THE FICTION OF THEA ASTLEY: "TO WRITE AS A MALE"?

by

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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, Thea Astley asserted that she had "to write as a male" to acquire literary acceptance in the 1950s and 1960s. In making this statement, Astley outlined what it meant to write as a male and to write as a female. The increasing critical use of these statements as an explanation for the subject matter and the style of Astley’s fiction, however, ignores the gendered reception of her work, generates misconceptions regarding her early novels, undervalues the continuity of her feminist critique of what she calls the "genital loading" of Australian culture, and negates her attack on genres, narratives, and plots which constrain women. Using the theoretical work of Raymond Williams, Kaja Silverman, and Rita Felski, this thesis proposes that Astley be read not in terms of "masculine" or "feminine" writing, but in terms of her political commitment to feminism. To contextualize Astley’s comment, Chapter One emphasizes the masculine bias of the literary debates in the 1950s. Chapter Two argues that the "misfit paradigm" used to read Astley’s fiction obscures the feminist and class themes of her work. To counteract the view that Astley’s early fiction concentrates on male characters, Chapter Three focuses on Astley’s representation in The Slow Natives (1965) of wife and prostitute, and on Astley’s critique of the mutually reinforcing genres to which they belong: romance and antiromance. Chapters Four, Five, and Six examine, respectively, A Descant for Gossips (1960), An Item From the Late News (1981), and Reaching Tin River (1990).
This chronological sequence establishes the consistency of her feminist critique of Australian society. It also accentuates the theme of masculinity in crisis and foregrounds the way in which critics have gendered Astley's work as feminine. These chapters consider the relation between melodrama and masculinity in A Descant for Gossips, the connection between Astley's use of the female "I" and the appearance of the transvestite in An Item From the Late News, and the political implications of the womb as a metaphor for escape in Reaching Tin River.
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1. Introduction

Thea Astley is an angry writer. The anger that punctuates her novels reminds me of the disaffection that punctuates the Sex Pistols's *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*. Unlike the Sex Pistols, whose anger was scatter-shot, short-lived, and, depending on who you asked, manufactured, Astley has maintained her focused rage for a long time. She writes as someone who belongs and doesn't belong to society, a situation described in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*:

> Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. (96)

From her first novel *A Girl With Monkey* (1958) to her thirteenth novel *Coda* (1994), Astley has raged against the institutions, practices, organizations, and narratives which, structured around masculinity and femininity, perpetuate women's inequality, subordination, and marginalization. In her fiction, Astley appears to be trying to resolve a query articulated by Julie Truscott in *Vanishing Points* (1992): "I wonder why men dislike women so?" (151). The outrage succinctly directed against the rampant masculinity represented by the character James Buckmaster in *A
Kindness Cup (1974) suggests an answer. Patronymically linked to capitalism and patriarchy, Buckmaster uses "[t]he violence implicit in the physical construction of hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 85-6) to control and oppress the "feminine": women, Aborigines, and non-masculine men.

Given what I took to be the feminist commitment of Astley's work and her "alien and critical" perspective on Australian society, I was surprised by the relative neglect of Astley's fiction and by Astley's comment, repeated in interviews during the 1980s, that she had "to write as a male." Even though Astley's oeuvre covers the period before, during, and after the Women's Liberation Movement changed Australian society, even though her fiction charts the fluctuations, anxieties, and changes in gender relations wrought upon and in Australian society during the post-World War Two period, contemporary critical assessments of recent Australian literary history underestimate or ignore Astley. By repeating the "to write as a male" comment, Astley seemed to negate the explicit and angry feminism of her fiction and confirm the view propounded by Hélène Cixous:

Most women do someone else's - man's - writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine.

("Castration or Decapitation?" 52).

As Terry Lovell remarks in relation to contemporary feminism's search for a "specifically feminine sensibility of style," "one of the damning things that can be said of a woman is that she writes like a man" (20). On the surface, then, it looked as though Astley was damning herself.
The repetition of the "writing as a man" theme in the various interviews, combined with Astléy's comments on her distance from feminism, made me wonder whether Astley was writing as a man or, as she later suggested, a neuter. Overall, Astley's comments on her position as a male or neutered writer struck me as being incompatible with the profound and insistent feminist commitment of her fiction. Of all the things Astley doesn't like - academic refugees, consumer society, mediocrity, suburbs, the Catholic Church, Australia's treatment of Aborigines, the me-generation, rock music, hippies, Sigmund Freud, women's magazines, and the list goes on - men and masculinity are the main object of her satire, patriarchal society the main object of her critique. The social alienation represented in her fiction is engendered by patriarchal gender relations.

Concern for whether Astley writes as a male or as a female displaces the issue of political commitment. In "Writing Like a Woman," Lovell proposes that the question should shift from "writing like a woman" to "the political question of 'writing like a feminist'" (23), a question quite distinct from what Rita Felski calls "[t]he chimera of a 'feminist aesthetic'" (2). The question of whether Astley writes as a male or female is not nearly so important as whether she writes as a feminist.

2. Writing as a Male, as a Neuter, as a Woman

Authorial comments culled from the interviews Astley gave in the mid- to late-1980s play a significant role in this thesis. At the time I first read Astley's work, early 1990, interviews with Astley
almost outnumbered the critical articles on her work. An author's comments can mould as well as inhibit interpretation, as Susan Sheridan illustrates with regard to Christina Stead, a much-interviewed writer whose explications of her work as belonging to a tradition of naturalism have been influential in shaping the way her work has been read and also in producing interdictions on certain readings, feminist ones in particular. (Christina Stead 15)

Astley's statements on her sympathy for the misfit, for example, have authorized a closed form of critical commentary, what Roland Barthes calls "a final signified" ("The Death of the Author" 53).

In nearly all the interviews she gave in the 1980s, Astley situates her position as a writer in relation to sexed categories ("man," "neuter," and "woman") rather than gendered categories ("masculine" and "feminine") and perpetuates the idea that the only way she could acquire legitimacy as a writer "was to write as a male." Asked by Candida Baker about the differences between "writing as a male" and "writing as a woman," Astley replied:

The thing was that I grew up in an era where I was completely neutered by my upbringing. I'm a normal heterosexual I think, I hope - but I grew up in an era when women weren't supposed to have any thoughts at all, and if they did express thoughts then either no attention was paid to them or they were considered brash and aggressive. I also grew up in an era where they talked about 'women's' literature. 'It's a woman's book', they'd say, as if there was something wrong with that. So when
I was eighteen or nineteen I thought to myself that the only way one could have any sort of validity was to write as a male. It seemed to me that male writers were accepted, and what they said was debated and talked about, whereas women writers were ignored, or whatever women did was ignored. (42-43)

The pressures of specific social and cultural constraints, subtle and obtrusive, convinced Astley that if she were to achieve literary validation and acceptance as a writer she had to imitate "the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" and internalize "its standards of art and its view of social roles" (Showalter, A Literature of Their Own 13). For Astley, the terms refer neither to an essence nor a particular type of writing, but to a position: "to write as a male" signifies inclusion and acceptance, whereas "to write as a female" in the 1950s and 1960s signifies exclusion and rejection. To overcome the prevalent prejudice that nothing of literary value could be expected from women writers, Astley uses the metaphor of "narrative transvestism" (Kahn) as a conciliatory fiction to negotiate the rigid gender categories ascribed to literary activity, to naturalize what critics would deem an unnatural act, and to legitimize her literary project. In "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," Andreas Huyssen argues that Gustave Flaubert's "masculine identification with woman" is historically determined . . . [by] the increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress - with the realms of business, industry, science, and law. (189)
Similarly, Astley’s identification is historically determined by the doubly marginal position she, as a woman, occupies in a culture which reserves serious artistic activity for men.

Outlining the textual implications of what it would mean "to write as a male" (Baker 43) and "to write like a modern female writer" (45), Astley confines her comments to matters of content, characters, point of view, and persona. Concentrating on male characters and "using a male persona" (Baker 43), Astley believed, would clinch artistic legitimacy for her work:

I naively thought the only way to gain any credibility was to write from the male point of view about male characters. But that didn’t work, for I only know how I feel. (Ross, "An Interview with Thea Astley" 267)

After the publication of An Item From the Late News (1982), however, "the only word" Astley could think of to describe her plight is "neuter": "I’ve been neutered by society so I write as a neuter."² The verb describes the castrating effect of "the social conditions prevalent during [her] time of growing up" (Ross, "An Interview with Thea Astley" 267) and the noun describes her status as a writing subject. The process of using a female narrator in An Item From the Late News intensified Astley’s consciousness of neutering’s destructive social and psychic effects:

I felt very stiff and awkward deliberately using the female approach. I’d been intellectually ‘neutered’ by the whole system and when I came to write as a feeling female I realized something awful had happened to me way back there. I grew up thinking I was a human being
and when I reached adolescence I discovered that I wasn't even a person. (Richey 101-02)

The social alienation and feelings of inferiority that Astley describes differ from those articulated by Jacques Lacan, who argues that the subject's alienation occurs prior to "cultural mediation" (Écrits 6). Historical and social processes, including, as I argue in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, psychoanalytic theories of masculinity and femininity, shape and constrain her, relegate her to a position of lack and insufficiency. Astley's rhetoric of neutering stems from her position as a woman in patriarchal culture. In addition to describing a state of sexlessness, neuter refers to someone of indeterminate sex, "as a hermaphrodite or castrated person" (Macquarie). Not coincidentally, these two categories figure prominently as destabilizing agents in An Item From the Late News, a novel in which having or not having a penis defines identity, and where feminine lack confirms masculine plenitude.

The flipside of the idea that one can "write as a male" is that one can "write as a female." To describe contemporary women writers, Astley uses two terms: the innocuous "modern female writer" (Baker 45) and the politically committed "feminist writers" (Ellison 57). The modern female/feminist writer, according to Astley, centres on women characters, uses a female point of view, and emphasizes "bodily functions" (Richey 102) such as menstruation, pregnancy, and orgasms. When Astley compares her work to other women's writing, she invokes a reflectionist model. According to Astley, Helen Garner realistically represents women's experience:
I thought, God, isn’t it marvellous the way Helen Garner can deal with female situations of getting meals (I’ve always avoided meals, you know) and deal with the mundanities of a woman’s day, and make it alive and intelligent and believable, without its looking twee.

And I thought, I can’t do this. (Ellison 57).

Although she uses the phrase "woman’s voice," Astley elaborates upon its significance not in terms of form or style, but the way in which feminist writers make "women’s problems and the woman’s voice seem not only intelligent and interesting, but totally credible" (Ellison 57). Astley emphasizes content (writing of the body) rather than form (writing the body). References to modern female writing as an oppositional semiotic style (rhythmic, open, non-linear, and multiple) are completely absent from Astley’s elaborations on the writing by modern female writers. In general, Astley respects novelistic conventions. Experimental writing frustrates and bores her.³

3. Critical Neglect

For some critics and Astley herself, the relation of Astley’s novels to feminism is distant and debatable. Asked whether she sees her work dealing with feminist issues, Astley disqualifies herself from representing women’s experience:

I simply can’t write about some of the things in the way many feminist writers do. Sometimes I wish I could, but I suppose I am just of the wrong generation. (Ross, "An Interview with Thea Astley 268).
Brian Matthews argues that Astley's focus on male characters stands in stark "contrast to the focus on women characters in contemporary women's fiction" and that her female characters "are very different" from those represented by Kate Grenville, Barbara Hanrahan, Elizabeth Jolley, and Garner ("'Before Feminism . . . After Feminism'" 17). In content, Astley's novels differed from feminist literature of the period which, according to Felski, frequently focused upon the representation of experiences exclusive to women, such as female sexuality, lesbian relationships, and the experience of motherhood. (167)

Astley's novels, in contrast, do not; nor, for that matter, does Astley have any desire to represent bodily experiences: "I don't really want to emphasize bodily functions as many eighties writers do" (Richey 102). Astley's reluctance to focus on women's domestic experience and detail the bodily experiences of menstruation, childbirth, and orgasms puts her out of step with a feminist literary critical practice influenced by Anglo-American gynocriticism's "instrumental" (Felski 3) emphasis on "the study of female experience" (Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" 28).

There are other reasons for the critical indifference surrounding Astley's work. Many find Astley's prose ostentatious, distracting, and difficult to read; Chapter Six documents the critical complaints directed at Astley's style. The geographical distance of Astley's home in north Queensland from the southern literary centres of Melbourne and Sydney played a role, according to Astley (Ellison 62). Being characterised as a social realist when critics in the 1980s preferred postmodern, experimental, or metafictional writing did not help Astley either. Indeed, the critical
infatuation with self-referential fiction often worked against women writers. Women writers excluded from *Liars: Australian New Novelists* (1988), Helen Daniel’s brilliant, idiosyncratic reading of Australian metafiction, include Jessica Anderson, Garner, Astley, Beverley Farmer, Hanrahan, Jean Bedford, Blanche d’Alpuget, Grenville, Margaret Barbalet, and Georgia Savage. They do not practice "metafiction," a category, like the front bar of pubs during the 1950s and 1960s, reserved for men. Male writers crowd Daniel’s canon: Murray Bail, Peter Carey, David Foster, Nicholas Hasluck, David Ireland, Peter Mathers, and Gerald Murnane. In the "Eighth Dialogue" that prefigures the section on Jolley, the sole woman writer considered appropriate to include, Reader and Liar (Daniel’s fictional alter-egos) focus on women writers and the reasons for their exclusion from the collection. Reader asks why so few women, and Liar responds:

Someone suggested to me that after all the changes in women’s status, it is still true that women are still burdened by reality, in ways that men are not, still forced by all sorts of factors to concentrate on the real world, and have not yet been able to free themselves in the way men have been able to be free as writers. (265)

Whether one writes metafiction boils down to emancipation: men have more freedom than women. Gelder and Salzman cite two problems with Daniel’s canon: first, experimental writers such as Marion Campbell, Ania Walwicz, Jan McKemmish, and Finola Moorhead "presumably are not ‘major’ enough"; and, second, "writers like Hanrahan and Grenville, who work both within and against the tradition of realism, have no space at all" (58).
Developments associated with feminism in the 1970s - increased interest in women writers, establishment of feminist publishing houses, re-evaluation of Australian history - worked in Astley's favour, but her status as an "older writer" (Smith 200) often meant that she was taken for granted. As a consequence, critics bypassed Astley in favour of newer, younger writers such as Hanrahan, Bedford, Garner, Farmer, and Glenda Adams. Anderson and Jolley, in age Astley's contemporaries, benefited in ways that Astley never has from the change in the literary climate and the way in which women's writing was received. *Australian Book Review* partly rectified this state of critical indifference. To mark the publication of Astley's twelfth novel, *Vanishing Points* (1992), *ABR* published favourable reviews by novelist Nigel Krauth and academic Marie Maclean, an interview conducted by *ABR* editor Rosemary Sorensen, and essays by academics very different in generation and critical practice, Harry Heseltine and Elizabeth Perkins. Yet, as Sorensen acknowledges in the preface to her interview, Astley, despite winning numerous awards and honours, has never been feted in the way that Patrick White and Hal Porter were, nor has she enjoyed quite the same attention that writers such as Elizabeth Jolley, Helen Garner, Tim Winton, David Malouf, have enjoyed in the past decade. (Sorensen 9)

Saddened by yet resigned to the fact that she is standing on the outside and looking in, Astley speculates on the reasons for her neglect:

I've been ignored for years and I'm perfectly calm about it. Sad. I think I was a bit ahead of my time, as it
were. I think I was writing this sort of stuff that women weren't supposed to be doing, and then by the time they were noticing how great Elizabeth Jolley and Helen Garner were, they said, oh, there's old Astley, she's survived! She's still around. And I think I suffered from that . . . Well, don't let's worry about her, she's been around for years. And I've always been a bit sorry that I've never had many critical reviews from the literary people. I don't think I ever had. Maybe I'm not literary enough. (Sorensen 10).

Nonetheless, all of Astley's books are in print and amongst reviewers there is widespread consensus regarding Astley's reputation as a major twentieth-century Australian novelist. Most reviewers, in addition to praising Astley's sharp wit, moral vision, and linguistic skill, use a variation of "one of Australia's most respected authors" to describe her. Furthermore, "critical reviews" on her fiction are being published, mostly offshore.

4. Attacking the Genital Loading

Castration reappears as a constant theme in Astley's work. The work of Juliet Mitchell (1974), Kaja Silverman (1981), and Teresa de Lauretis (1984) on the writings of Freud and Lacan proved indispensable to my readings of A Descant for Gossips (1960), The Slow Natives (1965), An Item From the Late News, and Reaching Tin River (1990). In Freudian theory, which Astley berates, the castration complex is the mechanism which normalizes subjects
around masculinity and femininity. The castration motif also appears in an interview. When Astley recalled the different rates of pay male and female artists received in the 1950s for their labour, she invoked the thematic of presence and absence central to the castration complex. Poems written under her own name, Astley recalled, netted her £3 a poem, whereas poems written under her pseudonym "Phillip Cressey" saw her reap an extra £2. Because the name "Phillip Cressey" signalled masculinity, Astley earned more money. The fiscal difference Astley attributed to a prejudicial "genital loading" (Kinross Smith 25). A loading is "an extra rate paid to employees in recognition of a particular aspect of their employment, as shift work" (Macquarie). In this instance, the extra rate recognises and rewards the anatomy associated with masculinity, the penis.

This is an important anecdote, for Astley's fiction attacks the concept of genital loading and the manner in which masculine subjectivity depends "upon a kind of collective make-believe in the commensurability of the penis and phallus" (Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins 15), a cultural belief which sustains and perpetuates patriarchy. Women experience social and economic inequalities because the presuppositions of the "genital loading" discount their value, their bodies, their voices, their ideas, their work, their presence. Throughout her career, Astley has examined the way in which gender categories are constructed and the mechanisms by which they are maintained. The theory of castration, in its assignation of voice, subjectivity, sexuality, place, acts as a bulwark for patriarchy. Her fiction underscores the economic,
social, and political reasons, that is, the material conditions and ideological setting, for the dominance of the castration complex.

Broadsides against Freud and his followers are common enough in Astley's canon. Vanishing Points's Julie Truscott describes Freud as "[t]he original male chauvinist schwein!" (220) and declares that he has "a heap to answer for!" (220). Over the years Astley's characters have pilloried psychoanalysis. The mild scorn evident in Astley's early fiction, for example Bernard Leverson's disdain for "brain-shrinkers" (72) in The Slow Natives, is replaced in the later fiction by utter contempt: in An Item from the Late News, Gabby, incredulous at their centrality in Freudian psychology, mocks the castration complex and penis envy. "Modern self-indulgent psychology proposes that one's self is one's centre but I find that theory unsatisfying" (93), says Belle, narrator of Reaching Tin River; ironically, this observation accords with the view of Freud's famous acolyte, Lacan, whose attacks on American ego psychology enliven his collection of essays.6

5. Male Characters and Male Reviewers

How would writing as a male manifest itself in her fiction? For critics, the most obvious sign is Astley's "preoccupation with male experience, male protagonists, male-dominated narratives" (Gilbert 109), a view reiterated by Smith (1985), Matthews (1987), and Lindsay (1995). Aside from downplaying the derogatory focus of Astley's "preoccupation," this observation implies that Astley has little to say about women. The next feature singled out for significance is Astley's casually hostile attitude towards female
characters. In an article published in the period before the interviews appeared, Goldsworthy proposes that Astley deprives her female characters of agency. Although Astley directs "a horribly ruthless eye" on both sexes, she treats them differently, demolishing female characters with the "disposable insult" yet allowing "male characters [to] expose themselves by their own behaviour" ("Thea Astley's Writing" 480). Even so, Astley grants agency to male characters only to reveal their tyranny and ridicule their inadequacies. Regurgitating the preoccupation-with-males theme, Lindsay confirms Astley's progress as a feminist writer by arguing that the novels written after Beachmasters (1985) are "increasingly focused on women" and do not, as all the novels written prior to Beachmasters supposedly do, dismiss women in a patriarchal manner (122).

As a consequence of the dominance of the idea that Astley focuses on male characters and male narratives, important exceptions to it - for example, the use of a female narrator in An Item From the Late News - are denied significance. According to Gilbert, An Item From the Late News "belongs to Wafer, the main character - and of course a male character" (110). True, Wafer is "of course a male character," but he is punished because of his refusal to support the socially dominant violent ideal of masculinity. No male characters in the novel consider him to be "masculine." Collapsing the distinction between "male" and "masculine," Gilbert treats all male characters as identical. Similarly, by accepting Astley's comment that she sought to focus on "the male character's point of view," Gilbert disregards the issue of sexuality in The Acolyte
To advance her thesis that Astley’s "novels are very much 'male' novels," Gilbert quotes Astley:

So when I came to write, I thought, well . . . maybe there'll be a chance of being read if I concentrate on the male characters in my book, or write as I did in The Acolyte, using a male character's point of view rather than a female's. (110; originally in Ellison 56-57)

As with An Item From the Late News, Gilbert underestimates the importance of the narrator. Of course Paul Vesper is a male character, but his masculinity, like Wafer's, deviates from the dominant cultural norm. Apart from characterizing himself as a eunuch, Vesper protests his heterosexuality too much.

Citing the lonely example of Laurie Clancy, Gilbert implies that male reviewers read Astley as a male writer: "it is with the male writer that male critics often compare Astley" (112). The correlation Gilbert posits here is the most tenuous suggestion forwarded to confirm the success of Astley's attempt to write as a male. The reception of Astley's work is considerably more complex and varied than Gilbert proposes. Clancy indeed compares Astley to Graham Greene, likens The Acolyte with Patrick White's The Vivisector (1970), and suggests that she and Thomas Keneally share a similar "view of religious life" ("The Fiction of Thea Astley" 43), but in the same overview of her fiction the surreal energy of The Slow Natives "reminds one of Elizabeth Jolley" (48). Female critic Margaret Smith also compares Astley to White; like Clancy, she compares Astley to a woman writer, rightly suggesting that the critique of rapacious masculinity in A Kindness Cup is "the fiercest in Australian women's writing" (215), equal to
Barbara Baynton's portrait in "The Chosen Vessel" (1902) of the harsh life and threat of rape rural women face. Given the comparisons to White, does sexuality matter? The argument could be made, moreover, that female critics often compare Astley to female writers. Elizabeth Perkins places Astley "alongside some of the greatest women writers of the last century" (17), George Eliot and the Brontës. In "Thea Astley's Writing," Goldsworthy says that The Slow Natives reminds her of Muriel Spark's The Abbess of Crewe (1974) and then goes on to compare Astley to Stead. The response of three female critics to Astley's short story collection Hunting the Wild Pineapples suggests how meaningless Gilbert's premise is: Georgia Savage compares Astley to Greene and Evelyn Waugh; Elizabeth Webby to Bedford, Hal Porter, and Stead; and Goldsworthy to Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. Finally, academic critics, male and female, usually contrast Astley with other female writers: Robert Ross compares A Boat Load of Home Folk (1968) with Mavis Gallant's Home Truths (1981); Ken Goodwin, yet another male critic, compares Beachmasters with Margaret Atwood's Bodily Harm (1981); Goldsworthy compares A Kindness Cup with Jolley's Miss Peabody's Inheritance (1983). Male academics, if anything, tend to compare Astley's works with works published in 1981 by Canadian women writers, but that's another thesis for another time.

While Astley has been "subjected to gender-biased attacks from reviewers" (11), and Gilbert cites Perkins (1985), of the four examples specifically relating to gender, half are made by women. 7 Perkins's concise analysis of the reception of Astley's work suggests that her desire to write as a man failed, for reviewers
applied phrases to Astley’s work "that would not be used of a male author" (12).

Then there is the "so what?" argument. Even if Astley’s novels centre on men, so what? Marx focused on capitalist production, and he didn’t have very nice things to say about that. As Perkins notes: "A recurring phrase in A Kindness Cup is 'the world of men', and it carries a fiercely pejorative connotation" (12). A casual reading of The Well Dressed Explorer, The Acolyte, An Item From the Late News, Reaching Tin River, and Vanishing Points would confirm this observation. Some argue that Astley’s male characters diverge from the norms of masculinity. In the first article to analyze Astley’s work, J. M. Couper intimated in parenthesis that with regard to "sex" "there are at least three" (336), a suggestive remark that influenced Smith. In her survey of the positive influence of feminism on cultural production in the 1970s, Smith observes that Astley’s "work is strongest when [her] focus of self is on a woman or on her new breed of androgynous men" (213), proposing that Astley’s work in the 1960s settled on a conflict between corrupt, chauvinistic men and other men who tend towards an androgynous identity. In some ways, these new men are surrogate females; in others, they are prototype men stumbling forward into a new consciousness. (213)

A Kindness Cup and An Item From the Late News are Astley’s most concentrated working out of the tensions in the hierarchy among men.

The aura of masculine inadequacy is palpable in Astley’s fiction, her books populated with eunuchs and men haunted by the threat of
castration straining to embody the superiority and power culturally attributed to the penis, or those like Wafer who retreat from the myth of masculine turgidity, or Archie Wetters whose cross-dressing mocks the relation between the penis and the phallus. Masculine lack unites Astley's procession of misfits, intellectuals, and rebels: Robert Moller, enjoined to celibacy; Bernard Leverson, pant-less, and his son Keith, who obsesses over his father's potency; Paul Vesper, "Holberg's eunuch!" (103); and Tom Dorahy, dubbed a "nancy" and a "bloodless man" (109) by an adversary. The castration motif reappears in Vanishing Points, where academic Macintosh Hope overhears someone refer to him as "Wordsworth's eunuch" (44). An Item from the Late News escalates the costs of castration. Where in The Slow Natives forcing his father to embody an ideal of phallic plenitude costs Keith Leverson a limb, a symbolic mutilation that hints at the violence inherent in phallocentric culture, in An Item from the Late News rejecting phallic plenitude costs Wafer his life.

6. Thesis Outline

The phrase "to write as a male" is the starting point for this thesis. It allows me to consider the historical context to which Astley refers (the 1950s and 1960s); the differences between male/female (essential), masculine/feminine (gender) and feminist (political); the critical reception of her work; and questions of genre and narrative.

The phrase also has implications for my position as a reader. For Lovell, the issue is not whether one writes like a man or
writes like a woman, but whether one writes from a political location or out of a political commitment - that is, whether one writes like a feminist. The shift in emphasis that Lovell proposes is applicable to the practice of reading as well. The point is not whether one reads like a man or reads like a woman, as Robert Scholes argues in "Reading Like a Man" (1987), but, as Diana Fuss counters in *Essentially Speaking* (1989), the political location one reads from. Male critics, Scholes argues, cannot hope to read like a woman:

A male critic, for instance, may work within the feminist paradigm but never be a full-fledged member of the class of feminists. On the same problems, the same texts, he will never work with the authority of a woman. (207)

However, Fuss suggests that Scholes collapses distinctions between "women," "woman," "female," and "feminist," and thus dodges the issue of "political identification" (26). While powerful, experience alone does not predetermine one's political identification. Political identification involves "commitment," which, Raymond Williams explains, is "conscious, active, and open: a choice of position" (*Marxism and Literature* 200). Commitment can override or contradict one's experience. For example, Marx and Engels propose in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that during class struggle "a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole" (46), sides with the proletariat. I, a lower-class, straight, white male graduate student, the first in my family to go to university, choose to side with feminists. In reading Astley's fiction in terms of its critique of the effects
of patriarchal power on feminine subjects, I read like a feminist. No reading position is neutral, outside of history, without bias. Feminist theory informs this thesis: the work of Juliet Mitchell, Michèle Barrett, Teresa Ebert, Lynne Segal, Teresa de Lauretis, Rita Felski, and Kaja Silverman powerfully critiques masculinity and femininity, provides an historical analysis of patriarchal relations of power, and seeks to end the ways in which social relations are unequally organized around gender.

So forceful were the negative determinations of patriarchal culture in the 1950s in Australia, Astley felt that she had to write like a man. The absence of women writers, especially those from the 1930s, from the emerging canon of Australian Literature and the denigration of women’s writing compounded Astley’s sense of alienation. Chapter One discusses Astley’s decision to "write as a male" in relation to the "negative determinations" (Williams, Marxism and Literature 87) of literary criticism which defined and established the limits that influenced Astley’s sense of artistic identity.

Until recently, Astley was rarely discussed as a feminist writer or as someone whose work had any bearing on feminist issues. Most critics argue that because Astley’s novels, excepting Girl with a Monkey and A Descant for Gossips, centre on male characters they have very little to do with women’s experience of femininity, domesticity, and the family: "Not for Astley the domestic world of Garner’s novels, or the close consideration of female relationships as in Jolley’s work, or the family-centredness of Masters’ fiction." Academic critics generally overlook the role of gender in Astley’s fiction. For example, of eleven references made to
Astley in Gelder and Salzman's substantial survey of contemporary Australian fiction, *The New Diversity*, only two occur in the chapter devoted to gender, "The Women's Story." She is altogether absent from "Sex" and the section of the chapter "Dialogues With History" that deals with "woman's history - her story" (159). To judge by their system of categorization, Astley is a regionalist: six Astley novels are listed in the "Regions and Regionalism" bibliography. Few critics have grappled with the complexity and comprehensiveness of her oeuvre, particularly her criticisms of capitalism and patriarchy. Single work studies of Astley's fiction invariably fix on the misfit, "the self-conscious hyperperceptive individuals on whom she concentrates" (Wilde, Hooton, and Andrew 41). Using the materialist readings of Freudian psychoanalysis done by the Frankfurt School, Mark Poster, and Kaja Silverman, Chapter Two demonstrates how the dominance of the misfit paradigm blinds critics to issues of class and gender in Astley's early fiction, especially her representation of the normalizing role of the nuclear family and her critique of the concepts of masculinity and femininity inscribed within that familial structure.

When Astley began writing, the romance was a critically maligned and gendered genre: "the woman writer was looked on as a creator of nothing more than 'women's books', something for the ladies to read" (Ross, "An Interview with Thea Astley" 267). To be taken seriously, a woman writer had to negotiate the dominant nationalist and internationalist literary theories regarding form, genre, and content, theories riddled with gender distinctions. The likelihood of woman or woman's experience emerging as a subject fit for the novel was remote, given that woman as subject was not countenanced
by the literary establishment and community at large: it wasn’t popular in my day to talk about menstruation or periods or the angst of having children. That was just a step above Ethel M[.] Dell, or Mills & Boon. (Ellison 56)

Disingenuous as this comment is - menstruation and sexual ignorance are crucial for the plotting of *A Descant for Gossips* - it nevertheless suggests that Astley felt restrained by definitions of what constituted literary subject matter and genres. Women’s pleasure, anxiety, or ambivalence about that experience rank slightly above the chaste, idealized world of popular romance. The meaning of women’s experience, the historical reality of being a woman in male chauvinist Australia, is either silenced - "it wasn’t popular to talk about" - or repressed and transformed in the popular yet debased romance. Alternatively, women’s bodily experience is both unfit for the romance formula and unseemly subject for literature: menstruation and childbirth cannot be readily incorporated within the dominant interpretative communities of the time, unlike, say, Voss stumbling about in the desert, a narrative amenable to both nationalists and internationalists. *The Slow Natives* grapples with sexual repression, hysteria, the delimiting sexual roles available to women, and it critiques the marriage plot associated with the popular romance. Chapter Three suggests that Astley shared the literary establishment’s disdain for the romance. But she did so not because the romance is an inferior genre but because the ideological implications of the romance have profound effects on women. In *Alice Doesn’t*, de Lauretis makes an especially useful distinction between woman, "a
fictional construct," and women, "real historical beings" (5). No "direct relation of identity" obtains between woman and women:

Like all other relations expressed in language, it is an arbitrary and symbolic one, that is to say, culturally set up. (6)

Astley explores the consequences of the disjunction between cultural fiction and historical being. The fiction of Ethel M. Dell, a successful English novelist of the 1920s and 1930s who specialised in the happy ending achieved through the marriage plot, typifies the narrative coherence and closure of the romance. The predictable consolations afforded by the solutions and formal unity of the romance (hero, heroine, various impediments and conventional moral dilemmas that prevent their marriage) deny what Astley registers as the "angst" experienced by woman.

Chapters Four to Six analyze novels from different phases of Astley's career: A Descant for Gossips (1960), An Item From the Late News (1982), and Reaching Tin River (1990). In terms of chronology, the selection of these novels approximates the three phases - before, during, and after - indicated by the title of Brian Matthews's second article on Astley, "Thea Astley: 'Before Feminism . . . After Feminism'." This diachronic structure establishes how consistent Astley has been in her attacks on patriarchy and illustrates how Astley's work has, in terms of its reception, been gendered. Reviewers of A Descant for Gossips read her as a woman writer, reviewers of An Item From the Late News ignored the question of gender altogether when Astley made it most overt, and feminist critics have read her work as "feminine," "maternal," and "feminist." This format also highlights feminism
as an "emergent" element of the cultural process. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams uses "class" to illustrate an "emergent" cultural formation, but he specifies that it is "not the only kind of emergence" (125): "there is always other social being and consciousness which is neglected and excluded" (126). Gender is a rallying point around which subjects can come to consciousness. Without specifying women's experience and consciousness of patriarchal oppression, Williams implies that feminism is "emergent" when he tropes what the dominant excludes as feminine: the personal, the private.

Astley's first two novels, *Girl With a Monkey* and *A Descant for Gossips*, the former concerning a female teacher, the latter the triangulated relationship between two teachers and a female student, breach the critical view that she focuses primarily on male characters. Chapter Four discusses the melodramatic tendencies of *A Descant for Gossips* manifest in its title, plot, character, and its concerns with the family, the legitimacy of the patriarch, gossip as women's discourse, and sexuality. *A Descant for Gossips* is a bleak rejoinder to the utopian, quixotic conclusion of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), one of the best Australian novels ever written, according to Astley. Reviewers of Astley's second novel judged the novel's ending, where Vinny Lalor swallows poison and commits suicide, implausible and melodramatic. The terms deployed to reprimand *A Descant for Gossips*, "melodrama" and "melodramatic," insinuate that Astley was writing like a woman and, moreover, producing a woman's book. Using Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) and various feminist and Marxist essays from Christine Gledhill's
brilliant anthology Home Is Where the Heart Is (1987), Chapter Four examines melodrama's origins as a revolutionary theatrical form, its negative transformation, by the 1960s, to a genre despised as feminine, emotional, and domestic, and its recent, phoenix-like rise in status, thanks to critical reassessment by feminists, Lacanians, and Marxists, as the "genre that most effectively and directly addressed [the family] and the tensions of heterosexual desire" (Byars 93). Of crucial importance in A Descant for Gossips, sexuality and desire are neither static nor immanent, though many characters treat them as such, but dynamic and produced. The production of masculinity and femininity and the alignment of gender and sexuality are at issue. For Vinny, subtly coerced or, in de Lauretis' phrase, "culturally set up" (Alice Doesn't 6) into heterosexuality, suicide is the only alternative to the patriarchal position mapped out as her natural destiny, motherhood. Astley produces a devastating critique of the destructive logic of Oedipal scripting.

Chapter Five deals with the much underrated An Item From the Late News, a trenchant critique of how patriarchal institutions and concepts perpetuate the structural and ideological conditions for the non-discursive and discursive subordination of the feminine: women, Aborigines, homosexuals, or insufficiently masculine men. Castration, transvestism, and a female narrator feature significantly in this novel. The work of Juliet Mitchell, Charles Bernheimer, and Kaja Silverman on Freud's castration complex informs my reading. The consequences of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 110) and the subordination of other masculinities will be discussed. An Item from the Late News attacks the reification of
the penis in patriarchal culture, particularly the exaggerated form masculinity takes when faced with the possibility that no natural relation obtains between the penis and the phallus, between nature and culture. By showing how the penis/phallus conflation sustains power, Astley demonstrates the ideological role the castration threat plays in naturalizing the gender relations of patriarchy. Furthermore, the symbolic appearance of cross-dressing Archie Wetters in the novel coincides with Astley’s realization that she was not at all writing like a man. With the twin appearances of the transvestite and the female narrator, Astley overtly places the issue of gender and the position from which one speaks at the centre of her fiction.

Since the publication of *An Item From the Late News*, female characters have assumed a central role in Astley’s fiction: Connie Laffey in *It’s Raining in Mango*, Bonnie and Belle in *Reaching Tin River*, Julie Truscott in *Vanishing Points*, and Kathleen Hackendorf in *Coda* (1994). Whether this new emphasis will affect earlier interpretations of her work remains to be seen. At any rate, it is having an impact. Critics are starting to give Astley’s work the attention it deserves. Chapter Six considers the familiar accusations thrown at Astley’s style. As Astley has often remarked, her style "infuriates reviewers" (Richey 101); she has tolerated her critical lapidation with remarkable grace. Some feminist critics, however, celebrate Astley’s poetic style, interpreting it as "feminine" or "maternal." This chapter categorizes recent feminist interpretations of Astley’s work into two groupings: those who emphasise her content (Strauss; Lindsay), and those who emphasise her style (Perkins; Kirkby).
critics influenced by French feminism have recuperated Astley's style and contended, contrary to Astley's view of her writing position, that she is writing like a woman, the implications of the maternal metaphors in work of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva are discussed. *Reaching Tin River* (like *An Item From the Late News*, narrated by a woman) problematizes the quest narrative and dismisses the "fallopian glory" of the womb, the central metaphor of **écriture féminine**. Belle discovers that using the womb as a metaphor for escape results in a dangerous obsession for nostalgia that degenerates into madness.
CHAPTER ONE

Writing Before Feminism:
The Negative Determinations of Literary Criticism

At the time Thea Astley published her first novel, *Girl With a Monkey* (1958), two subjects of social interest and anxiety were being discussed and analyzed: the status of women and the status of Australian literature. In the late 1950s, the Social Science Research Council of Australia commissioned Norman MacKenzie to undertake a comprehensive survey of the role, status, and position of women in Australian social, economic, and political life. During the same period Australian intellectuals debated "the possibility, and the propriety, of having Australian Literature as a subject of formal teaching and discussion in a university." Interpretative communities of various ideological hues competed for institutional control of the newly emergent subject, seeking to define and espouse cultural myths, values, practices and authors that underpinned their conception of the Australian literary tradition. Women who aspired to be writers had a difficult time ahead of them because they were alienated from cultural life, as MacKenzie’s study confirmed; moreover, the debates between nationalist and universalist literary critics over the subject of literature intensified this alienation, as both camps ignored the long tradition of women’s writing.
In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams proposed that "the complex idea of 'determination'" (82) best highlights "the indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness" (80). Negative determinations, he suggests, "are experienced as limits" (87), whereas positive determinations are "the exertion of pressures" (87). During the 1940s and 1950s women writers, Astley recalls, were ignored, dismissed, or relegated to the genre most associated with women, the romance - a genre of minimal cultural value. The negative determinations of literary criticism influenced Astley's perception of cultural activity. Astley's determination to write like a man is in part a response to the limits set by the literary-critical community.

For Australian Literature to be taught at university, academics and literary critics had to establish "a true canon in Australian writing" (Buckley, "Towards an Australian Literature" 60). Neither spontaneous nor ideologically neutral, a tradition is a politically interested and contested projection and celebration of social meanings. It is, Williams notes,

> an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification. (*Marxism and Literature* 115)

A literary canon emphasises "certain meanings and practices" (115) at the expense of other meanings and practices.² In short, a literary tradition arranges and combines otherwise separated and even disparate meanings, values, and practices, which it specifically incorporates in a
significant culture and an effective social order.

(Williams 115)

An ideological construction, a tradition establishes and invents connections between aspects of the past and contemporary society. Writing two decades earlier than Buckley, M. Barnard Eldershaw recognised the potential risks of canon formation - "To allot places in a hierarchy is dangerous" (3) - and understood how texts can be "allowed to slip away from the community of living books" (82). In the 1960s the books that the critical community allowed to slip away were mostly written by women.

The explicit and implicit masculinity of Australian society placed definite and indefinite restraints on women in general and women writers in particular. During the 1950s strict limits were placed on what counted as experience. Women's experience was ordinarily consigned to the private sphere of the family, a sphere considered far removed from men's experience in the public sphere of politics, economics, cultural production, history and so on.³ Regarding the options available to women, Norman MacKenzie, whose Women in Australia was published in 1962, presented a scenario considerably more optimistic than the morbid scenario outlined by Marc in Dymphna Cusack's Jungfrau (1936): "Women are cursed, all right. If you wither on the virgin stem you go all pathological; if you go off the deep end you get some foul disease; and if you marry and have dozens of young you die of exhaustion" (34). Even so, his chapter "Woman's Place" begins with the dour fact that adult life for ninety percent of Australian women meant marriage and motherhood. One significant change between Marc's comment and MacKenzie's was that fewer women were dying of exhaustion.
Declining family sizes meant that the coming decades would see women, particularly middle-class women, freed somewhat from the burdens of domestic duties. The full effect of this domestic shift would not be felt until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Women involved in cultural production, Astley says, had their cultural activity devalued. According to Astley, "'women's' literature" was a standard term of abuse, with the prefix stigmatizing the cultural activity it qualified. Because women are naturally inferior, the logic ran, so too must be their cultural production. Writing by women, therefore, could not be literature. Because the author was conceptualised in terms of a masculine identity and position, women writers were disregarded, ridiculed, their books excluded from literary culture. Literature had an invisible and unacknowledged prefix: "men's." For Astley, the confluence of these two factors - the denigration of women and women's writing - was too much. To be taken seriously, she thought she had to write like a man.

The situation Astley describes was a recent one, for in the 1930s women writers were recognised as expert novelists. Between 1890 and 1920, poetry and short stories were the favoured and legitimate literary genres, with the novel conceded to women. That situation changed in 1928 when the Bulletin, in recognition of the growing number of writers working with the novel, began its novel competition. Joint winners of first prize were Katharine Susannah Prichard's Coonardoo and M. Barnard Eldershaw's A House is Built. Their success set the tone for the following decade, a decade remarkable for the "qualitative pre-eminence of women novelists" (Modjeska 5). The increasing importance and prestige accorded to the novel benefited women writers. To account for the sizable
number of women novelists, M. Barnard Eldershaw use an apt vocational analogy: "Writing has become quite a recognized feminine profession - like nursing" (1). Writing was considered a socially acceptable activity for women because, as MacKenzie notes in relation to nursing, teaching, and clerical work, it "could be regarded as the natural extension of 'feminine' interests, previously associated either with the home or philanthropic interests" (8). Advantages came with the feminization of the genre:

A certain tardiness in recognizing the novel as a form of art allowed women to establish themselves in the practice of it without opposition. They did not have to combat a strong tradition. The sex has not developed an inferiority complex in regard to novel writing as in most of the other arts. Women had won their spurs before anyone thought of telling them they incapable of doing so. (Barnard Eldershaw 1)

M. Barnard Eldershaw’s critical survey of contemporary writing, Essays in Australian Fiction (1938), unashamedly privileges writing by women. The organisation of Essays in Australian Fiction implies the dominance of women writers between the wars. Unlike many books of criticism published after it, the number of male and female writers reviewed is equal; such gender equity, then as now, was anomalous. The essays on Frank Dalby Davison, Vance Palmer, Leonard Mann, and 'Martin Mills' (Martin Boyd) are bracketed by an introductory essay on Henry Handel Richardson, Prichard, and separate essays on Christina Stead and Eleanor Dark. Despite the general excellence of women’s writing, discrimination against women
writers was commonplace: "the scores are kept differently" (2). For example, some critics drew a correlation between the so-called biological inferiority of women and the natural inferiority of their fiction, crediting bad writing by women to their sex, and bad writing by men to some individual fault. Aware that biological differences are assigned particular social meanings, Barnard Eldershaw title the essay on Richardson and Prichard, "Two Women Novelists," thus singling out the sex of the authors for special mention. Being a woman, they claim, is no impedient to being a great writer. The category "male" constitutes the cultural norm, a taxonomy that need not be announced. It is hard to imagine an essay on Davison and Boyd entitled "Two Men Novelists."

When Astley began writing in the late 1950s, women were regarded as inferior writers, incapable of producing literature. How was it that women's writing could be devalued so quickly and so thoroughly? How was it that the women writers of the 1930s disappeared? The professionalisation of Australian literary criticism and the emergence of Australian literature as a fit and legitimate object of study in the 1950s and 1960s ultimately worked against women writers, because with the consolidation of critical preferences and tastes, the literary and political achievements of the writers of the 1930s, especially women writers, were disqualified. Twenty years separate M. Barnard Eldershaw's path-breaking Essays in Australian Fiction (1938) from Astley's Girl With Monkey, but in the interim women writers were on the receiving end of a cultural backlash. Established women writers of the 1930s vanished in part because of the literary criticism of the post-war period, neglected
due to a predominantly masculine view within literary criticism and literary history which does not recognise as legitimate the themes and subject matter of much of women's fiction. (Modjeska 252)

Australian literary criticism in the post-war period was inflected with a masculine bias. From the vantage point of 1981, John Docker interpreted the literary debates of the 1950s and 1960s as a contest between radical nationalists and conservative universalists. This binary view has been contested, but it is still valid for the purpose of contextualizing Astley's desire to write as a male. As these critical schools struggled for the power to regulate and transmit cultural norms and meanings, women writers were marginalised and the feminist protest of their work ignored. The achievements of the women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries went unacknowledged. Debra Adelaide argues that Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, Caroline Woolmer Leakey, Catherine Helen Spence, Mary Fortune and Mary Vidal were disregarded because their writing concentrated on the domestic aspect of colonial life. The celebrity of prominent women writers was ephemeral, usually restricted to their generation, a consequence of what Germaine Greer terms the "phenomenon of the transience of female literary fame" (quoted in A Literature of Their Own 11). Compiling a bibliography of Australian women writers, Adelaide discovered many writers acclaimed in their time who had subsequently "vanished into obscurity" (Australian Women Writers vii), their work out of print, unread, and forgotten. Often a women writer was noted for one book, for example, Prichard with Coonardoo, and the rest of their work forgotten.
In the early 1950s, nationalist interpretations of Australian character, consciousness, culture, and identity were in the ascendant, but this domination was subject to critical revision and attack from an emergent, rival literary formalism that would later, by the 1960s, become an entrenched institutional authority. Neither critical regime had much to say about writing by women. Nationalist literary historiography, with its oppressive masculine bias and emphasis on the Australian character (i.e. the Australian male character) contributed to "women’s virtual obliteration from a communal past" (Dixson 12-13). Nationalist historiography, too, was blind to women as historical subjects, blind to the way in which it elevated male experience as national experience, and barely recorded the presence of women. Three central nationalist texts, Vance Palmer’s *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), A. A. Phillips’s *The Australian Tradition* (1958) and Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), celebrated the masculine egalitarianism found among lower-class Australians. The bush, mateship, and egalitarian democracy of the late nineteenth century were heralded as typically Australian.

One reviewer of *The Australian Legend* objected to Ward’s promotion of the bush as the source of intrinsically national values and traits. Michael Roe criticised the ideological assumptions and implications of *The Australian Legend*, arguing that the book is anachronistic, mythical, untrue to the urban experience of the majority of Australians, and a perverse celebration of mediocrity, anti-intellectualism, conformity, racism, and materialism. Although Roe overlooks the way in which the legend
ignores women, he unintentionally alludes to the masculine bias of Ward’s project:

the outback worker has won recognition from other Australians as their prototype and so his qualities have become national qualities. (364 my emphasis)

Thirteen years later, Dixson, emphasising what Roe failed to comment upon, would add anti-feminist to the list of charges against the legend, arguing that Ward’s book "would be more accurately titled ‘The Australian Legend as Envisioned by Males’, or ‘a Male’" (58). The Australian character Ward describes as being essential for defining the values of national identity, Dixson convincingly points out, "centres around a special style of masculinity" (24) - diggers, bushman, Anzac, unionist - that depends on the absence of women. Moreover, as Kay Schaffer argues, "the dominant norms of Australian culture are masculine, White, Anglo-Irish and heterosexual" (12). That which is not typically Australian (i.e. masculine) is represented as "derivative, inauthentic, unnatural and thus ‘feminine’" (21). In It’s Raining in Mango (1987), Harry Laffey outlines a hierarchy very similar to that articulated by Schaffer:

I’m part of the established Australian social structure, he would say, and I can’t help it.

mate
horse
dog
missus
wog
poof
boong
that's
the
pecking
order.

See, he would say, a poem, a kind of poem of structure.
And as many girls as you can get on the side.
Do they count? someone might ask.
You're kidding, he would say. (115)

By the 1960s a new critical formation affiliated with the
formalist and metaphysical criticism of T. S. Eliot and F. R.
Leavis assailed the credibility, assumptions, and authority of
nationalist literary criticism and its concomitant tradition.²
Important representatives of this formation are Vincent Buckley's
Essays in Poetry, Mainly Australian (1959), Cecil Hadgraft's
Australian Literature: A Critical Account to 1955 (1960), Grahame
Johnston's Australian Literary Criticism (1962) and Geoffrey
Dutton's The Literature of Australia (1964). Where the
nationalists highlight distinctively Australian traits specific to
time, place, and society, the universalists accentuate the timeless
and universal human values found intermittently in Australian
literature. The "true subject" of Australian literature, H. P.
Heseltine contends, is "the individual human being confronting the
primal energies at the centre of his being on the stage of the
Australian continent" ("Australian Image" 43-4). The implied
"false subject" of Australian literature is collective groups
confronting and contesting political power. Like the radical nationalists, the new critic's interpretation of Australian culture relied on the construction of a canon, a literary gerrymander.

Cultural authority was at stake and this authority had, according to the rhetoric of those involved, to be fought for. The military language of H. P. Heseltine's prefatory remarks to his review of A. A. Phillips's *The Australian Tradition* conjures up an image of an all male battlefield:

> The view of our literature which has acquired perhaps the widest authority is that which sees it as a contest between an exclusive and an inclusive culture, in which the latter has consistently marshalled the superior forces; it is the democratic theme which is at the heart of our literature. ("Australian Image" 35)

The universalists discredited the legitimacy of that authority with gusto. Issues of national character and national identity, so important to the nationalists, did not primarily concern the new group. Buckley believed that the nationalist tendency "to praise, push, boom the inferior article on 'Australian' grounds" ("Towards an Australian Literature" 59) rewarded mediocrity and threatened literary standards. Nationalist critics, according to Buckley, were "zealous commentators" incapable of discussing literature seriously and lacking the knowledge and literary prowess to construct "a convincing canon of books" (59). The nationalist literary tradition was "mere patriotic illusion" (63). Universalists claimed that they, unlike the fiercely partisan nationalists, were critically disinterested, politically non-
aligned, and practised "genuine criticism" (59) rather than the bogus commentary and boosterism typical of the nationalists. Neither provisional nor informal, Buckley's "genuine criticism" is characterised by a process of inclusion and exclusion. It would "point to and define the quality of life in a writer's work, and so to place him (however provisionally and informally) in his proper rank" (60).

Much of the writing of the 1930s was labelled as too political for inclusion within the universalist canon. When social realists such as Prichard and Xavier Herbert were incorporated within the universalist canon, their social realism and the politics of their work were subordinated to metaphysical issues. An emphasis on literary standards was part of the anti-nationalist project. Echoes of Buckley's appeal in 1959 for "literary analysis all the way" (68) reverberate in Kramer's introduction to The Oxford Literary History of Australia, where she argues that she wants to avoid introducing "extra-literary considerations into criticism" (23). By eliminating texts that had a social message, the universalists displaced the women writers of the 1930s. Thus Buckley could make the nonchalant generalisation that Herbert was "the solitary creative peak of the 'thirties" (144) and get away with it relatively unchallenged. Not content with sequestering Herbert from the political turbulence of that decade, Buckley ignores the women writers of that period.9

Universalists bestowed poetic status to the prose they privileged. In his essay on Randolph Stow and Christopher Koch, "In the Shadow of Patrick White," Buckley praises the "mythopoeic, metaphysical, even religious" (144) elements of Patrick White's
novels. The novel is valorised only when "the sensibility at work in it works in rhythmic patterns which we think of as more characteristic of poetry than of fiction" (147). Stow and Koch deal with "the problem of alienation" and "the problem of metaphysical identity" (145). The human condition is considered to be more important than the "social message" (146). In describing Stow's work, Buckley deploys phrases associated with universalist criticism: "mythic figures," "dark sources," "isolation," and "cosmic emotions" (150). Realists, in contrast, are "not mythopoeic, not 'poetic', but concerned with psychological analysis or social commentary" (145). Realism could be "lyrical" but not social. Social realism equalled "social message," whereas lyrical-realism signified "some concentrated formulation of the human condition" (144). This criterion barred social realist novelists of the 1930s admittance to the canon.\(^\text{10}\)

Literary nationalism, in contrast, is tasteless, its meanings, values, and genres considered immature, coarse, and bland. Bush tucker's no match for international cuisine, according to Norman Bartlett, whose epicurean analysis of Australian literature revolves around an aesthetics and politics of taste: "The national billy tea literary tradition - the gum leaves make all the difference - no longer completely satisfies" (75). The average Australian novel is mediocre and lifeless: "dead as mutton, anyway, wholesome and filling, no doubt, but, oh! so dull" (77). Flavour is connected to discrimination, essence to judgment. Through the application of critical taste, Bartlett wants to improve the standing of Australian literature and criticism.
Realist novels promoted by nationalists "merely skirt the fringes of existence" (Bartlett 76). Claustrophobically provincial, the nationalist tradition championed inferiority and "act[ed] as a stultifying factor in Australian intellectual life" (78). For Bartlett, "democratic-realist orthodoxies" (83) and "correct opinions" (84) had outlived their usefulness. Whereas the nationalists focused on the Australian-ness of society and its people and values, the new critical formation aligned itself with "a continuous cultural tradition based on civilised rather than exclusively national or currently fashionable values" (77). In short, Bartlett is sick and tired of what would later be labelled political correctness. The artist's search for the universal, the timeless, the transcendental, and the essential is of utmost importance. The value of any novelists' work, Bartlett says, can be measured by the extent of their struggle to grapple with the dizzy and appalling vision of life - the permanent condition of man's existence on earth, irrespective of nationality or ideological adherence. (81).

Novelists who address "the larger questions of man's fate which rise way above contemporary politics or nationalisms or fashionable cliques" (79) are ranked highly, novelists who don't are simply rank.

On those occasions when women's writing is praised, it is for being natural, innocent, child-like, and free from ideology. Any hint of feminist polemic or complaint, any sense of disruptive hostility manifest in the text results in exclusion from the literary canon, as we see in Cecil Hadgraft's Australian
Throughout his survey, Hadgraft considers many women writers who were active in the 1930s to have written their best work prior to 1930. For example, he rates Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1928) as her best book because unlike her novels of the 1930s and 1940s it is free from her "addiction to the mission, to reform, to exhortation" (229). Preferring Prichard's earlier, seeming nonpartisan novels, Hadgraft charts her oeuvre in terms of its movement "from idyll to ideology" (231), from art to didacticism. In the case of Miles Franklin, Hadgraft's praise is condescendingly patriarchal. *My Brilliant Career* is adjudged a remarkable first book for a young woman. But it is foolish to praise it for what it is not. It is unlikely, for instance, that she should possess mastery. The book contains the artless outpourings of a youthful spirit dissatisfied with its material and spiritual lot. (164) With *My Career Goes Bung* (1946), criticised as inept because of its overt politics and sardonic critique of patriarchal culture, Hadgraft adopts a censorious, patronising tone and repeats his earlier claim:

Once again we can say the novel is remarkable for a young woman. It is sincere, but the personality that grimaces through the pages begins to take on the quality of oddness. It becomes after a time a trifle wearing. The literary champion of women's rights has begun to displace the literary woman. (164-65)

Rather than engage with the textual difficulties ("oddness") that "wear" him out, Hadgraft focuses on the author's personality.
Employing a distinction between literary and extra-literary activity, he argues that the social message - Franklin's outright feminism - should never swamp the literariness of the work. Franklin, he concludes, "is not a major novelist; she survives as a personality and will be remembered for her first gauche and artless and vital book" (166). My Brilliant Career is not imaginative in the true sense: it is an artless, hasty story of her experience, i.e., just another example of women's autobiography.

Assessing Stead, Hadgraft says her writing is "like spice" (247). With one simile Hadgraft situates Stead in the kitchen and uses it to criticise her critique of domesticity! Socially and culturally women's place is in the home, far away from politics, feminism, struggle and critique, yet even in this allowable space Stead is still too piquant for the "meat-and-three-veg" school of literary criticism. When not exploiting domestic analogies as a strategy of containment, Hadgraft retards writers at a period of seemingly perpetual pubescence, as though to minimise their experience as women. Women are best when they are not women, but young, inexperienced, artless girls, wide-eyed and breathless. For example, The Pioneers (1915) has

a simplicity and appealing quality that indicate where Katharine Prichard's real talent lay. Parts of this novel read as if written by some grave, wide-eyed, and articulate child. (228)

There was a considerable degree of patriarchal conformity among the nationalist and universalist camps when it came to evaluating writing by women. A notable exception to the masculine-onesidedness of literary criticism came from social scientist
Norman MacKenzie. Of the many fascinating and thorough observations he makes in *Women in Australia*, the result of his pioneering and meticulous research which appeared in 1962, his comments on the high incidence and general excellence of women writers bear repeating:

Not only did a considerable number find an outlet in writing, but their achievement in this field, has, on the whole and over the span of a century, been more considerable than that of men. It may be that writing was an aspect of life in which assumptions about masculine superiority mattered less, or in which women competed more on terms of equality. (26)

In context of the literary debates at the time, this perceptive observation is atypical." MacKenzie doesn't base his analysis on a handful of writers; he mentions works by Francis Vidal, Mrs Charles Clacy, Catherine Spence, 'Oline Keese' (Caroline Leakey), Richardson, Franklin, Praed, Mary Durack, and Judith Wright. He also comments upon the unconventional realism of women's writing and the consistency, recurrence, and longevity of its "feminist themes" (28). The claims Mackenzie makes for women writers in his conclusion are nothing less than laudatory:

What is relevant here is the contribution they made to the creation of an Australian consciousness, to the self-consciousness of women, to social criticism and to history. (28)

If such a viewpoint was the norm, then perhaps Astley would never have had to imagine that she had to write as a male. Such acclamation is qualified, though, with an acknowledgment that women
writers, for all their achievements, were definitely ignored and allowed, in Barnard Eldershaw's words, to slip away:

Few of these novels, memoirs and travel books are ever taken from the shelf today; many of them, indeed, are hard to find even in good libraries. But they made an important and still unappreciated mark in their day.

(28)

MacKenzie's observations remained a minority opinion. Women's writing continued to be eschewed, disparaged, and depreciated.

Theoretically, Astley should have benefited from the ascendancy of universalist criticism, with its focus on poetic prose and metaphysical issues. Her writing in the 1960s, she says, differed "from [that of] the Bulletin school" (Ellison 58), the prose most associated with nationalist criticism. For a short while, she did benefit. Early reviews of her novels make favourable mention of her "poet's love of words" (Geering 54). Bartlett approvingly cites Astley, along with Stow, Koch, Hal Porter, and Elizabeth Harrower, as an example of a writer for whom timeless and essential metaphysical issues are of prime concern. These writers, he argues, "probe beneath sociological, sexual, economic and partisan facts to the essential reality of the permanent conditions of existence" (84-85). For Bartlett, specifics of place, time, culture, and politics are unimportant, mere diluvium. But by the mid-1960s Astley had fallen afoul of the critics. Margaret Smith's excellent description of the "double-edged" nature of Astley's novels suggests why universalists and nationalists found it difficult to situate Astley in their respective canons:
Astley's work is always double-edged. There are her social realist concerns with the corruptions and contradictions of society, but overshadowing this is always the plight of the individual and the journey of the self - the operations of the individual consciousness as it seeks by whatever means to preserve autonomy, establish identity, and gain fulfilment. Her work is strongest when this focus on self is on a woman or on her new breed of androgynous men. (213)

The combination of both metaphysical and social realist attributes in roughly equal measure makes claiming Astley for either canon an exacting task. When Astley concentrates on what seem to be metaphysical issues - alienation, for example - she draws attention to gender and class.

Astley's belief that she had to write as a man is indicative of the limitations placed on women as producers of culture. With her simile, Astley focuses attention not on a specifically gendered textuality, a writing practice identifiably masculine or feminine, but on the social and cultural power men have to speak. Astley uses the phrase "to write as a male" to construct for herself a position from which to write. To develop a consciousness of herself as a writer meant sharing the assumptions valorised by the dominant culture: that entailed thinking that she had to write as a man. To write as a male, then, is analogous to writing from a position of power and legitimacy.
CHAPTER TWO

Romancing the Misfit, Ignoring the Family

Thea Astley has been typecast as the champion of the misfit, valorised as the patron of doomed individualism. Reviews and academic studies frequently depict Astley's fiction as being primarily concerned with "misfits," maverick individuals isolated, punished, and, occasionally, killed for their nonconformism. Each Astley novel, the criticism goes, reiterates and embellishes the same theme. Little, it seems, differentiates one misfit from another. What is being explicated and reproduced, however, is an interpretative framework - the misfit paradigm - which, in its romance of the individual, minimizes the specific relation between the individual and the social institutions and practices of culture, thus circumventing the complicated relationship between the subject, the mode of production, and the unconscious. As a critical matrix, the misfit paradigm briddles interpretation, eclipsing the claims of class, regionalism, and gender. More often than not, misfit status is accorded to characters who are clearly conformists, as is the case with Keith Leverston, teenage protagonist of The Slow Natives (1965); alternately, the misfit experience is seen to transcend differences, hence characters as disparate as Keith Leverston, Chookie Mumberson, and Vinny Lalor from A Descant for Gossip (1960) are casually lumped together even
though Astley clearly differentiates them by gender, education, and class.

The difficulties presented by the notion of the individual that underlines the misfit paradigm can be avoided by considering the misfit as a "subject" rather than as an "individual." This is not a trifling distinction, for "subject" denotes "a quite different semantic and ideological space from that indicated by the more familiar term 'individual'" (Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics 126). Put simply, "individual" betokens, among other things, consciousness, reason, freedom, and self-knowledge. Yet, as Louis Althusser argues, the "obviousness" of the autonomous, conscious, and ethical individual, like "the obviousness of the 'transparency' of language," is "an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect" (161). Subjects are born and then inserted into a cultural system (laws, discourse, institutions, roles, practices, beliefs) that pre-exists them, a point Althusser emphasises: "individuals are always-already subjects" (164).

Early on in Astley's career the misfit paradigm makes its appearance. Reviewing A Descant for Gossips (1960), Marjorie Barnard describes Vinny Lalor as "plain, awkward, painfully proud, helpless in a way that draws cruelty, a non-conformist to the pattern of life in which she is trapped" (440), setting a precedent subsequent reviewers have followed. Matters were not helped when, in 1970, Astley candidly acknowledged her empathy for misfits:

The outsider interests me enormously - not self-conscious phoney arty outsiders, but bums and old ladies and people who are lonely, seedy and unsuccessful. . . . I've always been staggered when critics charge my novels with
cruelty. 'Strikes again' was one barbarous phrase! I swear it must come out wrong, for in books like The Slow Natives and A Boatload of Home Folk I was trying to wring those trachyte reviewing hearts with my sympathy for the misfits. (5)

Since Astley made her compassion explicit, critics have rarely deviated from the misfit paradigm, seizing with wearying consistency on the idea of the misfit absorbed in a life-threatening ontological tragedy, bravely affirming an inexplicable yet somehow true self. In "Life in the Eye of the Hurricane," the first major survey of Astley's novels, Brian Matthews (1973) invokes an existential thematic to describe Astley's characters, those "islands of intense self-consciousness seeking in assertive, almost desperate avowals of identity, bastions against encroaching chaos" (149). Such typecasting received an authoritative imprimatur when The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature (1985), in the absence of any other articles on Astley in the interim, repeated and cemented Matthews's main points, thus shackling Astley and her oeuvre within the misfit paradigm:

she frequently writes from the point of view of the vulnerable misfit, the unspectacular outsider. For the self-conscious hyperperceptive individuals on whom she concentrates, life is necessarily isolated, an unequal, doomed, tragic-comic struggle for identity and integrity. From Elsie Ford of Girl with a Monkey to Paul Vesper of The Acolyte, she develops related but increasingly complex studies of desperate attempts to preserve the self in the face of disintegration. (41)
So entrenched and familiar, so inevitable and casually deployed, is the misfit paradigm that, on occasion, it is applied to Astley to explain her marginal status in Australian literature:

Astley is a senior and respected figure: she remains apart, nevertheless, something of a loner, something of a maverick even in the eyes of her sisters. (Matthews, "Before Feminism . . . After Feminism" 16)

Individualism and transhistoricism are apparent in "Life in the Eye of the Hurricane," an article that is still influential, ample testimony to Matthews's many insights into Astley's style, characters, and preoccupations, and the general shortage of Astley criticism since the piece was first published. For Matthews, the individual has categorical primacy over society. Central to his argument is the idea of a "real and vulnerable self" (165) being threatened by either an unnamed and unspecified external anarchy or the overwhelming egotism of (usually male) characters. The first group comprises "beleaguered men and women" - Girl With a Monkey's Elsie Ford, A Descant for Gossips's Vinny Lalor, and The Slow Natives's Bernard Leverson and Miss Trumper, each an "individual consciousness" facing "incipient or actual chaos of evil, sordidness, deadening triviality or cavernous loneliness" (151). In the second group, to which The Well Dressed Explorer's George Brewster and The Acolyte's Jack Holberg belong, "the ever-threatening anarchy" resides within "an individual psyche" (153).

Interpreted as an individual engaged in the romantic isolation of existential struggle, the misfit is magically cleaved from history. Matthews's stalwart synopsis of Astley's first six novels concludes with an ecumenical flourish:
Her enisled, intensely self-conscious heroines, her fugitive, desperate "slow natives," her voracious egotists and the protean Vesper transcend their Australian context to stand as an unnervingly truthful perception of what it is like to live in a time of disintegration, to live always in the eye of some hurricane, of some kind, somewhere. (173)

Synonymous with the misfit paradigm, then, is a tragic view of history. Powerlessness and suffering are irresistibly fated. This tragic and universal essentialism obscures social relations of power and disregards the ways in which class, gender, family, race, education, region, age, and sexuality, among other relations, intersect, clash, and struggle. Thus when Matthews argues that in The Slow Natives "a whole class of people is doomed because the world is the way it is" (165), class refers to a general cluster of motley individuals rather than a social grouping structured around specific economic relations. But economic relations and class differences constitute an important part of the social context occasioning the rebellion of adolescent misfit, Keith Leverson. In addition, Matthews's proposal that "Vinny has her counterpart in Keith Leverson" (156) effaces social differences, notably those of gender and class.4

Although critics conflate misfits and negate difference, Astley doesn't. Macquarie Dictionary defines "misfit" as "a bad fit, as an ill-fitting garment," "a badly adjusted person," and "one who feels ill at ease or out of place in a given environment, as a family, a school, a job, or society as a whole." In general, critics rarely direct their attention to the "given environment"
cited by Macquarie, preferring instead to read signs of unease or maladjustment as evidence of existential angst. However, while the opening sentence of *A Descant for Gossips*, for example, lends itself to incorporation within the misfit paradigm because it refers to an individual and invokes marginality - "Almost as long as Vinny Lalor could remember she had been on the fringe of things" (1) - the second sentence elaborates upon the specific nature of "the fringe of things": "Family and school both found her their least important member" (1). Astley situates Vinny's loneliness in relation to two institutions of socialization, of which the former plays a crucial role in reproducing class and constructing gender identity and sexuality. Indeed, despite the numerous references to the individual, identity and consciousness that choke Matthews's essay, there is no significant reference to or account of "the earliest point of confrontation with authority in the individual's life" (Benjamin 46), the family.

Psychic formation occurs in the family, a social location. To better understand the constitutive role the family played in the development of personality structure, the Frankfurt School revised the Marxist idea of the family, ameliorating it with some basic insights of Freudian psychoanalysis. The family, the Frankfurt School argue, is "a societally determined locus in which personality structure is formed, and which in turn is socially relevant" (133). The psychic deterioration many Astley characters experience, Matthews suggests, indicates a tragic, idiosyncratic individual self, something private rather than social, but "the structure of the psyche," Fredric Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious*, "is historical" (62). For all that can be said
against Freud's theoretical discoveries, those who have historicized his theories clearly demonstrate the specificity of the Oedipus Complex and its relation to "a limited family structure" (Poster 17), that of the bourgeoisie. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," Althusser argues that the family, along with the church, school, law, political system, trade union, media, and the arts, is an institution that has a determining significance in reproducing capitalist economic relations and situating the individual as a subject. To detail how "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects" (164), Althusser uses the family to illustrate his thesis, borrowing, unfashionably at the time, from Jacques Lacan:

if we agree to drop the 'sentiments', i.e. the forms of family ideology (paternal/maternal/conjugal/fraternal) in which the unborn child is expected: it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived. (164-65)

Moreover, the family reproduces gendered subjects: "the former subject-to-be will have to 'find' its place, i.e. 'become the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance" (165).

The Slow Natives appeared at a time when the concept and constitution of the post-war Australian family was subject to sociological analysis and monitoring. Social and national well-
being relied so heavily on a healthy, robust family, according to A. P. Elkin, editor of *Marriage and the Family in Australia* (1957), that it was "the responsibility of individuals, of families, and of society" (199) to minimize divorce because the family is "the basic and co-ordinating unit of society" (215), a point upon which the other contributors to *Marriage and the Family in Australia* agree. Any deviations from the family normalized by this study are stigmatized. The nuclear form this family takes is particular to the post-war period. Harold Fallding's "Inside the Australian Family," another essay in the collection, focuses on 38 Sydney families (defined as husband/breadwinner, wife/mother, two or more children, one of whom was in adolescence) to determine whether significant structural changes within the nuclear family were evident. His conclusion: "The over-all picture is one of patriarchy, being challenged by a pattern of partnership" (62). By 1965 this pattern was so pronounced and lopsided it merited a new phrase, "matriduxy," to designate the mother's "powerful leadership functions" (Adler 153) within the Australian nuclear family. The *Slow Natives* captures this sense of crisis, yet in the end patriarchy, not partnership nor matriduxy, remains in place.

*The Slow Natives* differs from Astley's earlier novels, *Girl with a Monkey* (1958), *A Descant for Gossips*, and *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962), in that, as Astley explains, it concentrates not on one or two misfits, but on many:

It got its title from the saying my son brought home from school: 'What's the black stuff between elephant's toes? Slow natives.' It hasn't anything to do with blacks.
The slow natives in this book were an unfortunate nun, a couple of failed priests, a mishap of a music teacher, and two adolescent boys - all of whom were moving in their various little circles on the outside of the family group, all without a center. That’s why the book is called Slow Natives. The elephant in this case was God or life who just squashed them. (Richey 92)

Importantly, Astley situates her "slow natives" in relation to the most consequential institution of identity formation, the family. When discussed in relation to the crisis of the bourgeois family articulated by the Frankfurt School and the emergence of the teenager in the post-war period, the actions and protest of one of the "two adolescent boys" to which Astley refers, Keith Leverson, are less those of a misfit than those of a bored middle class.

Two epigraphs preface The Slow Natives, the first being the juvenilia that gives the novel its name, the second an excerpt from John Aubrey’s Brief Lives which highlights father-son conflict. Sir Walter Raleigh punishes his son with "a damned blow over the face." The son returns the blow, striking indirectly at his father’s authority:

- his son, as rude as he was, would not strike
- his father, but strikes over the face of the
- Gentleman that sate next to him, and sayed,
- 
- Box about, 'twill come to my Father anon.

This anticipates the crisis of authority in the Leverson household. Bernard, according to Keith, will not punish him and he resents this absence of punishment which he equates with patriarchal authority. Consequently, from the age of eleven Keith’s "actions
were motivated solely by the longing to protest against his home" (1), that is, he protests against his father's inability to be a proper father and his failure to ensure that his family live up to what a family should be.

Years before Roland Barthes hailed the death of the bourgeois author, the Frankfurt School mourned the decline and displacement of an equally powerful authority, the bourgeois father. Sensitivity to the intense interpersonal relationships within the liberal bourgeois family and appreciation for the positive effects of bourgeois socialisation distinguished the Frankfurt School's analysis of the family from orthodox Marxism. The Frankfurt School agree with Marx's position in *The Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeois family is based on and organised around capital and private gain, but to Marx's bristly dismissal of the "bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child" (55), the Frankfurt School with considerable charity posit a subtle counterpoise: "Like every proper ideology, the family too was more than a mere lie" (138), more than the worthless, gaudy sentiment Marx made it out to be. Without the patriarch, they argued, autonomy was impossible.

The father's "economic and educational role" (141) in the nineteenth-century family, the Frankfurt School argue, constitutes a crucial process in the child's identity formation. The father's power as head of the family and head of the business were synonymous. Paradoxically, internalizing the father's authority and learning to behave within an impersonal capitalist system enables one to repudiate, modify, and transform authority. Repression contributes to the development of autonomy. While
familial ideology and the oppressive character of family life reaffirm the bourgeois social order, they simultaneously cultivate in individual family members "the agencies of conscience, individual independence, and possible resistance against the pressure of social conformity" (Horkheimer 392). The transformation from nineteenth-century liberal bourgeois capitalism to twentieth-century state industrial capitalism altered the once powerful economic role of the bourgeois father. In modern capitalism the social imperatives compelling children to comply with and submit to paternal authority lack the force they once had:

the child can no longer identify with the father, no longer can accomplish that internalization of the familial demands, which with all their repressive moments still contributed decisively to the formation of an autonomous individual. (141)

Instead, the child searches for authority elsewhere, susceptible to authoritarian political manipulation and vulnerable to the narcissistic satisfactions of consumer society. However, although the father's position diminishes, the collective authority figures controlling and mediating relations are profoundly patriarchal. Regarding socialization, the Frankfurt School was pessimistic, for "no longer does one struggle against [the family]; instead it is forgotten or merely tolerated by those who have neither the motives nor the strength for resistance" (142). Keith, however, struggles against the family on behalf of the family, his rebellion a conformist desire for patriarchal authority.

The absent father becomes a point of contention in The Slow Natives, where Keith argues that his father has absented himself
from enforcing the paternal discipline necessary for his positive cultural subjection. In one respect, Matthews is correct in detecting a similarity between Vinny and Keith: both are in search of a father. *A Descant for Gossips* anticipates a theme central to *The Slow Natives* and one that recurs in Astley's later novels: the dead or absent father. Fathers die - Wafer's father is blown up before his eyes in *An Item from the Late News* (1981) - or flee the family - "I come from a long line of wife leavers" (206) Julie Truscott reflects in *Vanishing Points* (1992). Indeed, "Where's dad?" (234), Reever's query in *It's Raining in Mango* (1987), echoes throughout Astley's oeuvre. A desire for cultural sameness, to be like other families, inspires Vinny's yearning for a complete family - a structure normalized by the bourgeoisie - even if it means preserving a familial structure that perpetuates patriarchal authority. Her family's difference from others concerns her. Mrs Lalor heads the family, her unreliable, violent, and fiscally irresponsible husband having abandoned them when Vinny was ten years old. Thinking of George Lalor inspires this melancholy thought from Joe Farrelly: "There went a special part of the Railway Hotel income" (250). Relatively new to Gungee, Helen "was under the impression he was dead" (23). According to Robert Moller, Lalor's disappearance benefits the Lalor family: "Mrs. Lalor seems to manage somehow. Better off, probably. Two of the kids still home are working, and they help out" (23). From her essay, "A Family Day," it is clear that Vinny wants to re-establish a relation with her absent father. Beginning with a question of difference, her single mother family, her essay ends with a desire for sameness:
At one place after another the same scene repeated itself, a crying child, a woman shaking a mop over the stair rail and a man lounging back in his chair and shouting an order . . . This part was different because my father shouted his last order three years ago and then left. I think this is a pity for though it is bad to be shouted at, it is worse to have no one to shout at you. I feel if he were here with us, shouting or not, we would be more like other families. (21)

What is important about this essay is the way in which Vinny’s culturally induced aspiration for a normal family headed by a father centres on the absence of his voice. Like Keith, she wants a return of the paternal voice, sign of patriarchal authority. This shout, though, is premised on the mother’s silence and a gendered division of labour: she mops the house and reproduces children.

Except in the most casual and indifferent sense, Vinny Lalor can never be Keith’s counterpart. One misfit does not equal another, especially when differences of class and gender are at stake. A father-headed family, Vinny feels, would help relieve the social ostracism she experiences because of her class position, thus allowing her some degree of social integration and normalcy, some stake in bourgeois hegemony. Being in a single-parent household not only compounds her class anxieties, but it exacerbates her sense of distance from the cultural norm, her exclusion from all the material advantages generated in the post-war boom.

In A Descant for Gossips, class differences are most pronounced at the ill-advised party Mrs Lalor arranges for Vinny’s thirteenth
birthday. Hoping for a miraculous reversal of her outsider status, Vinny invites "the very girls who disliked her most" (44). Everything that occurs at the party intensifies Vinny's awareness of her poverty. The girls' frocks make "Vinny's shrunken voile a sad matter" (45), their gifts are cheap and nominal. Her enemies attend mainly to satisfy their curiosity, to witness and mock the shabbiness of the Lalor household. Pearl Warburton initiates a conversation concerning a fashionable lounge suite her parents had bought, paid for in cash. Seeing an opportunity to humiliate Vinny, Pearl asks Mrs Lalor, in the kitchen slaving over a fuel not electric stove, for her opinion on the advantages of paying cash rather than getting "terms" for furniture. Her mother's nervous response shames Vinny:

I suppose you're right . . . . Still, we got all our stuff on terms and glad to, things being so dear and us not being able to rake up the money. Wouldn't have had a chair to sit on otherwise. (46)

The party goes from bad to worse when Vinny overhears Pearl alluding to intimacies with Vinny's older brother, Royce. More slights follow at the dinner table where the sponge cakes, fish-paste sandwiches, and sausage rolls inspire the guests to converse about "a gigantic meal" (50) they had had elsewhere. Then when Mrs Lalor, in response to Pearl's request for tea (an adult drink), brings it in on a "dented silver pot" in, Vinny understands, "an effort to impress," Vinny "could have wept with love and shame - but mainly shame" (50). Tension increases when Pearl asks for "two lumps" of sugar. All the shame Vinny feels for her impoverished
social situation explodes. Class anger and hysteria come out into the open:

"We only have this sort of sugar!" she shouted. "We don't have lump sugar. Only this, Pearl, only this awful old ordinary sugar."

She kept saying the words, "this awful old ordinary sugar" over and over, and, as if unable to stop and unaware of her action, had risen to her feet and was leaning forward, her arms jerking with rage. She shook the sugar bowl in the other girl's face and Mrs. Lalor gasped a protest.

"Vinny, what's up with you? What's got into you?"

"It's her!" she yelled, now beside herself and enjoying the scene. "Nothing's right. All she does is sneer and criticize us." She swung sharply round on Pearl. "Why do you stay?" Pearl listened appreciatively, her full red lips moist and ever so slightly curved into the crescent of a smile. "Why don't you go home instead of crumbling cake into little bits to shove to one side. Go home and whisper about Royce. Go on!" She summoned all her courage for the final insult. "You bitch!" she said.

The room became for a second very still. Then Mrs. Lalor, moving swiftly to a misapplied vengeance, was also unaware of her actions until it was completed. The shock of her hard palm rang against Vinny's thin face with dreadful concussion. (50-51)
The maternal version of the second epigraph to *The Slow Natives* occurs because Vinny makes social class an issue. Slapped into silence, her relationship with her mother will never be the same.

Different from Keith Leverson in terms of class and gender, Vinny nonetheless shares his affinity for a certain family structure, organization, and authority. This extremely ideological norm she accepts as natural. The bourgeois family structure examined and then universalized by Freud enjoys hegemonic status and masks, in the process of its hegemony, its ideological and historical dimensions. "The transformation of working-class family structure," argues Mark Poster in *Critical Theory of the Family*, "is one of the unwritten aspects of the political success of bourgeois democracy" (196). That Vinny invests in this particular family form attests to the ideological dominance of the bourgeoisie. The discrepancy between Vinny’s articulation of what constitutes a normal family and her experience of family life confirms the insidious hegemony of bourgeoisie ideology if not practice. On the whole, *A Descant for Gossips* reveals the family unit Vinny desires, to be fractious, shabby, bitter shams, hardly worth emulating.

Unlike Vinny’s father, Bernard Leverson has not physically abandoned the home. But in Keith’s mind he has abdicated moral, that is, patriarchal authority. "I can’t ask you home," Keith tells Brenda, his soon to be ex-girlfriend. Asked to explain why, Keith’s shame turns quickly to rage, as he denounces Bernard’s appearance and habits: "Nothing’s wrong, I suppose. Oh God, yes. Everything is. He’s sloppy and middle-aged and going bald and red and gets full" (3). Bernard fails to measure up to Keith’s ideal
father, who, in contrast to the negative portrait drawn by Keith, would be meticulous, youthful, hirsute, and sober. The gap that exists between Bernard's appearance and Keith's implied ideal-looking father does not bother Keith as much as the discrepancy between Bernard's indulgent paternalism and necessarily repressive cultural role he should play in order to make a man out of Keith. Iris, similarly, sees the answer to Keith's rebellion within the paradigm Keith craves. An authoritative father figure able to do masculine activities will strengthen the father-son bond: "What he needs is a father who will take him fishing or camping or rock-climbing or out to the tests" (10). Ally rather than antagonist, Iris, ironically, sides with Keith.

Keith links Bernard's dissolution to a deviation in the power structure of the bourgeois family. He blames his mother, Iris, for the erosion of authority. Gender roles in his household are reversed, and Bernard, much to Keith's chagrin, consents to this change in power: "He lets mum wear the pants because he simply isn't sufficiently interested to care" (4). Keith cannot bring Brenda home because his father is pant-less. Iris wearing pants is a problem for Keith because pants function as a sign of maleness. She has power she is not supposed to have. Traditional masculine and feminine roles have collapsed and Keith attempts to restore them. Keith uses two metaphors, one related to domestic production, the other to consumption, to complain of the degeneration of his father's artistic flair: "And he dishes up one of those Chopin instant waltzes" (4). He metaphorically feminises Bernard, while at the same time underestimates the labour Iris puts into the home.
Describing Iris, Keith proffers a bland cliche which he then emphatically negates: "A nice dull ordinary mum. No. Not so nice really, the way she pushes the old boy around." Female aggressiveness, he worries, is unnatural and has an infantilizing effect. The problem, though, is that Bernard's intellectuality conflicts with the traditional prerogatives of masculinity:

He's too gentle. Wishy-washy, I guess you'd call it.
After all, he does have a brain. Maybe one of these days he'll run away with a blonde stenographer. Fancy letting himself be shoved around by a bird-brain! (4)

Iris's power is not a consequence of her agency within the home: Bernard lets her, Keith says, shove him around. Dispirited by the humiliating indignities he believes his father experiences, Keith desires to revive the patriarchal power he feels his father has lost. His alternative plot is formulaic, premised upon male domination and female subordination in the workplace, what Game and Pringle term "the sexualization or eroticization of power and authority relations" ("Beyond Gender at Work" 280), and preserves conventional gender relations. Sexual potency will extend traditional patriarchal domination, thus restoring Keith's esteem for Bernard. Of course, when he learns that Iris is having an affair, Keith is appalled.

Any aspiring intellectual bohemian would despise the bourgeois family, yet fantasies of cultural regulation and paternal violence, expressed as desire, recur in Keith's thoughts: "I'm tired tired tired of all this pals-with-the-parents crap. I would like - and he grinned - a good strong hand across the seat of my pants" (10). What he wants is a formal rather than informal relationship.
Keith's predicament Nirvana's "Serve the Servants" encapsulates: "I tried hard to have a father, But instead I had a dad."
Punishment, censorship, and regulatory dictates he romanticizes:
He thought longingly of the other homes he had visited where there were limitations imposed, where language was minded before children, reading matter vetted, and soft drinks the only ones offering. (190)
Denial, the centrepiece of his conception of the parent-child relationship, dominates his thoughts. But his longing for regular discipline conflicts with the instant gratification consumer society encourages.
Rebellion and consumption become enmeshed. Keith represents the emergence of a new social phenomenon linked to post-war prosperity: the teenager. This category, with its own identity, language, values and institutions, is defined and defines itself through "a style of consumption" (Frith 182). Middle-aged Julia Geoghegan contrasts her experience with the current generation. "We were never teen-agers," she says. "There was never this cult. Fashion designers left us alone because we were at the awkward age. Now the only awkward age is ours" (197). Nowadays, Geoghegan's hyphenated neologism ("teen-agers") is redundant. Geoghegan's observation that teenagers constitute a new market and social group differs appreciably from Father Lingard's view. Adolescent rebellion, anxiety, sexuality and needs are, he says, "natural enough" (72). They are not natural, however, but constructed; in this process, fashion plays an important role. Youthfully and invulnerably arrogant in temper, posture, and behaviour, Keith bleaches his hair, wears tight jeans, smokes, listens to American
pop music, and drinks cappuccino. Wearing tight jeans has its farcical side, and Astley gives a parodic, suburban inflection to the Oedipus complex, with Iris as the castrating mother:

that time he had vanished immediately before dinner for nearly an hour and they had found him exhausted and frantic on his bed after a fantastic struggle to climb out of the tapered pants he had bought against their wishes. He had lain with his silly white behind sticking up while Bernard tried bracing himself against the wall and tugging the garment by the ankles. Finally Iris angrily slit the pants up each leg with scissors. (10)

This scene ironically forebodes the conclusion when Keith’s leg is amputated after a car accident.

But Keith is more interested in the semiotics of rebellion than rebellion itself. The most important sign of rebellion for Keith is a dufflecoat. It symbolises the angst-ridden outsider. For him, the coat is: "Very sharp. The young Rimbaud. Way out" (37). Such a coat, Bernard objects, is impractical, given the Brisbane climate. Even nonconformists conform, their alienation susceptible to commodification: "All the keen nonconformists are getting them" (38). Alienation converges with the ethic of consumption. Teenage popular culture, initially seen as a threat to the family, is commodified into positive, conservative rebellion, its ethic of consumption compatible with that of the bourgeois family.

Keith’s search for authority parallels the Frankfurt School model. In the absence of a strong paragon of paternal authority, they argue, youth will seek out alternative models of power, for example the collective authority of school, sports, mass culture,
and state. In this model, authority is externalised rather than internalised. Leo Varga, teacher and homosexual predator, represents one instance of an external, collective authority. At one stage Keith wants to "slog his patron and protector" (27) Varga; a "patron" is, according to the OED, "One who stands to another or others in relations analogous to those of a father." Varga makes his desire to stand in for the family clear to Keith:

"... More trouble with the folks?"

"Leave it!" Keith said slowly. "Just leave it."

"Leave what?"

"That stuff about my family."

"Dear boy, you have my sympathy. I’m on your side. I’ll stand in loco parentis, if you’ll pardon the cliché." (126)

After Keith rejects Varga as an external authority, he immerses himself in mass pop culture:

Couples, untouching, gyrated to the pulsations that came from a small platform where five young men, wielding guitars like sub-machine guns, thrust phrases over and over at the tumescent mob. Polo necks and beards became confused. Girls in cotton sweat shirts and tight jeans waggled their behinds and flung their manes of hair forward with screams. (199)

Popular culture is represented as potentially totalitarian and sexually apocalyptic. The crowd abandon themselves to carnal, communal pleasures, their individuality overwhelmed by a nihilistic mixture of sex, noise, and violence.
The class differences between Keith Leverson and Chookie Mumberson contradict the existential reasons usually forwarded to explain the misfit's alienation. Two different narratives become obvious when Keith and Chookie team up. Where for most of the novel we are aware of Keith's desire, the introduction of Chookie makes us aware of labour, the mode of production, class. Separate ends await them in the narrative. For Keith, the one who desires a functional bourgeois family, dependency on the patriarchal father occurs only after he is involved in an accident and has a leg amputated. The family is restored, but it is haunted by loss. Chookie, whose ideas regarding the family are so different from Keith's, is excised from the narrative, left dead.

Class distinctions between Keith and Chookie deflate the key assumptions of the misfit paradigm. The class-based asymmetry between Chookie and Keith challenges the universality Keith ascribes to his assumptions, values, and experience. Keith expects Chookie to have experienced similar experiences, but he has not: Keith is cultured, Chookie intuitive, Keith an only child, Chookie from a large family, Keith bourgeois, Chookie rural poor, Keith literary, Chookie oral, Keith finally alive, Chookie dead. Little joins them, other than age, flight from the family, and a dufflecoat. Different familial experiences and economic circumstances separate rural dropout Chookie from suburban educated Keith. First, coming from a large family, Chookie is not the sole focus of parental concern: "There was too many of us to ever care more about one than the other really, not that they ever did care much about me" (182). Keith, though, comes from a child-centred family: Bernard is certain of Keith's "peculiar pain in growing"
(20). Chookie is pleased to be away from home because his father wields the punishing patriarchal authority that Keith idealises. Limits, choices, and relationships within the family Chookie expresses negatively:

Never looked pretty like the girls. Never come top like Ken and Bert who’s studyin’ for an artiteck. No. No-good Mumbo he called me, an’ shot me out on the paper-run when I was nine jus’ after we came to live in Condamine, and the milk-run three years after that while in between times I come bottom. And then I struck out on me own doin’ a spot of gardenin’. (167)

Economic histories distinguish them — "Bin workin’ for years" (134) he tells Keith — as do their standards of morality. Bourgeois sexual propriety does not concern Chookie who, to Keith’s revelation that Iris "sleeps with another man," shocks Keith with his response, "So what?" (182).

At their first meeting — Keith relaxing in the sun, Chookie on the run having raped his employer, Miss Trumper — dress, possessions, money, education, and language establish class differences. Prosperity, "a plump and glossy leather brief-case that even at that distance glinted expensively," and literacy, "a thumbed-open book," attract Chookie to the "tubby blond in school greys" (116). He sees an opportunity to steal Keith’s dufflecoat. Bernard’s original objection to the coat proves accurate: Keith takes off the coat, which he exchanged for a flashier one, and settles down: "Sybaritic in sun, he began to chew and read" (116). The adjective connects Keith to pleasure and gratification. The unknown, decadent lad represents money and power. Chookie, by
contrast, does not. As he waits to make his move, Chookie counts "his small change." Theatre pass-outs and food coupons, with their "magic of folding money," substitute for pound notes. Money is not the only capital he lacks. When Chookie attempts to engage Keith in conversation over the book Keith is reading, his voice signifies to Keith a lack of cultural capital. "That accent!" is his response to Chookie's opening gambit, "Good book?" (117). Regarding the book's contents, Keith refuses twice to tell Chookie "what's it about": "'You wouldn't be the least interested, and I want to read, if you don't mind.' He put on his snottiest tone" (117). The manner of articulation, the expressive mood, speaks volumes. When Keith snubs the conversational bait, Chookie reflects:

But this fat chump didn't answer, like dad on a drunk when his mum had asked and asked and asked about the housekeeping and it was as if suddenly the ole man had gone deaf as a post with determination not to tell. (117)

The only analogy that Chookie can think of to interpret the relation of class inequality is drawn from his domestic environment. Keith acts like a patriarch, living out the cultural role one day expected of him. Keith's snobbery reminds Chookie of his mother's lack of economic power and his father's ability to (mis)manage economic matters. By equating Keith with a patriarchal figure, one who uses silence as a means of controlling his wife and wielding economic power, Chookie casts himself in a feminine role. To rectify this positioning and refuse the implications of the simile (Keith/ole man, Chookie/mum), Chookie attempts to be more masculine. The exchange between them, over tone, class, comes to
a temporary, unvoiced end when Chookie transforms the earlier adjective, "Sybaritic," into plain, homophobic language: "Dirty rotten nancy" (117), encoding the bourgeoisie as feminine.

Bernard uses transactional metaphors, the effect of which is if not reinstate then at least remind others of their dependence on his economic role. "Who does the paying?" (207), Bernard asks, reproving Keith for lending out his books. Parenthood is an economic venture: "Having children is buying oneself trouble" (97). Keith, though, depreciates Bernard's economic role:

Keith had mumbled something farewelling through a mouthful of cereal and had not bothered to look, really look, at his old dad going off to earn the family livelihood. (40)

Moreover, he lacks respect for his father's work:

I used to be rather proud of him once and now I feel such a crumb when people know he does it for a crust - teaches, I mean - and he still mucks about with corny bits of things. (4)

"Crust" functions as partial recognition of Bernard as breadwinner: work is bread, cash, an image he later recuperates. Before running away from home, Keith took his economic security for granted. Unlike Chookie, Keith does not have to get a job. On the road with Chookie, Keith understands once and for all his economic dependency on his father. He reworks the breadwinner analogy: "I'm aching, cold, hungry, bored, and Bernard always said I knew which side my bread was buttered" (167). The return home to the family marks the moment when Keith, as a bourgeois subject, accepts the "reified authority of the economy" (Horkheimer 83). One of the central
differences between the boys, then, is that Keith abandons the fantasy of himself as an outsider, marginal, delinquent, an image he constructs in relation to his parents, when confronted by someone obviously lower in the social scale. With Chookie, Keith, both speaking and silent, possesses the authority of the insider, conformist, cultural elite, someone who, although he doesn't explicitly recognise his relation to the economy, is in a more favourable position to reap its rewards than Chookie. Life on the road lacks the gritty glamour Jack Kerouac popularised, so Keith returns to the family, signalling an irrevocable acknowledgement of the economic and cultural advantages that benefit his class.

In a sense, Keith had accepted his father's authority all along. Bourgeois values dominate Keith's artistic tastes. For sure, he listens to "Surfer Stomp," which marks the Americanization of youth culture in the western world, but he does so primarily to antagonise Bernard, who characterises the record as "this bawling from the guts. Those clotted howls you kids go for." This is not bourgeois music, but infantile. Concerned with Keith's pattern of consumption, Bernard wants to prohibit Keith's consumer choices and taste:

I wouldn't care, you know, if just occasionally, mind you, only once in a while, Keith, you left this muck alone and bought something decent. (11)

Aural "muck" (the word Keith uses when he feels that Bernard is debasing his talent) similar to bawling childhood, dirties the household and is, as Bernard implies, indecent and immoral, its base, unrefined passion, formlessness, and sexual animalism a challenge to the precisely articulated emotionalism of Bach.
Culturally, Bernard's injunctions have great force, for despite flirting with popular culture Keith remains bound to the bourgeois culture Bernard favours. He alludes constantly to literature, using it as a weapon against Chookie. He invokes Restoration comedy when he calls his father a cuckold. Significantly, the presence of a book inscribed with his name distinguishes Keith from the dead Chookie, as though the possession of bourgeois cultural capital spares him from violence.

Although The Slow Natives manifests considerable scepticism toward psychoanalysis and "brain-shrinkers" (72), a trait other Astley novels share, the novel's conclusion restores the normative bourgeois family structure necessary for the successful "Oedipalization of the subject" (Silverman 131), with Bernard in the active paternal role, Iris the passive maternal role, and Keith symbolically castrated. The character who abandons the concept of family embraced by Keith dies. Masculine authority and feminine submissiveness are reinstated. The father-son relationship concludes the narrative. Intergenerational struggle of the kind the Leversons engage in demonstrates how father-son conflict can consolidate the bourgeois family and bolster the economic and gender roles patriarchal culture normalizes: the father's being instrumental, economic, and public, and the mother's affective, domestic, and private (Barrett 189). Ultimately, his rebellion, masking a wish for cultural subordination, renews patriarchal authority. Such conformism contradicts the nonconformism critics usually attribute to the misfit. Keith wants his father to wear the pants and his mother to return to pantlessness, the proper place in patriarchal culture for the female subject. Habitually
included by critics in their pantheon of Astley misfits, Keith is neither misfit nor outcast, but arch conformist, rebel with a bourgeois cause. He tries hard to have a father, and he gets one, in the end.
CHAPTER THREE

The Slow Natives:
Mother Virtue and the Marriage Plot Collapse

The Slow Natives details the contradictions generated by the romance, which affirms "the value of virginity and domesticity," and the antiromance, which stresses "the consequences of uncontrolled female sexuality" (Mussell 41). For the female characters of The Slow Natives, repressing sexuality has disastrous and masochistic consequences; the alternative, liberating one’s sexuality, is not possible because of the tendency on the part of male characters to associate that with a degenerate sexuality. The wife-mother is central to the romance, the prostitute to the antiromance. Both narratives, mutually reinforcing, place limits on women. Little distinguishes the wife-mother from the prostitute in patriarchal culture, Thea Astley observes in The Slow Natives. Both sites embody an idea of feminised labour, although, as Jill Matthews points out, the main sexual difference between prostitutes and wives lies in the nature of the contracts they undertake with men: short-lived versus lifelong, with a succession of men versus the one man, payment being immediate and strictly monetary versus diffused and honorific. (126)

At every turn, the spectre of the prostitute shadows the good mother. The threat of being designated "prostitute" keeps
schoolgirls, nuns, suffragettes, wives, and mothers in place. However, the genres associated with the marriage plot (romance, fairytale) metaphorically explode in *The Slow Natives*. The form detonation takes verifies Goldsworthy's observation in "Thea Astley's Writing" that Astley denies her female characters agency. The married women's protest against the institution of marriage is interiorised, indicative of the restrictions placed on women's agency, identity, and speech.

Astley is sequestered from feminist writers because of the dominance of the commonplace yet erroneous view that her early fiction focuses predominantly on male characters and ignores domestic, familial situations that are considered to be central topics of feminist literature. But in her early fiction Astley writes against the ideological implications of the genre most concerned with marriage and the family. For example, women's disillusioning experience of marriage in *The Slow Natives* clashes with the expectations of happiness inscribed in the marriage plot of the romance genre. In her study of modern domestic romances, *The Alienated Reader*, Bridget Fowler argues that the romance formula projects

life-long, monogamous marriage, chosen by the partners themselves, as the setting for desire; it offers a Madonna image of women as a glorified wife-mother role and it represents the private sphere as the only context for unalienated existence. (54)

Distinguished by marriage, the good mother, and family, the romance is ideological, representing "the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (Althusser
Feminist critics argue that the "imaginary relation" represented by the romance equips "women with a common fantasy structure to ensure their continued psychic investment in their oppression" (Modleski, *Feminism Without Women* 43).

The *Slow Natives* is not the first Astley novel that deals with the implications of the romance. When Elsie Ford, acetic protagonist of Thea Astley's *Girl With a Monkey* (1958), absconds from the narrow, socially prescriptive marriage plot so central to romance narratives and rejects the domestic formalities married life entails, little did we suspect how frequent, conspicuous and dominant this motif would be in Astley's much underrated oeuvre. Romance narratives insist on the desirability of marriage as a conclusion to a woman's life and terminate with the absorption of the female's identity into the male's. Escaping the narrative closure of the romance is arduous, particularly when women's identity, pleasure, and sexuality are centralised and sanctified in the ideological matrix of matrimony. Society fortifies the ideology of the romance. Advertisers, beauty experts, politicians, unionists, priests and fashion designers expend awesome cultural energy reiterating the single, insistent message: marry or wither. Marriage, Elsie feels, is made to seem woman's ambition and epilogue:

Lashed on like all members of her sex by the warnings of cosmeticians, the couturiers, the milliners, the retail stores, all of which sold the idea that not to achieve marriage was the greatest misfortune that could overtake a woman, she knew with the desperateness of one now
entering her twenties that at all costs she must keep one man. Which one? (103)

Elsie doesn’t keep her man. Before leaving town, she ditches the ring Harry gave her into the river, thus shunning marriage as the desirable form of closure, eschewing the culturally sanctioned imperative to chase a public and climactic denouement and identify with a ceremony where one’s identity and autonomy are subsumed.

Contrary to their expectations, the married women of *The Slow Natives* - Iris Leverson and Mrs Mumberson - discover that the self-completion, subjective satisfaction, and erotic fulfilment promised by the marriage plot of the romance is an appalling fiction. The halo surrounding marriage, motherhood, and family left them unprepared for the jarring disjunction between fairytale expectation and marital disappointment, for the end of romance and the beginning of domestic drudgery, where labour is hard, repetitive, isolated, and unacknowledged. A major ideological effect of the marriage plot in the management of gender relations is the "indoctrination" (Brophy 323) of women to domestic servitude. Romance narratives naturalise and maintain a division of labour premised on masculinity (the breadwinner) and femininity (the housewife). They structure the way we conceptualise gender and sexuality. The tantalizing narrative obscures the post-happy-ever-after reality of subservience and objectification. Astley focuses on couples at the point at which the romance ends, examining life beyond that symbolic moment. Of post-betrothal life, the romance has little to say. Disenchantment was sudden and unanticipated for Vivienne Brophy, who, in "An Australian Housewife: A Disillusioning Experience" (1975), noted that the
bride's "reign is of one day's duration" and that the post-romance period is not all it's cracked up to be: "immediately after the honeymoon some subtle Law of Diminishing Returns began to operate in my life" (324).

When Mr Mumberson gives Mrs Mumberson a new hand-bag, she, in response to her husband's arbitrary power to be generous, is "incredulous because fairy-tales had finished twenty years before" (132). Repeated throughout childhood, the narrative strategies, characterisation, plotting, and conclusions of fairytales acquire extraordinary, prescriptive force. To be a princess is something to live for, aspire to. At a conscious and unconscious level, romance fantasies provide a model for self-realization and identity, but the women of The Slow Natives discover that they also serve to "interiorize or at least to rationalize and supplement physical coercion" (Horkheimer 56). In the fairytale romance, marriage is inevitable and irrevocable, a vocation and an end in itself. Initially consolatory, the marriage plot offers women an esteemed place, glamour, and centrality. The quotidian, material effect of the fairytale on consciousness, combined with real restrictions on entry into the marketplace, perpetuates what seems to be a voluntary desire to marry. Social and economic factors inhibit the participation of women in public life - women have "less training, fewer job opportunities and lower pay" (Barrett and McIntosh 79) - and thus contribute to the perception of marriage as a suitably attractive plot, the best career available.4

Excreta, material circumstances, economic commitments, interpersonal hostilities, and domestic violence intrude on the ideology of romantic love. "Romantic love did not suffer the
embarrassed Keith Leverson learns, when his effort to discreetly piss fails, and Brenda, his girlfriend, hears "his private desperation tattoo[ing] the landscape with tin notes." The physical body defiles the ideology of romantic love. But the body in question is male. Conflict centres on urination, its social as opposed to biological significance. Keith is released from his pressing physical needs, bladder-oppressed Brenda is not because of the social imperative to be feminine. When Keith asks her to move ahead of him, she "knew at once what he wanted and hated him because she could not similarly take advantage of his absence. Female, she was trained to endure" (5). Females are disciplined to suffer and repress. Brenda's upper-class advantage over Keith means nothing when confronted with the social advantage conferred to the militaristic penis: she cannot piss in public. The intensity of her sentiment - she "hates" Keith - denotes fierce dissatisfaction with the strictures of feminine behaviour that govern gender relations. This socialisation of endurance is central to Father Lingard's philosophy:

One must persist, persist, persist. You know what we say - believe in spite of appearances, trust despite all evidence to the contrary, hope against hope. It should be easy, but it's damned hard work. (43)

All well and good, but as Brenda knows, it's hard to persist when you want to piss but society says you can't. The ideology of endurance oppresses women.

Feminists critiqued the ideological assumptions of the fairytale, especially their contribution to gender identity formation, and the relationship between the idealised princess and the idealised
mother and wife. "Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits" wrote Simone de Beauvoir (318), critical of the receptivity and submissiveness at the heart of fairytale narratives. Fairytale romances encode certain standards of behaviour (dependence, subservience, domestic care, passivity) which, carried to extremes, can become masochistic, as we see in Astley's "The Scenery Never Changes" (1962), a short story whose main character, "Princess Klein" (204), anticipates Iris Leverson and Miss Trumper; she also makes a devastating reappearance in "Ladies Need Only Apply" (1979). Klein's belief in "happy endings" (203) encourages her to conduct herself in a particularly self-sacrificing way. Astley characterises her efforts as "gingham-minded nightmares of strategy to make herself indispensable" (204) - cooking, cleaning, seeking advice from women's magazines, and being overly attentive to her male companion's every need.

Were it not for Mrs Mumberson, a tertiary character mediated through her son's memory, it would be hard to read The Slow Natives as critique based solely on Iris' momentous outburst, for Astley expends more rancour than charity on Iris Leverson. Compared to the main female characters, Sister Matthew and Miss Trumper, and the narrative importance of the father-son relationship, Iris can be seen as secondary, belonging to the "host of bizarre, satirical minor portraits" (Birch 59). But the similarity of their dissatisfaction with the marriage plot and their experience in marriage, the verbatim repetition of phrases in the extradiegetic commentary, reinforce the importance of this critique.
When Iris questions the content of the myth of successful marriage as narrative end, she interiorises her distrust of the discourse and genres associated with this narrative. The disjunction between the narrative she listened to, internalised and followed and the life she has lived leads to a momentary insight of truth, but one that cannot be verbalised. The difficulties of articulating feminist consciousness manifest themselves in the need for extradiegetic commentary. As Bernard prattles on, Iris interrupts his sentence and surprisingly silences his narrative with "Shut up shut up shut up." This momentous occasion, however, is not followed by direct speech because Iris, for the most part, mutes or is incapable of elaborating on her criticisms:

Because for years she had been afraid to explode the legend of for ever and ever, the durability of love within marriage, and had kept this lie alive along with a dozen other women with whom she took coffee breaks and who complained boastfully of their husband's incessant attentions, she was staggered by her lapse into truth. For half a minute, perhaps, their denuded dislike glared across the hire-purchase jungle - "Till final instalment do us part," witty Bernard had murmured provocingly - and then she took her frenzy with her into the back garden and started the car. (31)

Iris could not be more critically feminist, even if it is indirect. The repetition of "shut up" is a demand for peace and narrative space, an end to the masculine privilege that allows Bernard to speak non-stop. In the silence she is conscious of the incongruities of the ideology and narratives of femininity. The
legend is interpreted as an invention and misrepresentation. Iris is dissatisfied with the culturally sanctioned social form in which her needs are thwarted, and with the ideological narratives (legend, fairytale, romance) that affirm the desirability and naturalness of the marriage plot. Like Elsie Ford, she flees, albeit temporarily.

Contrast Iris's moment of feminist unconsciousness with a far less anxious and equivocal representation of feminist anger in *It's Raining in Mango* (1987), where Jessica Olive, another of Astley's heroic female publicans, challenges the ideal image of woman as Madonna fostered by the Catholic priest, Father Madigan, a professional celibate who, she sarcastically observes, knows "all the answers . . . to every domestic problem" (77):

"Tell me, Father, how is it that a sex which commits most of the crimes of this world also happens to be the arbiter on morals?"

"And which sex is that?" Father Madigan asked, twinkling.

"Oh God!" Jessica Olive moaned. "Oh God oh God oh God. Listen, just listen to me. All my liturgical loyalties, those reverences for the simple dogmas the poor unfortunate sisters drummed into me at the behest of a male hierarchy, have been my undoing as a human. No" - she waved her hand at him - "don't interrupt. You're too used to doing that. Hear me out. That terrified obedience you and your brothers in Christ exact is directed largely at women. Women. You've neutered us. Made us nonhuman." (75-76)
Rather than fleeing a confrontation with male authority, as Iris does, or simply insist that the male protagonist shut up, Jessica forces the priest to listen to her criticisms. Here Astley's female character uses direct speech. Her rant continues as she demolishes the manner in which male priests pontificate on matters they know nothing about to women: "You encourage men and women to breed endlessly without the faintest understanding of the toll it takes on women, of the strain of bringing up children" (77). More offensive than that, though, is the idea of male superiority that constitutes the basis for Madigan's authority:

But your last offence, and you don't even know you've been offensive, is addressing me in that repulsive biblical patriarchal way - 'woman.' You're patronising me, Father Madigan. And I won't be patronised. You're flaunting your male superiority. You're trying to belittle me. And I'll tell you this, mister, I am so tired of being condescended to by your sex and in particular by people of your calling, especially when they're so witless. (77)

In her later fiction, Astley's female characters say more, rant, criticise, confront the patriarchal order, exteriorise their complaints.

Alternative narratives to the romance, to marriage and motherhood, are hard to imagine in The Slow Natives. Reverend Mother is exasperated by the romance narrative, as she explains in a story about one of her past pupils:

A pretty girl. Always polite. Adrienne was her name.

At school she charmed everybody, opened doors, helped
with books, never failed to curtsey when she met one of the sisters, won the *prix d'honneur*. A model girl. Sometimes I hoped... However, she married and had her child, which later she brought to show me, all pink and gold and like herself. (152-3)

The ellipsis marks the lack of alternative narratives to the dominance of the marriage plot. Such narratives, though imagined, are left unarticulated. Her hopes for Adrienne cannot compete against the compelling and compulsory marriage plot. While it is unclear whether Adrienne was forced to marry because she was pregnant, or whether she married and then became pregnant, Reverend Mother's point remains the same: options for women are severely limited. When the glamour promised by the marriage plot fails to materialise for Iris and Mrs Mumberson, options for change are not forthcoming either. Iris embarks on adultery; Mrs Mumberson, after her husband ruins her handbag, "cried half a day and then shut up with her mouth tight and never said a thing for days" (132).

Momentarily critical of the marriage plot as the apex of female progress, Iris is nonetheless unable to transcend the limitations of the romance narrative structure. No "new plot" emerges "to expose the insufficiencies of the old" (Felski 128-29). We see this when we look at her fantasy narrative. When the actuality of lived experience becomes excessively oppressive, Iris and Keith seek the anticipatory comforts and imaginary precognition of daydreams. They invent an alternative narrative, plot and conclusion to counteract that of the present, seeing in these dreamy optimistic narratives encouraging possibilities for
ameliorating, enriching and changing their lives. In Biographia Literaria Samuel Taylor Coleridge said of the imagination:

It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and unify. (396)

Thus dreaming has the potential to be a positive, liberating experience. But the seductive satisfactions dreams provide also have insidious effects, as the Everly Brothers recognised in their sublime melancholic lament, "All I have to do is dream" (1958). Alone and forlorn, the narrator reassures himself with the fact that he can dream of a situation, one based on the couple formation, that will boost him into a future more desirable and bearable than the present. He constructs a dream of erotic, bacchanalian possibilities: "I can make you mine, taste your lips of wine, anytime night or day." Action, control, ownership, superiority, passion - these belong to the dreamer. The line "Whenever I want you all I have to do is dream" he repeats over and over, an incantation of hypnotic, palliative power that makes up for the inconsolable yearning generated by the absent "you" of the present. The anodyne pleasure of dreaming, though, exacts a cost: "Only trouble is, gee whiz, I'm dreaming my life away." Dreaming promotes dissipation and self-indulgence, two features hardly contributory to change.

With different degrees of conservatism, the fantasies of both Iris and Keith focus on the extramarital heterosexual romance and the desire for power through erotic control. Dispirited by the humiliating indignities he believes his father experiences, which he attributes to the untraditional domestic power structure in the
family, Keith desires to restore and revive the patriarchal power he feels his father has lost. Keith’s fairly traditional revenge narrative is based on an infidelity with the pervasive image of sexual convenience: "Maybe one of these days he’ll run away with a blonde stenographer" (4). In his future projection power is sexualized and preserves conventional gender relations. Iris’s fantasy is erotic also:

All pipe and tweeds, she imagined, influenced by some replays of old films on the telly where engineers ran off with girls who simply had to play Rachmaninoff concertos at Carnegie Hall, forgetting that thereby she would more or less duplicate Bernard. (17)

These imaginative projections are represented differently: Keith’s fancy is given direct speech, whereas Iris’s thought is indirect, unvoiced, and followed by curt, edifying extradiegetic commentary on the imported visual narratives of popular romance, what the Frankfurt School demonized as "the synthetic day dreams of the culture industry" (139), that form the content of Iris’s imagination. Although Iris’s fantasy is premised on a less reactionary conception of power than Keith’s, she is belittled. Is Keith’s dream so blatantly sexist and risibly predictable that it doesn’t warrant any commentary? Neither fantasy promotes social change, but Iris’s fantasy is structured around romantic love, with a significant twist: the man gives up his job and follows the woman.

Iris’s attempt to reconfigure other narrative possibilities amounts to plotting for herself a romantic future; in other words, repeating the same old narrative. A glamorous romance, she
believes, will offset Bernard’s indifference. In imagining new possibilities for herself, Iris relies on an updated, Americanised ideology of the romance. The legitimacy of sexuality being expressed in marriage is reinforced by the fact that Iris achieves no fulfilment or erotic satisfaction from her affair. When pleasure turns stale, so too does genre:

Her adultery had not been a success. Half the fun would have been in having Bernard care and the other half in having Gerald - ‘tortured by desire’ was the phrase she knew from her usual reading. But one did not care and the other was not tortured. The indifference of one she could have endured after the inadequacy of marriage for twenty years - stamina parties, they used to call them - the reluctant lover turned the whole thing into a farce. Gerald must feel like Byron, she reflected, raped oftener than anyone since the Trojan Wars. (114)

Adultery as consolatory narrative fails to live up to the mawkish seductions of the popular romance. Iris sees the experience in terms of that sullen comedy of manners, farce, with its mechanical and often aimless plotting and incredible characters. In terms of her power, Iris believes she has too much, and uses a rare literary analogy to make this point, imagining Gerald as passive and submissive, unable to escape her overwhelming erotic appetite. In the farce, Iris is not so much conscious of her sexuality but of her power as rapist. For Iris, rape is a metaphoric means of assuaging her marginal position. She sees her sexuality, her illicit behaviour, in terms of masculine violence, as a victimizer. Reversing naturalised assumptions regarding sexuality - men are
dominant and aggressive, whereas women are passive and yielding — Iris imagines that Seabrook's sexuality is violable. In a masculine position, Iris controls and overpowers Seabrook. Thus, by inverting subject/object relations, Iris moves from the passivity demanded of women (to be desired) to activity (desiring), thus transposing the ideology of the romance which puts a premium on passive female sexuality.

The persistence of the romance plot, the seductiveness of its illusion, and the ideological coherence suggested by the inviolability of the male-female relationship ultimately negate Iris's alternative narrative. She seeks pleasure and fulfilment within a narrative which parallels the suffocatingly narrow plot that she rejects.

Masculine fear accompanies the breakdown of the traditional marriage plot and the feminine sexuality that it encodes. To avert the breakdown of the family Bernard has at his disposal two very powerful counter-narratives, that of the good mother (the romance) and the immoral prostitute (anti-romance). Both reinforce the marriage plot, contain female sexuality within marriage, centre on the woman's body and conflate sexuality with morality. Male characters insist that women structure their lives around the romance paradigm of virtue, respectable female sexuality, while the female characters, Eva Kastner, Iris Leversion, Miss Trumper, in varying degrees, act in "patterns conventionally allowed only to males" (Mussell 39). A double-standard prevails. The idea that a woman could actively seek sexual gratification offends. Keith, only too willing to fantasize for his father an infidelity because, as Engels observed, the double standard insures that lack of sexual
self-control is "a slight moral stain that one bears with pleasure" (82), is shocked when he learns that his mother is doing so.

Virtue is associated with virginity (single women) and monogamy (married women). When the good mother narrative explodes, a male character does the talking; Iris, remember, interiorised her protest. After flailing Iris for being an unobservant mother, Bernard, in speech with onomatopoeic effect, expresses discontent with her failure to sustain the narrative most important to a woman, that of being a good chaste mother:

Poor old Keith. He'd always missed out on something parental - father-love, you say. Yes. And then . . . boom! Mother virtue collapses. (194)

The "Mother virtue" narrative centres on female sexuality. Society tolerates one form of sexual expression and sexual morality for women: within heterosexual marriage. It glorifies chastity and venerates purity (or, to use a domestic analogy, spotlessness). Asked whether she has lost her faith, Sister Matthew replies "No. . . . My virtue" (144). The ideology of virtue represses the body. Her memory of childhood shows how feminine elegance constricts activity, how clothing makes her attractive even though she has to remain inaccessible:

She was the small girl again in the expensive coat - Mother always dressed her better than the neighbour's children - so much better she could never play. "Don't spoil your lovely jacket, dear. Mind those new shoes. Elizabeth, Elizabeth there's a spot on your new skirt. What is that spot? Ice-cream? Ice-cream? But where could you have got ice-cream? Then they had no right at
all to offer, tempt, seduce and make that dreadful spot on your virtue." (148-49)

Cleanliness and spotlessness are to be maintained at all costs. The ice-cream sullies her skirt, the outer manifestation of her virtue, and it is a site of struggle, with men wanting it, the mother wanting her daughter to withhold it. The young girl is seduced by goods, a transaction similar to Chookie's crude offer of a pound to a young girl which, rejected, results in attempted rape. Elizabeth's virtue (morality, chastity, purity) resides in her spotless appearance. The spot is immoral, says her mother, a taint on her character. Pleasure, the eating of the ice-cream, is demonized, a blot, seminal fluid; it is to be renounced. The ideology of spotlessness operates in tandem with the ideology of disease and corruption, represented by the prostitute. Virtue is to be regulated if one is to avoid the stigma of the prostitute.

The figure of the prostitute has a corrective function, constantly policing women and their sexuality. Control, initiative, intelligence, rebellion, autonomy - these features in women cannot be tolerated, and any evidence of these traits is habitually treated as a sign of deviance, an infraction of feminine passivity. The prostitute reappears throughout the text. Aware of his mother's relationship with Seabrook, Keith silently accuses Iris of being a "whore." Women who upset the status quo of gender relations face a similar indictment. Incipient feminism is equated with prostitution. Monsignor Connolly "had inveighed for a long time against the Jezebels who flaunted their cosmetic-bright faces, [but] sheer weight of behaviour had defeated him" (78).
"Tell me now, girls," he pleaded once, "tell me now, why is it a woman shouldn't drink or smoke?"

"Please, Monsignor," some wilful suffragette smart alec had said from the side of the room, "it reduces us to the level of men."

He'd kept quiet for a long time after that. (78)

The female student, troped as Jezebel and suffragette, uses the morality inscribed into the good woman narrative against the priest. Where the housewife functions as a sign of conformity, obedience, and normality, the prostitute appears as a sign of disobedience.

The image of the domestic space as a site of prostitution is established by Astley quite early on when, at a slide evening, Mrs Coady bores her friends with the visual evidence of her and her husband's recent holiday to Egypt. As Astley scores points against the emptiness of this particular suburban ritual - Mrs Coady "worshipfully fed another culture biscuit into the god"- one image stands out:

"And there. That was a funny little laneway in Port Said. Dad simply loved it. He went back and took a couple of night shots. They seem a bit blurred though." She had fumbled them into the machine. The filthy brothels hung suspended on the spotless living-room wall. "Aren't those windows quaint?" she had cried. And they all goggled, hearing the supper-time rattle, longingly, lustingly, enduring until they could talk about job and each other and those not present and certain furtive arrangements that required skill and strategic
communications. Like Leo. Or like Keith. Or Mr Coady greasing a trail of some significance towards an autumnal debutante who worked havoc in the summer months, aided by Bermudas and brown limbs and witty beach shirts that invited, "Ring me. I'm waiting!" (7)

The two sites, brothel and living room, are distinguished by an opposition, filthy and spotless, which functions as a dominant pole of definition and assessment of women. Both words have a moral, injunctive force. "Filthy" conjures up a dirty, squalid, sordid scene, one totally at odds with the cleanliness of the suburban living-room. "Spotless" has moral qualifiers, virgin and chaste, and alludes to monogamy, marriage. In this scene, two extremes of womanhood share the same space: the idealised spotless wife and the filthy prostitute. The scene ends with a debutante soliciting, woman as prostitute. Despite the confidence of her t-shirt, which advertises her sexual availability, she is passive. Anyone can ring her, she is waiting.

Even Iris's bombshell, of contemplating yet not articulating the oppressive character of marriage, is paradoxically a moment of failure, a "lapse into truth." "Lapse" intimates that she is responsible in some measure for failing to uphold the lie. Truth is equated with falling. Thus, at the moment of revelation, Iris is a lapsed woman: she has lost her belief, trust, and hope in the appearance of marriage. This loss of belief is contiguous with prostitution, in that "lapse" evokes the narrative of the fallen woman, an identity Iris reinforces when, considering an affair, she imagines herself as "a courtesan at heart" (18). "Courtesan" bridges the romance and the antiromance. The OED defines
"courtesan" as "one attached to the court of the prince" and "a woman of the town; a prostitute." When imagining adultery, Iris couples adultery to a distinguished, higher-class position, one more elevated than that suggested by Keith's word, "Whore" (114). In thinking this way, Iris vents a desire for an economic relation to the world. Simone de Beauvoir makes the point that courtesans not only had "economic independence" but those of "the Renaissance and the geishas of Japan enjoyed far greater liberty than other women of their times" (580). Furthermore, courtesans who exploit their femininity to the limit create for themselves a situation almost equivalent to that of a man; beginning with that sex which gives them over to the males as objects, they come to be subjects. (580-81)

However, there is a negative aspect: "Their need of a man is most urgent. The courtesan loses her means of support entirely if he ceases to feel desire for her" (582). This is Iris's experience. Nonetheless, to get the equality and freedom theoretically enshrined by bourgeois society, Iris must prostitute herself, embody the contradictions expounded by Frederick Engels in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, social conditions exposed at the slide evening.

Throughout the novel, women are seen in terms of sexual exchange. Exchanging sex for money is done at various degrees of difference. Recalling her activities in the war years, Verna Paradise remembers of the American soldiers stationed in Brisbane that they were soft, socially gracious, sophisticated and "brave spenders" (92), unlike Australian males. The combination of these attributes resulted in girls losing "their hearts or their good sense" (92). The
sexualization of daily life that came with the arrival of American troops loosened the conservative moral and social codes governing sexuality.\footnote{7}

The situation facing married women, though, is poised to change. Dr Julia Geoghegan remarks on the development of a social and economic phenomena that will transform Australian society and hints at the way in which this historical situation is poised to change for women in ways unforeseeable at the time:

"There's an enormous wasted labour force there," Julia said, "rotting away at bowls or in front of the telly or going on quiz shows to be insulted by pup announcers and nearly win things they don't really want."

"But they think that's their reward," Kathleen Seabrook said, "after years of baby-minding and getting up at night. It's a well-earned rest."

"It might be," agreed Dr Geoghegan, "for those who have had four or five children, but hardly for those with one or none." She could not be bothered being kind to Kathleen, whom she thought a fool. "That's what puzzles me. How on earth do you fill in your time?" (197-8)

Smaller households are replacing the large family groups and extended households of previous years. In the nineteenth century "active mothering" was often "the task and identity that generally coincided with almost all of an adult woman's life" (Jill Matthews 186-7). By the 1960s, mothering had changed: "Women married earlier, completed their child bearing and rearing earlier, and lived longer" (187). What were these women going to do? Geoghegan's metaphors of economic debris and putrefaction suggest
that change will be negative: surplus women constitute a superfluous target for consumer society. As it happened, many post-maternal women, the "enormous wasted labour force," in the late 1960s and 1970s entered the labour market and tertiary institutions.

At the end of the novel, the feminist interrogation of the narratives which encode gender roles collapses. Emancipation requires collective action. The possibility for such action is suspended when Iris exhorts Bernard to pray, to submit to the external authority of God. This conversion marks the "local ideological limits" (Jameson, The Political Unconscious 53) of the narrative. Other women secretly share Iris's discontent with marriage. But because discontent is kept confidential, the problem remains unarticulated and individualized. Unable to conceive of women as a collective group, Iris seeks God to resolve the social contradictions she experiences as a woman. In terms of the narrative, Iris's religious conversion is inexplicable, for she is uncomfortable in the presence of Sister Matthew, superstitious, and mentions religion only indirectly. The irrational authority of religion reconciles her to her place in the bourgeois family. It is also a desire for coherence, formal unity, what Jameson calls a strategy of containment (53). Jameson argues that this narrative strategy manages coherence only by "repressing the unthinkable," which, in this case, is "the very possibility of collective praxis." Repressed and narratively contained are the "real relations which govern the existence of individuals" (Althusser 155), patriarchal capitalism. Her exhortation to pray is accompanied by another transformation: she becomes the dependent
wife, the worried mother. Masculine authority and feminine submissiveness are restored. When the Leversons discover that the dead boy is Chookie, not Keith, Iris "cried out once more and swayed and fell against her husband" (207). For Bernard, this crisis prompts a series of questions:

Are we reuniting? Is some catalytic process at work? When we stand before whomever we stand before, must we become a couple or will we proceed as separately as we have been? Appalled, he was aware that at this moment that should not be the core problem, yet it was the original ache, the one from which all others had stemmed. (206)

Marriage is both "core problem" and "original ache." He comes to a conclusion that the married women of the novel have already reached. Even so, The Slow Natives is imprinted by the narrative structure it critiques, for the romance plot restores "marital and family harmony after the threat of disintegration" (Fowler 8). The conclusion averts familial breakdown: the Leveron family is tenuously intact.

Despite occupying different social locations, Iris Leveron (suburban bourgeois) and Mrs Mumberson (rural poor) are united by their dissatisfaction with their status as married women and the narratives that normalised this status. Historical factors contributed to this emergent feminist consciousness that cuts across class identities. The transformation of the Australian family, the rationalisation of the household, the construction of the modern housewife and legal restrictions prohibiting married women from participating in the labour market eroded class
distinctions among women: "From the 1890s the distinction between ladies and women began to fade, while the cross-class concept of 'housewife' gained currency" (Gilding 62). For Mrs Mumberson and Iris, going beyond the negative critique of the ideological assumptions of the fairytale proves difficult. Iris’s strategy is simultaneously enabling and restraining: her independence (sexual autonomy) is recuperated within a romance narrative. Mrs Mumberson refuses to speak, to engage with language at all. At the diegetic level of narration, their protest is interiorised, mediated by Astley. The theme of alienation and isolation in Astley’s work, often credited by critics to religious metaphysics, refers to the alienation women feel in relation to their family, their sexuality and their labour.

Female characters critical of the structural and ideological implications of "the traditional script of heterosexual romance characterized by female passivity, dependence, and subordination," are unable to "develop an alternative narrative and symbolic framework within which female identity can be located" (Felski 129). At the conclusion, Iris submits to the ideological authority of religion. The married women of The Slow Natives cannot explain or resolve in feminist terms the alienation they experience; alienation generated by the contradictions between bourgeois notions of freedom and equality and the oppressive realities of the sexual division of labour - subjects which would occupy feminist attention in the 1970s. The theological narrative embraced by Iris reconciles her to disenchantment. She becomes the good mother.
1. Tragedy or Melodrama?

Thirteen years old, poor, and friendless, Vinny Lalor mistakenly fears she is pregnant, a belief impressed upon her by a volatile combination of her peers' malicious goading, her limited sexual experience, and society's reserve concerning sexual reproduction. Feeling betrayed and abandoned by the teacher she worships, Helen Striebel, Vinny commits suicide. The genre to which Vinny wants her action to belong, the extradiegetic narrative explains, is tragedy:

She wanted to punish someone, cause another person pain and thereby transform her own, be a tragic heroine, a centre of huge pity, a public martyr. (258)

Reviewers at the time and those lonely few who have since analyzed Thea Astley's *A Descant for Gossips* (1960) focused on the plausibility of the suicide and the plotting of the events which preceded it, and questions of genre, whether or not the novel was tragedy or melodrama. Meddlesome plots and unbelievable situations, critics frowned, ultimately conferred melodramatic innocence on Vinny, rather than tragic grandeur; in settling the
matter of genre, the critics used gendered categories which insinuated that Astley had written a woman's book.

Nineteenth-century interpretations of tragedy, Lea Jacobs notes in her study of the poetics of melodrama, accredited great cultural value and authority "to the idea of the activity and self-sufficiency of the tragic protagonist" (136), a critical valuation that elevated character (and the terms relevant to a discussion of character: spirit, psychology, will) above plot. Twentieth-century critical accounts of tragedy retain this nineteenth-century critical emphasis on the active, self-sufficient tragic hero. The internal workings, plausible and verifiable, of tragic protagonists activate plotting, originate causality. Summarizing Hegel's definition in Aesthetics of the main aspect of tragic suffering, Jacobs notes the relation between plot and the character's psychology:

all of the events of the plot, including the hero's downfall if such there be, should derive from forces internal to the protagonist, or from the conflict between his will and that of others. (137-38)

The plausible psychological complexity of the character's subjectivity and its influence on plot became the basis for distinguishing tragedy from melodrama. Active tragic heroes could not be confused with hapless melodramatic ones "caught in traps that are not of their own making, which are the result of coincidental occurrences or villainous machinations" (Jacobs 135); caught, that is, in the contingencies and situational possibilities of plot.
In every aspect melodrama was plainly inferior to tragedy. With its explosions, bright lights, music, sudden rescues, reversals, and recognitions, pure innocence and unadulterated evil, basic psychic roles, and moral polarizations, melodrama did not stand a chance in a critical environment that, in its construction of literary categories, favoured subtlety, nuance, restraint, and the idea that character should generate action (that is, be potent). Peter Brooks observes that it had "a bad reputation" and produces a lengthy list of qualities attributed to and inflicted upon the genre:

the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety. (11-12)

The sexual morality denoted by Brooks's use of "bad reputation" (11) suggests how critical judgements were gendered. Aesthetically, melodrama was dishonourable, a theatre of ill-repute and artistic prostitution. Similarly, the pejorative features Brooks identifies - emotional excess, schematic morality, passive characters, psychological simplicity, exaggerated expression, arbitrary plots - stand in relation to femininity. The active/passive binary that underlies the oppositions the critics structure between tragedy and melodrama leads to others: tragedy is trumpeted as active, authentic, mature, superior, and masculine; melodrama, dismissed as passive, counterfeit, immature, inferior, and feminine.¹
Although opinion divides on the success of the attempt, critics agree that *A Descant for Gossips* strives toward tragedy. Representing the minority view regarding Astley's success with the genre, Marjorie Barnard calls Vinny "tragically innocent" (439) and believes that "the final tragedy is both convincing and inevitable" (440). Laurie Clancy, similarly, writes of its "tragic end" and "the tragedy of Vinny's death" ("The Fiction of Thea Astley" 45).

More reviewers, however, hesitated in finding the tragedy persuasive. Some concluded that Astley, in killing off a character, distorted the narrative with coincidences that sacrificed character to plot, and, worst of all, imposed tragedy rather than let it occur naturally as generic conventions demanded. In short, *A Descant for Gossips* was melodrama. The cautious yet generally positive *Times Literary Supplement* review concludes with the observation that "Miss Astley is perhaps too melodramatic in tragedy, but caustic and convincing in satire" (205), a criticism R. G. Geering repeats in *Southerly* (53). This was the real problem with the novel. Critical dissatisfaction stems from the implacable plotting which necessitates, unreasonably in their view, Vinny's death.

There is, likewise, some over-emphasis in the handling of events in the final stages of the story, which gives the ending a melodramatic twist. . . . Was there any need to insist on such a concatenation of events to underline the tragedy and bring the girl to suicide? (Geering 54)

By deploying the terms "melodramatic" (Geering) and "melodrama" (*TLS*) Astley's reviewers signal their displeasure with her immoderate plotting. Witness Geering's complaint that *A Descant
for Gossips's "concatenation of events" violates the causality ordinarily associated with and expected of conventional tragic narratives. The actions, character psychology, and implausible couplings of the conclusion strain credibility:

Helen makes a mistake about the time of the train’s departure, so that Vinny comes to the hotel as arranged, only to find Helen has suddenly gone forever. Vinny finds the cast-off present (and it is hard to believe that such a person as Helen, either deliberately or accidentally, would have left it behind); and this sorry business is conducted under the eyes of Allie, the pregnant housemaid, who is a frightening embodiment of Vinny’s deepest fears. (54)

Because of its seemingly unmotivated conclusion, negatively described as "a melodramatic twist," and its implausible psychological motivation ("it is hard to believe . . ."), A Descant for Gossips is not read as tragedy.

As for the novel’s content and the target of Astley’s satire, reviewers and critics tended to foreground Astley’s hostility to and dissection of small-town provinciality, its "stultifying mediocrity" (Barnard 440), "narrow morality" (Heseltine, "Australian Fiction Since 1920" 241), and "popular and conventional social expectations" (Gilbert 116); indeed, Times Literary Supplement was surprised, maybe secretly consoled, "to learn from Miss Astley’s novel that small-town Australia is even more prim and malicious than our own suburbia" (205). Overall, Astley’s representation of the "general malicious stupidity" (Wilde, Hooton, and Andrews 41) of small towns collects more attention and praise
than her representation of specific class and gender hostilities. These last two did not go unremarked, just got lost in the clamour. Men are Astley's target, according to J. M. Couper: "Thea Astley will have suffered such men [Principal Findlay], and she has made them, very properly and very sharply, her victims" (334). Similarly, of The Well Dressed Explorer, which appeared in 1962, Couper notes: "the components of the really adult world, especially men, are seen with dislike" (336). The ruling class, R. G. Geering observes, "are unsparingly treated" (53).

Even of critics Astley who comment favourably on the tragic design of Astley's work tend to accentuate, intentionally or not, its relationship to the feminine and its melodramatic tendencies. In A Reader's Guide to Australian Fiction, Clancy aligns Astley's work with tragedy, but highlights its melodramatic plot. When Clancy observes that Astley "plots carefully for dramatic effect and exciting finales" (257), he implicitly situates Astley within the melodramatic tradition. Similarly, in "The Fiction of Thea Astley," the article that formed the basis for Clancy's abridged summary of Astley's work in A Reader's Guide to Australian Fiction, the repetition of "tragic" and "tragedy" in the section outlining A Descant for Gossips leaves no doubt as to which dramatic mode Clancy believes the novel belongs. However, after quoting an example of Astley's use of religious imagery, Clancy grants that her handling of tragedy in A Descant for Gossips induces a certain disquiet:

If there is a worry about this kind of writing it is that its very insistence, its almost overwrought quality,
tends to impose the tragedy upon its victims, rather than allow it to unfold more or less of its own accord. (46)

The external imposition of tragedy as opposed to one internal to the character or that naturally unfolds, and the unrelenting and overwrought (that is, hysterical) elements of Astley's style, all constituents of melodrama, trouble Clancy. Further comments on Astley's plotting Clancy qualifies, granting praise only to subject it to a proviso. Thus, the plot of *The Slow Natives*, a novel he considers "[t]he breakthrough in Astley's writing" and central to establishing her reputation, "is intricate and skilfully handled, provided one can accept the repeated fortuitous meeting of the characters" (*A Reader's Guide to Australian Fiction* 259). If one has a strong stomach for coincidence, the very stuff of melodrama, then the plot has the finesse, complexity, and character-motivated action one expects from tragedy. Overall, Clancy is reluctant to accept Astley's writing as melodrama.

A comparison of the critical reception that greeted *The Slow Natives* with that parcelled out to *A Descant for Gossips* reveals the unstated role gender plays in the criticism. The preference for *The Slow Natives* over *A Descant for Gossips* turns on questions of genre and plotting; these turns are gender-encoded. Astley's subtle sophisticated handling of the various narrative components of *The Slow Natives*, the critics marvelled, overcomes the stylistic gaucheries that flawed the earlier works and evidences her maturation as a writer.

In contrast to the critics's displeasure with the forced, expedient plotting of *A Descant for Gossips*, the majority of critics regard *The Slow Natives*, an Oedipal burlesque that confirms
the ideological power of the bourgeois nuclear family, as a refinement of technique. Several critics argue that the novel marks the onset of her best writing. Formalism redolent of the New Criticism comes into play when the critics appraise *The Slow Natives*. Couper sees Astley "mastering" the narrative shortcomings of the earlier novels: "The Slow Natives integrates theme, plot, character, dialogue and narration with impressive assurance and promise" (337). For Matthews, the novel demonstrates a "new sophistication, a firm control over the flow of event and, above all, a credibility and a convincing naturalness that the uneasy plotting of the earlier book did not allow" ("Life in the Eye of the Hurricane 156). When the critics invoke the idea of mastery, control, naturalness, credibility, unity, objectivity, and so on, they are voicing patriarchal meaning, for these positive values constitute the right side of the masculine/feminine opposition. In other words, *The Slow Natives* is masculine, whereas the earlier novel is feminine. Implicitly, the critical enthusiasm for the plotting of *The Slow Natives* recognises the male subject. The critics respond positively towards the narrative which details the difficulties of the male entry into society, the male oedipal narrative, and negatively toward the narrative which dramatizes the contradictions, difficulties, and ambiguities of the female entry into society, the female oedipal narrative.

With their focus on the structure and integrity of the family, both novels are melodramatic. Both *A Descant for Gossips* and *The Slow Natives* deal with the family and themes germane to it, such as personality formation, socialization, marriage, family structure, family breakdown, the role of parents, cultural
regulation of sexuality, and sexual and social reproduction - topics that recur in her fiction. In repeatedly articulating these themes, Astley gives issues concerning the social relations and contradictions of gender a primary role, so that Kathleen Hackendorf's caustic summary in Coda (1994) of the limited functions women have in society as "Bimbo, breeder, baby-sitter, burden" (114), comes as no surprise. Each novel deals with what Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, combining Marxism and Freudianism, identifies as melodrama's "social determinations, which have to do with the rise of the bourgeoisie, and a set of psychic determinations, which take shape around the family" (70). Right from the beginning of her writing career Astley has depicted the individual in relation to the family, a social institution whose role in constructing gender identity and sexuality is ideological rather than natural. As an institution of what Louis Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus (137), the family reproduces "masculine or feminine subjects" (190) necessary for the reproduction of the relations of production.

Despite the emphasis both novels place on the family, A Descant for Gossips, particularly its ending, receives considerable more criticism for being melodramatic, whereas The Slow Natives does not, the melodrama of its ending, for the most part, countenanced. In general, the critics use the idea of textual unity to separate A Descant for Gossips from The Slow Natives. There is little merit in studying and evaluating literary productions according to their "unity," Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar argue in "Literature as an Ideological Form," because such "totality, self-sufficiency and perfection" "is illusory and false." Less interested in the
"unifying effects" of literary productions than in "their material disparity" (8), Macherey and Balibar see texts as sites of extreme ideological struggle, where the appearance of unity, an effect of hegemony, seeks to cover over fissures, lacunas, signs of struggle. The appearance of unity, according to V. N. Voloshinov, is an ideological effect, the effort to "impart a supra-class, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uni-accentual" (23), to suppress heterogeneity and contradictions. Critical materialist analysis must therefore be directed to "signs of the contradictions (historically determined) which produced" the appearance of unity. These signs "appear as unevenly resolved conflicts in the text" (Macherey and Balibar 8).7

The distinction Laura Mulvey makes between masculine melodrama and feminine melodrama can be applied to A Descant for Gossips. Mulvey argues that those "made with a female audience in mind evoke contradictions rather than reconciliation" (79). Masculine melodrama, attentive to the dilemmas the patriarchal "overvaluation of virility" (76) fosters in relation to the family, ultimately allays excess and strives for reconciliation, the legitimizing happy end signalled when a "positive male figure" "rejects rampant virility and opposes the unmitigated power of the father" in the name of familial integration:

The phallocentric, castration-based, more misogynist fantasies of patriarchal culture are here in contradiction with the family, and in melodrama are sacrificed in the interests of civilization and reaffirmation of the Oedipus complex. (76)
Masculine melodrama strengthens the family and, in affirming the Oedipus complex and masculine-feminine couple formation, regulates and reproduces sexuality. In contrast to the reconciliation typical of masculine melodrama, *A Descant for Gossips* refuses reconciliation and Oedipal reaffirmation, and that explains the critical unease with the plotting of *A Descant for Gossips*: Robert, seeking to reaffirm the Oedipus complex, initiates the concatenation of events that propel Vinny toward suicide.

The heart of *A Descant for Gossips* centres on a distinction Helen makes between her being able to understand sexual activity but not its "repetition" (11), the social arrangements and practices that organize the subject into heterosexuality. The sight of school children "slaughtering the lunch-hour" on the first day of a new term drives Helen to melancholy reflections on social reproduction: "I don't know how the population increases . . . . That is, I understand the fundamental principle, but I cannot understand its repetition" (11). Male colleagues simply laugh, comfortable with their answer. Vinny, who does not understand the fundamental principle, is directed by Robert into assuming a position that he assumes will ensure the "repetition" of heterosexual desire.

Troubling economic, political, sexual, and cultural issues surround Vinny's death, but, in the main, reviewers and critics neglect them. Based principally on the so-called implausibility of its narrative resolution, the critics refuse to engage with issues that these contradictions, incoherences, or disruptions might signify. They negate Astley's critique of class hierarchies, the social construction of gender, the sexual division of labour, and the regulation of sexuality, rendering them inconsequential.
Where Astley plots suicide to address issues of gender and class, the critics use the plotting of the suicide as an excuse to displace and ignore them, focusing on aesthetic inadequacies of Astley's textual solution instead. The ending, according to the critics, signals shoddy artistry rather than ideological ferment.

2. A Short History of Melodrama

The "structural similarities" (Jacobs 138) between pre- and post-Revolution French theatre, the spectacular entertainment of nineteenth century British theatre, the Victorian novel, twentieth century cinema, television, musicals, and novels are well established. By the end of the nineteenth century, distinctions were being made between high and low culture. The elevation of realism and tragedy and their separation from popular culture that took place at the turn of the twentieth century "coincided with a re-masculinisation of cultural value" (Gledhill 34), one that would continue with modernism and postmodernism (Huyssen). For most of the twentieth century, melodrama garnered little credibility, vilified for its inevitable narrative structure, lack of restraint, exuberant sentimentality, exaggerated familial conflict, predictable yet implausible plotting, psychologically shallow characters, moral absolutism, and happy endings. Frequently accused and cited as examples of this excess were Hollywood women's films of the 1940s and domestic melodramas of the 1950s, their excessiveness - in emotion, character, theme, style - suspect, their narrative conventions not worth puzzling over, their appeal to and popularity with a predominantly female audience sufficient
reason for not taking melodrama seriously. Watching melodrama was similar to reading a sentimental novel or a woman's book. For Astley, having her fiction labelled "melodramatic" would be equivalent to having it labelled "women's writing."

For many literary critics, melodrama disposes of the mimetic narrative conventions and structures that contemporary literary critics desire and value. For example, in A Glossary of Literary Terms M. H. Abrams situates melodrama in an inferior relation to tragedy, justifying this positioning on the basis that melodrama "sacrificed" (101) plot, character, and representational verisimilitude. Against the naturalism and psychological realism of tragedy, melodrama appears garish, lurid, fraudulent, anti-intellectual, and culturally inconsequential. But that is not all. Melodrama poses a threat. For with sacrifice, an object is offered up in exchange for a higher good or cause, for something other. Abrams interprets this substitution negatively, seeing it as the devaluation of high culture narrative conventions. Nonetheless, in resisting ("sacrificing") these conventions melodrama makes possible the chance for the articulation of insights, meaning, interests, and benefits elsewhere. The excess of melodrama intimidates precisely because it affronts the ideological dominance of certain narratives, disrupts those ideological effects of narrative conventions (plots, character, realism) which construct, legitimize, and naturalize social relations, meanings, and subjectivities.

Along with other "formerly devalued forms and genres of cultural expression" (Huyssen 203), melodrama has been reevaluated. Film theorists more so than literary theorists produced in the 1970s and
1980s a considerable and sustained analysis of the techniques, structure, representations, psychology, mode of address, audience, and historical context of melodrama, a genre which before their reassessment and reappropriation was widely condemned and functioned as pejorative shorthand for artistic failure - specifically, a symptom of the degradation of generic categories. As Christine Gledhill observes in her introduction to *Home is Where the Heart is*:

> melodrama was at the beginning of the century constituted as the anti-value for a critical field in which tragedy and realism became cornerstones of 'high' cultural value, needing protection from mass, 'melodramatic' entertainment. (5)

This view of melodrama, which persisted for most of the century, has undergone significant revision. Nowadays, acclaimed as "one of the most ubiquitous of modern aesthetic forms" (Docker 63) and one of the most democratic, melodrama no longer needs to be defended.

A central article in the rehabilitation of melodrama as a subject worthy of serious study is Thomas Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations of the Family Melodrama" (1972), which centres on a small number of Hollywood family melodramas made between 1940 to 1963. Of the many features Elsaesser notes about melodrama, the most significant concerns its connection with social contestation. Melodrama parallels "periods of intense social and ideological crisis," in this instance, struggles of social class, "a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism" (45). The political meaning of melodrama -
whether it is subversive, conformist, an anodyne, or mere entertainment, whether it negates or affirms - depends on the historical context. Distinguishing between melodramatic plotting and its means of social representation in the pre- and post-Revolutionary period, Elsaesser argues that former emphasised exploitation, death, and the perpetuation of feudalism, and thus veered toward tragedy. In the context of the pre-Revolutionary period, melodrama’s propensity for coincidence had a profoundly political objective: it highlighted the horrors a subjective and capricious feudalism could perpetrate on "the individual unprotected by civil rights and liberties" (46). In many cases, with "the metaphorical interpretation of class-conflict as sexual exploitation and rape" (46), the female body suffered the brunt of feudal tyranny, became the site of social class struggles. Post-revolutionary plots, in contrast, with their happy endings and the triumph of the individual, "reconciled the suffering individual to his social position, by affirming an ‘open’ society, where everything was possible" (46), where everything was based on an interiorised yet objective ethics and the ideology of merit. The radical and necessarily sensational plotting of the earlier period was transformed and put to a different end, "consolidating an as yet weak and incoherent ideological position" (46) of the emergent bourgeoisie. In the process of ideological consolidation, struggle is not seen in terms of class but in terms of personal and individual morality.

Opposing the view suggested by Robert Heilman in *Tragedy and Melodrama* (1968) of melodrama as a transhistorical literary mode and contrary to Thomas Elsaesser’s argument that "the French
Revolution failed to produce a new form of social drama or tragedy" (46), Peter Brooks suggests that it is "a peculiarly modern form," locating its origins, development, and "epistemological moment" (14) with a time of profound social, political, and religious upheaval, and aesthetic transformation: the advent of modernity ushered in by the French Revolution. Brooks describes the genesis of a revolutionary bourgeois theatrical form. The conclusion of his study reiterates the connection between melodrama and modernity: "melodrama has become a necessary mode within modern consciousness" (202). Melodrama is coincident with the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms - tragedy, comedy of manners - that depended on such a society.10

With the traditional pre-modern world liquidated - its religion, social hierarchies, and modes of representation (tragedy, comedy) discredited - melodrama assumes a central role in the resacralization and legitimation of law and morality: melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and raison d'être the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths. It says them over and over in clear language, it rehearses their conflicts and combats, it reënacts the menace of evil and the eventual triumph of morality made operative and evident. While its social implications may be variously revolutionary or conservative, it is in all cases
radically democratic, striving to makes its representations clear and legible to everyone. We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred society.

(15)

Principal mode for whom? The bourgeoisie, for the ascendency of melodrama as a genre over tragedy represents nothing other than the triumph of the bourgeoisie as a class over the aristocracy. Although he argues that the social connotations of the form are iconoclastic, "radically democratic" (15), because of the transparent legibility of melodrama's representations, it is nonetheless clear that what Brooks identifies as melodrama's main object - defining universal ethical meaning - depends on a form of myth-making highly bourgeois in its operation:

Mythmaking could now only be individual, personal; and the promulgation of ethical imperatives had to depend on an individual act of self-understanding that would then - by an imaginative or even a terroristic leap - be offered as the foundation of a general ethics. In fact, the entity making the strongest claim to sacred status tends more and more to be personality itself. From amid the collapse of other principles and criteria, the individual ego declares its central and overriding value, its demand to be the measure of all things. . . . Melodrama represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms. (16)
The notion of impossibility Brooks invokes invalidates the possibility of envisioning sacralization in collective terms. For Brooks, melodrama is ostensibly concerned with the strong inner dramas of bourgeois consciousness, individual ego, and personality. Coeval with the urgent task of mythmaking, what Brooks calls resacralization, is the creation of the bourgeois subject, otherwise known as the individual.

In *A Descant for Gossips*, Astley is disgusted with the way in which the world has resacralized itself. Melodrama, Brooks argues, is a moral genre that comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern. (15)

The many references in *A Descant for Gossips* to the fall of what Brooks calls the "traditional Sacred" (15) hint not so much at Astley's nostalgia for a renewal of older values, myths, and certainties, but act as a contrast with the materialistic values that have replaced them. Dissatisfied with the "moral universe in a post-sacred society" (Brooks 15), Astley blames the social elite for moral lapse. Money and social status determine their ethics, their truths, as the mini-portrait of Banker Garth Cantwell suggests:

His well-fed body slouched now from the effort of years of being successful, which, in his case, meant being on top at all costs; but he still covered it reverently with expensive tussoire and tweed, regarding it as something
sacred, a temple not of the Holy Ghost but of financial enterprise. He could not whip the money lenders within.

(92)
The image of Cantwell slouching and the repeated references to the profane materialism of post-Sacred society suggest that worshipping the free market debases values, corrupts people, and forestalls critique.

With its democratic levelling and its emphasis on an individualized and intuitive understanding of basic ethical truths, melodrama posits a relation between the individual and society vastly different from that of the pre-revolutionary period. Concerning the differences between tragedy's and melodrama's object of address, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes that the relationship between author, audience, and subject matter undergoes a process of equality, whereby "the address is from one bourgeois to another bourgeois, and the subject matter is the life of the bourgeoisie" (71). In articulating a relationship where "only middling power relations are present" (71), melodrama in effect erases the political, economic, and cultural relations of power and seemingly abolishes hierarchies of difference. For example, David Grimsted's sociological analysis of the democratic entertainments of nineteenth-century American popular culture outlines the political implications of melodrama's emphasis on the basic immanence of its ethics and revelations:

This epistemology of feeling was potent democratic dogma, not only because it equalized men, but because it assured Everyman that, if his heart were pure, his understanding
was as good as a sage's, his judgment as much to be respected as any ruler's. (89)

People can speak the truth to one another and such truth will be obvious. Thus Brooks argues that melodrama breaks through the repressions of "class domination," and in his example he proposes "that a poor persecuted girl can confront her powerful oppressor with the truth about their moral conditions" (44). The "their" is ambiguous: do these moral conditions refer solely to the social class the girl belongs to, something historically constituted, or to all social classes, something transhistorical? Brooks, in speaking of egalitarianism and democracy, effaces and neutralizes relations of power. Truth in this instance has everything to do with articulating "moral" conditions, nothing to do with transforming "social" conditions.

In Brooks's view, melodrama is only superficially concerned with social tensions and inequities, issues like class struggle or sexual exploitation; its main purpose is to go "beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality, to open up the world of spirit" (2), a world concerned with "emotional and spiritual reality" (3), which Brooks goes on to elaborate as "the 'moral occult,' the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality" (5). Brooks suggests that melodrama is

an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the manichaeistic struggle of good and evil, a world where what one lives for and by is seen in terms of, and as determined by, the most fundamental psychic relations and cosmic ethical forces. (12-13)
Brooks emphasises the "full expressivity" of the melodramatic mode and its resultant "victory over repression":

Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship. (4)

In their desire to communicate "the unspeakable," whether it be through verbalization or symbolic gesture, melodrama's characters "assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions" (Brooks 4). The fundamentalist adjectives Brooks uses to explain melodramatic articulation suppress the social; however, as many theorists of the psyche have argued, any explanation of psychic roles and conditions must examine the historical moment that gives rise to such roles and conditions. The roles of father, mother, and child are neither static nor transhistorical, but social and therefore subject to history and transformation. The roles and conditions Brooks assumes are "basic" and "primary" to the family structure are in fact specific to the newly emergent and eventually triumphant bourgeoisie.

When Brooks argues for the primacy of the ethical over the social in the melodramatic mode, he positions a newly emergent class and the genre unique to that class's emergence - both of which, as his analysis shows, are determined by specific historical struggle - as something universal beyond the social. This effacement of historical and ideological conditions is precisely what bourgeois ideology sets itself to do. It erases its class position,
interests, and ideology by de-politicising or mythologising them, "giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (Barthes, *Mythologies* 142). It proposes that the main reason for this transformation is moral rather than social, economic, and political.

In contrast to Brooks, whose recourse to psychic categories suppresses the class conflict at the heart of melodrama's origins, Elsaesser argues that melodrama functions as "social and existential" critique which "reproduc[es] more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, morality and class-consciousness" (64). Laura Mulvey agrees with the psychoanalytic categories invoked by Brooks, but proposes a different argument: melodrama is concerned with "domesticity, woman, love and sexuality" ("Melodrama In and Out of the Home" 81), the private sphere of the bourgeois home, the setting which "touches directly on the raw nerve of the psychoanalytic":

The social sphere of the family provides a ready-made *dramatis personae* of characters whose relations are by very definition overdetermined and overlaid with tensions and contradiction, destined to act out Oedipal drama, generational conflict, sibling rivalry, the containment and repression of sexuality. (95)

Despite the impressive details marshalled to document the generic heterogeneity of secondary theatres and the stifling effects neoclassical thought had on tragedy and comedy, Brooks nonetheless seeks to preserve the generic homogeneity of post-French Revolution melodrama. Invoking infection, perversion, and decay to
characterise these changes, Brooks discerns transformations within the genre from the late 1830s to the early 1840s. Plays deviate from the "cosmic ambition" and "the struggle of transcendant ethical forces" (88) to rather mundane social problems, most of which concern issues of class and gender. When melodrama moves from a universal struggle against good and evil to specific struggles, the genre is infected. "One begins to detect a certain contamination of melodrama by the popular themes of Romantic drama," for example, when the "role of social class becomes more conspicuous." Here Brooks outlines the plot of such contaminated melodrama:

the heroines are daughters of the people who must struggle against a system of economic and social exploitation consciously manipulated by the villains. (87-88).

Moreover, documenting the onset of "decadence" in the genre, Brooks argues:

There is a tendency for some melodrama to become more 'domestic,' a greater interest in situation and plot, and a certain repose on the well-worn tenets of bourgeois morality. (88)

Odd, that Brooks should find fault with the domestic situations of a genre given over to basic psychic categories of father, mother, and child. Furthermore, this reposing on bourgeois values amounts to a consolidation of values that in the immediate post-Revolutionary period had to be fought and laboured for.

The theme of melodrama's decadence surfaces in Raymond Williams's work. Unlike Brooks, who details and celebrates the rise of a
bourgeois genre addressed to bourgeois subjects, Williams describes and is critical of a bourgeois theatre that offered bourgeois resolutions to social problems. In early nineteenth-century Britain, melodrama supplanted sentimental comedy and subsequently dispersed the ostensibly genteel and constricted audience consolidated during the period of Restoration theatre, replacing it with "a more, open and more vigorous 'popular' audience" (Williams, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment" 211). Monopoly patent theatres, as in France, held sway, restricting what could count as legitimate drama. These restrictions, however, had an unintended outcome: they stimulated innovation. Other theatres existed and, while respecting the letter of the law, did everything within their power to thoroughly subvert it, to capitalise on "every ambiguity of definition" (209), "to describe plays as anything but plays" (211), to rely on gesture, music, pantomime, spectacle, and muteness for their effects.

Political censorship in the early nineteenth century directly influenced the content of British melodrama, resulting in a dramatic form given more to sensational elaboration than political articulation. French plays, "overtly political during the Revolution" (211), were de-politicised in the process of translation. While these plays were popular with the public, their popularity rested on their spectacular aspects rather than their political ones. Later, in the variegated and volatile mid-nineteenth century, melodrama candidly examined social pressures and anxieties. Poor, downtrodden heroes and heroines pitted themselves against rich and powerful villains - aristocrats or factory owners, for example. But the sustained emphasis on social
problems and conflict - the horrors of factory work, the disparities between rich and poor, the plight of orphans, domestic violence, and other themes of victimization - did not necessarily result in a radical resolution of social ills, just individual triumph instead. Idiosyncratic and felicitous solutions - timely coincidence, pure luck, or individual perseverance - resolved the narrative tension inaugurated by social problems; they dissipated the force of melodrama's social critique."

Williams is critical of melodrama's ideological accommodation to and complicity with capitalism, its overall tendency to defuse its oppositional stance and mute its critique. Though melodrama "had got nearest to the crises of that dislocated, turbulent and cruel society" (214), those tensions were gagged, displaced, and "sensationalised, in that through the magic of disguised and providential authority a happy ending to what had in fact no ending is contrived" (212). Such endings deny or retreat from the possibility of the formation of a collective subjectivity.

Developing the idea that "[m]elodrama always sides with the powerless" (130), Martha Vicinus argues that domestic melodramas of the nineteenth century appealed to the working class because "it appeared to offer truths not found elsewhere" (131) and women, "who found it to be a reflection of the contradictions in their own lives" (132). Like Williams, Vicinus concludes her study of Victorian melodrama by declaring that no matter how "subversive its underlying message" melodrama "by its very nature is conservative" because it seeks to preserve "the family and its traditional values" (141), a claim undermined somewhat by her tendency to posit the family as a static category and institution that has the same
function for all classes. 12 Even so, Vicinus makes a strong case for melodrama's tendency to celebrate fortuitous individual reformism rather than systematic collective radicalism.

Film theorists, basing their work on women's films from the 1930s and domestic melodrama from the 1940s and 1950s, have paid considerable attention to melodrama's audience and the ideological function of melodrama's contradictions. Where Brooks and Williams see melodrama addressing the bourgeoisie and articulating and making sense of its concerns, Mulvey in "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama" (1977-78) sees melodrama addressing women and through its internal contradictions allowing them to make sense of their patriarchal predicament. The shift from class to gender does not alter melodrama's locus: the family. Like Brooks, Mulvey relies on psychoanalytic categories and sees melodrama as primarily "the drama of a recognition" (Brooks 202), but instead of the bourgeoisie seeing themselves and identifying with politics of the drama, women do. 13 Melodrama delves into the "pent-up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well known to women" (Mulvey 76). Directed at women, melodrama has a primarily "corrective" (76) function, offsetting the dominance of Westerns and gangster films which focus on active men and solicit a male audience. Melodrama allows women to recognise the horrors and pitfalls of their social location:

there is dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive and erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stamping ground, the family. (75)
3. Music and Melodrama

The musical reference in the book's title refers directly to melodrama and indirectly to the threat of castration so essential to the Oedipal scripting of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality.

The neoclassical genres of French theatre, tragedy and comedy, received institutional protection through monopolies extended to patented theatres and the dominance within theatrical criticism of Aristotelian aesthetics, which fixed and codified the immutability of genres, preserving them from innovation and deviance (Brooks 83-84). In general, institutional authorities were guarding speech, for neoclassical theatre "is essentially verbal, its meanings generated almost exclusively from word, intonation, diction" (Brooks 65). Other theatres, subject to censorship, were unable to privilege verbal signification. Moreover, secondary theatres, according to Brooks, appealed to a different audience, one less educated and intelligent than that which attended the patented theatres:

It was no doubt because of the restrictions on the word - as well as the uneducated nature of the bulk of their audiences - that these theatres paid special attention to the spectacular aspects of drama, to its visible signs: to decor, machinery, banners, inscriptions, gestures, action, music. (84)

Out of necessity, French melodrama relied on props, lighting, decor, pantomime, song, music, tableau, and gesture to circumvent restrictions imposed on speech. After the French Revolution,
restrictions on theatrical productions were abolished and many elements of secondary theatres, popular with all social classes, became staple ingredients of the theatre. As to music's role in melodrama, Brooks argues that its "desemanticized language" supplants myth, investing "plot with some of the inexorability and necessity that in pre-modern literature derived from the substratum of myth" (14). Wordlessly meaningful, music not only comments and critiques, as Astley's choice of title suggests, it also circumvents censorship and repression and helps determine the direction plot will take.

Two aspects of the title of A Descant for Gossips are relevant to the melodramatic mode. First, a descant refers to a song or melody. Melodrama originally means "a drama accompanied by music" (Brooks 14). As it did when Rousseau fashioned from the Greek melos (song) and the French drame (drama) a neologism, mélodrame, to describe the way music enhanced dialogue in his play Pygmalion, music continues to play an important expressive role in melodrama, supplementing and intensifying its terms, oppositions, and conflicts. Music marks the genre at every stage of its historical development and transformation. The audible amplifies the visible; this is especially obvious in "the contemporary form that most relayed and supplanted melodrama, the cinema," and Brooks refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's observation concerning the effect of musical accompaniment in the silent film, the kind of clear identity it provided for character and incident, the rigorous necessity it conferred on plot. Foremost among the functions musical accompaniment serves is its power to imbue drama with a "new emotional expressivity" (Brooks
14) legible to all. Music, a non-verbal commentary and critique, simplifies and clarifies character, situation, interpretation, and plot.

More important, though, is the significance descant has for voice and identity. In Italy "the opera rather than the novel reached the highest degree of sophistication in the handling of melodramatic situations" (44), an assessment with which Brooks concurs: melodrama "finds one possible logical outcome in grand opera" (49), Italian melodramma. The descant is usually sung by sopranos who, in keeping with the meaning of the Italian sopra, sing a counterpoint "above" the song. It could be said that Astley's satire and irony occupies this position "above." This connection to Italian melodrama relates to the second point. Soprano refers to the "highest register of female (or artificial male)" voice (Kennedy), that is, the highest singing voice of women or castrati (whose voices, incidentally, were held in great demand during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Recent criticism of melodrama makes explicit the connection between melodrama and castration. Speaking of the development of the Western and the family melodrama, Nowell-Smith makes the following distinction:

Broadly speaking, in the American movie the active hero becomes protagonist of the Western, the passive or impotent hero or heroine becomes protagonist of what has come to be known as melodrama... It often features women as protagonists, and where the central figure is a man there is regularly an impairment of his 'masculinity'. (72)
The title of *A Descant for Gossips* signals that it being narrated from a non-masculine position, that it is far from being, as Astley would have it, writing as a man. In addition, its main male character, Robert Moller, fits the description of impaired masculinity: the town assumes he is celibate; he teaches a feminine subject, English; he is impractical; he prefers books and music to sport; and is a poor driver.\textsuperscript{16}

Astley's preoccupation with music and song in *A Descant for Gossips* confirms its similarity with melodrama, as she uses it to comment, circumvent, and develop the plot. Early in the novel, a minor incident involving students emphasises song's capacity to overcome repression. School boys underscore their burgeoning familiarity with sexual desire by seasoning their version of a popular song with "a salacity of emphasis remarkable considering the age of the performers" (15). Singing an innocuous popular song allows the boys to mention a topic normally not spoken, sex. Although Robert dismisses the students as "Vulgar little bastards" (15), he will use music to similar effect: to give full expressivity to his feelings for Helen. Together at Robert's house for the first time, Robert and Helen listen to Beethoven:

\begin{quote}
They smoked, and they smiled occasionally at each other through the cantabiles and the diminuendos, cloistered in simplicity until the bassoons and horns eased in on the piano's muttered chords spelling out the dramatic final theme. The tiny silence held to just that point where it became unendurable. \textit{Attacca}. They were away on the allegro and its dogmatic statements of melody, and Moller and Helen lay back in their chairs and under cover
of gigantic fortissimos, shifted into more comfortable positions and lit new cigarettes.

"How was that?" Moller murmured when it was all over.

(39-40)

Language metaphors are associated with music: the piano mutters, bassoons and horns spell out and state its message emphatically, with insistent vigour and compelling intent. Listening to the music's statements, the couple experience a profound sense of privacy, comfort, and intimacy, where post-coital cigarettes are de rigueur. When Robert finally speaks, his voice is barely a whisper. In this scene, music clarifies for Robert the nature of his feelings for Helen and propels him to act and advance the plot. During the "cessation of speech the very climate of the room had changed" (41) and, impelled by the reverberations, its echoes, Robert tells Helen there "is one thing I must make clear": his love for her. Speech had ceased, meaning had not.

Whatever form it takes, popular song or Beethoven, music breaks through repression and confers "additional legibility" to a situation, allowing the senior boys to comment on their emerging sexuality and Moller to declare his love to Helen. After the high seriousness of Beethoven, Robert, while transporting Helen and Vinny to Brisbane, performs as a clown and sings a passage from Brahms. Though "fulsomely exaggerating" (55) the piece, Robert, like Helen, is "aware of the emotion behind this half-clowned performance of one of the loveliest songs either knew" (56), but Robert and Helen delude themselves in thinking that the emotion, the intent of its sentiment, is concealed. There is no "behind" to the music: it states all, clearly, obviously, even to Vinny who,
"apprehensive of an adult emotion in the air that she could not fathom" (56), nonetheless fathoms the music's effect. What the music arouses between the adults is palpable enough to inspire "jealousy as she, the acolyte, watched them, the priests, performing a wordless, actionless rite in front of her" (56). Wordless and actionless, music represses nothing, delineates character, and hints at the jealousy that will plague Vinny later in the novel. Music intensifies the scene. In this scene, the triangle that exists between Vinny, Helen, and Robert, and the conflicts that will beset this trio, are conveyed in the music. Freedom for the three of them will be shortlived.

4. Plotting Passivity, Patriarchal Plotting

The plotting of *A Descant for Gossips*, with its "heightened emphasis upon situations, and a relatively passive construction of the protagonist" (Jacobs 138), clearly belongs to the melodramatic tradition. Bad luck and bad timing structure and complicate the incidents and actions of plot. In *A Descant for Gossips* Astley puts it this way:

So little things swing bigger ones into scything motion; moments have the vengeance of hours and days and years, even, waiting upon the misplaced use of seconds. (129)

Each incident further mires the character in an irreversible chain of misery. No matter what action melodrama's protagonists initiate the plot gravitates toward the worse case scenario. As Lea Jacobs explains,
through a series of constraints imposed by the force of circumstance, against the will, and sometimes without the conscious intervention of the protagonist, the plot heightens the terms of the initial situation without generating a clear sense of progress from one situation to the next. (140)

Malignant in melodrama, coincidences in thrillers, in contrast, have a different function. The male hero, active, can "engineer his own escape" (139) from the various coincidences that threaten him, thus creating the impression that it is he "who propels the story" (140). Although they appear to generate movement and action, coincidences in melodrama stall activity and progress, and ultimately frustrate the desires of the protagonist.

Incidents and situations envelop Robert and Helen's relationship, foiling their desire for secrecy. Helen and Robert's hope that their Brisbane nightclub rendezvous remains private is stymied by adulterous Harold Lunbeck. "Had to go down unexpectedly" (97) he explains to Moller at a Saturday gathering of Gungee's social elites. From this soiree, Robert goes to warn Helen to be prepared for malicious comments because their relationship is the object of speculation. Prudence, he tells her, is pointless; whatever follows "is going to be a series of final actions. Final, foolish, and perhaps indiscreet" (105). As so often happens in melodrama, his behaviour is "pathetically at variance with the real objectives [he wants] to achieve" (Elsaesser 56). Warning Helen exacerbates a worsening situation. By going to the hotel where she boards, Robert makes their relationship public and thus hastens its demise. Arch gossip and social-climber Jess Talbot, also boarding at the
hotel, sees Robert in the corridor. She will ensure that everyone will know of his visit and the reasons for it.

The melodramatic plot heightens situations so that they tighten around the characters. Things deteriorate when Robert and Helen decide to do what everyone believes they are doing anyway. Two incidents cast an ignoble pall over their first weekend away together. Again, timing is important. Helen catches a train to Gympie, avoiding the locals and keeping to herself. Robert plans to drive there to meet her, and then they will head off to their real destination. While Helen waits at the Gympie railway station for Robert to arrive, a seedy salesman attempts to pick her up and, then, the walls of the women's waiting-room she flees to are covered in graffiti: "childish pornographies invited her to gross behaviour through injunction or sketch" (121). The narrative speaks of the role of events: "It was unfortunate, but she seemed to be pursued by incidents that spilt a sordidity over the whole affair" (120). The anonymity and peace they desire and temporarily achieve collapses when, rowing along a river, Robert spots Sam Welch and his wife in a launch behind them. Robert had "clean forgot about their bloody shack up here" (129), an oversight that entangles them even more in the web of gossip contracting around them and their movements. Circumstances go from bad to worse. Monday at school, everyone knows about their weekend tryst. To get away from the gossiping townsfolk, Robert and Helen retreat to the coast for the evening, only to be enmeshed in a plotting situation that compounds their original dilemma. The narrative is portentously melodramatic: on the way there, "the narrowness of the road was a symbolic narrowness, with situations falling away to one
side and sheering up upon the other" (167). After eggs and coffee in a milk-bar, they leave for Gungee. A mile out of town, fifteen miles from Gungee, they have an accident and, unable to find alternative transport, spend the night at the pub. "Things are loaded against us. I feel like a child caught out" (176-77) says Helen in response to this new, damning predicament. Robert and Helen act, but crowded in by situations they get nowhere.

Right from the start of the novel Astley reinforces Vinny's passivity. The verb *flung* that describes Vinny's fears in the opening chapter - "She was afraid, as she clung to the spinning edges of her world, that one day she would be flung unwanted and violently into space" (1) - is again used when Vinny imagines how that space, the threat of pregnancy her peers taunt her with, will close off her future. That night at home she "lay on the bed trying to probe, not her unpopularity, for she had learnt to accept that years ago, but the terrifying future that had been flung at her" (214). The repetition of *flung* highlights the extent to which Vinny is powerless to effect her social environment, to control events and situations. She can't act because, as the verb indicates, she is being acted upon, the social world being something she is flung into or something flung at her. The implacability of the plotting is evident from the moment Helen decides to take Vinny to Brisbane. Her act of kindness is represented as "the first piece in a dangerous montage" (23). The penultimate piece would be the meeting between Vinny and Allie, locally famous for getting into trouble: "Superstitiously Vinny decided that some external force had brought them suitably together for this last humiliation" (253). As they survey Helen's empty
room, a voice deep inside Vinny's head makes a connection: "Here we are . . . both of us here in the same room at last. There is a meaning in that. A proof" (255).

After the school dance the melodramatic theme of "innocence persecuted" (Elsaesser 46) comes into play. Vinny's status as innocent feminine victim becomes quite apparent when she alights on the "victim-hungry face of Pearl Warburton" (208) who confronts her about the school dance. Vinny is hounded by her class-conscious peers who torment her with gossip and rumour, transforming Tommy's goodnight kiss into sexual intercourse. Astley represents Pearl's confrontation in terms of a sexual violence that shatters Vinny's newfound sense of wholeness: "It was the raping of privacy, the shattering of personal stillness into laciniated fragments of the intruded self that shocked Vinny most" (209). The use to which Pearl puts her knowledge of Vinny's pleasure with Tommy has a masculine effect, "raping." Gossip violates Vinny's virginal innocence. From this point on in the narrative Vinny has no respite from suffering.

All of this is not to say that Vinny does not act, but that most of her actions - buying Helen a gift, rubbing graffiti off the road and toilet walls - are inspired by her relationship with Helen. We could interpret her acts of vigilant erasure as an attempt on her part not to spare Robert and Helen from exposure but to obliterate her knowledge of the truth of their relationship, which, if the graffiti is correct, would further marginalize Vinny, create an obstacle in her desire for Helen. For the trip to Brisbane not only inaugurates the flowering of Vinny's desire but of her jealousy, which she struggles to contain. When Robert asks
hopefully of Helen, "Shall I see you at all?," Vinny "prickled with unexpected jealousy and then repressed it in the knowledge that she was no longer on the fringe of things" (61). The first time she discovers graffiti in the girls' toilet, the "categorical finality" of the message, MR. MOLLER LOVES MRS. STRIEBEL, shocked Vinny with the greater shock that only the dreaded and expected can give. She stared at it a long while, refusing, thrusting back the truth she knew was there; then she took out her handkerchief and tried to rub the words out. (138)

These words are "threatening" (138). When the graffiti reappears it is in "monosyllables that Vinny had seen before and, although she was unaware of their exact meaning, felt to be unclean" (139). As gossip circulates Vinny even doubts Helen's innocence.

Weak, ostracised, and denigrated children, staples of Victorian melodrama, continue to be important characters and "representatives of complete innocence and love" (Vicinus 130) in twentieth-century melodrama. Citing the example of Little Nell's death in Charles Dickens's The Old Curiosity Shop, Vicinus suggests that the child's "purity made them triumph" and that in general "the deaths of children remind the powerless of their ultimate victory, while chastizing the powerful for their moral carelessness" (130). In nearly every respect Vinny Lalor conforms to Vicinus's description of the role children play in melodrama. Each fresh insult hurled at Vinny emphasises her innocence, vulnerability to assault, and marginalization. "The child," Vicinus argues, "is most successful when he or she is most victimized" (130). But Vinny deviates from the ideal of innocence, virtue, and purity in the very last pages
of the narrative, where she is fuelled by anger, "a rebellion of egotism that made her want to be noticed," and the desire "to punish someone, cause another person pain and thereby transform her own" (258). In the end, "[h]atred, not love, was the last emotion of her heart" (259). Moreover, where the "deaths of children remind the powerless of their ultimate victory, while chastizing the powerful for their moral carelessness" (Vicinus 130), Astley refuses to append any scenes beyond Vinny's death. Thus we do not get to see the reactions of the other characters to this event. Within Gungee there is no sense of awe, pity, or humbling.

In addition to the passivity plot confers, the need for a passive victim, and the culturally mediated passivity of women, the domestic melodrama "thrives on the multiplication of silences, alibis, and misunderstandings generated in the characters' incomplete comprehension of their melodramatic situations in which they are implicated" (Rodowick 275). As a narrative, A Descant for Gossips is organized around silences and omissions which prove fatal.

Frankly or surreptitiously, with refinement or vulgarity, adults discuss sex. It is their constant theme, one they attempt to shield from children. Teenagers inquisitive about the meaning of their bodies and sex constantly allude to bodies, sexuality, love, and reproduction, while the adults of the novel attempt to keep them ignorant. Characters repress any details of a sexual nature, relying instead on ellipsis, "the implication of omission" (48), to make their point. Using ellipsis, Pearl allows her friends to imagine her engaging in unmentionable sexual activity. Absence marks Pearl's salacious account of her night out with Royce Lalor,
Vinny’s older brother: "I sat next to him at the pictures the other night. Mmm . . . mmm!" Another omission follows: "And then after the pictures were over we . . ." (48). Practising omission is not confined to teenagers. Robert demands discretion from Helen, urging on her the following advice:

Helen, let’s hurt no one else in doing this. Especially Lilian. We must be sure that this snivelling bloody-minded town is unaware of us. (42)

Silence will ensure their safety and, self-servingly in Robert’s case, preserve his integrity, the image of celibate and faithful husband, and spare his ill wife pain. Ellipsis characterizes his comments regarding sexual activity. On hearing Helen’s time-consuming itinerary for Vinny (she plans to take Vinny to a matinee and either an art gallery or museum), Robert remarks: "All very educational, Helen. A little profanity, you know . . . . Still, never mind" (61).

Blanketing sexual matters with discretion proves fatal. Accused by her peers of being pregnant, Vinny cannot discount that as a possibility because apart from the "baldest fact that the baby grew inside the mother" she "knew nothing of the physiology of sex" (214). Unable to go to her mother for advice, Vinny consults the family medical book which is "suitably pruned of anything liable to stimulate unhealthy adolescent speculation" (226). These absences encourage rather than discourage speculation and, with its references to "puerperal fever and post-natal haemorrhages," compound Vinny’s dread. Consequently, Vinny knows a lot about "the entire process of parturition except for that one important factor" (227). Even Helen, when a visibly distressed Vinny asks for some
books on babies, declines to speak to her about sexual reproduction, despite her certainty that she knows that Vinny wants knowledge of how the baby "came to the mother's womb, not how it grew in that nine months of confinement. But she was discreet enough not to ask further" (234).

Melodrama's concern with the legitimacy of patriarchal authority is another reason for its focus on the home. The "question of law or legitimacy, so central to tragedy," Nowell-Smith argues, "is turned inward [in melodrama] from 'Has this man a right to rule (over us)?' to 'Has this man a right to rule a family (like ours)?' (71). This question is one Astley pursues in A Descant for Gossips and much of her later fiction. Not only is melodrama "inward-turning" (71) in relation to its social setting, it is inward-turning in relation to the plotting of its solutions and the passivity of the main characters. Regarding cinema, Elsaesser makes a distinction between the way Westerns and gangster films resolve conflict and the way in which domestic melodrama do. Westerns and gangster films are settled "by having the central conflicts successively externalised and projected into direct action," that is, "a jail-break, a bank-robbery, a Western chase or cavalry charge" (Elsaesser 55), in a life and death struggle against social forces. But in domestic melodramas such action is prohibited, so that the externalization of conflict typical of the other genres gives way to an interiorization of conflict, "an inner violence, often one which characters turn against themselves" (56). Violence in melodrama trains inward, Rodowick argues, "regulated only by an economy of masochism which often gives the narratives a suicidal thrust" (272). Vinny's suicide - the interiorization
of conflict, a hyperbolic internalized gesture - is characteristic of melodrama. Although her suicide may seem to be an active decision, the narrative indicates that it is not. Invoking the desolation of Matthew Arnold’s "Dover Beach," Vinny "felt as desolate as a beach at dusk pounded only by the monotonous theme of the sea" (256). Her complete surrender to events is final:

Here finally was the point of isolation, so perfect, so complete, there could be neither a going forward nor backward. Here was the occasion when it is better to remain still and allow the forces outside the central situation - but compelling it nonetheless - to take charge. (256-57).

Vinny resolves external conflicts of class, gender, and sexuality melodramatically, that is, she interiorises them.

5. Silencing Class Anger

Astley’s focus on Vinny is fissured, with the first half of the narrative focusing on her class position and the second half, after Mrs Lalor silences her class-consciousness and forces such knowledge to be repressed and turned inward, on her sexuality.

Melodramatic characters attempt to make the full totality of their social relationships representable. In A Descant for Gossips, class issues, not gender issues, can be dramatized and articulated. Class constitutes the basis for an organized and oppositional social identity. Few organizations, however, deal with the social polarizations, trials, and dilemmas of the "external sexual warfare" (79). There is one reference to women’s
equality, but it is the occasion for a joke, one that discredits a transformative, emancipatory politics based on gender, the possibility of feminism.

When Raymond Williams writes of how one experiences domination and subordination, he distinguishes between visual clarity ("seen") and perceptual uncertainty ("seem"), conferring political agency on the former. Hegemony permeates the whole process of living to such an extant that its tensions, contradictions, and restrictions, "seem to the most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense," when in fact, Williams argues, they "can ultimately be seen as [the pressures and limits of] a specific economic, political, and cultural system" (110). Furthermore, culture "has to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes" (110). Seeing hegemony for what it is results in both political intelligibility and identification. Class struggle and discourse are possible because of an identification, the taking on of an identity, and this process involves agency: "To identify, in short, is to be actively involved as subject in a process" (de Lauretis 141). Williams's notion of seeing is similar to Brooks's notion of legibility; both demand a constituency familiar with reading conventions. In turn, this means that the process of identifying, the "very possibility or impossibility of 'seeing'... would depend on its engagement of a historically and socially constituted subjectivity" (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 149).

The identifications available to women in the novel are severely restricted because "the whole substance of [women's] lived identities and relationships" (Williams 110), that is, their
experience of work, mothering, parenting, sexuality, and social subordination, has yet to become something around which they can organize. In relation to "the pressures and limits" of patriarchy they have yet, to paraphrase Williams, to become feminist. The only discourse that belongs exclusively to women is gossip, and Astley clearly rails against that. At the same time, she does suggest that women are poised to question the "reciprocally confirming" (Williams 110) relation between hegemony and experience, responding as they are to the fact that hegemony, "a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits" (112), is never complacently still, and that changes in historical circumstances allow women to resist and challenge.

With Pearl Warburton, Vinny assumes a social position and expresses "the whole lesson of their relationship" in class terms. She can articulate issues of class, because within Gungee identifying oneself in relation to class is possible. Gungee’s mill workers and farm hands exhibit after-hours solidarity at the pub because they, as workers, have "become a class, and a potentially hegemonic class, against the pressures and limits of an existing and powerful hegemony" (Williams, Marxism and Literature 111). At the end of each work day farm and factory hands alike spew "their dislike of the day in public outside one or the other hotels" (73). Due to society’s reticence on matters sexual and its embargo on homosexuality, Vinny cannot find the language to express the whole lesson of her relationship with Helen. In the absence of language, Vinny relies on melodramatic
gesture to get her message across and, when that fails, the "heightened" gesture of suicide.

The opening chapter refers to a painful incident from the previous year that haunts Vinny, a source of anger which she is forced, through the threat of her mother's violence, to repress. At the time, the source of conflict is not identified, but later in the narrative, after a nightmarish flashback, Vinny's suffering is related to a moment when she articulated her class difference and consciousness. Walking to school, Vinny, "remembering past humiliations still close enough to hurt" (4), directs her rage onto her school case, but finds that is not enough. Churning with anger, Vinny seeks to control it:

She selected a jagged rock from the road edge and hurled it on to the footbridge from where it splashed into the narrow creek that half-circled the town. "Warburton," she said under her breath, and then, frightened of saying it because she had seen her mother beat the daylights out of Royce for using the word and because she had once suffered similarly, she quietly spelt "B-I-T-C-H." After that she felt much better and stayed hanging over the weathered hand-rail until the last circles on the water had melted into the creek margins. (4).

Some words in some contexts are not allowed to be spoken. She cannot identify her enemy without suffering violence. She waits for the implications of the word to stop rippling the water, for calm to return, before heading to school. Not only is the word itself silenced, but the reasons for its uttering in the first place, the possible explanation for the significance of this taboo
word are not mentioned. The word Vinny uses to articulate class issues, "bitch," suggests its relationship to issues of gender, particularly feminine sexuality. The "sharpest shame" (44), we learn, refers to her thirteenth birthday party, the day when her mother silenced Vinny's class anger. Contrary to Brooks's suggestion that melodrama breaks through the repressions of "class domination," so that "a poor persecuted girl can confront her powerful oppressor with the truth about their moral conditions" (44), Vinny learns that such a social confrontation can end with a violent restoration of silence. Slapped into silence, her relationship with her mother will never be the same. Mrs Lalor muzzles Vinny's narrative of economic oppression. Her exclusion from the new consumer society and the pleasures of consumption that dazzle Pearl Warburton and, in general, inoculate the bourgeoisie to issues of class, is not to be discussed.

6. Gossip: Policing Behaviour

What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret. (Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality 35).

No doubt Thea Astley would agree with Roland Barthes's statement in his exemplary reading of castration and class, sexual difference and the mode of production, in Honoré de Balzac's melodrama Sarrasine, that "chatter (Proust and James would say: gossip)" is
the "deadliest language imaginable" (S/Z 186). Her aversion to gossip is palpable in *A Descant for Gossips*, its credo tersely summed up a few years later in *The Slow Natives* when Keith Leverson tells Chookie Mumberson, "I hate the gossip-monger" (136). "In *Descant,*" Astley said in an interview, "I was inveighing against the idea of malicious gossip that can destroy people in small country towns" (Willbanks 32). Do not discount the potentially violent effects of chatter, Astley warns. The results of gossip are clear in this novel: Vinny Lalor commits suicide, Helen Striebel is transferred to another school, and Robert Moller will endure friendlessness and a culturally imposed celibacy.

Definitions of gossip frequently describe it as idle or small talk; many of its synonyms (prattle, blather, and babble) insinuate that it is childish. Contrary to definitions which diminish the importance of gossip and characterize it as being superficial, casual, and innocuous, *A Descant for Gossips* shows that gossip, specifically when it constitutes "a specific type of discourse on sex" (Foucault 97), is oppressive, vindictive, and fatal. As an ideological practice, gossip constructs knowledge, reality, and on the basis of that knowledge protects or restores social order, authorizing some practices and liaisons, forbidding others. Laurie Clancy characterises it is an activity open to all the townsfolk of Gungee and uses the stock figure of melodrama to indict the entire town: "The real villain is the collective townspeople of Gungee itself" ("The Fiction of Thea Astley" 45). The isolation of the villain in Victorian melodrama, his or her distance from generally accepted social values, has an ideological function also. By being represented as "an aberration" or "an isolated figure,"
the villain is kept separate from society, his presence not "cast as part of a larger question of injustice" because, as Martha Vicinus argues, "[t]o do so would have been to call into question the ideology of an industrializing capitalist society; individual values must conquer the world, not combined action" (139). Despite its status as being a reaction to "the growing split under capitalism between production and personal life" (129), melodrama inevitably opted for a conclusion that sought a reconciliation that left developments in capitalist society untouched, self-regulating. Clancy's invocation of melodrama is quite appropriate, for gossip is a melodramatic mode in that it relies on the revelation of sensational incident, fact, or half-truth, intense passions, moral polarizations, and "persecution of the good" (Brooks 11). Gossips thrive on melodrama. Given that melodrama emerged during a time of ideological crisis, Clancy's reference to the townsfolk as villains hints, too, at social transformation: the gossips and their chatter are situated in a period of ideological realignment, where the post-war ideology of consensus managing class and gender contradictions that sustain appearances of social unity as it relates to the family, sexuality, and sexual relations is beginning to fracture. Gossip does not exist in a vacuum. As a form of social interaction and communication, it is shaped by social relations of labour and desire. What ideological interests motivates the gossips to talk so destructively?

To reinforce its destructive capabilities, Astley tropes gossip as an insidious form of torture. Well before the novel's conclusion, Robert jokingly refers to his and Helen's demise, employing an image of institutional authority to punish the body
to do so. The cost of infidelity will be extraordinarily high, as Robert's reference to the clothing Inquisition victims wore to their public recantation or execution attests: "I shall take you away," Robert tells Helen, "and we shall don our sanbenitos afterwards" (79). He dons them sooner than he expects. When Harold Lunbeck chooses the right moment to question Robert about his weekend in Brisbane, he is described as being ready "to torture Moller" (96). Having informed Robert that he saw he and Helen in a Brisbane nightclub, Lunbeck "pressed home his points with the skill of a picador" (97), an exquisite, irritating series of pricks that, as in bullfighting, nettle and enrage, but do not maim. Lunbeck initiates the violence that will unfurl, but as the bullfighting image implies, his role, important but finally subsidiary, pales beside that of the matador, the one who kills the bull, who earns the praise and applause. That job, curiously, is reserved for women, the principal participants in the gossip. Through their activities and influence as gossips, women possess power, superiority, and agency that they ordinarily lack.

On close inspection, the level and depth of unity suggested by Clancy's "collective townspeople" misleads because of its inclusivity. Gossiping Gungee townspeople are responsible for the violence that ends the novel, but within the novel itself blame is apportioned more specifically. Women are most inclined to gossip. Originally, gossip referred to "a woman friend who comes at a birth" (Chambers). Contemporary definitions negatively retain the gender aspect: "a person, esp. a woman, given to tattling or idle talk" (Macquarie). The idea that gossip is idle talk - passive, trivial, babyish - connotes femininity also. Numerous examples
attest to a specifically female as opposed to general cast of gossips. Principal Findlay characterises his wife as being "susceptible to the faintest adumbration of gossip" (147). Marian Welch is "[t]itillated by the gossip" (132). Images culled from the animal world describe the gossips. Jess Talbot, for example, plunged with desperate seriousness and ellipsoidal vowels into every new piece of gossip as if it were a pool, and surfaced refreshed and whale-like with a struggling little fish - the privacy of some local wrongdoer. (26)

Cecily Cantwell is bird-like, "beaking eagerly towards a suspected titbit" and nearly falling "off her perch in her excitement" (97) when she discovers the secret. Overall, Astley's portrait of these women hardly qualifies as flattering. The gossips's network of communication is extensive and swift. On learning that his wife's source of news regarding Helen's transfer to another school effective immediately is Cecily, Frank Rankin opines: "That means everybody knows about it, then" (238).

Men gossip, but only women are categorised as gossips. In the mesmerizing verbal staccato of the penultimate chapter, husbands, pictured as more forgiving and compassionate than their spouses, blame their wives for the way events unfolded. Lunbeck dares his wife to judge him, a galling, profoundly hypocritical reproof: it was he who, to deflect attention away from his "own erotic activities" (99), set the gossip rolling. As Jess revels in Helen's comeuppance, Alec Talbot urges her to "be fair" (237). "Busy spreading it around?" (238), Garth Cantwell asks Cecily. Drunk Sam Welch, having called Marian "a bloody interfering bitch" (238), stops her from leaving him by punching her "hard, twice, on
the face" (239). Regarding gossip, Frank Rankin sums up the differences between men and women:

"How did you hear, Frank?"

"Oh. Findlay dropped a hint yesterday. Asked me not to mention it."

"You beast! You might have told me!"

"My dear, in that case I might as well have rigged up a loudspeaker system at the top of the hill and done the thing with éclat."

"That's not kind."

"I know you women," Rankin said contentedly, sure that he did. (241)

Men see themselves as restrained, fair, civil, and conscientious; women, in contrast, they see as morally inflexible blabber-mouths, incapable of keeping a secret. As their names imply, women are too free (Freda) with their words, have an inferior relation to truth (Ruth), and, like Cecily, they cant well. That might be the end of the matter, were it not for the issue of class and the sexual division of labour: it is not simply women gossiping, but married middle class women. In this respect, A Descant for Gossips is Astley's most class conscious novel.

The power the women gossips have over Gungee is extraordinary. According to the men of the town, this phenomenal power incapacitates masculine agency. In their view, gossip is disruptive because it reverses the values inscribed within the masculine/feminine binary. Emasculated, the men are incapable of stopping the gossip, reversing its course, or enforcing silence. They are passive, the women, active. Robert elaborates on the
power women have over easily malleable men. The men who attend the school committee will "have been worked on by their wives and that will be a lot of votes against us" (160). Robert is not the only person to feel powerless in the face of the women's gossip. Unable to derive pleasure from the revelation of Robert and Helen's relationship, Sam Welch reflects on his inability to stop his wife from mentioning the scandal to Findlay: "Nothing on God's earth would stop her when she made up her mind to do something" (133). In this scenario, women possess power, influence, agency.

Interestingly, their husbands consider themselves virtually powerless to control or silence their nasty prattle. Patriarchal culture, it would seem, cannot contain or influence the threatening and death-dealing gossip. Recall the image of the inferior picador and superior matador. Their imagined powerlessness, however, is self-serving. Why stop chatter that ultimately serves and shores up patriarchal interests, that mystifies class and keeps everybody on their toes and in their place? Women gossip as proxies on behalf of patriarchal relations; their constant flutter of rumour, innuendo, and hearsay works to legitimate the sexual division of labour, heterosexuality, and monogamy, compelling others to live within those limits, even if it results in exile and death. The analogy between gossip and torture, however, suggests a social relation of power. Robert's reference to the Inquisition makes explicit the fact that torture is often an integral component of institutional power.

For Michel Foucault, the question that must be addressed when discussing "a specific type of discourse on sex" is "what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did
they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourse used to support power relations?" (The History of Sexuality 97). There is nothing "local," as Foucault would have it, about the power relations at work and the possible variety of discourse power relations generate in A Descant for Gossips. Patriarchal-capitalist power relations underpin the gossip, structuring its themes and designating its speakers, married middle class women principally, in a relationship that mutually reinforces and supports power relations that keep women passive, bored, monogamous, isolated, frustrated, and devalued in the home.

Changes in the position housewives occupy in the post-war period and the meaning and value accorded to that position are responsible for the intensity and vigilance of the gossip. The married middle class women live in a time when the contradictions between the ideology of the housewife, articulated and consolidated in the pre-World War Two period, and their experience of it in the post-World War Two period are near unbearable. They are threatened by an apparent redundancy that no amount of shopping can compensate for.

The post-war period in Australia saw the "consolidation of industrial capitalism and the realisation of the suburban dream" (Game and Pringle, "The Making of the Australian Family" 87). During the 1950s and 1960s, as the manufacturing sector increased in importance, as economic growth was stable and employment full, and as workers earned decent wages, experienced a standard of living unknown to their parents, and could afford to own a house, the "emphasis was on integration and consensus." However, men returning to the economy in the immediate post-war years displaced women from the work force. This displacement was discernible in
advertisements where images of "[t]he bride replaced the working woman" (quoted in Game and Pringle 90). As a result of the rising standard of living, the house became a site of pleasure and consumption, with women in charge. It was in the period between the wars, Game and Pringle argue, "that woman's domestic role was given a high social status," a rank conferred to partly ameliorate anger, frustration, boredom or inadequacy felt at their exclusion from the social sphere and society's "failure to match the political emancipation of women with equal educational and vocational opportunities" (86). Authority in the domestic sphere, a place where their mastery, expertise, and "skills were acknowledged and valued" (86), diminished in the post-World War Two period. Domestic skills and values - "thrift, respectability and self-help" (86) - lost their importance in an era defined by acquisitive consumerism. The domestic sphere had considerably less value than it did previously: "Though the ideology remained that housewifery was an honoured profession, its status declined" (86). The marketplace expansion that accompanied the consolidation of industrial capitalism transformed housework and domestic production. Many goods, services, and necessities women produced for domestic consumption were taken over by professionals. Mass production, writes Lees and Senyard, undermined the value of self-sufficiency: machine-made rather than hand-made became the hallmark of status in the decade. For women, cooking up broth or making preserves were a bad second to the standards of health offered by advertisements for Heinz Baby Food or Edgell's Frozen Vegetables. Sewing and knitting, too, lost out
against the glamour of the orlon cardigan, the machine-
made tablecloth and the nylon petticoat. (76).

Moreover, "[i]t became easier and cheaper to buy bread, jam, tinned
and frozen food, clothes and furnishings, than to make their
equivalents at home" (Jill Matthews 65). Advertisements targeted
women as consumers. Homes were accessorised and decorated, stuffed
to the rafters with all mod cons: radios, television,
refrigerators, cocktail units, stereos, clothing, salt and pepper
shakers, tupperware. Consumption rather than domestic production
defined the housewife. In short, it was a time of social and
ideological crisis, perfectly suited to melodrama.

Not everyone benefited from the post-war boom, a point Astley
reinforces by the fact that in the narrative Mrs Lalor is the only
housewife shown working under domestic conditions that prevailed
earlier. The Lalor household has yet to receive any benefits of
this economic boom. Mrs Lalor is always working, but under
conditions vastly different to those of the other wives. At
Vinny's birthday party, for example, she is "busy in the kitchen,
red and perspiring over the fuel stove" (46). The luxuries of
consumption are not hers to have. Household furnishings reek of
a "secure drabness from which nothing could redeem them" (31). Mrs
Lalor is influenced women's magazines, even though the magazines
establish an ideal of domesticity forbiddingly difficult to live
up to, especially for those, like the Lalors, who can't afford it:

Memories of magazine spreads with the tables' momentous
works of gelatines and ices, in sandwiches and open
glazed tarts, came to Vinny as she looked at the plain
sponges, the neat fish-paste sandwiches and the rolls.

(49).

Conforming to this exacting and uniform ideal extends beyond domesticity onto the female body itself: Vinny "did not yet know it was the duty of her sex to be perfect, to offer to the male, no matter how insipid he might be, an unblemished appearance" (204).

Employment options for unmarried women in the novel are limited to clerical or sales. Education does have its benefits; Vinny's older sister, Rene, works as a receptionist for Lunbeck, a position Mrs Lalor takes credit for: "I always knew I could make something out of Rene. Types and does shorthand and all that sort of thing as well as helping in the surgery" (31). By making Rene stay at school, Mrs Lalor enables her to have a degree of social mobility and economic independence that she lacks. Vinny dreads the end of school, for, as the narrative puts it, "nothing awaited her after the public examinations were over but a job in a Gympie office - if she were lucky - shifting figures from one column and one ledger to another, sifting the relationship of money and goods" (52). Astley uses an image of deadening containment to convey how restricting post-school employment opportunities are: "The counters of the department store imprisoned shop-girls in black" (67).

Marrying upwards, the chief way of negotiating this gender and class bind, ensures mobility. Ruth Lunbeck explains her reason for marrying in these terms: "I married you for your job" (241). However, opportunities for married middle class women - Cecily Cantwell, Freda Rankin, and Ruth Lunbeck - to participate in society at large are few and far between. Their economic position allows them some autonomy, heavily circumscribed as this is.
Protected by the shadow of Lunbeck's occupation, Ruth's freedom to gossip with impunity comes at a cost: she has to tolerate Harold's sexual intrigues, punishing him "with regular large purchase accounts at the city stores" (90). There is a choice irony here. In the boom years a woman's "value as a housewife and a consumer is reflected in her success as a consumer, filling the cupboards and fulfilling herself" (Game and Pringle, "The Making of the Australian Family" 95); Ruth's external success, represented by her consumption, is driven not by an expectation of fulfilment (itself erotic) but of punishment. The decorated home acts as a continual reminder of her husband's infidelities. But because marriage represents a gain, Ruth clung to the marriage rock like a limpet because it gave her a social standing in the town that she could certainly not have achieved otherwise, being devoid of intelligence and distinguished appearance. (90)

While reaping some of the advantages of their husband's economic and social standing, the women lose their identities in the process. The husband's name and his profession subsume the identity of his wife: "doctor Rankin and missus doctor Rankin and bank manager Cantwell and missus bank manager Cantwell" (74). Such social advantages, reflected in patterns of consumption, can, however, prove to be temporary. Conscious of being on the fringe of G ungee's social elite because of her husband's job as mill owner, Marian Welch worries that one of Sam's outbursts may cut them off from the town's élite. Looking round the room, she noted with pride the different objects that implied income, that put their home in a certain class -
the expensive radiogram that only ever played aborted versions of musical shows, the china cabinet threatening its guests with its gilt and biscuit-thin cups and saucers, the cocktail cabinet with all the right glasses for all the right drinks. She was home like the sailor, home from the sea of early married stringency, to a harbour of best wall-to-wall, of inoffensive landscapes, and a deep-freeze unit just packed with goodies. (135-6)

Astley does little to conceal her aversion to the consumerism that fuels Marian's desire for conformity. Obviously Marian and her "technical college, not a university" (131) educated husband have profited from the social mobility of post-war boom period. But as class newcomers, Marian and Sam occupy a precarious position. This may explain why Sam stands against the gossip, because his affiliation with the social elite is not completely binding. In rebuking the gossips, Sam argues that the Talbots apply their morality unevenly:

You never give friend Harold such thorough treatment.
But then he's one of the big four! Solid at lodge and lousy with dough! So he escapes! (136)

Because he has authority and money, Harold's behaviour is excused. Class privilege exonerates.

Thus, marriage for women in the post-World War Two period means being confined to monogamy, family, and home. To bolster their sense of worth and vouchsafe the legitimacy of their position within the family and their generally passive position in society, the married middle class women gossip, incessantly, focusing primarily on aberrations and deviations from the institution to
which they themselves are captive. Inscribed within the ideology of motherhood and domesticity is an ideal of wholeness. Every deviation that they alight on is seen as an attack on their sense of wholeness and propriety. It would seem, then, that the married women gossip to give themselves a utility and value that society, though acknowledging otherwise, denies them. In this environment, gossip not only polices contradictions and signs of disunity that threaten the cultural, political, and economic relations positioned as being responsible for social consensus, but functions as a valuable commodity, a means of exchange; the Welch girls use gossip "to buy themselves a little temporary prestige at school" (152).

Communal chatter plays a vital role in the discourse of sex, coercing people to practice and conform to a sexuality considered normal and uniform. Silence, suppression, and secrecy have a disciplinary function, equally as harmful as idle speculation. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that corrective and spectacular art of physical punishment was superseded by something infinitely more terrible because infinitely more discreet, infinitely more managed. Essential to the running of this new form of discipline is the existence of "a mechanism that coerces by means of observation" (170), what Lunbeck, having averted his wife's attention from his erotic activities to Robert and Helen's, imagines as Ruth's "between-house-rushing of speculation, of under-blind-peeping, of checking Moller's hours, watching his lights, listening to the identifiable, accusing, late hour creak of his front gate" (99). Gossip is a disciplinary mechanism of coercion. The gossips survey, weigh, summarize, pass judgement on the
behaviour of their neighbours, subjecting them and their actions to patriarchal norms.

The gossips discuss monogamy, sexuality, motherhood, the sexual division of labour, in short, the everyday practices associated with domesticity. The gossips's commentaries categorize and moralize, upbraiding individuals who neither observe nor obey patriarchal power. Sexual expression neither sanctified by marriage nor excused because of one's elevated social status cannot be tolerated. Topics of conversation include the homosexual incident at school; the "trouble" (28), as Jess euphemistically refers to it, that Allie, a single woman, got into because of her premarital sexual liaisons, her uncontrollable (i.e., active) sexuality; Helen and Robert's affair; the mothering skills of Marian Welch; the ways in which other women, never the one speaking, mismanages their domestic economy. Feminine sexuality that deviates from the patriarchal norms inscribed within heterosexual marriage and motherhood is monitored. There is a correlation between the unusual intensity of the gossips's vigilance and concern for maintaining proper patriarchal relations and its immediate historical context, a time of social and ideological crisis, as though their gossip posits and reproduces the legitimacy of patriarchal authority and the bourgeois family by citing every instance of deviation from it. The more they gossip, the more they focus on situations and, more importantly, possibilities different and contradictory from their own. For example, the ideology of consumption that promotes immediate gratification conflicts with the ideological demand that sexual
gratification be deferred until marriage. As an example of the failure to postpone sex, Allie is condemned and subject to gossip.

Educated, independent women receive the harshest criticism. The gossips resent Helen "because of a self-sufficiency that precluded the need to swap knitting patterns and sponge recipes and allowed her to retire blamelessly to her room at seven" (19). Small as it is, Helen's room at the pub is a room of her own, away from domestic production, from the responsibility of clothing and feeding family members and staying up past seven to supervise homework, wash and dry the dinner dishes, put children to bed, and find slippers for the master of the house. She has a freedom they haven't. The gossips register her withdrawal from activities traditionally reserved for housewives as "a personal affront" and "voiceless criticism of their behaviour" (19). Gossip sharpens in degree and fervour the more the family and the gossips's limited authority within it is questioned by the behaviour they observe and speculate upon. By gossiping, the women want it to be known that their identities conform with the one that society confers through marriage, that their behaviour conforms to the patriarchal model of femininity, and that their family lives are stable. Accepting moral superiority in the seeming absence of any possibility of social equality, the gossips (mis)direct their discontent, targeting those whose lives and behaviour pose a real challenge to their historically mediated situation, circumventing challenges to patriarchal norms.

Though Astley's botanical metaphors and similes suggest that sexuality is natural - "the germinating lasciviousness of the girls" (48), "Their bodies moved as naturally to each other as
flowers to light" (43), "budding daughters" (101) - and imply a biological basis for masculine superiority, it becomes clear from the gossip circulating around the sexual double standard that licenses male sexual promiscuity yet prohibits females from engaging in the same sort of behaviour is not applied to all men, only to those men whose hold on economic and social power is unassailable. Social standing determines whether one can get away with it. If the double standard is generally accepted and universally applied then Moller, married but male, should presumably enjoy its benefits, but he becomes instead an object of gossip precisely because the double standard extended to town rake Lunbeck does not apply to him, for he lacks "the importance of position that forgave these transgressions - with Lunbeck they passed for foibles pardoned, at least in public, amongst members of his own class" (101). Having listened to his wife and the Talbots discuss for many hours the various implications of Robert and Helen's affair, Sam Welch balks at the seedy immorality of the discussion and, taking note of the contradiction, puts the matter bluntly: "He's not bloody classy enough to get away with it, is he?" (135). The possibility for transgression, as Robert notes, depends on social relations of power that apply unequally to women and men. Monogamous heterosexuality is for those can't afford anything else.

Looking closely at the vicious gossip, its historical situation, its social interactions, and its targets, we see that Astley is denouncing a patriarchal form of communication saturated in the anxieties and contradictions of post-World War Two Australian society. Ostensibly a tirade against rather than a descant for
gossips, Astley's novel situates gossip, a genre, within a history of the social intercourse generated by real social relations and class struggle.

7. Masculinity and Oedipal Scripting

A Descant for Gossips deals with sexual and social reproduction. Having situated Vinny in relation to two institutions, "Family and school," the opening paragraph, when it touches on sexual maturation and reproduction, tilts from the cultural and political relations of society to the seasonal invariability of nature:

Buds flocked along the adolescent trees, but she came, after her fourteenth winter, unmoved by the spring into the first week of the last term. (1)

Flowering metaphors make clear Vinny is sexually immature, yet to "bud," to ripen and unfold. Mrs Lalor latches onto an organic analogy to explain the experience of menstruation to her daughter: "It's natural. It's like seasons in your body. A sort of ripening" (221). Moreover, she explains: "You can't have babies unless this happens. All this means is you're a normal girl and you'll be able to have children of your own one day" (220). Is that all it means? In an essay concerned with restoring materialism to feminist cultural studies, Teresa Ebert critiques theories that give a privileged position to the experiences of the female body and the knowledge such experiences give rise to, and tackles the question of whether experiences of the body are "natural, material grounds for social relations" or "always already mediated" (25). Ebert asks:
is the 'meaning' of menstruation in the 'experience' of menstruation (its physical bodiliness) or is the meaning in the way that experience gets read in a given society on the basis of the frames of intelligibility and labor practices that society produces. ("Ludic Feminism, the Body, Performance, and Labor" 25-26)

Having children, as we shall see, means signing up for the heterosexual contract. Feminine sexuality must be organized around reproduction.

Masculinity in melodrama, critics agree, is repeatedly interrogated, threatened by negation, effortlessly intimidated, and thrown into doubt. "Hollywood melodramas," writes Kaja Silverman in The Subject of Semiotics, "show how easily the male subject's potency can be challenged by putting it into crisis again and again" (139). The masculinity of the melodramatic hero, Nowell-Smith argues, is "impaired" (72). The masculinity put into question in A Descant for Gossips is Robert's. Locals mockingly mythologize Robert's unmanliness: students call him Herc, a diminutive of Hercules. Students are not the only ones to diminish Robert's status. Twice at a badminton party Robert's male peers refer to him as "boy," as though he is sexually immature and inexperienced. Neighbours, Robert imagines, enjoy the sexual abstinence forced upon him by his wife's hospitalization:

They love to think of me lonely and celibate, brave in my misfortune, living day to day all the momentous clichés of the women's magazines. (39)

Potency and genre are connected: celibacy is a topic that belongs to women's magazines, a feminized genre Robert disdains.
Heterosexual corroboration and acting as the father can potentially remedy Robert's masculine lack, but, as the plotting of *A Descant for Gossips* demonstrates, Astley is critical of Oedipal scripting, the drama that uses masculinity and femininity as grounding concepts to organize and reaffirm social relations. The libidinal intensity of the child's relationship with the mother forces the father to intervene. So begins the Oedipal complex, the process by which, in the case of boys, desire for the mother is repressed, or, in the case of girls, relocated. The triangle between Robert, Helen, and Vinny resembles the Oedipal scenario, each cast in the role of father, mother, child, respectively. The bond between Vinny and her mother is ruptured irrevocably after Vinny's traumatic thirteenth birthday. Following this moment Vinny directs "all her affection" toward Helen, cultivating "what might have been a mere 'crush' into a disproportionately deep attachment" (51). Vinny's excessive desire for Helen brings her into conflict with Robert who, wanting Helen for his partner alone, redirects and limits Vinny's desires and restores heterosexual equilibrium. The "Oedipal logic" of Robert's actions is compatible with the gossips's patriarchal chatter.

Melodrama makes obvious Freud's thesis in "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" that the psychosexual development of male and female subjects is not a simple process whereby sex and gender are ultimately stabilised and masculinity and femininity irrevocably secured. Rather, the formation of sexual identity is complex and turbulent, fraught with ambiguity and disquiet, conflict and dread, "painful disappointments" and "distressing experiences" (173). During this process, satisfactions more often than not are
frustrated and libidinal desires, unfulfilled, are sublimated. The "Freudian paradigm," Silverman argues, makes clear the inadequacy of the male subject, acknowledging as it does that he relies for his authentication upon the felt inferiority of the female subject. (The Subject of Semiotics 139)

Grounded in negation, masculinity reveals its inherent weaknesses in the process of substantiation. The confidence and security various acts of masculine verification supposedly betoken are suspect. Because "the renunciation of the feminine" rather than "the direct affirmation of the masculine" characterize the acts of verification necessary to maintain a masculine identity, "masculine gender identity [is] tenuous and fragile" (Kimmel 127), or "reactive" (Brod 238). Although the way in which "the subject situates himself vis-à-vis his biological sex is the variable outcome of a process of conflict" (Laplanche and Pontalis 243), culture erases the variability and uncertainty that precedes the outcome - the accomplishment of masculinity and femininity - by presenting that outcome as natural and inevitable.

The human subject's inherent "bisexual disposition," what Freud identifies as the capacity to identify with masculine and feminine attitudes and to pursue goals actively and passively, complicates the possibility of confirming sexual identity in terms of a "pure masculinity and femininity" ("Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 258). In relation to their first love object, the mother, male and female subjects experience similar desires and disappointments, using active and passive means to gain pleasure. For the male subject, achieving
and securing a masculine identity involves relinquishing the mother as the object of desire and identifying with the father. As Freud admits, the bisexual "double orientation" (250), the oscillation between active and passive identifications, complicates sexual identity. For example, in the active/masculine attitude the boy sees the father as a "disturbing rival" (249) blocking his desire to have intercourse with the mother; but in the passive/feminine position, the "boy also wants to take his mother's place as the love-object of his father - a fact which we describe as the feminine attitude" (250). The successful resolution of the Oedipal complex ends this "double orientation," the male subject's ability to identify with and occupy the mother's place, and establishes a single orientation and a single identification: for boys, with the father; for girls, in a more complex way, with the mother. The Oedipus complex assigns gender and structures desire, channelling sexuality into heterosexuality.

In Freud's account of the development of sexual identity, the penis, its presence or absence, functions as the sign of sexual difference. Masculinity and femininity are "culturally ordered by the castration complex" (Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 43). The castration complex has different outcomes for the child. In the positive Oedipal complex, the male subject's genital narcissism triumphs over his libidinal desire for the mother. The path to masculinity begins with a disavowal of female difference which, initially forgotten, cannot be completely disavowed because the lack cures him of his scepticism regarding the legitimacy of the castration threat, a threat he had "hitherto laughed at" (Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between
the Sexes" 252). At some point in his pursuit of the mother, the male subject distinguishes between the imaginary threat of castration, represented by his father, and being castrated, represented by women. If he continues to pursue his mother sexually, his father will castrate him. Castration, the boy discovers, is no laughing matter. Belief in the likelihood of castration, the power of the father's law, is necessary if the boy is to surmount the Oedipus complex. Fearing his father's threat of castration, the male subject internalizes his father's authority, accepts the incest prohibition, thus forming the superego, the "heir" (257) to the Oedipus complex which results in its termination. The formation of the superego allows the boy to inherit the father's authority, voice, and father's place in society. When the male subject internalizes the incest prohibition, his mother becomes "desexualized" and his desires are "sublimated" (257), forsaken in exchange for the imminent privileges of a patriarchal "cultural heritage" (Mitchell, Women 231). This exchange, Harry Brod notes, "introduces an ethic of delayed gratification which serves both patriarchal and capitalist imperatives" (238). The horror of identifying with the basis of terror itself, his father, is mitigated by an understanding that the possessive sexuality of the father will one day be his.

Although the boy represses his desire for the mother, he preserves, in sublimated form, the object-choice of his original libidinal investment: woman. The female subject's "double orientation" is more complex than the male subject's to dissolve, for it involves a "radical discontinuity between the libidinal investments of her infancy, and those which she is required to make
at the Oedipal juncture" (Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* 141). The female subject's "momentous discovery" (Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 252) of her castration inaugurates the process by which she exchanges the libidinal satisfactions enabled by the "double orientation" and directed to the mother for a single orientation. She transfers her desire for the mother to the father. Penis-envy solves the discontinuity, allowing the preconditions necessary for achieving femininity to be met: a transformation of the object of desire and the site of erotic pleasure. Coveting the penis marks the girl's permanent entry into a position she does not progress beyond, the Oedipus complex. When the female subject recognizes the superiority of "the strikingly visible" penis and the corresponding insignificance of the clitoris, she interprets her "small and inconspicuous organ" (252) as a sign of her own and all women's inferiority, an inferiority repeatedly brought home to her in social and familial relations. Femininity and heterosexuality follow from this moment of envious recognition. Penis-envy induces a spontaneous impulse against clitoridal masturbation and is "a forerunner of the wave of repression which at puberty will do away with a large amount of the girl’s masculinity" (255) and result instead in "vaginal sensitivity" (Mitchell, *Women* 231). Penis-envy soothes "the wound to her narcissism" (Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 253) and loosens "the girl’s relation with her mother as love-object" because she blames the mother for sending "her into the world so insufficiently equipped" (254). The penis can be had, but differently. The girl intensifies her relations with the
sufficiently equipped father. Desire for the penis perseveres, but it undergoes symbolic, unconscious, and compensatory transmutation: She gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: and with that purpose in view she takes her father as a love-object. Her mother becomes the object of her jealousy. The girl has turned into a little woman. (256)

These desires, Freud argues, "remain strongly cathected in the unconscious and help to prepare the female creature for her later sexual role" ("The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" 179). Unconsciously furnished with heterosexual desire, the female subject "takes" up a position steeped in patriarchal culture: the mother.

Freud's analysis in "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" of "the psychological formations produced within patriarchal societies" (Mitchell, *Women* 228) illuminates the ways in which patriarchy situates, that is, oppresses women. The female subject has to "make the culturally requisite investment in her father" (Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* 143) and withdraw from her mother, her first love-object. This libidinal transfer exacts certain costs. As Silverman argues, "the form which that investment most legitimately takes - i.e. the desire for a child" is ideological because it entails "'buying' . .. not just a heterosexual rather than a homosexual relationship, but the nuclear family, and by extension the whole of patriarchal culture" (143).

To be masculine means to be on constant guard against the stigma and "scar" (Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical
Distinction Between the Sexes" 253) of femininity. Repudiating femininity is essential to masculinity. The interpretation of female difference as lack will "permanently determine the boy's relation to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her."\textsuperscript{22} The boy's arrival into a gendered identity contains with it a derision and revulsion for women, because they embody a state which he is taught (it is not an instinctive but cultural reaction) to fear and loathe.

Never stable and consistent but always in process, masculinity for the male subject is achieved not once and for all, decisively, but constituted over and over again. The success of the achievement is suspended, conclusive proof elusive. Accomplishing masculinity demands from the "majority of men" that they close the gap that exists between them and culturally dominant definitions of masculinity, the "masculine ideal" ("Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 258). Few men live up to the culturally ascendant model of masculinity society most values. Of course, men need not literally duplicate and embody its definitions, although many try; all they need do is give them their support and approval.\textsuperscript{23}

Conscious of the images and names that follow him, Robert quests for potency. Pursuing Helen will allow him to assert a sexuality that will refute the town's generally negative impression of his passive masculinity. Incidentally, Robert's desire for masculine approval conflicts with his desire for secrecy. Going to the hotel to warn Helen of the gossips worsens the situation, but it also elevates him in the eyes of his peers. When his relationship with Helen becomes common knowledge, Robert is freed, so it seems, from
his melodramatic image, the cliches of women's magazines. Accounts of the affair chalked up on roads, fences, and walls bestow potency on Robert. Masculinity repaired, Robert reports to Helen that the graffiti compliments his "virility" and praises her "attractiveness" (158), that is, it praises his choice of partner. The conventional gender relations inscribed within the graffiti, masculine activity and feminine passivity (of which exhibitionism is part), console Robert. Often contemptuous of custom, Robert is gratified that the graffiti recognises that Helen conforms to an ideal of conventional femininity and he to an ideal of conventional masculinity. Even the graffiti's grammar, which renders the relationship in terms of subject-verb-object, must please the English teacher: MR. MOLLER LOVES MRS. STRIEBEL (138). Robert occupies the subject position, while Helen is the object acted upon.

Masculinity asserts itself over and against femininity. To repair his impaired masculinity and correct his image within the town, Robert repudiates femininity, whether it be his disdain for "women's magazines" or his observation that Helen's nostalgia is "incurably female" (124). Incurably insinuates that femininity is an ailment, an irrevocable handicap that can be overcome so long as Helen rejects it in favour of a restorative masculinity: "Try to be a bit male" (124), he exhorts. Acting like a man approximates a cure for the affliction. After their car accident, Robert aligns masculinity with realism, femininity with melodrama. When Helen voices her opinion that they are close to becoming the passive victims of a melodramatic situation - "I have a feeling something is building up for us - we're not safe anymore," Robert
dismisses her fears on the basis that she is "merely being feminine and nervous" (169), acting in concordance with social stereotypes, whereas he, in contrast, is merely being "realistic" (169). The night before Helen is transferred, Robert's masculine realism falters. Asked whether he is crying, Robert responds: "This is all back to front, Helen. You're the one who should be weeping" (240). There is some irony in the fact that Robert, who dismissed women's magazines because they perpetuate stereotypes, tries to maintain the binaries of gender categories and behaviour, continually using the masculine norms to gauge his and Helen's behaviour. Deviations from and violations of masculine propriety, crying in this instance, prompt another desire on his part to restore relations to normal: Helen "should" be crying, dependent on his shoulder.

Another instance of feminization proves more troubling to Robert than the nickname, his peers's contempt, or his reputation for celibacy. Before his sexual relationship with Helen begins, Robert considers Vinny to be a rival, an impediment blocking him from experiencing the long-anticipated pleasures consummating his relationship with Helen will supposedly afford. In other words, Vinny places him in a feminine position. Planning ahead to the moment when he can talk to Helen, he thinks: "Tea should be over, Helen free for the evening from the damnable little girl. God, he loathed her at the moment!" (72). Vinny's relationship with Helen thwarts Robert's desire for sexual gratification: "I planned this week-end hoping - well, no, of course I didn't hope really - I knew the child was to have the pleasure" (79).

Issues of sexuality are not confined solely to Robert's masculinity, therefore, but to Vinny's bisexual disposition. Both
Vinny and Robert see Helen as their love-object and an occasion for them to assert a masculine identity. Robert informs Helen of her status as an object of heterosexual and homosexual desire: "My dear, we are both in love with you" (74). Using the arguments of Freud regarding the phallic phase of the female subject, Teresa de Lauretis argues that "'femininity' and 'masculinity' are never fully attained or fully relinquished" (142); they "do not refer so much to qualities or states of being inherent in a person, as to positions which she occupies in relation to desire. They are terms of identification" (142). As positions of identification that exist in relation to desire, masculinity and femininity need not necessarily correspond to male and female, although society prefers it that way.

Sexual difference structures all narrative, according to de Lauretis, its two constituent parts being "male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (de Lauretis 121). The mythical subject is male; the "plot-space" he traverses or the "resistance" (119) he encounters, female. Vinny's "raptuous fantasy of herself and Mrs. Striebel in dangerous climates, with herself heroic at dying moments, nobly trying to stanch the flow of her friend’s tears" (44) is masculine. At the novel’s end, Helen is called upon to stanch Vinny’s tears, to explain to her the facts of life, a job at which she fails, through external circumstances, poor timing, and a reluctance to usurp the parental role.

Vinny’s affection for Helen could be set aside as natural, as Moller attempts to do, if it were not for the lingering effect of the "homosexual incident" involving a student and "the young maths
master" (134), the man Helen, seemingly, replaced. Prior to Helen’s arrival in Gungee, the townsfolk have dealt with an apparently isolated homosexual incident and normalized gender relations and desire. Temporarily banished, the incident reminds the townspeople, especially the gossips, that if "proper" sexual relations are to be maintained, then they must be vigilant, quick to respond to potential threats. Predictably, Jess Talbot invokes a quasi-medical discourse when she speaks of homosexuality as diseased. Of the incident, Sam Welch deflates the idea floated by Jess that the teacher corrupted the student:

What utter bull! That kid used to hang around the factory at nights when the eleven o’clock shift came off and practically ask for it. He just met a soul mate. I always did feel sorry for Russell. A victim of circumstances if ever there was one. (135)

Recalling the "fearful intensity" of Vinny’s smile that morning at breakfast, Helen is concerned that the situation could lead to what she refers to the "obvious thing" (75), a replication of the homosexual incident. So plain is the "obvious thing" it need not be named.

Understanding what the "obvious thing" is, Robert summons up a narrative that naturalizes heterosexuality to brush away Helen’s fears: "Natural adolescent fervour. Healthy in its way. Certainly natural. It will fade in time. Some boy, perhaps" (75). Embedded within Robert’s statement on human sexuality are two assumptions. The first is that sexuality is natural. "In truth there is no natural sexuality, no natural stages of sexual fantasy," writes Mark Poster,
sexuality is defined for the child through his interactions with his parents, who are themselves unconscious agents of their class, society and emotional economy (8).

The second is that sexuality evolves toward heterosexuality. Homosexual desires are tolerated as natural so long as they are temporary and terminate with the "heterosexualization of desire" (Butler 17), a pleasing congruity between sex, gender, and desire. If Vinny's bisexual disposition lingers, it is unhealthy. After the clipped certainty of Robert's pronouncements regarding the naturalness and inevitable dissolution of Vinny's "double orientation," the conclusion is hesitant. This natural, healthy phase of sexuality will disappear in the future when Vinny meets a boy, perhaps. By using perhaps to qualify his statement, Robert undermines his confident, prosaic certitudes pertaining to the naturalness of desire and concludes with a sense of uncertainty that aggravates his anxiety concerning the position of Helen as the object of Vinny's desire. Robert naturalizes gender, sexuality, and the heterosexual regime, seeing recuperation within heterosexuality as the solution to Vinny's unnatural desire. Robert's "perhaps" suggests that sexuality is risky business, precarious, and unstable, and thus suggests that the categories, oppositions, and indeed the social arrangements of the social order sustained and reproduced by narratives that naturalize heterosexuality are, in some respect, subject to change. At the end of the narrative Robert acts to rid desire of unpredictability and restore a profoundly ideological sense of symmetry by directing
Vinny’s desire so that it conforms to social expectations. He finds her some boy.

Vinny invests virtually all her scenes with Helen with ardent, at times hallucinatory, libidinal energy. Helen’s unexpected appearance at the Lalor household to announce the trip to Brisbane reveals the asphyxiating intensity of Vinny’s love:

When she saw Helen sitting calmly in the basket chair, at home in her house, the sudden upsurge of joy almost made her choke. She could say nothing. How much more satisfying it is to worship than to be worshipped! Her love for this woman shaped her entire day, caused her to count through classes to hers, to plan her lunch-hour round an opportunity of talking to her. Although she had little ability at mathematics, she slaved at the subject merely to win Mrs. Striebel’s commendation. For her the whole relationship’s huge flower spread its corolla in petals of kindliness, and tented her in with a form of affection and security, excluding the daily indifference offered by others. (34)

The idea that Helen is a protective tent becomes erotically charged later on in Brisbane.

She burrowed under the sheets and held them up above her to make a tent. It was very dark and warm. She said, "Dear Mrs. Striebel", and put a kiss on an imagined cheek. (83)

Vinny interprets Helen’s offer to go to Brisbane as "material manifestation of reciprocal love" (35). Yet it is a love that cannot be articulated and, because of the purged homosexual
incident, causes her to doubt its validity. After her evening with Tommy, Vinny evaluates her relationship with Helen:

And yet she could not really call a mature woman twenty years her senior a friend. The pupil-teacher relationship made that impossible. (200)

The homosexual incident, however, proves the very possibility of such a relationship.

There is nothing inevitable about the outcome of Vinny's "double orientation" or her object-choice, the "some boy, perhaps" of Robert's argument. Taking on the role of de facto father and fearful of Vinny's masculine attitude to Helen, Robert feels compelled to situate Vinny in a feminine position, to help her find her proper place and identity. In other words, Robert takes on a role central to melodrama. As Nowell-Smith explains:

the Hollywood melodrama is also fundamentally concerned with the child's problems of growing into a sexual identity within the family, under the aegis of a symbolic law which the Father incarnates. What is at stake (also for social-ideological reasons) is the survival of the family unit and the possibility for individuals of acquiring an identity which is also a place within the system, a place in which they can both be 'themselves' and 'at home', in which they can simultaneously enter, without contradiction, the symbolic order and bourgeois society. It is a condition of the drama that the attainment of such a place is not easy and does not happen without sacrifice, but it is very rare for it to be seen as radically impossible. (73)
The Oedipus complex, writes Freud, "encourages femininity" ("Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 256) in the female subject; the "Oedipal logic" (de Lauretis 140) of Robert's actions seeks to encourage femininity in Vinny.

Vinny's "bisexual disposition" or "double orientation" threatens Robert. To Robert, Vinny's obsession with Helen bears many similarities to the homosexual incident and therefore has to be corrected. She must invest in heterosexuality and, by implication, patriarchal culture. Acting in the place of Vinny's absent father, Robert will eventually intervene and re-direct Vinny's sexuality towards its proper object within patriarchal culture: men. Such a positioning will free Robert from a serious rival. Sexuality, according to Robert, is resolved naturally. Social institutions have little involvement in the natural, healthy evolution of sexuality and its ultimate metamorphosis into heterosexuality. Nature, though, needs a helping hand if the "perhaps" that concludes Robert's speech is to be erased and Vinny's bisexual disposition recuperated, helped to fade. While Robert argues for the naturalness of Vinny's bisexuality, his actions suggest the role adults play in directing children's sexuality. As much as Robert thinks he is unconventional and tolerant of difference, in matters of gender he is anything but.

Noticing Vinny alone at the school dance and recalling her acts of kindness to him and Helen, Robert determines to find her "a likely partner" (187). Altruism would appear to guide Moller when he takes it upon himself to do this. Likely, it turns out, is synonymous with the socially constructed natural. The most appropriate partner for Vinny, Robert assumes, is male, "but there
was not a boy in sight who was not dancing or busy talking in the middle of a group" (187). Outside the hall he catches Tommy Peters - poor, poorly dressed, a lovable dunce, rural hand - chalking up some "Anglo-Saxon derivatives." Rather than report him to headmaster Findlay, Moller pairs him with Vinny: "I think you'd better get in to the dancing. Vinny Lalor is without a partner" (188). Following this order, Tommy returns inside and asks Vinny to dance. Dancing with Vinny is a punishment that, if endured, will protect him from even greater punishment: "Perhaps if he kept on dancing with this Lalor sheila, Moller would let him off" (195). The thought of the belting he might get for being caught smoking and writing graffiti forces him to stay with Vinny. The boy-girl relationship here is hardly natural, hardly romantic, yet, as the emphasis on "likely" infers, it is an appropriate match: matching Tommy with Vinny, Robert enforces gender homology and class compatibility. On the one hand, Robert's hostility to small-town conventions and morality allows him to play the outsider. On the other, his valuing of potency and his actions as a surrogate father demonstrate his commitment to patriarchal values.

By finding a likely partner for Vinny, Robert creates a situation where Vinny can cathect her desire onto a proper object, that is, situate herself in relation to heterosexual desire. The cultural imperative to be feminine presses in on Vinny. In conversation with Tommy, Vinny alights timidly on the topic of football - socially regulated masculine violence - and attributes an heroic masculinity to Tommy. Like the graffiti praising Moller's virility, Vinny's talk flatters Tommy, elevating him from a poor, spotty schoolboy into an active, mythical subject:
I think it's a real exciting game. Like a battle. Remember those battles Mr. Moller told us about they used to have in the olden days? Each side would pick its champions to fight and sort of represent them. (196-97)

Realizing that his masculinity is being recognised and he is being situated into a heroic narrative, Tommy re-evaluates Vinny: "Tommy looked at her respectfully for he liked being called a champion, even indirectly. Ole Vinny wasn't too bad" (197).

Feminine sexuality, according to Freud's reductive penis-baby-father equation, is reproductive and contained within a heterosexual economy. Motherhood, the apex of femininity, frightens Vinny. In Gungee, pregnancy alone neither signifies nor legitimizes femininity. Pregnancy must occur within a culturally mediated and sanctioned site, marriage; otherwise, it is a disorder, a "woman's travail" (OED) euphemistically designated as trouble. Jess Talbot, for example, alludes to "that trouble" (28) young Allie, the cleaning maid at the pub, has experienced. Allie's reputation is known to Vinny, who, with her in Helen's vacated room, recalls her as the one "who had got in trouble last year" (253). Trouble afflicts married women, too. Vinny's father left the family because his wife was pregnant.

Pregnancy frightened Vinny. She still remembered three years ago, just before her dad left, her mother talking about the new baby, swelling gently under her apron and her worn out dresses; bulging horribly in the summer months and becoming cross, and all the rows and her father leaving and her mother suddenly taken by ambulance one night, sweating the pain in rivers, in tides, in
oceans, and then no baby, but her mother back home again, thinner than ever under the warped timbers of the house, just at the time when the seed pods were splitting open on the cassias. She never saw a tree in seed now without thinking of that time. (71)

Vinny attaches nothing positive to pregnancy. While in Brisbane Vinny sees a woman "shabby and pregnant, each factor seeming to complement the other" (70), before turning to look at burdenless bodies - girls, young men, and elderly seedless women. They carried no personality but their own, they bore no other body and no other destiny. (71)

Though burden refers to weight or load, one of its obsolete usages of "burden" or "burthen" refers to a child in the womb. Envy is directed at those who have no burden. Everything about pregnancy for Vinny, who knows very little about it, is "something unpleasant, something not spoken of" (214):

Vinny knew nothing, nothing at all beyond the baldest fact that the baby grew inside the mother. She associated this with all forms of spiritual and physical unpleasantness, with family rows and vomiting and fathers leaving home and great swollen bellies and adult hatred. How the baby came to be inside the mother she had no idea. She had thought vaguely that it was just something that happened when you got married - automatically, like wearing veils and having rice and confetti and glory boxes and best men and bridesmaids. Now she wasn’t so sure that you had to be married. She recalled dimly the hearing of scandalous fragments about the various girls
in the town who had "had to go to Brisbane to have it,"
little snippets - "they never said who the father was."

(215)

On the basis of her analysis of Jurij Lotman’s plot typology, Teresa de Lauretis concludes that women, in narrative terms, are similarly a burden:

the hero must be male, regardless of the gender of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and indeed, simply, the womb. (118-119)

For a short period, Vinny occupied the masculine position as hero until Robert saw her as an obstacle. In terms of the plot, Vinny comes to represent the womb, a positioning she resents.

The possibility that Vinny will be burdened with female trouble is prefigured at the school dance when Tommy, enjoined by Robert to partner Vinny, asks her to dance. At this moment of forced heterosexual coupling, Vinny stuffs the "hard damp ball" of her handkerchief "down the front of her bodice from where it rolled to her waist and stuck out in a funny little lump" (195), a presentiment of the cruel stories that will circulate next day at school. "You’ll have a baby" (210), Betty Klee squeals, having heard, second- or third-hand, of Tommy’s masculine braggadocio. To make the connection between Betty and the gossips, Astley describes her as being delighted with her discovery that her unfounded accusations prove to be "a very fine torture" (210).

Before taking on its present-day pejorative and gendered meaning, gossip referred "to a woman’s female friends invited to be present at a birth" (OED). The communal sharing of the childbirth
experience and the sense of friendship implied by earlier usage of the term are totally absent in *A Descant for Gossips*.

Fixing masculinity involves asserting an active sexuality, repudiating femininity, and conserving heterosexuality. Robert revives his masculinity through his sexual relationship with Helen and his de facto paternal relationship with Vinny, getting her to conform to the Oedipal script and renounce her first object choice, her mother, who Vinny, after being slapped down for articulating class anger, replaces with Helen. The cost of imposing femininity is fatal for Vinny. Meaning, Cixous argues, "only gets constituted in a movement in which one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favor of the other" (45). Robert's positioning of Vinny in a feminine position sets in motion the reductive and destructive logic of Oedipal plotting.

As melodrama, *A Descant for Gossips* re-stages the Oedipal drama, not so much to support Freud's theory, but to highlight the thoroughly social aspect of the construction of sexual identity and to critique the ideological manner in which the process of constructing masculinity and femininity and heterosexuality is naturalized, made to disappear. "Oedipal logic" (de Lauretis 140) dominates Robert's actions, particularly when, engendering subjectivity, he inserts Vinny into what he believes to be her proper place, femininity. The female Oedipal drama relies on the female subject abandoning her quest for phallic masculinity and accepting passivity and motherhood. Freud's narrative of masculinity, de Lauretis argues, predetermines the role and position women will come to occupy: "For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he enters into at his Oedipal phase, that
he will find woman waiting at the end of his journey." In her narrative, woman, the already-given reward at the end of the narrative of masculine identity formation, must journey to a destination where the male hero can find her, passive. But this fulfilment of desire signalled by narrative closure "is only promised, not guaranteed" (134). Masculine desire can be achieved so long as woman accepts an identification with femininity: "In other words, women must either consent or be seduced into consenting to femininity" (134). Refusing to take up this place, Astley suggests, exacts a considerable cost.

In her discussion of Victorian melodrama from 1820 to 1870, Martha Vicinus emphasises the connections between melodrama, rapid, seemingly "cataclysmic religious, economic, and social changes" (131), and its audience, especially its appeal for the working class and women, "large sections of society that felt both in awe of and unclear about the benefits of the new society being built around them" (128). Using the personal and emotional to examine and criticise the political and economic direction society was taking, melodrama focused on the family:

Domestic melodrama was the working out in popular culture of the conflict between the family and its values and the economic and social assault of industrialization. (128)

The happy ending in Victorian melodrama, for example, ensures that justice prevails, vindicates the victim, and establishes social harmony. But such an ending does not change or transform "the social and economic framework of the play" (Vicinus 132).

Reformist rather than revolutionary, according to Vicinus, melodrama offers "radical change" that centres on a "regenerated
family" rather than the "radical disruption" (137) a regenerated society would involve. *A Descant for Gossips* shows that resolving conflict in the manner characteristic of Victorian melodrama is no longer possible. The family cannot siphon off social tensions nor present itself as an effective conclusion to social problems because the social conditions that made the family an ideal political solution no longer exist. The happy ending, contrived social reconciliation, and Oedipal reaffirmation that melodrama traditionally promises - Astley cannot deliver.
CHAPTER FIVE

An Item From the Late News:
Attacking the Genital Loading

1. Introduction

The zenith of Thea Astley’s obsession with "genital loading" (Kinross Smith 25) and the castration complex - evident implicitly in the title of A Descant for Gossips (1960) and explicitly in the prevalence of neutered characters in her fiction and in the repetition of neutering as a motif in her discourse on gender and writing - is An Item from the Late News (1982). Difficult for Astley to write because of her unfamiliarity with what she calls "the female point of view" (Baker 43), An Item from the Late News more than any other Astley novel accentuates in order to puncture the excessive phallocentrism of Australian society, attacking it in four interrelated ways. First, at the level of content, she criticises masculine institutions, practices, and pastimes, especially objecting to "the insane machismo, the belligerence, [and] the aggression" (Baker 49) characteristic of sport, warfare, and economic development. Second, she magnifies to monstrous proportion the violence inherent in the castration complex, subjecting psychoanalytical accounts of masculinity and femininity to grotesque hyperrealism and parodic inversion. Third, for the
first time Astley uses a female narrator, Gabby Jerrold, whose narrative enacts the difficulties women face when speaking and demonstrates the effects of cultural marginalization. Lastly, Astley uses the figure of the transvestite to interrogate and deflate the masculine investment in the penis as the phallus.

The revelation that the recently deceased Archie Wetters is a woman hurls the men of Allbut into crisis because Archie affronts if not shatters the men's belief in the penis as sign of their "corporeal unity in relation to women's incompleteness" (Grosz 122). One of their community was woman, lack, the very condition they have repressed and continue to repress in order to sustain their masculinity. Archie's successful impersonation functions as an insufferable mnemonic that the masculine wholeness which sustains patriarchal culture is a cultural fraud. Penis-less, Archie reminds the men of the condition they most fear: castration. The disjunction between Archie's sex and gender dismembers the organic metonymy between penis and phallus, and undermines the natural basis for male authority. Negating the cultural logic inscribed within the castration complex, Archie disrupts the patriarchal symbolic order, his death the bombshell (to use a metaphor in keeping with the apocalyptic tenor of the novel) that loosens masculinity, never secure in Astley's novels, from its biological mooring.

2. Queasy and Uneasy: The Critical Response

Many reviewers found An Item from the Late News shockingly brutal and claustrophobic: angry in tone, violent in content, and bleak
in resolution. Its visceral intensity impedes the reading process and induces nausea, as Laurie Clancy attests in a favourable review: "I found it so disturbing and distressing that frequently I had to put the book down for a while before returning to it" ("Pessimism and Anger" 27). Cremasteric spasm over, Clancy half in jest proposes that its dust-jacket blurb could be: "So compellingly readable I couldn’t pick it up."1 Greg Houghton found it an unrelentingly "ferocious" and "scarifying" (Houghton 225) book. With coruscating prose and observations Astley corrodes national myths, ridiculing with an admixture of contempt and exasperation the rituals, language, myths, fables, and institutions that sustain rapacious masculinity. Not sparing any masculine pleasures from vitriol alienated Astley’s two greatest supporters, Brian Matthews and Laurie Clancy. Depicting cricketers as suffering from menstruation envy "appalled" (Baker 48) them, Astley recalls.

In "Are Women’s Novels Feminist Novels?" Rosalind Coward argues that the establishment literary criticism practice of assuming that writing represents reality in an unproblematic way . . . excludes from consideration the social context of the text and the practices of writing and ideology which make it. (229)

Rather than attend to the relation between social context and narrative practices, that is, how an extremely masculine social milieu marginalizes women and affects the narrative style of women who want to speak or write, critics tended to issues of verisimilitude, whether the novel was plausible and real.2 Neophyte reviewer Kate Roberts in Overland praises the novel’s
realism. Bulletin's regular reviewer and critical heavyweight Geoffrey Dutton dismisses the novel for "teeter[ing] between fantasy and actuality" (87) and failing to conform to the dominant and objective reality patrician Dutton has of outback Australia:

The fable is too pat. Australian towns are not hotbeds of concerted violence; they are too sleepy. The recurrent violence in this novel is unconvincing. (88)

Unconvincing for whom? Aborigines? Women? Men trying to resist hegemonic masculinity?

Where the content of An Item from the Late News forces Clancy to pause and recover from his squeamishness, its structure, style, and narrator give pause to others who discern an incongruity between the narrative and the events being narrated. Reviewing the novel in The Age, Brian Matthews finds the "intricate, basically very cerebral narrative" at odds with "the rough actuality" of the violence it depicts. Similarly, in an otherwise glowing review, Houghton queries the appropriateness of "the relation between the basic plot line and the stylistic resources Astley brings to bear on it" (225). Excessive Astley strikes again, unable to reconcile form and content. However, as the figure of the transvestite makes evident, the novel is about the disruption between form and content, the disruption of the conventions of gender coherence, or the fiction of gender.

The self-consciousness of the narrative was dismissed. Elizabeth Perkins calls the narrative style "self-conscious and rather trendy" (67), faddishly postmodern. "Great story, great character," writes Helen Garner for National Times, before qualifying her praise: "Stylistically, however, this book is like
a very handsome, strong and fit woman with too much make-up on."
The theme of excessive cosmetics extends to Gabby’s narrative, which Garner faults for being "heavy-handed, layered-on, inorganic, self-conscious, hectic and distracting." Confusing matters further, Garner says that Astley can "tackle big themes and symbols with the gloves off. She’s got the ease and power; she doesn’t need to pump iron" (22). Astley can’t win. On the one hand, she’s too made up, too feminine; on the other, she’s not feminine enough. Rather than ascribe the narrative self-consciousness to Astley, as the above critics do, it would be better to consider it in relation to the narrator, a woman who lives in a culture where women are rarely allowed to speak.

In 1973, Brian Matthews regarded The Acolyte as the pinnacle of Astley’s career. He noted its brevity, plotlessness, narrow focus, and its dense, restless prose. A decade later, Matthews targets these features as they appear in An Item from the Late News for criticism, finding the narrative "unnecessarily complicated." For Matthews, Gabby’s consciousness of reconstructing events in the process of constructing a narrative and her "frequent recourse to the emphatic phrase seems to clog the prose and the story’s movement" ("Maker of Chaos" 8). Sexual difference, it would appear, is at work here. A female narrator disrupts not only the plot movement of the narrative but masculine desire. As Teresa de Lauretis argues in "Desire in Narrative," femaleness represents an obstacle, "a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (119). The "goal-orientated" (Dyer 41) or climax-centred notion of narrative Matthews has in mind bears many similarities to the goal-orientated notion of male sexuality. The last thing male sexuality and male
narratives want, of course, is a woman telling a story which hinders movement toward the climax. Astley's narrative frustrates rather than stimulates male sexuality.

If Gabby is to be compared to any of Astley's previous narrators, it would make sense to contrast her with Astley's solitary other first-person narrator, Paul Vesper. Kerryn Goldsworthy (1983) contrasts Gabby to Paul, thus making an implicit connection between the first-person narratives. As much as Matthews's description of Gabby's narrative suggests its affinity with that used by the emasculated narrator of *The Acolyte*, Matthews links Gabby to two loathsome, predatory, and narcissistic male characters: George Brewster of *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962) and Paul Vesper's nemesis, Holberg, both of whom Matthews characterises in his seminal essay on Astley as "sublime egotists" who "prey upon those nearest them and . . . through the exercise of magnetic charm, attract new victim-admirers into their orbit" ("Life in the Eye of the Hurricane" 159). In the same essay, furthermore, Matthews calls Brewster "a man of impregnable egotism and a self-regard and self-preoccupation so monumental as to be virtually unshakable" (153). Like Holberg and Brewster, Gabby is "a destroyer, a maker of chaos," and her role in Wafer's death is "subtle, hurtful and decisive" ("Maker"). Comparing Gabby to the other male characters in the novel (Cropper, Stobo, and Moon), Matthews argues that their brutalities are easily understood, whereas hers are "much more complex." Unlike either character, Gabby wrestles with her guilt and shame at her involvement in a destructive act whose motivation bears no similarity to "the arbitrary and unpredictable motivation of [Brewster's] egocentricity" (154).
In addition to dismissing Gabby’s emphatic voice and linking her with horrible male characters, Matthews undermines her critique of Australian history, masculinity, and sport by suggesting that she is frivolous and insincere. "Gabby is different" from other Astley narrators "in the sense that her narrating voice is full of off-handedness, throw-aways, colloquialisms and numerous other devices to assure and reassure us that she is not taking herself too seriously." The implication seems to be that if Gabby is not taking herself seriously, then her impudent criticisms of Australian masculinity can be taken with a grain of salt.

Several reviewers mention but ignore the significance of the context of the narration. Helen Garner refers to Gabby’s return to the "male remnants of family." Likewise, Geoffrey Dutton describes Gabby as "a neurotic artist, daughter of a grazier" (87) without pausing to consider whether there exists a relation between Gabby’s marginal position in the Jerrold family and her neuroses. No-one relates Gabby’s position to the inferior status accorded to women in the novel, nor connects Gabby’s way of speaking about events and the dilemma she has with the authority of what she says to the generally held view that women should be seen, not heard. Ignoring cross-dressed Archie Wetters altogether, Dutton notes that Astley’s representation of characters is biased against men. Excepting Wafer, the majority of the male characters are "monsters" or "ineffectual hypocrites," whereas "All the women are sympathetic or omniscient, a state beyond ‘good’ or ‘bad’" (88). If, as Dutton says, Gabby is beyond good or evil, there would be no need for her to detail her role in destroying pacific Wafer, but that is precisely what the narrative is about.
3. Rewriting The Acolyte

Barbed assault on the masculinity dominant in Australian culture and meditation on the dire repercussions of passivity, An Item from the Late News is in terms of narrator, structure, content, and style the descendent of Astley's favourite novel, The Acolyte, which despite alienating critics and sapping their patience when it appeared in 1972 nonetheless won the Miles Franklin Award for fiction.6 The narrators of both these novels provide retrospective accounts of their involvement in a crisis, deliver abbreviated autobiographies, and rage against the phallus. Both are satiric, self-reflexive, intensely metaphoric, and burst with intellectual vim. Flashbacks, reminiscences, digressions, and a sense of plotlessness disjoint their narratives.

Both books are demanding to read. Reviewers and critics, pro- and con-Astley, speak of the tremendous effort that reading an Astley novel requires from them.7 The angular style, verve, and intense profusion of metaphors typical of Astley's novels, best or worst exemplified by The Acolyte, fatigues and incenses. Her prose demands "concentrated attention," David Gilbey notes,

because the style - ironic, metaphorical, self-aware - lives up to an expected and mannered mode which has a reputation for being unnecessarily and infuriatingly difficult. ("The Sense of a Novel" 83)

Here Gilbey refers to Nancy Keesing's Sydney Morning Herald review of The Acolyte:

If . . . Thea Astley persists with a style many critics, and I among them, have found unnecessarily difficult and
mannered, - then the style becomes a matter for acceptance and discussion - not for reproach.

Backhanded acceptance did not stop Keesing from deploring Astley's "difficult, and infuriating" (21) style.8 A decade later, Keesing's irritation with Astley's style finds its counterpart in a review written by Garner, who was driven "berserk" (22) by the style.

Writing *An Item from the Late News* was much more difficult than writing *The Acolyte*. Astley approached the writing of *The Acolyte* with an ease, assurance, and good humour absent when she wrote *An Item from the Late News*. *The Acolyte*, Astley enthused to Jennifer Ellison, is her favourite:

Yes, *The Acolyte*'s the one I like best. I don't even remember the pain of writing that. I enjoyed writing it and wrote it fairly quickly. I wrote it in less than a year, and I only did two drafts. I wrote very slowly. I wrote only about two hundred words a day, and when I came to retype it I hardly made any alterations at all. (54)

The writing of *An Item from the Late News* returned Astley to the question of writing and gender in a more explicit fashion than *The Acolyte* had called for; indeed, it proved to be so onerous that it thoroughly disabused her of the idea that she was writing as a man. Using for the first time the female first person point of view, Astley expressed reservations regarding the success of her attempt to represent a woman's point of view and thoughts:

I had great trouble writing *Item from the Late News*. Someone had suggested that I write a book from the female
point of view using first person: I tried, but I wasn’t a bit comfortable trying to be Gabby. I’d forgotten how women of thirty thought. I think it was inhibited writing. (Baker 43-44)

Writing from the female point of view prompts neither delight nor satisfaction, only trouble, discomfort, and inhibition. Pain is foremost in Astley’s mind when she talks about the book.

With The Acolyte Astley wanted to tell a story from the "doormat’s point of view." There are two inspirations for The Acolyte, Astley’s examination of the relationship between the celebrated and the obscure, the master and the servant. First, she saw Ken Russell’s Song of Summer (1968), a BBC documentary on the relationship between composer Frederick Delius and his amanuensis, Eric Fenby:

In this documentary the BBC made, which I saw twice, the egotism of Delius - and I think he’s a superb musician, but I’ve read somewhere that towards the end of his life he listened to no one’s music but his own - the egotism was appalling, and the way in which he treated his amanuensis, his acolyte, was appalling. I thought I’d like to write a book about a ‘great man’, but from the doormat’s point of view.⁹

Second, around the same time as The Acolyte was gestating, Astley read The Vivisector (1970), Patrick White’s novel about the egoistic artist Hurtle Duffield and his destructive relationships. The Acolyte is Astley’s cheeky response: "I thought out of sheer amusement, this is my reply - the vivisected."¹⁰
The first-person point of view in both novels sets them apart from her earlier work. To tell her story from the doormat point of view she initially chose a male bourgeois subject - a choice which, for some, confirms the theory that Astley writes as a man. The next time Astley uses the doormat perspective, she uses a woman, Gabby Jerrold. Although both narrators comment on the origins and implications of their passivity, Paul and Gabby have appreciably different narrative styles: Vesper, assuredly debonair and droll; Jerrold uncomfortably self-reflexive and bitter. An underling, Vesper speaks with an autonomy, coherence, and aplomb that Jerrold altogether lacks. Gender is the cause of this difference. Remarkng on the differences between the narrators, Kerryn Goldsworthy suggests that *An Item from the Late News* is Astley's "grimmest" novel because it lacks "the witty narrator who, unhappy or not, saves a lot of *The Acolyte* from being excessively grim" (484). Wit distinguishes Vesper from "fairly humourless, fairly neurotic" (484) Gabby, thus sparing *The Acolyte* from the dissonant, apocalyptic bleakness that characterises *An Item from the Late News*.

The difference between having a male and a female narrator is most obvious when gender issues are at stake. The proclivity of men, regardless of social and economic differences, to collaborate and exclude women from society figures in both novels, but in *The Acolyte* it is not subject to the same level of critique as it is in *An Item from the Late News*. Ilse's screamed criticism - "You rotten stick-together males!" - Vesper dismisses as "woman's magazine stuff" (129), thus minimizing her attack by affiliating it with a genre of no importance. In contrast, Gabby is
considerably more attentive than Vesper to the way masculine clubbiness marginalizes women and affects their place, movements, and voice.

Both are macabre phallus-busting novels. Indispensable as the theory of castration is to psychoanalysis, it is, Juliet Mitchell acknowledges in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, "difficult to accept" (74). Both novels question its legitimacy. But where *The Acolyte* caricatures and parodies, *An Item from the Late News* despairs with exaggerated realism. Regarding *The Acolyte's* genesis, Astley recalls:

I was working at Macquarie University at the time, and the corridors were ringing with the sounds of symbolism, and I wanted to write an anti-symbol novel. I always remember the time someone rushed down the corridor and said, 'Moby Dick is actually a giant penis'. I got tired of this extrapolation of symbols from novels and I thought, I'll write an anti-symbolic novel and I'll use as many symbols as I can, and send them up. That's why Vesper built a gigantic sling - it was really a giant phallus!"

The accidental, self-inflicted injury to Holberg's right hand sends Vesper off on an extended mediation on the ubiquity and absurdity of the castration complex. Admitting his incompetence as a "symbol hunter" to an imaginary psychiatrist, Vesper, strenuously asserting his heterosexuality, rails against the dominance of phallic symbols:

Doc, what's up with me? I simply don't see trees as dicks thrusting into the gaping uterus of the sky. I see them
as trees. I need help. Here's a whole acre of people who live in a world of phalli ("Sockets and spigots!" says rough-hewn Slocombe. I love you Nev-); of gulping labiae, of fourth-form interpretations of cars, whales, telegraph poles and mammalian lightbulbs. Look, doc, there are only two possible continuous lines - straight and curved. Do I have to see them as genital substitutes? Do I? It makes eating an ice-cream cone difficult. You take my point, doc? My low-grained sensibilia apprehend cars, whales, telegraph poles, and light-bulbs. I lick ice-cream, feller. I munch a flour-and-water cone. I am not homosexual. I like girls in moderation. I don’t want to bite off anyone’s tool or switch on a breast or impregnate the Pacific. I am still the clean-cut fifteen-year-old who won two cups running and I can’t get into the team. I can’t cry along with my pouched debilitated mates suh-hux! suh-hex! I don’t want to. Doc, am I normal? I want tea-pots to be tea-pots and cups to be cups. (63-4)

In this extraordinarily dense passage, Vesper refuses the binary logic at the heart of castration theory, where the active (thrusting dick) impresses itself on the passive (gaping uterus). Resisting phallic imagery it appears is impossible; Vesper, offended by the animality of popular culture he experiences at a rock music festival, uses the interpretative strategy he railed against: "I can’t stand this hoodlum cult where every singer projects like a pack-rapist, stereophonic balls and penis-stylus" (133). To confirm the literalism of Vesper’s observations,
festival-goers pack-rape Ilse. In addition to seeing rock performers as phallic, Vesper builds a phallus: "the battering ram had a superimposed human virility the simple-minded artist had not intended, cock-funny, and the catapult a distressing anatomical flavour" (109). Vesper’s weapon, Taurus, is a "steel member" (151) which allows Vesper to seek orgasm (155). But the construction of this phallus is driven by Vesper's "distorted and ironic sense of parody" (110).

By the writing of An Item from the Late News the phallus is beyond quips and jokes and its grotesque importance in patriarchal culture Gabby details with unsparing clarity and gothic terror. Tragedy where The Acolyte is farce, An Item from the Late News is full of horror.

4. I Confess

The most obvious and atypical detail about An Item from the Late News did not provoke much comment among reviewers. Missing from the reviews is any extended discussion of the narrator, Gabby Jerrold. Reviewers abstained from speculating on why it took Astley until her eighth novel to use a female narrator. Whether the omniscient female "I" is the same as the omniscient male "I" and whether using a female first-person narrative had any significance for the telling of what remains the most chilling narrative of Astley’s career were issues not broached.

Despite considering herself to be writing from a male position, Astley avoided for the bulk of her career the first-person pronoun, the coherent, rational, and sovereign "I." Astley did not write
in the person of man and use a first-person male narrator until her sixth novel, *The Acolyte*, a move she repeated with Keith Leverson in the short story collection *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979). Since writing *An Item from the Late News* she has used the first-person female narrator in *Reaching Tin River* (1990) and for Julie Truscott's narrative in *Vanishing Points* (1992).

For Virginia Woolf, the pronoun "I" represents an oppressive and phallic masculine subject. On initially reading Mr A's novel, Woolf's narrator in *A Room of One's Own* admires the intellectual freedom, "liberty of person," and self-assurance that his direct and forthright prose connotes. A couple of chapters into his book, however, the narrator becomes conscious of "a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped like the letter 'I'." Woolf's narrator, predating Louis Althusser's famous formulation of how the subject is interpellated, tires of being constantly "hailed to the letter 'I'" (98), subject to its rule and authority. In the "shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman" (98). The letter's dominance bores the narrator. Mr A uses the "I" to assert "his own superiority" (99), with the "I" being a sign of "virility [that] has now become self-conscious" (100).

*An Item from the Late News* enacts the problem women in patriarchal culture face when they use the "I." The male "I" and the female "I" signal quite different speaking positions: self-conscious virility and self-conscious lack of virility. In a discussion of Freud's and Lacan's accounts of symbolic regulation, Elizabeth Grosz argues that internalizing the name of the father authorises the male subject to speak:
The paternal metaphor is not a simple incantation but the formula by which the subject, through the construction of the unconscious, becomes an 'I,' and can speak in its own name. (71)

For female subjects, though, matters are not so clear cut:
In one sense, in so far as she speaks and says 'I', she too must take up a place as a subject of the symbolic; yet, in another, in so far as she is positioned as castrated, passive, an object of desire for men rather than a subject who desires, her position within the symbolic must be marginal or tenuous: when she speaks as an 'I' it is never clear that she speaks (of or as) herself. She speaks in a mode of masquerade, in imitation of the masculine, phallic subject. Her 'I', then, ambiguously signifies her position as a (pale reflection of the) masculine subject; or it refers to a 'you', the (linguistic) counterpart of the masculine 'I'.
(71-72)

The female "I" is therefore an alienated pronoun. Both the marginal position and general ambiguity of the female "I" are features of Astley's representation of Gabby. Also important is that Astley's first attempt at using the female "I" coincides with a focus on transvestite Archie, who performs in the "mode of masquerade."

The female "I" is socially constructed as a marginal and tenuous enunciative position. If Astley focuses predominantly on male characters, as Gilbert and others propose, An Item from the Late News explains why: "I come from a long line of men," Gabby says,
"This country tells me this. Rams this home. Well, women enter into it, but peripherally" (132-33). Perspicacious Emmie Colley, aged thirteen, knows that women have peripheral status in the community. When Gabby searches for Wafer after he's been forced back to town by Cropper, Emmie directs her to the School of Arts, telling her, "And they won't want any women there" (161). Women are allowed to enter very few places. On entering the building, Gabby is told to leave:

I obliged father yet after I had walked away a few yards the arrogance of his dismissal hit me - women are never quite adults - so I went round the back of the hall and found my way quietly to the change-room just off-stage in which the remains of the Allbut library mouldered in wasps' nests and dirt. (162)

Not by choice is Gabby an outsider marginal to discourse. In the novel, women's subordination to men is made obvious when Gabby explains that the wealth her mother inherits from her father sustains the Jerrold property. Despite that, Mrs Jerrold has no power over property affairs, only over the household. Social barriers responsible for infantilizing women and rendering them invisible and speechless are, by the time of Gabby's adulthood, slowly changing; for example, Gabby draws attention to a loosening of sexual segregation: at the Wowser they sit "in what used to be the ladies' lounge" (71).

Essentially about morality and desire, Gabby's narrative disrupts the aesthetic conventions and order that the "I" typically authorises. Attempting to explain why Wafer "blew our way" (3), Gabby makes an implicit pronominal shift in the narrative, from
singular I to collective our: "I say 'our' because the town has left its itch on my skin" (3). Gabby frequently uses "our" and "we" to show that she is as much to blame for events as Cropper, Brim, Stobo, her father:

I am Moon.

I am Cropper.

I am my father's daughter, the old man doing a Pontius Pilate as he watched the trucks pull out.

I am all of them. (195)

The text questions the God-like all-seeing, all-knowing authority of the author and demonstrates the manner in which the "I" produces knowledge and narratives. Aside from suggesting that there are limitations to the all-knowing authority signified by the "I," Gabby's self-conscious references to the miscellaneous sources for her narrative fragment the coherence of the "I," proposing that the "I" is a communal rather than individual location and subjectivity. In answer to the question, "How do I know all this?," Gabby foregrounds how others mediate her access to events. Her narrative is composed of information from her brother, "rumours and half-truths from dodgier characters in town, the gossipy intrusions of Doss Campion," and "threads spun out painfully one mothy evening with Wafer" (38). She re-translates (35), paraphrases conversations (43), puts characters in specific situations (35), and culls what she needs "from Tim, from Jam, from Emmeline" (49). Information regarding Moon's history, for example, comes from Jam who, drinking with him in the bar, hears Moon say he "was born in Louisiana to an Australian girl who'd married an American serviceman towards the end of the war." The veracity of his story
is questioned, first by Wafer, who calls the story a "lie," and her father, who "roars that he’s a draft dodger from New Zealand." From these fragments, Gabby pieces together a history for Moon. On an other occasion, conscious of narrative conventions, Gabby disarms criticism: "If I tell you that Doss is a big-breasted blonde of coarse good nature, you’ll say I am stirring a worn-out image. Nevertheless" (50-1).

When Gabby, Judas-like, betrays Wafer, she draws attention to genre. Having directed Sergeant Cropper and Councillor Brim to stop at the site of his lucky strike, Wafer spots Gabby in another vehicle and waves to her:

I waved back fraudulently as part of my jockeyship and thought, first person active voice autobiographically, "I am turning it out." (168)

The three elements Gabby emphasises – first-person, active voice, and autobiography, which develops "out of the genre of the religious confession" (Felski 103) – signal her desire to situate herself within the narrative as a subject who acts on others rather than being acted upon, a tendency at odds with a culture that objectifies and marginalises women. In concentrating on the active voice, Gabby refuses the consolations of the passive voice, its vague, weak, and incidental positioning.

In representing Gabby’s travail to explain her involvement in a violent episode of the history of Allbut and to fully acknowledge the horror of her complicity in murder, An Item from the Late News belongs to the genre from which autobiography descends, the confession. "What made me do what I did?" (64), she asks. Confession is painful: "Confession is not an art. It is a direct
vomiting of then as I sit in now."¹³ She describes the motivation behind her desperate attempt to contact Emmie as "the nagging spur of confessional lust" (65):

I need absolution and forgiveness and I cannot speak about it at all to anyone but Emmie who could pronounce the absolve te, if she would, and take me back, if only into the fringes of the groves of ordinariness again.

(65)

That she can confess only to Emmie, and not a male priest, points toward a collapse in the authority of traditional institutions.

The confessional impulse that characterises Western society, Michel Foucault argues, is not necessarily liberating. In the first volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault proposes that ars erotica and scientia sexualis are historically the "two great procedures for producing the truth of sex" (57). Truth in the former process is elaborated and evaluated through the body's experience of pleasure; in the latter, opposed to the first, through the act of confession, of "telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell" (59). Confession, he continues, is a central truth-producing ritual of Western societies, its reach extending to "justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites" (59). The literature of ars erotica centres "on the heroic or marvelous narration of 'trials' of bravery or sainthood," whereas the literature of scientia sexualis is

ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between worlds, a truth which
the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage. (59)

For Foucault, the contemporary search for "the fundamental relation to the true" via unfettered self-examination granted by the confession is illusory, because the truth that the self produces "is thoroughly imbued with relations of power" (60). Confession is a "millennial yoke" (61), a harness whose ultimate function is to normalise and maintain cultural order.

Taking Foucault's concerns into account, Rita Felski argues in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics that feminist confession can be positive. Constituents of the feminist confession can be discerned in the content, structure, and style of An Item from the Late News. As a narrative, the feminist confession either revises or rejects the "traditional aims and functions" (92) of autobiography - "a cohesive, chronological and retrospective account of the author's life centered around a unifying vision of self-identity" (89).

Stylistically, feminist confession "tend[s] to minimize synthesis and linearity in favor of montage" (99), "its structure is episodic and fragmented, not chronological and linear" (99). As criticism indicates, the novel does not live up to the critical expectations of coherence, linearity, and unified identity and narrative consciousness. Feminist confession can simultaneously display an "aesthetic self-consciousness" and demonstrate "a conspicuous lack of interest in irony, indeterminacy, and linguistic play" (100); on this score, one out of two will have to suffice: Gabby is self-conscious regarding narratives and interested in irony, indeterminacy, and language games.
"The questioning of self" in feminist confession "is frequently inspired by a personal crisis which acts as a catalyst" and often leads to an examination of its "broader implications" (88). More often than not, feminist confession "confront[s] the more unpalatable aspects of female experience as general problems" (106):

The strength of confession as a genre lies in its ability to communicate the conflicting and contradictory aspects of subjectivity, the strength of desire, the tensions between ideological convictions and personal feelings. It can be said to expose the complex psychological mechanisms by which women "collude" in their own oppression, but it also reveals the realm of personal relations as fraught with ambivalence and anxiety, intimately interwoven with patterns of domination and subordination, desire and rejection, which cannot be easily transcended. (116)

An Item from the Late News deals with the conflicts and contradictions of desire, the effects of women's oppression, and the theme of complicity.

Feminist confession details "the failure of intimacy" (110) and the "oppressive and even destructive effects" (109) of desire. Felski reiterates the argument of Ann Oakley's Taking it Like A Woman (1984): "women's excessive investment in personal relations and their reliance upon validation through others is a keystone of their oppression which needs to be critically confronted" (109). In An Item from the Late News, Astley overtly engages with jealousy and the calamitous effects of frustrated desire. Wafer, Gabby
says, "is uninterested in me and I confess I want his interest" (32). Because she can't get his interest, she helps destroy him.

Gabby's failure in personal relations is a persistent theme, made explicit by her dud marriage to "the trumpeter husband [she] seemed to have acquired on impulse" (5), and the succession of superfluous men in her life: Torben, Willi, Sam, and Jackson. She speaks of "the fever-rash of personal failure" and her "failure to inspire the gentleness of love" (160). Gabby's confession documents her all-consuming desire for Wafer and the jealousy that flows from rejection. As Roslynn D. Haynes argues in "Shelter from the Holocaust," Wafer's lack of possessiveness with regard to objects and people threatens those who see intimacy as a possession (144). Gabby is "unable to accept the radically non-possessive relationship Wafer offers" (Haynes 142). Wafer's relationship with Emmie worms away at Gabby so much that she starts "to hate Wafer" (112). Jealousy, she is aware, distorts her perception: "To my unadoring eyes Emmie seemed older" (115). As jealousy takes hold, Gabby uses a metaphor borrowed from her father's favourite game, chess, that emphasises the competitive way she sees human relations: when Emmie sits between Gabby and Wafer Gabby says she "let Emmie checkmate me" (72-73). Alone with Wafer while others search for the mineral find, Gabby confronts him about Emmie. "She wasn't mine," he replies, "Not mine the way you mean" (187).

As Astley showed in The Slow Natives, rebellion is sometimes not rebellion at all. At first Gabby appears iconoclastic, another misfit resisting the roles her parents and society map for her:

I could have, should have, been pliable. I could have been the daughter of their Sunday social page dreams and
married the raw-boned son of some other grazier. I could have entered the public service the moment I finished school and vanished without a trace. (5)

On the question of pliability, Gabby contrasts agency, suggested by "could," with duty, denoted by "should." The substitution of "should have" for "could have" suggests that Gabby regrets not conforming to her parents's expectations, as though if she had done what was expected then she would never have been involved in Wafer's death. Forsaking the predictable, Gabby goes to art school, marries on impulse, separates, tries communal living, "stave[s] off nine to five boredom" (7) by painting, is institutionalised, and travels the world to rescue herself from congenital boredom, returning home when her mother dies. Hardly the life expected of a pastoralist's daughter. As wayward and unyielding as Gabby seems, a military metaphor she uses to describe the havoc she creates at the family dinner table - "I chucked sour little bombs of protest" (5) - indicates that she, in terms of the way she thinks, is very much like her father. Similarly, just as the thought of money brings out the erotic in her father, the thought of the love brings out the economic in Gabby. Economic rhetoric dominates her perception of intimacy. Her description of her efforts to inspire love confirms their acquisitive basis: "always my emotional change seemed smaller than the amount I spent" (160). In this respect, she thinks according to the economic logic of masculinity. She has internalized the possessive values of patriarchal culture and, not being allowed to apply them in the public sphere, uses them in the private. As Wafer points out, the manner in which she thinks is "as stale and square and conventional
as those pot-bellies cracking at rocks down there" (189). Like the men, she doesn't get a return on her investment in Wafer. For that she punishes him.14

5. "Trouble With a Couple of Steers"

The figure of the transvestite, as character or author-position, currently enjoys critical significance as the meridian of defamiliarization. Much separates Peter Ackroyd's modest proposal of transvestism as "a potent symbol of ambiguity" (141) from Marjorie Garber's "an index of category destabilization altogether" (36), but both critical observations credit transvestism with dissidence, especially its role in subverting and denaturalizing sexual difference.15

Interpretations of cross-dressing, however, too readily focus on men, as is evident in Madeleine Kahn's *Narrative Transvestism*. To explain "the explosive fact that many of . . . the first canonical novels (Moll Flanders, Roxana, Pamela, Clarissa, the not-quite-canonical Fanny Hill) were written by men in the person of women," Kahn develops the metaphor of "narrative transvestism." Psychoanalytic accounts of "real-world transvestism" and the consensus among psychoanalysts "that there is no such thing as a female transvestite" (2) justify the exclusive application of this concept to men.16 Even though psychoanalysts stress the genital narcissism at the heart of transvestism, Kahn proposes that narrative transvestism is subversive, dynamic, and
an integral part of the emerging novel’s radical and destabilizing investigation of how an individual creates . . . a gendered identity. (6-7)

Appropriating the identity, place, and voice of woman, the male author "plays out, in the metaphorical body of the text, the ambiguous possibilities of identity and gender" (6).

Kahn argues that the "transvestite's refusal to be defined by one gender or the other" (10) is positive. However, her portrait of narrative transvestism as a "temporary and self-protective projection" which allows men access to a feminine realm "from which they could, if necessary, beat a hasty retreat" (19) suggests that the male author, fearfully absorbed in the feminine, continues to define himself according to his masculinity. The ephemerality of narrative transvestism and the "assertion of a female self" ultimately "enables the reassertion of a masculine identity" (18) and validates "the hegemony of the masculine" (7). The "transvestite cross-dresses to undress" because the "goal" of cross-dressing is to create "a male self" (13). Kahn believes that the "dynamic structure of transvestism" undermines the attempt to reaffirm masculinity. For this reason Kahn distinguishes her work from critics as varied as Terry Castle, Nancy K. Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and James Carson, whose work on male authors writing in the body of woman emphasises "the hegemony of one gender over an other" (7).

Acknowledging that women have indeed "written novels using a first-person male persona" (2), Kahn excludes any analysis of this phenomenon from her study for two reasons: the aforementioned nonexistence of female transvestism, and because more is at stake
when men engage in narrative transvestism. Isn’t it always the
case that no matter what men do, more is at stake? Since Kahn
rules out the possibility of women cross-dressing in the "real-
world," then there must also be less at stake when women write in
the person of man:

But the question, what does a woman author gain from
using a man’s voice? turns out not to be symmetrical to,
what does a male author have to gain from using a
woman’s? Women are borrowing the voice of authority; men
are seemingly abdicating it. (2)

For women, writing in the place of men is less a matter of
confirming femininity than dodging its stigma: "The rhetorical
‘dressing-down’ of narrative transvestism gave men access to the
same female realm that women were trying to escape" (44).

The theme of escape central Kahn’s idea of narrative transvestism
appears when Astley discusses real and literary instances of cross-
dressing in Australian history. Astley considers Joseph Furphy’s
Such is Life (1903) a classic of Australian literature, so it is
no surprise to find her citing it in relation to An Item from the
Late News.17 Like Such is Life, An Item from the Late News
features a remarkable instance of female-to-male transvestism.18

Of all the characters Furphy’s narrator Tom Collins encounters,
"the most interesting character within the scope of these scrappy
memoirs" (305) is Nosey Alf, the cross-dressing Molly Cooper.
Similarly, the most interesting character in An Item from the Late
News is Archie Wetters, the cross-dressing Clementine. Local
incidents of cross-dressing inspired Furphy and Astley. Furphy
based the story of Molly on Johanna Jorgensen who passed as Johann
Likewise, Astley bases Archie's story on local history:

There probably is in Australia a history of women who in order to escape the terrible male dominance have disguised themselves as men. Joseph Furphy in *Such is Life* has a character who had dressed as a man for years after an accident had scarred her face. Everyone thought it was a chap. My character I read about in a small local paper or in the *Cairns Post*. There was a funeral held in a town up on the Tablelands of this local identity who for years used to ride as a jockey in the local picnic races and win things. Everyone thought he was a nice little bloke. When it came time to do the autopsy, they discovered he was a she. She'd pulled the wool over their eyes for years. (Willbanks 29)

Some women use transvestism as a defence strategy to escape male oppression. In a similar vein, Astley uses the rhetoric of narrative transvestism to escape the literary realm devalued by men yet set aside for women writers, the romance.  

More so than in Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*, the cross-dressing essential to the plotting of *An Item from the Late News* initiates a crisis in categories structured around masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity. In *Such is Life* Furphy controls the potential disruptiveness transvestism signals for gender identity by investing transvestism with the signs of the heterosexual romance. His labyrinthine and submerged plotting conceals a love story. Nosey Alf and Warrigal Alf are paired in an "indissoluble relationship" (Indyk 307). Transvestism conserves
heterosexual desire and gender identity; Molly Cooper, "disfigured for life" (27), cross-dresses to be nearer to her masculine love object.

The funeral of Archie Wetters functions as a "disruptive act of putting in question" (Garber 13). Veiled in Such is Life, cross-dressing is conspicuous in An Item from the Late News. Compared to Nosey Alf, Archie is a relatively minor character; however, the threatening discontinuity between sex and gender he embodies settles the men on a course of violent action. Passing as a man, Archie explodes the ideology of naturalness which embeds, authenticates, and establishes gender differences. At age twelve Gabby knew yet refused to divulge Archie's secret. Unlike Tom Collins, oblivious to the various markers of femininity surrounding Nosey Alf, Gabby recognises that the books on Archie's shelves "were enough to label him queer in a town like Allbut" (19). It is not so much the presence of books but the dedications within them that reveal all:

All those inscriptions, the ink brownly stating, 'To Clancy with love from Mum and Dad', 'Dearest Clementine, for her twelfth birthday', 'To Clancy from her loving Aunt Bo'. But I never said. (19)

Later in the narrative, sexual vulnerability emerges as the likely reason for Archie's subterfuge, when Wafer gives Gabby and Emmie an outline of his family history.21 As Gabby looks at a daguerreotype of Wafer's grandparents, her attention is drawn to "a girl of seven or eight with passionate swoops of long hair so like Emmie my heart jumped" (94). The similarity between the girl in the portrait and Emmie is not lost on Wafer: "And that very
pretty little girl, Emmie, the one rather like you, was my great-aunt Clancy" (95). Shortly after being raped, Clancy, aged fifteen, ran away from home, and, we learn, protects herself from further sexual violation by masquerading as a male.

In *Such is Life*, Nosey Alf’s sex and gender are not doubted in the manner in which Archie’s is. The question mark hanging over Archie Wetters’s maleness and masculinity is not resolved until his death. Archie dies after having "a riotous heart attack in the front bar of the Wowser" (17). Little is known about this "wiry little fellow" (18), other than his age, somewhere between seventy and eighty, and that he lived alone. Like his literary ancestor, *Such is Life*’s Nosey Alf, Archie is a "boundary rider" (18), and a very good jockey. Gabby remembers Archie "crazily grinning because he had beaten two of the best riders in the area" (18). Short for Archibald, which means bold and genuine, the name of cross-dressing Archie is appropriate and ironic. Archie’s masquerade certainly qualifies as bold. According to the men, however, his masculinity is not genuine. The diminutive, "Arch," refers to both the central role he plays in disrupting gender categories and his cunning deception. Suspect despite his employment experience, equestrian skills, and beer-drinking talent, Archie is known as a "moph," a hermaphrodite. Moreover, "moph" has been used in Australia to describe effeminate homosexuals (Simes 40). Gabby’s father defines "moph" as "two bob each way" (19), a defensive gamble. To have two bob each way is "to support contradictory causes at the same time, often in self protection" (Macquarie). A protective strategy, cross-dressing sustains two contradictions: biologically woman, culturally masculine. Although
"moph" is hardly a flattering nickname, the doubts about Arch's masculinity still hinge on the presence of the penis, for a hermaphrodite has both male and female reproductive organs. Tainted with effeminacy, Archie is nonetheless accepted as a man by the male community because, as "moph" implies, he possesses a penis.

Posthumously uncovered, Archie's masquerade as plenitude destabilizes the authenticity and wholeness of masculine identity, disrupts the analogical relationship between sex and gender, and undermines the biological determinism informing the discourses of sex and gender that naturalize the social order. Archie reminds the men of what Freud calls "the threat of castration" ("Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" 176). According to Freud, the boy is threatened often during the phallic phase with castration. Insouciant, the boy discounts these warnings. However, when he sees the female genitals, the sight of the girl's lack terminates the boy's disbelief regarding the reality of the castration threat: from this moment, says Freud, "the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable" (176). In An Item from the Late News, Archie, lacking the visible sign of sexual difference, makes this loss real by embodying the unimaginable.

From a Freudian perspective, Archie's cross-dressing could be seen as a psychotic instance of penis envy whereby she, like Freud's little girl, "share[s] the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so an important respect, and, at least in holding that opinion, insists on being like a man" ("Some Psychical Consequences" 253). However, aside from Astley's brilliantly devastating parody of penis envy, Gabby's observation of Archie at
the races suggests the opposite: a contempt for the notion of men's superiority and a negation of the subjection inscribed in the theory of castration itself. Archie refuses to make "the culturally requisite investment in her father once she has acceded to the belief that she is 'castrated' or 'lacking'" (Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* 143), that is, she refuses to assume "her mother's place" and adopt "a feminine attitude towards her father" ("Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" 178).

The urgent efforts to consolidate sexual difference following Archie's funeral indicate that in All but the gender order, along with the economic order, is at crisis point. The first phase in normalising gender relations is aligning the proper sex to Archie. Hastily and with considerable embarrassment the town reassigns his gender: "Our beloved - um - sister in Christ" (17) the priest says. Archie may have lived as a man, but he is buried as a woman. The language of homosociability at Archie's funeral confers a penis on the "sister" being buried: "'Poor old bugger,' someone said behind me. And someone else said, 'He wasn't a bad old sod. Not when you consider he was a woman'" (18).

At first, the only link between Wafer and Archie appears to be the gender trouble they cause. Archie unnerves because he is a woman passing as a man; Wafer disquiets because he is a man who dispenses with the myths of masculinity. While Gabby does not foreground the familial connection between Wafer and Archie, overt references in the text identify the relation between them. First, Wafer mentions his great-aunt Clancy to Emmie and Gabby. Second, Wafer's uncle, aghast at fifteen year old Wafer's refusal to engage in the usual male pursuits (football and cadets) makes the
connection explicit: "There's a little too much of your mad Aunt Clancy in you, lad" (148). Even without the genealogical link Wafer would, culturally at least, still be Archie's heir, in that he replicates Archie's negation and demystification of masculinity, and refuses to subscribe to a commensuration between the penis and the phallus. Where Archie refuses the mother's place, Wafer recoils from the father's.

In Male Subjectivity at the Margins Kaja Silverman analyses post-war Hollywood films obsessed with castration, the constitution of male subjectivity, and "the failure of the paternal function" (52). The historical trauma, that is, "a historically precipitated but psychoanalytically specific disruption," of World War Two brings a large group of male subjects into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw from the dominant fiction.

(55)

In the dominant fiction, male and female subjects see themselves "through the mediation of images of an unimpaired masculinity" and "deny all knowledge of male castration by believing in the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father" (42). The point of Silverman's thesis is to demonstrate how history sometimes manages to interrupt or even deconstitute what a society assumes to be its master narratives and immanent Necessity - to undo our imaginary relation to the symbolic order. (55)

As a child, Wafer experiences what Silverman terms a "traumatic encounter with lack" (62). Phallic symbol par excellence, a bomb
annihilates Wafer's father and thus shatters the Oedipal scenario of the symbolic order which guarantees the male subject's masculinity: "he saw his father disintegrate before his eyes" (14). The father's voice and authority, central to inculcating the son into masculinity, are voided. Other symbolic fathers come to occupy the space Wafer's father once held, for example "his Uncle Bedwetter in loco parentis" (148), schoolmates, teachers, and Cropper, all of whom attempt to make Wafer acquiesce to social practices. But identifying with the symbolic power society invested in the father, Wafer learns, is no longer possible in the bomb age. Excessive phallic power disrupts the father-son relation necessary for sexuality, desire, masculinity. His search for the "perfect bomb shelter" (15) represents a desire to be free from the threat of extinction; fleeing the phallus, Wafer seeks the womb.

To some critics, the numerous allusions to literary figures and myths are obtrusive to the point of being meddlesome and ineffective; "casual citations only," according to Clancy, excessive flourishes that generate discontinuity rather than the coherent synthesis that Patrick White achieves with his "use of The Odyssey in the Aunt's Story" ("Pessimism and Anger" 27). But the first mythical reference reinforces the theme of patriarchy in crisis that runs throughout the book, thus suggesting that Astley's citations are more than casual. After a vague and colloquial beginning, "It all came to a head in a couple of months, really, those two months ten years ago now when the town prepared for and then dismissed its barbaric Christmas," Gabby elaborates on the circumstances surrounding the unknown pronoun reference: "that swollen moment of history when Wafer had the wax on his wings
melted from flying too close, not to the sun, but to the local grandees" (1). Astley's concern here, then, is with history, myth, and masculinity. Linked literally with the Eucharist, Wafer is linked analogously with Icarus. Gabby ironises the majesty of the myth, replacing the sun with the "local grandees" of Allbut staving off the prospect of becoming a ghost town. The Icarus myth is, among other things, the story of a son who, going against the advice of his father, dies. In a way, Wafer goes against the symbolic law of the father.

From the moment of his appearance in Allbut, the innuendo of masculine insufficiency dogs Wafer. According to Jam, Wafer lacks balls. When Gabby first meets Wafer, who's bogged his van in a creek and needs assistance getting it out, Jam, rendered "uncomfortable [and] anxious" by Wafer's near-naked presence in their household, introduces the castration thematic: "He gets up, says will you see to it, sis - the old boy is having trouble with a couple of steers - and rides off" (13). Jam fobs Wafer's request for assistance onto his sister; helping Wafer is women's work. The farm job becomes an occasion for linking Wafer to steers, castrated bulls. However, the fact that patriarchal authority is having trouble with steers foregrounds the cause of the gender trouble that is to come: castration. Jam is not the only one to link Wafer with the castrated. After ridiculing his effort to seek shelter from the nuclear bomb, Gabby notices Wafer's genitals: "His genitals - I don't really like to look - appear to have shrunk" (28).

For refusing to participate in and submit to the practices that confirm masculinity, Wafer is disciplined. Negating masculinity
incurs punishing physical costs. At the climax of the novel, Wafer, pinioned between his captors, recalls an incident from his school days. Students "armed with sandshoes" beat him for not playing football properly, for "dodging out on the tackle" (196) and avoiding an important symbolic ritual which prepares boys for the phallic authority of adulthood. The beating is pedagogic: "This is to teach you not to be a rotten little poof" (196). While his peers equate deviating from masculine norms with homosexuality, Wafer critiques the misogyny and latent homoeroticism of patriarchal culture by characterising the violence of "male group activities" as "a sop to homosexual proclivities" (148). The possibility that Wafer may be artistic is reason enough for the people of Allbut to question his sexuality: "Someone says he's an artist, musician, writer? Is he a poof?" (11).

From the outset of the narrative Wafer's values are set apart from those of the community. Gabby associates Wafer with the word "divest," a verb which means strip, dispossess, free. He divests himself of the cultural markers of masculinity. Indifference to the topics which most concern men (sport, war, and business) confirms Wafer's unmanliness, his difference from other men. Business is an exclusively male concern, with one exception, Wafer. A travelling sales-representative recognises Wafer as someone in opposition to the prevailing masculinity: "You don't really look like a business man if you'll pardon me" (74). The point is highlighted again when Stobo bitterly protests that Wafer "doesn't bloody care" (90) about the potential fortune to be made from his mineral find. The castration thematic introduced by Jam reappears when Stobo, certain that Wafer has been toying with the men and
leading them in circles as they search for the area where he discovered the stone, says to Wafer: "They think you've given them a bum steer" (192).

Aphrodisiac and entertainment, war is the yardstick by which Gabby's father measures men. While waiting for a television documentary on American MX installations, the Jerrolds and Wafer sit through the nine o'clock news. Blurring the distinction between combat and recreation, one item refers to "war-games" (57) in Europe. Excited by the "paraphernalia of aggression" (57), Gabby's father echoes the rhetoric of entertainment contained in the oxymoron when he asks Wafer, "And what shows were you in? . . . Vietnam? Korea? None of those shows?" (58). In reply, Wafer invokes a metaphor from his school days: "I've spent my life draft-dodging" (58). The rhetoric of entertainment, whether it be show business or sport, frames and diminishes the horrors of warfare. By using sporting similes to describe the violence of the men's phallic ritual, Gabby suggests that the recreational amusements of patriarchal culture prepare bodies for action, strengthen and discipline muscles, ready men for barbarism. Thus, when Gabby narrates the fight between Moon and Wafer, she uses many sporting images. As Moon and Wafer prepare to grapple, Gabby describes Moon's legs as

that muscle-force that shot like a fuse along the naked limbs down to the propped toes which had dug themselves into the earth as if it were a starting-block. (127)

When Cropper punishes Moon for violating bullfight protocol he "seemed to be measuring up for a goal. He kicked and kicked again
with his heavy blunt-toed boots" (130). Skills learnt at school and in the playground come in handy.

When it serves their political and economic interests, the male community represent Wafer as phallic in order to punish him, accusing him of committing incest while acting as a de facto father. Looking after Emmie while Smiler's in hospital, Wafer is a temporary if hesitant father-figure. The wet breaks while she stays at Wafer's. The only dry place is his bed. Reluctantly, he invites her in and rocks her to sleep in his arms, "[as] fathers do" (101). That is how Moon, who had attempted to rape Emmie, discovers them. For acting as the father, Wafer has a charge of rape, unfounded, hanging over him.

In Freud's analysis, masculine identity is premised on the repudiation of the feminine, a denial of passivity, a loathing of lack, a contempt for women. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the male subject's belief in the legitimacy of the threat of castration is necessary for the development of masculinity and the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. The connection the boy makes between two events - "prohibitions on the boy's expression of his sexuality, and his growing awareness that women 'lack' a penis" (Segal 71) - intensifies his castration anxiety. Before this, however, the boy entertains active/masculine and passive/feminine forms of libidinal satisfaction, imagining himself usurping his father's position and having intercourse with the mother, or usurping the mother's position and being loved by the father. The threat of castration ends the dual satisfactions of the Oedipus complex. Any sexual desire he has for the mother the father will punish with castration; on the other hand, to be loved by the father would
involve castration "as a precondition." Choosing between preserving his penis or satisfying "the libidinal cathexis of his parental objects," the boy prefers genital narcissism and, penis saved, thus "turns away from the Oedipus complex," represses desire for the mother, identifies with the strength and "authority of the father" ("Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" 176), and rejects femininity.

Fear accompanies masculinity, fear of being not man enough. In response to the fear of castration triggered by Archie's transvestism the men alleviate gender identity anxiety by re-establishing differences, a process which involves intensifying their masculinity and repressing the taint of femininity. The cardinal differences which order, constitute, and control the Australian identity, Kay Schaffer argues in Women and the Bush, are "masculine, White, Anglo-Irish and heterosexual"; the men of Allbut use these "dominant cultural norms" (12) to judge, categorize, and, when necessary, subdue. Those who fail to measure up to and embody all the categories are denigrated and excluded: women, homosexuals, Aborigines. Thoroughly denigrated in patriarchal culture, femininity is kept separate from masculinity, psychically expunged, physically sequestered, and mastered socially. The effort to repress femininity can reappear in phobic form as misogyny, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Whether at work or play, men and women occupy separate spheres. The front-bar of the Wowser is where men relax, for example. Troped as feminine, Aborigines are forced to live away from the town.

With his successful manipulation of the artifacts of gender, Archie de-naturalizes masculinity and patriarchy, suggesting that
the former is constructed and that the latter therefore is not immutable. Archie's death inspires neither a re-examination of the naturalised categories of identity nor a re-consideration of the various oppositions sustained by the masculine/feminine binary, but a longing for coherence, unity, and stability—a desire that sex unproblematically equal gender.

The disjunction between Archie's masculine gender and his absent penis disturbs the men, for in their view the penis is the referent that naturalizes masculinity, signifies wholeness, and sanctions patriarchal power. Because the men's idea of masculinity is bound up with their genital narcissism, they see the genitally lacking masculinity represented by Archie as a threat to their corporeal identity and social power. To avert the turmoil created by dwindling economic prospects and the uncertainty provoked by the disclosure of Archie's anatomy, both of which are interpreted as castrating, the Allbut men solace themselves with what they accept as the tangible fact of their masculinity. According to Freud, the threat of castration intensifies the boy's genital narcissism; he prizes his penis above all else. Masculine without a penis, Archie mocks what the men treasure. Consequently, the penis assumes terrific fetishistic importance, buffering the men from the economic buffeting and diminution in status they experience, reassuring them of their power, and allowing them to glory in their domination over those troped as castrated.

Nearly everything Gabby says to describe the men of the town is couched in phallic language, as for example when she reports, with some envy, how well Emmie understands "strutting male self-importance" (161). "Strut" means to swell, swagger, and protrude
stiffly. The OED definition captures the phallic quality exhibited by those who strut: "a manner of walking with stiff steps and head erect, affecting dignity and superiority; a stiff, self-important gait." Strutting is phallic movement. Following Archie's burial, the men punitively renew their genital narcissism, using erections to brutalize. By virtue of having a penis, the men can still retain power and be, in the words of feisty publican Doss, "cock of the walk" (118). Doss's summary of male behaviour is more than appropriate, for in addition to meaning "one who asserts himself domineeringly, as the leader of the gang" (Macquarie), the phrase combines maleness (the penis, the male bird), violence (as in a firearm hammer's discharge), and stiffness (the state of being conspicuously upright, secure, and certain). The men structure their actions around a literal interpretation of the significance of the erect penis. For them, the penis is the phallus, nature is culture.

Lexicographers are reticent when describing the condition of the "penis" essential to defining "phallus," preferring circumspection to adjectival embellishment. Following the swath cleared by Oxford English Dictionary, most dictionaries define "phallus" as a representation of "the male generative organ." Lacking the discretion of their English counterpart, Macquarie describes "phallus" as "an image of the erect male reproductive organ, symbolising in certain religious systems the generative power in nature." There is an etymological reason for the relation between erection and phallus. "Phallus" stems from Indo-European bhel-, which means "blow up, swell up" (Barnhart 785). The "turgidity" (Lacan, "Meaning" 82) of the penis symbolizes the power, virility,
and authority of the phallus. The metonymical status of penis as phallus is indicated when Jam refers to male genitals as "crown jewels," echoing the near universal lexicographical practice of explaining metonymy by using as an example "the crown" for "sovereignty." Similarly, the men insist on logical relation between the penis, "crown jewels," and patriarchal sovereignty. The penis is also transcendental; Cropper calls it "sacred."

Confusing the penis for the phallus is "a constitutive error in patriarchy" (Tyler 168). In "The Meaning of the Phallus," Lacan categorically denies the biological reductionism of such an error: the phallus "is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolises" (79). Essays in The Sexuality of Men comment on this fallacy. In "Male Sexuality in the Media" Richard Dyer remarks on the "discrepancy" between the symbolic phallus and actual penises:

- Male genitals are fragile, squishy, delicate things; even when erect, the penis is spongy, seldom straight, and rounded at the tip, while the testicles are imperfect spheres, always vulnerable, never still. (30)

Similarly, Peter Bradbury in "Desire and Pregnancy" argues that the social, psychological, and symbolic power designated by the phallus hides the realities of the penis in a web of mystery and threat. One way in which this mystery is sustained is through the transformation, within the dominant culture, of the penis into the phallus. Taken by itself the penis is a floppy appendage which rises and falls and is the source of a number of pleasures. The phallus is more than this. It is the physical organ represented as continuously erect; it is the abundance and
inexhaustibility of male desire; it is a dominant element within our culture. (134)

The cultural investment in the erect penis as the symbol of power is most obvious with Cropper. Representative of the law, Cropper is troped in an indisputably phallic way, a proverbial swaggering erection. Monolithic and seemingly invulnerable, he swaggers and "tower[s] huge above the funk-hole of all time" (63). As he charges Wafer with rape, Cropper's face is "engorged" (197). Literally embodying the penis as phallus, Cropper takes his erection as the symbolic reference point and justification for both masculinity and patriarchal power. Because he makes this conflation, Cropper must remain permanently erect and resist deflationary detumescence. His excessive phallicism suggests that for him "the shrinkage back to penile banality will seem like a castrating loss of patriarchal power and masculine identity" (Bernheimer, "Penile Reference in Phallic Theory" 121). Ironically, his name is an ambiguous, constant trial. "Cropper" signifies an image of inflation: someone who raises a crop; and an image of castration, a machine that shears. To crop a photograph, moreover, means to "cut off or mask the unwanted parts" (Macquarie). He has, in other words, the authority to castrate. However, the colloquial usage, "to come a cropper," means to fall, fail, or collapse. Patronymically burdened with the threat of castration, Cropper remains stiff, inflexible.

The alternative An Item from the Late News offers to the myth that masculinity is biologically conferred is that masculinity,
like the male body, is culturally mediated and constructed. R. W. Connell argues that the male body "receives masculinity (or some fragment thereof) as its social definition" (83). Social practice marks, organizes, and disciplines the masculine body:

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular physical skills and the lack of others, the image of one’s own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it, the way it operates at work and in sexual relations. In no sense is all this a consequence of XY chromosomes, or even of the possession on which discussion of masculinity have so lovingly dwelt, the penis. The physical sense of maleness grows through a personal history of social practice, a life-history-in-society. (84)

Female characters comment on the way in which identity is constructed. Gabby talks of the time when her brother Jam "achieved manhood" (4). Prior to its use here, Gabby explains the meaning of the verb "achieved" when she refers to her father’s wartime experience: he "had achieved officer class, not because of any innate ability to lead but because he’d been to the right private school" (4). The myth of the naturalness of gender veils the fact that what father and son "achieved," whether it be officer class or manhood, depends on an historically contingent privilege rather than something inherent or natural ("innate ability"). From this perspective, men can no longer justify their power by an appeal to nature. When Doss says that men are "the biggest myth
of the lot" (51), she is saying that the roles and values inscribed in masculinity are the result of a cultural fiction, as are those of femininity. A rebuffed suitor’s response to Doss, whose financial independence frees her from the need to marry, is "You’re not womanly, Doss. . . . Not an ounce of the woman in you" (51-52). Refusing marriage is an unnatural act. Doss controls her own desire, refuses to be an object of exchange, resists the image of Mother, and attacks the double standard:

If there’s anywhere in the world one of you who actually likes women or kids, the rest of you think he’s unnatural, a poof. It’s manly not to care, My god, how manly! So I play it your way and I’m the unnatural one. (52)

Doss does not need a man to secure her freedom or mobility. But her indifference to the romance plot and her refusal to embody the ideal of femininity desired by her suitor means she is troped as unnatural.

Ridiculing the phallocentrism of psychoanalysis is a favourite Astley pastime. The castration complex encourages genital narcissism in boys and "penis envy" in girls. Confronted with the fact of castration, the female subject transforms her desire for the penis into the desire to have a baby. In the novel, Astley parodies Freud’s concept of "penis envy," suggesting instead that men covet women’s reproductive capacity and this desire reveals itself in masculine pastimes. Watching the "manly games" of televised sport, Gabby asks: "Is there only a choice between crotch sniffers and cricketers with menstruation envy? Those red streaked groins!" (26). Fearing "the fecund womb" and "[t]he toothed
uterus" (It's Raining in Mango 76), patriarchal culture pathologises menstruation as abject sign of women's weakness. Through sporting rituals men express their repressed desire to be women: to maintain its shine, cricketers rub the cricket ball near the groin, leaving a very red stain on their whites. Men, Gabby insinuates, want to be as fertile as women and give birth. Menstruation is also troped at the funeral, where Gabby transforms her father into a woman:

His thumbs kept tugging at his collar, easing his neck, and the collar was already rimmed with red dust and sweat. Wearing the rags, the conventional rags, I thought ironically, vulgarly, turning a euphemism I'd picked up from Jam and always hated, straight back to its source. At that very moment I was conscious of a rush of sisterhood for Arch, dear old Arch, dear now to the our father which art and remembering his blood-shot eyes bright with something (I knew what it was) as he shuffled up the dusty street to the pub. Couldn't really think of him hallowed be his name as she, those bandy jockey's legs, the lace of grey curls, the face doubly lined oh ever so well lived in his kingdom come. (18-19)

Female solidarity immediately follows the linguistic return of the euphemism to its masculine source, turning her father into a woman at a funeral held to return a man to a woman. Gabby refuses to participate in the gender reassignment of the funeral and, syntactically, she refuses to "think of him hallowed be his name," that is, the law of the father.
Throughout *An Item from the Late News* male authority is represented as barbaric. As doubts over masculine identity spiral, "a hypermasculine ideal of toughness and dominance" (Connell 80) comes to the fore. The masculine fundamentalism of Sergeant Cropper, brutal, voyeuristic, and covetous, overflows, and the novel explodes into violent homosocial vignettes reminiscent of the small-town barbarism of Kenneth Cook's *Wake in Fright* (1961). Society authorizes and condones the bellicose masculinity represented by Cropper and Moon. Responsible for maintaining law and order, Cropper acts "with a raging lawfulness that he believed to be part of the job" (115-16). Policing duties vindicate his furious speech and violent acts. Drafted into the army and sent to Vietnam, Moon is given a "licence to kill" women and children, excelling so well at slaughter that he "even sickened his C.O." (33). Having rescued Emmie from Cropper, Doss explains why men act the way they do: "All men know is bully. Bully and shout. Part of the same thing, really" (117).

The bully constantly asserts his masculinity to reassure himself that his masculinity is stable and secure. He goes about this in a strange way: to ensure that the outcome of the test is predictable, the bully usually picks on people he knows he can beat. Consequently, the more he demonstrates his masculinity, the more it seems to be precarious, groundless, and weak. No satisfaction comes from this methodologically suspect test; his masculinity requires further confirmation, more proof, another scapegoat. Selected in the same manner as before, another victim is chosen to validate the bully's masculinity. The pattern repeats itself, with no fulfilment in sight. This cycle of violence Wafer
is all too familiar with: "Oh there’s a pattern I well remember. The bullies. The clique you couldn’t break into no matter how hard you tried. A classic pattern" (140). He has, Gabby notes, experienced the "jocular bastardry" (30) of the bully. At the informal meeting convened to interrogate Wafer, Cropper’s "bully-brain" does the "thinking for all of them" (162). As the meeting proceeds and Cropper settles on a course of action, Gabby describes him "cocking half a bull eye at the beer" (163). Even his movements refer back to "cock of the walk," while his features retain an animal-like aura of violence and sexual power. Like "phallus," "bull" takes bhel- as its source; hence the numerous references to bulls, bullying, and the bull fight.29

The competitive display among men creates a homosocial cacophony, an uproar that leads Doss to reject a commonplace notion regarding women’s volubility: "If you’d worked in a pub, dear, you’d never say women yakked again" (117). When Doss dismisses what the men are doing as "male stuff" she draws attention to its performative aspect: "The old bravissimo gene working overtime" (118). The superlative form of "bravo," "bravissimo" is an exclamation used "to express great approval, especially of a performance" (American Heritage Dictionary). Derived from "bravo," "brave" means courageous, showy, warrior, and bully. According to American Heritage Dictionary, courage can either be possessed or displayed. In the front bar of the Wowser (an ironic reference to continence and, perhaps, a veiled attack on the women’s temperance movement), the men perform and parade the qualities, usually physical, that conform to the cultural definitions of masculinity. For whom, though, are the men being loud? Who are they trying to impress?
Not women, but men. The men strut in front of each other to bolster their masculinity, but as with the bully, the preening strutting and vociferous bragging fail to guarantee masculinity. Sequestered in the front bar, men make up the audience for these highly competitive displays.30 Men evaluate and confer masculinity. In a sense, the men shout about their cocks, and their mates, gulping beer, look them up and down, applauding, exclaiming, cheering, and drinking until they are too drunk to fuck their mates, to act on prohibited desires.

To anchor identity in terms of a correlation between sex and gender, society must police its members, reinforce the hierarchy of differences, and quash deviance. Reaffirming the limits and categories of the so-called natural order becomes a priority for the townsfolk. Enforcing binaries is Cropper's job. Aided and abetted by the townsmen and, ultimately, Gabby, Cropper seeks to expel uncertainty and indeterminacy Archie represents by reinstalling the binaries (white/black, male/female, masculine/feminine) deemed essential to sustaining patriarchal order. Because social organization depends on the construction and performance of gender around masculinity and femininity, continuous and routine acts of formalization are required if gender identity is to be confirmed. Repetition of gender performance, according to Judith Butler, "is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation." Stylization reduces and simplifies meaning: tedious, hackneyed, and common-sense acts reinforce the meanings already culturally established and therefore limit possibilities for identity. Ultimately, the mundane
"stylized repetition of acts" keeps "gender within its binary frame" (140), conserving the binary by diminishing the range of possible types of performances.

The men displace the anxiety that results from their discovery of the asymmetry between Archie's anatomy and gender onto other groups, scapegoats. Hence, to purge Archie from memory, Cropper attacks those who most resemble Archie, punishing those who threaten or transgress the foundations of the categories in which he and the other men believe. The anxiety-driven violence that follows Archie's funeral shores up social divisions based on sexuality, gender, race, and, to a lesser extent, class. Another funeral immediately follows Archie's. Rosie Wonga and her son Billy set out "with their new funeral clothes packed in a plastic case" for Mainchance in order to attend Tommy Wildapple's funeral. Transgressing social protocol, Wafer gives Rosie and her son a lift to the railway. As Gabby puts it, "The town, fresh from burying old Arch and already in shock, was critical" (20). At Mainchance they are told that because Tommy died of leprosy he will not be buried there. His body is ready to be sent to the Allbut Mission. Rosie accepts a lift to the Mission in the hearse, which Cropper intercepts thirty miles from its destination. Troped as phallic, "a meaty man" and "massive with authority" (22), Cropper orders mother and son to strip. When she refuses, he uses the authority of language to justify his actions: "Quarantine, Nellie. You know that word, eh?" (22). The primary aim of this episode of purification is to confirm the essential basis of difference, to ensure that the categories of gender, race, and class are maintained. Archie intensifies Cropper's concern with the
stability of these categories and boundaries. In *Vested Interests* Garber argues that "transsexuals and transvestites are more concerned with maleness and femaleness than persons who are neither transvestite nor transsexuals" (110); this, as Cropper’s actions suggest, is overstating the case. Cropper wants to render Rosie’s differences, sexual and racial, visible, which is why he makes such a ritual of burning the clothes, of having Rosie put them into a "nice and tidy" heap. Once the small bonfire expires, Cropper remarks: "We’re nice and clean now" (23). The royal "we" indicates how necessary Rosie is for Cropper’s definition of self. At the end of this cleansing Cropper feels whole, knowledgeable, and in control. Denigrating the other and viewing what he associates with lack, the visible wound of her castration, confirms his masculinity and his power.31 Such an inordinate emphasis on order, wholesomeness and morality - his use of the words "nice," "clean," and "tidy" - marks one reaction to the disorder and confusion dead Archie inaugurates. Because of Cropper’s intervention Rosie misses her brother’s funeral. Wafer again comes to the rescue, dispensing light, clothing, and shelter to Rosie and Billy. Gabby links this event with "the start of it" (24): the purification and normalization of Wafer.

Aside from policing members of the community, Cropper polices language. Cropper’s narratives have a juridical or phallocentric effect. Wafer’s contention that there is nothing between him and Emmeline Colley, "Nothing you could lay a charge about," doesn’t faze Cropper. "You don’t seem to understand," he says, "It doesn’t matter there was nothing" (155). What matters is the narrative meaning that Cropper constructs. Content is irrelevant,
The desire for symmetry, equivalence, and order cannot be extricated from the desire for a particular system and form of representation. Hence Cropper's testy admission to Moon, "How the hell can I tell between fact and fiction, eh? How? Can you?" (190). Later in the novel Cropper's regulatory function is apparent when he and councillor Brim tell Wafer, waiting for the train at Jericho Crossing, that he will be returning to Allbut to show them were he found the gem. Wafer's reply to this request, "Oh fuck off!," brings out the authoritarian in Cropper:

"Language!" Cropper warned. "Language, mate. I could take you in for using obscene language in a public place."

"I'm catching the train," Wafer insisted.

"Listen," Cropper said. "Do I have to spell it out? You're coming back with me. There's a couple of things that need to be talked over. Normally I'd be glad to see the back of you, but there's that little matter of the kid for a start. Either you come nicely or we throw the book at you." (155)

The shift from "I" to "we" reveals that Cropper is acting not as an individual but on behalf of the community. As his violent images suggest, language is a site of conflict, struggle, and savagery. The authority of the "book" that Cropper wields can incarcerate Wafer, remove him and his voice from society.
6. Rural Decline and Masculine Crisis

The discovery of the disjunction between Archie's sex and gender occurs at a moment when the men are already obsessing over their masculinity. An economic recession has marginalised the men, rendered their bodies redundant. Opportunities for authenticating masculinity through physical employment disappear. The economic revival promised by the discovery of Wafer's stone will restore masculine wholeness and negate the horror of Archie's mutilated body.

Another Astley classic town name, Allbut encapsulates the central thematic of the novel. Simultaneously affirmative and negative, "Allbut" foregrounds the desire for wholeness and the frustrating limitation of that desire. The entirety designated by "All" is undercut by the adversative "but" which suggests incompleteness. Whatever content constitutes the privileged term ("All") depends on the existence of the exception; without the "but," the "All" would lack definition and coherence. An Item from the Late News examines the way in which communities designate wholeness and, through physical and symbolic violence, delineate themselves from the Other, the "but," exceptions to cultural norms.

Located in the bush, a place constructed by urban writers as the site where Australian masculinity and identity are tested and forged, Allbut is susceptible to economic change, change which disturbs. Once flourishing, Allbut at the start of the 1970s is dying. One architectural remnant, the school of arts, "a left-over from the days when the town was prosperous with tin mines back in the hills and travelling shows came through," attests to happier
boomtown days. "Hardly a town" (10), according to Gabby, Allbut's mining industry is extinct, its rural base stagnant. Small country towns like Allbut missed out on the fiscal gains enjoyed by many farmers and graziers during the prosperous post-war years and began a slow irrevocable decay. Towns "established during the horse-and-buggy era as service centres for farming families within a radius of 20 kilometres or less," Geoffrey Bolton argues in his history of contemporary Australia, "could find no new function once they were by-passed by motor transport" (63). Small farms declined, a situation that benefitted "agrarian capitalists" and disadvantaged "small-farming yeomanry" (Bolton 92). Squatters triumphed over selectors. Traditional outlets for male employment evaporated when farms consolidated because technology reduced the need for labour. A drunken sales-representative describes Allbut's plight: "Once a year I come through these parts and it gets worse. A steady god-marvellous rural decline. Every year. Worse and worse and worse" (75). As opportunities for traditional masculine employment diminish, the men of the community find themselves, indeed put themselves, under incredible pressure to perform as men, to embody an ideal of masculinity.

Economic vitality sustains the men's sense of potency; in contrast, economic slump is equivalent to castration. Seeking economic wholeness, Allbut's business leaders desire a return to past glories; to a time when the economy was strong and so was their manhood; to a time when the values, categories, and hierarchies of the town retained their status as normal, natural, and universal, and were immune to outside influence; to a time when white, heterosexual men were the norm that secured the town and
themselves against difference: women, Aborigines, immigrants, homosexuals, misfits. The setting of the narrative is important in this regard: the events that Gabby narrates take place during the Whitlam years of the early 1970s, a time of social change when feminism, gay liberation, and Aboriginal activism began to question dominant cultural values, prejudices, and preferences.

The men fear economic exclusion, because the workings of the economy confirms their masculine identity and their status as active subjects. The economy works on an object, the land, which is invariably feminised.³³ Exclusion situates the men in an inferior, that is, feminine relation to the economy. Mr Jerrold positions the Australian economy in a place no real Allbut man would want to be, the place of women: passive, available, inconstant, devalued. Mr Jerrold’s elaboration on Australia’s history relies on a variety of metaphors which signify femininity as victim, slut, and whore:

"Well," he says, dangling his pawn over the board, "well, all Australia has done for two centuries - you know that old joke about rape? - is lie back and think of England. No. I’m not quite right there. Now she thinks of the States, Japan and France as well. Even West Germany. All that stuff up north of us went to a German industrialist last June before you came back. She’s a regular scrubber of a country, eh? Not even a good tart. Does it with anyone anywhere any time - and doesn’t get paid. No respect, Jam," he said turning to my radio-twiddling brother, "no respect, not even the sort you give to tarts, unless you get paid. This country’s like
a dame with hot pants - give give give to any takers.
You can't move your rook there, Gabby - I speak of course
of her economic ploys, not the sexual habits of her
countrywomen." (39)

Easily possessed and exchanged, indifferent to those doing the
raping, Australia embodies an unregenerate feminine sexuality.
Moon literalises the rape motif inscribed in Gabby's father's
representation of the land as feminine when he attempts to rape
Emmie. Women and land are part of the same continuum, according
to Moon, who utters a line of poetry that links Emmie with the
earth: "To see you naked is to remember the earth" (68). Unlike
the analogy Mr Jerrold draws between earth and pliability, Emmie
fights back: "her struggles spoke" (67).

Successfully repulsed, Moon finds another substitute for his
desire: Wafer's stone. After the attempted rape, Moon visits Wafer
and is drawn to and excited by "Wafer's talisman" (78). The men
are similarly obsessed with and aroused by Wafer's stone because
the economic renewal it signals promises a conditional return to
phallic power. Imagining the possibility of economic survival,
councillor Brim gives voice to his fear of castration, a thematic
expressed in terms of deflation and absence:

I've watched it go down over the last fifteen years till
it's almost nothing. Rebirth. . . . A renewed interest
from the outside. Maybe a plug of foreign capital. (105-06).

He has witnessed male lack, the almost nothing (the all-but) of
femininity. Economic depreciation equals phallic infirmity.
Foreign investment is eroticised as penetrative, a plug "used to
stop up a hole or aperture" (Macquarie). Even with foreign capital, the men will still occupy a feminine position, of having to make the "almost nothing" town attractive. Domination and submission are at the heart of Brim’s phallic solution. Economically castrated, the men desire the foreign phallic plug "as a means of secondary access to phallic status" (Grosz 119). The plug will allow them to work/rape the object, the feminine land.

Dreams of easy wealth poison the townsfolk. From the outset of the novel, the location of Wafer’s stone is associated with the imaginary. Surveying the landscape, Gabby says:

the north lurches up in a side-swipe of scrubby range glinting with imagined Eldorados. I say ‘imagined’ for their glittering non-presence was part of the corruption.

(1-2).

Pressed by Moon to explain the stone’s origins, Wafer "invents a little story" (79), underestimating the “trouble” the narrative will have on a population "dreaming of the big strike" (83). Similarly, when Stobo suggests taking time off from work to go "hunting" (84) for the stone’s location, Doss rebukes him: "It’s all mirage stuff" (84). Not put off by Doss’s lack of enthusiasm for the imaginary, Stobo entertains the thought of being rich. "Balls!" she ridicules. The analogy between the imaginary and masculine wholeness ridiculed here by Doss is given further credence when Stobo speaks of the tangibility of the stone’s significance: "I want something I can grip in my hand, like so" (85). The stone signifies a phallic virility that, like his penis, is tangible, easy to handle. Uninterested in its geological significance, Wafer interprets the stone as "a symbol" (80) of good
fortune. The stone inspires a sexual response from Moon. After he hands the stone back to Wafer, Moon began rubbing his hands together, strong neat hands of a quick and carnal presence, his eyes blanked out with possibilities. (81)

The connection between the economy and male hands appears in Gabby's truncated history of her family's finances. Economic security comes from Gabby's mother's father:

a South Yarra merchant of no conscience and much money. He fell off his luxury yacht in Samoa when I was five. Well, mother said between bouts of prescriptive tears, that solves the boarding-school problem for both of you. Father was rubbing his hands quietly, too. The whole property began to look up. (4)

Throughout the novel, the activity of rubbing hands is linked with inflation. Stroking the economy is akin to stroking himself. The imaginary relation between Wafer's stone and economic plenitude parallels has a similar effect on the men as the penis/phallus conflation: it corrupts their perception to the point where everything is defined according to presence and absence, inflation and deflation.

7. Cock Fighting

Masculine stupefaction, as I mentioned earlier, follows the revelation of Archie's sex/gender disjunction. Amongst the men, Archie's cross-dressing promotes instability because Archie, ostensibly a "man," is ultimately not whole, a disclosure which
generates the fear that their identities, too, may not be entirely whole, and this precipitates the need to reconfirm their investment in a masculine subjectivity that denigrates femininity. The men consider the penis to be the natural referent of masculine identity and the essential foundation of patriarchal power. Archie's ruse dislodged the centrality of the penis, severing the indices of masculinity from its ultimate source and mocking its indispensability. In the men's view, someone already castrated passed as a man. In response to Archie's threat to their sense of physical wholeness and subjective coherence, the men readily seek out and embrace those ideological representations that symbolically resolve these contradictions and produce the illusion of a unified, stable subjectivity. (Ebert, "The Romance of Patriarchy" 38)

Instrumental in reviving the turgidity that confirms their identity and power is the transformation of men into bulls, the phallus as an uncastrated male bovine, symbol of genital and reproductive prowess. Reviving "the possibility of castration" ("The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" 176) is the solution to the economic and gender crises, a strategy which heightens the men's genital narcissism and results in their submission to the authority of the economy.

The men stage a ritual which focuses on the construction of gender identity and aims to preserve "the symbolic field in its present phallocentricity" (Silverman 149), where masculine wholeness is predicated on feminine lack, where mateship excludes women and the feminine. The men attempt to consolidate the gender
arrangements and cultural norms sanctioned by the castration complex. The castration complex, Charles Bernheimer argues, derives its theoretical power from its ability to articulate the field of difference, defining presence and absence, wholeness and lack, masculine and feminine, desire and the Law.

Designed to reinforce masculine identity, the bullfight ritual is masculine in many ways. First, it takes place outside, although it remains near the great interior space of masculinity, the front-bar. Second, traditionally the event excludes women from watching; the presence of Doss, Gabby, and Emmy indicates the waning influence of patriarchal authority to regulate women's presence at masculine events. Third, physical prowess resolves the contest.

The mechanical tendency on the part of the men to conflate the penis and the phallus is made most explicit in the bull fight. Compensating for their sense of lack, the horned headgear literalizes the idea that men have dicks for brains. The "taurine-comic" (124) metamorphosis dramatizes male power and functions as a rejoinder to the havoc of Archie's cross-dressing. Economically threatened men reaffirm their masculine identity by watching two men strip to their jocks, don kneepads, fasten bullock-horns to their heads, and crawl "round the roadway on all fours to the mocking shouts of the men" (119). Where Archie undermines categories, the men attempt to restore. The fight licences transformation so long as it is done in the name of traditional values, just as speaking on behalf of "family values" licences politicians to vent vicious prejudices. The competitors strap "bullock-horns" (119) to their foreheads, an obvious attempt to
symbolize phallic power; as farmers, though, the audience would know that "bullocks" are castrated bulls. Ironically, their symbol of phallic plentitude reinforces rather than repudiates their castration. Another reading of the symbolic horns suggests masculine inadequacy: Gabby considers the amusing possibilities of the "cuckold symbolism of their crazy heads" (124), as though the men are dupes incapable of commanding fidelity from their wives.

The rhetoric of entertainment informs explanations of the castration ritual's origins. When Wafer, restrained between two guards, having witnessed Moon's victory over Cropper, asks whether the ritual is a "town custom," Councillor Brim replies:

"Every couple of years, mate. Depends on the temper of the town. Haven't had one for three of four years now, but we've been doing it as long as I can remember just before New Year."

"But what for?"

"Don't bloody ask stupid questions. What for! Who knows what for. It amuses the boys. It's our town's special little thing. Tradition, that's what it is. Every town likes its little bit of tradition. Have something to mark it out. This is ours." (122)

By stressing the amusement factor of the ritual, Brim completely overlooks the economic and cultural reasons behind it. In contrast to Brim's cultural amnesia, Gabby's father provides economic reasons of a qualified sort: "it all started during the Depression. Home-made entertainment. Chance of a bet" (120). Having, as Archie did, "two bob each way" (19), is not the purpose of the ritual. It determines matters one way or another, for castration
revolves around either/or, winner/loser, masculine/feminine. Prising information from Wafer regarding his mineral find becomes the occasion for reaffirming masculinity and excluding femininity.

For beating Cropper, Moon has the right to challenge anybody as his opponent. Everyone knows that Wafer, pinned between two guards, will be chosen. The deadly duel parallels Moon’s attempted rape of Emmie, as the repetition of the words in both scenes makes apparent. Just as he straddled Emmie’s clothes, Moon "straddled" Wafer and "made the most delicate cuts across neck and throat" (127), a gesture which excites the crowd but renders Emmie mute, for she realizes what is going to happen. The town requires sexual submission from Wafer, as Gabby describes Moon’s thighs "as unrelenting as a lover’s," his head movements as "a sixth kiss-like sweep of the horn-tips," and Wafer "tensed below [Moon] in almost copulatory position" (128). At this point, Moon stops. Brim urges Wafer to "tell us" and "show us" where he found his stone. Oblivious to what is being asked of him, Wafer asks his inquisitors to be more specific with their request; Moon responds by applying the horn-tips to his neck and whispering, "The sapphire." Under pressure, Wafer promises to show them. It’s a promise he cannot keep. Then Moon takes it upon himself to castrate the man he has feminized:

he began to edge back down Wafer’s body, back off the groin, the thighs, forcing Wafer’s leg apart until he was kneeling above them, his hands clamped heavily just above the knees. (129)

Punishing Wafer for a rape he didn’t commit, Moon lunges at Wafer’s genitals:
"And this," he got out finally and so clearly it fed the yearning group, "is for Emmie," and the points swept down abruptly and viciously into Wafer's groin. (129)

Moon literalises the mutilation crucial to establishing the patriarchal field of difference. Believing that those who deviate from cultural norms of masculinity must experience the "loss patriarchy tropes as woman" (Tyler 163), Moon attempts to gore Wafer's genitals. The point goes into Wafer's thigh and, before Moon can get in another gore, Stobo and Cropper intervene. "Certain things are sacred," says Cropper, before kicking Moon (130). Not only is the penis considered inviolable, but also as a symbol of the country: "The old crown jewels," says Jam, adding: "They ought to be on the national emblem along with the beer can" (130).

As with the castration complex, the process of looking is of paramount significance. Not only does the ritual allow a return to the easy legibility of the body, it inscribes the body:

A long-winded scribble of blood ran down Cropper's left arm, dribbling post-scripts as he crawled, spotting black in the lighter patches of dirt. (119)

Unlike Archie, who appropriated the signs and clothing of masculinity, the men undress to expose the natural and essential basis of their masculinity - the body - and limit opportunities for fraudulently passing as a man. Hence the importance of looking at the near-naked bodies. Exclusive for the "boys," the amusing custom places a premium on looking. In between erotic yelping, Gabby's father's repeatedly insists on looking at the grappling
males: "oh God! Look at that, will you? ... oh God, look!"

The ethics and codes of mateship confirm male power, conserve patriarchy, and affirm and conceal the hegemonic power of the ruling class. Traditionally, the values of egalitarianism, loyalty, and equality inscribed into "national mateship" (148) are denied to squatters, but at the ritual the Jerrolds, members of an anachronistic squattocracy, merge anonymously with the male spectators. Divisive economic and social barriers are overlooked, for the men "derive validation and support from" witnessing the castration ritual "at a psychic if not an economic or social level" (Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics 141). Similarly, when the competitors disrobe they shed the uniforms or garments that confer rank and, in Cropper's case, authority, and stand before each other as men. Temporarily, there is equality among all men, fraternity among mates. Against Moon, Cropper is no longer protected by his status as representative of law and order; hence the near-unanimous support for Moon. Mateship, Kay Schaffer argues in Woman and the Bush, is a "refuge" and "retreat" whose "condition and possibility" (101) depends on excluding femininity: not only women, but squatters, Aborigines, Asian immigrants, homosexuals, urban bourgeoisie. The Allbut tradition occurs in an exclusively male setting, what Gabby calls a "loathsome male freemasonry" (120). Her presence, father indicates, breaks a taboo: "Women usually aren't in on this. Not even your mother knew" (120). Their obsession with repressing femininity, whether it be women, the land, or Wafer, blinds the men to the historical, economic, and ideological forces marginalizing them. As Schaffer puts it:
For the bushman, the land continues to be the enemy when, in fact, economic and political forces are more strongly at work. In the end, the nationalist myth perpetuates a ruling class ideology. (101)

Though the men gain nothing from the existence of the squattocracy, they nonetheless defend it. For example, a travelling circus forced, because a van overturns, to camp outside of Allbut are told to move elsewhere because the land they are on "is private grazing land" (61). Cropper backs him up on this score and forces them to move on. Similarly, the aim of the ritual is to extract economically beneficial information from Wafer which will make the town attractive to foreign investment. They are willing to submit to the logic of the economy, to feminise themselves so they can castrate others.

8. Conclusion

Thea Astley demonstrates, with her usual acerbity, the ideological function of the theory of castration, its centrality, as a marker of sexual difference, in perpetuating patriarchal society, and the way in which men use castration to maintain economic, political, and social order. For Cropper, Moon, and the rest of the men of Allbut, the theory of castration safeguards masculine privilege and allows them to feel superior to and scornful of all those they consider to be castrated: women, Aborigines, immigrants, Wafer.

Thematically and stylistically, An Item from the Late News is continuous with Astley's earlier novels - its bleak resolution
reminiscent of *A Kindness Cup*, its close focus on small town intolerance recalls *A Descant for Gossips* - but most particularly *The Acolyte*, with which it shares a first-person narrator. Similarly, the motivation for narration in *An Item from the Late News* duplicates that of *The Acolyte*. Yet these similarities pale beside the key differences: the importance of the female narrator and her self-reflexive interrogation of her narrative combined with the themes of marginalization and masquerade make *An Item from the Late News* the central novel in Astley’s career. In conclusion, *An Item from the Late News* remains one of Astley’s best and, in narrative terms, most formally ambitious novels, its only equal being *Reaching Tin River*. Examining the themes of alienation, masculinity, marginalization, and masquerade from a female point of view controls, as it were, the shape the narrative will take, its dissonant form. The narrative enacts the tensions between what the genre of confession demands and her position as a female subject. Moreover, the novel foregrounds what will predominate in Astley’s subsequent fiction: the female "I."
CHAPTER SIX

Reaching Tin River:
"Heading for The Womb and Beyond"

1. Introduction

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the number of articles on Thea Astley's fiction increase nominally and the critical emphasis shift its focus from examining the misfit, the existential criticism typified by the pioneering work of Brian Matthews, to highlighting, with rare exception, the latent or explicit feminism of her novels. While Astley's work has not been claimed nor championed in the same way as that of Elizabeth Jolley, Helen Garner, Christina Stead, Beverley Farmer, or Barbara Hanrahan, feminist critics are taking it up, despite Kerryn Goldsworthy's speculation "that Astley would hate to be taken up by a certain kind of mainline feminist academic almost as much as Christina Stead did" ("Thea Astley's Writing" 480). And they are placing Astley within a feminist context, rebutting earlier interpretations of Astley's work, and reevaluating her regularly vilified poetic prose.

Prior to the mid-1980s, surprisingly few critics thought to consider Astley as a feminist or feminist writer. In "Thea Astley: 'Before Feminism . . . After Feminism'" (1987), Matthews emphasises Astley's distance from mainstream feminism. Notwithstanding "the encouraging and supportive atmosphere" that the Women's Liberation
Movement created for women writers, Astley remained "something of a maverick even in the eyes of her sisters" (16). By virtue of writing before feminism, focusing on male characters, and perceiving "a world disordered," where characters, unable to cope with the inexorable "maelstrom" of existence, "can't make sense of the context they've been given," Astley is at variance "with the world-view of the second-wave feminist writers" (21). Astley herself has set her work apart from that of other women writers:

When the feminist movement of the late sixties started and women were writing about menstruation, and how they felt about being pregnant and having orgasms, I thought, 'I can't do this. I don't know how to express myself as a woman'. (Baker 43)

Laurie Clancy uses negative prefixes to distinguish Astley's feminism from the supposedly bitter and selfconscious Women's Liberation Movement. He refers to the "explicit and unembittered feminism" ("The Fiction of Thea Astley" 46) of The Nell Dressed Explorer (1962), a point he repeats in his review of Reaching Tin River (1990):

the unselfconscious feminism that runs through all her work and that emerged explicitly in the satiric figure of her third novel, The Well-Dressed Explorer, is more nakedly present in this novel than before. ("Astley's Joyous Indifference" 10)

Interviewed at the time of Reaching Tin River's publication, Astley confirmed Clancy's perception: "I seem to be getting more feminist as I'm getting older" (Sorensen 11). Unlike Stead, hostile to feminism, Astley appears quite comfortable nowadays with the term.²
Long overdue, the feminist reassessment of Astley's work draws attention to the way Astley's characters and narratives negotiate the "malestorm" of patriarchal culture. Three appraisals of Australian women's writing discuss the feminist context and content of her work: Margaret Smith's "Australian Women Novelists of the 1970s" (1985), Pam Gilbert's *Coming Out from Under* (1988), and Jennifer Strauss's "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels? An Australian Perspective" (1993). Astley's worldview, they argue, is not as separate as Matthews and Clancy suggest and her characters are aware of the patriarchal context they live in.

Responding to Matthews's concluding remark in his 1973 article that Astley's novels "stand as an unnervingly truthful perception of what it is like to live in a time of disintegration" (173), Elizabeth Perkins argues that disintegration, central to Astley's characters and her texts, is not existential but specific to women:

> there is sociological, literary and personal evidence to show that a woman's awareness of a world shaped and ordered by the needs and priorities of men may lead to a persistent sense of disintegration. ("A Life of its Own" 12)

Similarly, studies concentrating solely on Astley locate the "feminist strands" (Lindsay 119) of Astley's work or maintain that her perspective is feminist (Haynes 139).

The most fascinating aspect of the feminist interest in Astley's work, however, is not so much the emphasis on the feminist content but the renewed regard for Astley's poetic prose, routinely dismissed as excessive and violent, decorative and disruptive, and extravagant and difficult to the point of irritation. Some critics
proposes that Astley's dissonant style evidences "a ‘feminine' awareness" (Perkins, "A Life of its Own" 13) or "a return to the undifferentiated semiotic which underlies the symbolic order" (Kirkby 42), thus suggesting that Astley is doing precisely what she has repeatedly said she cannot: express herself as a woman. Stylistically, Kirkby argues, Astley had been doing so all along: The Acolyte (1972) "powerfully evokes the suppressed pre-Oedipal maternal rhythms" (Kirkby 40). This reading of Astley's fiction is incompatible with Astley's negative representation of the womb in An Item from the Late News (1982), Reaching Tin River, and Vanishing Points (1992). This chapter will examine the critical responses to Astley's poetic style, the concept of women's writing, and argue that Astley rejects the pre-oedipality that haunts theories of women's writing. In Reaching Tin River and Vanishing Points, Astley plots resistance not in a return to the a-mazing pre-Oedipal space, as Belle attempts in Reaching Tin River and Mac in Vanishing Points, but in social engagement.

2. "A withering, twisting verbiage": Astley's poetic style

Before she wrote novels, Astley wrote poems. She attributes her distinctive style to her love of poetry:

I often read a lot of poetry when I'm writing a novel.

I like poetry. I feel it stimulates me. The metaphor probably rubs off. (Willbanks 40)

There is no "probably" about it; unfortunately for Astley, the metaphors that rub off on her rub up critics the wrong way. Reviewers loathe Astley's style, and Astley knows it: "I've always
been torn apart because of my style" (Baker 37). Her style alienated reviewers - including her supporters: in 1969, Clancy called Astley "an exasperating novelist" (417). Described as incoherent, meaningless, lush, disruptive, ugly, and tortured, Astley’s poetic style intensified rather than lessened her alienation, thus conflicting with her desire, expressed within the "writing as a man" paradigm, for literary acceptance.

The critical approval given to the poetic aspect of Astley’s language by those who reviewed Girl With Monkey (1958) was, until recently, an aberration. Those who reviewed Girl With a Monkey were enthusiastic for and tolerant of Astley’s style, noting the influence of modernists James Joyce and e. e. cummings, both famed for their fondness for puns, extraordinary experiments with grammar, and unusual yet rhythmic syntax. Familiar with "the weird diction" of Astley’s poems, Donald Maynard, writing for the South Australian cultural quarterly Australian Letters, was unruffled by Astley’s "Cummings-like desire to choose the strange and the beautiful in prose diction" (47). Laurence Collinson in his Overland review accepts Astley’s stylistic excesses as "faults of enthusiasm." These faults did not stop him from concluding, prophetically, that her first novel "shows Astley struggling towards a style which will be totally her own" (48).

After the publication of Girl With a Monkey, reviewers, unsure of Astley’s talent but appalled by her excess, either qualified their praise or withheld it. R. G. Geering, in his review of A Descant for Gossips, noted Astley’s "highly charged, poetic style" (53) and how "[a] poet’s love of words leads occasionally to the
search for the unusual, and to some strange coinages" (54). The reader's reaction to her search, he speculates,
is most likely to be irritation at over-writing, and surprise that such stylistic blemishes should occur in a book which is, for the most part, well written. (54)

Astley's exorbitant and prolix prose prompted Alan Davies, reviewing A Descant for Gossips for Nation to wonder:
what has happened to those old Edwardian readers whom publishing houses used to employ to tell young authors what the language will not stand? (26)

More than most Australian writers, Astley has had her unfair share of neo-Edwardians perched on her shoulder. With the dichotomy between austere/lavish ("marquisite [sic] prose" [26]) and laconic/verbose structuring his critical observations and his reference to the novel as a "triple-decker sentimental," Davies implies that Astley writes like a talkative woman; as Astley has often remarked, "I don't think men liked reading women writers, it's like listening to a woman for three hours. And they don't want to bloody do that!" (Sorensen 11).

Reviewers found Astley's style irritatingly ornate, metaphors profligate, syntax idiosyncratic, and plotting casual. By rending language and seeing what it could or could not withstand, Astley denaturalized it, which exasperated critics in the pre-postmodern literary period of the 1960s. Disapproving reviews palpitate with an intemperance equivalent, in terms of their excess, to Astley's poetic lavishness. After declaring The Well Dressed Explorer (1962) "quite impossible" because of its "empty, mannered and
pretentious" (71) style, Rosemary Wighton made the following prediction:

Miss Astley, one can only gloomily forecast, is on the downward grade as a novelist, and all because she is trying to write meaningful and impressive prose. Arch mannerisms and ellipses are not enough to convey the conviction of a deep significance, nor yet of a lofty irony. It appears that Patrick White has exercised a destructive fascination for Miss Astley.³

Obviously, Wighton was not on the judging committee for the Miles Franklin Award, the award The Well Dressed Explorer shared with George Turner's The Cupboard Under the Stairs. Incoherence typifies each Astley novel, J. F. Burrows says in his review of The Well Dressed Explorer:

If in the long run this novel, like its predecessors, wavers into incoherence it seems to be because these 'flickering glances', these 'spots of wild light', are no substitute for a steady and informing radiance.⁴

For W. A. Murray, reading The Acolyte (1972) is akin to being assaulted, the "'spots of wild light'" now a pyrotechnical fanfare:

The reader's attention is constantly assailed by an irritating display of verbal fireworks; metaphor crowds in upon metaphor to the point where the reader suspects that the author has lost sight of meaning. (72)

Abundant metaphors generate too many meanings and frustrate the possibility of aesthetic closure. Much to Nancy Keesing's annoyance, Astley persists with an "unnecessarily difficult" (21) style. Again, this criticism did not stop The Acolyte from winning
the Miles Franklin Award. By 1982, Astley’s style had not changed; neither had the critics’ impatience with it.

Not all reviewers castigated Astley’s prose or tone. Kylie Tennant (1962) and Thelma Forshaw (1968) recognised the radical quality of Astley’s poetic style, discussing it as a positive textual strategy that converged with a political strategy. Tennant posits an interconnection between the woman’s perspective, the withering style, and the crushed object in her review of *The Well Dressed Explorer*:

> Thea Astley gives a woman’s view of the life of the Australian man, sweeping over his small and feeble pretences like a crown-fire, exploding and crackling in a withering, twisting verbiage, and leaving a devastated area which was once a comfortable, philandering journalist. (509)

Tennant links the excessive wordiness of Astley’s prose to a decidedly anti-phallocentric project: deflating phallic excess, making the Australian man flaccid. For the narrator of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, one sign of Mary Carmichael’s residual fear or hatred of men is "a tendency to the caustic and satirical, rather than to the romantic, in her treatment of the other sex" (92). Tennant’s description captures the burning, severely critical flavour of Astley’s prose.⁵

Reviewing *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, Forshaw argues that a "cry of purest anger" dominates *The Well Dressed Explorer* and, furthermore, that "[a]n eldritch laughter is a recurring element in her novels" (22). The emphasis on the strange, unnatural laughter pervading Astley’s novels is suggestive, because, directed
mainly towards men, it implies that Astley is conscious of herself as a woman writer. Women writers, according to the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own*, should "learn to laugh, without bitterness, at the vanities - say rather at the peculiarities, for it is a less offensive word - of the other sex" (90). Laughing without bitterness is, by the time of *Reaching Tin River*, not possible. Belle recalls an anecdote told at a party:

Frank [Hassler] . . . told the rapt group how his eighty-year-old dad had gone into shock after his wife died. No, not grief, Frank explained. He simply didn’t know how the stove worked. Imagine - and we all imagined - he’d been an industrial chemist for fifty years and the mystique behind the browned chop and the cream potato eluded him. The women’s laughter, I remember, was tinged with sourness. (213)

3. Stylistic and Ideological Transformation

Some critics argue for the stylistic continuity of Astley’s work. The novellas of *Vanishing Points*, Robert Ross argues, "do not differ stylistically from the earlier works." Certainly, each Astley novel overflows with metaphors, literary quips, nimble punning, grotesques, and memorable place names. Theme and content are similar: no Astley novel would be complete without its dissection of masculinity and femininity, generous preoccupation with marginal figures, scathing observations of social mores, and generally horrible remarks on contemporary rock music (Astley never loved Elvis). If Astley’s style has remained consistent, as Ross
claims, the recent adulation signalled by the 1992 *Australian Book Review* issue and the acknowledgment by reviewers of her status as a respected figure requires explanation. For Ross, critics have changed, not Astley: "It might not be entirely wrong to say that it took Australian literature almost thirty years to catch up with Astley’s writing" ("Thea Astley’s Long Struggle" 506). In her survey of the critical response to Astley, Perkins suggests that the dominance of a realist and masculine reading practice is the chief reason for the cultural paralexia identified by Ross: "it is possible that [Astley’s novels] are beyond the reach of the more usual modes of criticism" ("A Life of its Own" 11). Traditional approaches which "quest for ‘unity’ or ‘coherence’ totally fail to produce adequate readings of" (17) *A Kindness Cup*, hence Perkins’s deconstructive reading. Obsessed with coherence, stability, and meaning, Astley’s early reviewers could not, in Perkins’s view, read or make sense of Astley.

Others, pointing to the novels published after *An Item from the Late News* (1982), remark on the stylistic differences of the later works, especially their accessibility. Citing *It’s Raining in Mango* (1987) and *Reaching Tin River* as examples, Ray Willbanks suggested to Astley that they "are in terms of style more easily accessible than the earlier novels" (41). Astley agreed, contributing the change to the caning dished out by critics impatient with her luxuriant style and her desire to ensure that her style did not impede meaning: "it was no good writing about the problems of Aborigines in prose so imagistic that no one would get the message."
Feminist readings of Astley's work fall into two groups; those, like Strauss and Lindsay, who subscribe to the idea of ideological and stylistic transformation, and those, like Kirkby and Perkins, who do not. The former mode of criticism divides Astley's later work from her earlier work and emphasises content and tone over style. The latter mode of criticism stresses the ideological implications of Astley's style and does not make a chronological division. Focusing specifically on the language of Astley's novels, Perkins and Kirkby revalue the poetic style, reveal its subversive possibilities, and argue that her writing practice exemplifies the "feminine," "feminist," "maternal," or "semiotic" aspect of language which the "masculine," masculinist," "paternal," or "symbolic" order seeks to conquer and repress.

Critics who stress Astley's feminist consciousness often focus on her novels from _It's Raining in Mango_ onward to _Coda_ (1994), explaining that the previous novels, excepting _Girl with a Monkey_ (1958) and _A Descant for Gossips_ (1960), concentrate on male characters and "dismiss the female characters much as a chauvinist society would dismiss them" (Lindsay 122). The feminist consciousness of the later works, evidenced by the "range of female experience in _Reaching Tin River_," differs from "the claustrophobic world of feminine malice" (Strauss 50) displayed in _A Descant for Gossips_. For Strauss, "Astley's perception of the complexity and interest of women's lives has grown with her last two novels" (50), a view corroborated by feminist writer Janine Burke who, reviewing _Vanishing Points for Overland_, suggests that Astley's "relationship with her readers has changed." After the "struggle" of reading _An Item from the Late News_, Burke approached _Reaching Tin River_ "with
trepidation," only to find the novel full of "[l]argesse, humour and a cracking pace. An invitation to share" (81).

The importance of the mother figure in Astley's later novels confirms Strauss's observation regarding Astley's ideological transformation. The "mom-ism" evident in _A Descant for Gossips_ and _The Slow Natives_ (1965) is no longer present to the same degree.

In those novels, femininity and mass culture are lumped together, usually embodied in the figure of the suburban mother, vapid, morally-depleted, and materialist, who watches television, reads women's magazines, and is obsessed with cosmetics, clothing, and gossip. In _The Slow Natives_, Keith Leveson blames his mother for rendering his father "pantless," thereby denying him a model of authoritative and repressive masculinity necessary for his heterosexual development. Iris Leveson is also held accountable for the rampant materialism and superficial popular culture overwhelming Australia during the post-war period. Depicted as both castrated and castrators in the early fiction, mothers are represented as engaging, forthright, and liberated in _It's Raining in Mango, Reaching Tin River, Vanishing Points_, and _Coda_, less concerned with furniture and fads than with independence, social justice, and speaking out.

In _Vanishing Points_ Julie Truscott's mother, "about twenty years ahead of her time" (199), supports Julie's decision to leave her husband:

Mother wrote sympathetically and with understanding. You know dear, she said, we both happened to have married very boring men. My generation was socialised to hang in but I don't see why you should . . . The notion that women must always be the captured skin, cured and turned
into a rug on the dining-room floor is so passé, isn't it, dear? (199)

Like Strauss, Lindsay interprets Astley's fiction in terms of ideological transformation. According to Lindsay, Astley "reject[s] the more masculine aspects of Christianity and celebrate[s] instead the particularity of women's experience" (119). Astley's "strongly woman based" (122) view of spirituality is feminist.9 Reading Astley's novels chronologically to chart the shift in Astley's religious sensibility, Lindsay implicates Astley's novels in the generation and development of "Feminist Theology and Spirituality in Australia."10 To develop her thesis that Astley's fiction parallels the progress of secular feminism, Lindsay represses the feminism of the early fiction:

The feminist strands I am drawing out of her work are barely present in the earliest books, which were written well before second-wave feminism and feminist theology washed over Australia. (119)

However, as Chapters Two, Three, and Four argued, the feminist strands are very much present in her early novels. Moreover, the early criticism also implies that they are present. At the conclusion of "Life in the Eye of the Hurricane," Matthews compares Astley to Thomas Keneally and Barry Oakley, two writers concerned with Catholic experience, and argues that in their novels "the Catholic orientation to life . . . [is] continually undergoing a process of tacit or explicit critical evaluation" (170). Though Matthews does not explicitly refer to Astley's critical evaluation as feminist, the examples mustered from Girl With a Monkey and The Slow Natives to highlight Astley's dissatisfaction with and
criticisms of the Catholic church imply that it is. Matthews focuses on Elsie's memory of going to confession:

As an adolescent she had suffered the tortures of the damned about sex, chastity being ever-present with such swollen-to-larger-than-life proportions she thought of nothing else. Should she have happened to bump into men in crowded trams she would rush home to plead forgiveness of the Almighty and literally scrub herself all over, fearful of sins of the flesh, of a vague thing known as impregnation but more starkly to her as 'having babies'." (129; quoted in part in Matthews 170)

Furthermore, with her representation of the "disintegration of Father Lingard, Father Lake and above all, Sister Matthew, there is a tough indictment of a Church" (172). The disintegration of a nun "above all" indicts the Church. Repressing sexuality and conforming to the Church's suffocating ideal of asexual chastity is dangerous for women, the sections of the novel dealing with the nuns demonstrate. Nor is Sister Matthew the only one to feel the pressure: Sister Beatrice is "stuffed redly with unsaid words" (The Slow Natives 139). Yet for Lindsay The Slow Natives "possibly represents Astley's most masculinist reading of Christianity" (120). When Lindsay compares the two narratives of Vanishing Points, she forwards a view of "the female way" (122) compatible with patriarchal stereotypes, arguing that "Mac's is the way of the mind, Julie's is the way of the emotions and the body" (122). Between the two, Astley "favours Julie's way, the female way" (122). By associating women with the body, emotions, nature,
charity, and love, Lindsay reinforces a stereotype of femininity which Astley attacks in much of her fiction.¹¹

4. French Feminism

When Thea Astley made her remarks in the 1980s concerning gender and writing, the idea of *écriture féminine*, feminine writing, expounded by French feminists, Hélène Cixous in particular, enjoyed critical currency among North American and British feminisms.¹² The other approach to Astley, influenced by developments in French feminism, focuses on her poetic language and unravels the "feminine" strand in her work, seeing the ruptures, contradictions, and dissonance of Astley's prose as a subversive threat to patriarchal order.¹³ According to Cixous, poetic language resists the oppressive symbolic, disrupts the meanings and significations of patriarchy, and releases what the symbolic represses but does not obliterate: instincts, connection with the mother, and heterogeneity. As Cixous puts it: "poetry exists only by taking strength from the unconscious, and the unconscious, the other country without boundaries, is where the repressed survive - woman" (*The Newly Born Woman* 98).

Like Cixous, Julia Kristeva counteracts the tyrannical symbolic by returning to the position anterior to it: the womb. In "From One Identity to An Other," Kristeva links the semiotic with the *chora*, which, in Plato's *Timeus*, is an unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connotated
to such an extent that it merits 'not even the rank of syllable'. (133)
Kristeva associates semiotic activity with instinctual pre-Oedipal drives and the child's relation to the mother's body. Kristeva proposes "that there is within poetic language . . . a heterogeneousness to meaning and signification," an unsettling surplus which is "detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences" (133). Entry into "the symbolic (i.e., language as nomination, sign, and syntax)" (136) splits the original state of perpetual heterogeneity. The symbolic and semiotic coexist in a "bipolar economy," with the semiotic, manifesting itself in rhythms, intonations, musicality, and nonsense effects (134), straining against the symbolic's linguistic palisade, which, despite semiotic pressure, stands firm:

However elided, attacked, or corrupted the symbolic function might be in poetic language, due to the impact of semiotic processes, the symbolic function maintains its presence. (134)

In "The Laugh of Medusa," Cixous summarises the reciprocally confirming relationship between writing and reason, logocentrism and phallocentrism, as one of complicity:

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been at one with the phallocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism. (249)
Cixous proposes that "wherever discourse is organized" "Man" is situated over "Woman" (The Newly Born Woman 63). The valued term depends on the devalued term, even as it represses it. The repressive violence inscribed within the dialectic sustains patriarchy because meaning "only gets constituted in a movement in which one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favour of the other" ("Castration or Decapitation?" 45): woman is destroyed in favour of man. The "Man/Woman" metaphor permeates philosophy, criticism, history, and literature, wherein activity is valued over passivity, thought over feeling, the abstract over the concrete, theory over experience, culture over nature, father over mother, and so on. Critical of the manner in which these oppositions organize thought, social practices, and social arrangements, Cixous deconstructs the destructive dialectic of "'the' couple, man/woman" (64). The binary distorts relationships, alienates women from their bodies, generates violent conflict, and results in death.

Reason, objectivity, repression, linearity, coherence, and "representationalism" ("The Laugh of Medusa" 250) characterise masculine writing. Cixous encloses words associated with the oppressive masculine economy - logic, theoretical (251), truth, and total (254) - in quotation marks to suggest her distaste for and distance from what these words denote. In "Castration or Decapitation?," terms associated with literary realism (order, unity, coherence, and structure) are denigrated, as is the idea of omniscience, the obsession with origins, and the desire for "closure" (53). In reinforcing sexual opposition rather than sexual difference, the masculine economy governing writing represses the feminine. Women's writing, Cixous argues in "The
Laugh of Medusa," constitutes the precondition necessary for radical and fundamental transformation of social structures: I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural - hence political, typically masculine - economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak - this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (249)

The site for this change is the woman’s body. Arguing that feminist and Marxist critiques of motherhood and maternity constitute a "new form of repression" (The Newly Born Woman 89), Cixous abandons "the taboo of the pregnant woman" (90) and recuperates the diffuse and intense bodily experiences of motherhood. She uses the figure of the "mother" and her bodily experience of maternity in a metaphorical capacity to suggest the relation between the body and writing:
woman is never far from the 'mother' (I do not mean the role but the 'mother' as no-name and as source of goods). There is always at least a little good mother milk left in her. She writes with white ink. (94)

The mother's relation to the child in her womb and the drives associated with maternity - anal, oral, vocal, "the gestational" (90) - become a model of creativity directly opposed to the phallocentric economy and aesthetic:

It is not only a question of the feminine body's extra resource, this specific power to produce something living of which her flesh is the locus, not only a question of a transformation of rhythms, exchanges, of relationships to space, of the whole perceptive system, but also of the irreplaceable experience of those moments of stress, of the body's crises, of that work that goes on peacefully for a long time only to burst out in that surpassing moment, the time of childbirth. In which she lives as if she were larger or stronger than herself. It is also the experience of a 'bond' with the other, all that comes through in the metaphor of bringing into the world. How could the woman, who has experienced the not-me within me, not have a particular relationship to the written? (90)

The unphallocentric sense of self generated by experience with the other gives women a special relationship to textuality, which, as the metaphors suggest, will incorporate the bodily rhythms and pulsations systematically repressed in phallocentric culture, and
disrupt or "burst" subjective boundaries between self and other, and, by extension, linguistic boundaries.

In contrast to the repressive masculine economy, écriture féminine is open, fluid, plural, and "will always exceed the discourse governing the phallocentric system" (92). The definitive "will always" guarantees écriture féminine a continual subversiveness. In addition to allowing women to "'realize' the decensored relations of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being," the act of writing allows women to "forge for herself the antilogos weapon" ("The Laugh of Medusa" 250) necessary to shatter coherence, unity, knowledge, and mastery. Textual disruption and dislocation fuel Cixous's theory. Women will sweep "away syntax" and "wreck partitions, classes, rhetorics, regulations and codes" (256). Using an image of the woman writer as a bird and thief, Cixous imagines women's writing will take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (258)

At the beginning of "The Laugh of Medusa," which Marks and de Courtivron situate appropriately enough in the "Utopias" section of New French Feminisms, Cixous cites two aims of her manifesto, deconstructive and prophetic: "to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project" (245). Oracular, Cixous dares to imagine what the consequences of risking the other would involve and what the implications of écriture féminine would be. Utopias are founded on an imaginary ideal of perfection; Cixous's
vision is founded on the imagined perfection and freedom of the Imaginary, the period prior to the subject's entry into the inherently repressive and phallocentric Symbolic. For Lacan, the Imaginary is a time before the child is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject (Écrits 2).

Cixous harks back to the indescribable pleasures, drives, and babble of the pre-Symbolic:

The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. (The Newly Born Woman 93).

The relationship between maternity and écriture féminine is valorized as a Voice singing because song is less alienating than the repressive Symbolic order of language.

The political implications of this theory are negative. The exuberant claims made for écriture féminine as a strategy of resistance have been contested. The other contributor to The Newly Born Woman, Catherine Clément, dismissed Cixous's project as neither practical nor relevant to contemporary political activism. Nostalgic for the hysteric and the heterogeneity of the Imaginary, Cixous remains indifferent to struggles taking place outside of the seminar: class struggle, women's liberation movement in France or, as Clément points out, anti-imperialist movements in Indo-China (160). Postmodern pessimism is most noticeable in Cixous's reflections on the nature of power and the impossibility of resistance. Ideology for Cixous is "a kind of vast membrane
enveloping everything" (145). The conception of power and knowledge as impermeable and always negative means that Cixous cannot see, let alone understand, opposition to power. The editorial collective of Questions féministes objected to Cixous’s ahistorical emphasis on women’s bodies, whereby she junked "historical and dialectical materialism in order to give voice to the naked truth of women’s eternal bodies" (218). They also repudiated écriture féminine’s spontaneous and unmediated relation to the rhythms, diffusions, and pleasures of the body: "there is no such thing as a direct relation to the body" (219).

The maternal metaphor, valuable as it is for concentrating attention on repressed or taboo experiences and for its critique of the self/other split that structures patriarchal thought, has been criticized too. Domna C. Stanton looks at the difficulties posed by Cixous’s images, particularly "[t]he hidden ontotheology of the maternal metaphor" (161). Cixous’s "idealistic" use of metaphor ignores the problematic implications of metaphoricity. As the trope of similitude, affirms the verb to be - A is (like) B - or the notion of ‘being as’, and thus has an ontological function, what Derrida describes as a hidden essence. (161)

Relying on similitude rather than difference, Cixous’s metaphor leads towards "essence," biology, or nature, back to where patriarchy usually situates women. The pre-oedipal bond between mother and child, the central metaphor of écriture féminine, remains snug in the utopian possibilities of the Imaginary, outside of history and before the Symbolic. For Toril Moi, Cixous’s
metaphorical return to the womb "constitute[s] a flight from the
dominant social reality" (122).

Cixous's analogy between woman's writing and maternity, and her
description of woman's jouissance as unselfish, endless,
mysterious, and excessive are "easily assimilated into a long­
standing cultural symbolization of women in Western society"
(Felski 37). Differentiating Cixous's celebration of the enigma
of écritoire féminine from phallocentric depictions of the enigma
of woman is not easy. Defining écritoire féminine is impossible,
Cixous argues, because it transcends the regulative economy
characteristic of masculine discourse. Like women, écritoire
féminine "isn't predictable, isn't knowable and is therefore very
disturbing" ("Castration or Decapitation?" 53); men have been
saying the same about women for years. As Nick Cave, in response
to a gentle query regarding the misogyny of his recorded work, puts
it: "With women there's an unplumbable mystery, which I don't
really understand."¹⁸

Cixous emphasises "the repressive and alienating aspects of the
entry into language" and downplays "the necessary and enabling
nature of this process as a means to the construction of a stable
identity and an avoidance of psychosis" (Felski 40). Moreover, the
"anti-logos" strategy heralded by Cixous evacuates positive meaning
and oppositional value from concepts like concepts, truth,
objectivity, knowledge, and totality. Theories which aim for a
systematic understanding of the totality of social arrangements
Cixous repudiates, along with forms of political organization and
practices which, on the basis of that knowledge, attempt to change
social structures.¹⁹ Generalizing concepts which enable critique
and allow subjects to engage in collective political practice ("capitalism" for the working class, "patriarchy" for feminists, "disco" for punks) are for Cixous repressive, responsible for totalitarian horrors. Subversion is still possible, but the revolution, because of the redundancy of political organizations and political action, will be textual, "a new insurgent writing" ("The Laugh of Medusa" 250). Semioticians playfully subverting linguistic structures will lead the revolutionary vanguard.

More than once has Fredric Jameson defended the idea of theory. In "Marxism and Postmodernism," Jameson argues for the positive aspect of cognitive knowledge and totalizing thought:

In the old days, abstraction was surely one of the strategic ways in which phenomena, particularly historical phenomena, could be estranged and defamiliarized; when one is immersed in the immediate - the year-by-year experience of cultural and informational messages, of successive events, of urgent priorities - the abrupt distance afforded by an abstract concept, a more global characterization of the secret affinities between those apparently autonomous and unrelated domains, and of the rhythms and hidden sequences of things we normally remember only in isolation and one by one, is a unique resource. (33)

Other changes accompany the "stigmatization of the concept of totality and of the project of totalizing thought" ("Cognitive Mapping" 354). Emphasis shifts from a consideration of production to consumption, signified to signifier, labour to discourse, need to desire, use-value to exchange-value, collectivity to consensus,
political economy to cultural politics, global theory to local analytics, historical materialism to bodily matterism. Rejecting theory, feminists argue, perpetuates exploitation. "Why is it," Nancy Hartsock queries, that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainly emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect. (163-64)

For social transformation to take place, Hartsock continues, "we need to be assured that some systematic knowledge about our world and ourselves is possible" (171).

Convinced that realist representation and patriarchy are connected, Cixous fetishizes the radical potential of écriture féminine, claiming that it is inherently revolutionary: "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive" ("The Laugh of Medusa" 258). Because of the conspiratorial alliance between language and society, what Felski calls the "vague homology between literary structures and social and political structures (such as realism and patriarchy)" (8), to rupture one is to rupture the other. To be anti-logocentric is to be anti-phallocentric. Disrupting the sentence, overturning narratives, splintering masculine forms, upsetting representationalism, and sweeping away grammar will
fracture and transform the foundation of society. Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* "hypostatizes the 'feminine,' subversive quality of the polysemic text that undermines the linguistic conventions of a phallocentric symbolic order" (Felski 4).

5. Exploring the "Feminine": Perkins, Gilbert, Kirkby

The concept of textual disruption, theorised as "female awareness," "the 'feminine',' or "the semiotic," guides the alternative approach to Astley's novels favoured by Perkins, Gilbert, and Kirkby, all of whom argue that the "feminine" strands and semiotic pulsions of Astley's textual practice unsettle the monolithic unity of the text, unlock new meanings, send signifiers into giddy orbit, and counteract the "uniaccentual" (Volosinov 23) sign with the multiaccentual. Each critic emphasizes the way Astley fractures the foundation of narrative. Because they argue for the linguistic subversiveness of Astley's texts, Perkins and Kirkby are less interested than Strauss or Lindsay in reading Astley's work chronologically in order to establish a decisive stylistic or ideological rupture: they analyze texts from the early 1970s - Perkins reads *A Kindness Cup* (1974); Kirkby, *The Acolyte* (1972).

*A Kindness Cup*, in Perkins's view, is an inherently destabilizing text, one which "undermines its own status, authority, competence and credibility" (13). The textual contradictions of *A Kindness Cup* "arise from a female awareness of the ironies inherent in the value system of the society within in which the author works" (12). According to Perkins, the novel "can only be understood in terms
of a 'feminine' awareness struggling to orientate itself in a masculinist society. Astley's work can be understood as both a specifically feminine epistemology and a mode of writing which, flaunting masculine authority, realism, and content, is "feminine."

In contrast to Perkins's implosive metaphor, Gilbert sees textual ambiguities as a molten excess that sunders narrative "coherence and unity" (113). By unravelling and clarifying the various textual threads of Astley's texts, Gilbert argues,

the 'feminine' in the text can be seen to exist: the undercurrent which constantly threatens to erupt through the glossy surface - the man's world - of the novels. Astley's excessively 'male' fiction can then indeed be re-read and the 'feminine' discovered. (113)

Discussing Beachmasters, Gilbert elaborates upon the "'feminine' strand of the novel" (127):

A half-caste, a visionary old man, an ex-whore, a Catholic priest and a British headmaster are but some of the cast of characters that Astley layers under the strata of mercenaries, political opportunists, bureaucratic cowards and gun-crazed soldiers. The 'feminine' strand of the novel lies in this direction: in the resistance to destruction and militarism, in the rupturing of the 'official story' by human cowardice or personal obsession and in the ambivalence of a revolution that sought to be decent and chivalrous. (127)

The "'feminine'" refers to a general opposition by marginal characters, male or female, to masculine destructiveness; to textual splintering that disintegrates the very logic inscribed
into official (masculine) narratives; and to an ambivalent revolution premised upon an ideal of gallantry, nobility, and honour ordinarily associated with courtly romance. Incidentally, the list of mostly male characters cited by Gilbert either confirms the view that Astley’s works are excessively male or renders such criticism redundant: if the "feminine" need not refer to women at all, why make such a big thing out of Astley’s focus on men? If the "feminine" can be discovered in any Astley text, it makes little sense to obsess over her preference for male characters, focalization, or content.

In her engaging interpretation of The Acolyte "as an exemplar of the literature of abjection" (29), a disorderly text which transgresses boundaries and dislocates identity, Joan Kirkby favours an explosive metaphor:

In terms of artistic practice, the irruption of the semiotic within a text - signalled by maximum stylistic intensity, energy, violence, a rhetoric that relates the text to poetry - represents an overthrow of the social order, an undoing of the violence previously done to the body in the acquisition of language and culture. (40)

Kirkby delineates three ways to read the abjection of women in The Acolyte: "older style feminism," which would argue that Astley "has internalised the woman-hatred of the dominant order"; psychoanalytic feminism, as evidenced by Kaja Silverman’s interpretation of "masochistic excess" in Hollywood melodrama, whereby Astley "pushes the social definition of woman as abject to breaking point, thereby exposing the inadequacy of subject positions available to women in the social order"; and, lastly,
Kristeva's articulation of abjection as having to do with feminine POWER and see the language of the novel as subversive in disrupting the border of the social order.

(38)

With reference to a "feminine" more specific than the generalized "feminine" preferred by Perkins and Gilbert, Kirkby focuses on the implications of textual disruption, relating the excess of Astley's prose to the mother and the womb.

Unlike Strauss, who looks at the feminist content of Astley's representations of the mother, Kirkby sees Astley's language as evoking the mother's body:

the style powerfully evokes the suppressed pre-Oedipal rhythms. The novel is characterised by the disruptive aspects of language which Kristeva identifies with 'the discourse of the mother'. (40)

Using the theory of abjection articulated by Kristeva in Powers of Abjection, Kirkby argues that the symbolic order, linked to the name of the father, restrains the semiotic, linked to the mother's body. The semiotic is "the pre-oedipal space of polymorphous drives, rhythms, impulses - body energy before arranged by the constraints placed on the body by family and social structures" (39). Maternal fusion is brief in duration. The "affective intensity" of memories associated with the mother and the desires of the pre-Oedipal phase are "drastically reduced by submitting them to a linguistic organization" (Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics 75), in short, "linguistically blocked" (77). Language fractures the heterogeneity of the semiotic into discrete units, thus enabling "the subject to attribute differences and
signification to what was the ceaseless heterogeneity of the chora" (Moi 162). The splitting of the semiotic and entry into the symbolic order is irreversible. The mother prepares the subject's body for the cultural order, establishing boundaries, differentiating bodily zones, directing and containing the libido, converting "incoherent energy into coherent drives which can later be culturally regulated" (Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics 155).

As incoherent energy is converted into coherent drives and structured around "particular corporal zones" (155), the subject becomes desensitised, alienated from its "original libidinal flow" (156). The symbolic establishes differences, tears the subject away from its libidinal flow and the objects it assimilates (156). Thought, logic, and language have priority over emotion, chaos, and sensory perceptions; meaning triumphs over affective intensity (102), coherence over incoherence, father over mother.

Repressed, the semiotic manifests itself indirectly, "perceived only as pulsional pressure on symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences" (Moi 162). A constant effusion of semiotic kinetic rhythm propels The Acolyte:

[t]here is in Astley's style, to borrow Kristeva's words again, 'a deluge of the signifier which so inundates the symbolic order that it portends the latter's dissolution in a dancing, singing, and poetic animality'. (Kirkby 40)

Without detailing the text's maternal rhythm, Kirkby quotes some examples from the text explicitly critical of Holberg's phallicism. Kirkby's analysis relies on asserting that Astley's "baroque style" resists the symbolic, that textual hiccoughs radically transform society, an echo of the butterfly in Beijing wrecking havoc in New
York. Kirkby's remaining analysis focuses on content rather than style: the last chapter of *The Acolyte* is "redolent with maternal imagery" (41).

Examples from *The Slow Natives* and *The Acolyte* contradict Kirkby's positive reading of dissolution. Dancing, singing, and animality are linked with aggressive sexual violence, the confusion of boundaries, and authoritarianism, preceding a brawl at the "Sea Urchins" club in the former novel, and the gang-rape of Ilse, Holberg's wife, in the latter novel. The rape happens at a rock festival. The singer "projects like a pack-rapist," and the music, supposedly modern, is regressive:

The music was of that mind-stultifying cacophony and tunelessness . . . spattered with drum knock hard rock that phased itself right into the mood of the crowd, and during some amphibriac passage - the train knocking to nowhere, the guard drunk - a tripping girl joined the musicians on stage and began an interpretative rhythmic jerking that divested her of clothes and ultimately, thought Vesper the old priss, of her humanity. . . .

[and] the last scrupulous preserves of self. (133)

If anything, contemporary music carries the burden of abjection in Astley's oeuvre, Astley maintaining with Whitlamesque consistency her contempt for the post-Beatles's music. The aesthetic rupture celebrated by Kristeva as inherently subversive does not, Felski argues, "in itself imply anything other than anarchism or relativism and can just as well serve the interest of a reactionary irrationalism as the aims of a feminist politics" (40). Youths liberate themselves from bourgeois values - cleanliness, clarity,
propriety, conformity - only to engage in equally oppressive behaviour that intensifies violence against women. The "amphibriac" music returns the audience to a pre-civilized, liminal state, not to maternal fusion but pack-rape.

In short, Kirkby's interprets Astley according to one of the three overlapping categories of women's writing outlined by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*: the Female. According to Showalter, the Feminine phase (1840-80) of writing is imitative. Women writers, having internalized "its standards of art," copy the "prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" (13). Imitation, however, can lead to innovation:

the repression in which the feminine novel was situated also forced women to find innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life, and led to a fiction that was intense, compact, symbolic, and profound. (27-8)

Feminine writers such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot could, for example, subvert genres. Astley, when she articulated the "writing as a man" thesis, had internalized the dominant critical view regarding the romance. The Feminist phase (1880-1920) challenges artistic "standards and values" and espouses "minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy" (13). Often, though, feminist writers displaced "the felt pain and oppression of women" onto other oppressed groups, "mill-workers, child laborers, prostitutes, and slaves." Superseding the Feminist phase, the Female phase (1920-the present) represents a "phase of self-discovery, a turning inward" and a "search for identity" (13) that, undoubtedly bold, "carried with it the double legacy of
feminine self-hatred and feminist withdrawal" (33). Female writing, more experimental and disruptive than Feminine or Feminist, focuses on "words, sentences, and structures of language in the novel" (33). Because the Female phase is psychological not social, withdraws from the male space (public) into the female inner space (private room or womb), values form over content, is theoretical rather than experiential, and practices anti-realism rather than realism, Showalter does not think highly of it.

6. The Womb as Unattainable Ideal

The womb is a metaphor for absolute security in An Item from the Late News, absolute assimilation in Reaching Tin River, and absolute solitude in Vanishing Points. The melancholic desire to return to the wholeness, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and non-separation symbolised by the maternal womb involves death, as Kurt Cobain, lead singer of Nirvana, understood: "Throw down your umbilical noose so I can climb right back." Mania, social disengagement, and nostalgia characterise Wafer's search for shelter in An Item from the Late News, Belle's search for self in Reaching Tin River, and Macintosh Hope's search for silence in Vanishing Points. In the dry interior, Wafer creates an oasis whose verdancy affronts Gabby: "Wafer's few acres are obscenely green. There are fruit trees, still very young, and a vegetable patch" (27). As Gabby's description of Wafer's shelter makes perfectly clear, Wafer's desire to escape the nuclear threat corresponds to a desire to return the womb:
The concrete walls of his underground womb wrap him in a deadening content and squatting on his shelter floor, the crazy Job, he would visualize the amniotic quality of future living among his canned food stacks, his water barrel, his trim little cess pit. (28)

No romanticising of the womb is apparent here. Subject to criticism in *An Item from the Late News*, the utopian desire for shelter and solitude reappears in *Reaching Tin River* and *Vanishing Points*. Both books refer to Robert Louis Stevenson’s "El Dorado," a short essay on the impossibility of attaining one’s desires and goals. Perfection is forever elusive. There lies before the married couple

a life-long struggle toward an unattainable ideal.

Unattainable? Ay, surely unattainable, from the very fact that they are two instead of one. (117)

Stevenson rules out the possibility of achieving complete assimilation in one’s lifetime: "There is only one wish realizable on the earth; only one thing that can be perfectly attained: Death" (118). To arrive is to achieve perfection, that is, to die. Despite quoting Stevenson’s maxim, "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive" (120), Belle nonetheless strives to arrive, to fuse with the unattainable. Unlike Mac, who drifts towards East and perhaps to his death, Belle experiences psychotic collapse in her quest for Gaden Lockyer.

*Vanishing Points* critiques the womb as a metaphor for solitude. The solitude practised by nineteenth-century American individualist Henry David Thoreau bridges "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company" and "Inventing the Weather," the two sections of *Vanishing Points*. 
Years after the last bus trip of his failed company, Mac is reunited with temporary business partner James Binnaway and tourists from the last tour. He describes his life to them as "doing a Thoreau outside Charco" (7). Parallels with Thoreau are legion. Mac embraces the solitary life, perfectly content with the cadences of water, pavilions of leaf, satisfied with the small exchanges of living when he went to replenish stores, exchange library books.

(11)

On acquiring possession of the island, Mac lives in a "a one-roomed cabin of timber," pares away his connections to the material world, begins a journal, reads poetry, listens to classical music, and contemplates the inner life. Mainland visits are infrequent, hermetic isolation being preferred to the "barbaric racket" (11) of twentieth-century civilization. This ideal of self-sufficiency and individual solitude appeals to another male character, Julie Truscott's boss Baxter, who, cynical about the differences newly elected politicians will make in reining in coastal development, imagines sanctuary as settling

in a totally undiscovered section of the coast several hundred miles south of here. No power. No water. And best of all, no people. No nothing. . . . I shall rewrite The Compleat Angler and relocate Walden Pond.

(165)

Others, meanwhile, are intent not on rewriting Thoreau but recreating Coleridge's vision of paradise. Sister Tancred refers to Clifford Truscott as Kublai Khan, a real estate mogul intent on turning the Mission into "[a]nother Xanadu" (229), one more
"stately pleasure dome" (Coleridge 354) dotting the Queensland coast.

"Maps have a terrible nostalgia," writes Astley in "The Idiot Question" (6). The lines which antecede the fragmented quotation from Baudelaire’s "Le Voyage" that prefaces "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company" refer precisely to this textual nostalgia:

The child enthralled by lithographs and maps
can satisfy his hunger for the world:
how limitless it is beneath the lamp,
and how it shrinks in the eyes of memory!26

The novel links this erotic textual practice, later described as "fevered reading" (109), with mania and ruin:

Years of reading had saturated his spirit with island lust, that perversion that had been the damnation of so many wanderers around the Pacific. (32)

To satisfy his lust, Mac visits many islands, most tainted by commercial development, but their glory still visible: "Even the sewage and oil-spilled ruined waters of those places yielded glimpses of lost elysia" (33). Pleasure, death, and nostalgia are connected with elysium, the place "assigned to the blessed after death in Greek mythology" or, figuratively, a "place or state of ideal happiness" (OED). When he discovers the island that embodies "ultimate perfection" (120), the erotics of his desire are obvious: "He embraced the whole island, its smallness, its roundness, its secrecies and tiny coves. It was the loveliest of women" (35).

Once he has gendered the island, Mac explores its reproductive possibilities. The image of the womb dominates Mac’s thoughts as he constructs his "spiritual maze" (70), his rainforest labyrinth.
Mazes enchant Mac. He recalls that the rock carvings he had visited in Northern Italy "looked like the roughest sketch of a vagina leading to uterus with two depressions that could well have marked the ovaries" (36). After his decision to create a maze, the text questions Mac’s intentions and the maze’s symbolism: "Was he perpetuating the sexual imagery in the fantasies of a dried out old man? . . . Is the maze traveller illustrative of sperm entering, penetrating? The emergence of the newborn child? . . . Was the Minotaur the Teeth Mother? Did Minotaur symbolise vagina dentata?" (36). As for Mac, "He would hack out a maze he could penetrate and leave, himself newborn" - a desire for an impossible self-sufficiency, both mother and father. The allusion to Theseus’s clue as potential "umbilical cord" (36) refers to Ariadne’s thread which helped him navigate the Minotaur’s labyrinth.

By referring to his island as "Eden" (102), Mac forecasts the possibility of expulsion and exile associated with the Fall. In imagining paradise as "nirvana" (97), Mac submits to the idea of deathly obliteration. Meaning "the extinction of all desires and attainment of perfect bliss," nirvana is a "borrowing of Sanskrit nirvāṇa-s (mistakenly transcribed as nirvana) a blowing out or becoming extinguished, extinction, disappearance." After Mac farewells his island, he drifts "East east east" (121), heading for the place where the "improper" and "selfish" me-generation of the 1960s and 1970s went to find their inner selves (Willbanks 37). Earlier in the narrative, Mac considers the implications of the hermit’s isolation. He repeats a line from Chesterton, "I want nothing," and wonders whether the desire for nothing is destructive: "Was it nihilism they craved, a melting into the
void?" (63). The last word of the novella, "Void," suggests that at the heart of his enterprise is the desire for subjective annihilation.

The solitude and sanctuary that Mac and Julie long for is analogous to maternal envelopment. They search for a "caul," the physical vestige of the biological bond between mother and child and a symbol of security, in that it is "supposed to be a preservative against drowning" (OED). On his final tour, Mac refrains from taking his group to visit the hermit, some twenty miles away, that he and Binnaway had encountered on a previous trip, because it would be "an intrusion, a rupturing of that membrane the old man had created around himself, a caul protecting him from the failing years of the twentieth century" (73). All the hermit needs is the womb. Like Mac, who searches for and creates his own womb, Julie toys with the idea, only to reject it:

I must tell you: I have invented the weather. My personal weather. What I really, most urgently want to invent is the climate, a larger embracing caul/envelope to contain myself. Within that membrane I shall be able to press the emotional buttons of sun and shade and, let's admit it, fool myself. (157)

Retreating into a metaphorical womb in search of an ideal of completeness and multiplicity, Julie acknowledges, is foolish, a from of self-deception. Belle, narrator of Reaching Tin River, spends most of her narrative learning that lesson.
7. "Heading for the womb and beyond"

Unusual for an Astley novel, Reaching Tin River concerns the mother-daughter relationship, maternal separation, and the effects of nostalgia. In contrast to feminist theories which reclaim and celebrate the maternal body, Reaching Tin River refuses to idealize motherhood or associate women exclusively with the womb. Astley questions the effectiveness of the womb as a metaphor for empowerment. To free herself from the double standards of phallocentric society, Belle withdraws to the metaphorical space of the womb, a retreat which results not in the disruption and overthrow of society, as Cixous and Kristeva argue, but paralysing catatonia. Astley does not fetishize the "erotic pleasures" of the mother's body or idealize "madness and unreason" (Felski 41) in order to critique patriarchy.

Belle is self-conscious about narrative conventions. Six seemingly random fragments, each "true" (4), begin the narrative. The "starters," Belle's phrase for the segments, could also make do as "enders" (4), thus enclosing the narrative within a circle. To begin the story is to end it; to end the story is to begin it. But the fragments, despite Belle's casual aside regarding their arbitrary selection, register in miniature the interconnected themes that will preoccupy Belle. The first fragment, opening with "I," mentions her quest for Gaden Lockyer. The second is a snapshot of her eccentric mother, Bonnie, locally famous as a drummer. The third summarizes one of Belle's outrageous and absurd obsessions. The fourth conflates maternal separation with death. The fifth refers to marital failure. Finally, the sixth connects
Tin River, the "one-storey town" mentioned in the first fragment, with "a state of mind" (4). While the novel presents the theme of journey and its implied theme of arrival, Belle's journey, as with Mac's, proceeds not forwards to a future bright with the possibilities of a fresh start, but backwards to the yellowed archival papers of the past. This quest backwards is both seductive and deathly: "Tin River is a townlet of terminal attractiveness" (4). Given that Tin River is also "a state of mind" (4), the idea of the womb that forms in Belle's mind is similarly dangerous.

The question haunting previous Astley novels had been, as Reever put it in *It's Raining in Mango*, "Where's dad?" (234); in *Reaching Tin River* the question that absorbs Belle is "Where was mother?" (5). The relationship between Bonnie and Belle is strained: "The two of us, Bonnie and daughter (you note I refrain from writing 'mother and daughter') go plodding up the mountainside" (85). In Belle's eyes, Bonnie is an individual ("Bonnie") rather than a role ("mother"); Keith Leveson made a similar complaint in *The Slow Natives* - he wanted a "father" rather than "Bernard." Bonnie does not define herself solely through motherhood. Her farm upbringing has allowed her to reject the position of mother that Belle desperately wants her to occupy.

Hurled into a miserable alienation brought about by Bonnie's refusal to conform to the ideal of maternal femininity naturalized in patriarchy, Belle ponders the significance of maternal separation. In the fourth "starter," Belle pleads with her mother to let her stay at the family sheep property:
Oh mummy, mummy, I’ll die, I’ll simply die, if I have to leave Perjury Plains. (4)

Belle imagines the "turbulent effect" (12) of separation as death and then as expulsion from pre-oedipality, the violent birth signified by an image from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: she "was to be, at age seven, untimely ripped" from her home and "thrust into a coastal boarding school" (4). For Belle, Perjury Plains represents imaginary wholeness and maternal intimacy. It is a near all-female environment presided over by a silent, crippled patriarch who accedes responsibility for managing and running the farm to the women. In many of the childhood scenes, Belle is cocooned in bed and, "on the edges of sleep" (7) and "sliding into slumber" (9), listens to stories, feminist legends mostly, told by her mother and aunt, and "dream[s] into" (7) the narratives. The separation and differentiation associated with the symbolic has yet to occur. Female voices mingle, dreams and reality blur, and past and present dissolve. The "serial quality of those hundred fading snapshots" (6) along with the "bedtime stories" (7) told by grandmother, Aunt Marie, and Bonnie, secure her identity. At this young age, Belle exhibits the trait that will rear out of control: immersion in the past is so complete that she can "describe [events] as if I were there" (7). Entry into boarding-school life, however, puts an end to this security and changes Belle:

the boarding-school gates closed me off for terms like life-times from the things I knew and loved, bred in me a too-early self-sufficiency, a stifling of normal emotion, a tendency to hanker for the past. (12)
The ideal of perfection that Belle sees as a solution for negotiating alienation takes numerous forms: the "total beauty" (4) of Euclidean geometry, the "congruency" (76) between word and image, the desire to "merge" (93), "enter" (181), or achieve "fusion" (191) with a centre. The desire for a conventional family, the imaginary of the patriarchal order, motivates Belle’s nostalgia. Like Vinnie in *A Descant for Gossips*, Belle dreams of domestic order, of kitchens and mums and radios blaring behind that secure rattle of pots as dinner was prepared and the smells of roast lamb scented the air (5), a vision of parenting, nourishment, and security where the mother labours in the kitchen and the father, present but absent, labours in the public sphere. Bonnie, antithetical to domesticity, frustrates the image.

Nostalgia can defer separation. Spending weekends with Bonnie and Aunt Marie at a less than salubrious boarding-house, Belle discovers she "was becoming interested in the ramifications of nostalgia" (30). Formed from Greek *nóstos* (homecoming) and álgos (pain, grief, distress), nostalgia is an intense form of homesickness (Barnhart), "a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one’s country or home" (OED). Banished from Perjury Plains, she seeks Eden elsewhere. Photographs, like the maps and exploration narratives that ravished Mac in *Vanishing Points*, have a terrible nostalgia for Belle and act as a bulwark against the agonies of maternal separation. She uses old "snapshot[s]" to give substance to her "wavering unsure centre" (6). Later, a photograph of Gaden Lockyer, whose name literally evokes Eden ("ga[r]den") and
security ("lock"), fertility and enclosure, captivates Belle. An enlarged photograph of the Lockyer family becomes the mirror by which Belle defines herself. Taking up an entire wall, the photograph is similar to those "seen in dictatorland" (159). With this image, Astley confirms the oppressive, totalitarian character of Belle’s search.²⁸

Signs of pre-oedipality mark the rare and "forced" (64) moments of intimacy between mother and daughter: mingling, incestuousness (prohibited in the symbolic), security, and nonsense noises. As language dissolves and bodies fuse, Belle experiences a sense of warmth and security reminiscent of her childhood at Perjury Plains. After Bonnie’s sardonic response to Belle’s confrontation with a man hiding in the women’s bathroom, Belle breaks down. That night she "sleep[s] in mother’s arms, snuggled up to her late-home side, her arms cuddling me in a too-late circle of warm flesh and safety, her breath and mine mingling right through the night" (58). For a short while, mother and daughter complement each other, both secure in an ideal union where identities shift and integrate, neither stable nor individual. On the second occasion of such intimacy, Belle consoles Bonnie, beside herself that Marie is moving south to Melbourne. To cheer herself up, Bonnie suggests they do their "party trick," which, Belle explains:

is a musical nonsense we devised one airless summer at Villa Marina. It involves a duet, a voice-blend one semi-tone apart, calculated to clear a room in minutes. (65).

Bonnie chooses a lullaby, Johannes Brahms’s "Wiegenlied" (1868), and makes a "terrible" noise: "Let’s get our disharmony perfect.
It says something about what I'm feeling. Aaaaaaaah" (65). Their relationship, like their singing, is out of sync.

As described in the second "starter," Bonnie is a pre-feminism feminist:

Mother was a drummer in her own all-women group, a throbber of a lady with midlife zest and an off-centre smile. (3)

Belle represents her mother in terms of the nascent feminism signified by the collectivity of the group. This activity is in keeping with her smile, "off-centre." Because Bonnie is "off-centre" in the 1950s and 1960s, her unconventional behaviour and deviations from feminine norms are denied political and collective significance, labelled eccentric or seen as personal quirks. In fact, Bonnie represents what Raymond Williams calls "a structure of feeling," a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which . . . has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (Marxism and Literature 132).

These experiences "are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as so often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations" (132). The "'structure of feeling' is a cultural hypothesis" (132), that of feminism.

Bonnie's parents are responsible for her unconventionality. Hoping for sons, a source of cheap labour, and frustrated by the
sex of his children, grandfather "resolved to make the best of it and bring them up tough" (7). He turns the idea of women's equality to his advantage, silencing his wife's objections to using his daughters as drovers: "Where's that equality you're always talking about?" (7). Putting economic benefit ahead of cultural reproduction, Bonnie's father delays socializing his daughters into femininity, acculturating them instead into the values and practices of masculinity: activity, freedom of expression, autonomy. Bonnie's father puts her into a position where she can transgress the limits of masculinity and femininity that structure farm life and social relations in general. The combination of rural servitude and the "[s]mall refinements" (6) of boarding school allows Bonnie to question the opposition between masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity are permeable, rather than being rigidly and fundamentally opposed. Like Archie Wetters in An Item from the Late News, boundary rider Bonnie partakes of both masculinity and femininity, and this traversing of boundaries enables her to critique the social order. The only limits to female potential, thoughts, and behaviour, Bonnie discovers, are those imposed by patriarchal culture.

Experience on the farm licences Bonnie's "eccentric" behaviour, as the narrative concerning her decision to take up drumming confirms. At a party to celebrate Marie's eighteenth birthday, a bank-clerk arrives with a drum kit. Bonnie asks the drummer for a turn, a request that he assumes is a joke because, Bonnie tells Belle, "[h]e found with idea of a woman playing drums - well, gruesome" (8). Watching from a distance, Grandmother sends Marie to intervene. Laughter, she expects, will stop her sister: "Lady
drummer, she giggles under her breath." The important detail about the story's conclusion, though, is Belle's introduction to it:

At this point my mother always inserts a drop of feminist philosophy. I can quote her verbatim to this day. "If there is something unladylike about hitting drums with sticks, then how would you describe dagging the backsides of sheep?" (8)

This story would not in the early 1960s be called "feminist philosophy." Belle, from the perspective of the 1980s, adds that detail, putting a political name to behaviour or ideas that previously were considered a joke or crazy. Through her example, Bonnie suggests an alternative to the restrictive choices society offers women: boarding-school femininity, or its antithesis, the shadowy "reputation" (21) that Grandmother, on hearing of Bonnie's plans to tour as a band, alludes to.

Throughout the narrative, Bonnie, Marie, and Wilma, a sax-playing refugee from the sexist urban jazz scene who joins their band, introduce feminism into the story, a trait that Belle, used to hearing their rants as bedtime stories, picks up. One of Belle's favourite narratives is Marie's "rant" (21) against the absurdity of working beneath incompetent men,

pimply oafs who can barely form a sentence but have all the competence in the world when it comes to pushing you around because you're the wrong sex. (20-1)

Wilma rails against being identified completely with the body, where anatomy is destiny. Via a pun, she deconstructs the link between women and nature. Playing the saxophone, according to the town elders, violates women's biological identity: "It was
unwomanly. *Un-womb-man-ly*, Wilma explained later, punning in a way I wouldn’t appreciate for years" (22). In patriarchal culture, woman is the womb, biologically located. To defy conventions or act unnaturally, therefore, is to go against biology.

Having a feminist mother and aunt when feminism does not exist embarrasses rather than liberates Belle. In contrast to the other heterosexual relationships in the novel, that between Bonnie and Aunt Marie is "welded into a partnership stronger than marriage" (29). Because Bonnie and Marie create confusion concerning traditional gender divisions, their appearance at school events mortifies Belle. Bonnie’s "figure had thickened and become magisterial," her beautiful gold hair was "hacked into a cropped cap that was easy to deal with," she wore "sensible shoes," and, from regular swimming, she and Aunt Marie "developed shoulders like policemen’s." Rejecting the norms of femininity allows them greater comfort and mobility. They have freed themselves from heterosexual exchange and dependence on the male breadwinner:

[T]hey gave off the boisterous confidence of men-free women who, having achieved and now eschewed matrimony, managed to support themselves. Mother had long since ceased writing to Huck or accepting cheques from grandfather’s sheep. (30)

According to the dominant definitions of gender, Bonnie is "off-centre" in every respect. She abandons her husband, lives as a single mother, celebrates celibacy, mocks marriage, criticises gender divisions, and earns a living, marginal, as a drummer. Indeed, the reason she sends Belle to boarding-school is so that she can work and be free from the farm: "Words like work and money
peppered" (20) conversations between Bonnie and Marie prior to Belle's separation.

Belle's narrative oscillates between feminist engagement, grounded in a theory of social relations, and female withdrawal, grounded in an ideal of imaginary pre-social wholeness. In short, critique and cop-out. Just as Bonnie "inserts a drop of feminist philosophy" into her narrative, so does Belle. There is nothing small nor trifling, however, about the feminism that Belle inserts; it is a deluge rather than a drop, a constant stream of objections to and criticisms of patriarchal social relations and the manner in which power, economic or cultural, is distributed unevenly. Alienation, which she attributes to the maternal separation and the disruption of pre-Oedipality, stems from patriarchal culture, as her feminist criticisms make clear.

Feminist criticisms of Australian society constitute a dominant thread in the narrative. Belle attacks patriarchal institutions, ideologies, and assumptions, especially the persistence of "the great Australian division of the sexes" (171). She is terrified and outraged at pornographic representations that reduce females to the status of "meat" (51). She describes marriage as a ridiculous and "meaningless ceremony" (168), one that involves collective self-destruction for women, and dissects Seb's investment in a concept of family that coerces women (mother or daughter) to look after men. She objects to patronising language, whether Seb calling her "sweetie" (96) or the "boring repetitiveness of male poets discovering breasts thighs vulvae in the most banal of landscapes" (209). Religious attitudes to sex and sexuality, as well as those dominant in psychiatry, are
lambasted in terms similar to those used by Paul Vesper and Julie Truscott: "I’ve always had the unpopular idea genitals were for breeding and perpetuating the species" (87). Attacked too is the selfish economy of male sexuality, be it the refusal to share the orgasm or, worse still, the desire to dominate completely:

My God, he was going to take all of me and he refused to let the brain be separate from his mindless banging. He wanted to incorporate it into the act as if the vagina led straight to the cranium. (110)

*Reaching Tin River* is an extended mediation on "pith" (96) of marriage, an institution which, in the face of changing expectations generated by the Women’s Liberation Movement, is in crisis:

It’s these newer couplings that abrade and dissolve within weeks months years. Grandmother blames the new independence - she means women’s - and maybe she’s right. They’re rejecting the chattel status that’s been expected of them for so long. (86)

Belle uses "they’re" and "them" instead of "we’re" and "us," as if she belongs to a different generation. Failed marriages, what Belle calls "marital schism" (131) and "wedlock breakdown" (150), are the norm. Bonnie leaves Huck, Aunt Marie’s husband leaves her, and Belle leaves Seb. Marital discord affects minor characters: the maid at the boarding home, Frank Hassler, Huck’s trailer-park neighbour, teaching colleague Mr Bonsey, and Mr Bonsey’s parents. Following the news that school-friend Boobs McAvoy is going to marry an itinerant pineapple picker, Belle "ponder[s] the validity
of marriage, its necessity, thrown askew by the flip attitudes of [her] mother and aunt":

Surely, I tell myself, one must investigate a relationship with the other sex. Surely. (61)

Belle favours a methodical, impersonal yet tentative approach to the question.

"What are relationships between men and women intended to be?" (135), Belle asks. Relations between men and women are culturally mediated. Marriage, like Jam’s manhood in An Item from the Late News, is achieved: "How does anyone achieve a wife?" (167). Madness, is Belle’s answer:

It’s ridiculous, when you think of it rationally, that women rush so gladly like Gadarene sows into a life of servitude. It’s not that you need marriage for sex or breeding. Is it because men have cunningly put about the notion that spinsterhood is a bad joke, the old maid to be pitied? (167)

The Biblical allusion refers to Jesus’s exorcism of a Gadarene man possessed by thousands of devils (Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). Ordered out of the man, the demons beg Jesus to let them enter a nearby herd of pigs rather than consign them to the spiritual "deep." Jesus assents. Theoretically sound as the deal appears, it does not protect the demons, for the swineherd, suddenly overcome with collective hysteria, rush to their own destruction: "the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked" (Luke 8:33). Disorderly demons expunged, the man is restored to his "right mind" (Luke 8:35), a stable identity (ego, "I"). Despite her reference to Gadarene sows, Belle is all too
willing to become Gaden's sow. In the process of chasing after Gaden, Belle constantly refers to her mania.

The political and economic gains made by first- and second-wave feminism have yet to transform the sexual division of labour in the household. The insidiousness of the double standard disillusions and disgusts Belle. Seb's offer to share the burden of domestic duties extends to "men's cooking' - the infinite search for the perfect sauce" (170). When men consent to do feminine work, its value, in terms of creativity, increases. Familiar with feminist critiques of the family and marriage, Seb, joking but not joking, lays out in terrible detail the sexual division of labour when he proposes to Belle:

would you be prepared on a permanent basis to cook me fourteen thousand six hundred dinners, the same number of breakfasts, give or take a few? . . . And do approximately two thousand loads of washing and ironing, house-cleans and shopping? (167)

Attempts to negate the emergence of feminism or defuse its oppositional political implications take numerous forms, "incorporation" (Williams, Marxism and Literature 124) being the most common way to limit its development. According to Williams, "much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of acceptance" (125). Thus Bonnie's father recognizes the idea of equality for women when it works to his advantage. Similarly, Seb, with his marriage proposal, acknowledges the feminist critique of the household, satisfied that acknowledgement will placate Belle and secure his credentials as a liberated kind of guy. Given that it is a two-income economy, Seb expects Belle
to keep her job. The economy changes, but not the expectations regarding woman's role in the household:

For a man of the eighties he has a disposition to the cultural domestic arrangements of the last century, and I am becoming increasingly soured of a relationship that sees us both travel to and from work together and sees me go on working solo once the front door has slammed.

(84-5)

In the 1990s, the sexual division of labour burdens women with even more work.

At the end of her first week of married life, Belle, in response to Seb's callous reaction to her retelling of one of "the sexual epiphanies" (54) of her life, decides that she wants out of the present. An epiphany usually refers to the manifestation of the divine, for example, the appearance of Christ twelve days after Christmas to the Gentiles. In *Reaching Tin River*, Belle uses "epiphany" in a much darker sense to indicate the advent of the rapist, whose appearance to Belle, then eleven years old and on school holidays, confirms a basic truth about male sexuality. Walking across a paddock, Belle is confronted by a young male who "straddles the path" (54). As in *An Item from the Late News*, when a male "straddles" it generally signals rape. Smiling, he orders Belle to show him her pants. When he lunges at Belle, she cracks his arms with a stick before running off toward the homestead. He gives chase, but cannot catch her.

The repressed epiphany - "after a time I forget. Or think I forget" (56) - is revived and transformed when Belle and Seb are honeymooning. Thinking that the way to Seb's heart is by "woo[ing]
him with innocent confidences," Belle tells him about her epiphany, a memory still full of horror: "even as I tell, the terror hits me again" (80). At the beginning of her retelling, the details correspond to the scene: the paddock, the youth on the path, his command to pull her pants down, his fixed smile. Noticing that the story stimulates Seb, Belle "decide[s] to varnish the story a little" (81). Inverting the narrative to frustrate Seb's desire and transforming her fear and near sexual violation into triumph, Belle imagines herself in an assertive, less vulnerable position. Refusing to be the object of the masculine gaze, Belle returns it: "I said pull your own down, buster, and give me a look" (81). To this feature, Seb adds: "Well, that's a new twist," an innovative narrative jump that threatens his sexual and narrative satisfaction. She continues:

He wasn't expecting it. So I kept on yelling Show me, show me, and he began to back off. Silly cow, he said. Silly cow. But I was back in the saddle by now - did I mention I was riding? - and I taunted him. Go on, go on, I yelled. Bet you've got nothing and then I dug my heels in and my horse sprang forward, practically on top of him and he just managed to jump clear, screeching at me. (81)

In this new narrative, Belle becomes the snapshot image of her mother, "a pretty fair thing seated on a walloper of a stockhorse with a wild white eye" (6). Story concluded, Belle wonders if she has embellished too much. Seb realises that the narrative is about castration: "Quite the little ball-breaker, weren't you?" (81). Belle remonstrates: "You mean I should have let him? Protected his ego, his bloody needs?" (81). Again the theme of castration is
apparent in Seb's answer: "You belittled him" (82). Pondering "the
delicacy of male sensibility, its capacity for easy bruising and
the non-existence of its converse in the face of the male put-down"
(82), Belle vows:

to give myself up to archival relics that are beginning
to assume for me a reality and an importance my own days
lack.

If going forward is disaster, I have no alternative but
to go back. I have to start somewhere, go somewhere.

Heading for the womb and beyond. (82-83)
The womb metaphor signals regression rather than progression, past
rather than present, pessimism rather than optimism, surrender
rather than resistance.

Smell is repeatedly associated with Belle's return to the past.
According to Reynolds and Press, smell "returns us to the pre-
Oedipal universe of intimacy and utter proximity" (219), to the
undifferentiated sensations and affective intensities of the womb.
At the bayside library where Belle does research for her list of
the convent girls who learnt to play Christian Sinding's "The
Rustle of Spring" between 1945 and 1960, "the smell of old books
and newspapers besotted" (41) her. Later, as a librarian, she
works "in archives with a permanent smell of dust in [her]
nostrils, that delicate fragrance of old paper and bindings, and
[she has] permanently swollen olfactory glands" (74-5). Belle goes
to America "to nose out [her] conception spot in San Diego" (103-
04). At the end of her first meeting with her father, Belle kisses
him and is stirred by his scent: "He smells of cheap aftershave and
bourbon and this smell moves me more than anything else" (119).
Gaden Lockyer's grandson, cajoled to produce the family photograph album, intuits what Gabby wants: "he pushes a yellowed rectangle of cardboard mounting under my nose and says, 'Is that what you're after?'" (155). Reading Gaden's journal, Belle bends her "head to sniff the paper" (161).

In the process of carrying out her plan to become Mrs. Betsy Lockyer by merging with a life-sized photograph of the Lockyer family, Belle experiences an embarrassment with language that suggests she is moving closer toward the semiotic: "Lately I have become awkward with words as explanatory devices" (142). The symbolic order of language cannot explain or rationalize her desires. Considering the poster of the Lockyer family that adorns her wall, Belle notes that she resembles Betsy "exactly" in height, looks, hair, physique, and, via inventive theft, costume:

My hair is pulled back like hers and I think, looking into the mirror I have placed strategically on the opposite wall, that we really are rather alike. Especially with the hat. I forgot to mention the hat, a floppy straw arrangement with two ribbons dangling at her nape. It took me two weeks to find that hat and I finally had to steal it from the props department of a theatre company who were doing a period piece last summer. (143)

As she stands nude before the photograph, distinctions between past and present collapse:

the baby's howling is driving me mad and young Aubrey (I know the name's right - it took me a week of checking at the central register of births) has just kicked dust and
woodships at Liz’s clean white pinafore I starched specially for this photograph. Her young sister is starting to cry. But I smile and keep smiling and reach across and try to take Gaden’s paper hand. (143-44)

Belle’s madness peaks on the ruined veranda of Gaden’s homestead. To achieve her desired effect and recreate the hardships of the past, Belle ignores reality:

If I block out the sight of the present farmhouse with its gleaming white trim and cherry-red roof and subtract the monied results of crop-duster attention that has given the paddocks a fearsome verdancy, I can find desolation without the building as well. (173)

Not content to imagine the past, Belle has to get in touch with it. Shoe-less, she treads on the same ground as Gaden, literally following in his footsteps. Then she ties the Lockyer photograph to the veranda posts and wills herself back into the past:

backforcing my thoughts towards that centre until everything outside me is diminished and my mind lasers at unseeable speed towards the flaming expected core. (176)

She hurtles herself through the representation of Betsy, only to find that the "beyond" she desires comes to "Nothing," "an overwhelming emptiness," and a "hollowness [that] mocks" (177). She visits Gaden’s coastal residence for another try at recapturing paradise. His gardens are "edenic" and the house exhibits an "almost timeless splendour" (183), as if they belong to a time before the Fall. But this paradise is illusory, sordidly material: kickbacks paid for Gaden’s house.
The quest for complete assimilation results in a psychotic dissolution of identity. She uses the language of psychology to pathologize her search. Making her enquiries regarding the number of convent girls who learnt to play "The Rustle of Spring" is difficult, Belle admits, without sounding "unhinged" (40). Belle calls herself a "loony" (112), "a suitable case for treatment" (131), and "a crazed alien" (174). She hopes to hide her "mania" (156) from Gaden's grandson, and "repress[es] the jabs of rationality that keep warning [her] of spectacular idiocy" (172). When her attempt to merge past and present, self and Betsy, fails, Belle travels to Tin River, Gaden's final resting home. Using Lockyer's name, she signs herself into motel, "convinced of [her] identity" (195). In the room she makes a startling discovery: "I examine my face in the wall mirror and discover I have vanished" (196). There is no distinction between self and other so central to the symbolic order, only subjective incoherence, a complete loss of self. When she cannot remember neither her married nor maiden name, substituting "Hunter" for them, Belle knows her "breakdown" (216) is complete. She describes her quest as a "crazy flight backwards" (206) and refers to her "catatonic" state (218).

Recovery involves rejecting the interiority and non-alienation suggested by the womb in favour of exteriority and separation. Painful as immersion in the present may be, Belle nonetheless realises that the path to the past that she chose to follow is dangerous and unproductive. Belle's return to sanity is marked by an increasing concern for the outside world: "my absorption outside me rather than within" (222). Borders and categories, too, return
to their place: Gaden "is returning to print rather than inhabiting my mind" (222).

In choosing Betsy Lockyer as role model, Belle embraces a feminine identity and a past already rejected by her mother, aunt, and grandmother. Belle imagines separation from Perjury Plains and the loss of maternal love as symbolic expulsion from Eden, an idealization of home at odds with the women's experience of the farm. Bonnie and then Marie, both of whom are leaving Perjury Plains, refuse the bank clerk's selfish offer of marriage because he had "no concept of the realities of rural slavery" (9), what Belle, in conversation with the occupant of Gaden's classic Queenslander, calls "Drover's wife stuff" (189), a reference to Henry Lawson's classic short story, "The Drover's Wife," about a bush woman who, with four children, looks after a hut while her husband is away droving. Belle realizes that her fanatical and fantastical plotting to unite with Gaden Lockyer requires that she submit to the exhausting labour expected of a wife living in the bush in the nineteenth-century. Looking at the photograph of the Lockyers, where Gaden holds a baby and the rest of the family pose before their bush shack, Belle acknowledges the effect of rural slavery on Betsy Lockyer:

She's too tired to smile back and her eyes are weepy (I wish I knew their colour) and she wears what seems to be a patterned blouse tucked into the full and tight-waisted skirts of those times. There are three children older than the baby and the house isn't even finished. I can see sky through a bush-pole annexe erected to one side
of the main shack. You poor bitch, I think. Poor poor bitch. (143)

Despite the sympathy the photograph evokes, Belle wants to enter that world anyway. She rejects the path/plot taken by her mother for the plots available to women protagonists in nineteenth-century fiction. In these plots, the female protagonist's trajectory remains limited to the journey from the parental home to the marital home and [her] destiny remains permanently linked to that of her male companion.

(Felski 125)

Like the "terminal attractiveness" (4) of Tin River, the allure of the concept of family exerts a compelling and destructive influence, so that the feminist daughter of a feminist mother wonders whether she would "have plunged into Betsy's role with the sacrificial joy those times expected" (171). Effervescent conclusions are probably too much to expect from Astley, but at least Belle recovers from her mania for the home and family represented by the Lockyers and accepts the autonomy represented by her mother.

The place-names suggest the deceptiveness of nostalgia and the womb imagery associated with it: Belle idealizes Perjury Plains (dishonesty, falsehood) and travels to Tin River ("mean; worthless; counterfeit" [Macquarie]). Effecting a rupture with the patriarchal symbolic order and returning to the maternal semiotic, marked in terms of a shift from the word to the womb, reason to intuition, coherence to incoherence, separation to fusion, repression to release, is not necessarily productive, as Belle's madness makes clear. Yielding the symbolic is an unrealistic
option for women to pursue, because, as Astley suggests in *Coda*, language is too important to accede. 29 Loss haunts Kathleen Hackendorf as she sits in the mall recuperating from a fall. Well it might, for she loses her house, furniture, dog, family love, memory, and control of her sphincter. But *Coda* opens with her greatest fear: "I'm losing my nouns" (1). Forgetting nouns, verbs, adjectives, and tenses, Kathleen loses the medium necessary to narrate the past and structure her sense of identity, subjectivity, history, and community. Language confirms her humanity and presence. When Kathleen perceives "the mortality sentence" (150), existence and language are punningly coupled. Life is linked to a grammatical structure, our capacity to communicate. Loneliness creates in Kathleen a "need to speak to someone, anyone, to prove she was human, capable of communion, of receiving the ultimate wafer host of words" (185). Dependence and uncertainty accompany linguistic loss. Kathleen's desire for autonomy therefore necessitates recovering language, because to lose language is to lose one's identity and history. A sanguine and quixotic conclusion brings *Coda* to a close. The last image is of Kathleen aboard a ferry, struggling with the morsels of poetry and "shreds of metaphor" (187) that ring in her head, putting the words in order, taking charge, albeit temporarily, of her nouns, verbs, history, and life.

The idea of merging or fusing suggests a desire to be free from sexual oppositions (masculinity and femininity, self and other), yet Belle's fantastic attempt to couple with Gaden sustains the oppositions that her rhetoric of fusing undermines. Premised on an identification with and obliteration of Betsy Lockyer, Belle's
return reinforces marriage as the ideal form of union, an ideal which, in the 1990s, is crumpling. Belle vacillates between feminist political commitment, where she is aware of her identity as an oppressed woman, and political withdrawal, where she desires to take over an identity of an oppressed woman. As Astley’s conclusion suggests, the "ramifications of nostalgia" (30) can be conservative. Belle’s return to "the womb and beyond" (83) sanctions a cultural arrangement and experiences that her mother questions, refuses, and opposes. To secure her identity and resist disorder, Belle relies on a vision of the centre that centralizes maternity, marriage, and heterosexuality. She thus sustains patriarchal law and disavows feminist challenges to marriage as a cultural practice. The "beyond" that Belle heads for is certainly not beyond patriarchy. She seeks the restoration of a patriarchal order that her mother and the Women’s Liberation Movement have destabilized if not displaced. The individual response to patriarchal power attenuates rather than shores up the feminist critique threaded throughout the narrative.

*Reaching Tin River* neither romanticizes nor ridicules the return to the womb, but lays out its psychotic implications. In conversation with Ray Willbanks, Astley observed that her characters

have been misguidedly trying to get right away, out of the entire ambient of the cyclone and, of course, that is not possible, not for any human. The minute you are born you are put into this situation. (Willbanks 36-7)

Furthermore, enlarging upon the birth theme, Astley invokes the mother/child bond only to suggest that it is not the major bond:
The umbilical cord isn't just the thing between mother and child; there is an unseeable umbilical cord linking all humans, six hundred billion umbilical cords, which we ignore. (Willbanks 37)

For Astley, the collective relationship is more important than the individual one, the global picture more important than the local.
CONCLUSION

Early, middle, or late, Thea Astley's novels critique the historically specific meanings, contexts, and structures of women's oppression and the way in which gender is ideologically naturalized and made to seem as inevitable as the colour of one's eyes. With furious observation, comic deflation, politically charged irony, and exasperated disbelief, Astley suggests that a particular concept of family, the social meanings attributed to masculinity and femininity, and the patriarchal values inscribed within narrative forms all contribute to women's oppression.

In the 1950s, the absence of a feminist counter sphere, the preponderance of patriarchal thought dominating literary criticism, and the general scepticism toward women as producers of culture, had a profound impact on Astley's sense of herself as a writer. Astley's metaphor of neutering as injury attests to the psychic scars or damage of patriarchal culture. The hostility and indifference evident in the reviews can be attributed to the fact that Astley's novels were addressed in part to an audience who were yet to politically organize and collectively coalesce around their experience of patriarchal oppression. Reviewers detected "an unease, a stress, a displacement, [and] a latency" (Williams, Marxism and Literature 130) in Astley's fiction, but did not recognise it as emergent critique. Favourable reviews, similarly, defined the important aspect of her work as her concern for the misfit or her dislike of egoistic behaviour. In the absence of a
feminist public sphere, Astley’s works were interpreted and
categorised according to the dominant cultural norms. The sense
of disintegration experienced by her characters, for example, was
read as metaphysical, when in fact it was occasioned by patriarchal
oppression.

The emergence of second-wave feminism in late 1960s and early
1970s created a supportive environment for women writers and
provided a political context within which Astley’s fiction could
be placed and interpreted, but rarely was. The Women’s Liberation
Movement, Astley indicates in interviews, redressed the situation
she faced when she began writing, legitimizing the domestic sphere
and women’s experience as rightful themes of literature. To render
visible what was previously invisible, feminists reclaimed women
novelists from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Novels were reclaimed
on the basis of an interpretative strategy which sought positive
images of women, as Kerryn Goldsworthy observes in "Feminist
Writings, Feminist Readings" (1985):

The ‘images-of-women’ approach to reading these novels
reveals more or less ideologically sound heroines in whom
contemporary feminists might well rejoice - hence their
claiming of Christina Stead as a spokesperson and
advocate, to her own extreme annoyance. (514)

Despite this process of feminist reclamation, Astley’s novels were
for most of the 1970s and 1980s neglected, largely due to a general
inattentiveness on the part of critics to the literature produced
by women in the 1960s, the persistence of the misconception that
Astley evaded domestic and familial situations, and the "Images of
Women" approach to literature favoured by feminist critics in the
1970s. The negative representations of female characters in Astley's early fiction (the wives in *A Descant for Gossips*, Iris Leverson and Miss Paradise in *The Slow Natives*) may have suggested to feminist critics that Astley lacked empathy for and sensitivity to feminist issues and values.

This thesis, however, specifically details Astley's attack on the limited range of images, roles, and experiences available to women. The manner in which patriarchal society links feminine sexuality solely with reproduction has fatal consequences for Vinny in *A Descant for Gossips*. Similarly, the female characters of *The Slow Natives* have their behaviour measured against images of the good mother and the bad prostitute, both of which reciprocally confirm women's subordination. Moreover, the quest for affirmative images and feminist motifs of the "images-of-women" approach cannot adequately deal with Astley's feminist critique of the ideological implications of narrative structures: the terminal logic of the Oedipal scripting set in motion by Robert Moller in *A Descant for Gossips*, the limitations inscribed within the romance and anti-romance in *The Slow Natives*, and the psychotic and politically disabling consequences of questing for the womb.

The institution of the family has "analytic pride of place" (187) in Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* because it provides the nexus for various themes - romantic love; feminine nurturance, maternalism, self-sacrifice; masculine protection and financial support - that characterize our conception of gender and sexuality. (205)
Astley’s work centres on the social significance of the family. In *The Slow Natives*, Father Lingard asks Bernard Leverson, "How is your family?" (42). It is a question that Astley asks in every novel, for the family, or, more precisely, the "ideology of familialism" (Barrett 206), has been her focus all along. *A Descant for Gossips* and *The Slow Natives* negatively critique the ideology of the family. Despite the Women’s Liberation Movement’s critique of the gender roles and sexuality inscribed within the nuclear family, these categories and the expectations that go with them persist. In one way or another, Vinny Lalor, Keith Leverson, Belle and Seb, and Clifford Truscott believe in the nuclear family. Astley explores the undertow between the ideology of the family powerfully explicated by the middle class and the forms the family actually takes, with each novel concentrating on the way families are "an achievement . . . rather than a pre-given or natural entity" (Barrett 203).

The effect of "the ideology of familialism" on women is apparent in *Reaching Tin River* when Belle questions Seb about his family. Despite acknowledging the Women’s Liberation Movement’s analysis of women’s unpaid labour in the household, Seb continues to invest in the ideological construct of the family dominant in his youth that relegates women to the domestic sphere. Reluctantly, he admits that he has two brothers and an elder sister, Gloria, who, when their mother died, "had to leave school" and assume responsibility for managing the household: "She was rather bright. She did everything for us" (168). On learning this, Belle immediately aligns herself with Gloria, criticising Seb for being party to a system which forced Gloria to sacrifice herself in order
to care for the males of the family. These criticisms Seb brushes aside, contrasting his "normal" experience of the family with Belle’s "abnormal" experience:

I don’t know, Belle, whether you understand the concept of family. God knows, with that scatterbrain mother it’s a wonder you grew up normal. Well, almost normal. (169)

Any deviation from "the concept of family" that Seb understands is suspect. But Seb pays lip service to the concept, for he has no links with his "close family." He invites no relatives to the wedding, keeps in minimal contact with his brothers, and visits his father, housed in an expensive retirement village, "about once a year" (170). As for Gloria, Seb has had no contact with her since she rejected domestic servitude: "Three years after mother died she left home and went nursing in Victoria" (169).

Possibilities for a concept of family different to that of the patriarchal bourgeois family with its law of the father, constructions of masculinity and femininity, and its prescriptive heterosexuality, are explored in It’s Raining in Mango, subtitled "Pictures From the Family Album," and Reaching Tin River. The family in It’s Raining in Mango does not resemble the family hypostatized in bourgeois ideology: one local describes the Laffeys as a "[w]hole fuckin’ family of nutters" (233). Fathers are absent, incompetent, or peripheral figures in Astley’s later fiction. As Reaching Tin River suggests, families can function without a patriarch and gender categories can be transgressed and dismantled.

In 1967, Thelma Forshaw made an observation about Astley which holds true today: "As a writer she is at her finest - wit, style
and viewpoint all in perfect accord - when she is detesting" (22). Experience of the genital loading, masculine privilege, and patriarchy inspires Astley’s anger:

I’ve taught in so many schools where there were insufferable and incompetent males all earning far more than I, achieving promotion and higher salaries purely for their maleness rather than by efficiency. I guess growing up in a time before equal pay for equal work was implemented, I wrote it out of my system. But you do see it all around you all the time. It’s not just males, but sometimes I feel really resentful looking at the power brokers who control the whole world, people like Dan Quayle, for example. Looking at him on telly, he strikes me as an absolute bubble brain. I feel this resentment. Just on the grounds of maleness, he’s made vice president of the most powerful country in the world. I’d rather see George Bush’s wife as vice president. (Willbanks 35)

The discordant aspect of Astley’s novels is usually attributed to her artistic inferiority, the hypnotic influence of Patrick White, or sheer bloody-mindedness. Rarely is the textual disturbance that animates Astley’s novels attributed to anger and a sense of injustice, to feminist critique and intervention. Women artists aren’t allowed to be angry; that would be like hearing your mother say "fuck." "In the sphere of cultural production," Julia Lesage proposes, "there are few dominant ideological forms that allow us even to think ‘women’s rage’" (421). Evidence of anger is used to delegitimize political activity. Globe and Mail columnist Andrew Coyne ridicules collective political anger, interpreting it as
"political kitsch," "emotional self-enrapture," proof of "the bottomless human capacity for narcissism," and "irrelevant to the argument" (A18). Striking civil servants, says Coyne, enjoy their anger as they play the "coveted" role of victim. There is, he says, "no performance more ritualized than a strike." Nor is there anything more ritualized than a Globe and Mail column denouncing not only the strike itself but "the reality of the experience of the strikers themselves" (Salutin A13).

Not only is the idea of "women's rage" hard to think; so too, nowadays, are "women's experience" and "women's oppression," the reality of the experience of oppression. In Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, Rita Felski distinguishes the bourgeois from the feminist public sphere, the former claiming "a representative universality" and the latter advancing an oppositional "critique of cultural values from the standpoint of women as a marginalized group within society" (167). Central to the emergence of this new sphere is the notion of a "common identity" based on

the shared experience of gender-based oppression which provides the mediating factor intended to unite all participants beyond their specific differences. (166)

Never immediate nor transparent, experience is

a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations - material, economic, interpersonal - which are in fact social and, in a larger
perspective, historical. (de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't
159).

In her fiction, Astley relates "women's experience" to social and
historical relations.² For Felski, the collective identity
indispensable for the formation of the feminist public sphere is
a necessary and "enabling fiction," produced "only by obscuring
actual material inequalities and political antagonisms among its
participants" (168).

Some feminists have repudiated the "enabling fiction" of
collective identification with its assumption that patriarchy can
be critiqued "from the standpoint of women." By no means the first
to do so, Judith Butler in Gender Trouble argues that "the
assumption that the term women denotes a common identity" (3) and
"the political assumption that there must be a universal basis for
feminism" (4) posit a universality as troublesome as that which
Felski assigns to the bourgeois public sphere.³ Feminists who use
"women" or "patriarchy" as organizing concepts inadvertently
sustain a form of "epistemological imperialism" (13) that sanctions
exclusions and homogenizes gender: "gender intersects with racial,
class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively
constituted identities" (3). Not for Butler the awful solidarity
supplied by such concepts as "class" or "woman," nor the "unity"
typically assumed to be essential for "effective political action"
(15). In place of a solidarity politics based on a collective
identity, Butler proffers a "coalitional politics" based on
"separate identities" (14). The coalitional politics imagined by
Butler will neither "assume in advance what the content of 'women'
will be" nor "assert an ideal form for coalitional structures in
advance" (14). Nor, we assume, will it articulate in advance what it is for or against. Without a collective identity, political action will be difficult, as Felski argues:

Some form of appeal to collective identity and solidarity is a necessary precondition for the emergence and effectiveness of an oppositional movement; feminist theorists who reject any notion of a unifying identity as a repressive fiction in favor of a stress on absolute difference fail to show how such diversity and fragmentation can be reconciled with goal-oriented political struggles based upon common interests. (169)

The sophisticated distaste for the "limited epistemological usefulness" (Fuss 27) of the concept of "women's experience" and the scepticism regarding the possibility of collectively organizing around the concept of "women's oppression" is not new. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrator tacitly puts into question the possibility of representing women's experience of oppression when she proposes that great writers repress both their anger and their consciousness of their sex. In her interviews, Astley evinces a sex-consciousness which, according to the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*, has disastrous implications for both creativity and the longevity of creative works:

it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of
speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. (102-03)

Astley does not write "as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman" (92), Woolf's famous dictum and aesthetic ideal, because her experience of oppression reminds her constantly of her cultural, economic, and subjective inferiority. Sex consciousness leads to feminist consciousness.

Great writers hide their anger, according to Woolf's narrator. An incandescent state of mind is "most propitious for creative work" (58). Little is known about Shakespeare, Woolf conjectures, because his "grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us" (58). Accordingly, women's anger should be hidden, for resentment and hostility unnecessarily distort the text's aesthetic unity. The poems of Lady Winchilsea, for example, are "disturbed by alien emotions like fear and hatred" (59). The source of the alien emotions is feminist consciousness: "one has only to open her poetry to find her bursting out in indignation against the position of women" (59). The narrator cites Charlotte Brontë as an example of bitter writing and Jane Austen as better writing, the former's work spoiled by "that jerk in them, that indignation" (70), the latter's work "without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without pleading" (68). Of Brontë:

She will write in a rage where she should write calmly.
She will write foolishly where she should write wisely.
She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. (70)

Astley is not at war with her lot, for that suggests that women's oppression is fated, but at war with patriarchy, with "the economic
slave system geared against females" (Reaching Tin River 30), and with the ideas, narratives, and institutions which, structured around masculinity and femininity, perpetuate women's oppression.
INTRODUCTION

1 This phrase or variant thereof is mentioned in five of the seven Astley interviews cited in the bibliography: Baker (42), Ellison (56-7), Ross ("An Interview with Thea Astley" 267), Richey (101-02), and Sorensen (11).

2 Baker 43. Astley qualifies the verb "neutered" differently: "completely neutered" (Baker 42); "The era I grew up in, just before World War II in Brisbane, almost neutered me - that's the only word I can think of" (Ross, "An Interview with Thea Astley" 267); "I felt I'd been spiritually neutered by society" (Ellison 56).

3 The "tricky" structure of Marion Halligan's Lovers' Knots puzzled Astley, who prizes straightforward narratives: "Lovers' Knots reminded me of It's Raining in Mango, which I was going to call Portraits from a Family Album, and I thought that at least mine was exactly that, linear" (10).

4 The phrase, which comes from Janine Burke's Overland review of Vanishing Points (1992), can be found in an Australian newspaper, "One of Australia's most distinguished novelists," writes Helen Daniel in The Age Extra review of Reaching Tin River (1990), and an American journal devoted to Australian literature: Antipodes editor Robert Ross, reviewing Reaching Tin River, calls Astley "this most brilliant Australian novelist" (66).

5 The most recent articles on Astley have been published in non-Australian journals: Antipodes (Austin, Texas) with Lindsay (1995) and Milnes (1994); Kunapipi (Aarhus, Denmark) with Kirkby (1994).

6 Scattered throughout the essays in Écrits, Lacan's criticisms of North American distortions of Freudian psychoanalysis find their fullest expression in "The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of a Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis." The subject of psychoanalysis is not, as North American psychoanalysts would have it, the ego, but the unconscious. Those who suggest that the ego is sovereign or that the ethic of psychiatry is "individualist" (127) receive the full brunt of Lacan's mockery and derision: "The ego is a function, the ego is a synthesis, a synthesis of functions, a function of synthesis. It is autonomous! That's a good one! It's the latest fetish introduced into the holy of holies of a practice that derives its authority from the superiority of the superiors" (131-32).
7 Three examples of the many reviews Perkins cites have a gender-bias: Helen Garner’s review of An Item from the Late News, and John Ryan’s and Thelma Forshaw’s reviews of A Boat Load of Home Folk, the latter of which uses the "familiar equation of women with children" (12). Whether Ryan’s comment, "the eye is that of a woman, quite disconcertingly acute" ("Outsiders All" 216), constitutes an attack is debatable, however.

8 Gilbert 112. Despite separating Astley from the domestic and familial concerns that preoccupy Garner and Masters, Gilbert later praises Astley’s "attention to the intricacies of domestic and family relationships" (127). On Astley’s obsession with male characters, see Smith 213; Matthews (1987) 17; Lindsay (122).

9 For information on Dell, see Purton 185-86.

10 Matthews’s subtitle comes from Helen Garner’s "The Life of Art," published in her short-story collection Postcards From Surfers (1985). Narrated from the (ad)vantage point of the 1980s, the story reflects on what it meant to be a young woman in the early 1960s: "This was in 1965: before feminism" (56).

11 Because of their anomalous status within the Astley oeuvre, Gilbert analyses both novels. From a feminist perspective, Gilbert contends that Elsie Ford’s relationship with Harry "symbolises a political act of revolution . . . against the codes of social behaviour that will mould her into a middle-class wife and mother" (116).

12 Like Louisa Pollit in The Man Who Loved Children, Vinny Lalor is on the threshold of adolescence, possesses some talent for essay writing, and appreciates poetry. School holidays over, Vinny looks forward to returning to school because of an essay she has written: "For days she had longed to hand it in to Mr. Moller, calculating grandly on his recognition of her genius" (3). At the end of Robert Moller’s reading and analysis of Christopher Brennan’s "O desolate eves," she is the only student to comment on the paradox of the poem. She compares Brennan’s ability to assess and write "with sensitivity" (10) about his suffering to her own ability to do so. "Fame and fame and fame" of the literary kind, she imagines, will allow her to revenge herself on Pearl Warburton and "the rest" (11) of her tormentors.

13 The phrase comes from the title of John Mulvey’s review of Nirvana’s In Utero, "Band of Fallopian Glory."

CHAPTER ONE

1 Vincent Buckley, "Towards an Australian Literature" 59. In 1954 Meanjin ran a series of articles that deliberated on the possibility of Australian literature being taught at university level. See Hope, "Australian Literature and the Universities" (1954), and responses in the same volume by Milgate, Jeffares, Palmer, and Miller.
In the 1980s, other meanings and practices got a look in. The number of books devoted to women's writing increased in this period: Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945* (1981), Carole Ferrier's *Gender, Politics and Fiction* (1985), Jennifer Ellison's *Rooms of Their Own* (1986), Pam Gilbert's *Coming Out From Under* (1988), Debra Adelaide's *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (1988), Connie Burns and Marygai McNamara's *Eclipsed: Two Centuries of Australian Women's Fiction* (1988) and Dale Spender's *Writing a New World: Two Centuries of Australian Women writers* (1988) and *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing* (1988). Indeed, Spender has been at the forefront of a movement to uncover, re-evaluate, and publish the lost tradition of Australian women's writing. Perplexed by the lack of women writers in the literary canon and dissatisfied with the aesthetic judgments passed by the male-dominated academy on women writers as the reason for this exclusion, Spender began her search. *Writing a New World*, a chronological overview of approximately two hundred women writers, focuses on women's consciousness, experience, point of view, on "locating the origins of women's literary heritage and of tracing the development through to the present day" (xiv). Women writers were under-represented in the literary canon, she discovered, not for the poor quality of their work but because "their concerns, their views and values, were not those of men" (xvi). Critical of masculine constructions of the canon but not critical of the notion of canonicity, Spender constructs a female literary tradition. In the "Introduction" to *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing*, Spender acknowledges that "the responsibility for determining what should be in and what left out is a disquieting one" (xxiii). Practical problems create "anthology victims" (xxv). Nonetheless, after listing those who had to be left out, Spender constructs a female canon.

Two critics, using the work of Jurgen Habermas, make this point: Terry Eagleton in *The Function of Criticism*, and Rita Felski, whose conclusion to *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* concerns itself primarily with the emergence of the feminist public sphere.

In *Exiles at Home* (5) Modjeska documents the quantitative dominance of the novel during this period. Between 1917 and 1927, twenty-seven novels and eighty-seven volumes of verse were published. From 1928 to 1939, the number of novels published quadrupled (106), while volumes of verse declined by approximately one-third (57).

Docker's revisionist and blasé conflation of English Leavisites and American New Criticism, Peter Pierce argues, annuls the effectiveness and validity of his criticism. More damning still, Pierce aligns Docker's principles and methodology with one of his new critic antagonists, G. A. Wilkes, suggesting there is little difference between the "disgruntled Marxist observers of Australian literature" (74) and the new critics because "the highest intention" of both "is the re-ordering of the texts and authors in the field of Australian literature" (75). For an account of the post-world war two literary debates more subtle than Docker's, see
Buckridge, "Intellectual Authority and Critical Traditions in Australian Literature 1945 to 1975." The three intellectual groups seeking authority to judge, select, and rank Australian literature were, according to Buckridge, leftist, liberal, and conservative. Buckridge sees the liberal tradition as hegemonic, with the other two subordinate to it. The merit of Buckridge's analysis is his recognition of how liberal critics could occupy a liberal-leftist or liberal-conservative position. For example, Buckridge situates many of Docker's radical nationalists (the Palmers, A. A. Phillips) and new critics (Harry Heseltine and G. A. Wilkes) within the liberal group.

6 Regarding the response to and interest in contemporary women's writing, Adelaide is cautious: "I do not want readers in twenty years' time to wonder who Helen Garner was and what other books she wrote apart from that one which had something to do with monkeys. Of course, this notion seems ridiculously fanciful at the moment. Helen Garner and other contemporaries, such as Kate Grenville or Elizabeth Jolley, are well-known literary figures. They receive attention in the press, in journals; they receive awards. But in terms of historical precedent, their disappearance is more than a possibility" (Australian Women Writers vii).

7 As the 1970s progressed the call for feminist histories became more insistent. For example, see Curthoys, "Women's Liberation and the Writing of History" (1970), in For and Against Feminism (2-8). For a brilliantly scathing overview of the masculine assumptions of Australian historiography see Dixson's The Real Matilda (57-88).

8 Kramer's The Oxford History of Australian Literature (1981) marks the apogee of this critical formation, what Docker calls "the Australian New Critics and Leavisites" (In a Critical Condition 83) and Hodge and Mishra "the Eternalist model" (2).

9 Leonie Kramer rehearses a similar view, claiming that the revival of literary activity "begins in the late 1930s, with the first novels of Christina Stead and Patrick White" (16). Kramer's chronology is suspect, as Stead's first novels were published in 1934 (The Salzburg Tales, Seven Poor Men of Sydney). By 1939 four of her novels had been published. The revival began much earlier.

10 The Oxford History of Australian Literature best demonstrates the universalist tendency to favour poetry above prose. Employing a nutritional metaphor, Kramer argues that it is because of the blandness of social realist novels, "notably in the thirties, forties and fifties, that Australian poets of those decades offer more nourishment to the imagination." Novels of the sixties and seventies fare no better: "The poets provide a richer and more comprehensive account of the world than, with rare exceptions, the novelists of the last forty years have been able to supply" (19).

11 MacKenzie's observation was later repeated by Geoffrey Serle in From Deserts the Prophets Come: "Another feature of the period was the prominence of women novelists; however unconventional one's taste or ranking it would be impossible to deny that most of the
best novelists were women. Richardson, Dark, Stead, Prichard, Barnard Eldershaw, Tennant and Franklin were backed by a strong second rank, which included Helen Simpson, Jean Campbell, Henrietta Drake-Brockman and Mary Mitchell; and they were soon to be further reinforced by Dymphna Cusack, Ruth Park and Eve Langley" (123). It should have been impossible, but it wasn't. Of those listed, Richardson was the only certainty to be picked by universalists and nationalists for the canon. The others became footnotes to literary history, out of taste, out of the ranking.

CHAPTER TWO

1 Laurie Clancy (1992) is a recent instance of this tendency: "In general, her interest is in the outsider, the loner, the misfit" (258). For other examples, see Matthews (1973, 1987), Goldsworthy (1983), Jones, and Haynes, who sees misfits everywhere in An Item from the Late News (1982): "It is indicated that every inhabitant of Allbut has come there unwillingly, as a social misfit, from somewhere else" (141). Those who interview Astley inevitably refer to her preoccupation with outsiders; see Kinross Smith (28-29), Ross (264-65), and Willbanks (37-38).

2 Region and gender are, of late, critical paradigms used sporadically to analyze Astley's work. Gelder and Salzman (1988) and Heseltine (1992) locate Astley's work within a regionalist paradigm. Perkins, Gilbert, Kirkby, and Lindsay discuss Astley's fiction in relation to feminism, gender, and women's writing. Not enough work has been done on issues of class in Astley's fiction.

3 Matthews is abashed by the canonical status and longevity of his early assessment. "From about the middle of the 1970s through to the early 80s, anyone who gave a paper at a conference on the work of Thea Astley could be relied on to say at some point of the presentation, with a certain amount of incredulity, that there was still only one full-scale, substantial article on the work of Thea Astley. As the writer of that article, I gradually began to have mixed feelings about its lonely notoriety: on the one hand, it was nice to be cited; on the other, there was something dinosaur-ish about the way the article was living on into another and a different world" ("'Before Feminism . . . After Feminism'" 16-17).

4 In "'Before Feminism . . . After Feminism'" Matthews attends to issues of gender. The battle is still between the individual and society, but the individual is "often specifically feminine" (21), just as Astley is concerned with "women's place and plight" (18) in the world. Astley's misfits, even if many are female, represent something other than something specifically social: "The emphasis on the misfit, to which Astley herself has several times drawn attention and which if often remarked by students in discussion, is actually a step along the way to a larger and more inclusive emphasis in Astley's work - namely, the sense of a world disordered, disjoint" (21). Such an observation gives way not to an analysis of why the world is disordered but an upgrading in whirlpool metaphors: "for all around is maelstrom which will
eventually close in and which is irresistible" (21). Critics should focus their analysis to an area suggested by the anagrammatical "maelstrom" - the male storm that lashes Astley's female characters, or look, as so few have done, at the damage, disorder, and disjoint social class hierarchies cause. While "misfit" suggests gender neutrality, covering male and female characters, too often the salients of sexual difference are lost when various characters are yoked together. Citing the same list of misfits as Matthews, Laurie Clancy argues that Keith and Bernard Leverson, Father Lingard, Sister Matthew, Chookie Mumberson, and Miss Trumper suffer from "spiritual aridity" ("The Fiction of Thea Astley" 46), a claim indiscriminate in its application and one that ignores gender and sexuality. For example, Miss Trumper's spiritual aridity has a great deal to do with the norms of feminine sexuality and the guilt she feels because she had an abortion. She may "misread" (95) Bernard when he visits her, but her actions suggest she has interiorized the ideals of feminine dependence and sexual availability: "Her frantic hands automatically began to twitch curls into provocative positions and one forefinger, desperate digit, rubbed the corner of her mouth to erase the trapped carmine grease she knew from experience would be there. Then one hand stroked pleats, and then pushed at puffs of hair at her nape. Her hair-style had not changed since she wowed them during the war. And she went, naked as birth, across the concrete veranda to the man who had never yet really seen her" (95).

5 Poster argues that the three key parts of the Oedipal rubric articulated by Freud - "the child's sexual feelings for the parent of the opposite sex, the child's profound feelings of ambivalence toward the parent of the same sex and the child's profound feelings of anxiety in relation to threats against its genitals by the parents" - are not universally applicable because Freud, governed by an ideology of parentalism, "falsely expands the explanatory power of Oedipus to cover all situations, thereby disfiguring a critical concept into an ideological one" (17).

6 Alder claimed that "the wife's leadership role in Australia, compared with other western cultures, is so prominent that it requires identification as the special social phenomenon which we call matriduxy" (155). Such dominance was achieved, remarkably, in the absence of "appropriate inheritance lines" and "supportive legal structure and formal social organization" (149), although the reasons for such authority were not explored. For a critique of Adler, particularly his suspect methodology, see Bryson.

7 The Frankfurt School consider the father-son dynamic foremost, and have very little to say regarding daughters, aside from a few remarks on women's oppression. In their view, the mother mutes with "maternal tenderness" the harshness of the bourgeois patriarch, and cultivates within the family's individual members "a conscience, a capacity to love, and consistency" (141). Although she submits to the father, the mother embodies an oppositional tendency (love, conscience, consistency, dignity, emancipation) at odds with the repressive authoritarianism he symbolised. For a feminist critique of the patriarchal assumptions
of the Frankfurt School, and Max Horkheimer in particular, see Benjamin.

8 Provoking Bernard to fulfil his symbolic role is Keith’s aim, but Keith’s desire for symmetry will be frustrated. As Lacan says, "Even when in fact it is represented by a single person, the paternal function concentrates in itself both imaginary and real relations, always more or less inadequate to the symbolic relation that essentially constitutes it" (67). Bernard cannot fully live up to nor sufficiently embody the cultural role expected of him.

9 Rock & roll critic Lester Bangs argues that the fundamental egalitarianism of popular music threatens those who wish to maintain elitist distinctions between high and low art forms. Bernard’s criticism becomes, in Bangs’ psychotic hands, a source of praise: "Rock & roll is not an ‘art-form’; rock & roll is a raw wail from the bottom of the guts" (104).

CHAPTER THREE

1 Mussell reaches the same conclusion: "The romance fantasy reconciles readers to the cultural prescriptions of patriarchy" (190).

2 In The Well Dressed Explorer (1962) Marie comments bitterly on the way the romance narrative conceals the physical labour married life involves for married women, saying of housework: "We all know that the truly feminine woman finds only joy in those repetitive back-breaking chores. They fulfil her. You men have been telling us that for centuries and so it must be right" (123). Nearly thirty year later, Astley says the same thing in an interview: "Housework is very exhausting - no wonder men have made sure that women did it. I mean, vacuum cleaners have gotten heavier" (Willbanks 42).

3 The strength of this naturalising function of the romance narrative is evident in the sociological literature of the 1950s that deals with the family. Morven S. Brown, in "Changing Functions of the Australian Family" (1957) states that (a) "women have shown distinct reluctance to exchange their role as housewives for that of economic earners" and (b) "Whenever they can, Australian women mostly revert happily to their favoured roles of full-time wives and mothers" (113). The cultural narratives that make these roles "favoured" are not analyzed, however; nor are the social and economic reasons (less pay, menial work) for their reluctance to enter the labour market explored.

4 The social duty to marry was accompanied by a social imperative to withdraw from the labour market. The state, employers and trade unions colluded in the maintenance of an economy segregated by gender, with wages determined by gender and jobs classified according to gender. So-called "protective" legislation was "aimed specifically at working women, restricting "women in the hours they could work, the overtime they could perform, the machinery they
could use, the substances they could work with, and the weights they could lift." But, as Jill Matthews points out, such legislation did not cover the home: "there was never any question that a woman was able to life more than 35 pounds of wet washing, tired infants, groceries, or bedridden relatives. The were no eyebrows raised about her being on call 24 hours a day for her babies' needs, and no law saw contravention in her overtime house work after the day's paid work was complete" (61-2). Many women, once they married, were forced to resign from their job. When mum married dad in the early 1960s, she was compelled to give up her bank teller job. Her younger brother, also a bank teller, kept his job when he married. These days Uncle Geoff works as a middle-manager of Human Resources for the same bank; mum works part-time in a shoe store. Cheers.

5 A wonderfully, trenchant example is Jennifer Waelti-Walters, whose Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination begins: "Nobody in her right mind could possibly want to be a fairy tale princess. After all, what do they do except play dead across the path of some young man who has been led to believe that he rules the world? . . . The reading of fairy tales is one of the first steps in the maintenance of a misogynous, sex-role stereotyped patriarchy . . ." (1).

6 Ashworth blames Astley's corrosive portrait of Iris for the unconvincing domestic scenes: "This failure is a lack of sympathy on the part of the author. Iris Leverson has no depth to her character, but this does not excuse a lack of depth in the treatment of her" (65). Latching onto this tone, Brian Matthews lumps Iris in with a ragtag of human evils, "hypocrisy, maliciousness, vanity or stupidity" (158). The social conditions that promote these evils, vanity or ignorance in women, for example, are not explained.

7 For an account of the American presence in Australia during wartime, see Campbell's Heroes and Lovers.

CHAPTER FOUR

1 In "Castration or Decapitation?" Hélène Cixous criticises the various homologies that arise from the "active" and "passive" dichotomy: "In fact, every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems - everything, that is, that's spoken, everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us - it is all ordered around hierarchial oppositions that come back to us by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as "natural," the difference between activity and passivity" (44). In Vanishing Points (1992), Julie Truscott reminds herself that she cannot define her experience as "tragedy": "Where does tragedy lie? With women? Ah, I tell myself as the van rattles me seaward, only men may receive the nobility-enrichment of tragedy. Only men can become tragic figures" (171-72).
2 Tragedy and melodrama are the main genres invoked by the critics, but they are not the only ones. Others include the "triple-decker sentimental" (Davies 26), nearer to melodrama and Astley's dreaded "women's books" than tragedy, and the comedy of manners. The title of Geering's review, "School for Scandal," undoubtedly refers to Richard Brinsley Sheridan's comedy; an appropriate allusion, for Astley unrelentingly satirises upper-class sexual behaviour and breaches of social protocol, and ironic, given that sexual trysts occur amongst people whose aspirations to sophistication cannot disguise their philistinism, whose conversation relies less on wit than vindictive and hypocritical maliciousness.

3 For other examples see Couper (334-5) and Matthews (1973 152-3).

4 Reviewers unimpressed by the novel's plotting include Thomas, McLaren, and Ashworth.

5 If we calculate Astley's progress according to the number of reviews given to her work, then The Slow Natives signals her literary arrival. Greg Houghton's bibliography of Astley's works cites seven reviews for A Descant for Gossips: a newspaper (Sydney Morning Herald), the fortnightly liberal-left Nation, literary journals of various political hues (Meanjin, Overland, and Southerly), and Times Literary Supplement, the only non-Australian reference. In contrast, The Slow Natives attracted more critical attention in Australia and overseas. Of the nineteen reviews Houghton lists, there are, alongside Australian newspapers (SMH, Age, Australian), magazines (The Bulletin, Australian Book Review), and literary journals, reviews in a wide number of teaching and library journals (West Australian Teachers' Journal, Choice, Library Journal), the recently formed The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, and, in addition to TLS, London Magazine, Time, Saturday Review, and New Yorker.

6 For the most explicit criticism of The Slow Natives's melodramatic tendencies, see Ashworth, who disparages the "contrived melodrama" and "sentimentality" of its ending (65). Overall, however, the critical response, much larger than that given to any previous novel, was quite positive.

7 Interestingly, Macherey and Balibar rely on theatrical terms relevant to melodrama to detail the way in which the "imaginary solution" (8) works: "We shall say that literature 'begins' with the imaginary solution of inescapable ideological contradictions, with the representation of that solution: not in the sense of representing it, i.e., 'figuring' (by images, allegories, symbols or arguments) a solution which is really there (to repeat, literature is produced because such a solution is impossible) but in the sense of providing a 'mise en scene', a presentation as solution of the very terms of an insurmountable contradiction, by means of various displacements and substitutions. . . . [The literary text is not so much the expression of ideology (its 'putting into words' [sa mise en mots]) as its staging [mise en scene], its display, an operation which has an inbuilt disadvantage
since it cannot be done without showing its limits thereby revealing its inability to subsume a hostile ideology" (8).

8 In a lecture given in 1985 Raymond Williams speaks of the difficulties he experienced when trying to persuade students of film that cinema is heir to neither the novel nor painting, but melodrama. "I often find it difficult to convince people that well before film epics, naval battles in real sea water and train crashes with locomotives were staged in London theatres. Yet the record is quite clear. These staged spectacles were a central element of popular theatrical entertainment, on which the film camera and location shooting of course improved, in the end remarkably but not really as new content" (The Politics of Modernism 110).

9 In the field of literary studies, there is nothing equivalent to Christine Gledhill's comprehensive anthology of the directions film criticism, influenced by historical materialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics, has taken with regard to melodrama.

10 Brooks, 15. After a fairly lengthy paraphrase of the salient features of Brooks's account of melodrama's development, John Docker generously allows Brooks's "mythos of the pre-industrial organic/cohesive society [to] wing by: given the oppositional culture of carnival and the turmoil of the Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation; peasant revolts; the beheading of a king; the rise of nonconformist 'levelling' attitudes; of nationalism, of the discovery of print - give some or all of these, I think the degree of cohesiveness is perhaps exaggerated" (74).

11 Dominated by an "epistemology of feeling" (89), American melodrama, David Grimsted argues, worked toward this ending also: "The melodrama offered the rewards of a competitive society in modest degree - good people were assured of 'enough,' which was usually a little more status or money than they had - and at the same time insisted that such reward providentially resulted from wholly noncompetitive virtues and interests" (90).

12 As Brooks and Elsaesser argue, historical context determines whether melodrama is conservative or radical, affirmative or oppositional. For the emergent bourgeoisie seeking to displace the cultural, economic, and political hegemony the aristocracy held over society, melodrama was a radical theatre, its ideological intent revolutionary.

13 For a critique of feminist film analysis which relies on psychoanalytic categories, see Byars, 95.

14 Brooks credits Rousseau with coining the term either in 1774 or 1775 (14; 208 footnote 14). For the etymology of melodrama, see American Heritage Dictionary.

15 Brooks 14. Early cinema's exploitation of music's capacity to profile character and determine meaning was a matter of necessity, for as Laura Mulvey notes, "the movies were born mute, distanced
from language by technology rather than the law. These constraints placed a similar emphasis on gesture, dramatic action, and expression through visual meaning" ("Melodrama In and Out of the Home" 94).

16 In a culture "in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress - with the realms of business, industry, science, and law" (Huyssen 189), English and the arts are considered feminine. For the connection between the working class, women, and the rise of English as a subject, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, Chapter one. Literary criticism this century can perhaps be summarized as an attempt to masculinize the subject.

17 See Reiger for a full-length study of this process.

18 Game and Pringle, "The Making of the Australian Family" 81. Australians rejected any attempt to forcibly impose consensus. Prime Minister Robert Menzies began the 1950s with the Communist Party Dissolution Act. Menzies lost the referendum held in 1951 over the issue.

19 Castration normalizes subjects around hierarchial antitheses: presence and absence, unity and lack, and masculine and feminine.

20 Segal, Silverman, and Poster argue that castration or lack needs to be properly historicized and understood as a being a process of cultural mediation. Power relations within the bourgeois family, for example, account for the father's authority in the household. The allocation of genital value, too, occurs "from a point fully within patriarchal culture" (Silverman 142). Of the significance of castration in Freud's account of the development of the superego, Poster argues that Freud "assumes that the problem is the material lack of the penis, when it is clearly the valuation placed on the penis and on males in general by parents in Victorian society" (209).

21 See Poster for a similar argument.

22 Freud, "Anatomical" 252. As Silverman's analysis of "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" in *The Subject of Semiotics* demonstrates, the vision is "culturally mediated" (137) and retrospective.

23 Of the disjunction between the "cultural ideal (or ideals) of masculinity" (184) and the majority of men, R. W. Connell notes: "The public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support. The notion of 'hegemony' generally implies a large measure of consent. Few men are Bogarts or Stallones, many collaborate in sustaining those images" (185).

24 In "Femininity" Freud writes, "what constitutes masculinity or femininity is an unknown characteristic which anatomy cannot lay hold of" (114).
25 I say "seemingly" because within the text a discrepancy exists involving the subject the teacher exiled for his homosexuality taught. If he taught English, Robert replaced him; if he taught Maths, then Helen did. Although Robert refers to the disgraced teacher as "my predecessor" (77), Alec Talbot, in the company of his wife and Sam and Marlian Welch, refers to the teacher as the "young maths master" (134), thus suggesting his successor is Helen.

26 De Lauretis 133. Although, as Segal notes, "Freud wrote no formal account of 'masculinity' in its own right" (70), his essays on the Oedipus complex provide a fairly comprehensive narrative of masculinity.

Chapter Five

1 Thanks to Dr Lonn Myronuk for explaining the technical details of cremasteric reflex.

2 Not all critics, however, place Astley in the straitjacket of realism. For Annette Hildyard, An Item from the Late News belongs to the tradition of sensuous literary surrealism inaugurated by Patrick White's much-quoted comment about realism. She groups An Item from the Late News with the experimental work of David Malouf, David Foster, Murray Bail, David Ireland, and Peter Carey (40), a veritable male canon. According to Kerryn Goldsworthy, Astley's short story "Travelling Even Farther North" (1982) "suggests that Astley has taken off at some surreal tangent to what most of us sadly acknowledge as the real world" ("Thea Astley's Writing" 484).

3 "Life" 148. A section from Matthews's article turns up as a blurb on the University of Queensland Press reprint of The Acolyte.

4 In 1995, Quebec Superior Court Justice Jean Bienvenue, in the process of sentencing a woman for murder, made a similar contrast between men and women, claiming that when women fall from virtue they "reach a level of baseness that the most vile men could not reach" (Globe and Mail 13 Dec. 1995: A9).

5 Haynes argues that Astley's analysis of the rapacity, aggression, and materialism of masculinity that feeds the nuclear threat make the "novel's perspective . . . a feminist one" (139).

6 In interviews given from 1984 to 1990 Astley, when asked about her favourite book, names The Acolyte. See Ross (266), Ellison (54), Richey (100-101), and Willbanks (41). Pleased to win the Miles Franklin thrice, Astley nonetheless believes that the award clinched literary oblivion for The Well Dressed Explorer, The Slow Natives, and The Acolyte. Winning books which have escaped the void include Patrick White's Voss, Randolph Stow's To the Islands, White's Riders in the Chariot, Sumner Locke Elliot's Careful, He Might Hear You, David Ireland's The Unknown Industrial Prisoner, Xavier Herbert's Poor Fellow My Country, Jessica Anderson's Tirra Lirra by the River, Peter Carey's Bliss, Tim Winton's Shallows, Elizabeth Jolley's The Well, and David Malouf's Great World.
7 For Goldsworthy, reading *The Acolyte* was a "positively exhausting" (483) experience, an ambiguous compliment, depending on how one reads "positively." Similarly, in his interview with Astley, Ray Willbanks said: "I am so slowed by the density of the prose that I am exhausted at the end of a couple of pages" (40).

8 Reviewers beware: Astley has a good memory. In an interview conducted in 1984 she refers to Keesing's insulting criticism: "I remember a reviewer once saying, 'If Thea Astley wants to write this way, I suppose we've got to accept it by now', which I find offensive" (Richey 99).

9 Ellison 54. For accounts of Russell's documentary see Hanke (35-39) and Baxter (135-38).

10 Willbanks 33. Richard Cavell, in a marginal note on an early draft of this chapter, made a very important observation: "Ah - so her models are homosexuals . . .". Given the homosexual incident in *A Descant for Gossips*, the homosexual characters in *The Slow Natives, A Boat Load of Home Folk, It's Raining in Mango*, and *Coda*, and Astley's critique of bully-boy masculinity, a queer reading of Astley is in order.

11 Ellison 54. Joan Kirkby recently 'fessed up to being the one racing down the corridor.

12 In the critical literature the situation is no better. Pam Gilbert and Elaine Lindsay give short shrift to the narrative strategy of *An Item from the Late News*. Gabby's role, Gilbert argues, "is nondescript except in that she acts as the stereotyped female agent of jealousy" (110). The whole issue of Gabby's role as narrator, the way in which she narrates, the social conditions surrounding enunciation, the location from which one speaks, are ignored. Similarly, Lindsay considers the female narrator secondary to the book's content which "is still about male behaviour, retold from a critical perspective" (122).

13 *An Item From the Late News* (87). In *Girl With a Monkey*, confessing and vomiting are linked. Every fortnight adolescent Elsie Ford "would kneel, nearly vomiting, in the stuffy little cathedral confessional" (130). Nearly all the sins she confesses to revolve around "impure thoughts." Gabby's image of confession as "a direct vomiting" suggests that she is purging herself of sexual desire.

14 Despite her unconventional veneer and feminist critique of patriarchy, Gabby is still ensnared in a masculine economy of "gain" (Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* 87), whereby she expects her relationship with Wafer to yield a "'return', the relationship of capitalization, it this word 'return (rapport) is understood in its sense of 'revenue'" (86-7). The economy of "gain" criticised in *An Item from the Late News* returns in *Vanishing Points*. For most of her career Astley has railed against the morally bankrupt ethics and values which are bound up in capitalist exchange. My favourite example from "Inventing the Weather" indicts the immorality of
capitalist exchange: "[Clifford] has failed at a lot of things but an inheritance from his father set him off on a career of real estate buying, a pursuit that is so lacking in humanity and moral purpose it is on par with playing the stock exchange. Perhaps stock exchange activities are worse. After all buying and selling is nothing more than gambling and adds zilch to the total of human achievement. It is a sterile, almost moribund activity, structured for people who are too selfish to give anything to the world. Takers!" (127). Similarly, in "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company" Mac realises that "he had not the generosity to give without bile" (120). The small community of nuns in "Inventing the Weather" represent a different economy: "giv[ing] for," that is, they don't "try to 'recover [their] expenses'" (The Newly Born Woman 87).

15 Some critics, less sanguine about the postmodern preoccupation with cross-dressing as a sign of categorical instability, question, treat with caution, or dismiss outright the subversiveness euphorically attributed to transvestism. Elaine Showalter’s comment sparked by the "critical cross-dressing" of male feminists continues to be pertinent: "What is the sudden cultural appeal of serious female impersonation?" ("Critical Cross-Dressing" 120). Carole-Anne Tyler suggests male-to-female cross-dressing "may not be the sign of a particularly feminist change in the social ordering of gender" (161). Annie Woodhouse is not "particularly sympathetic to transvestism" (xiii) because the optimistic assumption that transvestism dissolves the politics of sex and gender ignores the fact that transvestism allows men to "retain the privileges of masculinity" while engaging in "stereotyped notions of the sort that feminists have rejected" (86). She concludes: the "transgression of gender is more apparent than real and does little to subvert the top ranking of masculinity and the gender divisions on which it is constructed" (87-88).

16 According to Robert Stoller, whose influential Sex and Gender Kahn cites, female-to-male cross-dressing evidences not transvestism but transsexualism. Regardless of methodological or ideological approach, psychoanalysts interpret transvestism as a male activity and focus on the genital narcissism of male-to-female transvestism. See Chapter Four, "Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender," of Garber’s Vested Interests for a critique of Stoller’s "phallessentialist" (96) bias.

17 Canvassed for her view on the great Australian novel, Astley specified three contenders: "Possibly the three best Australian novels, in my opinion, are The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, Such is Life - the Australian version of Tristram Shandy, and Voss" (Ross 268). In the course of explaining why she chose Patrick White’s Voss, Astley appends Christina Stead’s The Man Who Loved Children to her list.

18 Other literary manifestations of female-to-male cross-dressing in Australian literature include Eve Langley’s The Pea-Pickers (1942), Kate Grenville’s Joan Makes History (1988), and Peter Carey’s The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (1994).

20 Although Kahn applies the theory of narrative transvestism to male authors who use the "I" narrative, Astley's comments about "writing as a man" justify my appropriation and application of the term. Astley uses the "I" position sparingly: *The Acolyte* (1972), *An Item from the Late News* (1982), *Reaching Tin River* (1990), and "Inventing the Weather" (1992).

21 Economic and cultural explanations for transvestism, Marjorie Garber argues, displace the transvestite. Garber would probably see my reading of Archie's transvestism, sexual vulnerability as a cultural explanation, as a "normalization of the story of the transvestite" (69), whereby transvestism becomes "an instrumental strategy rather than an erotic pleasure" (70).

22 When Schaffer next mentions the hegemonic norms of Australian culture she appends class, conspicuous by its absence, to the list: "Meaning is made possible through reference to a system of differences (of relations between things) within an order of sameness (a white, masculine, heterosexual, middle-class culture)" (13). The value of a particular identity depends on "overlapping considerations of gender, sexual preference, race, class, age and ethnicity" (12). The mateship ethos depends more on working-class culture, as her example of "the Paul Hogan type as a projection of an ideal self" (13) makes clear. The defining features of mateship, "manly independence, an assertion of equality and a loyalty between men," are linked with "the little Aussie battler and not the squatter, pastoralist or capitalist investor" (101).

23 *Oxford English Dictionary* infers two general meanings from its etymology: Old High German *strüz*, combat or strife; Old Teutonic, *strüto-z*, to stand out, project, protrude; modern German *strotzen*, to swell out, to bulge.

24 Since doing this work I stumbled across Bernheimer's article, "Penile Reference in Phallic Theory," and found that I duplicated his section on the etymology of "phallus."

25 Unlike Freud, who uses both terms interchangeably, Lacan strives to eradicate from psychoanalysis the theoretical pitfalls generated by haphazard and conflated usage. Lacan dismisses any definition of phallus which relies on the penis as its signified: "One might say that this signifier is chosen as what stands out as most easily seized upon in the real of sexual copulation, and also as the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is the equivalent in that relation of the (logical) copula. One might also say that by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation" (82). One might say, but Lacan would never say.

26 Germaine Greer summarises the pathology associated with the womb in *The Female Eunuch*, "The Wicked Womb," 47-52. Chapter six of
Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex* gives an history of scientific explanations of menstruation.

27 The title for Helen Garner’s review of *An Item from the Late News*, "In the Tradition of Wake in Fright," makes the connection explicit.

28 See Kimmel for an account of bullying.

29 The entry for "phallus" in Hendrickson’s *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* refers to the entry for "bull." Old English *bula* is analogous to Greek *phallos*, "which comes from an Indo-European root meaning ‘to swell up’" (85).

30 Front bars can be very dangerous places indeed, which is why nascent bourgeois types like myself enter them with either a great deal of dread or very muscular friends.

31 Dismemberment is the essential part of Freud’s castration complex. Both Tyler and Bernheimer ("‘Castration’") argue that patriarchy envisages loss as a wound, seeing a cut where, as Tyler notes, "in fact, there are only different genitals" (162).

32 For urban representation of the bush, see Davison and chapter six, "Bohemians and the Bush," of White’s *Inventing Australia*.

33 For an overview and critique of the way in which the feminine is inscribed into national identity, see Schaffer.

34 Bernheimer, "‘Castration’ as Fetish" 1. Psychoanalytic theory, whether Freudian or Lacanian, attaches great primacy to castration as the indispensable mechanism necessary for dissolving the Oedipus complex, structuring sexual difference and sexuality, and allowing the subject to assimilate cultural prohibitions. Elisabeth Bronfen calls it "the linchpin of psychoanalytic theory" (41). The theoretical concept of castration, what Freud in "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" refers to as "the fact of castration" (253), is so central to psychoanalysis that without it "psychoanalysis would be castrated" (1), as Bernheimer deftly puts it.

**CHAPTER SIX**

1 The rare exception is Paul Sharrad. Postcolonial readings of Astley, though uncommon, should increase. The intertextual references to imperial literature in *Vanishing Points*, for example, provide substantial material for an article or two, as do Astley’s representations of Aborigines in *A Kindness Cup, It’s Raining in Mango, Reaching Tin River*, and *Vanishing Points*.

2 In 1985, Astley was wary of sounding like a feminist. After recounting the social conditions that existed during the 1950s and contributed to her decision to "write as a man," Astley wondered whether she was being too feminist: "women writers were ignored,
or whatever women did was ignored. 'A woman said that', 'a woman did that'... it's a wonder they didn't say 'woman teacher' or 'woman nurse'. I sound aggressively feminist, don't I?' (43). Of a different generation, Baker replied: "No, it sounds quite normal to me." The feminism Astley admires is that practised by Olga Masters, whose The Home Girls (1982) touches "on one of the big themes of this decade, of women's issues, without for one moment sounding off and sounding like a strident feminist at all" (Ellison 60).

Stead outlines her thoughts on feminism in an interview with Rodney Wetherell (22-23). See Susan Sheridan's excellent discussion of Stead's relation to feminism, particularly her reading of Stead's extraordinarily homophobic reaction to the Women's Liberation Movement (Christina Stead 1-9).

3 Wighton 71. Similar to Wighton, but less scathing, Adrian Mitchell in The Oxford History of Australian Literature speaks of Astley's "tendency to arch mannerisms and even on occasions to the 'Gothic splendours' of Patrick White" (166).

4 Burrows 280. Perkins criticises the masculine bias of Burrows's review (12).

5 Burrows complains that Astley's satire is uncharitable and that Astley is prejudiced against nearly everyone who inhabits her novels, the exception to the prejudice being a "young graduate teacher, preferably female!" (278). Astley, he decides, is better at "scorn" than "satire" (280). Astley counteracts these criticisms in "Writing in North Queensland" (1981): "Perhaps it is because I am a woman - and no reviewer, especially a male one, can believe for one split infinitive of a second that irony or a sense of comedy or the grotesque in a woman is activated by anything but the nutrients derived from 'backyard malice'. Assuming these particular qualities - sense of irony, the eye for the comic or the grotesque - are an indication of intelligence and believing a priori that no woman is intelligent, critics assign the evidence of humour, irony or comedy to darker forces at work: the Salem judgement comes into play and the lady writer most certainly is for burning" (4). Describing Reaching Tin River as "a very funny satire on the pretensions of men" (103), Peter Pierce characterizes Astley's satire as "acrid" (104), updating Tennant's review.

6 Willbanks 41. Astley says she changed her style with A Kindness Cup (1974), much earlier than the chronology espoused by the critics.

7 An American phrase that refers to a fear of matriarchy, "mom-ism" crossed the Pacific to Australia in the post-war period. "The term 'mom-ism' was coined by Philip Wylie in Generation of Vipers (1942), a virulently misogynist tirade against the degeneration of American culture at the hands of 'the destroying mother'... Soap opera, fashion, TV, radio, sentimental pop songs, Hollywood, department stores: these 'degraded' forms of mass culture, designed to appeal to feminine sensibilities, were undermining the virility of American culture" (Reynolds and Press 4).
8 Astley still indicts the crass materialism that bedevils parent-child relations. Separated from her family and making a go of it up north, Julie Truscott, as she waits for the arrival of her children, worries about "the poverty of my apartment, the bedrooms lacking posters, tape decks, expensive gadgets that are the ransom demanded by the young. Blood ties went out the window with the me generation" (208).

9 Writing about women's experiences, Rosalind Coward argues in "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" (230), does not necessarily make that writing feminist. For articles influenced by Coward, see Goldsworthy (1985) and Strauss (1993).

10 Lindsay 119. Interpretations of Astley as a religious writer are common. Ross, Clancy, and Matthews have commented on the Catholic consciousness, the Catholic experience, the ubiquity of Catholic characters, and the religious language in Astley's work. Ross affirms that she is "an essentially religious writer" ("Thea Astley's Long Struggle" 506) and underscores the centrality of religion as a theme in Astley's work. According to Clancy, Astley's convent upbringing accounts for her "orthodox and even strait-laced" ("The Fiction of Thea Astley" 44) ethical values. Lapsed, Astley comments on the enduring influence Catholicism exerts on her as a writer: "the Catholic church stimulates the metaphor glands, heightens the sense of suffering, gives meaning to guilt - all very good for writers" (Ross "An Interview with Thea Astley" 265). Of contemporary religion, Astley is critical: churches are "great PR organisations, like multinationals, and I think if Christ came back, He wouldn't know which door to go in" (Ellison 66). Astley makes a distinction between God and Christianity, believing in the former, decrying the moral bankruptcy of the latter (Willbanks 36). Interestingly, Astley praises liberation not feminist theology: the "residue of what Christ taught lingers on with priests who are working in places like Guatemala or Nicaragua, among the peasants" (66).

11 In Alice Doesn't de Lauretis argues that reducing women into an "oppositional notion of 'feminine' subject defined by silence, negativity, a natural sexuality, or a closeness to nature not compromised by patriarchal culture . . . simply reverts woman to the body and to sexuality as an immediacy of the biological, as nature" (161).

12 Of the renowned Cixous-Irigaray-Kristeva trinity, Moi argues that it "is largely due to the efforts of Hélène Cixous that the question of écriture féminine came to occupy a central position in the political and cultural debate in France in the 1970s" (102). English translations of Cixous's "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975) and "Castration or Decapitation?" (1981) first appeared in the North American feminist journal Signs: Journal of Women in Culture. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's anthology New French Feminisms (1980) included a revised "The Laugh of Medusa" and Cixous's "Sorties," a brilliant deconstruction of patriarchal binaries which, organized around the activity/passivity opposition, structure thought. La jeune née (1975), a collaboration with
Catherine Clément, was published in 1986 as *The Newly Born Woman*. Feminist journals in Australia, namely *Hecate* and *Refractory Girl*, covered the latest theoretical developments and debates in French feminism, so that "[b]y the early 1980s Australian feminists could have gleaned a fair idea of what 'French feminism' might involve for literary studies" (Sheridan, "Australian Feminist Literary History" 103).

13 In contrast, Astley sees poetic language as a means of meaning-making, of telling truths about the world, as her comments on poetic language, especially her distinction between metaphor and symbol, suggest. Poets, for Astley, "are the only people who tell the close truth about an object. A metaphor is the sharpest way of getting at the truth, as in [Gerald Manley] Hopkins, who told wonderful truths about the world around him. That's why my language is so metaphoric - a quality which has brought down the rage of critics" (Richey 99). Following the example of poets, Astley uses metaphors to arrive at a truth or an essence: "In spite of what has been said about my writing, I don't embellish just to fill up a page. Instead, I am always trying to get at the essence of a thing" (Ross, "An Interview with Thea Astley" 265). Symbols, satirized in *The Acolyte* and *Reaching Tin River*, encourage spurious extrapolation, and hence lead away from the truth.

14 For a critique of Kristeva's positing of the female body outside of discourse, see Stone.

15 Clément attacks Cixous for making "mastery absolutely coincide with knowledge" (*The Newly Born Woman* 144), for collapsing the distinction between phallocentrism and logocentrism. Similarly, Tania Modleski questions the assumption that textual explication is an inherently phallocentric form of mastery, "a means of arresting the free play of meaning analogous to the way patriarchy continually attempts to contain women and women's sexuality" ("Feminism and the Power of Interpretation" 126). The idea that feminists should relinquish mastery dismays her: "To my mind, there is something profoundly depressing in the spectacle of female critics avowing their eagerness to relinquish a mastery that they have never possessed. Since when have women been granted the power of interpretation or our readings accorded the status of interpretive truth by the male critical establishment?" (127).

16 An autobiographical detail from Cixous's section of *The Newly Born Woman* anticipates the importance that flight will assume in her theory of *écriture féminine*. As a child in Algeria, Cixous read texts to access a space uncontaminated by relations of exploitation, a place "not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise." Writing, she discovers, is "not obliged to reproduce the system." Writing offers escape: "And that is where I go. I take books; I leave the real, colonial space; I go away. Often I go read in a tree. Far from the ground and the shit." While she asserts that she does not read in order "to forget" or hole up "in some imaginary paradise" (72), the manner in which she articulates *écriture féminine* and the role of the mother/child bond. Reading allows her to flee the immediate
economic and social relations of exploitation and concentrate instead on "all the texts in which there is struggle" (72). In response, Clément argues intellectuals "have difficulty being able to size up the reality of the struggles directly, because they are in a position where work on language and work on the Imaginary have fundamental importance and can put blinders on them" (159).

17 More poetry, less party politics; that, judging from several remarks that crop up in conversation between Cixous and those in her seminar, is how Cixous’s acolytes propose to deal with the world. When Pierre Salesne mentions collective struggle it is only in relation to a text, the ugly battlefield of the seminar: "Working together collectively on a text it’s as if there are hands held out towards me, giving me the strength to fight" (Sellers 142). Take it easy, comrade. Mara Négron Marreo has absorbed Cixous’s ideas that poetry is politics and the political forms of organization are redundant: "It’s important to underline the political dimension of the seminar. I mean politics in the poetic sense, not party politics. For me, politics is a question of morals, of saving life. It involves a certain way of looking at texts, of listening to the other" (143).

18 Cave 33. "Where the Wild Roses Grow," the first single from Cave’s Murder Ballads (1996), confirms the destructive logic of phallocentrism’s appropriative economy, what Cixous calls the "fragility of a desire that must (pretend to) kill its object" (Newly 80). The song is "about a man talking to his dead lover after he’s smashed her skull with a rock" (Cave 32). In many of Cave’s songs, murder solves the enigma of woman. Still, Murder Ballads is yet another classic Nick Cave record.

19 Proving socialists have a sense of humour, Terry Eagleton satirises the postmodern disdain for "theoretically disreputable universals" ("Defending the Free World" 86): "A similar lack of internal conflictiveness and multiplicity characterises such organisations as the African National Congress. Instead of learning from American postmodernists that unity is ipso facto a negative phenomenon - ‘closure’, ‘essentialism’, ‘terroristic totalisation’ and so on - they obtusely continue to strive to achieve the maximum degree of agreement and solidarity among the people of the townships in order to bring the apartheid regime to its knees. Bishop Tutu can’t possibly have read his Smith, Rorty, Hartman, Hillis Miller, Felmann, Weber, or indeed hardly any left-leaning American critic at all. He certainly cannot have been reading most American feminist critics. There is now, among all such critics, an impressive degree of consensus that consensus is inherently oppressive" (87).

20 Marxists are not immune to the postmodern scepticism regarding the utility of such concepts as "emancipation" and "liberation." While there is nothing surprising when Jacques Derrida "tells us that he ‘would hesitate to use such terms as "liberation"'" (McNally 14), there is cause for concern when Michèle Barrett does the same. In the introduction to Women’s Oppression Today: The Marxist Feminist Encounter, the revised edition of the socialist-
feminist classic Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis, Barrett discusses each word of the original edition’s title and, like Derrida, hesitates: "'Oppression,' too, looks rather crude in terms of current feminist work" (v), an observation which accords with Lyotard's description of the "narrative of freedom" (31) or the "emancipation narrative" (48) as outmoded. Jameson singles out the "French nouveaux philosophes" for "reinventing the hoariest American ideological slogans of the cold war: totalizing thought is totalitarian thought; a direct line runs from Hegel’s Absolute Spirit to Stalin’s Gulag" ("Cognitive Mapping" 354).

21 This displacement, cited in the editorial of Transformation: Marxist Boundary Work in Theory, Economics, Politics and Culture as the explanation for a new Marxist journal, characterises the work of the "(post)modern 'left'" and exemplifies a "crisis of revolutionary theory and praxis" (i).

22 Perkins 13. As terms to designate literary functions or meaning, "feminine," "feminist" and "female" have different meanings and are used to mean different things by different critics. Elaborating on a distinction Josephine Donovan in Feminist Literary Criticism (1975) made between a "feminist aesthetic and a feminine one," Perkins uses feminine as a positive term to mean "a sense of female epistemology as rooted in authentic female culture" (18 n14).

23 Bernard Leverson calls pop music "muck" (11) in The Slow Natives. Pop music is troped as the abject in Reaching Tin River and Vanishing Points. "Pop music bucketing from speakers was vomitously audible" (122) at the resort Belle and Seb stay at; the rare time when Belle admires Seb centres on a moment of their shared disgust for pop: Seb smashes the radio after "the house had been shuddering for half an hour with whining pop music. 'It sounds,' screamed Seb, . . . 'as if they’re singing through their dicks. A horrible yellow stinking trickle!'" (215). In Vanishing Points, pop, disco, rock, and heavy metal are described as a "raucous screech" (64), male vocals as "pain-screams" (64), and the music's beat as "the repetitive thump thump thump as mindless as the copulation of rutting animals" (67). The music is also brutally phallic: the noise "raped" Mac’s solitude (90).

24 Showalter, A Literature of Their Own 28. Astley, too, displaces her feminist anger and desire for reform onto other groups. She diminishes the political substance of her early work, believing that she should have tackled social issues "years ago" (Ellison 60), a comment that devalues her critique of patriarchy and subordinates her feminism to other issues: Australia’s mistreatment of Aborigines, colonialism in the Pacific, and the nuclear threat.

25 The lyric occurs in "Heart-Shaped Box," a song from In Utero (1993), whose Cobain designed back cover features fetuses, exposed internal organs, and Baudelairean flowers. All songs on the album emit a profound disgust with the world. Strewn throughout the lyrics are images of the abject: semen, putrescence, mucous,
disease, faeces, afterbirth; other lyrics mention kissing open sores and ingesting milk, shit, and cancer. On the cover of Nevermind (1991), the album that, so far, defines the 1990s, a baby swims toward money on a fish hook. Rock critics Simon Reynolds and Joy Press identify Nirvana’s music and lyrics as a "regressive impulse to repudiate manhood and seek refuge in the womb" (97). Sanctuary means, like the band’s name, annihilation.

26 Baudelaire 151. Translated by Richard Howard as "Travelers," "Le Voyage" occurs in the "Death" section of Les Fleurs du Mal. Astley refers to the last two lines only. The translation Astley uses is: "Ah! How large the world is by lamplight! / How small in memory!"

27 Barnhart. At the end of his article on Kurt Cobain, Stephen Wright unpacks the etymology of Nirvana to suggest its significance in relation to Cobain’s suicide (63).

28 T. S. Eliot makes the same connection: "Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb" (quoted in Huyssen 201).

29 Theories which celebrate "feminine" marginality, silence, pleasure, and madness as disruptive antilogs strategies, or which construct pre-oedipality as a place to counter phallocentrism and logocentrism are "mistaken" according to Terry Lovell (18). Rejecting the symbolic order, Toril Moi argues, would "make us psychotic": "We have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that precedes us and from which there is no escape. There is no other space from which we can speak: if we are to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language" (170). Indeed, the celebration of "the 'feminine' as a site of resistance fails to acknowledge that women's assignment to a distinctive 'feminine' sphere has throughout history been a major cause of their marginalization and disempowerment" (Felski 11).

CONCLUSION

1 For a neat summary of the theoretical assumptions and implications of "Images of Women" criticism, see Moi 42-49.

2 Regarding those who suggest that the commonality of the phrase "women's experience" is essentialist, Tania Modleski makes the following argument in Feminism Without Women: "But surely for many women the phrase "women's experience" is shorthand for 'women's experience of political oppression', and it is around this experience that they have organized and out of this experience that they have developed a sense of solidarity, commonality, and community" (17). The same is true for many men.

3 For a similar argument, see de Lauretis Technologies of Gender. She argues that notion of "gender as sexual difference and its derivative notions - women’s culture, mothering, feminine writing, femininity, etc. - have now become a limitation, something of a liability to feminist thought" (1). Not only does the concept of
gender within these terms keep "feminist thinking bound to the terms of Western patriarchy itself" (1), it "makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to articulate the differences of women from Woman, that is to say, the differences among women or, perhaps more exactly, the differences within women" (2).
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For the bushman, the land continues to be the enemy when, in fact, economic and political forces are more strongly at work. In the end, the nationalist myth perpetuates a ruling class ideology. (101)

Though the men gain nothing from the existence of the squattocracy, they nonetheless defend it. For example, a travelling circus forced, because a van overturns, to camp outside of Allbut are told to move elsewhere because the land they are on "is private grazing land" (61). Cropper backs him up on this score and forces them to move on. Similarly, the aim of the ritual is to extract economically beneficial information from Wafer which will make the town attractive to foreign investment. They are willing to submit to the logic of the economy, to feminise themselves so they can castrate others.

8. Conclusion

Thea Astley demonstrates, with her usual acerbity, the ideological function of the theory of castration, its centrality, as a marker of sexual difference, in perpetuating patriarchal society, and the way in which men use castration to maintain economic, political, and social order. For Cropper, Moon, and the rest of the men of Allbut, the theory of castration safeguards masculine privilege and allows them to feel superior to and scornful of all those they consider to be castrated: women, Aborigines, immigrants, Wafer.

Thematically and stylistically, An Item from the Late News is continuous with Astley's earlier novels - its bleak resolution