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Radical Literature and Cultural Validation: The Paradox of Merlin Radical Fiction

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Radical Literature and Cultural Validation: The Paradox of Merlin Radical Fiction

Graham Carr

Margaret Harkness, *Out of Work* (London: Merlin 1990).

Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Merlin 1990).

Walter Brierley, *Sandwichman* (London: Merlin 1990).

THE INVISIBILITY OF RADICAL FICTION in the writing and teaching of cultural history has long frustrated critics on the left. Eager to "shift radically the political balance of the literary tradition," they have called repeatedly for the publication of anthologies and reprint series that would "recirculate and reclaim" works which have previously been marginalized by mainstream criticism.[1] The launch in 1990 of Merlin Radical Fiction (MRF) is one response to this appeal. Published under the general editorship of John Lucas, the series aims "to make available for present-day readers a number of once well-known [British, European and American] novels which have been languishing out of print, if not out of mind."[2] Yet while MRF satisfies the legitimate desire to increase the visibility of previously neglected texts, both the overall concept of the series and the individual novels that comprise it,

[1]Graham Holderness, "Miners and the Novel: From Bourgeois to Proletarian Fiction," in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London 1984), 19; and Gustav Klaus, *The Rise of Socialist Fiction, 1880-1914* (Sussex 1987), 4. See also Patrick Parrinder, "Revolutionizing the Canon: From Proletarian Literature to Literary Theory," in *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction* (Sussex 1987), 105; and Carole Snee, "Working-Class Literature or Proletarian Writing?" in John Clark, *et al.*, eds., *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London 1979), 165-6.
[2]John Lucas, "General Introduction," in Margaret Harkness, *Out of Work* (London 1990), v.

Graham Carr, "Radical Literature and Cultural Validation: The Paradox of Merlin Radical Fiction," *Labour/Le Travail*, 34 (Fall 1994), 269-85.

raise important questions about the nature of radical fiction and its relationship to mainstream culture.[3]

Some of these questions centre on the institutional function of MRF as a vehicle for oppositional literature. Although the goal of MRF is to bring radical literature to a new audience, the irony of the serial format is that it inevitably tends to "control ... the reader's response as much as it opens it to new vistas" and risks "privileging ... individual masterpieces as the authentic voice of a whole class or culture."[4] But if this risk is largely compensated by the advantages of greater accessibility to hidden texts, a more intractable problem stems from the criteria by which novels were selected for inclusion in the first place. Despite the perception that radical fiction is supposed to destabilize establishment values, MRF appropriates the normative logic of canonicity — which dictates that aesthetic quality is "noncontingent" and that certain works possess "inherent qualities" of "transcendence, endurance, and universality" that distinguish them from writing of lesser value — in order to validate the radical literary tradition.[5] According to the editors, "[n]ot all novels that were famous in their day deserve or need resurrecting," but "the ones [that] we have chosen to reprint are important, not merely because they were once celebrated, but because they have qualities that make them durable works of fiction."[6]

Paradoxically, the net effect of this allegiance to canonicity is to depoliticize MRF by deflecting attention away from the qualities that specify radical fiction, or differentiate it from other types of literature, and toward those elements that "link ... repressed and master voices" along a critical continuum.[7] Even though the

[3]This essay focuses on the first three titles in the series: John Law [aka Margaret Harkness], *Out of Work* (1888); Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894); and Walter Brierley, *Sandwichman* (1937).

[4]Jonathan Hart, "Canadian Literature: In the Mouth of the Canon," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23 (Winter 1988-89), 155; and Jeremy Hawthorn, Preface to *The British Working-Class Novel*, ix. See also, Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore 1984), 162-5.

[5]Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," *Critical Inquiry*, 10 (September 1983), 14, 10. In a further irony the "vocabulary of 'value'" which informs canonicity derives from the distinctly unradical commodification of cultural discourse in the 19th century, when critics became "advisers to a class of literary consumers anxious to know the worth of their purchases." Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford 1987), 7-9. See also John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago 1993).

[6]Lucas, "General Introduction," v.

[7]Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago 1983), 131. On the limitations of "rival canon[s]" as an alternative to mainstream criticism see: Holderness, "Miners and the Novel," 19; Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London 1987), 206-7; and Karen R. Lawrence, "Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Canons," in *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century 'British' Literary Canons* (Urbana 1992), 2.

concept of radicalism has always been highly subjective, the general introduction to MRF — which is barely a page in length — makes no attempt to typologize radical fiction or problematize its relationship to the dominant culture.[8] On the contrary, Lucas' naive reference to the MRF novels having once been "celebrated" before "languishing out of print," completely begs the issue of their containment in, let alone marginalization by, the mainstream.[9] No less evasive are the critical introductions to individual novels in the series: Philip Gorski dismisses any "attempt to theorise and evaluate differences in working class fiction," while Bernadette Kirwan steers clear of the term radical altogether.[10]

From a historiographical standpoint, the central flaw with generalized evaluative criteria such as durability is that they perpetuate the anti-materialist notion that meaning is wholly determined at the moment of production and fully transmutable over time and across space. As Michèle Barrett points out, "no text is inherently progressive or reactionary." Because social conditions, audiences, and cultural values are fluid and variable, meaning is necessarily "constructed" in the process of consumption, and the response to a particular text "may be different from, even opposite to" the "intended" or "authorial 'preferred reading.'"[11] One way to illustrate the inadequacy of the canonical approach is by comparing Lucas' general preface to MRF with his introduction to a 1971 collection of essays on *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth-Century*. Using rhetoric that scripts almost perfectly the language of his subsequent gloss on MRF, Lucas boasted that *Literature and Politics* dealt with "all the great nineteenth-century writers" and did not "miss ... out many writers or works of importance in the political literature of the nineteenth century."[12] Yet despite these sweeping claims, none of the "important," "celebrated" or, one assumes, "political" texts chosen to launch the series on radical fiction were so much as mentioned in the earlier collection.

Another area where MRF bows to conventional criticism involves its attempt to fit radical fiction to the aesthetic norms of canonicity. In a veiled reference to the anti-formalism of orthodox Marxist criticism, Lucas reassures readers that the editors of MRF "certainly do not intend to re-print novels that can be called radical

[8]On the changing meaning of radicalism, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow 1976), 209-11. For a discussion of various ways of typologizing oppositional fiction, see Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill 1991), 75.

[9]My comments on the need to problematize the relationship between radical and mainstream draw on Stuart Hall's notion of the "double movement of containment and resistance" that characterizes popular culture. See "Notes Toward Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 228.

[10]Philip Gorski, "Introduction" to *Sandwichman*, xiii; and Bernadette Kirwan, "Introduction" to *Out of Work*, vii-xix.

[11]Barrett, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Cultural Criticism," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana 1988), 702.

[12]John Lucas, *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth-Century* (London 1971), 4.

only because of the 'message.'" Instead, he explains: "We understand radicalism in a more rewarding way, one that includes the means of telling as much as what is told."[13] While it is true that left criticism has traditionally diminished the importance of aesthetics by holding literature to a rigid litmus test of "socially relevant" content, the problem with both Lucas' position and the critical introductions to the individual MRF texts is that they fail to consider — let alone clarify — how form, content, and subject matter function as constitutive elements of radical fiction.[14] This is a significant omission for, as Martha Vicinus explains, it is an open question "whether it is possible to write revolutionary fiction using a traditional form." Her own work on Chartism suggests that novelists who adopted the narrative strategies of popular melodrama as the vehicle for their radicalism became "trapped" in a set of literary conventions that "left little room for political change."[15] But the obvious counterpoints to this example are writers like Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, who devised poetics that broke radically with literary tradition while espousing "decidedly reactionary" political views.[16]

Whatever the shortcomings in MRF's conceptualization of radical aesthetics, the importance that is attached to the issue is revealing in itself. By treating issues of form and content as equivalent in significance and isolating them from all discussion of the socioeconomic contexts of textual production or distribution, MRF further emulates conventional criticism by its willingness to distance cultural achievement from material reality. Although the critical introductions to the MRF novels briefly describe the class affiliations of the authors and comment on the contemporary reception of their work, they ignore the sociology of books as artifacts of commercial publishing. Yet as the recent work of N.N. Feltes shows, even seemingly innocuous "details" such as the formats in which books appear, or the contractual arrangements between authors, publishers, and booksellers, are

[13]Lucas, "General Introduction," v.

[14]Michèle Barrett, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 701. For a contrary view that argues that Marxist criticism has always been "an enterprise in aesthetics," see Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London 1981), 104. In Eric Homberger, *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39: Equivocal Commitments* (London 1986), Homberger argues that the political commitment of radical writers is often more emotional than intellectual and does not necessarily signify a "mastery of economic theories," x.

[15]Martha Vicinus, "Chartist Fiction and the Development of Class-Based Literature," in Klaus, ed., *The Socialist Novel in Britain*, 22, 12. On the "tension between ideology and literary forms," see Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago 1985), xiii.

[16]See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley 1982), 47. The supposition that "literary subversion is analogous to ideological defiance" is also challenged by Sylvia Söderlind, *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction* (Toronto 1991), 229.

embedded in ideology and can be subtly determinative of aesthetic choices that are made in constructing the text.[17]

Beyond the realm of theory, the lost opportunity represented by MRF's failure to transcend the limits of canonical inquiry and set new parameters for analyzing radical fiction becomes all the more apparent when reading the first three titles in the series: *Out of Work* (1888) by Margaret Harkness, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) by Ella Hepworth Dixon, and *Sandwichman* (1937) by Walter Brierley. Despite important differences in their literary styles, political contents, and publication dates, all three works are profoundly political yet figured by ambiguity. Beneath their overt, sometimes polemical gestures of opposition, these novels are deeply implicated in the dominant aesthetic, ideological and production strategies of their times.

Beginning at the level of production, the tension between radicalism and conformity is especially acute in *The Story of a Modern Woman*, a novel in which the central character, Mary Erle, tries to forge her independence by becoming a professional writer in the increasingly commercial world of British magazine publishing. As Kate Flint points out, Dixon's abrasive treatment of the publishing industry's obsession with "marketable ... standards" was part of a much wider protest in the literary community against the growing "monopoly on literary space" that was being "wielded by the magazines and circulating libraries."[18] But while the subversive tone of Dixon's critique intentionally distances *The Story of a Modern Woman* from the crass business practices of the popular press, it disguises the reality that her own publisher, William Heinemann, was a leading player in the "transformation" of book publishing to a "fully capitalist" and "patriarchal" mode of production.[19]

Indeed, some of the marketing innovations that Heinemann helped bring to the book trade are specifically alluded to in Dixon's narrative and were material to the publication of her manuscript. For example, by substituting single-volume novels such as *The Story of a Modern Woman*, for the traditional three-decker format to which Mary Erle was forced to conform (149), publishers like Heinemann sought to improve their competitive position against the magazines by wresting control of production away from booksellers and distributors and centralizing it in their own hands. At the same time they increased their scope for profit-taking by devising specialized book lists that targeted audiences according to income and taste. In this context, Dixon's scathing condemnation of commercial publishers who insisted

[17]N.N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago 1983), x. See also his *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel* (Madison 1993); Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York 1982); and Gaye Tuchman with Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (New Haven 1989).

[18]Kate Flint, "Introduction" to *The Story of a Modern Woman*, viii-ix.

[19]Feltes, *Modes of Production*, 89. My descriptions of the general changes taking place in British book publishing, including the role played by Heinemann, are drawn from Feltes, *Modes of Production*, 76-98; and *Literary Capital*, 111-4.

that female authors write "pretty stories" (183) that "young ladies like to read" (107) obscures how her own work was aimed at the growing market of middle-class ladies who had become eager consumers of "new woman" fiction.[20] Similarly, her deprecating reference to profit-minded editors who refused the "morbid" work of "all these French and Russian writers" (183) on the grounds that "the British public" (182) would not buy it, could also be read as a compliment to Heinemann, who was one of the first publishers to offer a series on European fiction in translation as part of his business plan. Far from posing a vigorous challenge to the capitalist and patriarchal hegemony of British publishing, therefore, *The Story of a Modern Woman* is emblematic both of the ruthlessly competitive nature of the industry and its capacity to accommodate self-criticism in the interests of profit.

In contrast to Dixon's work, a very different example of the ambiguous relationship between radical fiction and mainstream publishing emerges from the production history of *Out of Work*, which was published by another of Britain's elite publishing houses, Swan Sonnenschein. As head of the firm, William Sonnenschein was also a major proponent of a formal canon of "best books" and boasted that all of the titles in his catalogue were "universally regarded as good — absolutely and not relatively."[21] Yet despite this bold assertion, the decision to publish Margaret Harkness' novel under the pseudonym John Law suggests that, where female writers were concerned, publishers and authors were prepared to balance abstract considerations of literary excellence against social criteria that diminished the public expression of women's voices.

Traditionally, feminist commentators have argued that the use of male pseudonyms by female authors was a form of "role-playing" which reflected the "radical understanding" that women's "will to write as a vocation ... was in direct conflict" with their gender status in society.[22] But while this argument is undoubtedly accurate to a point, it overlooks the possibility that the decision to adopt masculine pen-names was also determined by coercive, "gender-determined ideological practices" in the publishing industry. As Feltes has shown, by the 1880s the occupation of writer had become a profession in England — the Society of Authors was founded in 1884 — and denoted a specific productive status within the capitalist framework of the publishing industry. In this context, male pen-names became professional "titles" that formally distinguished their bearers from female

[20]Flint, "Introduction," xiii.

[21]Quoted in Feltes, *Literary Capital*, 41.

[22]Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton 1977), 19. See also Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriett Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca 1987), 165; Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago 1986), 20; and Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago 1988), 125. In her "Introduction" to *Out of Work* Kirwan adopts this positivist approach by pointing that the choice of John Law was a "complex joke" (vii) on Harkness' part.

writers who were regarded as amateurs. Paradoxically, while these titles enabled women like Harkness to participate in the specialized economy of capitalist book production, they also symbolized the degree to which that economy was predicated on its ability to exclude women from full membership.[23] Seen from this perspective, the satiric barb at Victorian patriarchy and commerce that was implicit in Harkness naming herself John Law, is blunted by the realization that her weapon of resistance ultimately reinforced a network of "assumptions about writers, their literary works, and their professional practices [that] were clearly related to the idea of author as male."[24]

As is the case with Margaret Harkness and Ella Dixon, the background of Walter Brierley's relationship to the literary establishment is also relevant to assessing the politics of his work. Having "won rapid fame" on the strength of his first novel, *Means Test Man* (1935), which was praised by Walter Allen, E.M. Forster, and the Woolfs among others, Brierley published *Sandwichman* with the prestigious house of Methuen to another chorus of positive reviews, including one in the *Times Literary Supplement*.[25] Yet while the critical reception of Brierley's work underlines his enviable position in the context of mainstream cultural production, the internal evidence of the novel suggests that he consciously sought to align himself with the British literary canon. In particular, there are numerous parallels between the metonymic style, Derbyshire setting, and oedipal subject matter of *Sandwichman* and the work of D.H. Lawrence. But more importantly, Brierley's narrative is punctuated by several direct references to Lawrence's life and to the novels *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*. (48-9, 169) In terms of plot development, these references help to construct the personality of the main character in *Sandwichman* who identifies with Lawrence and interprets his own situation through the famous author's eyes. But in a broader cultural sense the naming that occurs in the novel verges on appropriation and seems designed both to legitimize Brierley as Lawrence's inheritor and to anchor *Sandwichman* in the mainstream English literary tradition.[26]

Apart from their problematic connections to establishment canons and forms of production, the MRF novels are characterized by internal tensions between form and content that confuse their status as radical texts. In spite of Lucas' proclamations, there is nothing aesthetically innovative about the first three novels in the series. On the contrary, by conforming to standard mimetic conventions of late-19th and early-20th-century realism, the authors often subvert the radical message they

[23]Feltes, *Modes of Production*, 43-5; and Tuchman with Fortin, *Edging Women Out*, 53-4.
[24]Susan Coultrap-McQuinn, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill 1990), 15.
[25]Philip Gorski, "Introduction" to *Sandwichman*, ix.
[26]According to Carole Snee, some sections of *Sandwichman* are "incomprehensible" to readers "unfamiliar with Lawrence's work." See "Working-Class Literature," 181. Gorski also points out several connections between Brierley and Lawrence and suggests that the novel may have been a "reply" to *Sons and Lovers*. See "Introduction," xviii-xix.

intend to convey. This is particularly the case with *Out of Work*, which is the most overtly political novel in the group.

Set in London in 1887, Harkness' work is a searing indictment of industrial capitalism and middle-class complacency about endemic social pain. The novel describes the plight of Joseph Coney, an unemployed carpenter who migrates to London from rural England in a vain effort to find work, becomes destitute and tramps home where he dies, a broken man, on his mother's tombstone. From an ideological standpoint there are many features of *Out of Work* that justify its "radical" label. Unlike most reform fiction Harkness' critique of capitalism is structural, not personal, and encompasses institutions that are complicit in economic exploitation, including the press, the state, and organized religion. Instead of blaming social misery on the evil of individual entrepreneurs or the moral depravity of the poor, she condemns the "competitive system" (59) that routinely "crushe[s]" (59) workers into surplus labour before abandoning them to the ethos of "laissez-faire." (120) According to Harkness the logical alternative to this depressing condition is socialism. Several passages in the novel make the case for political change with tract-like fervour, urging workers and the unemployed to join the "class war which Socialists are now waging against ... [the] oppressors" and their "hateful competitive system." (67) In the most contentious passage of the novel, Harkness attributes the failure of the Trafalgar Square riot — a pivotal event in her narrative — to crowd apathy and forcefully argues the case for violent action: "Success is never absurd," the narrator observes, but "[f]ailure is often ridiculous. This thing is certain — if more people had followed the example of those men and women, if it had *really* been a Bloody Sunday, that labour programme which is looming in the distance would now be before Parliament." (201)

Stylistically, these references to actual historical events lend to the story a documentary quality that is reinforced by other narrative strategies. Drawing on naturalist techniques of clinical observation that were supposed to objectify fictional discourse, Harkness describes in detail material life in the slums, emphasizing the role of "environment" in "modify[ing] ... character." (114)[27] And throughout the novel the third-person narrator acts as a sympathetic "interpreter, mediating between the East-End working class and the prospective middle-class readership" by reporting on places and behaviour that were normally screened out of mainstream literature or luridly sensationalized.[28] But while these devices work to authenticate Harkness' story and affiliate her with experimental writers like Zola

[27]On Harkness' use of naturalist techniques, see Ingrid von Rosenberg, "French Naturalism and the English Socialist Novel: Margaret Harkness and William Edwards Tirebuck," in Klaus, ed., *Rise of Socialist Fiction*, 151-71; and John Goode, "Margaret Harkness and the Socialist Novel," in *ibid.*, 45-66.

[28]Kirwan, "Introduction," xiv. On the use of documentary reportage in working-class fiction, see Gill Davies, "Foreign Bodies: Images of the London Working Class at the End of the 19th Century," in *Literature and History*, 14 (Spring 1988), 64-80; and Rabinowitz, *Labour and Desire*, 1.

— who is invoked as a model at one point (204) — they are compromised by other features of her style. Not only does Harkness indulge in numerous editorial interventions that wrench the narrative out of the fictional and into the didactic realm, she employs a number of literary strategies that soften her political message by reinforcing, rather than challenging, social norms.[29]

In an obvious pitch to middle-class sensibilities, Harkness exploits the conventions of sentimental romance — melodrama, anthropomorphism, Christian allegory — in order to make the impoverished characters in the novel seem less threatening and "vulgar." (131) For all the earnest rhetoric about socialism and violence, the voices of dissent in *Out of Work* invariably belong to characters who are anonymous or else marginal to the plot. By contrast, the central figures in the novel, including Jos, are cast as passive, politically naive victims of circumstances. Harkness' female characters seem particularly inarticulate and detached from the public sphere. At one end of this degrading spectrum is the young flower vendor, Squirrel, who is doubly anthropomorphized as a "spaniel" (166) lying "curled up in a ball ... her big eyes fixed upon Jos." (170) At the other end is the "pretty Methodist" (16) Polly Elwin, who embodies the ideal of woman as physical object and whose sole ambition is to "marry a godly young man with a settled income." (221) In between are Polly's sodden mother, and the maid, Mary Anne, who inhabits a world of "daydreams and hallucination" (27) that is inspired by her reading of "dirty, dog-earred novelettes." (26)[30] Paradoxically, the only female character to command unqualified respect is Mrs. Coney, who is dead.

Some of the most graphic sentimentalization occurs in the heart-wrenching domestic scenes that are explicitly contrived to demonstrate "the truth" (106) that the poor are kind and loving. In one hearth-side redemption a "grim and scornful" labourer cradles his sick child with "tenderness" (58), while Jos donates his last pennies to buy medicine for the baby. Elsewhere, Harkness sets out to humanize the poor by challenging the popular stereotype that "men of ... [Jos'] class" feel nothing more than "animalism ... for their sweethearts" (106), and by reassuring her readers that nothing in Squirrel's sordid existence could erase the "motherly look" (166) on her face.

Predictably, melodrama is a dominant motif in the two key death scenes of the novel. But what makes these scenes doubly significant in structural terms is that they borrow from Christian allegories that clash with the secular form and content

[29]According to Brunhild de la Motte, feminist and socialist writers tended to be didactic because the traditional novel form "exclude[d] the experience and world view of the oppressed." See "Radicalism, Feminism, Socialism: The Case of the Women Novelists," in *The Rise of Socialist Fiction*, 46.

[30]On the image of vulgar working women in Victorian fiction, see Davies, "Foreign Bodies," 75; and Keating, *Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, 195. For a discussion of 19th-century anxieties about the desultory effects of fiction reading on women readers, see Kate Flint, "The Woman Reader and the Opiate of Fiction: 1885-1870," in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (London 1986), 47-62.

of Harkness' naturalist perspective. Echoing the language of the crucifixion (Matthew 27.46), the forlorn Squirrel wails "My God! My God! Why has thou forsaken me?" before throwing herself into the "strong embrace" of "Father Thames" (268), while poor Jos Coney, the lowly carpenter with Christ's initials, is transported in death "beyond the creeds, and above the churches, to the very foot of the Absolute." (276-7) Unlike novels in which suicide or death signifies a triumph over destiny, these events function in *Out of Work* as a pathetic release for characters who have already been defeated by life.[31]

The disjunctions caused by Harkness' appropriation of sentimental romance occur in two ways. Most obviously, the radical critique of politics, capitalism, and organized religion that informs the novel is diluted by characterizations of the main protagonists that beatify meekness. But the clarity of her message is also muddled by the formal confusion of the narrative. The documentary and naturalist techniques on which Harkness relies to authenticate her oppositional message are dulled by her dependence on the exaggerated conventions of romance to structure the plot.

As its title implies, the relationship between ideology and literary form functions as an important metafictional element in *The Story of a Modern Woman*. This is not unusual, for the struggle to find a voice and control narrative was often a crucial test of female identity in Victorian fiction by women.[32] Within the framework of Dixon's novel this struggle is enacted most fully by Mary Erle, who tries unsuccessfully to inscribe her independence from patriarchy by writing a novel that contains her "twenty-seven years of actual experience." (149) But while Mary's experience is dealt with in considerable detail, the symbolic importance of narrative in constructing female identity is also acknowledged elsewhere in the novel by scattered references to women who have "a story" (46) to tell, but lack the opportunity to "write [it] down." (122)

Of course, the failure of these fictional women to liberate themselves from conventional literary structures serves as an obvious point of contrast to Dixon's real-life achievement as an author. Although there is nothing intrinsically dissonant about her language, Dixon departed from a dominant tendency in late Victorian women's fiction by resisting idealization and writing what is essentially an anti-romance.[33] Instead of being didactic, Dixon signals her moral ambivalence by explaining, through the narrator, that: "Life is a compromise and must not be taken too seriously. It is absurd to be much in earnest, and it bores people." (35) At the most impressionistic level, this laconic attitude is personified by Mary's friend, Alison Ives — an "eminently modern young woman" (38) whose "clever face" is "modernised by a slightly bored expression." (37) In the end, however, it is Dixon's

[31]On suicide as martyrdom in feminist literature, see Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 240-62.

[32]See Homans, *Bearing the Word*; Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca 1992); and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York 1987).

[33] See Flint, "Introduction," xiii-xv.

beige characterization of Mary that most thoroughly defines *The Story of a Modern Woman* as an anti-romance.[34]

For all the emotional and intellectual growth that she experiences, Mary is singularly devoid of heroic potential and remains permanently conflicted by "a strange sense of dual individuality" that flows from visualizing herself as both a "woman" and a "girl." (262) Struck by "the impotence, the helplessness of woman's lot," part of her concedes that she is "the plaything, the sport of destiny," (154) while her "other self revolt[s] against the injustice of human laws." (261) In her one shining moment of defiance, Mary spurns a lover who had previously jilted her: but the power that she feels at having "made *him* suffer" is quickly dissipated by the realization that, as a single woman, she will "miss the best that life has to offer." (261) Confused and disconsolate, Mary retreats from the path of independence that she had previously taken and honours patriarchy by paying to repair her father's elaborate tomb.[35]

Ultimately, the anti-romance of the novel is sealed by its unsatisfactory conclusion. In a passage that recalls familiar, romantic images of the sublime, Mary stands on a hill overlooking "majestic" London, soaking in the "perfume of May." As she watches the birds "circling and swooping against the tender evening sky" the "sunset touche[s] her face, her hand, the flush of hawthorn above her head." (270-1) But the initial promise of the moment is shattered in the book's final sentence: "Standing alone, there on the heights, she made a feint as if to grasp the city spread out before her, but the movement ended in a vain gesture, and the radiance of her face was blotted out as she began to plod homewards in the twilight of the suburban road." (271)

This unresolved ending is a perfect correlative to the larger message of *The Story of a Modern Woman*. According to Kate Flint, the "radicalism" of Dixon's work derives from its ability to expose the gap "between social expectations and womens' capacity to achieve self-fulfillment."[36] To a large extent, it is Mary's ability to comprehend the structural basis of her unhappiness — to recognize the "intolerable burden which society has laid on her sex" (31) — that defines her as a modern woman. For Dixon, the core of women's suffering stems from the gendered inequality of "the Family" (259) as an institution, and the "artificial" ethos of domesticity that denies women the opportunity to participate fully in society by subordinating their desires to the "convenience and pleasure" (264) of men. Not surprisingly, all the families in the novel are dysfunctional, in large part

[34]In the novel's lone concession to sentimentality Alison dies unexpectedly, but not before invoking the privilege of a dying heroine to extract a promise that Mary "will never, never do anything to hurt another woman." (213) For a discussion of the role of the dead or dying heroine in sentimental fiction, see Jane Thompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York 1985), 128.

[35]By contrast, Mary's memories of her mother — who died following complications in the birth of a son — are expunged early in the novel.

[36]Flint, "Introduction," xiv.

because of the cretinous behaviour of their men who treat women as sexual trophies and profit by their exploitation. These realities are brought home to Mary by bitter experience. Forced to support her wastrel brother and pressured to abandon her writing career for the prospect of marriage, she becomes acutely "conscious" of how "stultif[ying]" it is for women to be "shut ... within four walls" in a "dimly-lighted interior" and bombarded "with images of facts and emotions which do not exist." (26)[37]

Yet while *The Story of a Modern Woman* is decidedly critical of patriarchal values, there are severe limitations to Dixon's radicalism. These stem from her hierarchical attitude toward class, as well as her inability as a writer to identify with underprivileged women as women, or to transcend conventional literary images of respectability and femininity. Although Dixon ostensibly disapproves of a society that forces "women of the lower classes" to "minister ... to the caprices of the well-to-do," (12) her feelings of female solidarity never lead her to question status entitlements. Instead, the leading characters in *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Alison and Mary, are bourgeois figures who proudly mark themselves off from the "underbred" (168, 174) women who serve them. The contradictions between class and gender that shade their progressive outlook are symbolized by Alison's intervention to arrange a suitable marriage for her "new girl," (45) Evelina, who has become pregnant. Even though Alison genuinely believes that the arrangement attests to her "lack of snobbishness" and "desire to be in sympathy with her own sex," (39) the end result of her meddling is to bind her maid to the very institution of marriage that the rest of the novel decries.

Apart from their privileged upbringing Alison and Mary are also set apart from common women by virtue of their superior intelligence and thoroughly modern willingness to challenge authority. Alison has the "look of a thinker" (37) and is an "exceptional" (39) individual, while Mary, too, belongs among the "classes who think." (8) The "work-woman," on the other hand, is not only "content to exist subserviently" in a vacuum of "unquestioning resignation," but is disparaged throughout the novel for her intellectual inferiority. Thus, Mary's seamstress is "a docile, humble, uncomplaining creature, who suggest[s] ... some patient domestic animal," (12) while the young nannies who mind other people's children are ridiculed for having their "foolish faces bent over a penny novelette." (122) In a generous bid to elevate the "child" Evelina from the bog of low culture, Alison condescends to "make" her into "a sensible person" by reading Dickens or Twain to her "while she knits." (46) Paradoxically, Alison's infantalization of Evelina echoes the tendency of men in the novel to patronize Mary as a "poor child," "little girl," or "little one." (53, 137, 132)

[37]On the theme of entrapment in women's fiction, see Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England, 1880-1939* (New York 1989), 146; and Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800* (New York 1989).

As this language suggests, there is also a wide physical gulf between the bourgeois modernists and the women they employ. For all her criticisms of the ornamental role that patriarchal society expects women to play, Dixon describes both Mary and Alison in terms that affirm conventional ideals of feminine beauty. Not only does Mary look "like a little princess," (65) but she also experiences a "first taste of power" when she discovers that her "slim satin bodice ... clear, peachlike cheeks ... swimming eyes ... and slender white arms" are sexually attractive to men. (28) Striking as Mary is, however, Alison's "handsome, clever face" and "superb air" recall a "classic" book or a painting "in the National Gallery." (37-8) By contrast, working women in Dixon's novel are invariably described as "gawky," "tawdry-looking," or "stolid," and are identified by their "ample bosom[s]," "pendant red hands and slightly open mouth[s]," not to mention their "pathetic" taste in clothes and "preposterous" names. (210, 122, 208, 117, 45)

Yet what is especially significant about these invidious descriptions is that they transcend the level of personal identity to signify a loss of sexual identity altogether. The starkest example of this slippage occurs when Mary encounters a former prostitute sitting on a park bench. Taking one look at the young woman's "shabby boots," "untidy" hair, "dirty pink-bow" and "frayed" gown, Mary concludes that: "The woman in her was dead; she was past the stage of caring about her appearance." (122) Nor is this an isolated example. Elsewhere in the novel readers encounter a seamstress whose womanly "features" have been "rubbed out and effaced with generations of servility," (12) and a nurse whose "sexless" uniform embodies "the bland, unemotional features ... of a woman who has learnt to witness suffering without a sign." (189)

Without minimizing the important ways in which *The Story of a Modern Woman* challenges the political and aesthetic conventions of Victorian feminist literature, the problem with the novel is that it unintentionally condones the values and epistemic structures of patriarchy that it purports to criticize. This contradiction is embodied in both the form and content of Dixon's starkly contrasting treatment of bourgeois and working-class characters. Her surface message of female solidarity is undermined by a subtext that indulges the false esteem of the beauty myth and values subordination to hierarchy on the basis of class and education. In a novel that extols the liberating power of narrative, Dixon's de-sexing of working-class women perversely illustrates her own containment within the cultural hegemony that she aims to tear down.

By comparison with the polemical agendas of *Out of Work* and *The Story of a Modern Woman* the politics of Walter Brierley's *Sandwichman* seem muted and ambivalent. This uncertainty is reinforced by Philip Gorski's introduction to the MRF edition, which praises Brierley's "quiet, self-effacing prose," yet describes his approach as "deliberately ... unpolitical" and "apolitical" — confusing labels for what is supposedly radical fiction.[38] The narrative centres on Arthur Gardner, a

[38]Gorski, "Introduction," xiv-xv.

bright young Derbyshire miner whose ambition to "escape" (32) life in the pits and become a teacher is cruelly dashed when he fails a university entrance exam and gets sacked from his job at the colliery. Ostracized by his stepfather Albert Shirley, and jilted by his girlfriend Nancy, Arthur stays on in the district strictly out of loyalty to his ailing mother. Desperate for work, he signs up for retraining at a National Social Service Centre. But the program is a "farce" (185) in a district that seems condemned to massive unemployment. "[D]evitalized" (185) by "hopelessness" and "frustrat[ed]" that "his life was going uselessly," (200) Arthur eventually submits to the indignity of a means test. He even accepts a temporary job as a sandwichman carrying advertising placards that promote consumption by exploiting his degradation. In the end, however, flight is Arthur's only way out: when his mother dies he abandons the region altogether and strikes out on the road to tramp.

Despite his diminished status as one of the "left-overs" (235) of the system, Arthur is an anti-hero of radical fiction who is profoundly alienated from his social origins and aspires to reach beyond "the practical atmosphere of his class." (49) Although he cannot deny the reality that he will always be "one of them" Arthur feels little solidarity with his fellow miners or the unemployed and categorically rejects the "idea of class" as a political construct. (61, 135) Captive to the establishment myths of self-help and education as social levelers, he is contemptuous of workers who lack "drive and the capacity to reach forward," (6) or who tolerate their plight without seeming "to *feel* the tragedy of their situation." (130) Even after he has been completely ruined by misfortune, Arthur refuses to question the system that has brought him down and stubbornly clings to the dogma of self-help. When, in the book's final scene, a fellow-tramp repeatedly warns him "[n]ivver [to] stop" at the Belford workhouse because the "[m]ester's a slogger," Arthur instinctively dismisses the claim and assumes that "the fault" was "in the tramp." (282)

Naturally, the gap between Arthur's social position and ideological outlook invites diametrical interpretations of the novel's politics. In a probing article on the relationship between realism, ideology and working-class writing, Carole Snee accuses Brierley of failing to "interrogate the dominant ... [liberal] ideology" and of invalidating "his own experience" as a miner by grounding the narrative in a bourgeois perception of individuality.[39] Yet this interpretation is rejected by Gorski who claims instead that Arthur is prevented from realizing his ambitions because he is caught in the "impossible" position of trying to balance his financial dependence on "monotonous and exploitative" labour with the time demands of "formalised and elitist" education. Employing a highly elastic definition of the term, Gorski concludes that the "genuinely radical" message of the story is that "class society wastes individual potential."[40]

[39]Snee, "Working-Class Writing," 169, 181.
[40]Gorski, "Introduction," xv.

While this reading is accurate in a limited sense — Arthur's abilities as a teacher are wasted — it is not clear how Gorski's interpretation differentiates *Sandwichman* from novels of social criticism that expose the imperfections of capitalism without challenging the status quo. By making Arthur culpable for his victimization — he gets sacked for negligence after causing an accident — and treating social conditions in Derbyshire in isolation from extrinsic economic and political forces, Brierley avoids connecting personal misfortune to broader structural realities.[41] Nor does *Sandwichman* provide a platform for the expression of militancy or dissent. All the references in the novel to left politics — whether communism or trade unionism (61, 175) — are negative, and the dominant impression created by the narrative is of a working class that fully conforms to the hegemony of capitalist values. This conformity is reflected both by Arthur's restless desire to achieve success, and by the other miners' willingness to accept low wages and complacently "adjust ... themselves" (13) to the hardships of unemployment. Instead of contesting the authority of managers or owners, working-class dissonance is directed internally, in the form of Arthur's disparagement of his fellow workers and their "negative envy" (27) at his status-seeking.

Ultimately, the political value of *Sandwichman* depends less on Brierley's ideology than on the descriptive range and authenticity of his profile of working-class life. Although there are limits to Brierley's vision — such as his tendency to cast female characters exclusively in passive support roles as mothers or lovers — the novel maps an impressive geography of worker experiences from workplace to home, school, cinema or store, and validates them on their own terms. Instead of filtering events through a cheesecloth of bourgeois sensibility — as Harkness and Dixon do, for example — Brierley exploits his gift for vernacular diction as a technique of familiarization and invokes a narrator who is socially neutral. But the narrative authority of *Sandwichman* also derives from its attempt to demonstrate how discrete elements of working-class life interrelate to form a cultural whole. Unlike the industrial writers of the 19th century, who "shift[ed] ... the location of the novel's action from the public, social world to the private world of the family" in order to provide "relief" from "antagonisms that cannot be resolved in the social world," Brierley transposes conflicts across spatial boundaries, thus intensifying them.[42] Far from being a sanctuary, the Shirley household is a prime arena of social conflict and latent violence that stems from the debilitating rivalry between stepson and stepfather over Arthur's mother, and their profoundly opposing attitudes toward work, unemployment, education, and domestic responsibility.

Throughout the novel the private and public spheres of Arthur's life constantly collide. At one point he resolves to stay away from the training centre because it

[41]As Raymond Williams points out, this narrowly regional perspective is not unique to Brierley. See "Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist: Problems in Some Welsh Novels," in *The Socialist Novel in Britain*, 116.

[42]Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 113-4.

reminds him that he and the other men "were still out of work." But he soon pulls back from this decision because "it would have meant cutting himself off ... from the only real contact, pleasant one, that he had. There was too much silence at home, too much loneliness roaming about the fields and the town." (200) Not only does this passage invert convention by making the employment centre a haven from problems at home, but the whole situation is further complicated in the next paragraph when a tranquil Saturday morning at home is rudely shattered by the arrival of the morning post summoning Arthur to a labour board hearing that same day. The impossibility of separating the domestic environment from outside forces is demonstrated even more dramatically near the end of the novel when a means test investigator arrives at Arthur's house and begins to probe for information about the family's income. Enraged by this perceived invasion of his privacy, Arthur's stepfather — who had previously distanced himself from the interview by pretending to a read a newspaper, itself a symbol of the public sphere — explodes in fury and throws the man out before he can complete his investigation.

While the ease with which Brierley shifts from one realm of activity to another instills confidence in the documentary quality of his perspective on working-class culture, he also makes a number of conscious attempts to validate his work by emphasizing the descriptive accuracy of his realist aesthetic. Indeed, the problem of distinguishing reality from unreality is a central preoccupation of the novel. This is seen on one level in Arthur's obsessive quest to get on "the real track of his living" (210) and discover his "real spot in the real world." (187) But it is also manifest as a revealing metafictional component of Brierley's work. Near the end of *Sandwichman*, as Arthur stands at his dead mother's bedside, he openly mocks the "sentimental clowns" who "say that people look lovely and peaceful in death." Focusing instead on the "ugly," tormented features of the dead woman's face, Brierley defies literary convention by treating death as an episode of absolute closure: "It was all over for ever; she had finished. She was lying there, still and away from [Arthur] ... He left her suddenly." (266)

If these passages are clearly intended to emphasize the mimetic purity of Brierley's style as a break from romantic forms of the novel, they mask the extent to which his aesthetic choices are nevertheless contained within broader literary structures that are "ideologically coerc[ive]."[43] Not only is *Sandwichman* recognizably a *bildungsroman*, but it also exploits various tropes — for example, seasonality as a mirror to personal fortune — and archetypal references — to Oedipus, Sisyphus and Job — that contextualize Brierley's work within the dominant literary culture. Furthermore, as Graham Holderness has pointed out, there are severe ontological limits to Brierley's grasp of reality that reflect the bourgeois determinism of his seemingly neutral style. These limitations are espe-

[43]Holderness, "Miners and the Novel," 26. For another view of Brierley's realist style, see Ramón López Ortega, "The Language of the Working-Class Novel of the 1930s," in *The Socialist Novel in Britain*, 129, 141.

cially visible in the sharp "dichotomy" that Arthur draws between the world of family, wage labour, and university on the one hand, versus the condition of unemployment on the other.[44] Staring out a window at the national training centre, he suddenly thinks of "his mother, step-father, Nancy, the examination, the Pit" and realizes that they are the "real" elements in his life "waiting for him in the real world." By contrast, the training centre "wasn't real at all." According to Arthur, the "place ... was the falsest thing imaginable" because "none" of the men who happened to be there "were their real selves, hadn't a chance to be." (177-8) Even though Brierley provides a compelling and sympathetic description of the demoralizing and fruitless routine at the training centre, his realism is determined by the core values of bourgeois society which demand economically productive labour. Unable to deal with the condition of unemployment on its own terms, he strips it of meaning altogether.

From a purely formal perspective, *Sandwichman* is the most cohesive of the novels examined here. On the whole, Brierley's characters are more fully developed than Harkness' or Dixon's, and his voice is more consistently appropriate to the narrative line. Yet in spite of these achievements, and notwithstanding his compelling profile of a segment of working-class culture, it is difficult to embrace Brierley's work wholeheartedly as a radical text. The images of economic vulnerability and social dislocation that infuse the novel implicitly invite indictment of capitalist inequality and ineffectual public policy, but this is not the interpretation that Brierley constructs. Instead, the underlying message of *Sandwichman* echoes the familiar consensus ideals of rugged individualism and self-help.

The ambiguity of Brierley's work illustrates the central paradox of MRF, which is that the novels conform to establishment political, literary, and production values as much as they contest them. Because of this paradox it is logical to question whether the MRF novels are radical at all. But while this is a legitimate concern the temptation to hold the novels to a monolithic, or doctrinaire, standard of political performance greatly oversimplifies the issue. The real weakness of MRF is not that it lacks an ideological benchmark against which prospective titles can be evaluated, but that it fails to provide an appropriate critical context that specifies the qualities of radical fiction and engages its relationship to mainstream culture. Although the series makes a positive contribution to the study of oppositional literature by enabling the discussion of previously obscure texts, it ultimately subverts its own agenda by validating radical fiction according to the canonical ideals of mainstream culture.

[44]Holderness, "Miners and the Novel," 26. There is an extensive literature by left critics arguing that the novel is a bourgeois art form that constrains the possibilities of working-class realism. See, for example, Hawthorn, "Preface" to *The British Working-Class Novel*, vii-x; Tony Davies, "Unfinished Business: Realism and Working-Class Writing," in *ibid.*, 125-36; and Goode, "Margaret Harkness and the Socialist Novel," 46.