

REMAKING FEMININITY AND DESIRE: A POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT

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THIS paper addresses ways in which fictional writing participates in, and is informed by, public discourse. It discusses the means by which fictional texts constitute their readers as political and historical subjects and is premised on considerations of how we might, on rereading such texts, pay attention to the relations of fiction and history.

The increased visibility and mobility of women in the sexualised war-time social spaces of cities had led to restrictive legislation aimed at controlling their 'deviant' sexual behaviour, especially in relation to American servicemen (Darlan-Smith 2). After the war women, and female sexuality, were identified as all of the following: a problem, the cause of the problem and the means of its solution. Too much freedom during the war had released women's inherently unhealthy sexuality; this must be rechannelled into its monogamous and reproductive social function through the official discourses of 'the Australian way of life', 'populate or perish', and their social site: the institution of the family. 'Public' femininity and sexuality were antithetical to the aims of the post-war reconstruction of Australian society.

Within this context I will discuss two post-war novels, *Soldiers' Women* (1961) by Xavier Herbert and *The Refuge* (1954) by Kenneth Mackenzie. Coincidentally reading both in a short period of time, I was struck by their preoccupation with, and anxiety about, female sexuality, and their setting during the war years. My reading of the two novels will explore them in terms of a reconstructive masculine discourse of sexuality, strategically deployed in narrative to represent feminine sexuality as deviant and dangerous in order to discipline and reconstruct it. This is a project of social and moral reform which seeks to regain lost masculine ground in relation to the definition of female sexuality, and the social and sexual situation of women's bodies. It is also a material expression of masculine sexual insecurity which seeks to restore the potency and robustness of Australian men's sexual self-image. There is a masculine investment in the construction and representation of female sexuality in any given historical context. The female body has historically been represented as 'saturated with sex and inherently pathological', establishing a *knowledge* of it which allowed for its protection, regulation and the reiteration of its responsibilities to society (McNay 31; Foucault 104). Such a representational strategy operates to produce and limit meanings and knowledges about the sexual and social attributes and roles of women.

One of the things *Soldiers' Women* and *The Refuge* have in common is a unified and organic notion of the category Woman. Neither has any hesitation in offering broad statements about the 'nature' of woman, that nature being utterly determined and dominated by her 'different' female sexuality, a sexuality which during the war years broke free from the control of Australian men. This 'threatening' sexuality has been released by alien forces in both cases: the American forces in Australia in *Soldiers' Women*, and both the GIs and imported European 'strangeness' in *The Refuge*. An example from *Soldiers' Women* of the nature of female sexuality:

The Lord overlooked the fact that, since he modelled woman physically on general mammalian lines in order that she should be 'fruitful and multiply', she was bound periodically to enter oestrus, the 'ripe-time', in which her whole being would be preoccupied with mating with man . . . she was inclined to indiscretion under the influence of the hormonal tide rising within her, perhaps to the waxing of her patroness, the moon. She was not really wilful, merely forgetful of precepts forced on her by those inclined to live by them. In point of fact, concern for the precepts, the moral rules, was really the duty of Adam at such a time, a large part of his service to her being to protect her during this period of her greatest vulnerability. (392-93)

Reduced to its biological reproductive function this description of animalistic female sexual irresponsibility comes complete with its own justification for control, as well as the mechanism for that control, in the name of protection. During the Second World War women had got out of control; their sexuality had become dangerous and threatened the social order and their Australian Adams were not here to protect them from themselves, their hormones (and other Adams), and to ensure that untrammelled feminine sexuality did not disrupt the patriarchal social order or cause conflict between males for dominance of the females. In *The Refuge*, it is Irma's sexual appetites which must be punished because they threaten the relationship between men, in this case father and son. In *Soldiers' Women*, women's sexual intractability traitorously undermines mateship, and the solidarity of comrades-in-arms in wartime. This is what happens to women when they are 'freed from the chains of man-made morality by the tides of war'. These are the women - and a more stereotypical and hormonally disturbed collection you couldn't hope to find.

The Lonely The Wanton The Corrupt

IDA - the unprincipled Dresden-china coquette . . .

SELINA - the loving young mother . . .

FAY - the child harlot . . .

ROSA - the rebellious young wife . . .

PATRICIA - the schoolgirl who will stop at nothing . . .

Here is a picture of life in the raw: seduction, murder . . . a story of women freed from the chains of man-made morality by the tides of war, expressing their desires in every kind of love from the brutality of drunken lust to the tenderest of passions.

These women are types. They function as exemplary characters, not for emulation, but to deter women from giving rein to their sexual natures. (Note the use of 'the', not 'a' in the cover blurb, signifying categories of women rather than individuals, and the conventional opposition of the 'coquette' to the 'natural' woman).

I want to discuss the production of female sexuality in *Soldiers' Women* through its deployment of specific narrative strategies and devices, address to the reader and the outcomes in terms of reader positioning and response in order to reveal the *investments* in masculine knowledges and social relations which are at stake. Women are situated in these novels as the riddle, the problem to be solved, the question to be answered. Their sex and their bodies are problematised, pathologised, psychiatrised and hysterised. Female sexuality becomes a crucial target of social power relations 'organised around the management of life' (Foucault 146-47) and knowledge relations organised around masculine knowledges of femininity which are implicitly sexual.

In *Soldiers' Women*, women are animals: pretty hen, old chook, ewe, tiger-cat, hippopotamus, gazelle, kitten, canary, mouse. They rut, conceive, bear and suckle like animals; they come on heat 'truly' only for reproductive purposes. Therefore there is no true female eroticism (275, 280-81). Instead women use their bodies to exercise power

over men. How is this made clear to the reader? The women themselves discuss it. And when Ida, who does not wish to believe that women 'like female animals . . . (come) on heat' (275), declares that women can desire at any time, the narrator intrudes to assure the reader that 'It was hardly logic' (281).

We are spared no detail in the description of women's wiles, beauty routines, bathing and dressing procedures to prepare themselves for this sexual rout and deception of men.

The dress she chose was of ivory decked with rosebuds of every shade of red from blood to cyclamen and flecked with gold. It was full-skirted, narrow-waisted, tight bosom locked with coral buttons, low-necked, with mere ribbons for support, the rest a bolero, cut-away, collarless, short-sleeved . . . (44)

. . . she took a good two hours to dress. The outfit today was in cerise hopsack, with large organdie collar colourfully embroidered in cornelli style, white gloves, red shoes, little red hat trimmed with red-eyed daisies . . . (127)

Throughout the text there is a fetishistic obsession with the construction of a narcissistic femininity—clothes, ablutions, makeup and hair— which exposes narratorial manoeuvres designed to situate the reader and elicit a specific response. We are compelled to adopt a voyeuristic male gaze and a masculine eroticism, along with the narrator. For instance, we watch Ida strip through the eyes of her male cat,

for he was waiting for her in her bedroom, and stayed to watch her strip to the astounding buff: magnolia breasts, a lily belly, mons like a mushroom under golden fairy-grass, legs like shaf^m of light. (36)

The next morning the cat stares 'at the breathtaking landscape of her nakedness, and when she began to hide it, turned away' (44). What have we here?—a singularly masculine cat who is enthralled by the sight of a naked woman? Or rather a medium (or familiar?) for a voyeuristic narrator, moving into a shared position of surveillance and voyeuristic judgment over the observed character. These clichés of gendered spectatorship confirm male modes of 'knowing' women, denying or eliding questions of female subjectivity. Ida remains an object of appraisal: her body is assessed for its value in male-erotic terms.

As well as animalistic sexuality, women are endowed with a far more dangerous and subversive potency. They are fairies and angels who radically metamorphose into witches and demons to thrust home the point of women's perverted sexuality: beautiful on the outside (object), evil within (subject). The narrative employs angel iconography to prefigure demonic activities. Thus, 'as sacred objects rather than (subjective) human beings they assault the sources of power, sexual, social and divine, whose new vulnerability is woman's new life' (Auerbach 107-8). Therefore, the fairy motif (Rosa enters like a fairy; the picnic is a 'fairy frolic'; the yeast fairy-floss; Ida and Rosa are fairy queens in the eyes of the 'Yankee soldiers') alerts us that 'witch's business' lurks only moments away. Such witch's business is abortion, an unnatural, dark, demonic act, whose accomplice is the moon who lusts 'in Lesbian lechery' after Ida: 'a moon long past the fullness of her promise, hump-backed hag-moon, a moon for witches' wickedness, like a peak-faced witch herself' (76). (All feminine friendships are Lesbian attractions in this novel.)

Oh, grope and groan and gripe and grubble . . . I was single, I've grown double . . . hag-moon break my baby-bubble . . . Moon-mother set me free . . . (77)

The male cat who has been witness to the beauty, cannot be witness to the secret evil of Ida and Rosa aborting Rosa's child. Witches' business destroys foetuses, Ida's children, marriages, families. The message is not subtle: Ida, bad mother, bad wife, bad daughter,

angelic in appearance, is metamorphosed into 'a face scarcely human: a mask of demonic glee' as she watches her house burn down and her children die while she is having it off with her GI lover in the boatshed (391).

What is constructed is a female sexuality which is totally self-absorbed, abhorrent, perverted, criminal, promiscuous, falsely erotic, ugly and diseased - it is a pathology of female sexuality located in a masculine discursive framework where women are absent as subject and over-present as object, where they are the spectacle and object of male gaze, in this case a gaze cohabiting uneasily with a reforming and reconstructive zeal. Sexual anxiety and the undermining of masculine power and potency that war and physical removal have brought about provide a sub-text which gains narrative momentum and tension in the obsessive watching, often filmic in its strained quality of absence and distance, and in the compulsive listing of 'things' associated with femininity. The urge to reform the sexuality of women is, however, directed towards the regulation of desire for political and social ends. Female sexuality must be recast and replaced in its 'natural' location, the home, and resubjected to male desire. Women must be worth fighting for: they must be vulnerable, helpless and pure. Even Selina, 'the loving young mother', the voice of feminine sanity 'in a world gone mad' (412), is tempted, but the book closes on a note of affirmation of the advantages for women in subjugating their sexuality to the love of husband and family.

As Darian-Smith has pointed out, the city, too, was implicated in the emergence of women as both embodied subjects and as the objects of reform and regulation. In both *Soldiers' Women* and *The Refuge* the city provides a locus of expanded potentialities for femininity and a threatening loss of control for men. An enduring strand of pathological discourse (with its antecedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth century) linked women's sexuality with the war-time darkened city of the night. Female sexuality could be represented as chthonian, dwelling in or beneath the earth, as dark, dangerous and unknowable as the blacked-out streets and hidden underworld of the city.

In *Soldiers' Women* the narrator is all-knowing; from a position of masculine knowledge, he can unravel the complexities of female sexuality and strip it back to its essential biological qualities. The narrator of *The Refuge*, however, represents Irma's sexuality as unknowable and mysterious and, for this reason, menacing. Her foreignness, and the city, are both developed as metaphors for the dark qualities of women which elude masculine understanding, and therefore masculine control. The 'otherness' of both to Fitzherbert is established early in the narrative. The European refugees are strange and alien: they are arrogant, have different political views, are reticent and secretive, have a different smell. The city of Sydney is ugly, with 'mean buildings behind grotesque and hypocritical facades' (51-52) and Fitzherbert escapes it at every opportunity for the regenerative properties of his Blue Mountains retreat,

my only personal refuge from the smell of that city life that meant to me violence and coarse human passions and ceaseless essays against the immaculate spirit. (113)

Irma is an Eastern European refugee who arrives in Australia at the age of eighteen with a mysterious past, a great deal of sexual experience and a power to fascinate. Fitzherbert, a police roundsman on a Sydney newspaper, comes to her aid, refuses her sexual advances, loses her, and some years later (having been unable to forget her) secretly marries her. It must be a secret in order to protect his teenage son from the knowledge of his father as a sexual being and also to avoid soiling the ever-virginal image both carry of the wife and mother who died giving birth to Alan. Three years after the marriage, he discovers that Alan, who is now a 19 year old medical student, ignorant of the marriage, is having an affair with Irma. Fitzherbert, building on imagery developed throughout the

narrative of Irma's sexuality as possessive, engulfing and animalistic (she claims his body 'with the genial appetite of certain spiders' (290)) decides he must remove Alan from her 'grasp'. So, he poisons her and dumps her body in the Harbour.

This is a very strange book, whose twisted nuances I can't do justice to here. (It would repay comparison with Mackenzie's poetry perhaps, on the recurrent theme of desire for the unknowable and evil and the juxtaposition of puritanism and eroticism.) Here I can only discuss what may be described as a dual pathological discursive trajectory, that is female sexuality as naturally animalistic and socially deviant (as in *Soldiers' Women*), and, more strongly, as Freud's 'dark continent', an unknowable 'other', which both fascinates and repels man.

She had scarcely any habitual attitudes or poses. This was in part the secret of her mystification of me. . . . Unlike any animal I can think of except a cat, she remained unpredictable to the end. There was no training her beyond what she already was . . . and what she was was a woman in complete control of her faculties who, like most women, always knew what she was doing with herself. (276)

(Just prior to this, Fitzherbert has been comparing her to his female spaniel, Donna - not for the first time in the book!) With her 'magical' power over men, Irma is a witch. Fitzherbert falls 'under the spell of her young enchantment, secret and ineffable, of absolute womanhood, and could not see the violence it concealed . . .'. (61)

We can trace a number of narrative 'moves' overlaid in these extracts, all of which recur at different stages in the novel. Irma is an animal, a witch and a woman; all of these elements are sources of her power over men. That power is not available to men; it is 'secret' to women; it is unspeakable and therefore it is dangerous to the existing order. Like the city, it hides the true darkness of its nature behind a brilliant facade. Again, (as in *Soldiers' Women*) there is a denial of a 'true' eroticism in women: they always know what they are doing and their sexuality is subterfuge, concealing their real desire to gain and exercise power over men. Irma cannot be *trained* - and this is, in the end, the reason she must be destroyed. Irma's sex, and its power over father and son, is dangerous, threatening, destructive. If father and son are forced to compete for woman's sex, what will happen to the family they represent, and to the bonding of men in mateship? Women's sexuality requires direction, regulation, policing, disciplining, but the dilemma is that if it cannot be known it cannot be controlled.

The Refuge also fetishises obsessively the body and clothing of Irma. Recurrent detailed description of her preferred clothing, house pyjamas, functions in two ways: to draw attention to the sexual desirability of her body and to a moral standard which decrees that these 'are not proper garments for a woman, even to sleep in, certainly not to wear, uncovered, by day, when they give a grotesque emphasis to whatever bodily beauty they affect to conceal', reinforcing a standard of feminine sexual 'decency' (55). Fitzherbert watches her constantly, often unobserved, with eyes that glide over her body, explore every nuance of face and hair, speculate on the depths of her unknowable psyche. This first person narrator forces the reader to adopt the same perspective; with no alternative reading position available other than the eroticised male gaze, the reader must consciously construct one in order to expose the workings of the text. Implicit in the obsessive collection of information about Irma is the desire for knowledge of her sexuality which might be used to control it. It is Fitzherbert's failure to achieve knowledge of and control over Irma's sexuality which drives him to remove the threat by murdering her.

In *The Refuge*, the combination of the war, the 'un-Australian' sexual and criminal activities of American soldiers and Australian women, activated by darkness in the 'browned-out' city which conceals and creates anonymity, are congealed into a degener-

ate and 'abnormal' dark-side of human nature where, to quote Mackenzie 'healthy mental and spiritual values' have succumbed to a 'moral devaluation' (190). Women have avidly grasped their new freedoms. They have a 'strange new look of life' in their faces, an 'unconcealed nervous excitement' at the thought of war (75).

Having established the problem: female sexuality; its context: the war years; and its site: the city, it becomes possible to elucidate how these novels engage with and intervene in contemporary debates; how they reinforce and resist knowledges and meanings about the female body, sexuality and identity. The war is over and reconstruction is under way. Both the nightmare city and the visible, sexual woman, as unwanted inheritances of war, must be exorcised. Women must be 'retrained' and their sexuality reconstructed; they are to be resituated in the invisibility of the private where their sexuality may be monitored and controlled. The city, site of feminine depravity and agent of concealment, must be reopened to the light of scrutiny. The masculinised social and sexual hierarchy has been damaged by war and absence; women have taken freedoms to themselves which have undercut the dominant and controlling strategies of masculine sexuality, leaving it weakened and vulnerable. A reassertion of male eroticism, through the fetishisation and objectification of the female body and the voyeuristic appraisal of fantasised episodes of female everyday life and experience, can regain lost ground by revealing feminine error. It can also be utilised in the service of a project of post-war reconstruction which aims to remind women of their 'essential' nature and their social responsibilities, thus regaining control over the redefined female sexualised body, occupation of space, and subjectivity.

These strategic constructions of women have as their ultimate aim in this particular place and time, the *reconstruction* of female sexuality for particular social and political purposes. It is a policy of containment, central to the aims of post-war reconstruction and it relies on a 'natural' and timeless categorisation of woman designated by her 'innate' biological characteristics (Pateman 17). A sexual contract is being offered which promises women protection and safety in exchange for obedience. This contract is tied to the notion of a quiet and orderly private sphere populated by women and children as the necessary and natural foundation for civil, that is, public life. Only men may move freely between the two spheres (Pateman 11). Both war and female sexuality are characterised as destructive forces. A bombardment of discourse, official, fictional, private and pathological, exhorts women to lay down their arms and surrender their consciousness in the 'baby boom', 'suburban dream' years after the war.

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