

# From 'Girl-Gladness' to 'Honied Madness': pleasure and the girl in the poetry of Zora Cross

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In the post-Federation period, a new identity emerged and was fiercely contested in Australia. This was the figure of the 'girl' who, though white, was no longer a transplant but native to Australian shores. She would have an important role in constructing national identity, as journalists sought to distinguish her from her English and American counterparts. Neither wholly child nor wholly woman, the 'girl' became a site of particular tension during the First World War. She represented Australia's promise, not only in the independence of her outlook but also as future bearer of the race. In 1917, Zora Cross's *Songs of Love and Life* became an overnight bestseller. Cross's name was subsequently given to children and even a racehorse (Sharkey 65). This paper traces the popularity of the poetry collection and its mixed critical reception in light of social investments surrounding the figure of the 'girl.' Revising the sonnet form, Cross would represent the 'girl' not merely as an object of enjoyment but as an actively desiring subject. Such desires were not only new matter for poetic treatment but threatened to undermine a national type that was arguably, from the outset, of nostalgic and conservative construction.

Press debates about the Australian girl were related to concurrent debates about the New Woman. As a result of the increased possibilities for education and work for women in the late nineteenth century, women had begun entering public life. As Dennis Shoemsmith points out, newspapers such as the *Age* and the *Argus* reported this with varying ambivalence (317). While feminist Vida Goldstein declared in the *Age* as far back as 1903 that the demands of the New Woman were grounded in social equality, a growing backlash by the end of the First World War envisaged the New Woman 'shaking [her] well-manicured fists in the face of God's immutable laws' (24 December 1903; 22 March 1919). With a strong will and unabashed

personality, the Australian girl was not so much a regional variation of the New Woman as her flipside. Whereas the New Woman was primarily an urban manifestation, the girl was a product of the bush. Writing for the *Australian Magazine* in 1908, John Garth argued that 'the real abode of the Australian girl is in the country'(1007). Shaped by her pioneering heritage, 'no finer feminine comrade can be found on earth'(1008).

As an admirable companion, the girl did not threaten gender relations in the same way as the New Woman. She might do similar things to the New Woman, like ride a bicycle or take up a job, but ultimately she was destined for marriage, hearth, and family. Bourgeois domesticity was safely intact, even biologically confirmed. 'Above all things,' Garth discerned, 'the Australian girl is "normal" in mind and body and consequently it is not in her to be intellectual'(1007). The Australian girl emblematised a natural progression of femininity, being free of the social pathologies that preyed upon the New Woman or girls from other countries. She showed neither the degeneracy exhibited in the 'vapid English girl,' nor the mannish traits displayed by the 'typically assertive American girl'(1006). Instead, she struck a happy eugenic medium. In nationalising a particular form of femininity, the Australian girl at once refined the scope of a nascent sexual identity, while, at the same time, counteracted the volatile feminism of the New Woman.

Women writers would also contribute to the creation of the Australian girl. One of the earliest literary manifestations was in Catherine Martin's 1890 novel, *An Australian Girl*, whose sensitive heroine declares her independence from colonial ties yet remains committed to an unequal, indifferent marriage. In 1902, Louise Mack envisaged a happier romance with *An Australian Girl in London*, her title character finding married love with an Englishman while remaining 'true' to her own country. Other publications included Rosa Campbell Praed's *An Australian Girlhood* (1902), Lillian Turner's *An Australian Lassie* (1903), and Mary Grant Bruce's *Billabong* books. Poets Mabel Forrest and Dorothea Mackellar also gained a large audience for their representation of the girl, although she existed more as an archetypal figure than a specifically Australian type. Eschewing realism, the bush or garden became a space of enchantment. The girl's dreams and desires remained locked in this private, idyllic world, safe from scrutiny or enactment.

Zora Cross's earliest efforts in writing would be encouraged by Ethel Turner, author of *Seven Little Australians*, and then editor of the Children's Page of *Town and Country Journal*. At the beginning of the War, Cross performed her own patriotic verse to raise funds for Australian soldiers. She also began contributing poetry, stories, and drama reviews to magazines like the *Lone Hand* and the *Bulletin*. In 1917, her 'Sonnets of the South' was published by David McKee Wright in the *Triad*. A full-length collection, *Songs of Love and Life*, was published the same year. While the short, first edition was financed by her mother, the second edition would be picked up by George Robertson who saw Cross as a modern-day Currer Bell. In her dealings with Robertson and Wright, Cross cultivated a naïve but coquettish femininity. She explained to Robertson that her impetuosity was merely a girl's 'dream-bloom' enabling her to overlook the harsh facts of adult life. She added:

[F]or fear I should annoy you, I want you to regard me as a child always. Then you will ... be able to forgive those thoughtless things which might otherwise seem unpardonable. Ah! Do not let this seem the outburst of an impulsive woman. I mean it. (letter dated 17 October 1917, Angus and Robertson Papers)

In performing this role of poet-ingenue, Cross could rationalise her otherwise unorthodox behaviour. Having married at twenty, she gave birth shortly after, although the baby did not survive. A second child, born well after Cross had separated from her husband, was left with her mother so that Cross could devote herself more fully to life on the stage.

The theatrical girl-persona of her correspondence extended to her poetry. A number of pieces in *Songs of Love and Life* combine the fleeting magic of childhood with a more mature wantonness. An example is the second stanza from 'Girl-Gladness':

O laddie, my laddie, quick, run out of school,  
 And away with a shout and a shake of the head;  
 I'll pick you a pearl from the pigeon-pink pool  
 Where cuddles and kisses are going to bed.  
     Away, come away  
     To the land of the fay,  
 For the afternoon tinkles your lassie-love's lay.  
 Play truant with Time and while Age is asleep  
 I'll give you the heart of my girlhood to keep.(99)

Here, Cross plays teasingly on the double meaning of 'lay,' drawing attention to her own poetic authority, but also to another connotation when read against the earlier line of 'going to bed.' The 'pearl' picked from a 'pigeon-pink pool' is heavily resonant with erotic imagery, the 'pearl' itself symbolising a ripened treasure, while the 'pigeon-pink pool' alludes to a fluid female sexuality.

'The New Moon' also describes the combined passion and wonder of a first kiss:

What have you got in your knapsack fair,  
 White moon, bright moon, pearling the air,  
 Spinning your bobbins and fabrics free,  
 Fleet moon, sweet moon, into the sea?  
 ...  
 Tender your eyes as a maiden's kiss,  
 Fine moon, wine moon, no one knows this,  
 Under the spell of your witchery,  
 Dream moon, cream moon, first he kissed me.(70)

Although three figures appear in the poem (the narrator, the moon, and the male lover), Cross suggests the awakening of heterosexual desire as a form of auto-

eroticism. It is the moon, conventionally aligned with female sexuality, that excites passion. Its association with the feminine is further reinforced in being characterised through the world of textiles, with its '[s]pinning,' 'bobbins and fabrics.'

In 'The New Moon' and 'Girl-Gladness,' girlhood is transported from the realities of a modern world. Like Forrest and Mackellar's work, they are filled with witchery, spells, faerys, and fayness. For Cross, the language of enchantment provides a way in which a girl's sexuality may be spoken, albeit an indirect way. It is no coincidence that in both poems sexual pleasure is covert—represented either as truant activity or a secret evening tryst.

By the time *Songs of Love and Life* was published, Cross was involved in a relationship with David McKee Wright, who was married with four children. In contrast to 'The New Moon' and 'Girl-Gladness,' the volume's central group of poems, a series of sixty 'Love Sonnets,' would do away with concealment. Although sonnet XXX has virtually the same subject as 'Girl-Gladness,' a very different effect is created:

Ah Love, back to realities we rush  
 Over each lidless dream, as boys to play.  
 Fancies and thoughts may blossom any day  
 But Youth has only once her early flush.  
 Age trammels us, and all her threshers crush  
 Passion, delight, and beauty into clay;  
 Time broods upon the bosom of the bay  
 Holding his finger with an ancient 'Hush.'

So while we are both young, while my breasts swell  
 Tingling to you, and life is mostly fire –  
 Warm blood, and warmer throb of pulse and kiss –  
 Strive not our happy passions to dispel.  
 Love ... Love ... until our bodies both transpire,  
 For growing old, we must forswear such bliss. (30)

Both poems celebrate the youthfulness of the girl, contrasting it favourably against the dimming of age. Yet while 'Girl-Gladness' represents the girl as more child than woman, sonnet XXX advocates what could be called a free love ethos. In bringing both sets of poems together in the one collection, Cross draws an inevitable comparison between the freedom of affection that girlhood allows and the bohemian desires more associated with the New Woman. Their difference is revealed to be of discursive degree: girlish sexual desire is described as 'gladness' rather than 'bliss,' a girl 'cuddles' rather than folding 'your limbs in mine' or indulging in a clinging embrace.

'[L]ove's sweet confidence which needs no vow' is shown, then, to be part of the same spectrum as the more acceptable enthusiasms of the girl ('Sonnet', Box 10, Cross Papers). Cross seeks to further legitimate it through the authority of the sonnet. The sonnet is undoubtedly the most powerful vehicle for the public repre-

sentation of sexual desire in the English language. Traditionally, it has been a medium for the male voice, its subject and muse coded feminine. Feminist critics such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis have debated whether it is possible for women to change their positioning within the sonnet's Petrarchan structure of feeling. Kate Chadwick contends that throughout *Songs of Love and Life* Cross shows 'a conservative deference to patriarchal authority' (74). Yet while she maintains many of the sonnet's conventions, Cross does attempt to neutralise their phallogocentric dimensions. An example is sonnet XXI, which parallels 'New Moon' in subject matter:

If there should be a moon above the hill  
 To-night, dip down with me into the sea  
 Of our first passion, and, with naked glee,  
 Breathe its ripe wonder to our beings' fill.  
 O, as the moonbeams on the violets spill  
 Rivers of uncontrolled felicity,  
 We'll tune our bodies to a melody  
 And set our pulses to a poet's thrill.

Love ... love ... Your hot lips tremble on my eyes;  
 You droop. You swoon in silence over me ...  
 Heaven, out of yours, my very eyelids sup.  
 The stars are running out of Paradise ...  
 I languish, perfumed with expectancy ...  
 Belovèd, kiss me, for the moon is up.(21)

Here, the subject/object position generally assigned to the sexes (whereby the male speaker addresses a female 'you') is reversed. Although the male beloved occupies a typically dominant stance, he is transformed into a passive figure. So while he leans over the body of the female narrator, he swoons in silence, his lips 'tremble,' and his body droops. In contrast, female receptivity is re-envisioned as active and empowered. The narrator's eyelids do not merely receive his trembling lips but 'sup' upon them. Although she languishes with the perfume of expectancy, it is her command that will move the scene forward.

Cross reflects this confident measure of passion in her control over the sonnet form. Just as bodies are tuned and pulses set, so too is the rhythm and pace of the poem. In contrast to the moonbeams' 'rivers of uncontrolled felicity' or the stars' 'running out of Paradise,' there is a slow increase in female desire. The punctuation of the sestet creates a growing sense of breathlessness and distraction. Yet, the sonnet is brought to a close at the moment when control might well be lost. Debra Fried has argued that 'The sonnet can embody metrically, sonorously, and syntactically a kind of perfectly efficient hedonism' (8). Within the contained form of the sonnet, Cross keeps playing with but ultimately suspends female enjoyment in her demand for '[m]ore love, more, and still more' (28). This paradoxical drive to both excess and

control is also evident in the eventual production of sixty sonnets. While Cross adheres to the rigid contract of the sonnet form, its restrictions arguably become qualified through sheer repetition.

For Cross, there is a more lasting virtue in strong passion than social mores. Indeed, such virtue elevates the individual to a spiritual plane, transcending the constraints of culture. The sonnets speak of a romantic love that is 'God-born, God-breathing,' even 'dearer than God' (29). Yet, this sublimation occurs through earthy means; passion is both a psychic and bodily sensation. While Cross uses coy Victorian metaphors such as 'wings of Cupid,' and 'fragile petals' to encode the emotions, her sonnets are unusual in their straight-forward details of finger-tips, feet, hair, breast, ears, and lips (18, 30).

Reviewing *Songs of Love and Life*, Mary Gilmore wrote that Cross was 'almost a new creation as far as Australia is concerned.' In 'overstepping' the boundaries as a woman writer, she has given women a language and direction previously only available to men. Cross's work reminded Christopher Brennan of the best sonnet-writers, 'from Rosetti back to Shakespeare.' Yet her 'astounding mastery' was matched by 'astounding lapses,' such as errant rhymes and her use of urban metaphors (Manuscript 314/108, Angus and Robertson Papers). Others condemned Cross's aesthetic radicalism as part and parcel of her sexual radicalism. Both would offend the masculine lens through which Norman Lindsay and his circle imagined their own Bacchanalian vision. While Kenneth Slessor satirised Cross's verse, Lindsay himself dismissed it on the grounds that 'all love poetry comes from the connection of the spinal column and the productive apparatus,' and it 'is a notorious fact that God did not connect the two in woman' (Slessor 23; Barker 86).

Significantly, many would view Cross's expression of 'girl-gladness' as striking a new note in Australian literature, while remaining deeply critical of the sonnets. An article in *Aussie*, for example, argued that the sonnets' eroticism threatened to overshadow her other verse, which was 'delightfully simple and sweet' (37). While praising 'The New Moon' and 'Girl-Gladness,' the editor of *Birth* attributed some of the sonnets to 'the temporary obsession of some evil influence' (5). Such critics carefully avoided the open secrets to be found within 'Girl-Gladness' or 'New Moon.' Ethel Turner did not, noting to Cross: 'I can't let my girl have it yet. It is of youth but certainly not for youth ...' (letter dated 16 November 1927, Cross Papers).

For single women following the First World War, both Cross's poems on 'girl-gladness' and the sonnets provided a symbolic register through which they could speak of their sexuality. Simultaneously transgressive and classical, they revised the Australian girl into a modern and powerful figure. Cross's appeal paralleled that of American poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose volume of sonnets, *Renascence*, made her a household name when they were published the same year. Millay also celebrated a youth spent intensely, or as she more famously coined it, burning one's candle at both ends. While it is probable that Cross's sonnets responded in part to Millay's work, they reveal key cultural distinctions. Far more intimate and explicit than Millay's sonnets, Cross continues the verse tradition of earlier Australian women poets, but importantly, rejects any colonial framework or domestic virtue.

It is ironic then, that while public fascination with the girl assured Cross's reputation, it left her little room for development as a poet or to further challenge cultural paradigms. Australians were less willing to read about maternal sexuality in 'Sonnets of Motherhood' or in the experimental long-poem, 'Man and Woman.'<sup>2</sup> When her inter-racial romance, 'The Lute Girl,' was deemed unpublishable, Cross reflected with both frustration and resignation that 'you can't expect papers to run a story that looks as if it doesn't quite agree with a white Australia policy' (letter to Hurst dated 4 November 1922, Hurst Papers). Female pleasure remained bound by national anxiety. Her only further success would be with *Daughters of the Seven Mile*, a melodrama which returned the Australian girl to her bush setting. The first edition sold out in forty-eight hours.

In the same year, Cross condemned the effusiveness of *Songs of Love and Life*, writing not only against 'girl-gladness,' but also against the spirit of 'honied madness' that energised her sonnets. As Michael Sharkey observes, her poem, 'Plain Paper,' takes on the effect of a manifesto (84). While it may advocate the well-made lyric, as he suggests, it more importantly aligns stylistic brevity with a paring away of feminine pleasure:

Never accuse me of things feminine –  
 Frilled frocks and lacy hats and parasols!  
 There was a time I loved these, being nine;  
 But it is long now since I played with dolls.

This plain white paper matches more my soul  
 ...  
 Just as the lines run here – now white, now black,  
 Straight, cold, indifferent to tide and time –  
 So, unadorned with broidery I pack  
 My plain self in my plain, still rhyme. (32)

Cross assumes a more recognisably modernist approach in refuting emotion and ornamentation. In this new, depersonalised text, sexuality is repressed, existing only as absence. Such a poetics bears witness to the difficulties experienced by women writers in producing a radical, embodied poetry. As a poetics, it promised only silence, an option that was financially untenable for Cross. Continuing to rely on more journalistic writings for support, the *Songs'* life of 'mostly fire' became the displaced memory she once fought so fiercely against.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Sonnets of Motherhood' and 'Man and Woman' were published in *The Lilt of Life*.

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