 1930s. Her most notable work is *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980).

4 Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*. As much as this study discusses the female political opportunities in the 1930s, it also adds to the discussion of feminism in reform culture. Those interested in learning more about how women directly and indirectly related to the New Deal should also read Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). Melosh explores both the cooperative relationship between men and women at work and the portrayal and power of female citizens in the 1930s through the performing and visual arts.

5 This phrase is taken from Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, “Feminist-New Style,” in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, ed. Susan Ware (New York:

in primarily political terms, emphasizing how the “experimental, reformist atmosphere of the New Deal encouraged and facilitated progress for women.”⁶ In the 1930s, federal offices, it seemed, proved more efficient than the speakeasy for effecting change. Through these characterizations, historians have thus established a confusing dichotomy. Political progress and social progress were not mutually exclusive, even though the scholarship casts them as separate and opposing forces. They must be read together in order to understand the whole character and full effects of feminism.

No woman can better challenge these narratives of interwar feminism than Eudora Ramsay Richardson. Born in Virginia in 1891, Richardson graduated from Hollins University. She went on to work for the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in the 1910s, and during the 1920s and 1930s continued to actively promote women’s rights and female independence. Richardson was also an accomplished author. The public consistently praised her articles, editorials, and books that tackled both the politics inherent to women’s issues, and changing gender expectations and norms in American culture. On the podium or in print, Richardson was a feminist unique to her time.⁷

“Striving Toward a Better Way of Life”

Politics contributed heavily to Eudora Ramsay Richardson’s feminist legacy. A majority of American women refrained from filling “their lives with public activity” at the turn of the century, but, “charged with the enthusiasm of Progressivism,” Richardson and other politically-active women in the 1910s injected “life [back] into the suffrage movement.”⁸ Specifically, Richardson worked on the

McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997). In Bromley’s article, originally published in 1927, she describes the “Feminist--New Style” of the 1920s that encouraged women to seek professional opportunities, financial independence, and social networks. In a way, “Feminist-New Style” is not unlike liberal feminism as both emphasized an individualistic approach to female empowerment.

6 Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*. Here, Ware argues that the opportunities inherent in President Roosevelt’s national reform programs allowed the women’s movement to succeed in the political sphere.

7 “Mrs. Eudora Ramsay Richardson, Writer, Feminist, Dies,” *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1973.

8 Karen Manners Smith, “New Paths to Power: 1890-1920,” in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 364 & 395.

ground with NAWSA to campaign for the women's vote. Her foray into politics did not end, however, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. In the 1930s, with the election of President Roosevelt and resurgence of the Democratic Party, Richardson witnessed firsthand both the incorporation of women's issues into national politics and the extent and consequences of New Deal reforms. As part of a grassroots organization and national party, Richardson honed the political dimensions of her feminist identity. Her varied career shaped and expressed her distinguished interpretation of women's rights, femininity, and gender relations.

The suffrage movement served as an opportunity for Richardson to refine her public persona. In 1914, she left her job as the head of the English Department at South Carolina's Greenville Women's College to join NAWSA. Working as a paid field director, she spoke to crowds across the US about women's suffrage, perfecting her public speaking skills in the process. In "Suffragist Defies Rain," for example, one reporter noted that:

Miss Ramsay speaks clearly and pleasantly and appeals both to the hearts and minds of her hearers. Her arguments are logical and she shows no fear in taking up the various objects put forth by those who opposed suffrage, and consistently did she show that they were one and all far aside from the issue when studied by fair minded men absolutely useless in proving that women should not vote.⁹

NAWSA effectively reaffirmed for Richardson the importance of rhetoric. The controversy that surrounded suffrage demanded that she avoid phrases that could anger or confuse listeners. Good words would generate good press for the women's movement. Richardson even used her audiences' reservations to her advantage. Before the interwar period, much of the nation understood political women in domestic terms. Female activists adopted "municipal housekeeping" campaigns which attended to "a variety of urban, industrial problems" like a wife would her family.¹⁰ Echoing this metaphor, Richardson claimed that "women needed the ballot because [they were] a favor in the home and the home [was] subject to the influence and control

⁹ Suffrage Clippings, "Suffragist Defies the Rain" [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, The Papers of Eudora Ramsay Richardson, Small Special Collections at the University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville [hereafter cited as the Richardson Papers].

¹⁰ Smith, "New Paths to Power," 386.

of the government.”¹¹ The acceptance of Richardson’s political goals relied heavily on the manner in which she expressed them.

Furthermore, Richardson learned how to defend herself in these crowded lecture halls. For example, “Suffragist Squelches Man,” an article from the *Utica Daily Press*, reported how one “conscientious observer” interrupted Richardson’s speech and claimed that he would become a suffragist as soon as she “cut loose from the Mormons and the Socialists.”¹² Richardson then fired back, letting the man know that her cause was “not allied” with either group, but also emphasizing how the suffrage movement had been “endorsed by...a hundred other religious bodies...labor organizations...and all the political parties.”¹³ With the possibility of conflict at every stop on her NAWSA tour, Richardson acquired a thick skin. She did not fear hecklers in the crowd, but welcomed them as opportunities to articulate her well-formulated arguments. Over time, these confrontations only added to Richardson’s reputation as an eloquent and aggressive activist. Her well-documented retort proved that she was “deserving of the fame that heralded her coming.”¹⁴ From podium to podium, she stood her ground.

The suffrage movement also prompted Richardson to face the ideological and political diversity that defined the nation’s feminist activists. Two groups in particular represented the opposing ends of this spectrum. Richardson herself was a member of NAWSA. Established in 1890, the organization drew inspiration from the women of the Progressive era and led “the battle for the vote into the twentieth century” by working within the established political system.¹⁵ Offices formed across the US and members worked toward state-by-state enfranchisement. However, some disagreed with this method. In 1914, Alice Paul and Lucy Burns left NAWSA to form the National Women’s Party (NWP), which lobbied for the passage and ratification of a federal suffrage amendment. While women’s

11 Suffrage Clippings, “Suffragist Defies the Rain,” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

12 Suffrage Clippings, “Suffragist Defies the Rain,” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

13 Suffrage Clippings, “Suffragist Defies the Rain,” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

14 Suffrage Clippings, “Suffragist Defies the Rain,” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

15 Smith, “New Paths to Power,” 363.

groups across the US—NAWSA included—eventually adopted this same platform, the NWP still distinguished itself with its often radical political tactics. Members were unafraid of large, public demonstrations or of challenging the established political order. The infamous Silent Sentinel campaign of 1917, as an example, stationed NWP members outside of the White House with signs asking “Mr. President, What Will You Do For Women Suffrage?” This activity led to numerous arrests.¹⁶ The singular goal of suffrage gave birth to multiple campaigns.

Richardson approached the schism between the NWP and NAWSA with reserved optimism. Speaking candidly with one reporter, she admitted that she “regretted that the suffrage movement should be hampered by its radical wing.”¹⁷ NWP demonstrations, she argued, were the ineffective and distracting tactics of militants. Some historians may criticize her for exacerbating cracks in an already fragmented movement; but, in actuality, her comments were more analytical than contentious. As much as she disagreed with the strategy and tactics of the NWP, it is clear that she still appreciated its members’ motives. Ultimately, she believed women’s political power was stronger than the strategies that divided the movement. Richardson even valued the dissent. As she stated at the time, “there [has] never been a great reform moment that [has] not been thus hampered [by disagreement].”¹⁸ Richardson thus viewed the spectrum of opinion as a hallmark of growth for American feminists, and continued to portray female solidarity in her political agenda.

Arguably, the greatest benefit of Richardson’s suffragist work was the national following that she gained. The public knew Richardson for her “attractive personality and...voice [that rang] out to the fringe of the crowd.”¹⁹ Following her “headline-making” stop in Utica, NY, a reporter from the nearby town of Clinton hailed her as an “apostle of optimism.”²⁰ The sense and spirit with which she

16 Smith, “New Paths to Power,” 409.

17 Suffrage Clippings, “Repudiate the Militants” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

18 Suffrage Clippings, “Repudiate the Militants” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

19 Suffrage Clippings, “Suffragist Squelches Man” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

20 Suffrage Clippings, “Inspires Clinton Women” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

expressed her feminist goals proved infectious, turning attendees into supporters. Another newspaper praised Richardson with nothing but superlatives, calling her “one of the most charming... [and] capable advocates of equal suffrage for women.”²¹ All public speakers relied on charm, but by combining her knowledge of women’s issues with a witty character, Richardson made the profession her own and established a brand of feminism that “[disarmed] foes and [won] friends closer.”²² Crowds gathered to see Richardson herself as much as they did to learn about the issue at hand. The following she cultivated as a NAWSA speaker provided her with a guaranteed audience for her later political work.

Ironically, the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, ushered in a decade in which American women sought empowerment through other apolitical means. The “rapid evolution and tremendous growth of the white-collar sector” allowed a woman to financially claim her independence.²³ She did not need a man to cast her vote or buy her a dress. At the same time, the flapper lifestyle of the “Roaring Twenties” allowed women to revel in leisure time as much as men. Women were not completely apathetic toward politics. Yet in the 1920s, “exhausted and elated suffragists [found that] there would be no permanent unity in the women’s movement.”²⁴ Journalist Dorothy Dunbar Bromley ultimately found that the 1920s gave way to a “new style” of feminism wherein women reaped the independence that followed suffragists’ political work but “did not want to wear their mantle [in the public sector].”²⁵ Feminism was now a term of “opprobrium” that aggravated tensions between the sexes.²⁶ Women instead wanted professional development and social liberalism. The 1920s celebrated women, not feminists.

Richardson thus reimagined her political platform for the post-suffrage era. NAWSA became the League of Women Voters (LWV) in 1920. As the “organizational heir to the suffrage movement,” the

21 Suffrage Clippings, “Suffrage Party Beings Organized” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

22 Suffrage Clippings, “Inspires Clinton Women” [c.a. 1910s], box 4, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

23 Smith, “New Paths to Power,” 384.

24 Smith, “New Paths to Power.” Bromley, “Feminist-New Style,” 146.

25 Smith, “New Paths to Power.” Bromley, “Feminist-New Style,” 146.

26 Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 126.

LWV championed a “new-style [of] feminism” that valued “women [who made] good in positions of responsibility.”²⁷ In that same vein, Richardson asserted that “women’s voice in public life [would be] a weak one until [they united] to show large voting strength.”²⁸ The campaign for suffrage had ended—women now had to learn to use their ballots wisely. Failing to do would leave women unprepared for the new opportunities and challenges of the 1930s.

Women across the US encountered new and greater obstacles throughout the 1930s. In the home, for example, women had to make do. While the “Roaring Twenties” celebrated convenience and luxury, the Great Depression reasserted the need for resourcefulness and thrift. Leaner household budgets left women in the home with a heavier burden, and unfortunately, these daughters, wives, and mothers could not help but feel personally responsible for the misfortunes that plagued their loved ones. In the workplace, the “deleterious effect of Depression-related pressure...was duplicated.”²⁹ Employers cut a majority, if not all, of their female workers to reduce payroll as well as to “maintain...gender roles.”³⁰ To cope with the uncertainty and fear of the Great Depression, the public turned to traditional ideas of home and family for support, forcing women back into the private sphere as men looked for work. Women, however, returned to the public sector with the advent of the New Deal as federal programs created new avenues for income and self-fulfillment. However, offices still discriminated against women and national icons of female strength, like Amelia Earhart, ultimately “did little to inspire women collectively.”³¹ “Raised in the belief that nothing was impossible for which they were willing to work,” women of the Great Depression found themselves at an impasse.³²

Nonetheless, Richardson lobbied for a new type of feminist activist. She needed to be, in her own words, “militant inside and

27 Sarah Jane Deutsch, “From Ballots to Breadlines: 1920-1940,” in *No Small Courage*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 464.

28 “Woman Urged to Show Their Power at Polls,” *The Washington Post*, June 18, 1936.

29 Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), x.

30 McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 181.

31 Ware, *Still Missing*, 118.

32 Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 96.

feminine, compromising, and comradely outside.”³³ Richardson did not view this need for reinvention as a sign of weakness. Rather, she believed that women’s nascent political identity worked to their advantage. She argued that female activists, raised in and tested by the suffrage era, could reinvent themselves without the “trite terms and flowery phrases that characterized the old-fashioned.”³⁴ Under Richardson’s guidance, feminists would flourish as modern activists in the New Deal.

By joining the Democratic Party in the 1930s, Richardson took her own words about the importance of electoral politics to heart and put them to work within the New Deal political order. For the election of 1936, the Women’s Division of the Democratic State Central Committee in Virginia appointed her chairman for Chesterfield County. Under the supervision of director F. Cleveland Davis, Richardson sought out “at least one woman in each [state] precinct... whose business it [would] be to get all those who are eligible to register [to vote].”³⁵ Clearly both the LWV and national parties prioritized increasing women’s involvement in politics. Richardson’s work paid off at the Democratic National Convention of 1936. She reported that women were now “present at all sessions of the important committee and may vote whenever anything [happens] to members.”³⁶ Local, state, and national issues could no longer ignore women’s interests.

Richardson’s interpretation of feminism also stressed how political progress could not be accomplished alone. She worked continuously so that all women—beyond the ranks of the Democratic Party—would appreciate and utilize the rights set before them by the Nineteenth Amendment. She believed that a strong female voice in national politics relied on the concerted efforts of the majority, not a handful of outspoken activists. Richardson and her peers succeeded not only in bringing more women to the public sector, but also in winning them the recognition they deserved. Following President Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936 by an “unprecedented majority,” Democratic state campaign director Horace H. Edwards extended a

33 “Woman Urged to Show Their Power at Polls,” *The Washington Post*, June 18, 1936.

34 “Woman Urged to Show Their Power at Polls,” *The Washington Post*, June 18, 1936.

35 F. Cleveland Davis to Eudora Ramsay Richardson, September 23, 1936, box 1, folder 3, Richardson Papers.

36 Personal Scrapbook, Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Finds Woman at Convention Getting on Political Map” [c.a. 1930s], box 3, Richardson Papers.

“hearty congratulations” to Richardson and the “splendid women of Virginia.”³⁷ They impressed everyone at “headquarters” and were “entitled to a large portion of the credit [for the victory].”³⁸ The political endeavors of women in the 1930s nurtured the seeds planted in the suffrage era. Whether Democrat or Republican, women across the U.S. came together and expressed themselves with the ballot.

At the same time, the New Deal allowed Richardson to promote women’s professional interests. Federal reform projects provided new opportunities for female leadership and advancement. The Federal Writer’s Project, for example, hired Richardson in 1937 to supervise its Virginia office, and there “perhaps...was no one in Virginia so well [qualified]” to take the job.³⁹ Her work there was rooted in her literary background, and she “accepted the position...[as] part of her obligation as a writer.”⁴⁰ Despite being unable to staff her offices with experienced personnel, Richardson still took pride in her responsibilities as a manager and mentor. She worked closely with her staff as they produced novels, scripts, and articles celebrating Virginia history and culture.⁴¹ With the New Deal, women such as Richardson could expand their professional aspirations beyond rank-and-file positions.

Richardson concurrently maintained a feminist profile in the workplace. Her exceptional writing and managerial skills proved that women could compete with men in the professional sector. After all, it was under her authority that Virginia produced some of the Federal Writers Project’s most acclaimed publications, namely *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion* (1940) and *The Negro in Virginia* (1940). One could argue that Richardson’s success bolstered liberal feminism. Could her privileged position truly impact the average woman? Richardson thought so and appreciated the role she played in helping the “many fine writers [male and female] who found

37 Horace H. Edwards to Eudora Ramsay Richardson, November 9, 1936, box 1, folder 7, Richardson Papers.

38 Horace H. Edwards to Eudora Ramsay Richardson, November 9, 1936, box 1, folder 7, Richardson Papers.

39 Eleanor Barton, “Important Book, Virginia, Supervised by Former Greenville,” *The Greenville Piedmont*, June 19, 1940.

40 Eleanor Barton, “Important Book, Virginia, Supervised by Former Greenville,” *The Greenville Piedmont*, June 19, 1940.

41 Account of the Federal Writers Project to Harold W. Landin of the American Council of Learned Societies, August 31, 1943, box 1, folder 11, Richardson Papers.

themselves without employment on account of the depression.”⁴² With Richardson at the helm of the Virginia office, women could rest assured that their ability, not gender, would be the distinguishing factor in their applications. Feminists in professional workplaces needed to be both inspirational and accessible.

Unsurprisingly, Richardson challenged the public’s definition of women in the public sector. Popular writer Uthal Vincent Wilcox outlined five classes of women in the 1930s. According to this categorization, Congressional women worked with Congress, “epitomizing the advance guard of women’s future role over national affairs,” but pushed themselves to the “breaking point when balancing political and personal ideas of femininity.”⁴³ Intellectuals “achieved great dominance” in federal bureaus advocating for reform based on hard, scientific data.⁴⁴ Executives were known for their “nasty, quick-tempered, and hard-boiled” personalities, yet worked well with men in the office.⁴⁵ Secretarial women, the largest and most distinct class, managed offices and communicated with the press, as long as they learned to “dress well [and] look fresh.”⁴⁶ Emotional women, known derisively as “sob sisters,” published articles saturated with “light, sweetness, and purity.”⁴⁷ Wilcox’s five classes evaluated a woman’s strengths and weaknesses based on an indirect relationship between professional development and personal fulfillment. Success and femininity did not move together. Richardson, however, failed to fit into any of Wilcox’s classes. Her reputation and her résumé reflected the characteristics of the Congressional and Intellectual woman, respectively, while her productive relationships with men and her experience with office management and public communication combined features of the Executive, Secretarial, and Emotional woman. By flouting both this unfair dichotomy and Wilcox’s classification, Richardson embodied an interpretation of feminism that forced the public to reassess its definition of female empowerment.

Sexism, however, still persisted in the 1930s. Writer Helena

42 Eleanor Barton, “Important Book, Virginia, Supervised by Former Greenville,” *The Greenville Piedmont*, June 19, 1940.

43 Uthal Vincent Wilcox, “New Deal Females,” *American Mercury* 38 (1936), 417.

44 Wilcox, “New Deal Females,” 419.

45 Wilcox, “New Deal Females,” 420.

46 Wilcox, “New Deal Females,” 421.

47 Wilcox, “New Deal Females,” 422.

Hil Wilcox even went so far as to claim in 1934 that “federal relief itself [had] been characterized by sex discrimination.”⁴⁸ Government programs often placed women in the service industry as opposed to white-collar offices, and the New Deal milestone of social security also differentiated between male and female workers. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris notes that policy makers did not believe that a woman “fit the profile of the stable industrial worker.”⁴⁹ Consequently, they included women in the social welfare program “as a matter of peace of mind for the husband.”⁵⁰ Traditional notions of work and family devalued women’s stake in the economy. Given the dire straits of the Great Depression, the nation expected its women to once again rely on—or rather, submit to—the male breadwinner. A woman’s work would do more good in the home than the in workplace. The New Deal and its hopes for national relief merely accommodated women workers. So, with their political and professional gains at stake, feminists in the interwar period reasserted women’s rights as citizens and workers.

Richardson joined this effort with her protest of Section 213-A of the National Economy Act, which allowed for “married women whose husbands [were] gainfully employed [to be] either... furloughed or displaced...[when] necessary.”⁵¹ Her petition, signed by thirty-nine women and sent to J. B. Perrish, assistant vice president of the Chesapeake and Ohio Clerks’ Association, attacked the Act on multiple fronts. First, Richardson stressed the hypocrisy inherent to Section 213-A. How could the New Deal bureaus created for the benefit of the American public deny benefits to women blatantly in need of aid? She wrote:

Women have borne their share of suffering during the depression and have risen to emergencies with courage...It seems exceedingly hard that a woman with ability who has by years of work created a place for herself should lose what she

48 Helena Hil Wilcox, “New Deal that Women Want,” *Current History* 41 (1934): 182.

49 Alice Kessler-Harris, “Designing Women and Old Fools: Writing Gender into Social Security Law,” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, Linda Kerber, Jane Sherron DeHart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 527.

50 Kessler-Harris, “Designing Women and Old Fools,” 522.

51 Letter Regarding the Furlough of Female Workers, February 21, 1933, box 1, folder 5, Richardson Papers.

has achieved...The sort of discrimination that sort of ruling [involves] strikes at [the] very heart of efficiency and thwarts women in her attempt to achieve success.⁵²

Richardson argued that national recovery relied on women's economic autonomy. Acknowledging women's contributions to markets and labor would only help the nation lift itself out of the Depression.

Second, Richardson emphasized the legislation's combative potential. Section 213-A raised "antagonism between the sexes" that was equally "unjust" and "dangerous."⁵³ From her perspective, the 1930s made it apparent that cooperation, not competition, would turn progressive ideas into legitimate reform. Neither Richardson's feminism nor other social movements could stand to lose male or female supporters. Thus far, the Democratic Party's reform efforts united both sexes in "striving for a better way of life."⁵⁴ By holding women in a separate, subordinate labor category, Richardson argued that the clause put the cooperation that allowed the New Deal to flourish at risk.

Third, according to Richardson, the framers of Section 213-A, who ignored the needs of their female constituents, were woefully misguided. What was drafted as a means to protect families by securing work for traditional (i.e. male) heads-of-households actually lengthened "breadlines...for many miles."⁵⁵ Instead of fulfilling the responsibilities of true public servants, Richardson argued, legislators played into the "form of depression [and] hysteria" inherent to discrimination.⁵⁶ Reform only went so far if it ignored women's issues. Writer Anita L. Pollitzer comparably noted this tension. Only by taking into account female interests would the Roosevelt Administration "bring about [greater] industrial conditions," and until then the New Deal merely crystallized "inequality and...[placed]

52 Letter Regarding the Furlough of Female Workers, February 21, 1933, box 1, folder 5, Richardson Papers.

53 Letter Regarding the Furlough of Female Workers, February 21, 1933, box 1, folder 5, Richardson Papers.

54 Newspaper and Magazine Clippings, "Democracy Must Be Saved State Women Told" [c.a. 1930s], box 4, folder 6, Richardson Papers.

55 Letter Regarding the Furlough of Female Workers, February 21, 1933, box 1, folder 5, Richardson Papers.

56 Letter Regarding the Furlough of Female Workers, February 21, 1933, box 1, folder 5, Richardson Papers.

women under new and greater handicaps.”⁵⁷ Richardson and her peers relished New Deal opportunities, but sex discrimination hampered their ambition.

One of the greatest obstacles to feminism in the 1930s, however, was what Richardson characterized as women’s misuse of their own political power. Richardson specifically criticized American women’s “failure” to live up to promises of the suffrage era.⁵⁸ Women in the 1930s, who she imagined in the 1910s would be meaningful participants in political discourse, now merely populated the Capitol as successors to “their dead husbands or in whose veins [flowed] the blood of kinsmen illustrious in the halls of lawmakers.”⁵⁹ Many women also “employed methods [so] exasperatingly womanish and calculating [that they bred] in men distrust of the women who [dabble] in public affairs.”⁶⁰ As much as Richardson believed in a strong female voice, she also understood that some women’s ways and beliefs ultimately damaged her gender’s reputation in public affairs. All women could be political, but not all women were meant to be politicians.

Even worse, Richardson found that her peers lacked direction and consensus. The NWP and LWV continued to organize female activists in the 1930s, but neither organization was capable of leading a national movement. While the NWP “fiercely and without charm...[carried] their cause to its logical conclusion,” Richardson observed, the LWV relied on “feminists whose development [had] been arrested.”⁶¹ In Richardson’s view, interwar feminism had been reduced to a combination of unpopular radicalism and ineffective conservatism. The remainder of women who considered themselves feminists in America lacked the necessary resources and guidance for undertaking meaningful work.

Still, the pointed realism with which Richardson approached her former suffragist allies left her surprisingly optimistic in the 1930s. She revealed in 1937:

It [was] certainly true that the enfranchisement of women
[had] not brought about the millennium promised.... Now

57 Anita L. Pollitzer, “The New Deal for Women,” *Equal Rights* 33 (1933), 261.

58 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Ladies of the Lobby,” *North American Review* 227 (1929), 648.

59 Richardson, “Ladies of the Lobby,” 649.

60 Published Quotations of Eudora Ramsay Richardson, box 2, folder 2, Richardson Papers.

61 Richardson, “Ladies of the Lobby,” 654.

that many years [have] passed, I don't mind divulging a secret. Suffragists never really thought that women equipped with the ballot could work miracles over night. ...But rather they tended to agree with Mrs. Poysner who said... 'I'm not denying that women are foolish. God almighty made 'em to match the men.'⁶²

Clearly, feminism in Richardson's hands never meant to use voting rights as a panacea for social ills. It was simply a milestone in a decades-long pursuit for equality. To "achieve the attitude toward women as individuals...[someone capable of pulling] herself up by her own bootstraps," American women needed to stop depending on patriarchal relationships, work amicably yet resolutely through political campaigns, and find a means to heal the splinters in women's organizations. For Richardson, critiquing her peers was essential to progress.

Altogether, Richardson's political work through the interwar period enabled her to advance the feminist principles she honed in the pre-suffrage era. As a suffragist, she undoubtedly viewed women's political rights as catalysts to their own personal and professional development. By actively participating in the NAWSA campaign, she learned how to articulate and defend these ideas in public. In fact, this work later benefited her as the boldness with which she expressed her feminist ideals earned her a national following. The 1920s, however, interrupted her work. The decade fostered political apathy among women. Luckily, the 1930s brought drastic changes to the federal government and women's political organizations alike, and incited Richardson adjusted her platform. She insisted that woman be vocal, intelligent, and authentic when seeking professional opportunities, combating discrimination in federal institutions, and working with their peers in and out of the public sector. Between the suffrage movement and the New Deal, the nation lived in flux. Yet, under this pressure, Richardson realized a style of feminism not only exclusive to the interwar period, but also influential to the American women's movement as a whole.

Liberating Literature

Despite her political accomplishments, history remembers Richardson as an author rather than an activist. She carried

⁶² Eudora Ramsay Richardson, "Women's Rise to Power," *Forum and Century* 67 (1937), 29-30.

several highly-acclaimed novels in her portfolio—her obituary in *The Washington Post* even describes her first as a “writer,” then as a “feminist.”⁶³ As with her political work, Richardson’s writings defined and disseminated her feminist beliefs. With rich, yet fictional narratives, in-depth, non-fiction articles, and a widely read *magnum opus* that incited a public battle of the sexes, Richardson’s career as a writer provided her with an essential medium for shaping and sharing her views on the contemporary woman.

Richardson used her female protagonists to both embody and promote women’s professionalism. For example, “Men Are Like That” tells the story of bank worker Emma Morrison. In this tale, Morrison “made herself indispensable...[and] was...depended on by the officers of the bank.”⁶⁴ But her success comes at a price. Emma is underpaid and overworked and has difficulty relating to other women, whom she regards as “silly children who in their ranking were as far removed from [her] as the president was from the office boy.”⁶⁵ Fortunately, her work does not go unrewarded. After Emma stops a co-worker from botching a high profile account, her boss promotes her to the position of “efficiency expert...[with] a bit more salary.”⁶⁶ Still, “Men Are Like That” harshly critiqued women’s opportunities during the interwar period. Richardson used the short story to empathize with female readers who shared Emma’s frustration. After all, the market crash that struck only a year after the story’s publication left a majority of women without work and suffering from anxiety and fatigue. Emma may have finally gotten her promotion, but her greatest achievement was bringing attention to the specific issues concerning professional women.

Nonetheless, Richardson’s writing did not restrict its interpretation of a woman’s strength to her professional opportunities. “The Hundredth Girl,” for example, tells the story of Kirk and Charlotte—two childhood friends whose relationship slowly blossoms into romance. Typical of Richardson’s feminist fiction, Charlotte proves to be a charismatic hero—even though Richardson never describes her at work. Instead, Charlotte is an intelligent flirt. While

63 “Mrs. Eudora Ramsay Richardson, Writer Feminist, Dies,” *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1973.

64 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Men Are Like that,” *Ladies Home Journal* 45, no. 5 (May 1928), 156.

65 Richardson, “Men Are Like That.”

66 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Men Are Like That.”

Kirk struggles to find his romantic footing, she knew “what [she wanted] and how to go after it.”⁶⁷ The confidence Richardson wished upon women of the public sector thus carried over into personal affairs. As historian Susan Ware notes, though women of the interwar period put a high “priority on self-expression and independence,” they were not totally “averse to love.”⁶⁸ Readers did not have to be the “hundredth girl” to realize that by approaching romance with the same determination, they too could find meaningful relationships in the interwar period.

“Air Madness” similarly intertwines women’s personal and professional interests. “Making a hundred a month...with the prospect of steady raises,” Jane, the flight attendant at the center of the short story, is the envy of any 1930s career woman.⁶⁹ Yet a cross-country flight tests her wits. Turbulent skies turn the routine trip into chaos as the pilot goes “stark mad” in the cockpit.⁷⁰ Jane heroically rises to the occasion, helping the distressed passengers and crew through the ordeal. “Air Madness” is interesting because of what it reveals about personal relationships. The driven career woman does not need to sacrifice love for success. In fact, it is Jane’s quick thinking that wins her the affections of Kent Hudgens, the first mate who looks “as though he might have stepped out of the cover of a sports magazine.”⁷¹ He admits: “Jane darling you’re a brick...and I love you.”⁷²

Together, “The Hundredth Girl” and “Air Madness” showcase what exactly made Richardson’s interpretation of feminism so unique. Richardson was not the only female activist to champion political goals and professional ambitions, but by pairing them with ideas that reassessed how women approached love and friendship, she became decidedly contemporary. Her breed of feminists could have it all. They no longer had to segregate their professional and personal selves, as the simultaneous expression of both would comfort and empower women in the interwar period.

Yet, much like her political endeavors, Richardson’s fiction

67 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “The Hundredth Girl,” *The Washington Post*, August 27 1933, SM6.

68 Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997), 155.

69 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Air Madness,” *Pictorial Review* 35 (1934), 17.

70 Richardson, “Air Madness.”

71 Richardson, “Air Madness.”

72 Richardson, “Air Madness,” 37.

did not exclude male characters from its feminist narratives. In “The Hundredth Girl,” Kirk is the clumsy bachelor burning the “candle at both ends in his pursuit of a glamorous girl.”⁷³ He is also stubborn, initially preferring the passive Germane to the outspoken Charlotte since the former “listened admiringly to everything he said and never started an argument.”⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, his bachelor tendencies eventually get the better of him. Faced with spending the last of his money on courting Germane, he begs her to tell him “I love you” since he can no longer “keep the [financial] pace [he had] started.”⁷⁵ Kirk is Charlotte’s literary foil. His gaffes accentuate her sensible demeanor and ultimately provide for a more accurate characterization of gender relations. Just as women are fully capable of success, so too are men vulnerable to emotion. Richardson’s work promoted diverse and realistic characterizations of men and women to encourage readers come to terms with their potential for failure *and* success and thus become more effective partners.

Arguably, the way in which Richardson associates femininity and feminism is the most remarkable feature of her short fiction. By the 1930s, much of the American public regarded feminists as “unrouged, stringy haired” creatures.⁷⁶ Charlotte is both a “naughty vixen” and “imp incarnate,”⁷⁷ Jane loves fashion, so she splits her checks between her mother and buying “pretty clothes for evenings off duty.”⁷⁸ Even Richardson herself was both distinguished by and lauded for being a “good looking” feminist.⁷⁹ Feminists could still be feminine. Much like her approach to women’s professional and personal ambitions, Richardson wrote to erase the line that separated beauty and strength. From Richardson’s perspective, the negative mischaracterization of feminists as unfeminine was as detrimental to her gender as Section 213-A. Men and women needed to move past clichés in order to fully appreciate women’s advancement.

With nonfiction pieces, Richardson further explored the relationship between love and feminism, emphasizing the need for

73 Richardson, “The Hundredth Girl.”

74 Richardson, “The Hundredth Girl.”

75 Richardson, “The Hundredth Girl.”

76 “Advises Women to Use Sex Appeal in Business,” *News Sentinel*, March 31, 1932.

77 Richardson, “The Hundredth Girl.”

78 Richardson, “Air Madness,” 16.

79 “Advises Women to Use Sex Appeal,” *News Sentinel*, March 31, 1932.

respect in romance. “Intelligent Husbands Wanted” tackles this issue straight on, with Richardson lamenting the fact that women looking for partners “neglected the task of being themselves.”⁸⁰ In her eyes, dating and marriage had become less a personal journey for romantic fulfillment and more a public submission to men’s interpretation of gender norms. For example, men’s infatuation with youth meant that a “young woman...[was] more likely to be [the older man’s] slave than his darling.”⁸¹ Richardson demanded that women “marry [their] intellectual equal.”⁸² Eternal love needed to be “handled in a manner satisfying to the two people whose happiness is involved.”⁸³ The opening of women’s public networks predicated the need to update cultural norms. “Intelligent Husbands Wanted” was even more forward-thinking with the inclusion of one topic: sex. Richardson affirmed its value as essential to a successful marriage: sex is not “something that a man [or woman] must get out of [his/her] system... [he/she] must let love become a part of [his/her] ambitions.”⁸⁴ Those who refused doomed themselves to be “the loneliest [creatures] on earth.”⁸⁵ Feminism in Richardson’s view was an ideology establishing equality for women’s minds and bodies.

At the same time, Richardson advocated for femininity in the workplace. With the various opportunities and challenges available during the interwar period, Richardson expected a woman to “use all legitimate and respectable methods to achieve her aim.”⁸⁶ Beauty and charm, she argued, were just as useful as intelligence and skill. Unfortunately, Richardson found that too many of her peers failed to appreciate the relationship between sex appeal and business, making women “too shy to be successful...[or] too arrogant [since] they... forward too much.”⁸⁷ Richardson’s feminism thus sought a balance. Women should neither let their gender hinder their work, nor forget

80 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Intelligent Husbands Wanted,” *Forum & Century* 98 (October 1937), 152.

81 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Young Man’s Darling,” *Forum & Century* 99 (January 1938), 19.

82 Richardson, “Intelligent Husbands Wanted,” 157.

83 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Recognizing the Homemaker,” *The North American Review* (1928), 695.

84 Richardson, “Intelligent Husbands Wanted,” 155.

85 Richardson, “Intelligent Husbands Wanted,” 157.

86 “Advises Women to Use Sex Appeal in Business,” *News Sentinel*, March 31, 1932.

87 “Advises Women to Use Sex Appeal in Business,” *News Sentinel*, March 31, 1932.

the advantages inherent in being female.

That being said, Richardson wrote profusely on the need for gender cooperation. Not all feminists were women. As the interwar period wore on, it became more apparent that a woman's success in the public sector rested on the collective efforts of her gender as well as the support of her male peers. Richardson insisted that the increased power of women post-suffrage was "the direct result of a new awareness on the part of both men and women."⁸⁸ For Richardson, defining feminism as a solely female pursuit discredited the appeal and effectiveness of the entire movement. The public needed to think of feminism not as the work of man-hating radicals, but as a legitimate reform effort in which both men and women held stakes. Extending these political views into the home, Richardson highlighted the "arrogance" of the belief "that woman is the homemaker."⁸⁹ Women influenced politics as much as men influenced the home. Both were "institutions built by love and mutual needs, created to protect and comfort the family...Whatever...title there is must be conferred jointly upon husband and wife."⁹⁰ Social or political efforts rarely succeeded by only appealing to one demographic. Feminism in the modern era would only thrive so long as men and women worked together.

Though domesticity and other factors of gendered tradition still shaped Richardson's feminist writings, her treatment of these issues was not entirely radical. In her essays, home and motherhood were not relics of a sexist society, but institutions that needed reconstruction in the wake of the Great Depression and New Deal. According to a 1930 Women's Bureau census, a third of the eleven million working women of the 1930s juggled home and work, and in as many as 450,000 of these homes, women were the sole wage earners for their family.⁹¹ Richardson reached out to her domestic readers, especially the "American housewife of the upper middle-class...the principal victim of the situation about which there is so much prating...[but no] passing word or compassionate glance."⁹² Balancing unstable finances with social expectations resulted in widespread anxiety and fatigue. The psychological issue demanded

88 Richardson, "Women's Rise to Power," 33.

89 Richardson, "Recognizing the Homemaker," 701.

90 Richardson, "Recognizing the Homemaker."

91 "Women Work and Run Homes Too," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1937.

92 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, "Lady and the Peddler," *North American Review* 232 (1931), 466.

public attention and, concurrently, elevated work in the home. The housewife bore the weight of her “daily tasks” and the “concept of a lady [emphasis original]” to persevere through a life arguably more difficult than the forgotten man. In the same fashion, Richardson, herself a doting wife and mother, reassessed family dynamics. Mothers “felt the strain of carrying two jobs at once” and had to deal with a cacophony of opinions dictating what was best.⁹³ Richardson urged her readers to believe in their maternal instincts. “If unhampered by the jargon of [child psychology] cults,” a mother and her family could “develop...self-confidence and serenity.”⁹⁴ Feminism under Richardson’s influence empowered the wives and mothers of the 1930s.

Richardson’s career as a feminist author culminated in the writing of *The Influence of Men—Incurable*. In 1936, author John Erskine published *The Influence of Women and Its Cure*, which offered men, allegedly the victims of the pernicious efforts of organized women, a new defense strategy. He argued that the public should not be fooled by the claim that women “have it harder than man.”⁹⁵ Organized women “softened and spoiled” institutions of the modern world, so the “meanest thing [society] could do to the women of America would be to give them...equality with men.”⁹⁶ Erskine caught Richardson’s attention, and she published *The Influence of Men—Incurable* in response. A mix of satire, historical research, gender studies, and political theory, the book was Richardson’s *magnum opus*, articulating her beliefs in modern womanhood. The brand of feminism featured in *The Influence of Men—Incurable* revolved around three themes.

First, *The Influence of Men—Incurable* revealed the manipulative systems that supported patriarchal societies. According to Richardson, the research allegedly proving women to be subordinate workers and thinkers was itself the product of devious men. She explained how men “stole [female] work...[and] rights” and “kept women out of the powerful inner circles...[so that they did not] initiate something new and dangerous—to men.”⁹⁷ Even spaces as mundane

93 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Every Wife To Her Last,” *Women’s Journal* 14 (1929).

94 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, “Little Learning,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 82 (1927), 157.

95 John Erskine, *The Influence of Women and Its Cure* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1936), 16.

96 Erskine, *The Influence of Women and Its Cure*, 69, 127.

97 Eudora Ramsay Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1936), 55, 64.

as a hotel room treated women “as though [they were] all cloistered in homes.”⁹⁸ Everything from the coat hangers to the bathroom outlets had been engineered to push traveling woman closer “toward oblivion.”⁹⁹ Richardson added a new dimension to previous feminist arguments about women’s mental and physical skills. It was one thing to recognize her gender’s wasted potential as submissive homemakers without a ballot, and another to trace the deeper roots of that oppression. Drawing from historical data, social customs, and everyday life, *The Influence of Men—Incurable* revealed to readers the multiple dimensions shaping and obstructing the experiences of women in the interwar period. Consequently, women’s equality relied as much on recognizing the structures that determined gender norms in every society as it did on critiquing current events (e.g., the treatment of women in New Deal reform programs).

Second, the book approached feminism realistically by refraining from defining it as a uniformly united and successful movement. Instead, *The Influence of Men—Incurable* agreed to one of Erskine’s main arguments. Idle women did threaten society—but not alone. They operated as the “tools of men who seek to take women out of fields in which competition exists.”¹⁰⁰ Most explicitly, Richardson insisted that the idle woman’s cause of protective legislation, the primary political focus of many post-suffrage feminists, retarded “women’s development and [increased their] parasitism and economic slavery.”¹⁰¹ Once again, she gave depth to the interwar period interpretation of feminism. She was unafraid to hold both men and women responsible for creating a society that was critical and oppressive of its female members. Feminism needed to move forward not as an ignorant sisterhood or a stubbornly anti-male organization, but as a movement authentically committed to the best interests and equality of women.

Third, *The Influence of Men—Incurable* fostered the concept of reconciliation between the sexes. Richardson admits at the outset that the “man who fought for the rights of women [remained] not only unhonored and unsung, but also uncarved.”¹⁰² It was not man that Richardson took offense to, but *men*. When together, she asserted,

98 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, 27.

99 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*.

100 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, 85.

101 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, 87.

102 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, 17.

their egotism, fear, and ignorance mixed to form a discriminatory and destructive system. Once more, Richardson espoused the need for gender cooperation. Feminists of her teaching believed that “the influence of men should not be cured. Unto it, however, must be added the influence of women.”¹⁰³ Men and women fighting for dominance served no purpose. It was ultimately a “man-and-woman’s world.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the potentially contentious nature of her writing, Richardson had a strong following in interwar-period America. Publishers and readers wrote to Richardson praising the style and content of her work, as well as the feminist perspectives woven into it. For example, Mabel Raef Putnam regarded “Intelligent Husbands Wanted” as “a most excellent article, covering many points, which have long needed discussion.”¹⁰⁵ Phyllis Moir, assistant editor of *The Forum*, found “A Young Man’s Darling” compelling because it started a “fascinating debate [on marriage and age] and [could] help clear... some of the confused and silly thinking that attaches to it.”¹⁰⁶ Arnold Gingrich, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, followed Richardson’s writing intently. Upon the submission of two of her manuscripts, Gingrich “saw [her] name...[and] pounced upon it and read both papers with great interest.”¹⁰⁷ He said they were “genuine and moving [bits] of personal experience.”¹⁰⁸ Even the White House lauded Richardson. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt admired Richardson’s *The Woman Speaker* as a “book which [she hoped would] be published before long so that women in general [could] obtain it.”¹⁰⁹ Evidently, Richardson’s feminist prose appealed to readers of many backgrounds.

Her celebrity unfortunately did not spare her from discrimination. At *Esquire* magazine, Edward C. Aswell refused to publish Richardson’s work. He respected her portfolio, but maintained

103 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, 156.

104 Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, 155.

105 Letter from Mabel Raef Putnam, October 3 1937, box 1, folder 2, Richardson Papers.

106 Letter from Phyllis Moir, May 19, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Richardson Papers.

107 Letter from Arnold Gingrich, October 11, 1933, box 1, folder 3, Richardson Papers.

108 Letter from Arnold Gingrich, October 11, 1933, box 1, folder 3, Richardson Papers.

109 Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day: By Mrs Roosevelt,” *Cincinnati Ohio Post*, February 1, 1936.

that *Esquire* was a publication “of and for males.”¹¹⁰ A review of Richardson’s biography of Alexander Stephens, *Little Aleck*, even referred to her as “Mr. Richardson,” an author who “marshaled his [sic] skill with his [sic] truly enormous array of facts.”¹¹¹ John L. Porter, speaking on her writings for the War Department in the 1940s, mentioned that she wrote with “all the qualities which [he] rather doubted would be found in one of [her] sex.”¹¹² Nevertheless, the sexism that marred some interpretations of Richardson’s work only heightened its value and necessity. Her articles and books prompted their audiences to rethink their views on women. Sex discrimination had no place in literature or society.

The reactions to *The Influence of Men—Incurable* demonstrated just how much Richardson’s feminist perspective could engage the public. One reporter in 1936 raved about how “earnest...powerful restrained comment...and [a lack of] dogmatism” distinguished *The Influence of Men—Incurable*, so much so that “to Eudora Ramsay Richardson the advancing of freedom of women is greatly indebted.”¹¹³ It seemed that women activists of the interwar period needed the novel to both speak for and organize them. *The Influence of Men—Incurable* mediated between radical and conservative feminism in a fashion that was both compelling and comprehensible.

At the same time, reviews for *The Influence of Men—Incurable* intensified the rivalry between Erskine and Richardson. Poet laureate Carter Wormley stood by Richardson in verse:

The guileless Erskine who views
The radiant aurora
Has witnessed but a poor excuse
To the glamorous Eudora¹¹⁴

Richardson’s book resonated with individuals beyond the feminist movement and women’s organizations. Margaret Ford of the *Boston Globe* astutely described this battle of the sexes in which the “referee’s

110 Letter from Edward C. Aswell, October 11, 1933, box 1, folder 3, Richardson Papers.

111 Comments on *Little Aleck* from Various Publications [c.a. 1932], box 1, folder 4, Richardson Papers.

112 Letter from John L. Porter, February 1, 1946, box 1, folder 13, Richardson Papers.

113 Henry Brantly Handy, “Clarity and Brilliance Mark Mrs. Richardson’s Challenge,” *See Who’s Who in America*, December 27, 1936.

114 Carter Wormley, “The Glamorous Eudora,” March 11, 1937, box 2, folder 2, Richardson Papers.

whistle might just as well sound.”¹¹⁵ As Ford explained, both writers claimed a corner and threw words “back and forth...[in] violent disagreement.”¹¹⁶ Erskine patronized Richardson when he claimed that “if a woman [was] really beautiful—she [was] useful enough.”¹¹⁷ Richardson was unfazed, maintaining her conviction that women were the “producers and conservers of humanity.”¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, the two authors were the first to admit that they were nothing but “friendly opponents.”¹¹⁹ Richardson did not dismiss Erskine as a misogynist. Erskine kept from repudiating Richardson as a bitter feminist. Each responded carefully to one another’s arguments, thereby proving that in academics, rhetoric, and diplomacy, men and women could be equally matched.

Richardson’s writing portfolio articulated a brand of feminism that was as forceful as it was unique. Her short fiction shed light on women’s complicated yet rewarding experiences at work and with others. Feminists of the 1920s and 1930s who took Richardson’s writing to heart would not have to choose between professional and personal fulfillment. Correspondingly, Richardson’s nonfiction pieces analyzed society and gender relationships. Her books and articles maintained that women could remain active in the public sector without sacrificing their needs as mothers, wives, or daughters. Her literary portfolio, and the feminist perspective that supported it, proved widely popular among readers, publishers, and journalists alike. From allegorical short stories to cutting op-eds, Richardson’s literature is essential to her legacy as an icon of contemporary feminism.

Conclusion

In the 1960s, feminism returned to the forefront of American politics. Groups like the National Organization of Women (NOW) and its members championed women’s liberation and looked to their predecessors in the suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for inspiration. Unfortunately, these

115 Margaret Ford, “Whose World Is It Anyways,” *Boston Globe*, November 1, 1936.

116 Margaret Ford, “Whose World Is It Anyways,” *Boston Globe*, November 1, 1936.

117 “John Erskine Declares Idle Women To Blame,” *Richmond News*, October 26, 1937.

118 “Egotism, Inferiority of Man Blamed for Woman’s Plight,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 1937.

119 “John Erskine Declares Idle Women To Blame,” *Richmond News*, October 26, 1937.

second-wave feminists—and contemporary historians—overlooked the contributions of an entire era. Interwar period feminists, such as Richardson, influenced the course of feminism through American history. Women who continued to lobby for their gender’s political, professional, and personal empowerment through the interwar years contributed to the establishment and success of second-wave feminism.

Eudora Ramsay Richardson distinguished herself as a feminist force in the 1920s and 1930s. As a field director for NAWSA in the 1910s she lobbied for women’s political rights and representation. During the 1930s, she worked with the Democratic Party to promote women’s active participation in state and national politics. She frequently critiqued the nature of women’s organizations in the hopes of advancing female solidarity across the United States. Richardson’s feminist theory proved just as tenacious in her writing. She crafted fictional characters and storylines that showcased the full spectrum of the interwar female experience. Whether rewarding the committed-yet-frustrating work of the office secretary or matchmaking a bachelor with his beautiful and flirtatious childhood friend, Richardson’s stories embraced the concept of female empowerment on all fronts. Nonfiction pieces also promoted these ideals. After studying the issues concerning wives, mothers, girlfriends, and career women, Richardson published works focused on establishing equality both in the public and private sector. Richardson eschewed the “unrouged, stringy haired” caricature of the 1930s feminist to surprise her peers and contemporary readers alike. Though a veteran of the suffrage era and an active patron of New Deal sociopolitical reforms, she and her interpretation of feminism clearly transcended the interwar period. She instilled within every woman—of the first wave, second wave, and in between—the “independent spirit [that would help] her earn [her] own living and her own glory.”¹²⁰

Richardson’s story recasts the place of the interwar period in the historical narrative of the American woman. The 1920s and 1930s challenged the nation’s political, economic, and cultural institutions, and in the case of feminism, redefined it entirely. Feminism did more than just survive in these years. Under the auspices of Richardson and her ilk, the movement bridged the gap between the first and second wave. American women no longer lived a life divided. Success could be achieved either as a mother, wife, worker, student, or flirt. To a

¹²⁰ Eudora Ramsay Richardson, *The Influence of Men—Incurable* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1936), 153.

degree, this politically driven yet socially grounded expression of feminism was radical. But, ultimately, the beliefs Richardson held and the lessons she taught resonate even in the sociopolitical landscape navigated by the twenty-first-century woman.

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