

ROMANCE AND THE FEMININE: GENDER AND GENRE IN THE NOVELS OF ROSAMOND LEHMANN

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Feminist analysis of the social, political and cultural upheavals of the interwar years inevitably confronts the problematics of gender in the interplay of power and sexual politics that characterised the period. This paper on Rosamond Lehmann, a writer whose work centrally addresses the impact of transition on women's sense of personal identity, begins with a reference to a cultural medium which became a key focus for exploring contemporary codes of representation and to a performer who embodied their ambivalence, Marlene Dietrich. Dietrich figures retrospectively as one of the most enduring images of a compelling female artist, and one whose performances self-consciously and very deliberately interrogate notions of gender and genre. Dietrich thus functions as a helpful lead in to a discussion of a writer of the 1930s and 1940s, and in particular as offering a perspective on reading the main texts with which this paper will deal, Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) and *The Ballad and the Source* (1944).

I want to begin with a brief reference to Dietrich's performance of "Falling in Love Again", a song which became associated with her and with her particular establishment of female power. I am especially interested here in the ways in which romance as a fictive construct becomes enmeshed with women's self-construction and with the anticipation of male response to representations of femininity during this period, as these become key indicators of cultural identities. The song, as performed by Dietrich, demonstrates a double-edged exploitation of literary clichés of the feminine, clichés that are deconstructed to ironic effect:

Falling in love again
Never wanted to
What can I do?
I can't help it.

Love's always been my game
I was made that way
I can't help it.

Men cluster round me
Like moths around a flame
And if their wings burn
I know I'm not to blame.

Falling in love again...

Dietrich's highly distinctive rendering of "Falling in Love Again" dramatically projects the ambivalence of the female subject as a participant in the game of romantic love. The song lyrics both suggest her own positioning as romantic victim and project an image of the *femme fatale*: "men cluster round me etc." implies a knowing manipulation of sexual power. The ambivalence is of course developed in the act. The cabaret performance itself, honed to perfection in the 1960s but based on Dietrich's earlier film appearances of the interwar years, both mimics and challenges established female stereotypes, in part through its reliance on cross-dressing, a device which tantalisingly re-enacts the equivocal location of female desire in its relation to the romantic scenario. The questions that this song raises are particularly relevant to Lehmann's writing: Does romance victimise or authorise women? Is "falling in love again" a compulsive activity with a willing collaborator who seeks erotic satisfaction in a masochistic form? Is it an addictive pleasure? Some of the lyrics of Dietrich's song - "never wanted to ... can't help it ... what can I do?" - imply that woman is helpless when caught in the grip of love, an unwilling and passive participant bound up in an inexorable process from which there is no escape. Others - "if they get their wings burnt ... " - indicate female control. The tone and manner of delivery similarly counteract the vulnerability implicit in the words. Dietrich is mannered, alluring and charismatic. The effect is to parody the artifice of femininity by suggesting that romance itself operates as a form of empowerment for women, releasing them from the constraints of formal social codes through their entry into a new arena where the exchange control mechanisms between women and men are radically revised. The performance also enacts as Laura Mulvey has argued, a supreme moment of erotic meaning (Mulvey 1975, 439), as Dietrich displays herself as female product, effectively combining two paradoxical gender identities in one, simultaneously passive sexual object and *femme fatale*. Dietrich's initial redrawing of the boundaries of gendered possibility (anticipating Madonna by sixty years) coincides with the emergence of the post-war emancipated woman in Western culture. As Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smythe point out in *Writing for Their Lives*, women artists in this period were often as adventurous in their personal lives as in their work, their artistic experiment finding its inspirational complement in their avant-garde lifestyles (Hanscombe and Smythe 1987, 7). This is certainly true of Rosamond Lehmann. Marlene Dietrich, film star and sexual icon was a major exponent of this form of cultural innovation, a cipher of the modern in her public expression of the instabilities of gender definition during this period. The ambiguity of her personal theatrical casting reflects and is repeated in the portrayal of women in both popular and serious literature of the same period. In particular the work of Rosamond Lehmann, a writer who was a best-seller in her day and who has since enjoyed a major British revival, explores the dilemma that Dietrich embodies.

Lehmann's early heroines, New Women of the twentieth century, find themselves enmeshed in stereotypic romantic narratives that force them to reconsider the nature of their own modernism. Her later ones - and in particular Sibyl Jardine, the enigmatic heroine of *The Ballad and the Source* - find in the romance myth a source of

gendered power that confirms their identity while at the same time operating as a form of entrapment. This paper addresses twin aspects of this problem: ways in which Lehmann herself deploys the romance genre to subversive effect, as an ingredient in the modernist interrogation of earlier narrative assumptions, and ways in which heroines of Lehmann's novels construct themselves within the romantic tradition and by so doing become both storytellers and protagonists of their own fictions.

Like Marlene Dietrich, although by no means so self consciously, Lehmann's heroines consistently find that love has always been their game, a ritualistic enactment of romantic scenarios that simultaneously fulfil their fantasies and compromise their integrity. For Judith Earle, the ingenue heroine of Lehmann's first novel, *Dusty Answer* (1927), her real education at Cambridge does not take place in the lecture theatre but in the theatre of passion, through the erotic encounters with both men and women that facilitate self-discovery. For Olivia Curtis, the heroine of *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), emancipated, a divorced woman who lives an independent life, falling in love proves both irresistible and treacherous. Despite her apparent sophistication and high level self-awareness, Olivia continually falls victim, not so much to erotic desire, but to the power of the romantic myth which makes its appeal to a collective female imagination. As Janice Radway has observed, "In repetitively reading and writing romances, ... women are engaging in a collectively elaborated female fantasy" (Radway 1987, 212). That is, the romance form itself, with its specialised appeal to the subliminal, creates a female community who participate in a shared response to the fantasies of power, escapism, and nurturing that romance literature variously embodies. This is seen most forcefully in *The Ballad and the Source*.

At the very beginning of the novel, the ten-year-old child, Rebecca Landon looks at a portrait of the young Sibyl Jardine:

a large, full-length portrait of a fair girl of about seventeen, dressed in white muslin with a blue sash tied around her small waist, and roses in her low bodice, her arms were round and bare, and she sat with her hands loosely clasped in her lap on what looked like a blue glazed earthenware barrel decorated with a pattern of dolphins. Behind were tall trees; and there were some doves on the grass round her blue-shod feet. While serious, piercingly beautiful, blue, full eyes staring out with fanatical directness, she was recognisably Mrs Jardine. As I gazed, the hopeless wish to grow up to look and dress exactly like that caused me a wave of almost nausea. (Lehmann 1982b, 21)

The important thing about this picture is that it is a work of art, and of artifice. Its image conforms to the prototype of romantic ingenue that Rebecca longs to emulate and that Sibyl (who is a manipulative and powerful woman) enacts for the purpose of being displayed as an art object. It thus relates crucially to the construction of femininity that both helps and hinders women to realise a sense of identity. Rebecca, aged ten, "had at this time a sense that I might be a more romantic figure than my parents and other

people realised" (Lehmann 1982, 10). Her need to find self-expression can be projected onto a stereotypic configuration of gendered identity that provides her with an artistic complement to her own indeterminate sense of self.

One of the crucial features of the love story as it has been interpreted by both women as writers and by women as readers is its ability to redefine the female subject position. The transformation scene is a central element in many romances, the transfiguration of Cinderella, for example, from her lowly, undistinguished ashes into glorious princess with access to power, achieved through the magical effects of true love. Rosamond Lehmann is one of a number of women writers of her generation who address themselves to the problems posed by such idealised analogues of the self and to the consequent revision of traditional romantic models. Lehmann's novels confront the romantic construct of the self and its status as iconic image for women who are dissatisfied with their own lives and bodies and unsure about their own selfhood. By dramatising how women strive to adopt an idealised femininity, Lehmann's work exposes the damaging results of their collusion in that pacifying device of patriarchal authority, the myth of romantic love. This in turn is linked to a parallel exploration of female sexual identity, and the anxieties that this subject generated during the period following the First World War. Lehmann's women fall in love repeatedly and unthinkingly, voluntarily offering themselves as sacrifices and redesigning their identities to comply with the image they wish to find reflected in their lovers' eyes. From *Dusty Answer* onwards her women see themselves as fragmented beings, adopting a variety of poses which conform to traditional romantic tropes of femininity. Trying to grasp and express a gendered identity, they are liberated by the freedom to express their sensuality while hampered by the versions of female self which the cult of femininity imposes on them. Further, the figure of the romantic heroine is not necessarily associated with a responsive lover. As can be seen from the example quoted above, it has in many respects taken on independent fictional life. It has acquired mythic status, and it is this status and its consequent impact on women that Lehmann is concerned to explore.

The Ballad and the Source takes as its central figure a woman who re-enacts a variety of female roles: Sibyl starts as ingenue (as seen in the portrait), marries a man who represents English *froideur*, falls in love (with a Frenchman) and has an extra-marital affair, as a result of which she is savagely punished with social excommunication, and prevented from seeing her baby daughter. Society has forced her to choose between sexual and maternal identities and the two roles are seen as essentially incompatible. Finally embittered, Sibyl Jardine determines to wreak revenge on the society which has conspired to deprive her of gendered self-fulfilment. To the men in the book she becomes the image of the terrifying Other, a powerful woman who, self-consciously deploys female stereotypes to her own advantage, and who consequently becomes a cipher which all other characters in the novel try to decode.

The Ballad and the Source is a text which takes female narrative strategies as its subject. It examines ways in which women create themselves as narrative subjects and how they use romance to enmesh others in their fictions, Sibyl for instance is a romantic novelist: she has published a sensational novel (only thinly disguised as fiction) based on

the events of her own passionate history. She is also at the centre of a web of stories told by other characters about her and to whom she becomes variously romantic heroine; femme fatale; tragic victim; passionate woman; manipulative bitch. Through the figure of Sibyl Jardine, *The Ballad and the Source* replicates distinctive strategies of female narratives re-presented in the light of a modernist consciousness. In particular, as Mulvey has remarked with reference to film, "in a world ordered by sexual unbalance ... the determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 1975, 475). Woman thus remains essentially an alien presence, isolated from male culture but, as with Sibyl, utilising the available female identities for tactical advantage. In *The Ballad and the Source* the oppositional practices of male and female worlds are made strikingly clear through the conflicting fictive images. The men are characterised by military metaphors; women by a range of romantic and sexual tropes - nature, flowers, serpents. Sibyl for example is frequently referred to as 'serpentine'. Lehmann's exploitation of the romance formula and the imaginative and erotic possibilities it holds for women is typically equivocal and frequently double-edged. In *Invitation to the Waltz* Olivia's attempts to authorise self are presented through a series of images of fragmentation. Coming tentatively to terms with herself as an object of desire, she continually mediates her own subjectivity through received models, and the text is permeated with references to the image of self as it is perceived by others, often through a refracted perspective. Both in this novel and in *The Weather in the Streets* Lehmann uses the idea of a mirror image for Olivia's attempt to find a visual complement to the self she idealises. As has been pointed out elsewhere, such use of the mirror in literature of this period dramatises both the wholeness of the ego and the division which characterises it (Defromont, 1991). For Olivia not only does the mirror metaphorise the fragmentation of the psyche (a not unusual occurrence in modernist literature), but it is used specifically by Lehmann to oppose conflicting idealities of Woman. In imagining herself the object of an evaluative and judgmental "male gaze", she can visualise her erotic potential as a measure of social success.

In *The Weather in the Streets*, off to the Spencer's house, in a significant repetition of a scene she has already rehearsed in the prequel to the novel, Olivia has to array herself in borrowed clothes in order to transform the avant-garde image she has so carefully cultivated over the past ten years into the more conventional persona that will suit her surroundings. Having re-encountered the romantic hero of her adolescent fantasies, Rollo Spencer, Olivia thus sheds her previously acquired identity in order to adapt herself to the image of the desirable Other that she knows will attract a lover. When she puts on her sister's dress and her mother's coat for the Spencers' benefit, she transforms herself into an immaculate copy of inherited femininity while fully conscious that she only mimics the poise and grace of a traditional model of womanly perfection. Despite her age and situation (a divorcée nearing thirty), the mirror shows her "a young girl and a pretty one" and it is this borrowed identity that earns Rollo's appreciation. "You're so young", he said. His voice full of pleasure. "You're like a young, young girl" (Lehmann 1982a, 64). As an adolescent Olivia had failed to find in the glass the reflection she needed for reassurance, but as an adult she has paradoxically learned to parody youthful innocence, the role she knows will please. This chameleon like facility

for adjusting to her surroundings only intensifies her dilemma, forcing her to confront her own negative of identity, catalysed by her love affair with Rollo. *The Weather in the Streets* shows Lehmann's explicit use of the romance plot to expose and explore the difficulties for women that the myth of the erotic Other creates. The cultural constructions of femininity are essentially debilitating for women in Lehmann's novels, but at the same time - and this is perhaps the crux of the problem - they are also energising. At the beginning of the novel, Olivia is compared to a sleeping beauty. "'You were like a statue'," Rollo tells her, 'I never thought I'd be able to bring you to life'". But in offering her the romantic experience she craves he also nullifies and destroys her by reducing her to a series of narrative tropes. This paradox operates initially through the romance format, which seduces its audience into a lulled receptivity (promising a happy ending) only to rebound on the reader in its deliberate withdrawal of this narrative satisfaction.

The Ballad and the Source develops this by depicting a woman who is both creator of meaning and enigmatic in her dazzling manipulation of the fictive images that have been exposed as essentially duplicitous. She represents the power of art:

She pursues truth with passionate, avid curiosity. She sees the possibility of it in the most unlikely places. She hunts it down. Testing herself ... experimenting with the design, the reflection that comes back to her, over and over again. Building up the proof once and for all. She's not sure you see. She hasn't much confidence. (Lehman 1982, 241)

As this extract suggests, Sibyl uses art as a means of securing and fixing an identity for herself. Again the images are those of refraction and the aesthetic, together with the idea of the illusory nature of the "truth" of a self. The formal structure of the text is also built on storytelling, on a series of narratives told to an impressionable listener who is enraptured by the romance of narrative itself and the subject positions it offers her, but who at the conclusion to the novel is ultimately left with a sense of confusion as to the real meaning of the feminine. Although produced in a very different context - and with a far more complex referential range of resonance - the representation of Sibyl Jardine suggests the same essential enigma of feminine identity as does Dietrich's dazzling stage performance. Femininity is an act, but it is one imposed on women by a culture that locates their identity in the erotic. As Rosamond Lehmann's fiction demonstrates, it can therefore be utilised to double effect.

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