Disapprobation, Disobedience and the Nation in Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand Stories

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In the most well-known and celebrated of her New Zealand short stories, Katherine Mansfield's view of the settler nation into which she was born is strongly refracted through her portrayals of traditional, conservative, patriarchal family structures. A number of these New Zealand family stories revolve around the Burnell family, consisting of husband and wife Stanley and Linda and their children Isabel, Kezia and Lottie, as well as Linda's sister Beryl and their mother Mrs. Fairfield. This family structure strongly resembles that of Mansfield's own childhood, with names from Mansfield's extended family (including Kezia, resembling Mansfield's own childhood nickname of Kass, and Mrs. Fairfield's surname, a literal English translation of Mansfield's own real surname of Beauchamp), chosen to underline the parallels.[1]

Beyond the house, the family's domestic space is clearly demarcated by the cultivated garden, with its deliberate arrangement of familiar British plants emphasising the total dependence of the family's economic and social status, as well as its value system, on the colonial centre. The domesticated space of the garden exists in sharp contrast to the recently settled land beyond it, which is glimpsed only rarely, but in which we find depicted the often brutal realities of the agriculture and dangerous manual labour that are necessary to maintain the economic structures which permit the colonial family's starkly incongruous existence in the midst of such terrain. The garden

gate becomes the boundary between two seemingly irreconcilable worlds, a boundary whose crossing becomes a highly significant and often transgressive event.

This garden space, according to Angela Smith, is for Mansfield the site of '[p]atriarchy's attempt to civilize the landscape and to contain girls and women within it', a constriction which is subverted by 'internalizing landscape and finding a way to represent a non-European country', leading ultimately to 'a recognition of the stranger, the Other, not outside as alien and menacing but within the self'.[2] Smith discusses this internalisation of the Other not in terms of the settler farmers and workers whose industry helps to sustain the existence of colonial families such as the Burnells, but in terms of Mansfield's treatment of the Maori, who are addressed even more rarely than the working class settlers in her fiction, and most strikingly in 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped', a story based around the transgressive crossing of the boundary represented by the garden gate.

Pearl Button's crossing of this boundary, which is also a crossing of a racial boundary, is closely related to a similar symbolic crossing made by Kezia Burnell in 'The Doll's House', in which boundaries of class, as well as of space, are crossed. A comparison may also be drawn between these crossings and Beryl's failure to perform a similar crossing at the end of 'At the Bay', and its attendant implications. The transgressive element of such crossings arises from their flouting of explicit or implicit familial disapprobation which is in turn a product of the 'Othering' process by which white middle-class families such as the Burnells define their elite place within the settler nation. Pamela Dunbar's observation in relation to Mansfield's construction of the Kembers in 'At the Bay'—that 'they are externally conceived, and to some extent melodramatic, figures—a mark of their being the creations of other characters' fantasies rather than of the writers' own'[3]—may equally well be applied to the Maori in 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped.' In

both stories, this may be read not as a failure of Mansfield's imagination but rather as a conscious attempt to depict an Othering process by the white middle-class elite. That both indigenous peoples and lower class settlers are constructed as Other by this elite makes the crossing performed by Kezia Burnell, like that performed by Pearl Button, an example of the internalisation of the Other which Smith describes.

A useful framework for examining the significance of these crossings in terms of Mansfield's representation of the New Zealand nation has been offered by Lydia Wevers in her essay 'The Sod Under my Feet: Katherine Mansfield'. In this essay, Wevers makes use of the notions of filiation and affiliation employed by Edward Said in 'Secular Criticism', the piece which introduces *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Said describes a process of transition

> [...] from a failed idea or possibility of filiation to a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship, which I have been calling affiliation but which is also a new system.

Where this process occurs, Said argues, there is to be found

> the deliberately explicit goal of using that new order to reinstate vestiges of the kind of authority associated in the past with filiative order. This, finally, is the third part of the pattern. [...] [T]he new community is greater than the individual adherent or member, just as the father is greater by virtue of seniority than the sons and daughters. [...] Thus if a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority— involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and institutional conflict—the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal

> forms—such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture.[4]

Wevers argues that this notion of a three-stage process, whereby affiliative bonds replace filial bonds as the dominant source of authority, is 'a particularly apt way of thinking about the Burnell family as Mansfield's re-presentation of New Zealand', in that 'the family becomes the sign for both sameness and difference, and in its characteristics and daily repetitions, it suggests the larger and constantly remade space of the family as nation'. [5] The Burnells, according to Wevers, represent a formulation of 'the family as nation' in which we can find the third stage of Said's transitional process shaping both the family and the nation. Yet, whilst my argument is indebted to Wevers's ingenious use of Said's concepts, I hope to demonstrate something rather different: that the families in Mansfield's stories represent a pre-national phase in which a patriarchal elite dominates the domestic space, whose boundaries remain defined by traditional filial ties. The transgressive crossings of these boundaries by girls and young women in Mansfield's stories, I suggest, represent moments at which the possibility of affiliative bonds is suggested, and can in themselves be viewed as nation-forming acts.

Central to Wevers's argument that the Burnell family can be viewed as an affiliative, quasi-national community is her interpretation of the type of patriarchal space represented by the family, and by the father figure Stanley. The oppression that might otherwise be embodied by the patriarchal authority of Stanley Burnell, argues Wevers, is tempered to a large extent by Mansfield's humane and gently mocking rendering of his character, which, coupled with the totality of the family's material reliance on Stanley's job, amounts to a 'reiteration of the patriarchal family [...] as a basic institution of social order'.[6] Yet whilst it is true that the potentially tyrannical elements of

Stanley's authority are neutralised by a certain comic ineffectualness, and that his industry enables the Burnell family to prosper socially and financially, it is perhaps a step too far to suggest that this amounts to a construction of 'family as nation' in the manner suggested by Wevers.

In her reading of the Burnell stories as a 'reiteration' of patriarchy, Wevers arrives at the inevitable conclusion that Mansfield's New Zealand is ultimately 'a deeply conservative representation of nation',[7] yet such a reading greatly underestimates the level of critique which underwrites Mansfield's depictions of the patriarchal New Zealand family. Wevers's reading of Mansfield's treatment of Stanley Burnell, in particular, fails to address the severity of the more subtly oppressive aspects of his authority. His 'power to surmount Linda's resistance to childbearing',[8] for example, is in itself profoundly problematised by Mansfield's foregrounding of it. When coupled with her reflection that 'I'm so fond of [him] in the daytime' ('Prelude', p. 115)[9]—and by implication *not* at night—Linda's use of the term 'Newfoundland dog' becomes, as Dunbar argues, not merely a term of endearment but also an expression of 'her resentment of his sexual appetite'.[10] However benevolent his affections may be, Stanley effectively denies Linda any control over her body, including the right to decline intercourse. That Mansfield explicitly draws this to the reader's attention seems to suggest that she is doing more than merely 'reiterating' this kind of authority as a legitimate basis for a functioning social order. Linda's rejection of her children, and her persistent wistful malaise, may be viewed as direct consequences of the sexual manifestations of Stanley's patriarchal authority.

That Linda at times seems resigned to the necessity of patriarchal structures in maintaining her own comfortable existence—most notably in 'At the Bay', where she reflects that her charismatic, romantically-inclined brother-in-law Jonathan Trout is much less materially successful and therefore less

equipped to provide for his family than the rather dull Stanley (p. 307)—does not detract from Mansfield's critique. Linda's lack of resistance may be read as a manifestation of Mansfield's 'acute awareness of the ways in which women restrict themselves by acquiescing in the dictates of patriarchy',[11] perhaps hinting that Jonathan's self-lacerating realisation that 'I put myself in jail and nobody's ever going to let me out' ('At the Bay', p. 308) is applicable also to Linda. Simply waiting to be 'let out' of a (partly) self-imposed domestic 'prison', rather than actively attempting to scale the walls imposed by the psychic boundary of the domestic space, is, as we shall see, one of the factors which clearly differentiates Linda from her spirited, adventurous daughter Kezia.

Whilst Stanley's patriarchal authority is problematised by Mansfield, however, what it does do indirectly is to create a kind of environment within his family which, in Said's terms, is likely to set in motion a transition from filiative to affiliative. The Modern period, argues Said, saw a proliferation of literary works

> in which the failure of the generative impulse—the failure of the capacity to produce or generate children—is portrayed in such a way as to stand for a general condition afflicting society and culture together, to say nothing of individual men and women. [...] [F]ew things are as problematic and as universally fraught as what we might have supposed to be the mere natural continuity between one generation and the next. [...] Childless couples, orphaned children, aborted childbirths, and unregenerately celibate men and women populate the world of high modernism with remarkable insistence, all of them suggesting the difficulties of filiation.[12]

Whilst there is no suggestion of infertility in the Burnell family, the consequences of Linda's enforced childbearing upon her health, and her resentment and rejection of her offspring, similarly suggest such difficulties. In 'At the Bay', Linda overtly

questions the assumptions of 'natural continuity' to which Said refers:

> It was all very well to say it was the common lot of women to bear children. It wasn't true. She, for one, could prove that wrong. She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love her children. It was useless pretending. [...] No, it was as though a cold breath had chilled her through and through on each of those awful journeys; she had no warmth left to give them. (pp. 295-6)

In exercising his patriarchal authority over Linda's body, Stanley has loosened the filial bonds between his wife and their children, facilitating a move by the latter towards the formation of affiliative ties.

The ways in which the children seek to form these ties differ dramatically. The Burnells' eldest daughter Isabel, a character who is presented unsympathetically as a younger version of Linda and Beryl, seeks to compensate for the lack of filial affection between herself and her mother by attempting to form affiliative ties within the same space. This desire manifests itself in Isabel's officious attempts to cement a complicity between herself and Linda by reporting her younger sisters for minor misdemeanours: "'I don't want to tell you, but I think I ought to, mother," said Isabel. "Kezia is drinking tea out of Aunt Beryl's cup.'" ('Prelude', p. 87). Despite her best efforts, however, there is no indication that she will be successful. Isabel apparently receives no reply from her mother on this occasion, casting grave doubt on whether the Burnell household represents a space in which affiliative bonds can be formed. Isabel's sister Kezia, by contrast, seeks to form such ties outside of the family space, in the process reaching beyond the boundaries set by the old patriarchal order towards the formation of a wider community, a

move which I will argue may be read as foreshadowing the establishment of a modern nation space.

Tellingly, such a move is beyond the capacity of Linda's sister Beryl, whose ties to the old patriarchal order remain so stubbornly strong that, despite her constant fantasies about escaping the confines of the Burnells' domestic space, she is unable to do so even when the opportunity presents itself. In 'At the Bay', Beryl represents an 'in-between' stage in the process of transition between filiation and affiliation. Here, as in Mansfield's other New Zealand stories, the family defines its social boundaries through a process of Othering. The disapprobation of those who are defined as Other maintains filial ties by psychically defining the domestic boundaries when the family has moved physically into a space beyond the garden gate, such as the beach in 'At the Bay', for example. Unlike the other family members of her generation, Beryl is attracted to the social Other, represented in 'At the Bay' by the Kembers. The vague hints of scandal and licentiousness which adhere to Harry Kember and his wife are irresistible to Beryl, as is the prospect of flouting the tacit disapproval of her mother Mrs. Fairfield. Beryl is compelled and repelled in equal measure by Mrs. Harry Kember: 'she was being poisoned by this cold woman, but she longed to hear. But oh, how strange, how horrible!' (p. 294).

Beryl's attraction to the Kembers is one which brings her, literally and metaphorically, to the garden gate in the penultimate section of 'At the Bay'. It is late evening, and as she fantasises about a lover coming to 'rescue' her from the confines of the Burnell household and her impending spinsterhood, Harry Kember arrives to suggest that they take a walk:

> Beryl stepped over her low window, crossed the veranda, ran down the grass to the gate. He was there before her.
>
> 'That's right,' breathed the voice, and it teased, 'You're not frightened, are you? You're not frightened?'

> She was; now she was here she was terrified, and it seemed to her everything was different. The moonlight stared and glittered; the shadows were like bars of iron. Her hand was taken.
>
> 'Not in the least,' she said lightly. 'Why should I be?'
>
> Her hand was pulled gently, tugged. She held back.
>
> 'No, I'm not coming any farther,' said Beryl. (p. 313)

As Beryl approaches the gate, the possibility of crossing the boundary between the Burnells' domestic domain and the dangerous, wild world outside represented by Harry Kember becomes ever more real. She finds that she is unable to move further, despite the ominous bar-shaped shadows which foreshadow her 'imprisonment' within the domestic space represented by the garden.

Beryl's 'in-betweenness' is underlined by this episode, which demonstrates an attachment to the social Other which she is unable either to resist or to follow. In the later Burnell story 'The Doll's House', an older, still unmarried Beryl has become a mouthpiece for familial disapprobation, reinforcing Linda's ban on Kezia's associating with the Kelvey children, whose social position relative to the Burnells automatically renders them 'undesirable' company. Beryl's failure to cross the domestic boundary demonstrates her inability to break the filial ties of the patriarchal order, but her persisting unhappiness indicates that she is equally unable to thrive within them.

It is in 'The Doll's House' that Kezia Burnell effects a decisive boundary crossing that breaks with the filial ties upheld by such disapprobation. As in 'At the Bay', the Burnell children are physically beyond the boundaries of the garden, this time attending school, and familial disapprobation again plays a crucial role in maintaining a psychic domestic space: 'the line had to be drawn somewhere. It was drawn at the Kelveys' (p. 352). Socially, Lil and Else Kelvey are diametric opposites to the Burnell children, and, as with the Kembers in 'At the Bay', a

mixture of class prejudice and unspecified scandal places them firmly outside the Burnells' social sphere:

> They were the daughters of a spry, hard-working little washerwoman, who went about from house to house by the day. This was awful enough. But where was Mr Kelvey? Nobody knew for certain. But everybody said he was in prison. So they were the daughters of a washerwoman and a jailbird. Very nice company for other people's children! (p. 352)

Yet while Isabel, the eldest Burnell daughter, is happy to adhere to the psychic boundaries set by the disapprobation of her mother and aunt, and even goes as far as to taunt the Kelveys, the sensitive, sympathetic Kezia invites them, along with the other children, to see the Burnell girls' new doll's house. The Kelveys, like the Kembers, are externally constructed within the story, a product of the Burnells' social Othering, but Kezia crucially does not participate in this process, and is genuinely perplexed as to why they are excluded. Kezia's gesture of friendship is much more spontaneous and generous, and hence much more successful, than Beryl's in 'At the Bay', but is nevertheless a powerful transgression of a direct order from her mother.

It is significant that it is their sight of the lamp which the Kelvey children treasure, for it is the lamp which has enchanted Kezia, but to which her sisters remain indifferent. The lamp is 'a symbol for artistic illumination',[13] and as such foregrounds Kezia's artistic sensibilities. Combined with the fact that the doll's house contains a figure corresponding to every member of the family *except* Kezia, which Dunbar suggests is symbolic of her 'privilege as artist or would-be artist [...] to observe the scene from outside',[14] the image of the lamp both demonstrates Kezia's imaginative capacity to conceive of a community beyond her domestic boundary, and provides the medium for a move towards such a community. The power of this move stems from

a certain kind of permanence which it acquires in the Kelvey children's memories. Although Beryl shoos the Kelvey children away from the house, and, as Smith suggests, '[t]he final isolated line of the story ['Then both were silent once more' (p. 356)] implies that the momentary rapport cannot affect social barriers for Lil and Else',[15] the memory of the Kelvey children's glimpse of the lamp is irrevocable, as indicated by Else's simple delight: 'I seen the little lamp' (p. 356).

In this symbolic transgression, Kezia has, in Said's terms, severed a filiative bond in favour of an affiliative one. Kezia's boundary crossing in this instance, I propose, may be read as an act of community affiliation which is peculiarly national in character, given the social inequalities between the Burnells and the Kelveys. Kezia's conception of her connection with the Kelvey children seems strikingly to resemble Benedict Anderson's account of the way in which the concept of *nation* is imagined 'as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail [...], the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.'[16] Kezia's crossing of the Burnells' domestic boundary in 'The Doll's House' can be read as a manifestation of this sense of 'horizontal comradeship', an imaginative step beyond the old colonial order of rigid class prejudice and declining patriarchal power represented by her family.

A national reading of this crossing is, of course, only one possible interpretation of 'The Doll's House', and one which demands that the regional specificity of the New Zealand family stories is assigned a greater importance than has been the case with much Mansfield criticism. Pamela Dunbar, for instance, makes no mention of nation in her interpretation of the story as an expression 'through Kezia [of] the precedence for [Mansfield] of her artistic vocation above the family home which seemed in some crucial way to have failed her'.[17] Although it is only a small step from Dunbar's reading to a consideration of what affiliations the artist might make beyond the family home within

its specific New Zealand setting, she chooses not to make this step, instead prioritising a reading of Mansfield as the exiled, and ultimately placeless, Modernist subject. Bridget Orr effectively highlights the limitations of such readings, which 'can't account for the specificity of Mansfield's treatment of class in Wellington at the turn of the century', and are, finally, 'mutually reinforcing misreadings of text and context'.[18] If appropriate attention is paid to the cultural setting of the Burnell stories, a reading of Kezia's transgression in 'The Doll's House' as a nation-forming act is able to sit comfortably alongside readings which prioritise the Modernist artistic sensibilities of Kezia/Mansfield, since it is these very sensibilities which enable both (to adapt Anderson's terms) to *imagine community*.

If a national reading is only one possibility among many hinted at by the Burnell stories, it is one which is more strongly suggested by the much clearer definition of place in Mansfield's earlier story 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped'. Whilst the structure and focus of this story differ substantially from Mansfield's later domestic fictions—this time it is the world *outside* the domestic boundary which is explored in detail, whilst the space inside the garden gate is referred to only implicitly—there are nevertheless sufficient similarities to render a reading of 'Pearl Button' alongside the Burnell stories illuminating. The story begins with Pearl already on the boundary of her domestic space, swinging on her garden gate, a position which, as Smith notes, recalls Kezia's in 'The Doll's House':

> In both stories the protagonist, a little girl, swings on the gate; both children are transgressive, in that they want either to get out of the world for which the gate is a demarcation line, or to admit outsiders to the well-regulated inside world.[19]

Pearl follows two 'dark women' (the Maori women, like the 'Others' elsewhere in Mansfield's New Zealand fiction, are externally constructed, this time naïvely, from the perspective of

a young child), crossing the literal boundary of the garden gate, and, it seems reasonable to assume, an implied psychic boundary. We do not explicitly learn the details of Pearl's family, but the hints at domestic drudgery (her mother is '[i]n the kitching, ironing-because-it's-Tuesday' (p. 20)), the 'frightened voice' in which she confesses to spilling her juice (p. 21), and her bemusement at the Maori world in which the men don't 'go to offices' (p. 22) suggest another traditional patriarchal family, though not as financially well-off as the Burnells since their 'House of Boxes' is apparently a much less grand affair. The similarities with the patriarchal New Zealand families of Mansfield's later stories suggest that this too is likely to be a family which defines itself in relation to its Others. Pearl's unfamiliarity with the Maori, and the assumption that she has been kidnapped—confirmed by the army of policemen who arrive to 'rescue' her—are further evidence that she has crossed more than a mere physical boundary. The sensuous evocation of Pearl's experiences with the Maori women—the colours, the food, the sea, the laughter—and of their warm, mothering instincts, is contrasted sharply with the drab, ordered world she has left behind. Tellingly, Pearl 'had never been happy like this before' (p. 22). As Smith argues, '[f]rom the perspective of the story, the kidnapping [of the title] is clearly the imminent snatching of Pearl by the little blue men and her impending incarceration'.[20]

Within such a reading, it is possible to view Pearl's following of the Maori women as another instance of a boundary crossing which rejects filial bonds in favour of affiliative association. Viewed alongside the Burnell stories, 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped' suggests a more radical interpretation than that offered by Wevers, who suggests that Mansfield's view of New Zealand is irreconcilable with the presence of the Maori:

> What is excluded from the 'New Zealand' signified in 'At the Bay' and 'Prelude' is the presence of the Maori, who

> cannot be accommodated in the familial structures and legends of white European nationhood [...]. The invisible Maori lie beyond the boundaries which construct the Burnells' landscape, are still unexplored territory[.][21]

If, rather than as 'family as nation', the traditional patriarchal family structures depicted in the Burnell stories (and arguably implied in 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped') are viewed as representative of an older, colonial order, it is possible to view the acts of disobedience in these stories as significant moves away from filial ties towards an affiliative, proto-national community. The children in Mansfield's stories who possess the imaginative capacity to move beyond the boundaries of their domestic space are, in doing so, reaching out beyond the narrow boundaries of a colonial society to their families' and societies' Others (crucially, *including* the Maori). While the filial ties to the colonial order will not be easily broken (and, indeed, characters such as Isabel Burnell will actively attempt to replicate them through affiliation), Mansfield's New Zealand stories offer at least the prospect that an inclusive modern nation may one day be built on affiliative ties formed outside the spaces of patriarchy and colonialism. The patriarchal family structures in these stories may be viewed as a starting point, an arena for nation-forming acts which are anything but conservative.

Notes

1 For a fuller discussion of the parallels between Mansfield's fictional New Zealand families and her own, see Pamela Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997), p. 138.

2 Angela Smith, 'Landscape and the Foreigner Within: Katherine Mansfield and Emily Carr' in *Landscape and Empire 1770-2000*, ed. by

Glenn Hooper (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), pp. 141-157 (pp. 141-3).

3 Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield*, p. 162.

4 Edward Said (1984), 'Secular Criticism', *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1991), pp. 1-30 (pp.19-20).

5 Lydia Wevers, 'The Sod Under my Feet: Katherine Mansfield' in *Opening the Book: New Essays on New Zealand Writing*, ed. by Mark Williams & Michelle Leggott (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995), pp. 31-48 (pp. 41-2).

6 *Opening the Book*, p.40.

7 *Opening the Book*, p. 45.

8 *Opening the Book*, p. 40.

9 All page references to Mansfield's stories are from Katherine Mansfield, *Selected Stories*, ed. by Angela Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

10 Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield*, p. 146.

11 Angela Smith, *Katherine Mansfield: A Literary Life* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), p. 40.

12 Said, 'Secular Criticism', pp. 16-17.

13 Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield*, p. 174.

14 *Radical Mansfield*, p. 174.

15 Smith, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 44.

16 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 7.

17 Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield*, p. 175.

18 Bridget Orr, 'Reading with the taint of the pioneer: Katherine Mansfield and settler criticism', *Landfall*, XLIII. 4 (1989), 447-461 (p. 450).

19 Smith, *Katherine Mansfield*, p. 41.

20 Smith, 'Landscape and the Foreigner Within', p. 156.

21 Wevers, 'The Sod Under my Feet', pp. 44-45.