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JANET BEER

Introduction

Kate Chopin (1850–1904) first published a story, 'Wiser than a God', in the *Philadelphia Music Journal* in 1889; her last, 'Polly's Opportunity', appeared in the *Youth's Companion* in 1902. The thirteen years in between marked a hugely productive career as a writer, primarily of short stories, with a novel at the beginning and at the end of the 1890s; an earlier novel, *Young Dr. Gosse*, she seems to have destroyed. Chopin did not work seriously at her fiction until she was a widow and had returned to her birthplace, St Louis, Missouri, to live. During her brief married life (although it was long enough for her to produce six children), she lived in Louisiana, first in New Orleans and then in Cloutierville, and it is in this southern state, in every way more French than American in its heritage and culture, that she set most of her stories and both her novels. Indeed, the publisher's advertisement for her first collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, in 1894, drew attention to the fact that Chopin's characters were 'semi-aliens' and featured in narratives 'quite unlike most American tales'.[1]

Chopin's work was published in the leading magazines of her day; she wrote for a variety of different audiences, including children, but she also found ways and exercised the means to place stories which were often daring in terms of their subject matter and expression. She was expert in her manipulation of both form and language so as to position herself to write about issues which she found compelling – issues which were often controversial. Commentators on her work are always sensitive to the level of Chopin's awareness of the editorial and critical reception of her writing in turn-of-the-century America. It is clear that the knowledge she had of the literary marketplace operated alongside a determination to write about difficult subjects. Working, as she did, in a particular sector of the literary world, writing mainly short stories for magazines, she became adept at finding ways to accommodate the tastes and idiosyncrasies of the editors without too much compromise on her part.

When Chopin published her novel, *The Awakening*, however, she came under a different kind of scrutiny. Chopin's biographer, Emily Toth, has dealt

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effectively with the overstatement of the detrimental effects that the negative reviews of the novel may have had on Chopin,[2] but it seems highly unlikely that Chopin thought that the subject matter of her novel would be uncontentious. Her voice was often a transgressive voice; some of her stories were not deemed fit to print, even by the most liberal of magazine editors, and others she did not attempt to place in the public domain – the most famous of these being the story of joyful adulterous sex, 'The Storm', written in 1898. The majority of her tales, however, did see the light of day and were published in magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harper's*, *Century*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Two Tales*, *Youth's Companion* and a variety of St Louis and New Orleans periodicals and newspapers, as detailed by Bernard Koloski in his essay here, '*The Awakening*: The First Hundred Years'. Chopin's writing brought her in much-needed income, and she kept detailed records of submissions and money earned. She wrote for a living but, as Pamela Knights has made clear: 'although she often yielded to the compromises required for publication, she would also defend her artistry, and was prepared to resist editorial suggestion'.[3]

One of the features of Kate Chopin's short stories and novels is that family members appear and reappear, the same characters are represented across a variety of different narratives, sometimes taking the main stage, as Tonie Bocaze does in the story 'At Chênière Caminada', written in 1893, and sometimes a small or even offstage part as he does in *The Awakening*, whispering with Robert Lebrun whilst Edna sleeps in his mother's house. Alcée Laballière appears in 'Croque-Mitaine', on his way to a ball; in 'At the 'Cadian Ball' he attends, unsurprisingly, a ball but becomes engaged to a woman who does not dance, and in 'The Storm', he makes passionate, adulterous love to a woman with whom he danced but failed to marry. His brother Alphonse plays a much less well-tempered role in the story, 'In and Out of Old Natchitoches' but also gets the girl in the end.

In this introductory essay to the *Companion*, I would like to discuss briefly the appearances and reappearances of another family, the Santiens, in order to say something about Chopin's narrative strategies, particularly in her short stories, before talking about the essays that feature in this collection. I have already mentioned Chopin's willingness as an artist to engage with difficult issues. One of the ways in which she achieves this is by fracturing what might otherwise be larger narratives and allowing information to seep out from the edges of the stories. For instance, she does not create the conventional family saga she could have written with the Santien family at its heart; instead, she has them play very particular roles in a number of tales, tales in which our attention is diverted by the lives of others: in two cases towards the completion of a conventional romance, and in one to the end of a romance. Chopin

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makes the building up of information about the family a privilege for the dedicated reader, weaving a range of references and a cast of characters across story and, in the case of the Santiens, story/novel boundaries, creating a momentum that can travel across narratives. There is no doubt that Chopin had a readership that made connections; for instance, the exploits of the Santien brothers had been sufficiently noticed for Houghton, Mifflin, the publishers of Chopin's volume of short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) to mention the fact that the collection would 'bring the three "Santien boys" together'[4] as a desirable feature.

The three Santiens, not permitted by Chopin's splintering of their family story to be the heroes of a saga of the vanquished South as displaced plantation owners, feature in a number of narratives but always as agents of change in women's lives. Grégoire liberates an abused wife in the story 'In Sabine' and courts and loses a woman in the novel, *At Fault*; Placide honourably frees his fiancée from her promise to marry him by feigning dishonourable behaviour in 'A No-Account Creole'; and Hector refuses to become involved with Suzanne St Denys Godolph in 'In and Out of Old Natchitoches' and so effectively drives her into the arms of Alphonse Laballière. In all the stories where they appear, Chopin laces an atmosphere of danger around the Santien boys, whether as a result of their violent behaviour – as with Grégoire, who commits murder and Placide, who threatens murder – or their socially unacceptable behaviour – as with the smooth-talking Hector: 'the most notorious gambler in New Orleans'.[5] Whilst the women with whom they are associated all change their lives – either through marriage or an escape from marriage – and the stories ostensibly centre on that change, the Santien men are portrayed in ways that are distinct and different to the women and the men they marry or unmarry. They bob and weave through the landscapes they variously inhabit in Louisiana and Texas, and their reputations – chiefly as hell-raisers – do not so much follow as precede them.

The over-arching narrative of the three short stories in which they appear and *At Fault* can be considered as both a counterpoint to the manner in which Chopin tells women's stories and also as yet another strategy for undermining the conventional. Chopin's work is rightly celebrated for its lambent, compelling portraiture of women: women in crisis, women at moments of disillusion or awakening, women at fault and women exonerated. What is less often discussed is the manner in which she portrays men at moments of destiny, the often subtly structured narratives in which the lives of men are shown in the process of vast and significant change. The Santien narratives are stories of men displaced by war and economic slump, of failed southern aristocrats who are in the process of falling out of the society in which they were born, living by a code which is no longer appropriate or perhaps even legal,

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galloping down the road to their final destruction. The three brothers are epigones; they are ultimately irrelevant to the economic and social life of the South, they are not heroic, except in small acts of kindness, and are actually interesting to Chopin because they are doomed.

In plot terms, Chopin is able to make very powerful use of the outsider status of the ill-fated brothers: Grégoire is travelling away from his failed relationship with Melicent in *At Fault* towards his pointless death in a drunken confrontation in Cornstalk, Texas when he pauses to liberate 'Tite Reine in the story, 'In Sabine'; and Placide Santien in 'A No-Account Creole' is very clearly the going not the coming man. Chopin begins the latter story with a beautifully judged portrait of Placide's rival, the 'cool and clear'-headed Wallace Offdean. Characterised as 'temperate', 'moderate' and 'healthy' and at a 'turning-point in his life' (81) he is set up in simple opposition to the last remaining Santien on Red River, the 'No-Account Creole' of the title, busy squandering his many talents along with his patrimony but retaining his honour, or at least his own notion of his honour. Chopin treats Offdean throughout in a tone of light irony, gently mocking his intention to 'banish [Euphrasie] from his thoughts' (93) and to 'set about forgetting her' (96) as if it could be a matter of simple determination. Placide, however, is characterised in quite a different manner; stories are told about him, by La Chatte, for instance, but he is communicated largely through his own action or inaction. Chopin describes the manner of his leaving the plantation after supper, justifying the time of departure in some detail:

> He would not wait until morning, for the moon would be rising about midnight, and he knew the road as well by night as by day. He knew just where the best fords were across the bayous, and the safest paths across the hills. He knew for a certainty whose plantations he might traverse, and whose fences he might derail.

She then follows this treatment of his journey plan with a sentence that undoes, with devastating effect, the rational Placide: 'But, for that matter, he would derail what he liked, and cross where he pleased' (88). This method of characterisation or narrative momentum is one of Chopin's most effective techniques: the predictable, reasonable explanation, which might be offered as a justification or a defence, is proffered and then completely undermined by a swift assault on the carefully accumulated evidence, which then communicates an essential truth about the situation. She does this in the short short story 'Doctor Chevalier's Lie' where the extreme economy of language does not preclude the rise and subsequent fall of the expected in the contradictions that follow:

> with a dead girl stretched somewhere, as this one was. And yet it was not the same. Certainly she was dead: there was the hole in the temple where she had

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> sent the bullet through. Yet it was different. Other such faces had been unfamiliar to him, except in so far as they bore the common stamp of death. This one was not. (147)

Just as this tells us much about Dr Chevalier: that he was used to reacting to the screams that arose in the night from the red-light district, that he was accustomed to clearing up after the suicides of prostitutes, and also that this was a girl he knew, so the apparently incidental explanation of Placide's decision to cut short his visit to Euphrasie tells us of his stubbornness, yes, but also of his deep, intimate knowledge of the landscape, his relationships with his neighbours and, finally, and devastatingly, of his arrogance and his wilfulness.

We are also invited in this story to take note of the fact that Placide has little time for his brother, Hector, and the manner in which this is conveyed is such that it exists in ambiguity in this narrative but can be explained by a reading of 'In and Out of Old Natchitoches': 'Placide was not very well acquainted with the city [. . .] His brother Hector, who lived in some obscure corner of the town, would willingly have made his knowledge a more intimate one; but Placide did not choose to learn the lessons that Hector was ready to teach' (93). We learn in the subsequent story that Hector earns a living from gambling and that his sexuality is something of an enigma, either of which explanation might suffice as a reason why Placide would want to keep Euphrasie away from him; however, it is also perfectly possible to read it as further evidence of Placide's refusal to take advice or, indeed, to learn. Chopin may mock Offdean gently throughout the story, but his thoughts and actions do communicate a sense of process and progress, an engagement with life. In her portrait of Placide, she is telling a determinist tale: in spite of his apparent wilfulness, the majority of his actions are predictable, not necessarily by him but by others who know how his story goes. Euphrasie knows his mind before he does, even Offdean is able to calculate what his reactions will be and so is able to save himself from being shot in the back; the double bluff is in the hands of men educated beyond 'the state of mutiny and revolt' (85) inhabited by the brothers. The narratives of all the Santiens are known in advance: Grégoire, it is widely acknowledged by all in *At Fault*, is heading for a violent death, and that destiny is fulfilled; Hector arouses such moral outrage in the eyes of most who behold him, not least Laballière, that he cannot be long for the world; and Placide, afraid of nothing except learning something, most especially from an outsider, will live an even more itinerant life, failing to earn a steady living or form enduring relationships because of the handicap of being a 'Santien always, with the best blood in the country running in his veins' (84).

In the story 'In and Out of Old Natchitoches', Suzanne St Denys Godolph's childhood intimacy with Hector Santien is quickly shown to be irretrievable

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because of the new relationship they must form in the public spaces of the city. She is, at first, like Athénaïse, in the story that bears her name, a refugee from the attentions of a decent but rough-speaking country landowner, another woman who must come to the city in order to be shown that her destiny lies in marriage and motherhood in the country. Hector in his guise as Deroustan, an apparently notorious gambler, is recognisably an intimate of the homosocial city; he is an unabashed dandy, evasive and non-committal in the face of Suzanne's affection for him. Suzanne invites him to be her suitor or even her lover by trying to incite him to walk out with her in spite of advice she has received not to be seen with him. He concedes to the accusation that such an outing would be inappropriate but refuses to put into words the reasons why. Chopin, however, gives us a choice of answers. Like his brothers, he is an outsider, but it may not be because of the way in which he earns his living, rather because of his sexuality: 'posed' on the streets of New Orleans, he is 'a fashion-plate' who never looks at 'the women who passed by' (266). Suzanne's attempt to goad him into direct expression of the possible signification of their being seen on the street together receives a physical rebuff with a stripped-down unsexed rose, a flower with which he stains her face, reddening her skin with the blush that would, necessarily, arise if her reputation were to be similarly stained by a public intimacy with him; the sweeping of her face with the rose is a substitute for that which 'a lover might have done with his lips'. His solution to the problem of her feelings for him is to send her away whilst he returns to the decadence of life as a 'bon à rien' (265). As in 'A No-Account Creole', the portrait of the Santien in question is not ironised, unlike Alphonse Laballière, whose hot temper, actions and reactions are mocked. Instead, Hector is spoken of and described as finished, 'his attire was faultless', the maintenance of his person clearly being of more interest to him than the maintenance of the Santien plantation which, as we know from Grégoire in *At Fault*: 'Hec, he took charge the firs' year an' run it in debt' (751).

Grégoire is more in the mould of Placide than Hector, but, still, his own story is done before it begins. There is no family life he cares to retrieve, the discipline of a job has no effect: his 'duty' on his Aunt's plantation 'was comprehended in doing as he was bid, qualified by a propensity for doing as he liked' (742). As with Placide, the stories told about him by the black workers testify to a life of hell-raising, and his reputation is enough to make the drink-sodden Bud Aiken cheer up: 'his face brightened at the prospect before him of enjoying the society of one of the Santien boys' (327). However, that reputation is also enough to make 'Tite Reine believe that she has at last found the means to escape from an abusive marriage. This is the paradox of the Santien narratives: Chopin is at her most naturalistic in the depiction of the brothers, that is, at her most predetermined and least ambiguous in their

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outcomes as individuals, but she employs them as agents of change in the lives of others and as a means to produce indeterminacy and ambiguity. As Pamela Knights notes in her essay, Chopin threads the appearance and agency of children through her narratives in very particular ways: 'Even where a younger character's story is not the primary strand, thinking about the children can highlight dominant strands of the text – the discourses of race and region, sociology or natural science'. The Santien boys serve something of the same purpose; the over-arching narrative is one of decay and despair, of decadence and superannuation, of the pre-eminent 'blood in the country' now become at best counter-cultural and, at worst, murderous, but the incidents and events – which they trigger – change other lives and draw attention to instances of both social good and social evil. The Santiens move, across the narratives, from *seigneur* to outlaw. They all position themselves against the Zeitgeist, but only Hector is rendered immune to the power of insult, being doubly estranged from the accepted standards – sexual and professional – whereas his brothers are still in the clutches of their own dying notion of honour, a death that Chopin refuses to mourn but nonetheless commemorates.

The essays in this collection range over Chopin's stories and novels and draw her into relationship with other writers, literary developments, genres and critical perspectives and pay particularly serious attention to the transatlantic dimensions of her work. Her aesthetic tastes and influences, her language, her culture, her manipulation of her 'foreignness' for her principally North American audience – all these contribute to the composition of the unique voice that is Chopin's. Of the four critics identified by Emily Toth as foremost in the rebuilding of Kate Chopin's literary reputation after more or less fifty years in the doldrums, three are represented in this collection: Toth herself, Bernard Koloski and Helen Taylor, who, with Per Seyersted, 'resurrected [Chopin's] reputation, and she is now solidly in the American literary canon'.

Toth's biographical essay provides a confident but also playful account of Chopin's history, linking incidents and episodes in Chopin's life with individual stories and life writings. Toth also provokes us with a number of speculations about periods of silence – mainly during the period of Chopin's married life in Louisiana – and brings the writer into new contiguities with other artists, editors and commentators. One of Toth's emphases here is on the importance of Chopin's relationships with women and also the fact that she had had, unlike many women writers, a serious education: whilst the female members of Chopin's extended family were an important influence on her, so were the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. As Toth says: 'The Sacred Heart nuns taught needlework, but cared much more about French, history, and

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laboratory work in science (extremely rare for young girls). Their minds were to be stretched, and Kate O'Flaherty had over a decade with the Sacred Heart nuns.'

Donna Campbell, in her '*At Fault*: A reappraisal of Kate Chopin's other novel', makes a serious case for a reconsideration of the text as a social-problem novel, a sub-set of the nineteenth-century realist tradition, practised most famously by Charles Dickens and Mrs Gaskell in England and in America by Rebecca Harding Davis. Campbell explores the extensive structural doubling in the novel: the relationship between David and Thérèse being echoed by that between Grégoire and Melicent; and domestic issues, notably divorce and alcoholism, being considered alongside social and economic issues, for example, the industrialisation of the South and the concomitant complexities of race and power relations. As she says, 'Like many social-problem novels, *At Fault* is at heart a story about change and resistance to change, as an idea worked out on the regional and on the individual level.' At the outset of Chopin's writing career, Campbell argues, having *At Fault* published at her own expense was 'her bid to be considered as a serious writer' who could be compared to novelists like W.D. Howells, the dominant American realist writer of his generation and someone Chopin admired. The multiple plotting, the inclusion of a wide range of issues, settings and characters allows Chopin to crowd the text with controversial issues so that, for instance, the arson plot, as Campbell says: 'equates white violence toward blacks with the social problem novel's cycle of violence and retaliation between industrial workers and managers', and in so doing Chopin provides a distinct and different account of the complex of relationships that lie simmering under any traditionally rendered picture of unthinking African-American fealty and obeisance.

'Kate Chopin and the subject of childhood' by Pamela Knights provokes us to look at children as both audience and subject in Chopin's writing, opening with the salutary reminder that the language used against Chopin in reviews of *The Awakening* emphasised its unsuitability for the young and also, perhaps, suggested that in writing such a novel Chopin had in some way betrayed her proper audience. Knights provides a detailed context in which to place Chopin's engagement with the literary marketplace (specifically with those periodicals aimed at young persons), her portrayal of children as individuals and her structural use of children in the short stories and in *The Awakening*. The 'complex and multiple discourses' which were, in the period, competing to inscribe what might constitute childhood are clearly and fully drawn by Knights, as are contiguities and continuities between Chopin's work and that of Louisa May Alcott and Frances Hodgson Burnett. The argument is clearly made that Chopin maintains a delicate balance between

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a focus on children as readers, children as subjects and children as the means by which to progress a theme in story or novel, such as racial exploitation or male economic domination. Knights discusses the tension between the structural and thematic claims of the child in Chopin's work whilst also providing a substantial picture of the complications of the social construction of the child as audience.

Susan Castillo's essay, 'Race and ethnicity in Kate Chopin's fiction', places Chopin's work in the context of the unique social and linguistic environment that was late-nineteenth-century Louisiana. She traces the history of settlement and provides an illuminating account of the many 'cultures, languages, skin colours, and ethnic affiliations' that went to make up the urban and rural communities in which Chopin set her fictions. Focusing her discussion on the novel *At Fault* and on selected short stories from *Bayou Folk*, Castillo illuminates the conditions of existence and the terms of Chopin's engagement with her subjects, for those living under slavery and for those in post-bellum Louisiana, paying particular attention to the position of black women. Castillo takes Chopin's problematisation of racial categorisation into a discussion of the portrayal of 'free people of colour, who in the ante-bellum period often owned slaves themselves' but who nonetheless occupy segregated space, and also examines the stories which show Chopin rebutting 'the objectification of Cajuns that was characteristic not only of much local colour writing, but also of its reception by the eastern critical establishment'.

'Kate Chopin on fashion in a Darwinian world' is Katherine Joslin's wry look at Chopin's use of fashion to signal not only the exigencies of climate and location but also the subtle and not-so-subtle nuances of class, status, gender, ethnicity and morality. Linking her discussion of the meaning of dress in Chopin's writing with the influence and effect of the social and natural scientists on her fiction, Joslin looks at the points at which flesh meets fabric, at the suggestiveness of the clothed as opposed to the unclothed, moving from the unleashing of a feast of sensual pleasures and personal gratification simply by the donning of 'A Pair of Silk Stockings', to a discussion of the later stories where 'The fashion in these tales is minimal, suggesting the naked animal beneath the social fabric.' Joslin, like Toth, emphasises the fact that Chopin was prepared to engage with complex scientific thinkers, and she makes a detailed analysis of the points of contiguity between the ideas of Edvard Westermarck and Kate Chopin's style and substance, focusing particularly on his deliberations on promiscuity, on the limits of freedom for the individual, on divorce and suicide and on fashion.

In '*The Awakening* and New Woman fiction', Ann Heilmann positions the novel and its protagonist in a complex of relationships: with the Anglo-American fiction of the New Woman; with French literature – in particular,

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Guy de Maupassant, Madame de Staël and George Sand; with the male-authored heroines of the European adultery novel as well as with sensation novelists such as Louisa May Alcott, Mary Braddon and Wilkie Collins, who 'created strong-willed, single-minded, and resourceful heroines'. Heilmann explores the manner in which controversial and often unpalatable subjects were treated by the sensation writers, providing an overview of the way in which shocking plot elements were used to explore woman-centred themes such as 'the social construction of gender, the sexual exploitation of women, the perils of marriage'. The essay reveals *The Awakening* to be part of a nexus of thematic concerns across genres, gender and continents, focusing principally on a continuum of cultures where 'married women held no legal rights over their bodies' but where Chopin, exceptionally, 'hazarded openly to explore women's sexual desire'.

Michael Worton's 'Reading Kate Chopin through contemporary French feminist theory' brings a fresh critical perspective to an understanding of her work, shifting our attention to a reader-centred focus that illuminates the fiction through recent French feminist theory. Whilst Worton emphasises the 'kaleidoscopic' capacity of Chopin's writing – her authority in a range of languages, themes, genres, environments – he is clear that she goes beyond the realisation of what constitutes the authentic in the lives of women, to 'foreground the importance of the relational', here privileged in his reading. He discusses, in particular, the intimacies between women that Chopin portrays and the differences between male and female social and homo-social interactions, asserting that 'Her work is less a manifesto of emancipation than a multi-faceted exposition of quests for enduring relationships.'

In her essay '*The Awakening* as literary innovation: Chopin, Maupassant and the evolution of genre', Elizabeth Nolan reorientates the angle of the discussion of Chopin's iconoclastic reputation from the subject matter of her writing into a consideration of the effect her experimentation with genre may have had upon her critical reception. Nolan positions Chopin on the 'cusp' of modernity but also as uniquely placed at an intersection of European and American literary traditions and influences. She re-examines the extent and nature of the debt Chopin owed to Maupassant in particular and reinvigorates the discussion by looking at points of differentiation and innovation in her work. As Nolan says, the debate about Chopin's work is complex and vibrant: 'Now, her writing is quite properly considered in terms of its sophisticated engagements with romanticism, transcendentalism, literary realism, naturalism and New Woman fiction and as anticipating the concerns of feminism and literary modernism.'

Avril Horner, in her 'Kate Chopin, choice and modernism', seizes that challenge, inviting us to examine the 'choice of narratives' Chopin offers. She

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