Women’s poetry poses a number of additional challenges to the teacher and the student on top of the already demanding job of bringing modernism into the lecture or seminar room. When asked which modernist poets they know, two names will usually be forthcoming (certainly from British students), that of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. It is remarkable that this is still the case, particularly as poets such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Gertrude Stein shared the international modernist stage in their time. They, like Pound and Eliot, travelled from America to Europe before the First World War where Stein settled in Paris, surrounded by her renowned salon of modernist painters, while H.D., in London, became a key figure in the formation of Imagism (arguably the mother of Anglo-American poetry). Meanwhile British-born Mina Loy moved between the modernist centres of activity (Paris, Florence, and New York) while Marianne Moore, after a brief flurry of travel, remained resolutely at home in New York. These four women are the key first-generation Anglo-American women poets on whom I shall concentrate in this chapter.¹

Many students do not know that experimentation in poetry has continued unceasingly to this day; this essay ends with a discussion of contemporary women poets in the modernist tradition.

Students will be fascinated by the lives of the major modernists and can find riveting accounts of them.² It is important, however, to sound a note of caution about over-emphasis on biography. Women writers from Sappho to Plath have been ‘prisoners of biography’ and modernist women writers are no exception to this (Altman, 1992: 39). Carolyn Burke, herself a celebrated biographer of Mina Loy, stressed the importance of reading the work beyond the biographical and, in particular, avoiding the equation of the lyric ‘I’ with the author herself in favour of seeking out the ‘more impersonal or nonpersonal’ voices in women’s
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poetry (Burke, 1985: 132). One element of modernist women’s writing lives which is worth drawing attention to is the degree to which they persevered with their writing long term, often without publication or critical notice to reward them. Twenty-first-century students, living in a world in which art is increasingly commodified, are impressed by this commitment to revolutionary forms, language, and themes.

Modernist canons and masculinist currents

The fact that students may not have heard of any of these poets is significant and necessitates some discussion of canons and their formation. Traditionally, the modernist writer is expected to conform to three key classifications: writing between c.1890 and 1930, breaking with previous literary conventions to create avant-garde forms, and engaging with modernity in terms of ideas, subject matter, and language. Earlier critical books on modernism do not add, oh and they should also be male, but, retrospectively we can see that this was in fact an implicit or, being kinder, an unconscious factor in the selection of canonical modernist writers. The dominance of literary criticism by male academics during the first half of the twentieth century, when ‘modernism’ was being established, is the most obvious factor.

It could be argued of course that the writers I have mentioned above form a new canon of their own, a canon created quite recently, between the 1980s and the present day, by a highly articulate and dedicated generation of scholars. In the early days, this group consisted, in the main, of American feminist critics such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Marianne Dekoven, Margaret Dickie, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Bonnie Kime Scott. They were engaged, not only in producing critical work about these writers, but also in printing, reprinting, and disseminating their work. They have brought to prominence the work of long-neglected writers, but even within this short time, there have been important challenges to this new canon. Perhaps the most significant and welcome has been the reclamation of the women poets of the Harlem Renaissance and of Negritude, two interrelated modernist movements based in New York and Paris (see Carole Sweeney’s essay in this volume for further discussion of this).

Certainly, it is important to stress to students that, a hundred years since its inception, the hard edges of modernism, who is in and who is out, are constantly being debated. It gives them an insight into the formation of literary movements, with all the ideological and political debates this entails, as well as making modernism an exciting and