

## *The Freewoman*: Feminism, Dialogism and Women's Education

Marva Milo

*The early-twentieth-century British periodical The Freewoman was a feminist weekly that presented various, often opposing ideas on women's situation and other contemporary social issues. Dora Marsden, the editor, advocated a philosophy of feminism that encouraged the expression of divergent opinions as a means of achieving agency for women. This commitment to dialogic feminism was in opposition to the unified opinions and goals of the suffrage movement. In this essay, a debate about university education for women serves as an example of Marsden's approach as an editor. By giving a stage to opposing opinions about education, The Freewoman allows us to see how charged education was, whether as an oppressive mechanism or as a form of resistance.*

In 1911 feminist activist Dora Marsden (1882-1960) established in London *The Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review*. Though publication ran for a little under a year (November 1911-October 1912), this periodical was a venue for unique ideas on feminist issues, and thus can contribute greatly to our understanding of early twentieth century British feminism. *The Freewoman* embodied Marsden's philosophy of feminism, which stressed the importance of expressing divergent opinions and holding open debates. It differed from most contemporary women's periodicals in that it was not connected to any suffrage organization, which enabled Marsden to express views that resisted both commonly held ideas about women and the dominant politics of the British suffrage movement. After placing Marsden and *The Freewoman* in the context of the British suffrage movement and the various organizations and ideas that were part of it, this paper will focus on how the periodical discussed women's education. These discussions emphasize the potential for women's intellectualism to be a form of feminist resistance. They also serve as an example of Marsden's insistence upon dialogic feminism: feminism that is based on the expression of diverse opinions, without intention of necessarily arriving at a final conclusion.

### *The Freewoman* and Early British Feminism

*The Freewoman* was the first Anglo-American periodical to use the term "feminist" in its title or subtitle, and it remained the only one to do so until 1935 (DiCenzo, Delap and Ryan 165). There are no exact figures available regarding its circulation, but it is clear that it had a relatively small readership, assumed to be between one and two thousand (Delap 623). The limited reach of the periodical was at least partly due to the periodical's high price of three pence. It is known that among its subscribers were individual members and branches of suffrage societies. In addition, *The Freewoman* was read out loud, distributed to libraries and reading rooms, and circulated among readers, all of which expanded its readership and influence, and increased accessibility for working class audiences who could not afford to buy it (DiCenzo,

Delap and Ryan 164-5). As part of its feminist agenda, *The Freewoman* was designed to attract both male and female readers, and to open feminism to both men and women (Barash 45).

Marsden started her feminist activism in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the militant suffrage organization established in Manchester in 1903 by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. The founding of the WSPU marked a shift from the diplomatic methods of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), which was founded in 1897. The WSPU employed new and militant tactics for directing attention to the problem of women's disfranchisement, including breaking shop windows, arson, heckling politicians' speeches, and inciting confrontations with the police. Marsden was among the minority of wholly dedicated WSPU members who were actively militant. She joined the WSPU in 1908, when she was still a teacher; however, after her first arrest, in 1909, she resigned from her position as headmistress of the Altrincham Pupil-Teacher Centre to become a full-time, paid organizer in the WSPU (Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 22). Despite being one of the more actively militant suffragettes, after less than two years of intense and zealous activity, which included several arrests and one month-long imprisonment, Marsden resigned from the WSPU in January 1911. Her resignation was due to her increasing criticism of the Pankhursts' autocratic style of leadership, which she felt left no room for initiative and free thinking amongst its members (Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 46-8).

Marsden was not the only one to accuse the Pankhursts of being autocratic—even dictatorial. Indeed, the WSPU had no constitution and held no votes, and the leaders spoke of its structure in militaristic terms, often referring to themselves as generals and to the members as soldiers. As British political historian Martin Pugh notes, given the illegal activities of the WSPU its autocracy may have been an advantage, indeed a necessity, rather than a condemnable feature (Pugh 176-9). At any rate, this style of leadership certainly influenced the debates that could evolve within the WSPU, and the flexibility of its members in both ideas and acts. This, along with disagreements over militancy and party affiliations, resulted in a number of splits and expulsions over the years of its existence. Most notably, in 1907, one group led by Charlotte Despard split from the WSPU and became the Women's Freedom League (WFL). The WFL was more subtle in its militancy, and promoted collaboration between the more militant suffragettes and those who favoured constitutional methods (Pugh 180).

One of the main reasons for Marsden's resignation from the WSPU was the feeling that its militant methods did not indicate equally radical political or feminist views. Pugh says as much, claiming that "[t]he traditional focus on the methods adopted by the Pankhursts has had the effect of obscuring the fact that in many ways they and their followers were distinctly conventional in aims and attitudes. In reality, though the suffragettes attacked and disparaged the parliamentary politicians, they desired to join the system rather than to overthrow the status quo" (216). Looking for a platform for more open and radical debates on feminism, Marsden turned at first to the WFL, offering to start an intellectually inclined supplement to their newspaper *The Vote*.

In her proposal to the WFL, Marsden suggested that this supplement would allow an inflow of ideas from outside the suffrage movement and could consequently become an independent platform. The League should be prepared for this platform “to be the cause of dissension” (qtd. in Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 52). The WFL was obviously not willing to fund this kind of initiative, and, after a short period of working for *The Vote*, Marsden resigned (Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 52).

Marsden's resignation from the WSPU and the WFL can be seen as indicating an evolving feminist consciousness; as a result, she could no longer agree with the two organizations' focus on the vote as their main cause (Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 47). It is important to note that Marsden's intention was to start not a new political movement but an intellectual forum for discussion. As Mary Gawthorpe, who was co-editor of *The Freewoman* for the first three months of its run, noted in a letter to Marsden that while “a critical controversial paper will always be in order and would ultimately be a blessing all round...a critical movement postulates a pretty problem in psychology” (qtd. in Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 55). Indeed, it would have been impossible to build a political agenda on debate and criticism, and these were exactly the features Marsden thought were missing in the feminist discourse of her day: while the suffrage organizations were moving away from abstract, philosophical debates (Pugh 58), Marsden was moving towards them. She believed that restricting the feminist debate to the single cause of achieving votes for women, without addressing other aspects of women's oppression, was a mistake. In Marsden's view, achieving women's suffrage was not significant in and of itself, but could only be considered as such were it part of a broader and more radical vision of social change. This view of the aims of the struggle for women's rights put into question not only the WSPU's violent methods, but the very ideas behind the suffrage movement as a whole. Marsden's opinion, as she stated in the first issue of *The Freewoman*, was that “feminism is the whole issue, political enfranchisement a branch issue and the methods, militant or otherwise, are merely accidentals” (“Notes.” 23 Nov. 1911: 3).

Feminism, as Marsden saw it, was an issue touching every facet of women's lives—private as well as social—and one that different women (and men) had opinions about, some of which were contrasting. Therefore, it was not a subject that could be addressed from the point of view of one collective, as was done in the suffrage societies. Quite on the contrary, Marsden believed that “there is no essential virtue in unity, especially among women. We are becoming more convinced that women will have to move apart the better to come together in a wider understanding” (“Superficial Unity.” 28 Mar. 1912: 377). For Marsden, the many ideological disagreements and splits in its ranks, which had been one of the suffrage movement's greatest weaknesses, could become a source of strength if given a proper platform.

Thus, *The Freewoman* was conceived as a distinctly feminist periodical, or, as literary scholar Bruce Clarke terms it, a “post-suffragist” project, which was concerned with the broader aspects of women's position, and with reflections and debates on feminism (93). It was also a place where the seemingly unified façade of the suffrage organizations was dismantled, their rhetoric and ideology deconstructed, and their

activities separated and shown to be working counter to each other, thus showing the complexity of feminism (Delap 620). *The Freewoman* covered a wide range of topics, among them socialism, anarchism, sexuality, motherhood and marriage, ideas of free love, women's work and education; it also published poetry. It had a lively correspondence section, in which letters from readers to the editor were published and answered by Marsden and other contributors. Among the respondents were authors H. G. Wells and Rebecca West; anarchist Guy Aldred; socialist and feminist Ada Nield Chew; physician, psychologist and sexuality researcher Havelock Ellis and others. The communication between readers and contributors continued beyond the printed pages in discussion circles in which they met and discussed the topics addressed in *The Freewoman*. These discussions centered around issues of sexuality and family structures, topics which aroused the most controversy in publication. The circles were usually established by readers who invited contributors to speak, and records of the discussions were published in *The Freewoman* (Garner, *Stepping Stones* 67-72).

The title *Freewoman* stemmed from Marsden's perception that "though some men must be servants, all women are servants, and all the masters are men," and that women faced two choices: remain protected wives, or take their place among the masters and become freewomen. The former was the safe choice, while the latter was the risky one. This set of choices stood in opposition to the position of other women she called "bondwomen," those women who were willing to sacrifice their freedom for protection. The effort to join the "masters" is what Marsden saw as underlying the feminist movement ("Bondwomen." 23 Nov. 1911: 1-2).

The dialogic approach taken by *The Freewoman* stood in stark contrast to the suffragist periodicals of the time such as *The Vote*; *Votes for Women*; *Common Cause*; and *The Suffragette*. Because these periodicals were linked to organizations, they reported on the activity of those organizations and promoted their agenda in a unified manner. Even if those groups did not always agree with one another, they still shared some opinions, mainly regarding women's presumed natural roles. The three major suffrage groups—NUWSS, WFL, and WSPU—were generally in agreement that woman's place was in the home as wives and mothers, roles that were based on service to others and for which their purported moral virtue and disposition to care for others made them particularly fit. Dora Marsden was keen on attacking these views, and *The Freewoman's* feminism rejected the appeal to the idea of sexual difference in order to justify the demand to enfranchise women (Garner, *Stepping Stones*).

It was common at the time to see the state through an analogy to a family or a household, and this notion, along with the idea of different gender roles, was used by some suffragists to explain why women should be allowed to vote (Delap 614-15). Those suffragists used notions about women that were also used by anti-suffragists, only with the opposite political implications. Women's perceived characteristics of nurture, care, and superior morality were presented as necessary for the country and the empire, just as they were needed in their own families. Some suffragist

leaders wanted what they saw as feminine—the domestic aspects of life—to be given more credence in the public sphere. The NUWSS newspaper, *Common Cause*, used women's supposedly natural inclination to domestic roles to explain women's demand for enfranchisement. It agreed that women's place was in the home, and added: "we say, 'Give us the power to keep them in the home.' This is one of the many reasons why women want to vote" (qtd. in Garner, *Stepping Stones* 13).

In contrast to the views that highlighted women's service roles, what Dora Marsden wanted for women was free choice and an expression of their individual will. She sought a feminism that was individualistic, based on the particular merits of individual women, and not on assumptions and beliefs regarding the sex as a whole (Barash 47). Marsden's opinion of what feminism should look like stood in opposition to the idea of the citizen's role, which shaped the struggle for the vote, and which many suffragists represented as being focused on service and duty rather than rights (Delap 621). Where suffrage activists used arguments based on sexual differences that tended to emphasize the moral, emotional or biological divide between the sexes, Dora Marsden's freewoman prototype emphasized individual freedom of choice, and was not restricted by traditional gender roles. Clarke identifies *The Freewoman* with Edward Carpenter's idea of an "intermediate sexual type" which transcends the male-female division (65). This identification may be strengthened by the fact that Carpenter's name and ideas appeared in *The Freewoman* in several articles dealing with male and female sexuality and its connection to women's liberation, as well as with homosexuality.

Marsden's position, characterizes her—and *The Freewoman's*—stance toward feminism more generally. Nothing was taken for granted in the analysis and attempts to resolve "The Woman Question." Les Garner, suffrage historian and Marsden's biographer, writes that understanding how the perceived characteristics of women were connected to their oppression was of central importance to *The Freewoman*. Therefore the veracity of their perceived maternal, domestic and sexual roles, remained open to debate and criticism (Garner, *Stepping Stones* 65). The suffrage organizations accepted women's perceived difference and their societal roles as a given, and asked for them to be given rights, or opportunities to serve, within the limitations of these roles and differences. Marsden, in contrast, sought a way to promote the sort of debate that would enable women to understand the roots of their oppression and to resist it.

While Clarke portrays Marsden's focus as essentially more individualistic than feminist, concerned more with the evolution of the individual than with the social movement (56-7), it seems that the two actually strengthened each other, or that this was at least Marsden's intention. Promoting women's individualism is in itself a subversive act, since, as Clarke points out, individualism was considered a masculine trait in patriarchal culture, and was valorized as such (8). Thus, the cultivation of individual women and their intellect was a crucial element in the struggle for freedom, which would make the clear distinction between feminism and individualism in Dora Marsden's thought difficult. The discussions about women's education in *The*

*Freewoman* illustrate the potential for resistance in women's individualism and intellectualism. They are also a fine example of Marsden's adherence to an open debate, even (perhaps especially) when the ideas presented contrast with one another, and some of them probably with her personal opinions as well.

## Women's Education

Until recently, women's higher education was perceived as having the potential to undermine the social order by enabling women to step out of their economic, intellectual and political subordination. As Dora Marsden saw it, higher education could serve two complementary purposes, both of which were essential to women's freedom. One was to equip women with the occupational skills that would enable them to support themselves without having to barter themselves in exchange for men's protection ("Bondwomen." 23 Nov. 1911: 2). The other was to cultivate their intellect, so that those women who had an individual view and understanding of life could express it in some creative form ("Commentary on Bondwomen." 30 Nov. 1911: 21). Both the occupational training and the intellectual cultivation Marsden advocated went beyond women's customary roles as mothers and homemakers. Marsden herself had both kinds of education, having been trained as a teacher since she was thirteen through the pupil-teacher training system, and later studying history, philosophy and other humanities subjects at Owen's College, Manchester (Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 14-18). She must have ascribed considerable significance to this education, since until the end of her editorial career her name appeared on the masthead as "Dora Marsden, B.A."

One of the questions that arose time and again in the discussions was the connection between women's education and their place in the home. Suffrage organizations tended to see women's work in the household as comparable to work outside it, even suggesting that wives should be paid for it by their husbands (Garner, *Stepping Stones* 51). There were also efforts on the part of government institutions to battle the view that housework was inferior to work outside the home. One of the ways to do that was to try and professionalize housework, or at least give it the appearance of professionalized work. Several articles in *The Freewoman* addressed a King's College program in Home Science and Economics that was meant to upgrade housework. The first article, titled "A University Degree for Housewives?", was published in the first issue of the periodical, and was written by an anonymous female author who signed as "Educationist." The article begins by quoting parts of the advertisement to the King's College course of study, which listed the subjects offered, including: biology, chemistry, physics, household work (e.g., cookery, laundry, and housewifery), and others. The course was, according to the advertisement, "an endeavour to treat all subjects connected with the household both scientifically and practically" ("University Degree?" 23 Nov. 1911: 16-17). The curriculum was based on the assumption that the natural role of women is taking care of the domestic sphere, and on the causal relation between the household and the commonweal of the nation: "The moral and physical

welfare of our country depends primarily on the training and healthy upbringing of its children. This is the special work which Nature and custom has assigned to women" ("Home Science." 29 Feb. 1912: 295).

One of the main points of criticism raised by "Educationist" is the appeal to science and the prestige of the university in order to keep women in a subordinate position. She claimed that the government assigned £100,000 in scholarships to the program, which was meant to attract young women to choose this course of study over others. This reflected, in her view, the interest of men to keep women in the home; otherwise, they would have given the same amount of money as scholarships to women, regardless of their chosen program. The aim of the program as she saw it was "perpetuating woman's inferiority by perfecting her in the role which puts the greatest difficulties in the way of her development" ("University Degree?" 23 Nov. 1911: 16-17). As mentioned above, there were some women at the time who tended to agree with the notion that the home was woman's proper place, and thought that it is women's place in this sphere that actually empowered them. This view was criticized by the author, who quoted a section of the curriculum that referred to the course as the special contribution of women to the professionalization of housework, and remarked: "That is the tragedy of it! Women make a 'special contribution' towards educational facilities for women, and it turns out to be this" ("University Degree?" 23 Nov. 1911: 16). Implied here is the view that there is no inherent solidarity or unity of cause among women. Those who seek to be free and cultivate their intellect face not only men, but other women as well.

The article was followed by a letter from a reader, Adele Meyer, who defined herself as a devoted feminist and suffragist, and claimed that "Educationist" completely misunderstood the goal of the King's College course of study. The aim, as Meyer put it, was "to apply scientific methods to what is called 'Woman's Sphere'" ("Letter." 7 Dec. 1911:54). Meyer further stated that the teachings should cause women to rebel against the methods used in the household—but not against the idea that it is actually their place by nature. Meyer regarded the home as the proper place for a woman, and argued that domestic work is not inferior in itself, only that women should be professionalized like those in other scientific occupations such as agriculture and engineering. In reflecting a view that was common among some suffragists, Meyer's letter gave the readers a different perspective from which to appraise the course of study offered by King's College, and encouraged a discussion of women's place in society more generally. "Educationist" replied to Meyer's letter, emphasizing points already raised in her first article and pointing out that such training should not be in the university, the goal of which is to educate, not merely to train ("Letter." 14 Dec. 1911: 71).

The editors asked Rona Robinson, a chemist and former suffragette, to write an article about the scientific education in the King's College program. Robinson was the first woman in the UK to receive a first class degree in chemistry, from the University of Manchester, and she was part of Dora Marsden's social circle (Garner, *Brave and Beautiful* 19-20). When the editors asked her to write the article, Robinson

was enrolled in the Home Science and Economics program as a student, and was a recipient of the Gilchrist scholarship. She did not mention in her two-part article what made her enroll in the program in the first place, given that she had a Master of Science degree. While the reasons for her enrolment are unclear, her reasons for agreeing to write the article are—she wrote that she withdrew from her studies and gave back her scholarship “owing to increasing hostility to the aims and methods of those responsible for the scheme” (“King’s College.” 15 Feb. 1912: 255). Robinson’s article provides the perspective of a woman who got a scientific education, and refers to the ways in which proper science education for women could improve their status.

Robinson noted that the scientific education that women got in this program could not be comprehensive, if only for the number of subjects studied. For a degree in science at that time, four subjects were studied to an intermediate level, and three of these to an advanced level. In the King’s College program, women were supposed to study fourteen subjects over the same period of time. After stating the quantitative relations she addressed the quality of the science classes. The material was, in her view, taught very superficially, leaving the students still far from even “the realm of the young dabblers in science” (“King’s College.” 15 Feb. 1912: 256). Robinson’s descriptions of the classes, and her ability to compare them to her own experience in a standard degree program, give the impression that the King’s College program was adjusted to the intellectual level and interests of women as its founders perceived them. This includes applying knowledge in physics to cleaning, knowledge in chemistry to cooking, and a biology class that covers various theories on evolution and genetics such as Darwin, Lamarck, Galton and others, leading up to “general conclusions as to the nature of Heredity” (“King’s College.” 15 Feb. 1912: 256-7). It may be assumed from the inclusion of Darwin and Galton that an emphasis was put on the differences between the sexes in body as well as mind.

Robinson accused the people who established the program of manipulating women into enrolling in it insofar as its founder appealed to the prestige of science and the university, and to women’s wish to professionalize. Rather than opening educational possibilities to women, this program, she pointed out, deprived them of accessing the advantages that were secured to men. The program as it stood “did not provide an education in science, nor, on the other hand, did it provide training in the Domestic Arts of a standard equal even to that provided in a school of Domestic Arts.” She wrote that if the students knew what the studies in the program were like, they would have chosen either to study science in a standard program, or to enroll in a Domestic Arts school (“Home Science.” 29 Feb. 1912: 294-5).

As for women’s scientific education, Robinson saw it as an important element in women’s liberation. Science should be studied not to produce the “womanly woman and perfect housewife,” but for its intrinsic worth (“Home Science.” 29 Feb. 1912: 295). She also argued it must also be separated from the domestic sphere, for as long as it will stay in the house, it would remain amateurish. According to Robinson, all new inventions, even those intended for the home, were invented outside it, and by men. “For the present,” she wrote, “women must realize that knowledge of pure

science, and the power to apply it, are chiefly in the hands of men, and to men they must appeal for application of science to the household, unless they themselves are prepared to become serious scientists" ("Home Science." 29 Feb. 1912: 295-6). Science education could enable women to control the various spheres of their lives, but they must start it by leaving the domestic sphere.

Women's sexuality and the effect that higher education may have on it were another aspect of the discussions on education in *The Freewoman*. Women's learnedness had been discussed in Europe for several centuries, and intellectualism had long been seen by many as unsuitable for women. If a woman chose to pursue any kind of learning beyond what was deemed necessary to her role as mother, she would be termed "masculine," "unwomanly," or "unsexed." Perhaps the most famous use of the term "unsex'd females" was in a poem of the same name, written by Rev. Richard Polwhele in 1798. This poem was a diatribe against Mary Wollstonecraft and other women writers and intellectuals who, in Polwhele's opinion, had forsaken feminine virtue for intellectual pursuits, thus becoming masculine and domineering. In the nineteenth century, industrialization provided women with more opportunities to develop intellectual interests, and as a reaction to this change, medical and evolutionary theories put forth new evidence to the physical and mental unsuitability of women for higher education. Physicians claimed, among other things, that women lose their sexual attraction when they become learned and competitive, and one stated explicitly in 1885 that studying could result in "the unsexing of the girl" (Raftery 123-9).

Though several decades have passed, similar terms were still used when *The Freewoman* was published. In her article "Spinsters in the Making" author Helen Hamilton stated that college educated women are essentially undesirable and that they destine themselves to a life of spinsterhood, since they lack the normal feminine charm and attributes. She wrote that it is rude to refer to them as "learned pig," "defeminized spinster" or "unsexed woman," but "there is no smoke without a fire" ("Spinsters." 14 Dec. 1911: 67). Hamilton claimed that these women tended to become inferior imitations of men, with well-trained intellect, but lacking in emotional capacities. Most importantly, perhaps, they lost their sexual attraction, and became "defiant and almost fierce with the men" ("Spinsters." 14 Dec. 1911: 68). Hamilton found this to be not only unwomanly, but also detrimental to the suffrage movement, since the sympathy and co-operation of men will be necessary for its success, and learned women might scare them away. Hamilton stressed that all the adverse effects of education applied to women who aspired to intellectual cultivation, and that education focused on women's role in the household would pose no problem ("Spinsters." 14 Dec. 1911: 67-8).

On the point of the sexual desirability of educated women, "Educationist" presented a completely different view. For her, a woman educated in a program seen as appropriate for women, such as the Home Science program at King's College, would not be learned-yet-desirable like the women that Hamilton positively refers to, but rather "an intolerable, excruciating bore...She should be effectually suppressed" ("University Degree?" 23 Nov. 1911: 16-17). On the idea of spinsterhood, an author

named Elizabeth Barry wrote an article, in which she talked in very positive and endearing terms about a woman doctor, who enjoyed life as a “spinster.” She was not a spinster because she never wished to marry, but because she found her job fulfilling and could support herself, and was unwilling to make compromises on a life partner. Barry contrasted her spinster friend’s fulfilling life to her own married life, which she described as years spent in misery and loneliness (“Another Way.” 28 Dec. 1911: 116-17). Barry and “Educationist” both acknowledged the effect that education has on what women can bring to a partnership, and how it may change their expectations with regard to marriage. Yet instead of presenting it as having a negative effect, they portrayed learned women as interesting and attractive potential partners, and as ones who may do very well without marrying at all. What is clear from both perspectives as well as Hamilton’s is that the notion of spinsterhood, chosen or not, of educated women posed a threat to the socio-sexual order. British and American physicians at the time claimed that unmarried career women and political activists constituted an “intermediate sex,” which had the potential of upsetting the sexual power relations (Clarke 81).

The discussions of women’s education in *The Freewoman* show intellectual cultivation to be a powerful way for women to rebel against the prevailing social structure. As opposed to most forms of training available to women at the time, higher education had the potential of promoting women’s intellectualism, and with it oppositional thought and action. When combined with the economic independence that university-educated women could achieve, higher education posed a serious threat to the social order. It is evident from the different voices in the debate that the authors realized the power that women’s education might hold for the future of feminism.

The education discussion also illustrates the unique openness of *The Freewoman* which set it apart from other suffrage and women’s periodicals of its day. Marsden’s editing of *The Freewoman*, in accordance with her definition of feminism, provided a forum for varied and conflicting views from within and outside the women’s movement. The discussions generated in this way between the different authors are perhaps Marsden’s radical interpretation of the genre of teaching through conversation. This genre had long been considered suitable for women and had previously been used in some of the earlier women’s magazines and newspapers (Onslow 166). But whereas these conversations were usually didactic and ended with a clear message, *The Freewoman* discussions remained open-ended, allowing divergent voices to be heard without one suppressing or silencing the other.

*The Freewoman* had declared itself different by labeling itself “feminist,” and for Dora Marsden those open debates were part of what justified the use of this term. As one who censured the WSPU for being autocratic and narrowly focused, Marsden seems to have been determined not to let *The Freewoman* fall into the same traps. Allowing contributors to express provocative opinions, whether progressive or conservative, that would arouse debates and dialogues, was a way of democratizing feminist discourse, in opposition to the perceived despotism and false unity of the

suffrage movement. The dialogism of *The Freewoman* reflects not a lack of opinion or direction, but a philosophy of feminism that sees diversity and its public expression as means of achieving agency.

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MARVA MILO is a second year PhD student in the Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies at York University. She studies late nineteenth and early twentieth century British radical feminist periodicals, focusing on contemporary debates about women's sexuality and its connection to education and political activity.