



## The Chicago spinsters: Stella Miles Franklin and the New Woman response to marriage inequality

Janet Lee

*Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Oregon State University, Waldo 246, Corvallis, OR 97331-6208, USA*



### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 13 March 2014

### SYNOPSIS

This paper focuses on the portrayal of spinsters in the unpublished writings of Australian feminist Stella Miles Franklin. I emphasise the ways Franklin's spinsters narratives are shaped by her feminist social purity and New Woman intellectual and artistic influences, as well as by her personal experiences as an unmarried woman. I suggest that Franklin joins New Woman writers beginning to portray spinsters as sympathetic characters, but goes one step further in scripting these 'old maids' as attractive, intelligent, and competent. Such portrayals include nuanced representations of unmarried women as first, witty, vivacious, and physically attractive characters; second, women who negotiate romantic relationships with men for themselves and others; and third, characters involved in feminist civic-minded work.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

Eleonora Haskett, the spinster in Australian feminist Stella Miles Franklin's unpublished novel 'While Cupid Tarried' (c. 1909), has 'the ripe unfaded glory of advanced maturity... [like] a gorgeous day towards the end of summer' (272). In these lines, as in much of her writing during this period, Franklin's spinsters take centre stage as strong and attractive characters critiquing the injustices of women's domestic destiny and presenting alternative narratives to marriage and maternity. Although little-known outside of Australia Franklin remains an important literary figure who left behind a strong legacy of uniquely Australian fiction and a prestigious literary award in her name. Best known for her novel *My Brilliant Career* (1901), which 'not only tells the story of a feminist rebellion but also serves as an illustration of a formal rebellion against literary tradition' (Miller, 117), Franklin also amassed a huge collection of unpublished short stories, novels, and plays during her expatriate years in Chicago and London (1906–1927) when she left Australia in search of feminist adventures and new literary opportunities. Passionate about suffrage and the economic as well as political rights of working women, Franklin dedicated years of her life during this period to social justice.

This paper has two goals: first, a resuscitation of Franklin's little-known, early writing through close readings of select, unpublished manuscripts; and second, a contribution to the literature on spinsters in early twentieth-century U.S. society through a focus on Franklin's work. In particular I emphasise the ways Franklin's spinsters narratives are shaped by her feminist social purity and New Woman intellectual and artistic influences. I suggest that Franklin's portrayal of spinsters includes women both resisting marriage and developing assets to become more appealing future wives and eschewing marriage and living full, independent lives. As illustrations of the former I discuss Miss Hilton in the short story 'Uncle Robert's Wedding Present' (1908) and Eleanor Haskett in Franklin's novel 'While Cupid Tarried' (started in 1909 and worked on until 1914; also adapted into a play, 'The Love Machine' [1910]). These stories represent the ways romance narratives still dominated women's literary traditions and set up marriage as women's fulfilment. Franklin's spinsters who revolt by subverting marriage and leading full, independent lives include Sophie Mortimer from 'Aunt Sophie Smashes a Triangle' (1913) and Antoinette Toby from the play 'Virtue' (1916), the novel 'Sam Price from Chicago' (1921), and the short sketch 'Miss Toby's Party' (c. 1913<sup>1</sup>).<sup>2</sup>

In 1906 Franklin left Australia and arrived in Chicago, a vibrant U.S. mid-western city and site of the Chicago Literary Renaissance, hoping to pursue a literary career. The Chicago Literary Renaissance was a key aspect of Progressive-era politics involving socially-responsible art that provided models for enlightenment and protest (Pinkerton and Hudson). Letters of introduction to Jane Addams of Hull-House acquainted her with key social reformers and resulted in work with the newly-elected president of the NWTUL, Margaret Dreier Robins. After working as Robins' personal secretary in 1908, Franklin was elected NWTUL national secretary the following year at a salary of \$25 a week, became co-editor with compatriot Alice Henry of the League's journal *Life and Labor* in 1911, and briefly served as its editor in 1915 (Coleman; Kirkby; Roe).

Immersed in Progressive-era activism to improve the conditions of working women's lives, Franklin laboured on the administration of the League and took a leadership in her own stenographer's union. This practical work underscored the necessity of women's economic self-sufficiency, fine-tuned Franklin's critique of marriage as economic servitude, and shaped her spinster narratives. In late 1915 Franklin moved to London, but continued on the NWTUL executive board, following her demotion as national secretary and after conflict over editorship of the journal. In London Franklin became involved with the radical, pro-labour Women's Freedom League (WFL) and worked as a cook and server at its vegetarian Minerva Café (Roe, 200). For the WFL, as for Franklin herself, the vote was not an end in itself, but was linked to these wider social and economic issues. After a stint on the Eastern Front with the Scottish Women's Hospitals from July 1917 until February 1918 Franklin returned to London to take a post with the National Housing and Town Planning Association.

Similar to her migration to the U.S., Franklin anticipated new literary opportunities in England and hoped to support herself as a freelance journalist. By early 1917 she had at least eight press articles (mostly in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and with occasional reporting in the WFL magazine, *Vote*), but just as in Chicago where she also wrote incessantly and published little, opportunities to publish her own work were again limited. As a result, alongside hectic work schedules and physical and emotional ailments that always seemed to plague her, Franklin left behind a vast collection of unpublished work that included novels, plays, sketches, and short stories that have been noted as among her most 'fluent and uninhibited' (Duncan, xiii). Her publishing failures during this period are well-known; the reasons for them, complex. Plagued by ill-health and depression, she was demeaned by the failure to get the sequel to *My Brilliant Career* (what would eventually become *My Career Goes Bung* [1946]) published in Australia (Roe). In addition, the lukewarm reception of her Australian pro-suffrage novel, *Some Everyday Folk and Dawn* (1909), and later the *The Net of Circumstance* (1915), most likely shook her confidence. She often used obscure pseudonyms during this period, as in Mr and Mrs Ogniblat L'Artsau (spelling Talbingo, Australia, her hometown, in reverse) and was relatively secretive about her writing (Coleman; Roe). And, of course, because her strong feminist characters challenged gender arrangements, like many feminist writers of her generation she would have irked her reviewers (Miller). The fierce, independent Sybylla

Melvyn of *My Brilliant Career* would have struck a chord in the pioneering society of the Australian outback whereas the strong-willed spinsters of her later works – and their often didactic monologues on marriage, men, and militarism – most likely were read differently.

The post-1915 manuscripts discussed here, although written in London, are according to Franklin's biographer, Jill Roe (156), definitively 'representative' of her Chicago years. Such voluminous literary production during these years was influenced by the Chicago Literary Renaissance that encouraged socially-responsible art critiquing corporate expansion and fostered social awareness through literary realism and political drama (Gardner and Rutherford; Miller). Franklin's spinsters with their critique of marriage reflect this protest genre in their popular appeal to a wider audience with hopes for political consciousness-raising. All manuscripts discussed in this paper illustrate these liberatory trends and question marriage and women's relationship to it.

### The spinster

In the nineteenth century women who did not marry were at best treated as sacrificial angels: pathetic virgins entombed by the demands of ageing parents or siblings' children; at worst they were ridiculed and pitied as human failures bringing shame and scorn on their families (Hill; Katz). However, symbolic of broad economic changes associated with urbanisation and industrialisation, the spinster was not a static or monolithic cultural icon, but shaped by class and social location. Working-class spinsters had always worked alongside their married sisters in agricultural and industrial labour, while genteel women who were destined to be poor because of their marital status could only seek appropriate employment as ladies' companions, teachers and governesses, or seamstresses (Smith-Rosenberg). In response to such sad subservience and the 'politics of superfluity', some spinsters in the U.K. emigrated (Kranidis, 19); many lived to end their days in poor house and charity institutions wherever they resided (Vicinus). Still, even while such women suffered socially and economically, defined by what they could not have, their experiences as women who disrupted notions of female sexual subordination by resisting heterosexual relationships, or choosing celibacy, or both, positioned them as subversive subjects (Auerbach; Jeffreys). This is not to say, of course, that spinsters during this period were outside the control of fathers and brothers in terms of their lived experience as women in families, only that by avoiding the oppositional logic associated with marriage they emerged as potentially radical, transgressive figures, 'often resented by men whose control they had escaped' (Hill, 2).

With access to higher education and employment by the late-nineteenth century and with a growing openness about the fragility of happiness in marriage, independent middle-class women no longer regarded marriage as necessary for financial support or self-respect (Smith-Rosenberg). As the century ended they were increasingly free to live outside the parameters of family control (Rosenthal). Indeed, Sheila Jeffreys makes the case that in the U.K. between 1906 and 1914 many spinsters were 'deliberately choosing to remain single and were articulating their decision in political terms' in response to the double standard of sexual conduct subordinating women, and because

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/376090>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/376090>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)