

# **“A Woman Doesn’t Represent Business Here”: Negotiating Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Australia**

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Attempting to access services in Katherine, a tiny frontier town of Australia’s Northern Territory, Mrs. Jeannie Gunn was consistently re/located in her moral feminine role with the firm reminder: “A Woman doesn’t represent Business here” (Gunn 1908) Although Mrs. Gunn and “Mine Host” (the Hotel Manager) had their encounter in the farthest frontier of Outback Anglo-Australia, she still had no excuse to transcend morality by entering the masculine arena of business. In fact, the harsh conditions of the colonial frontier created enough threat to Victorian social order, that strict adherence to “the civilizing roles of genteel society” became a self-conscious performance, a means to lessen the ambiguities of bushlife (Sobel 1991).

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Nineteenth-century Victorian England witnessed the birth of the “Ideal Woman.” Developed within the socio-economically elite world of the British upper classes, this role effected gender relations around the world, as the British Empire spread cultural prescriptions throughout its colonies. The Victorian “Ideal Woman” became the template for defining and constructing concepts of “femininity,” the blueprint for maintaining gender relations (Strobel 1991; Vicinus 1972).

Bounded and carefully prescribed behavior defined the role of this ideal woman. She was essentially of the ruling classes, although less perfect versions of her existed throughout the social hierarchy. The Perfect Lady was high priestess in the infamous Victorian cult of domesticity:

Once married, the perfect lady did not work; she had servants. She was mother only at set times of the day, even of the year; she left heirs in the hands of nannies and governesses. Her social and intellectual growth was confined to the family and close friends. Her status was totally dependent upon the economic position of her father and then her husband. In her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption, and the worship of the family hearth (Vicinus 1972:ix).

The perfect lady was expected to guard that hearth against the immoralities of the public male sphere. She protected her own nebulous Virtue by appealing to the “Better Nature of Men,” thereby maintaining British societal concepts of Morality. As Australian scholar Lynette Finch

noted, emphasis on domestic Hearth Protection was central to nineteenth-century definitions of moral femininity:

[morality] relied upon references to observable behaviour, and the role that that behaviour played in the maintenance of social order. People engaging in forms of behaviour considered to threaten social order could not be considered moral. As the family unit was perceived as the basic unit of order, and the cornerstone to social stability, those who did not marry but were not chaste either, were immoral (Finch 1993:17).

Any behavior perceived as threatening to the family was therefore judged essentially immoral. While men engaged in the business world, acting in the moral role of family provider, women protected this Family from the cruel ravages of the outside world. Or, as summarized by marxist-feminists, moral men produced; moral women reproduced (Finch 1993; Davis 1981; Windschuttle 1980). Thus, ideal Victorian gender roles were constructed in the context of social relations of labor (Bourdieu 1977), with moral masculinity located in the public arena of business (economically productive exchange) and moral femininity relegated to the private domestic sphere.

Obviously enough, the Perfect Lady, as an ideal gender archetype, could never be fully realized in any practical society. This Ideal Family, the basic unit of social order, referred essentially to only upper class households of Britain and the colonies. The concept of morality became a means to legitimate surveillance and control of the working classes (Finch 1993; Foucault 1979). The culture and everyday lives of the working classes were judged threatening to the Ideal Family, therefore immoral and worthy of social and legal restriction, causing the explosion of nineteenth-century social welfare and reform laws (Brown 1972). For example, drinking in public, previously considered a natural behavior for the urban poor, became outlawed in the early nineteenth century as temperance societies gained power. Alcohol itself was not the immorality. Drinking was immoral because it prevented men from holding their jobs and providing for the Family; it prevented women from hearing the cries of their hungry babes (Finch 1993:36). Women venturing outside their role as reproducer, or Hearth Protector, became a threat to the very fabric of society. They became thieves, whores, sluts, abortionists, sexual inverts, and shrews.

“Less than Perfect Ladies” were essentially immoral, requiring firm re-education to advance their salvation. As with all hegemonic constructs, these class based gender roles were highly negotiated, especially within the ambiguous social world of the colonial frontiers. This paper will now turn to explore a documentary and an archaeological Australian example of nineteenth-century gender role negotiation. As a predominantly nineteenth-century colonial culture, Australia is a particularly relevant historical environment to examine such negotiations. Developing a new national consciousness, Anglo-Australians of the Victorian Era nervously mediated their British concepts of masculinity and femininity with the harsh cultural and environmental realities of their frontier colony. With differing degrees of success, they struggled to construct an ordered engendered world out of the stolen *terra nullis*, the “wilderness” they called Australia.

**"not only in Melbourne, but whilst in the bush"**

Documentary evidence of negotiated femininity forms the underlying narrative of Mrs. Ellen Clacy's published journal, "A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia in 1852–53, written on the spot." (1853). Working around the Bendigo gold fields with her brother in 1852, Ellen Clacy carefully defended her status as a Perfect Lady through the travel tales published a year after her return to London. Struck with "goldfever," Melbourne and its gold fields represented the dark underside of social decay to this adventuring Perfect Lady. Living within the violent anarchy of this masculine colonial world, Clacy's interactions with the few other women at The Diggings were marked by highly ambiguous gender dynamics. Harriette Walters, a woman she encountered at the Eagle Hawk Gully, nursed Clacy's foot after the author fell into a mine shaft. While emotionally bonding over the foot, Clacy realizes that Harriette was the "young boy" she had met outside of Melbourne at the beginning of her journey. Harriette had come to Melbourne to join her mining husband, and when her ship arrived three months early, she had disguised herself as a boy in order to gain both employment unloading ships at the docks, and protection for her unsullied virtue. Once her husband had arrived, and they had journeyed back to his camp, Harriette abandoned her trousers to assume the Perfect Lady's role of homemaker (Clacy 1963:77–79).

Clacy's favorable representation of her mate Harriette contrasted strongly with that of "the amiable female," as Clacy and Brother named her:

Whilst her husband was at work farther down the gully, she kept a sort of sly grog-shop, and passed the day in selling and drinking spirits, swearing, and smoking a short tobacco-pipe at the door of her tent. She was a most repulsive looking object. A dirty gaudy-coloured dress hung unfastened about her shoulders, coarse black hair unbrushed, uncombed, dangled about her face, over which her evil habits had spread a genuine bacchanalian glow, whilst in a loud masculine voice she uttered the most awful words that ever disgraced the mouth of men—ten thousand times more awful when proceeding from a woman's lips. (Clacy 1963:52–3)

Although both women had highly ambiguous gender roles, Harriette's temporary excursion into masculinity had been abandoned once an opportunity at Perfect Ladyhood presented itself. When the author met her, Harriette had developed into the dutiful wife, already planning the feminine landscape of her cottage in Adelaide, to be purchased the following season. Furthermore, Harriette's motive behind compromising her feminine role had itself been faultlessly feminine: she had become a boy to protect her moral virtue. However, "the amiable female" adopted the worst vices of masculinity, and for immorally capitalist intentions. Obviously working class, she was Representing Business—and not just any business. She was selling illicit liquor out the back of her tent. Thus, she was a "much less than Perfect Lady;" she was a "most repulsive looking object."

Increasing the ambiguity of the situation, "the amiable female" had further undermined the boundaries between masculine and feminine identity. Harriette had maintained the role appropriate to the gender assumed. When playing a boy, Harriette had gone truly

transsexual—she adopted both masculine dress and social behavior. The boundaries, although transcended, were kept safely distinct.

However, “the amiable female” rejected and confused the entire dichotomy by behaving like a man while outwardly appearing female. In the chaotic world of the Bendigo gold fields, Clacy found such an embrace of gender ambiguities threatening and repulsive. As Kay Shaffer argued in *Women and the bush*:

Actual men and women are defined and define themselves within and across...masculine and feminine categories. Women can be afforded status when they act in ways deemed masculine, but their behaviour will be acceptable within a total social network of meanings only if they remain true to what is believed to be their feminine nature. Actual men and women may resist or oppose these meanings, but they are also inscribed within them. (Schaffer 1988:14)

“The amiable female” made pathetically ambiguous attempts at both gender roles. She represented sublime immorality. Mrs. Ellen Clacy defended her own questionable feminine role by highlighting the extreme gender role negotiation existing in the Australian colony.

### **“a factory of sorts, in which to contain them”**

Through the interplay of documents and material culture, these gender role negotiations can also be examined in the archaeological record. Constructed to contain female convicts transported during the mid-nineteenth century, the Tasmanian Female Factories attempted to reform women by teaching them domestic skills such as laundry and sewing. Convict Department officials believed such training would enable the prisoners to gain moral employment as domestic servants upon release, saving these “fallen girls” from their immoral criminal livelihoods.

Extensive historical research has recently proven that the vast majority of these women were convicted of thievery (Tardif 1990:4–9). However, the Factory convicts were and continue to be universally considered “a bunch of damned whores,” as Lt. Ralph Clark of the First Fleet termed them in June 1790 (Summers 1975:267). These conflicting perceptions manifest a significant manipulation of convict gender identity. Convict women were understood only in terms of their sexual immorality: their deviancy from Perfect Ladyhood mythologized as sexual contamination. As whores, their sexuality was Business. Since a Victorian lady “Doesn’t Represent Business Here,” convict women became the ultimate representation of female immorality. Their petty thievery became sexualized into a whorish identity—their living network of possible actions, livelihoods, crimes, and behaviors all summarized into an essentialized and determining sexual identity:

It is hardly surprising that the harsh conditions of life in 19th century England had left their mark on so many, but the image conjured up by these descriptions may be a little unfair. Features which might have painted a more complimentary picture were largely ignored....Only the negative

aspects, the deviations from normality, were thought noteworthy. Those women who met the authorities demands for quiet and industry were virtually ignored. As a result later writers, already preoccupied with the image of the "fallen girl," found nothing in the records to contradict their views. The convict woman who was at once a drunkard, and "abandoned prostitute" and a habitual thief emerged almost by default. (Tardif 1990:9)

Some of the convicts were a "stropmy mob," engaging in diverse statements of resistance to the containing and controlling power of the Female Factories. However, as with their social identities, their complex array of resistance strategies was observed, summarized and recorded primarily as sexual displays. Their perceived sexual behavior became a battleground of power negotiation, as Prison Officials attempted to enforce the acceptable Victorian feminine role of asexual motherhood, and convict women engaged in resistant displays of non-reproductive wanton lust.

This social dynamic can only be examined through the careful interplay of documentary and archaeological evidence. During the 1840's, prison architecture the Factories changed dramatically. Although solitary cells are common to most prison designs, Convict Department architects constructed new double-room solitary cells, the inner dark room serving as sleeping space, the outer room serving as a solitary work shop (Kerr 1990:153). Lit from a tiny slit window near the ceiling, the cells provided work light and inmate surveillance, while preventing illicit contact between prisoners. Taken by themselves, these new archaeological features seemed an anomalous and expensive display of containment for the Convict Department. However, when examined in light of documentary evidence, these new solitary cells become weapons in gender role conflicts at the Tasmanian Female Factories.

A letter from the Superintendent of the Factory at Ross Township to the Visiting Magistrate, contextualizes the archaeological evidence. Superintendent Dr. Irvine wrote:

...these young girls are in the habit of decorating themselves, cleaning themselves scrupulously, and making themselves as attractive as they can before resorting to the "man-woman," if I may so style her, on whom they have bestowed their affections: I believe a large proportion of the quarrels which too frequently occur amongst the women...are occasioned by, or take their rise from disagreements concerning the choice of a pseudo-male, or jealous feelings consequent on some of these disgraceful transactions. To my certain knowledge several disputes have arisen here, from these causes there have been letters intercepted and shown to you, which will prove the warmth and the impetuosity of the feelings excited in the women towards each other, when allied in such unholy bonds. (MM 62/31 13859)

Documentary evidence shows that the strange solitary cells were explicitly constructed to prevent the "disgraceful transactions" from occurring (Kerr 1990:152-3). Prisoners would never have the opportunity to form liaisons: they would sleep, eat and labor in strict solitary confinement. The contained prisoner would be socially and physically dislocated from her female peer network, leaving only the hierarchical and disciplinary convict/guard relationship to powerfully create a disoriented and docile, or easily re/formable lady (Foucault 1979). Not only were the homosexual relationships themselves distressing, the liaisons seemed

to account for the acquisition and distribution of illicit materials throughout the Factories. Confiscated alcohol, buttons, lace, and tobacco were all reported to be gifts exchanged to woo the “unnatural affections” of a potential lover.

Since documents necessarily provide a partial and undemocratic narrative of the past, the authenticity of Dr. Irvine’s account must be critically pondered. The sexual relationships themselves leave negligible concrete evidence to check against the existing documentary data. We must read the material world of the dominant elites (fencelines, doorways, barracks, and solitary cells) to consider the shadows of subordination that may have co-existed (Martin Hall 1994, personal communication). Why would prison officials bother to fortify a fenceline, brick over a window or erect a lamp post in any particular location? If institutional containment is understood to be a constant, fluid and partial negotiation of power, then the architectural features were responses or challenges to subordination as much as they were methods or statements of domination (Foucault 1979; Paynter & McGuire 1991). In other words, something was going-on at those Female Factories. Some unacceptable challenge to the containing structure of the prison occurred for the Convict Department to experiment with new dislocating forms of barrack architecture at those prisons. The question now obviously turns to consider the nature of the subordination: what were those “goings-ons?”

The specific question of “did they or didn’t they?” is unanswerable—we will never be able to positively know whether or not homosexual relationships “really” existed between convicts at the Female Factories. Instead, at least two possible pasts must be equally considered, two paths of implications and interpretations for the authenticity of female homosexuality.

If such illicit liaisons did not “really” occur at the Factories, why would the Convict Department exhibit such an overwhelming fascination with the subject, generating numerous letters, architectural designs, and even a Governor-General’s report for the British Parliament (Kerr 1990:145–158; Brand 1990:147–160). Acting through the social framework of Victorian gender roles, the prison officials judged women against the standards of asexual Perfect Ladyhood. The criminality of these convict women became oppositionally sexualized, as previously discussed. As whores, the totality of their actions and identity was sexual. Therefore, any relationship between the women would also be sexually perceived. “Normal” ladies had passionate friendships (Smith-Rosenberg 1985). Immoral convicts would cross that boundary and have sexual relationships (Faderman 1981). Causation of such Invert behavior, which was originally simply attributed to the moral inferiority of working-class culture, soon developed scientific physical and medical complications (Chauncey 1977).

As in Ellen Clacy’s travel journal, the ambiguously gendered behavior of inmates could only be perceived as a form of transsexualism—a member of each couple identified as the “pseudo-male.” Thus, Victorian concepts of femininity and masculinity remained preserved, even through the shifting of gender roles. Discussing nineteenth-century research into human sexuality, Lillian Faderman wrote:

They [“congenital inverts”] and some of the medical men who work with them, are convinced that [the inverts] are trapped in the wrong bodies. Most are also fixated on the notion that there is “appropriate” masculine and

feminine behavior and that same-sex love is sinful. Thus, if a woman loves a woman, it must be because she is a man. (Faderman 1981:317)

The imagined spectacle of female homosexuality was appropriated by the gaze of male Convict Department officials, used to titillate, to shock, to repulse, to illicit passionate responses within their circle. But ultimately it served to reinforce acceptable gender roles:

...it is my belief and opinion that these women are often distinguishable by exterior appearance. I mean to say that I think women belonging to the female convict class, who present a masculine appearance, who have a lower voice, and the development of a pair of imperfect moustaches, "cateris paribus" are very probably belonging to this class [of Inverts]...the "pseudo-males" in some cases have I believe a preternatural development of an organ peculiar to the female, the "clitoris" and are thus able to assume partially the functions of a male—in other cases I have learned that artificial substances mechanically secured to the person form the substitute for the male organ... (MM 62/31 13859).

The point of this letter is not merely to convey knowledge on the anatomy of sexual inversion, but to construct the scientifically observed biological alterity of the pseudo-male. The "true" identity of the essentially deviant Invert vulnerably reveals itself under the powerful gaze of the medically trained male superintendent. She is hidden no longer, and can be separated from re/formable convicts to prevent contamination (Ellis 1905). This biological identification of homosexuality formed the underlying frameworks of nineteenth-century sexology, such as in the pioneering work of Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Iwan Bloch and Magnus Hirschfeld (Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey 1989). Scientific descriptions of medical complications resulting from sexually deviant behavior resemble contemporary characterizations of other "female-troubles:"

...many of the women who are prone to these [homosexual] habits as well as other bad and impure ones ("ex grat" "masturbation") suffer so much and long from palpitation and functional, if not structural diseases of the heart and the frequency of complaints of palpitation &c. amongst the women shows that there is...some moral cause in producing uniform results in a number of individuals; Of course, as long as the exciting cause of disease is not removed, every species of treatment can be merely palliative. (MM62/31 13859)

Hysteria is a condition that often characterizes certain derangements of the nervous system, almost exclusively noticed in girls and women. In this state there is frequent inability to control the emotions and even the muscles.... In a hysterical fit the patient screams, throws herself down on the sofa, or glides to the floor, and is violently convulsed. She makes a great deal of noise, cries, sobs; gets very hot and exhausted, and when thoroughly worn out grows gradually quieter and becomes herself again. (Medicus 1910:125)

Thus, the presence of archival documentation on female homosexuality could be the result of negotiated gender constructs, rather than authentic occurrences. The imagined

spectacle of “disgraceful transactions” would have been perceived and constructed through the essentializing sexualization of the convict women, telling us more about gender perceptions of the male Convict Department officials than the actions of the contained female inmates.

However if, as documents suggest, homosexual relationships did exist between convict women in the Female Factories, then their actions could be interpreted as strategies of resistance to enforced Perfect Ladyhood. By dramatically displaying such unacceptable relationships, were convict women defiantly sending messages of non-compliance with enforced “femininity”?

A significant distinction must be made between the homosexual activity reported in the Female Factories and lesbianism as defined today. As a word coined in the early 20th century, lesbianism refers to a sexual and cultural identity which only exists in a modern context (Weeks 1977; Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey 1989). The convicts’ activities described in Convict Department documents could be more accurately identified as “bisexual,” since archival research shows that many of the women reported in homosexual liaisons later applied to the Convict Department for permission to marry men, their prospective spouses predominantly being free colonists, marines, or ex-convicts themselves (Tardif 1990:22). However, these heterosexual relationships must also be problematized; they could easily have been marriages of convenience, since social and legal oppression encouraged convict women to develop outward signs of Perfect Lady domesticity. For example, upon marriage legal responsibility for the maintenance of a female convict’s sentence transferred from the colonial government to her husband; she became “assigned” to him as an indentured laborer for the remainder of her sentence. This practice cast him as both spouse and parole officer. Although such a marital relationship produced significant domestic abuses, many convict women overtly employed marriage as means to escape the Female Factory System, as evidenced in the frequent complaints of prison superintendents (Tardif 1990:23). However, similar to “lesbian,” the term “bisexual” also invokes a particularly modern political identity, causing me to refer to the behaviors as “homosexual activities.”

Were these unacceptable relationships displays of resistance? Were they a method of adjusting to the brutally disciplinary Factory life? Were they a means of establishing and maintaining peer social networks within the prisons, thereby challenging the hierarchical authority of convict/guard interactions? Or were they simply a way to enjoy a measure of emotional support and physical pleasure in a tragically dehumanized environment? Such possible interpretations can all be read or constructed from critical examination of historical documents. If we believe that homosexual relationships did exist between Factory convicts, further historical and archaeological data must be examined in order to answer the question of resistance. We must critically interweave documentary and material lines of inference in order to construct meanings, intentions, and negotiations from the relationships. And we must ultimately read these meanings through the engendered and power-laden context of nineteenth-century colonial life.

This discussion began with the consideration of unusual solitary confinement cells. Recognizing that their very existence suggests a contestation of power within the Factories, an interpretation supported by the documentary accusations of female homosexuality, the spatial meanings of the architectural features can be archaeologically pondered: how were the new



solitary cells perceived by female convicts and by male Factory authorities? How did they transform the cultural landscapes of the Factories? What behavioral negotiations developed in response to the new architecture? Only through the careful interplay of archaeological and documentary resources can I begin to even imagine the active role material culture (such as solitary cells) played in the contestation of gender identity and power relations within the Tasmanian Female Factory System.

## Conclusion

The nineteenth century was a period of increased social order, with ideal gender roles of masculinity and femininity oppositionally constructed. However, much ambiguity often existed between and within lived gender identities. Both the structure and fluidity of these roles developed from Victorian social relations of labor, specifically from the discrepancies between ideal and "moral" domestic/public divisions of labor, and lived economic or social necessities which blurred those boundaries.

In all of the above examples, nineteenth-century Australian women mediated their ideal domestic labor role by assuming some characteristic of "masculinity." These women were all engaging in some form of Business, some kind of economically productive material exchange. Their negotiations of traditional Victorian divisions of labor, their mediation of the engendered production/reproduction boundaries became perceived as transsexualism, as their contemporaries (located within the same social world) viewed and textually recorded the women's ambiguous actions.

As historical archaeologists, we can explore the hidden conflicts. Through the interplay of material and documentary sources, we can challenge gender roles that have been legitimated as "traditional." By reconsidering historical texts through the context of architecture and artifacts, we can begin to question whether some ladies actually *did* Represent Business.

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