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# **A Single Woman's Place**

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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of selected novels by Anita Brookner and Muriel Spark. It explores the depiction of women as figures of resistance and insurgence in the novels Look At Me and Hotel du Lac by Anita Brookner, and in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and The Abbess of Crewe written by Muriel Spark. The study looks first at the way the role of the single woman is structured, and functions as a location of resistance and subversion. The specific characters are Frances Hinton in Look At Me, and Edith Hope in Hotel du Lac and Jean Brodie in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, and the Abbess Alexandra in The Abbess of Crewe. The second focus is to determine whether a transfigurative process is enacted, how, and upon what.

The women characters are the pivotal location for the transfigurative processes, and their characterisation reveals what is disclosed, and what is transfigured. The proposal is that those transfigurative processes subvert culturally constructed notions, or commonplaces, about how women may see, and be seen, in the social environments presented in the novels.

The transfiguration of these nominal commonplaces is revealed in Brookner's work through the processes of change, which are depicted as necessary for the key characters to undergo. Transfiguration abounds in Spark's work as her satire and parody mock all social norms.

Finally, this thesis looks specifically at the relation between the consolidated material from the process outlined above and two general strategic approaches to women's writing. The first strategy is the revisionist approach that proposes a re-writing of traditional texts as a method of challenging and subverting the hierarchical constraints found in those texts. The other strategy advocates the appropriation of dominant patriarchal models for women to use in writing about women, and supports effecting change from within those models.

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*Tena koe, tena koutou hoki*

*mo o mahi manaaki, mahi awhina*

*i ahau, ara matou hoki.*

*Kia ora koe.*

*Kia ora koe.*

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# 1.

## Introduction: The subversive Single Woman

### The transfigurative idea

This thesis is a study of the figure of the single woman in four novels by Anita Brookner and Muriel Spark. It explores the disparate and yet analogous ways in which their roles depict women as figures of resistance and insurgence by using an idea influenced by the fictional psychological thesis "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace" in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by Muriel Spark. There is no specific inclusion in the novel of the content of that fictional thesis other than a description of it as an "odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception" (35). Within the narrative it is suggested that Sandy's thesis has the power that transfigurative processes have to both disclose and displace commonplaces. The catalyst for that transfigurative process is the key character, Jean Brodie, whose decisive influence transforms, even at a remove, relationships between all the major characters in the book.

The example of Sandy Strange's thesis leads me to the supposition that there is an analogous kind of transfigurative process apparent in the structure of the novels Look At Me and Hotel du Lac by Anita Brookner and in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and The Abbess of Crewe written by Muriel Spark. There are two major assumptions within that supposition, and the

investigative streams used across the four novels chosen, stem from those assumptions. The first of those assumptions is that the way the role of the single woman is structured functions as a location of resistance and subversion, and the associated stream of enquiry analyses that role to determine the truth of that assumption. The scope of the first stream, in the selected novels by Anita Brookner, is to study the solitary and independent single women as figures of resistance from inside the confines of a romantic ideal. The key characters within those novels, Frances Hinton in Look At Me, and Edith Hope in Hotel du Lac, are reticent women writers engaged in trying to understand the world they must live in and the complexities of human relationships. In contrast, the section on Spark's work focuses upon the charismatic figures of Jean Brodie in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Abbess Alexandra in The Abbess of Crewe. These are larger than life figures who function as both figurative tools of political satire and, through travesty parody, as examples of disruptive literary practice.

The second assumption is that there is a transfigurative process enacted, and the attendant analysis looks at how, and upon what, that transfiguration takes place. The analysis of the role of the single woman is inextricably linked to this enquiry because these women are the pivotal location for the transfigurative processes, and their characterisation reveals what is disclosed, and what those processes transfigure. The proposal is that those transfigurative processes subvert culturally constructed notions, or commonplaces,

about how women may see, and be seen, in the social environments presented in the novels. The transfiguration of these nominal commonplaces is revealed in Brookner's work through the processes of change, which are depicted as necessary processes for the key characters to undergo. That change requires their resistance to an untenable romantic ideal to enable them to attain, or maintain, an authentic and enduring subjectivity. Transfiguration abounds in Spark's work as the satire and parody mocks all social norms. The deluded perspectives and activities of Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra ridicule the conventional expectations of vocation and leadership and place all assumptions about a unified and authoritative view and voice under disruptive scrutiny.

Finally, this thesis looks specifically at the relation between the consolidated material from the process outlined above and two general strategic approaches to women's writing. These strategies spring from a feminist understanding that, historically, women's writing in terms of style, subject matter and critical evaluation has been determined by a male-dominated critical consensus to be inferior. As a consequence feminists see the product of women's writing, and its subject matter, as having been marginalised. One of the strategies that seeks to address this effect is a revisionist approach that proposes a re-writing of traditional texts as a method of challenging and subverting the hierarchical constraints found in those texts. The Brookner material interrogates the conventions surrounding the ideal of love, as it relates to the conventional

romance model, and surveys how the search for an authentic subjectivity is disabled by the constraining assumptions surrounding the concept of what behaviour most becomes a woman. The other strategy advocates the appropriation of dominant patriarchal models for women to use in writing about women, and supports effecting change from within those models. The appropriation of dominant political and patriarchal models is a main feature in the Spark texts. There is a strong relationship between the inherent dangers in that appropriation, which is made visible by the parodic structure of the text, and the problems within the feminist strategy that advocates the same approach.

#### Common ground

Brookner and Spark were chosen for several reasons, in addition to my personal penchant for the subtleties of intelligent wit and consummate comedy. As they are both British citizens, and women writers, and they both also occupy similar areas of professional and personal experience these similarities support a reasonable assumption of some contiguity in their cultural environment. That assumption enables this work to make generalised observations about analogous content without the added complexity of acknowledging a wide range of cultural diversity. Neither author has directly identified herself as engaging in feminist praxis, however. Quite the contrary in fact. Brookner and Spark have never consciously demonstrated a strategic

engagement with either of the feminist approaches brought to this thesis. This is viewed as an opportunity to surmise an unselfconscious commonality, not only in the relationship of the text to a feminist perspective, but also in the relationship of the texts to each other.

Both Brookner and Spark manifest use of repetitive themes and devices as unifying structures across their texts. In his chapter on Anita Brookner in Contemporary British Women Writers, Robert E. Hosmer Jnr. believes that her novels employ incremental variations on a consistent theme (30). Working with those thematic variations provides the opportunity for this thesis to compare and contrast the key figures, and also to suggest developments in thematic devices and modes of presentation across both novels. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, in Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark, thinks Spark's work persistently uses epigrammatic structures that are "verbal icebergs" that are like "glacial peaks above masses of submerged implication" (2). A discriminating analysis of the highly distilled nature of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and a study from the approach of Bakhtinian dialogism of The Abbess of Crewe provide access to the destabilising effect Spark's use of travesty and parody has on the objects of its attention.

While Brookner and Spark have approached the role of the single woman very differently, and they place their characters in contrasting milieux, both have populated their novels with female

characters depicted primarily in exclusively female environments and both place those environments under a disruptive scrutiny. The themes of exile and displacement dominate Brookner's novels. The sensitivities that are exacerbated by feelings of displacement and exile are the source of feelings of disaffection and isolation, which initiate the process of transfiguration. In Spark's novels enclosure and exclusivity are used to circumscribe her characters and create a sense of tribal belonging. That enclosure feeds the megalomania of the key figures and the ensuing parodic content of that megalomania almost establishes transfiguration as the norm.

The use of humour is common to both writers, but difference in style is one of several ways in which their creative modes diverge. Brookner's delicate and rueful irony rescues her work from a depressing introspection, and undercuts and denies the social fixity in which her characters are placed. Spark's satire and parody work to dismantle unfounded dominating social hierarchies of political and religious power and assumptions of unity and authority in the language of the novels.

### Singular women

It is proposed that processes of transfiguration are articulated from a cultural commonplace, the nominal figure of the spinster. The key to unearthing those processes is in understanding the socially structured expectations governing the lives of these women. The tensions apparent between those expectations, and the realities of

their situations offered by the writers, are the entry points that disclose patriarchally determined and culturally produced assumptions about the definition of the role of the single woman and her work. Those tensions are presented in two distinctly different ways. In Brookner's novels the depiction of her characters' efforts to participate in, and gain some level of control over the representations of themselves as female subjects, requires dramatic changes in their self-perception and their understanding of their environment. The process of transfiguration that brings about those changes is an enabling one, whereby some level of control is gained over the realm of their subjectivity. Resisting and subverting an ideal of romance provide that control, as does rejecting an imposed range of images of the ideal woman that is untenable to them. That resistance centres around opposing ideals about what is an authentic image for a woman, and what constrains the acquisition of authenticity. Unresolved tensions that remain suggest a deterministic stance from Brookner that poses problems for actions of individual agency and possibilities for social change. This is because Brookner's characters achieve an understanding of the dynamics of a prescriptive subjectivity, but they are left with no strategy to overcome those dynamics, other than an evasive isolation. Contrastingly, the despotic charisma of Spark's figures, who lead their small groups by virtue of their personalities and their manipulation of the desire to belong, pay no heed to nominal expectations. These women appropriate patriarchal methodologies

to build personal power structures. The basis on which they build those structures is revealed as delusory, and that revelation, in turn, produces a destabilising transfiguration of those structures and of themselves. The constituent elements of power are exposed and ridiculed. Any strategy of advance, because the process of insurgence is attached to the same power relation that is found in patriarchal methodologies, becomes locked into the dynamics of polarised and binary oppositions.

### Transfigurations and commonplaces

The term “transfiguration of the commonplace” is appropriated from The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie where it is used to explain an imposition of change on norms of behaviour and perception. This thesis uses the term in the same sense. What the use of the term also means is that these texts do not deal with direct pro-active engagements with political, academic, or other kinds of public affairs. The novels concentrate on the activities of their singular figures. All action is contained within the arenas of the private, the personal and domestic and in this respect they are firmly embedded in a commonplace understanding of the exigency of the female world. That is not to say that there is no concern with personal power, for it is attention to the acquisition of some degree of personal power that provides an understanding of the transfigurative platform for this work. But the behaviour studied is not explicable in terms of revolutionary rhetoric, however, or

rigorous political polemic. The Brookner texts are not vigorously dramatic, or expository, as they contain the quiet movements of reticent, intelligent women in an English library and a Swiss hotel. Spark's Scottish schoolteacher and Benedictine nun, however, transcend the restrictive environments of the schoolroom and the cloister through the muted megalomania of travesty and parody. The transfigurative term involves a dependence upon a strategy of subtle elusion in the case of Brookner, and upon a robust and vigorous use of travesty and subversion in Spark's work.

The commonplace is a unified concept, but it works as a portmanteau phrase that assumes two different sorts of usage. The first usage refers to a figurative "common place" where women have long been presumed to belong in a patriarchally dominated world. It is a physical place and a situational space. These locations are represented in the novels by the obscure research library and by the subdued out-of-season hotel, by the schoolroom as a locale of adolescent drama and by the enclosed convent. They are not traditionally places that give occasion to insurrections of any great portent, and are all enclosures out of the public arena. They are described in these novels as either a displacement or as confinement and enclosure experienced through exile, in the case of Brookner, or vocational choice, in the case of Spark. The second proposed usage refers to a combination of commonplaces that operate as normative and heterogeneous symbols in presenting the relationship between women and the world at large. The

“commonplace” in the Brookner novels is a synonym for the ordinary, the habitual, the trivial and plain, the middling and dull. Spark’s works produce tragi-comical and quixotic figures whose ineffectuality and delusions of grandeur may be readily dismissed as commonplace for crackpots or for fools. All of these defined commonplaces are the locations upon which a transfiguration takes place.

### A Feminist Focus

This thesis uses the simple critical examination of the named literary texts of Brookner and Spark to provide analysis organised around the fictional construction of the female subject, and the created environment within which those subjects function. That analysis will focus on the possibilities of achieving a personally realised female subjectivity that is resistant to the dominant and constraining social environment, notwithstanding the part that such an environment may play in the construction of such a subject. A feminist perspective is brought to the commonplaces spoken to see how they contribute to a devalued understanding of women’s lives and work. It is the main interest of this thesis to see how women and their productions are valued, while undertaking at the same time a critique of the limiting structures they inhabit.

Brookner and Spark might seem surprising choices for a feminist focus. The two authors have distanced themselves from any involvement in a feminist polemic. Brookner is described by

Patricia Waugh as having “explicitly distanced herself from feminism” (139). In an interview with John Haffenden, Brookner states, “You’d have to be crouching in your burrow to see my novels in a feminist way.” In this instance she identifies feminism as an ideology that is anti-male. She goes on to say, “I do not believe in the all-men-are-swine programme” (70). In a further interview with Susha Guppy, Brookner’s disapproval of radical feminism is based on a rejection of its anti-male programme: “As for the radical feminism of today, the rejection of the male, I find it absurd” (162). In that same interview she expresses a belief that women having financial freedom and control over their destinies is a good thing, but feels that the self-fulfilled woman is far from being realised. She goes on, however, to say that “The *ideal* woman, on the other hand, is quite different; she lives according to a set of principles and is somehow very rare and always has been” (162). I believe that a quest for elements necessary to this ideal woman is central to the Brookner works discussed here, and the engagement in the search for such an idealisation is also a major facet of feminist interest. Consequently, the burrow may be higher and wider than Brookner would concede.

On the other hand, Judy Little states that for Spark, “feminism is an active undercurrent ...although...the issue is most often latent, matter-of-fact, assumed rather than analysed or professed” (100). The two Spark novels analysed in this thesis concentrate exclusively on communities of females led by strong women. Exhibiting the true

nature of that leadership is a key component in the texts, and for this thesis. Underlying that exhibition are assumptions about leadership that rest on a feminist interest in the appropriation of types of power that have always operated in the masculine domain.

### The Approach to Brookner

Brookner's work has been criticised as formulaic and stereotypically based around the popular romance novel. Those kinds of criticism are refuted in a deeper examination of the style, the plotting and the character typing in Look At Me and Hotel du Lac. As subversive shifts are disclosed that are transfigurative of both the characters, and of the context in which they are placed, the ideal of how women must behave, and the ideal of conventional romance, are placed under a disruptive scrutiny. The women in both Brookner novels work through an internal struggle, in order to achieve, or maintain, an authentic female image. Confined within the ostensible identity of the spinster librarian and the self-effacing writer of ladies' romances, they are precisely drawn, and shown to exhibit the fastidious habits of careful grooming and quiet dress. They are given the occasional distinctive splash of colour only within the limits of punctilious behaviour and manners, and the controlled posture of a bowed head and lowered eye.

In Chapter 2 the focus is on how the characters in both Brookner novels, Frances Hinton and Edith Hope, work through their individual struggle to achieve, or maintain, an authentic female

image. For both characters their struggles are compounded by the ambiguity in their perceptions of love. The common places for the characters in Brookner's work are those situations and groups in which they find themselves engaged in a paradoxical struggle for both inclusion and release. The physical places in Look At Me are portrayed as claustrophobic and regressive, and they dominate the diminutive figure of Frances Hinton, and the lack of impression that Frances is able to make on these places is indicative of her powerlessness in sustaining an authentic and rigorous individual subjectivity. The social space Frances wishes to occupy requires behaviour antithetical to her integrity. In Hotel du Lac Edith Hope's banishment for sins of omission and commission against the socially prescribed expectations of romance and marriage place her in a lacklustre and vapid physical environment. It is a place of exile and moribund retribution.

Both texts use subtle irony in the presentation of cultural assumptions that inverts them and connotes oppositions. The acts of writing and observation function as both the means to liberation, and a source of alienation. Amorphous silences abound that according to John Skinner indicate defiance against the modes of articulation that are available within the framework of a patriarchal social order (83). Their resistance repudiates the orthodox positions available to them and culminates in the production of seemingly inconsistent narratives. Analysis of the source of that inconsistency lends credibility to the contention that the single women in these

texts undergo a transfigurative process. That inconsistency in Look At Me is found in the incompatibility of Frances's declarations of authoritative objectivity and her vulnerable and displaced subjectivity. The key inconsistency apparent in Hotel du Lac resides in the gap between Edith Hope's acquiescence to stereotypical expectations as a spinster writer of romances and her duplicity in using that exterior presentation to bring expectations of her own to fruition.

In the first section of Chapter 2 the study of Frances Hinton in Look At Me is organised around her desire for, and the realisation of, an authentic subjectivity. Frances is an intensely internalised, single, female figure. Dislocated from family or group Frances engages in an attempt to achieve happiness as defined by the social expectations around romantic attachment. Her desire to occupy a visible and valuable place within a publicly situated social context, and the realisation that such a place can only be fully realised from firmly within the boundaries of socially structured relationships enacted between men and women, presents an untenable prospect for Frances.

Frances's development as a subject is constructed around tensions between several perspectives. Tracking the resolution of those tensions also traces the development of Frances from being constrained within the common places of displacement, futile blamelessness and loneliness, through her struggle to gain acceptance into a social scene where recognition and inclusion will

guarantee success and happiness. Her ultimate arrival at an authenticated and self-appointed place outside of patriarchally inscribed expectations and the process by which she attains that place, entails a significant process of transfiguration.

In the second section of Chapter 2 an analysis of Edith Hope in Hotel du Lac emphasises the manner in which her characterisation serves to deconstruct the ideal of love in the popular romance novel. The study of Edith sees her develop from a position of voluntary exile to a coherent self-defined repatriation after resisting traditional and socially constructed expectations surrounding love and marriage. A more strong-minded and confident woman than Frances Hinton, Edith functions with relative ease socially and her submissive postures are more deliberate. She is still as engaged in the quest for authenticity as Frances, but she is more aware of the complexities surrounding that search than Frances. Her means of acquiring that image are thus better informed and strategically planned. She is not, however, without uncertainties and anxieties, which are driven from a very similar lack of clarity in her self-recognition. Edith's resistance to an untenable solution, no matter how authoritative, is proof of a transfigurative process that is revelatory if not salutary.

### The Approach to Spark

In Chapter 3 the strong, charismatic and flamboyant female figures in the work of Muriel Spark are examined. The role of the

single woman is again at the forefront, but in Spark's case the social environment in which the key characters are placed is more outwardly focussed. The relationships between individuals in the groups are more active and extrovert. The single female figures are outwardly poised and confident. The key focus will be on analysing the appropriation of the public and political domain by those figures. The organising principle for scrutiny of both novels and their key characters is based around the use of travesty and satire as methodologies that subvert the notion of dominant discourses. The Bakhtinian idea that parodied forms are objects of representation, that through ridicule present inverted images of the original, is explored. An inversion, which in Spark's two novels, discloses and subsequently undermines the composite elements of leadership, vocation and ultimately the unity and authority invested in both object and subject

In contrast to Brookner the key characters in the two works by Spark take up a direct appropriation of a dominant male political image through a portrayal of strong, charismatic feminine leadership. They are robustly colourful and fully focussed on polemic activity in the places they occupy and their exertions parody the public activities of the powerful figures on which their political practice is based. Written into the script in terms of worldly affairs they are constrained to playing them out within the juvenile intrigue of the classroom and the liturgical restraints of the religious life. The limitations of their characterisations are realised through delusional

power bases based on incongruous and enclosed groups with little or no connection to the public world of power and politics. The eccentricity and incongruity of the beliefs of these characters in what they are doing reveal a lack of acuity about the world in which they are portrayed, and that lack provides access to a critique of the assumptions that produce that lack. While they are engaged in dynamics of personal power and leadership they are constrained within the limitations of their own spheres. Through parodic mimicry they subvert those limitations and ridicule the dynamics of the authority and power, both political and textual that have produced them.

The common places in both of Spark's novels are in the enclosures of vocational institutions, and the satirical use made of conventional organisational groups such as the Girl Guides and the ordinary nuns. The febrile proliferation of fantasy, intrigue and manipulation springs from the limitations imposed on powerful imaginations and passions. The enclosures of the schoolroom and convent are restrictive and the relationship-founded power bases are insufficient for the delusional grand schemes that are constructed upon them. The charge of being bourgeois is targeted at conventional groupings with a common focus on accepted norms and goals which contrast with, and heighten the travesty of, the groups depicted in the two novels manipulated by totalitarian and authoritarian leaders.

The depiction of Jean Brodie in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie as a woman in her prime also portrays her as a woman of her time. As a post first world war spinster she is what Judy Little in Comedy and the Woman Writer calls one of Spark's "anti-structure figures" (99) and it is this role of the outsider, that exiled state shared by the Brookner characters, that provides the foundation for an understanding of this character. Jean Brodie's relationship with her peers and her students establishes the assumptions that predicate her knowledge of herself and her world. Her misconception of what that relationship entails and her subsequent betrayal overturn those assumptions and the beliefs that support them. Jean Brodie is the prime source of the concept of the transfiguration of the commonplace. But it is apposite that her betrayer, Sandy, is the key to her eventual displacement as a figure of adult authority and leadership as a liberation from a totalitarian and delusional authority. A practitioner of transfiguration herself, she is ultimately transfigured by the same process, a possibility noted by Judy Little:

Human efforts at transfiguration, however tend to impose the will of the person who attempts the transfiguring. The attacker and reformer of institutions confuses the fictional world of possibility with the factual one that exists, confuses a mere 'economy', or parable for the truth it represents. (134)

The Abbess Alexandra is a similar leadership figure to Jean Brodie expanded to an exaggerated degree, and subject to the same effect identified by Judy Little. This novel exhibits one of the persistent themes identified by Judy Little: "of growth, initiation or

social change” and its counterbalance “ of presumptuous, misguided reformism or spiritual quest.” In this case the adjective ‘misguided’ is rather mild but the secularity of Alexandra is incongruously, or even blasphemously, out of keeping with an expectation of spirituality, chastity and charity. This novel ostensibly satirises the Watergate scandal whilst the parody and mockery destabilises all other levels of narrative in the text. The depictions of materiality, vocation, male authority, surveillance and silence rotate in an hilarious exposition and juxtaposition.

In the Spark novels the charismatic figures and the transfigurative process are produced by the creative mode in a tightly inter-related manner. Travesty, parody, comedy and liminality intertwine with arrogance, delusion, reformation and eccentricity. There is no simple resolution of the normal over the comedic but there is an attack on the assumptions of what is normal. As already noted, a mocking parodic mimicry of a considerable number of strongly based cultural norms has a reciprocal effect on the figure doing the mocking. If the clown playing as the king only reveals the king as a clown the question arises as to where that leaves either.

### Conclusion

Chapter 4 consolidates the arguments advanced in the preceding chapters and makes a final assessment of the notion “Transfigurations of a commonplace”. What the transfigurative processes and commonplaces have proven to be, and what has

transpired between them will be examined. A discussion of the manner in which those processes were impacted upon, and disclosed by, the role of the single woman will accompany that examination. Attention in closing will focus on how the hypothesis, and the discoveries that have been made through its use, enrich an understanding of the products of women's writing and the power within that writing to support and sustain a feminist perspective.

## 2

### **An Authentic Image in the Novels of Anita Brookner**

#### **• Look At Me**

##### The plea to “Look at Me”.

The plea to “Look at me” in this novel is a cry to be recognised. Analysis shows that underlying that plea is an imperative for that recognition to sustain an ideal of integrity and authenticity. In an article ‘Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism’ Annette Kolodny suggests that the most compelling fear portrayed in women’s fiction is “the fear of being fixed in false images or trapped in inauthentic roles” (83). This suggestion is particularly relevant to an analysis of Frances Hinton in Look At Me because Frances is consumed with the task of being recognised, but that task is complicated by her ambivalence towards the kinds of recognition made available to her and their incongruence with her self-perception.

Frances’s ambivalence is seen through a tension of perspectives. Frances’s self-perception is the central point from which she observes others, and from which she adopts the stance of a detached observer of others. In Women, Gender, and Criticism Kristina Straub points out that the notion of an ostensibly objective observer has always traditionally been a male one, and requires an

exclusive focus on the object of observation. For while it is possible, perhaps, to remain sympathetic, the observer must be separate from, or not implicated in, what is being observed. Straub maintains that the authority implied in objectivity is questionable in a strictly empirical sense but impossible to avoid in any practice of explanation, analysis or assessment. The stance of detached observation is key to understanding the character of Frances. Straub's eventual point is that "femininity is implicitly aligned with what is *seen*, not with the one who observes" (856). The woman who proposes herself as an objective observer places herself at risk in stepping outside a patriarchal expectation that she should be the object of scrutiny, not the scrutineer. Frances Hinton has "long ago cast (herself) in the role of an observer" (59) and her inability to understand that risk is an important part of this discussion.

Frances perceives herself as having an introspective nature, as being inclined towards calm and solitary pursuits and possessing orderly and Spartan habits. She also admits that she is famous for her control which has seen her through many crises, yet immediately concedes that "By a supreme irony, my control is so great that these crises remain unknown to the rest of the world, and so I am thought to be unfeeling " (19). This façade of emotional detachment, which renders a false impression, is one of many ironies that resonate throughout the novel. Also, beneath that need for control over conditions of crisis is a possibility that her neat and tidy list of attributes is less stable than she would admit. There is

also a suggestion that the control necessary to maintain the asceticism implied by these temperate attributes might also render a false personal understanding.

The prospect that her grasp on her projected image, and her self-perception, may be less than secure is made evident when her unequivocal claim to her name, "I do not like to be called Fanny" (5), is readily abandoned when Alix Fraser labels her as "Little Orphan Fanny!" (34). This is because Frances perceives the Frasers as representing physical perfection of a sort which makes her feel "weak and pale, undernourished, unfed by life's more potent forces – condemned to dark rooms, tiny meals, obscure creeping existence, and enfeebled status that will allow her to gently decline into extinction" (37). So Frances cannot sustain even a claim to her name because she feels herself so inferior both physically and socially.

#### The deceptions of self-perception

A clearer understanding of Frances's self-perception is available through Brookner's creation of Frances's character. Lynn Veatch Sadler is of the view that the other female characters in Look At Me augment the character of Frances. Olivia, Alix, and Miss Morpeth provide both inclusive comparisons and sharp contrasts with Frances, and each other. There are elements in other characters that enhance similar attributes, or highlight differences. Inconsistencies arise between what Frances perceives herself to be,

and what is revealed by other figures. Those inconsistencies place a further strain on the accuracy of Frances's self-perception.

Skinner suggests that Olivia is a "virtual alter ego to Frances" (51). This is a convincing interpretation since Olivia "whose moral strength never falters" is, like Frances, a composed and reticent character. They also project an infantile state of innocence in their "dark and serious room" which is "like a nursery for grown-up children" (46). As they plan to rest and read after the office Christmas party in preparation for the evening Frances feels that they reflect "Shades of our childhood, when we always had to rest before a party" (149). Olivia epitomises the attributes of innocence to which Frances has such a strong attachment. Frances describes her as "a creature of... high breeding" and "very brave" (12), whose "moral strength never falters" and acknowledges her as "my only critic" (46). In this sense Olivia serves as an ideal for Frances, and a criterion for evaluating her own attributes that she feels to be wanting.

Miss Morpeth of the 'sad green skirts with matching cardigans,' (64) functions as an antecedent of Frances, and while Frances sees Miss Morpeth as an instance of dreary duty, a late understanding of their similarity affects Frances profoundly. She sees her originally as a figure of pity to which she bestows charitable attention. She arrives later at a more honest understanding of their relationship as mutual dislike, each seeing in the other a negative reflection of herself. So the essential futility of

Miss Morpeth's wishes for the future, which are negated by her age and health, represent a similar prospect for Frances.

Alix Fraser is a sharply contrasting foil to Frances, emphasised through her carelessly cruel and contemptuous dismissal of Olivia and Miss Morpeth. Her maturity, selfishness and completely socially centred focus are antipathetic to the qualities of Olivia. Alix serves as the model for Frances's aspirations for inclusion in a world that disregards the conventions of duty and discipline. While Frances recounts Olivia's fine qualities, it is Alix to whom her attention turns for excitement and inclusion in the wider social context. The key contrast is that Olivia is flawlessly beautiful, morally strong and physically impaired while Alix is "not beautiful", almost amoral in her use of others, but with "such an aura of power that she claimed one's entire attention" (47). It is possible to see Alix as a template for the model of Frances as she would wish to be. What is made visible through the sharp contrasts between Olivia and Alix (if Olivia is taken as an alter ego to Frances) is the crisis of conflict that eschewing the respected attributes so apparent in Olivia will have on Frances's quest for an authentic image predicated on integrity. This consequence is not visible to Frances.

What Frances can see of her present situation is "the most dreadful emptiness" (36). Her place of work which is "dedicated to the study of problems of human behaviour...an archive...of photographs of works of art and popular prints depicting doctors and patients through the ages," is almost rendered futile when the nature

of its archived materials is understood. They are depictions of diseases. The extreme distance of patients and practitioners from any form of diagnostic practice would seem to preclude any direct understanding of the illnesses as does the emphasis on filing and cataloguing rather than understanding. That possibility is acknowledged by Frances herself when she says ruefully that "Problems of human behaviour still continue to baffle us, but at least in the Library we have them properly filed" (5). Frances's filing duties are passive and support the notional futility of her work, which she acknowledges herself in her remark that "Most of the real work in the Library is done by Dr Leaventhal, the librarian" (9).

In conjunction with the ineffectiveness of her work the Hinton home is described as "a building for old people" (22) and Frances is "hardly aware of this place as home, although I have always lived here" (23). She is unable to inscribe any personal stamp on it at all, and it seems nothing more than an inherited remnant of an era of innocent ineffectuality, disappointment and death that is associated with her parents. The vapidness of her home induces in Frances a sense of claustrophobia. Frances's greatest desire is for release. "Sometimes I wish it were different. I wish I were beautiful and lazy and spoiled and not to be trusted, I wish, in short, that I had it easier" (19).

So her self image, her uncertain claim to her name, the nature of her work and her uncomfortable occupation of her home build up suggestions of impotence and insularity that are

compounded by her feelings of desolation and of loneliness. She “feel(s) swamped in (her) solitude and hidden by it, physically obscured by it, rendered invisible” (19), and the result is an image of effacement. The nature of Frances’s detachment becomes a sense of imposed displacement, which she is powerless to overcome, rather than a distance deliberately assumed for a clearer view.

### A blameless futility

Frances despairs about the futility and lack of successful constructive action in her present and in her past. The ineffectual men in the novel embody these attributes of displacement and dislocation that reinforce Frances’s own feelings of dissatisfaction. The courteous and resigned Dr Simek suffers from a loss of professional stature as a result of his geographical displacement. This is emphasised by his inability to claim the attentions of the stronger male characters, James and Nick who are firmly placed in the medical establishment. Frances’s father, his partner Sydney Goldsmith and her mother’s doctor, Dr Constantine, are also imbued with characteristics of blamelessness and a paucity of successful action. So for Frances, at this point, it is a lack of attachment to a socially prescribed centre that forces displacement.

The source for the qualities that Frances feels she must acquire to negate her displacement, and achieve inclusion in the Frasers’ sphere, is discernible in a pattern, in Look At Me, of male figures attendant upon a central female. Nick Fraser and James

Anstey are related to their key female figure, Nick's wife Alix, by an attentive sexual fixation displayed through grooming which she reciprocates as a procurer or provider of pleasures. Frances's father, his business partner Sydney and the hapless Doctor Constantine are related to her mother with an equally attentive but vain ephemeral struggle to keep her alive. The social and sexual vitality of the former group of men is in poignant contrast to the impotence of the latter group. That contrast delineates for Frances that the qualities of the former group are what is needed for social and sexual success. Her understanding of her own inferior and ineffectual position drives her to seek to eradicate "The blamelessness that flourished within these walls (which) left us all deficient in vices with which to withstand the world, deficient in the sort of knowledge that protects and patronizes one's ventures" (31). What Frances must achieve, in order to join the Frasers of the world, is to rewrite herself in their image.

The prime example upon which to base that rewriting is Nick Fraser. Nick's impeccable attributes include being "tall and fair, an athlete, a socialite, well connected, good-looking, charming: everything you could wish for in a man. An all England hero, Olivia once called him" (11). He is also "devoid of that element of need that makes some men, and rather a lot of women, unattractive in their desires; he was, in fact, desire in its pure state" (38). Frances is the antithesis of all of these successful attributes as she is small and dark, creative and scholarly, reclusive, un-connected, attractive only

in what she feels is a meaningless way, almost silent and of course, a woman. Nor is Frances devoid of that unattractive state of need she so deplores in others and so it can be implied that she is desire in its impure state. So to achieve this re-writing and attain the place she craves, where she can be taught "that life can put on a good turn of speed and bowl one along with it" and achieve "that pure egotism" which will dispatch "that tremulousness...that *disappointment*" (41), which haunts her consciousness she must become attached, somehow, to this exemplary role.

That attachment is provided for her in the burgeoning relationship she has with Nick and his wife Alix. They exhibit a symbiotic relationship to Frances who can imagine them "strolling with the same unconcern, the same gaze directed towards each other rather than around them, through every circumstance of life" (41). Frances's connection to the Frasers is as "an audience and an admirer" (56). She perceives her function as an external auditor to the exhibition of their marriage because "some element in that perfect marriage was deficient, because ritual demonstrations were needed to maintain a level of arousal which they were too complacent, perhaps too spoilt, even too lazy, to supply for themselves, out of their own imagination" (57). She is "the beggar at their feast, reassuring them by my very presence that they were richer than I was" (57). To fulfil that function appropriately Frances must reflect back a confirmation of the Frasers' relationship and so

she needs to relate to a man in the same way that Alix does for Nick. She is provided with a candidate in the form of James Anstey.

#### Being written into the plot

Frances is shocked with genuine pleasure at the benign interest taken in her and James: "For the one thing I had not expected was to be written into the plot. I had really not expected that at all" (82). Consequently her writing is laid aside "And I did not write for many evenings that followed " (84). She feels that she is enveloped in a new security and revolts against the isolation that writing imposes, the clausturation, the sense of exclusion, because she believes that the business of writing is "...your penance for not being lucky. It is an attempt to reach others and make them love you" (84). At this juncture she begins to think it may not only be unnecessary, but potentially harmful.

At the point where a relationship with James, and entry into the world of the Frasers, becomes a serious possibility the dichotomy involved in Frances's choice between being a writer, and becoming a woman of the Frasers' world, becomes apparent. At the commencement of the novel her writing is presented as an entertaining hobby, the light-hearted re-arrangement of incidents at the library compiled for her mother's amusement. There is one publishing success which is lightly brushed over, as Alix has dismissed it as uninteresting to her and therefore of no value. It is made obvious that Alix does not like Frances's writing, for as

Frances says, "Alix did not like my writing. She regarded it as a secret which I was keeping from her" and as Frances is obdurate at keeping it to herself until it is more complete, Alix complains "'Little Orphan Fanny's holding out on me'" (53). Frances's writing is also an area over which Alix has no proprietary control, and her principles of social distinction do not include quiet librarians writing subtle and possibly critical pieces. Alix says, 'If you must write something, find something that interests other people" (54), and it is quite apparent that those other people would be interested most in reflections of Alix herself. Importantly, it is for use in her writing that Frances engages in the activity of detached observation and if she continues both activities she cannot become part of the object of that observation, when the authority of her objectivity is based on her detachment. Also, if she is a detached observer she cannot, at the same time, function as a reinforcing reflection of the Frasers' relationship, because for them the role of auditor is to confirm the truth of the account not to critique the principles on which it is based.

Frances's decision is to take up the warmth, pleasantness and good humour of the vigorous and successful life. "Why pay the price for being outside it all? I was no writer, I decided, dismissing that fictive outcome which was somehow encoded into my imaginings and therefore doubly shameful. I was no writer: I was a criminal masquerading as a librarian" (77). Her writing facility and powers of observation ebb and flow in direct correlation to the progress of her relationships with the Frasers and James and she is

initially only too glad to be relieved of the burden of her solitude, which is what her writing represents to her. At this stage of the novel any semblance of detachment is abandoned and any claims to creativity are relinquished for Frances has “learned very quickly that (she) must never criticize” as “happy and successful people (are) extraordinarily sensitive to criticism” (68). It is important to note that the only thing that makes Frances pause before finally committing herself to the influence of the Frasers “was the thought of my novel waiting to be written” (71) and this brings about her delay in accepting an offer to live with the Frasers. Her hesitation is selfish, to maintain a lingering thread to her writing as she awaits the fate of a short story, but ironically will lead to her being written out again.

#### Incalculable fallacies

Once the introduction to James Anstey takes place, however, Frances subdues what is almost a compulsion to see clearly, and to write about what she sees, for the sake of inclusion in a world that will recognise and value her. She assumes that the Frasers’ world has the power to do that. She assumes that the means to dispel her loneliness and unhappiness will result from that. She assumes that being looked at in a manner compatible with *her* understanding of a valuable recognition will be an outcome of that.

This conception of her control over this process is evident in her determined resistance to Alix’s earlier efforts to embellish her grooming with make-up and some maintenance of her detachment

and her writing while she is still "Little Orphan Fanny". Frances attempts to make her relationship with James somewhat different from that of Nick and Alix, reinforcing the view that she believes she can manipulate the requirements of a socialised relationship. She wants to be straightforward and private, and so she resists the attempts by Alix to probe and publicise an attachment more in keeping with Alix's own relationship with Nick. Again, Alix complains, " 'you're holding out on me, aren't you?' " (93). The food and drink that Frances shares with James is plain and nutritious and eaten peacefully in the confines of her home, in direct contrast to the careless consumption of chocolates by Alix and Nick, and the rich food eaten with avid appetites by the Frasers' social circle. As a couple Frances and James are the converse image of the socially and sexually sophisticated Nick and Alix. Their relationship does not enact a mutual enclosure, but serves as a contrasting alternative to that of Nick and Alix. Frances does not see that she and James cannot act as a conduit to the desired social centre for the other, for they are both beggars at the feast, supplicants at the altar of love. The assumptions behind these strategies for establishing difference, of Frances's attempts to transform what is required of a conventional couple to meet her own purposes, will not prove to be accurate.

For Frances to belong, as Alix Fraser does in epitomising the kind of powerful female role that is prescribed by a male image of female sexuality, she must assume the same role in the same

manner. She must engage men's sexual attention and gather together an appreciative audience and then take upon herself that male defined sexual image as an innate understanding of herself. Most importantly she cannot take control of that image. For she has not totally registered the significance of Alix as also being displaced through having come down in the world. Nor does she notice at the time, what she remembers later, "that (Alix) was not only restless but even dismayed by the lack of continuous satisfaction which her present life provided" (68). For Alix does not appear to have any function other than in relation to Nick, and that relationship has displayed a sense of lack, very early in the novel, through its prurient need for an external auditor. Frances cannot see past her need for inclusion, to discern the vacuity of Alix's position or to see that her understanding of what it will take to achieve that place where one can command the world to "Look at me", has been based upon an incalculable fallacy.

#### Being written off

The exposure of that fallacy begins with the appropriation of James by Nick and Alix, evidenced by his moving in to live in their spare room, and is the point at which Frances completely loses her hard gained attachment to the social structure. The occasions for the refrain of "Look at me" become greater and her suppression of them becomes stronger as she is rendered obsolete to the Frasers' circle. James " would not even meet my eyes. Look at me, I wanted

to say. Look at me" (126). Her confidence dwindles as she contrasts her own blamelessness and understatement with Alix's power, which is manifested by her tight black dress and opulent curves: "I could capture no one's eye. Look at me, I urged silently. Look at me" (158). She is again reduced to silence. The relationship between Frances and James has not matured nor has it fulfilled the requirements of a fully socialised couple. The relationship does not reiterate the expectations of a fully socialised and sexualised attachment and it does not affirm the Frasers' relationship. Therefore Frances must be replaced, according to Alix's sense of priorities, and James will achieve admittance into their world through the procurement of Maria (who will function in the same way as Alix), as is evidenced in the final feeding scene.

Aside from not meeting prerequisites she has not understood, what has compounded Frances's exclusion is her inability to articulate her feelings for James. For she cannot respond to Alix's immense interest and she is "unable to explain it to her", she is "simply at a loss, for suddenly all the words, scenarios, plots, exaggerations, seemed to have failed (her)" and "that was the most extraordinary thing; I was wordless" (92). Frances can see that Alix is exercising "a proprietorial right in the matter" and "a certain feudalism in her attitude; she not only exacted a sort of emotional *droit de seigneur*, she extended this into perpetual suzerainty" (92). But Frances has "lost the words with which (she) might once have investigated the matter" (92). The most obvious reason for this loss

of voice would appear to be the loss of her detachment and thus her writing. But another crucial element in understanding her silence is introduced in the explanation behind the passage on knowledge and truth in the opening paragraph of the novel. The significance of this passage has been concealed until this mid-point. It is revealed that she has seen James as the antidote to a past encounter. This is made plain as she explains that she does not love him "in the fatal sense...he is not a drug, an obsession, like that time of which I never speak" (121). With James she has "enjoyed the openness of consorting with an eligible man in full view of others" and she wants to "make up for all the sadness, all the waste and confusion, all the waiting, the sitting in sickrooms, the furtive returns and the lying morning face" (122). In her mind this past affair is inextricably linked with the death of her mother and this relationship will regain for her "a chance to be simple – as I was meant to be – and had been long ago, a long, long time ago...love should be simple. And it is. It is." (122) The ambiguity that has dogged her efforts to assimilate into the sphere of the Frasers' is explained when her reasons for that assimilation are revealed as duplicitous. Little Orphan Fanny *has* been holding out.

This revelation explains Frances's intensely conditional understanding of how she can successfully negotiate her way to being loved, and she ritualises moral imperatives to drive it. That opening passage underlies that understanding, and is a repetitive refrain woven throughout the novel:

Once a thing is known it can never be unknown. It can only be forgotten. And, in a way that bends time, so long as it is remembered, it will indicate the future. It is wiser, in every circumstance, to forget, to cultivate the art of forgetting. To remember is to face the enemy. The truth lies in remembering. (5)

So one of the imperatives Frances sees as necessary for success in love is repression and reticence, which is achievable through silence. As her relationship with James begins she feels she must "cancel out all the old information, forget (she) ever knew...all those sad spoiled things." For she shudders at the visions she has of herself "at (her) old merciless interrogations" (93). She must say nothing when James begins to avoid her, as she sees "no virtue in making a man feel guilty. Although I believe it sometimes works" (101). This silence, that is the catalyst for the eventual failure of this relationship, is revealed as a response to an anxious articulation that has caused the failure of a former one. Again Frances's attempts at control have negated her success, because that control has been predicated on the same incalculable fallacy. That fallacy is the mistaken belief that she has the power to manipulate the prerequisites for inclusion in a fully socialised world that includes a mature and fully realised heterosexual relationship. A belief that is, in turn, predicated on an understanding of the relationships between men and women as clouded by the trauma of loss.

This holds true for another of Frances's ritualised imperatives in which all responses to her sexuality must be unsolicited, and all of her responses to sexual encounters must be passive. This quiescence reads almost as the transfixed state that follows severe

shock, a state that would fairly describe the effects on Frances of her mother's death and the humiliation of her past relationship. She seems to believe that no untoward movement must be made to exacerbate that pain and recovery will only be possible under conditions of total immobility. The seduction scene is thus doubly disastrous because she breaks that imperative by behaving assertively and is rejected because of the incongruity of this assertiveness to the behaviour she has previously displayed. The irony is tragic. The earlier irony of her famous control having been misconstrued as a lack of feeling is compounded here. For where a façade of simplicity and innocence has masked a complex desire for love, it has been misconstrued as unassailable purity, and condemned her to failure and loneliness.

In her final social scene with the Frasers Frances describes the faces of Nick, Alix, James and Maria as "flushed, venial, corrupt, gorged with sweet food and drink, presaging danger " (161) and this description imbues her final rejection by James as almost an escape from harm. She perceives "the noise and heat of that restaurant, the intent and flushed faces, the oozing custard, the sucking inhalations of cigarettes, the raucous but sly excitement, the watchers. That, clearly, was the correct atmosphere in which love might flourish" (163). If that is the correct atmosphere, and it is antithetical to the plain and straightforward atmosphere Frances has craved, and there is a presage of danger emanating from those with whom she once felt she wished to belong, then Frances is finally faced with an

accurate view of the world she has admired and what is required from her to live in it.

This realisation is only confirmation of what has been intermittently exposed throughout the narrative by the underlying, introspective and unselfconscious source of images, which brings with it the compulsion for Frances to translate these images into writing. For true to her admonition about knowledge and truth Frances has forgotten, or suppressed, her original fascination with the power of images. She has known that "sometimes an image stands for something that will only be understood in due course. It is a mnemonic, a cryptogram, very occasionally a token of precognition" (17). She has once paid very great attention to images, for on the day of her first meeting with Alix the spectre of Dr Constantine's desperation at his inability to deal with her mother's dying needs haunts her. Alix's dismissive attitude towards Olivia's disability caused an image of the cruel pink collar to provoke Frances to Olivia's defence. The image of the gravely ill Dr Simek's painful struggle to afford Frances a courteous leave-taking drives her to write it down in spite of her determination to abandon her writing to concentrate on James. Now, the images of avidity and appetite drive her out of the restaurant and into her harrowing night walk through London.

### A rite of passage

That walk, a consummate portrayal of danger and fear, is the first stage of Frances's disconnection from the world of couples, the world she mistakenly believed would confirm her value and accord her a voice at the world's tribunals. The physical flight resembles a rite of passage through a darkened and threatening underworld as she has been repulsed, and driven back to the origination of her creativity, after experiencing a profoundly wrong turn. Her relinquishing of the Frasers' milieu is not clear-cut nor is it without remnants of ambiguity. She feels "as if I had to accomplish this ritual on foot, and that only if I did so could I face the haven of warmth and muffled air that awaited me. Only in this way could I exhaust myself sufficiently to put thought to sleep and if I did not so exhaust myself I would feel that I was entering a tomb, rather than a perfectly ordinary bed" (169). So her return to her home is laden with a dread of its own.

In being received back into the house by Nancy, Frances is subsumed into her dead mother's identity by being dressed in her mother's nightgown and put to bed in her mother's room. She has returned to the origination of her writing but the nature of that writing has changed. The short, light, droll pieces her mother enjoyed and that she envisaged being admired by academic dons have become transfigured, through expansion and an increasing depth, into novels. The novels are satirical and clearly focussed on her recent experiences and the people who have populated them, although her lack of anger disturbs her, "for without anger where is the satire?" (180). She regresses into a morbid

depression and begins to waste and shed her biological characteristics: "In future I would become subsumed into my head, and into my hand, my writing hand" (179). This regression is a retreat from her failed attempt at a female role predicated on a male defined sexual image. She has not been able to undertake that role due to its incongruence with her desire for an autonomous female subjectivity.

Yet Frances still proclaims, "for now that I knew that I loved him" although that declaration is tempered with the ambiguous admission that "it was his whole life I loved" (183). For Frances's perception of love is entwined with her view of life; she even buoys herself with the prospect of a reunion with a diminished stature and a suitably humble and submissive attitude. She needs "those lords of misrule" (183) to dispel her blameless sacramental Christmas, but eventually realises that for James at least, her "watching eye and (her) writing hand" (183) will keep him away. Her last effort at lightness restores her appetite and vigour, but her confidence falls away. Her writing resumes with ease and speed and eventually she abandons hope, and she acknowledges "with the letting down of this final barrier between myself and the truth I seemed to welcome back those images which used to throng my mind" (191). She sees Dr Constantine crouched over the telephone without resource, Dr Simek braced against the back of his chair, determined under duress, Mrs Halloran becalmed with a bottle, Miss Morpeth writing to

her niece, and she sees herself, and "a voice says, 'My darling Fan.' I pick up my pen. I start writing" (192).

Frances's disconnection and her final dispensing with the Frasers completes the transfigurative process. Frances is forced to disconnect because her alternatives are mutually exclusive. She must inevitably resist the constraints of a gendered socialisation if she cannot subvert it by transfiguring the prerequisites for love within a socially realised relationship, which will affirm an image of her self that will be authentic and enduring. Her last struggles with her social need are quelled by the obvious innate quality of her writing skills. Frances must continue to function in her role as a single woman. She has been destined to attain that stance of detached observation which is fundamental to her destiny as a writer, but only through the process of transfiguring the misperceptions and misconceptions that misinformed her original view.

#### A sparsity of choice

In terms of a feminist appreciation, Frances has evaded a false image she cannot sustain to maintain her innate integrity, which can only be expressed from within the realms of her unbidden imagery and the preservation of the writing that her mother saw as a gift at the beginning of the novel. This outcome is compatible with a feminist interest in finding ways of writing about women's experiences that evades the patriarchally contrived value systems

that automatically marginalise both the experience and the writing of it. But what is to be made of the determinist dilemma that arises from this valorisation of an innate and essentialist view? For Brookner has clearly stated in an interview with John Haffenden, "I think one's character or predisposition determines one's fate, I'm afraid" (62). The constriction of the mutually exclusive choice has been made obvious in this discussion of Look At Me. The prerequisites for a male defined sexual image are exposed and then resisted and thus averted, but not indelibly transfigured. The price of a false image, or inauthentic role, is too much to pay. Frances has achieved a personal transfiguration, a process that the study of Edith Hope in Hotel du Lac may progress.

- **Hotel du Lac**

The behaviour most becoming to a woman

As many of the thematic devices and modes of presentation that appear in Look At Me are repeated in Hotel du Lac, the purpose of this thesis in analysing the role of the single woman is well served by treating the novels as continuous expositions of that analysis. The approach to Hotel du Lac is to look at the role of Edith Hope with particular emphasis on Edith as a figure of resistance to a romantic ideal. This is not to say that there isn't also a thematic concern with acquiring, or maintaining an authentic image. The focus on Edith's struggle to elude conventional matrimonial opportunities serves to define what, for Edith, that authentic image might need to be.

In conjunction with the analysis of Edith's role there is an enquiry into what prompts the transfigurative process to be enacted, how, and on what. It is the question around which Edith has written her novels, the question she has attempted to argue with her literary agent as she is about to leave England, and the question she believes she has consistently failed to answer. That prompt, in Hotel du Lac, appears in the guise of an enquiry into "what behaviour most becomes a woman" (40). There is a close corollary between this enquiry and the quest for an authentic image that so consumed Frances Hinton. Frances thought she already knew the answer. The complexity of the question is what interests Edith.

Edith's exploration of that question takes up the major part of this chapter, preceded by an equal exploration of Edith. For Lynn Veach Sadler describes Edith as complex and proposes that "Edith is not forthcoming about herself but presents a persona" (57). Sadler believes Edith "fulfil[s] the expectations of others with regard to the stereotype she cuts as a spinster writer and the inner [expectation, which is] of no small satisfaction to herself" and she achieves this by "exact[ing] from those around her the image of herself that she wants them to have" (61-62).

#### A duplicitous impression

Access to Edith's character, to explore Veach Sadler's proposition, is complex. The omniscient narration provides a conventional narrative and character portrait in which Edith Hope is presented as a more secure and confident woman than Frances Hinton, as the action predating the opening scene of the novel attests. She is a successful romance novelist, enjoys her home and garden, and has considerable autonomy. Unlike Frances, Edith functions equably in an external social milieu among friends. Like Frances she is presented as serious and reserved. Her character is compiled in a list of the roles she performs; "a householder, a ratepayer, a good plain cook" (8) and alongside those roles is a steady repertoire of tepid appearances that are "mild-looking..., distant, inoffensive" (9) and these descriptions are overlaid with

insignificant physical attributes such as “ quite nice eyes, rather large hands and feet, meek neck” (10).

Edith's relationships with other women in the novel is indicative of the deceptiveness Sadler identified. She fulfils her friend Penelope's expectations of her by allowing Penelope to treat her “as if she were a child” (58), whilst wordlessly establishing a liaison with David Simmonds behind Penelope's back. She submits to the patronage of the Puseys, at the same time as joining Monica in deriding them, and equally satirises all of them in her unsent letters to her lover, David. Even her compliance to being banished to the hotel is made along the lines of least resistance, so as to make things easier when she goes home.

These aspects of Edith's portrayal present a unified self-perception and exterior presentation. That impression is modified when Edith's methods of fulfilling her own inner expectations are examined. The use of passages that seamlessly insert Edith's streams of thought into the narration and her letters to David gradually expose her inner view. This device is displayed as Edith describes to David her departure from Heathrow at the moment of contemplating herself in the mirror at Heathrow:

...here was this mild-looking, slightly bony woman in a long cardigan, distant, inoffensive, quite nice eyes, rather large hands and feet, meek neck, not wanting to go anywhere, but having given my word that I would stay away for a month until everyone decides that I am myself again. For a moment I panicked, for I am myself now, and was then, although this fact was not recognised. Not drowning, but waving. (10)

As well as enriching the characterisation, this witty transposition of the lines of Stevie Smith's poem "Not Waving but Drowning" inverts the cry of Smith's drowning man who moans, "I was much too far out all my life/And not waving but drowning" (11-12), a line that would more accurately describe Frances than Edith. For Edith seems in control of the boundaries of her life and she can state quite unequivocally, 'I am myself *now*' (my italics for emphasis). Her panic is only momentary.

That inner view is not completely stable, however, for Edith is not without some anxiety and insecurity. That moment of panic may have been gotten over, but "it was not easy" (10). She is diffident at making "the entrance, always so difficult to negotiate, into the dining room" (12). She needs the fortification of tea and cherry cake to pluck up "the courage to look around" (17). This behaviour intimates that she has suffered a more serious setback than she has admitted, an intimation that is confirmed when in the course of the narration (after her lunch with her agent Harold Webb) her appetite is gone because, "It hardly mattered what she ate these days, since she no longer mattered to herself" (29). It is not made clear, at that stage of the novel, what action has provoked this despondency, but it is clearly connected to her banishment.

An example of Edith's uncertainty is demonstrated in the repetition of ritualising activity that is driven by a conditional understanding of cause and effect, which was also apparent in the study of Frances Hinton. Edith has known what she wanted, taken it,

and been prepared to pay for it. Yet she still tries to maintain some conditional control of her situation. She does not totally unpack her case “signifying to herself that she could be off in a few minutes if the chance arose” (13). The fears that drive that need for control are made manifest as the reality of her occupation of the hotel begins to take substance and that reality acquires a “dimension of terror...as if knowing the place too well might give her presence there some reality, some validity” (37).

In addition, Edith shares Frances’s obedience to an unidentified source of authority with the power to confer authenticity or legitimacy. This is made evident as she presumes that she is “not to be *allowed* (her) lapse” (8), and hopefully conjectures that “(she) shall be *allowed* back, to resume (her) peacable existence” (9). There is no physical constraint to her going wherever, and whenever, she pleases. She acknowledges that in saying “Nobody is actually forcing me. But I must give it a try, if only to make things easier when I get home.” (21). That complicated sense of interior disciplinary reference arises again in the description of her walk around the lake as “she carried on until she thought it time to be *allowed* to stop “ (22, emphasis added). These examples of Edith’s inner anxieties destabilise the outer composure she displays. That composure contributes to stereotypical expectations, as does the narrative in assigning her with “a serious and hard-working personality” (8), which is endorsed when she declares, “I am a serious woman...a deliverer of typescripts well before the deadline; I

sign anything that is put in front of me; I never telephone my publisher" (8-9). The unmistakable and deliberate inferences to a likeness to Virginia Woolf underscore stereotypes of the writer and scholar and her reserve guards her singular independence.

The cumulative content of her letters to David revises that stereotype as she uses the letters to chronicle her private feelings. She lampoons the inaccuracy of her "novelist's famed powers" (11) and acknowledges her ambivalence towards the satirised Puseys for "there was love there, love between mother and daughter" and she acknowledges the sad and bitter contrast between them and her relationship with "her strange mother, Rosa...slatternly and scornful, mocking her pale silent daughter" (48). The culmination of this self-appraisal bursts forth in the penultimate letter that must be put aside for "unsound elements seemed to have crept into her narrative" and she becomes "aware of exceeding her brief" and further "aware of the restriction that that brief implied: to amuse, to divert, to relax" (114). This exercise has gotten out of control and has "somehow accumulated elements of introspection, of criticism, even of bitterness" (114).

#### Calculated fallacies

Again, at the midpoint of the novel, in exactly the same way as it appeared in Look At Me, the significance of antecedent action is revealed. The circumstances surrounding Edith's banishment are made clear in her review of the events that have brought her to the

Hotel du Lac. Accompanying this revelation is a disturbing fragmentation of her reason, "that controlling element...as hidden areas, dangerous shoals, erupted into her consciousness" (116). The impact of the pain of self-recognition, and the curious attachment between a failure in love and the death of a parent that was found in Look At Me, is repeated in the structural composition of Hotel du Lac. Edith has presumed she is only there to "clear the decks" and wipe the slate clean, preparatory to being allowed to return "suitably chastened". This action is reminiscent of her father's preparation for a hospitalisation from which "he had not come home" a reminder from which Edith is forced to surmise, "maybe I shall not go home...her heart breaking with sorrow." (117). Like Little Orphan Fanny, Edith has been holding out.

What Edith has really wanted is a productive respite from which she can return having made the required reparation, to resume her former life and love. To amuse herself Edith has undertaken "an exercise in entertainment" in the same way she has soothed David with "gentle observations, always skilfully edited". She comes to realise that this behaviour is prompted by how David sees her... "and out of love for him that is how I tried to be" (114). To meet the expectation of another, Edith has become fixed in a false representation, accepted an inauthentic image. The consequences to Edith of this realisation are transfiguring to her view of herself, and the expectations that lie behind it.

The transfigurative process that reveals Edith's self-realisation is enacted through a similar organisational structure to that used in Look At Me. The other female characters in the novel are categorised as either figures, who share specific attributes with Edith, or as distinct contrasts. All of these characters serve to represent, or critique, types of female behaviour in Edith's quest to understand the behaviour most becoming to a woman. There is a correlation between these attributes, behaviours and variations on the traditional romance plot. For like Frances Hinton, Edith is looking for love as well as an authenticated image, and just as Frances had, she has predetermined assumptions.

With the exception of the Puseys, the female figures sharing Edith's sojourn in Switzerland are all displaced, physically, personally and socially. Monica has been displaced, or in fact suspended, for not being robust enough to breed successfully and she wilfully contributes to that displacement through her anorexic eating habits. Madame la Comtesse is aging and stranded by the avarice and insensitivity of her son and daughter-in-law. She is displaced by her age and widowhood and her role as a mother cannot rescue her. Monica and la Comtesse are the rejected victims of contrasting sides of a prescriptive femininity. This prescription is based on the social traditions of marriage and motherhood. Monica is the victim of an expectation that requires her removal from the traditional married state if she is incapable of sustaining the biological reproduction so necessary to the continuation of the

conventional (and, presumably, aristocratic) family. Madame la Comtesse has outlived her role in that same context, and must therefore be put aside. Their displacement is akin to Edith's banishment with some important distinctions. Monica and la Comtesse have been overcome by the tragedy of a prescriptive biology. For Edith (as it was for Frances), an incongruity between perspectives of love has overcome her.

Edith's displacement operates at a more complex level, for it has as much to do with being foreign and with being an orphan, as it has to do with the reasons for her banishment to the hotel. As M. Huber the elder ponders Edith's name in the hotel register, "Hope, Edith Johanna. An unusual name for an English lady. Perhaps not entirely English. Perhaps not entirely a lady" (23) and Edith Johanna has always been something of a foreigner at home, as well as abroad, through her parents' European descent and her mother's scornful rejection.

The contrasting characters are the Puseys and they provide as much material for Brookner's subtle wit as they do for Edith's enquiry. Mrs Pusey is introduced as a "lady of indeterminate age" (17) and Jennifer as "rather the same model as her mother but not brought to the same state of high finish" (18). The constantly revised details of age and appearance come under the spotlight of Brookner's deft, and often damning, irony. This is accomplished in the same manner in which Edith's friend Penelope is cattily presented as, "a handsome woman of forty five" who "will remain so

for many years" (58). This satirising of façades of youthfulness is repeated towards fleshiness and appetites, which are depicted as avid and materialistic. The same kind of appetite in Look At Me presaged danger. This is echoed in Edith's "mild feeling of faintness when she watched Mrs Pusey and Jennifer eating their dinner" which denotes "a difference of appetite, one that seemed to carry a threat to her own" (39). The perception of femininity first discerned in the Puseys as "an unexpected note of glamour" and "a delightful spectacle" (17-18) is progressively rendered grotesque with increasing allusions to Jennifer's placid fecundity and Mrs Pusey's superficiality.

As this change in perception of Jennifer and her mother increases there is an analogous decrease in their value as social models. This is despite Mrs Pusey's declaration that she is a romantic "'brought up to believe in the right values'" (73). Those values require a meaning of love that entails marriage, romance and courtship and the ability of a woman "to make a man worship her" (74). As Edith's estimation of their ages increases, and her observation of their appearances and their actions becomes more judgemental, Edith's relationship with them undergoes a parallel degeneration. This was, perhaps, foreshadowed by her "powerful and undiagnosed feelings toward these two: curiosity, envy, delight, attraction, and fear" (33). But there is also a possibility that Mrs Pusey's "right values" insinuate too closely for comfort to Edith's own view and remind her uneasily that to date they have not been

realisable. There is self-preservation, and a suggestion of vengeance in her observations that the Puseys "were beginning to emerge in a rather harder light than had at first been apparent" (82). Edith is uneasy about Mrs Pusey's references to her late husband for "they appeared to be a function of Mrs Pusey's narcissism" (82), and intuits that any revelations will entail the provision of comfort and sympathy on her part. This negative interpretation of Mrs Pusey's effusive sentimentality is contained in Edith's declaration that "to exhibit my wounds would, for me, denote an emotional incontinence of which I might later be ashamed" (83). It is clear that no such shame would attach to Mrs Pusey, and the unsuitability of her behaviour for Edith's ideal is established.

Essentially, the Puseys function as negative models for Edith of the ideal behaviour of women, and this is mostly attributable to their fatuous preoccupation with conspicuous consumption and with each other. Edith was originally envious of their loving closeness, and the total contrast this had with her mother's past unkindness to her, but she begins to associate them with her memories of her mother's degeneration in looks and temperament as the elderly Iris's physical infirmities become apparent and Jennifer's infantilism and complete subservience to her mother becomes vaguely questionable. Also, as the Puseys' relationship is probed, its mutual exclusivity and insularity are found to be completely solipsistic. They do not acknowledge any outside sources, continuously affirming their own view of the world.

Jennifer and Mrs Pusey occupy the same symbolic space as the Frasers in Look At Me. Secure in their inclusion in a material world, their appearances and their behaviour (and the fact that they alone have chosen to come to the Hotel du Lac of their own volition) place them inside a traditional social centre. Their occupation of this centre is reminiscent of that of Alix Fraser, as Mrs Pusey particularly displays "attention-catching ploys," a "determination to never leave the field," and more pertinently, glimpses "of a somewhat salacious mind" (83). The desire to capture male attention is evinced by Mrs Pusey's florid mannerisms, and is coupled with the affectations of helplessness and submissiveness portrayed by Jennifer along with an "apparently uninformed voluptuousness" (112) that suggests to Edith an insistent expression of latency. These hints of moral expediency are in keeping with the characteristics that defined Alix.

### A Defined Romance

There are no behaviours manifest by these figures that produce a continued positive response from Edith. This indicates that Edith already has assumptions about the type of behaviour most becoming to a woman and the source for the romantic ideal. An excerpt from the Harlequin Mills and Boon 'Guidelines to Aspiring Romance Fiction Writers' on the Internet address [www.nzwriters.co.nz/publishers/millsboon.htm](http://www.nzwriters.co.nz/publishers/millsboon.htm) is an interesting basis from which to analyse Edith's romantic ideal, (since she is a "writer of romantic fiction under a more thrusting name" [8] ), and to

delineate the three relationships of love in which she plays a central part.

Written in (the) third person, from the heroine's point of view, each book should focus almost exclusively on the developing relationship between the main protagonists...Readers should be... gripped by romantic suspense as the couple strives to overcome the emotional barriers between them and find true happiness in the romance of a lifetime. (2)

Edith thinks that writing romances has functioned, for her, as a means of displacing repressed desires and memories too painful and complex to acknowledge. This is a view that Brookner has touched on in an interview with John Haffenden when she admitted "that a very perverse energy...has gone into the novels – conversion hysteria, I would say. If I could say it, I would; as I can't say it, I have to write it" (62). Edith also admits the possibility that her romance novels may be acts of reparation to the mother who comforted herself with tales of love. Edith is also adamant, however, that she has not been cynical, or detached, about her popular romance novels, but "believed every word" (181).

The adulterous relationship she has had with David would not meet the criteria of a Mills and Boon romance. Her letters express her desire for David and the structure of the narrative creates the prerequisite suspense. But the key missing component is David himself. He is absent, has stayed absent and will always be so. Regardless of every piece of evidence she has to the contrary, in spite of him being a married man, she has constructed an ideal romance plot for her and David...and it is a fiction.

The virtually arranged marriage to Geoffrey meets no personal criteria for Edith other than fulfilling the social expectations of tradition and her friends. Furthermore, it would mean the disposal of her objects of feminine comfort such as the old baggy wicker chair and the known boundaries of her narrow white bed. There is even the possible threat of a cessation to her writing. The authentication of this image denies Edith the integrity of her self-identification and any control over how she is viewed by others.

The proposed marriage based on convenience and commonsense to Philip reduces the notion of love to a cipher. It contains no element of love and Edith is adamant that she "cannot live without it...I mean that I cannot live *well* without it. I cannot think or act or speak or write or even dream with any kind of energy in the absence of love. I feel excluded from the world." (98). But Philip Neville's astute insights into Edith's character and true understanding of love is dangerously close to the truth. He understands that she is "misled by what (she) would like to believe" (95). He sees the truth, akin to Veatch Sadler's contention, that "love has made (her) secretive, self-effacing, perhaps dishonest", and he knows that her romanticism will only "keep rueful thoughts at bay for a time" (100), and then she will discover a common feminine discontent. He predicts, almost presciently, that she will never write anything other than popular romance until she looks harder at herself. Edith "recognises the voice of authority" (100) and its truths, but she is desolated by his ruthlessness in exposing her need.

Philip's offer of social position also elicits Edith's distaste for the similarity in intent and practice it encourages to Monica's role of fortune hunter, or gold digger, as "the whole sorry business of baiting the sexual trap was uncovered by Monica's refusal to behave herself in a way becoming to a wife" (82). Edith loathes "the idea of women prospecting in this way" (147). But Edith finally acquiesces, for reasons other than love, "the lure of domestic peace... obviously too great for one of my timorous nature to resist", and the doubt that she has "anything more to look forward to" (181).

The final denouement that reveals Philip's liaison with Jennifer ultimately affirms Edith's instinct that a role as an object, no matter how highly valued, will neither be authentic nor compatible with her integrity. So Edith ultimately resists all the comparative modes of presentation that do not meet her personal criteria of authenticity, and all alternatives of the romantic ideal. In the process her cherished assumptions are laid bare, her duplicity is exposed, and her options evaporate. She can do no more than cross out the words "Coming home" and their implication of a domesticated ideal, and write simply, "Returning." (184)

### The problems of love

Genre fiction in general, and romance fiction in particular, has presented feminist literary criticism with difficult challenges. There is a view, expressed by Mary Eagleton in Working with Feminist Criticism, that the deliberate appropriation of popular genre fiction to

a self-consciously feminist viewpoint is a positive way of leaving the artist free from critical, academic or canonical supervision by placing it outside dominant value systems. This suggests that a self-consciously feminist viewpoint is only adequately expressed outside such supervision and systems, a suggestion that is hard to sustain when the majority of feminist viewpoints have originated, and are still operating, in a critical and academic background. A pertinent point of Eagleton's, however, is that of all generic fiction, romance fiction may be the most intractable, and result inevitably in a capitulation to the very structures that feminist writers and critics have set out to challenge and subvert. In accordance with this view Diana Wallace sees the re-writing of earlier texts written by women as a key strategy in twentieth-century women's literature (borrowing Adrienne Rich's term "writing as re-vision" or "of entering an old text from a new critical direction" [235] to define what she means by re-writing.). Wallace also, like Eagleton, still sees re-written genre fiction as problematic, however, because of the question of the innate conservatism of the patterning that accompanies it. Her argument is that the reliance of the romance novel, in particular, on the expectation of a happy (heterosexual) conclusion is a capitulation, of exactly the kind that Eagleton finds problematic.

Brookner provides, in Hotel du Lac, a precise analysis of multiple variations of the traditional romance novel that subvert the expectation of capitulation. The authenticity of Edith's self image is maintained. Edith's resistance to the authoritative resolution

presented in her final marriage offer, despite all of the rational and logical truths contained within it, is her confirmation of the essential integrity necessary in the behaviour most becoming to a woman. Edith remains obdurate in her belief in love, despite all the options that have been made available to her, all the evidence that she has gathered about what constitutes the behaviour most becoming to a woman, and what she has come to understand about her personal experience. Edith quits the Hotel du Lac and the common place of marginalised space occupied by women is denied, and the commonplace solution that would infer that a woman's place is as the object of male desire is rejected. The behaviour most becoming to a woman is that behaviour, which will allow an authentic subjectivity. In the work of Muriel Spark in the coming chapter, an authentic subjectivity is something that Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra assume they already have.

# 3

## Transfigurative chaos in the novels of Muriel Spark

### • Introduction

#### Making a Mockery

Transfigurations abound in the two novels of Muriel Spark's studied in this chapter. The fictional treatise, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace", in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie was the source of the idea in this thesis that a transfigurative process disclosed and displaced commonplace concepts and conventions. An analysis of the single women in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and The Abbess of Crewe illustrates transfiguration of all conventional expectations through parody. The processes of change, or alternative ways of understanding, are so interconnected and have been elevated to such a height that the norm, or the conventional, or the traditional elements of what this discussion has been calling "commonplace" has almost disappeared. The only stable element in the texts is the use of the destabilising potential of comedy.

Because of a historical practice of using stereotypes of women as the figures most often belittled in comic representations, comedy in literature is particularly problematic from a feminist point

of view. The depiction of women in comedy is usually predicated on physical, intellectual or moral deficiencies and departures from accepted norms. Even the strident Judy subsides as a hapless victim of the violent Punch. The dumb blonde, the aggressive woman leader and the countless responses between the whore/actress and the bishop resound throughout every communicable media and arguably inform the opinions of many male citizens. Further examples are neither desirable nor necessary in an already overcrowded field. As Judy Little says, "the more conservative comic statement...direct(s) our laughter against the outsider, against the one who deviates from a norm of beauty or appropriate behaviour" (1). The conservative comic statement capitulates to patriarchal structures that assert a marginalised view of women, and their writing. Capitulation to dominant structures was discussed as problematic to a feminist perspective in relation to the popular romance novel in Chapter 2, because of the conventional requirement for a happy, and heterosexual, ending. The problematic capitulation in comedy is the focus of derisory laughter on the outsider, or the figure other than the norm, where the norm is consistently the male and that "other" is going to be always female.

A strategic alternative would seem to be to redirect the laughter by changing either the manner, or the content, of the comic statement. To do that involves disrupting the traditional foundations of comic approaches. Those approaches are celebratory, satirical or scatological. The celebratory travesty of the carnival or the pageant,

and the satirical parody of conventional figures and traditional social and cultural expectations, are the hallmarks of these two novels. The basic juxtapositions in comedic presentation are traditionally, on the one hand, between an instinct and its disciplined social expression, and on the other hand, between a socially acceptable norm and eccentricity. The narrative, characterisation and style in these novels produce disruptions of both of these juxtapositions. Self-preservation as an instinct is raised to the heights of delusions of grandeur and is juxtaposed against the disciplined social expression of competent leadership and altruistic vocation. The balance of socially acceptable norms is completely abandoned for the eccentricities of megalomania. Spark redistributes the focus of the laughter across all the contributing elements and the processes that place them in contrast. Judith Little contends that Spark "mock(s) what another writer would allow to stand as a norm, as something in which everyone could still trust and believe" (20). Essentially that is true, but that mockery is then extended to mock both itself and its method of production.

The narratives mock credulous interpretations of dogmatic political and religious assertions as Jean Brodie derides conservative values, and is then derided herself, as a hypocrite. The Abbess Alexandra disregards the Vatican Council's untenable relativism for the strict Rule of St Benedict, whilst enjoying the sybaritic pleasures of food, wine and English poetry in a manner that ignores both. The characterisation uses foil characters to destabilise supposedly unified subjects, as Sandy Strange exposes Jean

Brodie to ridicule and eventual betrayal. Sister Felicity and the community of nuns are ineffectual in contrast to the powerful Abbess, as ciphers of opposition that carry their own seed of disruption. The sparsity and elision in the style provides little purchase for assumptions about textual authority. The structure of both texts delivers all the elements of a transfigurative process. This chapter examines the narratives and the characterisations as they relate to their central element, the role of the single women, Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra. Features of form and style across both novels introduce a meta-fictive intent on the part of Spark to display the production of a text as ultimately transfigurative.

The normality under scrutiny in these novels is revealed in terms of parodic contrast, and also in terms of its own travesty, and Spark does not succumb to belabouring the process or producing reformed normative truths as solutions. The consequences are left alone, untended, to reach resolution, or not, as individual interpretation would have it. This chapter's main objective is to examine the features that build the roles of Jean Brodie and Abbess Alexandra in the context of renegade comedy, and travestying parody and how this determines mutually transfiguring processes, with the roles of Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra as their catalyst.

## • The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

### A Woman in her Prime

The characterisation of Miss Jean Brodie is made available through multiple facets of comparison and contrast in a similar fashion to Brookner's treatment. A picture is produced of Jean Brodie through the famous attributes proclaimed for each of the girls in Jean Brodie's set. Monica is famous for mathematics, Rose for sex, Eunice for gymnastics and swimming, Jenny for her prettiness and gracefulness. Sandy is "merely notorious" (3) for her small eyes, but famous for her vowel sounds, and the hapless Mary Macgregor for "being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame" (4). These attributes are not described in relation to any depicted activities of the girls, or revealed obliquely as the content of any desires in their inner thought processes. They are assigned in the narrative in a declamatory manner parallel to the proclamations, maxims and edicts Jean Brodie declares for the edification of her pupils and therefore reveal more about her methods (and eventually her madness) than they reflect of the actual characteristics of the girls.

The maxims Goodness, Truth and Beauty, used by Miss Brodie to counteract the conventional maxim of Safety First advocated by her headmistress, Miss Mackay, are equally revelatory. The conforming nature of Safety First is imputed by Jean

Brodie to deny the value of culture, and to appreciate a pragmatic aptitude for passing examinations. Yet Jean Brodie's appropriation of these maxims is just as pragmatic as Miss Mackay's insistence on "work(ing) hard at ordinary humble subjects" (69), and this pragmatism is made evident in Jean Brodie's punctiliousness in correcting the girls' posture, grammar and vowel sounds. These attributes are essentially rules of behaviour predicated on conventional, even bourgeois, social values, which sits at odds with the free-spirited and liberal impression that Jean Brodie strives to produce.

Admittedly the text claims that it was "not to be supposed that Miss Brodie was unique at this point of her prime; or that... she was in any way off her head" for "there were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties" in "their war-bereaved spinsterhood" (43). But there is a unique facet of Jean Brodie, which is manifest in her choice of teaching post "in a school like Marcia Blaine's" (43). For while the other Edinburgh spinsters who have suffered from post-war disappointments in love and marriage engage in new political ideas or reforms, they do so in wider fields and with more transparent practices than Jean Brodie. The Marcia Blaine School for Girls is a particularly unusual choice, for "the progressive spinsters of Edinburgh did not teach in schools, especially in schools of traditional character like Marcia Blaine's School for Girls. It was in this that Miss Brodie was, as the rest of the staff spinsterhood put it, a trifle out of place" (43). So Jean Brodie has placed herself out of the sphere of her peer group of "progressive

spinsters" and into the sphere of "the staff spinsterhood" to which she does not traditionally belong. For the progressive spinsters are not "committee women" and "they were not school-teachers", and this is because, "the committee spinsters were less enterprising and not at all rebellious, they were sober church-goers and quiet workers" (44). The school-mistresses "were of a still more orderly type, earning their keep, living with aged parents and taking walks on the hills and holidays at North Berwick" (44). They would all have made fine character models for Anita Brookner.

The implications of Jean Brodie's choice of vocation, and the choice of environment in which to undertake that vocation, are therefore complex. It would be cynical to suggest that she takes with her the progressive occupations of one peer group to deliberately aggrieve another. It can be presumed that Jean Brodie has a vocational interest in education. It is certainly possible to assume that she has decided to pursue that interest at a level where her students will be at an impressionable age commensurate with her own developmental stage. She is presented as "still in a state of fluctuating development", and therefore "[its] not a static Miss Brodie...whose nature was growing under [the girl's] eyes, [as similarly] the girls themselves were under formation" (45).

Consequently although it may be uncharitable, but not unthinkable, to believe she has chosen, egoistically, to be the big frog in a little pool, it is obvious that her perception of her own social and intellectual superiority is not lacking in self confidence.

Evidence of a self-serving motivation in her teaching becomes more obvious as Jean Brodie portrays an increasing degree of eccentricity. Her assimilation of the Jesuitical methodology of capturing pliant minds at an early age is indicated through her maxim, "Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life" (6). Her fanaticism is highlighted by her attempts to transcend the social norms of family and religion. She is contemptuously dismissive of the art teacher Gordon Lowther's large family and her perception of the Catholicism that encompasses it. Her own utilitarian approach to church attendance and her continuing influence over her young charges long past the time they have passed through her classes is tribal, if not maternal.

The despotism in Jean Brodie's programme is revealed in the way the elitist nature of her educational programme is undermined by the pragmatism of her selection criteria. She is described as having "selected her favourites, or rather those whom she could trust, or rather those whose parents she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy" (25). Thus whilst her intent may be seemingly benevolent that benevolence is subverted by the self-preserving nature of her methodology.

The chosen ones, the *crème de la crème*, are first presented by virtue of their famed attributes neatly equipoised as brains and beauty, languor and energy. Against the consolidated characteristics of all the girls, Sandy and Mary are set as counterbalances. As

Sandy is expected to be the leaven, it is Mary's inescapable fate to function as the lump, thus Sandy is attributed the fame of insight, while Mary remains essentially insensate. The girls' own displays of uniqueness are exhibited in the first chapter through the subtle differences in the wearing of their hats, and in their thoughts and fantasies on the matters at hand, which are often at odds with the assumptions made about them by their mentor and leader. An interconnecting method of flash-forwards builds upon the incongruities between Jean Brodie's perceptions of them and the sort of women they will become, demonstrating in the process the increase in her delusions. What is also demonstrated is the insufficiency of the grounds on which she has attributed the qualities for which they are, or will become, famous in the first place. Like all precepts based on spurious foundations, these qualities promise more in their conception than they do in their materiality.

The greatest evidence for Jean Brodie's spirited independence being more aligned to appearances than any true radicalism is displayed in her renunciation of an adulterous relationship with Gordon Lowther. Her decision to forgo that relationship is a seemingly selfless one guided by a traditional moral imperative. The same kind of submission to social constraints on behaviour is signalled in her tempering of Eunice's gymnastic exuberance on Sundays because "in many ways Miss Brodie was an Edinburgh spinster of the deepest dye" (25). This sits at odds with her rejection of the maxim of Safety First. For Safety First is a

symbol of the conventionality that is exhibited by the Miss Mackays of the world, who believe that "Culture cannot compensate for lack of hard knowledge" (69). Jean Brodie's submission to a moral imperative against adultery aligns to a Safety First, and very Calvinistic, view of sexuality not to be unexpected in spinster school-mistresses of the unprogressive kind, but incongruent with Jean Brodie's ideal of herself. That display of moral rectitude is also in direct contrast to her virtual procurement of Rose as a surrogate, and her insistence on using Sandy as a voyeuristic conduit to information on the proposed affair between Rose and Gordon. It appears that Goodness is to be selectively ignored when sacrificing Beauty to a specious Truth for the sake of Safety First.

These developments in the enactment of Miss Jean Brodie's prime parallel the development of the girls in her set. It is in her relationship with her set that the transfigurative processes can be found, for as the text forewarns "the principles governing the end of her prime would have astonished herself at the beginning of it" (45).

#### The primary transfiguration

Jean Brodie effects what Sandy Stranger defines as a transfiguration by subverting the commonplace. She disregards the subject matter of conventional teaching practices and replaces them with lectures on topics of her own interest. She leaves the confines of the classroom to conduct lessons outdoors, or on walks through the city or visits to public places. She dismantles the authoritarian

distance between teacher and pupil, by including the children in discussions on school, national and international politics, and issues of economic class, love and sexuality. She talks with them and she elicits their opinion. So she subverts the commonplace assumptions and expectations of pedagogy and completely displaces curriculum prescriptions, methodologies of control and containment, and the unified authority of expert instruction. This seems to be no bad thing, for even the envious Miss Mackay has to observe that there is a marked difference about Miss Brodie's girls, a difference which leaves them no worse off intellectually, if not a great deal better.

The most effective element in Jean Brodie's method is her condemnation of the team spirit. Her argument against it is that "phrases like 'the team spirit' are always employed to cut across individualism, love and personal loyalties" and she finds that idea contrary to women "of that dedicated nature whose virtues from time immemorial have been utterly opposed to the concept" (83). The irony of this, of course, is that Jean Brodie herself relies on a team spirit in order for the Brodie set to function, and doubly so as she also uses them as a support structure for her despotic individualism. She invokes incongruous figures as prime examples to support her argument. Whilst Florence Nightingale, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, the Queen of England and Sybil Thorndike might embody the idea of having a dedicated nature, their rejection of the team spirit is a claim that cannot be confirmed. The fact that Jean Brodie seems unaware of the contradiction in her argument signals the depth of

her delusion. The naivety of her premises, such as the Queen of England only being concerned with the King's health and antiques, an unsubstantiated assumption that her ten year olds might have made, exposes the credulity (and expediency) of her thinking.

Jean Brodie comments on the matter of subversion in an exquisitely ironic statement on the nature of impropriety, which foreground ideas of betrayal. She explains that her methods "cannot be condemned unless they can be proven to be in any part improper or subversive...As for impropriety, it could never be imputed to me except by some gross distortion on the part of a traitor. I do not think ever to be betrayed" (39). It is apt that she makes no defence against subversion, but this is another prophetic statement that will be proven ill-founded because it is the relationship between Jean Brodie and Sandy Stranger that contains the kernel of her betrayal, and structures the overturning of her processes of transfiguration.

It is established early that Sandy is able to see more clearly, the nature of the relationship between Jean Brodie and her girls, than the others. As Sandy slips between her imaginary scenario as a brave companion to Alan Breck and the reality of their walk through Edinburgh city, the intrusion of Miss Brodie's voice prompts the charitable thought of being nice to Mary Macgregor. But in looking back at the group she perceives the group as a body with Jean Brodie as its head. Her inclination to sympathise with Mary is panicked by the knowledge that in so doing she would "separate herself, and be lonely, and blameable in a more dreadful way than

Mary" (30). Sandy understands intuitively that Mary symbolises the eternal scapegoat and must bear the blame for any deficiencies in the group. Fear of displacement through association with Mary drives Sandy back into behaviour that complies with that symbolisation, and into the refuge of another more mundane imaginary scene in which she can vent her frustration.

It is also Sandy who observes the inconsistency in Miss Brodie's condemnation of the team spirit. She can see the analogy between the Brodie set and Mussolini's fascisti, for it occurs to her "that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along" (31). She sees that there is an element of jealousy in Miss Brodie's disapproval of the Girl Guides, and discerns "an inconsistency, a fault" which could be explained by supposing that "the Guides were too much a rival fascisti" (31).

Sandy acts as a subliminally dissenting figure to the excesses of Jean Brodie's megalomania, for it is she who understands the scope of Jean Brodie's fantasy and fanaticism: "She thinks she is Providence...she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (129). Sandy understands the Brodie set as "a body with Miss Brodie for the head", submitting "in unified compliance to the destiny of Miss Brodie, as if God had willed them to birth for that purpose"(30). As she observes Jean Brodie transfiguring the world over which she wields power, and

gradually comes to understand the megalomania that compels that transfiguration, Sandy subverts it and writes one of her own.

### Transfigurations transformed

Sandy's subversion is her betrayal of Jean Brodie and she effects that betrayal in two ways. The first, and most obvious, is her capitulation to Miss Mackay's continual probing for an opportunity to dismiss Jean Brodie. It is in keeping with the consistent parodying of Jean Brodie's over-determination of her own groundless prophecies that it is a gross distortion from the evidence of a traitor that is her undoing. It is equally parodic that political subversion, and not impropriety, is the claim brought against her. The second betrayal is in Sandy's sexual liaison with Gordon Lowther, because it is Rose whom Miss Brodie believes will fulfil that role. Sandy perceives that Jean Brodie "was obsessed by the need for Rose to sleep with the man she herself was in love with" and she wonders, as she remembers the passage of time, "to what extent it was Miss Brodie who had developed complications throughout the years, and to what extent it was her own conception of Miss Brodie that had changed" (128). In sleeping with Gordon Lowther Sandy refutes Jean Brodie's attribution of the famed defining characteristics of the Brodie Set. For Sandy was supposed to be "the girl with a mind, a girl with insight" and "Rose (was to have) instinct but no insight" (132). Sandy knows that she has both, and that is why she sees so clearly that "the woman isn't to be taken seriously" (132).

So it is betrayal that displaces Jean Brodie's transfiguration, and in turn it is Sandy who cannot see what this turn of events might mean for Jean Brodie. For Sandy is bored and afflicted by "the whine in (Jean Brodie's) voice (saying) – '...betrayed me, betrayed me' –... it is seven years, thought Sandy, since I betrayed this tiresome woman. What does she mean by 'betray'?" (63). Later in the narrative Sandy argues enigmatically to a plaintive enquiry from Jean Brodie, "If you did not betray us it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us. The word does not apply" (136). She qualifies that statement to Monica with "It's only possible to betray where loyalty is due" (136). Jean Brodie's claim to loyalty is obviously, in Sandy's view, misconceived, possibly because loyalty is only due to one who has not been a betrayer. The implication is that no loyalty was due to Miss Brodie, and therefore she was not betrayed. In other words, loyalty is mutual, and if that mutuality is lacking then betrayal cannot happen. Another possibility is that claims of loyalty are only applicable if there is some common aim agreed, and only then is there a possibility that one of them could betray it. A deluded need to create a cult of followers for reasons of self-enhancement was never their common goal.

#### An economy of style

The phrase "economy of method" as it is used in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie has a dual function and is as much embedded in the structure of the novel as it is used in a number of narrative

devices. Jean Brodie uses economy of method to create expedient shortcuts between fantasy and truth. Gordon Lowther's economy of method is to produce continual reproductions of Jean Brodie irrespective of whom he is painting.

An element that Robert E. Hosmer contends is a measure of Spark's economical procedure is the way that her novels "regularly manifest the conviction that the style is the person, and style is frequently verbal" (164). A good example of this encapsulation of characterisation in the verbal style is the fictitious love life created by Jenny and Sandy for Jean Brodie. It is a glorious piece of comedy, and adeptly portrays the little girls' innocence through the application of their own language to an adult situation just beyond their comprehension. This culminates in the hilarious letter they write on behalf of Miss Brodie to her supposed lover, Gordon Lowther, which they conclude by congratulating him "warmly upon (his) sexual intercourse, as well as (his) singing." (78). Their fervent reading of Scott and Stevenson is mixed in with the language of their parents, and resounds with the colloquialisms of pre-teens. The line "But alas, I must ever decline to be Mrs Lowther" carries the stiff formality and grandiloquence of their reading. Alongside this are the social euphemisms of the family tea table, expressed in "If I am in a certain condition", and the clear rebuke of the earnest child is evident in "Her knees are not stiff. She is only pretending that they are" (77). This missive delivers the children's social background, their education, their taste in literature, their passionate fantasy in

their inner world, and most importantly, their intense interest in the love life of their teacher and mentor.

Spark's method of characterisation through the presentation of verbal style places Sandy as an outsider. This status is conferred on her through an expressed admiration of her half-English vowel sounds that is undercut by an exposure of their foreign origin. Sandy understands that her placement as she chafes at her mother's use of the endearment "darling" whereas "the mothers of Edinburgh...said 'dear'" (16).

The repeated emphasis on the diminutive size of Sandy's eyes in conjunction with the increase in her ability to see clearly is a fine example of Spark's balance and economy. It is a supreme irony that Jean Brodie's self-proclaimed and exaggerated insight will prove to be wanting through the exercise of that same attribute in Sandy. The final irony, however, is that the only one of her pupils to fulfil her proclamations of fame is the much maligned Mary Macgregor, burned to death in a blind panic, yet who remained ever loyal.

So Jean Brodie's transfiguration of anything commonplace, whilst effective, is proven vulnerable to charges of her own attachment to conventional values. The processes she employs, such as disrupting the cohesion of organisational devices like curricula, the team spirit, and selection by merit, are in turn disrupted when the hypocritical expediency of her own example is exposed. Her perceptions of her own character and abilities are

proven deluded, even mad, when the over-determination and groundless assumptions behind them are clearly viewed. Thus Jean Brodie is in turn, herself, transfigured.

But what becomes of the transfigurer, Sandy Strange? Another single woman, who elects to remain so, in another more enclosed environment than the schoolroom of her childhood days. For Sandy has destabilised the figure of Jean Brodie as a power in the world, and re-written the authoritative work on the transfiguration of the commonplace from her convent cell. As she developed her famous insight, and her infamous instincts, Sandy was also transfigured. As Sister Helena of the Transfiguration she can only clutch "the bars of her grille more desperately than ever" and when asked about the main influence of her school days, answer "there was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime" (137).

The satire in this novel is ruthless in its inclusiveness of subject. It is relentless in its interrogation of all assumptions of unfounded power, and unrestrained in its attention to every instance of commonplace expectations real or imagined. It is completely catholic in its transfiguration.

This would be difficult to say about the novel discussed in the next section of this chapter, The Abbess of Crewe.

- **The Abbess of Crewe: A Modern Morality Tale**

### Introduction

The Abbess of Crewe is a novel that operates at a number of levels. At the most immediately accessible level it functions as an allegory of the Watergate scandal. There is also a satirical critique of the excesses of a modernist relativity that factionalists thought invaded the Vatican Council. There is another level to the material, however, that works beyond those obvious parallels and that is a further, cohesive, level in which the composition of the text parodies itself.

The identification of multiple levels of meaning in this text is achieved through the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyglossia, which is a key component of his theory of dialogism. This discussion sets out to determine whether The Abbess of Crewe functions as an example of travestying parody by surveying the presence of multiple languages, and whether it is, therefore, receptive to the use of Bakhtin's dialogism. Alongside that search is a parallel quest for the applicability of the role of the single woman, the character of the Abbess Alexandra, as the location for determining transfigurative processes. As the novel operates as travesty, parody and feast of misrule the commonplace is blurred in the idiosyncrasy of the environment and the process of transfiguration that has been the major focus of this thesis almost becomes the norm.

### The evidence of travesty

Bakhtin considered every novel to be a “dialogized system” made up of “images of ‘languages,’ styles and consciousnesses that are concrete and inseparable from language” (131). In that context, the language in a novel not only represents an object, but is itself an object of representation, and thus “novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself” (131). Bakhtin considered the fundamental task for composing a definitive stylistics in the novel as the specific study of the organisation, the typology, and the combination of images of languages and styles with interest in the “transfers and switchings of languages and voices; their dialogical interrelationships” (132). That vast task is not the purpose of this thesis, but Bakhtin’s accompanying observation is. He proposed that the stylistics of direct genres, by which he meant the straightforward narratives of prose or poetry, could “offer us almost no hope” (132) in that undertaking. The form he proposed most useful was the form that represented the direct word (of the direct genres). That form is parody, and more specifically the travesty of the Middle Ages that was “the direct heir to Rome, and the Saturnalian tradition” (145).

The contention that The Abbess of Crewe is a travesty of parody is supported by the parodic treatment of authority figures, dress, manners, rules and observances. The themes of dedication and service are surreal perversions of the religious life. That surrealism is made evident by the deadpan delivery whereby the oddest

assemblage of detail is presented without any visible discomposure. An incongruous subject like electronic surveillance is juxtaposed with the omnipresence of God. Oxymoronic phrases such as “that great carnal chastity” (246) that is described as filling the character Sister Winifrede’s passing days, and the description of Sister Felicity as a “lascivious puritan” (306) make sense in a farcical way provided by the parodic context.

It is that travestying parody within The Abbess of Crewe that provides access for an exercise in Bakhtinian dialogism. That exercise reveals the almost chaotic disruption of any “direct word” in the Bakhtinian sense of traditional novelistic or poetic discourse, and at the centre of that chaos is the role of the Abbess Alexandra. To enable a dialogistic exercise it is necessary to peel apart the layers within the narrative and then to pursue the parody that disrupts each layer. In Spark’s inimitable economy of style consolidation of these approaches involves the narrative, the style and the characterisation in an equally subversive and mutually inclusive manner.

#### A babel of languages

The plot of the novel centres on the election of the Abbess of Crewe and the candidates are Sister Alexandra and Sister Felicity. The intrigue that accompanies the election parodies the electoral process, the probity of the candidates, and the fitness of the electorate.

Allusion to the Watergate scandal occurs early in the text in an ironic inversion of the transatlantic attitudes that prevailed at the time. It is revealed that the newly elected Abbess Alexandra is the centre of public controversy, and allusion is made to American magazines according considerable coverage "to Britain's national scandal of the nuns" (253). The Abbess's comment is dismissive:

All this public uproar over a silver thimble. Such a scandal could never arise in the United States of America. They have a sense of proportion and they understand Human nature... a realistic race, even if they do eat asparagus the wrong way. (253)

Bakhtin declares that the author, as the creator of the novelistic whole, "cannot be found at any one of the novel's language levels: (s)he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect " (131). He goes on to say that all levels of language in the novel "are to varying degrees distant from this authorial center" (131). In the case of The Abbess of Crewe the author's view of Watergate is revealed in an interview with Sara Frankel, where Muriel Spark expresses the thought that the American scandal was completely exaggerated, "like a nun's quarrel over a thimble" (444).

With Watergate as the organisational centre of the parody, represented through the election of an Abbess, the initial dialogic, "image of language" made available is the expedient language, or spin, of political contests. In the opening scene of the novel the comic confusion between the Abbess Alexandra and Sister Winifrede centres on the electronic bugging of the trees that line the avenue where they are walking, and the language of electronic

technology permeates the text. In the citation above the language of the politics of class is also introduced in the Abbess's disparaging remark about American etiquette, or lack thereof. In the use of the setting of the Abbey of Crewe, and the introduction by the second page of the text of the nuns as Benedictines, Spark embeds the narrative firmly within the language of religion. Yet another example, within the first two pages, "What a piece of work is her convent" (246), is a variation upon Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man" (Act 2, Sc II). Aside from conferring upon Alexandra a parodic role as a creator, it admits the first of a considerable number of inter-textual literary allusions and consequently the language of canonical literature. The task of conferring degrees of distance from the authorial centre upon these multiple images of languages is the work of an entire thesis in itself. Suffice to say that the language of this novel can be seen to operate in exactly the way Bakhtin meant, as "a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language" (130). In the case of The Abbess of Crewe the interanimation is almost impenetrable without keeping the closest of watches on the central figure, the Abbess Alexandra, and the central action, the election of the Abbess of Crewe. It is apt that the novel's opening scene is placed after the election so that, as is often the case in Muriel Spark's work, the outcome of the action is immediately established and therefore becomes completely secondary to the process that produced it. It is the prime mover

behind the manipulation of the electoral process, who is the centre of attention.

#### A superior creation

The Abbess is created through descriptions that emphasise the singularity of her appearance. Her religious habit stands out “white among the black” (246), which serves to distinguish her from the rest of the community. We discern in her a fastidiousness regarding appearance, as she changes her habit twice a day, a fastidiousness that sits at odds with a vow of poverty. References to her antecedent “fourteen generations of pale and ruling ancestors of England, and ten before them of France” that are “carved also into the bones of her wonderful head” (245) create for her an aristocratic genealogy.

The language surrounding the presentation of the Abbess works to enhance her status and lineage. She is described as being “like a tower of ivory” (245-246), a phrase from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. She stands “like the masthead of an ancient ship” (290), a maritime allusion that is repeated at the close of the novel as she embarks for Rome: “She sails indeed on the fine day of her desire into waters exceptionally smooth, and stands on the upper deck, straight as a white ship’s funnel” (315). This is noted by Judy Little to also contain an allusion to Thomas Traherne’s ‘Centuries’, a seventeenth-century prose poem that describes the glowing aura which seemed to surround people and natural objects when the poet

was young: "The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown" (168). This is repeated later in the novel where she is presented as "marvelling how the wide sea billows from shore to shore like that cornfield of sublimity which never should be reaped nor was ever sown, orient and immortal wheat" (315). These interanimations of language reverberate continuously through the novel.

The role of the Abbess is supported and enhanced by the complementary figures of Sisters Walburga, Mildred, Winifrede and Gertrude. While not the point of this analysis, it is interesting to note that Sisters Walburga and Mildred can be discerned as parodic figures based on H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman who were the advisers to President Nixon jailed for conspiracy, obstruction of justice and perjury. Walburga and Mildred are both described in terms that emphasise their strength, Walburga for maintaining a virgin heart by virtue of her wealth, and Mildred for maintaining a virtuous body in resisting the sexual advances of Thomas the Jesuit. More pertinent to the purposes of the Abbess, both have endowed the Abbey with considerable dowries of valuable property and are pragmatically loyal to Alexandra. The three nuns resemble the witches in *Macbeth* as they are depicted gambolling gleefully when Alexandra's election is finally successful.

The presentation of Winifrede positions her as their inferior, and it is intriguing to suppose her parodic counterpart to be John Mitchell, the former Attorney General whose admission of White

House collusion uncovered the cover-up. Winifrede's lower status is achieved through her middle class appearance and her naïve enthusiasm for the Office. She is described "as tall as the Abbess, but never will she be a steeple or a tower, but a British matron in spite of her coif and her vows" (245). Her exclusion from the trio of Alexandra, Walburga and Mildred leaves her susceptible to becoming the scapegoat in the same manner as Mary Macgregor in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. This is evident as Winifrede is portrayed as blindly stupid, "looking stupidly around the still more stupid assembly" (276) and continually missing the hidden inferences in the Abbess's complex planning. She has self-protective instincts, however, much like Sandy Stranger's, for when the Abbess chastises her for believing the evidence of her own ears, she retracts her inappropriate statements. Her honest observations are quickly abandoned for the safety of belonging to the group. She is damned with faint praise by Alexandra who says, "I could eat you were it not for the fact that I can't bear suet pudding" (286 –287), and subsequently condemned by Muriel Spark as "the absolute clot" (308).

#### An inferior competitor

Sister Felicity, Alexandra's opponent for the position as Abbess, is depicted as an ineffectual antagonist, always fugitive or absent and, in keeping with the theme of electronics, a weak negative charge to Alexandra's power. She is called a common little

thing, "puny Felicity" (266). Her physical stature is diminished through the use of terms such as tiny, little, and plain, as in "her little fingers" (267) and "her tiny bad-tempered face" (281).

Alexandra perceives Felicity "with her insufferable charisma" (252) to have more power than she actually has, whereas Alexandra herself exerts the greater charismatic influence with an arguably more harmful intent. Alexandra marginalises Felicity through a process of demonisation. Enacted by the admonition to be sober, vigilant, still, and watchful, this variation on the Compline preface is reiterated countless times along with the constant warning against the devil working in their midst. Felicity is rendered futile through the relegation of her work as paltry and insignificant and her interpretation of the Rule as trivial. Ultimately she is abandoned by her constituency of followers amongst the community of ordinary nuns through association with a set of values that is at odds with the values of the community in which she wishes to make her place.

The weak-mindedness of Felicity's power base is revealed by the sheep-like indifference of the nuns to the allusions contained in Winifrede's reading of Ecclesiasticus, "Fools are cheated by vain hopes, buoyed up with the fancies of a dream" (274). As "the forks move to the faces and the mouths open to receive the food" the more revealing reading from Machiavelli's advice on how to trap a spy, infiltrate an enemy's ranks, and manipulate unity in your own ranks is similarly ignored by the community "into whose ears the words have come and from which they have gone" (276).

Felicity's sewing-box is spitefully used to symbolise "the precise measure of her (experience) of love and... freedom" through the clever use of the Greek letters alpha and omega that signify minuteness and insubstantiality. Alexandra's derision is scathing when she sees the sewing-box and looks at it "with that certain wonder of the aristocrat at the treasured toys of the bourgeoisie... It is in poison-bad taste" (281).

Felicity's political credulity is exposed when what she believes is the only applicable clause of the Rule is ridiculed. "Of all the clauses of the Rule (the) one that Felicity decrees to be the least outmoded, the most adapted to the urgency of our times [is] 'Not to say what is idle or causes laughter'" (267). The humourlessness of this rule, and its derisive applicability to Felicity as a cause of laughter herself, both trivialises and satirises her intellect and leadership ability.

The address by Alexandra, which seals her succession to the position of Abbess, is a consummate political statement, which equates orthodoxy with the democratic levelling of class. While Felicity works on "a little embroidery frame" which is described as a "frail exhibition" (289), Alexandra invokes a list of attributes that manipulates the community's craven regard for social position. It is a parodic manifesto that places the attributes of a lady against the attributes of a bourgeoisie, the attributes of a lady always preceding those of the bourgeoisie and enhanced with value laden terms. Alexandra's haughty dismissal of Felicity is maintained without

change, even when summoned by a "Congregational Committee of Investigation," she flouts the authority of that body by relegating the subject indifferently "into the case of Sister Felicity's little thimble and thimble-related matters" (314).

#### On matters of state

The character of Sister Gertrude plays the role of an ambassador at large with considerable parallels to President Nixon's Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. That an Abbey of the Order of St Benedict should have its own representative out in the world, with a definite penchant for avoiding the edicts of the Vatican, and brokering the conversions of heathen cannibals and a vegetarian sect, is a little bizarre. Mildred's explanation that "she went off by herself" seems insufficient as the Abbess uses her as a sounding board for resolving difficulties. The allusions to her gruff voice, Walburga's comment that "Gertrude should have been a man...with her moustache" and the Abbess adding that Gertrude is "bursting with male hormones" (256), poses the possibility that she may well be a man. In The Abbess of Crewe anything could quite easily be anything else at all. Sister Gertrude maintains her distance from the Abbey, the Abbess, and the scandal. It is fitting that the Abbess only uses those portions of Gertrude's advice as she uses Gertrude herself, as "she fits the rhetoric of the occasion" (259).

### The commonplace

The community of nuns collectively inhabits both the sets of meaning that apply to the term "commonplace" that was outlined in the Introduction. Within the Abbey they occupy the places where manual work or service are undertaken and are described as "ordinary nuns grown despicable by profession" (281). They are portrayed as a silent and long-suffering electorate who is easily manipulated. The emphasis on profession, not vocation, places them in a context of ordinary occupation not religious vocation and in total contrast to the aristocratic and superior depiction of Alexandra. It is not in the nature of the Abbess to serve, in any capacity, her community or God. They are acknowledged as only showing a trace of individualism when discontented. All of the background nuns are depicted contemptuously, exemplified by those who work in the kitchens and the laboratories who are subordinated to the greater realities of appetite, whether it be for food or power. Mildred believes "The kitchen nuns are so ugly...and such common little beasts" (271), and Alexandra is of the opinion that "the laboratory nuns are far too stupid to do anything but wire wires and screw screws" (269). The consistent image of the nuns as a mindless group is confirmed through a picture of them moving in unison to the motions of feeding: "The forks move to the faces and the mouths open to receive the food. A less edifying crowd of human life would be difficult to find...they are in fact a very poor lot, all the more since they do not think so for a moment" (275). The

repeated closures to the Scripture readings at meal times with pieces from an instruction manual on electronics is not only comical in its incongruity but can also be seen as a telling critique of mindless adherence to habitual occurrences that are not truly understood. Only in the failure to find Felicity's thimble do the nuns display, "in their discontent, a trace of individualism at long last" (282), and that individualism ironically has been brought to the fore by the deliberate manipulation of their conformity.

The Abbess's vocation, in contrast, appears to be founded upon social good form rather than upon religious imperatives. She has no scruples about invoking maxims based on the great and ancient Rule of St Benedict as and when it suits her: "The rule obtains when I say it does" (246). The Abbess appears not so much to be a Catholic as an antinomian in her disobedience and heretic lawlessness. In sealing off her order from authority, and in substituting her own fiats for those of God and his Church, she displays a megalomania that leaves Jean Brodie in the shade.

#### A festive chaos

"In The Abbess of Crewe all conventional attitudes and assumptions are turned on their heads" (94). That inversion is obtained in a manner that meets Rodney Stenning Edgecombe's claims of festive pageantry through elements that suggest a stage play or a pageant (91). That suggestion is confirmed in the Abbess's declaration that "We are the actors, the press and the

public are the chorus" (254). Further evidence of an atmosphere of the theatre is given when she elaborates upon her own textual status: "The Abbess of Crewe continues to perform her part in the drama of 'The Abbess of Crewe'" (257). Comparisons with classical drama support her specious argument that they cannot be excommunicated without the facts, which she proposes will be effectively routed by the volume of the scandal. Greek tragedy is brought to bear on her claim of immunity: "You cannot bring a charge against Agamemnon or subpoena Clytemnestra, can you?" (254). It is a supreme irony when Alexandra claims, "We are the victims of popular demonology" (254), considering her treatment of Felicity.

That the satire of the novel is of the nature and form that Bakhtin proposes for the travestying and parodic forms common to festive ceremonies is apparent in the way in which the novel mocks secular or religious authority by exaggerations and comical inversions of the significance of dress and manners.

Monastic dress is supposed to cover social difference and affirm rules of poverty but Alexandra's own garment is tailored in the manner of fashionable haute couture, which is flattering rather than neutralising. She makes judgements on style and social bearing as if the religious life is just an extension of the social one, and she makes hierarchical judgements about people that are foreign to the spirit of the rule.

The parody in the religious observance and practices of the Abbey of Crewe is described best as “distant (in) its newness from all the orthodoxies of the past... far removed in its antiquities from those of the present” (246). We learn that the electronic eavesdropping is an expedient to further the Abbess’s political and financial agenda. We also come to understand that the invocation of the Rule of St Benedict is another expedient means to reject the modernism and relativism of the Vatican Council. Declaiming English love poetry in counterpoint to the Benedictine Offices subverts the religious and spiritual intent of those Offices through the use of secular and sensual imagery.

Further subversive elements are found in The Abbess’s aspirations to construct her own myth whereby God is to be displaced by electronic surveillance. This parodies His omnipresence and omniscience and reduces the religious observations of the Abbey to the level of an egoistic materialism. Alexandra has converted vocation into destiny, and she demonstrates a conviction in her own power that is pure megalomania. Her individual fiat takes on the semblance of a cosmic one, as she insists, “I was elected the Abbess and I stay the Abbess and I move as the spirit moves me” (247). The spirit in this instance is not the spirit of the triune God, but the human spirit of Alexandra. In seeing mythology as “nothing more than history garbled, likewise history is mythology garbled” (103), Alexandra does not comprehend the vulnerability of her own myth-making to

the cynicism of the argument. The assumption is that the making of "some sort of garble" (300) entails the avoidance of the sphere of history and entry into the sphere of mythology. What constitutes entry into the sphere of mythology is the construction of scenarios. The Abbess replies to Winifrede's innocent question, "what are scenarios", with the explanation that they are "an art-form... A good scenario is a garble. A bad one is a bungle. They need not be plausible, only hypnotic, like all good art" (302). The effect of her definition of the nature of mythology, upon the validity of her own personal myth, does not seem to be apparent to her. In terms of her own argument she is therefore nothing more than history garbled.

#### The absence of God

God is noticeable in His absence from The Abbess of Crewe, especially considering the religious setting of the novel and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe contends that there is a vacuum created by the godlessness in The Abbess of Crewe, which is "the saturnalian vacuum of the feast of fools" (90). This discussion agrees with that, and his further contention that the absence created by that vacuum is filled by the presence of Alexandra, the Abbess of Crewe. It is therefore reasonable to say that The Abbess of Crewe is a travestying parody. But if the emphasis of the secular over the religious is all there is in the nature of this saturnalian frolic, how does such travesty function as a transfiguring tool? Mikhail Bakhtin contended that parodic-travestying forms, such as the saturnalian

frolic, “liberated the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net; they destroyed the homogenising power of myth over language “ (139). That object, the direct word of the traditional text and its assumption of a unified and authoritative view and voice, is liberated through the disruptive subversion of the “interanimation of languages” contained within the text. It is liberated, in the context of being separated out from, what Bakhtin calls, the homogenising power of myth over language. Behind that power is the further assumption of unity and authority in the construction of myth, and the similar relation of myth to comprehension of the power language. As such the parody of this text enters “the great and diverse world of verbal forms that ridicule the straightforward, serious word in all its generic guises” (133).

The festivity of misrule that the saturnal implies reigns supreme in The Abbess of Crewe through the manipulation of incongruent juxtapositions of language. The Abbess re-writes every aspect of convent life. In her appropriation of mythology, the text becomes a script. Elements of farce are detected in the mockery and mimicry of the religious offices of the Benedictine abbey and the readings of the Benedictine Rule interspersed with sections of instruction on electronics. The figures of Alexandra and her supporting cast of nuns all parody political factions in respect of which all factionalism is ridiculed.

Every particular about the components of religious and political practices is transfigured under this kind of assault. As are

the ideals of vocation founded on selflessness, and altruistic service. The structures of enclosed and separatist communities are demeaned. There is no sense of completion possible in this respect that would not elevate the travesty to a position that entailed becoming another “generic guise” susceptible to its own disruption. The satire is never that definite, and the novel has neither catharsis nor peripeteia. It ends relevantly with a journey toward further engagement rather than any conclusive arrival.

The likelihood in The Abbess of Crewe is that one instance of the homogenising power of myth has just been replaced by another. So what Bakhtin saw as the further possibilities of language being transformed from absolute dogma, existing in a sealed off and impermeable framework, to “a working hypothesis, for comprehending and expressing reality” (140), has not happened here. The multiplicity of transfigurations, delivered via the role of a particularly singular woman, has become symbiotic. In destabilised and plural images of languages they revolve interminably around binary and polar oppositions. Whether this is a problem that can be solved or a paradox that must be lived with is the focus of the concluding chapter.

# 4

## Conclusion

### The hypothesis revisited.

The major contention in the introduction of this thesis was that there are transfigurative processes taking place in the novels studied that subvert culturally constructed commonplaces. It was argued that the single women who occupy the roles of the central characters in the novels perform disruptive roles, which are pivotal to the disclosure of transfigurative processes, and which enable readings to be made that contain resistant and subversive interpretations to those culturally constructed commonplaces.

This concluding chapter consolidates the material that has been offered to support that argument by summarising the evidence and argument around the major contention, as it has been manifest in each of the four novels. What each of the individual novels has revealed of a transfigurative process will be discussed as well as what that allows us to say about the transfigurative idea. Alongside that discussion must be a conclusion as to what the commonplaces proved to be under the purview of that process and what effect the transfigurative process had upon them. The prime component of this concluding statement must be a review of whether the process was disclosed through the disruptive role of the single woman, and how that disclosure took place.

The transfigurative process was proposed, at the commencement of this thesis, to subvert culturally constructed notions about how women may see, and be seen, in the social environments presented in the novels. Those culturally constructed notions were gathered under the heading of the commonplace, which was taken to mean a figurative and inferior location in a dominant structure. It was assumed that the struggle for control that the key characters had to engage in to resist, or subvert, the constraints of common place environments in which they found themselves disclosed the culturally produced assumptions that lay behind those common places. In those acts of resistance or rejection, and in those disclosures of the commonplace, would be found the strategies of subversion.

#### The authentic image

In Look At Me, as the title suggests, the consuming preoccupation is with being included in a socialised milieu whilst maintaining an authentic subjectivity. Frances Hinton's desire to be admitted to the world of Alix and Nick Fraser springs from a horror of the blamelessly futile world she already inhabits, her positional common place. Her personal characteristics operate as symbolic commonplaces, and are created as weaker than those of the competent occupants of the fuller social environment. She demonstrates attributes, which invite displacement and display an almost disingenuous lack of insight. In contrast the world of the

Frasers is central to some mature and highly socialised ideal, towards which Frances can only assume the position of supplicant. Frances's own attempts at a relationship are not successful and neither is her attempt at a tenuous attachment to the social centre occupied by the Frasers. She discovers the price she must pay is the loss of her facility of detached observation that is inextricably attached to her ability as a writer, and the authenticity of her self as a subject. As her social viability diminishes her writing returns, prompted by the resumption of powerful unbidden subconscious images and a compulsion to describe them.

Frances, as diarist, first person narrator, and protagonist, shows considerable ambivalence towards her desire to be accepted. The betrayal of personal integrity necessary for inclusion, and the additional undisciplined gratification of gross appetites, undermine the desirability of such inclusion.

So to say that Frances Hinton, in Look At Me, transfigures the culturally created common places and acquires control over the representation of her subjectivity must be a qualified statement. There remains a difficulty in Frances's submission to a pre-destined future since it requires some resumption of her life in the common places she strove to escape. It can be presumed that she will continue her work in the library and even the change she makes in inhabiting her mother's room was, at first, driven by an infantile regression to parental comfort to assuage her defeat. Frances's way forward is inextricably bound to her past. There is an element of

defeat in that position, and also elements of a deterministic conformity to an occupation and a situation that no individual agency can evade. If Frances cannot become any more than what she has been somehow pre-destined to become, she is under the power of some kind of fatalistic determinism that denies her existence as a free agent and implies a subjection to some authorising force. Even if that force were not patriarchal in origin, it would still be problematic for the emergence of a fully authentic subjectivity. The suggestion that her fate, or destiny, may be governed by some essential nature in herself as a female subject argues an essential femininity that implies in turn a biological determinism. That determinism would preclude again any notion of free agency, and any possibility of escape from a patriarchally structured world. If Frances is returned to the constrained work place, home environment, and the sphere of restricted activities, then the transfiguration has done no more than reinforce the constricted paths available to be taken. So, does Frances arrive at an authenticated image by her resistance to a false one, and in so doing does she reverse the connotations of authority, authenticity and integrity, aligning them to the disciplines of a self-defined virtuous life? If not, as far as her future is concerned, little will have changed other than a sharpening of the perceptions about what is entailed in a full engagement in a life bounded by patriarchally based social requirements. The possibility offered by Brookner is situated in Frances's writing.

Frances has progressed from penning witty short anecdotes to amuse her mother to the idea of writing a satirical novel where “If they were to meet their fate at my hands, and all unknowing, would this not be a very logical development?” (184). The “they” being those people who exemplified the kind of social life she desired, and who denied her admittance, those false friends who would not “look at me”. As a writer Frances may accomplish an authentic and transfigurative subjectivity through the process that Helene Cixous exhorts women to follow when she says in The Laugh of the Medusa, “Woman must write her self... must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (245). That accomplishment must be modified, however, in terms of Cixous’s further comment that “The future must no longer be determined by the past” and that she will not, and by implication the writing woman must not “confer upon (the effects of the past) an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural” (245). Frances doesn’t stride comfortably into her new world and the possibilities of her new future. She flees from her failure to get things right, and still cannot see that the effects of her past continue to confer an irremovability the equivalent of destiny. Because she still believes that forgetting is the only way to survive, because she still believes in memory as the truth, and as the enemy, she has still not taken into consideration that some things that are known...are just untrue.

### The deconstruction of romance

Edith Hope in Hotel du Lac, on the other hand, is aware of the problem in confusing the difficulties conferred upon her future with the effects of the past, and seeks to remedy that constraint. For although Edith acquiesces in the stereotype of the spinster writer, and indeed fosters it with a façade based on Virginia Woolf, she is duplicitous in her drive to secure her own authentic identity in her own terms. She is not totally secure in that undertaking, however, but her resistance to three options of the romantic ideal offered to her sees her develop that security and transfigure herself, and to disrupt and deny the conventional expectations, which lay behind the traditional and happy ending to the popular romance ideal.

Edith's first offer of marriage is the model of conventional behaviour, the common place, which would allow her to function fully in society and meet the needs and expectations of others in a pretext of mutual affection. Her second option is the passion of her adulterous relationship, which meets the needs and expectations of her own desires. The final offer placed before her requires the subjugation of all desires to a materiality, a variant on the common place, that would meet the needs and expectations of others but would not pretend to anything other than the truth of material and social expediency. Edith's rejection of the first offer from Geoffrey and the last offer from Philip as variants on a similar theme, exposes those choices as predicated on a submission to social structures that do not meet the needs of an authentic subjectivity. Whether or

not she actively chooses to resume her affair with David is left unstated. The fact that she may illustrates a self-determination that deconstructs the traditional view of marriage as the only valid and morally acceptable avenue for a woman to have a sexual relationship with a man, and also undermines support for the subservient roles of mother or housekeeper. Defacto and extra-marital relationships deny the authority of the state in certifying sexual relationships, dismiss the power of the church in sanctifying them, and reject the grounding of social expectations around ideals of family and heterosexuality. Those practices are sited around an authority that is almost invariably male, but in this case that authority is taken captive by a text that is distinctly female and the theme subverted to the individual desire for an authentic image.

So, Edith seems to reach a conclusive and self-determined authenticity that is resistant to patriarchal expectations of heterosexual relationships and the accompanying social conventions of marriage. Edith does not go home to a domesticated future as a compliant wife. But it is implied that she may be returning to her role of mistress to a married man, a patriarchally inscribed role that renders her vulnerable to charges of betraying another woman and of being compliant to the selfish needs of a weak man. All of this appears to be because of a belief in love, carefully nurtured through romance fiction which awards a subservient position to the single woman entangled in an extramarital relationship. So whilst Edith does not capitulate to the traditional

expectations of the marriage plot, she still harbours an ideal of love that valorises male desires over female needs. Edith repatriates herself to an uncertainty to which we must, at the moment, be resigned.

### The travesty parody

In Spark's work the nature of the transfigurative process and what it might mean becomes more complex and uncertainty becomes the norm. For Spark's charismatic female figures believe they have total control over their subjectivity having already subverted the commonplace expectations of their vocations. In Spark's novels, the Marcia Blaine School for Girls and Jean Brodie's ranking with all the other war-deprived Edinburgh spinsters, the mocked and docile nuns in the Abbey of Crewe, and the ferociously satirised Sister Felicity, are representations of the commonplace understanding of vocation as service and selflessness, and they consequently become ciphers for the satire to ridicule. The control that Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra achieve is through an appropriation of the methodologies of masculine political models. Rather than belonging to a "subversive comic imagery [that] may give us portrayals of the disillusioned and the oppressed as they mock the hypocritical or the tyrannous" (1), which is a definition of subversive comic imagery proposed by Judy Little, these women *are* hypocritical and tyrannous and they are the ones that mock the disillusioned and the oppressed.

Also the travestying parody renders their control, and consequently their subjectivity, at the most as totally delusory and at the least as ineffectually contained within exclusive and private domains. In the Bakhtinian model, travestying parody realises an opportunity to subvert totalitarian and authoritative discourses. The festive occasions Bakhtin used as examples, however, always had a defined duration and on completion returned to the original public order where some transformational working hypothesis might be constructed out of the relationship between the travesty and its object of parody. That working hypothesis was construed as a means of working toward the elimination of the totalitarian discourse. The return of the original public order does not happen in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie nor does it happen in The Abbess of Crewe. Jean Brodie dies still certain of her superior insight and instincts and ignorant of the identity of her betrayer. The Abbess sails majestically to Rome convinced of her status as a work of art and her immunity from excommunication because of her argument that religion is founded upon a paradox. The creative mode of high comedy reveals the specious nature of deluded and politicised power, but there is no purchase for any hypothesis of revolutionary transformation. What appears to happen in these novels is that one type of monolithic myth making is just subsumed into the making of another.

### Expectations of a feminist perspective

To comment reliably on where this might leave the key proposals in this thesis, it is necessary first to take a step back and discuss what expectations were brought to the project in the beginning. Initially the role of the single woman was considered a central feature in the novels chosen, and could be seen as a conduit for discerning and analysing the process of transfiguration that was proposed. That approach proved useful and instructive as Brookner's characters Frances Hinton and Edith Hope were easily discerned as engaged in gaining, or retaining, control over the representation of themselves as subjects in a way that preserved their integrity. The creations of Muriel Spark, Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra, were more complex in their presentation as extremely parodic figures of deluded political power. As such they were already subversions. They revealed the dominating structures and conventional expectations being subverted, but instability, hypocrisy, and incongruent behaviours in their characterisations undermined the subversive practice as well as the patriarchal original.

The proposition that there are common places of expectation, or assumption, made about women, or that women are depicted in commonplace environments that are portrayed as inferior is discussed and proven in a huge amount of material available in the discipline of feminist literary criticism. So also is evidence that those common places are predicated on predominantly masculine modes

of thought and action that work to restrain women from fully achieving their full potential. That the same kinds of restraint is imposed on men who find themselves displaced from the common locations of masculine power is touched on in the discussion of the male characters in Look At Me, who share some aspects of Frances's displacement. For the purposes of this thesis they have not been discovered to occupy all of the common places that the women do, and are less disenfranchised by the notion of a dominating masculine power base by sheer virtue of their gender. That there is a politics of gender is a well-established fact beyond any need of this thesis to defend.

In seeking out a transfigurative process there were two implied expectations at the outset. The first was a belief that looking closely at how the single woman was portrayed would reveal structures that were related to gender-based assumptions, and would in turn reveal exactly what those assumptions were. The second expectation was that the patriarchal structures would be illuminated, by the creative modes of the authors, and then subverted through the single female figure as a catalyst for that purpose. This was argued as a plausible undertaking in the Introduction in spite of the respective writers' distance or detachment from any purposeful engagement in feminist praxis. It is possible for a feminist reading to be brought to a text as a critical analytical tool, as may any other kind of theoretical approach, without the original text having been specifically engaged with that

theory in its conception. Using a feminist viewpoint was also supported as a fruitful possibility by the comments made by Sydney Janet Kaplan in her essay on "Varieties of Feminist Criticism" in which she praises Annis Pratt's "understanding of the profound differences between what society allows women and what it makes possible for men" as Pratt "brings the weight of evidence from hundreds of novels to conclude 'that even the most conservative women authors create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become'" (47). An unspoken adjunct to this second expectation for a transfigurative discovery was that the analysis and its results would signal strategies, or would suggest possibilities, of change.

Brookner's single women achieve an authentic image that in the case of Frances Hinton seems vulnerable to the problems of a biological determinism that would rob her of the active agency of self-definition. Edith Hope has not completely escaped an attachment to a relationship that would place her in thrall to a traditional male-dominated role as "the other woman". As Spark's quixotic heroines parody and subvert the politicised power of the male dominated institutions of state and church, the attachment of these heroines to their appropriation of the modes of power subverts them in turn.

These dilemmas have components that are analogous to the issues that arise in two major streams of feminist literary criticism.

Those two streams are aptly analysed by Kristina Straub in "Women, Gender and Criticism" in which she asks three pertinent questions:

If the model for critical authority is masculine, can a female critic restyle it along lines more culturally feminine without diluting the power of the authority? On the other hand, if the female critic simply puts on the masculine model of the critic/observer without revision or retailoring, does she fully put on the authority of that role? Or does she rather become a sort of intellectual transvestite, a woman dressed up in the trappings of male power? (862)

The nature of the power of the authority is one of the key considerations in these questions. In appropriating a masculine model, even with revision or "retailoring", the function of criticism, or transfiguration, still rests on an empowerment that privileges the critic over the critiqued. So the appropriator of the masculine model may interrogate that model, and that interrogation may reveal something about the disempowered. But in the end the power of the authority remains embedded in an assumption that it is possible to remain a detached observer without having to take into account the social, and possibly patriarchal, structures that are brought to the observation, something Frances Hinton discovered cannot be done with risk to an authentic subjectivity. Another key consideration is related to the nature of culturally feminine lines. Either the prerequisites for what it is to be culturally feminine need to be so all-inclusive as to be impossible to enumerate, or there must be some privileging based around "essentiality" or "authenticity"? If that is the

case, what space can be maintained for difference, or disagreement?

Anita Brookner does not provide a neat escape for Frances from her destiny or Edith from her ideal. The notion of the 'ideal' woman who evinces the behaviour most becoming to that ideal woman is in danger of becoming another common place. Unless the prescription is so all embracing and inclusive as to be rendered meaningless, ideality places a constraint on the possibilities of difference. That constraint would inhibit multiple authenticities, and continue to marginalise some women, and their work, within yet another common, albeit feminine, place. The progress of Frances and Edith towards an authenticity of image, and some authority over how they will be seen, does expose the social structures that prevent their total realisation. Muriel Spark parodies the norm and the transfigurative activity that subverts it, reveals all, and resolves none. The appropriation of dominant methods of power only produces a reiteration of the dominance in another guise. But Spark realises this, why else such robust disbursement? Destabilising the entire text fragments unity and authority of view and voice, but leaves open the possibilities of continuous "interanimated" conversation and subsequent future discoveries. A female subject with integrity and authenticity would be an absolute prerequisite for this to take place.

In effect, there is no more required to be done to support the contention that the roles of the single women in the novels Look At

Me , Hotel du Lac , The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and The Abbess  
of Crewe disclose a transfigurative process that subverts the  
common places of patriarchal, social structures. That disclosure,  
and its outcomes, may well have provided base material for more  
definitive solutions, or at the least contributed to new sets of  
questions.

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