A Lady and a mouse: Two characters from Traill's early writing

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Résumé: *Dans "Little Downy le mulot", Catherine Parr Traill a créé un personnage féminin qui s'écarte des conventions d'alors (manifestes d'une manière un peu empesée dans un récit antérieur, "The primrose girl"). Cette rupture précoce d'avec la tradition littéraire annonce la création d'un nouveau type: la jeune pionnière du Canada.*

Catharine Parr Traill's emigration to Canada in the 1830s was the catalyst which sparked a major change in her writing: after her arrival in Upper Canada, she focussed almost exclusively on the new world in her fiction and her non-fiction. Moreover, in such works as *The backwoods of Canada* (1836), *Canadian Crusoes* (1852), and *The Canadian settler's guide* (1855), Traill adapted an English tradition of female characterization to suit Canadian frontier conditions, designing in the process a new model of femininity, the pioneer woman. This pioneer woman, a capable, active and pragmatic woman who could survive (and triumph over) frontier living conditions, is a redefinition of ideal femininity and is most fully realized in Traill's Catharine Maxwell of *Canadian Crusoes*.[1] It is clear that Traill was one of the early innovators in Canadian literature – daring not only to use a Canadian setting, but also to create characters appropriate to that setting. For the most part in her early fiction, Traill adhered to British conventions of female characterization, producing such slavishly imitative works as "The primrose girl" in *The tell tale: an original collection of moral and amusing stories* (1823). Yet she could also break new ground, and in *Little Downy: or, the history of a field-mouse* (1822), Traill has drawn a unique and feisty heroine, one who anticipates Traill's later ability to create the Canadian pioneer woman. A comparison of the two protagonists, Emma of "The primrose girl" and Downy of *Little Downy*, serves to indicate the vast differences of Traill's pre-Canadian writing. On the one hand, she produces Emma, a dim (and dull) reflection of the English lady; on the other hand, she creates Downy, a delightful and interesting character who escapes type-casting.

The ideal lady, as she was perceived by British society and as she appeared in fiction,[2] such as Traill's "The primrose girl," was a member of a privileged upper class, a class which could afford to support its female members in a life of relative luxury. The lady displayed a certain fixed set of traits, a list which

included personal qualities (such as sensibility, intelligence, physical beauty) as well as acquired accomplishments (needlework, painting, playing the piano, speaking French), and she passed the time in her relatively idle life by performing the duties appropriate to one in her station (overseeing a household, visiting the poor).[3] Despite the emergence of a powerful middle class in the nineteenth century, the well-bred, idle, accomplished upper-class woman remained at the top of the social pyramid; less fortunate women admired and emulated her lifestyle; her prototype appeared frequently in fiction. In "The primrose girl," Traill is drawing upon a well-established tradition of female characterization.

There are exceptions to the general rule, as for example Traill's Downy of *Little Downy*. Nor is Traill unique in her choice as heroine of a woman (in Traill's case, female mouse) from the working class. One notable difference, however, is that while other writers measure their heroines against a preconceived definition of ideal femininity (the lady), Traill, through her Little Downy, sets off in a new direction. The scope of this paper does not permit an extensive study of the exceptions to the norm in the characterization of women; but it may be useful briefly to look at some of the writers who choose heroines who are, to some extent, atypical.

In his novel *Pamela* (1740),[4] Samuel Richardson charts the meteoric rise in society of an exemplary servant girl, Pamela. Knowing her duty as a servant and as a Christian, she fends off her master's sexual attacks. Yet Pamela is much more than a mere servant. She possesses many of the traits of a lady (intelligence, sensibility, piety, beauty) and thus is worthy of marriage to her master and the resulting promotion to a higher class. Because she is inherently a lady, she makes none of the awkward mistakes one might logically expect from a servant girl who is abruptly catapulted into the aristocracy. In other words, Richardson reinforces rather than questions commonly accepted views of ideal femininity.

Other deviations from a standard pattern are used to produce either comedy or tragedy. Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741)[5] features a heroine who burlesques Richardson's *Pamela* and the virtue-rewarded theme. Much of the humour in Fielding's novel lies in the discrepancy between Shamela's behaviour as a member of the lower class and the behaviour which Fielding's readers would expect to see from a fictional heroine – especially one who is moving into the upper class. Pamela is adept at transformation; Shamela, although grotesque, is probably closer to reality. Inappropriate behaviour and aspiration beyond one's class can lead equally well to tragedy (death) or to near tragedy (dangerous illness). Samuel Richardson's Clarissa of *Clarissa* (1748),[6] to cite one example, makes a serious error in judgment, is rejected by her family and by society in general, falls into a decline, and dies. It is important to note the common bond between Fielding's Shamela and Richardson's Clarissa: both protagonists are measured against a standard of ideal femininity and both are

found wanting.

Later, in the mid-nineteenth-century, a few working women appear as heroines in fiction. Notably, George Eliot, in her novel, *Adam Bede* (1854),[7] shows Mrs. Poyser and Hetty actively at work in kitchen and dairy – not at all suitable employment for a lady. It must be remembered, though, that Eliot stays close to the common social theories and the traditional methods of characterization: Mrs. Poyser has a number of servants to help her; Hetty, a young girl, aspires beyond her station, makes errors in judgment, and is punished for her sins. Other writers who use working-class heroines, as for example Mrs. Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853),[8] tend to remain faithful to traditional views of women as well. In their appearance and in their innate personal qualities, Mrs. Gaskell's heroines are superior to (for example, they are more delicate and fragile) their lower-class fellow women, and are therefore closer to ideal femininity. Traill's *Little Downy* which appeared thirty years before Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Gaskell's *Ruth* and *Mary Barton*, is, in some ways, more innovative than the other, better-known works.

Traill, then, emerges as a leader in a movement to develop and change female characterization. Unlike writers who measure their heroines against a general standard, Traill quietly creates a new standard. Granted, Traill dodges the issue somewhat by choosing a field-mouse as protagonist; this allows her to experiment with a woman's role in fiction without offending reader sensibility. The extent of Traill's cleverness (not to say genius) becomes apparent when Emma, a version of the typical heroine of the day, is compared to Downy, an engaging little mouse, who is by no means a lady.

Emma (*The primrose path*) is a version of the English "lady", a character type used extensively in the English fiction of the period, who generally exhibits the way of life, the traits, and the behaviour expected (rather, *demanded*) of the proper lady of the nineteenth century. She belongs to a leisured, privileged, upper-middle-class society, a society which is eternally aware of its social status, and which reinforces perpetually a rigid class structure. When Emma's beloved old nurse, Susannah, arrives for a visit, Emma is friendly and welcoming, but Susannah is sent to the housekeeper's room for refreshment. As a member of the privileged section of society, Emma has been surrounded by material comforts; she has been catered to by loving parents; she is accustomed to the services of a large number of devoted servants. Consider the contrast between the life of Emma, a "blooming rose"[9] who has her own flower garden to enjoy, and that of the poor Primrose girl who must sell flowers to eke out a survival for herself and her mother. Emma is the protagonist, the model, the heroine. The beggar girl is included only to serve as the object of Emma's charity. Emma also possesses the selective education, the decorative skills and accomplishments, and the delicate appearance of a lady: she is beautiful; she can recite flawlessly the "Beggar's petition" at her birthday party; and she is also becomingly modest about her talents. A lady does not flaunt her

abilities[10] and Emma accepts her well-deserved praise with a lady's habitual modesty. Rich, pampered, idle, well-educated, morally sound, possessing decorative skills, and decorative herself – these are trade-mark qualities of the lady of the nineteenth century, and Emma has them all.

Emma's character has been created to personify charity and the plot is designed to demonstrate charity in action.[11] In case anyone has missed the point, Traill interrupts her story to observe:

> ... we must not look with contempt upon servants because they are our inferiors; for they are not only useful to us, but they are also our fellow-creatures, and sometimes prove our friends, and there is nothing more unbecoming in young persons than to speak uncivilly to those who are employed in their service. I hope you will remember this, my young reader, and never pout, or look cross at persons who do their duty towards you, in that humbler station in which it has pleased Providence to place them. (167)

The various objects of Emma's charity are, without exception, individuals belonging to a lower class in society. Her good deeds include buying flowers from the primrose seller, as well as giving her a piece of birthday cake, giving money to her nurse and serving her some refreshments. These are small but tangible deeds of charity. But, in Traill's view, the acts alone are not enough. Much is made of the fact that Emma does these things naturally. Although she belongs to the upper stratum of society, she is neither proud nor ashamed to be seen talking to poor people. Because of her "amiable disposition and gentle manners" (167) she is universally loved by her social inferiors. This innate goodness is a common trademark of a lady, who dispenses charity as naturally as she breathes.[12]

Emma's social exchanges with her inferiors never over-step the boundaries imposed by the rules of polite society: she is always the beggar girl's social superior. Just as Emma is a lady who is meant to give charity, so the Primrose girl is a beggar who, by virtue of her inferior station in life, is meant to receive charity. The beggar, like Emma, is an ideal of her type: she is extremely poor, but she works hard, is kind to her mother, and accepts Emma's assistance with genuine gratitude as a good beggar girl should. Neither girl is particularly interesting. For the present argument, the significance of Emma's characterization lies in the fact that it illustrates Traill's ability to reproduce the norm and to incorporate into her work the most commonly used female character type in the English fiction of the period.

Fortunately, when Traill escapes the confines of type casting, she creates more memorable characters. From "The primrose girl" and its cloyingly sweet heroine it is refreshing to turn to *Little Downy* and its field-mouse heroine. Much of Downy's unique nature as a fictional character can be attributed to the fact that she is a mouse rather than a human. Traill's attention to biological detail attests to her keen interest in the natural world. She seems to prefer, and to be more comfortable writing about animals and plants than

people.[13] The adventures of Downy purport to be those of a real mouse, and, at several points, Traill adds explanatory footnotes verifying her facts. A mouse's real and constant threat of death from dogs, cats, birds, or humans is never denied or muted despite the book's orientation towards a youthful reading public. It is a harsh reality of life that mice are exposed to danger from many sources, and Traill (like E.T. Seton, Charles G.D. Roberts, and, to an extent, Beatrix Potter later in the century) deals with this aspect of the animal world in a matter-of-fact, unsentimental fashion. The vitality and freshness of the adventures of Downy confirm that Traill's ability to note and record the most minute details of the natural world with a detached, almost scientific, eye far exceeds her ability to invent sentimental, moral tales such as "The primrose girl".

Unlike "The primrose girl", which emphasizes moral instruction, *Little Downy* is essentially an amoral tale. The underlying amorality of the story derives from the fact that Traill is describing an animal rather than a human world. Downy is first introduced living with her family, quite contentedly and comfortably, in a farmer's wheat stack. The wheat stack is destroyed subsequently by the farmer, and dogs are turned loose on Downy and the others. Most of the mice are killed, but, by a stroke of luck, Downy manages to escape. Although Downy proves to be a superior mouse, the most kind-hearted, the "prettiest", "the wisest and the best"[14] of her family, her narrow escape is not due to any intrinsic moral virtue. She is "the most worthy" (8), but it is a simple (amoral) fact of life that, in an animal world, death may come at any time, from any direction, and even the wisest and best mouse cannot necessarily escape her fate. Downy is merely luckier than the rest of her family and hides underneath a clod of earth during the slaughter: her salvation is by no means an example of "virtue rewarded".

Thus, while in "The primrose girl", everything – plot, setting, character – serves to body forth the story's moral, in *Little Downy*, the abstraction of a moral purpose is made more difficult by the amorality of an animal world where virtue may *not* be rewarded. From the story of Downy alone a moral is not clear. The element of change dominates the action. To offset the amorality of Downy's life, Traill sets the mouse's adventures within a frame. A woman, Mrs. Clifford, is telling her son, Alfred, the story of Downy's life. As Mrs. Clifford narrates the story, she reminds Alfred of his minor transgressions, and attempts, by means of awakening his sympathies, to teach him compassion towards all less fortunate creatures. He has called for the death of a marauding mouse and this has upset his mother:

> Mrs. Clifford was much grieved that her little Alfred shewed so much inclination to be cruel and revengeful, two qualities so dangerous in a child, or in any one; and she knew that, unless it was timely checked, it would grow into a habit. (7)

In itself, the frame is uninteresting and not essential to the main plot, being connected only tenuously by the suggestion that the "ugly brown mouse" (5) which has eaten Alfred's plum cake, thereby arousing his ire and his desire for revenge, is Downy's daughter Velvet. The frame exists solely to aid the advancement of a moral thesis, and in the overall narrative structure, the story of Mrs. Clifford and her son Alfred recedes into the background as Downy dominates the tale.

Traill's attention to biological detail in *Little Downy* has ensured that Downy is a more true-to-life character than Alfred, who, like Emma Selwhyn, exists only to serve a moral function. The real strength of the characterization of Downy, however, stems from her human and undeniably female qualities, qualities that invite comparison with Traill's other female protagonists. When Downy makes mistakes which endanger her life, for example, these errors can be excused partially by the amoral nature of the animal world. The realization that Downy is a mouse, and therefore possesses a limited intelligence, makes these mistakes probable and, indeed, inevitable. Yet, Traill also intends these mistakes to be perceived as errors in judgment or as "human", particularly "female," fallibility. As soon as Downy discovers the farm garden, she begins to luxuriate in idleness: "Downy did nothing but eat and enjoy herself the whole day, and did not think of returning home that day, nor for many days afterwards..." (20). The result is that Downy becomes fat and lazy; she is nearly caught and killed by the farm cats. Unlike Emma Selwhyn, Downy makes mistakes and learns from these mistakes.

Also very feminine, and very human, is Downy's love affair and "marriage". She has the great misfortune to meet and to fall in love with an idle, though very handsome, young mouse, Silket. Seduced by his great beauty, she is made very unhappy by his actions until she manages partially to reform him (Traill's version of the reformed rake). Many of the ingredients of sentimental fiction exist in this situation – the honest, hard-working young woman falls in love with and marries the handsome and indolent scoundrel – but this line of development is never followed fully. Struck by tragedy (Silket's indolence), Downy does not fade away. Perhaps Downy has made a mistake but she lives with the consequences. Traill's narrative continues to combine human and animal probability, rather than to follow formulaic developments.

There are some other factors which separate Downy from the general rank and file of ordinary heroines of English fiction and which anticipate Traill's creation of a new character type in her Canadian fiction. For example, although Downy could perhaps be termed "ladylike" in her habits and her appearance, she is not a "lady". She is neat, but plain in appearance. She is neither beautiful nor delicate, and her daily existence in no way resembles the life of a lady. Except for a brief hiatus in the kitchen garden when she lives in "idleness and luxury" (25), Downy is hard-working. She builds her own house, finds her food, and supports her family, including her husband. Unlike Emma Selwhyn, she

must fend for herself. She is never sheltered or protected. Her survival depends on her consistently quick reactions in times of danger. This is a daily struggle which is far removed from the pampered life of the English lady. Indeed, Downy's working-class experiences bear more resemblance to the life of the primrose seller in "The primrose girl" than to the life of the lady. The living conditions can, of course, be explained by noting that Downy is a mouse. Yet the fact remains that the character of Downy promotes a vastly different image of femininity – practical, hard-working, and flawed – than that projected by Emma Selwhyn – pampered and perfect.

Emma Selwhyn of "The primrose girl" is basically a very boring character: moribund, static, and uninteresting, weighted down by British literary and social convention. Downy is active and exciting, breaking with convention, looking forward to the new and vigorous character, the pioneer woman, created in Traill's later Canadian work. *Little Downy* has no connection with Canada, with Traill's subsequent emigration to Canada, or with her production of literature with Canadian settings, themes, and characters; yet, it is an important beginning point in a feminist study of Traill's fiction. It shows that Traill was capable of ignoring or rather, of rising above, the limitations imposed by strict observance of convention. And this early refusal to be bound to convention (or to a literary "Mrs. Grundy",[15] if you will) in the development of a female character anticipates the characterization of women in Traill's Canadian books.[16] A pampered young lady like Emma would not likely survive the emotional and physical stress of her first Canadian winter, whereas a sturdy independent character like Downy would flourish on the frontier.[17] Accordingly, the type represented by Emma disappears from Traill's fiction, and a new type takes over: the pioneer woman, an active, capable woman who takes charge in any emergency.

NOTES

1 There is an extensive explanation of the pioneer woman in my *The pioneer woman: A Canadian character type* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

2 There are many studies dealing with the role of the British woman in fact and fiction; the points mentioned in this particular study reflect commonly accepted theories. For some typical analyses see, Patricia Branca, "Image and reality: The myth of the idle Victorian woman," *Clio's consciousness raised* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Sandra Burman, ed., *Fit work for women* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979); Jenni Calder, *Women and marriage in Victorian fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976); Vineta Colby, *Yesterday's woman, domestic realism in the English novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Duncan Crow, *The Victorian woman* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972); Dr. C. Willett Cunnington, *Feminine attitudes in the nineteenth century* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1973); Lenore Davidoff, *The best circles, society etiquette and the season* (London: Croon Helm , 1973); Janet Dunbar, *The early Victorian woman, some aspects of her life*, 1937-57 (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1953); Susan Gorsky, "The gentle doubters: Images of Women in Englishwomen's novels, 1840-1920," in *Images of women in fiction, feminist perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon

(Bowling Green: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1972); Georgiana Hill, *Women in English life from medieval to modern times*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1896); Hazel Mews, *Frail vessels, woman's role in women's novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot* (London: Athlone, 1969); Susan Siefert, *The dilemma of the talented heroine: A changing ideal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and be still, Women in the Victorian age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972). For some representative definitions of the perfect lady from a late eighteenth-century or early nineteenth-century point of view, see the following books of advice: Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The women of England, their social duties, and domestic habits* (London: Fisher, Son, 1839); Dr. Gregory, *A father's legacy to his daughters* (1774; rpt. London: Minerva Press, n.d.); Hannah More, *Works*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1854).

3 Dr. Gregory, Hannah More, and Sarah Ellis offer invaluable advice to their gentle readers. Dr. Gregory, for example, has the following words of wisdom about decorative accomplishments for women:

> The intention of your being taught needlework, knitting, and such like, is not on account of the intrinsic value of all you can do with your hands, which is trifling, but to enable you to judge more perfectly of that kind of work, and to direct the execution of it in others. Another principal end is to enable you to fill up, in a tolerably agreeable way, some of the many solitary hours you must necessarily pass at home. – It is a great article in the happiness of life, to have your pleasures as independent of others as possible.

See Dr. Gregory, *Legacy* (see note 2), 62-3.

4 See Samuel Richardson, *Pamela: or, virtue rewarded.* 1740. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980).

5 See Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, 1742, ed. and with an introd. by Martin C. Battestin (London: Methuen, 1965).

6 See Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa: or, the history of a young lady* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985).

7 See George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980).

8 See Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); see also *Ruth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

9 Catharine Parr Traill, "The primrose girl, or, Little Emma's birthday," in *The tell tale: an original collection of moral and amusing stories* (London: Harris and Son, 1823) 156. All further references to this work will appear in the text.

10 See Hannah More, "Coelebs in search of a wife," in *Works* (New York: Harper, 1854), II, 304-436.

11 Others of Traill's early works include a strong moral and didactic bias. See for example, Catharine Parr Traill, *Happy because good; The tame pheasant, and the blind brother and kind sister* (London: Thomas Dean and Son, n.d.); Catharine Parr Traill, *The keepsake guineas; or, the best use of money* (London: A. K. Newman; London: Dean & Munday, 1828); Catharine Parr Traill, *Sketches from nature; or, hints to juvenile naturalists* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1830).

12 See for example, Hannah More, "Strictures on the modern system of female education," in *Works*, I, 332:

> Young ladies should also be accustomed to set apart a fixed portion of their time, as sacred to the poor, whether in relieving, instructing, or working for them; and the performance of this duty must not be left to the event of contingent circumstances, or operation of accidental impressions; but it must be established into a principle, and wrought into a habit.

13 See also Catharine Parr Traill, *Sketches from nature; or, hints to juvenile naturalists* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1830); *Lady Mary and her nurse; or, a peep into*

the Canadian forest (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, 1856); *Pearls and pebbles; or, notes of an old naturalist* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1894).

14 Catharine Parr Traill, *Little Downy; or, the history of a field-mouse, A moral tale* (London: Dean and Munday, 1822) 8. All future references to this work will appear in the text.

15 Traill mentions Mrs. Grundy in *The backwoods of Canada; being letters from the wife of an emigrant officer, illustrative of the domestic economy of British America* (London, 1836; rpt. Toronto: Coles Canadiana Collection, 1971) 270.

16 See, for example, Catharine Parr Traill, *Canadian Crusoes, a tale of the Rice Lake Plains*, ed. Rupert Schieder (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1986); Catharine Parr Traill, *Lady Mary and her nurse: or, a peep into the Canadian Forest* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co., 1856).

17 Daniel Defoe also creates female characters who would thrive on a frontier. Defoe's Moll Flanders of *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Roxana of *Roxana, the fortunate mistress* (1724) are sturdy, independent women. It is interesting to note that Traill was aware of Defoe's writing, using the title *Canadian Crusoes* for one of her Canadian books (alluding, of course, to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* [1719]). See Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); *Moll Flanders*, introd. David J. Johnson (London: Dent, 1975); *Roxana, the fortunate mistress* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). See also Catharine Parr Traill, *Canadian Crusoes: a tale of the Rice Lake Plains*, ed. Rupert Schieder (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1986).

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