

DOROTHY HEWETT'S PATHS TO *THE CHAPEL PERILOUS*

In 1958, after a silence of over ten years, Dorothy Hewett announced her return to writing with the novel, *Bobbin Up*. Years later she wrote that she had been “silenced by political activism, the deep-seated anti-culturalism and socialist realist dogmas of the Australian Communist Party, plus the terrible struggle to survive.”¹ Once the silence was broken, in the decade following *Bobbin Up* she published numerous poems and stories, many of them going against the grain of those socialist realist dogmas. But she did not, in fact, leave the Party until 1968. What happened in those intervening years that led her finally to renounce her membership, but also enabled her to write again, and prepared her to produce the extraordinary plays and poetry that flowed from her pen during the 1970s?

I am interested in Hewett's transition from a Communist writer in the 1960s to a poet and dramatist recognised (though not always self-identified) as a feminist in the 1970s. This article considers the work she produced in the 1960s in its political and intellectual contexts, and so traces the paths she took towards the achievement of her controversial play of 1971, *The Chapel Perilous*.² The play's heroine, **Sally Banner**, is a social rebel who refuses to bow to the authority figures that loom over her life. She is a bold seeker after intensities of sexual experience, with male and female lovers, and she is a poet, who needs to “answer to her blood direct” and “walk naked through the world.” As a woman, these needs and desires can only bring her trouble. She horrifies her parents and teachers, suffers rejection and disillusionment with her lovers, and the loss of her children. As the play's title suggests, she is on a quest, like the knight seeking the Chapel Perilous,³ confronting her own weaknesses as well as external dangers. Seeking to escape the shadow of annihilation, she wants to believe in love and poetry. When these fail her, she throws herself into the Communist Party and its dream of a free and equal world.

The parallels with events in Hewett's own early life are evident, and were widely recognised at the time. Yet the play's historical significance was also seized upon: it was "then and now understood as a watershed moment for second-wave feminism in the theatre, and a play that undid and made new the possibilities for a feminine subjectivity in an Australian imaginary."⁴

Hewett's own accounts of her transition from Communism vary. In *Wild Card*, an account of her life up until the late 1950s, when she wrote *Bobbin Up*, she creates a romantic narrative of a sexual and political rebel who always went to extremes,⁵ projecting a self that might readily cross over from communism to feminism. Yet her comment quoted above, and others, about having been "silenced" by the Party suggest a deep split between her younger and her older self, and a sudden liberation from the constraints of dogma. Only the opening chapter of a second intended volume of her autobiography, "The Empty Room," was completed before her death, and so we have to work to imagine how she made the transition. It may not have been as dramatic and sudden as all that, however, given the ideological currents flowing around the rebirth of her career as a writer in the 1960s.

The Political Context: Communist Intellectuals and the New Left

In that excerpt from "The Empty Room," which she published in 2000, Hewett recalled how the success of *Bobbin Up* brought her into contact for the first time with a whole community of Marxist writers and intellectuals. She paid tribute to "all the old icons of the left who once came to celebrate the launch of a first novel by a young woman of thirty-five" when she visited Melbourne to publicise the book. These "icons" included Stephen Murray-Smith, Ian Turner, Brian Fitzpatrick, David Martin, John Morrison, Alan Marshall and Aileen Palmer. She had spent her life from the late 1940s to the late 1950s believing that being a writer and being a Communist activist were incompatible. Now, she wrote, "I began to feel culturally deprived," for "a whole period of Australia's literary life had come of age while I, enclosed in my proletarian gulag, had hardly been aware of it".⁶

By 1958, when Hewett met these "icons of the left" in Melbourne, many of them were renegade Communists, having left the Party after Russia crushed the Hungarian uprising, and Khrushchev attacked Stalin's crimes and the "cult of personality" surrounding the former leader. Ian Turner, then secretary to the Australasian Book Society, was expelled, and *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith left in sympathy. Aileen Palmer was still a member but her sister Helen had been expelled for publishing her magazine, *Outlook*, without the Party's permission.⁷ By contrast, among

the “proletarian gulag” that Hewett inhabited in Sydney only Frank Hardy appears in her memories of the period as a Communist intellectual, one who encouraged her to write, and who at times criticised the Party line, especially on cultural matters. However he did not turn in his Party card in the late 1950s, and nor did Dorothy Hewett.

What Hewett did do, however, was just as momentous for her: she revolutionised her personal and intellectual life. She left the home she had shared in Sydney with fellow Communist Les Flood, scene of the “terrible struggle to survive” that she describes in the second half of *Wild Card*, and took their three sons with her back to Perth. Her family helped her to settle there, and she returned to the University of Western Australia to complete the degree she had abandoned in 1942. She met up again with Merv Lilley, whom she had first encountered on the triumphant visit to Melbourne when *Bobbin Up* was published. They married and had two daughters. In 1965 Dorothy was appointed to a teaching position in the English Department where she remained until the family left Perth for Sydney in 1973.

At first she had no contact with the local Communist Party in Perth (from which she had made a “scandalous departure” ten years before). Her new love was also a writer and a Communist, though the Party disapproved of him as a bit of an anarchist.⁸ His apostasy evidently suited Dorothy very well: she was no longer constrained to prove herself as a perfect cadre, although her loyalty to the idea of socialism remained. She read voraciously, mostly literature but also Marxist cultural theory. Ian Syson, who found some of her unpublished essays of this period, concludes that the Communist Party of Australia was eventually “not Marxist enough for Hewett, and this was revealed to her in its attitude towards cultural matters”.⁹ Before going on to consider how her ideas developed during the 1960s, we should consider the broader political climate.

Communist parties in the West underwent significant changes in the 1960s. They were affected by the movement now known as the New Left, when many intellectuals left the Party but maintained an allegiance to Marxist ideas, returning to the founding texts to undertake their own readings of Marx, and other writers long outlawed by the Party, such as Trotsky and Gramsci. This loose alliance of non-Party Marxists and left-wing social democrats was represented in Australia by *Outlook*, Helen Palmer’s journal, and the later-established *Arena*.¹⁰ With the New Left came the possibility of distancing the socialist project from Soviet Communism. Within Communist parties the Sino-Soviet split produced conflicts of loyalty, and some national parties began to move away from Moscow’s stranglehold on their

policies. In many places a process of reconstruction began, which accelerated after 1968, the year of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the “Prague Spring” liberalisation, and also the year of the “events of May” in France that announced a new kind of Left activism independent of the Communist Party. **By the end of the 1960s there were many more Marxists** outside the Communist parties than in them.

In Australia, a split in 1963 resulted in the formation of a breakaway pro-China CPA (Marxist-Leninist). The Communist Party of Australia’s gradual assertion of independence from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dramatically intensified in 1968, when the leadership’s pro-Dubcek stance led to a strong condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. This aroused the hostility of a previously silent opposition within the Party, and eventually resulted in a **split in 1971 between the Communist Party of Australia** which was in the process of reforming along New Left lines and a pro-Soviet Socialist Party of Australia. While this reconstruction was initially driven by the desire to develop a Party more responsive to Australian conditions, interested in the Italian model of socialist pluralism and even a parliamentary presence for the Communist Party, it was soon swept up into the broader social and political radicalisation that marked Australia after 1965. The anti-Vietnam war movement, student radicalism, a revived struggle for Aboriginal rights and the new Women’s Liberation Movement, together transformed political opposition into an extra-parliamentary force to be reckoned with. Communist activists of various hues were a presence in all these movements, despite the majority of their participants’ lack of interest in working-class politics and suspicion of any kind of organisation as “Stalinist”.¹¹

The anti-war and anti-conscription movement made leftist politics more populist than they had been since World War II, with a strong emphasis on grass-roots organisation as well as the international scope required by its anti-imperialism.¹² In terms of political traditions, the early Women’s Liberation Movement in Australia grew out of the radical student movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam, and had earlier links with union – and extra-union – activism for equal pay. It was at times aligned with the extra-parliamentary Left, the Communist Party and Trotskyist groups.¹³ **Because of these links between the political Left and Women’s Liberation**, in the early 1970s the meanings of “Marxist” and “feminist” in Australia were far from incompatible. This has a particular bearing on later analyses of Hewett’s work, which have been described by Nicole Moore as **“a critical scramble for Hewett as either feminist or Marxist, and never**

both, a stalemate that resulted in the separation of Hewett's work into two parts: that completed before 1968, when she left the Party, and work done after that".¹⁴

The Women's Liberation Movement also grew out of a decade of fierce debates about censorship, particularly of sexual matters, and initially it had strong links with the sexual liberation movement of that time. This meant that the sexual freedom practised by Hewett's dramatic heroines like Sally Banner of *The Chapel Perilous* was readily greeted as a forerunner of Women's Liberation, whatever her creator might have intended. It was ironic that this work by an ex-Communist who had rejected any idea of writing a thesis-play was seen as a statement of women's liberation, but on sex and marriage Hewett's views were easily unconventional enough to qualify. She told an interviewer in 1969 that marriage can be an escape from the real world for young women, that sex without love is fine, and indeed "if you've been a promiscuous girl you're more likely to have a happy marriage".¹⁵ Such a public statement from a Communist Party member would have been unthinkable ten years earlier.

Despite this radicalisation both within and outside of the Communist Party, the events of 1968 spelled the end of her long commitment to the Party for Dorothy Hewett. On 30 May she wrote to her friend David Martin in Melbourne: "My disillusionment with the world of politics grows deeper while I sense that your feelings David are undergoing some sort of mellowing". In a reference to the events of May in Paris, she writes: "A profound pessimism informs everything I think and yet the young are marching and cheering all over Europe. Have I at last grown old ... is it as Yeats says 'Who would have thought that the heart grows old?'" It seems that her "years of Utopian idealism and tender belief" have withered and "I am now as clear eyed and cynical as the 20 year olds I teach every day". She thinks "the Czechs or some of them seem to be the hope of the socialist world".¹⁶ The timing of this letter, between the May uprisings and the Soviet invasion of Prague in August of that year, suggests that the crushing of Czech hopes was the final straw for her.

By that time she had redefined herself as a writer first and foremost, and it seems that she was less interested in the possibilities of developing socialism outside the Soviet model than in the role of writers and the Party's benighted attitudes to cultural matters. Besides, the Party no longer offered the only possible home in a hostile world, as anti-establishment ideas gained popular appeal. Over the ten years between 1958 and 1968, the world changed radically, as did the writer.

The Intellectual Context of Hewett's Writing in the 1960s

Together with Merv Lilley, Hewett produced a collection of poetry, *What about the People?* (1963), which included many poems and songs of social protest, drawing on older folk ballad traditions. Folk music linked them to a more populist version of socialist struggle that rejoiced in its connection with older rural traditions, discarding Party prescriptions for writing about the urban proletariat.¹⁷ So too did the stories Hewett published during the 1960s in *Overland* and other magazines: these had mostly rural settings and drew on the Lawsonian tradition of Australian fiction. A clue to her thinking at the time comes from her review of *Australasian Poetry 1959*, where she saw “a clear pattern of myth-making,” of reaching “inwards to explore and discover ... the abiding meaning” of events and places in “that frighteningly empty Australian landscape”. This kind of myth-making in poetry goes back to Lawson and Gilmore, she wrote¹⁸ – and clearly it had great appeal for her, as she would demonstrate in poems about her own family such as “Legend of the Green Country”.

Another move to free herself from the prescription that the urban working class was the only proper subject of socialist literature was to forge imaginative links with socialist writers elsewhere. One poem in this book, “My Party,”¹⁹ is a roll-call of writers associated with Communism, but outside of Russia. It is as if Hewett were trying to conjure up a heroic world-wide communism that she could still call home. The opening words are especially poignant in this respect:

I am not alone ... in the beating of my heart
Are the songs of Lumumba, the poems of Neruda.
Brecht's lost children wander through the Polish snow,
'The Rail Splitters Awake' in my heart each morning,
With Nazrim Hikmet I have seen beautiful days
And my Party is the Party of Aragon.
I have loved all beautiful things,
Flowers and music and Robeson's songs,
Seeger's guitar and Woody Guthrie singing,
The Tennessee Valley blooming under his lips... .²⁰

This poem was omitted from the *Collected Poems* published in 1994, yet it is a crucial clue as to what kept her commitment going during the 1960s. She would make another visit to Russia in 1965, a deeply disillusioning experience which is reflected in the long poem, “The Hidden Journey.”²¹ In this poem, published close to the moment of her resignation from the

Party, the roll-call is of Russian writers who have been persecuted, some of them executed, by the Soviet regime. It is heroism in a different key.

Two previously unpublished essays from the 1960s show Hewett addressing literary issues that preoccupied her.²² “The Times They are a’Changin’” is concerned with the obsolescence of *The Realist Writer* as a separatist publication which attempts “to impose a left sectarian point of view”. While Realist Writers groups and the journal had provided a crucial sense of “identity” and “purpose,” at the same time they became “closed shops” that resulted in “dogmatism” and “kicks and bouquets delivered with embarrassing self-confidence.” She urges “young progressive writers” to join various writers’ groups, to seek help from “some sympathetic older writer” and eventually to send their work “into the market place, to all the journals ... and to take part in the struggle of ideas.” Citing recent issues of *Overland* and *Meanjin*, she notes: “Never has there been such a ferment of anti-establishment ideas.” She lists her own connections with “broad writers’ groups in Perth,” and activities including fund-raising for students charged with burning their draft cards.²³ Anticipating charges from her comrades of biting the hand that once fed her, she ends this article with a call to question the concept of the Realist Writer “as we are questioning so many ideas the left once thought axiomatic.”

The title “Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth” quotes a Russian proverb, which she uses to argue that both political analysis and creative imagination are needed – the first without the second is like bread without salt. She opens with a key quotation from Jack Beasley’s study of Katharine Susannah Prichard: the creation of the revolutionary hero will only be possible “when full expression can be given to imagination, to the emotional faculties.” She accuses realist writers of being afraid to “free their characters to question, suffer and grow,” adding “the taboos against sex operate strongly in this context.” She concludes:

Static characters, soberside Communists, the hero who becomes a flat, non-hero, fear of sex, love, conflict and death, the shrinking away from unpalatable truths, distrust of symbolic language, the smoothing out of contradictions; all these seem to me to be the symptoms of a fatal division between the head and the heart; intuitive imaginative understanding, and broad, honest, intellectual analysis. We have to free ourselves to both think and feel deeply.

These were indeed the qualities of the poetry and drama she would go on to produce, with prominent themes of sex, love, conflict and death, explored in symbolic language.

Letters to fellow Communist David Martin during this period illustrate how she grappled with such issues. She had abandoned “complexity and individualism” in the hope of “the communion with all men,” she wrote, but still her poetry is rejected. Although it is meant to be read aloud, and to work by accumulation “not from paring down,” it attracts “remarks like romanticism and not enough originality of metaphor or triteness of thought or too loose” from someone like *Meanjin* editor Clem Christesen. Hewett blames “our terrible modern mistrust of romanticism” which is really a “terrible mistrust of emotion, of feeling, of faith in life,” something both Left and Right have in common.²⁴ Her first solo book of poetry, *Windmill Country* (published by *Overland* in 1968) was a reassertion of this faith in romanticism as a style and a stance. In it she added to the ballads a number of overtly autobiographical poems.

In another letter to Martin she refers to having finished a three-act play: “It is a rather odd play, in that I’ve tried to use realism plus symbolism a la O’Casey, which is all that really interests me now.”²⁵ She worries that it may not be a successful marriage perhaps because of “the hangovers of the naturalistic style.”²⁶ She is ready now to abandon the “crime of naturalism” for which she had been criticised by comrades who disliked *Bobbin Up*, but not the attention to sexual matters that they particularly objected to.²⁷ The distinction between realism and naturalism that she had in mind is evident in her 1960 article about Kylie Tennant. She praises *The Battlers* as the best thing Tennant ever wrote, comparing it with Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* for its “romantic realism.” By this Hewett means a “juxtaposition of lyrical romanticism with a kind of hardheaded laconic realism of speech and characterisation,” which enabled Tennant to create heroines out of “battling” men and women. This description could equally well apply to Hewett’s style in *Bobbin Up*, which was by no means orthodox socialist realism. Yet when she goes on to charge that Tennant later allowed herself to be sidelined, as Steinbeck also was, by “the grotesque and the bizarre, the rejects of society,” we can hear a clear echo of the Party line. This is classic 1950s Communist Party scorn for the kind of “naturalism” that took “society’s outcasts” as its subject: socialist heroes must be made out of the respectable working class, not the lumpenproletariat.²⁸

Realism, too, would have to be jettisoned before Hewett found her theatrical metier, but not yet. In the meantime she was investigating literary theory. In 1961 she wrote a long letter to Jack Beasley about the need to create “the revolutionary hero or heroine,” where she castigates herself for missing this opportunity with Nell Mooney, the Communist cadre in *Bobbin Up*. Nell “thrust herself out of the body of the book and

began to take on something of the lineaments of ‘a heroine,’” and if her creator had let Nell have her own way she could have given the novel its “poetic and revolutionary centre.” Hewett has been reading Lukacs, probably *Studies in European Realism*, and believes the fragmented form she used in her novel prevented this from happening: “There is something capitalist in this very mode of presentation . . . , the fleeting glimpse rather than the built up subtly analysed character (Gorki, Tolstoy, Balzac).”²⁹ Hewett is getting ready to create dramatic heroes, but perhaps Lukacs’ requirements for realism delayed the development of her distinctive theatrical style, where protagonists are not “built up and subtly analysed” as characters but are larger than life figures, presented through fragmented time frames and a range of non-verbal theatrical devices.

Making a Spectacle in the Theatre

Hewett’s return to university meant that she could read English, Australian and American literature to her heart’s content. She mentions becoming “obsessed with Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway.” Her letters to David Martin tell of investigating a number of Australian topics for a Masters thesis, at one point “the split between realism and symbolism” in Randolph Stow, at another Vance Palmer’s novels.³⁰ In the end she seems to have taken Katharine Susannah Prichard’s advice to give up the thesis as it “will not advance you as a writer.”³¹ She devoted her time instead to working on a play, which would become *This Old Man Came Rolling Home*. It was at this point in her life that Hewett turned seriously to writing for the theatre. When *This Old Man* was produced in Sydney in 1968, even though it was not conventionally realist, a famous Sydney critic was heard to exclaim as he left, “Old, old, old. Call me a taxi.” Stung, Hewett began to read “all sorts of new playwrights, Europeans in particular” – Brecht, Beckett, Artaud, Orton, Bond, as well as Wedekind and other expressionists.³²

Theatre was a difficult milieu for a woman dramatist. In a 1980 article about women and writing, she pointed to a long tradition of female stereotypes in theatre, and no tradition of female playwrights to speak of.³³ Yet at the time she was writing *The Chapel Perilous*, her third play, Hewett did not consider such feminist perspectives: rather, she was concerned with the problem of writing plays in Australia.³⁴ The attempt to do so is “a peculiar form of masochism,” she claimed at the time. In this 1970 article she mulled over the problems of establishing an Australian drama that could without self-consciousness leave behind “the sentimental bloke and the roaring nineties.” At that time the “new wave” of Australian theatre was only just emerging – the Australian Performing Group in Melbourne and

the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney - and in Perth she felt especially isolated: "This is the greatest problem for any Australian dramatist ... where can he work, who can he work with?" She was also concerned with problems of form: neither a tragic nor a comic view of existence would do. The "black comedy" of her new play, *The Chapel Perilous*, was "the only way I know anymore of dealing with emotions and circumstances which are too painful to allow any other kind of discipline but ironic laughter."³⁵

She records in this early piece that she had been encouraged by her old friend from university days, then lecturer in Drama, Philip Parsons, who insisted that she "had the sort of imagination that created plays."³⁶ It had been Parsons' idea to incorporate the New Fortune theatre into the new University of Western Australia Arts building and, as Hewett later recorded, she was inspired by the three-tiered Elizabethan style of this theatre with its large platform stage. It recalled the theatre of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, and also Brecht's boxing ring. This was, for her, "the great uncluttered room of the imagination, the empty room with no curtains to go thump at the end of each act, little or no props, just an empty space inhabited by bodies and words."³⁷ Theatre in such a space could be free to mix music, dance and song with words, puppets with players, comedy with tragedy, farce and burlesque. These directions she explored in a series of plays: 1969 *Mrs Porter and the Angel*, 1971 *The Chapel Perilous*, 1972 *Bon bons and Roses for Dolly*, 1974 *Catspaw* [a rock musical], 1974 *Joan* [a rock opera], 1974 *The Tatty Hollow Story*, 1976 *The Golden Oldies*, 1978 *Pandora's Cross*, 1979 *The Man from Mukinupin*, and so on through the 1980s.

Philip Parsons would continue to be her most important support in the theatre, giving feedback on her drafts, arranging readings and full productions of her plays, and publishing them in the Currency Press list that he set up in the early 1970s with his wife Katherine Brisbane. These two friends were her crucial link with the theatre world in Sydney, and Aarne Neeme, another of Parsons' protégés, would direct some of the most satisfying productions of her plays, including the inaugural *Chapel Perilous* in Perth. As Dorothy wrote to Philip in 1971: "Just as well the Parsons believe I'm a playwright or I should cease to believe I exist at all. I think I'll go back to writing novels. This is a mug's game."³⁸ Little did she know at the time that *The Chapel Perilous*, which had premiered in January that year, would rapidly achieve productions in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney as well, and be published in Currency Press's first list, in 1972. It was a huge success, and made a lasting impact on Australian theatre. It takes pride of place among the seven plays reprinted in the 1997 book *Australian Women's Drama: Texts and Feminisms*, as a founding text of Australian feminist drama.³⁹

***The Chapel Perilous* and the Moment of Women's Liberation**

Thus it was that in January 1971 at the New Fortune Theatre at the University of Western Australia, a flamboyant figure made her first appearance on the stage: Sally Banner, heroine of *The Chapel Perilous*. "Wearing her hair 'like armour' [she] storms her way to a place in the Australian imagination," an "incandescent heroine," wrote Sylvia Lawson.⁴⁰ In a Prologue and two acts, the play covers Sally's life from schoolgirl to woman in her 60s. Its visual and musical elements evoke the passing of time from World War II through the Cold War to the late 1960s "make love not war" era, in a kaleidoscopic presentation of political events and ideas, popular songs and dances. Sally interacts with a series of lovers and power figures (represented on stage as giant puppets), while a chorus offers the outsiders' view of her quest, where she so often flounders: "Poor Sally, she never made it," they sing. There is a repeated contrast between Sally's romantic view of her destiny, her lovers' failure to live up to that view, and society's disapproval or ridicule. At the end she reaches a kind of apotheosis as she makes a gesture of acceptance that is ambiguous enough to be readable as a bow of defeat. Her almost-final words are often quoted: "I had a tremendous world in my head, and more than three quarters of it will be buried with me."

Critics quickly recognised that Sally was a figure of her time, whether they admired or disapproved of the way she was presented and what she represented. Leonard Radic, theatre critic in the Melbourne *Age*, recognised Sally's historic importance: the play is "highly evocative, highly personal," but it goes beyond the autobiographical. It speaks for her generation and later ones too, "a kind of secular Pilgrim's Progress." Sally is "both a rebel and an early women's liberationist" but (he seems relieved to note) Dorothy Hewett "resists the temptation to glorify Sally's attempts at emancipation."⁴¹

A reviewer wrote of the published play that it was "magnificent in conception," a personal credo that ends with a question mark. In her view, "the theatre of the 1970s is enriched by this play in many ways: by the character of Sally Banner, by poetry, by the sheer massed effect of vast assembled material, by the play's orderly transcendence of the limitations of time and space, by the bid of a woman to speak the naked truth."⁴² The *National Times* published a full-page article based on an interview with the playwright, where Kevon Kemp praised Hewett for "starting to put together some sort of a definition of the Australian woman... [S]he is set on a big and lonely task – that of building a realistic notion of what it is like to be a strong and questing woman in Australia, and of the difficulties such a role encounters sexually." *The Chapel Perilous* is a big play, he wrote,

and it “puts modern woman’s problems so directly and freely on stage as to light up the name Hewett along with Greer.” He concluded, with no little patriarchal condescension: “for an enormous population of women it is a work that will make things suddenly and blindingly clear.”⁴³

The discursive terms that shape these comments are worth noting – it is not “feminism” but “Women’s Liberation;” and the novelty and boldness of Sally’s quest for sexual freedom, and her desire to speak the truth about her female experience, are the points of interest. This emphasis on Sally’s historical significance has its most eloquent expression in Sylvia Lawson’s Preface to the published play, from which I have already quoted. She makes explicit the difference that “women’s liberation” meant when she writes that: “it is only in an age when emancipation [which meant careers and votes for women] has given place to liberation that the Sally Banners of the world can begin to tell us who they are.” She also took up the implications of the play’s title and drew out its link with the resonant line from Greer’s recently-published *The Female Eunuch*: “It is exactly the element of quest in her sexuality that the female is taught to deny.” Lawson adds:

Dorothy Hewett’s real audacity is that she summons up the whole rich tapestry field of heroes and heroic questing, and by implication insists that a demanding, gifted woman’s confused and confusing experience in the twentieth century can actually be its living equivalent.⁴⁴

Feminist Responses to *The Chapel Perilous*

As Women’s Liberation became “feminism” and developed its own ideologies, feminist critics began to distance themselves somewhat from Sally Banner. Anne Summers, in her 1975 landmark book *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, welcomed *The Chapel Perilous* as the single exception to the rule of the silent/absent woman in contemporary Australian drama. She regarded Sally as ultimately “capitulating to the forces that defeat her,” but read her anguish as a pioneering example of a woman expressing “universal problems” without their sounding “incongruous or pretentious.”⁴⁵ Carole Ferrier’s 1976 account of Sally’s significance was more critical: she saw Sally’s problem as a female one, not a “universal” one - the difficulty for women to combine writing, political activism and personal relationships. But she was not impressed by Sally’s exceptionalism, by what she saw as Hewett’s ‘essentially individualist view’ that “collective transformation through revolutionary change” is unlikely. This judgement illustrates the kind of socialist-feminist perspective that was common among 1970s Australian Women’s Liberationists.⁴⁶

Different reservations were expressed by students when I taught this play as a text in the late 1970s and 1980s. For many of them, Sally's search for fulfilment in romantic heterosexuality, and her susceptibility to men who used and discarded her, were problematic. How could such a woman be a feminist hero? Wasn't she, rather, complicit with patriarchy? Sally Banner's dramatic role as hero became implicated in the sociological idea of a role model, which was prevalent at the time. Margaret Williams, in her 1992 monograph on Hewett's plays, *The Feminine as Subversion*, also reports that such misgivings about Sally were more often voiced by women than written down. In counteracting their objections, Williams makes good use of the then-new feminist emphasis on women's difference, and of the related recognition that there was no free space outside of patriarchal culture in which to operate: feminists had to work both within and against patriarchy, subverting it at the same time as they sought to create alternative values and practices. *The Feminine as Subversion* argues that "the extreme case is valid... in exploring the frontiers of experience" and that Sally Banner and other Hewett heroines dramatise role-playing as a means for women to explore alternative selves.⁴⁷

In a major collection of essays on Hewett published in 1994, it was possible to place earlier feminist views in a longer perspective. After her prolific publication of poetry as well as theatre works during the 1970s and 80s, the essentially *literary* qualities of Hewett's imagination were by now undeniable. Critics identified her interest in mythologies of the feminine, rather than using a more sociological notion of the ideology of femininity. Considering the five plays Hewett wrote about women in the 1970s, Peter Fitzpatrick noted that whatever her theatre lacked in "ideological soundness," it was "absolutely committed to the experience of its central women. Moreover, it reflected an increasing concern with those ways of feeling and understanding which have always been defined stereotypically as female; they range from the more socialised kinds of intuitive knowledge to forms of magic."⁴⁸ Jennifer Strauss, in one of the first sustained discussions of Hewett's practice of self-mythologising, pointed out the "engrained masculinity of the literary patterns of ... the archetype" of the questing hero that Hewett tried to adapt to a female protagonist. She added that the incongruity between "woman" and "quest" cannot be altogether resolved by substituting a female figure in a narrative whose structure is essentially unchanged.⁴⁹ In this collection, too, Susan Lever observed that Hewett's writing "criss-crosses the lines of feminist approval, so that she may be seen as both radical experimenter and pioneer, and a reactionary romantic individualist."⁵⁰ While this observation

captured the openness of Hewett's text to variant readings, it also alluded to the fact that there was enough diversity in feminism to produce such contrary judgements.

These literary judgments of Sally Banner and *Chapel Perilous* might not have been so polarised if there had been more recognition of the play's theatricality. Peter Fitzpatrick pointed out that Hewett's kind of theatre, although it appeared at the same time as the "new wave" of Australian drama, was nevertheless quite distinct, and remains a challenge to any construction of a canon featuring that new wave (which was made up of male playwrights like Williamson, Buzo, Blair, Hibberd and Romeril). "It has never been comfortably clear what level of reality we were confronting in a Hewett play," he wrote (97). He went on to note that her techniques make her plays especially difficult to analyse as scripts (rather than performances), because musical and visual effects are crucial, and verbally they are rather sparse (98-9): they do not take the more conventional form of "the theatre of meaningful conversation," like David Williamson's plays (113). Sally Banner, for example, is "framed" both physically and verbally in the opening sequences, in a way that sets up an initial barrier to audience identification with her, and even though 'as the action develops the sympathy solicited for her trials and errors make her seem larger than the dramatic world she inhabits,' (108) the initial framing causes audiences to experience ambivalence about the central character and her manifest confusions. There can be no simple embrace or rejection of Sally for the audience who experiences her in action, in the play's performance, Fitzpatrick concluded.

Nevertheless, Joanne Tompkins' feminist analysis of *The Chapel Perilous* as a performance piece rather than a play on the page runs counter to this emphasis on ambiguity.⁵¹ Aiming to re-situate the play as one affirming female resistance rather than confirming oppression, she uses details of the original staging at the New Fortune theatre to argue that the play has a strongly feminist conclusion. It ends with Sally's image in the stained glass window finally being illuminated, so that "Sally has reached the pinnacle of the stage, her likeness towering over the Authority Figures." (53) Tompkins argues that this symbolises a feminist triumph, at least in terms of reversing the hierarchy of patriarchal authority over the female individual. She sees it as a personal triumph that does not require radical change in the social structures that discriminate against women, and identifies it as "a kind of feminism that belongs to the 1960s and 70s." (52) Such an individualist liberal feminist stance was not the predominant one in the Women's Liberation phase of the movement. As I indicated

earlier, in the early 1970s socialist feminism, and an emphasis on sexual liberation, shaped a different climate of ideas. Where social conditions for women were seen as the problem, any individual woman's rebellion, though heroic, would inevitably be compromised, as in Anne Summers' reading of Sally's final gesture.

Nicole Moore's later reading of the play does not try to name the kind of feminism that the play enacts. Rather, she emphasises its caustic, sardonic edge. She suggests that Sally might be seen as standing at the centre of a "solipsistic wheel" of possibilities which she must choose among, but her choices bring only "suffering, humiliation, chastisement." The liberal feminist model of choice is thus, in her view, "lambasted as foolish, as illusory." Yet still Sally haunts the imagination as an image of the complex, contradictory, desiring woman, whose subjectivity is a matter of "re-performance" in multiple subject positions.⁵² That *The Chapel Perilous* can be read in such postmodern feminist terms is a tribute to the text's formal inventiveness as well as its political openness.

Dorothy Hewett's Feminism

As Hewett saw herself, she was always a feminist, and she resented being told by the new feminists of the 1970s that "I wasn't carrying the flag at the right angle" – in this respect feminism was too like Communism.⁵³ She had reservations, now, about any kind of political organisation, and its demands on a writer. She is famous for having intoned, at an Adelaide Writers Week forum on women's writing in 1980: "I fear the habit of the sheltered workshop: its safety and its inevitable, even justifiable, paranoia." This surely alludes to her experience of the Communist Party as inward-looking, a closed shop, as well as suggesting a frequent objection to separatist tendencies in feminism. Yet even as she questioned the very rationale for the women's forum, in the next breath she made a claim that many feminists at the time were wary of: "I suspect that there is a definite feminine sensibility, a certain style, diction, rhythm and flow which is supremely female, and has its own rules of logic and syntax which can enrich and extend the language and experience of the tribe." At the same time she said, "I also know the arguments [in defence of women-only forums]... the constant struggle of women, still, to legitimize their artistic credibility, the limited access to a wide range of male possibilities, the crippling suffocation of the roles imposed upon us."⁵⁴

In fact, she was active in feminist cultural projects. She participated in Sisters Publishing, the women's press set up by Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble, both as a member of the Board and as a contributor to *Journeys*, the

volume of poems by herself, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson and Gwen Harwood, edited by Fay Zwicky.⁵⁵ A further indication of the kind of feminism she espoused can be seen in her association with the journal *Hecate* from its very beginning in 1975 until her death in 2002, both as contributor and as the subject of others' attention. *Hecate* was never a separatist journal and always advertised itself as socialist feminist, and this breadth suited Dorothy Hewett well. In 1976 her play, "The Golden Oldies," had its premiere publication in *Hecate*. The journal also published: in 1977 an interview reproduced from the ABC radio program, the Coming Out Show; in 1979, a piece on "Creating Heroines in Australian plays;" poems on at least three occasions in the early 1980s; an interview in the anthology *Hecate's Daughters*; and in 1995, the two previously unpublished essays discussed above.

Hewett was a feminist who criticised separatism but favoured a position of permanent opposition; one who proposed a "feminine sensibility" but never attributed moral superiority to her female characters. Embracing contradictions was ever Dorothy Hewett's style. Her Communist past, and its residue of critical thinking, underpins her capacity to create out of contradictions. In her quest as a writer, her errant path to her own Chapel Perilous, she brought along the best of Marxist thinking as well as her passionate commitment to "free [herself] to both think and feel deeply" and to use all the resources of poetry and theatre in her work. The worst of that earlier experience, the requirement that writers produce ideologically correct work, led her to reject any kind of prescription for artists, and this was a crucial bequest to feminism and women's writing.

NOTES

- 1 Author's Introduction, *Bobbin Up*, London: Virago, 1985.
- 2 *The Chapel Perilous*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1972.
- 3 From Sir Thomas Malory, *The Tale of King Arthur*, 1485 (cited in *The Chapel Perilous*, 92).
- 4 Nicole Moore, "Dorothy Hewett," in *Companion to Australian Literature*, eds. Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer. New York: Boydell and Brewer/University of Rochester Press, 2007, 321-334, 321.
- 5 Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1990, p.175.
- 6 "Excerpt from 'The Empty Room', an autobiography in progress," *Overland*, 160, 2000, 4-10, 9-10.
- 7 "Empty Room," 8.

- 8 Hewett to Jack Beasley, 10 Feb 1961. Jack Beasley papers, National Library of Australia [NLA] MS 9266, Series 1Box 1 Folder 3. The author thanks Kate Lilley, Dorothy Hewett's literary executor, for permission to quote from unpublished materials in this article.
- 9 Syson, "A Note to the Dorothy Hewett essays," *Hecate* 21, 2, 1995, 129.
- 10 Alan Barcan, *The Socialist Left in Australia 1949-59*, APSA monograph 2, 1960.
- 11 Winton Higgins, "Reconstructing Australian Communism," *Socialist Register* 1974, London: Merlin Press, 159-65.
- 12 Peter Beilharz, "A Hundred Flowers Faded" in *Staining the Wattle*, eds Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1988, 164-72, 166-69.
- 13 See, for example, Ann Curthoys, "A short history of feminism, 1970-1984" in *For and Against Feminism*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988.
- 14 Moore, "Dorothy Hewett," (2007), 327.
- 15 *The Independent Magazine* [Perth] Dec 14, 1969; Hewett Papers, NLA MS 6184, Clippings file, Box 32, folder 3.
- 16 Hewett to Martin, 30 May 1961, David Martin Papers NLA MS 6885 Series 2, folder 6.
- 17 As discussed, for example, in David Carter, "The Story of our Epoch, A Hero of Our Time" in *Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment*, eds Paul Adams and Christopher Lee, Carlton North, Vic: Vulgar Press, 2003, 93-6.
- 18 "Mediocre Competence," *Westerly*, n.2, 1960, 38-9.
- 19 Ian Syson, "It's my party and I'll cry if I want to:" Recent Autobiographical Writing by Australian Women Communists, *Hecate* 22, 2, 1996, 144-53, draws attention to several poems from this book which were omitted from *Collected Poems* (1994), and quotes "My Party," noting that it was first published in the *Realist Writer* (9, 1962: 20).
- 20 Reprinted in *Hecate* 22, 2, 1996, 146-7.
- 21 Published in *Overland* 1967, then in *Windmill Country*, 1968. In the USSR from the mid-60s, as David Carter notes, "literature played a key role in marking off the new regime from the old" during de-Stalinisation, but "a series of liberalising moves [was] followed by exemplary attacks on writers:" *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*, Toowoomba, Qld: ASAL, 1997, 177-8.
- 22 Hewett, "Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the truth," and "The Times they are a'Changin'," with note by Ian Syson, *Hecate* 21, 2, 1995, 129-36. The first is dated March 1965; internal evidence indicates that the second of these was written in 1966.
- 23 In this she is recommending her own publishing practice during the 1960s, when she published with the Party's *Realist Writer*, with non-aligned Left-wing *Overland* and *Meanjin*, and also with non-Left *Westerly* and *Australian Letters*.
- 24 Hewett to Martin, 24 May 1961, David Martin Papers NLA MS 6885 Series 2, folder 6.

- 25 That is, in the style of Irish playwright, Sean O'Casey.
- 26 Hewett to Martin, 27 July 1964, David Martin Papers.
- 27 "The Empty Room," 6.
- 28 "How beautiful upon the mountains," *Westerly* n.3, 1960, 4–7. When, referring to the well-known story of Tennant's research for *The Joyful Condemned* (1953), Hewett writes disapprovingly of "highly coloured reportage on the delinquent out to catch the easy-money Yanks, with Kylie roaming the streets disguised as a blonde-wigged prostitute," can we detect a slight note of regret, or envy?
- 29 Hewett to Jack Beasley, 10 Feb 1961. Jack Beasley papers, NLA MS 9266, Series 1 Box 1 Folder 3. *Studies in European Realism* was published in English in 1950.
- 30 Hewett to Martin, 27 July 1964 and 2 Oct 1964, David Martin Papers.
- 31 Prichard to Hewett, 16 Jan 1963. Hewett Papers NLA MS 6184, Box 1, folder 1.
- 32 Brian Kiernan, "Seeing her own Mischance" in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, ed. Peter Holloway, Sydney: Currency Press, 1981, 49.
- 33 "Isis in Search," *New Poetry* 28, 1, 1980, 49–56, 50.
- 34 A redefined cultural nationalism was part of the "New Wave" in Australian theatre; the Australian Performing Group's motto was: "Make it Australian."
- 35 "A peculiar form of masochism," *The Critic*, University of WA Literary Society, 11 (2), 1970, 14–15.
- 36 "A peculiar form of masochism," 14.
- 37 "The Empty Room," 4–5.
- 38 Currency Press Papers NLA MS 8084, Box 21: Hewett Correspondence Folder.
- 39 Edited by Elizabeth Schafer and Peta Tait, Sydney: Currency Press 1997.
- 40 Preface, *The Chapel Perilous*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1972.
- 41 "Sally's cry for understanding," *The Age* Friday May 5, 1972, n.p. This and other reviews for which incomplete details are available were consulted in the Clippings file, Hewett Papers NLA MS 6184, Box 32, Folder 11.
- 42 Jo Gibson, "Nice, Seamy Drama," *Canberra Times* 30/9/72. n.p.
- 43 "Dorothy Hewett writes the roles she would love to play," *National Times* Sept 4–9, 1972, 20.
- 44 Preface, *The Chapel Perilous*, 3–4.
- 45 *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Ringwood, Vic: Penguin [1975] 2002 ed., 92–3. Wrongly cited as a negative critique of the play by Tompkins (see footnote 51).
- 46 "Dorothy Hewett: Australian Dramatist," *Lip* 1976, repr. in Peter Holloway ed, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1981, 363.
- 47 *Dorothy Hewett, The Feminine as Subversion*, Currency Press, 1992, 133, 135–6.
- 48 "Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama" in Bruce Bennett, ed., *Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994, 97. Subsequent quotations from this article are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

- 49 “Writing the Legend of a Glittering Girl” in Bennett ed., 58.
- 50 Lever, “Seeking Woman: Dorothy Hewett’s Shifting Genres” in Bennett, ed., 149.
- 51 “‘I was a rebel in word and deed’: Dorothy Hewett’s *The Chapel Perilous* and Contemporary Feminist Writing,” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, n. 10, December 1993, 41-56. Subsequent quotations from this article are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
- 52 “Asking for more: The impact of Dorothy Hewett,” *Overland*, 153, 1998, 26–31, 27.
- 53 “Coming to terms with the Ghosts” in Jenny Digby, *A Woman’s Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets*, University of Queensland Press, 1996, 218–40, 222.
- 54 “Isis in Search,” *New Poetry* 28, 1, 1980, 49-56, 49.
- 55 *Journeys*, Carlton South, Vic: Sister Publishing Inc, Carlton South, 1982.