

# Catherine Pratt: 'What Had She to Do with Angels?': Gender and Narrative in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*

**Author:** Catherine Pratt

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MANY scholars have been preoccupied by Richard Mahony's spiritual quest and his struggle to understand what makes life meaningful. Recently, feminist scholars also have been drawn to *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, and they tend to discuss the novel in terms of the presentation and development of female characters, particularly Mary, and of the politics of gender in the novel.<sup>1</sup> Two aspects of the novel — Mahony's struggle and the politics of gender — have not been considered together or, indeed, as related. In *The Fortunes*, the question of how the events of an individual life might be charged with meaning or, in my terms, how personal narrative might be generated, is indeed central. I would argue that this question is presented and addressed by the text as intrinsically linked to the construction of gender. Essentially, the text presents us with two different kinds of narrative; focused on the characters of Richard and Mary, these two are intrinsic to the gendered experience of that character. Furthermore, Mahony's story often has been discussed at the expense of Mary's: while the two cannot be considered except in relation to each other, the focus of this paper is largely on Mary and the development of her narrative.

One must hasten to add that while experience is never unproblematically gendered in this novel, and requires a far more lengthy analysis than this paper can provide, its exploration of narrative meaning does occur in the context of a critical attention to the realities of Victorian society, which certainly enforced a strict demarcation between spheres it defined as masculine and feminine. In this context, the linking of 'intense individualism' and the desire for 'spiritual emancipation' (163) in Mahony's narrative may be seen as specifically masculine in many ways. It is also increasingly anachronistic in the materialistic world of the novel. On the other hand, Mary's way of making life meaningful is through relationship, and particularly through the relationship of motherhood.

Ironically, motherhood is suppressed in the early part of the trilogy. Mary is seen largely from Richard's point of view, and what we see is that figure of ideal Victorian womanhood, the 'Angel in the House'. This suppression, or silencing, is significant, firstly because colonial masculinity appears to depend upon it for a coherent, integrated sense of itself. Secondly, it is significant because as motherhood emerges from beneath the ideal, it represents a different kind of narrative, one which highlights the anachronism of Mahony's. This narrative is ultimately offered as an alternative wherethe (naturalistic) conditions of the novel and the world it presents radically undermine the possibility of transcendence and the grounds for belief in God. By the end of the novel, Mary is no longer silent, and the metaphysical consolation that would transform her husband into an angel is rejected in the reflection: 'and what had she to do with angels?' (826). Ultimately, very little indeed.

Mahony is impelled through the text by his sense of his lack of spiritual wholeness, and the meaningfulness of his living in the present depends upon his belief in God and a life beyond the worldly one. Mahony is preoccupied with 'pierc[ing] the secret of existence' which he articulates in the following questions:

*What am I? Whence have I come? Whither am I going? What meaning has the pain I suffer, the evil that men do? Can evil be included in God's scheme? (163)*

For Mahony, these questions can only be answered through the postulation of a 'Hereafter', which would prove 'the endless groping, struggling, suffering ... but rungs in the ladder of humanity's upward climb' (467). This climb is thus envisaged also as a forward progress through time:

*Even in himself, who had won through to the belief that life was a kind of semi-sleep, death the great awakening, it [John's illness] called up the old nervous fear of being snatched away before he was ready to go. (521)*

Recent work on male and female autobiography can provide an illuminating model for understanding this kind of narrative.<sup>2</sup> Mahony's sense of his life's progression is inscribed by a masculine teleology which constructs life as the successful progress towards the achievement of unified, integrated selfhood. Mahony may reject success defined only in material terms, but his spiritual questing does represent this striving towards personal wholeness. At stake for him is a whole history of thinking about the world which highlights the relationship between God and the individual. This relationship is assailed firstly by evolutionism, and secondly by the extreme materialism of colonial society. As he blackens the borders of his Bible in an effort to adapt his sense of the spiritual to these new conditions, he signals the death of what he writes about. This seems intrinsically connected to the fact that 'the thought he ha[s] to spare for his fellow-men [is] of small account' (163). With the philosopher whom he criticises, he too will ultimately cry: 'I am affrighted and confounded with the forlorn solitude in which I am placed by my philosophy ... begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed by the deepest darkness' (162).

Ironically, in view of this isolation, marriage provides the structural and thematic frame in which meaning in the text is worked out. From its opening with the gold licence hunt, the story moves quickly to Mahony's introduction and marriage to Polly. As Mahony idealises Polly as stereotypical maiden/wife/mother, she becomes the matrix of values which integrate his sense of the world. Ironically, her emergence as a presence in the text must contribute, then, to the shattering of that matrix. In addition, as the novel progresses, Mary also comes to embody, in his mind, everything he so despises in the material world. His narrative becomes centred around his struggle to reject her and what he thinks she represents. Marriage may also be seen as the archetype of those ties from which Mahony takes flight throughout the novel. It also stands in ironic contrast to the supreme value Mahony places on his individuality. The structural necessity of Mary and marriage in the text parallels and underlines the claims of her narrative, which is defined by her sense of relationship to others.

In *Australia Felix*, however, Mary does not appear as an independent presence in the text but is constructed by Richard according to Victorian stereotypes of femininity. He has an ideal of what a wife should be, and this is literally coloured by aesthetic and romantic fictions:

*... there descended to him ... from some shadowy distance, some pure height, the rosetinted vision of the wife-to-be which haunts every man's youth. And, in ludicrous juxtaposition, he saw the women, the only women he had encountered since coming to the colony: the hardworking, careworn wives of the diggers; the harridans, sluts and prostitutes who made up the balance. (34)*

This sounds very much like the 'damned whores and God's police' dichotomy identified by Anne Summers. Mary is present in the text as an aesthetic ideal, and there is a recurring emphasis on her physical appearance. Her objectification as body seems to begin when Mahony is entranced by the vision of her slender ankle disappearing over the window sill, and this is reinforced by his inability to remember the details of her face, only her eyes. There seems also to be an implicit correlation in Richard's mind between beauty and virtue. He and John Turnham contemplate Mary at the theatre, her 'beautiful, rounded young shoulders' standing out of 'her blue silk bodice', her eyes 'moist from the noble sentiments of *The True Briton*' (223). It is crucial to note that she has been helping John in his election campaign. Present in the text only as the object of the male gaze, the ideal woman, as Adrienne Rich says, 'serves the interests of the patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism' (45).

The notion of the text as both an instrument and territory of suppression is pointed up in the use of letters as part of the depiction of the courtship. We are given the details of Richard's letters to her, and told that:

... Polly drank in his words, and humbly agreed with all he wrote, or at least did not disagree; and from this, as have done lovers from the beginning of time, he inferred a perfect harmony of mind. (76)

On the other hand, all we read of Polly are snippets of which Richard is particularly fond, arguably because they are consistent with that 'rose-tinted vision':

*It pleased him, did this prim little note: there was just the right shade of formal reserve about it. Then he began to study particulars: grammar and spelling were correct; the penmanship was in the Italian style, minute, yet flowing, the letters dowered with generous loops and tails. (58)*

Of course, the use of letters also highlights the idea that each lover's knowledge of the other is limited to a romantic ideal, so that the physical distance between them becomes ontological as well.

The concept of inscription provides a metaphor for the dynamics of Mary's suppression in the text. She is a reflection only of Mahony's own thoughts and values — simply 'all one lovely glow of acquiescence' (64). This idea recurs in Richard's mind in relation to Emmy:

*this lack of preoccupation ... this freedom — even emptiness if you would — of mind, into which oneself poured the contents, ... rendered a very young woman so delightful a companion. (451)*

The feminine is imaged here as the empty vessel, or blank slate perhaps, awaiting masculine inscription.

In the light of this, Mahony's constant reference to his wife as 'little Polly', 'Pollykins', 'little wife', 'little Jenny Wren' and so on may be seen as an active construction of her young womanhood as *tabula rasa*. That Richardson is emphasising Polly's childishness in order to make this point is supported by the fact of Polly being somewhat younger than her prototype, Mary Richardson. The dynamic of power within the relationship is explicitly patriarchal in that weakness and dependence are reinforced as part of her material condition as 'child wife'.

Part Two of *Australia Felix* opens with the Eureka Stockade, with 'little Polly' docilely (or not so docilely, as a brief insight into her thoughts tells us) returning indoors to her dishwashing. In *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Deborah Gorham points out that '[i]t was seen as necessary that a woman retain a childlike simplicity precisely because it was felt that her life ought to be restricted to the domestic sphere and her domestic calling was seen as both the cause and effect of the need to shelter her from the rigours of the public sphere' (6). This outside, public world of active struggle against oppression is explicitly identified as masculine throughout *Australia Felix*, but the juxtaposition here with Polly's world suggests that such a construction of masculinity depends both ideologically and materially upon the construction of femininity as dependent, submissive, domestic, inside. However, there are moments in *Australia Felix* when Polly quite literally breaks into Mahony's narrative and is seen not only to be adult, but also to be more capable of operating in that public sphere than Mahony. The textual dynamics enact the relationship between the public and the private sphere to reinforce the notion that, in its construction of the feminine, colonial masculinity builds itself upon a silence.

Polly may be little and she may be young, but in Richard's eyes, she is primarily 'wife'. Chapter Three of Part Two (99–106) of *Australia Felix* is a sustained depiction of Polly in terms of her household duties. However, the line '[h]e loved to contemplate her' signals to the reader that what follows is Richard's objectification and idealisation of her. His approving gaze lingers on her pliability ('she adapted herself implicitly'), and he is surprised to find that she has a 'character of her own'. Fortunately, this does not 'displease him'! He appreciates her because 'no one raise[s] a better loaf or ha[s] a lighter hand at pastry ...'. Richard's view of Polly conforms to the Victorian argument that 'it was a woman's fundamental task to create a home that would provide an environment of emotional stability for her husband and children' (Summers 307). This is precisely what Mary does, but in Richard's eyes she comes to embody all that is antithetical to his spirit.

Mary changes from child-wife to mother when Purdy's improper advances to her at a ball are misconstrued by Richard as an expression of an independent sexuality:

*'My wife consents to another man paying her illicit attentions behind her husband's back!'* (286)

Mary points out that he is not sorry for her at all, or only insofar as she is his wife. In his construction of her as child-wife, Richard has created an asexual figure. For him, this is a moment when the feminine stereotype appears to crack, and it is important to note that this threatens his own sense of masculinity: he sees himself as ‘“... the convenient husband who provides the opportunity” ’ (285). From Mary's point of view, too, he now needs to be managed, and she takes on the role of mothering him:

*[w]ith quickened faculties, all her senses on the alert, she watched, guided, hindered, foresaw.* (296)

The nature of patriarchy seems to require that ‘mother's love’ (296) is channelled into policy, strategy and manipulation.

Standing in contrast to this is a masculine idealisation of motherhood, an idealisation like that of the child-wife in that the physical, and even sexual, nature of motherhood is repressed. If it was ‘a woman's fundamental task to create a home’, then motherhood was her destiny: as John Turnham says, ‘every woman is fitted by nature to rear children and manage a house’ (337); or as Mahony reflects, ‘women's arms, like their bodies, were built to cradle and enfold the young of the race’ (494). This insistence on nature is problematic because nature is only the projected other of culture in discourse that, in *The Fortunes*, is both patriarchal and colonial. Women become Madonnas in the eyes of these men:

*The beautiful young woman and her children might have served as model for a Holy family — some old painter's dream of a sweet benign Madonna; the trampling babe as the infant Christ; the upturned face of the little John adoring ... Were they not in the presence of one of life's sublimest mysteries — that of motherhood?* (73)

Their statements position women's bodies, and maternity, as objects in and of discourse. As Brenda Walker points out, ‘the mother's body cannot be directly apprehended, it can only be spoken for’ (70). And spoken for it is during Polly's first pregnancy and labour. There is, for example, the obviously ironic passage where, as he contemplates her, Polly's pregnancy is ‘spoken over’ by Richard's own intellectual anticipation:

*Over the top of book or newspaper Mahony watched his wife stitch, stitch, with a zeal that never flagged, at the dolly garments. Just as he could read his way, so Polly sewed hers, through the time of waiting. But whereas she, like a sensible little woman, pinned her thoughts fast to the matter in hand, he let his range freely over the future. Of the many good things this had in store for him, one in particular whetted his impatience. It took close on twelve-month out here to get hold of a new book ... You perforce fell behind in the race, remained ignorant of what was being said and done — in science, letters, religious controversy — in the great world overseas.* (115–16)

On the other hand, Mary's labour is related entirely from Richard's point of view, and she becomes the object of medical discourse:

*Rogers ... cited such hoary objections to the use of the new anaesthetic in maternity cases as Mahony had never expected to hear again: the therapeutic value of pain; the moral danger the patient ran in yielding up her will (‘What right have we to bid a fellow-creature sacrifice her consciousness?’); and the impious folly of interfering with the action of a creative law ...*

*Had the case been in his own hands he would have intervened before now ... he impetuously offered up his fondest dream to those invisible powers that sat aloft, waiting to be appeased. If this was to be the price exacted of him — the price of his escape from exile — then ... then*

...

*To come back to the present, however, he was in an awkward position: he was going to be forced to take Polly's case out of the hands of the man to whom he had entrusted it. Such a step ran counter to all the stiff rules of conduct, the punctilios of decorum, laid down by the most code-ridden profession in the world. (138)*

Furthermore, his own projected narrative imposes itself on this moment ('his escape from exile'). Specifically, then, Mahony's intellectualising silences the maternal body in the text.<sup>3</sup> The bloody state of the room in which Polly has given birth provokes Ellen, the servant, to exclaim: "[i]t's just like Andy Soakes's shop ... when they've been quarterin' a sheep" (139). Here, an alternative way of talking about motherhood forces its way into the text, one that graphically returns maternity to the body in its emphasis on the blood of motherhood.

Mary's other pregnancies and labours are also passed over in the text. However, when their daughter Lallie dies, 'Mary's heart ble[eds], as raw, as lacerated, as once her body had lain in giving [her children] birth' (666). Her grieving and her loss are made physical, and the maternal body is given a voice: "I want to hold in her in my arms ... and feel her ... and hear her speak. She will never speak to me again. Oh, my baby, my baby!" Her narrative is characterised by the physicality and the immediacy of its love, and it refuses any kind of metaphysical consolation as unreal. This stands in complete contrast to Mahony's subsequent judgement that 'for people like Mary, death was inconceivable apart from awfulness and majesty' (674). Although their grief draws them together, the cold comfort offered by Richard's appeal to a world beyond is subsequently made bathetic by his attempted communication with Lallie's spirit, and the reception of this in the Barambogic community.

By *Ultima Thule*, in Mahony's mind Mary's motherhood has been reduced to the 'preventing hand' (591), the figure that thwarts his chances of escape (733). More significantly, she merges in his mind with the figure of his own mother: "... he might have been a boy once more, standing before his mother ..." (615); or, "... once again the years fell away, and he was a little velvet-suited lad, paling and quivering under the lash of a caustic Irish tongue" (693). At such times, she is connected with the thought of his mortgage, and thus explicitly with the bonds which tie him to the material world. She has indeed become a figure of 'suburban stultification' (Summers 42). Also, if we recall the Proem's image of the suffocating earth as mother, then, for Mahony, both earth and motherhood become metaphors for what he recognises as 'death and the death-fear' (693).

Although Mahony views Mary as the embodiment of the materialism he so despises, we are told that she is 'bound by but gossamer threads to all things material' (502). At times, the contrast to Richard's unworldliness may not appear to support this. It is not, however, the bonds of money or possessions that connect her to Australia or to society, but rather the bonds of love. For example, on their return to Australia in *The Way Home*, the news of Richard's newly acquired fortune takes second place to the joy of the reunion with old friends, and old bonds 'cemented anew' (427). *The Way Home* is very much Mary's novel as she establishes herself as the centre of a network of friendship. This culminates with the articulation of her 'philosophy' at the end of that novel:

*But, more and more, as the day wore on, did a single thought take possession of her — and in this thought, Mary came as near she ever would, to a conscious reflection on the aim and end of existence. It began with her suddenly becoming aware how she longed to hug her babies to her again, and how much she had missed them; a feeling until now absolutely repressed ... for Richard's sake. Now, as, in imagination, she gathered her little ones to her heart — and gathered Richard with them, he, too, just an adored and absent child — it came to her like a flash that, amid life's ups and downs, to be able to keep one's little flock about one, to know one's dearest human relationships safe and unharmed, was, in good truth, all that signified. Compared with this, hardships and misfortunes weighed no more than feathers in the balance. (581, my emphasis)*

For Mary, materiality is in human relationships. Her affirmation of the supreme importance of relationship, and later her acknowledgement that 'nothing mattered ... but him' (749), stand in direct contrast to Mahony's 'intense individualism' (162) and his lack of ability to affirm that his wife and children are 'dearer to him than his own life' (692). Mary's experience constitutes a different way of giving meaning to

life. And yet, the mother-child relationship seems to become the figure in which all of Mahony's fears are concentrated.

As motherhood develops a voice in the text, the Angel in the House is seen to be 'a tiger fighting for her young' (808). That 'figure of proper Victorian motherhood' (Lawson 78) is shown to be precisely that, a figure:

*... there came moments when she could understand and condone the madness of the mother who, about to be torn away, refused to leave her little ones behind. For, to these small creatures, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, links bound Mary that must, she felt, outlast life itself. Through them and her love for them, she caught her one real glimpse of immortality. (799–800)*

Here, concepts like immortality, which have been specific to the development of Mahony's narrative, are quite literally given new meaning as Mary's maternity shifts away from the Victorian stereotype of motherhood. The physical replaces the spiritual and, paradoxically, immortality inheres in 'bone' and 'flesh'. In this way, her narrative comes to represent a challenge to the beliefs and values on which Mahony's depends.

For Mary, it seems that the meaningfulness of existence grows out of love, and more especially, love that is acted upon. At one point she says that if she goes to Heaven, she hopes 'at least to find there'll be something — something really useful — *to do*' (572). The following passage represents perhaps Richard's greatest insight into, and appreciation of, Mary:

*There was nobody like Mary in a crisis: happy the mortal who, when his end came, had her great heart to lean on. That was worth all else. For of what use, in one's last hour, would be the mental affinity, the ties of intellect he had lately so pitied himself for having missed? One would see these things then for the earth-trimmings they were. A child faced with the horrors of the dark does not ask for his fears to be shared, or to have their origin explained to him. He cries for warm, enfolding arms with which to keep his terrors at bay; or which, if met these must be, alone can help him through the ordeal. Man on his death-bed was little more than such a child; and it was for the mother-arms he craved, to which he clung in passing, until, again like a child, he had dropped to sleep. Hope, faith and love, these three ... yes, but needed was a love like Mary's, compounded of utter selflessness, and patience, and infinite forbearance — a love which it was impossible to sin against or overthrow ... which had more than a touch of the divine in it; was a dim image of that infinite tenderness God himself might be assumed to bear towards those helpless beings He had created. Measured by it, all other human experience rang hollow. (521)*

'Hope, faith and love'? Yet another idealisation of womanhood? The terms in which Mahony describes his wife here undeniably hark back not only to the Madonna imagery he employs earlier in the novel, but also to his idea about the special design of women's arms. We must remember, though, that this particular reflection is prompted by the news of John's terminal illness, and it stands in stark contrast to Mahony's image of life as 'a procession that troop[s] along [a] perilous margin' with death as the ever-threatening 'abyss' (520).

While Mahony claims that he has won through to a faith in 'death as the great awakening' (520), this faith is undermined by the metaphor of the child's horror of the dark. This suggests a radical ambivalence about the status of death, an ambivalence which is compounded by the fact that he can only 'assume' that God is loving. In powerful contrast to this mere assumption is the absolute certainty of mother love, and the image of the mother arms is actually important here because it signifies the physical, tangible nature of this love, again in contrast to the insubstantiality of Divine love. One might well argue that it is the materiality of Mary's love which gives it its divine aspect. This mother love provides the counter to Richard's argument that all is flux: it is an emblem of the idea that everything remains. If indeed it does affirm *semper idem* as the 'eternal truth' (485), then it firstly challenges a masculine striving towards achievement (dismissed by Richard as 'earth-trimmings'). Secondly, Richard visualises the self as longing for mergedness and unity and

so the challenge is also to the rigidly defined individual self invoked by that teleological paradigm. That the passage is related from his point of view and in his terms lends weight to this idea.

By calling into question Mahony's understanding of his relationship with his God, the narrative of human relationship thus calls into question the way he conceptualises his self. Furthermore, it is substituted in the text for a no longer tenable belief in God. For example, on the one hand, Mary 'radiat[es] love and safety, a very pillar of strength' (773) for Cuffy while, on the other, he discovers that 'God wasn't there' (789). At the end of the novel, after Mahony's Gethsemane-like agony in the bush, and his descent into madness and meaninglessness, the ties of intellect and mental affinity are no longer important, and it is to Mary's mother arms that Richard is delivered.

As Richard lies dying, we are moved into Mary's consciousness. She remains firm in her scepticism about the afterlife, and her commitment to living in the world of immediate experience, for 'what had she to do with angels?' (826). The conventional representations of heaven are no less antithetical to her than they have been to Richard, and she also rejects the conventional consolations; indeed, the whole metaphysical experience is alien to her. Mary asks 'what was life, but care and suffering?' Death as absolute, and separation as inescapable, are both emphasised here, as Richard's 'half-cold hand' is contrasted to her 'warm, live one', as she recognises that part of her 'would do down in the grave', as she acknowledges that he is now only an 'inanimate object'. For her, it is not the hope of eternity, 'vast, cold, impersonal', that redeems life, but rather 'love and comradeship'. Her experience accepts death as an absolute, but finds its consolation in human love.

After the tortuous account of his physical decline, Richard's assertion of his flight into eternity remains tenuous. Significantly, these are not his final words; the phrase '[d]ear wife' may well be seen as an acknowledgement, even an acceptance, of the meaningfulness she offers. Also, the last four paragraphs work to emphasise the littleness of human life, the insignificance of human death, as well as the idea of 'dust to dust'. God's existence, which has underpinned Mahony's sense of his rigidly defined individual self, can no longer be confidently affirmed. This sense of self has also been buttressed, however, by his construction of the feminine, and of Mary in particular. As she takes off her wings, and unpins her apron, she challenges much more than the idealisation of womanhood. In *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, the emergence of the feminine is intrinsically connected to the subversion of a whole way of thinking about the self; the alternative set of terms which it offers for the construction of narrative has little to do with angels, but is, perhaps, all the more 'meaningful' for that.

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1 See, for example, Elizabeth Lawson, ‘“A Rather Prosaic Wife”, or The Fortunes of Mary Mahony’ and Marian Arkin, ‘A Reading Strategy for Henry Handel Richardson's Fiction’.

2 See, for example, Joy Hooton, *Stories of Herself When Young. Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women*.

3 Mary Poovey devotes a chapter to the debate about the use of chloroform during parturition: ‘In the process of claiming childbirth for medical expertise, Simpson's [the doctor who developed chloroform] representation transferred to the doctor the *knowledge* of pain by reducing the woman to a body; even if she retained consciousness, then, the doctor could read this body more accurately than she or any clergyman could’ (Poovey 28).

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