

# Catherine Pratt: Fictions of Development — Henry Handel Richardson's 'The Getting of Wisdom'

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Laura has not been at school very long when she writes a letter home, in which she says:

*Lilith Gordon is a girl in my class she is in my room to she is only as old as me and she wears stays and has a beautiful figgure. All the girls wear stays. Please send me some I have no waste. (49)*

*The Getting of Wisdom* is a novel that not only explores constraint of the female body and mind, but also the constraint of narrative. By reading the novel in the context of its own literary self-consciousness and against *Myself When Young*, it may be seen that the text consciously takes up different forms of narrative, two of which I shall focus on here — the popular romance and the *Bildungsroman*. My argument is that Henry Handel Richardson set them against each other and shows how each structures its narrative meaning through the representation of gender. The story of Laura's development, however, cannot be adequately "stayed" by either, nor can it be stabilized by gender. This begs a consideration of the end of the novel, often felt — with some justification — to be unsatisfactory. At the beginning, Laura wants a "waste," but by the end she could perhaps concur with her mother's judgment that "*You don't need stays. ... Your own muscles are quite strong enough to bear the weight of your back.*"

This argument takes up some issues raised by some fairly recent feminist criticism. As an aside, it is interesting to note that both of the following articles, by Delys Bird and Carol Franklin, are now ten years old, and there has been little work on *The Getting of Wisdom* since — almost as if the final words had been said. Despite the conclusiveness and convincing nature of Franklin's reading in particular, there remains a vague sense that something about this apparently simple novel continues to elude the reader. This essay will suggest that this inconclusiveness must not be overlooked in any reading that seeks to discuss the novel's feminist politics.

Referring specifically to *The Getting of Wisdom*, Bird's article, "Towards an Aesthetics of Australian Women's Fiction," argues that the pressures felt by the woman writer in Australia — doubly marginalized by her sex and her art — are reproduced in "textual dislocations such as structural uncertainty and thematic irresolution" and in "narrative strategies [that] are self-conscious, ambiguous, and often either aggressive or apologetic" (181). In her study, "The Female *Künstlerroman*," Carol Franklin discusses Richardson's intertextual engagement with Björnson's *The Fisher Lass*, and its importance in Richardson's feminist critique of the possibilities available to the woman as artist. While Bird is accurate in identifying self-conscious narrative strategies in the novel, her reading actually emphasizes the inevitable and unconscious reproduction of ideological contradictions in textual form. I would argue, however, that Richardson's narrative strategies are far from being an unconscious product of "internalised uncertainty" (181). On the other hand, where Franklin suggests that Richardson's answer to Björnson is a "realistic exposure of the forces ranged against" (427) the success of the woman as artist, I think Richardson's response to the *Bildungsroman* goes further than that. It seems to me that the text consciously inspects this fiction of development, laying bare its investment in the ideology of gender, and questioning its adequacy and appropriateness for the representation of female adolescence and growth.

Franklin takes it "largely for granted" (423) that *The Getting of Wisdom* is a *Künstlerroman*, but it could well be argued that this assumption proceeds from the lessons in aesthetics that Laura understands only vaguely at best, and from the narrator's rather flabby reassurance about her artistic future at the end of the novel:

*And Laura? ... In Laura's case, no kindly Atropos snipped the thread of her aspirations: these, large, vague, extemporary, one and all achieved fulfilment; then withered off to make room for more. But this, the future still securely hid from her She went out from school with the uncomfortable sense of being a square peg, which fitted into none of the round holes of her world; the wisdom she had got, the experience she was richer by, had, in the process of equipping her for life, merely seemed to disclose her unfitness. She could not then know that, even for the squarest peg, the right hole may ultimately be found; seeming unfitness prove to be only another aspect of a peculiar and special fitness. But, of the after years, and what they brought her, it is not the purport of this little book to tell. It is enough to say: many a day came and went before she grasped that, oftentimes, just those mortals who feel cramped and unsure in the conduct of everyday life, will find themselves to rights, with astounding ease, in that freer, more spacious world where no practical considerations hamper, and where the creatures that inhabit dance to their tune: the world where are stored up men's best thoughts, the hopes, and fancies; where the shadow is the substance, and the multitude of business pales before the dream. (233-34)*

In some ways, this reassurance may work against itself. This is particularly so if assessed in the light of Franklin's resounding declaration that the novel is "the first genuine female *Künstlerroman*" (436) because of its strong element of social criticism. While the narrator's predictions for Laura may well be consistent with the novel's depiction of the lack of reconciliation between her individuality and her society, they also rely on the notion that the artist's world is one "where the shadow is the substance, and the multitude of business pales before the dream" (234). Fulfillment of Laura's artistic destiny is only possible if the world of "business" fades into the background, so that the social criticism that propels the novel, and which (according to Franklin) gives it its character as a *Künstlerroman*, is no longer important, or even applicable.

For this reason, and others, it may be quite difficult to speak categorically of the novel as a portrait of the artist as a young girl. Yet, the aesthetic themes embodied in the narrator's intervention continue to press their claims upon the text. Laura clearly has artistic potential, even though its future development is far from clear at the end of the novel. There seems, then, to be an oscillation between the social criticism and aesthetic themes of the novel, but this is not necessarily equivalent to ambiguity or irresolution. It may be understood not so much as a problem of confused or conflicting structure and themes, but in terms of the tensions between possible readings of Laura's development, towards which the text itself directs us.

The critical history of *The Getting of Wisdom* is one that focuses on the role and status of the artist, and this may well be influenced by our knowledge of the novel as largely autobiographical. But this focus on the artist or writer in the novel has resulted in a neglect of the text's parallel interest in the creative agency of the reader or audience. After all, the role of the reader, and the place of interpretation, is glanced at again and again in *The Getting of Wisdom*. Laura herself is an avid reader, having consumed "the knowledge of a whole house" (26). For example, much of the first part of the novel is taken up with different ways of knowing, as Laura struggles to come to grips with the idea that the imaginative knowledge stimulated by her reading is of no advantage in a system that values only facts. The real power of "readership" is best illustrated when Laura begins her stories about Mr. Shepherd. She does so to cater to her audience's taste for romance, knowing that they as "readers" will believe her inherently improbable fictions. Laura learns, however, that the difference between story teller and "vile little liar" is one constructed largely through the reception of one's stories/lies. Therefore, Laura's discovery that "as soon as you put pen to paper, provided you kept one foot planted on probability, you might lie as hard as you liked" (196), is an aesthetic one; but is also a lesson in the pragmatics of literary production. That is, it has to do with the necessity of tailoring one's art for its readers.

This element in the novel is one aspect of a generally overt textuality that is manifested in a number of other ways. There is, of course, the title of the novel with its allusion to the Biblical proverb, and its ironic underscoring of the process of Laura's education. Secondly, there is the novel's twinning with *Myself When Young*: "*The Getting of Wisdom* contained a very fair account of my doings at school and of those I came into contact with. It must, however, be remembered that both place and people were seen through the eyes of a very young girl and judged accordingly" (54). In its attempt to excuse the ironic intelligence and critical eye of the older narrator in the novel, this remark from *Myself When Young* also institutes a mutually

corrective dialogue between the two texts. The provisional and necessarily fictional nature of either text read as autobiography is emphasized here as well. This twinning of *The Getting of Wisdom* with the factual narrative is also akin to the former's sustained intertextual debate with Björnson's *The Fisher Lass*.

While Björnson's novel is an unspoken presence, there are numerous allusions to both romances and realist texts; and the novel arguably constructs a dialectic between Zola's *Nana* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* on the one hand, and any Walter Scott adventure on the other. As well as this, there is, of course, Laura's central fantasy about Mr. Shepherd, in which she manages fleetingly to blend romance and realism to plausible effect. This provides the basis for the aesthetic wisdom she subsequently learns about the difference between truth and fiction. It is this self-conscious literary context that argues for Richardson's own conscious exploration of different narrative genres, such as the romance and the Bildungsroman.

*The Getting of Wisdom* opens with a romantic fantasy, whose central character is the princess waiting for her prince, and who is surely to be associated with the fairy tale persona Laura has created for herself, that of "Wondrous Fair." The novel opens, then, with a fiction, and the particular nature of this fiction introduces into the text from the start an element both of self-consciousness, but also of skepticism about the act of narrative. The fairy-tale setting of Laura's story, as well as its literal location in the Edenic garden of her childhood home, emphasizes its fictionality; and Pin's practical warning to Laura about dirtying the sheets establishes the discrepancy between fairy tale and reality. The contiguity of Pin's warning to Laura's story, and even more significantly, the predominantly female and domestic context of Laura's childhood, makes explicit the ideological role of the fairy tale. For example, Karen E. Rowe argues that, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "popular tales for young girls, including *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, portrayed acquiescent females who cultivated domestic virtues in dreamy anticipation of a prince's rescue by which the heroine might enter magically into marriage — her highest calling" (69). After all, the transformation of the travel-stained robe of Laura's heroine is straight out of the world of washing powder advertisements: what better example of the cultivation of domestic virtues. Thus, this opening scene immediately poses the narrative framework that structured ideas of the middle-class Victorian girl's development.

The rest of the novel takes up and expands on the fairy tale narrative in its specifically nineteenth-century form, the popular romance. Richardson herself was familiar with such stories, as she says in *Myself When Young*:

*Mother's predecessor had left behind him a large number of Yellow Backs. ... Here I read Lady Audley's Secret, Aurora Floyd, and various others, including one called The New Magdalen, over which I had seen my elders purse their lips. ... A friend had presented [my mother] with several bound volumes of The Family Herald, and on these I was the first to pounce. Becoming so engrossed in the fate of some plain governess wooed by Lord Ashby de la Zouche or the like, that I persisted in going on with it while my hair was being curled. ...*

*One result of these sensational tales was that romance began to invade my own stories, which I was still 'making-up' as hard or harder than ever. (40)*

While Richardson's "making-up" suffered some set backs during her school years, as does Laura's, romance of the Lord Ashby variety continues to invade her "stories" in significant ways. Miss Zielinski, for example, languishes over a "trashy novel" by Ouida (99), which, along with Laura's fairy tales and Richardson's Yellow Backs, clearly define a paradigmatic narrative framework for female development:

*... one of the day-scholars in Laura's class was actually engaged to be married; and in no boy-and-girl fashion, but to a doctor who lived and practised in Emerald Hill: he might sometimes be seen, from a peephole under the stairs, waiting to escort her home from school. This fiancée was looked up to by the class with tremendous reverence, as one set apart, oiled and anointed. You really could not treat her as a comrade — her, who had reached the goal. For this was the goal; and the thoughts of all wererefixed, with an intentness that varied only in degree, on the great consummation which, as planned in these young minds, should come to pass without fail directly the college-doors closed behind them. (133)*

It is important to note how the boundaries of the girl's development are narrowly delineated by home and school, and patrolled by her husband-to-be, so that normal and desirable female development is structured here by the dominant codes of love and marriage. In the romance, "representations of sexual difference acquire meaning by reinforcing the values of love and marriage, of emotional vulnerability and domesticity, and by making them appear natural, inevitable, and desirable as culturally legible signs of "femininity" (Cohan and Shires 80). Thus, even though the flirting rituals Maria Morell outlines make no sense to Laura, to Maria, they are only "natural": "what d'you think one has a boy for, I'd like to know" (131).

In her attempts to conform to the "common mould" of desirable femininity, it is natural, inevitable, and desirable that Laura should find herself in love with Mr. Shepherd: "Since, however, it seemed that someone had to be loved, if you were to be able to hold up your head with the rest, then it was easier, infinitely easier, to love the curate" (138). In the final analysis, Laura has little choice in the way she will describe her weekend at the Shepherds' because the romance fantasy is what her audience most wants to hear and, ironically, it is what they will believe. That romance is the only narrative in which the woman can act as a subject — that is, the subject of love — is thus brought home during this section of the novel.

It is precisely this contrast between the reality, say, of the governesses' drudgery, or the necessity of adjusting one's progress "to the steps of halting little feet" (233), which confirms the potency of romance as a narrative form. When "observing the extent to which reality appears turned upside down in the conventions of romantic fiction, we can register the presence of a powerful ideology that speaks to and resolves in imaginary form many of the most significant and fundamental aspects of women's subordination" (Bastleer 104). In one of her rare, and thus notable, interventions as narrator, Richardson draws attention to the contradictions this ideology holds together:

*For out of it all rose the vague, crude picture of woman as the prey of man. Man was an animal, composite of lust and cruelty, with no aim but that of brutally taking his pleasure: something monstrous, yet to be adored; annihilating, yet to be sought after; something to flee and, at the same time, to entice, with every art at one's disposal. (114)*

Richardson's acerbity underlines the way in which these contradictions render the female subject incapable of action, even in her own story, as she flees only in order to be caught. Successful female development seems, then, to depend upon a version of femininity that is passive, waiting for the Prince, Lord Ashby, or, if no one better comes along, the doctor from Emerald Hill.

The passage above is followed by a couple of chapters that depict Laura's unlucky romantic adventures, and then her fantasy. Even though Laura realizes that "one single event ... would put an end, for ever, to all possible, exciting contingencies," she also knows that romance saves one from "derision" (133). The ideology of romance defines success for women only in terms of love and marriage, and the "wisdom" of the novel's title becomes the knowledge of "what to do when a boy's gone on you" (130-31). Thus, while the day-scholar's progress is to be marked by the closing of various doors, romance allows these to be described as "goals" and "consummations." Laura feels herself to be a failure because she is incapable of attracting either Tilly's cousin Bob, or the boy at the cricket match. And perhaps the final word on her story-telling comes from Tilly: "You make anyone in love with you — you!" (163). Laura's crime is to imagine that she can be the subject of romance, and her transgression of the romantic paradigm forces a recognition of its fictional nature, after she has brought it so close to being true.

On the other hand, the text puts forward the *Bildungsroman* as a developmental narrative and, indeed, this is probably the way the novel has most often been read. Carol Franklin shows how, in engaging with Björnson, the text also engages with the *Bildungsroman* tradition since *Wilhelm Meister*. This is apparent again in the opening chapters of *The Getting of Wisdom*, which arguably invoke the *Bildungsroman* model. We may see this, for example, in the Edenic nature of Laura's childhood garden, and in her removal to a school where she will get wisdom, and which is a microcosm of the society into which she must become integrated. Laura's journey to and arrival at school is strongly reminiscent of one of the archetypal English development narratives, *David Copperfield*. Patrick O'Donnell is not unlike Barkis (perhaps somewhat more loquacious), and the way in which both children make their journeys independent of their mothers is strikingly alike. Similar also are their first impressions of their respective schools. David observes that

“Salem House ... was inclosed with a high brick wall, and looked very dull” (61); to Laura, Presbyterian Ladies College is an “imposing building,” which seems “vast in its breadth and height, appalling in its sombre greyness” (31). The welcomes they receive from the school authorities are equally forbidding. In the light of the overt textuality of *The Getting of Wisdom*, it is possible to speculate that this is a deliberate allusion on Richardson's part. The social integration ultimately achieved by Dickens' masculine hero is what Laura envisages for her arrival at school, but Richardson's novel maps the course of her heroine's disillusionment in this regard.

From its opening, then, *The Getting of Wisdom* posits the *Bildungsroman* as a masculine model. This is reinforced by the title's allusion to the proverb and its suggestion of a shaping imperative that, as Bird says, is “imposed by a patriarchal, authoritarian religion” (178). Moreover, there is the question of the wisdom to be got within this framework that is, Margaret Butcher points out, central to this kind of narrative: “The European *bildungsroman* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries concerned itself with the development of a single male protagonist whose growth to maturity was the result of both formal and informal education, the latter acquired largely through his relationships with various women” (255). Richardson's critique of this focuses on the gendering of knowledge, since facts are what is demanded of Laura, and the ability to acquire them is several times defined as a masculine one. These two aspects are firmly aligned in the examinations at the end of the novel, which Laura finally passes. Presided over first by Dr. Pughson, and then by a handsome young man from Trinity, Laura's success signifies her achievement in the public world of masculinity.

Simply in terms of its narrative trajectory, then, *The Getting of Wisdom* is certainly a *Bildungsroman*. But this trajectory is continually subverted. A pattern is established whereby every time Laura ventures beyond the confines of the school, her excursion forces her back onto the feminine paradigm, which stresses domesticity and passivity. For example, her visit to Godmother's is taken up with Marina's domestic duties; the invitation to visit Tilly's relatives highlights Laura's inadequacy in the flirtation stakes; and the visit to the Shepherds' precipitates Laura's romantic folly. Indeed, with the end of the novel comes the regressive possibility that Laura will return home to be a governess to her younger siblings.

Terms like wisdom and development, then, are intrinsic to the generic meaning of the *Bildungsroman*, but they derive their significance in this context largely through their projection onto the dichotomous opposition between masculinity and femininity. The wisdom and development of this model are to be associated with the public world, which is also a masculine one. So, it is not so much that Laura cannot be an artist because she is a woman; but, rather, because she is a woman the narrative cannot be a *Bildungsroman*.

How, then, is the narrative of Laura's growth to be understood if both the romance and the *Bildungsroman* are rejected as the text itself rejects them? Is the female subject to be left hanging between them? Perhaps the difficulty in articulating the nature of Laura's development stems from a reticence surrounding the narrative fate of women in the novel generally. If we return to the fiancée for a moment, we can see that when the last door closes behind her, the rest is silence. Similarly, the narratives of other women remain largely unspoken: Cupid, M.P., Evelyn. Cohan and Shires suggest that while a woman can be the subject of the love plot in a romance narrative, marriage as the end of romance effects a transfer in which the man becomes the subject: “after all, he is the one who proposes, she the one who accepts” (79). In this novel, the feminine narrative effectively ceases to be as the woman is relegated to the function of object in her husband's story.

In general, the narrative is firmly tied to Laura's consciousness throughout the text, but at its conclusion the reader is increasingly distanced. This occurs first as the older voice intervenes to reassure the reader that Laura lives happily ever after and, second, as Laura runs away and is “lost to sight.” This has often been criticized as softening both the irony with which Laura has been viewed throughout, as well as the social criticism that is arguably central to *The Getting of Wisdom*. The narrator's intervention remains questionable but some aspects of the novel's dialogue with *Myself When Young* provide one possible way of rehabilitating Laura's final romantic gesture.

Two central relationships highlighted by Richardson in the later autobiography are deliberately muffled in different ways in the corresponding fictional text: the first her passion for the curate, and the second for the girl she calls Evelyn. Her own attachment to Jack Stretch, which becomes Laura's infatuation with Mr.

Shepherd, Richardson describes as “an emotional experience, so strange and shattering, that it compelled me to seek help and comfort from a power outside myself” (41).

In the novel, Richardson transforms her affection for the curate into the stuff of Laura's folly, but she deals differently with her passion for the older girl, of which she says in *Myself When Young*:

*To have touched this other than lightly would have been out of keeping with the tone of the book. The real thing was neither light nor amusing. It stirred me to my depths, rousing feelings I hadn't known I possessed, and leaving behind it a heartache as cruel as my first. Along with the new and bitter realisation that to live meant to change. No matter how fast one clung, how jealously one tried to stem the flow, in time all things changed and passed* (54)

The emotional intensity of this relationship is such that Richardson cannot write about it in her “merry little book.” The lesbian nature of the affair renders it largely unrepresentable within the framework of the heterosexual romantic paradigm, or within the *Bildungsroman* with its emphasis on the public, social world. On the other hand, Richardson's frankness about her attraction to and affinity for “Evelyn” in her autobiography shows that perhaps it is not simply unspeakable in the novel but, to a certain extent, deliberately unspoken. At the same time, however, as Richardson chooses to touch only lightly on this episode and merely to hint at its lesbianism, its significance in Laura's development is still conveyed in terms similar to those she uses above: “everywhere and always, even while you revelled in them, things were perpetually rushing to a close; and the fact of them being things you loved, or enjoyed, was powerless to diminish the speed at which they escaped you” (214-15). What this might suggest, then, is that having assessed various narrative modes throughout the novel, Richardson finally refuses to “cut and trim” her central emotional experience to fit forms in which, like Joyce's Stephen, she can no longer believe.

The conclusion to *The Getting of Wisdom* distinctly echoes Nora's door slam in *A Doll's House*, and like Nora, Laura is “not here any more” (Ibsen 232). In each text, it is true that the female subject disappears after the gesture that asserts her selfhood, but not to fulfill the function of object in a masculine narrative — both Nora and Laura have experienced this already and reject it. To the extent that their futures remain largely undisclosed, narrative closure is instead deliberately indeterminate and withheld. In *The Getting of Wisdom*, this may be seen as a truly wise resistance against the compromise and constriction of inadequate and inappropriate forms; as the text creates a space in which the self can go, judiciously but also joyfully, in search of a voice.

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