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Alison Mackinnon
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1 Gender Crises and Social Anxiety

THE WOMAN WHO LAUGHED IN HER SLEEP, anticipating the day when the joys of both independence and love would be hers, faced a difficult awakening. As Olive Schreiner had predicted, she would have freedom: freedom from the constraints of marriage and family, freedom to earn a living and be independent. But she would have to prove herself able to stand alone, to succeed in a man's world, before that world would grant her the possibility of both an independent way of life and the joys of married love and commitment. Such a combination was not to be possible for many for decades to come. Only a hardy few led the way.

Olive Schreiner wrote as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. Born in South Africa, and self-supporting from the age of 15, she was keenly aware of the difficulties faced by a woman alone in the world. Her 1883 novel *The Story of an African Farm* featured a strong feminist heroine who was prepared to love outside marriage. Schreiner's search for a new moral code gave her an entrée into radical intellectual circles in London on her arrival there, and she was a founding member of the Men and Women's Club, a radical group which took as its starting point a reassessment of relations between the sexes.[1] One of the members of the

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group, the sexologist Havelock Ellis, wrote of Schreiner, 'She was in some respects the most wonderful woman of her time'.

Schreiner imagined a time in the future when love would be only one part of women's lives as it was of men's. No longer would the choice of marriage partner determine women's entire existence. Her imagined future held a world in which 'love is no more bought or sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman's life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness, breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for but found'.[2] A century later we ask ourselves if that Utopia has been reached: have we arrived at a time where women enjoy the fruits of economic independence, the assurance of equality and the joys of love? For some, perhaps, that possibility is at hand. Women who inherited the legacies of the early activists, the right to a higher education, the right to take up a profession, can combine economic freedom with a committed emotional life. But it is not easy.

Contemporary literature and cinema, women's magazines and academic studies all point out that independent women have to give up much of their financial and psychological autonomy when they form partnerships and bear children. The choice between love or freedom still causes heartache for many a professional woman. The young lawyer, doctor, business woman or journalist knows that commitment to husband and children will produce enormous conflicts when career decisions have to be made. While at the end of the nineteenth century a new dawn appeared to be breaking, at the end of the twentieth the glare of full sun has revealed the fragility of the dream. A sense of optimism is more precarious. The characteristic late nineteenth-century fears of women transgressing the fragile boundaries between the sexes have reappeared in new and virile forms.

Now the straightforward opposition between love and freedom of Schreiner's fable appears too simple. What do we mean by love? Love of whom? Did Schreiner have in mind only love between men and women? What of those women who found love and commitment with other women, or within a community of women? Were they able more readily to find both love and freedom – or was their apparent freedom also constrained by bonds of love, even if it avoided the ties of putting husband and children first? No longer can we talk of 'women' as a unified category.

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Class, race, sexual preference and ethnicity are just a few of the ways women differ from each other, 'each [living] at a different node in the web of oppression', as a recent feminist collection avows.[3] While middle-class women fought to enter the workplace, working-class women hoped to put down their burdens. While women from dominant settler societies struggled to gain freedom from excess childbearing, indigenous women resisted family limitation as annihilation, as many women in non-metropolitan countries do today.

And what do we mean by freedom? Freedom to choose or not to choose a partner, to engage in the type of work that will be satisfying and economically rewarding, to choose when and if to bring children into the world, to choose one's own sexual expression? A recent United Nations report, *The State of World Population 1994,* supports the right of women to choose whether and when to marry and become pregnant, pointing out that such basic freedoms are not available to millions of the world's women at century's end. The demand for sexual autonomy, for the right to control over one's body, is one of the most enduring of feminist claims and one that is still elusive and fragile. And what is the meaning of the freedom to pursue a career when that career is so demanding that there is no time to contemplate partnership, much less the care of children? Why do women have to 'solve the contradiction between care and autonomy themselves'?[4] And finally, why is it women who have to make these choices in ways that are incomprehensible to many men?

FINDING A GROUP WHO DREAMED OF LOVE AND FREEDOM

This book examines the lives of some of the first women who tried to navigate the difficult waters of love and freedom. In order to tease out some of the hopes and fears of the women of Olive Schreiner's time I have chosen to focus on the first generations of professional women who could earn their own living and choose an independent life. Where could they be found? Schreiner points the way. In Cape Town in 1912 she wrote to her husband Samuel Cronwright Schreiner of her attendance at a conferring of degrees ceremony. Glimpsing 'a great crowd of girls in their caps and gowns sitting

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amongst the boys', Schreiner was astonished to find herself crying. 'I have never been more moved in my life', she wrote, 'than by the sight of those girls. The first *little gleam* of the realization of the ideal that haunts us – and which we shall never see fully realized'.[5] These fortunate young women taking out their degrees represented the culmination of a dream for so many early feminists, the dream of attaining an education of the highest order, a preparation for a range of occupations and a testament to women's intellectual equality. Much rested on their shoulders. They would be the standard-bearers for the ranks of free women. They were the forerunners of the independent young women of today, women whose lives have changed so much but in many ways, paradoxically, remain the same.

Most of the women who grace the pages of this book were Australian, and most graduated from Australian universities in the years before 1920. They also happen to be white middle-class women in the imperial and settler societies such as Australia, for it was only women from such ranks who stood a chance of being educated; their privileged position allowed them to lead the way. Rather than referring constantly to 'some women' or 'middle-class women' I often refer to women, asking the reader to keep the qualification in mind. These Australian women were the first generations to have the opportunities of their brothers. But their experiences were shared by countless women in Cape Town, London, Boston, Toronto and Auckland, from all parts of the Western world where women had been admitted to universities. For in spite of an extraordinary misogynist opposition in some parts of the globe, women were generally admitted to degrees in all Western universities in the period from 1870 to 1900. The ancient foundations of Oxford and Cambridge held out longest, admitting women to their courses but not to full university status until 1920 and 1947 respectively. In some cases the decision to admit women to universities was spearheaded by liberal-minded men and women who believed, like John Stuart Mill, that women's inferior position in society was largely due to their deficient education. In others, the decision was a pragmatic one, based on the need of the new public secondary school system for effective and cheap teachers.

Nowhere was the tension between love and freedom more clearly posed than in the lives of the first generations of women who interrupted

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the conventional contours of bourgeois life by attending universities, by training for the professions, by entering academies of art and by daring to claim the economic independence which was by custom the preserve of men. Having won a measure of independence, were they to give it up on marriage and devote their lives to a husband's career and children's development? Many did, but at a high cost to their newly won sense of intellectual identity, as their personal narratives often reveal. Others found the cost too high and chose to pioneer new professional paths for women, acting as friends and models to those coming after, finding their rewards in the ever widening opportunities they helped to create. Only a few in the earliest years of the twentieth century were able to combine love, marriage and active work in the public world. For those few, privileged class position, access to household help and a loving partner were necessary but not sufficient conditions.

Were the options always as clear-cut as Schreiner envisaged them? Having seen the difficulties and the task ahead, many chose freedom from marriage, certainly, but they found a freedom protected from the harsher aspects of solitude by the comforting support of other women. Nor did they necessarily remain childless, some adopting children or caring for a special niece or nephew. Others refused the choice, claiming both alternatives, attempting in their lives to confound the oppositions which constrained them.

HOW DID THEY PERCEIVE THEMSELVES?

Women who chose new pathways were faced with the need to reassess their identities. Who were they? Could they define themselves solely in terms of their new professions? Could they, like Helen Mayo, cheerfully turn their backs on traditional sources of identity such as wifehood and motherhood? In 1905 Mayo, a new medical graduate of the University of Adelaide, travelled to India for practical experience at St Stephen's Hospital in Delhi. She often visited the *zenana* (women's quarters). After one visit she recounted with much amusement that she had been asked her age, and if she were married. 'Oh no', she responded, 'we don't go in for that, we doctors as a rule'.[6]

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In the following chapters we explore some of the ways in which educated women such as Mayo forged a new sense of self. An essential part of changing that self involved a reshaping of relations with others. Some, prepared for the possibility of a life alone, were surprised by the joy of finding 'a strange sudden sweetness' stealing upon them, an unexpected love which could become a source of lifelong satisfaction and support. Hilda Clark, for instance, fresh from a British medical degree and working at the Birmingham Maternity Hospital, wrote in 1910 to her companion Edith Pye:

> But I think love is the only thing that carries one beyond the boundaries of this life. No, I can't separate it from the joy of 'doing right', they are two wonderful fundamental essentials of the soul's existence. We cannot grow unless we do right, we cannot grow unless we understand the meaning of love, and just as I have to learn to 'do right' by doing right the duties that this outward world brings, so do I learn to love by loving thee dear creature, dear friend that this outward world has brought me in contact with. I do try so hard to keep my love pure & unselfish & not only outward. Dear Twin-soul – I feel it is impossible to dwell too much on it. It helps all that is best in me to grow … I used to pray for a friend too – I always knew I was one of those people who would be greatly helped by one, and that if my life should have to be solitary, it would be incomplete in a very real sense of the word. I do not feel nearly so dependent on marriage to complete myself – though I know it would bring one a world of new experiences and teach one to understand things that perhaps one will not fully understand without, but I am quite sure I do not depend upon or require it in the way that I did thee. It makes me feel that very likely it is true that God does arrange the circumstances that are best for us.[7]

For both Hilda Clark and Edith Pye the loving support of the other underpinned their work in French hospitals behind the lines during World War I, in post-war reconstruction work throughout Europe and in the peace movement. Together or apart they affirmed the importance of each other's work and life. Their way of life enabled both to sustain important professional identities without either having to sacrifice her abilities to maintain a household. Yet both clearly found deeply satisfying emotional needs met by their lifelong relationship.

This reshaping of relationships with others was an essential part of women's changing subjectivity. In our era, one which disclaims the possi-

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bilities of a unified subject, it is unfashionable to speak of 'the self', of self-identity. We speak instead of 'multiple subjectivities', of the subject as a site through which discourses are played out. These postmodern insights can be appropriated as we reassess the varied elements that constituted the 'subjectivities' of the newly educated woman, the many languages, 'social dialects' from which she chose to reinvent her place in the world. Women slipped between the master narratives, writing their own narratives, reversing the discourses.

WOMEN AND THE DECLINE OF THE BIRTHRATE

Many external observers looked with dismay at the educated women of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Their demands for economic independence, occupational opportunities and, more threateningly, for sexual autonomy typified the 'new women'. For those who supported the status quo, new women seemed to embody the worst aspects of social change. In rejecting marriage, as many did, they were seen as undermining that bastion of social life, the family. And by not marrying they were not reproducing the nation. A vast fear of population decline gripped many countries at the time. France's population had begun markedly to decline from the eighteenth century, and by the last quarter of the nineteenth century a range of countries exhibited a decrease in population. Australia was not immune to this decline in spite of its status, in European terms, as a 'young' nation. Its white population produced on average six children per family in the 1880s. By the 1910s the average family had three children. For many nations a declining population seemed to suggest an eroding of its power, its ability to wage warfare, to compete on the international stage as a strong power, to uphold its native stock against the incursion of immigrant groups who gave birth to larger families. In Anglophone societies it was feared that the predominant Anglo-Celtic groups would be outbred: the spectre of 'race suicide' emerged.

Moral panic gripped communities who felt their very existence was under threat. Much of this panic was directed at women who, it was argued, were failing to carry out their duty to the state to produce the next generation. Further, the idea of women training for professions fuelled a

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fear that they would take over men's jobs. How would the sexes remain distinct if women refused to produce babies and threatened men's livelihood? They would probably even begin to wear trousers. In this social climate, educated women who attempted to redefine their lives were seen to be transgressing hallowed social codes and were thus in considerable jeopardy. The fear that the boundaries between the sexes were breaking down was all-pervasive, and educated women seemed to be chiefly responsible for the collapse. Increasingly in the first decades of the twentieth century women such as Hilda Clark and Edith Pye, who found their primary support through other women, would come to be seen as deviant and abnormal, their mutual love reduced to the narrow categories of the sexologists (see Chapter 6).

Mary Louise Roberts claims that the essence of every culture is its notion of relations between the sexes. In her work on post–World War I France she argues that gender was central to how change was understood:

> [t]he discursive obsession with female identity during those years reveals that a wide variety of French men and women made it a privileged site for a larger ideological project: how to come to terms with rapid social and cultural change, and how to articulate a new, more appropriate order of social relationships. Debate concerning gender identity became a primary way to embrace, resist, or reconcile oneself to changes associated with the war.[8]

Roberts's claim could well be applied to early twentieth-century Australia, where changing relations between men and women were fraught with national anxieties about population decline and broader economic and social change. Representations of single educated women spoke of a world awry, of nature defeated.

THE DEMAND FOR SEXUAL AUTONOMY

The reluctance to marry and bear children which caused such anxiety was at the heart of a major feminist attempt to redefine sexuality. Two issues were crucial for women seeking sexual autonomy. First, they wanted economic independence for women so that no woman would be forced into marriage as her only means of support. Many women viewed marriage as no better

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than legalised prostitution. In her book *Marriage as a Trade*, the well-known English feminist Cicely Hamilton defined women's relationship to marriage as 'the exchange of her person for the means of subsistence', arguing that while marriage was voluntary for men, for women it was practically compulsory.[9] In the second place, linked with the demand for economic independence was an assertion of the dignity of the single woman.

Feminists sought reform within marriage itself, challenging the notion of conjugal rights. Feminists in England, in America and Australia, indeed in most Western countries, claimed a wife's right to determine her own sexual response, her own control over her body. The existence of the concept of rape within marriage, only recently recognised in a few jurisdictions, was clearly identified by several women writers in the late nineteenth century. As Margaret Jackson has recently demonstrated, the understandings developed by several nineteenth-century feminist thinkers constituted a direct attack on the patriarchal model of sexuality, reversing its terms to women's advantage.[10] Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in England, whose ideas on sexuality have been curiously neglected, confronted the dominant notion that the male sexual urge was natural and could not be controlled. This was the critical tenet in a model of sexuality which underpinned the tacit approval of prostitution and the doctrine of conjugal rights.

In contrast to the dominant patriarchal discourse, Blackwell argued 'not only that the sexual faculty *could* be controlled but that *failure* to do so was *unnatural*'.[11] Thus she asserted that the essence of being human was the capacity to guide and control instinct by means of active use of Reason and Will. The distinguishing feature of humanity was the use of mental capacities and the power of self-control. Blackwell used a form of reversal, turning the dominant narrative on its head, a strategy much employed by educated women. Contrary to the dominant belief that men's sexual urge was strong and uncontrollable while women were generally asexual, Blackwell asserted that women's capacity for sexual passion was as strong as men's. She again challenged convention in claiming that sexual pleasure did not depend on heterosexual intercourse but was more diffuse: sexuality was a compound factor in which emotion and spirituality played as strong a part as physical passion.

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Elizabeth Blackwell was only one of several women in Western countries who developed sophisticated analyses of male sexuality. Rosamond Benham, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 2, was another. This challenge was an essential plank in the broader program of the challenge to male power. Control of women's sexuality was, as feminists and many others realised, a key site of struggle for the emancipation of women.

THE LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE OF CHANGE

Language is critical in shaping our social world. Recently literature and history have converged in their insistence that we can know the 'real' only through language, 'language being understood for the most part as systems of meaning rather than as words or words alone'.[12] Systems of meaning both reflect and construct social reality and are embodied in sets of practices and in institutions. Certain groupings of symbolic systems, governed by apparent rules, form 'discourses' which convey particular constructions of the way things are. By deconstructing discourses we can reveal the hidden assumptions which pervade the taken-for-granted web of social reality. Within historical texts, differing discourses of social groups betray their world views.

Mary Poovey has revealed, for instance, that the division of the world into masculine and feminine 'underwrote a whole series of oppositions (public/domestic, property owner/commodity) which structured Victorian ideology as it was expressed in ideas, written texts, social practices, and institutions'.[13] Poovey also identifies statistics as a discourse, a representation which produces certain types of knowledge. The 'figures of arithmetic' are no less politically situated and manipulated than 'figures of speech'.[14] In this book we explore the varied discourses on relations between men and women, noting where women reversed the terms of existing discourses, used newly acquired knowledge to challenge conventional thinking, to gain acceptance for ideas which gave them greater space for autonomy.

Prophetically Olive Schreiner encapsulated the dilemma in the language of oppositions – love *or* freedom, realising that to have both was not possible for the women of her day. She realised that Life would have to return when the terms of the debate were different, when space had been

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