

Ready-Made Dissidence? The Figure of the Factory Girl in Modern Australian Poetry

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Unlike England's, Australia's industrialisation occurred only towards the end of the nineteenth-century, resulting in large and periodic influxes of women in the workforce throughout the 1880s and late 1890s, as well as between 1902 and 1911 (Damousi 79). As a relatively new labour force, women workers were exploited both in terms of class and sex, a fact reflected in wages that barely reached subsistence level. Conditions of employment often involved excessive heat and noise, overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and dimly lit rooms. In a journalistic piece describing a day's work in a jam factory, the popular writer Weeroona (Mary Simpson) contrasted the long exhausting labour against its laughable 'reward' of eleven pence. While Weeroona spoke first-hand of this experience, middle-class poets like Mabel Forrest and Myra Morris invoked the factory girl as a way to voice nostalgia for a distant or lost pastoral life.

As in England, the middle-classes tended to view the factory system as 'filthy,' 'degraded,' and 'immoral.' Jeffrey Weeks argues that these characterisations served an important ideological function in displacing the social crises from an area of class conflict and oppression 'where it could not be coped with, into the framework of a more amenable and discussible area of 'morality''(20). The very presence of the factory girl disturbed the ideological underpinnings of the New Woman by revealing a female independence born of economic rather than political expediency. In moving beyond the family unit, she was also the domestic woman's Other. While women may have been doing similar work to what they had once done in their homes, Susan Zlotnik rightly identifies public scrutiny as a new, additional element (Zlotnik 148). The high visibility of factory work rendered it a morally suspect activity. Describing the impact of industrialisation, Thomas Laqueur suggests that: '[E]verything in the new social order was heated up, changeable, morally shaky, and sex was the prism through which its dangers were imagined'(210).

The factory girl, in particular, foregrounded the inter-relationship between consumer and libidinal economies. Beyond the restraints of parents or husband, she was considered vulnerable to sexual dangers. Sexologists like Havelock Ellis saw factory life as favourable to fostering homosexuality, as well as tempting the working-class girl into a life of prostitution. In his influential *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* (1908), Ellis quotes Niceforo who found that conversation in the workrooms 'perpetually revolves around sexual subjects in the absence of the

mistress or forewoman, and even in her presence the slang that prevails in the work-rooms leads to dialogues with a double meaning.' 'A state of sexual excitement is thus aroused,' comments Ellis, 'which sometimes relieves itself mentally by psychic onanism, sometimes by some form of masturbation'(127).

Confined for long hours in heated rooms and in close contact with one another, factory-girls were thought likely to develop homosexual practices. Unlike Niceforo, Ellis believed that such practices could be both a form of spurious homosexuality (which would disappear in the presence of a man) *and* congenital inversion (128–29). Elsewhere he writes that the 'severe and exacting routine of dull work' led the factory girl to seek thrills which might put her own femininity at risk. 'There cannot be the slightest doubt,' he concludes, 'that it is the effort to supplement the imperfect opportunities for self-development offered by our restrained, mechanical, and laborious civilisation which plays one of the chief parts in inducing women to adopt . . . a prostitute's life.' In finding homosexuality more frequently among prostitutes than other women, Ellis completes a circle of inevitable disgrace.

His opinions would be echoed, at least in part, by feminists like Emma Goldman. In her landmark essay, 'The Traffic of Women'(1917), she argues that everyone is a prostitute who experiences the 'social conditions' of 'industrial slavery.' Elaborating her point, she turns to the factory girl. It is the 'daily routine' of working life that sets the prostitute on her path. 'Girls, mere children,' Goldman states, 'work in crowded, overheated rooms ten to twelve hours daily at a machine, which tends to keep them in a constantly overexcited sex state'(25–26) .

This pent-up desire also became the subject of literary speculation, with Nina Murdoch's poem, 'In a Factory'(1922), being a case in point:

I am a queen with a queen's body
that knows nought of a queen's gown,
For life flung me a robe shoddy
And fate played with my queen's crown.

[. . .]

Dreams come of a great lover,
A clean lover, a wise guide.
A lost dower shall he recover,
And I shall walk with a queen's pride.

I am a queen with a queen's passion,
A queen's hunger, a queen's drought.
But life woos in a weary fashion,
And fate's kisses have blanched my mouth.(60)

The stately description in Murdoch's poem is reminiscent of well known nineteenth-century factory girl, the Scottish poet Ellen Johnston, who regaled readers

with her royal successes within the factory domain. Yet Murdoch focusses more on the narrator's body than her influence, flagging the factory girl's sensuality in the very first line. Her poem plays up to middle-class suspicion that the factory girl (like the prostitute) was dissolute, inevitably spending her income on her own narcissistic enjoyment. Murdoch's narrator has little discipline over her working-class body. Although she imagines herself a queen, she is not unused to kisses. Indeed, such liberties have been taken so regularly that they have 'blanched' her mouth. Sexual expenditure translates here into class-status – the factory girl's poverty can be rationalised away as the result of her excessive sexuality. Furthermore, while she may dream of marriage and security (the clean lover who will recover some 'lost dower'), she can only expect the attentions of what Peter Stallybrass and Allan White have defined as low Others – those associated with the filth and sordidness of poverty(5). For the factory girl, the dream of a 'clean lover' must remain just that – a fantasy. The poem makes clear that it is not an aristocratic existence that is out of her reach, but a bourgeois life.¹

Given the prominent medical and political views of figures like Ellis and Goldman, it is not surprising that the factory girl was a common concern for feminists and socialists in Australia, particularly as the first World War grew more imminent and fears of racial degeneration escalated. Many advocated motherhood as woman's 'natural' vocation, condemning *any* entry by women into the workforce. Elizabeth Roth, for example, considered the employment of women in industry an alarming development that would lead to the 'total destruction of the family life'(3). Although quite radical in her feminism and one of the few Australian poets to ever broach the sensitive issue of abortion, Marie Pitt confirmed and extended Roth's argument by suggesting that motherhood was put at risk by the ever-present inducements for working-class girls to become 'material girls'(5).

A poem in the *International Socialist* highlighted the theft of motherhood in its description of women's exploitation in industry:

she . . . goes early to some machine,
 that in a factory-prison waits for her,
 Where with the soulless iron is melted in
 The fresh young life that should her pulses stir . . .
 So one by one, the days, the weeks, years go by
 Whilst motherhood is slowly, subtly slain;
 Its few fair flowers are stolen from her sight,
 But she wears all its thorns of care and pain. (Anon, 5)

1. Stallybrass and White argue that subjectivity is formed through 'transcodings', whereby one 'low' value is associated with another 'low' value in a different discursive chain, and this is then associated with others. They further argue that 'the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticised constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the constitution of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level' (5).

In contrast to most feminists and socialists of her day, Lesbia Harford would find political advantages in the factory girl's uncontrollable sexuality. Although she was one of the first women to complete a law degree in Victoria, Harford worked in a number of low-paying jobs after becoming involved with the Industrial Workers of the World (also known as the 'Wobblies'), which she had been introduced to by her then lover, Guido Baracchi. (She had previously been involved in the Victorian Socialist Party in which the poet, Marie Pitt, occupied a central role.) The key tenets of the IWW were industrial organisation and direct action. They hoped to build an industrial union movement (One Big Union) that would unite the entire working class, irrespective of sex, race, age, skill or culture.

Unlike in America, where women like Mary Harris, 'Mother' Jones, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn occupied leading roles within the party, Australia's IWW membership was overwhelmingly male (see Damousi). The Wobblies primarily attracted itinerant and seasonal workers: shearers, miners, and fruit-pickers, as well as those who worked on the docks. In America, women had long been recognised not only as a particularly exploited group of workers, but also as a potentially powerful force to the movement. Yet, in Australia, division amongst the workers was thought to imperil class solidarity and reforms suggested by feminism were often dismissed. Women had little place in the political agendas of the movement.

Harford was unusual in being one of the few women to openly campaign for the party, but also to perceive the importance of women workers in challenging current structures of labour. Her belief in direct action led her to apply for a job in the clothing industry, where she was accepted despite a longstanding and severe heart condition. She would also join the Clothing and Allied Trades Union and become a union organiser. In the same year that Goldman's essay was published, Harford wrote 'Machinists Talking':

I sit at my machine.
 Hourlong beside me, Vera, aged nineteen,
 Babbles her sweet and innocent tale of sex.

Her boy, she hopes, will prove
 Unlike his father in the act of love.
 Twelve children are too many for her taste.

She looks sidelong, blue-eyed
 And tells a girlish story of a bride
 With the sweet licence of Arabian queens.

Her child, she says, saw light
 Minute for minute, nine months from the night
 The mother first lay in her lover's arms.

She says a friend of hers
 Is a man's mistress who gives jewels and furs
 But will not have her soft limbs cased in stays.

I open my small store
 And tell of a young delicate girl, a whore
 Stole from her mother many months ago.

Fate made the woman seem
 To have a tiger's loveliness, to gleam
 Strong and fantastic as a beast of prey.

I sit at my machine
 Hourlong beside me, Vera, aged nineteen,
 Babbles her sweet and innocent tale of sex. (72-73)

Harford's poem recalls the royal passion of Nina Murdoch's poem. But while Vera yearns for love, she is well aware of its probable result: a life of unplanned pregnancies. Harford avoids the tendency of many contemporaries to transform working class life into a sentimental fiction. Rather she recuperates stereotypes such as the factory girl who becomes a rich man's mistress. While to the public eye she may appear reliant on her lover's whims, Vera's friend has decided to free her body from stays. The Victorian demand to keep the female body encased (and thus manageable) is rejected by the mistress, who paradoxically combines both feminist will and a traditionally dependent role. This is the greatest fear of the middle-classes – that the mistress or prostitute might not be a victim of dark social forces but instead have some independence and control over her life. Harford reinforces this by her final image of the whore who has been stolen from her mother as a young girl. Instead of representing her as an object of pity, Harford reveals the girl to be 'strong and fantastic as a beast of prey.'

In sharing her 'small store' of stories with Vera, Harford's narrator displaces one consumer economy in preference to another – one which gives exchange value to the tales themselves. While Ellis would highlight the very dangers of factory girls swapping their stories of sex, Harford suggests that they operate as an empowering and de-mythologising form of consciousness-raising. Furthermore, her poem positions the reader as a new listener to such life-stories.

In another poem entitled 'An Improver'(1918), Harford describes the sexual development of a workmate, Maisie:

Maisie's been holding down her head all day,
 Her little red head. And her pointed chin
 Rests on her neck that slips so softly in
 The square-cut, low-necked darling dress she made
 In such a way, since it's high-waisted too,

It lets you guess how fair young breasts begin
 Under the gentle pleasant folds of blue.
 But on the roof at lunchtime when the sun
 Shone warmly and the wind was blowing free
 She lifted up her head to let me see
 A little rosy mark beneath her chin
 The mark of kisses. If her mother knew
 She'd be ashamed, but a girl-friend like me
 Made her feel proud to show her kisses to. (95)

At first instance, Maisie's sexuality appears to be just emerging. The dresses she wears hint at her sensuality but with her head down at work, she might be taken as a picture of the proper, demure miss. It is only at lunchtime that her forbidden knowledge is disclosed: the lovebite, a corporeal testimony of her active sexuality and a hidden sign of power. There is an erotic politics at work here in which political resistance and female pleasure are revealed to be inter-related. The body politic, governed by the disciplining mechanisms of capitalism, precludes a thinking of the self as something occurring apart. Yet the marks on Maisie's body individuate her as a desiring subject that is in excess to the economy of female commodification.

In another poem, Harford explicitly aligns the sexuality of the factory girl with the political objectives of the Wobblies:

To look across at Moira gives me pleasure
 She has a red tape measure.

Her dress is black and all the workroom's dreary,
 And I am weary.

But that's like blood – like a thin blood stream trickling
 Like a fire quickening.

It's Revolution. Ohé, I take pleasure
 In Moira's red tape measure. (100)

Red, here, symbolises both passion and the socialist revolution. The 'fire quickening' is the accelerating pulse of both sexual and political desire, ironically immeasurable as an index to power.

Yet, while Harford challenged contemporary thought – conservative and radical – by celebrating instead of censuring the factory girl's sexuality, she was not wholly at ease with the *effect* of such sexuality upon herself. Such force undermined her own much-needed autonomy and self-control. Accordingly, she refuses giving free rein to her own desires by adopting a process of scopophilic externalisation. In 'A Blouse Machinist,' for instance, Harford writes of Miss Murphy's elusive beauty:

Of course things would be different in Japan.
 They'd see her beauty.
 On a silken fan
 They'd paint her for a princess in Japan.
 But still her loveliness eludes the blind.
 They never use their eyes
 But just their mind.
 So must much loveliness elude the blind.(94-95)

By orientalising Miss Murphy, Harford distances her as Other to herself. At once disclosing her same-sex desire, Harford simultaneously rejects its implications by aestheticising Miss Murphy, thereby transforming a potentially respondent subject into a picture on a silken fan.

In 'Buddha in the Workroom,' she again approaches the unsettling implications of sexual desire:

Sometimes the skirts I push through my machine
 Spread circlewise, strong petalled lobe on lobe,
 And look for a rapt moment of a dream
 Like Buddha's robe.

And I, caught up out of the workroom's stir
 Into the silence of a different scheme,
 Dream, in a sun-dark, templed elsewhere
 His alien dream.(89)

Flower-like in opening outwards, the skirts invite sexual daydreaming. They provide a way by which the narrator of the poem can enter into thought which is 'alien' and possibly taboo in its sacredness. Such subconscious yearnings bring together characteristics such as 'sun' and 'dark' which are otherwise construed as incompatible in everyday life. The figure of the Buddha further suggests a kind of hermaphroditic harmony that exists outside sexually divided categories.

In both poems, the fan and the skirts become fetishised objects in so far as Harford focusses on them rather than the female bodies which they cover and hide. In a different sense, both the tape measure and the lovebite may also be seen as fetishes. As a sign of sexual activity, the lovebite simultaneously marks while displacing attention from the act itself. Like the male fetishist, Harford remains in a position of rare ambivalence. Unwilling to abandon the female love object or to compromise her own femininity, she refuses to position herself within the normative constraints of the heterosexual paradigm.

Given their provocative content, it is not surprising that few of Harford's poems were published while she was alive (although a special issue of *Birth* did feature a diverse range of Harford's work in 1921). Besides sexuality, Harford would also foreground the divisions between women created by capitalism ('Work-

girls' holiday'; 'Skirt Machinist'), highlighting a problem that feminism had yet to consider. For Harford, the homosocial environment of the factory created a space where ideologies of class and femininity could be explored, even dismantled. It was also a place where the agency of women could be confirmed and where desires once repressed find new and complex form.

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