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## MARGINAL GENRE/MARGINAL GENDER: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE SHORT STORY

Over most of the last two centuries since Edgar Allan Poe's ground-breaking theoretical reflections on what he called "short prose narrative,"<sup>2</sup> the short story has been considered, in spite of the favour it has met among readers and publishers, as a marginal literary genre when compared to the centrality of the 'major' form: the novel. In the last forty years or so, at least since the 1970s-1980s, scholarly and market attention towards short fiction has increased, and the short story as an autonomous literary genre appears to have been emancipated from its peripheral position and narrative subjugation.

What is noteworthy is that, in all postcolonial literary contexts, the short story has always been, for various and different reasons, a deeply-rooted genre playing a "disproportionately" prominent role (Hunter 4) in comparison with the novel. In Australian literature in particular, the pre-eminent function of the short story is revealed by the fact that it has been an identity vector since the 1890s and it has been regarded as the literary means that could distinctively interpret the white Australian character. An identity and a character, though, that were essentially male and strongly imbued with a masculine slant.

In this article I intend to draw a parallel between the non-hegemonic, allegedly 'minor' literary status of the short story and the marginal, under-estimated position (at least for a long time) of Australian women writers in a patriarchal society and in a male-dominated literary context, and in the meantime, by going through some representative short stories by nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers I aim to give evidence of a distinctively female literary tradition of the short story in Australia that has contributed to the development of the genre and to the making of the Australian literary canon.

The relegation of the short story to a marginal position and its hierarchical subordination to the novel can be ascribed to diverse reasons. Firstly, its relatively limited length has often wrongly been regarded as a sign of simple and un-sophisticated writing, that made the short story appear as a 'condensed novel' or a novel in miniature, hence, a sort of secondary literary exercise, tainted with worthless literary value. Secondly, the frequent association with popular genres (like detective stories, ghost stories, love stories) has contributed to label it with an allegedly lower literary (or sub-literary) status. Besides, the publication in commercial magazines, that made short stories easier to market than single-author collections, also made them, in Mary Louise Pratt's words, become "garbage after a reading" (192), a consumer's product to be replaced with an equivalent one in next week's or next month's issue. Furthermore, as L.P. Hartley notices, a different reading approach is required when facing a collection of short stories, as much as an "unusual concentration" that is not expected, instead, when reading a novel (Head 3). Adding to this, a writer's relationship with short fiction is generally ambiguous; very rarely, indeed, does an author devote himself/herself to the short story only, or is he/she best known for his/her short fiction rather than for his/her novels (although there are, of course, rare but notable exceptions like, in Australia, Henry Lawson and Frank Moorhouse – the latter at least until the 1990s). Quite often, young writers use the short story form to launch their careers but go on to novel writing once their literary reputation has been established in order to be recognized as major talents.

All these factors contributed for a long time to consider the short story as a minor form, a peripheral literary genre or, as the title of an early contribution by Thomas Owen Beachcroft quotes, as a "modest art." But the critical response to the short genre has changed over the last thirty years, as Maria Teresa Chialant and

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<sup>2</sup> See Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (Graham Magazine, May 1842) where he elaborates his aesthetics on the principles of length, rhythm, and unity of effect and impression in what he defines "short prose narrative" or "prose tale." Similar considerations on the fundamental function of the unity of effect in short works of art is given in his famous critical essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846).



Marina Lops observe (3), the status of the short story has been consolidated in the literary establishment as confirmed by academic institutions like, for example, the “Society for the Study of the Short Story (founded in 1988), or by the rise of journals exclusively dedicated to the short form, such as the prestigious *The Journal of the Short Story in English* (started in 1983).

Moreover, theoretical works on the conventions and formal specificities of the genre have begun to proliferate especially from the 1970s onwards, starting with the seminal work of Charles May (1976; reprinted and revisited in 1994), and followed by relevant contributions by Ian Reid (1977), Helmut Bonheim (1982), Valerie Shaw (1983), Clare Hanson (1984 and 1989), Dominic Head (1992), to the most recent studies, not incidentally focused on the development of short fiction in postcolonial literatures, by Peter O. Stummer (1986), Jaqueline Bardolph (2001), Marta Dvorak and W.H. New (2007), Adrian Hunter (2007), up to the latest edition of essays by Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell (2013).

The general assumption made by these latest works is that there is an affinity between the short story and postcolonial literatures as not only is short fiction keenly experimented by postcolonial writers, welcomed by local journals and magazines and copiously published in the numerous anthologies issued every year, but the genre is also critically endorsed by scholarly works, it is the object of academic conferences and the subject of several literary competitions and awards. The reasons for the success of the short story form in postcolonial literatures have been deeply investigated, starting from the premises that the short story’s literary subordination to the well-established middle-class tradition of the novel seems to represent a metaphor of the political and cultural subjugation of colonial countries to the Empire, a reflection of the postcolonial binary opposition between centre and periphery.

But its status of “minor” literature is only one of the frameworks by which the short story and the postcolonial can be associated. As a discontinuous, unstable and elusive genre, detached from a specific socially and politically oriented background, and wavering in a liminal cultural position between the commercial product and the artistic medium, the short story is permeable to social and cultural change. As a fragmented genre that resists received conventions and defies categorization, it can best represent fragmented social realities, portray the cultural and identitarian disruption brought about by colonization, give voice to the margins and contribute to the moulding of a new postcolonial identity. In this light, as Adrian Hunter underlines, the short story is a form of “minor literature” in the meaning given by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their 1975 study on Kafka, of a literature that a minority constructs within a major language and upon the remains of the dominant culture (Hunter 139).

A similar association with the concept of “minority” had already been proposed by the Irish scholar and writer Frank O’Connor in his seminal work, *The Lonely Voice* (1963), where he perceived in the short story genre “an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time” (May 1976, 88). In this sense the short story is inherently related to the conditions of marginality and otherness that are typical of the fringes, of dislocation, of “liminal or problematized identities” (Hunter 138), and which are, above all, the heritage left by colonialism. Twenty years later, Clare Hanson, in the introduction to her critical contribution on the short story, extends the category of marginalized groups excluded from the “ruling narrative” to women, thus moving towards a feminist critique of the genre: “the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women” (1989, 3), and her position is endorsed by Mary Eagleton who in “Gender and Genre” (1989) interprets the non-hegemonic, peripheral, contradictory nature of the short story as a reflection of the position of women in a patriarchal society (62).

These observations appear particularly pertinent when applied to the Australian literary context. It is indeed a point of fact that Australian literature has acquired since European settlement distinctively male features that marginalized women, both as characters and as writers, by means of a strident misogyny that the writer Shirley Hazard has defined as “part of the Australian wound” (207), in a country where “derision of all artistic expression was not unconnected with derision of woman as a sex” (207). Until mid-twentieth century, at least, the short story in particular, also due to its affiliation with the nationalist, radical and male-chauvinist policy of the *Bulletin* (which became itself a school of short story writing), remained a “man’s world”, invested with the role of transmitting what, from a white and male perspective, was assumed to be quintessentially Australian. As a consequence, women writers, unable or unwilling to embrace the masculine ideal, became, as argued by Debra Adelaide, strangers in their own land (10) and remained eclipsed from official records (at



least until the rise of the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s) in spite of their conspicuous presence and strenuous activity. An accurate bibliography of Australian women short story writers, compiled by Ewa Gajer in 1995, comprises 1268 names of women who wrote short stories between 1844 and 1987. And yet, suffice it to go through the list of contents of some of the numerous anthologies published from the 1890s onwards to realize that there is a disparity, until recent years, between the number of stories included written by men and by women.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, it is this very marginalization that gives rise in women's stories to challenging outcomes. As Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin point out, the typical colonial process which relegates what is alien to the margins ends up turning upon itself and generates in the margins an impetus to decentre and destabilize: marginality thus becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy (12). By way of analogy, as the short story due to its marginalized and liminal position has become rich in tension and possibility, thus revealing a power of subversive creation, likewise the approach and engagement of Australian women writers with the short story, although kept to the margins of a masculine tradition of the genre, have revealed a destabilizing creative drive that since mid-nineteenth century has challenged the male dominated 'mainstream canon' and contributed to redraw Australian literary history.

Indeed, the production of short stories by Australian women writers was overshadowed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by male writers who, by giving voice to the bush and to what was considered as 'typically Australian', were regarded as national icons – not only Henry Lawson, of course, but also Marcus Clarke, Price Warung and later Vance Palmer or Hal Porter, to name just a few. And yet, women like Rosa Praed, Ada Cambridge, Tasma, and later K.S. Prichard, Marjorie Barnard and many others were extremely prolific and their stories, and the women they portrayed, challenged and contested the official Australian narrative, not only by mining its constructed masculine image and ascendancy but also by rethinking gender identity. They explored, with the sharpness given by the short pace of the story and often by means of the implicit, new possibilities for 'femaleness' that took distance both from the model defined by the metropolitan centre (i.e. deriving from the moral, social and aesthetic values of Victorian England) and from the dominant patriarchal ideology of the Australian colony.

Although they did not always explicitly take up feminist positions, women's short stories can be considered as a form of feminine colonial/postcolonial resistance to imperial/patriarchal dispensations. Their "feminine" concerns, in the meaning given by Toril Moi, that is, concerns with what is marginalized, repressed and silenced by the ruling order (220), reveal a more or less consciously feminist anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position. So the representation of a femininity that is deviant from normative social structures (in terms of social attitudes, physical appearance, gender roles, sexuality) becomes a literary device adopted by Australian women's stories to elude and subvert institutional power, even more if these female characters are located within a traditional colonial space where they perform traditional female roles.

An early example of this subversive approach in the short stories of 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian women writers is to be found in Ada Cambridge (1844-1926), whose production was marginalized from the radical mainstream literature of the turn of the century both because it was a woman's literary offspring and because it belonged to what in the 'gendering of literature' was regarded as a typically female and feminine sub-genre: the romance, dismissed at the time as a poor literary and intellectual form. And yet, in the six stories comprising her only collection *At Midnight and Other Stories* (1897) Cambridge employs the "courtship and marriage story form" to question and to parody exactly what this genre was supposed to promote, i.e. the institution of marriage and the domestic role of women. If her literary production remained underestimated until the 1980s it was due to her anglo-Australian perspective and colonial exoticism, which were still recurrent features in the works of a generation of writers who were not born in Australia – even though they had spent most of

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<sup>3</sup> The scarce presence of women writers' contributions is particularly evident until the 1990s when the number of stories included written by men and women writers begins to appear more homogeneous. A similar gap can be noticed in the Sydney anthology *Coast to Coast* a major channel of encouragement and distribution of the Australian short story, published by Angus and Robertson and issued annually between 1941 and 1948, and biennially between 1949 and 1970, with a final number appearing in 1971. What is interesting to notice is that a relevant numerical disparity is evident even in those issues edited by women writers themselves, like M. Barnard Eldershaw and H. Drake-Brockman, editors respectively of the 1946 and 1955-56 issues.



their lives there – and whose approach set them apart from the radical male tradition of bush realism. But what contemporary readers failed to recognize is that through her irony, which in the sharp bite of the short story is possibly even more bitter than in her novels, Ada Cambridge proved to be as much averse to sentimentalism and romantic idealism as male writers who wrote about the bush and bushmen in stark, realistic terms. Significantly enough, Susan Lever sees in Cambridge's habit of undermining idealism and romance with the irony of a realist, an appropriate comparison with Joseph Furphy – a literary icon of the masculine 1890s Australian tradition (35). Evidence of this kind of approach is to be found in the story "A Breath of the Sea" where Emma, the gloomy female protagonist separated from her husband, is much more than a romantic heroine suffering the pangs of love and abiding by the conventions of romance. Cambridge denounces through her the claustrophobic condition of women who were not allowed to find scope outside marriage, as the omniscient narrator implies by saying that "when you have been married – even if married miserably – you have been spoilt for any other life" (Cambridge 135), which suggests in the economy of the short story that, according to Cambridge, the role of wives was supposed to absorb completely women's individuality and to preclude any alternative choice or re-thinking. And if by the end of the story Emma concludes that it is "better to have even a bad husband than to have none" (142), one cannot avoid perceiving in this stereotyped declaration a bitter irony against the conventional idea of marriage as a goal for women.

A similar implicit critical position on the passive role of women is to be found in "The Wind of Destiny" where during a yachting race the handsome Herbert Lawson (apparently, not an incidental name) has to make up his "distracted mind" as to which of the two girls he has invited will become his wife. By setting the trial day of the man's choice in a thoroughly masculine context, and yet not in the bush, Cambridge obliquely keeps her distance from the topography of the Australian legend, implying that the bush was not the only real Australian place and not the only man's world where women were marginalized or, as in this case, objectified. Noteworthy is, indeed, the description of the spick and span yachts lined at the port of St Kilda with their beautiful sails going up – a pride for their owners and a metaphor for the reader of an exhibited and aggressive virility, by means of which women could be won as trophies. But in opposition to the requirements of a romance's ending the prize gained by the girl on whom Herbert's choice finally falls, turns out to be a high price to pay rather than a reward. As a matter of fact, in the words of the narrator, no more implicit but almost sardonically explicit, the prospected marriage will lead but to harmful consequences: "They will sink together to that sordid and common matrimonial state which is the despair and disgrace of civilization. She will get fat and frowsy as she gets into years – a coarse woman, selfish and petty, and full of legitimate grievances; and he will hate her at first, and then cease to care one way or the other, which is infinitely worse than hating. And so two lives will be utterly spoiled, and possibly three or four – not counting the children who will have no sort of fair start" (305).

Another story worth mentioning, and one which is frequently anthologized, is "A Sweet Day" where the female protagonist, Letty Kemp, has the typical traits of the ideal colonial femininity of the "Australian Girl," a mixture and adaptation of the old English world values to the new Australian conditions that resulted in a more independent, authoritative, energetic female type than the English middle-class woman, more masculine, in a sense, but still filled with strict moral values and maternal instinct (Dalziell 36). A model that was certainly complicit with British imperialist propaganda and meant to exalt the results of the colonial enterprise (McPherson, 8): Letty indeed works hard and cleverly as a bee-keeper, earns money and maintains the family income; she is ambitious and runs her business as a proper commercial enterprise planning to export honey abroad and get rich. Nevertheless, her activity only apparently makes her independent because it does not set her free from patriarchal control and from the destiny of marriage. There is nothing in her of the subversive new woman, as the narrator underlines, in fact it is her job that ties her strongly to her family, to her unquestioned role of owing daughter and to a well-off matrimonial life. The finale of the story depicts her as "Her Grace the Duchess now" who has discarded her interest for the bees in view of "worthier objects for the exercise of her abilities" (Cambridge 277), that is great households to administer and young dukes to rear – in other words the established roles of wife and mother imposed by the traditional, patriarchal family. The fact that Letty eagerly accepts her gendered position seems to function as a narrative device to make the story fit in the conventions of romance, as required by readers and editors, but one cannot help noticing that the unconvincing conclusion is subversive even in its apparent conformity because



it hides not only the authoress' reservations on the model of the Australian Girl, as constructed by colonial discourse, but also her sarcasm and disagreement on a society that forces women to deny themselves and their ambitions.

A similar position is to be found in the short stories of the Australian-born and expatriate Rosa Praed (1851-1935), in whose four collections, published between 1902 and 1909, the concerns with the woman question and with her social marginalization are contained within the framework of the romance, but their subversive strength lies in her atypical use of the "bush tale" that was at the time dominating the literary scene. Praed wrote copiously and acutely about the outback, especially in her short fiction that, unlike her several novels, mostly set in urban contexts (the 1860s Brisbane, in particular), is mainly centred on the bush and bushmen in all their different guises (squatters, selectors, bushrangers, etc.) and voices. Praed indeed recreates a lively Australian idiom through the words of her characters, thus giving her stories the shape of yarns, in order to transmit a more realistic *Aussie* sound. But in spite of all these elements, typical of the Bulletin story, just like many of her female contemporaries she was not acknowledged an active role in the process of construction of a white Australian identity. As Dale Spender denounces, she could not be comfortably placed within the Australian male tradition because her view was different, it was that of women, "and it is this 'woman's view' which has been eclipsed" (164). But it has to be pointed out that besides her female perspective what sets Rosa Praed apart from the male tradition is above all her subversive use of the bush story, exploited as a means to overturn those very values and prototypes it was supposed to promote. The bush story turns against itself in the hands of Praed and questions undisputed moral codes like mateship and the predominant role of men.

With this regard, one of the most significant stories is "The Bushman's Love Story." The title deliberately puts together in an ironical and defiant juxtaposition the protagonist of the masculine Australian tradition (the bushman), and the romantic expression of female literature (love stories): two apparently irreconcilable entities and a deliberate desecration of the values of the Australian legend. But the reader's expectations of a proper love story are very soon overthrown because the romantic topic is relegated to the end of the narration and it reveals to be the least important and more conventional aspect of it, included only to formally meet the requirements of romance. But, above all, the title's assumptions are neglected because the bushman is no protagonist at all, he is instrumental to the introduction of a female character, who also appears only at the end to become the real protagonist *in absentia* because it is around her that the real topic of the story is centred, that is, the woman question, the emancipation of women and the right to vote. The story is thoroughly realistic in terms of discussion of social politics and depiction of the contemporary Australian context, but what is again unexpected, and meant to undermine the bush tale from the inside, is the fact that the story is not set in Australia but in London, where a bushman and a Sydney man meet in the flat of an expatriate Australian woman (the narrator and a patent alter ego of the authoress) to drink tea, smoke the pipe and talk about old friends in bush vernacular. Hence, Australia is decentred from the predominant position that is given in bush tales, from a realistic setting at the antipodes to a ritual of stereotypes in the imperial centre of London. And yet, Praed's intent is not to marginalize Australia but rather to make it central in a conversation dealing with topics that were not considered in men's stories and questioning what in these stories was instead given for granted. For example, the reactionary position of both the bushman and the (apparently) more liberal Sydney man against the right of women to vote is clearly revealed in the debate and in this way it is implicitly denounced. The bush tale, therefore, is decentred also from masculine connotation, as made evident by the passage in which the narrator observes that the conservative bushman reminds her of a character in one of Lawson's stories and, by means of this apparently insignificant comment, Praed undermines, and distances herself from, the Australian legend and its male-chauvinist protagonists, celebrated by its most famous interpreter, Henry Lawson. In another significant passage the bushman, who has been ruined by the economic depression, asserts that Australia is "no place for a man" (Praed 1987, 203), thus profaning a typical expression of the nationalist tradition that instead defined the bush as a man's world and, conversely, as "no place for a woman". A similarly subversive comment is made by the Sydney man who, by pointing out that "Australia isn't made up of *all* bush" (203), seems to lament the exclusive identification of Australia with the bush, both as setting and as subject – again, an ironical jibe at the bush tale, and a sort of anachronistic anticipation of the discontent with social realism that began to proliferate among Australian writers in the 1970s. In other words, what is central



in the nationalist and masculine tradition of the *Bulletin* story is here mined from the inside and marginalized and what is instead marginal – women and their position in society – is given prominence: Theodora appears in the *denouement* of the story and becomes central to the plot by revealing to be the woman the bushman had loved in his youth and now a prospective wife and a mate for him. By finding a female mate for the bushman, Praed closes the story without betraying the expectations of romance readers but, in the meantime, she implicitly attacks and revisits the exclusively masculine bond of mateship.

The creative and revolutionary energy that emerges from stories like this seems to dry up in other more autobiographical and gloomy pieces, where the writer's object is not to attack the male Australian legend but to show its reverse side: the nightmarish condition women are forced to suffer in the bush where, unlike men, they can find no way out. In the story "Aurea" (mainly based on Praed's mother's experience) the protagonist Brenda, who has lived in the outback for ten years, bears on her body and on her mind the signs of a terrible climate, of personal misfortunes, of isolation and solitude; she is a living example of how, as the narrator underlines, "the woman always pays" (Praed 1988, 229) in the bush. And here the bush is indeed "no place for a woman" but Praed does not accept the reasons implied in male interpretations of the Australian legend, based on the assumptions that women were weaker or less prepared than men to face its hardships, and she subverts the stereotype by declaring that men are not in a stronger position but rather in a more privileged one. This favourable condition is embodied in the story by Forbes, Brenda's attractive husband who, unlike his wife, has been preserved from the harsh consequences of the bush, thanks to the different kind of life that his male identity has allowed him to lead. As the narrator says: "His life was less monotonous. He did not have to stay always in the bush. Sometimes he went to town to arrange matters with the bank and transact other station business. He was not forever weighed down by the horrible bush grind, the sordid bush hardships" (231). What is important to underline is that, by ascribing to men an advantaged condition in the bush, Praed obliquely intends to de-mythologize, as already said, the nationalistic apology of the strength, courage, supremacy of bushmen, but also to claim that the marginalization of women in the bush is not due to the bush itself but to the static role and claustrophobic confinement forced upon them by the traditional gendered division of roles.

Rosa Praed's subversive use of the bush story and her subtle psychological analysis, accompanied by the capacity to realistically draw on the gloomy experiences of women in the bush, seem to anticipate the narrative approach and sensitivity of Barbara Baynton, with whom the genre of the Australian short story by women writers comes to a turning point, finally receiving a well-deserved critical attention. Baynton was one of the very few women writers to have a story published in the *Bulletin* and her only collection *Bush Studies* was honoured with very positive reviews when it was published in London in 1902. But her immediate success and her association with the *Bulletin* (due, however, to one single, heavily edited, story and to her personal friendship with the literary editor A.G. Stephens) should not lead one to think that she had a different treatment from other women writers. Actually, the acknowledgment of her literary stature and mastery of the short story that made her the female counterpart to Lawson arrived late, in the wake of the 1980s feminist revolutions and when, as Bruce Bennett points out, the short story had become more widely studied as an art form. Nevertheless, if it is mere coincidence that *Bush Studies* was published in the same year in which women in Australia were allowed the right to vote, it is not incidental that these stories became epoch-making for women's short story writing because their fierce denunciations of women's harsh lives in the bush and of their exploitation by bushmen started a tradition of overt dissent that paved the way for the early feminist contributions of the 1930s and 1940s and, in the meantime, played a part in the process towards international recognition of the Australian short story.

It must be emphasized that Baynton's stories were mainly misinterpreted at her times, in particular her use of realism was over-estimated and this was the reason why she was not marginalized from the male-dominated national literary milieu, as her predecessors had been. A.G. Stephens himself praised her way of depicting the bush with the same stark realism of her male contemporaries. He defined her stories as "the work of a pure realist" (112-13), and yet, a close reading proves that her writing is much more complex than a realistic portrayal of the bush and its inhabitants would imply. And, paradoxically, the prominence given by contemporary criticism to Baynton's realistic stance was itself, in a sense, a form of marginalization: her stories were appreciated only in the light of dominant masculine norms and were therefore subdued to them; what was instead innovative both in terms of genre and of gender was significantly disregarded. Baynton's



realism is indeed imbued with symbolism and imagery that, as Rosemary Moore has noticed, allow her to convey obliquely what could not be said overtly (30). It is also a kind of ‘psychological realism’, since the stories are “studies” (as the title of the collection quotes) of the effects of the bush on men and women. And “studies,” indeed, appears to be a term Baynton chooses to implicitly distance herself from the anecdote or sketch form promoted by the *Bulletin*. The style of the stories is also complex and it anticipates modernist writing with the removal of the omniscient narrator, the overlapping of multiple points of view and sudden changes in perspective. All this considered, realism plays but a limited role and rather seems to act as a narrative device to break into the celebratory and male-dominated nationalistic literature of the turn of the century with a view to rejecting it, of cutting down to size what it was supposed to exalt and of bringing to the fore what was instead expected to be marginalized and suppressed: women’s psychology and identity.

The well-known and much commented-upon story “Squeaker’s Mate” is, with “The Chosen Vessel”, the most frequently anthologized story of Baynton’s relatively small collection (including only six stories) and it has been variously interpreted since the 1960s as an anti-nationalist criticism (Phillips), a study of the reversal of roles (Moore), a contradictory construction of femininity (Schaffer), a study of motherliness (Hergenhan), a masterful piece of naturalism (Lindsay), a tale of true and false mateship (Webby). The different focus of all these definitions gives evidence of a complex, elaborate and finely-written story that contributes to a fundamental step in the development of the genre in Australia. Considering the story on the background of women’s short story tradition and from the margins of women’s position, one can notice that the subversion of the *Bulletin* story and of the masculine values it promoted goes further in Baynton by means of a more refined symbolic elusiveness (Hergenhan 218). If in Praed’s “The Bushman’s Love Story,” for example, the attack of the exclusively male bond of mateship implied a victorious reversal of roles with a female mate for the bushman, in “Squeaker’s Mate” the reversal of roles implies, instead, the repression of female identity and humanity and, necessarily, tragic consequences.

The ironical subversion of roles is anticipated by the Lawson-like title<sup>4</sup> where the use of the possessive is meant to underline a hierarchical position of power of the possessor (usually a male) over the possessed (usually a female) reduced to a simple role. In Baynton, the genitive subjugation of the mate to Squeaker is subverted both in terms of gendered roles, since the mate is a woman and a wife (and also a surrogate for a mother), and in terms of power because she is not subordinate at all, as revealed by the famous beginning of the story presenting an unexpected and unnatural masculine wife and an effeminate husband: “The woman carried the bag with the axe and maul and wedges; the man had the billy and clean tucker bags; the cross-cut saw linked them. She was taller than the man, and the equability of her body, contrasting with his indolent slouch, accentuated the difference” (Baynton 54).

Particularly incisive in this passage is the rhetorical device of the oxymoron in the image of the linking saw which actually represents the two characters’ mutual detachment, and emphasizes that they are no mates at all, worse, between them there is no communication, no respect, no solidarity. Hence, mateship, the most sacred of all bonds in the bush, is desecrated by Baynton and what takes shape after the accident in which a felled tree breaks the woman’s back is only the atrocious monstrosity of a careless husband who does not help her crippled wife/mate in any way, who is annoyed at her lying on the ground in silence and who leaves her alone when the billy boils in order to eat his dinner. The scene could not be more shocking and more antithetical to the depiction of mateship in the *Bulletin* stories. Moreover, the silence into which the woman falls to the end of the story is also significantly subversive because, besides highlighting her marginalization and de-humanization, it also debunks another fundamental element of the Australian Legend, i.e. yarning. Telling yarns was an important social practice in the bush,<sup>5</sup> it was a way for the laconic bushmen to reveal something of themselves, to strengthen mateship and to be able to survive isolation and hardships; on the contrary, by remaining silent and being “a woman with no leisure for yarning” (Baynton 59), Squeaker’s mate is excluded from the participation of other mates, she is removed to the margins of the narration and of her marital life and she almost succumbs to death. As Susan Barrett rightly observes, the woman’s silence is important because “it is precisely what is not said which draws attention to the hardships of the woman’s life”

<sup>4</sup> See, as an example, titles from Henry Lawson’s stories like “His Father’s Mate,” “The Drover’s Wife,” “Brighten’s Sister-in-law.”

<sup>5</sup> For an exhaustive study of the yarn and its function in the Australian social and literary context see Ron Edwards, *The Australian Yarn: The Definitive Collection*. St Lucia: UQP, 1996.



(3), it is the verbal absence of the woman from the story that speaks out for her being a victim. Indeed, the story is constructed around the gradual disappearance of the woman: her femininity has been concealed, she has renounced motherhood, has been cut out from friendship with other women, has challenged the patriarchal division of roles, and for a sort of natural(istic) revenge she is injured, betrayed and threatened by her husband, abandoned in an old hut, reduced to silence and left to die. By the end of the story the woman is thoroughly brought to the margins and she is taken back to the centre of the narration only in the final scene which paradoxically confirms the loss of her identity: when Squeaker's new, younger and pregnant mate attempts to steal her water she attacks her with the wildness of a robbed tigress and only at this stage, to implore her mercy, does her husband call her by her first name, Mary. But far from suggesting reconciliation or intimacy between husband and wife, the woman's Christian name has the metonymical function of reasserting her non-identity: Mary is the female she was and ceased to be after marriage, the mother she hasn't been able to become, the saintly figure she is about to be transfigured into after death. The message given by Baynton is not that the bush is "no place for a woman," but that it is no place for dissident women acting as men and mining the fixity of gendered roles.

After Federation, when Australia became an independent nation and literature loosened the grip of bush realism and of the construction of a national identity, women's writing flourished and began to enjoy higher critical appreciation. In particular, during the 1930s, as Drusilla Modjeska remarks, women "were, for the first and indeed only time, a dominant influence in Australian literature" (1). The social and cultural climate with the decline of Victorian moral standards and the effects of the first wave of feminism favoured debates on women's role in society, gender relations and the opening up of professions to women; all these concerns are reflected in the short stories of contemporary women. And, in a curious and maybe not incidental pairing of gender and genre, the 1930s was also a decade that, as Bruce Bennett underlines, saw a developing awareness of the artistic integrity of the short story all over the world (102).

It is in this fruitful period that the names of Henry Handel Richardson, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Marjorie Barnard emerge in the short story field for their contribution in introducing the world of women into the literary mainstream, often by means of a strong feminist consciousness and subversive issues. H.H. Richardson's short story collection, *The End of a Childhood* (1934), gathers together disparate pieces written throughout her career with different settings and focuses, but linked by the presence of sexually oppressed women and by the denunciation of the roles forced upon them of caring wives and sacrificing mothers in which they are caged by time-established gender norms. In particular, a number of sketches subtitled *Growing Pains. Sketches of Girlhood*, that prove Richardson's craftsmanship with the short story form, have been given important critical attention. These stories are indeed noteworthy for their discussion of problems related to gender and sexual formation, unveiling Richardson's familiarity with Freudian theories and her harsh criticism of the compulsory heterosexual enculturation in which girls are brought up. In the sketch titled "Conversation in a Pantry", thirteen-year-old Trixie refuses the idea that women have to get married wondering by means of an existential unanswered question: "Why are men and women? Why have they got to be?" (Richardson 107). In "And Women Must Wait," instead, Dolly is let down by her first experience at a ball because she is never asked to dance but, above all, because she realizes that the parallelism between women's position at a ball and in real life is all too evident, since they are supposed to wait to be chosen and learn to sell themselves, depending on men for their fulfilment. The issue of homosexuality, and of the weight of social pressure related to it, is dealt with in "Two Hanged Women" where two lesbian girls have to face social exclusion and bullying and are forced to admit that only marriage to a man can buy social acceptance. Their incapacity to come to terms with it: "Why has it got to be like this? I want to be happy, like other girls" (140), speaks out for Richardson's revolutionary protest (even more so in 1930s Australia) against sexual orientation discrimination and the imposition of heterosexual social norms. The denunciation of gender and cultural constrictions are metaphorically represented in "The Bathe" by the marks left on the skin of two adult women when they take their clothes off to swim in the sea. By removing their tight bodices, heavy skirts, several petticoats, stiff corsets, long drawers, voluminous chemises, buttoned boots and stockings, the women are physically released from the prison of oppressing clothing and metaphorically discard the social restrictions inflicted on their sex. Nevertheless, the marks on their skin show they have been unnaturally deformed by restraining garments as much as they have been by social and cultural conventions. Just like the women portrayed by her predecessors, Richardson's female characters are as much marginalized by



their non-acceptance of superimposed gender roles but their advantage over them is having the opportunity to cry out their discontent and non-conformity.

Apparently less involved with feminist concerns proper is Katherine Susannah Prichard, whose engagement with contemporary politics as a founding member of the Australian Communist Party made her formally reject feminism owing to its bourgeois ideological background. Nevertheless, if her short fiction published in the 1940s and 1950s is clearly shaped by the ideology of socialist realism, in the earlier stories of her first collection, *Kiss on the Lips and Other Stories* (1932), she deals with the topics of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood with as much delicate sensitivity and powerful feminine emphasis as her most radical colleagues. In “The Cow” and “The Cooboo” she tackles the issue of maternity, in neither case idealizing it, through a combination of realism and subtle symbolism, and with the capacity to focus on the individual caught between rationality and instinctual drives. “The Cow” opens with a woman so much wishing to become a mother that she is instinctively jealous of her husband’s copiously fertile cow drawing her husband’s attention and cares. Nevertheless, when her longing for maternity is fulfilled not once, nor twice, but for three consecutive times, she begins to develop a bitter awareness of the social and biological impositions on her femininity: “Waking in the morning, to weariness and exhaustion, dumb, strung by an effort of will, she cooked, scoured dishes, fed, washed and dressed her children, swept and tidied the house, sewed, and fell into bed again. That, day after day, becoming wearier, more slatternly, more ill-tempered, harassed, devastated” (Prichard 142). The final assertion of her right to independence and free choice – “I will not have life forced through me against my will” (144) – gives evidence of Prichard’s involvement with female protest and gender awareness even in her non-radical and non-subversive approach to the struggle for women’s emancipation.

The world of women, their feelings, needs and fears are also at the centre of Marjorie Barnard’s short stories. Like Prichard a very prolific and wide-ranging writer, Barnard, in spite of refusing the label of “feminist,” admitted that her feminine nature and outlook mainly came through in her short fiction. The stories collected in *The Persimmon Tree and Other Stories* (1943) definitely break, as Bruce Bennett points out, the pattern of the *Bulletin*-style bush realism (that partly still persisted in Prichard) replacing it with an urban setting and domestic situations of individual crises (118) conveyed by a style rich in symbolism and suggestion. In her most appreciated story, “The Persimmon Tree,” a strong sense of marginalization and solitude is transmitted by the first-person narrator, an unnamed woman recovering from an undefined illness who finds shelter from the outside world within the walls of a quiet, shadowy and cool flat. When she discovers that another lonely woman lives in the opposite flat, she identifies and almost becomes obsessed with her, observing her in silence from the window. She develops a sense of sympathy and emotional affinity that are symbolized by the imagery of the persimmons that the other woman lays out on the sill to ripen in the sun, and which create a link with the narrator’s childhood – a safe place of memories sheltered in the past and in the peace of autumn. And yet, what becomes clear at the end of the story is that the solitary condition both women have chosen for themselves is not so much a defence from outside attacks, but something to be jealously defended, therefore not a link between the two women but another barrier since, as the narrator realizes: “Lonely women have something to guard” (Barnard 24).

It is only with the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s that women’s short stories are definitely included in the Australian literary canon. Thanks to the new cultural climate, diverse means for the production and reception of women’s writing begin to emerge: feminist bookshops and publishing houses (Sisters), women’s anthologies and journals (*Refractory Girl, Hecate*), women’s studies at universities – all of them influencing and promoting female creativity and contributing to criticize the patriarchal domination of the arts, thus reshaping the Australian cultural environment. The short stories written by Elizabeth Jolley, Barbara Hanrahan, Kate Grenville, Janette Turner Hospital in the 1970s and 1980s challenge the traditional and hegemonic representation of national femininity by setting against a monolithic and normative idea of womanhood multiple and multifarious female figures, with unconventional, weird and often dislocated identities.

In a collection of stories defined by their authoress as “angry and pointedly anti-men” and significantly titled *Bearded Ladies* (1984), Kate Grenville presents women who refuse to conform to stereotyped womanhood and preordained gender roles by giving up femininity or making it ambiguous, even if it implies being ridiculed for that. Like Barnard’s women Grenville’s female characters appreciate the value of private space



but with a renewed consciousness of independency. If in Barnard loneliness was a shelter, in Grenville it is the pleasure of being on one's own, no matter if it implies having to face prejudices and preconceived ideas on gender roles. In "the Space Between", Sandra, who is travelling alone in India, is almost forced to become acquainted with an attractive single young man by an elderly couple who think it their duty to find her a match because it is "no good being on your own. For a girl especially" (Grenville 5). But when she turns down the offer and continues her solitary travel, hiding her femininity under shapeless clothes, she is exposed to mockery by a group of Indian children who innocently keep questioning "you boy or girl?" (8), thus placing her indeed in a liberating "space between". The consequences of the loss of sexual identity are also at the core of "The Test is, If They Drown" where unmarried and eccentric Miss Spear is marginalized and scorned by the whole village community for non belonging to any acknowledged female role, but the prejudices of her neighbours, that are given voice in a collective interior monologue, also reflect Grenville's mockery at their narrow-mindedness: "An old lady wearing funny clothes living in a big house with a cat must be a witch. No way she can be anything else. A witch a murderer a gobbler of children a creature from another planet. An alien" (25-26).

To conclude women's short stories form a long, composite, and solid tradition in Australian literature that has always had to face and struggle against a patriarchal context. In order to overtly or obliquely denounce sexual inequality, women's stories have undermined the very basis of the male national ethos, and they have given prominence to alternative female characters not conforming to social and gender expectations – a subversive representation that, from a postcolonial perspective, corresponds to a form of resistance. These female characters represent the masculine and patriarchal loss of control over preconceived ideas on the role and identity of women, and they are an active response to the homogenized identity imposed by mainstream literature, confirming, as Richard Gray suggests, that "one viable response to feelings of being marginalized is to build on the margins, to root one's thinking precisely in the sense of being disempowered and different" (7).

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