

Feminine Transports and Transformations: Textual Performances of Women Convicts and Emigrants to Australia from 1788 to 1850

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Feminist historians often fail to engage with the fictive elements of early narratives by and about colonial women. Mary Ellen notes that social historians like Anne Summers, Miriam Dixon, and Portia Robinson tend to treat archival material as documentary text that has an unproblematic relationship to the real, and prefer to see the female convict from an Australian rather than an English perspective (253). This is particularly true, she states, of histories concerned with the period before 1850. One might extend Ellen's argument beyond depictions of convict women to include early representations of British female emigrants to Australia. There have been several significant collections of convict and emigrant women's writing prior to 1850, including Helen Heney's *Dear Fanny: Women's Letters to and from New South Wales, 1788-1857* (1985) and Patricia Clarke and Dale Spender's *Life Lines: Australian Women's Letters and Diaries, 1788-1840* (1992), but Ellen contends that there has been relatively little analysis of the literary form and politics of such writing. Furthermore, there is still much work to be done on the relationship between British imaginings of colonial life for women and the early "eye-witness" accounts, especially those circulated in the British press. This article analyses the fictive nature of convict and emigrant women's writing, including their deployment of gendered conventions, tone, and personas. I discuss how the effective use of such techniques may have been to their author's advantage and even generated a sense of agency. Finally, I consider how such testimonials were taken up and transformed through subsequent literary productions in Great Britain, such as the street ballad and revisionist narratives in both prose and poetry.

Clarke and Spender note the scarcity of writing by women convicts: "Few letters—and no diaries as far as is known—have survived from the 23 000 women convicts transported to NSW and Tasmania" (1-2). Significantly,

most of the letters that have survived were those published in British newspapers. Many are clearly written with the help of an amanuensis and quite a number suggest editorial intervention. Some also seem to have been specifically written for publication or, at least, for an audience larger than the cited addressee. Newspapers often published letters for their sensationalist subject matter, giving readers not only a first-hand report of an exotic place distant from metropolitan England but also toward confirming their own relative “normalcy” and comfort through the identification of criminals and their consequent suffering.

As Liz Stanley comments, letters are “strongly marked by their quotidian present” (208). Like photographs, they hold memory and have a kind of “flies in amber quality” in representing a moment of their production (Stanley 208). They suggest a self that “lives on” even after the death of the writer. Significantly, the British penal system, and transportation in particular, was designed to remove a subject’s past identity and any agency attached to that identity—convict women were sent to Australia without their children and their previous marital status generally rendered irrelevant. Even free female emigrants had little claim to individualised identity and agency. Women of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain were typically under the protection of their families and, as Clarke and Spender note, a woman—whether wife, daughter, mother, aunt or sister—could become a victim of involuntary migration if she was dependent upon a man who elected to embark on emigration (xi). Early women letter-writers at least generated both a presence and a sense of self-determination through communicating their experiences to family, friends, or the public back home.

One of the earliest examples of convict women’s writing is “Letter from a Female Convict”. The anonymous writer probably arrived on the *Lady Penrhyn*, which carried more than half the First Fleet’s female convicts. It was written on 14 November 1788 between six and seven months after the landing and describes “our disconsolate situation in this solitary waste of the creation”:

As for the distresses of the women, they are past description, as they are deprived of tea and other things they were indulged in in the voyage by the seaman, and as they are totally unprovided with clothes, those who have young children are quite wretched. Besides this, though a number of marriages have taken place, several women, who became pregnant on the voyage, and are since left by their partners, who have returned to England, are not likely even here to form any fresh connections. (Clarke and Spender 3)

Published not only as a representative female voice but also for its general overview of the colonial situation, the letter measures a woman's cultural capital in the new world by the status of her virtue. Already there is a subtext of the female convict, particularly pregnant and abandoned, as unable to be recuperated as a civil subject. The focus is simply on the women's fate; whether they were seduced or knowingly participated in their downfall is irrelevant.

Another early example is a letter by an anonymous female convict published in the Dublin *Public Advertiser*, 14 June 1793. The writer declares "her sad distress in this desolate place of banishment, which is very severe; occasioned by hardships and shortness of provisions. We have during my short stay here lost near 1,500 souls from these causes" (Heney 9). Once more, the emphasis is on exile and isolation, the lack of provisions—particularly tea, as the first anonymous letter-writer and many others would note—signifying the loss of "civilised" female life. Against the likelihood of actual death, the letter presents convicthood as a kind of living death, likely to induce the reader's pity. The letter, written to a previous benefactor, concluded with a request for money. The colonies and their values still functioned according to old economies.

The letters also invoked separation from past connections to gain a reader's sympathy. Margaret Catchpole, condemned to transportation for horse-thieving, wrote to a kindly ex-mistress, Mrs Cobbold, on 25 May, 1801:

my sorrows are very grat to think I must be Bannished out of my owen Countrey and from all my Dearest friends for ever it is very hard indeed for anyone to think on it and much moor for me to enduer the hardship of it. (Heney 21)

Catchpole uses her reminiscences of intimacy with Mrs. Cobbold as she does the extremity of her newfound state to play upon Mrs. Cobbold's feelings and thus increase the success of her subsequent request for money.

Early letters from emigrant women reflect the female convict's discourse of banishment and exclusion. Elizabeth Marsden, wife to the second chaplain of NSW, wrote on 1 May 1796:

We seem in our present situation to be almost totally cut off from all connection with the world, especially the virtuous part of it. Old England is no more than like a pleasing dream; when I think of it, it appears to have no existence but in my own imagination. I feel as if I had once converse with friends united in love by the same Spirit; some faint remembrance of those pleasures still remains, & I cannot but flatter myself with some distant hope that it will again be with me as in months past. (Heney 13)

Here memory dissolves into imagination, and England, not Australia, becomes less real. While Brian Elliott and Adrian Mitchell contend that the overriding theme of early colonial literature is memory, Eliza Marsden's letter suggests that memory is a slippery concept, mutating over time and bringing together elements of desire, dream, and the spectral (xvi). When a sense of place and belonging is in crisis, memory becomes both worked upon and even manufactured afresh as a kind of therapy for the colonial mind.

Anna Josepha King, the wife of the third Governor of New South Wales, noted that the atrocious conditions on convict ships could even lead to madness, where all sense of the real was lost. Writing of her journey to Australia on the *Speedy* in 1799, she records how one convict woman lost her reason and died, "an event that had such an effect on the other convicts that several nights later they believed they saw the dead woman's spirit among them" (Clarke and Spender 51). Distinctions between identifiable states of being (life and death; the real and phantom) become blurred in such early colonial representation.

Typically women's representations of early Australia were subjugated to men's. The reputation of the *Lady Juliana* (the first convict ship to leave England after the First Fleet) as a floating brothel was generated by accounts such as those of its steward, whose memoir, *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (1822), was not only written decades after the journey but with as colourful a slant as possible in order to increase its marketability. Nicol's assertion that "every man on board took a wife from among the convicts" echoed the received view of the *Lady Juliana*; though an account by a female convict published in the *Morning Chronicle* (4 August 1791) reported the strong survival rate and overall health of its passengers, as well the paternal care given to them—even down to provided baby linen (Edwards 154; Heney 3). This version by an unknown convict mapped a continuity of civilisation rather than its disintegration, and was no doubt less appealing to British readers desiring—at that stage—some distinction of the Antipodes from "home".

Significantly, Nicol strengthens his representation of the general depravity of female convicts through two key exceptions. He takes particular note of one Mary Rose, a "timid" and "modest" girl who "never joined in the ribaldry of the rest" (Edwards 155). Nicol relates a sentimental tale of how this wealthy farmer's daughter was seduced and then abandoned by an officer. Having disgraced her family, she fails to seek their help when her landlady falsely accuses her of stealing. Nicol records justice prevailing, as Rose's family discover her unjust fate and secure a pardon to be waiting for her when she

arrives in Australia. Ron Edwards notes not only the impossible time-frame of a waiting pardon but contends that the actual Mary Rose might be traced as going on to marry twice in Australia. Nicol's tale constructs a mythic "Rose of England," whose virtue demands her recuperation back to British soil.

In his other example:

a Scottish girl, broke her heart, and died in the river [. . .] The poor young Scottish girl I have never yet got out of my mind; she was young and beautiful, even in the convict dress, but pale as death, and her eyes red with weeping. She never spoke to any of the other women, or came on deck. She was constantly seen sitting in the same corner from morning to night; even the time of meals roused her not. My heart bled for her—she was a countrywoman in misfortune. I offered her consolation, but her hopes and heart had sunk. When I spoke she heeded me not, or only answered with sighs and tears; if I spoke of Scotland she would wring her hands and sob, until I thought her heart would burst. I endeavoured [sic] from her lips, but she was silent as the grave to which she hastened. I lent her my Bible to comfort her, but she read it not; she laid it on her lap after kissing it, and only bedewed. At length she sunk into the grave of no disease but a broken heart. (Edwards 152)

"[Y]oung and beautiful," this unknown girl symbolises an idealised feminine above the rabble. By emphasising the girl's Scottishness (the only marker of her identity), Nicol suggests that the broken heart results from the loss of her (and his own) homeland rather than lost love.

While accounts like Nicol's sought to cash in on the British middle-class fascination with the new colony in the 1820s, broadsides would transform first-hand convict reports into sensational, cautionary tales for the working class. Testimonies by poor unfortunates would be told over and over again in both ballad and prose form. Accordingly, "Elizabeth Watson's Tale" (published in London as a broadside by Pitt Printer but not dated) always had the same narrative chronology despite appearing in multiple forms with variations in character names, periods between events, and their location (in one ballad variation the name of the female speaker is Charlotte Mills). As a merchant's daughter greatly cherished by her parents, the speaker is reared on the values of virtue and truth. However, she is tricked at a young age by a gentleman who persuades her upon promise of marriage to leave her father's house. He keeps her as his mistress for a year and then deserts her. Rejected by her father and turned out by her landlady, she is forced into a life of prostitution and eventually driven to felony. Although doomed to

fourteen years at Botany Bay, she is eventually reconciled with her father and recuperated back into the family and national hearth (Edwards 141). There are clear similarities with such a ballad and Nicol's tale of Mary Rose, in that the female convict is projected in both as helpless victim.

In another ballad, "Sarah Gale's Lament" (published by Hillatt & Martin but not dated), the speaker is also brought up to be virtuous by honest parents (Edwards 24). Yet she cohabits with a married man, Greenacre, and is arrested with him over the death of his prior *de facto* wife, Hannah Brown. The ballad had its basis in the sensational newspaper reports of an 1836 trial, which resulted in James Greenacre being sentenced to hang and Sarah Gale, to transportation for the term of her natural life. Though Gale was not quite the dupe like Elizabeth Watson, *The Times* nevertheless described her as an "unfortunate" woman (13 May 1837) and an attempt to raise a petition through the newspaper on her behalf failed. In the various ballad versions, "murder" becomes "death," alleviating any sense of intention and reducing the extremity of the crime (Hannah Brown was dismembered and found portion by portion) (Edwards 25). The ballad gives no details of the motivation for the murder nor any details of Brown's missing child and Gale's surviving child. Instead, it presents Gale as a desolate woman, newly alone: "In agony I weep forlorn/In a foreign land I'm doomed to linger" (Edwards 24). This ballad, "Elizabeth Watson's Tale," and Nicol's representation of Mary Rose perform femininity as weakness. The culpability of the subject is offset by her susceptibility to attentions of the "wrong man"; her vice found in straying from the safety of the family hearth.

An alternative narrative of colonial redemption and newfound independence for women might be read against these representations of a doomed femininity. The most famous of these is Robert Southey's narrative of the convict, Elinor, in his *Botany Bay Eclogues* (1794). Here England is viewed as a pastoral idyll centred around the "lowly, lovely dwelling" of her childhood home, while Australia can only offer a "drear scene". With its "savage lands," "barbarous climes," and "joyless shore", it functions as in many of the letters published in British newspapers, as a site of purgatory, a fitting place for "[a]n outcast, unbeloved and unbewail'd". Yet without civilisation, there is a base equality between all: "Nature benignly gives to all/enough./Denies to all a superfluity". In England, Elinor is constantly reminded of her fallen status but in Australia there is no one to condemn her but herself. It therefore provides respite and the possibility of "calm repose". Elinor begins to take on prized character traits: honesty ("Day by day/I earn in honesty my frugal food"), moderation, courage, and fortitude. The monologue ends with the suggestion:

On these wild shores the saving hand of Grace
 Will probe my secret soul, and cleanse its wounds,
 And fit the faithful penitent for Heaven. (81)

The poem sets a “secret soul” which is salvageable against the visible livery of shame. Australia provides firstly a space of peace and healing, and finally spiritual redemption. Southey was then still a radical sympathiser with the French Revolution, and his vision of Australia is not so much as a place where Europe is extended but rather where a wholly new civilisation begins. While Elinor is the only female among the Eclogues’ eight convict speakers (women were outnumbered six to one by male convicts in the first sixty years of Australia (Elliott 164)), her literary and literal solitude becomes a marker not of mourning, but of emerging independence and inner strength.

A letter by the convict Sarah Bird in *The True Briton* (10 November 1798) was one of the few early letters published in British newspapers to present a positive alternative to the typical representation of female convict as lost or irretrievably damned. Unlike her anonymous contemporaries, or Sarah Thornton, Bird is largely undismayed at being sequestered in a “remote quarter of the globe”. She tells of successfully trading during the ship’s passage, and continuing such independence in a solitary colonial existence: “I live by myself, and do not as the rest of the women did on the passage, which was, every one of them that could had a husband” (Heney 16). Allegedly written to her father, the letter suggests a freedom unlikely had she stayed at “home” under patriarchal surveillance. Its factual haziness (Heney notes that Bird’s relative freedom likely derived from the protection of an officer during the voyage, and that the protector may also have drafted her letter and taken it back with him to England (15)) evades any question regarding her standing as a virtuous woman.

Examples of women as colonial businesswomen, landholders and property owners undermined the concept that genteel eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women must remain subjugated to the rule of father or husband. One such example can be found in the letters of Margaret Catchpole to Mrs Cobbold. Despite initially bemoaning her “Bannished” state, her letters construct a subsequently prosperous, independent colonial figure. A much-needed and reliable midwife, she eventually ran her own small farm, survived several floods, and refused to marry. Catchpole would later be mistaken for the subject of the widely known ballad, “The Convict Maid” (published in Liverpool as a broadside by William McCall Printer but not dated) who is “betray’d” by her “youthful heart”. By the ballad’s end, the speaker declares that if she was “but once more [. . .] free [. . .] I would seek some honest

trade" (Edwards 144). Female emigrants also wrote success stories. The correspondence of Anne Drysdale relates the successful establishment of a farm with partner, Caroline Newcomb (Clarke and Spender 35-38). Elizabeth Macarthur's letters and journal detail her skill in managing the family farm single-handedly for thirteen years as well as encourage a widening of the narrow society that she and her friend, Eliza Marsden, had once grieved over (Clarke and Spender 20-29). In 1821, Eliza Walsh, despite being a single female, fought for her right to a land grant suggesting to the authorities, "it does not appear altogether a just measure to exclude Ladies from making use of their money for the benefit of the Colony in consequence of their sex, nor can it be deemed a real objection" (Clarke and Spender 34).

While these writings attest to the possibility of female independence in the Australian colonies, British women poets made use of colonial female experience as a screen to explore their own authorial agency. In 1825, L.E.L. (Letitia E. Landon) published "The Female Convict" in *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems*. The volume was hugely successful and went through six editions in one year. Daniel Riess notes that Landon habitually borrowed from other people's texts and certainly the title poem adapted de Staël's plot for *Corinne*. Landon lacked any actual firsthand knowledge and Riess contends that "The result is a poetry of pastiche, a second-order synthesised Romanticism" (818). As Herbert Tucker notes, 1820s verse such as Landon's merely extended Romanticism's project of domesticating the exotic (527).

Landon would embellish Nicol's already mythicised and sentimental story of the unknown girl aboard the *Lady Juliana*. The girl's silence comes from an inability to weep and her red eyes are not the result of weeping as in Nicol's account, but the glint of madness. Such elements echo the Gothic influences in Anna Josepha King's narrative. Finally, the girl releases a single outburst of emotion after dreaming of her bucolic homeland. The centrepiece of this originary, edenic tableau is her childhood home with her father laying down his Bible and welcoming her, and kneeling with him beside her mother's grave. Through prayer, she "heard a hymn" and at that moment, awakens. The dream has "waked feelings long, long since fled" and the hope of redemption. She entreats the narrator to "Take this long curl of yellow hair,/And give it my father, and tell him my prayer, My dying prayer, was for him" (42). Moving to the following day, the narrative describes the ocean burial of an unmarked coffin.

The poem is marked by excessiveness. While an acceptable technique for many male Romantic poets, it was less so for the emergent and rival figure of the late Romantic, proto-Victorian poetess. However, Angela Leighton

suggests that the cult of sensibility that lay behind the rise of women's poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century offered a useful model of creative power for women (58). The poems in *The Improvisatrice* might be seen as performances through which Landon negotiates the possibility of female authorship. Although doomed, the female convict shakes off the shackles of confinement and takes voice cathartically before eternal silence. Yet paradoxically, she speaks of her submission to a literal father, God, and the Law of the Father. Her body ends up in the "green sea" (42), which, in Victorian times, often symbolised expansiveness and freedom. However, a corporeal remain (the curl of hair which fetishistically stands in for the whole) will return to the hands of the father, signifying the heroine's recuperation back into British society. Landon therefore sets up ironic tension between female agency and its surveillance at several levels.

Isobel Armstrong suggests that nineteenth-century women poets used the dramatic form as a displacement of feminine subjectivity (to protect against self-exposure) in order to make it an object of investigation (325). "The Female Convict" might be viewed as an allegory of the woman poet, and there is the temptation to read it even more specifically. It was published at a time when Landon's reputation was at a low point, with much speculation over the nature of her association with a number of men, including her first publisher, William Jerdan. Indeed, Charles Lamb casts her as a kind of convict, declaring, "I would lock her up and feed her on bread and water till she left off writing poetry. A female poet, or female author of any kind, ranks below an actress" (Patmore, 84). In other respects, "The Female Convict" might be understood, to use Armstrong's terms, as a "double poem," always foregrounding its "own particular investment in a mode of representation and the epistemological assumptions made therein" (5). That is, Landon uses sensibility and appropriation as the stock tools of the poetess to demonstrate how they render her illegitimate as an author while also testing their capacity to reveal tensions in the prescribed roles and narratives available to women.

Frances Browne's poem, "The Australian Emigrant", which appeared in *The Star of Attéghéi; The Vision of Schwartz; and Other Poems* (1844) also registers the contradictions in a colonial setting as both site of exile and the realisation of liberty. A blind Irishwoman then living in England, Browne often brought together issues of national and feminine oppression, and emphasised the fact that her livelihood was at the mercy of patronage. She would champion other culturally dispossessed groups in poems like "The Removal of the Cherokees". While Landon's earnings paid for her brother's

education, Browne's supported her sister's training as an amanuensis. Like "The Female Convict", Browne's poem is framed by a primary narrator who spies an unidentified girl and whose distance from her enables both narrative interpretation and ambivalence. Contrasting other "maids" weeping because "They should look on [England's] greenness never more":

[. . .] one was there—who shed no tears!—
 A girl, in the blossom of her years;—
 Yet bloom had she none from the roses caught
 For her cheek was withered with early thought,—
 And her young brow bore the written doom
 Of a lonely heart and a distant tomb. (235)

The girl's doom is inscribed corporeally in terms of a withering British rose. The passage out to Australia however, provides a transformative space. "Silent" as "she gazed on the shore and sea" yet once:

[. . .] the mountains faded in misty blue,—
 And louder the grief around her grew.
 Then, turned the maid to that mourning throng,—
 And poured the power of her soul in song! (236)

The girl's "parting strain" is "sadly mixed" as she asks her sisters, "Whence flow this flood of sorrows?" (236) She declares that while man may grieve when severed from hearth or soil (for which he has some right), "why should woman weep her land?" for she has "no portion there" (237). Indeed, "For her the homes of earth/Are the houses of bondage, still" (237). As an alternative, Australia may provide "summers brighter" than "o'er our childhood shone" (237).

For Browne, exile has a positive element in providing an opportunity to escape an oppressive regime where women—lacking status as citizens in their own right—are already prisoners or slaves. Once past England's shores, the girl is able to shake off social confines and claim a voice. Despite this feminist orientation, the poem remains steeped in melancholy as the memory of Britain lies weighty around the heart. Like Landon's female convict, Browne's girl does not survive the journey:

She ceased:—for the shore was fading fast,—
 She looked on it longest, then, and last:—
 And the dying tones of her parting song
 Remained in the hearts of the listeners long.
 —When tidings came, from the wandering band,
 Of brightening days in that distant land,
 Of the minstrel's fortune none could say—
 She had passed, in her loneliness, away! (238)

In *The Star of Attéghéi*, the editor's preface draws strong parallels between Browne's loss of sight as a toddler and the situation of the female emigrant:

De Foe's castaway was not more apparently helpless and companionless on his desert island, than this young girl, cut off by her calamity from the peopled world of vision, and left to an intellectual loneliness whose resources she had none to help her in finding out. The hint given by the preaching of the pastor was the first "footprint left on the sand" of her desolate place.

While Browne's narrative echoes Landon's earlier one, it demonstrates how Australia was increasingly viewed as an alternative, liberatory topos for marginal and dispossessed groups in Britain. By 1840, transportation to the Australian mainland had ceased and the experiment touted as a success in England. Louisa Anne Meredith's account of the effects of transportation in *My Home in Tasmania, During a Residence of Nine Years* (1852) represents the view then circulating in the popular press:

To this system, it has of late been fashionable to attach the term 'white slavery' [. . .] Although doubtless susceptible of great improvement (as what human scheme is not?) the results were in the main highly satisfactory, and precisely what the Home Government and all humane persons desire they should be, namely, the conversion, in five case out of six, of idle unprincipled outcasts into industrious trustworthy servants, and the redemption of thousands. (41)

As Meredith notes, she does not write for colonial readers as it would "appear an useless repetition of things as familiar as one's alphabet" (44). Yet while she draws this analogy between the real and the letter, Meredith is ambivalent about the status of her written account in England. She claims authority firstly as an eye-witness (equal to others with colonial experience) then adds a further layer by having the volume illustrated by the Bishop of Tasmania and dedicated to the Queen. Yet at the same time, Meredith frames her Australian reminiscences as mere entertainment, "little tome[s] of womanly gossip" (x). Interspersing discussions of social life in the colonies with confident commentaries about its politics, Meredith, like Landon and Browne works subversively within the confines of feminine subject positions and styles of female authorship. Yet the popularity of her book and Landon's poetry are testament to their effective use of gendered conventions surrounding writing and authorship.

By mid-century, success stories of female emigration also circulated throughout the British popular press. Yet many still constructed the colonial woman as a productive and moral helpmeet to man. As Michael Ackland comments, the role of woman was "to aid, to abet, but never to

hinder or to compete" (75). Female agency was therefore often moderated through the rhetoric of domestication. An example is Reverend Richard Cobbold's *History of Margaret Catchpole: a Suffolk Girl* (1847), a "romantic but true narrative" which was based on his mother's relationship with the real Margaret Catchpole and their correspondence (1897 edition; 7). His *Catchpole* epitomises the full correction of the female convict:

It will be seen that from the want alone of early impressions of religion, the heroine of these pages fell into the errors of temper and passion, which led to the violation of the laws of God and man; but that after the inculcation of Christian faith and virtue, she became conspicuous for the sincerity of her reformation and for an exemplary life. (1971 edition; v)

As terms such as "heroine" confirm, his performance of *Catchpole* is based on the model of literary romance. He highlights the love-interests in *Catchpole's* story, pointing out that Margaret's dismissal by Mrs. Cobbold occurs only when Margaret refuses to give up an infamous local smuggler. He suggests that her decisions to steal a horse and escape from jail were for her lover's sake. While the actual Margaret repeatedly proclaimed her single, independent status in her correspondence, Reverend Cobbold concludes with Margaret marrying John Barry, who fell in love with Margaret back in England. Unaware of Margaret's convict existence in Australia, he migrates there and becomes a "leading man in the colony" (1897 edition; 313). Reverend Cobbold leaves them "happy ever after" in New South Wales.

Like Meredith who published as "Mrs. Charles Meredith" and repeatedly emphasised her vantage point as a free settler's wife, Caroline Leakey mapped out an independent will within a discourse of domestication. In the second half of *Lyra Australis, or Attempts to Sing in a Strange Land* (1854), she defines the Australian landscape from the border space of her verandah. Dividing her poem in two, Leakey suggests a passage from exile and mourning to self-empowerment through familiarisation with Australian space. Meredith too drew power through her capacity to detail both the climate and gardens of Tasmania, as much as its social life. While Leakey and Meredith claim a right to take up the pen by framing their publications as life-writing, the genres that they work in are recognizably the novel and poetry. While the discovery of gold in the 1850s resulted in the reinforcement of Australia as a topos of social promise, that decade saw colonial female authorship in a state of change. Yet, as this article demonstrates, women were testing authorial constraints through textual performance from the earliest days of colonisation. Indeed, Australia became the site for both British-based and

colonial women where meanings of “belonging”, femininity, and subjectivity were placed under pressure and re-imagined, often obliquely but sometimes quite directly.

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