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Convergence and Divergence in Ada Cambridge's *A Woman's Friendship*



Although Ada Cambridge is a major writer of the colonial period, she has long been neglected in Australian literary history. Her serial novel *A Woman's Friendship*, published in the Melbourne paper *The Age* (August-October 1889), was widely read and circulated and, as such, offered a way in the social and gender debates of the time. This paper aims to reflect on Cambridge's ambivalent representation of female characters and gender issues in the 1880s Australian society, oscillating between convergence and divergence with conventions, and between conformism and radicalism.

Geographically and culturally, Ada Cambridge found herself at the crossroads between two antipodean parts of the world, England and colonial Australia, when she undertook her seventy-nine-day voyage to Victoria in 1870. A poet and a novelist, born in 1844 in England, Cambridge married the Anglican clergyman George Cross in 1870 before settling in Australia, where she died in 1926. First feeling as an exile, "homesick practically all the time" (*Thirty Years* 1), she nonetheless later claimed that Australia was her "true home" (Letter n.p.). Throughout her writing career, she used the vantage point offered by her position at the confluence of two geographical and cultural experiences to reflect in her work on the settler society that surrounded her in Australia, as well as the place women occupied in it. She published regularly in the local press, at first using only her initials, "A.C.," to sign her serial novels, probably in order to avoid trouble for her missionary husband, as what she wrote was anti-conformist enough. Some of her favourite themes were indeed marriage, women's rights, social equality, class norms and institutional religion.

Cambridge was a prolific writer and was praised by her contemporaries, notably by literary critics, such as Henry Gyles Turner and Alexander Sutherland: "Ada Cambridge is entitled to the first place amongst the novelists of her sex in Australia, [...] by reason of the quality of her work, and the varied distinctiveness of her several stories" (Turner and Sutherland 87). In the 1880s-90s, she was a major literary figure in Australia, writing in the Australian press as well as for the English and American book markets. However, at the turn of the century, interest in Australian colonial women writers waned as their novels were often disregarded as tackling feminine, domestic concerns, away from the nationalist, masculinist tradition that began to assert itself in the 1890s. Romance tended to be dismissed while the emphasis was placed on realism as promoted by the *Bulletin* writers – a predominant view until the 1980s. For instance, Ken Goodwin, in his 1986 *History of Australian Literature*, reflects the enduring view that Cambridge was "unable to break from the confines of the standard romance plot" (34). Nowadays, it can be difficult to procure Cambridge's serial novels and stories, a lot of them unpublished in book form. Nonetheless, since the end of the 1980s, critical works have paved the way for a re-evaluation of Australian colonial women writers, among whom Ada Cambridge takes a prominent place. There have been attempts at reconstructing Australia's literary history with the inclusion of these writers, notably by Dale Spender, who defines them as a "submerged' heritage," whose study is necessary to "redress

the balance, to reclaim those lost women writers who will then enable us to construct a comprehensive world-view and a coverage of the full range of human experience," notably in the colonial period (xiv, 296). Debra Adelaide also invites us to "re-read the history of Australian literature" from the point of view of women writers (1), and Susan Sheridan has argued that women writers of nineteenth-century Australia "were never the silenced outsiders that later historians and critics rendered them," demonstrating that the emphasis on realism has had a marginalising effect on women's fiction, and calling for a reappraisal of romance as a form used by women to address social and gender issues (viii). Two biographies of Ada Cambridge were published in 1991, one by Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling and another authored by Audrey Tate. Other prominent studies on Cambridge include Susan Lever's and Elizabeth Morrison's works, including the latter's edition of the serial novel *A Woman's Friendship* in book form in 1988. The novel was originally serialised in the Melbourne paper *The Age* from August to October 1889 and unpublished in book form at the time. In this paper, we will also refer to Ada Cambridge's preceding serial novel, *A Marked Man* – published in *The Age* just a few months before *A Woman's Friendship*, under the title "A Black Sheep" – as it echoes certain aspects developed in *A Woman's Friendship*, notably the ambivalent representation of women characters and the oscillation between conformism and radicalism.

A Woman's Friendship portrays the everyday life of two Anglo-Australian couples living in colonial Victoria. The men are used to going to the club and their wives, Margaret Clive and Patty Kinnaird, wishing to turn their ideals into reality, create their own club to discuss social justice and women's rights. Their club is mixed, informal and extremely select: the two married women have accepted only one more member, a widower, Seaton Macdonald. Nevertheless, ideals begin to be cast aside by the two women, for the private meetings turn into a pretence for another cherished activity: talking about and meeting up with Mr. Macdonald, who becomes the unavowed object of their desires. While the reader witnesses the difficulty the married women experience in coming to terms with their repressed desires, the narrator's sardonic wit, a frequent feature of Cambridge's writing, keeps flashing in the background – but what does it really debunk?

Despite the re-evaluation of some of Cambridge's works, the extent of her feminist stance remains open to debate. As Susan Lever remarks, "in Cambridge, the critic faces a writer overtly concerned with feminist issues but dealing with them within existing conventions, in a manner palatable to an educated general public" (21). The ambiguity between conventionalism and radicalism prevails in Ada Cambridge's fiction, notably in the late-1880s serial novel considered in this article. This paper aims to reflect on Cambridge's ambivalent representation of female characters and gender issues in the 1880s society that the author had come to discover, oscillating between convergence and divergence with conventions, between conformism and radicalism. The serial novel, used as a point of entry into the social and feminist debates of the time, develops female characters whose views deviate from social and gender norms. The club gradually turns into a shelter for their diverging, unavowed desires, while the divergent voice of the narrator, wittingly sardonic, keeps flashing in the background, leaving the reader unsure of who or what the target of her irony may be.

Diverging from Class and Social Conventions

“All the great reforms begin with a few people” says Margaret Clive in *A Woman's Friendship* (13). Her proverbial assertion initiates what is to become the “Reform club” and expresses the great ambitions that the character places in the experiment, that is to say, re-defining the status of women in colonial Australia and fighting class restrictions – “we shall be pioneers in the proper sense,” Margaret emphatically adds (21). In the Victorian period, clubs offered a distinct sphere or an intermediate space between the private and the public realms, for they were “quintessentially private institutions” which “bordered the public worlds of politics and urban pleasure” (Gunn 101). Originally, clubs were intrinsically male spaces, where British gentlemen were sheltered from the worries of life (see Milne-Smith; Gunn), which is what Margaret's and Patty's husbands were seeking. By founding their own club, Margaret and Patty claim women's right to have access to the same privileges that men had, namely leaving the private sphere to get involved in politics. By foregrounding the whole process of the development of the club by the two women, from its creation to its disintegration, Ada Cambridge therefore questions the restriction of women to the private sphere in the Australian colonial context.

The two female characters, in their rebellion against class distinctions, want to change the existing order, using its own tools in the form of the club. For instance, the two women want the wealthy to stop wasting their money, therefore they decide to stop buying first-class train tickets and travel instead on second-class carriages, while Margaret tries to explain the importance of such a choice to Patty's husband:

[T]o systematically defy the laws of caste on the railway will mean a great deal [...]. You know as well as I do that a lady would be simply insulted – not in words or deeds, but in the general regard of her class and the authorities – if, because she was strong enough not to mind a hard seat, and had no money to waste, she chose to travel for a pound instead of thirty shillings [...]. And yet you tell me that such an act of courage – true courage, I call it – is too small and paltry to deserve mention! [...] Don't discourage her with conventional platitudes about ladies being out of place when they are here or there where ladies don't usually go. (22)

Breaking class barriers is shown as less socially acceptable for a woman than for a man, so that by breaking class norms, Margaret attempts to go beyond gender conventions as well. Class norms is a recurring theme in Cambridge's fiction, notably in her preceding novel, *A Marked Man*. This novel focuses on Richard Delavel, the younger son of an aristocrat English family, who, against his father's will, refuses to take holy orders. He marries a farmer's daughter, thereby breaking class barriers, and is consequently driven to exile in Sydney. There, he becomes a successful businessman, yet remains unhappy in his marital life, because of his unfulfilled passion for Constance, a young woman who took care of him while he was sick, and secondly because his wife Annie turns out to be a class snob who insists on a strict respect of class and gender conventions. The novel then portrays the growing love between their daughter Sue and Noel Rutledge, a former churchman who questioned the limitations of his religion, and the short affair between Richard and Constance. The portrayal of these two love stories leads to thoughts on social ethics, marriage, sexual passion, and agnosticism. Margaret's views in *A Woman's Friendship* in fact recall Sue's radicalism in *A Marked Man*, as both women refuse to conform to the norm:

We believe that the time is coming when people will be *ashamed* to be rich – I mean rich for merely their own purposes. It will be vulgar, it will be selfish, it will be mean; people will look down on the rich person instead of up, as they do now. (*A Marked Man* 238; original emphasis)

Sue speaks for herself and her father, Richard Delavel, who is openly against “class snobbery” (16), as Margaret and Patty also try to be in *A Woman’s Friendship*. Yet even if *A Marked Man* may seem less ambivalent and less problematic – maybe because having a male protagonist enabled Cambridge to depict experiences and views that would have been deemed too improper for a female character – *A Woman’s Friendship* foregrounds specific instances of divergence from social norms. For instance, another club rule is that when Patty and Margaret go to concerts, they are to buy tickets for the cheap seats in the stalls, because “it is both vulgar and cowardly to spend more than is necessary or than we ought to afford, merely because we are afraid of losing caste with Mrs. Grundy” (20).¹ The association of wealth with vulgar selfishness closely echoes Sue’s words in *A Marked Man*, but the future form “will be” has been replaced by the present form “is,” as if the time of social ethics that Sue hoped for in *A Marked Man* had finally come in *A Woman’s Friendship*.

It is interesting to note that this move away from snobbery and class conventions is associated to the move from England to Australia: in *A Marked Man*, the first half of the novel takes place in England, associated to aristocracy, strict social norms and conventionalism. Richard is there a “rebel ma[king] no parade of his rebelliousness,” “a ‘marked’ man, at a disadvantage with the world” (7). Cast away as a black sheep, he decides to go to Australia where he expects to make his fortune. While England is represented as the land of established values, the Australian colonies are portrayed as a land of opportunities. Once in Australia, being a “black sheep” is defined positively as being “just the one person in the world who never pretends to be what he isn’t” (159). In *A Woman’s Friendship*, the story takes place in Melbourne, and England is only mentioned at the end, when Seaton Macdonald, having turned out to be a sham of a feminist and having contributed to the destruction of the club, goes back to England:

Mr. Macdonald, having married Miss Joyce within a month of his engagement to her, with the readiest permission of her friends, vanished into outer darkness – that is, went off to England to present his bride at court while the wedding dress was fresh [...]. (120)

Sarcasm is patent, and again, Cambridge creates a sharp contrast between Australia and England, two countries she herself lived in. She described both as home, but eventually decided to settle back in Australia, for good, making it her chosen home, after a few years back in England with her husband.

The introduction of the club at the heart of the plot of *A Woman’s Friendship* enables Cambridge to tackle social and gender issues in colonial Victoria. The two protagonists’ political claims, under the cover of the club, which they call the “Reform Club,” diverge from the social norms of the colonial society. Yet the club turns out to be a shelter for the two women’s desires, rather than a political experiment, thereby also questioning gender norms.

1. Mrs. Grundy, or the proverbial guardian of respectability, implies the importance that one’s opinion has on someone else’s everyday behaviour. The name comes from Thomas Morton’s play *Speed the Plough* (1798).

Divergent Desires

As Susan Lever points out, in colonial Australia, “while women were denied access to public office and even to public platforms, the novel became an accepted way for women to enter the debate about social change and women’s rights” (18). Ada Cambridge’s novels assume this role, *A Woman's Friendship* being an example of how she used fiction to engage in the social debates taking place in the urban Melbourne where she lived. The novel’s concern with the Woman Question echoed the Australian social debate taking place at the time about marriage and franchise. In the 1880s, the first societies in favour of women’s franchise appeared, and in 1888, the year of the publication of *A Woman's Friendship*, the first woman’s suffrage bill went into the Australian Parliament in Victoria. Women were to obtain the franchise in South Australia a few years later, in 1894, so that the social changes occurring in Australia constitute the background of Cambridge’s novel and are echoed in her fiction. During the club meetings, Margaret and Patty indeed discuss their future once women obtain the franchise and have “a hand in the making of the laws” (36). The club as such embodies a shelter where women are able to voice their progressive, feminist ideas:

Let us say what we think, dear, and do what we know, and not be afraid of being laughed at. Let us feel ourselves that we are not miserable sheep-like imitators [...] but individuals with souls and with responsibilities of our own. [...] If we shake ourselves free, we may encourage others – at least we shall have a right to our own self-respect. (15)

This is a demonstration of persuasion: women must turn their thoughts into actions. Margaret wishes to speak for all women, uniting them behind an inclusive “we,” universalising the purpose of the club. Dealing with women’s dissatisfaction with their social position, the novel foregrounds these women’s desire for fulfilment outside marriage. This echoes *A Marked Man*, in which Sue, whose mother tries to turn into a “lady,” declares to her nurse Hannah that she will never marry, in order to maintain her independence:

“I will never have a husband,” said Sue.
 “Oh, won’t you? We shall see about that. *You* are not cut out for an old maid, whoever else may be.”
 “Not one who will order me about – most certainly. [...] No man or woman either shall ever make a slave of me.” (150)

In both novels, marriage is associated to constraints that are to be avoided if women are to maintain their free will. Ada Cambridge often promoted a love marriage as opposed to one for money, a view reflected in her writing, with for instance Sue raising the idea that women’s financial independence should not be linked to marriage: “I hope I shall be an old maid to the end of my life before I sell myself for money” (*A Marked Man* 179). This appears in a chapter originally published in October 1888, and strongly resembles the rejection of what Mona Caird had called a “mercenary” marriage a few months earlier, in August 1888, in an essay exploring the question of the domestic and conjugal subjection of women. In this essay, she makes a claim for the “ideal marriage”:

The ideal marriage then, despite all dangers and difficulties, should be *free*. [...] The economical [*sic.*] independence of woman is the first condition of free marriage. She ought not to be tempted to marry, or to remain married, for the sake of bread and butter. (197-8)

This claim for women's financial independence is supported by and reinforced in *A Woman's Friendship*, in which Margaret and Patty read Mona Caird's "Marriage" article, which is explicitly mentioned. This reading gives the opportunity for the author to praise Mona Caird as "a courageous woman, not [...] afraid to stand up alone, in her own proper person, against the solid army of prejudices arrayed against her" (44). Furthermore, women's financial independence and paid work was a concern of Ada Cambridge's, who wrote in her memoirs that she financially contributed to the family resources by her writing, at a time when it was believed in the colonies that reading and writing would make women unfit for the domestic duties that were considered theirs: "I remember the time-honoured theory that a writing person is no good for anything else [...]. I began to write for *The Australasian* [...] to add something to the family resources when they threatened to give out" (*Thirty Years in Australia*, 38, 69).

A Woman's Friendship thus reflects the feminist claims of the time, but also tackles the question of female desire in less explicit terms through the love triangle comprising the three members of the club. The club is indeed both a place where women could exchange on topics not so appropriate in public, and a pretence for unconventional meetings. The club, neither a public, nor a completely private sphere, is a rather secret sphere where the two women can play with fire and attempt to acknowledge their sexual desires. The club is shown as offering a realm of possibilities to them, reinforcing its role as a shelter for socially unacceptable sexual desires. As such, the club embodies a "neutral territory" (Levy 533), serving as an in-between space where private encounters are allowed to happen because for the outside world, club events are socially accepted, while the Reform Club in fact offers a front for a partly illicit activity.

The very first chapter, entitled "The Reform Club," is devoted to preparing the love triangle that will be developed in the rest of the story. The setting of the scene – the 1888 Melbourne Centennial Exhibition – is described in terms replete with the lexical field of secrecy: "nooks and corners," "retirement from observation," "out of everybody's way," "only twittering little birds to spy upon you," "darkness" (9). The reader may picture a couple of lovers wandering through the Exhibition premises, until the end of the chapter unveils a love triangle: "three people had withdrawn themselves instead of two. It was the Reform Club holding its little meetings" (10). Instead of depicting "a purely intellectual friendship" (57) – as Patty defines their relationship – the narrator foreshadows a love triangle and binds the two notions of the club and of seduction together.

The exclusiveness of the club shelters its members from the public eye and from the Victorian conventions of propriety, allowing the club meetings to gradually turn into private encounters, when the members choose to meet in twos instead of threes, "sub rosa" (80). For instance, when Patty is in Seaton's company, she does not hesitate to leave social issues aside, stating that she "came here to be free and happy, not to drive at things" (88). The climactic episode takes place when Patty and Margaret go to Seaton's station, unchaperoned and without their husbands. Desire, revealed by innuendoes, has taken over politics for the three members: Seaton is "delighted to have secured a club meeting under his own roof" (65); when he addresses Margaret, she feels "the subtle something that is like wine in women's veins [which] quickened her pulse for the moment" (70-1); and Patty, when alone with Seaton in the early morning, feels "a pleasant sense of youthful liberty" (76). Another example of this rhetoric is

found in Chapter XV, which, quoting Patty's words again, is ironically entitled "A Purely Intellectual Friendship" (96), while it focuses on flirtation between Patty and Seaton: "It certainly is the most delicious morning to be out in." / "And to be out in it with you – up in this quiet spot, far from the madding crowd – that is enchanting" (98). The reference to Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) in Seaton's statement reminds us that the escape from the public eye that the club offers may hide more passionate relationships, while forbidden desires show through Patty's understatement. The challenge to conventions is reinforced by the fact that the women are shown to be aware of the impropriety of their actions, as Patty's letter to her husband ironically reveals – "Certainly there is no mistress at Yarrock, but then as there will be two of us, that doesn't matter" (57). She is also aware of the meaning of Seaton's look upon her – "She knew the look too well to make any mistake about it" (74). The fact that the two women protagonists' sensual and sexual desires are alluded to through innuendoes and understatements, rather than fully expressed in plain terms, enabled Cambridge to remain in keeping with the conventions of propriety that, as a woman, she was altogether expected to conform to, while her novel was dealing with a socially unacceptable topic.

A Woman's Friendship presents the club as a liberating possibility used to challenge the Victorian strict social and sexual constraints weighing on women, notably the expression of their desires. The experiment of the club, created out of the women's will to diverge from the social conventions of the colonial society, ends up diverging from this original purpose, thus highlighting the parodic aspect of the experiment.

Ambiguity and Ambivalence

The club itself may be a parody, which could therefore partly undermine the reading of the women's experiment as radical. First, far from the realities of clublife in colonial Australia, this club is not granted any dedicated building. The first full meeting takes place "at Mrs. Clive's house" (9), the second one "at the Imperial Coffee Palace" (9), and after that "the members assembled wherever and whenever they could do so conveniently. [...] Thrice they met in the Public Library; once in the Botanic Gardens; twice in the University Museum; four times they went down to Brighton and sat on the beach" (9). The incredible number of different places is ironically counterweighted by the extremely restricted number of members: "three was the full number. [...] [It was] the most exclusive club that ever called itself by that name" (5, 8-9). Cambridge's fictional "Reform Club" thus diverts the name of the famous 1836 London club, hers having but the name of a club. Despite its declared social reform program, Margaret and Patty's "Reform Club" is a formal parody, leaving us to ponder over the target of parody: is Cambridge mocking the rigid institution of the club, the habits of colonial society, or even the women themselves? The dissolution of the club at the end of the novel, partly due to the two women's jealousy, increases the reader's doubts: the collapse could be read as a failure, and, a common view at the time, as evidence of the impossibility for women to seriously enter political matters, consequently casting a shadow on the anti-conformist reading of the club. In this perspective, we are led to wonder if Cambridge really wrote with a feminist intent, or if she did not rather write so-called "ladies' literature," which was a guarantee of making good copy at the time.

Moreover, the narrator's omnipresent sardonic wit further increases the tension between conventionalism and radicalism in the novel. The narrator's stance constantly

oscillates between foregrounding the women as strong-willed and progressive, and deflating their militant assertions. For instance, the narrator notes that, despite their grand political declarations, they put an end to the club's discussions because they cannot conceive being late for the evening with their husbands, "for, with all their modern notions, they were still quite conventionally punctilious in their regard for the convenience of their husbands" (23). In fact, the narrator's comments, mocking the women's inconsistencies, suggest their partial complicity with social conventions. For example, when Patty rejects her husband's offer to buy her lace and jewelry because "he must find a better way of spending [his money] than that," her refusal is immediately followed by the narrator pointing her contradictions through the fact that she is going to the theatre "in all her best clothes" (37). Later, the narrator underlines their role as caring housewives who feel absolutely necessary at home, and who finally go back to their husbands for emotional support, seeking the security of marriage as a force against the challenge to propriety:

Patty gave herself wholly to him [*i.e.*, her husband] and the domestic concerns – the bees and flowers, the poultry and dairy, the fruit preserving, the tomato sauce making, the rearing of puppies [...]. She gave her lord something besides mutton chops for breakfast every morning, and the best of puddings for his dinner, as a sacred duty. (120)

Sarcasm is perceptible in the enumeration of domestic tasks, as well as in the religious, sacred tone used in the hyperbolic labelling of Patty's husband as a "lord" and domesticity as a "sacred duty." In the light of this, *A Woman's Friendship* could be read as a satire of women's supposed inconsistencies, which would appear to confirm what Beilby and Hadgraft wrote about Cambridge's women characters: "the tenor of her views is unmistakable – she did not think very highly of them" (10). Susan Lever has also argued that in "*A Woman's Friendship*, women are the central victims of her wit" (21).

Yet, criticism may not so much be directed at Patty as at the Victorian, colonial conventions that attributed the "pudding making" to women rather than letting them get involved in politics. In this light, the narrator's sarcasm is not directed solely at the two women. As Susan Lever has rightly pointed out, "this shifting of ground and multiplicity of viewpoints are the source of much reading pleasure" in Cambridge's novels (32). In *A Woman's Friendship*, sarcasm and criticism also target the socially-accepted inequalities between men and women and the lack of possibilities offered to women, as the following dialogue between two passing-by men about Seaton's new fiancée, Miss Joyce, at the end of the novel, shows:

"Miss Joyce plays the violin and writes poetry." [...]
 "Great Scott! You don't say so. Then now I begin dimly to see why he puts his neck under the yoke" [...].
 "Well, if it were my case, I'd rather leave the poetry out. [...] I'd like to have my wife attend to her children and the pudding making. [...] Every wife and mother should do it, whatever her class of life. If I were as rich as the Rothschilds, I'd make my wife look after the nursery herself – aye, and the puddings too – because that's her proper sphere and business." (114-5)

The repetition of "pudding making" as a woman's proper activity in the last two chapters of the novel draws the reader's attention to the phrase's resonance with Jane's thoughts on women's duties in *Jane Eyre*, published more than 40 years before and that Ada Cambridge, known to have been an avid reader, would most likely have known:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; [...] it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 93)

The recurrence of this domestic chore in Cambridge's novel makes it stereotypical and thus ironical, and the insistence on a woman's "proper sphere and business," coming at the end of a novel devoted to two women blurring this very idea of a division between public and private spheres through their club, is highly ironical. The criticism rather weighs here on the two men's restricted view of what a woman's place in society should be. Moreover, when one knows the importance of poetry in Cambridge's life – she started her writing career with poetry, of which she wrote four volumes – the description of Miss Joyce in the following paragraph as "this pretty creature, who writes poetry" is also ironical (115) and highlights the men's condescension. Cambridge knew too well the criticism that could weigh on a woman should she be writing instead of fulfilling the domestic tasks that were imposed on her. It was a prime concern of hers, as her memoirs reveal, when she emphasises that despite her writing activity, she still attended to the domestic tasks, and writes, almost apologetically, that "in fact, housework has all along been the business of life; novels have been squeezed into the odd times" (*Thirty Years in Australia* 45). Yet, the huge amount of fiction that Cambridge wrote raises doubts about this statement, which reflects her own conflicting position, as the wife of a clergyman writing unconventional fiction, and publishing her serial novels under her initials so as to hide her married name, because her interests and her husband's ones were divergent.

Ada Cambridge's writing has long been neglected in Australian literary history, despite its popularity when it was published. Considered too romantic, too domestic, or even too conservative, her novels in fact resist any definite categorisation. *A Woman's Friendship* presents female characters whose views diverge from class and gender conventions, and the "Reform Club" they create is gradually used as a shelter for the two women's unavowed desires, inappropriate as they were for married women in Victorian society. Their club, consisting of only three members, is rather a parody of a club, and the narrator's sardonic wit further blurs the frontier between radicalism and conventionalism, and between convergence and divergence with social and gender norms, as it highlights the two women's inconsistencies. Yet, irony rather targets the socially-accepted inequalities between men and women, often reproduced by each alike.

The serial form of the novel, which has contributed over the past decades to the neglect Ada Cambridge's novels have suffered from, has nonetheless enabled her to be widely read in the nineteenth century. As such, this form could be used as an accepted way for women to enter the social and gender debates of the time. As far as *A Woman's Friendship* is concerned, the newspaper in which it was published, *The Age*, was circulated up to the enormous number of 80,000 copies a week in 1888 (Smith n.p.), when Cambridge's novel was serialised, confirming that Cambridge could thus reach a very wide readership thanks to this specific publication format. *The Age* was an inexpensive newspaper, costing only a penny, thereby increasing the readership's access to Cambridge's serial. The paper was also very influential, as its editor David Syme confirmed it in 1888:

“So far everything is going well. The paper maintains its influence with the public as well as it ever did” (Letter, n.p.). Writing serial novels thus constituted an effective way for Cambridge to take part in the political and social debate on the Woman Question on quite a large scale, while *A Woman's Friendship* also demonstrates her brilliant use of irony, wit and ambivalence. As such, Ada Cambridge's *A Woman's Friendship* exemplifies the wealth that serial novels written by colonial women writers represent nowadays in Australian literary history.

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