'Temper, romantic; bias, offensively feminine': Australian Women writers and literary Nationalism

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Abstract
My title, I have to confess at the outset, does not signal the discovery of a long-lost feminist literary manifesto. You will probably have recognised it as an appropriation of Joseph Furphy's famous claim for his novel of 1903, Such is Life, that its temper is democratic, its bias offensively Australian. I have changed its terms for two reasons. The first is to draw attention to the pejorative characterization of women's writing which emerged in the 1890s — in particular, of the fiction produced by the so-called Lady Novelists who were well-known at the time: Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, and 'Tasma'. All three (though only Cambridge still lived in Australia by then) continued to publish popular romantic novels, variously drawing on the domestic romance, the Gothic and the novel of manners, during a period when the masculine forms of romance (stories of convicts, bushrangers and station life) were fading in popularity — were, indeed, coming under concerted attack. So romantic fiction came to be associated exclusively with women writers, and to be defined by its traditionally feminine forms. This shift in the meaning of literary romance was particularly disadvantageous for two younger women writers who began to publish at the turn of the century, Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin. Despite their association with the newly-dominant literary institution of the Bulletin's Red Page, features of their work were attacked in the same terms as that of the 'lady novelists' I have already referred to. They too were deemed to be limited by their 'romantic' temper and 'offensively feminine' bias.
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The second reason for changing the terms of Furphy’s dictum is to show what happens when the excluded terms of the dominant discourse on cultural nationalism are made explicit. Furphy’s phrase, ‘temper
democratic, bias offensively Australian' employs terms from the political end of a spectrum that runs through to the specifically literary; the obvious substitution in political terms would seem to be 'temper aristocratic, bias offensively British', signifying the class-bound colonial culture which the nationalists set themselves against. However, I would suggest that to substitute terms from the less political and more cultural end of the spectrum serves to show up the link between 'good' politics and 'good' writing which is assumed in the cultural-nationalist discourse of the *Bulletin* in the 1890s, and to show up the suppressed association between these positive terms (democratic and nationalist politics, realist and vernacular writing) and masculinity.

What the *Bulletin* and its associates defined during the 1890s as the distinctively Australian literary mode has been fairly constantly scrutinized and refined ever since. But throughout all the debates about the significance of literary and (more generally) cultural nationalism, the dominant critical discourse has mobilized the following set of familiar oppositions:

- independent and original vs. conventional and derivative
- egalitarian and democratic vs. class-bound and 'aristocratic'
- Australian nationalist vs. British colonial
- vigour and action vs. emotion
- outside (the bush or the city) vs. inside (the domestic, the home)

Plus two pairs of terms which were especially salient at the turn of the century but which have by now formed a scarcely noticeable sediment of common sense about what constitutes literary value:

- realism vs. romance
- vernacular or folk vs. popular or commercial

These are the oppositions I want to look at more closely here, and to suggest that in this period of debate during the 90s, they come to be cemented into the suppressed opposition between masculinity and femininity, thus defining the distinctively Australian tradition as masculine.

As feminist deconstruction of such sets of binary oppositions repeatedly demonstrates, the set of terms associated with masculinity is characterized as normative and positive — evaluations which depend for their force on the projection of the deviant and the negative onto the feminine side.¹ But both are constructions within the same social space, and it can be seen that the norm — in this case, the egalitarian, the
realist, the vernacular Australian culture — requires as a condition of its articulation the suppressed Other — in this case, the class-bound, the romantic, the popular ‘colonial’ culture. In this paper I am concerned with ‘the feminine’ as an ideological construct and with the historical moment at which it seems to be fixed as the repository of a whole cluster of attributes which have been of necessity displaced from the mythology of Australian literary culture, and indeed of national culture in the broader sense, the terrain of that endless debate about national identity.

POPULARITY AND POLITICS

Women novelists of the 1890s like Cambridge, Praed and ‘Tasma’ were ‘popular’ in the sense that their fiction was published in accessible forms and widely circulated. The usual pattern was: serial publication in an Australian weekly newspaper or journal, followed by book publication with an English company — usually the newer and more enterprising ones like Heinemann (which established a series called The Colonial Library of Popular Fiction). Book publication then put their novels into the big English circulating libraries like Mudie’s as well as finding them a large consumer market. But the often-repeated charge that they ‘wrote for an English audience’ is easily refuted by pointing to the fact of prior serial publication in Australia.

This charge makes more sense, though, when ‘English’ is interpreted in class terms, i.e. ‘English’ meaning ‘ruling class’. Weekly newspapers of the period like the Australasian and the Sydney Mail were designed for country readers by their publishers — which were, respectively, the Melbourne Argus and the Sydney Morning Herald. So the weeklies may be seen as representative of the conservative squattocracy. Their period of growth and decline confirms this supposition: beginning in the mid 1860s, they continued to appear until the 1930s, dwindling away finally with the shrinking of pastoral capital in favour of industrial manufacturing development. But established, hegemonic interests can afford to be generous, even liberal, and in their heyday in the late 19th century the weeklies featured large literary sections, flexible enough to accommodate, as the Australasian did, the ‘cosmopolitan’ journalism of Marcus Clarke as well as Ada Cambridge’s early novels about the colonial marriage market. (In fact, she had nine serials published there in the twelve years between 1874 and 1886.) Clearly, these weekly literary sections in middle-class family newspapers, with a growing urban as well as country readership, were the major local publishing outlets for fiction
— at least, until the *Bulletin*’s Red Page and similar literary magazines appeared late in the century.

Though it became known as The Bushman’s Bible, the *Bulletin*, as has often been remarked, was produced by and largely for an urban educated population. The figure of the Bushman constructed there was a touchstone of the nationalist egalitarian progressive values which the *Bulletin* espoused and explained to urban readers. If anything, the *Bulletin* was a mouthpiece of the liberal urban bourgeoisie as opposed to the conservative pastoralists, whose power was already declining after the financial crash of 1890. The shifting of power between these two major groups in the ruling class was the wider context of that struggle for literary hegemony which occasioned the *Bulletin*’s diatribes against the intellectual decadence and ostentation of the Sydney and Melbourne literary establishments.

In this conflict, the ‘popular’ fiction of the period was associated with the establishment weeklies and thus with the older pastoral ruling class, on the one hand, and with English commercial publishers on the other. Against this the *Bulletin*, in its bid for literary sovereignty, mobilized an association with the vernacular or folk culture of the Bush — most notably in its promotion of the ballads of Paterson and Lawson. At the same time it demonstrated allegiance to literary innovation, to a new mode of ‘realism’ in particular, to set against what it designated the stifling conventionalities of colonial writing. And this was an allegiance lent considerable sophistication by the literary editor, A.G. Stephen’s, Arnoldian belief in literature as a high calling, to be distinguished sharply from popular fiction. Sylvia Lawson indicates its range:

The *Bulletin*’s ways of seeing were possible through lenses made available by Dickens and Balzac, Zola, Henry Kingsley, Mark Twain — and Flaubert. More than one kind of presence haunted the milieu; while social realism was both literary and political principle, so was the exercise of style for style’s sake. *Punch* and Labouchère were there, with all their journalistic kind; and Beardsley collided with Hogarth.

GENDER AND GENRE

The position of women writers was a paradoxical one in this scenario. Excluded by their gender from the all-male clubs and societies of the colonial literati, they were nevertheless associated with that establishment by default. Their work was damned with faint praise by the urbane and gentlemanly comments of luminaries like Desmond Byrne, Turner and Sutherland and Patchett Martin. The ‘lady novelists’, it was
said, dealt quite properly with social life and relations between the sexes — after all, this was woman's domain and (it was implied) fiction was after all a lower branch of literature, providing edification and entertainment, but making no claims to art.

They fared even less well with their radical nationalist contemporaries. Here, the recognition that they were working in the sub-genres of romance (domestic, Gothic or novel of manners) was not accompanied by chivalrous praise of their proper womanliness. Because literary nationalism wanted to claim a high place for fiction, there was no room there for a separate sphere for the romance mode: fiction was becoming an art. In Furphy's *Such is Life* various kinds of romantic fiction are satirized mercilessly — the feminine romance, by his narratorial ironies at Tom Collins' expense about Ouida and the 'tawny-headed tigress'; and its masculine form, the 'romance of station life', by his string of mocking allusions to the conventions of character and plot popularized by Kingsley's *Geoffrey Hamlyn*. In this text, and in much literary-nationalist critical discourse, popular forms of romantic fiction — no matter whether they looked back to Walter Scott or to Jane Austen or to Gothic and sensationalist fiction — were marginalized. And 'feminized' at the same time.

It's instructive to notice how, in later accounts of the emergence of a national literature, the 19th century masculine romances like *Robbery Under Arms* and *For the Term of His Natural Life* have been redeemed. H.M. Green, for instance: 'Whereas Boldrewood's romances of brisk action and out-of-door adventure call to the spirit of youth in man and women, Mrs Praed's romances have not so wide appeal.... They are «a girl's hammock-dreams of love».' So: love is merely girls' business, while adventure has 'universal' appeal.

Later John Barnes, discerning literary as well as historical interest in the novels of Kingsley and Boldrewood, found that in the hands of women writers the Anglo-Australian romance had *dwindled* into 'the novel of romantic love'. In his view it is the love-story genre which 'compromises the individuality' of these women writers and 'limits the conception of human nature' which they employ.

Much more recently Adrian Mitchell, in the *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, uses the epithet 'romantic' primarily to express dissatisfaction with the 'love interest' of these novels, while granting them some degree of historical and sociological interest in their social observation.

However, as I have argued in an earlier paper, the apparently unchanging conventions of the love story are themselves used in these novels to *mediate*, precisely, *social* comment on the colonial marriage market and its cultural implications — for women.
Back in the 1890s, in the spirit of Furphy's later call for writing that was 'democratic and offensively Australian', the critical discourse of Bulletin writers excluded women and all those unAustralian cultural phenomena attributed to 'the feminine'. Yet they were engaged in defining an ideological position which on the face of it, had nothing to do with gender difference. Here are two examples where women writers are praised — but only for transcending their female qualities and preoccupations. In both cases, praise is given to their representations of 'The Bush' — and 'The Bush' comes to signify nationalism, literary originality and, by implication, masculinity.

First, Lawson, in his Preface to My Brilliant Career, distinguishes between the 'girlishly emotional' parts of the book (which 'prove' it was written by a 'girl', despite her masculine name) and the authentically Australian aspects of the book which portray 'bush life and scenery' and which make it 'true to Australia — the truest I ever read'.

Secondly, A.G. Stephens, reviewing Barbara Baynton's novel, Human Toll, accounted for what he took to be its unintentional power in this way: 'Mrs Baynton is palpably interested in her heroine, and yet — possibly unconsciously, possibly owing to a woman's inherent inability to express himself [sic] — instead of a heroine she has given us the Bush.'

Clearly, women can only be admitted to the ranks of Australian literature despite their gender — they cannot be writers, Australians, and women all at once. Only if they contribute to this masculine construction of 'the Bush' can they be redeemed from the frailties of their gender and from the limitations of their chosen genre, the romance.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN WOMEN'S WRITING

The likelihood that both Franklin and Baynton were working critically with the conventions of female romantic fiction was not considered. But if the new contenders for cultural hegemony had looked back at what was being published in the '90s by their despised female predecessors, they might have recognised some links with the new and more rebellious women writers. For there are signs of dissatisfaction with the ideology of women's separate sphere that is inscribed in the conventional romance of courtship and marriage.

Catherine Spence, whose early novel Clara Morison had set the pattern for this genre in Australia, had pretty much given up writing novels after her future fiction, 'Handfasted', was rejected by the Sydney Mail as being 'too socialistic' and 'calculated to loosen the marriage tie'. Ada Cam-
bridge, having published and then withdrawn a volume of outspoken verse called *Unspoken Thoughts* in 1889, then found a fictional form for articulating her religious and ethical doubts in several novels featuring a male protagonist. The best-known of these, *A Marked Man*, looks back to Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* but it could fruitfully be read inter-textually with Richardson’s later *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Cambridge also produced an ironic gloss on the conventional pieties of marriage and motherhood, a novel called *Materfamilias*. Also in the ‘90s, ‘Tasma’ was writing problem novels about unhappy marriages, in the vein of her English feminist contemporaries. Rosa Praed’s interest in the occult enabled her to begin, however melodramatically, to focus her later novels on the theme of female desire.

These signs of dissatisfaction, and even of radical new perspectives straining the limits of the conventional ‘woman’s novel’ did not, however, indicate the opening up of new spaces for a feminine literary discourse to develop. This much is evident from the mess that Miles Franklin got into over the reception of *My Brilliant Career* (it was read as artless autobiography) and the failure of the two novels which she published subsequently — and pseudonymously — with Mills and Boon in the U.S. It’s also evident in the extreme oddness of Barbara Baynton’s only novel *Human Toll* (1907) — which was also taken to be autobiographical, despite its Gothicisms. This suggests that any writer known to be female who did break or at least bend the much-criticized conventions of literary romance could only be assumed to be writing direct from her own experience, the only alternative for a woman.

New directions in women’s writing in this period were muted by the tumult and the shouting of cultural nationalism and marginalised by its newly dominant literary standards, standards of ‘high culture’ which left no middle ground for those negotiations with generic conventions and social ideologies that have been so important in women’s fiction.

**FEMININITY VS. AUSTRALIANNESS**

However this was not an exclusively literary matter, not just a question of women writing outmoded kinds of books. The problem was, in the *Bulletin*’s scheme of things, the offensiveness of femininity. ‘The Woman Question’ was of great concern at the time, but the *Bulletin* was not inclined to support feminist demands because women were ‘innately conservative’, class-bound, irrational, and this was why democrats should not support their demand for the vote. An editorial accused:
‘Tories champion the alleged cause of women because the women of today are, as a rule, Tories; almost every woman is a queen-worshipper, a prince-worshipper, a parson-worshipper’ (1 October 1887). And another declared: ‘Female suffrage, [the Bulletin] still maintains is a present danger to the cause of Democracy’ (9 March 1889). And as the cause of Democracy was identified with that of Australianness, it was clear that women could have no place to speak in an Australian national culture. Women were scapegoats, in nationalist discourse, politically, socially and culturally.

Sylvia Lawson, whose account of the Bulletin’s dealings with the Woman Question I have drawn on here, sees this prejudice as contradicted by other expressions of sympathy for women’s limited opportunities and by Archibald’s fulminations against a Puritan double standard of sexual morality. She quotes the following comment to illustrate this apparently pro-woman line: ‘The cause of nine out of ten of our girls «going wrong» is just this — the misery of their homes, the meanness and tyranny, temporal and spiritual ... [they] succumb ... from the disgust and despair of the weary and dreary Australian middle-class home life.’ But the culprit in this account is easy to spot: it’s the home, the middle-class home which oppresses ‘our girls’. And ‘the home’, in the Bulletin’s view, was identified with female influence, that is, innate conservatism and the denial of masculine pleasures. It was women exclusively who were wowsers and puritans — and all of them, it would seem, were middle-class.

As Marilyn Lake argues in a recent paper entitled ‘The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context’, the cult of domesticity was at once the bugbear of the masculinists and the ideological underpinning of late 19th-century feminist campaign. She argues that for historians to depict feminist ‘concerns with temperance and social purity in terms of «respectability» is to ignore the sexual politics’ in a situation where ‘masculinist values had been elevated to the status of national traditions’. Feminist campaigners were venomously mocked, and indeed all women were seen, at times, as conspiring to establish a single ideal of Domestic Manhood to tame men and deny their pleasures.

She argues that ‘The Bulletin was prominent in expounding, in opposition to this, the separatist model of masculinity which lay at the heart of eulogies to the Bushman’, and continues: ‘When the «nationalist» school of writers represented the pastoral workers as cultural heroes they did so because in their apparent freedom from the ties of family, in their «independence», these bushmen were closely approximated to their masculinist ideal.’
Lake's paper goes a good way towards explaining the explicitly and insistently masculine — indeed masculinist — tenor of that cultural nationalism which became the dominant discourse constructing 'Australianness' during the 1890s, and which has survived in some quarters ever since. That, of course, is a much longer story.  

So I want to conclude by returning to the women writers of the '90s, both the 'lady writers' (so called) and the associate members (part-time) of the Bulletin club. Neither group directly contested the whole cultural nationalist baggage that excluded them as women and marginalised their writing — they did not produce a feminist literary manifesto, or align themselves openly with the suffrage and social reform movements. But it could be said that the subversive elements of their fiction, questioning the dominant ideology of masculinity and femininity, working within and against the narrative conventions of popular romantic fiction, constituted a literary counterpart to the activist women's movement in its challenge to the masculinist definition of Australian culture.

NOTES

8. J. Furphy, Such is Life (1903); a useful edition is The Portable Joseph Furphy, ed. J. Barnes (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1981).
9. T. Davies, 'Transports of Pleasure: Fiction and its Audiences in the Later Nineteenth Century' in Formations Editorial Collective, eds., Formations of Pleasure (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) argues that 'romance' came to have exclusive reference to women's fiction (novels of love, marriage and domestic sentiment) in the later nineteenth century in Britain and was simultaneously relegated to
the status of the 'popular' by the 'ethical-aesthetic preoccupations of literary criticism' (p. 56).


13. See note 7.


19. Ibid., p. 196.


21. J. Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974) includes a discussion of the male-centredness as well as the ethnocentricity of Vance Palmer's influential *The Legend of the Nineties* (pp. 95-6). However, most recent discussions of the nineties pay no attention to its masculinism; a useful survey of debates can be found in the concluding chapter of D. Walker, *Dream and Illusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity* (Canberra: A.N.U. Press, 1976).

22. Although Miles Franklin was later to do so. See D. Modjeska, *Exiles at Home* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981), pp. 156-190.