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**Re-Inventing Radical: Interpreting Early
Twentieth Century Canadian Feminism
by
Margo Freigang, B.Ed.**

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

**Department of Canadian Studies
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August, 2001
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of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of the thesis**

**“Re-Inventing Radical: Interpreting Early
Twentieth Century Canadian Feminism”**

submitted by Margo Freigang, B.Ed.

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts**

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Abstract

Feminist reformers in early twentieth century Canada have largely been categorized by social historians as “maternal feminist,” justifying women's public sphere activities through an essentialist argument of a higher feminine morality and duty. Maternal feminism has been codified by its complicity with the dominant regime, pursuing an extension of privilege without significantly challenging inequitable race, class and gender relations. The putative ubiquity and conservatism of the maternal feminist approach tends to obscure the degree to which this period's feminism was a rich strategic discourse utilizing both equal rights and maternal feminist rhetoric as well as the discursive strategies of irony and metaphor. Through an examination of selected Canadian reformers recorded speech and writings, this thesis will attempt to mitigate the association of early twentieth century Canadian feminism with rhetorical simplicity and patriarchal complicity.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction and Statement of the Problem	1
Chapter Two: A History of Hierarchies	34
Chapter Three: Maternal Metaphors	66
Chapter Four: Re-Inventing Radical	116
Chapter Five: Conclusion	137
Works Cited	143
Appendices	156

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Original source information for citations in The Proper Sphere: Woman's Place in Canadian Society. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Appendix B: Original source information for citations in A Great Movement Underway: Women and The Grain Growers' Guide, 1908-1928. Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1997.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

At the turn of the twentieth century, Canada was in a period of transition involving vast changes. There was a marked increase in rates of industrialization and immigration. Economic growth was accompanied by a period of rapid urbanization in which increasing poverty, crime and disease were visible markers. Prostitution and the abuse of alcohol were seen to be "laying siege to the premier social unit and site of identity for women," the sanctity of home and family.¹ The heavy foreign immigration which stoked the economic fires had a similar effect on fears that the white race was in imminent danger of degeneration. Together, these factors created a perception of social and moral decay, and of a society out of control. Women, too, were quite literally "out of control." Though the passage of the Married Women's Property Act of the 1870's entitled women to have, hold or dispose of their own property, exempting wages, a woman did not have control of her own person. Upon marriage, a woman's identity was suspended under that of her husband by the dictates of English common law. Conjugal rape was legally impossible, as a man could not be liable for an assault upon himself. Canadian women were not yet entitled to vote and it would not be until 1929 that the decision of the Privy Council would enable them to be legally considered persons. Married women also lacked the legal

¹ Jane Errington, "Pioneers and Suffragists," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada ed. Sandra Burt (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993) 75.

means to control their children. As Clara Brett Martin wrote in an article entitled Legal Status of Women in Canada, 1900:

A father may bind out his infant children, apprentice them, give them in adoption, educate them how and when he pleases, and in what religion he pleases. He is entitled to all their earnings until they reach their majority. In fact, he has control and custody of their persons until they reach that age. A mother stands legally in exactly the same position as a stranger.²

If women's legal position was restricted, their social position was no less confining. Marriage was not only a social but also an economic necessity for most women, as Jeanne L'Esperance notes in The Widening Sphere: Women in Canada: 1870-1940. There were social repercussions for women who did not marry. They were "pitied and criticized, and their attempts to make themselves a fulfilling life on their own brought them ridicule and ostracism."³ For women who did marry, there were considerable societal dictates on how to perform this idealized role of wife and mother appropriately. For example, Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem entitled "The Angel in the House" detailed everything that was perfect about Victorian womanhood. It achieved iconic status, appearing in more than twenty editions during Patmore's lifetime and in an exhibition at the London Library and was referred to in all the important periodicals of the day.⁴ In a paper read to the Women's Service League, a

² Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchison, ed., The Proper Sphere (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976) 94.

³ Jeanne L'Esperance, The Widening Sphere: Women in Canada, 1870-1940 (Ottawa: National Library of Canada) 25.

⁴ Ian Anstruther, Coventry Patmore's Angel: A Study of Coventry Patmore, His Wife Emily and the Angel in the House (London: Haggerston Press, 1992) introduction.

professional women's organization in 1931, Virginia Woolf satirized the angel as:

intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all - I need not say it - she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty - her blushes, her great grace. In those days- the last of Queen Victoria - every house had its Angel.⁵

These were not empty, romantic words. As I will discuss in detail in chapter one, it was a short step from a belief in gender essentialism - the idea that women and men had distinct natures and virtues - to a doctrine of separate spheres. Women's purportedly innate attributes of nurturance, passivity and a higher morality were viewed as naturally suited to the private sphere of home and family. According to man's assumed characteristics of rationality, dominance and strength, the public sphere of commerce and business would be his primary domain. Ironically, although women's relegation to the home had been justified as a natural consequence of their innate, feminine attributes, the masculine prescription for performing femininity was quite specific. This is aptly exemplified in Victorian poet John Ruskin's juxtaposition of the separate spheres in his 1894 essay "Of Queen's Gardens:"

⁵ Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," Collected Essays: Volume Two (London: Hogarth Press, 1966) 284.

The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial;—to him, therefore must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; *always* hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division...the woman's true place and power. But do you not see that, to fulfill this, she must—as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error? So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise not for self-development, but for self-renunciation.⁶

One of the images that emerges from an assessment of legal, artistic and social conditions in turn of the century Canada is a clear picture of a socially constructed, historically specific, and legally backed conception of woman as caregiver. Clearly, not all women were represented by this narrow ideal. The type of restrictive sanction that applied to a woman was dependent upon her race, class, age and marital status. While some women may have achieved a degree of comfort and stability through good marriages, family position or other particular circumstances, women continued to be defined through their relations with men, and were dependent upon their good will and support. Women who were not white, middle class, Anglo-Saxon and married were not adequately protected in this manner however. It was through their own observations of the disjuncture between the ideological and the practical that women participating in social reform became politicized. Reformers noted the degree to which the concept of femininity occupied a celebrated theoretical position but also a highly repressed and restricted practical role within society.

⁶ John Ruskin, Sesame and Lilies (New York: Charles E. Merrill & Co., 1981) 136.

The types of reform activities in which they participated were diverse and often reflected their individual location in terms of geography, class, race, and cultural background. Women's organizations often rallied around a central objective. For example, the Canadian Suffrage Association focused on women's enfranchisement, and the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire emphasized the dissemination of a patriotic British-Canadian view of Canada. Equally frequent, however, their initial mandate diversified into myriad other societal activities, issues and concerns. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), for example, was originally established to achieve prohibition but by the turn of the century, it had 26 departments dealing with issues as diverse as dress reform to bird conservation.⁷ This divergent trajectory of women's organizations was also true of the activism of individual women. As Kealey notes:

Not every organization formed by women started with reform in mind, but a substantial number in the course of their evolution found themselves actively drawn into some aspect of reform. Women who had previously played limited roles in ladies' auxiliaries expanded the realm of what was considered proper for women, to include in their purview the fields of temperance, child welfare, urban reform, city government, public health, child and female labour and suffrage.⁸

Due to this wide range of activism and women's often increasing feminist politicization through time, I have used the term "reformer" interchangeably with "feminist" and "feminist activist." Despite documentation

⁷ Ramsay Cook 199.

⁸ Linda Kealey, ed., A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979) 2.

that first-wave feminism exhibited both racist and classist attitudes, I imply "feminist" when using the term "reformer" to indicate women who challenged societal institutions and practices to end the subordination of women. That their individual objectives and tactics varied widely is acknowledged. Whether it is ultimately useful to classify the degree to which an individual "qualifies" as a feminist at different stages of her activism, I leave to others to decide. As Jagger writes in Feminism as Political Philosophy, the term feminist has been employed as an imprimatur to bestow upon those we agree with:

The term feminism carries a potent emotional charge. For some, it is a pejorative term; for others, it is honorific. Consequently, some people deny the title 'feminist' to those who would claim it, and some seek to bestow it on those who would reject it...I think that this practice is not only sectarian but misleads us about history. Just as an inadequate theory of justice is still a conception of justice, so I would say that an inadequate feminist theory is still a conception of feminism.⁹

Regardless of their label, reform membership was largely composed of a very homogeneous population of white, middle class, Anglo-Saxon women who had sufficient leisure time that enabled them to participate in public reform associations and activities. Studies of the movement's executive suggest that the majority of reform women were either professionals themselves, or married to professionals,¹⁰ giving them a degree of both social and economic clout and credibility to participate in public activities. Their

⁹ A.M. Jagger, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988) 5.

¹⁰ Carol Bacchi, Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists: 1877-1918 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983) 4.

reform activities, however, posed a challenge to the status quo in that they necessitated an extended degree of public sphere involvement that was not socially sanctioned for women. Women were supposed to derive their pleasure and purpose from the private sphere of home and family, an ideology that historian Barbara Welter has termed "the cult of true womanhood."¹¹ A woman's influence on society was therefore indirect, manifested through her relationships with men. Her power was highly correlated with her interpolation as maternal nurturer, feminine caregiver and moral guide. Credibility would be assessed by the degree to which women approximated this ideal. Reformers thus countered public disapprobation by justifying their public activities as an extension of their already sanctioned activities in the home.¹² Utilizing metaphors of motherhood, early Canadian feminists negotiated power and presence in the public sphere through an often conservative discursive style that built upon society's ideal of proper womanhood and motherhood. As Errington notes in Pioneers and Suffragists, due to the Women's Christian Temperance Union's appeal

to women's maternal role and its avowed purpose to strengthen the home and the family, [it] was able to galvanize support from both men and women who remained fearful of the social and political upheaval that might result when women were granted the vote.¹³

¹¹Errington 65.

¹² Lisa Gaudet, "Nation's Mothers, Empire's Daughters: The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, 1920-1930," M.A. Thesis. Carleton University, 1993. 198.

¹³ Errington 79.

Reformers appropriated the biological determinism inherent in the doctrine of separate spheres to argue that there were many important public duties which men were simply incapable *by nature* of performing. The “equal but different” argument relied heavily upon this idea of distinct, but compatible, natures:

“Not by man’s work alone may a nation be built, but by the united work of man and woman, each with their several and distinctive qualities, as halves of a whole or separate sides of a sphere; both necessary to the completeness of the work.” ¹⁴

Reformers took up many public sphere activities that closely resembled women’s domestic care-taking roles. Religious instruction, educational questions, patriotism, public health centers and child care programs were all directly related to, or paralleled, those responsibilities women had overseen in the home. Issues such as temperance or establishing homes for “fallen girls” could easily be argued as requiring the guidance of a woman’s much celebrated, innate, higher morality. It was upon these distinct gendered characteristics that reformers argued the merit of their public participation and their claims to power. This kind of essentialist feminist activism has been labeled by social historians as “maternal feminist” and, as will be documented in this thesis, has come to be viewed as the dominant form of feminism during the early twentieth century in Canada.

¹⁴ Mrs. Dr. Parker, “Woman in Nation Building,” Woman; Her Character, Culture and Calling, ed. Principal Austin (Brantford: The Book and Bible House, 1890) 459.

It is at this juncture, however, that this thesis diverges from the general consensus of the primary source historians who will be cited in it. This thesis is premised upon the belief that social historians have underestimated the tactical complexity of early Canadian feminist activism. I argue that maternal feminism was not a monolithic, wholly internalized, philosophical theory about womanhood which women adopted uncritically. Rather, I suggest that while reformers likely realized that an argument structured on essentialist ideologies of distinct natures and duties was ultimately limited, they also recognized that a conservative discourse based on outward conformity with a venerated feminine image wielded the greatest potential for immediate change. Recognizing that they had to be “given” rights from those in power, reformers constructed a reassuring discourse of care giving and maternal solicitude. The venerated societal symbols of femininity and motherhood were utilized as an ideological frontispiece and, rather than symbolizing women’s actual subscription to their mythology, justified reformers’ public speech and presence as well as providing a soothing, non-threatening suasion.

There are several important reasons for considering maternal feminist arguments as politically strategic rather than a manifestation of internalized essentialism. First, the current emphasis on maternal feminism’s apparently axiomatic conservatism has functioned to underestimate its inherently radical questioning of, and challenge to, the structural tenets of a phallogentric society. Secondly, the privileging of maternal feminism by social historians

has tended to sublimate or erase the prevalence of equal rights feminism. Equal rights, or natural justice, arguments were used frequently, both on their own and in conjunction with maternal feminist rhetoric. These two types of feminist arguments are not exclusive, incompatible, or chronologically distinct. As such, it is unnecessary and incorrect to establish a hierarchical ranking between them as has been common practice in the writing of the social historians cited in this thesis.

In light of the tendency for early twentieth century Canadian feminism to be read both narrowly and conservatively, this thesis asks some fundamental questions about interpretation. Are there other possibilities of interpretation than those previously offered using a different theoretical lens or combination of lenses? Has the importance of linguistic strategies of irony and metaphor embedded in feminist arguments been adequately recognized? How do they function as evidence against the possibility of reformers' complete subscription to dominant discourses' inequitable ideologies? What can be discerned about the diversity of an individual's perspective by examining different genres of their writing? What is the effect upon a discourse of Canadian nationalism and identity when a relatively small body of Canadian feminist reform research is remarkably united in its characterization of one particular kind of conservative activism as representative of early Canadian feminism? Finally, how, and for what purpose, do we insist on a plural reading of early twentieth century feminism,

highlighting the contradiction and ambiguity that ultimately speak to a particular, perpetuated image of a collective Canadian identity?

This thesis will attempt to investigate these questions by using an interdisciplinary approach. It will address very specific perspectives or issues, drawing from feminist poststructural theory, literature and history. It is the interrelationship of these three areas that inform the thesis' conclusions and each must be read in conjunction with the others. Because its interdisciplinarity has considerable relevance to the validity of this thesis' conclusions, I will explicate the research design at some length.

The historical component of the thesis, an examination of a particular period in Canadian history and its interpretation, is researched through studies of selected Canadian reformers and writers, regions and events. It is also a review and critique of a particular subset of social historians who have interpreted early twentieth century Canadian feminism broadly, categorizing the period's activism primarily through studies of large scale, mainstream women's movements. For the most part, I have privileged the work of social historians who are Canadian by birth or naturalization, having received their Ph.D's from and teaching at Canadian universities. That is, for its primary sources, this thesis has focused on research that attempts to interpret early twentieth century Canadian feminist activism broadly, defining a Canadian persona, a Canadian feminist methodology, a Canadian sensibility.

Certainly, a much larger body of historical writing on early Canadian feminism exists than that which has been utilized in this thesis. A quarter

century ago, scholars lamented that "the history of women remains a seriously underdeveloped area of Canadian history."¹⁵ By 1991, the editor of Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History noted that no area of Canadian history had developed faster in the past few decades and that both the number of scholars and the amount of material "pour[ed] forth in a rich and broad torrent."¹⁶ A great deal of this recent material has documented the specifics of particular fields, such as sexuality, sport, women's writing, art, employment, and regional and ethnic activities.¹⁷ These studies have become increasingly attentive to reformers' race and class locations.¹⁸ Broad analyses have been refined by investigations into the interrelationships of gender, race and class. Also relatively recently, the activism of individuals

¹⁵ Ramsay Cook 2.

¹⁶ J.L. Granatstein, foreword, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Clark Copp Pitman, 1991)

¹⁷ See Helen Spalding, "A Decade of Lesbian Organizing," Canadian Woman Studies 14.4 (1994): 24-26; Judy Fudge and Patricia McDermott, eds. Just Wages: A Feminist Assessment of Pay Equity (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Elizabeth Kalmakoff, "Naturally Divided: Women in Saskatchewan Politics, 1916-1919," Saskatchewan History 46.2 (1994): 3-18; Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, "What's Sport Got To Do With It?" Canadian Woman Studies 15.4 (1995): 6-10.; Roxana Ng, "Finding Our Voices: Reflections on Immigrant Women's Organizing," Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada, eds. Jeri Dawn Wine and Janice L. Ristock (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co., 1991) 184-197.

¹⁸ See Peter E. Paul Dembski, "An English, Protestant, Upper-Class Feminist on the Grand Tour: Elizabeth Smith Shortt in Great Britain and Europe, 1911," Journal Of Canadian Studies 28.4 (1993/1994): 72-87; Sophia Spirdakos, "'For the Joy of the Working': Laura Elizabeth McCully, First-Wave Feminist," Ontario History 84.4 (1992): 283-314; Nancy Chater, "Unexamined History Repeats Itself: Race and Class in the Canadian Reproductive Rights Movement," Fireweed 33 (1991): 44-60.

and organizations outside the white, middle class, Anglo-Saxon mainstream has been documented. Examples of this are found in studies of African Canadian women's feminism¹⁹ and also of French Canadian activists,²⁰ all of which extend our understanding of early Canadian feminist activism. Upon compilation, their regional, class or racial specificity creates a more diverse, complex picture than previous examinations of the mainstream movements' elites. While these sources form an integral part of constituting a history of Canada and were frequently referenced in this thesis to support a particular point, their field or regional specificity relegated them to a supplementary position, diverging from the predominant focus of this thesis.

Aside from studies which did not identify broad categorical tendencies, the next largest percentage of material was outside of the purview of the thesis because it researched an historical period outside the established

¹⁹ See Sylvia Hamilton, "The Women at the Well: African Baptist Women Organize," And Still We Rise, ed. Linda Carty (Toronto: Women's Press, 1993); Shirley J Yee, "Gender Ideology and Black Women as Community Builders in Ontario, 1850-70," Rethinking Canada, ed. Veronica Strong Boag and Anita Claire Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman Ltd., 1991) 135-153; Susanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in Late-Nineteenth Century Halifax Country," Acadiensis 22.2 (1993): 61-83.

²⁰ See Marta Danylewycz, "In Their Own Right: Convents, an Organized Expression of Women's Aspirations," Rethinking Canada, ed. Veronica Strong Boag (Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman Ltd., 1991) 182-200; Marie Lavigne, Yolande Pinard and Jennifer Stoddart, "The Federation Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste and the Women's Movement in Quebec," A Not Unreasonable Claim, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979) 71-87; The Clio Collective, Quebec Women: A History (Toronto: Women's Press, 1987) 241-269.

constraints of this thesis, 1890-1916: the last decade of the nineteenth century to the achievement of the first provincial franchise.

Finally, a block of historical writing was excluded from this study due to the fact that it was outside the parameters of English-Canada's reform activities. Either written in French or studying Quebecois activism, this body of material documents a cultural distinction that certainly merits the separate scholarship it has received. There were considerable differences in chronologies including the later dates for the organization of the first feminist movement, the achievement of the franchise and access to universities. As Micheline Dumont notes, "feminism in Quebec was stimulated and nurtured by the powerful nationalist movement which swept Quebec between 1963 and 1990...shap[ing] a feminism different from that in the rest of Canada."²¹

After these exclusions, the work of several social historians emerged as logical and pertinent primary sources. Addressing early twentieth century feminist activism, and writing over a period of almost fifty years, these scholars include Catherine Cleverdon, writing in the 1950's. The selected articles and books from Ramsay Cook, Deborah Gorham, Linda Kealey, Wendy Mitchison and Wayne Roberts were published during the 1970's. Carol Bacchi's work dates from 1983 and 1990. Sylvia Bashevkin, Jane Errington and Veronica Strong-Boag also contributed to this body of writing

²¹ Micheline Dumont, "The Origins of the Women's Movement in Quebec," Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States ed. Constance Black and David H. Flaherty (Montreal: Queen's University Press, 1992) 89.

produced in the last decade of the twentieth century. While Mariana Valverde also categorizes the period's feminism in a manner similar in many respects to the above noted historians, her heavy emphasis on race and class considerations makes her analysis less compatible and comparable to the broader focus of the other authors. The specificity of her work makes it valuable as a secondary rather than primary source.

Through an analysis of these primary sources, I have attempted to argue for a different, less conservative interpretation of early Canadian feminism. To achieve this, wherever possible,²² I have accessed the same archival material upon which these social historians have based their interpretive claims, including the speech and writings of prominent early twentieth century reformers who led or participated in reform organizations. For example, when their texts have included excerpts from the reformers' conferences and club meetings, records of their public speech, biographical data, or when articles written in weekly newspaper columns or their books have been referenced, I have also utilized these original manuscripts. I have also utilized excerpts assembled in two archival anthologies.²³ With these sources, I have attempted to argue for a different reading based upon the discursive shifts and understandings that have occurred within the half

²² In some cases, this was difficult. The University of Toronto no longer has Denison's unpublished manuscript "Li'l Sue" in its entirety. The novel's last section has been lost.

²³ For extended bibliographic information related to The Proper Sphere and A Great Movement Underway, see appendix A and appendix B, respectively.

century passage of time between Cleverdon's 1950 text and this early twenty first century thesis.

While reviews and critiques of first wave feminism and interpretation have been done before, what I contribute in this thesis is an analysis using poststructural theory on a reading of this period of Canadian activism. The choice of this particular theoretical framework and the extension of my study to examine the fictional writing of three reformers builds upon the historical analysis to combine with other analyses. A study of these women - Nellie McClung, Francis Beynon and Flora MacDonald Denison, gave me the opportunity to highlight other facets of their activism and beliefs than would be emphasized when viewed solely as public activists. These subjective decisions of importance and relevance will testify to my own discursive construction. These particular women have been singled out for further study because in addition to their feminist activism, each woman was also a writer, both journalist and novelist.

I have chosen to focus on the fictional writing of these reformers rather than their journalistic endeavours because of the greater distance of novel writing, than journalism, from the public speech of their activism. I am interested in how different genres of writing enable the expression of different sentiments and how they contribute to my search for multiple meanings and realities.

In Writing A Woman's Life, Carolyn Heilbrun cites a study by Jill Conway in which Conway discovered considerable differences between her subjects' autobiographies, and their letters and diaries:

Their letters and diaries are usually different, reflecting ambitions and struggles in the public sphere; in their published autobiographies, however, they portray themselves as intuitive, nurturing, passive, but never- in spite of all the contrary evidence of their accomplishments- managerial.²⁴

Heilbrun suggests that it is difficult for women to admit or claim achievement and ambition, or recognize " that accomplishment was neither luck nor the result of the efforts or generosity of others."²⁵ Indeed, after the enormous success and influence Nellie McClung experienced in her public career, she demured:

In Canada we are developing a pattern of life and I know something about one block of that pattern. I know it for I helped to make it, and I can say that now without any pretense of modesty, or danger of arrogance, for I know we who make the pattern are not important, but the pattern is.²⁶

A study of the reformers' fiction, then, may provide insight into its authors' beliefs by removing some of the self-censure evident in writing clearly coded as autobiographical. Heilbrun has stated "We are only just

²⁴ Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing A Woman's Life. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988) 24.

²⁵ Heilbrun 24.

²⁶ McClung, Times xx.

beginning, I think, to understand the way autobiography works in fiction, and fiction in autobiography." ²⁷

The banner of fiction also provided Canadian reformers some degree of critical protection for their descriptions of the state of society, or for the reforms they advocated. Insofar as fiction is the general term for invented stories²⁸ and connotes an imaginative narrative rendering, the novel's events and characters are depicted but not necessarily sanctioned by the author. This is not to underestimate the degree to which authors' choice of content was heavily circumscribed by the powerful moral censorship associated with the circulating libraries. However, in addition to the protection offered by pseudonyms, there were also narrative techniques such as the use of "reserve" or "palimpsests" through which authors could express themselves in deliberately ambiguous ways. Reserve allows an esoteric veiling of meaning that requires insider status for comprehension. A figurative palimpsest is a work with several layers and thus several meanings and possible readings. A narrative could starkly depict the commonly accepted inequities of a society or argue in support of controversial issues through sympathetic characters, encouraging audience identification. Through fiction, authors determine the degree to which they wish to make their meaning or motivation manifest. As such, novels provide an interesting contrast to the often carefully circumscribed language of duty utilized by women's organizations.

²⁷ Heilbrun 118.

²⁸ Chris Baldick, Literary Terms (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 83.

Beynon wrote only one novel, Aleta Dey. Denison wrote two: Mary Melville and Li'l Sue. The latter written work is privileged in this study because, as an unpublished manuscript, it has a greater chance of being uncontaminated by an editor's hand. Nellie McClung wrote sixteen books. This thesis investigates Purple Springs because it is a fictional re-enactment of McClung's own challenges to the Conservative government of Manitoba in the time directly preceding women's enfranchisement. Through narrative, it elaborates on many of the arguments McClung made in her feminist polemic In Times Like These.

To summarize this research design, this thesis utilizes four distinct kinds of sources to constitute the textual foundation for its premises. The first is the interpretive research of particular social historians regarding the period 1890-1916 in Canadian feminism. The second source is the archival material that documents early reformers' feminist activism. The third source is a study of three early Canadian feminists, and their fiction, who were differently located but similarly constituted, as women, through contradictory discourses. Finally, I draw from a body of theoretical writing on poststructuralism and irony as a discursive strategy which I will use to deconstruct the predominant interpretive bias towards conservatism, and also to explicate, defend and celebrate the contradiction in reformers' discourses. In this thesis, the recognition of irony plays a critical role. I am arguing that it functions as crucial evidence to differentiate a very fine, very difficult interpretive line. The strategic, subversive "attitude" of irony as a tactic of a counter-discourse is

that which differentiates between the interpretations of social historians cited in this thesis and my own. It distinguishes between a view of reformers as those who were convinced of their rights to improve society based upon their maternal-feminine qualities and reformers who were convinced of the need to manipulate conceptions of their maternal-feminine qualities to obtain their rights.

Using these texts and strategies, I intend to demonstrate that Canadian women's feminist activism in the early twentieth century was as rich in strategy as it was constructed through multiple but essential, contradictory discourses.

Admittedly, there are flaws in the methodology. This thesis has, to some degree, perpetuated the terms of the existing interpretive parameters against which it argues. In the introduction to Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1977-1918, Bacchi describes the difficulty of obtaining information on the rank and file members of various suffrage societies. She concludes that "the study of a [leadership] elite is quite compatible with the study of the ideology of a movement as the elite usually formulates and propagates that ideology and usually understand the movement better than those distant from the central organizations."²⁹ In structuring the historical component of my thesis around the research of previous social historians, I have engaged with their interest in Canadian

²⁹ Bacchi, Liberation 4.

women's organizations and their leadership elites. In so doing, this study has privileged organized feminism and the assumption that a movement and its ideology can be divorced from the sentiment and perception of its distant "members." While studies of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, The National Council of Women of Canada, or the Canadian Suffrage Association, provide essential information on the development of organized feminist activism in Canada, they by no means represent Canadian feminism itself. The excerpts from women's letters to the Grain Growers' Guide are included here to testify to the nascent feminism of the individual woman, often isolated geographically and socially, and therefore inaccessible to the interpretations of those central elites who purportedly understood the movement better.

Interpreting Interpellation

As I have suggested, the consensus of social historians over the past twenty years has posited maternal feminism as the dominant form of feminism during the early twentieth century in Canada. These historians include Carol Bacchi, Sylvia Bashevkin, Catherine Cleverdon, Ramsay Cook, Jane Errington, Deborah Gorham, Linda Kealey, Wendy Mitchison, Wayne Roberts, and Veronica Strong-Boag. Although the degree to which they do so varies considerably, each writer has continued to privilege maternal feminism over another prevalent feminism called equal rights or natural justice feminism. This tendency has resulted in an erasure, sublimation or

juxtaposition of the latter. Equal rights feminism did not rely on a particular maternal subjectivity to justify public sphere involvement and to seek social change. Instead, it insisted that all people had a full right to citizenship and to public voice and presence by virtue of being human beings. The following excerpt from a paper read in 1904 by Dr. Stowe-Gullen at the eleventh annual meeting of the National Council of Women of Canada, is a classic example of equal rights feminist discourse:

Any country, government, any law which gives power to one class over another is iniquitous and unjust; pernicious in precept and disastrous to the happiness and well-being of the whole. Equity knows no sex, no color. Invidious distinctions held and perpetuated, whether between man and woman, or one class of society over another, are not in accordance with basic principles, and the country, race and civilization, which is unmindful of the true spirit of ethics-will ultimately sink into oblivion.³⁰

The unequivocal nature of Stowe-Gullen's demands based on equal rights is a more obvious threat to the status quo than requests couched in conservative language, though both equal rights and maternal feminist demands were politically subversive.

An example of the interpretive tendency to depoliticize both equal rights and maternal feminist strategies is found in Bacchi's writing. She asserts that Canadian feminism's "relatively easy victory" was predominantly due to the moderate character of the movement.³¹ Like Errington and Mitchison, Bacchi views reformers' motivation as primarily an attempt to

³⁰ Ramsay Cook 259.

³¹ Bacchi 3.

restore control and stability in society, rather than advocating radical reforms or attempting to restructure society's inequities. While she recognizes the primary importance of the institution of the family during a period of considerable change, she does not suggest that reformers may have been politically compelled to protect it during their challenge to other social structures. In fact, she depicts suffrage as such a non-controversial issue that politicians "simply waited for the appropriate moment to introduce it."³²

Errington sublimates an equal rights discourse through her assertion that "there were only a handful who...demanded equality and the vote as a natural right".³³ By equating equal rights as the distinct feminism of a tiny minority, she precludes the possibility that it could have been imbedded in the rhetoric of maternal feminists as well. This is made apparent by her depiction of the overarching purity of maternal feminist motivations, "Middle class women...were also challenging the private/female and public/male dichotomy. Yet they did so only because they believed it was absolutely essential to infuse the public world with a domestic, female morality."³⁴ It is implied that an argument based on equal rights would not likely co-exist with those who accepted "*without reservation* the hierarchical organization of the social and economic order."³⁵ This kind of absolutism privileges maternal feminism by

³² Bacchi 3.

³³ Errington 77.

³⁴ Errington 75.

³⁵ Errington 77.

making alternatives seem implausible. Similarly, in the introduction to Catherine Cleverdon's book The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada, Ramsay Cook writes "even among suffragists, there was never a hint of suspicion that these very institutions- marriage and the family- might themselves be serious obstacles to equality." ³⁶

Bashevkin is another historian who juxtaposes the period's prevalent forms of feminist activism. She identifies "hard-core" feminists, those who challenged all aspects of discrimination against women, as outside and unlike the larger, more moderate, maternal feminist movement. She views feminist moderation as reflective of the English-Canadian culture.³⁷ This distinction based upon degrees of feminism is also found in Mitchison's writing. In her study of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Mitchison states that their sanction of suffrage and temperance were two of the most controversial reforms of the period. Despite this, she argues that support for suffrage did not contradict domestic values and that prohibitionists were social feminists, not feminists.³⁸

Kealey is another historian whose writing has categorized early twentieth century Canadian feminism. In the introduction to A Not

³⁶ Catherine Cleverdon, The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950) xii.

³⁷ Sylvia Bashevkin, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1991) 419.

³⁸ Wendy Mitchison, "The WCTU: 'For God, Home and Native Land': A Study in Nineteenth-Century Feminism," A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1979) 167.

Unreasonable Claim, Kealey raises but does not answer two interesting questions. She asks, "Was the focus on the suffrage and the rationale developed to obtain it an inevitable and conservative path? Were there alternative paths these middle-class women might have chosen?"³⁹ Although she recognizes that maternal feminism was a "response" to anti-suffrage arguments, she does not press this logic further to consider that it may have been strategically employed. Similar to Roberts, she posits that the short-lived natural rights argument did not co-exist with maternal feminism but rather disappeared under maternal feminism's weight. With its disappearance, Kealey suggests, went any element of radical criticism. Moreover, she characterizes maternal feminism as abandoning social criticism of the family and separate sexual spheres.⁴⁰

In Firing the Heather, Mary Hallett and Marilyn Davis note that contemporary theorists of first wave feminism view the dichotomy between maternal and equal rights feminism as a false one. They argue that most reformers accepted both feminist arguments. While this is, in my view, a step forward, it still maintains that the two categories were distinct. They suggest, for example, that maternal feminists "did not expect women to do anything to radically change the status quo."⁴¹

³⁹ Kealey 10.

⁴⁰ Kealey 7.

⁴¹ Mary Hallett and Marilyn Davis, Firing the Heather (Winnipeg: Fifth House Ltd., 1993) 113.

Of course, some writers have been more temperate in their assessment of reformers' motivations and activities. Strong-Boag perceives suffrage itself as potentially radical. She also identifies feminist activism as having two perspectives, both maternal and equal rights feminism. However, her characterization of the latter as an "abstract notion of justice" tends to dilute the agency and rhetorical sophistication inherent in its claim for individual rights.⁴²

The above noted writers stand at the edge of describing maternal feminism as a tactical response to a particular societal mood but stop short before doing so. They describe maternal feminist arguments as a "response", a "protection", a "right as well as a duty", without actually opening the door to a reading of early reformers as politically astute, strategic, or ideologically complex. Gorham is distinguished from other feminist historians in that she acknowledges the co-existence and compatibility of maternal and equal rights feminism. She documents feminists who utilized both arguments and does not suggest that equal rights feminism disappeared over time. She alone suggests that the maternal feminist approach "may have been a tactic of argument as much as it was a deeply felt belief."⁴³ Finally, she suggests that

⁴² Veronica Strong-Boag, "Ever a Crusader," Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1991) 275.

⁴³ Deborah Gorham, "The Canadian Suffragists," Women in the Canadian Mosaic, ed. Gwen Matheson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1976) 25.

maternal feminism “does not provide a complete and totally satisfying framework for understanding Canadian feminism.” ⁴⁴

Taken together, the scholarship of the feminist historians mentioned above has played an important role in making turn of the century Canadian women activists visible in particular ways, and also in acknowledging their role in Canadian nation building. Recent historical research has undoubtedly benefited from the foundations laid by their predecessors. An investigation of recent works can demonstrate how historiography has changed over time. A review of works published in the past decade on first wave Canadian feminism establishes what kinds of questions feminist historians are now asking and how differences in direction and substance have evolved.

One of the trends in recent historiography is towards regional studies. Margot Duley, writing about the history of the women's suffrage movement in Newfoundland states that the neglect of women's history there, as elsewhere,

“is a product of generations of historiography which regarded political, military and economic events and not culture as the real substance of history. It should be noted, however, that the suffrage movement was as much a political as it was a cultural phenomenon.”⁴⁵

Duley documents the contributions of feminist Armine Gosline, “the intellectual and organizational linchpin” of Newfoundland's suffrage

⁴⁴ Gorham, Suffragists 52.

⁴⁵ Margaret Duley, The Radius of Her Influence for Good (St. John's: Memorial University, 1993) 15.

movement and notes that her ideology drew from both maternal and equal rights traditions.⁴⁶

Faye Reineberg Holt also endeavors to record the specifics of a provincial struggle for suffrage. Holt's focus is on events in Alberta. She notes, "some provincial historians claim the vote was granted without a fight. As a result, the real struggle in the Alberta story is little known."⁴⁷ Holt's writing documents the establishment of local branches of the WCTU, the drafting of petitions for dower rights, and the formation of the United Farm Women of Alberta. All of these achievements were important regional milestones. Among others, Holt quotes two historical voices that summarized Alberta's suffrage movement. The first is Alberta historian John Blue who, in the 1920's, stated "woman suffrage was never opposed by any representative body of men in the whole province."⁴⁸ Nellie McClung is also recorded as in agreement. Keeping her satiric wit in mind, McClung claimed that

without any noise of fuss or trouble, women's suffrage is arriving! And it is going to happen just as naturally and quietly as Monday becomes Tuesday...and we didn't have to fight for it at the last, and we didn't have to knock anybody down and take it away from them! It's going to be handed to us, with kindest regards and best wishes, hoping that we are enjoying the same."⁴⁹

Michael Cramer's regional emphasis is upon the founding of several of

⁴⁶ Duley 22.

⁴⁷ Faye Reineberg Holt, "Women's Suffrage in Alberta," Alberta History 39 (1991): 25-31.

⁴⁸ Holt 31.

⁴⁹ Holt 30.

the first women's organizations in Victoria, British Columbia, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) and the first suffrage campaigns. In contrast with the conclusions of this thesis, Cramer states that

[f]or a long time, the rhetoric of supporters of woman's suffrage had emphasized the purifying of government by the woman's vote and it is evident that many women accepted this view of themselves, making it their reason for future involvement in politics.⁵⁰

Not all recent studies have focused on regional events however.

Barbara Roberts' paper entitled "Ladies, Women and the State: Managing Female Immigration, 1880-1920" examines the relationships between gender, race and class as well as maternal nationalism within the context of Canadian nation-building. Specifically, Roberts' work looks at how women of the ruling class organized single, foreign, working class women into domestic service occupations.

Susan Jackel details a highly recognizable portion of the Canadian Women's Press Club, a group of Canadian suffragist- journalists who were members between 1906 and the first war's end. These women included Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Violet McNaughton, Cora Hind, Francis Beynon and Lillian Beynon Thomas, among others. Jackel suggests that these women, "characteristically at the nerve center" of this network of clubs, societies, leagues and associations were

⁵⁰ Michael H. Cramer, "Public and Political: Documents of the Woman's Suffrage Campaign in British Columbia, 1871-1917: The View from Victoria," In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in BC, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria: Camosin College, 1980) 96.

highly cognizant of their role in and their potential for change.⁵¹ Many of these women left textual records in the form of novels, memoirs and journals documenting their activities and perspectives.

The historical researching of biographies and memoirs has been another trend continuing to gain momentum in the past ten years, including those of activists cited in this thesis.⁵²

In terms of issues and campaigns, historical research in the past ten years has continued to look at the large, mainstream organizations such as the WCTU⁵³, the NCWC⁵⁴ and the YWCA. A comparison of articles from

⁵¹ Susan Jackel, "First Days, fighting Days: Prairie Presswomen and Suffrage Activism, 1906-1916," First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History, ed. Mary Kinnear (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1987) 70.

⁵² On McClung, see Hallett and Davis, 1993 and 1990; Randi Warne, Literature as Pulpit: The Christian Social Activism of Nellie L. McClung (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993). Regarding Beynon, see Sheila McManus, "...these women realized the power of union...": Mutuality as Empowerment in the United Farm Women of Alberta," blurred Genres: A Journal of Writing By Students in the University of Victoria Department of History, 2 (1994) : 114-128.

⁵³ See Phyllis D. Airhart, " 'Sweeter Manners, Purer Laws': Women as Temperance Reformers in Late-Victorian Canada," Touchstone 9.3 (1990): 21-31; Mimi Ajzenstadt, "Cycles of Control: Alcohol Regulation and the Construction of Gender Roles, British Columbia 1870-1925," International Journal of Canadian Studies 11 (1995): 101-120; Sharon Anne Cook, " 'Earnest Christian Women, Bent on Saving Our Canadian Youth': The Ontario Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Scientific Temperance Instruction, 1881-1930," Ontario History 86.3 (1994): 249-267; and Tanya Gogan, "The WCTU's Contribution to the Woman's Suffrage Movement in Nova Scotia," Dalhousie Undergraduate History Society Academic Journal 3 (1992) : 55-64.

⁵⁴ See N. Griffiths, The Splendid Vision: Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada: 1893-1993, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993).

three researchers regarding the latter organization demonstrates the occupation of an interesting middle ground between the premises of this thesis and those of the historians cited as primary sources.

Carolyn Strange, Diana Pedersen and Sharon Anne Cook have each written about moral regulation in the early twentieth century, though their perspectives differ. Strange's book, entitled Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867-1939 details several regulatory campaigns focusing on prostitution, temperance, homosexuality, and venereal disease. Among the groups who lobbied the government were the Young Women's Christian Association, National Council of Women of Canada, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Strange asserts that the ultimate goal of these social purity movements was "to mould and maintain individual self-regulating subjects."⁵⁵

She documents a strategic awareness on the part of social purity advocates in their attempts to popularize their platform against prostitution. Lobbyists "encouraged Canadians to drop the conventional image of the hard-bitten, drink-sodden prostitute in favour of the virginal girl, forced to service men of all classes and races against their will."⁵⁶ She does not suggest that women's participation in these and other reform activities was a means to negotiate public presence and power.

⁵⁵ Carolyn Strange, Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867-1939. (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1997) 80.

⁵⁶ Strange 65.

Pedersen's study of the moral reform efforts of the YWCA is, in my view, a nuanced approach in comparison with Strange. The YWCA viewed young women as future mothers, the foundation of society and as "God's own cornerstones."⁵⁷ As such, it attempted to provide "respectable" accommodation, entertainment and maternal supervision in what they viewed to be a wholesome, Christian environment. Pedersen views the YWCA's objectives as both strategic and separatist and suggests that the success of its objectives depended upon strategic negotiation and representation. She notes that without capital and political power, the organization had to align itself with local business owners to achieve much needed funding. In so doing, it had to downplay its critique of "uncontrolled and irresponsible male sexuality and... the masculine culture of Canadian cities that failed to provide women with needed services and recreational opportunities."⁵⁸ It also sublimated the organization's primary purpose, the saving of souls and as Pedersen notes "such rhetoric never appeared in campaign literature."⁵⁹ Pedersen does not posit that the YWCA activists were simply protecting the status quo.

In her investigations of the WCTU, Sharon Anne Cook mediates the conception of prohibitionists as over-zealous puritans, explaining that

⁵⁷ Diana Pedersen, " 'Keeping Our Good Girls Good:' The YWCA and the 'Girl Problem,' 1870-1930," Canadian Woman's Studies 7.4 (1986) 22.

⁵⁸ Pedersen, Good Girls 22.

⁵⁹ Diana Pedersen, " 'Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow': Businessmen, Boosters, and the YWCA, 1890-1930," Urban History Review 15.3 (1987) :235.

The tradition of feminine piety imbued women, not with an unquestioning acceptance of clerical and male authority, but with a sense of moral superiority and righteousness that bred discontent with a society apparently rejecting the primacy of the family and the sanctity of the home. In the case of the Ontario WCTU, this evangelical piety also provided self-identity, collective consciousness, and organizational strategies for women themselves.⁶⁰

Veronica Strong-Boag has noted, however, that the rescue efforts of both the WCTU and the NCWC were problematic. While they saved women and children from sexual predators, the shelters were stigmatized, providing "control as well as assistance."⁶¹

Studies such as these, which note the tactical acumen of reform organizations, their critique of male privilege and the sexual double standard, do much to mitigate our understanding of early twentieth reform activities as purely coercive, co-opted, regulatory campaigns. As such, they offer a more complex reading of the period's feminism. These and other studies that have a racial, class or regional perspective in addition to their examination of gender relations provide an important contribution to an evolving Canadian historiography.

⁶⁰ Sharon Anne Cook, "Through Sunshine and Shadow": The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930 (Kingston: Queen's University Press, 1995) 12.

⁶¹ Veronica Strong-Boag, "Daughters of the True North, 1900-1995," The Beaver (1995) 29-40.

CHAPTER TWO: A HISTORY OF HIERARCHIES

The Constitutive Power of Discourse

An examination of the recorded speech and textual materials of early feminists is necessarily an investigation of discourse. Discourse is not restricted to language but also includes shared conceptual understandings and methods of interpretation. It uncovers the ways a society thinks, speaks and writes and as such, it is historically specific. When the concept of discourse is written about in the singular, as in a dominant discourse, it is implicit that it is constituted by myriad smaller discourses. Capitalism, Christianity, patriarchy and heterosexuality are but a few discourses which often work together to constitute the dominant discourse of western cultures. Liberal humanism is another discourse that heavily influences the way western culture tends to think about itself in terms of language and subjectivity. Liberal humanism conceptualizes the essential subjectivity of each individual as "unique, fixed and coherent [and that] which makes her what she *is*." ⁶² The subject is autonomous, free-willed and able to express her own thoughts and experiences through language. Language, itself, is assumed to be transparent, merely a mode of communication using arbitrary signifiers to express concepts without bias. Its transparency is a result of its objectivity and neutrality.

⁶² Chris Weedon, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (Cambridge:Blackwell, 1987) 32.

In light of these basic premises, liberal humanist theory is both problematic and inadequate as a theoretical framework with which to deconstruct the historical discourse of early twentieth century feminists. Insofar as I wish to demonstrate that their particular rhetoric was strategic, that it co-opted and subverted the discursive icons and practices of a privileged dominant discourse, this thesis requires a theoretical framework that recognizes language as a political site of struggle over meaning. It necessitates a theory that posits language as having a cultural and historical specificity which constitutes, not reflects, social reality and subjectivities. Post-structuralism is a theory and a deconstructive practice which meets these criteria.

Post-structuralism examines the relationships of power between language, subjectivity and social organizations in order to identify strategies for resistance and change. As Weedon notes, contemporary poststructuralism is informed by many other perspectives, including the structural linguistics of Saussure, the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan, as well as Derrida and Foucault's work regarding the theory of deconstruction.⁶³ One of its basic tenets, however, is that discourse is a structuring principle of society within which individuals, or subjects, are constituted. Within discourse, a society's dominant ideologies and institutional practices are inscribed and as such, it is a powerful cultural medium and signifier, shaping our understanding of events. Language, therefore, is not seen to be neutral. It

⁶³ Weedon 12.

does not merely express thought, but constructs it. The most powerful of a culture's discourses are those that the subject accepts as obvious and natural, lending to their hegemonic power. Consequently, discourse relies heavily upon the concept of common sense to create the illusion of coherence and disguise both its self-interest and its agency.

Common sense is the ubiquitous perception that particular beliefs and practices do not require empirical substantiation, but can be taken for granted.⁶⁴ It exists relatively unquestioned, appearing timeless, inevitable, and as such, resists the possibility of change or challenge. Within this setting, where meaning is discursively constructed, an individual's subjectivity is also constituted. The term "subjectivity" is used to refer to the "conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world."⁶⁵ Borrowing a term from post-Saussurean theorist Louis Althusser, the subject is "interpellated" within the confines and interests of the dominant discourse.⁶⁶ That is, she internalizes an externally constructed identity and believes this representation to be real and self-generated, "the source rather than the effect of language."⁶⁷ This assumption is enabled by the humanist belief in an

⁶⁴ Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice ((London: Methuen & Co., 1980) 3.

⁶⁵ Weedon 32.

⁶⁶ Weedon 30.

⁶⁷ Weedon 30.

essence that defines the autonomous subject as unique, free-willed and possessing self-agency. Post-structuralism, however, contests the notion of the individual as a coherent, unitary entity. Rather, it proposes a subjectivity which is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak."⁶⁸ Contradiction results from the fact that the subject is constituted by many competing, often conflicting discourses. It is within this disjuncture, the inherent instability of the constitutive discourses, that the transformative power of poststructuralism resides. Although the subject is constituted within language and even her resistance against interpellation occurs within a discursively constructed subject position, she nonetheless is capable of reflection and choice. Her recognition of the contradiction between discourses enables new, plural meanings, continually open to negotiation and reinterpretation.

Poststructuralism's potential is, "in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it."⁶⁹ Specifically, the utilization of post-structuralist tenets has two important repercussions for this thesis. First, without having the theoretical label of post-structuralism with which to organize their beliefs and practices, early Canadian feminists recognized and manipulated the inherent contradictions within the discursive construction of their feminine/maternal subjectivities. From the apparent discrepancies

⁶⁸ Weedon 35.

⁶⁹ Belsey 40.

between the naturalized rhetoric of essentialism and women's lived experiences, they formulated opportunities for resistance and change, subverting the dominant discourse by conservatively pushing its hegemonic boundaries.

Secondly, poststructural theory provides a useful framework to theorize possible reasons for the overwhelmingly conservative readings by Canadian social historians of early Canadian feminism. Poststructuralism's emphasis on the plurality of meanings and its conception of subjectivity as contradictory and inherently unstable, suggests that early Canadian feminism can, and perhaps must, be read in many different ways. Contradiction should not be seen as undermining interpretation, but rather an essential factor occurring when people are constituted through multiple, ideologically laden, often competing discourses. In this light, the existence of equal rights arguments would not appear incompatible with maternal feminist rhetoric, but a natural and inevitable product of a discourse that is not wholly consistent with itself.

Finally, poststructuralism's emphasis on the subject's social, cultural and historical location troubles the interpreter's implicit claim to an objective reading. Socio-historical and literary criticism must always be conscious of the way in which it is imbedded in its own cultural milieu, predisposing or privileging a particular understanding of events depending upon the discursive context or framework through which it is read. A discourse of Canadian nationalism, for example, that assumes a long-standing history of

tolerance, relative pacifism, and courtesy would influence the interpretive stance from which Canadian feminist activism might be understood.

Similarly, one's position in history's chronology also affects subsequent interpretation. My own location as an early twenty-first century researcher during feminism's "third wave" affects my understanding of both first wave feminist activism and its primarily second wave interpretation. To avoid creating a narrative that reproduces the very binaries which feminism seeks to deconstruct, and to resist reinforcing the phallogentric constructs within which discourse is confined, interpretation must attempt de Lauretis' "view from elsewhere."⁷⁰ This liminal space searches for contradiction in the "margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus."⁷¹

With such a formidable goal in mind, I turn now to an analysis of various discourses. I begin by situating early maternal and equal rights feminist rhetoric within a liberal discourse of binaries and essentialism. Consideration will then be given to how western discourse was influenced by masculinist philosophical thought, conceptualizing personal attributes and societal relations in terms of hierarchical oppositions that privileged men and subordinated women. This analysis will also investigate the writing of two early feminist reformers, determining their rhetorical adaptability and scope within a discourse that structured the parameters of "appropriate" feminine

⁷⁰ Theresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 25.

behaviour and speech. Distinct rhetorical similarities exist between feminists from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and those under study in this thesis. Feminists from both periods utilized maternal feminist and equal rights arguments, adapted their approach and rhetoric depending on their audience and the genre of their medium. Though distinct in time and place, they reiterated considerably similar concerns about their oppression under patriarchy.

With this precedent established in chapter two, chapter three will document specific examples of how feminist rhetoric was sometimes cloaked in maternalism to justify its public presence and agency, and how, at other times, it was argued on its own equal rights merits. The chapter will also investigate how maternal metaphors such as “public housekeeping” and “mothering” were used strategically to accentuate women’s duty and to veil a discourse of rights. It will examine a variety of textual genres to document a pattern of appropriation and subversion, and of both confrontation and compliance. Finally, it will demonstrate that many reformers’ feminist rhetoric was marked by a complexity that suggests a clear comprehension of societal hegemony and backlash, including the use of satire and irony to dismantle patriarchal logic and privilege. These tactics should suggest a significant degree of irreverence for the prevailing notion of male superiority and thus function as evidence against reformers’ putative essentialist interpellation.

⁷¹ De Lauretis 25.

In light of the evidence garnered to support a view of early Canadian feminism as strategic, chapter four will revisit social historians' conservative interpretations in an attempt to theorize possible reasons why the conservative label of maternal feminism has been applied to a period of such diversity.

I have argued that dominant ideologies are inscribed in discourse and as such, constitute the relations of power that exist in a particular society. Dominant Western discourses are solipsistic, patriarchal ones which have a long history of controlling the production and dissemination of "knowledge." The power to define Truth has long been instrumental in the ideological construction and containment of women. Appreciating the longevity and phallocentrism of this dominant discourse is essential to comprehending its hegemonic power. Its historical precedent has functioned to reify the status and credibility of its premises, suggesting a social determinism on myriad levels: biology, theology, culture, economics and convention, all of which are political. Women's feminist activism emerged out of these contexts and was therefore informed by an ongoing masculinist interpellation that is recorded as occurring as far back as 500 B.C.

At that time, the Pythagorians developed an exhaustive list of binaries, mutually exclusive pairs of philosophical oppositions. They included, among others, light/dark, good/bad, male/female. The first term of each pair was

positively correlated with masculinity, and the second, a negative term attributed to femininity that was disorderly and threatening.⁷²

This original table of ten dichotomous orderings has been expanded upon to such a degree that discourse is now conceptualized in terms of oppositional, hierarchical pairings. As Roberta Hamilton notes in a review on discourse analysis, the binary categories of language define the world in terms of oppositions, making distinctions and ignoring all the points on the continuum that are in between.⁷³

Philosophy's very foundation, an emphasis on reason, was itself dependent upon binaries for definition. The highly praised "objectivity" of reason required an exclusion of the body: its passion, emotion, desire and materiality. These were not neutral terms. They were coded as feminine. The term "woman" became:

nature in relation to man's culture, body as opposed to mind, lack in opposition to presence, irrational and unknowable in relation to reason...always reduced to a position subordinate to and dependent upon the male., positioning the female only in relation to him.⁷⁴

Women's association with a denigrated corporeality had important repercussions during the Enlightenment: a time of great change and possibility. During this period, the divine right of kings was challenged in favour of an emphasis on individual rights. Individuals, in theory, no longer

⁷² Elizabeth Grosz, "Philosophy," Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct, (New York: Routledge, 1990) 153.

⁷³ Roberta Hamilton, "Feminist Theories," Left History 1 (1993): 18.

⁷⁴ Grosz 152.

required truth to be mediated by the church or the aristocracy, but had the innate potential to deduce it themselves. Descartes had suggested that every person was capable of rational analysis and independent thought. This concept had enormous transformational potential for women as it theoretically justified a challenge to all authority by any person, regardless of gender or level of education. But this seemingly liberal and inclusive challenge to traditional authority was not as emancipating as was initially assumed. The use of the term “man” in the rhetoric of individual rights was synonymous with “male.” Building upon the binaries established in antiquity and reinforced by Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, writers such as Voltaire, Locke, Hume and Rousseau predicated their gendered philosophies on the idea that a woman’s role was as wife and mother in the private sphere. Through a teleological discourse, her emotional, passionate dependent nature innately excluded her from a ranking on par with man’s inherent state of independent rationality. In an era that adulated logic, contradiction reigned. For example, John Locke (1632-1704), who had argued for free contractual relations between men, did not include women as participants in civil society. Due to biological imperatives, “woman’s place was in the home, subordinate to man’s better judgment,”⁷⁵ a view also shared by David Hume (1711-1776). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) wrote extensively on women’s natural inferiority and their proper role. As with his contemporaries, Rousseau’s logic was flexible in accommodating the egalitarian principles of his social policy with its highly

⁷⁵ Andrea Nye, Feminist Theory and the Philosophy of Man (London: Croom Held, 1988) 6.

inequitable, gendered results. Rousseauian social contract theory claimed that a government was only legitimate if it respected each individual's right to participate in public decision-making.⁷⁶ In practice, however, women were seen to be biologically unsuited for participation in the public sphere. As wives and mothers, reproduction was their primary concern.

Thus, in a handy bit of circular reasoning, these early liberal writers confined women to the private sphere because of their innate biological inferiority, and then prescribed a regime of education which would ensure that they were suited for little else. These inequitable dictates on education echoed from the past and foreshadowed the future. Without reference to the substantive inequities that had produced them, gendered differences in ability and inclination became the justification for separate spheres. An investigation of the aptitudinal differences among boys held much less ideological allure. This belief in gender essentialism, that women and men had distinct natures and virtues would become inextricably linked to a doctrine of separate spheres which would further form the basis upon which to structure women's subordinate status.

Despite the power and hegemony of essentialist discourses, the contradictions between society's ideological construction of femininity and the diversity of women's lived experiences were profound. The ideal was race and class specific and as such, excluded a significant proportion of women. Many women needed public sphere, waged labour for survival and/or were

⁷⁶ Nye 11.

not married. As Gorham notes "the women who were the worst off were mothers who had to be out in a labour force that did not recognize their right to be there and that therefore provided them with little or no support or protection."⁷⁷ They were further chastised by evolutionary theories positing that single women who pursued careers squandered their reproductive energy:

The bachelor woman...has taken up and utilized in her own life all that was meant for her descendants, and has so overdrawn her account with heredity that, like every perfectly and completely developed individual, she is also completely sterile. This is the very apotheosis of selfishness from the standpoint of every biological ethics.⁷⁸

But just as early twentieth century feminists would adapt their rhetoric to defend and protect themselves from anti-feminist discourses, feminists living in and after the era of Rousseau, Locke and Hume also reconfigured their own discourse of femininity, motherhood and citizenship. A brief comparative study of two feminist polemicists from the seventeenth and eighteenth century can contribute to an understanding of early Canadian activism in several important ways. The first is that it locates Canadian reformers within a long tradition of feminist activism, resisting the protectionist tendency of the dominant discourse to isolate and erase all that is not

⁷⁷ Deborah Gorham, "Flora MacDonald Denison: Canadian Feminist," A Not Unreasonable Claim, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 65.

⁷⁸ Mariana Valverde and Franca Iacovetta, Gender Conflicts (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 9.

consistent with itself. This attempted erasure serves to combat the forging of a collective feminist consciousness, the "many years of thinking in common" of which Virginia Woolf spoke,⁷⁹ for despite their very different social, economic and political locations, women's voices have certainly reiterated some common concerns under patriarchy.

A comparative study from different time periods also serves to document the remarkable similarity of Canadian reformers' rhetorical styles with their antecedents, demonstrating that women throughout time have been similarly constituted by, and struggled with, competing discourses.

The two feminists whom I will examine are Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft. Though Canadian reformers were certainly influenced by American activists, I have forgone an American comparison in favour of a British one to avoid the critique that Canadians perpetually define themselves against their southern neighbours. In addition, the choice of Wollstonecraft and Astell are an acknowledgment of English-Canada's early British heritage and the degree to which early Canadian feminism was influenced by British feminists. Despite the fact that Canadian feminist activism was not characterized by violent tactics on the part of reformers, there was certainly a strong precedent for a change of tactic from moderation to more extreme methods. Both McClung and Denison had publicly expressed interest in the activity of British suffragettes who had begun their activism, like Canadian

⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Harcourt Brace, 1929) 65.

reformers, by conforming to conventional notions of respectable womanhood. The suffragettes' move to active militancy including hunger strikes and vandalism "smashed the image of woman as a passive, dependent creature as effectively as they smashed the plate-glass windows of Regent Street."⁸⁰ Denison saw British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst as "the liberator of her sex"⁸¹ and wrote sympathetically about British suffragettes in her column in *The World*.⁸² It is impossible to declare with certainty that an environment conducive to following the militant British example may not have developed in Canada over time. In addition to the visits by their feminist leaders, Canada was strongly influenced by beliefs, institutions and traditions from Britain and for this reason, a study of early British feminists creates an interesting parallel.

Astell has been described as the "first systematic feminist theoretician in the west" and also as "the first English feminist."⁸³ Similar to early twentieth century Canadian activists, her feminist rhetoric is a blend of maternal and equal rights feminism. It is also heavily ironic, the importance of which will be discussed in chapter two.

Wollstonecraft is highlighted because of the considerable contradiction between the beliefs she espoused and her lived experiences. As a writer of

⁸⁰ Valerie Bryson, Feminist Political Theory (London: MacMillan, 1992) 93.

⁸¹ Gorham, Denison 58.

⁸² Alison Prentice, Canadian Women: A History (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996) 217.

fiction, she provides an interesting parallel to the Canadian novelists under study in this thesis. Both women are important to document because their feminist voices were the early enunciation of core liberal feminist tenets that would form an integral part of feminist thought from that time forward.

To begin, Astell (1666-1731), was an early feminist who critiqued women's enforced subordination. Her writings were heavily ironic, irreverent towards men, and appropriated the male preserve of logic to demonstrate the fallacious arguments that underwrote male supremacy. Her arguments were an amalgamation of both equal rights and biological determinism, and ranged across a wide spectrum from radical to ultra conservative. Anticipating the rhetoric of many feminist theorists who would come after, Astell wrote from a variety of positions and demeanors. As will be demonstrated, at times she made straightforward demands on the basis of natural justice. She ridiculed the logic that emanated so clearly from a position of masculine self-interest. But, she also wrote reassuringly about women's conservative aims and modest requests that reinforced, rather than disturbed, stereotypical conceptions of women's nature. As such, Astell is invaluable to the purposes of this thesis to demonstrate that political acumen was consonant with early feminism, that rhetorical malleability and tactical strength were inherent to her polemic, and that both radical and conservative positions were reconciled within one writer's perspectives. To demonstrate this, I will turn now to briefly examine the two best known of her feminist tracts, A Serious Proposal to the

⁸³ Bryson 12.

Ladies...by a Lover of Her Sex (1694), and Some Reflections Upon Marriage (1700).

In A Serious Proposal, Astell suggested no less than the establishment of separate female communities, a woman's retreat from the world and from being "confined by what they justly loathe."⁸⁴ Men are explicitly represented as "the enemy" who, "under pretense of loving and admiring you, really serve their own base ends."⁸⁵ While professing the primary objective of these communities was for religion, Astell then writes in detail about the fortunate by-products which are women's higher education, knowledge and their pursuit of truth. She anticipated that men "will resent it to have their enclosure broken down, and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly monopolized."⁸⁶ While this attempt to create a separate space for women as a liberatory alternative is characteristic of a radical feminist tradition, Astell was also capable of promoting her ideas in considerably more conservative style. In this same essay, she assuages her opponents with the following:

We pretend not that Women shou'd teach in the Church, or usurp Authority where it is allow'd them; permit us only to understand our own duty, and not be forc'd to take it upon trust from others; to be at

⁸⁴ Moira Ferguson, First Feminists (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) 185.

⁸⁵ Ferguson, Feminists 186.

⁸⁶ Ferguson, Feminists 190.

least so far learned, as to be able to form in our minds a true idea of Christianity.⁸⁷

Though Astell's writing was often permeated with irony, her essay, Some Reflections Upon Marriage, was a direct, explicit challenge to men's occupation and defense of their position of privilege. She expends little effort in mitigating the contentious nature of her claims. Extrapolating the logic that had successfully been used to emancipate men from the absolute authority of kings and the church, she argued:

If Arbitrary Power is evil in itself, and an improper Method of Governing Rational and Free Agents, it ought not to be practis'd anywhere... If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?... And why is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded, and held so necessary and so sacred in another.⁸⁸

She responded to those wielding scripture to explain women's subordination by saying that the Bible foretold what would be, not what ought to be. Further, she suggested that since God has imbued women with intellect, it was only men's intervention that perverted this design. "Whatever other great and wise Reasons Men may have for despising Women, and keeping them in Ignorance and Slavery, it can't be from their having learnt to do so in Holy Scripture."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ferguson, Feminists 198.

⁸⁸ Ferguson, Feminists 193.

⁸⁹ Ferguson, Feminists 194.

Although Astell critiqued her female contemporaries for their unfortunate focus on beauty and their willingness to accept a subordinate position in relation to men, she insisted that the status quo was a result of socialization and circumstance rather than ability. Echoing Descartes, she argued that women were equally capable of reason but had yet to be adequately instructed in its use. Education was the key to rectifying this inequity and was the natural right of all people. Her objective for women's educational achievements was purportedly to produce strong and happy marriages, and effective, thinking mothers.⁹⁰ In A Serious Proposal, however, Astell stated that religion was the "adequate business" of women's lives, taking in "all we have to do, nothing being a fit employment for a rational Creature, which has not either a direct or remote tendency to this great and only end."⁹¹ Despite her own aversion for marriage and her suggestion that other women similarly avoid the institution, she protected man's position as head of the household. This, in light of her obvious disdain for men's abilities in and of themselves, is more likely due to the fact that she was a "staunch loyalist," and logic required her to accept the parallel icons of domestic authority, if not ascribing them with superior attributes.⁹²

There are contradictions in Astell's argument. She advises women to educate themselves to perform their role in marriage and motherhood better,

⁹⁰ Joan Kinnaird 37, "Mary Astell: Inspired by Ideas (1668-1731)," Feminist Theories, ed. Dale Spender (New York: Pantheon, 1983) 30.

⁹¹ Ferguson, Feminists 186.

while clearly identifying marriage as an oppressive institution for women. But, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter two, these contradictions represent the real ambiguities of women's lives, and the incongruity of the "logic" placed before them by patriarchal discourses, which structured their subordination. A further investigation into what appears to be contradiction is aided by moving forward a century to another feminist polemicist, Mary Wollstonecraft, to document a pattern of remarkable similarity in theme and presentational style.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), like Astell, heavily privileged the concept of reason, emphasizing its presence in each individual. From this belief in equal capacity, equal entitlement logically followed. Wollstonecraft argued that equality and liberty were the natural right of every person. She saw education as key to changing women's demeaned state, attributing existing differences to opportunity rather than nature. Astell had situated the responsibility for child-care upon women, and cited men's incompetence as justification, noting that "Precept contradicted by example seldom prove effective."⁹² Wollstonecraft stated that the care of children in their infancy was a grand duty "annexed to the female character by nature."⁹⁴ She was equally explicit about the aims of women's educational achievements.

⁹² Kinnaird 30.

⁹³ Kinnaird 37.

⁹⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," A Vindication of the Rights of Man and A Vindication of the Rights of Women, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 243.

Instead of the autonomy suggested by Astell's woman-centered religious institutions, Wollstonecraft spoke directly to men's privilege and self-interest:

Would men but generously snap our chains and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers-in a word, better citizens."⁹⁵

Wollstonecraft argued that women's obedience and submission, bereft of the virtue of having been reasoned out and independently valued, were shallow and fragile. She wrote:

There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground...It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree, independent of men; nay, it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and good mothers.⁹⁶

Wollstonecraft implicitly reassured men of their tendency to view women only in relation to themselves. She suggested that citizenry for women would be achieved through their active participation in family matters, educating her children and assisting her neighbours, though she also suggested women become physicians as well as nurses, and that women pursue their economic rights. She stated, "Business of various kinds they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for a support."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Wollstonecraft, Vindication 240.

⁹⁶ Wollstonecraft, Vindication 230.

⁹⁷ Wollstonecraft, Vindication 238.

As with Astell, a relatively conservative argument is interspersed with highly contentious notions that liken marriage to prostitution.

Moreover, further rhetorical distance between the reforms that feminists publicly proposed and those that they privately contemplated can be seen in an examination of different genres of their writing. At the time of her death, Wollstonecraft was working on a novel entitled The Wrongs of Woman (1797). The novel was significantly different in tone than her essays. It was not a syllogism, requiring careful attention to premises and conclusions but a narrative of emotion. This was in keeping with traditional, gendered notions of the genre of novel writing. Believed to require less intellectual rigour than other forms of writing and thus commonly associated with women, excess emotion was therefore acceptable in this particular genre.⁹⁸ Due to these reduced literary expectations, there was a degree of authorial freedom in writing under the banner of fiction. Fiction was an imaginative rendering of events, not necessarily a depiction of what is or what ought to be.

In The Wrongs of Woman, the unfaithful husband of a woman named Maria has encouraged his friend to seduce her. He then incarcerates Maria in an insane asylum in an attempt to control her inheritance. In court, she attempts to persuade a male judge of the justice of her decision to leave her husband. Maria critiques society's tradition of requiring women to bear all of men's humiliations and abuse to preserve the order of society. She then claims

⁹⁸ Mary Eageleton, ed. Feminist Literary Theory (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1986) 88.

a woman's entitlement to "consult her own conscience, and regulate her conduct, in some degree, by her own sense of right."⁹⁹ She considers the marital contract made void by her husband's immorality and claims a divorce so that she can live with her common-law husband, enjoy her financial fortune and fulfill the duties of wife and mother. In response, the judge denies the validity of allowing women to express their "feelings", an action that he believes ultimately functions to undermine the sanctity of marriage.

In this narrative, Maria is given the opportunity to make an impassioned plea in her own defense as to the general inequity of existing laws and their repercussions on the individual. By having the judge, an icon of masculine authority, dismiss Maria's reasoned argument as affective subversion, Wollstonecraft illuminates both the patriarchal privilege which the story's male antagonist enjoys, and extends this immunity to herself, as author, on the basis of narrative convention. Plot often served as a moral arbiter, endorsing good and proper behavior by awarding characters embodying it with a happy ending. In this tradition, Maria's narrative misfortune suggests societal censure, relieving Wollstonecraft from responsibility for her character's conduct. The author is thereby enabled to utilize the novel as a pulpit from which to identify societal ills but is buffered by narrative convention from full responsibility. Ultimately, though the denouement has not explicitly sanctioned Maria's argument, the novel has

⁹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, "The Wrongs of Woman," Mary, a Fiction and the Wrongs of Woman, ed. Gary Kelly (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) 197.

nevertheless enabled her speech, explicated the vulnerability of her societal position and encouraged reader identification with an empathetic protagonist.

Despite this narrative protection, the text states that for Maria, the “sarcasms of society, and the condemnations of a mistaken world, were nothing to her, compared with acting contrary to those feelings which were the foundation of her principles.”¹⁰⁰ Reading sympathetically, one might assume that Wollstonecraft, whose life was anything but conventional, shared these views.

What the comparison of these two texts suggests, then, is that different genres allowed for very different expressions of Wollstonecraft’s feminist principles. In The Wrongs of Woman, Wollstonecraft addressed women’s property and custody rights, their subjugation under marriage, the lack of appropriate alternatives other than marriage, and the gendered, legal double standard regarding infidelity. It suggests through example that women should have the ability to determine justice unmediated by men or law, including demanding divorce by determining their own grounds, participating in extra-marital affairs according to their conscience, and subverting financial contracts if necessary. These were exceedingly radical principles as compared with the relatively more conservative tone of A Vindication, where the concept of virtue is cited some twenty odd times in the space of nine pages.

From this limited snapshot of her writing, one sees that Wollstonecraft was willing to use a conservative construction of femininity, invoking

motherhood and a woman's duties as wife. Her rhetoric, however, also included a confrontational demand for natural justice, a highly inflammatory depiction of patriarchal culpability and self-interest. Neither Astell nor Wollstonecraft would stand alone in their tendency to inhabit different identities, tactics, and rhetorical styles with which to argue for women's rights. But throughout this fluidity of position and polemic, there were recurring themes in their ongoing negotiation between reform and anti-reform forces. Both were heavily informed by the style and substance of their opposition.

It may be tempting to suggest that Astell and Wollstonecraft's use of conservative rhetoric ultimately functioned to de-politicize their overall message. However, it is critical to remember that despite the radical nature of women challenging men's power, their society's hegemonic boundaries were narrow and frequently intolerant. One of Wollstonecraft's feminist contemporaries was a French woman named Olympe de Gouges. Among other texts, she wrote an auto-biographical anti-slavery play, and also an appeal for women's civil and political rights entitled Declaration of the Rights of Woman (1791). The vehemence of her denunciations resulted in both her vilification and her ultimate death by guillotine in 1793. Her opponents held her as an example to dissuade any who might think of following her:

Recall that virago, that man-woman, the shameless Olympe de Gouges who was the first to establish women's clubs, who abandoned the care of her household, wished to play politics and committed crimes. All those immoral beings have been annihilated under the avenging sword of the laws. You would like to imitate them? No, you

¹⁰⁰ Wollstonecraft, Wrongs 195.

will realize that you will be truly worthy of interest and respect only when you are what nature wished you to be. We want women to be respected; that is why we will force them to respect themselves.¹⁰¹

This chilling example illustrates that societal hegemony had many faces. It ranged from reward, to mild social pressure to conform, social or economic ostracism to death. Indeed, it was the publication of Wollstonecraft's memoirs shortly after her death, documenting an affair with a married man, the birth of a child out of wedlock and two suicide attempts which discredited her reputation. Her contemporaries were scandalized and as Bryson suggests, "the association of feminism with 'immorality' effectively banished it from consideration in 'respectable' society."¹⁰² For some, however, it was those very contradictions and juxtapositions that made Wollstonecraft a more interesting subject of study. Both Emma Goldman and Virginia Woolf wrote about Wollstonecraft, querying "the disparity between the feminist feats of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the gothic fates inflicted on Wollstonecraft's fictional heroines."¹⁰³

Contemporary critics have also been interested in Wollstonecraft, specifically in how her knowledge of her life experiences has overshadowed her writing. In Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria J. Falco suggests that misinterpretation and denunciation has prevented

¹⁰¹ Marie Josephine Diamond, "The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges," Feminist Issues (Spring 1994):69.

¹⁰² Bryson 26.

¹⁰³ Susan Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One,' " Feminist Studies 20 (1994) 460

Wollstonecraft from “being appreciated as a ‘founding mother’ of feminism...even though some of her major arguments had been resurrected by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor and Virginia Woolf.” ¹⁰⁴

Penny Weiss queries why Wollstonecraft isn’t included in the canon of political theorists:

To accept dismissals of Wollstonecraft’s work based on the character of her life is to do something other than commit the supposed crime of confusing the ideas and the author (for indeed the two are related). It is to accept anti-feminist judgments of how women “should” act, in regard to what issues, in what tone, and so forth; that is, to accept the ideas against which Wollstonecraft wrote and lived.” ¹⁰⁵

Literary critics have investigated the gendered traditions of writing and how these conventions restricted Wollstonecraft’s expression of ideas. Gary Kelly writes:

As a revolutionary feminist writer, Wollstonecraft had to write in ways that would disrupt the gendered hierarchy in writing - including style, genre and discourse- that reproduced women’s oppression. Yet she had to write in ways that would reach the widest possible readership if she were to revolutionize the ‘reading public,’ and especially women. ¹⁰⁶

Wendy Gunther-Canada concurs, arguing that Wollstonecraft’s writing demonstrates an acute understanding of the gendered nature of political

¹⁰⁴ Maria J. Falco, ed. Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 5.

¹⁰⁵ Penny Weiss, “Wollstonecraft and Rousseau: The Gendered Fate of Political Theorists,” Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 28.

¹⁰⁶ Gary Kelly. “Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft,” Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) preface.

discourse. Her appropriation of the voice of reason took on the “gendered mask of political authority”¹⁰⁷ which did not provide the security rendered through anonymity. To write, Gunther-Canada suggests, is to “invite public censure. For a woman to author a political tract, she must trespass upon a traditionally forbidden discursive space.”¹⁰⁸ Appropriating the masculine voice, even in subversion, can be problematic. Patricia Yaegar queries whether Wollstonecraft’s textual abstraction and obsession with theory make her susceptible to the accusations of French feminists that she has capitulated to phallogocentrism.¹⁰⁹

Other critiques of Wollstonecraft have suggested a certain degree of self-loathing and misogyny in her tendency “to locate herself outside what she deemed [to be women’s] self-demeaning behaviour.”¹¹⁰ Ferguson suggests that Wollstonecraft’s critique of middle class women entails the creation of a distinction between them and herself, as a “mentor-censor.”¹¹¹

Carol Poston has responded by suggesting that Wollstonecraft’s voice, “far from being that of a self-loathing male-identifying virago, is really that of

¹⁰⁷ Wendy Gunther-Canada, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s ‘Wild Wish’: Confounding Sex in the Discourse on Political Rights,” Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 69.

¹⁰⁸ Gunther-Canada 62.

¹⁰⁹ Patricia Yaegar, Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women’s Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 151.

¹¹⁰ Moira Ferguson as quoted in Gubar 459.

¹¹¹ Ferguson 133.

an abused child striving to eliminate sex and the body altogether from political discourse.”¹¹² She views the problematic sexual language in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman as coding Wollstonecraft as a survivor of abuse.

Writers from many other disciplines and locations have examined Wollstonecraft's writing including historians of homosexuality¹¹³, liberal feminist theorists¹¹⁴, and those like Jennifer Lorch, who believe that Wollstonecraft's most cogent representation of her feminism lies not in her polemical tracts but in her personal correspondence.¹¹⁵

Perhaps Wollstonecraft's own bifurcation of her life experiences and her writing suggests that she was keenly and quite rightly aware of the power of societal sanction. Canadian feminists of the early twentieth century were also well aware of the power of social disapprobation. Though they may have been unfamiliar with the fate of Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft, there was a much more immediate example which they could reference: the phenomenon of the New Woman.

¹¹² Carol Poston, "Mary Wollstonecraft and 'The Body Politic,'" Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 10.

¹¹³ See Jeanette Foster, Sex Variant Women in Literature (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1976) 56-60; and Lillian Faderman, "Who Hid Lesbian Theory?," Lesbian Studies: Present and Future, ed. Margaret Cruickshank (New York: Feminist Press, 1982) 117.

¹¹⁴ Virginia L. Muller, "What Can Liberals Learn from Mary Wollstonecraft?," Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 47-90.

The pinnacle of the "New Woman" occurred in the 1880's and 1890's. New Women were feminists, especially writers, who wrote openly about female sexuality and desire, marital and maternal discontent, venereal disease, contraception, divorce, free love and adultery. Their outspoken critique of sacred societal institutions such as family, marriage and motherhood resulted in their social vilification as mannish, over-educated, humorless bores.¹¹⁶ Associated with moral degeneracy and sexual debauchery, the New Woman was ridiculed and dismissed by those who wielded the conservative, moral, high ground. Elizabeth Linton was perhaps her most vehement critic though she was joined by many others. It was Ouida who gave the label "New Woman" as a response to Sarah Grand's 1894 essay "The New Aspects of the Woman Question."¹¹⁷ The novels of the New Woman were parodied and her image was caricatured in the press:

There is a New Woman, and what do you think?
 She lives upon nothing but Foolscap and ink!
 But though foolscap and Ink are the whole of her diet,
 This nagging New Woman can never be quiet!¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Jennifer Lorch, "Mary Wollstonecraft: The Making of a Radical Feminist," Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁶ Sally Ledger, The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism and the Fin de Siecle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 96.

¹¹⁷ Ann Ardis, New Women, New Novels (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 10.

¹¹⁸ Ardis 11.

In Canada, the first "New Woman" novel was reputedly Lily Dougall's 1895 book, Madonna of a Day.¹¹⁹ The term "New Woman" was eventually extrapolated beyond provocative, *fin de siècle* writers to encompass any woman exhibiting the brashness, irreverence and independence which characterized its petticoat-burning image.¹²⁰ The following critique of the New Women by Elizabeth Linton was also heavily laden with negative class and race stereotypes:

[The New Woman] smokes after dinner with the men; in railway carriages; in public rooms-when she is allowed. She thinks she is thereby vindicating her independence and honouring her emancipated womanhood. Heaven bless her! Down in the North-country villages, and elsewhere, she will find her prototypes calmly smoking their black cutty-pipes, with no sense of shame about them. Why should they not? These ancient dames with "whiskin" beards about their "mou's," withered and unsightly, worn out, and no longer women in desirableness of beauty-why should they not take to the habits of men? ¹²¹

It is highly likely that the caustic backlash against this particular feminist experiment influenced the direction of subsequent feminist activism. The New Woman's contempt for, and refusal of, a confining maternal-feminine subjectivity disavowed the one location of power which society granted women. With this knowledge, perhaps it is not surprising that the next generation of reformers would choose to include maternal feminist arguments along with their demands for change to the status quo. To swim with the current, at a tumultuous time when society's fear of change

¹¹⁹ Wayne Roberts, "Rocking the Cradle for the World," A Not Unreasonable Claim, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 17.

¹²⁰ Wayne Roberts 16,18.

heightened the usual protection of societal institutions such as the family and motherhood, would have been both logical and politically expedient.

Moreover, as the arguments proposed against women's rights were often paradoxical and contradictory, utilizing a socially sanctioned role would allow women to press for the advantages for which the opposition's illogic provided.

A close examination of the arguments of reformers and anti-feminist forces illustrates quite clearly that they were both very much informed by the substance and the style of the other.

In this chapter, I have considered how western discourse was influenced by masculinist philosophical thought and how it functioned through hierarchical binaries. I have examined how the Age of Reason was variously interpreted and how these interpretations became prescriptive. I have briefly considered excerpts of British feminist rhetoric from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to determine the rhetorical adaptability and scope of these early feminist reformers within various discursive mediums. Finally, I have emphasized the hegemonic parameters within which early feminist discourse was constructed. With this socio-linguistic, political context established, we may now turn to an examination of Canadian feminist rhetoric during the early twentieth century.

The next chapter documents specific examples of how feminist rhetoric was often cloaked in maternal language to justify its public presence and agency. The chapter investigates how maternal metaphors such as "public housekeeping" and "mothering," were used strategically to accentuate

¹²¹ Ardis 25.

women's duty and to veil her liberal humanist discourse of rights. I examine a variety of different genres of writing of several early twentieth century Canadian feminists to document a pattern of appropriation and subversion, and of both compliance and confrontation. I demonstrate that many reformers' feminist rhetoric was marked by a complexity that suggests a clear comprehension of societal hegemony and backlash. Finally, I document a frequently ironic approach to patriarchal logic and privilege. This irony should suggest a significant degree of irreverence for the prevailing notion of male superiority and function as evidence against reformers' putative essentialist internalization.

CHAPTER THREE: MATERNAL METAPHORS

O fairest of creation, last and best
 Of all God's works, creature in whom excelled
 Whatever can to thought or sight be formed,
 Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet.
 Milton

A being breathing thoughtful breath,
 A traveller betwixt life and earth;
 The reason firm, the temperate will,
 Endurance, foresight, strength and skill;
 A perfect woman, nobly planned,
 To warn, to comfort, and command.
 Wordsworth

Romantic literature and poetry had often eulogized woman's virtue, her beauty, purity, and her nurturing self-denial. Anti-feminist forces also engaged in hagiographic accounts of woman's nature. This rhetorical homage discursively enabled a particular kind of feminine/maternal identity politics which women could adopt and adapt. Rather than struggle against the mawkish portrayal of woman as angel or queen, reformers claimed the crown and raised the sceptre.

Maternal Metaphors

As Roberta Hamilton has noted, "words do not simply describe or identify. Words make distinctions and create oppositions...they carry and create shifting identities, possibilities and constraints."¹²² The Victorian concept of motherhood was particularly value-laden, positively associated with nurturance and selflessness. I have entitled this section "maternal

¹²² Roberta Hamilton 18,20.

metaphors” to illustrate the ways in which reformers capitalized on the image of maternity, identifying a number of women’s activities and behaviours by a reference normally denoting something else, namely, the very specific act of looking after one’s own children.

For example, at the first annual meeting of the National Council of Women in 1894, Lady Ishbel Aberdeen elaborated on the council’s membership as follows:

We come together as women who are more or less alive to the high duties and opportunities which are ours in virtue of our womanhood...to carry on our grand women’s mission.... How can we best describe this woman’s mission in a word? Can we not best describe it as “mothering” in one sense or another? We are not all called upon to be mothers of little children, but every woman is called upon to “mother” in some way or another.¹²³

Aberdeen’s address appeared to be a conservative discourse. In keeping with biological determinism, it reified the notion of distinct natures, and also securely linked mothering with women. But therein lay the initial groundwork for subversion. Though motherhood and women were linked, the concept of “mothering” was not defined exclusively as child care. Mothering was applied more generally to women’s celebrated care-giving role. This figurative extension created conceptual space for women’s agency in a larger context such as that of the public sphere. Aberdeen’s discursive construction of mothering, as home-makers and home-builders, linked the former, familiarly feminine term, with a more masculine conception of builder, as one who creates and constructs. The examples she cites in the following quote

¹²³ Ramsay Cook 200.

illustrate that the work of home-building was not restricted to the domestic sphere:

I see the idea of “mothering” of which I spoke running through all. Whether it be the providing of police matrons or of women inspectors for introducing industrial training into our schools; or the encouragement of unity of purpose and work; or the cultivation of art, and music, and literary effort, and the love of all that is beautiful or the caring for the fatherless and motherless, the sick and the fallen; or the examination into the science of motherhood and the problem of domestic service, we see the same thought running through all – the caring for others.¹²⁴

Despite the nurturant language, mothering is seen to equal humanitarianism, which in turn relates to philanthropy and thus, public works. The care of society’s sick and fallen is work that is necessarily situated in the public sphere, not in the woman’s own home. Similarly, the police matron is a paid position of some power and visibility, requiring training and allocation of resources. The police matron’s link to mothering is less obvious in isolation but bundled together with phrases such as “the love of all that is beautiful”, its usurpation of masculine space is disguised.

Other reformers such as Nellie McClung, Toronto feminist Mrs. Parker, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union president Letitia Youmans also utilized this strategic discourse which seductively spoke of caring and maternal guidance while blurring the boundaries between private and public. Maternal metaphors naturalized women’s public participation by emphasizing women’s feminine aptitude and affinity for certain types of public works. Incrementally, the boundaries of the home and the skills of the homemaker

¹²⁴ Ramsay Cook 202.

were extended. As Mrs. Dr. Parker described in her 1890 essay entitled "Woman in Nation Building," the home was the miniature state wherein women had learned "the importance of 'little things,' a qualification which applied to state administration would be of incalculable good both in a moral and also in a pecuniary sense."¹²⁵ She documented mothers' exercise of principles of commercial honesty, political economy, skills at arbitration and the teaching of obedience necessary to good citizenship.¹²⁶

With reference to women's professions already outside the home, she correlates the public authority figure with her maternal counterpart.

"From the home, the next step in the process of nation-building which we notice is the school.... In these schools we find women enthroned as teachers, and also frequently the governing power, enforcing daily the same principles and laws initiated in the home."¹²⁷

The similarities between private and public spheres were emphasized through analogy. Medicine, theology, law and social services were subsumed within women's maternal care giving activities. As described in the same essay, Parker relates philanthropy to the nation as:

the sick room is to the home. The great schemes of philanthropy [plan] to rescue the perishing, to uplift the fallen, to reform the erring, to nurse the sick, to care for the orphan, and feed the poor of the nation; all these are promoted, if not always originated, by women.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Austin 460.

¹²⁶ Austin 460-461.

¹²⁷ Austin 461.

¹²⁸ Austin 461.

Characterizing an activity as innately feminine could have a dissuasive effect on men wishing to perform it. As a consequence, reformers sought to cast their gendered net as broadly as possible. This last example drawn from Parker's essay is an example of a discursive attempt to appropriate broad categories as areas of women's work. "There are two features in nation-building which are peculiarly the work of women, the physical and the social."¹²⁹ If successful, many public activities could be annexed through language as pertaining to a woman's domain. In another example, McClung used mother-daughter imagery to establish the need for women in particular public positions:

It is no pleasant task to have to tell a joyous, sunny-hearted girl of fourteen or fifteen about the evils that are in the world, but if you love her, you will do it! I would like to see this work done by trained motherly and tactful women, in the department of social welfare, paid by the school board.¹³⁰

As noted by Mitchison, an appeal to women's perceived maternal duties attracted many women to reform who otherwise might not be reached. "Home and family were the cornerstones of society; an attack on one was an attack on the other."¹³¹ The maternal icon could also be utilized to rally a mother's duty to familial protection against the state:

As long as you make the laws for us, as long as you tax us, as long as you give our babies infected milk and contaminated water... we must ask the reasons why? And we will continue to do so until you realize

¹²⁹ Austen 462.

¹³⁰ Nellie McClung, In Times Like These (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) 84.

¹³¹ Mitchison 159.

that we are determined to have our full share of direct influence and responsibility in all these matters.¹³²

Mothering was not the only metaphor used to extrapolate women's domestic activities into the public sphere. Very closely linked to it was another gendered term used to draw a parallel between the public and private spheres; namely "housekeeping" or "housecleaning." The home was depicted as a microcosm of the state and the similarities of the skill sets were emphasized:

Even housekeeping need no longer be confined to private life...but a particular gift for it can be used in a broad way to benefit the community...Municipal government, after all, is only a huge house keeping proposition, and the Council but a committee of citizens elected to supervise the household.¹³³

As Bashevkin notes, for McClung and many of her allies, politics was perceived as housekeeping on a grand scale, "Just as the mother's influence as well as the father's is needed in the bringing up of children and in the affairs of the home, so are they needed in the larger home,-the state."¹³⁴

In 1883, feminist Lillie Devereaux, speaking to the Toronto Women's Suffrage Club, contested men's public performance of women's housekeeping duties with an irony that is difficult to misconstrue. She queried:

What is the idea men have of cleaning streets? They sweep the dust into piles for the wind to blow away. They take away what is left in an open cart and it blows out. We ought not to blame the men, though,

¹³² Wayne Roberts 18-19.

¹³³ Gaudet 46.

¹³⁴ Bashevkin 422.

for it's a woman's work to care for such things. Women ought to have charge of the roads." ¹³⁵

From cleaning houses to cleaning streets, and from cleaning streets to taking charge of the roads. Despite the self-effacing imagery of women as street cleaners, roads are a metaphor for a pathway to something or somewhere. Taking charge of the roads is a clear metaphor for agency and power. It is likely that Devereaux's language was intended to amuse rather than to disguise, due to the fact that she was speaking to the converted. For general consumption, however, considerable care and rhetorical sophistication were often employed in feminist arguments in order to communicate a powerful message in non-threatening language and mannerisms. For example, an American temperance activist, Clarina Howard Nichols, summed up her public speaking strategy in the following manner:

By showing the connection, as of cause and effect, between men's rights and women's wrongs, between women's no-rights and their helplessness and dependence, I could disarm that prejudice and win an intelligent support for both temperance and equal rights...I assured my audiences, that I had not come to talk to them of "Woman's Rights," that indeed I did not find that women had any rights in the matter, but to "suffer and be still; to die and give no sign." But I had come to speak of man's rights and woman's needs." ¹³⁶

Canadian reformers were similarly aware of the inflammatory nature that challenges to the status quo represented. Letitia Youmans, Canadian president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, stated in 1893:

¹³⁵ Kealey 8-9.

¹³⁶ Carol Mattingly, Well-Tempered Woman: Nineteenth Century Temperance Rhetoric (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998) 16.

So strong was the opposition in Canada to what was commonly termed “women’s rights,” that I had good reason to believe that should I advocate the ballot for women in connection with my temperance work, it would most effectively block the way, and it was already uphill work for a woman to appear on a public platform.¹³⁷

In light of this recognized dynamic of resistance, it is not surprising that many reformers stressed communal rather than individual benefit. Ultra-conservative rhetoric functioned to explicitly deny the appearance of reformers’ self-interest as a motivation for their activism. Pejorative insinuations about men’s privilege and character were assuaged by statements such as “the woman [sic] of today ask the ballot, not that they may use it against men, but with and for all good men in making this world a better and safer place.”¹³⁸ A Saskatchewan “farmeress”, writing to her local paper, defended her interest in dower rights with much the same language, stating “It is not for myself that I so much want our rights as for our unfortunate sisters who, no matter how hard they toil, can never get what they merit.”¹³⁹ Such speech did not overtly challenge or demand, but rather asked permission to help for common gain.

Like their predecessors, Astell and Wollstonecraft, reformers in early twentieth century Canada emphasized the benefits to society for increasing women’s public presence and power, including their improved ability to raise and educate children. In an article appearing in 1914 in the newspaper The

¹³⁷ Mitchison 158.

¹³⁸ Lyn Gough, As Wise as Serpents (Victoria: Swan Lake Publishing, 1988) 63.

¹³⁹ Ramsay Cook 111.

Champion, an unidentified author states that women's entrance into the political arena would make them "more broadminded, liberal and tolerant, and therefore better fitted to raise and supervise the education of their children, and to fit them for the struggle of life which is every year becoming keener."¹⁴⁰ At times, this rhetoric was directed to those with the power to make legislative changes, but the discursive manipulation of conceptions of womanhood and femininity were also directed towards women. In an 1879 letter to the journal The Canada Education Monthly, women's much celebrated passivity was deconstructed as dangerous apathy:

Women think by their indifference and feigned humility they win admiration and affection, which is all many of them seem to require. They are not conscious of the intense selfishness that makes them shut their eyes and seek only to live and let live. For it is undoubtedly selfishness and indolence that oblige them to forget how many hundreds of women are struggling for maintenance.¹⁴¹

If women could not be convinced to participate in public affairs for the benefit of others, arguments were brought closer to home. At the inaugural meeting of the National Council of Women of Canada in 1894, council president Lady Aberdeen stated:

[A woman] must learn that if the poor around her doors are not cared for, the orphans not housed, the erring not reclaimed, because she was too much engrossed in her own house to lend a helping hand, the results of her self-absorption may be in the future to provide pitfalls for her own children, who she so desires to cherish.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ramsay Cook 83.

¹⁴¹ Ramsay Cook 138.

¹⁴² Ramsay Cook 201.

Women had been buffeted with a discourse of duty. Reform rhetoric was replete with attempts to renovate its connotation with servitude. In a 1904 paper delivered at a National Council of Women of Canada meeting, for example, Dr. Stowe-Gullen chided women for the disastrous consequences that their habits of self-sacrifice had upon human liberty. She stated that "if it be our duty to respect the claims of others, it is likewise a duty to maintain our own; ours are no less sacred than those of others, and we may not carelessly ignore or abandon our dues for the sake of peace."¹⁴³

The goal for feminist reformers was to reconfigure the conception of womanhood in a manner that would retain all the strength and virtue attributed to the icons of motherhood and femininity, but to enlarge upon their sphere of influence. This necessitated resisting the opposition's ability to galvanize the restrictive aspects of the icons for their own oppressive uses. For example, when Saskatchewan premier Rodmond Roblin suggested that "nice" women did not want the franchise, McClung satirized his stereotype:

By nice women... you probably mean selfish women who have no more thought for the underprivileged, overworked woman than a pussycat in a sunny window for the starving kitten in the street. No, in that sense I am not a nice woman for I do care.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Ramsay Cook 261.

¹⁴⁴ McClung, Times x.

Roblin had intended to contrast nice women with feminist activists. Instead, McClung outplayed him by discursively claiming full inheritance to the original stereotype of womanhood as caring, selfless and nurturant.

As McClung likely realized, a very large part of this period's feminist fight was conducted through discourse. As I have demonstrated, tactics included appropriation and reconfiguration of terms and stereotypes, deconstruction of essentialist logic and an unmasking of the patriarchal privilege that structured the status quo. Individual feminists performed this discursive dance differently. With the intention of celebrating their diversity, rather than seeking categorical similarity, I will now investigate the public and literary writings of three of these prominent feminists in turn. They are Francis Beynon, Flora MacDonald Denison and Nellie McClung. I have chosen these three feminists because in addition to their feminist activism, each of the women was also a novelist. In the following section, I will consider examples of both their public activist discourse and their fictional writing to determine differences in tone and also to emphasize the contradictions inherent in their occupation of contested space; namely woman as speaking subject.

Another benefit of extending this study to an investigation of individual women is that of an increased specificity in terms of race, class, marital status as well as additional political and religious beliefs. In the first chapter, I characterized the prominent members of various reform organizations as primarily white, middle class, Anglo-Saxon women who were either

professionals themselves, or married to professionals. While such descriptions have some explanatory benefit, they also obscure the wide scope and hierarchies inherent within these categories. The term “middle class,” for example, does not adequately differentiate between levels of economic security, educational achievement, or class movement throughout the various stages of one’s life such as in childhood and through marriage.¹⁴⁵

A description of McClung, Beynon and Denison is fraught with the danger of over-simplification. Each occupied a distinct social location from the others. McClung was a married, middle-class woman with children; Beynon was single, middle class, deeply religious and a socialist, and Denison was a married, essentially self-supporting, working-class mother who was also interested in socialism. But these labels tell only part of the story. Denison, for example, underwent a class change in childhood through financial misfortune. Gorham suggests that Denison’s marginal status may have been a benefit in terms of the increased independence it gave her to make a life for herself.¹⁴⁶ Although she was accepted by the group of women doctors who constituted the leading suffrage workers in Toronto, her precarious class position was also used as ammunition by those who opposed Denison’s politics. An anonymous letter states:

You had better keep yourself quiet on the subject of the honored president of the Equal Franchise. What did you or your party every do

¹⁴⁵ Naomi Wolf makes explicit reference to the constitution of class in her book *Promiscuities*. In self-definition, she distinguishes between her family’s location in the cultural upper middle class but economic lower middle class. See Naomi Wolf, *Promiscuities* (Toronto: Random House, 1997) 4.

¹⁴⁶ Gorham, Denison 50.

for the cause compared to her. The fight is right out of the dressmaking class with the help of Mrs. Leathes and good ladies such as Mrs. Meredith and Mrs. Boulton and for them suffrage in Toronto would be among the first people. Keep to your own class.¹⁴⁷

Nellie McClung, whose status as a married woman conferred some privilege, nonetheless had to defend herself against suggestions that her public presence compromised her ability to mother well. She joked about this criticism, beginning speeches by saying that she "had just phoned home and her family was fine. The younger children were in bed...and the older ones doing their homework."¹⁴⁸ Each social location which conferred privilege also entailed responsibility, just as each marginalization incurred a defensiveness which infused the woman's self-expression, including their fictional writing.

As Yaeger notes:

These socially imposed silences are figured in women's texts and we have begun to read these 'unnatural silences' as an essential part of women's plots, to emphasize the vulnerabilities, fragilities, interruptions, the absences in women's writing, and to valorize these absences as the most characteristic aspect of women's scripts.¹⁴⁹

It is for these plots that we investigate the writings of McClung, Beynon and Denison.

Nellie McClung (1873 - 1951)

Once I heard of a woman saying the hardest thing about men I ever heard- and she was an ardent anti-suffragist too. She said that what was wrong with the women in England was that they were too particular- that's why they were not married, and, she went on, any

¹⁴⁷ Gorham, Denison 61.

¹⁴⁸ Hallett and Davis 133.

¹⁴⁹ Yaeger 154.

person can tell, when they look around at men in general, that God never intended women to be very particular. I am glad I never said anything as hard as that about men.¹⁵⁰

McClung is perhaps the best known of early Canadian feminists. She has been called “maternal feminism’s foremost Canadian advocate” by Nancy Adamson in Feminist Organizing for Change.¹⁵¹ In the introduction to In Times Like These, Veronica Strong Boag states that McClung “personified Canadian feminism in the first quarter of the twentieth century.”¹⁵² She asserts that McClung viewed motherhood as a woman’s highest achievement and that her demand for women’s rights was “a logical extension of traditional views of female moral superiority and maternal responsibility.”¹⁵³ The difficulty lies in that if McClung, as maternal feminist icon, is misinterpreted, early twentieth century Canadian feminism is also misrepresented. If McClung can be said to represent early Canadian mainstream feminism, I wish to demonstrate through an examination of her writing and speech that this feminism was much less conservative than has been assumed.

Strong-Boag has criticized McClung for stating “marriage and homemaking are [women’s] highest destiny”¹⁵⁴ and judged the sentiment “as

¹⁵⁰ McClung, Times 39.

¹⁵¹ Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, Feminists Organizing for Change (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988) 31.

¹⁵² McClung, Times vii.

¹⁵³ McClung, Times vii.

¹⁵⁴ McClung, Times 82.

traditional as any of [McClung's] opponents."¹⁵⁵ As a critical oversight, the remainder of the sentence goes unreported. What McClung actually says is that "marriage and motherhood are her highest destiny, or so she has been told often enough."¹⁵⁶ This mitigation of the original assertion recognizes McClung's skepticism and her awareness of the ongoing hegemonic reinforcement of particular feminine behaviour and goals. It is unlikely that anyone who believed that marriage should be a woman's highest goal would write, in the same text, the following:

It is no wonder marriages are so unhappy, when they are put before girls as the end, the thing to be achieved...When we struggle for a thing, when we fight for a prize, at least we expect, with reason, that the thing shall be worth the winning. This is truly the way our future husbands are held up to us, and the result must often, of course, be disappointment and despair.¹⁵⁷

Similarly, Strong-Boag documents McClung's rather totalitarian statement in In Times Like These "every normal woman desires children."¹⁵⁸ Later in the same text, McClung again qualifies this statement as follows:

Deeply rooted in almost every woman's heart is the love of home and children; but independence is sweet and when marriage means the loss of independence, there are women brave enough and strong enough to turn away from it. "I will not marry for a living," many a brave woman has said.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Strong-Boag, introduction, In Times Like These, by Nellie McClung (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) viii.

¹⁵⁶ McClung, Times 82.

¹⁵⁷ McClung, Times 135.

¹⁵⁸ Strong Boag, Times viii.

¹⁵⁹ McClung, Times 86.

Despite being characterized as one who "never really came to terms with women whose major function would not be motherhood," ¹⁶⁰ McClung's book In Times Like These, published in Canada and the United States, contained frank treatment of her own views of maternity and how they contrast the norm. She stated "according to anti-suffragists, children never grow up, and no person can ever attend to them but the mother." ¹⁶¹ McClung rejected this view on several grounds including the mother's self interest and personal development as well as the larger message it communicated to the children about her status.

"Children do not need their mother's care always and the mother who has given up every hope and ambition in the care of her children will find herself left all alone, when her children no longer need her. But dear me, how the church has exalted the self-sacrificing mother, who never had a thought apart from her children, and who became a willing slave to her family. Never a word about the injury she is doing to her family in letting them be a slave-owner, never a word of the injury she is doing to herself." ¹⁶²

In her 1983 M.A. thesis, Bette Noreen Blore insightfully observed that while McClung may be seen to

wax poetic about motherhood, it is well to remember that in addition to raising five children, she published sixteen books, was a member of the Alberta Legislature for five years and a member of the C.B.C.

¹⁶⁰ McClung, Times vii.

¹⁶¹ McClung, Times 63.

¹⁶² McClung, Times 75.

Board of Governors and a Canadian delegate to the League of Nations.¹⁶³

This would seemingly put criticism about the traditional nature of McClung's marital and maternal status to rest. That marriage and motherhood were important to McClung can be safely conceded. Whether she privileged them above all else is less obvious. In In Times Like These, McClung related the religious parable about two sisters, Martha and Mary. The former is the quintessential housekeeper; the latter is "the thinker." In the parable, Jesus states that Mary "hath chosen the better part"¹⁶⁴ and McClung, as a religious woman, tells something of her own beliefs when she emphasizes this highest form of sanction to the intellectual woman. McClung did critique the church but explicitly differentiated between God's word and the church's interpretive liberties. She wrote "The church has been dominated by men and so religion has been given a masculine interpretation, and I believe the Protestant religion has lost much when it lost the idea of the motherhood of God."¹⁶⁵ McClung was able to deftly maneuver among the inconsistencies and contradictions that structured society. She believed in marriage, though not in the inequitable state it currently resided. She had a deep respect for motherhood but wanted the choice and opportunity to balance it among other

¹⁶³ Bette Noreen Blore, "Women's Liberation as Portrayed Through the Writings of Nellie McClung and Francis Beynon; an Agrarian Reform Perspective," M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1983, 134.

¹⁶⁴ McClung, Times 30.

¹⁶⁵ McClung, Times 70.

interests. She was religious, though queried the church's role in women's subordination.

Perhaps the best evidence of McClung's sophistication of thought and her intention to be subversive was her frequent use of irony. Perhaps above all else, McClung is remembered for the ironic wit embedded in her rhetoric. As such, a brief investigation into irony as a discursive practice is valuable. In its simplest form, irony has been described as "antiphrasis" which means saying one thing but meaning its opposite. To understand intended irony, one must accept that what is being spoken may not be taken literally. As Linda Hutcheon points out in Irony's Edge, there are obvious dangers in employing irony. The first is that the irony may be detected by a non-intended audience whereupon its quiet subversive potential is reduced. The second is that no irony will be detected and the speaker will either be taken at their literal word or else accused of contradiction.¹⁶⁶ Clearly, the success of irony depends upon its correct interpretation by the discursive communities in which it is received. As the subject is constituted within multiple discursive communities dependent on her myriad macro and micro-political associations, her ability to recognize irony is highly correlated with her ideological proximity to the discourses in which it is generated. If she shares pertinent understandings of those discourses, the hidden meaning of the irony is more likely obvious. This reliance upon shared assumptions and expectations is essential because irony requires more than simply an interpretive substitution of

¹⁶⁶ Linda Hutcheon, Irony's Edge (London: Routledge, 1994) 16.

opposites. Hutcheon suggests that irony, despite its implicit nature, is the expression of an attitude.¹⁶⁷ It is a discursive strategy that can be used by the counter-discourse with politically transformative power.¹⁶⁸ Premised upon the unruly, the inconsistent, the ironic ruptures in the narrative tapestry, it has the potential to undermine the logic of dominant discourses by highlighting its inconsistencies, gaps and omissions.

I will now return to Nellie McClung and through example, attempt to demonstrate that inherent in the irony of her rhetoric is evidence of her non-complicity with the dominant discourse. That is, despite the understated style, there exists an attitude that is essential to a culture of resistance.

In the following passage, she satirizes the hypocrisy and sincerity of men who would deny women time to vote. Humour notwithstanding, the argument "no taxation without representation" is quietly but decidedly made.

There still exists a strong belief that the whole household machinery goes out of order when a woman goes to vote. No person denies the woman the right to go to church, and yet the church service takes a great deal more time than voting. People even concede to women the right to go shopping, or visiting a friend, or an occasional concert. But the wife and mother, with her God-given, sacred trust of molding the young life of our land, must never dream of going round the corner to vote. "Who will mind the baby?" cried one of our public men, in great agony of spirit, "when the mother goes to vote?" One woman replied that she thought she could get the person that minded it when she went to pay her taxes.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Hutcheon 40.

¹⁶⁸ Hutcheon 30.

¹⁶⁹ McClung, Times 51.

McClung mocked the self-interest of men who protected their privileged public sphere against incursion while lamenting women's abdication of their natural duties.

At the present time there are many people seriously alarmed by the discontent among women. They say women are no longer contented with woman's work and woman's sphere. Women no longer find their highest joy in plain sewing and working in wool. The washboard has lost its charm." ¹⁷⁰

I have included the following, rather lengthy example to illustrate that McClung was fully aware of the need to adapt her rhetoric to the interpretive abilities and the ideological positions of her audience. In Times Like These contains two dedications. Both are heavily ironic, but are nonetheless quite different in tone and tactic.

Dedication I

To the Superior Persons

Who would not come to hear a woman speak being firmly convinced that it is not "natural."

Who takes (sic) the rather unassailable ground that "men are men and women are women."

Who answers (sic) all arguments by saying, "Woman's place is in the home" and, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," and even sometimes flashed out with the brilliant retort, "It would suit those women better to stay at home and darn their children's stockings."

To all these Superior Persons, men and women, who are inhospitable to new ideas, and even suspicious of them, this books is respectfully dedicated by

The Author.

Upon further deliberation I am beset with the fear that the above dedication may not "take." The Superior Person may not appreciate the kind and neighborly spirit I have tried to show. So I will dedicate this book again.

¹⁷⁰ McClung, Times 44.

Dedication II

Believing that the woman's claim to a common humanity is not an unreasonable one, and that the successful issue of such claim rests primarily upon the sense of fair play which people have or have not according to how they were born, and

Believing that the man or woman born with a sense of fair play, no matter how obscured it has become by training, prejudice, or unhappy existence, will ultimately see the light and do the square thing and-

Believing that the man or woman who has not been so endowed by nature, no matter what advantages of education or association, will always suffer from the affliction known as mental strabismus, over which no feeble human ward has any power, and which can only be cast out by the transforming power of God's grace.

Therefore to men and women everywhere who love a fair deal, and are willing to give it to everyone, even women, this books is respectfully dedicated by the author.¹⁷¹

McClung's insertion of the passage preceding the second dedication explicitly records her anticipation of resistance to the first dedication.

Whereas the first one is a critical response to non-feminist beliefs and admonitions, the second dedication is on the basis of equal rights. Its appeal to those who have been "adequately endowed by nature" to comprehend the inherent rightness of equality is itself an ironic twist on the biological essentialism of the maternal feminist argument. In this passage, ability and understanding are not based upon gender. Rather, it is the degree to which individuals have *not* been contaminated by their environment, by "training, prejudice or unhappy experience."

The chapter titles in the book are also heavily ironic, for example, "Should women think?" and "What do women think of war? (not that it matters)". Despite its frequent conflation with humour, the efficacy of irony

¹⁷¹ McClung, Times 3-4.

should not be underestimated as a subversive strategy. In Irony's Edge, Hutcheon charts a sliding scale of irony from the most benign in tone and inferred motivation to more contentious zones where it is accepted as a strategy of provocation and polemic.¹⁷² Feminists' performance of the 1914 mock parliament that undermined the credibility of the anti-feminist, conservative, Manitoba government was clearly an example of irony manifested as a strategy of provocation. When manifested in its subtler forms, one must be open to its status as irony, as it cannot flag itself.

Despite her trademark wit, McClung was explicit when required. She bluntly defined the sphere of women as "anything that a man does not wish to do himself. This is a simple distribution of labour and easily understood and very satisfactory to half the population."¹⁷³ She ridiculed men's suggestion that marriage and maternity allotted women great power with which to influence society indirectly:

When driving with a small child, we often let the little fellow hold the end of the reins, and if the child really believes he is driving we consider the game successful, but we cannot deceive the average child very long. So, too, the average woman refuses to be deceived when she is praised like an angel and treated like an idiot. The hand that rocks the cradle does not rule the world.¹⁷⁴

As evidenced by the dual dedications to In Times Like These, McClung did utilize equal rights rhetoric. She believed that the vote should be granted on the basis of natural justice. Women deserved it as citizens, not based on

¹⁷² Hutcheon 46.

¹⁷³ McClung, Times 289.

¹⁷⁴ McClung, Times 289.

questions of morality but on their humanity.¹⁷⁵ In this subscription to the ideals of natural justice, she shared a great deal with another Canadian feminist, her contemporary Francis Beynon.

Francis Beynon (1884-1951)

Francis Beynon was a single, middle class woman who was deeply religious. Barbara Roberts describes Beynon as “the clearest feminist and socialist voice of conscience against the war.”¹⁷⁶ Her pacifist views remained intact throughout the war years, unlike both McClung¹⁷⁷ and Denison who “assumed an antiwar stance when war first broke out, but fell away from it and became supporters of Canada’s ‘war effort’.”¹⁷⁸ Ironically, in standing her ground, “Beynon, like other Canadians who remained principled pacifists throughout the war, shifted from a liberal to a radical position.”¹⁷⁹ The consequences were severe. By preserving her feminist-pacifist principles during a time when many others began to espouse patriotic views, she

¹⁷⁵ McClung, Times 57.

¹⁷⁶ Barbara Roberts, “Why Do Women Do Nothing To End the War?” Canadian Feminist-Pacifists and the Great War (Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1985) 15.

¹⁷⁷ In “Nellie McClung and Peace,” Randi Warne argues that while McClung did eventually support the war effort, she did so late and reluctantly.

¹⁷⁸ Gorham, Up and Doing 30.

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Roberts, War 11.

became extremely unpopular, lost her job at the Grain Growers' Guide and had threats upon her life.¹⁸⁰

Beynon's feminism, socialism and pacifism were interconnected and she cited economics as both a causal and perpetuating factor for the war. Ending the war would require a restructuring of society's economy and its institutions. Roberts writes that Beynon's pacifism stemmed from three related sources, "her deep faith in the decency and wisdom of ordinary people, her religious convictions and her belief in democracy."¹⁸¹

Her forum to express these views was as the woman's page editor from June 1912-1917 of the Grain Growers' Guide which was a paper for western Canadian farmers. Her column served as an information exchange and also a consciousness-raising forum, especially for farm women. It featured editorials as well as letters from its readers and as such, is an interesting study of both Beynon's political views and those of the general population.

Beynon's style was direct and unabashedly feminist. Her rhetoric was directed not to the politicians, but to the women themselves. Supporting the cause of women was, she avowed, one of the deepest convictions of her own mind.¹⁸² When a male reader suggested that Beynon was forced by her

¹⁸⁰ Barbara Roberts, War 11.

¹⁸¹ Barbara Roberts, Up and Doing 53-54.

¹⁸² Ramsay Cook 109.

position as woman's page editor, to take the woman's side, she responded with tenacity and force:

All my life I have been a woman's woman... Again "Another Mere Man" shows that he has failed utterly to get our point of view when he says that husbands are compelled by law to support their wives and what more do we want. The attitude of mind expressed in that sentence is one of the things that is driving women to the point of utter exasperation today. He can't see that the progressive, independent woman doesn't want anybody to support her- that all woman who isn't either mentally or physically lazy wants is a chance to support herself. What is still more trying is that he and many thousands of people like him cannot see that you women in the country who work early and late are supporting yourselves right now often without wages, except your board and clothes. I consider it downright impertinence for a man on a farm to talk about supporting his wife. When she cooks his meals and sews and mends for him and his children from dawn to dark, what is she doing if she is not supporting herself?¹⁸³

Beynon encouraged her readers to express themselves through the pages of the Grain Growers' Guide and gave them the opportunity to claim a voice that had little public expression elsewhere. In an editorial, she wrote, "You know the conditions in your own districts and can give us the point of view of a person at close range. And please don't all of you leave it for some other person in the section whom you fancy is cleverer or better informed, to write."¹⁸⁴ Her readers responded. Despite their frequent apologies for article length or for their trivial interests, readers wrote to the woman's page asking questions, responding to other articles and often, expressing considerable discontent with the current state of affairs. The titles of their letters, "Appeal

¹⁸³ Ramsay Cook 109.

¹⁸⁴ Barbara E. Kelcey, ed., A Great Movement Underway: Women and the Grain Growers' Guide, 1908-1928 (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1997) 78.

for Justice" (31); "A Declaration of Independence" (84); "Wives [Are] Unpaid Servants" (92); "Marriage is Slavery" (140); "Walked to the Polls" (157), "A Radical Platform" (146), suggest the nature of their grievances. Scattered throughout their letters demanding change were phrases such as "common justice", "common sense and common humanity", and "equal rights".

Beynon took a hard line at times, rebuking women for believing there was virtue in submitting to indignities. She advised overworked, undervalued wives to visit faraway friends for a few months to teach husbands the difficulty of women's work. As McClung had also done, Beynon attempted to disassociate conceptions of motherhood with solely the private sphere. She wrote:

We have too long been contented with the kind of motherhood that can look out of the window and see little children toiling incredible hours in factories or canning sheds over the way, until their small heads grow dizzy and their little fingers are bruised and bleeding, and say calmly, "Thank God, it isn't my children." ... I tell you, sisters, this kind of motherhood isn't good enough for the present day. We want a new spirit of national motherhood- mothers whose love for their own children teaches them love for all children.¹⁸⁵

Beynon encouraged her readers to join or form women's clubs associated with the Grain Growers' Guide. She advised them of upcoming meetings and conventions where prominent feminists would be speaking. She also suggested that conventions be run by the farm women themselves, with a farm woman as chair. As such, she built upon women's increasing confidence to first attend the conferences, and then to manage them. She

¹⁸⁵ Ramsay Cook 287.

attempted to link the disparate chapters by asking each society to send in an annual report of their achievements.

Beynon praised the women's farm organizations for their resolutions, which spoke of equal rights, and lauded their progress, documenting the exponential growth in attendance at the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' convention within just a few years. She characterized this growth as "a great movement underway."¹⁸⁶ This language was important because it countered the highly prevalent feelings of isolation and dependency which emerged in the rural women's letters. It depicted individual or small groups of women as working in tandem, in different parts of the country but assuredly toward common goals. Her language was also sensitive to many of the women's belief that they would be unsuited for the requirements of public procedure due to their rural experiences. She encouraged them as in the following passage:

What a good many of our women need is more faith in themselves and the realization that an organization is not a formidable thing to be undertaken in a solemn and anxious mood, but a relaxation to be entered upon joyously. Never mind whether you know all the ins and outs of parliamentary procedure. That is merely a tool for the more expeditious performance of your work, which you will learn to use in time. If you have the right spirit of helpfulness all these other things will be added onto you.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Kelcey 127.

¹⁸⁷ Kelcey 129.

Beynon praised the “strong, virile women of the kind who do their own thinking.” ¹⁸⁸ She discussed ways for farm women to have their own businesses based on their farm work, and paid to publish letters detailing individual women’s successes. She structured theme discussions on such issues as the Dower Act and homesteading for women. As would be expected, women readers receiving such encouragement and witnessing their concerns reiterated by others, developed enough of a sense of community to be quite open in their letters to Beynon’s column, sharing both pleasures and pains. Among many other issues, they discussed the sexual double standard, their economic and legal vulnerability, and their subordinate status as compared to men. At times, both anger and despair boiled over. “Sisters, shall we let such degraded beings, I will not call them men, govern us?” ¹⁸⁹ “Is life worth living when it is only hell on earth and wives are to have nothing when they are old, after years of toil and deprivations?” ¹⁹⁰ The letters also illustrate very different levels of political awareness as evidenced by the cogent analysis which follows:

The women are in the same position in regard to the men as the workers to the masters. One difference! No modern master dares to hope that the workers who are toiling to produce wealth for their masters can love them. ... slaves! Such order (disorder) is called the capitalist system. Under this system, while it lasts, there is not and cannot be any happy marriages unless you call slavery happiness. ¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Kelcey 148.

¹⁸⁹ Kelcey 109.

¹⁹⁰ Kelcey 93.

¹⁹¹ Kelcey 141.

Men wrote to Beynon's column as well as women, and she both printed and responded to these letters, supportive or otherwise. One particularly telling letter written by a male contributor is worth reprinting in its entirety:

Could anything better illustrate the way women do their work as compared with the way men do theirs, than to look over a town of say, a thousand families, on Monday? In a thousand little kitchens a thousand little women would be seen thrusting wood into a thousand little cook-stoves, heating a thousand little wash boilers, bending their back [sic] over a thousand little wash boards, and hanging their clothes on a thousand little clothes lines. If, by some singular social revolution the men of such a town were to undertake to do the work, their first step would be to get up a stock company, invest capital in building and machinery, so organize the work that about a half-dozen men could do the work for the whole town, receive good salaries therefore, and the rest of the men would go about their own business on Monday just as on other days. Yet these very women form themselves into bunches of "suffragettes" and ask for a vote! ¹⁹²

Printed within a feminist friendly forum, these sentiments were surely as incongruent as they were ironic and as such, provided a clear view of the structural tenets of patriarchy which supported them. For farm women who worked long days without a wage or legal protection for the fruit of their labour, the writer's boast about men's organizational acumen and access to resources would have been difficult to endure. Likely, it illuminated not what men could do, but what they had not. If the work of a thousand women could be done by a half dozen men, both the underlying foundations of capitalism and the privilege of men must have been easily apparent, as Beynon very likely knew. These were the sentiments which women writing to the Grain

¹⁹² Kelcey 141.

Growers' Guide experienced in their daily lives. Beynon created a space and a setting in which a discourse of rights usurped that of duty, and where single voices became a collective. In this, she was not alone. Though both Beynon and McClung were prominent, well known activists, there were many other women who played equally important roles, though their contributions have not been studied to the same degree. The texts of these lesser known women such as Alice Chown and Edith Summers Kelley are often found in library archives rather than on bookstore shelves, but are interesting and worthy of study on their own merit. One such woman, voicing a critique of women's subordinate status that often surpassed Beynon's in the scope and intensity of its denouncement, was Flora MacDonald Denison.

Flora MacDonald Denison (1867-1921)

Denison was a vocal reformer who wrote for a variety of newspapers in addition to being the leader of the Canadian Suffrage Association from 1911-1914. Like Beynon, she had a weekly column in which she wrote about feminist activities and issues. As I will detail shortly, despite being located differently from McClung and Beynon's middle class status, her critiques often echoed the same concerns. Denison shared McClung's criticism of the church's patriarchal bias and its mistreatment of women, but her language was considerably more explicit. She wrote that the church:

with its doctrine of total depravity of the human race founded upon its assertion of the inherent wickedness of woman has built up a false morality, a mock modesty, a sneaking hypocrisy. It has murdered innocence...The teaching of the Church is at the bottom of women's slavery.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Gorham, Denison 48.

Denison supported divorce and birth control, and flirted with socialism. She rejected the division of labour on the basis of sex and went further than most other reformers at that time by stating that "there is no sex in the human brain."¹⁹⁴ She argued that women had full rights to citizenship by virtue not of their femininity but of being human. Why should women, she asked, "who represent half the human family, not have equal rights and privileges...or all the natural conditions of their brothers, or civil conditions made by the laws of their country...for the benefit of the human family in general."¹⁹⁵

Having made declarations with such a distinct emphasis on equal rights, Denison may appear to be far removed from the presumed conservatism of maternal feminist rhetoric. However, in remarkably similar fashion to both McClung and Beynon, she utilized a variety of strategies depending on the situation. She publicly defended the highly unpopular, militant actions of the British suffragettes but did so by subtly appealing to gendered stereotypes. She defined them as "earnest women anxious and willing to sacrifice themselves that the race may be benefited and moved nearer to an ideal civilization of cooperative brotherhood and sisterhood."¹⁹⁶ Despite her frequent reliance on a liberal discourse of rights, she found appropriate occasions to use a different approach. In 1914, as leader of the

¹⁹⁴ Gorham, Denison 62.

¹⁹⁵ Gorham, Suffragists 26.

¹⁹⁶ Gorham, Denison 56-57.

Canadian Suffrage Association, she stated that "the women of the world are not asking for the ballot as a right or privilege but because the social and political conditions of the day make it obligatory." ¹⁹⁷ Roberts cites the reason for this apparent capitulation towards moderation as resulting from pressure from conservative factions of other women's groups such as the National Council of Women of Canada. ¹⁹⁸ It seems logical to assume that if feminists modified their language through pressure from within, they would similarly be susceptible to pressure from without, in the form of a conservative or anti-feminist public.

Without the power to implement the changes they desired, Canadian feminists were dependent upon public support from a variety of different interests. As one sees from the examples noted above, no single rhetorical strategy or standpoint could have accomplished this goal. Feminist arguments thus ranged across a broad spectrum, usually attempting to appear moderate, despite their various aims. That this tactic was both necessary and often successful is suggested in the qualified support given by a male headmaster at Queen's University to the Montreal Ladies' Educational Association:

Because the aims of your Association are modest, and therefore suited to the present condition of popular sentiment with regard to Education for ladies in this part of Canada, because they are in the right direction

¹⁹⁷ Wayne Roberts 24.

¹⁹⁸ Wayne Roberts 24.

and promise to lead to greater things, I had much pleasure in acceding to your request to give the Inaugural Address of the year.¹⁹⁹

This conditional support reflected the fact that as public activists and speakers, reformers trespassed upon the male preserve of the public sphere. As documented in chapter two, the rules of engagement were established by a long precedent featuring a distinctly masculinist bias. A somewhat less restrictive opportunity for public voice existed within the traditionally female genre of novel writing. All of the feminist reformers examined in this chapter, Nellie McClung, Francis Beynon and Flora MacDonald Denison, were also feminist novelists. As such, it is an endeavour of considerable interest to explore their fictional writing to determine if there were differences both in tone and in content from that of their public activist discourse. We will now examine each writer in turn, reviewing excerpts from Nellie McClung's novel Purple Springs, Francis Beynon's book Aleta Dey and Flora MacDonald Denison's unpublished manuscript Li'l Sue. In reviewing these passages, I will further demonstrate the ideological complexity of the authors' thoughts as well as illustrate the ways their beliefs were manifested through their fictional characters yet often disguised in their public speech. Finally, I wish to foreground the contradictions in these feminist writers' visions, not with the intention to discredit but to make evident the inevitability of contradiction when the feminist, speaking subject is simultaneously in a position of both power and powerlessness.

¹⁹⁹ Ramsay Cook 124.

Purple Springs

Purple Springs was Nellie McClung's third novel, written in 1921 after the federal franchise for women had been achieved. In fictional form, it recounted the kinds of arguments being made for and against women's rights in the period leading up to the vote. The novel's protagonist, eighteen year old Pearl Watson, has been described as McClung's fictional alter-ego.²⁰⁰ Pearl is neither married nor a mother. The logic of her feminism is premised upon natural justice.

Individual characters in Purple Springs represent institutions and issues around which McClung developed her arguments against patriarchal privilege and women's economic and legal vulnerability. A character aptly named Mrs. Paine, for example, represents a woman disempowered by her position as a legal non-entity, having no economic leverage or legal recourse in her husband's plans to sell the family home against her wishes. Through her, McClung argues for the Dower Act which entitled women to legal claim of a percentage of the family estate.

Another of McClung's female characters endures social ostracism by perpetuating a façade of unwed motherhood in order to maintain custodial control over her child. Through this sub-plot, McClung illuminates the societal hypocrisy inherent in not legally protecting women's rights to function in the one capacity which society specifically sanctioned; namely motherhood.

²⁰⁰ Nellie McClung, Purple Springs (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) viii.

The protagonist's family is characterized as hard-working, honest labourers and as such, figuratively represent "common sense" as juxtaposed to the circuitous "logic" of government officials whose actions are premised upon self-interest and protectionism. But among the range of patriarchal representatives depicted in Purple Springs, as premiers, doctors and lawyers, McClung often distinguishes between the old and the new school. The younger males, though privileged, are often unaware of their patriarchal perquisites until they are explained bluntly by their older counterparts. It is the young lawyer, in his cross-country travels, who begins to note the disparity between the small size of the house and the large size of the barn. Similarly, McClung does not issue a diatribe about political patronage and disingenuousness through the voice of her feminist protagonist, but allows it to surface through the voices of government opposition members who attempt to convince the young doctor of the sagacity of their platform:

I do not mind telling you that I don't think any government of men are very keen on letting the women vote- why should they be? But there's always a way out. What will happen is this- if our fellows get in, they will grant a plebiscite, men only voting of course, and it will go strong against the women- but that will let us out.²⁰¹

Through various epiphanies, these young male icons of privilege and power begin to understand the gendered segregation of society and instead of becoming co-opted, begin to fight for change. In this way, McClung is able to mount a scathing attack on women's subordination to patriarchal institutions and practices while simultaneously creating an opportunity for change.

²⁰¹ McClung, Springs 123.

Avoiding the defeatism inherent in characterizing societal structures as inevitable and immutable, McClung renders patriarchy as an anachronism about to be usurped by the more egalitarian thinking of younger generations of both sexes.

As a very young protagonist, Pearl Watson serves a similar function. With full-blown idealism, she advocates a perspective that is, as yet, relatively untainted by tradition's alibi. The story's provincial premier justifies the status quo by saying "The world is very old: certain things are established by usage and the very fact that this is so argues that it should be so."²⁰² Conversely, Pearl disallows any justification for current practices except that they serve the immediate interests of those in power. Her idealism condemns men's actions but not the inherent nature of men themselves. It allows for the possibility that men might redeem themselves through their actions. McClung also juxtaposes women of different generations. When Mrs. Paine argues that marriage means bondage and slavery for women²⁰³ and urges Pearl not to marry, Pearl's disbelief is depicted as naivete.

The larger narrative does not exonerate men for their actions or obfuscate their intentions. Mr. Steadman, the local member of parliament, makes his anti-feminist views explicit: "The women are getting all stirred up and full of big notions. We can hold them down all right,- for they can't get the

²⁰² McClung, Springs 222.

²⁰³ McClung, Springs 250

vote until we give it to them- that's the beauty of it." ²⁰⁴ But Pearl, with youthful innocence, insists that each of the novel's inequitable situations occurs not because men intend harm, but rather because they do not understand, "they have not thought, they do not see." ²⁰⁵ This interpretation allows room for enlightenment through education and also depicts the novel's feminist heroine as open, optimistic and conciliatory. She exists in an ephemeral state that comprehends the systemic discrimination but still believes in a peaceful, cooperative resolution.

On the societal level, Pearl's contingent state of idealism can be paralleled with the state of early twentieth century Canadian feminism. Notwithstanding the fact that other countries' resistance to feminist demands, such as Britain, had moved beyond rhetorical negotiation to violent activities, Canada still existed in a transitory, historical period of societal calm which required immediate agency, before the reformers' mood and methods changed. The potential for change existed. McClung was sympathetic to the British suffragettes' methods, saying:

womanliness, and peaceful gentle ways, prayers, petitions and tears have long been tried but are found wanting...these brave women in England, maligned, ridiculed, persecuted, as they were, have been fighting every woman's battle, fighting for the recognition of human life, and the mother's point of view. ²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ McClung, Springs 113

²⁰⁵ McClung, Springs 74.

²⁰⁶ McClung, Times 25.

Despite the popularity of her writing, McClung has been criticized for her sentimentality. At the novel's conclusion, erring men are reformed simply through dialogue. The novel's protagonist makes several impassioned speeches about gendered inequity that open the eyes of previously abusive men. As Blore has noted, McClung's novels were a form of consciousness raising, and it was therefore important that the heroine should triumph over adversity rather than succumb.²⁰⁷ McClung was also a believer in the social gospel movement whose goals were for the establishment of equitable, peaceful relations between people. She admitted that her novels were "sermons in disguise."²⁰⁸ They functioned as a didactic illustration of the status quo while envisioning positive, productive change. As Hallett and Davis have noted, practically no in-depth analysis of McClung's fiction exists. The satiric humour in her fiction has been ignored and the didacticism has resulted in the dearth of its serious literary consideration.²⁰⁹ Hallett and Davis credit McClung's "voicing the voiceless" as forcing society to listen to the consciousness of women.²¹⁰ In contrast, in the introduction to *Purple Springs*, Randi R. Warne attributes the popularity of McClung's writing to the time in which it was written. The period included an expanding literary market

²⁰⁷ Blore 55.

²⁰⁸ Strong-Boag, Crusader 281.

²⁰⁹ Hallett and Davis 228.

²¹⁰ Hallett and Davis 269.

which valued the Canadian standpoint for its role in nation-building.²¹¹ She does not see the novel as pure didacticism but rather a political commentary framed in conventional romantic melodrama.²¹² Again, there is the inherent suggestion of strategy involved. Warne suggests that the novel's romanticism may have been the "necessary 'hook for readers otherwise unwilling to listen to lectures on women's rights.'" ²¹³ However, as we shall see, McClung was not be the only reformer to use fiction as a platform to address her reformist concerns and agenda.

Li'l Sue

Though McClung's novel Purple Springs contained a spirited defense of the value of honest labour, a concern with the hierarchies of the capitalist class system did not inform her fiction as it did in the work of Flora MacDonald Denison. Denison utilized the genre of fiction to critique more than society's inequitable gendered relations. Her unpublished manuscript, entitled Li'l Sue, is both a study of gender and class inequity. In the novel's first sentences, Denison places culpability for cruelty or inhumanity not upon the individual, but on a "system of economics bad in essence" which becomes worse with time.²¹⁴ This preface alerts the reader that in the narrative that follows, the division between people is not solely on the basis of their sex, but

²¹¹ McClung, Purple Springs xii.

²¹² McClung, Purple Springs xxvii.

²¹³ McClung, Purple Springs xxxiii.

²¹⁴ Flora MacDonald Denison, Li'l Sue, ms, Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto, Box 5, 1.

also upon their societal position and the degree to which they sanction an economically based stratification system.

The heroine of Denison's story is a girl named Li'l Sue who, as the presumably orphaned daughter of an unwed mother, is considered both socially and legally "illegitimate." She is adopted by an upwardly mobile Christian family, not as a sibling for their children but as a nurse maid. In addition to the class-conscious views of her adoptive family, the reverend of the local church also attempts to impress upon Li'l Sue that, in light of her questionable family status, she should be grateful for her present position in the household of a respectable family. He thus reinforces the classification system that considers the unwed mother as erring, and the child forever branded with her mother's shame. Through these different discourses, Li'l Sue's subordinate class position eventually becomes self-evident and she begins to develop a rebellious inner self despite her obedient outward demeanor.

The protagonist's position as servant provides Denison with a forum through which she discusses issues important to her own feminism. Li'l Sue's precarious status that distinguishes her from her employer, designated upon birth and not through her own agency, is continually perpetuated by the black dress and white apron she wears as a badge of servitude.²¹⁵ Denison personally objected to these markers of class, believing that labour was

²¹⁵ Denison 20.

essential, respectable and, despite differences in type, equal in value.²¹⁶ Her abhorrence for the hierarchies of class and the capitalist system is evident in the heroine's speech on the day she leaves the family to make her own way in the world:

I acknowledge no superiors, excepting those whose ideals and aspirations are higher than mine! I will hate you no longer, but I will continue to hate as long as there is breath in my body, THE SYSTEM THAT LOWERS HONEST WORK, THAT GIVES NO DIGNITY TO THE USEFUL, AND THAT BRANDS THE UNBORN BABE!²¹⁷

The fact that the extended capitalization occurs in the original manuscript leaves little doubt that this emphasis had considerable meaning to Denison. In keeping with her personal belief that economic independence was the key to women's equality, one of Li'l Sue's first actions upon her release from domestic servitude is to enroll in business classes. From there, as Gorham has noted, the novel departs from the traditional narrative in that Li'l Sue rejects romance to seek personal and financial independence.²¹⁸ If McClung's heroine embraced romantic fulfillment, and Denison's repudiates it in favour of her ideals, Beynon's feminist protagonist would fall somewhere in between.

Aleta Dey

Aleta Dey, Beynon's only novel, was first published in 1919 when the author was thirty-five years of age. Two years before, she had been fired

²¹⁶ Gorham, Denison 20.

²¹⁷ Denison 33.

²¹⁸ Gorham, Denison 67.

from her position as the women's page editor of the Grain Growers' Guide due to her vocal pacifism. The novel has been considered autobiographical²¹⁹ and investigates issues important to its author such as religion, socialism, feminism and pacifism. With regard to the latter, it is of interest to note that Aleta Dey was ignored by reviewers from prominent Canadian magazines. The Grain Growers' Guide, which had praised Nellie McClung's patriotic collection of essays, *The Next of Kin*, in December 1917, gave no review space in 1920 to the novel written by their former women's editor."²²⁰

The novel traces the life of a free-thinking young girl as she develops into a defiant young pacifist-suffragist. Despite the heroine's unconventional thought, the first person narrative laments the process by which children are socialized out of their individuality and strength. The character introduces herself in the novel's first lines:

I am a coward. I think I was born to be free, but my parents, with God as one of their chief instruments of terror, frightened me into servility. Perhaps I owe it to the far horizons of my Canadian prairie birth-place; perhaps to the furious tempests that rocked our slim wooden dwelling, or it may be to the untrammelled migration of birds to distant lands that the shame of being a coward has survived their chastening. I know that these things have always beckoned to something in me that vainly beat its wings against the bars of life.²²¹

²¹⁹ Francis Beynon, Aleta Dey (London: Virago Press, 1988) v.

²²⁰ Anne Hicks, "Frances Beynon and the Guide," First Days, Fighting Days: Prairie Presswomen and Suffrage Activism, 1906-1916," ed. Mary Kinnear (Regina: University of Regina Press, 1987) 42.

²²¹ Beynon 62.

As Aleta grows up, she continues to encounter the tyranny of authority in many different incarnations. She struggles to understand the church's dogmatic beliefs but is punished for asking irreverent questions. In the home, religious doctrines are utilized to break children of their will and to sanction the father's patriarchal privilege. In tandem, the institutions of the family, religion, and the education system teach children not to think for themselves, but to consume knowledge that has already been interpreted for them. In this stifling atmosphere that celebrates conformity, the heroine muses introspectively:

Why did I find myself apologetic when I did not agree with the majority. When I was given a mind that questioned everything, why was I not given a spirit that feared nothing? Since minds came into being that questioned things it seemed the world needed that kind of mind. Then why be ashamed of it? So I reasoned fruitlessly, for the wings of my soul had been clipped in my infancy. I had lost the power to fly while retaining the will to rise above the clouds of bigotry and prejudice.²²²

As in McClung's Purple Springs, Beynon's characters each represent issues or institutions in the larger society. The first of Aleta's two potential love interests is a paradigmatic symbol of the patriarchy: an older politically conservative man whose perspective on life is completely at odds with Aleta's. He is juxtaposed with a younger, Socialist radical named Ned, with whom Aleta's temperament is much more closely aligned. Despite the latter's liberal ideologies, he is equally incapable of envisioning real equality between the sexes:

²²² Beynon 66.

"What's the use of starting a lot of things and having to give them up when you get married?" Ned objected.

"Maybe I wouldn't have to give them up." I said.

"You'd have to" he returned flatly.²²³

Through the heroine's interactions with both men, the novel explores the resistance to organized authority that is central to Beynon's feminism. In the authorial preface to the book, she stresses that to ensure every person the right to a voice, some have to "take up the heavy burden of rowing against the tide of public opinion."²²⁴ Despite the heroine's impassioned narratives, Beynon de-mythologizes the romanticism of the radical by saying that, in reality, he is a "drab medium sized [individual] ...discouraged and saddened by his social isolation, but going doggedly on, impelled by some unknown law to follow the stony path of resistance."²²⁵ It is a very non-sensationalized view of the activist's motivations.

Beynon's character of Aleta is far closer to the classic literary "New Woman" than either McClung or Denison's protagonists. In keeping with the New Woman's challenge to the dominant ideology regarding woman's sexual passionlessness, Aleta is receptive to pre-marital relations with McNair:

I felt his muscles tighten up. I knew that my head against his arm was a great temptation, and to-night I wanted it to be so. I had thrown discretion to the winds. With two words McNair could have picked me up and carried me off to be his wife in fact at least.²²⁶

²²³ Beynon 83.

²²⁴ Beynon 7.

²²⁵ Beynon 172.

²²⁶ Beynon 183.

All three novels, Purple Springs, Li'l Sue and Aleta Dey, provided forums for their authors to either extend the arguments they made in their public speeches and writing, or to configure them differently. They had the authorial power to determine the result of their heroine's actions, to either sanction or punish them, and to determine to what degree their heroine's fictionalized communities would accept or reject their arguments. But to do this required the writers to conceptualize their respective narratives in a coherent fashion. That is, supposing it were possible to write an entirely coherent text, McClung, Beynon and Denison had to be positioned in a location and utilizing a discourse that recognized the credibility of the narratives they depicted.

Upon examining each novel's conclusion, however, we find the suggestion that there was some distance between the authors' idealism and the fate awaiting those who attempted it. Neither Purple Springs nor Aleta Dey reconcile feminism with personal happiness, and Li'l Sue does not attempt to define the protagonist's fate in leaving its narrative open.

In Purple Springs, for example, despite the fact that the preceding narrative has almost entirely emphasized Pearl Watson's feminist drive and determination in the public sphere, the novel ends with her rather abrupt return to domesticity. Her feminist motivations are subsumed by romantic concerns. After having brought down the government through the staging of a mock parliament, Pearl becomes disillusioned, and the narrator reports:

Suddenly it had all become distasteful to her – hollow – useless - vain- what was there in it?- a heavy sense of disappointment was on her. After all, was life going to disappoint her, cheat her- giving her so much, and yet withholding the greatest joy of all? ²²⁷

In a passage that appears to undermine and de-politicize the heroine's previous actions and intentions, Pearl reassures her future husband when he says:

"These new women can get to be so independent-they are uncomfortable to live with." Pearl rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, like a well-pleased kitten. "No chance!" she said. "I'll let you pay every time-I'll just love spending your money- I won't ever know it from mine." ²²⁸

The return of the feminist protagonist to the conventional narrative territory of matrimony can be read as anticlimactic considering that McClung had already publicly speculated alternatives. She had previously described an ideal marriage as one in which:

women will be economically free, and mentally and spiritually independent enough to refuse to have their food paid for by men; when women will receive equal pay for equal work, and have all the avenues of activity open to them...when men will not be afraid of marriage because of the financial burden, but free men and women will marry for love, and together work for the sustenance of their families. ²²⁹

That McClung did not utilize this idyllic construction of marriage in the conclusion of Purple Springs raises the question of whether she believed it was plausible either personally or to her readers. There appears to be a

²²⁷ McClung, Springs 203.

²²⁸ McClung, Springs 334

²²⁹ McClung, Times 84.

contradiction between the protagonist's spirited fight for women's access to the public sphere, and her disillusionment with the fruits of her efforts. How can this conclusion be read?

One interpretation is that because marriage and motherhood were important to McClung and these discourses formed an integral part of her feminism, she intended to emphasize that a woman could participate in the public sphere and have a family life. Purple Springs was not the manifestation of a feminist utopia, as the novel Herland was to Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It did not intend to deconstruct societal institutions and create new ones. Instead, it rendered a pointed critique of masculinist and institutional privilege with an optimistic belief in the capacity for progressive change. As anti-feminist forces had charged that feminist activism was unwomanly, McClung may have been attempting to show that they were quite compatible, even within the small town setting in which her fiction takes place. By marrying her heroine quite conventionally to the respectable town doctor, McClung abided by the traditional narrative fate for heroines; namely marriage or death.

Francis Beynon also toed the traditional line in her conclusion to Aleta Dey by choosing death for her protagonist. Aleta's death suggests that her unconventional beliefs and feminist activism cannot be reconciled with her contemporary society. In an impassioned speech before her murder, when faced with a choice between love and her ideological beliefs, she mourns, "I don't want to come out strong. I want to be weak and conventional. I want to

be happy.”²³⁰ She renounces the qualities that had previously distinguished her independent spirit and juxtaposes strength with happiness. Rather than being an agent of change, she suggests that perhaps in after-life, the world will be one in which an individual's natural instincts would be less antagonistic to his/her ideals.²³¹ This capitulation celebrates conformity, not a world that has grown to accept its radicals.

On the other hand, Aleta's death occurs while she is in the act of being a speaking subject. She is fatally assaulted while espousing her feminist views publicly. A potent image, Aleta's death symbolizes what Angela Leighton has described as the figure of the woman poet “ who dies as she sings, or who must die because she has dared to sing.”²³²

The question remains whether these possible contradictions and seeming retractions are fatal to the credibility and integrity of the narratives or its authors? I would argue that they are not. Their existence accurately reflects the dissonance between the women's feminist visions and the very real constraints of their lives: a dialectic between head and heart. McClung, Beynon and Denison were speaking subjects, women who had a public voice at a time in which feminine visibility and power were neither recognized nor sanctioned. They understood the systemic discrimination that structured women's subordination, yet had little political power to affect change, except

²³⁰ Beynon 227.

²³¹ Beynon 228.

²³² Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynold, Victorian Women Poets (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) xxxvi.

that which they could convince those in power to grant them. Their narratives are an amalgamation of theory and practice: rational argument and lived experience. They are the result of an individual's constitution through the competing discourses of being female, feminine and feminist. In the introduction to Beynon's Aleta Dey, for example, Anne Hicks observes that in its last quarter, the novel's mood "splits and swings like a pendulum, from peculiar, nihilistic despair to the archaic romanticism of its conclusion."²³³ Although this is explained as an autobiographical debt to Beynon's own life, it appears to disappoint in terms of literature. Though Beynon's personal narrative may be contradictory, her fiction was not expected to show the same ruptures in its narrative tapestry.

Through their own activism and the public's reaction to it, Beynon, McClung and Denison each learned that their distinct subjectivities, deciphered through their sex, race, class, and marital status either conferred or withheld personal privilege and political credibility. With the recent era of the New Woman as a warning, they pressed for all the advantages which a discourse of biological determinism could grant them and attempted to broaden society's hegemonic boundaries, not demolish them. To abandon the institutions of family, femininity and motherhood would have meant cutting the foundations from underneath themselves. This paradox materialized in their fiction, sometimes in an easily apparent manner, and at others, as a faint undercurrent. In their writing, these authors demonstrate what Jacques

²³³ Beynon xiv.

Lacan has described as “a contradiction between the conscious self, the self which appears in its own discourse, and the self which is only partly represented there, the self which speaks.”²³⁴

Thus it becomes apparent that much more can be read into early twentieth century feminism than is on the surface of the activists’ speech and texts and what is reprinted by accounts of social historians. With this in mind, the next chapter will return to the interpretations of Canadian feminist historians regarding this period in our history. It will theorize possible reasons why such a rich, diverse history of Canadian feminist activism has been reduced in its complexity to one rather conservative reading of maternal feminism. By examining some of the discourses that may have influenced a particularly conservative interpretation, I will argue for a different reading of early twentieth century Canadian feminism.

²³⁴ Belsey 64.

CHAPTER FOUR: "RE-INVENTING RADICAL"

We are more conservative than the Americans in our hopes, more conscious of our limited powers. Canadians often point out that while the American Constitution promises "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the constitution of Canada—written in the 1860's in England—sets a more modest goal; "Peace, order and good government." This difference reaches into every corner of the two nations.²³⁵

In this chapter, two fundamental questions are considered. First, how did a period in our country's nation-building history that is so diverse in perspective and rhetoric and rich in irony and contradiction become characterized by a singular, predominantly conservative label of maternal feminism? Second, how did maternal feminist rhetoric come to be regarded as conservative?

At a time when women enjoyed few legal protections and rights, reformers' demand for the vote was radical. It represented the potential for women's permanent place in the public sphere and an equal voice in the affairs of the country. The ballot was the critical point at which "public opinion takes hold on public action... where sentiment crystallizes into law."²³⁶ From a position of relative legal and economic vulnerability, women's agency to obtain suffrage was a direct challenge to both societal conventions and institutions. Men and women's distinct gendered roles had been structured

²³⁵ Robert Fulford, "Mary Pickford, Glenn Gould, Anne of Green Gables, and Captain Kirk: Canadians in the World's Imagination," Lecture at The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 5 June. 1997.

²³⁶ Ramsay Cook 228.

upon biological determinism, positing that men's reason and women's emotion suited them for entirely different spheres. The vote, indeed women's interest in all public activities, was a direct indictment of men's ability, and past record, to adequately care for the rest of society. The wide scope of reform activities including suffrage, temperance, public health and social welfare, and legal and economic reform among others, demonstrated the incalculable depth of women's discontent and disdain. The struggle to reconfigure the status quo, regardless of whether it was through arguments of maternal feminism or natural justice, was an unmistakable rejection of long-standing doctrines of male superiority and their putative compatibility with the prerequisites of the public sphere. It co-opted Rousseauian social contract theory that required each individual's participation in public decision-making in order for a government to be considered legitimate. Women's large-scale public participation also threatened to reconceptualize society's class structures by making the "angel in the house" an anachronism. It had the potential to highlight the contradiction between the celebration of protected femininity and society's quiet sanction of working class women.

Much of the interpretation of social historians regarding this historical period has been conservative. When Jane Errington contends that women were propelled out of their homes by a sense of religious duty and a desire to control society's deviants and that they only challenged the status quo because "they believed it was absolutely essential to infuse the public world

with a domestic, female morality," ²³⁷ women's activism is made to appear reactionary, rather than visionary. To make the unmediated suggestion that women "accepted without reservation the hierarchical organization of the social and economic order" ²³⁸ is to make an indiscriminate, sweeping generalization which is as ahistorical as it is oppressive. At best, it conflates women's desire to take control with their ability to do so, and at worst, perpetuates a de-politicizing portrayal of reformers as co-opted and non-feminist.

At this historical distance from the period under study, it is exceedingly difficult to ascertain with any kind of certainty, that maternal feminism was a "conviction" ²³⁹ rather than a strategy. Are we able to categorically state that reformers internalized the essentialist doctrines that were prevalent in their times? Is this assumption even logical? We've established that maternal rhetoric was premised upon the belief that women's distinct nature endowed them with a higher morality and that women were seen to be naturally passive, nurturant and emotional. In keeping with Pythagorean binaries, these feminine qualities were established in relation to men's oppositional, hierarchically privileged attributes. That this essentialism was polar, but relational, is critical. Maternal feminism is distinguished from maternal essentialism in that it utilized half of the essentialist equation and rejected the

²³⁷ Errington 75.

²³⁸ Errington 77.

²³⁹ Kealey 7.

rest. That is, reformers capitalized on the attributes that reified women's strengths while critiquing men's absolute rights to, and performance in, the public sphere. How could reformers attempt to reconfigure society through their agency if they had been wholly interpellated? Maternal feminism has thus been conflated with biological determinism, assuming that reformers believed wholesale in their innate natures rather than recognizing and utilizing a particularly opportunistic discourse of femininity and maternity.

This thesis does not dispute that maternal feminism used rhetoric which celebrated women's distinct natures. As I have attempted to demonstrate, women used myriad methods to both sanction and extend their participation and power in the public sphere. Inductive and deductive logic to co-opt and counter essentialist restrictions, humour and fear-mongering all featured in discourses of duty and of rights. However, its maternal cloak should not obscure its radical motivations or its diversity. Women's rights were a request for power, not because women acknowledged men's superiority, but because the changes they desired had to be granted by those in power. This elite had to be convinced that there was some benefit to themselves and to society in giving women political power and place that would not result in their own enforced abdication or decreased privilege. The feminist rhetoric of societal betterment, of philanthropy, and especially of women's continued preservation of sacred societal institutions and practices was essential to this persuasion. This rhetoric had to be convincing enough to persuade those individuals and groups whose power and privilege lay in

the balance. If designed for this important purpose, why would historical reviewers be less susceptible to the apparent sincerity of these arguments?

In fact, maternal feminists have been taken at their word to such a degree that they have been held accountable for rhetoric that is outside this maternal stereotype. In an environment where women were legally non-persons, disenfranchised with restricted property, wage and custodial rights, Bacchi notes that “a degree of sex antagonism seems to have motivated the women.”²⁴⁰ Strong-Boag also observes that McClung’s arguments often have “anti-masculine overtones. Men were frequently portrayed as aggressive, selfish and uncontrollable. Women were their victims. This myopia is often an unfortunate corollary to the claim of female moral superiority.”²⁴¹ Strong-Boag’s negative reference to McClung’s “anti-masculine feelings” seems to undermine or refuse the validity of her experiencing anger. Is there an implicit coercion in the expectation that reformers should not be angry? In Writing a Woman’s Life, Carolyn Heilbrun states “above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one’s life.”²⁴² McClung wielded reputedly masculine logic with precision and was successful in several different public forums despite the social, legal and economic disincentives for women. Is palpable frustration not to be

²⁴⁰ Bacchi, Liberation 3.

²⁴¹ McClung, Times xx.

²⁴² Heilbrun 13.

expected when, despite these successes, the following perspective remained common:

The degrees of the university we consider inappropriate to ladies...Their proper sphere of action is the domestic circle. Their highest duties they owe to the family, which also calls forth their most shining virtues. Therefore her education should be practical, fitting her to govern her household with wisdom and prudence. For her own sake, her mind should be cultivated, but her mental culture should not be what is regarded as distinctively intellectual.²⁴³

Despite the conservative, conciliatory mantle, anger underwrote the satire, the premises of the mock parliaments, the narrative rejections of domestic bliss, and also the farm women's letters to the woman's page editor of the Grain Growers' Guide. If the letters of the general population demonstrate an anger and impatience with the distance between their responsibilities and their rights, it is quite rational to assume that feminist activists experienced the same dissonance. Taken together, this wide range of emotions, rhetoric, tactics, interests and diversity of participants works against a single conservative reading of early Canadian feminism.

The obvious question, after arguing that a prevalent conclusion is incorrect, is to query why it is prevalent. This is difficult to theorize but a return to post-structuralist tenets is helpful. Post-structuralism proposes that subjects are discursively constructed and that these discourses are historically specific. Discourse produces and reinforces power but also

²⁴³ Ramsay Cook 123.

“undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.”²⁴⁴ As readers, we are agentic in constructing meaning that is never fixed but contingent upon our particular social and historical location. As Weedon notes, the “legitimation of particular readings and the exclusion of others represents quite specific patriarchal, class and race interests, helping to constitute our common sense assumptions as reading and speaking subjects.”²⁴⁵ Poststructuralism celebrates the notion of the essential contradiction in the fragmented self and as such, would eschew an interpretation that sought to sublimate the inconsistencies in reformers’ logic. Specifically, it would resist a narrow interpretation of one kind of feminist activism as a coherent label for early twentieth century feminism, and would not juxtapose different rhetorical strategies as belonging to entirely distinct perspectives. As women are “both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses,”²⁴⁶ resultant meaning must be as polyphonous and variable as the discourses which constructed it.

In addition to their socio-historical distance from the early twentieth century, Canadian social historians read this period within a particular nationalistic discourse. Historical accounts are located within a bias which the original events, and their subsequent interpretation helped to construct. According to Eva Mackey in The House of Difference, the myth of national

²⁴⁴ Weedon 111.

²⁴⁵ Weedon 168.

²⁴⁶ Belsey 65.

tolerance is the central foundational myth of Canadian nationhood and identity.²⁴⁷ According to Mackey, this tolerance is commonly presumed to be manifested in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which recognized Aboriginal peoples as autonomous and self-governing peoples; the Quebec Act of 1774 which enabled the future legal provision of a distinctive society in Quebec; and the celebrated impartiality of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.²⁴⁸

This mythic heritage of forbearance is as important to our national identity as the tendency to differentiate ourselves from other countries, notably the United States. For example, our nation-building narrative propagates an image of peaceful co-existence with Canada's Aboriginal peoples, in contrast to American policies of cultural genocide. Despite our affinity to a national identity of tolerance, pacifism and courtesy, Mackey notes that our national heritage is actually one of "contradictions, ambiguity, and flexibility."²⁴⁹

Mackey posits that these narratives of nationhood work through

a body of stories and myths with which people identify and which stand for, or represent the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation. As members of an "imagined community," we see ourselves in our mind's eye, sharing in this narrative...connecting out every day lives with a national destiny that pre-existed us and will out live us.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Eva Mackey, The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada (London: Routledge, 1999) 24.

²⁴⁸ Mackey 23.

²⁴⁹ Mackey 25.

²⁵⁰ Mackey 71.

If we integrate Mackey's theory of Canada's nation-building mythologies with a poststructural insistence on our social, cultural and historical locatedness, we may be able to distinguish an interpretive pattern of early twentieth century feminism. Catherine Cleverdon, in the preface to her book, The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada, is perhaps the most explicit in her subscription to these nation-building myths. In juxtaposing American and Canadian routes to their respective national goals, she writes:

The southerly and more assertive member of the family chose a picturesque shortcut. Beset with excitement, even violence, at frequent intervals along the way, it has afforded a paradise to the historian and tale-spinner. The more circumspect northern member chose a longer and less scenic route, arrived safely in the course of time- and then lamented audibly over the lack of colour in their journey." ²⁵¹

She concludes that Canadian feminists waged a "wholly dignified campaign."²⁵² Others have been less overtly stereotypical in their characterizations but have certainly drawn upon conservative images of peacefulness and co-operation nonetheless. Bacchi stresses the moderate character of the feminist struggle, both of reformers whose view of women's rights meant "the right to serve" and also of politicians who "generally had no reason to fear [suffrage] and simply waited for the appropriate moment to introduce it." ²⁵³ This spirit of generosity would likely have come as some surprise to Frances Beynon who lost her job at the Grain Growers' Guide over

²⁵¹ Cleverdon vii.

²⁵² Cleverdon vii.

²⁵³ Bacchi, Liberation 3.

her vocal pacifism, and also to Flora Macdonald Denison, who lost the leadership of the Canadian Suffrage Association for her denouncement of flogging as a punishment.²⁵⁴

This interpretive conservatism influences the way particular groups are remembered. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), for example, has come to be regarded as a group of puritanical cranks for their efforts to achieve national prohibition, despite the fact that prohibition was an anti-establishment position. It is largely forgotten that they were the first English-speaking organization to support the cause of suffrage by petitioning the government that "the rights of citizens not be denied on account of sex."²⁵⁵ This clear equal rights mandate from Canada's largest women's organization contradicts Errington's suggestion that "there were only a handful who...demanded equality and the vote as a natural right."²⁵⁶ Similarly, as the WCTU's petition was struck in 1893, it refutes the popular conception that for most activists, interest in enfranchisement only occurred after they realized it was the vehicle by which to achieve their particular reforms. Thus considered, is it correct to assume that suffrage was won chiefly due to the "moderate character of the movement"²⁵⁷ or was the

²⁵⁴ Gorham, Denison 61.

²⁵⁵ McClung, Springs 22.

²⁵⁶ Errington 77.

²⁵⁷ Bacchi, Liberation 3.

movement moderate because success appeared likely? This distinction is important. The first interpretation, in accordance with our national mythology of toleration and conservatism, suggests that both feminist and anti-feminist forces found moderation to be acceptable and desirable. The second option suggests that radical measures were a potential choice should negotiation ultimately prove ineffectual. The latter appears to have been what McClung was threatening when she suggested to Premier Roblin that if the government would not support suffrage, women would "make a fight for it."²⁵⁸ A conservative reading of early Canadian feminism tends to play down the degree to which Canadian feminists were influenced by their more militant British counterparts. Emmeline Pankhurst visited McClung's home during her 1911 visit to Winnipeg, after which McClung noted:

I regret lawlessness. Whether all the militants have done was right God only knows but I would rather take my place with them in the last day than with the women who sit at home babbling of indirect influence and womanly charm but never doing anything for the betterment of humanity.²⁵⁹

As Gorham notes in "Singing up the Hill," McClung's support was echoed by most equal rights reformers. Their attitude "was one of sympathy rather than empathy."²⁶⁰ The violent attacks upon suffragettes by police and press illuminated a coercion that elicited a decided wary reaction by Canadian reformers. Newfoundland suffragist Armine Gosling defended the British

²⁵⁸ Gorham, Suffragists 44.

²⁵⁹ Hallett and Davis 119.

²⁶⁰ Deborah Gorham, "Singing Up the Hill," Canadian Dimension 10.8 (1975):34.

suffragettes because newspapers “exaggerate the bad, and suppress the good, and the truth is not in them.”²⁶¹ British activists living in Canada also played an important role in Canadian feminism. Rose Henderson, Ph.D and member of the British Labour Party, emigrated to Canada in 1911. She joined the highly political organization, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in which Laura Jamieson, Helena Gutteridge and Violet McNaughton were also members, among others. Due to these associations and influences, it is difficult to posit that early Canadian feminism would have maintained its mythic conservatism.

Apart from a national discourse of tolerance, the tendency toward conservative readings may be influenced by a second major consideration: the popular conception of feminism as occurring in “waves”. I utilize the notion of waves for clarity, despite the uneasiness I share with many others who critique it as both reductive and an erasure of feminist activity occurring between these prominent periods.

Early twentieth century “first wave” feminists are considered distinct from the birth of their “second wave” progeny in the 1960’s, both in terms of chronological time, but also of feminist goals and insights. Second wavers critiqued their ancestors’ presumed contentment with marriage, motherhood and the family. The absence of issues such as abortion and contraception

²⁶¹ Duley 22.

from their platform in favour of issues such as temperance made them appear “unrepentently bourgeois in social position and belief.” ²⁶²

According to Strong-Boag in Daughters of the True North, 1900-1995, second wave feminists were “more diverse and less sanguine” ²⁶³ than their predecessors, though admittedly still confronting their own politics of inclusion and exclusion. Western belief in theories of linear development and the inexorable march of progress likely contribute to this discourse of differentiation. It is difficult for one wave to see themselves as similarly situated to their forerunners for myriad reasons, not the least of which is the disempowerment inherent in the realization that women continue to struggle through time against the same forms of oppression. Another factor is that each wave tends to configure their strategies of subversion upon different premises. In Fear of Feminism, for example, a second wave professor of women’s studies observes that her third wave students often “interpret critiques of marriage...as evidence of their author’s dysfunctional families.” ²⁶⁴ This is an interesting parallel to “second wavers’ ” beliefs that turn of the century reformers’ inadequate critiques of marriage provide evidence of their dysfunctional feminist consciousness. Despite the century which separates

²⁶² Judith Allen, “Contextualising Late-Nineteenth-Century Feminism: Problems and Comparisons,” Journal of the Canadian Historical Association 1 (1990): 18.

²⁶³ Veronica Strong-Boag, “Daughters of the True North, 1900-1995,” The Beaver January 1995: 79

²⁶⁴ Lisa Marie Hogeland, “Fear of Feminism. Why Young Women Get the Willies,” Ms. Magazine Nov.-Dec. 1994:18.

them, the tactics of first wave feminists have some commonalities with third wavers who state, "We want not to get rid of the trappings of traditional femininity or sexuality so much as pair them with demonstrations of strength or power."²⁶⁵ With the benefits won for them through a century of feminist activism, third wavers are able to overtly declare an interest in creating "models of contradiction."²⁶⁶ For "third wavers", this contradiction is not seen as irrationality, but as a celebration of multiplicity. Third wave feminism shares much with post-structuralist theory in that it "encompasses the apparently contradictory with ease - even, on occasion, with pleasure."²⁶⁷

In contrast, second wave feminism was marked by attempts to appear unified. Their sublimation of the diversity and contradiction of first wave feminism may have been due to their desire not to appear fractious or to present a divisive politic. Poststructuralism's insistence on the fragmented and de-centered self posed problems for mobilizing around the feminist "we". As humanist discourses had defined "contradictory knowing" as flawed

²⁶⁵ Melissa Klein, "Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community," Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism, ed. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 223.

²⁶⁶ Klein 22.

²⁶⁷ Bronwyn Davies, "Women's Subjectivity and Feminist Stories," Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992) 59.

knowing and lacking in direction,²⁶⁸ poststructuralism appeared to many, to have a de-politicizing effect on women's organization and unity.

What these comparisons illustrate is that a recognition that feminists operate in different socio-historic contexts is essential to appreciating their objectives, methods and achievements.²⁶⁹ It avoids the tendency to judge earlier feminists by our contemporary standards and find them wanting, "as if...Wollstonecraft would have turned out better work if she had had a word processor or a microwave oven."²⁷⁰ If we compare Wollstonecraft with McClung, for example, we find that interesting differences in interpretation emerge, despite the similarities of their rhetoric. As noted, both women emphasized reason, used discourses of both duty and of rights, and relied heavily upon the discourse of motherhood. They both critiqued the church and societal conventions such as marrying for economic support. In their fictional narratives, despite the century which separated them, they both discussed women's property and custody rights, their subjugation under marriage and the legal double standard. Both have become feminist icons of their own times. However, as Valerie Bryson writes in Early Feminist Thought, "viewed through the smoke of the Bastille, Wollstonecraft loomed like a blood-stained Amazon, the high-priestess of loose-tongued liberty."²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Davies 55.

²⁶⁹ Allen 18.

²⁷⁰ Gubar 455.

²⁷¹ Bryson 21.

Despite her pacifism, she was associated with the violence of the French revolution whereas McClung's sympathy with the violent tactics of her British counterparts has not hindered her interpretation as the conservative voice of early twentieth century Canadian feminism.

By what process did McClung come to personify feminism during this period over other prominent feminists? In her 1993 Carleton M.A. thesis, Lisa Gaudet suggests that McClung's heralding as a woman worthy has been at the expense of those whose "class, region, religion, or ethnicity rendered them either oblivious, indifferent, or resistant to the pursuit of equality, [becoming] the *persona non grata* of Canadian women's history." ²⁷²

What are the consequences of privileging a conservative reading of maternal feminism and allowing it to stand as an accurate representation and framework for turn of the century feminist activism? The seemingly unanimous, conservative emphasis may obscure the contributions of women who do not fit this predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual, liberal feminist perspective. This particular interpretive lens may also affect our national, historical consciousness, both present and future.

As a Canadian nation, we are reputedly plagued with a constant struggle to define ourselves, both relative to others, and on our own. This definition, its inclusions and exclusions, are highly political. As Charles Taylor has noted:

²⁷² Gaudet 5.

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.²⁷³

While this oppression occurs widely with subaltern groups, it also has a reductive, restrictive influence on our national identity. Would Peter Harcourt's belief that "Canadians have never been empowered by a manifest destiny"²⁷⁴ change if he believed our ancestors had a comprehensive, strategic plan for our national development? Specifically, would there be a perceptual difference in our self-concept if early twentieth century feminists were conceptualized as politically astute and agentive, rather than possessing a vague notion of equal rights and an equally indistinct desire to join the public sphere as "helpmate"?

In Becoming Indigenous, Eva Mackey states that the most fundamental assumption is that a nation needs a strong, bounded and distinct national identity but that this entity is itself hegemonic.²⁷⁵ With regards to early Canadian feminism, this hegemony has been manifested through

²⁷³ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, ed. Amy Guttmann (Princeton, 1994) 25.

²⁷⁴ Peter Harcourt, "The Canadian Nation-An Unfinished Text," Canadian Journal of Film Studies 2.2-3 (1993):15.

²⁷⁵ Mackey 89.

conservative readings, privileging maternal feminism over other equally viable alternatives or combinations. The satire, anger, discursive manipulation, and especially the inherent contradictions have been subordinated or erased in favour of a rather wooden reading of feminist co-optation and myopia. Reformers' discordant subjectivities and competing discourses appear to have been experienced interpretively as disorder: unassimilable into a national identity which desires coherency. One of the benefits of applying a clear, consolidating label such as maternal feminism to a period of enormous diversity and disparity is that order is imposed. Emiko McAllister states that "objective linear narratives function to repress the irrationality that is central to what we experience as violent."²⁷⁶ I contend that it is a sense of non-physical violence, such as psychological discordance, that is manifested in the contradiction and ambivalence of the reformers' public speech and fictional narratives. Rather than highlighting this discord, early Canadian reformers have been accommodated into a national narrative of cooperation, tolerance and conservatism.

I would argue that it is this assimilation that is problematic for understanding early Canadian feminism. In the eloquent introduction to Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History, Strong-Boag writes

Inasmuch as we as human beings need to understand ourselves by placing ourselves in time, to tie ourselves to those who came before us, it is only right that women-and men too- know as

²⁷⁶ Kirsten Emiko McAllister, "Narrating Japanese Canadians In and Out of the Canadian Nation: A Critique of Realist Forms of Representation," Canadian Journal of Communication 24 (1999): 82.

much as possible about the lives of their female ancestors. To be denied a sense of one's own history [is] indeed to be informed that there exists no history worth recounting.²⁷⁷

Insofar as we investigate our women's history without disturbing the traditional binaries, not only between women and men, but also the paradigmatic ones among women themselves, our history is similarly limited. To conceptualize early twentieth century feminism as a maternal feminist era, in which this term is equated unproblematically with interpellated essentialism, is to be ideologically reductive towards the period's diversity and inherent radicalism. To juxtapose maternal feminism with equal rights feminism is to create an artificial dichotomy, replicating the terms of the masculinist, liberal humanist discourse. To draw out the most conservative rhetoric of one feminist such as Nellie McClung, and then extrapolate it not only to represent her feminism, but also to juxtapose it against other feminists, is to perpetuate the old dichotomies between good and bad women. Moreover, to read the period's rhetoric without questioning the existence of irony is to contort logic to a singular degree. It presupposes a solemnity and co-optation of half of the population that is virtually unfathomable in a democracy. Hutcheon notes that when irony "is considered the mark of the intellect, woman is denied access and understanding."²⁷⁸ By refusing to contemplate early twentieth century

²⁷⁷ Strong-Boag, Canada 1

²⁷⁸ Hutcheon 8.

Canadian feminist rhetoric in anything but its most literal sense, interpreters risk perpetuating these gendered inferences.

Conservative feminist activism is thus incorporated into our national mythology and that which is not comfortably accommodated is obscured. This occurs because historians are necessarily situated in, as much as constitutive of, the discourses which make alternatives less visible. Belsey suggests that if readers have not recognized the silences in a text, "it was because they read from within the same ideological framework, shared the same repressions and took for granted the same silences."²⁷⁹ While this is unlikely between the feminist "waves", it has considerable explanatory power about socio-historical situatedness among those of a distinct time period.

The invisibility of the women and their rhetoric that is categorically "outside" what we conceive as predominant, functions as evidence to our culpability in perpetuating the terms of the discourse which originally erased all women. As Joy Parr has written, it is important to unmake the chain of binary oppositions to "rethink the categoricism ...which has illuminated the previously invisible but now threatens to obstruct our view of the living space beyond."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Belsey 137.

²⁸⁰ Roberta Hamilton 19.

Hegel states that we can only flourish to the extent that we are recognized.²⁸¹ In terms of a Canadian identity, to what extent may we flourish? Do we seek to know the past to understand the present and future, or do we reconfigure the past to accord with our pre-existing national mythologies? That is, have historical events constructed our self-concept or has this identity constructed our interpretation of our past? If the answer lies primarily in the former, then future scholarship on early twentieth century feminism has much scope in celebrating its polyphonous discourses and thus learning a great deal more about the complexity and diversity of our ancestors and their motivations. If the researcher's interest resides in the latter, there is considerable potential in investigating how this perspective informs our practices and determines our future.

²⁸¹ Charles Taylor 50.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

then the day came
when the risk to remain
tight in a bud
was more painful
than the risk it took
to blossom

Anais Nin

In this thesis, I have highlighted the strategic diversity inherent in first wave Canadian feminist activism. Refuting the notion that there exists but one dichotomous choice between confrontation and capitulation, I have attempted to demonstrate that reformers' various challenges to the status quo were rich in strategy, subversion and vision. I have argued that this period cannot adequately be represented as either inherently conservative or categorically maternal feminist. Instead, I have endeavoured to suggest the strategic necessity and inherent logic of early reformers adopting a non-threatening and conciliatory position when negotiating from a position of relative powerlessness. An essential premise of this thesis is that reformers' putative conservatism was actually a Trojan horse. From conservative pleas to assist man as feminine helpmate, the more mid-range argument of "equal but different", to bold assertions claiming equal entitlement, the broad scope of their challenge suggests that reformers were not wholly interpellated in a belief in biological determinism. Rather, they understood the utility of subtle tactics for achieving radical goals. Within discourses of rights and of duty, the

dialectical subversion and the appropriation of venerated symbolic icons, early feminists carefully and astutely negotiated for power.

I have also argued that early twentieth century rhetoric must be read with an eye to irony. Utilized as a discursive strategy, irony is a critical explanation for the conservatism in what otherwise were radical demands for power. The belief, or absence of the belief, that irony is heavily implicated in the discourse of first wave feminists delineates the difference between two fundamentally different interpretations. The first is a view of reformers as those who were convinced of their rights to improve society based upon their maternal-feminine qualities. The second sees reformers as convinced of the need to manipulate conceptions of their maternal-feminine qualities to obtain their rights.

Finally, I have juxtaposed different genres of writing to suggest that different forums elicit or encourage different perspectives. This is not a straightforward or entirely conscious process. As Valerie Gauthier has suggested, the aphasic woman and the woman who mimics male speech are equally maimed:

As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt.²⁸²

There exist contradictions and limitations both in the women's discursive construction and within the formats available for the expression of

²⁸² Yaeger 151.

their beliefs. Literary traditions do change over time as does feminist historiography. As noted, broad analyses have been refined by investigations into the interrelationships of gender, race and class. Relatively recently, the activism of individuals and organizations outside the white, middle class, Anglo-Saxon mainstream has begun to be explored. Recent studies of mainstream organizations have also changed, increasing their attention to nuances of reformers' race and class location. It has become more common for historians to note the contradictions in the women's reform ideologies and to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of their subjects' lived experiences. As Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde note in the introduction to Gender Conflicts, feminist scholars have

felt compelled to emphasize the contributions of women in the past. In the process, however, their work at times neglected the class bias and xenophobic views and practices of some of the women they studied. This was particularly true of many studies of middle-class suffragists and first-wave feminists. Here, there was a tendency to see a racist ideology as a minor slip in an otherwise progressive platform.²⁸³

Instead, Iacovetta and Valverde suggest that early Canadian feminists' experiences should be "analysed rather than celebrated." The premise of this thesis mediates that suggestion very carefully. I have suggested that contradiction itself should be regarded as essential, positive and revealing. I do not propose that the issues constituting the contradiction, such as racism, be applauded, but that these disparities hold enormous potential in understanding the ruptures in the subject's narrative tapestry.

²⁸³ Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) xv.

I hope that the emphasis in future scholarship, in conjunction with continued investigations of the larger feminist movement and its motivations, will move away from Bacchi's "study of the elite." I favour a writing of history that Iacovetta and Valverde have described as "from the bottom up."²⁸⁴

Through the study of diaries and personal papers, the voices of individual women can augment and personalize the important framework which social historians have thus far recovered and constructed. Taken together, these studies of the individual constitute what Elianne Silverman has termed a "collective autobiography."²⁸⁵ As Silverman writes about the Alberta frontier women who described their life stories to her in their interviews:

The women who spoke with me, although initially reluctant, were eager, in the end, to tell their stories – eager, I think, to participate in the creation of a world in which women have a place, a place they would make public and visible. They were seeking historical validation, a sense of continuity, a knowledge of community and of their role in the western prairie community. Instead of spiritual isolation, they were aware of asserting a tradition, a continuum with those who were there before and those who will come after. They wanted to leave a trace of themselves, not to disappear unnoted. They knew that what has been deemed the private realm- and that is most often the realm of women- is as meaningful and as real as the public world of "important people." The words they spoke are part of the long process of making women visible in our tradition.²⁸⁶

As eager as those women were to tell their stories, I am part of a growing number of people who are eager to hear them. I appreciate the

²⁸⁴ Iacovetta and Valverde xiii.

²⁸⁵ Eliane Leslau Silverman, The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930 (Calgary: Fifth House Ltd., 1988) 4.

²⁸⁶ Silverman 4.

sentiment behind Virginia Woolf's suggestion that women "ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn...for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds."²⁸⁷ I emphasize the continuum, the female lineage that begins long before Astell and Wollstonecraft, includes McClung and Denison, through Woolf and Bronwen Wallace. A Canadian poet, the late Wallace paid homage not only to those who came before, but those women who would come after:

faces of friends
of women I have never even seen
glow on the blank pages
and deeper than any silence
press around me
waiting their turn²⁸⁸

I, too, am aware of standing in between generations of women. My interest in early twentieth century feminism stems from a desire to explicate my maternal grandmother's era to those who have never had contact with its participants. Born in 1892, the power she wielded was through discourse. Sophisticated and subtle, it bore little resemblance to the characterizations of first wave feminism as blind to issues of race and class, and content with myriad gendered inequities. My insistence on reading early twentieth century feminism within the context of irony and multiple discourses pays homage to the diversity and complexity of her life and by extension, the lives of other women. Emphasizing the multiplicity of constitutive discourses ensures that

²⁸⁷ Woolf, Room 66.

²⁸⁸ Bronwen Wallace, Signs of the Former Tenant (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1983) 51.

women's history does not simply replicate the same masculinist binaries that have structured liberal humanist assumptions for so long.

A return to a study of the individual, then, must be a study of the subject as contradiction. That is, a celebration of the omissions, silences and ambiguity, the paradox of a "self" constituted through multiple, often competing discourses. Contradiction must be viewed as an enabling rather than a divisive politic, where the existence of multiple discourses functions as an indictment of the incoherencies of master narratives, rather than the rationality of the individual. This approach adopts de Lauretis' suggestion that we work against the grain and between the lines to engage that which has "been rendered almost unrepresentable by the existing modes of hegemonic discourses."²⁸⁹ In so doing, we create an enabling liminal space that recognizes and celebrates Canadian women's existential complexity and scope. It is upon the foundation that early twentieth century Canadian women struggled to build, that we have our own feminist view of the world around us.

²⁸⁹ Griselda Pollock, Differencing the Canon. (London: Routledge, 1999) 8.

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

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<u>Page Number</u>	<u>Original Source</u>
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109	Brun Kulla, "The Country Teacher's Standpoint", letter to the <u>Grain Growers' Guide</u> , 25 June 1913.
93	Faith, "Women Should Have Business Training", letter to the <u>Grain Growers' Guide</u> , 4 December 1912.
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Appendix A: Original source information for citations in The Proper Sphere: Woman's Place in Canadian Society. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976.

Appendix B: Original source information for citations in A Great Movement Underway: Women and The Grain Growers' Guide, 1908-1928. Winnipeg: The Manitoba Record Society, 1997.