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# ‘These our actors’: Histrionics in Shakespeare’s *King Richard III* and Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard*

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard* opens with a speech, not from *Richard III*, but from *The Tempest*—the well-known speech in which the magus, Prospero, ceremoniously dismisses the spirits he has conjured in a ‘pageant’ staged for the edification and entertainment of his daughter, Miranda, and her lover, Ferdinand:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air,  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a wisp behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.<sup>1</sup>

*The Tempest*’s priority at the head of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s works in 1623 ‘has been taken to imply that the play is an epitome of Shakespeare’s career, or of human experience’, writes Stephen Orgel, ‘that it was the truest expression of Shakespeare’s own feelings, and that in the magician-poet Prospero he depicted himself’.<sup>2</sup> For nearly four hundred years of theatrical tradition, this speech (like the play) has been understood as Shakespeare’s

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tempest*, 4.1.148–58, The Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: OUP, 1987, 2008), with one variation discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tempest*, ed. Orgel, p.1.

farewell to the stage, a swansong in which the ageing playwright meditates on the imaginative power and manipulation of art, conjuring with it even as he appears to be renouncing it. The tradition may explain why, in an American documentary like Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, which is preoccupied with national origins and theatrical traditions and which agonises out loud about who holds authority over Shakespearean drama, the choice of accent is an English rather than an American one. (Either way, the choice seems a curious capitulation, implicitly conceding priority to the English in a way that haunts the American actors featured in the documentary.)

Al Pacino's choice of Prospero's famous speech at the beginning (and the end) of *Looking for Richard* goes to the heart of his autobiographical enterprise. For one thing, it suggests that his larger interest—his quest—is not just for *Richard III*, but for Shakespeare himself. To look for Richard in the world of modern New York is to look for the place of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry in a modern, apparently alien world. And it establishes the preoccupation of what Pacino calls his 'doco-drama type thing' with histrionics—with the theatre, that is, and theatricality, though the word 'histrionics' operates metaphorically as well as literally and has a complex psychological and metaphysical suggestiveness that extends beyond the stage. The Oxford English Dictionary records three main uses of the word:

**histrionics**, *n.*

1. Drama, theatre; acting. Also: pretence, play-acting.
2. Melodramatic or hysterical behaviour, typically intended to attract attention.
3. Technical virtuosity in a vocal or instrumental performance, esp. (in later use) characterized as showy, attention-seeking, or frenzied.

All these senses are applicable to *Richard III* and help to make sense both of the character of Richard himself and of the play as a meditation on historical (and hysterical) politics.

This is only the beginning of the speech's significance, however. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, once Prospero's spirits have been 'dissolved', they 'leave not a rack behind'—meaning 'not a trace' or, if you like, 'not a wisp', as *Looking for Richard* has it. The directorial substitution of the word 'wisp' for 'rack', for which no textual justification can be found—the kind of substitution more or less arbitrarily made on behalf of the audience in

many modern performances of Shakespeare's plays—reflects the difficulty faced by a modern director when attempting to translate an idiom and a sensibility from a period as remote as the Elizabethan. Director Peter Brook effectively grants Pacino permission to make the substitution when, in his interview for *Looking for Richard*, he advises him not to 'fetishize' the text by adhering so faithfully to the original language of the play that the audience is confused and alienated.

Using 'wisp' instead of 'rack' may seem an innocent amendment, but the substitution raises all the questions that Al Pacino wants to ask about art in and across time: about the durability of language and the canon and about how (and how much) we are able to understand transhistorically. What is it we are hearing when we attend a modern performance of a play by 'Shakespeare' and how much has it to do with 'Shakespeare' himself? So much of what we surmise about the plays and about the man exists within scare quotes. This inevitable historical distance, and whether and how far it can be overcome in the theatre, will prove central to Pacino's meditation on the place of Shakespeare in modern culture, even as the substitution of 'wisp' for 'rack' implicitly betrays the concessions he is willing to make in order (as he says) 'to communicate what I feel about Shakespeare to other people'.

'What the fuck do you know about Shakespeare?' asks Pacino's friend and second, the writer and producer Frederic Kimball. But Al Pacino is not just *seeking* Shakespeare, he is also selling—or, as he says, 'peddling'—Shakespeare to a contemporary audience, in the same way that he peddles the play and the bard to all the representative New Yorkers at the opening of the film, only to discover that, beyond someone's recognising the expression 'My kingdom for a horse', no one has the faintest idea about the play. Nor does it bode well that, when Pacino tries to rehearse the names of the rival factions and to account for what is going on amongst Queen Elizabeth's consorts as Richard's brother King Edward IV dies, he discovers how 'very confusing' the politics and history behind the play is. 'I don't know why we even bother to do this at all', he says in histrionic despair at the end of this scene—rhetorically, of course, because bothering is just what he is doing.

What this historical confusion and the alienation of the modern audience necessitate, then, is the 'doco-drama type thing' which is *Looking for Richard* and it is worth looking at what lies behind Pacino's loose, throwaway classification for what it might tell us about the enterprise. His 'doco-drama type thing' is, first of all, a self-conscious hybrid, generically and technically various: part interactive rehearsal (workshop) and dramatic

interaction, it is also part dialogue and debate (Frederic Kimball and Al Pacino) and part self-reflection, exploiting the dramatic form of the soliloquy. It involves informal banter (play) and formal paraphrase (narrative), exemplary enactment and exhibition, with audience participation, as well as literary tourism (the trip to Stratford) and literary criticism. But if we focus on the simple crossover suggested in the term 'doco-drama' we realise the central form of the film is paradoxical, like the genre of the 'history play' itself: a mixture of what purports to be reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, licensed imagination (or 'insubstantial pageant'). The 'reality' supposedly recorded in and by the documentary is, it turns out, self-consciously scripted and staged. Again, histrionics.

Because it is an American documentary, to go to England 'looking for Shakespeare' as they do—in this case, to Shakespeare's Stratford birthplace—is to go into the foreign country of the past. From here, Pacino and Kimball are ironically exiled in a scene that comically enacts the American sense of being exiled from Shakespeare by an intimidating English theatrical tradition—a sense of cultural insecurity openly discussed by F. Murray Abrams and Alec Baldwin during the rehearsal scenes. And the aloof dottiness of Shakespeare scholar, Emrys Jones, and arrogance of English actor John Gielgud are hardly likely to encourage Pacino and Kimball in their quest. As the smart young member of the public says in one of the film's interviews, Shakespeare is 'a great export'—but to export the play out of one culture and into another, out of one period and into another, requires careful adaptation and (as we saw) more or less silent modification. Recognising this, the Restoration meddled with the Shakespearean text without compunction, and for two hundred years Colley Cibber's radically abridged and adapted version of the play of 1699 exercised a stranglehold over stage performances.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the necessary slippages and opacities of time and place and change, what Pacino offers—it is what we offer as literary critics—is interpretation, reconstruction. But who is best qualified to interpret Shakespeare, the film asks? Well, the actor, it would seem, and emphatically not the scholar. When Pacino suggests asking a Shakespeare scholar to explain what goes on in the famous seduction scene between Richard and Anne, Frederic Kimball explodes:

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<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction to the updated New Cambridge Shakespeare of *Richard III*, edited by Janis Lull (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), pp.24–32.

it is just ridiculous that you are getting a scholar, because you know more about *Richard III* than any fucking scholar from Columbia or Harvard—you're making this entire documentary to show that actors are the proud inheritors and possessors of the understanding of Shakespeare, you don't need a PhD.

As long ago as 1793, George Steevens was asking us to distinguish between the page and the stage in a way that could only reinforce Pacino's arrogation of theatrical authority here:

I most cordially join with Dr. Johnson and Mr. Malone in their [unflattering] opinions; and yet perhaps they have overlooked one cause of the success of this tragedy. The part of Richard is perhaps beyond all others variegated, and consequently favourable to a judicious performer. It comprehends, indeed, a trait of almost every species of character on the stage. The hero, the lover, the statesman, the buffoon, the hypocrite, the hardened and repenting sinner &c. are to be found within its compass. No wonder therefore that the discriminating powers of a Burbage, a Garrick, and a Henderson should at different periods have given it a popularity beyond other dramas of the same author.<sup>4</sup>

*Looking for Richard* opens with an instantly recognisable Al Pacino and Kevin Spacey in pre-rehearsal mode, as Pacino approaches what is shaping up to be an intimidating audience, opening the curtain only to discover an empty theatre with a single audience member dressed in Elizabethan clothing—Shakespeare, we presume. How far Pacino is playing to Shakespeare, as he suggests with this scene, trying to please the long dead playwright—always, along with the people in the theatre, the other demanding audience—must remain a moot point. (Pacino's joke, of course, is to have 'Shakespeare' shaking his head disapprovingly later in the film.) So we address the present and the past, mindful of how the present will shape the future, and the future will try and understand us when we are past, as well as try to rewrite us. This goes to the heart of *Richard III* and its consciousness of itself as fictional history and to the heart of the meditation of the various characters throughout Shakespeare's play on their relationship to their past. So Richard in the play, self-conscious to the last, addresses his once and future audience.

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<sup>4</sup> *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, 6 vols, ed. Brian Vickers (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974–1981), 6:594.

*Richard's play*

Al Pacino's 'doco-drama type thing' is about Shakespeare, then, about meaning and value over time, about national traditions of actors and acting, and about the protracted battle between scholarship and the theatre for authority over the Shakespearean inheritance. It is an unequivocal act of homage, both to the playwright and to the profession, designed to engage a young, contemporary audience of whom it has no expectations beyond ignorance and resistance. But in what ways does our knowledge of *Looking for Richard* modify our understanding of Shakespeare's *Richard III*—and vice versa, how does our knowledge of Shakespeare's history play affect our understanding of Pacino's documentary? In his introduction to the Arden edition of *Richard III*, James Siemon identifies those aspects of the play that have preoccupied the critics:

Over the years . . . attention has consistently returned to the play's unusual protagonist, its highly patterned language and action, its female roles and its religious, historical and political implications. Woven through these considerations are different reactions to its pervasive, multiform ironies and comic elements.<sup>5</sup>

At different times, *Looking for Richard* comments more or less directly on all these things, most obviously drawing our attention to the play's unusual protagonist. However, I want to look at the way it highlights two obviously related things: the first is the centrality of protagonist in the play—before anything else, Shakespeare's *Richard III* is an exercise in personality and its charismatic effects, and so, too, is *Looking at Richard*—and the second is the preoccupation with acting, with the theatrical, in the political world of the play.

What I am calling an 'exercise in personality' is, of course, Richard's own, no less than it is a dramatic experiment of Shakespeare's. Both playwright and protagonist audaciously test what they can get away with:

I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,

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<sup>5</sup> James R. Siemon, in the introduction to his edition, *King Richard III*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), pp.2–3.



Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
 Into this breathing world scarce half made up,  
 And that so lamely and unfashionable  
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them,  
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,  
 Have no delight to pass away the time,  
 Unless to see my shadow in the sun  
 And descant on mine own deformity.  
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover  
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
 I am determinèd to prove a villain  
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.  
 Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous . . .  
 (1.1.18–32)<sup>6</sup>

*Unmade* by fate—'deformed, unfinished'—Richard resolves instead to make himself. Central to Richard's otherwise sinister appeal is his capacity to invent himself, and to perform the character he invents. With this comes a fascination on his own part, no less than on the part of the audience, with how a 'bottled spider' and 'foul bunch-backed toad' like himself manages to get away with it, until of course we realise humankind's infinite capacity to temporise and abrogate when confronted with awkward alternatives. His own relentlessly manipulative energy enforces a collective passivity on those who should oppose him in what is, after all, a war-wearied and beleaguered state.

BRAKENBURY: I will not reason what is meant hereby,  
 Because I will be guiltless from the meaning.  
 (1.4.94–5)

'We are prompted to marvel at his sheer audacity', writes James Siemon, 'his clarity of motive, his ruthless exploitation of the factional and ideological limits that constrain others, his watchful alertness among half-conscious sleep-walkers, egotists, blinkered factionalists and time-servers'.<sup>7</sup> What is attractive about Richard, as Siemon suggests, is this insight into his own character and motive—it is part of Richard's Medieval inheritance, Richard himself recognises, as a direct descendent of the Vice figure from

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the edition of *Richard III* I am using throughout this article is the updated New Cambridge Shakespeare, edited by Janis Lull.

<sup>7</sup> *King Richard III*, ed. James Siemon, p.17.

the morality plays whose self-consciousness and self-publicity were a vital part of the interactive theatrical experience. Only in Richard's case it is accomplished with more intellectual power and, with that, political power, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge remarked.

The characters of Richard III., Iago, and Falstaff, were the characters of men who reverse the order of things, who place intellect at the head, whereas it ought to follow like geometry, to prove and to confirm – . . . Richard, laughing at conscience, and sneering at religion, felt a confidence in his intellect, which urged him to commit the most horrid crimes, because he felt himself, although inferior in form and shape, superior to those around him; he felt he possessed a power that they had not.<sup>8</sup>

Prospero in *The Tempest* is an ageing egotist, a magus, who uses magic and poetry to achieve his wish-fulfilling ends—so, of course, does Richard, however much we may disapprove of those ends. And so does Al Pacino in *Looking for Richard*, though for the moment we are talking about Shakespeare. *Richard III* is a play about power in which the protagonist and other people in power show nothing but contempt for the needs and understanding of the people they rule.

*'These our actors'*

This is where the second aspect of *Richard III* opened up by Al Pacino's 'doco-drama type thing' comes in—its preoccupation with acting. Granting what Phyllis Rackin calls 'the association between the transgressive, the demonic, and the theatrical', what is especially and unsettlingly true is their further association with the political in the world of the play.<sup>9</sup> With our overexposure to modern politics as an ongoing media event, we hardly need convincing that the 'spontaneous' political life of the nation is scripted and staged:

as has long been noted, Shakespeare links his own contribution to these [political, psychological, and metaphysical]

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Penguin, 1992), pp.145–6.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Rackin, 'History into Tragedy: The Case of *Richard III*', in *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), pp.31–53 (40).

explanations of Richard's behaviour to his medium by introducing allusions to and reflections on theater and theatrical performance. The play's metatheatrical moments allow audiences to consider the theater itself as a vehicle through which history is presented and explore the ways in which politics and the theater are implicated in each other.<sup>10</sup>

Buckingham and Richard's cynical staging of the offer of the crown in Act 3 scene 7, for example, involves an elaborate mime of humble leadership reluctantly acceding to the pleas and importunities of a needy people. Rather than be seen murderously to eliminate all opposition in a cold, calculating usurpation and brutally to grab the throne—the brutal truth has been established by Richard's confidential compact with the audience—Richard creates a stage illusion for the people of England constraining them to beg him to take power. The 'aesthetic nature' of Richard's bid for power, as Joel Slotkin reminds us, 'appears most clearly in Richard's appearance "between two bishops" (3.7.89), which is basically a pretty picture purporting to represent an act of piety'.<sup>11</sup> Earlier, Buckingham had been gathered into Richard's histrionic 'revels' –

RICHARD: Come, cousin, canst thou quake and change thy  
colour,  
Murder thy breath in middle of a word,  
And then again begin, and stop again,  
As if thou were distraught and mad with terror?

BUCKINGHAM: Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian  
Speak, and look back, and pry on every side,  
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw.  
Intending deep suspicion, ghastly looks  
Are at my service, like enforcèd smiles.  
And both are ready in their offices  
At any time to grace my stratagems.

(3.5.1–11)

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<sup>10</sup> Martine van Elk, "'Determined to Prove a Villain": Criticism, Pedagogy, and *Richard III*, *College Literature*, 34:4 (Fall 2007), 1–21 (3).

<sup>11</sup> Joel Elliot Slotkin, 'Honeyed Toads: Sinister Aesthetics in Shakespeare's *Richard III*', *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 7:1 (Spring/Summer 2007), 5–32 (10–11).

– as a dangerous division opens up between appearance and reality, word and truth, between what people say and what they do, in a play that imagines a Manichean world of almost unrelenting evil, the prevailing metaphor for which division is theatrical.

This disjunction between word and truth is especially revealing in what we might loosely (and ironically) call the 'performative language' in the play: those utterances that, rather than stating or describing things, are acts in themselves, like oaths, vows, and promises. The integrity, stability, and predictability of any society is dependent on utterance as undertaking, binding the speaker to enact the reality she or he articulates. In Act 2, scene 1—what Pacino calls the 'atonement scene'—the dying King Edward exacts 'solemn vows' of reconciliation and future friendship from all the warring factions, all of which turn out to be spectacularly empty, like Richard's oaths when protesting his love for Anne, and his and Anne's marriage vows. Pledges of fealty in *Richard III* to country, friend, family, and spouse, far from being genuine performatives, are merely performances: acting.

Again, this time in Act 3, scene 1, we witness the deconstruction and emptying out of the word 'sanctuary':

CARDINAL : God forbid  
We should infringe the holy privilege  
Of blessèd sanctuary. Not for all this land  
Would I be guilty of so great a sin.

BUCKINGHAM: You are too senseless obstinate, my lord,  
Too ceremonious and traditional.  
Weigh it but with the grossness of this age:  
You break not sanctuary in seizing him.  
The benefit thereof is always granted  
To those whose dealings have deserved the place  
And those who have the wit to claim the place.  
This prince hath neither claimed it nor deserved it,  
And therefore, in mine opinion, cannot have it.  
Then taking him from thence that is not there,  
You break no privilege nor charter there.  
Oft have I heard of sanctuary men,  
But sanctuary children ne'er till now.

CARDINAL: My lord, you shall o'er-rule my mind for once.  
(3.1.40–57)

Richard's rule, as the Cardinal suggests, is a 'rule of mind'. Richard only looks forward, imagining that, like the State in George Orwell's *1984*, he can systematically rewrite the past in order to bring people and events around to his own will. In all of this, Richard's deformity is a vital ingredient in the part—or rather parts—he fashions for himself. Not only does he rely upon 'the multiple significations of his deformities as a technology of performance to aid his bid for power', as Katherine Schaap Williams suggests<sup>12</sup>—and it is worth reminding ourselves before we resort to superstitions about bodily deformity signalling spiritual corruption in the Elizabethan period that its significations are indeed multiple and that Richard manipulates them all—that for Richard disability *is* a performance, one that the theatrical tradition has taken up with a comparable gusto on occasion. 'Richard's character fashions disability', argue David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder: 'He sets to work performing deformity'.<sup>13</sup>

How, then, can we separate profession and performance, the play asks, reality and subterfuge, documentary and drama? But it is more complex than these simple dichotomies might suggest, and the standard questions thrown up by the metaphor of theatre and performance are not searching enough. What is especially challenging about *Richard III* is that the familiar dualism of evil feigning innocence, a dualism that preserves for the reader or audience a comfortable discrimination of appearance from reality, comprises only a comparatively small part of Richard's theatrical subterfuge. Richard also commands and seduces assent from the other characters when his depredations are chillingly apparent. In Act 3, scene 4, for example, everyone knows that Richard's charges against Hastings for his withered arm are confected and nonsensical, but they act out, ritualistically as it were, Richard's scripted drama (central to which is the hysterical performance of his own deformity). The truly threatening theatrical experience is one which the audience sees through, yet accedes to nevertheless. 'The point is not that

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<sup>12</sup> Katherine Schaap Williams, 'Enabling Richard: The Rhetoric of Disability in *Richard III*', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 29:4 (2009), [1-14] <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/997> [4].

<sup>13</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2006), p.103.

anyone is deceived by the charade', writes Stephen Greenblatt, 'but that everyone is forced either to participate in it or watch it silently'.<sup>14</sup>

SCRIVENER: Who is so gross that cannot see this palpable  
device?

Yet who so bold but says he sees it not?

(3.6.11–12)

Richard, then, is the consummate actor, and for three reasons. First, he is able to push beyond the simple binary of dissimulation in which, though evil, he is taken for virtuous and obeyed accordingly. Here, as with so many of Richard's distinctive strategies, the scene in which he prevails upon Anne is exemplary.

RICHARD: Was ever woman in this humour wooed?

Was ever woman in this humour won?

I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.

What, I that killed her husband and her father,

To take her in her heart's extremest hate,

With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,

The bleeding witness of my hatred by,

Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,

And I no friends to back my suit withal

But the plain devil and dissembling looks?

And yet to win her, all the world to nothing?

Ha!

(1.2.231–42)

'The "palpable device", the deception that advertises its deceptiveness but works anyway, is a primary feature of Richard's attractiveness in the play', writes Joel Slotkin, and it begins 'with his wooing of Anne', who 'tries continually, but unconvincingly, to display normative responses'.<sup>15</sup> Richard's second distinction as an actor is that his 'performative concept of identity', to quote Martine van Elk, 'shows it to be constituted not merely in action but specifically in improvisation'.<sup>16</sup> Finding the part under pressure of circumstance is true accomplishment.

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1980), p.13.

<sup>15</sup> Slotkin, 'Honeyed Toads: Sinister Aesthetics in Shakespeare's *Richard III*', 12.

<sup>16</sup> Martine van Elk, "'Determined to Prove a Villain": Criticism, Pedagogy, and *Richard III*', 8.

Beyond this, the provocation of Richard's histrionics is metaphysical. Richard's third uncanny accomplishment is the suggestion, not that the self is an actor or improviser, but that the actor or improviser is the self. 'Richard empties himself out in *Richard III*', writes Janet Adelman, 'doing away with selfhood and its nightmare origins and remaking himself in the shape of the perfect actor who has no being except in the roles he plays'.<sup>17</sup> The roles we play and are, however, are likely to return to haunt us, nor are all the parts we play comfortable or compatible, for not only do we antagonize and are antagonized by other people, we are sometimes divided against ourselves. Here we focus in on Richard on the eve of the battle of Bosworth at the end of the play, wrestling with his own theatrical multiplicity. We are reminded that the very notion of self-consciousness is a theatrical one in which we double as our own audience:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me?  
 The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.  
 Cold, fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.  
 What? Do I fear myself? There's none else by.  
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.  
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.  
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:  
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?  
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good  
 That I myself have done unto myself?  
 O, no. Alas, I rather hate myself  
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.  
 I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.  
 Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.  
 My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.  
 Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree,  
 Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree,  
 All several sins, all used in each degree,  
 Throng to the bar, crying all 'Guilty, guilty!'  
 I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,  
 And if I die no soul will pity me.

(5.3.183–209)

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.8–9.

What we witness in this speech is the death and quartering of Richard, as the style and syntax literally fragment him. We watch the way the easy and familiar rhythm breaks down as his adaptability and customary eloquence (improvisation) desert him.

### *Looking for Pacino*

'Shakespeare began from a different place', as Jonathan Bate reminds us: '*He was an actor himself*'. We should not be surprised to find that the theatrical in both *Looking for Richard* and *Richard III* goes deeper than public charade—or, at least, that in both cases it is more personal than this.

Richard is quintessentially Shakespearean, supremely charismatic in the theatre, because he knows that he is a role-player. He revels, and makes the audience revel, in play-acting. He is the first full embodiment of a Shakespearean obsession which culminates in Macbeth's 'poor player' and Prospero's 'These our actors'.<sup>18</sup>

As we watch Richard stage-managing history and politics as a personal 'doco-drama type thing', we think of Pacino in rehearsal and Pacino in performance, of Pacino as interpreter compared with Pacino as writer, director, producer, interlocutor, and we become aware of all the parts *we* play, of the way in which we script and stage our lives, adopting different parts.

Richard in the play and *Richard III* in the history of performance offer object lessons on egotism and acting, and Al Pacino's egotistical project (projecting the ego) slots neatly and ironically into a vigorous and inventive stage history of the play, in which it has never fallen out of the repertoire. Just about every renowned actor-manager concerned to establish or enforce his reputation has crafted a characteristic performance of the role and the play, from Shakespeare's contemporary, Richard Burbage, through David Garrick, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, and (in the US) Edwin Booth, to the twentieth century, in which John Barrymore, Donald Wolfit, Laurence Olivier have all offered signature versions of the role. Since Olivier's filmed performance in 1955, it is hard to imagine a major 'actor-manager' who has not attempted it, including recent performances by Ian

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), pp.118–19.



McKellan, Kenneth Branagh, and Kevin Spacey that articulate neatly with their careers in the modern media of television and film. In this, and in exalting the egotistical actor, *Looking for Richard* does not just make connections with Richard himself, it also makes connections with this whole theatrical tradition: *Richard III* is an actor's play, as well as being a play about acting, one of a handful of Shakespearean parts that over the centuries have become the vehicles of renown and reputation.

In this tradition, *Looking for Richard* is a 'doco-drama type thing' that betrays the obsession of its maker, and that obsession, before anything, is with the maker himself, the self-maker, Al Pacino: with Shakespeare insofar as Shakespeare can be said to have created the conditions for Pacino's performance and prefigured and prophesied his career. Pacino draws upon and reprises his role as the godfather, Michael Corleone, and anticipates his role as John Milton/Satan in *The Devil's Advocate* (1997). What does Pacino's friend and fellow producer say towards the end of *Looking for Richard*? If he had brought another ten rolls of film, Pacino would have used them all. In the end, his endless fascination is with himself and with his profession, with acting. And it is precisely in this endless fascination with himself—with performing himself—that Al Pacino establishes his affinity with and insight into his subject, Richard, Duke of Gloucester and later king of England.

After all, in desperately seeking Richard/Shakespeare and struggling to make sense of the part and the play in order to create his autobiographical 'doco-drama', Pacino is only pretending to struggle, pretending he does not understand—feigning ignorance no less effectively than Richard feigns humility and friendship and piety and love. The spontaneity of *Looking for Richard* is scripted, its organisation and incidents (like Pacino and Kimball's 'expulsion' from Shakespeare's birthplace) tendentious and argumentative. It is, supremely, pretend. It is what actors do, after all, and it is why actors love *Richard III*. Both *Richard III* and *Looking for Richard* are doco-dramas—both of them 'based on a true story', as Hollywood producers love to say, but elaborated tendentiously into fictional artifacts of the self.

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# Invasion and Resistance in *Mansfield Park*, *The Wanderer*, *Patronage* and *Waverley*

OLIVIA MURPHY

He through the events  
Of that great change wandered in perfect faith  
As through a book, an old romance or tale  
Of fairy, or some dream of actions wrought  
Behind the summer clouds.

Wordsworth, *The Prelude*<sup>1</sup>

Despite William Hazlitt's claim that year that 'literature has partaken of the disorder of the time... our prose has run mad', 1814 was arguably the greatest year for Romantic-era fiction.<sup>2</sup> The many significant publications of 1814 include four of the best-known novels of the Romantic era: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Frances Burney's *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties*, Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* and Walter Scott's *Waverley, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since*. It is another 'sixty years since' Kathleen Tillotson published her work on early Victorian fiction, *The Novels of the 1840s* (1954) in which she developed the methodology which, on a much smaller

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* Book IX, ll. 305–9, in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.516.

<sup>2</sup> This research was conducted at the invitation of Jacqui Grainger, rare books librarian at the University of Sydney. It was part of a symposium organized by Jacqui to coincide with the launch of her exhibition of the novels of 1814, an exhibition not limited to the four works considered here. William Hazlitt, 'On the English Novelists', in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. 5, 111. Hazlitt's sexist excoriation of both Edgeworth and Burney—the two most successful living novelists of the day—is contextualised by Mark Schoenfeld in 'Novel Marriages, Romantic Labor, and the Quarterly Press', in *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture*, ed. Kim Wheatley (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), pp.62–83.

scale, I adopt here. Tillotson's book was one of the first to demonstrate the possibilities that arise from considering texts in relation to the historical moment of their production. This article seeks to discover if a reduced field of research might offer equally useful, if proportionally narrower, suggestions for new approaches to a few selected texts.

That the four novels under consideration were published in the same year is mostly due to coincidence. They had very different gestations. Begun in early 1811, *Mansfield Park*—the first of Austen's novels written wholly in maturity—was completed in mid-1813 and published in May of the following year. There is reason to believe that Austen revised her manuscript in proof in response to the publication of Edgeworth's *Patronage*, which appeared early in the new year of 1814.<sup>3</sup> Scott, prior to *Waverley*'s publication, was known to the reading public only as a poet. He had written six chapters of a novel with the working title *Waverley, or 'tis fifty years since* as early as 1805, only resurrecting the project in 1813.<sup>4</sup> The production of *The Wanderer* was similarly halting: Burney began the novel soon after *Camilla*'s publication in 1796, but then abandoned it to concentrate on drama, taking it up again and adding to it throughout her decade of exile in France between 1802 and 1812. The bulky manuscript famously survived the suspicions of customs inspectors on both sides of the Channel, but its reception did not justify the optimism of its publishers. While Scott lost his status as bestselling poet to Byron, only to assume the title of bestselling novelist, Burney's status and reputation sank after 1814, accruing hostile, misogynistic reviews and relatively slow sales.

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<sup>3</sup> Jocelyn Harris suggests this in an unpublished paper, 'Jane Austen's revision in proof to *Mansfield Park* (1814): a speculation', presented at 'The Great Novels of 1814: Austen, Burney, Edgeworth and Scott', held at the University of Sydney on 16 April 2014. See also Elaine Bander, '*Mansfield Park* and the 1814 Novels: *Waverley*, *The Wanderer*, *Patronage*', *Persuasions* 28 (2006): 116–125. Edgeworth writes of waiting for the snow to thaw so that the package bearing the first edition of *Patronage* could get through to Edgeworthstown in a letter to Mrs Ruxton dated 25 January 1814. Reprinted in Maria Edgeworth et al., *A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, with a Selection from Her Letters by the Late Mrs. Edgeworth. Edited by Her Children* (unpublished: privately printed by Joseph Masters and Son, London 1867), Vol. I, p.297. Edgeworth had previously informed her correspondent that 'the first volume of 'Patronage' is printed', in a letter of 25 November 1813: *Ibid.*, p.296.

<sup>4</sup> See Claire Lamont, 'Introduction' to Walter Scott, *Waverley*, ed. Lamont (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), ix–x. Further references are to this edition of the text.

Despite their varied compositional history, these four important novels share surprising similarities. The sheer size of them is what first stands out. The average novel of the long eighteenth century—in which Samuel Richardson’s gigantic works are the notorious exception—fits neatly into a broad-margined two- or three-volume octavo. The nearly Victorian bulk of *Patronage* and especially *The Wanderer* might be seen to hint at the prodigious doorstops and multi-year serializations to come. These novels’ joint and several vastness precludes sustained close analysis of their various themes in the space of an article. Nevertheless shared features can be identified: in addition to their remarkable size there is a thematic common thread running through these four novels, which bears closer investigation.

The Romantic era was a time of flux for the novel as a genre, spurred by the beginnings of serious critical appraisal and authorial anxiety surrounding the genre’s proper subject matter and future direction.<sup>5</sup> The question of what does, and what does not belong to a novel—what can and cannot be written about—is central to the development of the genre in this period. In re-reading these four novels of 1814 it becomes apparent that each one is preoccupied by a topic that had only recently emerged from the category of novelistic taboos, or ‘that which cannot be written about’. Each of these novels, that is, responds in various ways to the lifting of a tacit embargo on writing in fiction about the threat of invasion.

As we are well aware, no French invasion of Britain has succeeded since 1066. Nevertheless the *prospect* of an invasion by Napoleon’s troops was a very real one in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Such fears were expressed in typically ambivalent ways. The most famous is Coleridge’s complaint in ‘Fear in Solitude’ that the idea of invasion was ‘a melancholy thing’ for a man wishing to ‘preserve / His soul in calmness’:

It is indeed a melancholy thing,  
And weighs upon the heart, that he must think  
What uproar and what strife may now be stirring  
This way or that way o’er these silent hills—  
Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent analysis of discourse surrounding the genre in the first decade of the nineteenth century is Claudia L. Johnson, “‘Let me make the novels of a country’: Barbauld’s *The British Novelists* (1810/1820)”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34.2 (2001): 163–179.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Semmel provides evidence of this widespread anxiety in *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.38–71.

And all the crash of onset; fear and rage  
 And undetermined conflict—even now,  
 Ev'n now, perchance, and in his native isle,  
 Carnage and screams beneath this blessed sun!<sup>7</sup>

Not all reactions were identical. At the height of the invasion worry, Coleridge's then mentor Anna Letitia Barbauld wrote more measuredly, but ultimately with similar reflections:

all Englishmen are now to turn knights-errant and fight against the great giant and monster Buonaparte ... One hardly knows whether to be frightened or diverted on seeing people assembled at a dinner-table, appearing to enjoy extremely the fare and the company, and saying all the while, with a most smiling and placid countenance, that the French are to land in a fortnight, and that London is to be sacked and plundered for three days,—and then they talk of going to watering-places. I am sure we do not believe in the danger we pretend to believe in; and I am sure that none of us can even form an idea how we should feel of we were forced to believe it. I wish I could lose in the quiet walks of literature all thoughts of the present state of the political horizon.<sup>8</sup>

The political horizon remained ominous. At the height of the invasion crisis between 1803 and 1805, before the battle of Trafalgar conclusively established British naval superiority, Napoleon kept a couple of hundred thousand troops in the Army of Boulogne encamped along the French coast, and conspicuously devoted resources to building the flotilla of barges that was intended to carry them across the Channel.<sup>9</sup> Fears of a French invasion of Britain, of course, proved unfounded. We must not conclude, however,

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Fears in Solitude, written in 1798 during an alarm of an invasion', in *Romanticism: An Anthology* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p.634.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Judy Beecroft, 28 July 1803, quoted in William McCarthy, *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp.460–461.

<sup>9</sup> See Martyn Lyons's summary of events, in which he suggests that the planned invasion 'had always been a bluff, a ruse which enabled Bonaparte to assemble a peace-time army without alarming the continental powers'. *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp.204–5.

that those fears therefore never existed, or that they were quick to disappear after it became apparent that Napoleon was fully engaged by the task of conquering continental Europe. Stuart Semmel has written at length of the doubt, fear and pessimism that characterized the reactions of many Britons to the perceived threat of Napoleon in the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The presence of invasion plots in the novels of 1814 strongly suggests that the fear of invasion was not at all quick in passing.

The Russian defeat of Napoleon's army in 1812, and the beginning of the War of the Sixth Coalition, can be seen as a decisive turning point in Britain's twenty-odd years of conflict with revolutionary France, leading to Napoleon's abdication in April 1814.<sup>11</sup> If we accept this premise, we can thus view the years of 1812, 1813 and 1814 as the first in decades during which Britons could reasonably anticipate a victorious end to the war with France. What the four novels under discussion here suggest is that it is this prospect of an end to the war—or at least the growing confidence that Napoleon was not invincible—that freed novelists to examine closely the various ideas about invasion that had been, as it were, culturally inexpressible for some time.

The novel most obviously concerned with threats of invasion is Scott's *Waverley*, in which the frankly gormless hero, 'blown about with every wind of doctrine', is persuaded to invade his own country under the banner of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Highland clans.<sup>12</sup> Jacobitism is here equated with quixotism:

Reason asked, was it worth while to disturb a government so long settled and established, and to plunge a kingdom into all the miseries of civil war, for the purpose of replacing upon the throne the descendents of a monarch by whom it had been willfully forfeited?<sup>13</sup>

Scott goes to extreme lengths throughout the novel to stress the pointlessness of the Stuart rebellion and paint every one of its supporters as either a fool or a villain, to the point at which the reader begins to find it implausible that

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<sup>10</sup> See Semmel, *Napoleon and the British*, pp.20–146.

<sup>11</sup> For a summary of these events see Paul Johnson, *Napoleon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002), pp.131, 147–150. Johnson argues that 'Wherever one turned in 1813 ... the zeitgeist was against the French emperor'. *Ibid.*, p.145.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Waverley*, p.237.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141.

such a ragtag bunch of adventurers ever made it past Stirling. Everything that Scott can do to romanticize and exoticize the highlanders he does, although he takes equal care to stress the French education of the Mac-Ivor siblings Flora and Fergus, and the French manners of the Young Pretender and his retinue.

Avoiding any reference to the historic alliance between France and Scotland, Scott is at pains to represent the conjunction of the two parties in a ludicrous light. The most comic instance of this is when the French cavalry officer le Comte de Beaujeu is sent to direct a party of Highlanders, 'although understanding not a word of Gaelic, and very little English'. The comte exclaims:

Messieurs les sauvages Ecossois—dat is Gentleman savages, have the goodness d'arranger vous [...] Qu'est ce que vous appelez visage, Monsieur? [...] Ah, oui! *face* [...] Gentilshommes, have de goodness to make de face to de right par file, dat is, by files. Marsh!—Mais très bien—encore, Messieurs; il faut vous mettre à la marche . . . Marchez donc, au nom de Dieu, parceque j'ai oublié le mot Anglois—mais vous etes des brave gens, et me comprenez tres bien.

This leads to the memorable incident in which MacWheeble—or as le comte calls him, 'de littel gross fat gentelman' is tumbled from his mount.<sup>14</sup> But the Highlanders are not 'sauvages' to the French courtier alone. Earlier in the novel Scott writes:

So little was the condition of the Highlands known at that late period, that the character and appearance of their population, while thus sallying forth as military adventurers, conveyed to the south-country Lowlanders as much surprise as if an invasion of African Negroes or Esquimaux Indians had issued forth from the northern mountains of their own native country. It cannot therefore be wondered if Waverley, who had hitherto judged of the Highlanders generally from the samples which the policy of Fergus had from time to time exhibited, should have felt damped and astonished at the daring attempt of a body not then exceeding four thousand men, and of whom not above half the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.272.



number, at the utmost, were armed, to change the fate, and alter the dynasty, of the British kingdoms.<sup>15</sup>

In fiction so as in history, the Jacobites are sent on their way, with Charles Stuart and Waverley making daring escapes, and Fergus Mac-Ivor being gruesomely tortured in the name of British justice. The latter event takes place, with due decorum and regard to the ladies, off-stage.

Following this first botched invasion of England, however, is a second invasion that is presented to the reader as more distressing than anything occurring at the Battle of Culloden. This is the despoliation of the Baron Bradwardine's estate at Tully-Veolan by vandalizing English troops, which Scott offers the reader in great detail—the paintings of Bradwardines past destroyed; the baron's armorial bears toppled from their pillars; even Rose Bradwardine's rose garden is deliberately wrecked in a small, domestic version of the actual historic destruction wrought by the English in the vengeful highland clearances. And just as this intensely personalized invasion is given far greater affective power in the text, so it is more speedily remedied. The would-be usurpers of the manor of Tully-Veolan are repulsed by its loyal tenants, and with a decent injection of English cash via the Waverley estates, the Bradwardines' birthright is restored not just to its former faded glory, but to a level of polish that would not shame the National Trust.

Maria Edgeworth establishes a similar plot in *Patronage*, turning on the loss and restoration of Percy Hall. While there is a minor subplot concerning an unnamed European nation being invaded by the French army, the true upheaval surrounds the occupation of the Percy family's estate. The invaders, this time, are not Jacobites or Highlanders but another branch of the family in residence. The complex means by which the paragon members of the Percy family are evicted from their home might strain credulity, but the ease with which the dishonest usurpers (a different—and hence inferior—Percy family) are defeated, and the true, honest, authentic Percy family is reinstated in their hereditary rights defies everything known about the English legal system in the early nineteenth century. The Percy family's loyal tenants shed sentimental tears on their departure, and ring the parish bells on their return. These tenants are represented as essentially peasants, with no feelings more complex than inbred habits of loyalty. Edgeworth writes:

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.214–15.

It was now their turn to glory in that honest obstinacy, and with the strong English sense of justice they triumphed in having the rightful owners restored to their estate, and to the seat of their ancestors.<sup>16</sup>

Once again can be seen the pattern established in *Waverley* of an invasion, the resistance of that invasion, and ultimately a restoration.

This same pattern—resistance, invasion, and restoration—is repeated in Frances Burney's final novel *The Wanderer*, and this time the invasion is from that fearful quarter, the French Jacobin. The heroine long suffers under mysterious anonymity and suspicion of being a French spy. Once Juliet's character is cleared, however, her Jacobin *de jure* husband pursues her to Britain where he can only be turned away with a large bribe of English cash, so that the initially nameless heroine can be restored to her rightful place in society, within the solidly respectable families of Granville and Harleigh.

The events of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* have attracted more critical attention than those of the previous works combined. Mary Poovey summarizes the conventional reading of the plot of *Mansfield Park* thus:

dangerous outsiders invade Mansfield's expansive grounds. In many ways, Mansfield Park seems a citadel in a turbulent world ... The Crawfords epitomize the external challenge to Mansfield Park and the values it ideally superintends.<sup>17</sup>

The invasion of Mansfield Park by the sophisticated Mary and Henry Crawford is resisted—at first only by Fanny Price, but eventually by most of the Bertram family—and ultimately the Crawford siblings are expelled, so that the chilly domestic harmony of Mansfield may be restored.

Given that these four contemporaneous novels contain the same basic plot element, what might this tell us about the historical and literary situation in 1814? Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that each of these invasions is in some way representative of a feared French invasion that never eventuated. How, then, do these novels suggest such an (imagined) invasion

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<sup>16</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Patronage* (1814), ed. Eva Figs (London: Pandora, 1986), p. 618.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.213.

might be resisted? What kinds of ideological defenses do they suggest might successfully hold out against foreign incursion?

Within literature, the arsenal for ideological weaponry is, of course, literature, and so it behoves us to pay attention to characters' reading habits. Here is what we are told about Edward Waverley's:

he had read over, and stored in a memory of uncommon tenacity, much curious, though ill-arranged and miscellaneous information. In English literature he was master of Shakspeare and Milton, of our earlier dramatic authors, of many picturesque and interesting passages from our old historical chronicles, and particularly of Spenser, Drayton, and other poets who have exercised themselves on romantic fiction, of all themes the most fascinating to a youthful imagination.<sup>18</sup>

Later we learn that Edward 'was warm in his feelings, wild and romantic in his ideas and in his taste of reading, with a strong disposition towards poetry'.<sup>19</sup> Edward Waverley's reading, it seems, is much like Scott's own—he loves to read of knights, of chivalry, of adventure—in fact, while he lives smack dab in the Age of Reason, Waverley is completely uninterested in eighteenth-century thought. Instead, he is attracted by anything to do with the feudal and medieval past: he is a proto-gothic, proto-Romantic reader.

As for Fanny Price, Austen is characteristically taciturn on the subject of Fanny's reading, with the exception of the completely orthodox material prescribed by her cousin Edmund or abandoned in the attic by the easily bored Bertram children. This is, after all, the most plausible reason for the East Room's small collection of Crabbe's *Tales*, the *Idler*, or Lord Macartney's *Embassy to China*. Austen's careful readers, however, will note frequent clues as to the kinds of texts Fanny really dwells on. When she hears about Mr Rushworth's plans to 'improve' Sotherton, Fanny murmurs to Edmund, 'Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does not it make you think of Cowper? "Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited"'.<sup>20</sup> In the chapel at Sotherton we get the full force of Fanny's imagination, which turns out to be furnished in more recent, but otherwise similar, fashion to that of Edward Waverley:

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<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Waverley*, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.66.

Fanny's imagination had prepared her for something grander than a mere, spacious, oblong room, fitted up for the purposes of devotion—with nothing more striking or more solemn than the profusion of mahogany, and the crimson velvet cushions appearing over the ledge of the family gallery above. 'I am disappointed,' said she, in a low voice, to Edmund. 'This is not my idea of a chapel. There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand. Here are no aisles, no arches, no inscriptions, no banners. No banners, cousin, to be "blown by the night wind of Heaven." No signs that a "Scottish monarch sleeps below."'"

'You forget, Fanny, how lately all this has been built, and for how confined a purpose, compared with the old chapels of castles and monasteries. It was only for the private use of the family. They have been buried, I suppose, in the parish church. *There* you must look for the banners and the achievements.'

'It was foolish of me not to think of all that, but I am disappointed.'<sup>21</sup>

Later, when Mary Crawford lets slip that she much prefers the name Mr Bertram to 'Mr. *Edmund* Bertram', which she feels is 'so formal, so pitiful, so younger-brother-like' that she 'detest[s] it', Fanny hastens to defend her cousin's Christian name:

'How differently we feel! ... To me, the sound of *Mr.* Bertram is so cold, and nothing-meaning—so entirely without warmth or character!—It just stands for a gentleman, and that's all. But there is nobleness in the name of Edmund. It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes, and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections.'<sup>22</sup>

This chivalry, this new medievalism, belongs to the *romance* trend within Romanticism, the aspect of the movement that we associate with a love of the gothic and the irrational, the mythological, mysterious and mystical. This is not the revolutionary side of Romanticism we now associate with the fall of the Bastille or the American *Declaration of Independence*, with Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy' or Wordsworth's leech-gatherer. Anna Letitia Barbauld

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.100. Fanny is quoting Scott, from the second canto of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.246. Austen's emphasis.

had warned about these competing Romantic movements at the beginning of the Romantic period:

Hanging woods and fairy streams,  
 Inspirers of poetic dreams,  
 Must not now the soul enthrall,  
 While dungeons burst, and despots fall.<sup>23</sup>

What we find in these four novels from 1814 is the kind of Romanticism associated with ‘woods and fairy streams’, with harp-playing young ladies, with Ann Radcliffe and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, with fairy stories and fantasy, or with the anti-revolutionary writings of *Edmund* Burke. In the 1790s, shocked by Burke’s about-face defection to the monarchist cause, and his emotive defence of the French Royal family, Mary Wollstonecraft levelled her memorable accusations against Burke’s rhetoric and the ideology behind it:

I perceive, from the whole tenor of your Reflections, that you have a mortal antipathy to reason; but, if there is any thing like argument, or first principles, in your wild declamation, behold the result:—that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that, if we do discover some errors, our *feelings* should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. These are gothic notions of beauty—the ivy is beautiful, but, when it insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support, who would not grub it up?<sup>24</sup>

Wollstonecraft here calls to account the flaw in Burke’s logic—or, more accurately, Burke’s total lack of logic, his rejection of reality, common sense, and natural justice. In their place we find, in Keats’s phrase, ‘The brain, new

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<sup>23</sup> Anna Letitia Barbauld, ‘[Lines to Samuel Rogers in Wales on the Eve of Bastille Day, 1791]’, in *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), p.120.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1791) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): pp.1–62, 8.

stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay / Of old romance'.<sup>25</sup> Despite the criticisms of Wollstonecraft and others, it was nevertheless Burkean principles that would come to dominate British discourse as the war with revolutionary France dragged on. These four novels from 1814 enact, over and over, resistance to France and its revolutionary principles. In so doing they also demonstrate that a sea-change is occurring, and in some cases has already occurred, in British culture and ideology. The restorations that take place in each one of these novels go further than just returning everything to the *status quo ante*. They emphasise the triumph of an ideology that does more than merely resist revolution. This ideology, in fact, constitutes a different kind of revolution: a conservative revolution. In this brave new world (which is in fact a rather fearful one), the Burkean illogic of neo-medievalism reigns supreme.

This is clear in *Mansfield Park*, where Fanny creates her *preux chevalier* out of the most unlikely raw material of the prudish Edmund Bertram, and ultimately succeeds in establishing her strange, incestuous fantasy as the unconvincing happily ever after of *Mansfield Park*. Clara Tuite, for one, has argued that *Mansfield Park* novelizes Burke's ideology, concluding that 'if Burke's *Reflections* offers political history as family romance, *Mansfield Park* is the family romance as political history'.<sup>26</sup>

In *Waverley*, after the defeat of the Jacobites, Edward feels himself, 'entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced'.<sup>27</sup> Yet any reader can see that this is no kind of realism, where in return for treason Waverley is rewarded with riches and the girl, and the devastation of the civil war can be transformed as if by magic. 'By my honour!' declares the Baron of Tully-Veolan, seeing his estate completely refurbished almost overnight, 'one might almost believe in brownies and fairies'!<sup>28</sup>

This same reactionary, Burkean version of Romanticism is at play, too, in *The Wanderer*. In the England to which the heroine Juliet flees as a refugee, the conservative Admiral Powel is on hand to represent everything that is admirable about John Bull's old England—the harmless xenophobia,

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<sup>25</sup> John Keats, *The Eve of St Agnes*, ll.40–41, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p.300.

<sup>26</sup> Clara Tuite, *Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.101.

<sup>27</sup> Scott, *Waverley*, p.283.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.339.

the obsession with Roast Beef and porter—but Powel is atypical of the Englishmen Juliet meets. Juliet’s ‘wanderings’ take her further and further from Revolutionary France, but also from urbanized modern life. One especially telling moment comes when Juliet finds herself on Salisbury Plain, quietly eating lunch at Stonehenge with the gouty, priapic Sir Jaspar. The baronet’s tales of imps, fairies and druids at first seem like distractions, until they are revealed as foreshadowing Juliet’s solitary journey into the fairy-tale setting of the New Forest.

Even in Edgeworth’s *Patronage*, despite its emphasis on its own modernity, and the numerous ways in which poor Rosamond Percy’s harmless sentimental fantasies are shown up as illusory, a neo-gothic conservatism is paramount. Whig and Tory may disagree on every topic under the sun, except in the important one of total opposition to every new idea or innovation:

‘It is extraordinary, Mr Percy,’ continued Lord Oldborough, ‘that, knowing how widely you differ from me in political principals, I should choose, of all men living, to open my mind to you.—But the fact is, that I am convinced, however we may differ about the means, the end we both have in view is one and the same,—the good and glory of the British Empire.’

‘My Lord, I believe it,’—cried Mr Percy—‘With energy and warmth he repeated—‘My Lord, I believe it.’<sup>29</sup>

All of this—the restorations of rightful heirs, the fairies and brownies, the knights and damsels and cheering villagers—spells nothing less than the end of revolutionary Romantic sentiment, by 1814 banished from the discourse of the popular novel and on the run along with Byron, Shelley, and Napoleon himself.

What we get instead is intimations of the tempered Romanticism, or rather the Victorianism that is to come. No longer will Romantic novels incite revolution, or question the very foundations on which society is based (although some Romantic poetry will continue to do so). No longer will hereditary privilege, the double-standards involved in judging between the sexes, or the classes, be open to fictional judgment.<sup>30</sup> No longer, moreover,

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<sup>29</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, p.305.

<sup>30</sup> The single most important exception to these trends is Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1817).

will novelistic heroines partake of the sprightliness verging on vulgarity we delightedly find in Elizabeth Bennet, nor will they engage in the issues of the day, like Amelia Opie's Adeline Mowbray, say, or Mary Hays's Emma Courtney. The sophisticate and wit Mary Crawford must lose out to Fanny Price, the revolutionary Flora Mac-Ivor and Elinor Joddrel to the quietly upright Rose Bradwardine and Juliet Granville, and triumphing over them all, that queen of prigs, Caroline Percy.

From 1814 the novel will be inherited by new heroines. These sentimental saints will become the self-effacing, domesticating handmaidens of empire. Their greatest delight will be in hearth, home, and their heroes' happiness—they will be the angels in the houses of the Victorian novel. As Flora Mac-Ivor says of Rose Bradwardine:

Her very soul is in home, and in the discharge of all those quiet virtues of which home is the centre. Her husband will be to her what her father now is—the object of all her care, solicitude, and affection. She will see nothing, and connect herself with nothing, but by him and through him.<sup>31</sup>

It is conservative, Burkean thinking that has won out here. One after another each of these novels demonstrate that in preparing their ideological defenses against the prospect of French incursion, a terrible sacrifice has been made. Napoleon is not to be defeated by good British sense alone, but rather by a very different kind of Romantic revolution. It is a new feudalism that will be restored, along with the Bourbons. And as the novels of 1814 demonstrate, this new world of the nineteenth century will take its rhetoric, its heroes and its ideals, from an imaginary, pre-Raphaelite land of fairy tale and medieval legend.

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<sup>31</sup> Scott, *Waverley*, p.111.



‘Ovid was a mere fool to you’:  
Clothing and Nationality in  
Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer*

STEPHANIE RUSSO

Frances Burney’s last novel, *The Wanderer*, is also her most explicitly political work: set during the height of the French Revolution, the novel explores ideas about nationhood in a time of political crisis. Throughout the novel, characters muse about what it is to be ‘English’, but increasingly find they are unable to locate a distinctive and convincing answer. Instead, as the narrative progresses, Burney’s characters find that national identity can be as ephemeral and easily created, or discarded, as the clothes one wears. The controversial nature of Burney’s suggestion that there is no such thing as stable national identity should not be overlooked. Burney started writing *The Wanderer* in the revolutionary decade of the 1790s, and worked on it intermittently during her exile in France until its eventual publication in 1814.<sup>1</sup> This partly accounts for the novel’s unhappy reception history: this is a novel of the Revolution, and by 1814, these concerns were seen as rather outmoded. Further, as Linda Colley has usefully pointed out, during the Napoleonic Wars, the French ceased to be associated with the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity—the guiding principles of the Revolution—and had ‘reverted in the British imagination to what they had so often seemed in the past: spiritless victims of over-powerful government at home and ferocious exponents of military aggression abroad’.<sup>2</sup> In *The Wanderer*, Burney manages to both confirm and frustrate these reader expectations of France. Juliet’s husband is certainly as violent and cruel as the English might expect of a Jacobin. Indeed, the most horrifying element of Juliet’s story is not the fact that she witnesses an execution by guillotine, but the prospect of

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Chisholm provides a valuable account of Burney’s passage back to England with the manuscript in 1812 and the subsequent publication of the novel in 1814. Kate Chisholm, *Fanny Burney: Her Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp.218–39.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p.318.

her husband claiming his marital rights over her body. It is this threat that impels her trip to England and her desperate belief in the relative safety of the land of her birth. Juliet's inset narrative, detailing life in France during the Revolution, therefore, could be read as a conventional representation of the horror of the French Revolution during its most bloody period. However, Burney continually undermines popular perceptions of the French, and indeed, over the course of the novel, presents England in an increasingly unflattering light. Burney's exploration of nationality is inherently bound up in her exploration of the symbolic significance of clothing. National identity is consistently undermined in *The Wanderer* in this novel full of shape-shifting, where characters can assume and discard nationalities as easily and simply as they can get dressed or undressed.

Burney's novel resists perceptions of the French as 'spiritless' at home and 'ferocious' abroad, to borrow Colley's phrase. In fact, so disappointing was Burney's sympathetic depiction of the French in *The Wanderer* to many of her readers that the novel was sharply criticized for the sympathy with which Burney treats France, although that Burney was sympathetic to the French could hardly have been surprising given that Burney was married to a French man and had lived in France for a decade.<sup>3</sup> The sharp critique of English society within the novel also accounts for some of the hostility with which the novel was treated upon its publication, given that this was a time when the discourse of nationalism, or patriotism, was reaching its nadir, as Linda Colley and Gerard Newman have shown.<sup>4</sup> *The Wanderer* takes on a quasi-travel narrative form, which allows Burney to take Juliet on what amounts to a walking tour of England, from the seaside to the towns to the countryside. During her travels, Juliet meets a wide range of English society, from the upper classes at the beginning of the novel to the rural working peasants of the New Forest. While Juliet imagines that England will provide a relief for her from the violence of revolutionary Paris, she finds only danger in England. During her attempts to find refuge in the New Forest, for

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<sup>3</sup> As Margaret Doody speculates, 'Burney's public would have liked her novel better if she had spent all of it attacking the French and Napoleon.' Margaret Doody, 'Burney and politics' in *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, edited by Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.109. Rose Marie Cutting also suggests that Burney's readers were hoping for a novel that 'unmask[ed] the sins of French society'. Rose Marie Cutting, 'A Wreath for Fanny Burney's Last Novel: *The Wanderer*'s Contribution to Women's Studies,' *Illinois Quarterly* 37 (1975): 47.

<sup>4</sup> Colley, *Britons*, and Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740-1830* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987).

example, she finds that the idealized image of the English countryside hides a landscape populated by petty criminals and people too busy trying to scratch out a living to appreciate the natural beauty which they live amongst. Both France and England are mired in suspicion, paranoia and violence. What Juliet discovers during her travels is that the English have no claim to moral superiority. In fact, most of the English people Juliet meets are avaricious, selfish and cruel. Juliet's French 'family', meanwhile, are the epitome of virtue and generosity. I am not suggesting here that Burney is arguing, in any kind of simplistic manner, that the French are 'better' or more virtuous than the English. Rather, *The Wanderer* calls into question the whole notion of national boundaries through its emphasis on the arbitrariness of notions of 'nationality'. The idea that either the English or the French can be assigned specific virtues or characteristics is destabilized throughout the novel, as other critics have noticed.<sup>5</sup> One of the key ways that Burney problematizes the concept of national identity through *The Wanderer* is in her use of images of clothing, dressing, undressing and cosmetics, and how these images are linked to the creation of national (and class) identities. While there is general agreement in the critical literature that Burney collapses national distinctions throughout *The Wanderer*, this has hitherto not been associated specifically with the use made of clothing in the novel.<sup>6</sup> By blurring the differences between France and England in the novel, Burney suggests that any idea of national difference is simply a cultural construction and, further, one that can be constructed through dress and cosmetics. While the English characters would like to claim superiority over the supposedly effeminate, frivolous French, entangled in a bloody

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<sup>5</sup> Leanne Maunu argues, for example, that 'Burney calls attention to the artificial and culturally constructed nature of nationalism...the randomness of one's birthplace and peer circle, Burney points out, influences our attachments and dislikes, which ultimately influence our understanding of other nations and people'. Leanne Maunu, *Women Writing the Nation: National Identity, Female Community, and the British-French Connection, 1770-1820* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), p.216.

<sup>6</sup> Many critics have, however, foregrounded the importance of clothes in the novel. Kristina Straub, for example, argues that both *Camilla* and *The Wanderer* 'address the complex and contradictory position of the woman who seeks to control the way she is seen, the woman as manipulator of appearances, as the marker of her own identity—in short, of the woman as artist'. Kristina Straub, *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p.190. More recently, Chloe Wigston Smith devotes a section of her study on the representation of work and clothes in eighteenth-century literature to *The Wanderer*. Chloe Wigston Smith, *Women, Work, and Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.145–79.

Revolution, the notion that they can actually differentiate themselves from the French is consistently undermined over the course of the narrative, to the point where even the most virulently Francophobic characters in the novel are forced to reassess their prejudices. Burney's representation of nationhood is radical, then, in its suggestion that national boundaries are performative, and therefore, largely arbitrary fictions.

That clothing has the ability to create or disguise national identity is repeatedly demonstrated in *The Wanderer*. Juliet appears in various guises throughout the novel, from impoverished black woman to fashionable French woman to English milkmaid. Of course, the first and easiest way to identify national identity is through clothing. When Juliet turns up at the boat that will take her from France to England she is dressed in rags and covered in black paint. The people she meets thus immediately identify her as an impoverished Creole woman. Later, when she is participating in the play staged by Elinor Jodderel, she dons the fashionable clothing of the upper classes, and her elegant bearing and the apparent ease with which she wears such outfits is read as revealing her true identity as an upper-class English woman. Juliet's ability to create (or discard) her national and class identity through clothing is constantly commented upon by a variety of characters, to the point where she is characterized as an Ovidian figure of trickery and metamorphosis. Juliet's ability to shapeshift through nationalities throws the idea of stable national identity into doubt. If Juliet can appear to be, and is treated as, a black woman, a French woman or an English woman, then how are we to tell what national identity is the 'true' one? Burney solves one problem for us—Juliet is not really black and therefore cannot sustain her disguise, which must inevitably wash off—but the uncertainty around whether she can be considered English or French lingers throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, for example, Juliet returns to France as soon as she is able to, and we are told that she would be quite happy to stay there indefinitely, if it weren't for her pregnancy and the need to present her child to her husband's English family. For all Juliet's apparent 'Englishness', then, she appears far more comfortable in France, surrounded by her adopted French family, than she ever appears to be in England. In this novel so acutely concerned with the making and wearing of clothes, then, the ability of clothing to allow the wearer to perform national identity is central to understanding the way Burney problematizes the idea of nationhood.

From Juliet's first, dramatic appearance in the novel, the people around her comment upon her ability to frustrate their expectations by eluding all of the definitions they seek to impose upon her, and thus they immediately

characterize her as a shape-shifter. Mrs Ireton's comment, 'Why that new skin must have cost you more than your new gown', said to Juliet when the black paint she has used to disguise her appearance in order to escape France has washed off, serves as a useful summation of the way unstable boundaries of nationality are tied up with either putting on, or taking off, clothing.<sup>7</sup> If skin can be purchased, or simply put on as a dress can be, then nationality is simply another form of disguise or costume, able to be purchased and donned whenever it is convenient for the wearer. Mrs Ireton clearly finds such shape-shifting radically unsettling: 'You have been bruised and beaten; and dirty and clean; and ragged and whole; and wounded and healed; and a European and a Creole, in less than a week. I suppose, next, you will dwindle into a dwarf; and then, perhaps, find some surprising contrivance to shoot up into a giantess. There is nothing that can be too much to expect from so great an adept in metamorphoses' (46). While Mrs Ireton's 'ire' largely stems from her frustrated petty tyranny, this is a startlingly accurate prediction of precisely what Juliet will go on to do over the course of the novel. Juliet does, in fact, shape-shift numerous times, appearing at various times as white and black, English and French, rich and poor (although she does not manage to appear as either giantess or dwarf). Further, Juliet cycles through almost every occupation available to women in the late eighteenth century, from music teacher to milliner to shopkeeper and humble companion, showing a remarkable ability to adapt to ever changing circumstances. The uncertainty that the secondary characters feel about who Juliet actually 'is' is mirrored in the reader's uncertainty: for most of the novel, the reader has no idea what Juliet's real name is, or why she must conceal her identity so strictly. Elinor gives her the appellation 'Ellis' when Juliet can give her no other name, and so we are left to work out for ourselves how we read Juliet's class and national identity.

The idea that Juliet is a shape-shifter, able to appear to be anything that she wants to be, is returned to at the end of the novel. This time it is Riley who notes that 'you metamorphose yourself about so, one does not know which way to look for you. Ovid was a mere fool to you' (771). Like Mrs Ireton, Riley goes on to point out exactly how Juliet appears to be both 'European' and 'Creole', linking her ability to shape shift to her facility with costume and cosmetics: 'Look but what a beautiful head of hair she's displaying to us now! It becomes her mightily. But I won't swear that she does not change it, in a minute or two, for a skull-cap!' (771). Juliet's ability

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<sup>7</sup> Frances Burney, *The Wanderer*, edited by Margaret Anne Doody, Robert L. Mack and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.45. All subsequent page references to this novel are taken from this edition.

to transform herself is achieved primarily through the clothes and accessories that she wears. She can cover up her natural beauty with a 'skull cap', or choose to appear as a young, beautiful woman and, crucially, she is believable in every guise she adopts. She has the ability to make people believe she is a black woman, a French woman or an English peasant, and all of these transformations are achieved through fashion. Juliet presents an intriguing puzzle to everyone she meets: she speaks perfect English with a French accent, yet is apparently black, and wears the costume of a poor black woman. Juliet's supposed racial identity at this early stage of the novel is entirely the product of what she is wearing and how she presents herself. She has used paint to appear black, and she is wearing clothes designed to conceal as much of her body and facial features as possible: 'the prominent borders of a French night-cap, which had almost concealed all her features, displayed a large black patch, that covered half her left cheek, and a broad black ribbon, which bound a bandage of cloth over the right side of her forehead' (20). The disguise is convincing: Riley suggests that she is from 'the settlements in the West Indies' or 'somewhere off the coast of Africa' (19). In other words, nobody doubts the authenticity of the costume that Juliet adopts, as indeed, nobody throughout the novel ever 'sees' through Juliet's various disguises. This ability to maintain a successful masquerade puts the lie to any claims that any one of Juliet's costumes is any more 'authentic' than another, as we will see.

Appropriately, given her own propensity for masquerade, it is Elinor who unknowingly anticipates the fact that Juliet's racial identity is a disguise when she mockingly suggests adopting the same strategy of transformation in order to attract Harleight's knight-errantry: 'for I won't lose a moment in becoming black, patched and pennyless!' (28). Indeed, a few days after her arrival, Juliet's disguise washes away: 'a manifest alteration in the complexion of her attendant, which, from a regular and equally dark hue, appeared, on the second morning, to be smeared and streaked; and, on the third, to be of a dusky white' (42-3). Soon, Juliet is revealed to be of 'a skin changed from a tint nearly black, to the brightest, whitest, and most dazzling fairness' (43). Juliet's transformation from black to dazzling white can be read on one level as a moment of revelation: far from the West Indian or African woman she is assumed to be, she is a European and her white skin is 'real'. However, Mrs Ireton points out that the revelation of Juliet's whiteness hardly solves the mystery of her national identity, saying:

'O! what, you have some other metamorphosis to prepare, perhaps? Those bandages and patches are to be converted into

something else? And pray, if it will not be too great a liberty to enquire, what are they to exhibit? The order of Maria Theresa? Or of the Empress of all the Russias? If I did not fear being impertinent, I should be tempted to ask how many coats of white and red you were obliged to lay on, before you could cover all that black.' (44)

The image of Juliet painting red and white paint over her black skin suggests that Juliet's ability to become a different nationality through the use of cosmetics throws the idea of being able to identify somebody's 'authentic' national identity into considerable doubt. Which layer of skin is the true layer and which is the layer of paint? Of course, we know that Juliet is 'really' white, but if her black skin was so convincing that she fooled everybody on the boat into thinking that she was black, then Mrs Ireton's question becomes rather more revealing. Juliet could be white pretending to be black, or she could be black pretending to be white. If skin colour can be painted on or washed off, then how are we to determine racial boundaries? Indeed, Juliet's ability to frustrate expectations becomes something of a parlour trick for Elinor, as she tries to coerce Juliet to adopting different disguises to 'phiz' Aunt Maple (53). Of course, this is largely a false, and quite problematic, equivalence here: Juliet can simply wash off her black skin, and therefore, escape the kind of racial discrimination that a real Creole woman would face in eighteenth-century British society. The parallel between skin colour and cosmetics is, at best, an uneasy one. Nonetheless, Burney does suggest that race and nationality are simply things that can be either assumed or discarded, just as clothes can either disguise or reveal, so, at least in the narrative world of *The Wanderer*, black paint can conceivably be used as a marker of the instability of racial boundaries.

Given the novel's emphasis on the difficulties inherent in using dress as a means of identifying racial and/or class boundaries, it is difficult to assign authenticity to any of the roles Juliet takes up over the course of the novel, even when they are read by other characters as revelatory. When Juliet takes up the role of Lady Townly in Elinor's production of *The Provoked Husband*, the fashionable outfit that she dons causes the company to perceive her in an entirely new light:

it was from the ease with which she wore her ornaments, the grace with which she set them off, the elegance of her deportment, and an air of dignified modesty, that spoke her not only accustomed to such attire, but also to the good breeding and

refined manners, which announce the habits of life to have been formed in the superior classes of society. (92)

Juliet is 'really' the upper-class woman that she appears to be in these clothes, so on one level this outfit does reveal something about Juliet's true identity. However, while Juliet's performance of an upper-class woman in Lady Townly is read as an authentic portrayal, this is, in fact, literally a costume. Juliet's 'identity' is again read through her clothing, but while this costume is read by those around Juliet as revealing something of her 'true' self, it should not be overlooked that she is playing a part in a play at the time, and thus again self-consciously assuming a role. The idea that one particular costume is more authentic than another is a problematic contention in this novel of metamorphosis and shape-shifting. Helen Thompson has described this moment in the text as 'Burney's paradoxical, apparently incoherent attempt to figure the wanderer's whiteness as both self-evident (asserted by her blushes) and spectacularly revelatory (blindingly revealed by the opened shutters)'.<sup>8</sup> This is an important point, because it seems here that Burney does not quite grasp how problematic it is to embed in her narrative the assumption clothing can reveal 'true' self, when this is firstly, literally a costume and, secondly, when the rest of the novel repeatedly demonstrates how fashion and performance can construct (or disguise) identity. Juliet's performance of white, English upper-class woman is persuasive, but then, so was her performance of lower-class blackness. How, then, can you decide which national identity is the correct one? How can clothes reveal the truth about one's identity if they can also conceal, shape or distort the truth? In attempting to 'reveal' Juliet's class status through her clothes, Burney is attempting to utilize what she has already established to be an unstable determinate of identity.

The instability of clothing as a marker of class status is further underlined by the many instances in the novel when Juliet is 'read' as a lower-class woman due to the clothes that she wears. When Miss Arbe convinces Juliet to take part in a concert during the period of time when Juliet is attempting to use her musical abilities to support herself, she buys Juliet a gown designed to mark out her difference from the other young ladies taking part. The colour Miss Arbe suggests is bright pink, a colour that is both sexually suggestive, and designed to draw attention to Juliet and mark her out as different: 'as our uniform is fixed to be white, with violet-ornaments,

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<sup>8</sup> Helen Thompson, 'How the Wanderer Works: Reading Burney and Bourdieu,' *ELH* 68.4 (2001), 971



it was my thought to beg Miss Arbe would order something of this shewy sort for Miss Ellis; to distinguish us *Dilettanti* from the artists' (314). Juliet, with her acute sense of the political significance of clothing, is well aware what the pink dress signifies, and responds with revulsion, refusing to wear the gown and instead appearing at the concert in 'plain white satin, with ornaments of which the simplicity shewed as much taste as modesty' (358). Juliet will not be part of an attempt to use her clothing to signify her difference, so instead she uses her clothing as a kind of mute protest. White registers both her purity and her reluctance to perform in public. Clothes are the way that she can frame herself as the reluctant performer: a genteel woman hesitant to be seen as sexually available. As Juliet cycles through professions, she finds herself adopting the clothes of women ever further down the social ladder. During her journey through the New Forest, Juliet adopts the costume of a country maiden: 'she changed over night, her bonnet, which was of white chip, for one the most coarse and ordinary of straw, with her young hostess; of whom, also, she bought a blue striped apron' (665). Once again, Juliet finds that the clothes make the woman, as her adoption of Debby Dyson's bonnet leads to unwanted sexual advances. Juliet is treated like a working class, promiscuous woman, because that is the persona her costume evokes. Such is the power of her bonnet that it attracts sexual invitations no matter who is the wearer. When Juliet swaps the offending bonnet with the daughter of a farmer she stays with, the sexual connotations of the bonnet travel with it again: 'she had caused Bet to be taken for that bold hussy, by the higler' (702). So powerful are clothes that they literally take their symbolic significance with them, erasing or disguising the woman who wears them. Juliet's very ability to successfully pose as a working-class woman through her clothing recalls anxieties around Marie Antoinette's adoption of plain white muslin gowns and straw hats as her preferred costume at Le Petit Trianon, as if an upper-class woman can be taken for a working class peasant, then surely the opposite can be true. As Caroline Weber points out in her excellent study of the symbolic significance of Marie Antoinette's clothes, there was much anxiety about the way the pastoral style cultivated by the Queen 'obfuscated long-standing sartorially coded differences in class'.<sup>9</sup> How could the French distinguish their Queen from a peasant, if they were both wearing the same kind of dress? Juliet is an aristocratic woman by birth, yet is read as a working-class, sexually available woman due to the clothes that she wears. The ability of a working-class woman to appropriate the fashions of the upper-class was a key site of

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), p.159.

anxiety during the eighteenth century, so Burney is here exploring popular anxieties about the politics of fashion in ways that would be very recognizable to her contemporary readers.<sup>10</sup>

As I gestured towards earlier, the problem of identifying Juliet's racial identity is hardly solved when we discover that Juliet's black skin washes away. There is considerable confusion over whether to identify Juliet as an English woman or as a French woman, and she is read variously as both over the course of the novel. While some of the more virulent Francophobic characters throughout the novel respond negatively to Juliet's French accent, when Juliet takes up employment in a milliner's, she finds that her Frenchness is as much an asset in this environment as it is a liability in others. She functions as a draw card for customers due to France's association with high fashion. When Miss Matson spreads the word that she has employed a French woman, the news is 'soon spread through the neighbourhood; with the addition that the same person had brought over specimens of all the French *costume*' (429, emphasis is Burney's). Juliet's Frenchness, or ability to assume the identity of a French woman, is the most effective means to advertise the wares of the store, and she becomes a local draw card for women hoping to take her advice on how to emulate the latest Parisian fashions. Juliet's ability to advise customers how to arrange their gowns and accessories, is presumed to be a natural consequence of her Frenchness, or at least her long residence in France. That Juliet does, in fact, have this facility with dress and cosmetics has been stressed repeatedly through the novel, so here Juliet's identification as a fashionable French woman seems quite apt. Once again, then, Juliet can appear to be of a different nationality by way of her clothing and what that clothing signifies. The way Juliet dresses herself (and others) creates her as a French woman just as other people read her skill in arranging her outfits as a sign of, variously, her innocence and her gentility. Despite the ease with which Juliet can arrange her clothing in order to create or disguise her identity, which is linked to her fashionable Frenchness, Burney goes to some length to demonstrate that Juliet is a master of disguise because she simply must be. This is not a matter of choice or play: in order to keep her identity firmly concealed, she must

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<sup>10</sup> John Styles' discussion of the significance of white stockings is interesting here. White stockings had been associated with the upper class, but from 1750 onwards, the possession of white stockings by the working class had become a 'common subject of plebeian aspiration'. Again we see here the idea that clothes give the wearer the ability to transcend social and cultural boundaries. See John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p.195.

adopt a variety of disguises. It is clear that this sits uneasily with Juliet, as Burney tells us that 'shocking to all her feelings was this attempt at disguise, so imitative of guilt, so full of semblance to conscious imposture' (174). Chloe Wigston Smith has read Juliet's shame at having to adopt such disguises as revealing Juliet's 'essential Britishness—conceptualized in the novel as moral purity', so that we 'see through the literal and figurative darkness of her disguise'.<sup>11</sup> I would argue that, in fact, there is no such thing as 'essential Britishness' in this novel. In this novel so concerned with the concept of disguise and metamorphosis, even Juliet's Britishness is simply another outfit that can be put on or removed depending on her needs, just as she can capitalize on her links with fashionable France when it is convenient. Even though Juliet is personally uncomfortable with imposture, this does not necessarily negate the effect of Burney's portrayal of nationality as costume. At the end of the novel, Juliet dons clothes appropriate to the station that she has been born into, when Sir Jaspar, in the full knowledge of who she really is, presents her with a 'complete small assortment of the finest linen' and a 'white chip bonnet of the most beautiful texture' (769). These are clothes befitting the status of the Honourable Miss Granville, and form part of her conscious attempt to 'prove' her authentic identity as an upper-class woman now that it is expedient for her to do so. However, after reading some 768 pages of text about the ability of clothes to *create* identity, it is hard to accept that this particular outfit is somehow more authentic than any of the costumes donned by Juliet prior to this point, just as her Lady Townly costume is problematic as a stable marker of identity. The fact that these clothes also form part of Juliet's self-conscious strategy to convince people that she is, indeed, Juliet Granville, lends further weight to the suggestion that clothes can be used to create social identity. Clothes signify the creation (or destruction) of class and national status throughout *The Wanderer*, so the high status accorded to Juliet when wearing fine linens and handsome bonnets is radically destabilized.

Juliet is hardly the only character, meanwhile, with an acute understanding of how clothing can be used to construct identity. Elinor Joddrel dons a variety of highly theatrical outfits and poses throughout the novel in order to construct herself as a radical Wollstonecraftian figure, from her adoption of 'foreign' male drag to floating around graveyards dressed in a white shroud. Indeed, Julia Epstein has perceptively called both Juliet and Elinor 'self-activating chameleon[s]'.<sup>12</sup> However, while Juliet is hesitant

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<sup>11</sup> Wigston Smith, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p.187.

about the morality of disguise, Elinor revels in it, seeing herself as a profoundly disruptive figure: 'I regard and treat the whole of my race as the mere dramatis personæ of a farce; of which I am myself, when performing with such fellow-actors, as principal buffoon' (153). Elinor creates herself through highly staged pieces of theatre and elaborate costumes, seeing life as a farce with herself at the center. In Elinor's 'farces', we see the essential theatricality of the Revolution. The Revolution is created through pieces of theatre, whether these pieces of theatre are public executions, such as the one Juliet is forced to witness in order to scare her into marrying the French commissary, or Elinor's staging of herself as a heroine of romance through her numerous suicide attempts (which are used to further tie her to Wollstonecraft, whose suicide attempts became notorious after they were revealed in Godwin's posthumous memoir of the author). Elinor defines France as the location of true, radical enlightenment: 'I feel as if I had never awaked into life, till I had opened my eyes on that side of the channel' (18). She thus attempts to align herself to France by the way she dresses, but instead of creating herself as a fashionable French lady, she instead attempts to position herself as a French man. When Elinor attempts to commit suicide at Juliet's concert, she dresses in drag, in a costume designed to disguise herself both as a man, and as a foreigner:

He was wrapt in a large scarlet coat, which hung loosely over his shoulders, and was open at the breast, to display a brilliant waistcoat of coloured and spangled embroidery. He had a small, but slouched hat, which he had refused to take off, that covered his forehead and eye-brows, and shaded his eyes: and a cravat of enormous bulk encircled his chin, and enveloped not alone his ears, but his mouth. Nothing was visible but his nose, which was singularly long and pointed. The whole of his habiliment seemed of foreign manufacture (357).

Elinor, the self-professed revolutionary, essentially dresses up as a French man in order to stage her public suicide attempt, so this is essentially a double performance. While her clothes are not necessarily immediately perceived as specifically 'French', their very strangeness marks them out as 'foreign' in style, as everybody immediately recognizes. Elinor has created herself as a foreign man, just as Juliet has created herself as a black woman, but these identities are costume: attempts to create an alternative self through clothing.

Clearly, the intersection of national identity and clothing is one of *The Wanderer's* central preoccupations. However, one of Burney's most

interesting comments on the link between clothing and national identity is easily overlooked. The comic character Gooch comments that he would like to know if the French have 'millions and millions of red-coats there, all made into generals, in the twinkling, as one may say, of an eye?' (79). While the English soldiers wear red-coats, the French army did not.<sup>13</sup> While it certainly plausible to suggest that Gooch has simply presumed that French soldiers wear red uniforms because that is the colour of English uniforms, I would suggest that this comment is far more significant, and tied to Burney's exploration of the performative nature of national identity. The French and the English are once again confused, and again, the source of that confusion is the clothes that they wear. The French soldiers become English red coats, and vice versa. If the way to identify which soldier is which is through the uniforms that they wear, what happens if they swap uniforms? Or wear the same colours? If the English cannot even tell French soldiers from English soldiers, how can you tell what nation an individual properly belongs to? This comment takes on increased significance, too, when read against the importance placed on military uniforms by the English at the time. As Linda Colley writes, British military costumes of the period were immensely lurid: richly ornamented, very brightly coloured, and quite impractical, an impulse she attributes to 'underlining their wearers' patriotic function'.<sup>14</sup> British military costumes were supposed to signify something intrinsic about their wearers, but Gooch's inability to differentiate the British army from the French suggests that, while the British army might hope to use clothing to create a sense of national identity, this is actually impossible to achieve. Clothing is an unstable determinate of identity, and so British attempts to fashion an identity through their military costumes can only ever be delusive. This easily overlooked error from the comically ignorant Gooch, then, is a neat, comic summation of the interplay between clothing and constructions of national identity in the novel. The patriotic function of the red coat is undermined by Gooch's inability to see the costume as specifically signifying Englishness.

As Juliet travels through England, adopting the clothing of various nationalities and classes as she goes, she finds herself adopting what feels like an almost endless sequence of identities. At no point is the authenticity of her costumes questioned, and in fact, her disguises are so successful that she is able to literally walk past Harleigh at one point without being

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<sup>13</sup> See Terry Crowley's *French Revolutionary Infantry 1789-1902* for more information about the uniforms of French soldiers during the period. Terry Crowley, *French Revolutionary Infantry 1789-1902* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Colley, 190.

recognized: 'Harleigh, to whom her dress, as he had not caught a view of her face, proved a complete disguise of her person, concluded her to be some light nymph of the inn' (726). That Harleigh immediately reads Juliet as a 'light nymph', with all its sexual connotations, reveals that he cannot, in fact, immediately recognize her true gentility, despite his claims to the contrary. As Smith astutely writes, 'the more time Juliet spends in England, the more she is subjected to sartorial stereotyping by acquaintances and strangers'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the further into the heart of England Juliet travels, the more she finds that her previous ideas about what defines Englishness do not withstand any kind of scrutiny. Juliet imagines that the New Forest will provide her with refuge from the harsh judgments of the world: 'to lodge with a rustic family of this simple description, in so retired and remote a spot, promising all the security and privacy that she required' (659). However, it is during this sojourn in the New Forest that Juliet discovers that English national identity is built on as unstable a foundation as her own masquerade as a black woman, finding that the beauty of the landscape hides a network of criminals, cruel patriarchs, and shallow, frivolous women. Just as Juliet's black skin washes away, so too do her fantasies about the English countryside, musing that popular perceptions about the pastoral idyll would be destroyed were the upper and middle class English people 'to toil with them [the peasants of the forest] but one week!' (697). The English may comfort themselves with myths about the graceful and beautiful countryside, but these myths hide a much darker reality of poverty and economic disadvantage.

Ultimately, despite the happy ending to the novel, in which Juliet's true identity is asserted and her marriage to Harleigh made possible through the conveniently timed execution of her husband, Juliet never really seems to align herself with England wholeheartedly. It should be noted that one of Juliet's first actions upon her marriage is not to set up a home for herself in England, but to retrace her journey across the Channel and return to France. Both locales, in fact, become 'safe' at precisely the same time, again underlining their familiarity. The denouement of the novel sees France become safe due to the demise of Robespierre (and Juliet's husband) and, at precisely the same moment, England is rendered safe (at least, for Juliet) as her identity is affirmed through Admiral Powel's codicil. Once again, Burney emphasizes the similarities, rather than the differences, between the two locales: just as they were once both hostile environments to Juliet, they are now both perfectly safe and welcoming. Moreover, upon Juliet's return

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<sup>15</sup> Wigston Smith, 176.

to France, she receives the warm homecoming that she did not receive upon her homecoming to England:

There she was embraced and blessed by her honoured benefactress...there, and not vainly, she strove to console her beloved Gabriella; and there, in the elegant society to which she had owed all her early enjoyments, she prevailed upon Harleigh to remain. (871)

Juliet is evidently in no rush to return to England. In fact, the only reason that Juliet does return to England at all is her pregnancy, and the need to present her child to both Harleigh's English family, who remain invisible in the novel, and Admiral Powel. The implication here is that Juliet would be quite satisfied to remain in France indefinitely, except for the fact that a 'rising family, then, put an end to foreign excursions' (871). While Juliet has, at last, been given the English name she has sought throughout the novel, it seems that she is more interested in reuniting with her adoptive family in France than settling into an English upper-class lifestyle. Again, the suggestion that Burney is privileging France over England is far too simplistic a reading of what is a complex and thoughtful exploration of both nations. Rather, her refusal to bow to national stereotypes of both the English and the French reveals that, to Burney, national identity is a meaningless construction. The English are not uniformly virtuous (indeed, far from it), and so too are the French not uniformly dissipated and sensual, despite popular prejudices. In Burney's fictional universe, virtue is the only true indicator of worth, and these virtues bear no relationship whatsoever to the arbitrary fictions that are national boundaries.

In Burney's fictional rendering of both England and France, then, the only difference that she can identify between the two nations is geographical distance: there are no qualities or characteristics that can be defined as 'French' or 'English'. While France is in the midst of political upheaval, England is hardly the safe haven that the English present it to be, and even the pastoral idyll evoked by the New Forest ultimately fails as a coherent marker of national identity. Conversely, the French are hardly the lascivious corrupted spendthrifts that the English imagine them to be, but, in fact, provide far more useful and loyal assistance to the beleaguered heroine than the English. Burney's long, digressive novel works through models of both English and French national identity, only to finally decide that these models are meaningless fictions with no relevance to life as it is actually lived. Virtue does not belong exclusively to either the English or the French, and

neither England nor France is privileged: a remarkable position, given that Burney was representing France at the height of Revolution. Rather, private morality and personal worth are the only means by which to accurately judge another person. The ability to either create or disguise national and/or racial identities suggests that such identities are simply a matter of performance: that they can be put on or put off with one's clothing. In emphasizing the performative nature of national identity throughout *The Wanderer*, Burney undermines the very nature of nationhood itself. In a world where national identity can be performed through one's clothing, neither England nor France can lay claim to any sort of stable national identity. Published at a time when patriotism was at its zenith, Burney's portrait of nationhood was radical indeed.

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# Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*: A Literary Pivot Point Between Maria Edgeworth and George Eliot

RYAN TWOMEY

The publication of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley, or 'tis sixty years since* in 1814 marked a revolutionary change in the production of literature and set in motion Scott's dominance as a writer of prose fiction. *Waverley's* influence on a generation of writers was in part a reaction to the voracious appetite Scott's historical novel awoke in the reading public. It is no exaggeration to say that all strata of society read Walter Scott, from the highborn gentleman to the common reader. Scott's *Waverley* can also be viewed as a literary pivot point between Maria Edgeworth and George Eliot. This article examines the literary progression identifiable between the three authors while illuminating the formative role of Edgeworth and Eliot's juvenilia. Although the regional tales Maria Edgeworth inaugurated in Ireland would influence Scott, it was Edgeworth's early experimentation with provincially accurate settings and recognisable character voices in her juvenilia drama, *The Double Disguise*, which can be viewed as the starting point of this influence. In turn, *Waverley* was to have its own influence on George Eliot's production of juvenilia, a short story titled *Edward Neville*, that signals Eliot's admiration of Scott and foreshadows the great historical novelist she would become.

While Walter Scott is arguably the first historical novelist in English, and regarded as a dominant force on the direction of the novel, there has been a temptation to resist the influential role played by his literary forerunners. In particular, the formative influence of key nineteenth-century women writers on Scott's development of the novel genre has tended to be downplayed, or even dismissed. In George Lukács' significant work, *The Historical Novel* (1962), a study that was highly influential in reinstating Scott's prominence as an important nineteenth-century novelist, the majority of female authors are side-lined as 'second- and third-rate writers'. Lukács

states, 'With Scott, in particular, it was the fashion to quote a long list of second- and third-rate writers (Radcliffe, etc.) who were supposed to be important literary forerunners of his.'<sup>1</sup> While relegating Radcliffe to the status of a second- or third-rate writer is curious, the complete absence of Maria Edgeworth's role in the development of the historical novel, and Scott's debt to the Anglo-Irish novelist, is inexplicable.

Lukács' omission is contrary to Walter Scott's own acknowledgment of Maria Edgeworth's literary precedence. This acknowledgement is contained in chapter seventy-two of *Waverley*. In the section titled a 'Postscript which should have been a Preface', Scott makes clear that it was his intention to produce Scottish characters for *Waverley* that emulated the 'Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth':

The Lowland Scottish gentleman, and the subordinate characters, are not given as individual portraits, but are drawn from the general habits of the period (of which I have witnessed some remnants in my younger days), and partly gathered from tradition. It has been my object to describe these persons, not by a caricatured and exaggerated use of the national dialect, but by their habits, manners, and feelings; so as in some distant degree to emulate the admirable Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth, so different from the 'Teagues' and 'dear joys' who so long, with the most perfect family resemblance to each other, occupied the drama and the novel.<sup>2</sup>

In order to emulate the specific characterisation employed by Edgeworth, Scott's commencement of *Waverley* in 1805 would have required him to consult *Castle Rackrent* and/or *Essay on Irish Bulls*. Both texts focus on regionally accurate portraits, including the employment of Hiberno-English, to aid in the realistic and recognisable settings Edgeworth was producing. Scott establishes a similar approach to characterisation in *Waverley* by employing realistic Scots vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. Scott recognised that accurate representations of characters led to enhanced observational realism and combated the 'caricatured and exaggerated use of the national dialect'. Yet, while Edgeworth provided a paratext in the form of a glossary in *Castle Rackrent* to aid in the readers' comprehension of dialect, Scott chose to include in-text English definitions immediately

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<sup>1</sup> George Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1962). p.30.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Scott, *Waverley* (London: Penguin, 1985). p.493.

following the use of regionally specific discourse.<sup>3</sup> Like Edgeworth, Scott realised that a large proportion of the English readership required an apparatus to decipher the regionally accurate vocabulary, spelling, and grammar specific to Scotland. Rather than ostracise a particular reader, Scott wished to produce a novel that would enhance an understanding of the inhabitants of his homeland. Once again, this is something that Scott recognised as a convention first attributed to Edgeworth:

Without being so presumptuous as to hope to emulate the rich humour, pathetic tenderness, and admirable tact which pervade the works of my accomplished friend, I felt that something might be attempted for my own country, of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

Scott recognised the literary achievements of Maria Edgeworth, particularly her ability to produce characters reflective of real life habits, manners, and feelings of the country that she called home. Although Edgeworth was born in England, she moved to Ireland in 1782 at the age of fourteen. Despite making various sojourns abroad, Edgeworth would live out her life in rural County Longford. Ireland was the country where Edgeworth would hone her writing craft as a teenager, and it was to be the locale in which she would inaugurate the regional novel in English. According to Walter Allen:

Maria Edgeworth gave fiction a local habitation and a name. And she did more than this: she perceived the relation between the local habitation and the people who dwell in it. She invented in other words, the regional novel, in which the very nature of the novelist's characters is conditioned, receives its bias and expression, from the fact that they live in a countryside differentiated by a traditional way of life from other countrysides.<sup>5</sup>

Yet before she was praised as one of the most important literary figures of the nineteenth century, and well before Walter Scott praised her for advancing the genre of the novel, Edgeworth was experimenting with regional tales in her juvenilia. In 1786, when she was just eighteen years old,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: 'hallan', 'henchman', 'Bladier', 'Bhaird', 'strath', and 'glen'.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, *Waverley*. p.523.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Ernest Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958). p.103.

Edgeworth wrote her first surviving stage drama titled *The Double Disguise*—a foundational work that would influence her later narratives, including her most popular novel, *Castle Rackrent*.<sup>6</sup> *The Double Disguise* is a full-length drama produced exclusively for the entertainment of Edgeworth family and friends. It was first performed at the Edgeworthstown family home at Christmas in 1786, with a second private performance taking place in 1801. Although a complete, full-length, comedy-drama, the manuscript sat unpublished in the Bodleian library at Oxford until 2014.<sup>7</sup>

*The Double Disguise* is revolutionary in Edgeworth's writing because it signals her turn toward literary realism through a focus on her Anglo-Irish heritage, issues of gender, and representations of the middle and lower classes. It is also the work in which Edgeworth produces her first Irish sketch, equipping the character of Justice Cocoa (played by Maria's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, in the family performances) with a Hiberno-English dialect, similar to that which would later be employed by Thady, the faithful retainer-cum-narrator of *Castle Rackrent*. Three years prior to her production of *The Double Disguise*, however, Edgeworth produced another stage comedy titled *Anticipation, or the Countess*. While Edgeworth was only fifteen years old at the time of writing the play, it signals her burgeoning interest in the socio-political concerns that would ultimately play out in the pages of *The Double Disguise* and *Castle Rackrent*. Writing to her school friend Fanny Robinson, Edgeworth expressed her dislike of the stock character treatment of the working classes she was encountering in French theatre:

Moliere's [plays] entertained me much. The plots of all I have yet read of Marivaux I think too much alike & too uninteresting; indeed that is a fault I have met with in most French plays—the waiting women & valets are mere machinery to help the author through his plot and to bring their Masters and Mistresses in spite of fate together.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed examination of *The Double Disguise*'s influence on Edgeworth's later narratives see: Ryan Twomey, 'The Child Is Father of the Man': *The Importance of Juvenilia in the Development of the Author* (Houten: Hes & De Graaf, 2012). pp.19–52.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *The Double Disguise*, ed. Christine Alexander and Ryan Twomey (Sydney: Juvenilia Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> ME to Fanny Robinson, 15 Sept. 1783; quoted in Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). p.150.

*Anticipation, or the Countess* was Edgeworth's response to the formulaic French theatre she was reading. Seeking Fanny's advice on the efficacy of the work, Edgeworth wrote: 'Are the gossips overdone? Or would they *take* on the stage?'<sup>9</sup> Fanny's reply was not favourable toward *Anticipation, or the Countess*; by December, Edgeworth had scrapped all but a single page of the manuscript, writing once more to Fanny to tell her that she 'had cured her of "the Mania of Playwriting at least for the Winter season"'.<sup>10</sup> Edgeworth was clearly disheartened by her earliest attempt at producing a drama that concerned itself with accurately representing the social milieu. Despite this setback, however, Edgeworth persisted with the themes inaugurated in *Anticipation, or the Countess*, leading to *The Double Disguise*.

*The Double Disguise* is Edgeworth's first attempt at portraying the common and ordinary individual going about their everyday business. The youthful Edgeworth constructed characters based on those she was personally familiar with, those from the lower and middle classes, along with a proportion from the servant class. This is no surprise given Edgeworth's introduction to Ireland in 1782. Richard Lovell employed the young Maria as his bookkeeper, a role that brought her into daily contact with the lower-class Irish inhabitants and Edgeworthtown tenants. It is also during this period that Edgeworth came into contact with the Edgeworthtown steward, John Langan—the real-life personality that would form the basis for Thady. Thirty-four years after the first edition of *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth wrote of Langan's influence:

The only character drawn from the life in *Castle Rackrent* is 'Thady' himself, the teller of the story. He was an old steward (not very old, though, at that time; I added to his age, to allow him time for generations of the family). I heard him when first I came to Ireland, and his dialect struck me, and his character; and I became so acquainted with it, that I could speak it without effort; so that when, for mere amusement, without any idea of publishing, I began to write a family history as Thady would tell it, he seemed to stand beside me and dictate; and I wrote as fast as my pen could go.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ME to Fanny Robinson, 15 Sept. 1783, quoted in *ibid.* p.151.

<sup>10</sup> ME to Fanny Robinson, 6 Dec. 1783, quoted in *ibid.* p.151.

<sup>11</sup> ME to Mrs Stark, 6 September 1834; quoted in: Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, ed. Ryan Twomey, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2014), p.86.

Both Maria and her father had an exceptional ability to mimic the subtleties and oddities of Langan's Hiberno-English dialect and would often employ it in order to simply entertain family members.<sup>12</sup> Fourteen years before *Thady* and *Castle Rackrent* was produced, however, Edgeworth was experimenting with the employment of folk phrases, such as, 'Don't skin a flint for three pence and spoil a four penny knife in doing it',<sup>13</sup> and idiomatic Irish phrases like 'faith & troth',<sup>14</sup> to generate a distinctive dialect in her youthful drama. *The Double Disguise's* production of entertaining yet accurate Irish characterisations, a hallmark of Edgeworth's regionalism, was also coupled with realistic and identifiable locations. *The Double Disguise* is set in a common inn providing simple accommodation with much of the plot revolving around the day-to-day running of the lodgings and associated bar. Edgeworth's detailed knowledge of food preparation, travel, and housekeeping, all further the realistic aspects of her juvenilia drama. The employment of a realistic setting had yet to be attempted by Edgeworth and it signals her turn toward the regionally accurate narratives she would later be credited with pioneering. Butler suggests that one reason for this sudden turn toward realism was that 'the broad temper of the times was moving writers towards a more frank and detailed realism, and the Edgeworth family's appetite for fact was in itself merely a symptom of this'.<sup>15</sup>

In order to present readers with 'frank and detailed realism', *The Double Disguise* couples a realistic setting with identifiable and individual character voices beyond the employment of regional vernacular. The servants of *The Double Disguise*, Betty Broom, a housemaid, and the Landlady, the owner of the inn, speak in a lower-class dialect in contrast to those guests of the inn who were of the higher social class, such as Westbrook and Dolly,<sup>16</sup> who speak in more formal verbal patterns. For example, Dolly is often formal in addressing other characters, either as 'Dear Sir' or with the prefix of 'pray'. Dolly labours what she sees as correct manners whenever she has the chance to speak: 'Lord Papa, you read it with

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<sup>12</sup> Edgeworth would often include snippets of Langan's use of Hiberno-English when writing letters, highlighting her remarkable aptitude for recalling his dialect. See: Augustas J.C. Hare, *Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, II vols., vol. I (1894). p.245, p.306.

<sup>13</sup> Edgeworth, *The Double Disguise*. p.39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p.8.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*. p.153.

<sup>16</sup> Although Dolly is middle class she wishes to rise in social standing by any means, including by marrying for money, or winning a fortune in the newly established Irish lottery.

such a provincial accent it quite destroys the effect of the sentiment, the manner is more than half; indeed it is all as the elegant Chesterfield teaches.<sup>17</sup> While Betty Broom speaks in a lower-class dialect, delivering lines such as: 'Lackadaisy, I beg your pardon—but my heart misgave me. I was in such a fright—I was so flustered. I was well nigh in a swoond—but no offence I hopes'<sup>18</sup>, along with, 'the'en Ma'am there's poultry & pigeons ready to kill & the collar'd pig's head Ma'am for brawn'ent & quite eat.'<sup>19</sup>

This specific voicing leads to character portrayals reflective of the social strata, and not just those who are caricatured or formulaic. As mentioned, *The Double Disguise* is also the first of Edgeworth's narratives to employ the distinctive Hiberno-English dialect, a feature of *Castle Rackrent* that was to prove innovative in establishing the use of regional dialect in novels and would be praised by Scott. The use of Hiberno-English and speech patterns reflective of social hierarchy emphasises the unique dramatic life of Edgeworth's characters. Edgeworth had a remarkable ability to capture the nuances of real-life individuals, both in terms of the modes of speech and their mannerisms. In particular, Edgeworth and her father rejected the stereotypical representation of the blundering Irish in *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), the "'Teagues" and "dear joys"', that Scott also wished to avoid in his Scottish novels. According to Richard Humphrey in his study on *Waverley*:

[The] interplay of Scots and English does allow Scott to portray a further reality of his changing and divided country, where the Lowlands gentry and clergy such as Melville and Morton speak English, but the lower classes such as Mrs Flockhart broad Scots, where in a family such as the Bradwardines the father speaks a medley, but the daughter only English, and where a highlander such as Evan Dhu can modulate from English into Scots into Highland Scots and then into Gaelic.<sup>20</sup>

The appetite for detailed realism that led Edgeworth to produce *The Double Disguise* was the same appetite that led her to produce *Castle Rackrent*. Edgeworth's focus on the lower classes and servant characters in her juvenilia foreshadows the later social and political concerns that would play

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<sup>17</sup> Edgeworth, *The Double Disguise*, p.45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.5.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Humphrey, *Scott: Waverley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.105.

out on the pages of her adult works. It seems self-evident to a modern day reader that an author would choose literary representations of their home region, and those who reside there, as a way of bringing the social and political concerns of the period to the fore. Yet, for Edgeworth's literary contemporaries, the representation of locale was often confined to London or Bath as a generalised, rather than specific, setting. Walter Scott recognised the narrative shift toward realism and an identifiable location that Edgeworth was making—a shift inaugurated in her juvenilia—and he wished to emulate it in *Waverley*.

Scott's focus on a specific region and characterisation was recognised by Frances Jeffrey, who stated in his November 1814 *Edinburgh Review* of *Waverley*:

The object of the work before us [*Waverley*], was evidently to present a faithful and animated picture of the manners and state of society that prevailed in this northern part of the island, in the earlier part of last century; and the author has judiciously fixed upon the era of the Rebellion in 1745, not only as enriching his pages with the interest inseparably attached to the narration of such occurrences, but as affording a fair opportunity for bringing out all the contrasted principles and habits which distinguished the different classes of persons who then divided the country, and formed among them the basis of almost all that was peculiar in the national character.<sup>21</sup>

Francis Jeffrey's early review of *Waverley* echoes Scott's own praise of Maria Edgeworth. In particular, Jeffrey's praise of Scott's representations of the varied strata of society was an innovation Scott gleaned from the pages of Edgeworth. Yet, while Edgeworth's juvenilia was crucial to the establishment of the regional novel in English, Scott's continuation of Edgeworth's literary innovations in *Waverley* were to prove influential on the development of the historical novel. All over Europe authors were turning to historical fiction to enrich their national literature. Authors such as Wilhelm Hauff (Germany), Mikail Zagoskin (Russia), and Tommaso Grossi (Italy), all produced historical novels indebted to Walter Scott. Outside of Europe, Scott's influence reached as far as the Canadian-born author John Richardson, while on the back of *Waverley*, James Feinmore

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<sup>21</sup> Frances Jeffrey, '[Review Of:] *Waverley*, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since. In Three Volumes.,' *The Edinburgh Review*, no. 24 (November 1814), p.209.



Cooper's novel *The Spy: a Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821) launched the historical novel in America.

While Scott's influence is identifiable in the work of a multitude of writers who followed in his wake,<sup>22</sup> one writer in particular, George Eliot, established her literary career due to Walter Scott. As Eliot's biographer Gordon Haight stated, it was Sir Walter Scott who 'first introduced her to the writing of fiction'.<sup>23</sup> Like Edgeworth before her, Eliot's literary career commenced with the production of her first work of juvenilia. In 1827, when Eliot was just eight years of age, Eliot's neighbour lent the family a copy of Scott's *Waverley*. This was a transformative moment; Eliot's youthful reading of Scott's work was to prove central to the writer she would become. Eliot was immediately drawn to *Waverley*, and to Scott, who she later wrote of in *Middlemarch* (1871) as 'the beloved writer, who has made a chief part of the happiness of many young lives'.<sup>24</sup> For the young Eliot, then known as Mary Ann Evans, to be a novelist meant being a historical novelist.

The happiness Scott evoked in Eliot found an outlet in her earliest attempt at juvenilia—a work imitating *Waverley* that is no longer extant. As we will see, Eliot's first attempt at fiction focused on the leader of a Scottish Jacobite clan, the 'loyal Evan Dhu', and an aging Cavalier, the 'quaint, Bardwardine'. The Jacobite stories and the tales of the 45' heavily influenced Scott, and this influence was clearly not lost on the youthful Eliot. In *Vertical Context in Middlemarch: George Eliot's Civil War of the Soul*, Joseph Nicholes argues that the 'central Civil War motif in *Middlemarch* is in part a product of Eliot's lifelong veneration of Walter Scott.'<sup>25</sup> While imitation can be labelled as simple copying, or worse, plagiarism, this does little to explain the importance of the process in the production of juvenilia. As Christine Alexander has argued in the *Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*:

Imitation is a major characteristic of youthful writing, and it is a feature that is often misunderstood. We are inclined to think of imitation as bad. This is because one of the meanings of 'imitate' is to copy, to reproduce. Mere copying of course has a stultifying

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<sup>22</sup> For a further examination see: Humphrey, *Scott: Waverley*. pp. 99–105.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon Sherman Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (London: Clarendon Press, 1968), p 7.

<sup>24</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Second ed., Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2000), p.353.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Nicholes, 'Vertical Context in Middlemarch: George Eliot's Civil War of the Soul,' *Nineteenth-Century Literature* Vol. 45, no. No. 2 (Sep., 1990), p.145.

effect on the creative process, and can also involve issues of dishonesty and plagiarism. To imitate is to follow the example of, to try to do something in the manner of someone else. It involves reworking, writing in the style of someone else, and until we develop our own style this is exactly what we do, what every writer does. We learn by imitation.<sup>26</sup>

A large part of what makes juvenilia so important and interesting is the wealth of information that can be gathered about the author and the works they imitated, about the composition process, and, perhaps more importantly, the direction of this process as the writer progresses from youthful pursuits into adult endeavours. Reflected in Eliot's juvenilia is the role that Scott's first historical novel played in the development of her authorship. It was an incomplete first reading of *Waverley* that was to ignite Eliot's interest in Scott's narratives and the historical novel genre. Eliot's neighbours had lent the family a copy of *Waverley* only to request its return before the eight-year-old Mary Ann could finish reading it. In distress, she set about recreating the tale and provided a conclusion as she presumed it would have occurred. In the now famous epigraph to Chapter 57 of *Middlemarch*, Eliot recounts:

They numbered scarce eight summers when a name  
 Rose on their souls and stirred such motions there  
 As thrill the buds and shape their hidden frame  
 At penetration of the quickening air:  
 His name who told of loyal Evan Dhu,  
 Of quaint Bradwardine, and Vich Ian Vor,  
 Making the little world their childhood knew  
 Large with a land of mountain, lake, and scaur,  
 And larger yet with wonder, love, belief,  
 Toward Walter Scott, who living far away  
 Sent them this wealth of joy and noble grief.  
 The book and they must part, but day by day,  
 In lines that thwart like portly spiders ran,  
 They wrote the tale, from Tully Veolan.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster, *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.77.

<sup>27</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p.353.

Although the notebook in which the 'lines that thwart like portly spiders ran' no longer exists, the fact that Eliot chose to immortalise her youthful attempt at historical fiction in *Middlemarch* speaks to the importance of Scott's early influence on her as a writer. As mentioned, the Civil War setting was to prove highly influential in Eliot's construction of narratives. It is no surprise, seeing that it was a 'popular... preoccupation on the part of [Victorian] historians, novelists and artists', which had sprung after the Napoleonic Wars, 'from a new impulse, the romanticism of Sir Walter Scott'.<sup>28</sup> For Eliot, the impulse to write about the Civil War was a desire to imitate Scott. The Civil War motif also occurs in Eliot's earliest surviving attempt at historical fiction, *Edward Neville*, written when she was just fourteen. The youthful Eliot had begun calling herself Marianne, creating a *nom de plume* for her works of juvenilia. As Juliet McMaster stated in the Juvenilia Press edition of *Edward Neville*, the 'teenage Marianne, like the eight-year-old Mary Ann, takes to writing as an exercise in recreating Scott. For her, being a writer still means being Scott'.<sup>29</sup>

Setting her juvenilia narrative *Edward Neville* in the autumn of 1650, Eliot was placing her historical fragment towards the end of the English Civil War (1642–1651). The setting is the 'small but picturesque town of Chepstow', with narrative focus on the castle that is within Chepstow's boundaries. Eliot's principal resource whilst constructing *Edward Neville* was William Coxe's *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire* (1801).<sup>30</sup> Coxe's work provides information on the topography that Eliot used in the opening section of *Edward Neville*, reflecting her early interest in the importance of factual research when producing fictional narratives. *Edward Neville* provided a platform from which Eliot launched her historical fiction, and the narratological methods formed in Eliot's juvenilia culminated in classic works such as *Middlemarch*.<sup>31</sup> It was in *Edward Neville* that Eliot honed her ability to produce picturesque scenes supported by precise geographical locations and physical descriptions. For example, Reading Coxe's *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire*, Eliot was presented with the passage:

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<sup>28</sup> Roy C. Strong, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?: The Victorian Painter and British History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p.137.

<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, *Edward Neville*, ed. Juliet McMaster (Edmonton: Juvenilia Press, 1995), p.xiv.

<sup>30</sup> William Coxe, *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire*, 2 vols. (London: Cadell, 1801).

<sup>31</sup> See: Twomey, 'The Child Is Father of the Man': *The Importance of Juvenilia in the Development of the Author*, pp.89–108.

on my arrival at Chepstow I walked to the bridge; it was low water, and I looked down on the river ebbing between forty and fifty feet beneath; six hours after it rose near forty feet, almost reached the floor of the bridge, and flowed upwards with great rapidity.<sup>32</sup>

Eliot recreated this scene for *Edward Neville*, borrowing the imagery of the tidal river and introducing the castle that was to be the site of the narrative's drama:

It was indeed a scene of beauty; the tide was at its highest spring. Before him on its opposite bank rose the majestic walls of the castle, then in its prime (tho' now still more beautiful in its ruins), and founded upon the solid rocks.<sup>33</sup>

Eliot's recreation of Coxe's passage indicates that it wasn't just topographical and historical accuracy aided by the use of secondary sources that Eliot gleaned from Scott. Scott's narratives were popular thanks to their coupling of historical accuracy and correct period detail with an entertaining and engaging narrative. This particular approach to the construction of historical fiction had an impact not only on the novel, but also on the academic discipline of history. As Brian Hamnett has argued, 'Scott's introduction of believable history as a theme between 1814 and 1819 significantly contributed to the transformation of both history and the novel.'<sup>34</sup> This was due to historians realising that Scott's narratives were both informative *and* entertaining. Scott produced novels that kept his readers reading—something that the historians of the day were envious of.<sup>35</sup> When Eliot set about emulating Scott's narratives in her juvenilia she was aware of the importance of historical sources, yet as equally aware of producing engaging narratives with riveting plots.

One way Eliot achieved this in *Edward Neville* was to borrow another of Scott's practices, that of 'recasting the classic Romeo and Juliet

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<sup>32</sup> Coxe, *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire*, p.358.

<sup>33</sup> Eliot, *Edward Neville*, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Hamnett, 'Fictitious Histories: The Dilemma of Fact and Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Historical Novel,' *European History Quarterly* Vol. 36, no. 31 (2006). 32.

<sup>35</sup> See: Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p.26.

problem'.<sup>36</sup> Neville was a Roundhead officer in love with the daughter of a passionate Royalist, placing two lovers on opposite sides of a political conflict. This dynamic is seen in Scott's *Old Mortality* (1816) and *Peveiril of the Peak* (1822). In *Old Mortality* we witness Henry Morton, the son of a Covenanter, fall in love with Edith Bellenden, a member of a Royalist family. While in *Peveiril of the Peak*, Julian Peveiril, a Cavalier, is in love with Alice Bridgenorth, a Roundhead's daughter.

The primary research Eliot conducted for her juvenilia is dwarfed by the research she undertook for her adult narratives. Eliot's adherence to historical accuracy in *Middlemarch* led Henry James to ask, 'if we write novels so, how shall we write history?'<sup>37</sup> Eliot wished to avoid the conventional historical plots that lacked substance, not unlike Edgeworth wishing to avoid the stereotypical reproductions of the lower classes in French drama. Eliot wrote:

I want something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view, and something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction. I want brief, severely conscientious reproductions, in their concrete incidents, of pregnant movements in the past.<sup>38</sup>

Eliot's ability, and willingness, to conduct historical research was combined with a realistic and recognisable setting, something that the youthful author first witnessed in Scott's *Waverley* when she was just eight-years of age. Scott's novels marked a shift from the 'masquerades and mummeries of Walpole, Monk Lewis or Mrs Radcliffe' to focus on a definite historical period and 'keen observation of correct period detail'.<sup>39</sup>

An accurate representation of historical periods, regional settings, and characterisations, was something that Scott recognised in the work of his friend and literary counterpart, Maria Edgeworth. Her early motivation to

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<sup>36</sup> Nicholes, 'Vertical Context in Middlemarch: George Eliot's Civil War of the Soul,' p.146.

<sup>37</sup> Henry James, in David Carroll, *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971), p.359.

<sup>38</sup> George Eliot, *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp.446–47.

<sup>39</sup> Strong, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?: The Victorian Painter and British History*, p.30.

provide a regionally accurate setting for the recognisable voice of her characters was established in her juvenilia *The Double Disguise*. In turn, Edgeworth's writing was to prove influential on the development of Walter Scott's first historical novel, *Waverley*, which was to have its own influence on Eliot's production of juvenilia, and by proxy, her later authorship. It is not suggested that Edgeworth's juvenilia directly inspired Scott's work—or that without *Castle Rackrent* Scott wouldn't have written *Waverley*. It is argued, however, that an identifiable history of influence can be traced from Edgeworth, to Scott, to Eliot, with youthful writing playing a seminal role in the literary development of the three authors.

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# Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), Judith Wright and Decolonised Transcultural Ecopoetics in Frank Heimans' *Shadow Sister*

PETER MINTER

## 1. *Minjerriba*

About half-way through Frank Heimans' classic 1977 documentary *Shadow Sister: A Film Biography of Australian Aboriginal Poet Kath Walker*, an intriguing segue shifts the focus from the figure of Walker the Aboriginal Australian poet and activist to Walker the close friend of Anglo-Australian poet Judith Wright.<sup>1</sup> Wright's appearance follows a segment in which Walker speaks frankly of her move in 1968 to live in Brisbane's Holland Park, the prejudices of her white neighbours and her profound sense of alienation from 'white suburbia.' Dressed in a bright pink kaftan-style gown, Walker cleans and works around a campsite. In a voiceover she declares 'I found that I couldn't emerge as an Aboriginal. I was an imitation white.' She describes how she has returned to Minjerriba (North Stradbroke Island) to 'live in a gunyah' and dwell authentically again on her traditional land. The scene then moves inside. Walker is sitting by an open fire composing a poem

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Heimans, *Shadow Sister: A Film Biography of Australian Aboriginal Poet Kath Walker, M.B.E* (Sydney: Cinetel Productions, 1977), Videorecording. While acknowledging that today Walker is properly known as 'Oodgeroo Noonuccal', throughout this essay I follow Heimans' title and use 'Kath Walker'. See *Australian Poetry Library*, 'Oodgeroo Noonuccal,'

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/noonuccal-oodgeroo>. 'In 1988, as a protest against continuing Aboriginal disadvantage during the Bicentennial Celebration of White Australia, Walker returned the MBE she had been awarded in 1970, and subsequently adopted the Noonuccal tribal name Oodgeroo (meaning 'paperbark').' Indigenous historian and activist Gary Foley also writes that Walker had publicly used Oodgeroo Noonuccal since at least 1970, once she had returned to her traditional lands on Minjerriba (North Stradbroke Island) and established the cultural and education centre Moongalba. See Gary Foley, 'Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal),' <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/heroes/kath.html>.

with pencil and paper. Over scenes of sand-mining, water pollution, industrial decay and rusting cars, she reads ‘Minjerriba’, a poem that rallies against the environmental destruction caused by extractive industries like sand mining while reminding us of the centrality of traditional Aboriginal stories and knowledges to a native Australian mode of environmentalism:

Minjerriba was a giant in the sun  
 His green back coated with cypress and gum,  
 Belly bloated with rich grains of sand,  
 Eyes brimming with waters so cool,  
 He stretched for miles in the sun.  
 And Pacific on the east  
 Quandamooka on the west  
 Bathed this giant in the sun.

But Minjerriba's back is now broken,  
 Men came and tore out his guts,  
 Stole his rich grains of sand,  
 Stripped his cloak of cypress and gum,  
 Drained water from his ageless eyes  
 And weakened this giant in the sun.

Oh man, with your machinery and science,  
 Your greed and callous disregard,  
 When your savage looting and lying is done,  
 Will the Gods in the future,  
 If future there is,  
 Spare you your place in the sun?<sup>2</sup>

The poem ends as the camera focuses on a close-up of a tall green weed growing from the broken shell of car, sunlight shimmering in cobwebs.

Judith Wright’s arrival on the ferry from the mainland, over the choppy green waters of Quandamooka, signals both a bifurcation and intensification of the black activist environmentalism underpinning ‘Minjerriba’. The moment of arrival is an embrace, as Wright bounces chirpily from the ferry to the Dunwich wharf and into Walker’s arms. It is also a challenge. Wright’s appearance on Minjerriba and the scenes that follow say much about the

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<sup>2</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, ‘Minjerriba,’ *Creative Moment : World Poetry and Criticism*, no. 13 & 14 (1976).



close friendship between the two women and how their shared interest in (and sharing of) poetry sustained broader engagements with political issues such as Aboriginal land rights and the conservation movement.<sup>3</sup> But over the many years of their friendship, perhaps emblematically their relationship always seemed to have a sense of mutual entanglement and dutiful negotiation. Still embraced on the Dunwich wharf, for instance, Walker lovingly hands Wright what she calls a ‘Stradbroke Island Orchid’, a gesture that sets off a profoundly interesting tussle between the two women over the name of the flower. They disagree. As we shall see below, Wright expresses her delight for the gift then immediately corrects Walker, naming the flower ‘Galeola.’<sup>4</sup> This very discrete moment of disagreement, its signalling of a seemingly intractable cultural difference over the body of a gifted flower, is probably the true subject of this essay. Wright’s appearance cues a complex set of deeper themes and questions in which Walker and Wright’s personal and poetic relationship can be read as thoroughly symbolic, firstly of a unique, feminist mode of decolonised transcultural environmentalism, and secondly of the markedness of the appearance and intensity of this mode of environmentalism during the decade from the mid-1960s, and what this can tell us about a late modernist or perhaps even postmodernist Australian sensibility.

My focus on a decolonised transcultural environmentalism is aimed at contributing an ecocritical perspective to readings of Walker and Wright’s friendship.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarship has faithfully examined the personal,

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<sup>3</sup> From the early twentieth century, terms such as ‘conservationist’ and ‘the conservation movement’ were commonly used to denote what would today be known as ‘environmentalist’ or ‘environmentalism’.

<sup>4</sup> My sincere thanks to Dr Bruce Gardiner for helping identify the species as *Galeola cassythoides*, first described by early colonial botanist Allan Cunningham.

<sup>5</sup> While at the time of writing, ‘transnational’ is used far more commonly in, for instance, comparative and modernist literary studies, here I prefer ‘transcultural’ is it specifically suggests that which exceeds cultural division, especially at points of cross-cultural resonance in which cultural material is shared beyond the temporal, geographic and political imperatives of ‘the nation’. The ‘transcultural’ may indeed offer new horizons in what Susan Stanford Friedman calls a ‘*transformational planetary epistemology*’ (original emphasis). See Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies,’ *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010), 474. On decolonisation and transcultural environmentalism in literary studies, see for example Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Routledge, 2010) and Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and

political and cultural bonds between them; for instance, Brigid Rooney's 'Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright' examines the sincere 'mutual narrative' of their personal friendship alongside the 'inter-racial' and political complexities of their 'public sisterhood.'<sup>6</sup> An ecopoetic appraisal of Walker and Wright's dialogue adds a dimension that can tell us a great deal about a transcultural (and counter-cultural) environmentalist sensibility in Australia, and how it has contributed to a uniquely Australian environmentalist poetics. Central to my discussion is the principle that the marrying of the conservation and Aboriginal land rights movements in Australia can be understood as a local, antipodean exemplar for interactions between larger cultural frameworks at work in global late-modernism, especially those to do with post-war decolonisation and the western environmentalist movement. Walker and Wright's friendship developed amidst the convergence of counter-cultural and activist politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coincident with various other progressive political vanguards (anti-Vietnam war; anti-nuclear; feminism; the sexual revolution; black power) at the cusp of economic and technological globalisation and the space-age. As a synthesis of local conservationist and land rights movements, however, Walker and Wright's transcultural environmentalism is uniquely Australian. I argue that it can be understood as an idiosyncratic mode of decolonisation, one in which a burgeoning western environmental movement intersects with the local Aboriginal land rights movement and a political agenda that is anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, ecocentric and pro-human rights.

Of course, in their own way, decolonisation and environmentalism, while emerging in counter-cultural and indeed 'counter-modern' contexts, are in themselves instances of the field of the modern. Rallying against modernist internationalism while appealing to a revitalised planetary postmodernism, the counter-cultural promise of Walker and Wright's friendship is representative of the proliferation of modernisms in the post-war period, a local manifestation of what Peter Nicholl's and others have

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George B. Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies : Literatures of the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Brigid Rooney, 'Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright,' in *Literary Activists : Australian Writer-Intellectuals and Public Life* (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2009), pp.59–77. Rooney also writes on Heimans' documentary and its pre-Mabo contribution to the lobby for permanent traditional Aboriginal tenure at Moongalba.

described as ‘multiple modernisms’.<sup>7</sup> As Susan Stanford Friedman writes, ‘modernity ... has no single meaning, not even in one location’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Walker and Wright’s counter-modernism and its transcultural, decolonising and environmentalist intersections, while being always-already implicated in the modern, mark an antipodean turn away from hegemonic modernity, perhaps in a manner equivalent to what Ralph Maud has described as the ‘archaic postmodern’ and its projection of a post-modernity that draws upon forms of anterior or pre- modernity.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, Walker and Wright’s friendship and its nuancing of environmentalism and land rights is noteworthy not only for its localised (and localising) transcultural intersections and intensities, but also for its complex figuration of deeper cultural formations that were at work more generally in post-war Australia.

## 2. *The Golden Orchid*

When Kath Walker hands Judith Wright a stem of flowers to welcome her to Minjerriba, she initiates a conversation that demonstrates not only the cross-cultural, sisterly complexities of their friendship, but which also sheds light on some of the key historical and political discourses at work in the emergence of a counter-cultural late modernism in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s, one that is especially inflected by a decolonising and feminist environmentalist sensibility. By the middle of the 1970s, when *Shadow Sister* was produced, it was widely acknowledged in Australia and internationally that Walker and Wright were among the leading Australian women poets of their generation, and they were both highly respected for their work as ‘writer-intellectuals and writer-activists’.<sup>10</sup> It can also be said that they were each representative of very particular cultural paradigms that were part of the fabric of twentieth century Australia, formations about race, gender and class that had roots in colonial and nineteenth century Australian

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<sup>7</sup> See Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms : A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and more recently Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms : Provocations on Modernity across Time*, *Modernist Latitudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies.’, 473.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Maud, ‘Charles Olson’s Archaic Postmodern,’ *Looking for Oneself: contributions to the study of Charles Olson* [Published in Minutes of the Charles Olson Society #42 (September 2001)] (2001), <http://charlesolson.org/Files/archaic1.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Rooney, ‘Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright.’ 61

culture that were inflected by complex sets of historical, political and ideological forces. Walker, of course, was an Aboriginal woman of the Noonuccal people of Minjerriba. Remarkably, she grew up freely, escaping the fate of so many others in Queensland and around Australia who were forcibly relocated onto missions and reserves. Walker's biographer Kathie Cochrane explains that, as a result of the failure of the Stradbroke Island mission, Walker's parents 'lived a free life' and brought up six children in the family home at Dunwich. Walker 'never experienced the heavy, paternalistic hand of mission rule. She grew up with a strong sense of her Aboriginal identity and the determination to fight for the rights of all her people.'<sup>11</sup> Conversely Wright, daughter of the colonising Anglo-Christian pastoral 'squattocracy' that had occupied south-eastern Australia from the early nineteenth century, spent much of her life deliberating on what Rooney describes as 'her haunted sense of complicity' in her family's role in Aboriginal dispossession and environmental harm.<sup>12</sup> Walker and Wright are curiously entwined, as representatives of the racial divide and as breakthrough transcultural interlocutors, Walker bearing the conscience of Aboriginal activism after growing up unusually free of white subjugation, and Wright the free settler daughter who grew up burdened by the cross-generational guilt of her ancestors.<sup>13</sup>

Sometime in 1976 (in an early-career shot by renowned Australian cinematographer Geoff Burton) all these factors suddenly coalesce on the Dunwich wharf.

Kath Walker (KW): Hi!

Judith Wright (JW): How are you?

KW: A famous Stradbroke Island orchid ...

JW: Oh! Well that's fantastic. I've come at just the right time.

KW: It's all in full bloom especially for you...

JW: Thank you

KW: When we go in, I'll show you where it is, and it's all over a big tree.

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<sup>11</sup> Kathie Cochrane, *Oodgeroo* (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1994), pp.7, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Rooney, 'Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright.', 73.

<sup>13</sup> These issues were always central to Wright's writing, from her first collection *The Moving Image* (1946) and the poem 'Nigger's Leap: New England', to her family history *The Generations of Men* (1959) and later essays such as 'Landscape and Dreaming' (1985).

JW: I'll tell you one thing: it's Galeola, the Golden Orchid.  
KW: It is an orchid? It's not a bean?  
JW: It's an orchid. Galeola.  
KW: I heard it was a bean .... [scene shifts from Dunwich Wharf to forest] .... Oh isn't it a marvelous specimen.  
JW: Beautiful one.  
KW: And you think it's Galeola?  
JW: It's very interesting with a dark brown stem.  
KW: Yah...  
JW: I think it's related to it.  
KW: There's two varieties.  
JW: This one is the Golden Orchid and ours was yellower than this.  
KW: A different variety.  
JW: This one I think seems very much the same as our flower.  
    So, you will wanna watch that one like anything.  
KW: Oh I only let special people come in and see that one!  
JW: Good!  
KW [off camera]: I first met Judith Wright at a writers' do, and she came out to me, and she said 'I think your poem 'Son of Mine' is really beautiful', and she said she envied me having written it. And we've been very very firm friends ever since.  
    We share so much in common with each other.  
    We're poets. We fight the mining companies because of the terrible battering they give to the country. We fight for a better way of life, for the heritage that all Australians are entitled to in Australia, and I think this is what binds us very very closely together.<sup>14</sup>

This friendly horticultural contest over the name of a plant broaches the contours of a transcultural environmentalism with roots in both settler and Aboriginal histories, associations and epistemes. On film, Walker and Wright embrace, their arms crossed affectionately behind one another's backs, their warmth 'in full bloom' as they begin to walk toward the camera. However, as Wright interjects to correct Walker's 'Stradbroke Island Orchid', their arms drop and they face one another. Wright gently insists, re-

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<sup>14</sup> Heimans, *Shadow Sister: A Film Biography of Australian Aboriginal Poet Kath Walker, M.B.E.*, transcript from 24:35 to 26:04.

naming the flower ‘Galeola’, a quibble that continues in the following scene in the forest at Moongalba as Walker shows her the flower in its native setting growing along the large branch of a tree. Here I wish to make a detailed appraisal of the content and tenor of Walker and Wright’s dialogue, especially to trace and distinguish its unvoiced blend of intimacy and interstitial fragmentation. The discourse might best be figured as a ‘cleaving’, a curious entanglement of synthesis and difference, a simultaneous splitting away from and a joining and faithful adherence. The hinge of this congenial incongruity is to be found in two subtle conditions in Walker and Wright’s exchange. On one hand, in their different senses of the normative object-hood of the flower, they demonstrate a cleaving-away. On the other, and perhaps less obviously, in their shared, feminist commitment to a transformative decolonising choreography, which is aimed at unsettling the very conditions of a normative colonial ontology, they demonstrate a cleaving-toward.

From Walker’s perspective, the gift of the ‘Stradbroke Island Orchid’ functions as an invitation for Wright to join her in an affectionate filial bond with one another and, significantly, with Minjerriba itself. She says ‘it’s all in full bloom especially for you’, a generous gesture of welcoming from Minjerriba and Walker as its emissary. Walker is welcoming Wright to country, bearing its perfume and fertility to the Dunwich wharf, entreating Wright to join her in a privileged sororal space in which the flower is synecdoche for a transcultural kinship with both herself and Minjerriba. Wright’s approach to the flower is, at first, awkwardly imperious. Her insertion—‘I will tell you ...it’s an orchid, Galeola’—declares not only a susceptibility to bossiness but also a reflexive allegiance to the normative epistemologies of western science and the logic and nomenclature of Linnean botanical codification. Walker backtracks, ‘I heard it was a bean’, but the discrete rebuff is consequential. Essentially, Wright’s ‘it is’ aligns her with the western episteme’s assumption of the right to objectify, name and catalogue, while Walker’s ‘I heard’ reifies a relational, quotidian reality in which naming and situating are radically localised, always in flowing networks of conveyance and reciprocity. Wright’s ‘it’s ...Galeola’ rests on the laurels of colonial Australia and the imprimatur of the European Enlightenment, while Walker’s ‘I heard’ defends indigeneity and the embodiment of a sonorous, neighbourly kinship with others and country.

At this point in the documentary, the exchange between Walker and Wright, precipitated by Walker’s gentle gesture of welcoming, reveals a precipitous divergence between colonial and Indigenous sensibilities.

However, the dissension is short lived. In the forest at Moongalba, looking at the orchid growing on a tree, Walker and Wright's discourse again grows closer. Wright tempers her position by suggesting her 'Galeola' may be homologous to the 'Stradbroke Island Orchid', saying 'I think it's related to it' and that it only 'seems' a match. Wright's ontological certainty is subtly deferred in a moment of shared scepticism and a re-alignment of her discourse with Walker's rhetoric of sisterly being-related. It is significant that this 'cleaving-toward' occurs in a private, demarcated space somewhat hidden in the trees. Walker declares that she 'only let[s] special people come in and see that one.' While in the end, between them the name of flower remains uncertain, Walker's emphasis of a concealed, secret opacity, over which she, ultimately, has sovereign control, re-marks her invitation to Wright within a transcultural economy of female intimacy and regard, for each other, for the flower and for Minjerriba, which remains opaque behind a veil of sisterly exchange ('shadow sisters') but which looks forward to a shared and very visible feminist environmental sensibility.

Walker's modest invitation for Wright to join a privileged sororal space is underscored by an off-camera voiceover in which she describes their first meeting and enumerates their activist credentials. It is here that we can observe the description of a decolonised environmental sensibility in which transcultural female coterie inflects both respectful sisterly regard and an ethically attuned veneration of nature. Walker declares they are united as activist poets in a 'very very firm' friendship inaugurated over a poem about motherhood (Walker's 'Son of Mine') and strengthened by a shared dedication to environmentalism. Walker says Wright 'came out to me' at a 'writers' do' and together they 'fight the mining companies because of the terrible battering they give country.' Anchored in a trope of domestic violence, the 'terrible battering' genders country in the feminine, reinforcing Walker's sense of sisterly camaraderie and the stronghold of filial (and territorial) kinship. And, in a significant gesture that underscores Walker's decolonising framework, she asserts that the fight is 'for all Australians', the protection of the environment from extractive industries a transcultural responsibility to preserve 'the heritage that all Australians are entitled to in Australia'. Walker's all-inclusive gesture underscores the earlier symbolic significance of her presentation of the flower. For Wright, having at first demarcated a singular capacity to know and to name, Walker's invitation to an ethically responsive space of feminine transcultural kinship presents the possibility of a nurturing sororal relation to nature and, finally, the means to circumvent and partly resolve her family's legacy (as a daughter of the colonial 'squattocracy') of patrilineal environmental and interracial

violence. For Walker, it reaffirms her authority as a sovereign speaker in her country. These factors are crucial to the documentary's following scene, in which Walker and Wright's sisterly vanguard is positively affirmed.

3. 'Still bearing'

[By a stream and lake]

KW: ... and gather here, and you can see over there the shellfish we used to eat, for our lunches. Here was the—the men would put up a nice waterfall for us. People used to come here. They used to, of course buy the white man's food, and that's a date palm that was one of the dropped seeds, and the date palm grew there. And the old grannies used to bring the lemons, and they used to plant the seeds, and there's lemon trees in there.

JW: Still bearing?

KW: Still bearing. Still bearing. They always planted wherever they went, for the next generation of children.

JW: Yes...

KW: Which was, you know, a marvelous way of [unclear].

JW: Well that's what we used to do too, up to a point, with apple seeds and things.

KW: Yes.

JW: Now, nobody, nobody ever does it now.

KW: Nobody bothers now. No.

JW: Too difficult.

[dialogue obscure as they cross the waters]

KW: ... no nobody seems to know what the meaning of balance with nature is all about anymore. You know they look at this [pointing to midden] and say, you know, Aboriginal kind is tardy, look at the mess they made with those shells. Ha!

[They wander along together collecting rubbish from the lakeside]

KW [off camera]: Judith gave me something very special. She gave me a beautiful poem she called 'Two Dreamtimes'. In it she says:

*My shadow-sister, I sing to you  
from my place with my righteous kin.*



*You were one of the dark children  
I wasn't allowed to play with—  
river bank campers, the wrong colour,  
(I couldn't turn you white).*

That is part of the poem. And, in my answer to this very beautiful poem, I write:

*Sister poet, this I know,  
Your dreams are my dreams,  
Your thoughts are my thoughts  
And the shadow that made us sisters  
That binds us close together  
Together with us cries.<sup>15</sup>*

In a scene that unfolds alongside bodies of water, estuarine interzones consisting of a small stream and an inland island lake, Walker and Wright's decolonised environmentalism is given further nuance. Walker and Wright emerge from a deeply shadowed bush track, Walker touring Wright about country. She points to a shellfish midden and narrates childhood memories of gathering together with her family to eat, emphasising how the older women would intentionally propagate new trees from fruit seeds. It is at this moment that the considerable depth and value of Walker and Wright's transcultural sisterhood is fully brought to bear. Until now, Walker and Wright's relationship in the documentary has been textured by Wright's interjection and its suggestion of an imbalance founded in distinctly different, and indeed oppositional, histories and epistemologies. In this scene, any divergence is rescinded under the sign of a truly transcultural feminine ontology that looks beyond colonisation and invites the sense of a new stage in a decolonised historical dialectic.

The pivotal moment is Walker's telling the story of her 'grannies' planting lemon seeds to grow new trees for the future, and Wright's leading question: 'Still bearing?' Walker responds in the affirmative: 'Still bearing. Still bearing. They always planted wherever they went, for the next generation of children.' Here we can observe, in the figure of intergenerational reciprocity, the natural conclusion of Walker and Wright's repartee. Their shared embrace of maternal fertility is a moment of complete

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<sup>15</sup> Transcript from 26:05 to 28:00. In Cochrane, the third last line reads 'And our shadow that made us sisters'. See 'Sister Poet', Cochrane, *Oodgeroo*, 97.

understanding and pride (note in the film, when Walker confers, Wright's proud turn of the head at 26:35) in a real-life contribution to the expression, sustenance and maintenance of life and culture. 'Still bearing?' is both recursively and proleptically loaded, reaching back to a fecund and solicitous past while projecting a bounteous present and future. The transcultural dimension is amplified by Wright's agreement that 'that's what we used to do too ... with apple seeds and things', a sensitive, indeed collaborative gesture of entwined existential realities. For both Walker and Wright, 'still bearing' forms the basis of a properly decolonised cultural kinship in which care for country and filial generosity are combined to propagate a sustaining feminist vision of transcultural and intergenerational well-being. It also conveys a redemptive function, redeeming any personal or indeed historical division between the settler's daughter and the Aboriginal activist, sublimating their shared anger and guilt over invasion, disenfranchisement and displacement.

Of course, 'nobody ever does it now.' Walker complains that 'nobody seems to know what the meaning of balance with nature is all about anymore', returning us to the political realities of modernity and alienation from nature, and the need for a transcultural environmentalist activism aimed at recuperating and restoring a balanced material, cultural and aesthetic ontology. Walker and Wright stroll beside the lake collecting bottles and plastic rubbish, and we are returned to the story of colonisation, disconnection and pollution. In another off-camera voiceover, Walker again appeals to the powerful remedy of a sororal transcultural affiliation. Walker retells the story of Wright's gift of a 'beautiful poem ... 'Two Dreamtimes'' and her reciprocative 'Sister Poet'.<sup>16</sup> Wright's poem is exemplary for its declaration of settler guilt and her heartfelt aspiration to find a meaningful personal and historical resolution to the impact of colonisation, her resounding '(I couldn't turn you white)' unequivocally signalling her rejection of white assimilationist ideology. Walker's response (unpublished during her lifetime) is typically unfeigned. 'Your dreams are my dreams, your thoughts are my thoughts' announces the embodiment of a (possibly utopian) transcultural space in which racial difference is collapsed and 'dreaming' and 'thinking' are exchangeable. Walker underlines her sense of kinship between herself and Wright, a cultural, philosophical and poetic reconciliation which, while admitting the suffering of inter-racial conflict, is aimed ultimately at the resolution of histories of colonisation and violence under the rubric of a feminist decolonised environmentalism.

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<sup>16</sup> On the exchange of the poems, see Cochrane and Rooney.

4. *Sister Dreamtimes*

Writing on ethics and ecological theory in her volume *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, internationally acclaimed Australian philosopher Val Plumwood distinguishes between an Indigenous ‘ethics of virtue’ and a western ‘ethics of reason’:

There are many good reasons to avoid building an account of ecological morality on ethics in its usual rationalist conception, and to move in the direction of an ethics of virtue. Rationalist-inspired ethical concepts are highly ethnocentric and cannot account adequately for the views of many indigenous peoples. The attempted application of these rationalist concepts to their moral life tends to lead to the view that they lack a real ethical framework ... Alternative virtue-based concepts such as care, respect, gratitude, sensitivity, reverence and friendship seem more applicable.<sup>17</sup>

Plumwood’s ‘ethics of virtue’ echoes Walker and Wright’s shared fidelity to an environment that is ‘still bearing’ and a sororal kinship to country that incorporates (and relies upon) modes of reciprocity, mutuality and care. It seeks to contain or surpass an instrumentalising rationalist ethos, in which ‘ethics and morality are equated with duty, sermonising and self-sacrifice, in effect Kantian ethics, which operates as a prohibition on desire’<sup>18</sup>, reflecting Wright’s revisionist and decolonising yearning to reimagine her patrilineal settler endowment by sharing in, and personally encouraging in her own work, the propagation of a feminist, transcultural ecology of enrichment, conservation and justice.

In Heimans’ documentary, the sequence between Walker and Wright lasts for three and a half minutes, enough time to say a great deal about a particular mode of Australian late-modernism. At the heart of Walker and Wright’s ‘cleaving’ is the figure of an idiosyncratically antipodean counter-culturalism that, especially in the decade between 1965 and 1975,

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<sup>17</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.183. At Chapter 7, note 12, Plumwood reminds us that although ‘virtue ethics are Aristotelian and Aristotle is usually counted as a rationalist, this is one of a number of areas in which his work is not typical of rationalist thought.’

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.182–183.

synthesised western environmentalist and Aboriginal land rights movements to form a decolonised transcultural environmentalism that was radically ecocentric and variously anti-hegemonic. Their sororal habitus emerges, not only in the film but, of course, throughout their friendship, as the cornerstone of an inter-racial, anti-racist environmental activism in which the politics of anti-mining, for instance, is allied with a practical and philosophical engagement with the material, ethical and cosmological dimensions of Indigenous responsibilities for country.

The sequence ends as Walker recites the final lines of her poem ‘Sister Poet’ in voiceover — ‘and the shadow that made us sisters, that binds us close together, together with us cries’—as she is shown walking with Wright along an avenue of tall, sweeping paperbarks growing beside a lake. As we now know, Walker’s tribal name Oodgeroo, which she used publicly from 1988, means ‘paperbark’. The closing image is deeply resonant, the sunlit trunks and branches of the paperbarks vibrating in reflections on the surface of the rippling water. Wright has been absorbed utterly into Walker’s home and the name, character, and ethos of her identity, while Walker wills the coalescing of her identity, its dreams and thoughts, with Wright’s. The effect is a kind of shared sovereignty of the imagination. Walking side-by-side in an opaque but Sapphically refined, interior sororal space beneath the trees, Walker and Wright finally demonstrate a uniquely antipodean ‘*transformational* planetary epistemology’ and its radical promise.

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# The Tragic Story of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and the Theory of the Grotesque

JACK MITCHELL

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) tells a story that is permeated by tragedy, but one which possesses a grotesque vision. The work's appeal and popularity can lead one to ask the long-standing question, Why does tragedy give us satisfaction? An exploration of this question will lead to the notion of irreconcilable conflict, which is a fundamental component to the theory of the grotesque. McEwan's construction of conflicting motifs within *Atonement* becomes an appropriate springboard for scrutinising its textual and meta-textual strategies through the lens of the grotesque. It will then become appropriate to compare the vision of the grotesque to that of tragedy. In doing so I hope to come to a conclusion concerning the effect of *Atonement's* grotesque nature, particularly in relation to its unexpected conclusion, and in its denial of absolute truth.

One does not have to apply a particular tragic structure or model to *Atonement* in order to consider the story's dire circumstances in a tragic light. The novel opens in 1935 on the Tallis property in rural England. Thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis interrupts her sister, Cecilia, and the maid's son, Robbie, in their first moment of sexual intimacy, and misconstrues the act as violence. When two young cousins go missing after dinner, a rape occurs during the search period, and Briony wrongly accuses Robbie of the act. The accusation leads to Robbie's imprisonment and subsequent deployment to France for World War II, and Cecilia distances herself from the family for good. As Brian Finney notes, Briony's decision is a 'judgement that brings tragedy to some of those closest to her.'<sup>1</sup> This description points to the

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Finney, 'Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's "Atonement,"' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2004): 79, accessed 27 April 2015; available from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831941>>

misery which the story descends into in its subsequent sections. The second part of the narrative traces Robbie's experience as a soldier, while the third focuses on Briony's work as a nurse, and her attempt to apologise to Robbie and Cecilia for the separation she caused them. The final part is set in London in 1999, and describes Briony's final attempt to atone for her wrongdoing. That a reader would find satisfaction and enjoyment in a story such as this, and further, that a production company would feel compelled to adapt it into a film which then received popular acclaim, seems to be at odds with the way that people tend to view tragedy in life.

The popularity of tragic stories presents critics with a paradox. People are repeatedly drawn to these narratives despite their potential to elicit negative emotions. Regarding the popularity of tragedies amid other genres, Laura Estill et al. researched trends in scholarship on Shakespeare's plays between 1960 and 2010, and found that '[t]he number of scholarly publications written about tragedies in general is higher than the number of publications about comedies and histories combined'<sup>2</sup>. The study made clear that in this particular field of scholarship, publications about tragedies are favoured over other works by Shakespeare. Additionally, Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick et al. have observed that tragedies can lead to an increased appreciation for the relationships in one's life. This was concluded after 361 students answered questions that attempted to gauge 'life happiness,' during the course of watching a condensed version of the film adaptation of *Atonement* (2007).<sup>3</sup> Taking studies such as these into consideration, the popularity of tragedies and their potential for positive impact can certainly be acknowledged. However, due to the personal nature of responses to tragic works it is problematic to claim that all people are indeed drawn to tragedy in various art forms. Hence, at this point it should be kept in mind that the proposition of pleasure being drawn from tragedy in art will be considered a possibility, rather than a universal principle. And further, in the course of

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Estill, Dominic Klyve and Kate Bridal, '“Spare your arithmetic, never count the turns”: A Statistical Analysis of Writing about Shakespeare, 1960–2010,' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (2015): 11, accessed 7 April 2015; available from <[https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/shakespeare\\_quarterly/v066/66.1.estill.html](https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/shakespeare_quarterly/v066/66.1.estill.html)>

<sup>3</sup> See Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 'Tragedy Viewers Count Their Blessings: Feeling Low on Fiction Leads to Feeling High on Life,' *Communication Research*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2013): 747–766, accessed 9 June 2015; available from <<http://crx.sagepub.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/content/40/6/747.full.pdf+html>>

this essay I will focus predominantly on the emotional responses that tragedy and the grotesque can elicit, rather than their technical or literary qualities in particular. This is not to diminish the significance of discussing features such as plot and character in both forms in order to consider their allure, but is a choice based primarily upon the useful similarities that exist between tragedy and the grotesque in regard to the emotional effects they can produce. This agreement will prove particularly productive when considering *Atonement* and its impact on readers. D. D. Raphael contemplates the appeal of tragic narratives: '[w]hy should one *want* to see a tragic drama? Not everyone does. But many people do, myself among them, and even rate the 'pleasure' or 'satisfaction' of Tragedy higher than that of any other *genre* of literary art.'<sup>4</sup> This pleasure has been regularly accounted for, perhaps foundationally with Aristotle's notion of 'catharsis.' However, there is one notion in particular which draws the discussion to the theory of the grotesque, and thence to a deeper appreciation for tragedy's magnetism.

The idea that tragedy's power rests in its presentation of conflict in different forms is particularly helpful in contemplating its effect on viewers, and will prove insightful for understanding the effect of *Atonement* and its grotesque qualities. In E. M. Dadlez's discussion of David Hume's essay 'Of Tragedy,' she outlines Hume's conception of emotional responses to tragedies as a seesaw kept in balance. She argues that it is most satisfying to think of a response to tragedy as consisting of the interdependence of both pleasant and negative emotions.<sup>5</sup> In Joseph Harris's comparison of theories of tragic pleasure in early modern France, he writes about the tragedian Belloy's theory of emotional impact, which contrasts Dadlez's idea of a simultaneous balance of emotions. For him the emotional responses trace a linear development, with a positive response (pity) to the conclusion of the work counteracting the overwhelming force of the negative response (horror) experienced during the rest of the work. Regarding Belloy, he writes that '[p]ity and horror are not simultaneous, then, but are placed in a narrative structure which redeems the spectator's initial shock with compassion'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> D. D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p.13.

<sup>5</sup> See E. M. Dadlez, 'Pleased and Afflicted: Hume on the Paradox of Tragic Pleasure,' *Hume Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004): 218, accessed 28 April 2015; available from <[https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/hume\\_studies/v030/30.2.dadlez.pdf](https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/hume_studies/v030/30.2.dadlez.pdf)>

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.136.

A slightly different conception to Dadlez and Belloy is put forward by George Santayana, who argues that in isolation, the suffering presented in a tragedy cannot be all that constitutes a viewer's enjoyment of it. Instead, it must be the manner in which the tragedy is crafted which elicits intrigue and sympathy for the suffering of the characters. This artistry exists in order to balance out the horror of the tragic material. He writes, 'reduce the tragedy to a mere account of the facts and of the words spoken, ...and the tragic dignity and beauty is entirely lost.'<sup>7</sup> According to Santayana the delight felt in response to the presentation of tragic stories, which might also include a kind of yearning from the reader for 'what they might have been if they had not been tragedies'<sup>8</sup>, is said to mingle with the sorrow produced by the characters' suffering. It is because of this combination of responses that tragedy can achieve the effect that it does. Thus, the success of Shakespeare and McEwan become key examples in this regard. For Santayana too, a significant aspect of tragedy's effect lies in its engendering of a conflict of emotional responses: 'in our delight there must be a distinguishable touch of shrinking and sorrow; for it is this conflict and rending of our will, this fascination by what is intrinsically terrible or sad, that gives these turbid feelings their depth and pungency.'<sup>9</sup> Dadlez, Harris in his discussion of Belloy, and Santayana each posit that tragedy's appeal is somehow related to the contrasting emotional reactions it produces in viewers.

This understanding of the effect of tragedy as an emotional conflict is one way to comprehend its influence, and is a notion which is also fundamental to the grotesque. This is not to suggest that any work which presents some kind of conflict must be grotesque, but more to say that the grotesque's particular emphasis on conflict and contradiction is a useful step forward in comprehending the allure of tragedy, and especially *Atonement*.

The use of the term 'grotesque' has morphed over the centuries since its emergence as a description of a visual art style. Its original designation suggested the coexistence of two incompatible motifs, which clash but do not resolve their tension. In turn this has the potential to provoke the viewer into reconsidering his or her knowledge of the world. As a theory the

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<sup>7</sup> George Santayana, *The Works of George Santayana, Volume II: The Sense of Beauty, Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, critical edition, ed. William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr (Cambridge [MA] and London: The MIT Press, 1988), p.140.

<sup>8</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.143.

<sup>9</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.140.



grotesque has been defined in many different respects, and it is often insisted that as an idea it should remain essentially uncategoryed. In this essay, the above definition will be kept in mind while recognising the multifaceted nature of the grotesque generally. The term's use is commonly understood as being rooted in its aesthetic application in the late Fifteenth Century to ceiling and wall paintings which were found while excavating Nero's Golden House. The imagery showed an elegant indecorum: a beautiful patterned style which was problematised by visually jarring forms. Grotesque artworks are dominated by hybrid concepts: by a fusion of the monstrous and the human, the ethereal and the earthly, the foreign and the recognisable. The amalgamated images hence 'stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived'<sup>10</sup>. This disorienting blend of images, according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, has a way of 'calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world'<sup>11</sup>. Grotesque images constitute a defiance of logical categorisation, hovering in a void of inexplicability. They occupy a transformative and liminal space, which Harpham claims has the potential to '[impale] us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.'<sup>12</sup> The grotesque exists in opposition to structures and forms that people usually employ to interpret the world. By its fusion of forms, it confounds the viewer and supplants order.

This fusion instils a response in the viewer that is also ambivalent because the complexity of grotesque images is both intriguing and disorienting. In his analysis of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser alludes to Christoph Martin Wieland, whose understanding of the grotesque's impact is that 'we smile at the deformations but are appalled by the horrible monstrous elements as such.'<sup>13</sup> Grotesque decorations 'feed the eye'<sup>14</sup> in their ornamental shapeliness and symmetry, but elicit a repulsive response by the detail of the forms themselves, which in their hybridity are abnormal and horrible. Kayser explains that '[t]he grotesque world is—and is not—our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1982), p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.16.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p.31.

<sup>14</sup> R. Cotgrave in Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, xxiii.

alienated under the impact of abysmal forces'<sup>15</sup>. The hybridity of grotesque images insists that viewers reassess their own understanding of the world. In its defiance of clarity the grotesque 'instils fear of life rather than fear of death.'<sup>16</sup> It gives form to what humans fear and do not understand<sup>17</sup>, and perpetuates disorder. Kayser summarises it as 'the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.'<sup>18</sup> The grotesque's depiction of irreconcilable objects instils in the viewer an emotional conflict. The beauty of the image's design may be intriguing, but repulsion at the disruption of the natural order of the world occurs simultaneously. The grotesque forces a re-examination of one's own understanding of reality.

McEwan's *Atonement* resembles the grotesque's presentation of conflict and chaos on a number of significant levels, and similar to the grotesque, engenders a response that is bound up in contradictions. Initially, one might consider the artistry of McEwan's writing: the attractiveness of his sentences and the novel's vividly crafted settings feed the reader's imagination, but clash with the tragic content of the story. The effect of such a combination might be considered in relation to Wieland's postulation concerning the simultaneous intrigue and repulsion of grotesque images. McEwan's writing style is utterly intriguing but mixes uncomfortably with his characters' painful trajectories throughout the course of the novel. On a structural level, its first two parts are dramatically divergent in their design and emotional effect. The first part is situated on the grounds of the Tallis family home, and the reader does not leave except during the dreams and memories of the characters. McEwan moulds it into a contained idyll, rich with the fragrances, touches, and secluded peace of rural life. It also contains the promise of romantic bliss for the central lovers, Robbie and Cecilia, which they only momentarily grasp in the house's library, before misfortune interrupts and pulls the narrative into a downward spiral. The pleasant and vivid rural setting is supplanted in the second part by a dreary wartime landscape. This rift in the story between dimensions is indicative of the foothold which the theory of the grotesque seems to have in McEwan's novel. Initially this can be observed in its conflict between worlds, and further within the author's descriptions, structure, and the shocking closure to the story which flings the narrative and its reader into a state of irresolution.

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<sup>15</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.37.

<sup>16</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.185.

<sup>17</sup> This is elucidated by Friedrich Durrenmatt in Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.185.

More localised conflicts exist in McEwan's character descriptions, their thought processes, and the way in which the novel's visual settings are examined in contrasting manners. Early on, the reader understands the polarity between Briony and her sister Cecilia by McEwan's description of their bedrooms: '[w]hereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon'<sup>19</sup>. Such a contrast is echoed in the clash between local elements of Briony's own world: the order of her room hides her 'passion for secrets'<sup>20</sup> even if the girl has no secrets to keep. McEwan describes the various contraptions and containers she possesses to aid this passion, and begins the novel with a snapshot of Briony's most recent play (exhibiting another passion of hers: writing), which embodies the thirteen-year-old's consistent desire to enter worlds which are distinct from her immediate, tangible one.

Two passages in particular highlight the experience of contradictory feelings by the characters, reflecting the grotesque's ability to evoke a dichotomised response. One is Briony's decision to open a letter which Robbie has asked her to deliver to Cecilia. McEwan writes,

[t]he very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit. What fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction? ... It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything.<sup>21</sup>

Briony's feelings clash as she moralises the decision. Furthermore, her suggestion that fairy tales are not so concerned with contradiction also points toward the grotesque. Arthur Clayborough suggests that '[a] merely alien world, one which is completely strange to us from the outset, as in the fairy-tale, is not grotesque; it is not a transformation of our own world.'<sup>22</sup> The grotesque's contradictory essence is dependent upon both that which is recognisable and that which is alien for its effect. Clayborough suggests that a world which is already distinguishable from our own, and not a product of

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<sup>19</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, pp.4–5.

<sup>20</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.5.

<sup>21</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.113.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.64.

the fusion between the unknown and the recognisable, is not grotesque. Briony's distinction between the fairy tale and a world of contradictions resembles this differentiation of the grotesque from other alienated worlds. Another moment in the novel that focuses on conflicting feelings is during the romantic scene between Robbie and Cecilia in the house's library. The narrative at this point is focalised upon Robbie's perspective, and his feelings are explained like this:

[h]is excitement was close to pain and sharpened by the pressure of contradictions: she was familiar like a sister, she was exotic like a lover; he had always known her, he knew nothing about her; she was plain, she was beautiful; she was capable ... and twenty minutes ago she had wept[.]<sup>23</sup>

One thinks not only of the grotesque's insistence upon contradiction, but with the initial 'excitement' being close to 'pain,' of Dadlez, Harris, and Santayana's postulations about the combination of distinct emotions as a response to tragedy.

Another aspect of the grotesque which pervades McEwan's novel is the effect of making strange, or alienation. McElroy explains that the grotesque 'distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it.'<sup>24</sup> In a similar fashion, Kayser claims that its nature can be summarised in the phrase 'the estranged world',<sup>25</sup> which is different to a world which is already foreign (like a fairy tale). The grotesque occurs with the transformation of the familiar by its fusion with the unfamiliar. Thomson describes this effect as 'alienation': '[s]omething which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing.'<sup>26</sup> The terminology employed by these theorists supposes that the grotesque takes what is known and recognisable, and distorts it. In *Atonement* there are two notable segments which suggest a distortion of reality. This is achieved by two descriptions of the same scene at different times which, by their contrasted nature, jar with each other. Firstly, on the grounds of the Tallis home there is a fountain containing a sculpture of a triton (a creature which Hugo identifies as 'grotesque'<sup>27</sup>) which is referred to contrarily by McEwan at a

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<sup>23</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.130.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (Basingstoke [Hampshire] and London: Macmillan, 1989), p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.184.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1972), p.59.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Hugo in Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p.45.

number of points in the text. One example is an early observation of Cecilia's, which reads, 'he was beautiful in morning sunlight, and so were the four dolphins that supported the wavy-edged shell on which he sat.'<sup>28</sup> At a later stage, the same object 'rose before them, an inky mass whose complicated outline was honed against a sky turning greener as the light fell. They could hear the trickle of water, and Cecilia thought she could smell it too, silvery and sharp.'<sup>29</sup> The figure's pleasantness is contrasted in the second instance with dark and unusual colours and smells. The narrator's change in perception estranges the world, and perhaps pre-emptly Briony's unpermitted reading of Robbie's explicit letter in the following chapter, which is a springboard for the despair to come. Furthermore, the contrast between the fountain's auras at these two moments is representative of the idea of conflict, which is a fundamental aspect of the effect of both tragedy and the grotesque.

Another physical location whose nature is altered during the course of events is the library. First its darkness and seclusion attracts Robbie and Cecilia into romantic bliss,<sup>30</sup> and later Briony is questioned about what she saw in the same room by the constable.<sup>31</sup> By way of this, the location has been transformed into a crime scene. The rich shroud of darkness in the first scene has become the gloomy threat of punishment in the second. These are just two moments in McEwan's novel which indicate one reality for the reader being made strange at a later time. The warping of perception in these cases is relatable to the grotesque's essential transformative power over the world as it is regularly perceived.

Grotesque artworks are frequently peripheral, and exist as decorative complements (often as borders) to the rest of an artwork. On one level this affirms the grotesque's place just beyond the comprehension of reality as a fusion of real and unreal realms. But conversely, having understood the compelling nature of grotesque imagery, it seems odd that as a style it has been commonly regarded as subordinate to other images. Harpham explains that this aspect of the grotesque throws the idea of a fixed 'centre' into flux: '[a]ll grotesque art threatens the notion of a center by implying coherencies just out of reach, metaphors or analogies just beyond our grasp.'<sup>32</sup> The artist Signorelli drew attention to this in parts of his decoration of the chapel of the

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<sup>28</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, pp.18–19.

<sup>29</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.107.

<sup>30</sup> See McEwan, *Atonement*, p.132–139.

<sup>31</sup> See McEwan, *Atonement*, p.179–181.

<sup>32</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.43.

cathedral at Orvieto. He depicts a figure, the philosopher Empedocles, who has emerged from a hole in the middle of four grotesque panels that contain hybrid forms (humans, creatures, vegetation), and is 'gazing at one of the walls of the chapel'<sup>33</sup>. By shifting the focus of the artwork away from its centre through the figure's gaze, Signorelli brings the peripheral grotesque patterns around the philosopher into the viewer's consciousness. Harpham articulates that this decision is endowing Empedocles with transformative power: he is 'emancipating the grotesque and becoming his borders' border.<sup>34</sup> By the shift in focus Signorelli does for the grotesque images what Harpham claims the grotesque does to one's viewing of such images: he 'threatens the notion of a center.'

This peripherality can be linked to Naomi Booth's understanding of Briony's position in *Atonement*. She posits that Briony's desire for control of the narrative, and her wielding of authorial power in order to adjust the story, is a result of her witnessing the 'primal scene' in the library between Cecilia and Robbie, from which point she herself exists only in a peripheral capacity compared with the other characters. Booth writes,

[t]he primal scene, as violent wound to the ego, as site of perspectival triangulation and peripheralisation, might make of the narrator a wounded and peripheral figure in relation even, and perhaps especially, to her own work. And the primal scene might make omniscience a delusion founded in hurt.<sup>35</sup>

It is as though Briony's construction of the story is a manifestation of her desire to have been a part of that scene, and the recipient of Robbie's love in place of her sister. If this is the case for Briony, it should be read as a subliminal goal because her explanation in the book's fourth part outlines otherwise: that in altering the fates of Robbie and Cecilia she is attempting both to allow them to live on and to atone for her own foolishness as a child. Perhaps this could be argued for in relation to McEwan's emphasis on Briony's obsession with secrets near the book's opening, but an egotistical longing to be at the centre of the relationship she observes jars with the apparent sincerity of her confession in the final section of the novel (even if truth in all senses is thrown into question by her confession). Booth's reading

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<sup>33</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.39.

<sup>34</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.40.

<sup>35</sup> Naomi Booth, 'Restricted View: the Problem of Perspective in the Novels of Ian McEwan,' *Textual Practice*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2015): 859–860, accessed 12 June 2015; available from <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2014.987687>>

of Briony's position can be related to the grotesque's location in artworks: one which stays on the outskirts of the central narrative or image. In Signorelli's decoration the grotesque's potency is drawn to attention by the gaze of the central figure, and in McEwan's novel, Briony's decision to craft the story in the way she does can be viewed as a product of her exclusion from the story's centre. In opposition to the grotesque patterns in Signorelli's work, Briony cannot be '[I]berated from marginality'<sup>36</sup>. Like the philosopher she remains an observer, but cannot shed her peripherality in order to adopt a salient position.

Perhaps the most useful correlation between *Atonement* and the theory of the grotesque comes with the novel's ending, which distorts the reader's understanding of the entire book, and throws the believability of the narrative into question. Its fourth part, 'London, 1999,' reveals that the previous three parts have in fact been written by Briony. Furthermore, she reveals here that the reunion of Robbie and Cecilia after the war, Briony's visit to them in Balham to apologise, and her subsequent promise to change her testimony which convicted Robbie of rape, had all been fabricated. The lovers in fact never saw each other after their brief meeting in central London before Robbie's deployment: 'Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940' and 'Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station.'<sup>37</sup> The Briony of 1999 explains that her alteration of the story was an attempt to atone for the separation of Robbie and Cecilia, which her misjudgement and perpetuation of a lie earlier in life had caused. Even so, she understands actual atonement as 'an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.'<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the crumbling of her memory and her body, this fictional inscription of the characters' lives will be all that remains of them. Instead of presenting the 'truth,' marked by grief and death, and which would deny readers any sense of hope, Briony decided to fake the lovers' survival so that her 'spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love.'<sup>39</sup> Along with revealing Robbie and Cecilia's tragic fates, and probably magnifying the reader's sorrow, this moment unveils that the narrator had manipulated the story in a manner previously unbeknownst to the reader. In turn, the reliability of Briony's narration throughout the entire novel can then

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<sup>36</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.40

<sup>37</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.370.

<sup>38</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.371.

<sup>39</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.371.

be questioned, and the reader is left with a conflict of interest, both wanting to honour Briony's attempt to atone for her act, and unable to trust the teller of the story. Her status as a conjurer by the end of the novel brings the reader's attention to the potential that McEwan is also a conjurer. It foregrounds the authorial process as well as the author's capacity to conceal the truth. One wonders if this kind of problem should matter because it is a work of fiction. If it was a fictional story in the first place, what does it matter if another fiction is layered on top? Regardless, McEwan's technique has bound up the reader in a fictional story which is subsequently revealed to be deliberately falsified, and so draws attention to levels of authorship, blurring his own voice with Briony's.

McEwan passes suggestions to the reader early in the novel which hint that the truth is a bendable concept, and that Briony has manipulative power. From the beginning, the reader understands that she is a writer: a constructor of fictional worlds. Descriptions related to her control such as 'godly power of creation,'<sup>40</sup> her belittling opinion of her cousin Lola as 'unable to command the truth' when she herself can, and prophetic declarations such as 'it was about the get worse'<sup>41</sup> all clue the reader in to the concept that the truth might be malleable, and somehow in Briony's control. These phrases are exposed under new light with the revelation about Briony's authorship at the end of the novel. Kathleen D'Angelo even suggests that with the ending's revelation, McEwan shifts the onus onto the reader. Briony's confession is said to place the reader in a position where he or she can choose how to judge the narrator.<sup>42</sup> In the same way that the confession distorts one's understanding of the entire narrative, it also deflects Briony's godlike status, leaving the reader to decide what her standing is in his or her own mind.

The confusion experienced at the novel's close brings the discussion back to tragedy and the grotesque. One way in which these two forms can be understood together is by analysing what they propose about closure. Both Kayser and Jan Kott distinguish the grotesque from tragedy in that the former defies and mocks the structural and thematic goals of the latter. For Kayser, where both tragedies and grotesque artworks might portray similar events and themes, the grotesque distances itself in its ultimate embrace of

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<sup>40</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.76.

<sup>41</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.121.

<sup>42</sup> See Kathleen D'Angelo, " "To Make a Novel": The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's "Atonement," " *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2009): 101, accessed 27 April 2015; available from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533916>>



'incomprehensibility.'<sup>43</sup> He elucidates that tragedy brings from disorder and meaninglessness the 'possibility of a deeper meaning—in fate, which is ordained by the gods, and in the greatness of the tragic hero'<sup>44</sup>. Conversely, the grotesque 'must not and cannot suggest a meaning.'<sup>45</sup> This echoes the above discussion of the grotesque's delight in irreconcilable notions; it refuses to bring accord out of strife and absurdity, but is content only to remain in such a contradictory state.

Similarly, Kott emphasises the possibility for situational similarities between tragic and grotesque works, but suggests that their differentiation is to be found in their depictions of closure. He writes that '[i]n the final instance tragedy is an appraisal of human fate, a measure of the absolute. The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience. ...[The] grotesque offers no consolation whatsoever.'<sup>46</sup> This fundamental repudiation of an absolute narrative and resolution finds accordance with George Steiner's theory of tragedy. He claims that '[t]ragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering'<sup>47</sup> and 'there is in the final moments of great tragedy... a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit'<sup>48</sup>. These suggest that, along with an ending which leaves characters uncompensated and empty, tragedy in this sense will lead to a 'fusion' of positive and negative feelings. The description of the 'irreparable' nature of tragedy leads Steiner to suggest that Shakespeare's vision is actually 'tragi-comic'<sup>49</sup>, not tragic, because even in celebrated tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, order and hope are restored after the destructive force of death wields its power. In Shakespeare's oeuvre only *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* bear resemblance to the true tragic model for Steiner because they deny any sense of hope or futurity. His understanding of tragedy is relatable to both Kayser and Kott's understanding of the grotesque, as a form which denies reconciliation and elicits conflicting emotional responses. Even so, Steiner's theory of tragedy remains particularly focused on Ancient Greek drama with its universal scale and end

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<sup>43</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.185.

<sup>44</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.186.

<sup>45</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.186.

<sup>46</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, second edition (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967), p.104.

<sup>47</sup> George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, second edition (New Haven [CT] and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p.8.

<sup>48</sup> Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, xiii.

goal of utter ruin. This is different to what the grotesque proposes because it suggests a conclusion (orchestrated by the fates) which is beyond repair, as opposed to a liminal position of conflict and irresolution that must remain so. Hence, Steiner's word 'irreparable' should be kept in mind in relation to this. What remains useful about his tragic theory is the discussion of conflicting emotional responses which tragedy can elicit, as this bears resemblance to the conflicting emotional response of the grotesque.

*Atonement's* troubling end resists potential hope for the future, or reconciliation between the emergent conflict between reality and fiction. What the reader thought to be true in the novel is undermined by Briony's ultimate revelation, consequently unsteady his or her emotional engagement with the story. The reliability of the entire narrative becomes questionable, and the reader must consider what has just been read in new light. Even if one believes what Briony claims her writing to be, it does not resolve what is complicated by the ending. It is not only up to the reader to decide whether to absolve Briony of her mistake (as suggested by D'Angelo), but one must also decide whether or not to believe her account, which is not a straightforward decision, having been made aware of her manipulative ways. Any absolute governing structure which might have brought the strands of the story into accord is problematised by McEwan. It seems that *Atonement* accomplishes what Kott and Kayser ascribe to a grotesque conclusion, in its 'criticism of the absolute' and lack of 'consolation.' This is a further point of agreement between the grotesque and the novel. Like the real and imaginary worlds which the youthful Briony is said to inhabit, at the end whatever the true narrative might consist of is thrown into conflict with her fictional construction. Meaning or satisfaction which might otherwise be gleaned from the novel is obfuscated, and McEwan leaves the reader unable to reconcile the various versions of the story which he or she has been presented with. The end of the novel seems irreconcilable.

*Atonement's* effect in this regard brings to the fore critical assertions about the ability of both tragedy and the grotesque to access the truth, and the consequent impact of this on the reader. A. D. Nuttall and Santayana both refute the claim that tragic art forms are enjoyable because they are kept distinct from the viewer's own experience. Nuttall writes that the mind is pleased by the truth, despite the possibility that it will be uncomfortable: '[e]ven in time of war one can prefer true bad news to manifestly false good news. For me there is pleasure, therefore, in the... very refusal to pretend

that the good end happily<sup>50</sup>. *Atonement* immediately complicates this notion because the truth remains obscure. If there is satisfaction or pleasure to be experienced as a result of reading the novel, it is unlikely that this would result from its resemblance or adherence to the truth. Even if the reader believes that the reality of Robbie and Cecilia's end was indeed that they died prematurely, Briony's revelation defies Nuttall's suggestion that this would be more satisfying than a falsely contrived happy story. There is no way the reader can claim that there is one truth in the novel, because he or she has been denied consistency in this regard. Santayana suggests that tragedy's relationship to and conveyance of the truth is its very reason for existing, reasoning that truth is 'the excuse which ugliness has for being.'<sup>51</sup> He observes that people are 'deeply interested in truth' and that

[h]owever unpleasant truth may prove, we long to know it, partly perhaps because experience has shown us the prudence of this kind of intellectual courage, and chiefly because the consciousness of ignorance and the dread of the unknown is more tormenting than any possible discovery.<sup>52</sup>

This dread of the unknown is inverted by Clayborough, who in his discussion of G. K. Chesterton's theory of the grotesque, claims that the grotesque's revelling in the realm of the bizarre is in fact the key to seeing the world as one ought to. He writes that the grotesque 'does not so much draw our attention from the natural world as to make us see the world with new eyes in a way which is not less but more truthful than the usual attitude of casual acceptance.'<sup>53</sup> In this instance the grotesque does not remain peripheral and perverse, but by paradox allows for a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the world in its very subversion of what one understands it to be. He also summons John Keats's concept of 'negative capability,' which is a state described as 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'<sup>54</sup>. Being comfortable with nescience may be the only way to cope with the jarring and open-ended conclusion to *Atonement*. Perhaps the intrigue of the story is that in its restriction of one's access to knowledge, and its encouragement to remain without it, the novel

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<sup>50</sup> A. D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.102.

<sup>51</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.144.

<sup>52</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.143.

<sup>53</sup> Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p.59.

<sup>54</sup> John Keats in Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p.73.

accords with a proper appreciation of lived experience, which remains full of ambiguities and absences of meaning.

Even with *Atonement's* disorienting and dismal conclusion, its popularity must be accounted for. It seems strange that a story would frustrate the truth, refusing to grant readers the satisfaction of closure, and yet remain intriguing. Here Clayborough's suggestion of the grotesque's communication of an underlying truth which is embodied in ambiguity, and Keats's understanding of satisfaction with nescience, seem appropriate concepts to apply. A final moment in the novel is worth considering in relation to this, and though it cannot be conclusive in what it communicates about the story's positive effect, it is indicative of the McEwan's contentment with a lack of clarity. The mother of Briony, Cecilia and Leon is Emily. There is one chapter that focuses on her perspective, and in it she observes the magnetic quality that light has upon insects. It reads,

[t]hat night creatures were drawn to lights where they could be most easily eaten by other creatures was one of those mysteries that gave her modest pleasure. She preferred not to have it explained away. At a formal dinner once a professor...had pointed out a few insects gyrating above a candelabra. He had told her that it was the visual impression of an even deeper darkness beyond the light that drew them in. Even though they might be eaten, they had to obey the instinct that made them seek out the darkest place, on the far side of the light—and in this case it was an illusion.<sup>55</sup>

Though, as Emily recollects, she is not satisfied with the explanation of why insects are drawn to the light, the intrigue of 'deeper darkness' and 'illusion' are pertinent. The insects, in a similar way to the novel at large, are not content to relate only to that which they can see, but are drawn to what lies beyond the surface of the visible world. As has been discussed, the novel, like the grotesque, defies logical explanations, an absolute narrative, and clarity of resolution. Like the insects, and Emily it seems, McEwan is more interested in the 'deeper truths' which are beyond what light can bring into vision. By the presentation of grotesque elements in the novel, McEwan seems to prefer nescience to knowledge, and darkness to clarity, perhaps nudging the reader toward such a perspective as well.

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<sup>55</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.149.

The popularity of tragic stories such as *Atonement* forces one to contemplate the nature of the enjoyment of such works. One way to account for the phenomenon is by understanding the emotional conflicts which are central to the effect of tragedy on viewers. Conflict is also fundamental to the grotesque's critique and sabotage of the world as it is commonly perceived, and to the viewer's response to such a work as well. *Atonement*'s grotesque features, embodied in its characters, its objects, and its problematic ending, combine to disorient the reader and challenge his or her understanding of the world, and particularly of truth. The baffling contradictory elements in the story and the consequent clash of responses challenges the reader with an inability to mend the fractures, but instead encourages him or her to seek that which exists beyond common perception. Like the insects drawn to the light, this might involve not understanding the visible realm or knowing what lies behind it, but being invited to explore the darkness.

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# Kenneth Slessor and Bertha Blither: Two Sides of an Australian Writer Between the Wars

ROD GRANT

‘Old Ships and the Tales They Tell’, an uncredited article published in *Smith’s Weekly* on June 29 1929, described central Sydney by night as ‘a gulf of misty light between black cubist cliffs that glitter with opaline fire from a thousand sky-signs.’ The piece detailed a meeting of ex-naval men ‘strangely incongruous to the life of the city’ and was almost certainly written by Kenneth Slessor. There are several elements that link it to Slessor’s contemporary poetry. ‘Captain Dobbin,’ completed two months beforehand, posits a very similar relation to that established in the article between the ‘illusion’ of ‘ordinary’ modern life and the ‘reality’ of ‘thoughts that wander in strange lands and in years long past’. The pointed use of ‘cubist’ to describe the urban landscape animated by ‘the spirit of here and now’ also recalls the modernist awareness evident in Slessor’s poetry from the period. Like several of those poems, moreover, the article deals with sailors of a bygone era and uses the action of water as a metaphor for the temporal conditions governing human life; the city’s ‘rivers’ are ‘fed with the restless force of human energy’ and ‘flow forever on, teeming with men and women that dart along like shoals of hungry fish, or linger by the banks, or strand like flotsam in the backwaters.’

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that any general or necessary correspondence pertained between Slessor’s poetry and his work for *Smith’s Weekly*. Indeed, a detailed investigation of Slessor’s career at the paper reveals a very different side to the writer widely considered ‘the first renovator of twentieth century Australian poetry.’<sup>1</sup> This essay will explore an important aspect of Slessor’s journalism that shows him to be a popular entertainer whose product was defined by narrow commercial and cultural considerations. None of the material examined here has received scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> Mead, P. ‘Kenneth Slessor: A Lyric Poet in the Age of Modernity’ in P. Mead (ed), *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings* (St Lucia: UQP, 1997), p.9.

attention, despite the light it throws on the divisions and contradictions in the work of one of Australia's most celebrated writers. That omission is scarcely surprising given the piecemeal fashion that critics have treated the relationship between Slessor's poetry and his journalism.

While it is generally acknowledged that Slessor wrote his best poetry while working at *Smith's Weekly* between 1927 and 1939, the creative implications of that circumstance remain obscure. Commentators from the 1950s and 60s, such as Max Harris, Vincent Buckley and Judith Wright, regarded Slessor's involvement in the 'unpoetic rat-race of journalism'<sup>2</sup> as simply irrelevant to his major work. The severity of that approach mellowed with time. In his 1990 biography of the poet, Geoffrey Dutton asserted 'the uninhibited atmosphere' of *Smith's* 'liberated' Slessor but the effect such freedom had on his poetry was not made clear. In fact, Dutton effectively sidestepped the issue by claiming, 'there is total integrity, no evasion, in all his dealings with words.'<sup>3</sup> A less reverential note was struck by Adrian Caesar in 1995. Caesar argued it is Slessor's 'deep conservatism that is the common denominator between his poetry and his journalism.' Linking the 'sexist, racist, and thoroughly elitist' influences on Slessor's poetry to the 'brutal leaders' he wrote for the *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*, Caesar endeavoured to critique the 'apolitical' stance adopted by the poet and many of his critics. Oddly, the main focus of Caesar's interrogation was the post-war period when Slessor had completely stopped publishing poetry; the relations between *Cuckooz Contrey* (1932), *Five Bells* (1939) and the tenure at *Smith's Weekly* were addressed with greater uncertainty by Caesar. Despite alluding to the 'complex of conflicting impulses' Slessor was heir to, Caesar could only reconcile the 'populist' ethos of *Smith's* with the 'elitist' poetry through their shared 'conservatism', a category not granted clear definition by the critic.<sup>4</sup>

Although Caesar's approach was an often uncomfortable mixture of literary and cultural studies, it reflected a theoretical move towards contextualisation that has continued to influence Slessor criticism. Both Peter Kirkpatrick and Philip Mead have sought to establish links between Slessor's serious poetry and discrete aspects of his work for *Smiths*. According to Kirkpatrick, the light verse Slessor wrote for the paper between 1928 and 1933 can be seen as 'a bridging medium between the poet's earlier

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, M. *Kenneth Slessor* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963), p.42.

<sup>3</sup> Dutton, G. *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* (Ringwood: Viking, 1991), pp.141–178.

<sup>4</sup> Caesar, A. *Australian Writers: Kenneth Slessor* (Melbourne: OUP, 1995), p.2.

Vision phase and the later more mature collections'.<sup>5</sup> Mead views Slessor's film criticism for *Smith's* as crucial to an understanding of his poetic development: "Five Bells" could not have existed ... without his (and Australia's) specific historical experience of film and the cultural apparatus of the cinema.'<sup>6</sup> Neither critic considers the ways in which the broader culture of *Smith's Weekly* mediated and shaped Slessor's writing for the paper. Mead conceives of Slessor as possessing a high level of agency as a journalist: 'Even though Slessor's film writing occurs within (a) melange of popular press forms,' he maintains, it is nonetheless free of 'dumbing down or cultural snobbery' and 'wasn't just a professional round' but 'a way of negotiating his way through modernity.'<sup>7</sup> In more measured terms, Kirkpatrick views Slessor as 'an innovative popular writer' who found his 'ideal metier' in the 'relaxed, creative atmosphere of *Smiths*.'<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the above positions, this essay will consider Slessor's writing as essentially duplicitous and view the relationship between his journalism and poetry as dissonant rather than supportive. Edgar Holt, Slessor's colleague at *Smith's*, implied such dichotomies when he noted that attempts to combine journalism and poetry are 'almost impossible' as 'the two states of mind are so utterly different.'<sup>9</sup> Slessor emphasised that disparity for creative as well as professional purposes. He believed that poetry should concern itself with 'eternal simplicities and mysteries' rather than with 'ephemeral' social or political matters.<sup>10</sup> Journalism, on the other hand, was a 'bread and butter scuffle' in which there was 'little demand for style or a fixed point of view.'<sup>11</sup> Slessor was at pains to keep the two areas of his writing life completely separate. As another contemporary, Elizabeth Riddell, asserted, he was 'split down the middle' between 'artist' and 'craftsman' and 'never had a problem with two lives.'<sup>12</sup> The degree to which Slessor's imagination was fired by this incongruity has been underestimated by critics. His mature poetry was driven by an anxious need to define a place

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<sup>5</sup> Kirkpatrick, P. 'When Skyscrapers Burst into Lilac' in Meade P. (ed) *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings*, pp.176–177.

<sup>6</sup> Meade, Philip, *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008), p.34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.60.

<sup>8</sup> 'When Skyscrapers Burst into Lilac', p.191.

<sup>9</sup> Edgar Holt interviewed by Mel Pratt, <http://nla.gov.au/nlaoh.un735133>.

<sup>10</sup> Slessor, K. 'Spectacles for the Fifties', *Southerly* No 3, 1952.

<sup>11</sup> Slessor, K. Introduction to *The Giraffe's Uncle* by Les Robinson, Sydney, 1933.

<sup>12</sup> Address by Elizabeth Riddell: *Recollections of Kenneth Slessor Poet and Journalist*, 25 May 1991. Sound recording, nla.oh-2688-0000-0004 Reel A.



for artistic purity amongst the crushing materialism of the modern world. An obsessive concern with boundaries and intellectual dislocation first came to the fore in the maps, shorelines and ‘riven earth’<sup>13</sup> of *Cuckooz Contrey* (1932). But his preoccupations with definition and integrity extended beyond ‘the countries of the mind’<sup>14</sup> charted in that volume. Norman Lindsay once wrote of Slessor that he ‘dodged all association with the literary elect and consorted only with journalists.’<sup>15</sup> The key word is ‘dodged’; there is an elusive quality to Slessor, a propensity towards subterfuge and disguise which emerges as a motif in his serious poetry and animates his work as a newspaperman. In a sense, Slessor’s entire career as a journalist was a cover for his ambitions as an artist. Certainly, during his most productive period as a poet, Slessor was able, as he remarked of Les Robinson, ‘to daub his face with alien chalk and join the chain gang of the clowns.’<sup>16</sup>

The sophisticated and deeply personal poems collected in *Cuckooz Contrey* were written from 1927 to 1931 alongside a stream of journalism consciously attuned to the ‘assumptions and biases’<sup>17</sup> of a white, male and middle class readership. Philip Mead claims that film journalism was Slessor’s ‘main published contribution for the paper’ and enabled him to adapt the cinema’s ‘new structures of feeling and experience’ to his poetry.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Slessor only became Smith’s chief film critic in March 1931 and pursued varied roles for the paper before and after that date. In *Remember Smith’s Weekly?* (1966), George Blaikie referred to Slessor as ‘Smith’s Jack-of-all-trades’: ‘He was the regular understudy for Jim Donald, the famed fight writer, and also the official office poet, leader writer, film reviewer, special writer, satirist and doer of anything else the gods wished to dump on him.’<sup>19</sup> Most of Slessor’s signed prose in *Smith’s* before March 1931 broadly adhered to the style of humourists like Reg Moses or Lennie Lower. Even when reporting from the Stadium as ‘Jim Donald’s Understudy’ he adopted a droll persona: ‘First Van would hit Anderson, and then Anderson would hit Van. And what could be fairer than that?’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Slessor, K. ‘Crow Country’, in Kenneth Slessor, *Selected Poems*, Angus and Robinson: North Ryde, 1988, p.82.

<sup>14</sup> Slessor, K., ‘Dutch Seacoast’, in *Selected Poems*, p.60.

<sup>15</sup> Lindsay to John Hetherington, August 1964.

<sup>16</sup> Slessor, K. Introduction to *The Giraffe’s Uncle*.

<sup>17</sup> Kirkpatrick, P., *The Sea-Coasts of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney’s Roaring Twenties* (St Lucia: UQP, 1982).

<sup>18</sup> *Networked Language*, p.35.

<sup>19</sup> Blaikie, G. *Remember Smith’s Weekly*, Sydney: Rigby, 1966.

<sup>20</sup> Slessor, K. ‘When the Gong Goes’, *Smith’s Weekly*, January 26, 1930, p.4.

Contrary to accepted critical opinion, humour was the form with which he was most closely associated during the 20s and 30s. When Slessor was appointed Australia's Chief War Correspondent in 1940, a contributor to *Smith's Weekly* foresaw that Slessor's despatches from the front would 'break up' the war cabinet and leave the Prime Minister 'laughing helplessly.'<sup>21</sup> Strangely, Blaikie made no mention in his book of a notorious and popular comic character associated with the paper nor of Slessor's role in her creation.

The top of the page containing 'Old Ships and the Tales They Tell' is dominated by a striking banner headline: 'Bertha Blither Advises Wife to Cut Husband's Throat (Cheers!)'. Further down the page the reader is informed:

At enormous expense, and tremendous risk to the susceptibilities of its male staff, 'Smith's' has enlisted the services of beautiful Bertha Blither. Bertha will answer queries from love-lorn flappers, young ladies contemplating marriage (companionate or permanent), downtrodden wives, and picture show usherettes. No fee is charged, but where photo is enclosed the Editor's decision is final.<sup>22</sup>

A cartoon by Joe Jonsson accompanied this résumé and showed Miss Blither seated stoutly at a desk with a pipe clamped in her mouth. In contrast to the gamine-like 'girls' drawn by Virgil Reilly as decorations for Slessor's light verse, Bertha is endowed by Jonsson with a robust and manly bearing; huge hands sit heavily on the desk beneath a boozy, grizzled face little softened by the flowers protruding haphazardly from her short and rumpled hair. A telephone at her elbow and an overflowing wastepaper basket complete the picture of a hardworking, hard-bitten, journalist dispensing the good oil on 'how to do it, and when, in words of one syllable.' The only touches of femininity are a dress and high heeled shoes, both mostly obscured by the desk, and discrete frilly cuffs extending from the sleeves of her bulky cardigan. Bertha does not appear unfriendly, however; she gives the world a slightly befuddled glad eye through her monocle as she writes her 'daily dozen answers to correspondents.'

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<sup>21</sup> 'A "Smith's" Humourist at the War', *Smith's Weekly*, 20 April 1940.

<sup>22</sup> 'Bertha Blither Knows Best About Everything', *Smith's Weekly*, June 29, 1929, p.11.

As the headline suggests, these answers tend towards the reductive if not the brutal. In response to ‘Bewildered Betty’'s suspicion that her husband had arrived home drunk (‘He insisted on kissing me and raised my allowance to £2 a week’), Bertha retorted:

Well, what of it? He had to come home somehow, didn't he? If he hadn't come home at all, and was still sober, where would be the sense in that? ...I'd let him come home drunk once a week for £2 or 5 nights at a cut rate of £7/10/- and a set of lingerie.<sup>23</sup>

This relaxed attitude towards alcoholic excess and an insistence on women holding the whip hand in domestic matters became hallmarks of Bertha's style. Most commonly, Bertha was called upon to assist a wife in modifying some habit or characteristic of her husband judged to be unacceptable. ‘Tangled Truda’, married to an ex-fighter whose nocturnal breathing exercises made sleep impossible, was advised to ‘wait until he has his chest fully expanded, then push a butcher's skewer through the soft ribs. Repeat this until he is fully deflated.’<sup>24</sup> ‘Innocent Imogen’ was disturbed in bed by her husband's bow legs and adenoids; Bertha was highly sympathetic: ‘When he's fast asleep, tilt him sideways and iron out his legs with a heavy iron and a damp cloth. You might file the adenoids with a nutmeg grater.’<sup>25</sup> Bertha was not above invoking federal legislation to support her pronouncements. ‘Lively Lizzie’ was told:

I think the laws of this land are simply made for girls who find their husbands unbearable. It's so simple. Just nag at him...If you keep it up long enough he'll go away altogether, and then you'll be able to take out a maintenance order against him...If he doesn't pay up you can GAOL him.<sup>26</sup>

While two Blither columns were credited to Reg Moses in 1929 and 1930 the balance of the work by ‘*Smith's Domestic Diplomat*’ was published anonymously until 1932. During an interview in 1987, Jim Russell made some revealing comments about Slessor's position at the paper and his connection to Bertha:

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Bertha Blither Knows Best.’

<sup>24</sup> ‘Bertha Blither Brightens Up More Homes’, *Smith's Weekly*, July 20, 1929, p8.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Everybody's Laying Their Problems at Bertha's Big Feet’, *Smith's Weekly*, July 13, 1929, p11.

<sup>26</sup> ‘This is Big Bertha Blither's Page’, *Smith's Weekly*, July 6, 1929, p11.

He was just one of the boys. He liked to write humour, rough and tumble sort of stuff. He wrote, created, a character after Dorothy Dix, which he used in *Smith's Weekly*—what was her name again? Bertha Blither! Bertha Blither, he used to write answers to letters he wrote, of course, to himself. Bertha Blither would answer.<sup>27</sup>

Bertha's rough and tumble approach had much in common with the hard edged comedy of contemporary Americans like Groucho Marx and W. C. Fields. But Slessor's involvement with Bertha also suggests other international points of comparison. Nathanael West, a Hollywood hack and brother-in-law of Marx Brothers script writer S.J. Perelman, imagined a male agony aunt with an 'almost insane sensitiveness to order' in his 1933 novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*. For *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the 'harsh' and 'raw' sounds of the modern city defy significance: 'no repeated grouping of words would fit their rhythm and no scale would give them meaning.'<sup>28</sup> A similar mood of alienation from traditional representative modes pervades Slessor's 'Last Trams,' where human beings are 'dumb presences' amongst new, unyielding forms of urban expression:

That street washed with violet  
Writes like a tablet  
Of living here; that pavement  
Is the metal embodiment  
Of living here

Both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Bertha Blither* were produced by modernist writers intimately involved with a mass culture that was erasing the conditions which made high art meaningful. Another figure beset by that contradiction was Brian O'Nolan, who maintained that 'a male writer should include in his impostures a female pen-name.'<sup>29</sup> Like Slessor, O'Nolan combined journalism with 'serious' writing and assumed a number of authorial personae, among them Count 'O'Blather and Flann O'Brien. And like Slessor, O'Nolan was admonished by critics for wasting his gifts on

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<sup>27</sup> Jim Russell interviewed by Geoffrey Dutton, 13 October, 1987, NLA MS7285, Box 71, Series 28, Folder 15.

<sup>28</sup> West, N., *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (London: Farrer, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p78.

<sup>29</sup> Murphet, J., Ronan McDonald, Sascha Morrell (eds) *Flann O'Brien and Modernism*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

newspaper work. Hugh Kenner's ponderous witticism that, by the 1950s, 'a great future lay behind' O'Nolan was given focus by a tart enquiry: 'Was it the drink was his ruin, or was it the column?'<sup>30</sup> Martin J. McGuinness noted that 'after 1945 most of (O'Nolan's) talent was spent on articles for the *Irish Times* as Myles na Gopaleen and alcohol was becoming more of a problem.'<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Max Harris sniffed the air of the Journalist's Club during the early 1960s and pronounced: 'In this hard drinking, hard bitten club, with the incessant racket of the poker machines in the background, Slessor expends his creative energies.'<sup>32</sup>

Yet Slessor was also a very different kind of artist to West or O'Nolan. His journalism involved an immersion in popular culture more absolute and unabashed than anything suggested by the commercial work of those writers. West may have made a living in the dream factory but, like Tod Hackett in 'The Day of the Locust', he mainly used its 'truly monstrous' commodification of 'the need for beauty and romance'<sup>33</sup> as the inspiration for modernist art. O'Nolan was given a free hand at the *Irish Times* to determine what he wrote and the style of *Cruiskeen Lawn* was not dissimilar to that of his novels. Slessor, on the other hand, worked as part of a team at *Smith's Weekly* and his prose writing for the paper was often indistinguishable from the work of other staffers. His position on the *Smith's* assembly line is perfectly illustrated by the compositional history of Bertha Blither.

Slessor's by-line did not appear on a Blither piece before 1932 and authorship was also attributed to Moses, Jack Gell and 'G.D.' after that date. An article from July 1, 1933—'Bertha Blither Casts a Horoscope'—was co-signed by Slessor and Moses. There is no reason, however, to dispute Jim Russell's attribution of authorship to Slessor. Several of the paper's cartoon characters were invented by one artist and then became the property of several. The Aboriginal stereotype Jacky, for example, appeared in cartoons by Stan Cross, Joe Jonsson and Frank Dunne; the comic strip 'You and Me' was originated by Cross and later inherited by Russell. A similar cooperative spirit existed among prose writers at *Smith's*. Ronald McCuaig asserted that 'everybody would make suggestions' for his column during staff meetings at the paper; his job was 'to get all these suggestions and put them

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Allan Barra, 'Flann O'Brien: Tall Tales, Long Drink', *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> McGuinness, M. *Fortnight* 264, Jul-Aug 1988, p.20.

<sup>32</sup> *Kenneth Slessor*, p.5.

<sup>33</sup> *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*, p.262.

together.<sup>34</sup> Bertha was unique, however, in that her pungent personality could find expression in joke blocks or columns of text; she was both a visual and a verbal character, a condition offering a possible link to Slessor's idiosyncratic status on the paper. At *Smith's*, Russell maintained, Slessor was 'as much a part of the artists as he was a writer' and actively participated in the weekly artist's conferences.

As a collaborative journalist, it is unlikely that Slessor was able to exercise the sort of intellectual autonomy suggested by Mead: 'in some ways his position at *Smith's* was similar to Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, both journalists in the 1920s, who wrote about popular culture, especially film.'<sup>35</sup> Leaving aside Slessor's genuine interest in cinema as an art form, this assessment vastly overstates the degree to which his journalism pretended to a detached view of contemporary culture. The style and subject matter of his work for *Smith's* mark him very much as 'just one of the boys', a jobbing writer who largely suppressed his own cultural sensibilities in the interests of corporate newspaper production. According to Ronald McCuaig, Slessor obeyed a simple maxim as a journalist: "'You're their man"—meaning that when you go to work for the Packers or the Fairfaxes you belong to them.'<sup>36</sup> There is little in Slessor's output for *Smith's* at odds with a managerial philosophy that encouraged a simplistic celebration of the national character and deep suspicion of deviations from the norm. Central to this vision was the mythic concept of the 'Digger' which, as Peter Kirkpatrick asserts, the paper was 'instrumental in helping to consecrate during the twenties.'<sup>37</sup> When Slessor characterised this figure in April 1928, he imagined an 'ordinary chap' who 'hates trumpets and top hats':

So, if you don't mind, in greeting this man of the week, we'll merely say, 'Good-day, Digger' and ask him how he got on at Randwick, or how the Nasturtiums are doing and, if possible, we'll drink some beer with him.<sup>38</sup>

The word 'ordinary' is repeated twenty-four times in the space of fifteen hundred words. Thus *Smith's* presented an idealised image of its average reader, a resolutely 'ordinary chap' pursuing a suburban life spiced with the masculine consolations of drinking and gambling. Paradoxically, the

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald McCuaig interviewed by Peter Kirkpatrick, 29 March, 1990.

<sup>35</sup> *Networked Language*, p.56.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald McCuaig to Geoffrey Dutton, October 15, 1987, NLA MS 7285

<sup>37</sup> *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*, p.78.

<sup>38</sup> Slessor, K. 'The Man of the Week', *Smith's Weekly*, April 28, 1928, p.13.

digger's quiet refusal to parade his heroism, and therefore distinguishing himself from his fellows, is the very quality which identifies him as extraordinary.

The other people considered extraordinary by *Smith's* were its own staff, a number of whom achieved a kind of stardom through the relentless self-promotion of the paper. In 1930 Virgil Reilly's talent for inducing titillation in *Smith's*'s male readership received Tennysonian tribute by an anonymous poet, probably Kenneth Slessor:

I salute thee, 'Smith's' own, Virgil,  
I that loved thee since thy day began,  
Creator of the cutest darlings,  
Ever longed for by the lips of man<sup>39</sup>

'Ode to Virgil' was accompanied by illustrations, drawn by Reilly himself 'with characteristic modesty,' which showed the artist hard at work with an easel and models in various states of undress. Typically, this eulogy highlighted the technicalities of Reilly's vocation ('Thou that limnest/With a crayon deft and neat') just as an opportunistic reference to Moses and Stan Cross in the same edition points out they are 'professional humourists' who have 'to think up something funny for this week's issue' despite their failure to see anything amusing in the current economic climate.<sup>40</sup> It is significant, therefore, that Bertha Blither was 'employed' by *Smith's* as a journalist specialising in affairs of the heart, a topic foreign to a 'purely man's paper', which, George Blaikie asserted, 'just did not know what it was dealing with' when it came to women.<sup>41</sup> On July 6, 1929, under the headline, "'Smith's'" New Lady Help Takes up Her Pen Again,' it was announced that Bertha 'has helped so many readers towards their soul's desires that 'Smith's' has put her on the permanent staff.'<sup>42</sup>

It was soon clear, however, that Bertha's tenure at the paper was not going to be without hiccups. Her seventh appearance, on August 10, 1929, was headlined 'Australia Bemoans the Temporary Slipping of Bertha Blither.' A cartoon sequence showed why 'Bertha's diplomatic services have perforce been withheld from "Smith's" this week'; a false step on a wet

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<sup>39</sup> 'Ode to Virgil', *Smith's Weekly*, November 8, 1930, p.22.

<sup>40</sup> 'Stan Cross and Mo Fail To See The Great Depression Joke,' *Smith's Weekly*, November 8, 1930, p.10.

<sup>41</sup> *Remember Smith's Weekly*, p.211.

<sup>42</sup> 'This is Big Bertha Blither's Page'.

pavement had led to Bertha receiving first aid in the form of gin proffered by a kindly passer-by. A succession of fainting spells were treated with repeat doses until a policeman was forced to make a desperate telephone call: 'Send ambulance—lady has fainted 15 times!' A caption to the cartoon observed, 'She drinks gin and she is game to admit it. Most girls won't.'<sup>43</sup> One who would, apparently, was 'Larynxless Lucy' whose query as to 'the best thing to drink as a chaser' with neat gin received a monosyllabic response from Bertha: 'Gin'.<sup>44</sup> By October 1929 Bertha had been compelled 'into temporary retirement again' after 'an elaborate personally conducted wake' for 'the disaster suffered by her old intimate friend Mr Bruce.'<sup>45</sup> The following month a 'penitent Bertha' was begging forgiveness from readers 'for making such a show of myself last issue'<sup>46</sup> when she had rampaged in an increasingly drunken condition throughout the pages of the paper ('we lost sight of Bertha since page 16 and this is the state she turns up in! Page 19 only makes it worse.')47 Despite these mishaps, *Smith's* was proud to declaim that 'to Bertha nothing is insoluble. Some things are soluble in whisky, some in sloe gin, others demand O.P. ether. Whatever the solution, Bertha will find it.'<sup>48</sup>

On one level, Bertha's spectacular conduct and drinking were a grotesque parody of liberties enjoyed by Flappers in the popular imagination. As Liz Conor asserts, 'more than any other type of the Modern Woman, it was the Flapper who embodied the scandal which attached to women's new public visibility'.<sup>49</sup> But the Flapper also symbolised the putative transgression of young women into areas that were traditionally the preserve of men. In 1930 Slessor hailed Amy Johnson, 'the fundamentally pretty girl' whose solo flight had caused a sensation, as 'the flapper who led them from lipstick to joy stick'. Johnson had 'invented a new type of history', Slessor maintained, that 'begins in 1930 A.D.—Amy's Defiance':

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<sup>43</sup> 'Australia Bemoans the Temporary Slipping of Bertha Blither', *Smith's Weekly*, August 10, 1929, p.10.

<sup>44</sup> 'There's Nothing Undreamt of In Bertha Blither's Philosophy', *Smith's Weekly*, August 31, 1929, p.10.

<sup>45</sup> 'Lest we Forget', *Smith's Weekly*, October 26, 1929, p.9.

<sup>46</sup> 'Penitent Bertha Tenders Apologies', *Smith's Weekly*, November 16, 1929.

<sup>47</sup> *Smith's Weekly*, November 9, 1929, p.18.

<sup>48</sup> 'Bertha Blither Says a Word for Mothball-Munching,' *Smith's Weekly*, November 23, 1929, p.11.

<sup>49</sup> Conor, L., *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2004), p.209.



There may even be women explorers and pioneers who will open up the world's wastes, and when they have subdued the wilds, send back for their menfolk to come and open up the tinned soup<sup>50</sup>.

Bertha's scandalous behaviour was contingent on a similar breakdown of distinctions between the domestic and public spheres; her anarchic energies refused to be contained within the feminised space of the home and erupted outwards into areas of male exclusivity. Although Bertha was touted for her expertise in solving 'home problems'<sup>51</sup>, she displayed scant interest in domesticity; 'what about doing the housework for me?' she suggested to a job-seeking reader<sup>52</sup> and commiserated with another's concerns about her baby's weight by saying, 'We women are never without our troubles. If it's not the S.P. cove it's the tax on beer.'<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Bertha was always eager to venture away from the hearth. When 'Bowser Brigid' complained that she had married a 'wowser' who 'won't take me round the pubs', Bertha told her, 'You're a girl after my own heart. Meet me at The First and Last and we'll do the Cross, 'Loo and Hills pubs in time to get in some of the fights.'<sup>54</sup> In response to 'Thirsty Theresa's' criticism of the beer tax, Bertha claimed, 'I am registering my own protest against this iniquitous tax on necessities by drinking in the public bar.'<sup>55</sup> It is worth remembering that such privileges were not granted to Australian women until the 1970s.

Bertha's physical appearance made that audacious trespass seem plausible. Over time her features became increasingly lean and masculine. When she 'resumed duty' in July 1930, after six months spent in the care of 'alienists at the reception house', Bertha was sporting a shirt and tie beneath a white jacket that nicely set off her five-o'clock shadow. From the waist down, however, she achieved a kind of slovenly femininity, with stick-like legs encased in wrinkled stockings protruding from a dress that might have

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<sup>50</sup> Slessor, K. 'The Flapper Who Led Them From Lip-Stick to Joy-Stick,' *Smith's Weekly*, May 24, 1930, p.3.

<sup>51</sup> 'Bertha Blither Knows Best.'

<sup>52</sup> 'Bertha Blither Follows in Melba's Footstep,' *Smith's Weekly*, October 5, 1929, p.10.

<sup>53</sup> 'Bertha Blither Joins Issue with Trudy King,' *Smith's Weekly*, October 19, 1929, p.8.

<sup>54</sup> 'Sailors Don't Care—Neither Does Bertha Blither,' *Smith's Weekly*, October 12, 1929, p11.

<sup>55</sup> 'Bertha Blither Joins Issue with Trudy King.'

been a pair of bloomers.<sup>56</sup> Although Bertha was not a ‘fundamentally pretty girl’ - as distinct from Charles Hallett’s ‘Flapper Sisters’ and other black and white projections of male desire that flitted through the pages of *Smith’s* - her uncertain gender played to contemporary anxieties about Flappers and ‘The Modern Woman’. According to Billie Melman, the androgynous look of the Flapper, with its ‘tube-like’ and ‘emaciated and curveless’ contours was considered ‘unnatural and immoral—a lapse, as it were, from the ideal masculine and feminine shapes.’<sup>57</sup> Bertha was certainly curveless and a cartoon from 1931 suggested that her appearance was the result of hard living rather than genetic predisposition. She is shown entering a beauty parlour and emerging ‘three hours later’ completely transformed. Svelte, chic and poised, Bertha walks off with great style, only to pass a hotel which she enters after a moment’s hesitation. ‘Three hours later’ she emerges again as her old self. The caption reads, ‘Beauty Is Only Gin Deep.’<sup>58</sup>

To the modern eye, Bertha’s mannish clothing and behaviour (‘that’s not very gentlemanly of you’, she is admonished by another character after an aggressive outburst)<sup>59</sup> might suggest pronounced lesbian tendencies. As Laura Doan argues, however, the ‘meaning of clothing in the decade after WW1, a time of unprecedented cultural confusion over gender and sexual identity, was a good deal more fluid than fixed.’<sup>60</sup> Bertha’s monocle, for example, did not necessarily signal affinity with noted lesbians of the period, such as the English novelist Radcliffe Hall, but symbolised more general, if ‘perverse’<sup>61</sup>, assertions of female independence. In 1920 the *Border Morning Mail and Riverina Times* reported the ‘mad’ and ‘idiotic’ nature of the ‘latest fashions’ had recently been demonstrated at a race meeting outside Paris: ‘80 per cent of the women wore monocles, jauntily stuck in the right eye’ and several ‘carried parrots on their left shoulders, held captive by tiny gold chains.’<sup>62</sup> Similar sightings were not recorded at the Albury Jockey Club but Bertha would have been more at home in that setting than among the *beaux monde* at Autene. And like the ‘monocled brides’ gracing London

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<sup>56</sup> ‘Bertha Is Back On The Job Again,’ *Smith’s Weekly*, July 5, 1930, p4

<sup>57</sup> Melman, B. *Women and Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), p.22.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Bertha’s Back Again—Full of High Thoughts & Low Intentions’, *Smith’s Weekly*, March 21, 1931, p.10.

<sup>59</sup> *Smith’s Weekly*, November 2, 1929.

<sup>60</sup> Doan, L. ‘Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s.’ *Feminist Studies*, 24,3, 1998, 664.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 673

<sup>62</sup> *The Border Mail and Riverina Times*, 19 June, 1920, p.4.

in 1930<sup>63</sup>, Bertha was definitely heterosexual in orientation. While admitting to being 'Joe Jonsson's morganatic wife,'<sup>64</sup> she openly advocated 'freer love' on the front page of *Smith's* in November 1935: 'Maybe I'm old fashioned, but I've got refined ideas ... any gentleman with two or more children who wants to take me to Fairy Bower has got to produce his marriage-lines.'<sup>65</sup>

Melman asserts that 'derision had always been one of the most efficient weapons of the opponents of women's rights'. Bertha was an utterly ridiculous figure whose transgressions against propriety were intended to inspire laughter rather than critical thought. To that extent she was a typical product of *Smith's* 'satirists', as Blaikie termed them, a group of verbal clowns bent on 'poking fun at anything or anyone in the sacred cow category.'<sup>66</sup> The general imperative here was to reduce complex issues to crude simplicity and to affirm the conformist values of the *Smith's* readership. There is often a kind of deadening, jeering quality to this humour, even when it takes an ingenious form. In 1928, Slessor contemplated 'the menace of the Basso Profundo' after two rival grand opera companies advertised their seasons simultaneously: 'the Commonwealth will be shattered right and left with cannonballs of Puccini, Rossini, Boccherini and Cherubini, not to mention Mussolini and Martini'. Slessor suggests that the Australian way of life is threatened by this assault from high culture: 'Grand opera itself is harmless enough. It's when it starts to leak out onto the streets that steps should be taken.' The piece goes on to forecast a situation where 'people will start singing at the slightest provocation' and where even a two-up school would take its cues from Gounod:

Bass two-up player (excitedly): A dollar he heads 'em.

Tenor two up player: A dollar it's tails!

Baritone two-up players (at a loss for words): Pom, pom, pom-tiddy, pom, pom-pom!

Bass two-up players (more intelligent): We, at any rate, know where the music's from!<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> 'Latest Craze In London,' *Goulbourn Evening Post*, 21 March 1930, p.2.

<sup>64</sup> 'What Happened when the Chorus Girls Washed their Lingerie?' *Smith's Weekly*, August 17, 1929, p.10.

<sup>65</sup> Slessor, K. 'Freer Love! Now Husbands Can Be Fiancés,' *Smith's Weekly*, November 7, 1936, p.1.

<sup>66</sup> *Remember Smith's Weekly*, p.125.

<sup>67</sup> 'Kensless,' 'Getting the Grand Opera Habit,' *Smith's Weekly*, January 21, 1928, p.9.

It is questionable if that knowledge was shared by many of Slessor's readers. Even if it was, however, the humour of the piece is predicated on the idea that opera and Australian life are incompatible, that an 'epidemic' of the former is a 'menace' to the latter. Despite its arch references to European culture—'Far better the Grand Guignol plays' - the piece actually reinforces the petty, isolationist mindset identified by John Williams: 'a need to deny and decry all that was seen as confronting and potentially contagious, whether within or outside the frontiers of the nation state.'<sup>68</sup> Slessor succeeds in highlighting his own superior cultural credentials while pandering to the perceived prejudices of his audience.

Anything genuinely confronting about Bertha, on the other hand, was mitigated by her command of the Australian idiom and her enthusiasm for drinking, an interest shared by many of the *Smith's* readership and most of its staff. A cartoon sequence from 1936 entitled 'Behind the Scenes at "Smith's"' shows 'Mr Slessor' seated at his desk with an angel's wings and halo while a search is carried out for him in places including 'the Assembly hotel and across the road at the Tudor'. The reader is told: 'The paper was late to press once because Ken Slessor was in his room, and consequently couldn't be found.'<sup>69</sup> Slessor was editor of *Smith's* at that point. In the same year, Bertha 'disclosed to Ken Slessor' plans to open a bar of her own: 'I suppose,' she mused, 'practically every Australian with a dreamer's imagination and a poet's soul has lain awake at night picturing the ideal bar. Well here it is.' She asked readers to notify her 'by bottle post' if she had missed anything out and 'I'll bung it in'. There is an ironic poignancy about the words 'poet's soul'. Slessor's poetic output had become a trickle by 1936 and was on the verge of petering out altogether; here he wilfully equates his avowed 'magical' art form<sup>70</sup> to vulgar fantasy: 'the more beer you can drink, the more credit you can have'. Bertha's 'splendiferous new beereteria', where the time is 'always five minutes to six', provides further evidence of the gap between Slessor's private sensibilities and those of his targeted audience:

The menu will be simple but satisfying. I shall merely throw out a few random selections such as cotelletes d'agneau aux pointes d'asperges, filets de sole Mornay, maquereau grille d'maitre d'hotel, vol-au-vent de ria de veau, and so on. For

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<sup>68</sup> Williams, J.F, *The Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism, 1913-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.5.

<sup>69</sup> 'Behind the Scenes at "Smith's",' *Smith's Weekly*, October 21, 1936, p.8.

<sup>70</sup> Slessor, K. 'The Quality of Magic,' *Southerly*, Vol. 31, No.4, 1971, pp.249–256.

those whose taste demands the more sophisticated sausage,  
there will be an endless belt of saveloys revolving around a  
silver windlass on the counter. <sup>71</sup>

Perhaps Slessor did not consciously associate the image of ‘an endless belt of saveloys revolving’ with ‘the day after the year after, terribly returning’, his bleak projection in ‘To the Poetry of Hugh McCrae’, but the echoes in that shift from the sublime to the ridiculous are intriguing. Both formulations suggest an eternity defined by entrapment in punishing repetition; the ‘endless’ circulation of the ‘sophisticated sausages’ no less terrible than the visions in a ‘harsher glass’ to a gourmet like Bertha - or her author. It is little wonder that Slessor became an early admirer of Barry Humphries whose comedy also elevated the mundane to levels of mock poetic intensity.<sup>72</sup> Like Humphries, Slessor manipulated demotic conventions while inhabiting the persona of a crass and domineering woman to comic effect. Such role playing was fundamental to Slessor as a writer. In a late unfinished poem he wrote:

Once I was a hundred men  
And a few girls too <sup>73</sup>

The poet who claimed in ‘Five Bells’ he had ‘lived many lives’, and who imagined a process of metempsychosis enabling him ‘suddenly to become John Benbow’, was also a multifaceted performer on the stage of *Smith’s Weekly* capable of slipping between, and behind, categories of identity and gender. It was clearly a self-conscious performance. When Slessor presented a sub Swiftian report on ‘the secrets of Bertha Blither’s boudoir’, he described surprising the ‘charming chatelaine’ at her ‘*table de toilette*’: ‘It gave me a bit of a jolt myself as I watched me gradually appear behind her vivacious features in the dressing table mirror.’<sup>74</sup> Here, one of the ‘proud masks’ that symbolise the ‘act’ of human life in ‘The Old Play’ is seen to slip in a very different context; the ‘jolt’ of self-recognition is caused by the dissolution of the boundary between the writer and his ‘vivacious’ alter-ego.

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<sup>71</sup> Slessor, K. ‘The Splendiferous New Beereteria,’ *Smith’s Weekly*, January 11, 1936.

<sup>72</sup> Dutton, G. *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* (Ringwood: Viking, 1991), p.310.

<sup>73</sup> NLA MS 3020/27/178

<sup>74</sup> Slessor, K. ‘The Secrets of Bertha Blither’s Boudoir,’ *Smith’s Weekly*, May 1, 1937, p.4.

It is a fleeting moment, however, and completely incidental to the rather laboured humour which is the *raison d'être* of the piece.

By the mid-30s Bertha was not only a gourmet but an 'expert on everything.' Her remit had broadened beyond agony aunt to encompass tax problems (August 16, 1930), veterinary science (June 6, 1931), test cricket (Feb 4, 1933), architecture (June 30, 1934) and mind control (August 17, 1935). In 1930 Bertha had signed on as 'private secretary to J.T. Lang', that most reviled of political figures in the pages of *Smith's* (a measured headline from 1931 informed readers that 'soviet government has arrived in New South Wales' and that a 'reign of terror and spying had commenced' under Lang<sup>75</sup>). She started her own political party in 1931, the Bertha Blither Battalion, which stood for 'anything with a kick in it' and 'God Save the King',<sup>76</sup> before opening her 'campaign for suffering womanhood' in June 1932, declaring herself a 'representative of the one and only working class—the women of Australia, Tasmania and parts of New Zealand.'<sup>77</sup> Following the *Sydney Morning Herald's* aerial expedition to the Northern Territory in late 1933, Bertha led *Smith's* 'own exploring party' to the top end. Slessor took the opportunity to promote Bertha as a paragon of *Smith's* unvarnished approach to newspaper reporting:

Those who prefer fanciful pen pictures or flamboyant metaphor will no doubt find all they want in 'The Sydney Morning Herald's' dispatches. The plain facts about the Northern Territory written in plain English by a plain woman in a 'plane are to be found herewith. Miss Blither leaves fancy writing to others. Hers is a cold and unemotional scientific chronicle.<sup>78</sup>

Bertha, in fact, embodied important aspects of the 'irreverent' and 'raspberry blowing' attitude which George Blaikie saw as essential to *Smith's* 'free-swinging style of journalism.'<sup>79</sup> Her status as a 'woman-journalist' allowed Bertha to channel criticism of *Smith's* competitors while giving Slessor the opportunity to vent some of his pet peeves. The prospectus of Bertha's own newspaper was published by *Smith's* in 1935:

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<sup>75</sup> *Smith's Weekly*, March 31, 1931.

<sup>76</sup> 'Join Bertha's B.B.B. Army,' *Smith's Weekly*, April 18, 1932, p.2.

<sup>77</sup> 'Bertha Blither Opens Her Campaign for Suffering Womanhood,' *Smith's Weekly*, June 4, 1932, p.10.

<sup>78</sup> 'Slessor Wants a Backer to Help Him Back Bertha Blither,' *Smith's Weekly*, December 28, 1933, p.3.

<sup>79</sup> *Remember Smith's Weekly*, pp.1–5.

No expense is to be spared in setting up the newspaper with every modern refinement. Special arrangements have been made for the hire of an infinitive-splitting gang from the 'Sydney Morning Herald' and the use of the words 'who' and 'whom' will be the special care of experts selected from the staffs of the 'Age' and Sydney 'Telegraph' whom will supervise the work of whoever the paper employs.

The article is unsigned but 'Kenneth Sappho Slessor' is listed as a director of The *Daily Blither* and a cartoon of the inaugural shareholder's meeting shows him keeping 'order with a gun.'<sup>80</sup>

It was, indeed, a compulsion to maintain order in his writing which spurred the creativity that Slessor enjoyed during his first years at *Smith's Weekly*. The paper allowed him enormous latitude to explore the divisions in his own psyche that shaped the world of his best poetry. *Smith's* was also a means to present himself as an 'ordinary chap' in a society which treated artists with philistine contempt. To that extent, whether or not Slessor agreed with the paper's policies is less important than his acquiescence to them. The material covered in this essay provides evidence that Slessor largely conformed to cultural imperatives which militated against the acceptance of modern art in Australia. Far from being irrelevant to his poetry, however, Bertha Blither represents a previously ignored aspect of a writer whose complex legacy has not been properly understood within its historical context. The incongruous relationship between artist and craftsman defined Slessor as a writer and, for a short period during the 20s and 30s, inspired some remarkable poetry. It also encouraged the kind of authorial role playing that produced 'the immortal Blither,' as she was once characterised by her better half in a moment of Miltonic transport.<sup>81</sup>

Bertha appeared less frequently in *Smith's* as the decade wore on. This was partly due to the departure of Reg Moses from the paper in 1935 and the subsequent promotion of Slessor to editor-in-chief. But Bertha's brand of vulgarity, and her identity as a kind of anti-flapper, were perhaps unsuited to the more austere atmosphere of the late 1930s.<sup>82</sup> At least one segment of the Australian population had always voiced distaste for her antics; Jim Russell claimed Bertha 'was so offensive to Melbourne people that they got the

<sup>80</sup> 'A Real Newspaper at Last!!!,' *Smith's Weekly*, June 22 1935, p.6.

<sup>81</sup> NLA 3020/19/4.

<sup>82</sup> *Women and Popular Imagination in the Twenties*, p.146.

Melbourne editor, Vince Kelly, and asked him if they couldn't have it cut out of their edition.'<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere in the Commonwealth, however, Bertha had clearly struck a chord, assuming a life beyond the pages of *Smith's* and achieving the status of folk heroine. In 1933, the *Cairns Post* relayed the information that 'the much discussed Bertha Blither was officially married last night, at a dance held in the Drill Hall.'<sup>84</sup> Bertha was also 'noticed' at the 'fancy dress birthday party' of Jack Rumball of Berri in 1935, among guests including 'right hand men of Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, Don Bradman, Mae West and Sandy McNab.'<sup>85</sup> These beefy excursions into drag (the *Maitland Daily Mercury* assured its readers that 'Bertha Blither (Wes Young) looked anyhow in her red frock of crepe-de-chene' at the Thornton 'Presentation Ball'<sup>86</sup>) signal the degree to which Slessor's creation entered the national consciousness. It would take another decade, and the social and cultural changes wrought by the Second World War, before his poetry received any general recognition at all.

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<sup>83</sup> *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography*, p.126.

<sup>84</sup> *Cairns Post*, 17 November 1933, p.3.

<sup>85</sup> *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record*, 7 February 1935, p.14.

<sup>86</sup> *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, 3 September 1938, p.3.