

**Reappraising Forgotten Fictions: The Tasmanian
Romances of Marie Bjelke Petersen**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in English**

**University of Tasmania
November 2004**

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ABSTRACT

Marie Bjelke Petersen was a prolific writer of popular romance fiction in the early twentieth century. This thesis analyses her five Tasmanian based novels. Although popular with her contemporary reading public, the novels have been critically marginalized in the Australian literary tradition and they now languish largely unread. The work of Susan Sheridan, Fiona Giles and Robert Dixon provides a theoretical context in which Bjelke Petersen's fiction can be re-read and reappraised, for these critics identify an Australian romance tradition that is continuous, prolific and diverse. More importantly, they demonstrate such texts can be recuperated as important cultural artefacts, which articulate and debate in popular form the inherent anxieties, interests and concerns of a culture, at a particular time.

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter demonstrates Bjelke Petersen's competence as a writer of popular fiction and argues against claims of aesthetic inadequacy. John Cawelti's work on formula fiction and Rita Felski's formulation of the popular sublime provide the theoretical basis for this chapter.

The second chapter considers the representation of love and romance in Bjelke Petersen's texts. It identifies a re-imagining of the roles of heroines and heroes and a strong commitment to promoting the ideal of companionate love. It argues that such representation is influenced by mainstream feminist campaigns for women's greater agency but also reflects less widely circulated discourses about sexuality.

The third chapter focuses on Bjelke Petersen's preoccupation with Tasmanian wilderness as a form of "literary placemaking." In each of her novels wilderness is constructed as a place of freedom, adventure, healing and love: a haven from modernity. This chapter evaluates and historicizes Bjelke Petersen's representation of landscape. It concludes that Bjelke Petersen's writing, whilst mindful of generic convention is also informed by local knowledge, and strives to communicate a sense of aesthetic appreciation for nature. The capacity of wilderness to engender physical and spiritual wellbeing – characteristic of romantic ideology – is here compromised by discourses of evangelical religion.

The thesis concludes that Bjelke Petersen's romances, when considered outside the narrow framework of an Australian realist nationalist tradition, are important as popular cultural artefacts. These texts reflect a variety of marginalized early twentieth-century discourses and demonstrate the diversity and complexity of Australian literary culture in this period.

Acknowledgements

I wish to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr Anna Johnston, for her intelligent and professional guidance, her amazing calmness and her interest and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis. I also wish to thank my associate supervisor, Professor Lucy Frost, for help and advice. Thanks are also due to my family – Rupert, David, Simon, Patrick and Peter – for their interest, encouragement and patience.

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Introduction

Marie Bjelke Petersen is remembered in the Australian popular imaginary as the lesbian, feminist, and conservationist aunt of Joh Bjelke Petersen, a former Queensland premier notorious for his conservatism (Lohrey 69). As Amanda Lohrey points out, these are not descriptive terms Bjelke Petersen or her contemporaries would have used. Rather, they are present day constructions of an unmarried woman who supported herself, lived independently, occasionally dressed in mannish clothes, was an outspoken critic of Tasmanian forestry practices, and had a close long-term relationship with another woman.¹ However these are not the reasons Danish-born Bjelke Petersen was well known to her contemporaries. In the early decades of the twentieth century she was a celebrated writer of popular romance fiction who published nine novels. Five of these have Tasmanian settings: *The Captive Singer* (1917), *Dusk* (1921), *Jewelled Nights* (1923), *The Moon Minstrel* (1927) and *The Rainbow Lute* (1932). The remaining novels – *The Immortal Flame* (1919), *Monsoon Magic* (1930), *The Silver Knight* (1934) and *Jungle Night* (1937) – are set variously in Queensland and New South Wales. Overall sales of these novels were estimated to be in the vicinity of 250,000 copies. *The Captive Singer* was reprinted many times and reportedly sold over 100,000 copies in English. In 1921 it was translated into Danish and a further 40,000 copies were sold (Alexander 85, 92). Bjelke Petersen's contemporary reviewers afforded the novel guarded praise and predicted a bright future for this forty-three-year old "young authoress" (*Sydney Mail* 24 Oct. 1917, AOT NS 1294/10).² The Sydney paper, *Sunday Times*, wrote that *The Captive Singer* was an "Australian book" in a "very special and cordial sense" and praised its "originality" and Bjelke Petersen's "artistry" (7 Oct. 1917, AOT NS 1294/10). Demand for *Dusk*, Bjelke Petersen's third novel, was so great that the first edition sold out and a new edition was called for before the official publication date (*Mercury* 30 Dec. 1922, AOT NS 1294/13). *Jewelled Nights* was similarly successful, selling 5,000 copies in its first month (*Daily Guardian* 20 Dec. 1923, AOT NS 1294/6).

¹ For biographical details readers are referred to Alison Alexander's biography of Bjelke Petersen.

² AOT NS refers to material contained in the Marie Bjelke Petersen archive, NS 1294/ 1-13, held in the Non-State collection (NS) of the Archives Office of Tasmania (AOT), Murray Street in Hobart. This archive contains Bjelke Petersen's unpublished and incomplete personal diary for the years 1900-06 and 1928, personal correspondence, newspaper reviews, articles and photographs. Reviews, such as those referred to above, are included as clippings and bibliographic details are often incomplete. In the thesis references to newspaper material from this collection are acknowledged in text; where possible I include the name and date of the relevant publication and its precise location in the archive.

Bjelke Petersen's novels were eagerly awaited and well reviewed in Australia and overseas, and film companies negotiated to base productions on her novels.³ Newspapers in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney included details of Bjelke Petersen's social engagements when she visited those cities. Various magazines and Tasmanian newspapers frequently sought interviews with Bjelke Petersen and she was asked to speak to literary and women's groups in Tasmania and on the mainland. In 1935 the Tasmanian government awarded Bjelke Petersen the King George V medal for literature in recognition of her achievements.⁴ Bjelke Petersen was awarded the literature medal ahead of other Tasmanian writers: Roy Bridges, Hilda Bridges, G.B. Lancaster, Isobel Dick and Helen Power (Alexander 191). When Bjelke Petersen died in 1969 at the age of 94 she was described in her obituary as a "well-known authoress, artist and humanitarian" ("Top"): a portrayal that acknowledges her literary contributions, artistic ability and philanthropic work. But Bjelke Petersen's novels proved ephemeral and are now considered old-fashioned; history has elided and trivialized her literary achievement and her novels now languish on library shelves largely unread.

Informed by recent theoretical work on popular fiction, this thesis recuperates Bjelke Petersen as a skilled writer of popular romance fiction able to achieve commercial and critical success in a competitive international market. It argues that Bjelke Petersen's texts are highly crafted commodities designed for entertainment, but that Bjelke Petersen manipulated her chosen genre to disseminate her particular views, which are variously progressive and conservative. It also recuperates her novels as culturally and historically significant artefacts. This thesis contributes to the small body of scholarship focusing on Bjelke Petersen, which includes Alison Alexander's recent biography and scholarly articles by Ross Smith, Tim Suttor, Roslynn Haynes and Jean Delamoir.

The reappraisal of Bjelke Petersen's fiction that this thesis undertakes is informed by scholarship which argues that popular or formula fiction is a literary art that can be evaluated like any other. Such scholarship contends that formula fictions are non-mimetic narratives with their own standards and

³ Although Bjelke Petersen encouraged speculation that her novels would become films and entered into negotiations with producers, only *Jewelled Nights* was filmed. In 1925 Louise Lovely Productions produced a film version of this novel (Alexander 136).

⁴ These medals were awarded in all states of Australia to celebrate King George V's silver jubilee. Medals were awarded for outstanding success in a particular field or for faithful and distinguished public service.

conventions, rather than inferior literary forms produced for commercial gain by writers who are mindlessly following conventions or “lady novelists” who wrote for their own amusement. Through analysis of Bjelke Petersen’s five novels with Tasmanian settings, this thesis demonstrates that Bjelke Petersen was a versatile and committed writer of popular fiction, familiar with a broad range of literary techniques and the conventions of genre, and able to manipulate such conventions to produce interesting and innovative novels that appealed to a broad cross section of readers.

While the thesis shows that Bjelke Petersen worked capably within the conventions of genre to produce aesthetically competent narratives, I am also interested in the ways her texts operated in the society that produced them. Some scholars have argued that popular texts reinforce the dominant ideologies and cultural practices of societies at a particular time, while others contend that popular texts create a forum for resistance to such ideologies. Others suggest that such texts are historically and culturally specific and best understood as discursive sites that reveal contemporary social tensions. Informed by these diverse theories of how popular texts can operate in a particular society, this thesis demonstrates that Bjelke Petersen constructed her novels strategically to address specific views and commitments. It also explores the extent to which Bjelke Petersen is able to accommodate interests that are sometimes diverse and contradictory in the highly conventional romance form. Some of these interests – such as the current state of gender relations and issues of emergent nationalism – were reflected in much popular writing of the period, but others were more idiosyncratic and related to Bjelke Petersen’s passionate commitments. Evangelical religion, an appreciation of Tasmanian wilderness as a redemptive space, and a desire to publicize Tasmania as a tourist destination emerge as issues in which Bjelke Petersen was interested. As such, Bjelke Petersen’s novels – traditionally categorized as genre romance and critically disparaged as ephemeral, sentimental and florid – assume significance beyond the provision of entertainment and escape. In spite of their entertainment value, these texts operate as discursive sites that reflect, with varying emphasis, key anxieties, commitments and desires of Bjelke Petersen’s time.

For reasons that are both practical and parochial this thesis focuses on those novels that are set in Tasmania. (I will refer to these as the Tasmanian novels from this point.) From a practical point of view this selection includes Bjelke Petersen’s

most significant literary achievements – her bestselling novels *The Captive Singer*, *Jewelled Nights* and *Dusk* – and provides an adequate sample to develop an understanding of the important characteristics of her work. More parochially I am interested in fictional representations of areas familiar to me. These areas are represented positively and enthusiastically and are a welcome departure from most early fictional depictions of Tasmania.⁵ Her novels publicized a little known area of Australia and disputed mainland Australian perceptions of Tasmania as a cultural backwater. Such a focus allows me to consolidate Haynes' work in claiming some space for Bjelke Petersen among a growing number of writers and artists who celebrate Tasmanian wilderness. This focus allows me to consider how what Bruce Bennett calls "literary placemaking" (97) can occur in popular fiction. The areas about which Bjelke Petersen wrote had a deep personal significance for her as places free from social constraints where she and her companion of thirty years, Sylvia Mills, were happiest. This thesis reads Bjelke Petersen's representation of such places as a form of literary placemaking and thereby challenges the notion that high literary genres are the only place for aesthetic appreciations of place and region.



Popular romance fiction has traditionally been reviewed pejoratively and dismissed as nothing more than a "conservative mirror of wish fulfilment," where the progress of a woman's quest for love is assumed to be the full extent of meaning (Giles, *Too* 19, 9). It is this assessment that best summarizes influential Australian criticisms of Bjelke Petersen's work. The *Bulletin* devoted three quarters of a column to scathing criticism of *The Captive Singer* as a "snoopopathic" novel⁶ and urged Bjelke Petersen to "prune her language" and "write only of what she knows" ("Snoopopathic"). A later *Bulletin* article referred to her as "Australia's Marie

⁵ Nineteenth-century novels set in Tasmania focused on the convict presence; the best known of these was Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874). Clarke's depiction of Tasmania's west coast, based on secondary sources, emphasizes the area's barren and bleak aspects. His interpretation is vastly different to Bjelke Petersen's enthusiastic responses to this landscape.

⁶ The *Bulletin* "Red Page" attributes this term to Stephen Leacock but offers no precise definition. Considered in context it appears a derogatory term for Bjelke Petersen's descriptive prose and initial preoccupation with manners and mores, particularly as the novel begins in the parlours of London. However, in this instance the *Bulletin*'s criticism is misguided because Bjelke Petersen's representation of London society, in the examples quoted in the *Bulletin* article, is ironic and variously parodies Oscar Wilde's plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

Corelli”⁷ and dismissed her work as the extrusions of a fountain pen (AOT NS 1294/5). Some contemporary reviewers were enthusiastic about Bjelke Petersen’s novels, going so far as to consider her work a positive contribution to Australian literature. A critic from the Hobart *Mercury* registered his academic bias against her works’ popular status but praised her writing because it represented “the Australian people and the Australian bush, as something bright and cheerful.” The reviewer considered this a “most welcome contrast to those writers who have made it a fashion to write of the bush as sombre and hopeless and the Australian people either as bushrangers, as broken-down swagmen, or as city larrikins” (12 Mar. 1920, AOT NS 1294/11). However, it is the *Bulletin*’s views that are replicated in most later critical assessments. E. Morris Miller and Frederick Macartney, in *Australian Literature: A Bibliography to 1938*, mention Bjelke Petersen in the extensive bibliography and dismiss her work as “sentimental” and “more popular overseas than in Australia” (64). Much later, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* described *The Captive Singer* as a “conspicuous financial success” and dismissed her other novels as “sentimental, romantic and florid in language” (95) and “more appreciated overseas” than in Australia. In similar vein, Tim Suttor compares *Jewelled Nights* and E.L. Grant Watson’s *Desert Horizons* (1923) and argues that, while both novels can potentially be read as homoerotic subversions of mateship, it is more likely that “Watson had a clearer idea of intention than Petersen” (109). Ross Smith discusses *Jungle Night* (1937), which he stumbled across while searching for novels to include in a bibliography of North Queensland, and concludes that the novel is commendable as the work of an “amateur novelist” but “should be re-consigned to oblivion” (95, 99). Such criticisms reflect an entrenched attitude of condescension to the sentimental and romantic, and contribute to the dismissal of women’s popular romance writing as old-fashioned, trivial and escapist.

More recently Roslynn Haynes and Jean Delamoir have made positive contributions to scholarship about Bjelke Petersen. Haynes’ excellent article “Romanticism and Environmentalism: The Tasmanian Novels of Marie Bjelke Petersen” provides an overview of Bjelke Petersen’s Tasmanian novels and focuses on romantic representations of wilderness in these narratives. She identifies Bjelke

⁷ Marie Corelli was a bestselling British author of popular romance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her books sold in the hundreds of thousands, easily making her the most successful popular writer of this period. Like many popular writers, Corelli’s work was despised and disparaged by professional critics and reviewers (Felski 115-16).

Petersen as the first novelist to depict Tasmanian wilderness positively. Haynes argues that Bjelke Petersen represents these areas in the tradition of the Romantic sublime (70)⁸ and concludes that Bjelke Petersen's novels are an important contribution to the "acceptance of wilderness conservation in the state" (74). The genre-based analysis of wilderness representation that this thesis undertakes extends Haynes' work. Delamoir's article focuses only on *Jewelled Nights* and has a cultural rather than literary focus. Delamoir identifies *Jewelled Nights* as a popular culture text that circulated widely at a time when gender roles were undergoing significant redefinition (131). While this thesis disagrees with Delamoir's interpretation of the structural aspects of *Jewelled Nights*, her article provides an interesting interpretation of gender instability in the novel, which forms the basis of my treatment of this issue.

Those critics who belittle and dismiss Bjelke Petersen's fiction reflect the traditional Australian realist-nationalist bias against women's romance and a more general academic bias against popular fiction of all kinds. In recent years numerous critics have exposed the distinction between popular fiction and its canonical literary counterpart as an arbitrary one, a matter of taste and fashion rather than an unbiased judgement about the intrinsic quality of a work (Irons xiii). Terry Eagleton persuasively argues that the category "literature" is not objective, ontological, and immutable but subjective: a reflection of what is valued by the arbiters of literary taste in specific situations (10). Rita Felski similarly suggests that criticisms of popular fiction as aesthetically inadequate are more a feature of "the critic's own training in particular techniques of cultural discrimination ... [than] a self-evident feature of the object itself" (119).

In an Australian context, Susan Sheridan has demonstrated that the marginalization of romance in Australia was political and arbitrary. She argues that the *Bulletin*, a magazine for the urban educated population, promoted as typically Australian the kind of writing that had an association with the vernacular masculine folk culture of the bush, which demonstrated literary innovation through the mode of realism. Romance writing, often serialized in Australian establishment periodicals (and distributed amongst pastoral classes) before publication in novel form by British publishers, was marginalized and feminized as colonial, conventional and derivative (30). Popular romance writing was considered to be the work of "lady novelists" and

⁸ Haynes notes that before Bjelke Petersen, non-fiction writers, artists and photographers had represented Tasmanian landscape romantically (69-70).

only interested in representing social life and relations between the sexes. Critics deemed these novels to be remote from issues of national identity, providing “entertainment but making no claims to art” (30). Such writing was particularly disparaged for its perceived function as entertaining a British audience with tales of Australian life (4).

This recognition of the arbitrary and political nature of the categorization of literature into the familiar oppositional binaries – high/ low, serious/ popular, masculine/ feminine – has subsequently engendered scholarship that focuses on the way popular texts operate in a society and also a body of enquiry that is interested in the aesthetics of such fiction. Susan Sheridan, Fiona Giles, Robert Dixon, John Cawelti, Rita Felski and Anne Cranny-Francis are scholars whose work has proved invaluable for my reappraisal of Bjelke Petersen as a writer of popular fiction. These scholars develop strategies and approaches which provide a theoretical context and methodology that enables me to challenge the grounds upon which Bjelke Petersen’s romances have been marginalized and dismissed as aesthetically inadequate, thematically shallow and politically conservative. Their work builds upon that of early Marxist and feminist critics who were dismissive of popular fiction as a conservative genre that reinforced dominant bourgeois and patriarchal ideologies.⁹ It also offers an alternative approach to those feminist recuperations of popular texts that emphasize the subversive powers of such texts, which as Felski argues leads to “finding [doubtful] evidence of buried feminism in every text written by a woman” (141). As Felski argues, this more recent scholarship has developed new “critical methodologies, which have explored the semiotic and intertextual complexities of popular texts in order to give a more nuanced account of their aesthetic and political significance” (141).

The theoretical work on which I have based my reappraisal of Bjelke Petersen’s fiction recuperates popular novels, less judgements, as historically specific cultural artefacts. Sheridan and Giles, writing about Australian women romance writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, maintain that popular romance writing is an important site for the articulation of women’s

⁹ Marxist critics adopted the idea that popular fiction “lulled its readers into a state of somnolence, indolence and passive receptivity to the ideological propaganda” of a bourgeois capitalism (Radway, “Reading” 10). And likewise, many feminist critics argued that romance narratives encoded dominant gender ideologies that demanded subjugation, monogamy and domesticity as the ideal for every woman, and privileged masculinity by supporting a sexual double standard and encouraging participation in public rather than private domestic worlds.

domestic and emotional experience in the culture of an emerging Australian nation. Both scholars have recovered a female romance tradition that is prolific and diverse, both in the sense of the women who wrote and the things about which they wrote. Sheridan argues that this literature is created out of the knowledge, commitments and desires that textured individual lives using available literary materials (viii). Crucially, Sheridan and Giles emphasize that women are never a unified group speaking with one voice but are rather a diverse group whose utterances will reflect a variety of speaking positions, interests and commitments.

For these scholars generic romance is not a blueprint that must be faithfully reproduced, but a literary paradigm whose conventions can be manipulated by the writer and in some cases offer subtle criticism of dominant ideologies. Giles identifies romance as a site of female resistance, which “enables at least the entertainment of transgressive behaviour and fantasy” (19). She remarks: “the narrative strategies of the feminine romance writers ... point to an experimental dismantling of generic boundaries in an effort to employ genres as enabling and permissive narrative conventions rather than excluding and prescriptive literary rules” (*Too* 19). Sheridan assigns women writers, whether they are “lady novelists” or radical journalists, a role as cultural agents who take possession of the “various positions made available to them in middle-class culture” and, from there, wield “their pens with a degree of social power” (x). Although Sheridan allows romance to be understood as a literary genre that women have successfully used in a variety of ways to their advantage rather than a vehicle for reproducing dominant ideologies, she is sceptical of feminist analysis that categorizes such fiction as either subversive or reactionary (xi). She argues that in reality many of these texts included an oppositional strand but in other ways were quite conservative (x). The strategies for analysis developed by Sheridan and Giles offer a way for me to reconsider the representation of women and marriage in Bjelke Petersen’s novels. Haynes argues that because these novels end traditionally in marriage and do not engage with issues of social justice they fail to make any significant contribution to the “formation of feminist role models in Australia” (68). Applying the approaches to women’s romance writing devised by Sheridan and Giles to Bjelke Petersen’s texts allows me to challenge Haynes’ criticism and, as Chapter Two shows, present the novels as sites of temporary experimental transgression.

In his study of imperial romances with an Australian setting from the late Victorian and Federation eras, Robert Dixon expands the work begun by Sheridan and Giles. He uncovers a similarly diverse literature, which he argues has importance as a site for articulating conflicting discourses about nation, masculinity and the British imperial project. Like Sheridan and Giles, Dixon argues that popular fiction has no inherent tendency to work either subversively, as a radical critique of a society, or conservatively, as an advocate of a dominant ideology (10). Dixon posits popular writing as a genre that articulates the intrinsic anxieties of a culture at a particular time as the members of that society come to terms with the contradictions of lived experience. He contends that popular romances have a “conflictual economy which simultaneously displays and disavows the anxieties that produced them” (5). As he says, to “view adventure romance in this way is to view it the same way as the *Bulletin* is now treated, not as a unified text expressing a single point of view ... but as a ‘mutilated text,’ a complex site of discursive boundaries” (8). Such a position makes popular romance visible as a site where discourses, which are sometimes contradictory, clamour to be heard. For Dixon, Giles and Sheridan the discourses that were most frequently articulated in Australian romance fiction in the Federation era were those that dealt with sex/ gender, race, nation and empire.

Situating popular texts as historically specific cultural artefacts allows me to consider Bjelke Petersen’s popular romance novels in the context of the society and the individual that produced them. Informed by the theoretical work of these scholars this thesis reads Bjelke Petersen’s texts as historically and culturally specific artefacts produced by a woman who had some interest in the dominant issues of sex/ gender, race and nation but whose primary interests were more idiosyncratic. By focusing on the Tasmanian novels, Bjelke Petersen’s fiction has the potential to offer insight into the anxieties of Tasmania in the 1920s. Appropriating Dixon’s work, this thesis identifies a conflictual economy in Bjelke Petersen’s fiction as it strives variously to demonstrate allegiance to region, nation, evangelical religion, and independence for women, companionate love and wilderness.



Chapter One of this thesis establishes Bjelke Petersen’s literary milieu and explores her aesthetic practice. John Cawelti argues in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* that popular fiction is

formula art, constructed according to rigidly defined standards and conventions. He contends that the aesthetic imperatives of such art are entertainment and escape, which are best achieved through the creation of exciting fictional worlds and manipulation of plot and convention to produce interesting and innovative narratives while still working to fulfil generic expectations (which for feminine romance is the triumph of love). This chapter evaluates Bjelke Petersen's fiction according to the criteria established by Cawelti and demonstrates her skill as a writer of popular fiction. I identify Bjelke Petersen's formula, demonstrate her familiarity with literary conventions and reveal her competent manipulation of plot to produce interesting and popular narratives.

Chapter Two focuses on Bjelke Petersen's representation of women, love and marriage. From a contemporary feminist point of view, Bjelke Petersen's texts appear quite conservative, but historicized as early twentieth-century texts they reveal a more progressive nature. The chapter argues that Bjelke Petersen's fiction makes a significant challenge to the gender ideology of monogamy, female subjugation and domesticity that romance narratives typically encode. More radically, the chapter will argue that Bjelke Petersen's insistence on companionate love challenges typical heterosexual relationships as they are represented in romance writing and indicates gender instability. The chapter concludes with a queer reading of *Jewelled Nights*, which demonstrates how this novel challenges those discourses that stigmatized same-sex friendships as deviant.

Chapter Three focuses on the ways Bjelke Petersen's passionate commitment to Tasmanian wilderness regions and evangelical Protestantism are reflected in her novels. The chapter argues that Bjelke Petersen had some interest and investment in Tasmanian wilderness beyond its exploitation for local colour or as a suitably exotic location for romance. Indeed, wilderness representation in Bjelke Petersen's fiction works as literary placemaking. According to Bennett, placemaking manifests itself most effectively as romanticism "tempered with knowledge and close observation" (101). Such representation, as opposed to parochial regionalism, signifies a deep regard for the landscape beyond the merely conventional. This chapter argues for the role of popular fiction in such regional concerns, demonstrating Bjelke Petersen's deep personal investment in, and concentrated representation of, unique Tasmanian wilderness regions. Religious elements too are incorporated beyond what is usual in popular romance. In each novel divine intervention is required before the romance

drama can be happily resolved. The chapter explores the tension that Bjelke Petersen's commitment to region and religion creates in her fiction and examines the consequences of such a focus in popular romance.

Chapter One

Formulas for Success: Bjelke Petersen's Popular Aesthetic

Bjelke Petersen fashioned herself as an ambassador for Tasmania and saw publicizing the beauty of the state and altering overseas perceptions of Australia as a cultural backwater as important and integral aspects of her fictional project.¹⁰ Bjelke Petersen's novels unashamedly sought a popular audience and had no pretence to high literary values. They were published and distributed by the British publishing houses Hodder and Stoughton and Hutchinson, which both specialized in the production and distribution of cheap, mass-produced, adventure, mystery and romance narratives in Britain and the colonies in the early decades of the twentieth century (Nile 24). They offered large print runs, wide distribution and multiple editions.¹¹ Their novels were readily available in bookshops, railway bookstands, city bookstalls and lending libraries in Britain and throughout the Commonwealth. They were, in effect, an early twentieth-century equivalent of novels found nowadays in the airport bookstall. Such novels, distinguished by their gaudy, eye-catching covers, are intended to absorb the reader happily and completely for a few hours before they are cast aside (Nash 2). For a writer like Bjelke Petersen, who wrote to earn an income, to publicize Tasmania and change overseas perceptions of Australia, such British publishers offered the best chance of commercial success and wide distribution.

Bjelke Petersen's commitment to popular genres is such that her narratives go so far as criticizing high literary fiction. In *Jewelled Nights* she defends her romance aesthetic by criticizing the prejudices of establishment critics. Here, through the voice of the publican at Loud Water, she ironically inverts the general criticism that women's romance writing has a tendency to gush unchecked and uncensored onto the page (Felski 125) and applies it to a realist writer whose novels, according to the

¹⁰ In the *Mercury* Bjelke Petersen told a reporter "Tasmania has an enthusiastic champion in me. I certainly do my utmost to put our island before the world in the most favourable light. I love it and I want to make everyone else love it too" (5 Jan 1924, AOT NS 1294/6). Similarly in a report in Burnie newspaper the *Advocate* she claimed that she had met many "English and American people whose knowledge of Australia was ... surprisingly narrow" and "who were surprised to meet a cultured Australian" and as a consequence she "determined, even if only a voice crying in the wilderness to do something to dispel such shades of ignorance" (undated cutting AOT NS 1294/ 11)

¹¹ Editions varied between the 6/- edition intended for the British home market, cheaply bound colonial versions that retailed for 3/6, and 2/- editions of more popular novels (Lyons 23).

publican, “oozed out of him at every pore—he threw them off like sweat” (123).¹² Bjelke Petersen cleverly appropriates Joseph Furphy’s term “offensively Australian” – famously used to describe his canonical novel *Such is Life*¹³ – as a descriptive term for Tasmanian wilderness. The publican relates the writer’s opinion about the beauty of the area: “he said this place was ‘offensively fine’—that was the expression he used.” The publican decides that the writer “had a frightful down on beauty,” claiming it was “old-fashioned and that no one with any ability ever wrote about beautiful things nowadays.” He was also “keen on what he called strong settings” because they gave “‘prestige’ to a book straight away; made it a kind of top-notch” (123). Later in the novel, “modern writers” are accused of being “vivisectionists” rather than “artists.” Their narratives “are no longer satisfied to portray their characters; they cut them open and show the readers how the wheels go round inside” (292). Similarly *Dusk* includes criticism of modernist representation. Dusk Harland, the eponymous heroine of this novel, comments that a book she is trying to read is “so loose jointed, it seems to be coming to pieces all the time” (168). Another is criticized for its obscurity: “The characters are vague and so is their intelligence. The atmosphere is foggy. The whole thing seems written with pale ink and a very thin nib which absolutely refuses to make anything but the weakest outline” (168). This modernist preoccupation with obscurity and non-linear narrative is summarily dismissed by both protagonists, who prefer a less ambiguous, more accessible novel that “is written with the butt end of a pen – of the buffalo type, ready to charge with its head down,” which is “vigorous and strong” and ideas are clearly presented (168). Like her protagonists, Bjelke Petersen emphatically asserts the value of her narrative aesthetic over modernism.

Bjelke Petersen deliberately and explicitly privileges such kinds of robust and opinionated writing. Critics who accuse her of naivety, ignorance, sentimentality or aesthetic inadequacy thus miss the point, for high literary values are not those by which Bjelke Petersen’s fiction should be judged. Bjelke Petersen’s writing does not ask to be evaluated according to the artistic criteria of more highly valued mimetic forms where meaning is multi-layered and not always readily apparent, but rather by

¹² This incident may even be a direct response to the *Bulletin*’s earlier criticism of Bjelke Petersen. The *Bulletin* glibly noted that following the success of *The Captive Singer*, Bjelke Petersen’s “fountain pen has been exuding best-sellers” (AOT NS 1292/5).

¹³ The term “offensively Australian” is used by Joseph Furphy to describe *Such is Life* in a letter to the editor of the *Bulletin* dated April 4th 1897. This letter is reprinted in John Barnes’ *The Writer in Australia* (117).

its ability to satisfy the primary aesthetic imperatives of formula fiction. Bjelke Petersen was a highly competent writer of popular fiction well versed in romance conventions and their manipulation. Without such competency her novels would not have been the significant financial success they proved to be, for formulaic fiction must satisfy a range of different, often conflicting, readerly desires. A work that fails to meet the criteria of successful formula narrative is likely to be thought a disappointment if it is not innovative enough in manipulating the conventions of genre, if action is overwhelmed by propaganda or if it is too closely grounded in reality to adequately absorb the reader into the created fictional world. As Anne Cranny-Francis points out, the traditional audience of genre fiction “may find a heavily transformed text unreadable, no longer recognizable as a member of the generic family from which it was developed” (19). Bjelke Petersen experimented by inserting a number of her idiosyncratic interests and views into a romance archetype but she was always mindful of fulfilling the expectations of her readers.

This chapter will demonstrate Bjelke Petersen’s competence as a writer of popular fiction. It outlines the characteristics of popular fiction, as John Cawelti defines them, and analyses the ways that Bjelke Petersen imparts interest and variety to create exciting novels that are still within generic limits. The chapter will demonstrate innovation at the level of plot, character and choice of setting, and argue that Bjelke Petersen’s effusive prose style creates an emotionally satisfying fictional world that maintains a connection to the present world. The chapter demonstrates how Bjelke Petersen works within the constraints of genre to produce a distinct narrative that entertains but also has the advantage of serving her specific (and idiosyncratic) interests and commitments.

Genre fiction is highly conventional and standardized in terms of plot, character and structure. The reader familiar with the conventions of a particular genre begins such a narrative with a set of expectations about how events will unfold, and the type of emotions she or he will experience. Providing a familiar form promises the reader satisfaction, a predictable emotional reward and “a sense of what to expect in new individual examples, thereby increasing [their] capacity for understanding and enjoying the work” (Cawelti 9). Cranny-Francis and Jean Radford both explain this as a “social contract” between writer and reader (Cranny-Francis 18; Radford 9). Formulaic fiction regularly creates an imaginary world in which fictional characters command the reader’s interest and concern and thus transcend the boundaries that the

reader ordinarily experiences. Readers willingly escape to a world free from frustration, where “the hero successfully overcomes his enemies and surmounts great dangers, the lover has his or her desires fully met [and] the long suffering saint is finally rewarded” (Cawelti 38).

John Cawelti argues that enjoyable, entertaining and therefore successful formula fiction arises when the writer produces a narrative that fulfils formulaic conventions in innovative and interesting ways. This is best achieved when the writer is able to imbue stereotypical characters and situations with new vitality, and construct innovative plots while still remaining within formulaic limits (10, 11). In terms of the experience of escape, a work will be deemed successful if it creates an imaginative event where its audience “can encounter a maximum of excitement without being confronted with the overpowering sense of insecurity and danger that accompany such forms of excitement in reality” (16). Such an experience will generally occur if the writer constructs a fictional world that absorbs and interests the reader but maintains a connection with reality, creates idealized characters with whom the reader identifies, as well as developing a plot that permits the reader to indulge the experiences of anxiety, uncertainty and excitement safe in the knowledge that everything will be resolved happily and successfully (17). Critics such as Cawelti rightly acknowledge that considerable artistic skill is required to create such fictions.

Generally speaking, the popular romance reader expects the plot to develop as a romance between a man who is strong, mature, experienced and handsome and a younger, beautiful, less experienced woman. Traditionally the hero will be wealthy and/ or professional and may have an aristocratic background, while the heroine is not wealthy and, as a rule, will have a more humble social origin. Initially the heroine will dislike the hero because he is arrogant but in the course of the narrative her opinion will change and the narrative will end happily, usually with marriage (Cranny-Francis 181). This basic plot can be loosely applied to fiction as diverse as the novels of Jane Austen and Daphne du Maurier, and present day mass-market Mills and Boon novels (Drabble 871). Such novels will usually be culture specific because, as Gillian Beer argues, romance is “acutely fashionable, cast in the exact mould of an age’s sensibility.” It often registers with “extraordinary refinement the peculiar forms and vacillations of a period” (12). Romance plots and worlds, as well as the idiosyncrasies of the characters, are closely linked to the fashions, anxieties

and customs of a particular age, and in this way we can read romances for their valuable cultural insights.

In nineteenth-century Australia – where women were often immigrants, in a minority and dependent upon marriage for financial security – the dominant romance plot typically traced “the heroine’s quest for domestic fulfilment, love and a sense of self determination.” This was usually a quest for marriage where, in a specifically regional inflection, the heroine was often forced to choose between “the refined but unsuitable Englishman and the less sophisticated, naturally virtuous, Australian” (Giles “Romance” 227, 233). Writers such as Rosa Praed, Tasma and Ada Cambridge successfully used this formula. However this formula loses social relevance as women enter the workforce, gain access to higher education and become less reliant on marriage for financial security. In response to historical developments, then, a new mode of feminine romance began to emerge in the early twentieth century in which the heroine was not specifically engaged upon a quest for marriage. The heroine of these narratives was generally a competent, confident Australian who was more geographically and socially mobile than her colonial predecessor, often in paid employment and not always interested in marriage. Less constrained by middle-class notions of respectability, she was more sexually adventurous than her fictional precedents, and although, the formation of adult relationships remained a key element in these narratives, it was not mandatory that they should conclude with marriage (Sheridan 52).

Though a twentieth-century writer Bjelke Petersen follows the conventions of nineteenth-century romance for her first novels (*The Captive Singer* and *The Immortal Flame*). The conventions of this formula were well described and had proven commercially successful; therefore, they provided an established paradigm for a beginning writer like Bjelke Petersen. However, as later analysis of *The Captive Singer* shows, Bjelke Petersen’s adherence to nineteenth-century formulaic conventions had a thematic, as well as commercial, justification. Like many nineteenth-century writers, Bjelke Petersen used the romance form to address assumptions of European and British cultural primacy (Giles “Romance” 226). (While some writers challenged this premise others endorsed it through triumphant return of the protagonists to Britain.) In *The Captive Singer* Bjelke Petersen takes exception to the assumption of European cultural primacy and adopts a sustained anti-British tone and repeatedly asserts the advantages of life in Australia. In the

other novels Bjelke Petersen, like many of her contemporaries, is less concerned with questions of national identity (but still addresses issues of cultural primacy) and there is a corresponding uptake of some twentieth-century techniques and the emergence of protagonists who are unselfconsciously Australian.¹⁴

While Bjelke Petersen's novels generally follow the conventions of feminine romance they also incorporate significant aspects of the male quest romance (a form that was very popular at the end of the nineteenth century). Generally speaking in these narratives a group of English adventurers embark on a journey to an exotic location where they are involved in a number of exciting and challenging incidents before a triumphant return to the homeland (Dixon 62). Usually, the adventurers in these stories are jaded individuals who exhibit a "yearning for escape from a confining society, rigidly structured in terms of gender, race and class to a mythologized space" where masculine regeneration is possible (Showalter 81). Like feminine romance, these novels were presumed to encode a dominant ideology. Dixon argues that these novels had a perceived role as an "antidote to the degeneration and feminizing of the [English] race" and provided an "accessible fantasy of masculine and Anglo-Saxon supremacy in a world turned upside down" (5). Novels such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* and *King Solomon's Mines* are famous examples of this genre. It was not unusual for feminine romance to include attributes of this genre in the sense that many incorporated adventure as a subsidiary element (Radford 11). However Bjelke Petersen makes significant use of conventions other than the adventure motif in her narratives. Bjelke Petersen's protagonists are rarely engaged upon a quest for love; rather, like the heroes of masculine outdoor romance, they are seeking regeneration. Similarly, unlike the heroines of much feminine romance whose sphere of influence rarely extends beyond the verandah, Bjelke Petersen's heroines have agency in the outdoors.¹⁵ In most of Bjelke Petersen's fictions the heroine enters the wilderness – the place of adventure in masculine romance – and through her experience of the environment and adventures there, finds

¹⁴ Sheridan argues that in twentieth-century romance questions of national and personal identity fade into insignificance and the heroine is less likely to be well connected and more often readily identifiable as a "bush-girl" (55).

¹⁵ In the "Introduction" to *From the Verandah: Stories of Love and Landscape by Nineteenth-Century Australian Women* Fiona Giles comments that many women writers were preoccupied with the bush but notes that in their stories male protagonists rather than female ones enjoy an outdoor experience. Women continue to be present in these stories as wives and mothers in charge of domestic arrangements. These writers report the activities or men as seen from a woman's vantage point on the verandah, which Giles describes as a "mediating space between private and public worlds" (1).

healing and love and successfully escapes the social constraints of the civilized world.

Bjelke Petersen's skill is such that she blends the conventions of these popular genres to create a formula of her own. In each of her novels a beautiful, independent and physically competent heroine finds love and romance in the Tasmanian wilderness with a masterful, handsome, yet sensitive hero. The usual scenario is that one or more of the protagonists arrives in the Tasmanian wilderness as a refugee from a metropolitan centre in Europe, America or Australia and seeks to recover, in varying degree, mental or physical health. Significantly, the traditional impediment to romantic resolution does not arise from the heroine's dislike of the hero but rather results because the union contravenes an accepted social code. Recovery in each narrative derives from the combined powers of love, the healing facility of the Tasmanian wilderness and recourse to prayer. But because the narratives continue to be structured around the successful resolution of a central heterosexual relationship, in which love is "triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (Cawelti 42), the conventions of generic feminine romance are adequately fulfilled and regular readers of this genre will not be disappointed.

Bjelke Petersen's formula remains the same for all the narratives but there is considerable variation in how different conventions are incorporated. As Bjelke Petersen gains confidence and experience she becomes more adept and adventurous about combining and manipulating narrative traditions and techniques. Brief analysis of Bjelke Petersen's first novel, *The Captive Singer*, followed by an overview of some other novels, will demonstrate this aspect of Bjelke Petersen's aesthetic practice. *The Captive Singer* follows closely the conventions of nineteenth-century feminine romance but integrates some aspects of the male quest romance. This novel concentrates on a young, traditionally beautiful, wealthy and aristocratic British heroine who is atypical in terms of class and financial situation but also in the sense that she has little interest in domestic affairs and prefers to be outdoors in the Australian bush. She also differs from conventional heroines because she demonstrates the independence and moral strength usually associated with the hero in traditional romance. The paradigm for feminine romance is further subverted because she finds love with a handsome, kind sensitive man who is ostensibly her social inferior.

Nevertheless, in keeping with traditional feminine romance, this narrative maintains a significant focus on the progress of romance. Love is declared early and its successful resolution is the novel's only source of narrative tension. Iris is at first confused about whether her allegiance should be to her family and class, or to her lover. Eventually she decides in Justin's favour. In doing so she commits to renounce the privileged ways of her upbringing to live in reduced circumstances: "I shall give most of my income away. I shall live simply, and it will not cost much to keep me" (90). Altruistic as this is, it threatens romance conventions in two ways. The first is that it undermines the culture of conspicuous consumption that is made explicit in romance narratives by a focus on beautiful clothes and sumptuous surroundings. Secondly, this decision threatens the paradigm of upward mobility, usually linked to marriage, which feminine romance typically encodes. (The desired end of feminine romance is marriage and consequent improvement of the heroine's situation socially and/ or financially.) This scenario successfully enhances the reader's experiences of escape, and encourages identification with the heroine through creating an idealized self-image (Cawelti 18). In *The Captive Singer* this fantasy is threatened for a part of the narrative by Iris' intention to remain in the Tasmanian wilderness as Justin's wife. As such, the narrative's appeal and status as a popular text is potentially compromised because it offers a conclusion that may be too close to the reader's actual situation. Fortunately, such an outcome is subverted with revelations that Justin is actually Lord Lennox. Iris is rescued from her fate – through the Victorian convention of the "last minute discovery of a peerage" (Sheridan 53) – and romance conventions are preserved intact. Here, Bjelke Petersen competently varies generic convention to produce a distinctive and individual narrative that works, as Cawelti says it must, towards the fulfilment of conventional form.

In subsequent narratives Bjelke Petersen makes significant departures from the nineteenth-century paradigm as she confidently varies the age, social class, nationality and marital status of her protagonists, develops more complex plots and shows greater interest in less conventional thematic preoccupations. Bjelke Petersen's fourth novel, *Jewelled Nights*, begins by focusing on an adventuring youth and in the initial stages the plot is not readily discernible as feminine romance. Here Elaine Fleetwood, the female protagonist, is disguised as her brother and embarks upon a quest for adventure and wealth. Bjelke Petersen's unreliable narrator conceals Elaine's actual identity for two thirds of the story, referring to her as Dick and using

a masculine pronoun until after revelation of her actual sex. The romance is initially structured as a boy's own adventure but, as Chapter Two shows, develops as a convoluted demonstration that companionate love and friendship underpin both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. This issue is explored while still working toward fulfilment of the aesthetic imperatives of formula romance. In *The Moon Minstrel* a very conventional romance plot, in which misunderstanding keeps the lovers apart, is used to explore the abstract issue of adequately representing nature in art. The protagonist of this novel is Myrta Lost, a foundling raised in the Tasmanian wilderness by a family of trappers and a self-taught but talented musician and dancer. She leaves the wilderness, achieves an education, fame and fortune but is unhappy, anxious and dissatisfied with her art, feeling that the beauty of nature frequently eludes the artist and at best, like a "little pool," she can only reflect its beauty (192). The woman as artist is a common device in feminine romance. In most cases this device is commonly used to explore the difficulty for women to adequately combine marriage and maternity with creativity (Beauman 82). Bjelke Petersen follows this convention in the sense that Myrta must relinquish her career to remain in the Tasmanian wilderness with her lover, but it is of secondary importance to the issue of adequate representation of nature. Nicola Beauman argues that some of these novels had a "semi-autobiographical" (90) component; perhaps Myrta's anxiety about her art resonates with Bjelke Petersen's own worries. An interest in contemporary social concerns is most apparent in *The Rainbow Lute*, which is set in the same region as *The Captive Singer* and has the same narrative structure of a central love interest between a beautiful girl and a handsome man with a mysterious past who occupies a humble position in an isolated community (Alexander 185). The novel was written in the depression years and reflects the austerity of this period with a sustained anti-materialist stance. Len Dare rejects his past life (as a Hollywood film star) and considerable possessions in favour of an uncomplicated existence in the valley with the heroine Faith Langdon, who is repeatedly praised for her modesty and thrift.

In these ways, Bjelke Petersen's manipulations of plot create interest and entertainment and contribute to the experience of escape while still working to address her specific concerns. Escapist plots are largely dependent on the creation of an ideal remote world to which the reader can escape, and in this element Bjelke Petersen excels. According to Cawelti, romance worlds lack the disorder, ambiguity, uncertainty and limitations of the reader's present world but are sufficiently far from

ordinary reality to make the reader less inclined to apply ordinary standards of plausibility and probability to the events related (13, 19). In feminine romance such locations were often sites for representation of unconventional, illicit or erotic love: distance licenses the representation of, and vicarious pleasure in, such love while also dissociating this behaviour from the reader's present reality. In masculine romance formulas of Bjelke Petersen's era geographically remote locations were favoured as sites of regeneration. Elaine Showalter describes such locations as "anarchic" and "primitive" spaces where "men can be freed from the constraints of Victorian morality" (81). European society is not replicated here; if it exists or had existed it has usually been corrupted. Such spaces had the power to challenge and compromise the protagonist, but would usually be mastered by the hero, thus asserting the superior power of the white race and European civilization.

In Bjelke Petersen's fiction Tasmanian wilderness is both a place for unconventional love and for moral and spiritual regeneration. But like the incorporation of other aspects of formula romance there is considerable movement between the paradigms of romance and adventure in terms of setting. *The Captive Singer* and *Dusk* maintain an allegiance to feminine romance in the sense that the heroines inhabit recognizably civilized enclaves within a wilderness space and only make forays into the outdoors. In *The Captive Singer* Iris lives in a guesthouse with a dining room and a private sitting room that she has transformed to assume "an atmosphere of well-being and comfort, of culture and luxury" (253). In *Dusk*, Dusk is a guest at the Grand Hotel in Queenstown. However in *Jewelled Nights* and *The Moon Minstrel*, female protagonists live in less conventional circumstances (for feminine romance); Elaine camps in the bush while Myrta lives in a bush shack. As such Bjelke Petersen places these heroines in settings usually reserved for the heroes of adventure narratives.

Bjelke Petersen's novels use a variety of textual devices to establish geographical and cultural displacement. *The Captive Singer* adheres closely to the archetypal conventions of romance, in that temporal and geographical location are non-specific. Geographically, the narrative is set in a remote location, specified only as "some terrible out-of-the-way place amongst great lonely mountains, where there are lots of horrid caves and all that sort of thing" (5). Specifically, the isolation of this setting is defined by its difference from the London society gathering that is described in the first chapter. *Dusk* and *Jewelled Nights* are site-specific –

respectively Queenstown and Savage River on Tasmania's West Coast – and care is taken to develop the areas authentically. In these novels isolation and remoteness are established through the device of the journey, the purpose of which is to illustrate the beauty of the areas and emphasize their difference from the civilized world. In all cases these are worlds that are effectively outside history and modernity. Bjelke Petersen's novels make no reference to Tasmania's past history of convictism or Aboriginal genocide. *Dusk* refers indirectly to episodes of cannibalism amongst convicts whom Bjelke Petersen euphemistically calls "early pioneers." These men had "lost their way" and "like wild beasts, had at last torn their comrades to pieces" (261). In these isolated communities modern technology is largely absent. Transport is on foot or horse drawn rather than mechanized. Appropriately, in *The Captive Singer*, it is Ralph Barton, the Englishman and rival suitor, who intrudes upon the tranquillity of the Tasmanian wilderness by arriving in an automobile (147). This event occurs in a chapter aptly named "The Intruder" and interpretative flexibility is compromised to the extent that the reader has no misconceptions about the opinion of modernity the narrative wishes to convey or about Ralph's role in the drama.

Despite Bjelke Petersen's compliance with the romance convention of an ideal remote setting, she represented these areas authentically.¹⁶ For her contemporaries this was an interesting and innovative aspect of her work and one upon which much of her early reputation was built. Her fiction brought to her readers an isolated and little known area of Australia. Such practices are often condemned by critics as formula writers exploiting the Australian landscape to provide exotic locations and glamorous scenes "remote and unfamiliar to British readers" (Barnes 149). But as Chapter Three shows, Bjelke Petersen's interest in Tasmanian landscape extends well beyond exploitation for commercial success. Bjelke Petersen was not ignorant of the predilection of overseas readers for novels set in remote and exotic locations, but she used this preference strategically and constructed her fiction as a forum to challenge overseas perceptions of Australian life and landscape in the years around Federation.¹⁷ Here again, Bjelke Petersen's skills

¹⁶ Giles notes that in the nineteenth century writers increasingly incorporated such realist strategies into their narratives. She argues this has long been a feature of Australian romances, many of which had an acknowledged function as guidebooks for prospective immigrants ("Romance" 228).

¹⁷ Coral Lansbury argues that many British writers of this period represented Australia in a clichéd fashion as a land of gum trees and kangaroos. For these writers Australia was of little interest beyond a convenient location to account for unaccustomed wealth or dispose of an unwanted, often profligate

in the canny manipulation of convention for her idiosyncratic purpose become apparent.

Formula plots establish geographic isolation and facilitate the experience of escape but the world's difference becomes apparent and is sustained largely as an effect of language. Beer has written that romance fiction (of all types) creates a discursive space that absorbs the reader in an otherwise unattainable experience. By drawing the reader into this world, which Beer describes as excessive, ample, inclusive and exaggerated (3), the willing reader is freed from his/ her own inhibitions and preoccupations. In Bjelke Petersen's fiction such a world is created through an extravagant, effusive and enthusiastic prose style. It is this prose style that earned her the opprobrium of Miller and McCartney and led to the *Oxford Companion* dismissing her writing. In *The Gender of Modernity* Rita Felski identifies this writing style as the popular sublime. Felski develops this phrase as a less pejorative term than "kitsch" to describe the unreserved, sentimental prose style that characterizes woman's popular romance and is often cited as evidence for such writing to be dismissed as aesthetically inadequate (119). Felski refuses the notion that such writing is the product of "quasi-intellectual and unconscious creativity," written in ignorance of literary convention (125). Rather, she argues that it is an appropriate and consciously chosen style for a type of fiction that is trying to articulate a transcendent other world. Felski's formulation provides an alternative view of Bjelke Petersen's linguistic excesses.

The popular sublime is characterized by a melodramatic rhetoric of exaggeration and hyperbole that indulges strong emotion and encourages moral polarization (122). It is a highly modified, dense prose, piling adjectives and metaphors one on top of the other; exclamation marks, dashes and italics are frequently used to demonstrate the insufficiency of words (125). Moreover, it encourages an emotional response from the reader and contributes to suspense, thus enhancing the experience of escape. The force of the prose is such that the willing reader is hard pressed to remain unaffected. In Bjelke Petersen's fiction this mode is effectively used to convey the protagonist's emotions in such a way that the protagonist's happiness, fear or despair becomes the reader's own. More subversively, this mode of representation allows the fantasy of sexual pleasure to be

character (155). Overseas publication of Henry Lawson's work, which depicted the Australian landscape as harsh, desolate, vast and empty, was also influential in forming opinions of the country.

entertained within the conventional framework of formula romance. In terms of wilderness this mode is used effectively to convey awesome responses to the beauty of these areas as well as to catalogue grandeur and diversity. As Chapter Three shows these episodes bring Tasmanian wilderness graphically before the reader.

Bjelke Petersen uses an assortment of narrative techniques to deliver her material in interesting and innovative ways. Materially this is achieved in *The Captive Singer* with an innovative format that includes photographs, lyrics and a musical score. Stylistically a developed romantic aesthetic, parody, irony and intertextual references distinguish Bjelke Petersen's narratives and demonstrate familiarity with literary convention. As shown earlier, intertextual allusion to other literary genres effectively establishes Bjelke Petersen's literary milieu and rebuts her critics. As Haynes has noted, parody is capably used in the opening chapter of *The Captive Singer* to dispel popular overseas perceptions of Australia (66). In this chapter Bjelke Petersen parodies the clichéd opinions of Australia expressed in Oscar Wilde's plays. *The Importance of Being Earnest* promulgates the view that Australia is a receptacle for profligates (308) and in *Lady Windermere's Fan* the Duchess of Berwick opines that Australia must be "pretty with the dear little kangaroos flying about" (28). In *The Captive Singer* the members of London society, gathered in Lady Dearn's reception rooms, express similar ideas, but these views are undermined by the narrator's ironic exposure of such apparently sophisticated characters as manipulative, passionless and materialistic. In *The Moon Minstrel* irony is used extensively in an exchange between unsophisticated Myrta Lost who has been raised in the bush, and the worldlier Beatrice Carlton who has condescended to educate Myrta. In the interchange between the two women Myrta challenges the value that the civilized world attaches to traditional knowledge. Books are dismissed as composed of "white paper with a lot of black marks on it" (56); only reading such books, as opposed to an appreciation of nature, is perceived as narrow; and traditional writing is described as one means of communication among many, as Myrta argues that her music is adequate to say all that she wants (59). At the conclusion of this encounter Myrta emerges triumphant and unintimidated, while sophisticated and modern Beatrice is "fagged" and in a "most unamiable frame of mind" (59).

Bjelke Petersen also varies the narrative point of view in her novels. In both *The Captive Singer* and *Dusk* a free indirect style allows the reader to be privy to the

psychological state and emotions of the protagonists. At the outset, in both these narratives the reader is aware of the inner thoughts of only one of the protagonists while remaining ignorant of the mental state and history of the other. This device encourages identification between reader and protagonist while at the same time it contributes to narrative tension or suspense – both necessary attributes of good formula fiction. In *The Captive Singer* the reader is variously aware of Iris' distress and elation but for a long time remains ignorant of Justin's thoughts. In *Dusk* the romance unfolds from the hero's point of view. Annette Frederico argues that this device was frequently used by women writers of Bjelke Petersen's era to "comment ironically on the male perspective or to explore the male experience" (254). Indeed, Bjelke Petersen takes this opportunity, and critiques Kerrigan's arrogance towards Dusk, who is indifferent to his advances. The device is also crucial in allowing the narrative to proceed while keeping Dusk's circumstances a mystery. Kerrigan can respectably indulge his passion for Dusk because he believes that she is a widow. But in fact she is still married and it would contravene Bjelke Petersen's code of respectability to allow Dusk to indulge similar feelings. In *Jewelled Nights* an unreliable narrator creates confusion and allows ambiguity to proliferate and in *The Rainbow Lute* the narrative tone is restrained and didactic but totally appropriate to convey the narrative's anti-materialist, revivalist religious message.

Bjelke Petersen was clearly a competent and innovative writer of formula fiction, able to produce interesting narratives that entertained her readers and provided them with the opportunity to escape present reality. But aside from the proven entertainment values of Bjelke Petersen's formula and techniques, her novels have the further advantage of specifically serving her interests and commitments, allowing her to promote independence for women, the ideal of companionate love and the beauty of the Tasmanian wilderness as well as espousing her evangelical religious faith. Bjelke Petersen was one of those writers whom Sheridan describes as "taking possession of the positions made available to them in colonial middle-class culture – whether as 'lady novelist' in literary production or as 'woman comrade' in radical journalism and wielding their pens with a degree of social power" (x). She was a woman writing not only to entertain but also to circulate her views. The following chapters will investigate how Bjelke Petersen successfully used her fiction to disseminate her ideas about women, love and romance, and Tasmania and religion.

Chapter Two

“The Purest and Brightest thing”: Love and Romance in Bjelke Petersen’s Fiction

Sheridan writes that in the first decades of the twentieth century the “romance of experience,” which was primarily concerned with female subjectivity, replaced the “domestic romance in a colonial setting” (51) as the dominant narrative of women’s romance fiction. Sheridan’s definition is based upon a survey of fifty novels by women writers born after 1860, who published for the first time between 1901 and 1930. Although Sheridan’s survey includes writers such as Miles Franklin, Katherine Susannah Prichard and Henry Handel Richardson, whose work is now placed within the canon of Australian literature, her focus is on those other writers, Bjelke Petersen included, who worked within the conventions of romance and whose writing remains outside the canon. Unlike women’s colonial romance, these narratives were not overly focused on the heroine’s quest to find a husband, but were more concerned to “inscribe the shape of a young woman’s life, in relation to both the private world of the family and the public world of education and employment” (Sheridan 52).

This rewriting of the romance archetype reflects women’s experience in a period that is generally regarded as one of consolidation and change. Since the 1880s, women had begun to expand their sphere of influence beyond the domestic through access to the franchise, paid employment, higher education and more equitable divorce laws. These changes increased women’s independence and made them less dependent on marriage for financial security. At the same time a proliferation of contradictory discourses about sexuality and sexual behaviour created anxiety for many women. On the one hand, proponents of the so-called “sexual revolution” advocated greater sexual freedom for men and women and promoted the idea that women could experience sexual pleasure, while, on the other, there was a contradictory campaign that sought to transform gender relations and regulate male sexual behaviour (Jeffreys 1). Also in this period, due to the proliferation of discourses about sexual behaviour, same-sex relationships once assumed to be platonic and non-sexual came to be scrutinized as deviant (Martin, “Quaker” 203).

In this chapter, which focuses on the representation of love, romance and the protagonists in Bjelke Petersen’s Tasmanian narratives, I consider the ways that women’s changed participation in public life and the discourses about sexual

behaviour are reflected in or inform the various fictions. Firstly, I evaluate the feminist potential of Bjelke Petersen's narratives through comparison with the dominant narratives of Australian women's popular romance in the first decades of the twentieth century as Sheridan defines them. I will historicize Bjelke Petersen's representation of love in the context of proliferating discourses of sexual behaviour and gender relations. I will argue that Bjelke Petersen's fiction proposes companionate or psychic love as the ideal and suggest that this indicates a proselytizing intervention for Bjelke Petersen's romance narratives and militates against dismissal of them as simply novels of entertainment and escape.

In each of Bjelke Petersen's narratives a beautiful, independent and physically competent heroine finds love and romance in the Tasmanian wilderness with a masterful, handsome, yet sensitive hero. As already mentioned, none of the heroines is specifically engaged upon a quest for romance or a husband. Rather, they are more likely to be exercising their autonomy by refusing to remain in a relationship that they consider undesirable. In the isolation of Tasmanian wilderness Bjelke Petersen's protagonists experience an ideal love that Iris Dearn, the heroine of *The Captive Singer*, describes as "the purest and brightest thing that has ever come into our lives" (88). Such love, which is based on friendship, devotion and loyalty rather than physical desire or material circumstance, triumphs in spite of the difficulties imposed by prior attachment to others or differences of social position. Importantly, the relationship that ensues will be declared as made in heaven and a "gift from God." Bjelke Petersen's novels all end happily with heterosexual union and marriage, which is the convention for feminine domestic romance. From a contemporary feminist point of view, such endings seem conservative and are usually interpreted to endorse the patriarchal gender ideologies of monogamy, female subjugation and domesticity that romance fiction typically encodes. However, when historicized in the context of early twentieth-century gender relations, Bjelke Petersen's happy endings appear quite progressive. Here, women enter marriages as the financial and social equal of their partners and continue working outside the home.

In Bjelke Petersen's popular romances the heroines will usually be modern in the sense that they are independent, mobile, adventurous and subject to desire. In this respect the heroines conform to Sheridan's paradigm, but at the same time look back to those nineteenth-century heroines who were distinguished by their moral and

sexual purity. In terms of employment, nationality and class, Bjelke Petersen is tentative in the early novels in representing the modern woman. In these novels her heroines are members of establishment society, wealthy and have no need for paid employment. Iris Dearn, the heroine of *The Captive Singer*, resembles in appearance and background the traditional heroine of nineteenth-century Anglo-Australian fiction¹⁸ but in autonomy and physical ability she is more like the heroines Sheridan describes as typical of the twentieth-century “romance of experience.” She is an independently wealthy English aristocrat who has disobeyed her mother to escape the tedium of a London society season, and marriage to an earl of suspect morality, to spend time in the Tasmanian wilderness with her recently widowed cousin. Like the traditional heroine of romance she is beautiful and virginal:

Iris made no reply as she walked beside her cousin, tall, erect,
slender – all in white from her slim shoes to her slanting parasol;
her exquisite profile with its bewildering contours of chin and
throat softly outlined against the bronze-green bush, her deep blue
eyes shadowed almost to blackness by their drooping lashes staring
straight before her. (18)

But in contrast to the traditional heroine of nineteenth-century popular fiction, Iris is not interested in domestic arrangements. She prefers to be outside than in her beautifully decorated private sitting room. She is not as comfortable and competent in the bush as later Bjelke Petersen heroines but nevertheless she acquits herself admirably in this regard. Not usually given to hysterics, she is physically adept and at home in the Tasmanian wilderness where she is able to climb mountains, negotiate cliff ledges and face a snake fearlessly. She possesses an integrity and forthrightness that enables her to challenge the arbitrary laws of her class, specifically, her love for a socially inferior man.

Similarly, Dusk Harland, the mysterious heroine of *Dusk*, is independently wealthy and does not need to work. She is an orphan, although well connected, who has eschewed the “frivolity and worldliness” (220) of polite society and now seeks solitude and healing in the Tasmanian wilderness. Her beauty, superiority and sophistication are emphasized at the expense of the local women whose appearance

¹⁸ This is a descriptive term for fiction written in Australia or Britain about Australia by writers who may or may not have first hand experience of this transcultural experience. These novel were usually published in Britain before distribution to Australia and the colonies (Giles *Too Far* 30-31; Dixon 5-6).

is dismissed as “garish and cheap” alongside Dusk’s “superb simplicity in black” (12). Like Iris, she is not given to hysterics and proves a fearless companion for the hero Warren Kerrigan as they tour the Queenstown sights and mine. She is mature, married and travels unchaperoned, and, in this respect, approximates more closely the heroine of the “romance of experience” whom Sheridan describes as having a greater opportunity to experience the world than her colonial predecessors (53).

In the remaining novels the heroines are working women of mostly humble origins and, because they are active and competent in the bush, they offer a more direct challenge to accepted conventions of gender in terms of physical activity than the heroines of the earlier novels. Elaine Fleetwood, the heroine of *Jewelled Nights*, is an Australian girl who at one time has enjoyed the same privileges of wealth and position as the heroines of Bjelke Petersen’s earlier novels. Her father was a rich and prosperous station owner whose wealth was squandered by his foolish, extravagant wife. After her father’s death Elaine is forced to abandon the life of a Melbourne socialite in order to support her mother. Unable to earn enough money if she had gone “into an office or [taken] up teaching” (251) (which were traditional occupations for women needing to find paid employment in this period), Elaine, disguised as her brother Dick, travels to the Savage River to mine osmiridium where she becomes competent as a miner and gradually earns the respect of the men at the camp.

A straightforward feminist reading of *Jewelled Nights* would argue that Elaine’s success at Savage River is a triumph for women, demonstrating that they can capably operate in traditionally masculine arenas. Such a reading assumes that Elaine’s cross-dressing is mere disguise. (Indeed it is structurally strategic in the sense that it is the only way Bjelke Petersen can authentically situate her romance in the all male community at Savage River where women are excluded.) Marjorie Garber argues that feminist readings of cross-dressing miss the point, looking through the disguise to find a hidden (true) sex, rather than looking at the transvestite figure itself whose gender is effectively blurred (6). Garber contends that the presence of a transvestite figure signifies a blurring of gender boundaries offering a “challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories ‘female’ and ‘male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (10). As such, a transvestite presence “puts into question identities

previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded and ‘known’” (13), rendering them provisional and shifting.

Jean Delamoir draws on Garber’s work to suggest that Elaine’s transvestism in *Jewelled Nights* reflects generalized anxiety about gender roles in the 1920s as increasing numbers of women entered the workforce and became politically active. This development was accompanied by a post-war crisis in masculinity. Delamoir notes that the men who returned from the war were often “less ‘manly,’ physically and psychologically broken” (120). She argues that when Elaine Fleetwood, the Melbourne socialite, assumes the persona “Dick” and infiltrates the mining camp at Savage River the “‘masculinity’ of this world” is “destabilized” (123). Although not as strong as the other miners, “Dick” endures, coping physically and mentally with privation and is eventually admired for “his” integrity and courage. In this case success pertains to the individual rather than to a stable male identity. In the dual persona of Elaine/ Dick, Bjelke Petersen successfully challenges the conservative ideology of a separate masculine sphere of public and outdoor activity and a feminine sphere that is domestic and private. Elaine, despite her prowess in the outdoors, is also a capable housekeeper and affectionate friend to Gus, proving that she can operate simultaneously in both spheres. Delamoir makes the important point that in *Jewelled Nights* gender is shown to be irrelevant to “masculine” success as a miner (123). In the same way it can be argued in Bjelke Petersen’s other novels that gender is immaterial to success in traditionally female activities such as nursing.

In these novels many of the protagonists disrupt prescribed notions of gender, throwing notions of stable identity into question. Each of Bjelke Petersen’s heroines possesses, in varying degree, attributes traditionally gendered masculine (particularly in romance archetypes). They are physically competent, enjoy the outdoors and demonstrate courage and resilience but they also have feminine attributes. In *The Moon Minstrel*, when Myrta is in the West coast wilderness she rides bareback and skins kangaroos however in Sydney she inhabits a traditionally female world, wears glamorous clothes and is welcomed into society women’s drawing rooms. Faith in *The Rainbow Lute* is a competent and brave rider but the children, for whom she cares selflessly, affectionately call her “sweetness” (20). Heroes demonstrate the same duality. In *Jewelled Nights*, Jim describes Salarno as “one of them jolly blokes:” a foolhardy larrikin who is popular with women and a flirt (25). But, when Dick is injured, Salarno is a judicious nurse, never leaving his side, watching him

“day and night, bathing his eyes, applying the lotion and easing his pain in every way possible” (191). Justin in *The Captive Singer* is also a patient nurse on occasion, spending time at the bedsides of those who are seriously ill, and Len Dare in *The Rainbow Lute* is valorized for his kindness to children and good works in the community. Such representations challenge the notion of separate spheres of interest, influence and activity.

Bjelke Petersen’s heroines have little or no domestic interest and are physically competent, but they are still feminine and similarly her heroes are nurturing, comfortable indoors, but still masculine. The effect is not to suggest a widening of spheres but rather a crossover between spheres: the creation of a protean shared space where gender becomes irrelevant to an individual’s performance and interest. Bjelke Petersen does not question a protagonist’s right to occupy a particular gender position but rather suggests that such a position should not restrict an individual’s sphere of activity or influence.

More significantly, in Bjelke Petersen’s fiction gender is shown to be ultimately immaterial to successful couple formation. Successful relationships are based on devotion and friendship rather than motivated by physical attraction and desire. Bjelke Petersen’s commitment to this ideal is such that it is rehearsed in each novel, except *The Moon Minstrel*. In *Jewelled Nights*, “Dick” and Larry Salarno, an older miner, form a relationship that is developed as one of mutual admiration and respect. It becomes a friendship of the “two-man patch,” which Salarno explains signifies a partnership in which two men work together, and which demands commitment and loyalty. Such a partnership engenders affection between mates, which is the “genuine article” and superior to the type of friendship based on “sentiment” that flourishes in the “civilized world.” Characteristically “there’s nothing that [the friends of the ‘two-man’s patch’] wouldn’t do for each other. They would make sacrifices, endure privations, and face death for a mate” (149-50). The strong basis of this friendship is such that after Elaine’s identity is discovered both protagonists are convinced that their relationship will continue as before. Salarno is at first shocked by the discovery that “Dick” is actually Elaine but reasons that “the fact should not make any vital difference between them; for was not his little pal just the same? His personality, his delightful ways, his high courage, the qualities he most admired in him” could “not be affected by the circumstance of sex” (192). Elaine, too, assumes that the basis for the relationship remains the same: “Salarno

was her friend. And their friendship was not the mere ordinary kind – a detached loose thing that could be blown away by any adverse breezes. It was the dear partnership of the ‘two-man’s patch’” (255). As Delamoir rightly notes, Bjelke Petersen subverts romantic convention at this point, by emptying out the categories male/ female and pointedly arguing that “in the end, gender is irrelevant to the formation of the couple” (123).

In *The Rainbow Lute* the relationship between the protagonists Faith Langdon and Len Dare develops as one of friendship, more spiritual than physical, and built upon Faith’s support of the troubled and melancholic Len rather than developed as an archetypal relationship based on physical attraction and desire. The notion of psychical (spiritual) love is developed in this narrative to the point where, faced with separation, Faith assures Dare that their love will endure in a spiritual sense: “Well, you see, distance doesn’t really matter. Love is a spiritual thing and not limited by physical laws” (270). Faith assumes their love is of a transcendent nature, which does not require physical reinforcement for its continuation.

In *The Captive Singer* and *Dusk* the structuring heterosexual relationships are initially based on physical attraction and desire but are later transformed to friendships predicated on devotion and loyalty. In *The Captive Singer* Iris is initially represented as imperious and egocentric and her first efforts to secure a relationship with Justin Rees are motivated in part by selfishness for her own happiness. His reluctance to become involved, ostensibly because of the disparity in their social positions, is an affront to Iris, for she is used to having her own way. She is distressed that “fate” had shown her “what could give [her] unspeakable bliss and then told [her] it must never be [hers]” (90). After she learns that Rees remains in the isolation of Mole Creek because he has a history of alcoholism, her love is motivated less by the need to satisfy her desire and more by concern for him. She determines that “she would go to the end of the earth” to help him overcome his addiction to alcohol (137). The relationship is hampered by difficulties and prejudice, all of which are overcome, allowing Iris to commit to Justin on the basis of love and devotion rather than physical attraction or for economic reasons.

In *Dusk* it is the hero Warren Kerrigan whose desire must be transformed. Kerrigan is attracted to the exceptionally beautiful and sophisticated heroine, Dusk Harland, whom he assumes is recently widowed. However, she is indifferent to his attentions and reluctant to spend time with him. Initially Kerrigan’s interest is

motivated by the desire to change her attitude so that “she would not for long treat him as an impersonal, inanimate official” (37). Yet his attitude towards her softens after he becomes aware that she is constrained by some terrible sadness. Eventually Dusk confides that her husband is not dead but suffers from leprosy and is hospitalized near Sydney. Kerrigan’s attitude alters at once: he becomes remorseful, apologizes for his “desperate passion” and promises to develop a “strong deep affection,” which he explains as the other side of his love, to show “what a friend [he] really can be” (217). From this point their relationship becomes one of devoted friendship until after the death of Dusk’s husband.

In our current era of compulsory sexual activity, Bjelke Petersen’s formulation of love and devotion as the proper foundation for a significant relationship appears outdated, unrealistic and prudish. However when considered in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses on gender relations and sexual behaviour it is apparent that Bjelke Petersen’s views were shared by a growing number of individuals from disparate backgrounds. Sheila Jeffreys argues that in this period British feminists saw psychic love as a way of countermanding the problems of prostitution, sexual abuse of children and sexual assault. It was commonly believed that all of these problems were inextricably linked to a social order which assumed women should be freely available to satisfy men’s uncontrollable and frequent sexual urges (40). She cites feminist sex philosophers Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and Francis Swiney as women who publicly urged sexual restraint for men and actively promoted the ideal of companionate love.¹⁹ Jeffreys argues that rather than dismiss this discourse as prudish we should more properly consider it as a “clear statement of women’s right to physical integrity and self-determination” (30). In this way we are able to see Bjelke Petersen’s position as progressive rather than reactionary and perhaps as making a greater contribution to feminist role models than other scholars have indicated.

Bjelke Petersen’s objection to the abuse of women is also registered in her condemnation of profligacy. In *The Captive Singer*, *Dusk* and *Jewelled Nights* the

¹⁹ Wolstenholme Elmy argued for the right of women to control their own bodies and promoted psychic love, based on justice, equality and sympathy, as the ideal form of relation between men and women (qtd. in Jeffreys 32). Francis Swiney was a feminist activist and theosophist who saw the “sexual subjection of women as fundamental to the oppression of women by men.” Like Wolstenholme Elmy, she proposed the elimination of genital sexual activity beyond the procreation of the race and promoted sexual self-control for men as a means of ending such oppression (qtd. in Jeffreys 35).

heroines have all escaped from well connected, and therefore socially desirable, men who have exploited and abused women. In *The Captive Singer*, Iris has refused to marry an earl whom London society suggests was guilty of some sexual indiscretion and in *Jewelled Nights* Elaine Fleetwood flees from a prospective husband who “drank and had other objectionable habits” (154). Dusk is described as “notorious,” accused of taking drugs, and of being promiscuous (*Dusk* 180-81, 200). But her reputation is later restored when it is revealed that her husband – an older man, and a student of eastern philosophy and “spiritism”²⁰ – had threatened her with sexual abuse.

The issue of male restraint receives explicit treatment in *The Captive Singer*. Iris and Justin are forced to spend a night unchaperoned in a cave. Here, in a series of broken sentences, “husky,” “tremulous” and “stammering” voices and “shuddering” and “trembling” bodies bring them to a moment that Iris likens to an “invisible avalanche from some other colossal world” (226-27).²¹ Matters reach a point where both protagonists appear to have lost their composure, and passion and desire threaten to overwhelm them. But a sexual denouement is averted and Iris’ honour remains intact because Justin altruistically declares he must “go away and get calm” (227).

In *Dusk* and *The Captive Singer* Bjelke Petersen makes it clear that her sexually aware heroines look forward to intimacy after marriage. Iris, in *The Captive Singer*, responds to Justin’s entreaty for the “tender, sacred, privileges of a husband” by taking him in her arms and pledging her life and fortune to him (257). Towards the conclusion of *Dusk* when all the impediments to the union, such as ailing husbands and empty-headed fiancées, have been removed, Kerrigan presses Dusk about their lack of intimacy, euphemistically described as “that—other.” Dusk reacts with an abandoning kiss and the promise that after marriage they will be free to return to the “glorious jungle” where they will make their way “together into the

²⁰ “Spiritism” is Bjelke Petersen’s preferred word for spiritualism.

²¹ Beauman explains that in women’s popular romance of the period such language is suggestive of sexual fulfilment or arousal but it is usually metaphoric and euphemistic rather than actual (104). In this respect Bjelke Petersen uses language in a way similar to British writers such as Elinor Glyn and Ethel M. Dell who are less subtle in their intentions. According to Beauman these writers largely escaped the attention of the censors (as D.H. Lawrence for *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and Radclyffe Hall for *The Well of Loneliness* did not) because they set their fictions in a remote location and frequently employ religious imagery that is imbued with moral overtones (194).

great silence that will give [them]—all” (279).²² Such developments potentially contradict the emphasis on companionate love that the narratives have followed, but more progressively they can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of a woman’s right and desire to experience sexual pleasure, while at the same time (particularly in *Dusk*) emphasizing women’s autonomy and integrity.

Archetypal feminine romance leads typically to marriage and domesticity and an endorsement of patriarchal ideology. Sheridan observes that more than half of her surveyed novels conclude in this traditional way. Yet many of these narratives were critical of the institution of marriage, representing it as a sub-optimal compromise that required the heroine to relinquish her independence and employment. In other cases such narratives focused on an unhappy union either choosing to emphasize women’s abuse and subordination or, more positively, women’s rebellion, which was usually manifest as transgressive desire (60-62). Bjelke Petersen’s narratives all end happily with marriage but because they urge change within this tradition they can be considered as feminist interventions in gender relations.

Bjelke Petersen’s emphasis on companionate love as the basis for significant relationships effectively elides the gender hierarchy of female subjugation that genre romance typically encodes, thus enabling women to enter marriages based on equality. This equality is also apparent in the dynamics of the developing relationships. Typically the heroines are capable and competent, and rarely demur helplessly to the hero or wait patiently for love to find them. In fact sometimes the dynamic is reversed such that the heroine occupies the traditional male role of protector. In *The Captive Singer*, Iris announces her intentions, going so far as to ask Justin to marry her. She defends Justin admirably from accusations of impropriety and emphatically banishes Ralph Barton for underhand behaviour. In *The Rainbow Lute* Faith Langdon’s support for Len Dare is instrumental in his recovery, and in *Dusk* the heroine’s prayer is the catalyst for Kerrigan’s rescue and recovery.

In the narratives fortunes are made and redeemed, or happily relinquished to achieve the condition of financial equality for Bjelke Petersen’s protagonists. In *The Captive Singer* Justin is revealed as the estranged son of Lord Strathfell and elevated to the same social status as Iris, and in *The Rainbow Lute* Len Dare relinquishes his

²² Employing conventional romance techniques of repetitive vocabulary and imagery (Radway 197), the narrative is referring the reader (and Kerrigan) to an earlier moment of intimacy the two had experienced in the “great silence” of the forest (*Dusk* 194).

fortune to become a poor working man with Faith Langdon. As an endorsement of the anti-materialist position this narrative adopts, Dare dramatically signs his possessions over to his estranged fiancée, electing to remain in Storm Valley as a telephone cabling contractor. At the outset of *The Moon Minstrel* the heroine Myrta Lost is a penniless foundling, lacking formal education. However in the course of the narrative she achieves an educational standard and financial status that is equal to, or better than, that of her lover. Importantly Bjelke Petersen's heroines are not condemned to domesticity after marriage: rather they continue to be involved in the public world. In *The Captive Singer*, Iris and Justin return to England where they work together curing alcoholics. Elaine Fleetwood in *Jewelled Nights* continues to work after marriage as a miner and similarly, in *The Rainbow Lute*, Faith remains as the teacher at the small school in Storm Valley.

The changes within marriage that Bjelke Petersen advocates are indeed progressive and her novels represent a positive contribution to feminist discourse, but on the whole they are far from offering radical challenges to patriarchal ideology. Within the conservative framework of genre romance Bjelke Petersen creates an opportunity for more radical opposition to this ideology when she introduces a significant challenge to the institution of marriage in the final pages of *Jewelled Nights*. Through the voice of her character Norah Foster, Bjelke Petersen asserts that marriage is an outdated and restrictive practice that women should have the right to refuse:

Golly, what a stale old world this is! Everybody dong the same old thing—all getting married! Our grandmothers got married, so did our mothers; our friends do the same—all following each other like a lot of silly sheep! Why can't someone strike out and do something new and not go on in the same old rut! (310)

Norah claims she is not going to marry but “go out into the wide, wide world and keep young and gay” (310). Norah's views resonate with Bjelke Petersen's private opinion that marriage was an “old fashioned” institution in which women were required to be “*conventional* help-meet[s]” (original italics Diary 25). Sometimes in genre romance overt feminist arguments such as this will be made by dubious characters whom the reader does not respect (Cranny-Francis 181); the views are therefore regarded with suspicion or dismissed out of hand. In *Jewelled Nights* Norah's voice is respected, therefore her progressive opinions about marriage carry

significant weight. Bjelke Petersen's strategic inclusion of these ideas in Norah's voice so close to the end of the narrative thus ensures that they escape generic foreclosure.

These readings of the representation of women and companionate love propose that Bjelke Petersen's texts endorse a proto-feminist discourse that suggests new subjectivities for romance protagonists and new modes of heterosexual romance. It also establishes Bjelke Petersen as a writer who experimented with conventional romance forms to challenge dominant gender ideologies. But this is only one way to read her experiments and I would like to conclude this reading of love and romance in Bjelke Petersen's Tasmanian novels by considering the more radical proposition that her narratives include a kind of proto gay/ lesbian discourse. By this I mean an early and rudimentary prototype of current discourse that seeks to resist homophobia and challenge the "ideological and institutional practice of heterosexual privilege" (Abelove, Barale and Halperin xvii).

In Bjelke Petersen's era such discourse might have found its inspiration in the work of English sexologists Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter. Jeffrey Weeks has shown that Ellis argued same-sex attraction was most accurately understood as a variation of normal sexual behaviour and advocated that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, provided a basis for meaningful personal and sexual relations (Weeks 24). In *The Intermediate Sex* Carpenter argued that different forms of sexual attraction were natural and normal and contended that love between members of the same sex was based on the highest principles of loyalty, devotion and affection and in many ways superior to that between men and women (24-26, 40, 82). As such, Carpenter's work provided a positive representation of homosexuality and was generally well received among those involved in same-sex relationships.²³ Of course, such arguments circulated alongside a counter discourse that associated same-sex relationships with degeneracy, disease and deviancy.

Bjelke Petersen's life experiences tempt contemporary commentators to align her with these early twentieth-century modes of sexual identity, even though there is no evidence that Bjelke Petersen contributed to any of this discourse nor indeed any

²³ Laura Doan argues that Carpenter's work is represented positively in Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* (143). Sylvia Martin demonstrates that Mary Fullerton drew upon Carpenter's formulation of the Uranian to construct a positive subjectivity for herself as a homogenic woman (399). Judy Greenway comments that Carpenter's work was well received by contributors and readers of the radical feminist newspaper the *Freewoman* in the early decades of the twentieth century (36).

suggestion that her relationship with Sylvia Mills, her long-term companion, was ever scrutinized as unusual or attracted adverse comment at the time. Bjelke Petersen met Mills in 1898 and they remained close friends and companions until Mills' death in 1927. In her diary Bjelke Petersen wrote about this relationship as a loyal, devoted and affectionate friendship and allegorized it to be as enduring as the association between Roland and Claude, two mountains in the Sheffield area. Bjelke Petersen described these mountains as "bosom friends" who "loved each other with a strong unfailing devotion and wandered through life hand in hand ... there is no death & no separation for Roland and Claude the gods have bound them together ... and their love takes the form of real gold" (Diary 24). Elsewhere in the diary she asserted that her "earthly paradise must contain no Adam," and likened her friendship with Mills to the strong bond that existed between biblical characters, David and Jonathon (25). Based on Bjelke Petersen's diary writings and anecdotal assessments of the friendship between herself and Mills, Lillian Faderman's expression "Boston Marriage" and Adrienne Rich's more contemporary concept of a lesbian existence appear as appropriate descriptive terms for this relationship.²⁴

Despite the lack of evidence linking Bjelke Petersen to any kind of discourse about sexual behaviour the development of relationships in the all-male environment of *Jewelled Nights* encourages a speculative reading for same-sex romance. Through representation of a cohort of same-sex relationships at Savage River the narrative establishes that these associations are significant and meaningful, and built upon loyalty and devotion. Like marriages they are not to be entered upon lightly but require commitment. This kind of relationship develops between the protagonists, "Dick" and Salarno, but is successfully transformed into a properly heterosexual relationship by the resolution of "Dick"/ Elaine's potential transvestism. By sustaining this sexual ambiguity for so long, however, Bjelke Petersen seems to suggest that gender is immaterial to couple formation and love and devotion are the correct basis for any long-term relationship. She also valorizes this type of friendship (between members of the same sex) as equivalent to marriage. In this way the traditional binary is disrupted and heterosexual privilege is challenged, albeit in a careful way.

²⁴ Faderman uses the term "Boston marriage" to describe turn of the century, mutually satisfying, long term monogamous relationships between financially independent, educated and cultured women who were otherwise unattached (190). Adrienne Rich's term denotes an "independent, non-heterosexual, women-connected existence" but is not prescriptive about sexual behaviour (231).

The other respect in which *Jewelled Nights* can be considered a proto gay/lesbian text is its resistance to homophobia.²⁵ Bjelke Petersen's strategy for constructing a text that demonstrates such resistance is to develop the relationship between "Dick" and Salarno romantically (and to a lesser extent other associations between male couples), and then to encourage and allow characters to speculate about the nature of such relationships. Finally, the narrative reveals that these attachments are platonic and the relationship between "Dick" and Salarno (also platonic) is "normal." It is accurate to say that experienced readers of romance will be aware from early in the narrative that "Dick" is in fact a woman. However Bjelke Petersen uses the device of an unreliable narrator who does not reveal Dick's real identity until two thirds of the way through the novel. Until this time, the narrative remains ambiguous by using a masculine personal pronoun to refer to this protagonist and introducing Norah Foster as a possible alternative heroine.

Bjelke Petersen develops the association between "Dick" and Salarno as one of mutual admiration and respect but the persistent use of the language of romance and desire to describe the relationship instils homoerotic overtones and creates innuendo. This confusion begins with Dick and Salarno's first meeting. Dick is disturbed as he works his claim and contemplates the "nervous excitement" associated with "knocking at the door of his beloved's abode" (43). It is in this context of romantic and erotic anticipation that Dick looks up to be confronted by an irate Larry Salarno who is represented as a "human being of ... statuesque perfection and possessing ...vivid startling beauty" (44). Oblivious to Salarno's anger, Dick continues to be mesmerized by his handsome physicality. He notices the "rich, mellow quality" of his voice, "which somehow matched the softness in his dark liquid eyes" (44). Salarno is similarly impressed by Dick's proud bearing: "the boy made a picture as he stood, slim and graceful, ... the morning sunshine glinting in his wavy hair, his blue eyes, shadowed by their long dark lashes, luminous with proud defiance" (44). The sexual tension this encounter communicates is an anomaly in Bjelke Petersen's fiction. In other narratives Bjelke Petersen's usual practice is to focus on the impressions of one protagonist only and to avoid any kind of sexual

²⁵ I use this term in its broadest sense to denote prejudice and hostility towards same-sex relationships and those involved in such relationships. David Plummer notes that the term first appeared in the literature in 1972 but that the sentiments it describes have existed for most of the twentieth century, if not longer (3-4). Plummer infers it is a term that refers specifically to male homosexuality. My use of the term in this sense is an appropriation.

innuendo. In *The Moon Minstrel* at the first meeting between Brett Lade and Myrta Lost, for instance, there is no evidence of sexual tension, merely an indication that Lade is fascinated by the combination of Myrta's beauty and dishevelled appearance.

While expressions of admiration do not in themselves signify homoerotic desire, Salarno's cryptic comments about women (50) and a request for Dick's company that, as Delamoire observes, has an "unavoidably queer atmosphere" (15), is suitably ambiguous to be construed as an invitation for romantic or sexual dalliance:

The older man looked him over silently for a few moments, before saying with a slight change of manner, "Ever feel kind of – lonesome round here in the evenings?"

The boy moved suddenly. "No—oh no—I—I generally go to bed early." He spoke rather quickly.

"Umph – well, of course, bunk is a first-rate mate when you are sleepy. But when you are not – it's about as entertaining as making love through an ear trumpet!" Salarno laughed and somehow the gay notes made the damp forest all at once seem brighter ...

"I say, sonny, what about coming around to my camp to see how my company will inspire you!" (69)

Depicting Dick as a jealous lover after he observes Norah Foster and Salarno flirting with each other in the forest further develops the concept of homoerotic desire. Dick is appalled at the "behaviour of the man he had put on a pedestal" and with whom he believed he shared a friendship that was "quite the finest thing that had ever come into his life" (132). This admonishment can be explained as disillusion with a platonic friend or a hero who has failed to come up to expectations, but such a conclusion is undermined by the expression of desire that emerges as Dick listens to Salarno "lilt the Waltz song from *Boheme* in a soft falsetto voice:"

And as the soft unsullied notes poured into the moonlit night, a sense of respite stole into the sore heart, and with it came a queer little ache for the singer. He wanted Salarno as he had never wanted him before. He wanted him close; wanted to talk to him, pour out his misery to him, tell him how lonely and friendless he felt! (134)

Again, nothing untoward is actually suggested here, but read in context (and by readers well versed in romantic convention) it could easily be interpreted as the expression of a resentful admirer.

The confusion created by Bjelke Petersen's depiction of the developing relationship between Salarno and "Dick" is compounded by the comments of others, which intensify rather than dispel homosexual insinuations. Again this is an uncharacteristic aspect of Bjelke Petersen's usual formula for developing romance. In other narratives (nascent) relationships do not attract any kind of speculation. In *Jewelled Nights* these comments suggest that the relationship between "Dick" and Salarno is based on physical attraction; moreover, the narrative creates the impression that such things are commonplace in the isolated Savage River community. For example, the other miners attribute Salarno's uncharacteristic attraction for Dick to the boy's "devilish" good looks (88), and Jim interprets "Dick's" diffident question about whether or not the men would "interfere with" him to be an enquiry about sexual liaisons. In reply Jim winks "suggestively" and informs "Dick" "If they 'appen to be in a good mood, jollied up by a trip to town ... I'll daresay you'll not do too bad" (25). Similarly, after Netta Garrett has failed to seduce Salarno, she accuses him of "making love" to Dick whom she describes as his "curly headed boy." Her accusations continue with the conclusion that "I suppose you diggers down here must have someone to make love²⁶ to – but why don't you try me? I'd be nicer than a boy anyway" (145).

In one respect these examples can be explained as nothing more than clues for the reader that Dick is in fact a girl, but it can also be interpreted as a reflection of popular perceptions about same-sex friendships in the 1920s. It is difficult from this distance to accurately assess the dissemination of such ideas, in particular their absorption into popular consciousness, but scholars generally agree that information about different types of sexual behaviour was becoming increasingly available at this time. In an Australian context Susan Magerey speculates that knowledge about same-sex relationships was more widespread in the 1920s than the 1890s (109), while Laura Doan indicates that in the 1920s sexological discourse had begun to be widely circulated (132). Bjelke Petersen's text adopts, as a popular perception, the idea that same-sex relationships are prevalent in single-sex environments and could be

²⁶ "Making love" in this early twentieth-century context implies romantic rather than sexual dalliance.

romantic, and have a physical component. Moreover her depiction of “Gus the Poet” as a “clever guy” who “writes verses and recites somethin’ fine” and gets “mashy” and “spoons with Old Trousers” (101) resonates with the view promulgated by both Carpenter and Ellis that homosexuality was more prevalent amongst those with artistic aptitude. For Tim Suttor, the fact that these observations are made without an accompanying sense of “moral outrage” indicates Bjelke Petersen’s naiveté in this regard (108). Alternatively it is possible they are included in this way so that they can be dispelled.

Even though Bjelke Petersen allows ambiguity to proliferate, the relationships between miners in *Jewelled Nights* always prove to be platonic and thus popular suspicions of these relationships are shown to be unfounded. For example Gus might “spoon” with Old Trousers but only when he is drunk and hankering after a “petticoat.” Then his ardour is not clandestine but a public display of affection. Popular belief that intimate same-sex relationships are commonplace in the remote mining community is rebutted more directly by Salarno’s spirited admonishment of Dick, when he allows “his fingers to [find] their tremulous way to the older man’s shoulder” in a moment of distress and gloom. Salarno recoils in horror, criticizes Dick’s “smoodgy ways” and accuses him of “behaving exactly like a—girl”(173). In this example Salarno is an innocent and unsuspecting party, ignorant that “Dick” is a girl, therefore Salarno’s reaction conveys a powerful message that friendships of the “two-man’s patch” do not involve physical intimacy.

Although scholars such as Delamoir and Suttor have analysed *Jewelled Nights*, the resistant potential of the novel is not accepted by Suttor and goes unremarked by Delamoir. Suttor admits to being intrigued by Bjelke Petersen’s portrayal of the relationship between “Dick” and Salarno and the insinuating remarks of other characters. However he attributes Bjelke Petersen’s treatment of these issues to naivety and ignorance, constructing her as a faithful but unsophisticated recorder of events and relationships at Savage River. Furthermore he betrays his commitment to late twentieth-century sexual ideologies and assumptions when he argues that Bjelke Petersen naively assumes that a “lovingly devoted single-sex friendship (such as that, presumably, between herself and her long term companion Sylvia Mills) can be convincingly applied to male characters in a macho environment” (107-08). I would argue that Jim’s comments to “Dick” about the likelihood of being “interfered with” at Savage River and Salarno’s abhorrence of Dick’s advances militate against

claims of ignorance about the sexual potential of single-sex relationships. Although Suttor concludes his article with the finding that *Jewelled Nights* encourages a subversive homoerotic reading of mateship, he argues that it was likely that Bjelke Petersen had no intention of such interpretations. Yet Suttor's reading effectively ignores Bjelke Petersen's subtle and complex negotiations of contemporary mores.

Delamoire introduces her article about gender instability in *Jewelled Nights* with the comment that Salarno's exchange with "Dick" is "queer" (15) but does not pursue a queer reading. Rather, she argues that the text declares itself from the outset as a feminine romance and differentiates itself from "*Bulletin*-type" bush stories by the "extravagant language" it uses for landscape descriptions, in feminizing "Dick's" good looks and focusing narrative tension around the central relationship (124). Delamoire, basing her understanding of romance on Janice Radway's observations in *Reading the Romance*, rightly notes that romance readers are familiar with heroines disguised as men. Radway argues that this is usually interpreted as a feminist intervention that expresses dissatisfaction with women's traditional role (123-28). However in the examples Radway cites this impact is apparently realized because the reader is aware of the heroine's disguise. Delamoire overlooks this aspect of Radway's analysis and therefore attaches no significance to Bjelke Petersen's decision to keep "Dick's" identity a secret. Bjelke Petersen's insistence on narrative concealment does nothing to enhance the feminist potential of the narrative, nor does it contribute to the narrative tension that is integral to successful romance. Indeed it could be argued that secrecy deprives the audience of a source of tension. Sharing the heroine's secret and subsequent fear of discovery would surely contribute to the readers' anxiety. But instead Bjelke Petersen's chosen strategy creates confusion, encourages sexual innuendo and ultimately provides a forum to dispute the sexual nature of such relationships and thus infer that current discourses of deviancy are unfounded.

Although it is accurate to say that Bjelke Petersen's intervention challenges the popular perception that same-sex relationships were a form of aberrant and deviant behaviour, the radical potential of Bjelke Petersen's experiment is defused through an emphasis on the platonic nature of same-sex relationships at Savage River. This emphasis is supported rather than disputed by the depiction of sexual tension between "Dick" and Salarno, because after discovering that "Dick" is Elaine, the aberrant element of this relationship can be attributed to sexual difference. Today

this insistence would be untenable but in the context of the early twentieth century this stance has greater relevance. Bjelke Petersen's intervention assumes an autobiographical component in the novel's dedication which explicitly links the platonic friendships of the "two-man's patch" to that between herself and Mills: "*To My Playmate of the Two-Man's Patch who has dug much rare metal with me from Friendship's Claim.*" Bjelke Petersen's intercession is thus idiosyncratic rather than altruistic or politically motivated and plot and conventions, in this case, are manipulated to support her individual views and interests.

Chapter Three

“A Voice Crying in the Wilderness”²⁷: Region and Religion in Bjelke Petersen’s Fiction

Bjelke Petersen had a long-standing and passionate interest in, and commitment to, evangelical religion and Tasmanian wilderness regions. From her arrival in Hobart in 1891, Bjelke Petersen lauded the beauty of the landscape she described as a “paradise of untouched beauty” where life was “free and easy” (qtd. in Alexander 10). These early impressions were consolidated in the ensuing years through explorations of Tasmania’s more remote regions.²⁸ These areas assumed an added significance for Bjelke Petersen as a favourite holiday destination, after she met Mills. In the early years of this friendship, the women were both employed as teachers, and spent their leisure time in small rural communities where they explored and painted wilderness areas.²⁹ Bjelke Petersen’s diary describes these holidays as happy times and indicates that both of them appreciated the freedom of these remote areas and the opportunity to spend long days together. In later years she used her novels to promote Tasmania as a tourist destination, and her celebrity status to speak out about conservation issues in Tasmania (Alexander 129).

Bjelke Petersen’s passion for Tasmanian wilderness areas was matched by a fervent commitment to the evangelical Protestantism to which she converted in 1892, after hearing George Grubb preach in Hobart (Alexander 12). Grubb was an influential premillennialist³⁰ revivalist, who favoured literal interpretation of the bible, preached a message of secular hopelessness and future judgement, and encouraged conversion and missionary activity (Lawton 8, 94). Bjelke Petersen embraced Grubb’s fundamentalist philosophy, becoming a committed premillennialist and active missionary and philanthropist. Bjelke Petersen’s commitment was such that before she began writing novels she wrote three

²⁷ Bjelke Petersen’s self-description as quoted in the *Burnie Advocate* (undated article AOT NS 1294/11).

²⁸ Bjelke Petersen’s diary contains a sketch of Cradle Mountain from Lake Wilks indicating that she had visited this remote area in 1905 several years before Gustav Weindorfer had visited in 1909. Weindorfer was a pioneer explorer who selected and purchased land at Cradle Mountain, and built a chalet for visitors. His enthusiasm and vision for this area was largely responsible for its establishment as a national park in 1921 (Giordano 25, 37, 68).

²⁹ Bjelke Petersen taught physical culture, which had been pioneered in Australia by her brother Christian, at the Friends School in Hobart from 1897 until illness forced her retirement some thirteen years later (Alexander 17, 18, 59). Mills taught music and singing privately (Alexander 30).

³⁰ Premillennialism is a conservative futurist eschatology, growing out of disillusionment with present day society, which believed that the Second Coming of Christ would precede the millennium (Lawton 8).

successful religious tracts – *The Mysterious Stranger* (1913), *Before an Eastern Court* (1914) and *Muffled Drums* (1914) – that promoted these evangelical ideas.³¹ In the 1930s Bjelke Petersen's missionary zeal led her to hold meetings in her home and a local hall for the purpose of spreading her religious message (Alexander 184).

These passionate interests and commitments are reflected in Bjelke Petersen's novels: indeed, her attention to Tasmanian wilderness regions and inclusion of religious elements exceeds if not threatens our expectations of the romance genre. In Bjelke Petersen's popular narratives the religious theme is introduced as a crucial element of plot, providing an opportunity to reiterate the views that are espoused in her religious tracts, while at the same time vindicating unconventional relationships between protagonists. Her narratives also regularly include hymns, prayers, bible readings and disconcerting episodes such as sermons and details of religious conversions. As such the religious motif has a presence and influence beyond the imagery and allusion that was frequently used to provide a necessary moral tone for moments of (unbridled) passion in romance novels of Bjelke Petersen's era (Beauman 185).

Similarly, Bjelke Petersen's narratives are distinguished by extended descriptions of wilderness areas, which occur randomly and frequently throughout the various texts. This preoccupation with wilderness is unusual in formula romance where setting is usually a conveniently isolated or remote location that provides a background for unconventional romance or adventure. In such fiction descriptions of people are generally considered more important than descriptions of place. Descriptions of setting will usually be brief and occur at the beginning of a narrative, or a chapter if there is a shift of narrative location, and will often function symbolically as a portent or emblem of action or character (Nash 125-26). In Bjelke Petersen's fiction wilderness settings do not remain as background or only have a symbolic function. Instead, they are represented as active participants in the drama, acquiring the status of character. The overemphasis on instruction and description that her commitment to representing wilderness and promoting religious views engenders has the potential to compromise the status of her narratives as popular

³¹ These small books (about 40 pages) were first published in Hobart where they were reprinted many times. George Robertson re-published *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Before an Eastern Court* in Melbourne. In 1934 the Religious Tract Society of London re-published *The Mysterious Stranger*. This text was reportedly translated into Arabic (Alexander 241).

romances, but as this chapter shows Bjelke Petersen is able to incorporate these potentially distracting elements whilst still fulfilling generic expectations.

This chapter begins by examining the role of region and identifying the different influences that determine its construction. Some of these influences are culture specific, and their presence is indicative of Bjelke Petersen's commitment to her adopted home and engagement with contemporary issues, but others are motivated by a more general romantic admiration for wilderness. Looking at modes of representing the land itself, the chapter identifies different categories of appreciation and thus separates symbolic representations with a primary commitment to genre or evangelism from those which are motivated by a deep regard for the landscape or region. The chapter will then demonstrate different ways religion is included in the narratives and conclude by discussing whether Bjelke Petersen's romantic wilderness aesthetic is indeed compromised by the competing claims of genre and didactic evangelical religious discourse.

Bjelke Petersen's Tasmanian novels construct wilderness regions as places where healing, love and adventure are possible for individuals desiring escape from a modern world that is depicted as culturally decadent and increasingly secular. These regions provide a safe haven and healing environment for Justin Rees, a reformed alcoholic, Len Dare, a Hollywood film star who has suffered a nervous breakdown, and melancholic Dusk Harland who comes to the wilderness seeking solitude, anonymity and respite from caring for her leprotic husband. They are also environments where women have adventures and enjoy experiences that are unavailable to them in a cultured and ordered society that is rigidly organized in terms of gender and class. An emphasis on the primitive and natural aspects of wilderness creates a superior location that provides an effective space for regeneration and experiences that are not available in "civilized" society. Tasmanian wilderness in Bjelke Petersen's narratives becomes the antithesis of the civilized modern world. Graeme Turner points out that such romantic constructions of idealized spaces outside the city are more often motivated by disappointment in metropolitan society than regard for the land itself (28). And, indeed, in Bjelke Petersen's fiction use of this familiar romantic opposition is motivated by a commitment to millennialist philosophy.

More politically Bjelke Petersen used this construction effectively to challenge the notion of British and European cultural supremacy that romance

narratives, particularly in the nineteenth century, encoded. Traditionally these narratives privileged British and European values over those of the colonies, usually demonstrated by the triumphant return of the protagonists to these cultural centres. This challenge is made most emphatically in *The Captive Singer* where the Mole Creek region is defined in opposition to aristocratic London society. The society characters are depicted as shallow, passionless and scheming and only interested in rank and position. Here wealth outstrips the “the kind of love which would lay down life itself for the object of its devotion” (and which of course flourishes in the Tasmanian wilderness) (3). European society, more generally, is also condemned as an “artificial culture” where “natural integrity has almost died out” (152). Australia, on the other hand, is constructed as a free and spontaneous society whose people are remarkable for their “natural integrity” (152) and “naïve simplicity” (59). Australia is an egalitarian society, free from artificial convention and superficial appearance, and therefore, despite the apparent disparity of their social standing, capable of accommodating the love that develops between aristocratic Iris Dearn and her driver Justin Rees. Although in this narrative the protagonists return to Britain, they do not return to their old lives, but rather devote their time and wealth to “curing” alcoholics. In this case, the triumph that usually attaches to a successful return to the homeland is undermined by the comments of an American lady at a society gathering. Full of admiration for the “charm and delightful, easy grace” of Justin and Iris, but only vaguely informed of their past, she comments “they are the real thing; only England can produce such types” (301). Paradoxically, Iris and Justin owe their good fortune to events that took place in “wild” Australia or more specifically “wild” Tasmania.

European cultural primacy continues to be an issue for Bjelke Petersen and is addressed in other narratives, albeit in a less overt or sustained manner. In *Jewelled Nights*, Long Plains is claimed as a more suitable place for Elaine and Salarno’s wedding than such British cultural icons as Westminster Abbey or St Paul’s Cathedral, which are described as “only little specks of dirt beside it [Long Plains]” (309). Likewise, Len Dare in *The Rainbow Lute* rejects his lucrative Hollywood film career to remain in Tasmania with Faith Langdon. Myrta in *The Moon Minstrel* returns to the West Coast and Brett Lade, the Tasmanian geologist, in preference to marriage with Paola Virgona, an Italian aristocrat.

While the construction of a more natural and primitive society effectively represents Tasmania as a morally superior location, the beauty, diversity and grandeur of wilderness is conveyed in the tradition of the sublime. Haynes has demonstrated that Bjelke Petersen used this mode extensively to construct her wilderness worlds (70). Bjelke Petersen's use of the sublime is not limited by the high culture aesthetic qualities associated with the theories of Kant or Burke, or distinguished by Wordsworth's simplicity of diction and appeal to the imagination. It is rather a rhetorical mode that is marked by a tendency to linguistic effusiveness. Understanding it, according to Felski's formulation of the popular sublime,³² clarifies Bjelke Petersen's graphic representations for in this mode exaggeration and hyperbole produce an enthusiastic rhetoric of astonishment and admiration. Usually, an omniscient narrator repeatedly expresses awe for the beauty of the mountains and ravines and the power of the magnificent rivers, while at the same time emphasizing the primeval characteristics of wilderness. In the first pages of *Dusk*, a fecund and savage environment is positively represented as "wild, unapproachable, savage" (12). It is a place of excess where "hills bulged with primeval forests" and are "packed to suffocation with stately myrtles" (12). Bjelke Petersen's hyperbolic prose emphasizes the strength, chaos and violence of this environment, while at the same time signalling attributes of virility and fecundity:

The jungle was a riotous confusion of strong growing things, which clung savagely together and almost strangled each other in their fierce passionate embraces!

Cable-thick lianas wound about rotting tree trunks, yard-long strings of moss trailed from sinewy branches, matted creepers draped arrogant undergrowth, succulent vines sprawled insolently over grass, tree and ferns. There was a reckless profusion of green everywhere! The rich, lavish West knew not the meaning of economy, it flung about its virile, ferocious beauty in careless extravagance, threw it heap upon heap, till the pile of it almost toppled over! (12)

Here the reader's senses are assaulted as image after image spills onto the page and the narrative strives to convey a sense of the overwhelming power, beauty and

³² Felski's formulation of the popular sublime is explained on page 22 of this thesis.

variety of the wilderness environment. This accumulation of visual images and frequent adjectival modifiers emphasizes the connection of the West coast wilderness to the primitive and helps establish its difference from the civilized world, but beyond this it conveys a sense of enthusiasm and delight for the areas described (180).

This same enthusiasm is apparent in Bjelke Petersen's representation of the West Coast mountains, which are typically represented as "terrifying but uplifting" (Haynes 70). References to mountains are frequently modified by adjectives such as "gaunt", "bold", "savage", "austere" and "terrible" or metaphorically connected to the monstrous, primitive and otherworldly. In *Dusk*, the view from the summit of Mt Owen is represented in the following terms: "The white slope at their feet fell into a terrible abyss and beyond this rose a titanic chaos of mountains – in every direction there was staggering grandeur" (99). Here irregularity, immensity and terror do not signify a wasteland but rather enhance the majesty of nature, alerting the reader to the sublime beauty of the region and preparing it as a place where transcendence can occur.

Bjelke Petersen was well qualified to write about Tasmanian wilderness areas and Tasmania more generally. Unlike many writers of romance in this period Bjelke Petersen had first hand experience of all the areas about which she wrote. Robert Dixon writes that, in the Australian context, writers of adventure/romance did so from a variety of positions, including some English writers who wrote about Australia without ever visiting the country (6). Bjelke Petersen's knowledge of the north west coast of Tasmania where *The Captive Singer* and *The Rainbow Lute* are set was initially gained on tours of the state enjoyed by Bjelke Petersen and Mills in the first decade of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Bjelke Petersen travelled to the West Coast specifically to research the areas as settings for her novels.³³ Accompanied by Mills as her assistant, Bjelke Petersen visited many times to gather material for the novels set in that region. This research was exhaustive, Bjelke Petersen diligently familiarizing herself with the technical, historical and logistical aspects of mining as well as the topography of the region.

³³ In the 1920s the West Coast was relatively isolated. The only way to reach Queenstown was by rail from Strahan, and the journey to Savage River involved horseback riding and trekking (this journey is authentically represented in *Jewelled Nights*).

This research produced novels that have a specifically regional focus. In each narrative, care is taken to impart some authentic sense of the landscape and establish that the healing experience of the protagonists is one specifically linked to particular Tasmanian wilderness areas. Most critics would exclude Bjelke Petersen from consideration as a regional writer on the grounds that her knowledge and appreciation of the areas about which she wrote was that of a traveller, rather than someone who lived and worked in the area. Certainly, Ross Smith argues that Bjelke Petersen's novel *Jungle Night* does not qualify as a North Queensland regional novel, because the tropical details that distinguish the narrative could be gleaned from tourist literature or a brief holiday visit. He defines a regional novel as one that is a serious and perceptive study of what it is like to live and work in a particular region (95). Smith's definition of regionalism resonates with Jim Davidson's earlier assessment that regional writing is an "indication by the writer of what he feels to be peculiar or distinctive about a particular place and its way of life" (78).

However, Bruce Bennett's formulation of regional writing as a kind of "literary placemaking" provides a more nuanced paradigm. Literary placemaking, according to Bennett, manifests itself most effectively as romanticism "tempered with knowledge and close observation" (101). Such writing signifies a deep regard for the landscape beyond the glib or merely conventional. Although Bennett argues that this experience is a personal response to landscape, he does not insist that it is the exclusive domain of those who live and work there, and instead foregrounds "the deep subjectivity of [an] author's interactions with the physical environment" (104). Bennett applauds this kind of writing because it is able to "convey an alert and lively sense of contemplative wonder as it brings forward specific instances of human interaction with landscape" (100). Bennett's concept of literary placemaking is here appropriated as a descriptive term for those episodes in Bjelke Petersen's fiction where representation extends beyond the symbolic and strives to communicate a sense of appreciation and deep regard for the land itself.

Bennett's formulation of literary placemaking privileges "high" literary forms, but Bjelke Petersen shows us that this project can happen in popular fiction – in fact this might be a particularly important place for it to happen. Popular interpretations of place are likely to be accessible to a great many people, not only in terms of their wider distribution but also because ideas are generally simply expressed and therefore easily interpreted by the reader. Bjelke Petersen had

significant experience and knowledge of the areas about which she wrote and Tasmanian wilderness had a deep personal significance for her as a place where she and Mills were happiest. It is the West Coast novels that provide the best examples of literary placemaking, in Bennett's sense of "contemplative wonder" and romanticism "tempered with knowledge and close observation" (100). This is contradictory in the sense that this area, unlike the Mole Creek region, was visited specifically in order to gather materials for the novels. However the West Coast functioned as a site of excitement and adventure because it provided Bjelke Petersen and Mills with the opportunity to participate in many of the activities that appear in the narratives as the experience of Bjelke Petersen's heroines. In this environment Bjelke Petersen rode astride, hunted rabbits, dressed in jodhpurs, camped and was able to live a life unrestricted by the conventions of correct behaviour and attire for women. Margery Godfrey reports that, some 45 years after her time at Savage River, Bjelke Petersen's memories were "vivid" and her "eyes lit up" as she recalled these adventurous days (6).

Beyond the personal, Bjelke Petersen was also committed to promoting the areas for tourism. A self-proclaimed ambassador, she told a *Mercury* reporter that "Tasmania has an enthusiastic champion in me. I certainly do my utmost to put our island before the world in the most favourable light" (5 Jan. 1924 AOT NS 1294/6). Bjelke Petersen took this seriously and in *The Captive Singer*, *Dusk* and *Jewelled Nights* plot is manipulated specifically to promote the relevant areas for tourism. In *The Captive Singer* and *Dusk*, Bjelke Petersen's commitment is such that the heroines in each case are tourists and the respective romances develop as a series of wilderness encounters in local tourist locations.

Dusk and *Jewelled Nights* are distinguished by geographical and topographical specificity. Bjelke Petersen takes great care to adequately and accurately represent the settings of these novels and both begin with extended descriptions of a specific wilderness area: the rail journey through rainforest from Strahan to Queenstown in *Dusk* and the arduous trip from Waratah to Savage River in *Jewelled Nights*. These representations establish the isolation of the area and also work to convey a sense of beauty, diversity and grandeur. Whilst Haynes rightly notes that Bjelke Petersen uses Gothic imagery to create a sense of menace and encroachment (70), this effect is countered by a positive focus on the area, which more specifically conveys the possibility of freedom and adventure. As Elaine begins

her descent of the ravine to reach Savage River in *Jewelled Nights*, the forest lining the path threatens and is represented simultaneously in terms of the sinister, the grotesque and the serene: “[i]t encroached on the path, stretched sinewy arms over it, and claw-like fingers caught at the youthful wanderer making his way through the cool green dimness” (27). The effect of “claw-like” and “sinewy” to evoke fear and terror is countered by “cool green,” which suggests sanctuary. Elaine’s excitement and amazement amplify as she continues her difficult journey and her admiration is expressed through sublime rhetoric:

That terrible void! That seductive deep! It thrilled. It drew. It stirred within him [Elaine/ Dick] an uncanny, a fearful excitement. ... he stood gazing in breathless astonishment at the terrific beauty ... He was bombarded with it. ... Such amazing grandeur! The height of it! The depth of it! ... The beauty was overwhelming. It stupefied. It stunned. It terrified. (28-29)

Cross-dressed, “Dick” is initially cast as the typical adventurer of masculine quest romance, and the river as the adversary that must be conquered. To this end the river is a “gigantic serpent” that the hero must “wound” and “disable” in order to get at the “treasure it protected with such ferocious vigilance” (30). However, as the narrative progresses the river gives up the osmiridium easily enough and Elaine, safely disguised as Dick, becomes accustomed to life in the ravine. The early adversarial prose disappears and Elaine begins to look upon the ravine as “home” and is surprised that the place should give her such a “sensation of safety and homeliness.” A free indirect narrative concludes that the “ravine must have taken him to his heart as he had taken it to his” (80).

The narrative proceeds from this point with frequent but brief references to the natural environment. The river remains a constant presence and the splendour of summer is often remarked upon. Significantly, Elaine’s injury and blindness is not symbolized by a deterioration of her physical environment. After this incident, Christmas comes and goes, the leatherwoods blossom, the sun shines and the land continues to nurture Elaine/Dick. Other aspects of literary placemaking are evident in Bjelke Petersen’s careful reproduction of colloquial language and familiarity with the geography of the area. The narrative often features discussion of travellers in the district and places are referred to in the local way. The “Nineteen Mile” camp is described simply as “the Nineteen” and Savage River is known among the locals as

“the Savige [sic].” Local knowledge is also apparent in Bjelke Petersen’s careful and respectful explanations of mining procedure. The narrative also conveys its sense of admiration for the people of this region.

Dusk, too, is remarkable as a tribute to the West Coast wilderness and an example of literary placemaking in the sense that it conveys an appreciation of the beauty, magnificence and grandeur of the area, and associates it with significant and meaningful personal experience. But beyond this, the narrative is critical of human destruction of the area. The extent of the devastation that mining activity has caused is signified early in the narrative, where the Queenstown environs are contrasted sharply with the fecund beauty of the rainforest:

As it approached the great mining district the face of the country changed entirely. The forest thinned, the luxuriant vegetation grew scanty and finally vanished altogether ... The sulphur fumes from the smelters and the ruthless woodman’s axe had completely robbed the landscape of its sumptuous, green covering. (15)

The Queenstown landscape is “remarkably lunar-like and unearthly” (17), mountains “have been through the agony of death” (33) and a panorama of the valley reveals “pigmy towns” and “huge depraved desolation” (35). Despite her enthusiasm to promote the area as a tourist destination, Bjelke Petersen does not shy away from pointing out the devastation that mining, development and modernity have caused. Mindful of Tasmanian anxiety to promote industry, though, she is careful to include pro-mining discourse.³⁴ This occurs in conversations between *Dusk* and Kerrigan. *Dusk* expresses an anti-mining point of view whereas Kerrigan speaks in support of the mine. Essentially the issue remains unresolved: mining is accepted as an integral and necessary part of life in the area, *Dusk* maintains a dissenting voice and Bjelke Petersen continues to represent the mine metaphorically as a monster. As such she maintains her concern for the effect of human activity on the land.

Not all Bjelke Petersen’s writing can be held up as an example of literary placemaking and some wilderness representation is undeniably what Bennett would describe as glib and programmatic (98). In some novels, Bjelke Petersen’s commitment to place and the healing power of wilderness is undermined by the competing claims of generic convention and religious evangelism. This is certainly

³⁴ In the 1920s the Tasmanian Government actively encouraged Tasmanians to promote the island as a site for future industry (Harris 137).

the case for *The Captive Singer*. Here, Bjelke Petersen is highly attentive to romance conventions and as such the wilderness locations usually have a symbolic relation to the events described or the protagonist's emotional state. The first of these locations is the clandestine space of the Marakooapa Cave, which Haynes has observed is represented in terms of the "subterranean passages of the traditional gothic novel" (70). The caves are associated with entrapment and helplessness and symbolize in different ways the predicament of the protagonists. Both Iris and Justin are captives: his addiction to alcohol holds him captive in the wilderness and she is imprisoned by the expectations of her class and family.

The beauty of the caves is briefly referred to, but is principally conveyed through the frontispiece photograph in the narrative. The caves, renowned for their beautiful limestone formations, are represented as an "underworld of gaping chasms, of treacherous streams bounding in unfathomable depths; a world of eerie sounds, menacing objects, slippery footholds, of slimy water creeping insidiously from rock to rock" (28). Narrative interest focuses largely on Iris' terrified response to the cave. Bjelke Petersen creates a hostile environment where Iris, who has separated herself from the group touring the caves, feels she is at the "mercy" of "wailing spirits ...crouching to spring" and "drag her down – down – down – down into those awful, bottomless caverns" (28, 29).³⁵ But this claustrophobic, menacing place also provides an environment and opportunity for Iris and Justin to experience a moment of intimacy. Iris, overcome with terror, faints and is comforted in Justin's arms. Here she lies "mute, overcome, crushed into silence by the beauty of his music. She felt her heart throb, her bosom sink and swell quickly, and at last the turmoil within found vent in a long, sobbing sigh" (40). Later they meet at the Alum Cliffs, where Iris' position is both physically and socially precarious. Here, seated "on a flat rocky ledge overlooking a tremendous precipice" (76), Iris is on the brink of commitment to Justin. In this case she risks the physical danger of falling into the ravine and social ostracism if she commits to a relationship with Justin. This pattern of wilderness representation continues throughout the narrative. Iris and Justin's relationship begins with an accidental but fateful encounter in a cave, develops

³⁵ This episode bears an uncanny resemblance to the Marabar Cave incident in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, published in 1924. In *The Captive Singer* Bjelke Petersen's uncomplicated and graphic narration of events and Iris' emotions avoids the mystery and sexual innuendo that characterises Adela Quested's experience.

variously in the forest and the cliffs, and is finally proclaimed before God on a mountain.

Similarly, in *The Rainbow Lute* wilderness has a largely symbolic function as an emblem of God's anger towards a decadent modern world. In this narrative extended descriptions of the natural world focus not on the mountains, rivers and forests of the valley but instead have a celestial focus, in the sense that much space is given to description of sunrise, sunsets, wind and rain. In the course of the narrative, the aptly named Storm Valley is subject to severe wind and torrential rain. These adverse conditions in turn cause flooding and a landslide. In a long polemic at a local revival meeting, the preacher Mrs Glen condemns modern society as decadent and corrupt and cites the example of the "terrible landslip and the tragedy it brought with it" as an indication of God's anger, evidence that the "time draws nigh for the Lord to step in and take up His rule and put everything right that man has made wrong" (251). Although Bjelke Petersen has maintained the motif of Tasmanian wilderness as a redemptive site for her protagonists, here the locality of place is undermined by a focus on religious discourse and symbolic rendering of region.

Of course, in romantic discourse wilderness and religious experience are not unconnected. Since the eighteenth century wilderness had been constructed as a place where the sacred could be evoked and the soul enlarged by an aspiration towards the infinite (Nicolson 321). At this time mountains lose their traditional Christian association with "waste" and "wild" and are valorized as "natural cathedrals" (Nicolson 2) and sacred "symbols of God's abiding reality" (Monk 228). In its most complex artistic expression, the association of wilderness and religion evokes a transcendent experience of "awe and reverence for the power of God," and a serenity and tranquillity "that passes all understanding" (Nicolson 393).³⁶ In a sublime aesthetic the transcendent religious experience that wilderness can evoke is best understood as a singular, uplifting one where the soul gestures towards an ever unattainable infinite.

In Bjelke Petersen's novels this is not the association that is made. Wilderness does give rise to significant experience but it is not necessarily a transcendent religious experience or indeed a singular one. The romantic myth of the

³⁶ Nicolson makes this comment in response to the descent of the Simplon Pass in William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, VI 624-40 (1850 version). Samuel Monk likewise lauds these lines as the supreme example of the eighteenth-century sublime (232).

mountain as cathedral is made explicit through simple and unambiguous language. Mountains become “great white temples” (*Dusk* 101), “nature’s temples reared up for God” (*Rainbow* 52) and places where “prayers are heard quicker” (*Captive* 232). They are, however, appropriated as places of shared experience for couples and the evangelical experience of immanence.³⁷ In Bjelke Petersen’s fiction mountains are not places where God is figured as beyond consciousness but rather where God is a realized and personal presence (Lawton 76). Bjelke Petersen thus appropriates this familiar romantic trope to promote her particular religious views.

In this respect Bjelke Petersen does not follow the traditions of women who used their writing as a vehicle to present conservative religious views.³⁸ Her fictional project can rather be likened to writers such as Marie Corelli and Rosa Praed, both of whom used romance narratives as a way to challenge orthodox religions and explore other kinds of religious or mystical experience such as theosophy and spiritualism. Patricia Clarke, in *Rosa, Rosa*, observes that Praed’s commitment to theosophy had a profound effect on the writer’s spiritual life and was a rich source of material for her fiction (83). Corelli also experimented with new religious experience. Felski argues that, although Corelli distanced herself from the spiritualist movement, many of its assumptions are reflected in her work, most particularly the phenomenon of mystic “out of body” experiences. Felski observes that these experiences are manifest in Corelli’s fiction as episodes in which protagonists escape mundane reality to soar through the universe (134). Like these writers Bjelke Petersen experimented in her novels to challenge orthodox religious practice but, unlike them, she did not endorse alternative formulations of religious experience. Rather she used her popular romance novels to promote millennialist evangelist Protestantism and to actively denounce alternative religious philosophies.

In each of Bjelke Petersen’s novels except *The Moon Minstrel* desolate protagonists, who are usually agnostic or lapsed Christians, beseech God to help a lost or injured lover. In *The Captive Singer* Justin is desperate to find Iris, who is lost on Cradle Mountain, and entreats God to “lead him to the girl he would give his life to rescue” (216). In *Dusk*, Dusk Harland begs God to save Warren Kerrigan who

³⁷ This aspect of evangelical doctrine argues that God is a realised presence in the world. It is opposed to transcendence which holds that God is an entity beyond consciousness (Lawton 76).

³⁸ Patricia Clarke identifies a cohort of nineteenth-century Australian women writers – Matilda Jane Evans, Henrietta Foot and Maria Scott among them – whose novels typically delivered moral messages of restraint and humility in subdued and unexciting prose. Such novels promoted virtuous living and pointed their readers uncategorically on the paths of righteousness (*Pen* 85).

is trapped, believed drowned, in a flooded mine. Salarno, in *Jewelled Nights*, calls upon God to restore Elaine's sight after she is deliberately blinded. God's response is usually immediate and always positive – He achieves the seemingly impossible, thus installing a didactic logic of cause and effect that leaves the reader in no doubt about who is responsible for the events.

Such demonstrations of divine providence are usually catalysts for religious conversion or reaffirmation of faith. Therefore in *The Captive Singer* Iris and Justin, who had previously shown carelessness and disregard for God, pledge to devote their lives to helping those who had suffered (265-68). In *Dusk*, the heroine who had briefly flirted with alternative religions recommits to God. In *Jewelled Nights*, Elaine – who is admonished because she has “lived merely for earthly things” and “showed” God “rank callousness” all her life (237) – renounces her old life and begins to lead a more spiritual existence. Significantly, these conversion episodes provide Bjelke Petersen with the opportunity to reprise the philosophy espoused in *The Mysterious Stranger* (her first religious tract). Here the death of a loved one becomes the catalyst that persuades modern individuals who are hedonistic, egotistical and materialist to adopt a more religious life.

Bjelke Petersen experimented with the type and amount of religious discourse her narratives included. *The Captive Singer* is least experimental, for here the religious element appears suddenly and dramatically at the climax of the story. Bjelke Petersen avoids potentially confronting religious rhetoric, so a third person narration rather than emotional dialogue recounts the story of Justin and Iris' conversion. The narrative is coy about criticizing orthodox religion, merely referring to the evangelical faith Iris and Justin have embraced as a “kind of new religion” (302).

In novels such as *Dusk* and *The Rainbow Lute* religion has a more pervasive presence. *Dusk* reinforces the power of prayer and critique of hedonism that *The Captive Singer* articulates but includes a vehement condemnation of theosophy, an alternative spiritualist movement that reached its peak influence in Australia in the 1920s and was ideologically opposed to evangelical religions.³⁹ In *Dusk*, the heroine, whose husband has exposed her to this belief system, delivers a vehement

³⁹ Jill Roe describes theosophy as an idealistic, internationalist, non-discriminatory movement interested in the mystical and the occult (xii), which, as Clarke says, drew its inspiration from the ancient religions and texts of the East (*Rosa* 81).

condemnation of theosophy's practices and effects. Bjelke Petersen's condemnation is guarded in so far as she avoids the term theosophy but the parallels between it and the religious practices she attacks are significant. Eastern religions are described as "dead codes of morals" and the lands that practice such religions are "nothing but caverns of crime, cruelty and unspeakable horrors" (69). Bjelke Petersen's vitriol against these lands and spiritual practices is such that she specifically criticizes Australian writers (perhaps Praed) who have embraced Eastern religions and dabble in the occult (224). Dusk ends her speech, self-reflexively, with the comment that if she were an author she "would write a book warning humanity not to touch [those] terrible black arts" (225). Dusk's polemic is confronting and sustained but it is accommodated in the narrative because it is included as two separate outbursts. Strategically, Bjelke Petersen ensures her readers remain a captive audience, using these episodes to inform the reader about Dusk's mysterious past.

The novel concludes with a church service at which the miners and officials have gathered to give thanks for Kerrigan's "wonderful deliverance" (281). In a polemical sermon the minister decrees that recent disasters at the mine are due to the forces of evil: "there is no such thing as bad luck; it is all due to the same force exerting its fiendish influence. We have lately had a terrible exhibition of its malignant onslaughts." Equally, the change of fortune is attributed to God: "But we have also had a glorious display of Someone Else's might to save! God is constantly intervening ... He is ever seeking to save us from the enemy. ... Our puny strength cannot help us" (283). Such rhetoric moves the miners to spontaneous applause: a development that privileges Bjelke Petersen's evangelism over traditional Protestant protocol.

The Rainbow Lute has a persistent religious theme. The novel was written and published in the depression and is distinguished by a restrained and sombre narrative tone. It is set in a small rural community surrounded by mountains, where evangelical religious revivals are currently occurring. The heroine, the appropriately named Faith Langdon, is a pious and devoted Christian, heavily involved in the local church and the community more generally. The novel promotes traditional family values and makes no attempt to disguise its religious agenda, expounding millennialist Christian philosophy in lengthy polemical sermons. Here Bjelke Petersen reverts to the rhetoric of her tracts, using terse declarative sentences and anaphora. Such language instils narrative authority and decreases interpretative flexibility. Modernity

is condemned outright and millennialist philosophy is presented as beyond scrutiny. This sermonic discourse is augmented by inclusion of hymns, prayers and bible readings. Immanence is described and religious conversion is demystified and promoted through the experience of the sceptical Tonks, who is converted and experiences “rapturous happiness.” This pronouncement is followed by an emphatic endorsement of the experience: “So *this* was conversion! *This* was the dreaded thing he had heard so much about! The thing he would have run a thousand miles to escape” (255). Bjelke Petersen has strategically chosen her working-class subject, for the positive experience she constructs around Tonk’s conversion is a propagandist statement for the benefits of religious conversion.

Bjelke Petersen delivers religious discourse in a direct, instructive and opinionated way. Her novels reprise so precisely the tracts and millennialist philosophy that it could be suggested delivering this message is Bjelke Petersen’s prime concern, more important than delivering her readers an entertaining popular romance or promoting the beauty of Tasmanian wilderness. Indeed the novels’ advocacy of God’s greater power and absolute ability to heal compromises rather than complements the healing power that the narratives assign to wilderness. In *Dusk* the West Coast has the power to free Dusk, in that it allows her to acknowledge her feelings for Kerrigan and begins to heal her melancholia, but in essence it is God’s greater power that restores Kerrigan to her after the mining accident. Similarly it is God who gives final release to Dusk in the death of her husband. In the context of the novel this fortuitous occurrence is presented as an act of divine providence, which eventuates after Kerrigan appeals for God’s help to protect Dusk from her fate (caring for her leprotic husband). In *The Captive Singer* too the same logic operates. The mountains surrounding Mole Creek have “sheltered [Justin] and kept him safe” (192) but again absolute healing is a result of divine intervention. Justin announces himself cured and Iris emphatically proclaims that “*God* did it, ... He alone is wonderful” (268).

Despite the crucial role of divine intervention for successful couple formation and the inclusion of religious discourses, Bjelke Petersen retains control of her narratives. Just when religious rhetoric appears to get out of hand Bjelke Petersen tempers its influence through recollections of Tasmanian wilderness worlds and refocuses on the relationship between hero and heroine. In *Dusk* the lovers leave church together, “their shoulders caress[ing] intimately,” and look out to the “knife-

like foothills and gigantic mountains” (287-88). In *The Rainbow Lute* after Tonk’s conversion the emphasis returns to romance and a few short chapters resolve all difficulties for the protagonists. Dare divests himself of fortune and fiancée and is free to commit to Faith. This he does, predicably at sunset, as “the red glow was fading from the mountain peaks” and a “soft velvet twilight stole over the valley” (286). In *The Captive Singer* the same affirmation is made. This novel ends with the lovers happily together but remote from Australia. However the influence of Australia upon their happiness is acknowledged as the two sing an Australian hymn whose lyrics and musical score are included in the text.

These endings are clichéd formula romance. The protagonists are together, usually in a passionate embrace, religious allusion provides the necessary moral tone and the hero and heroine look confidently towards the sky or distant mountains in wondrous anticipation of their shared future. Crucially, in all Bjelke Petersen’s narratives, except *The Captive Singer*, the protagonists elect to remain in the Tasmanian wilderness in new social worlds that privilege nature and communication with the Divine over culture and modernity. While this development in each novel endorses Tasmanian wilderness as a morally superior location, it also suggests a millennialist fantasy for the “Kingdom of God” (described by William Lawton as an “ideal community bound under ethical laws” [23]). Bjelke Petersen’s protagonists by and large enter communities organized according to this principal. At Savage River friendship based on love and devotion flourishes and in Queenstown the community has been united by the recent disaster at the mine. In *The Rainbow Lute* revivals have been freely embraced, the gossips and schemers have been admonished and harmony exists in the close knit and non-materialist community. While such conclusions are conventional for formula romance they are also engineered to accommodate in roughly equal fashion all Bjelke Petersen’s particular interests.

Conclusion

This thesis has reconsidered Bjelke Petersen's Tasmanian novels outside the narrow framework of the Australian realist nationalist tradition. It has inserted Bjelke Petersen into a popular tradition and demonstrated that she was a commercially successful writer of formula romance in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her dedication to her craft, her familiarity with a range of literary techniques and her ability to competently manipulate the generic conventions of romance ensured that she produced interesting and innovative novels that had wide appeal. While such generic variations entertained her readers and provided them with the opportunity to escape quotidian reality, they also functioned strategically to allow Bjelke Petersen to address specific interests and commitments. The thesis has identified gender relations, Tasmanian wilderness regions and evangelical religion as Bjelke Petersen's specific interests and has analysed how they are incorporated into generic romance. Such interests ensure the novels remain relevant as historical and cultural artefacts.

In Bjelke Petersen's formulaic narratives beautiful heroines and handsome heroes experience love, romance and outdoor adventure in the Tasmanian wilderness. Usually, one or more of the protagonists has come to a remote region as a refugee from a metropolitan centre in Europe, America or Australia and seeks to recover mental or physical health. In the course of the narrative this will be achieved through the combined powers of love, the healing powers of the Tasmanian wilderness and recourse to prayer. This formula fulfils generic requirements in that there is a central focus on the progress of love that culminates with successful resolution. But beyond this, the formula is strategically structured to allow Bjelke Petersen to endorse independence for women and changes within marriage, to promote Tasmanian wilderness regions as ideal tourist destinations and regenerative spaces, to challenge notions of European or British cultural supremacy and to espouse a fundamentalist evangelical religious philosophy. These elements variously reflect Bjelke Petersen's commitment to women's independence, Tasmania and evangelical Protestantism and are included with different emphasis in each narrative.

While this formula maintains a connection to the focus on issues of sex/gender, race and nation that Sheridan, Giles and Dixon have identified as predominant in popular fiction of the years around Federation, it also addresses more idiosyncratic interests and as such demonstrates a heterogeneity in Australian writing of the period that has not been previously investigated or acknowledged. In Bjelke

Petersen's fiction the usual emphasis on nation is largely replaced by a focus on region. In every novel except *The Captive Singer*, which contains significant nationalist discourse, Bjelke Petersen maintains a focus on a specific area of Tasmania. This is strategic in that it allows her to promote the scenic beauty of these areas, but it is also indicative of a nation becoming less self-conscious and less interested in defining itself against an European norm.

Bjelke Petersen's writing practices thus create narratives that are structurally sound in the sense that they fulfil generic requirements but ideologically fractured in that they are required to accommodate a number of conflicting ideas. Her commitment to various causes produces a conflictual textual economy that oscillates between progressive and conservative views.

Many writers, as Sheridan and Giles have shown, shared an interest in gender relations in the Federation era. Like others, Bjelke Petersen used her fiction to challenge the patriarchal gender ideologies of female subjugation and domesticity. As the thesis has shown, in Bjelke Petersen's novels independent and physically competent heroines enter marriages based on equality. Her novels dispute notions of stable gender identity and construct new subjectivities for women but they fall well short of any kind of radical subversion of patriarchal ideology in that they urge change within, rather than an end to, the institution of marriage.

Bjelke Petersen's interests in religion and region are more idiosyncratic. As artefacts about Tasmania the novels are particularly valuable. As a contemporary review noted, she brought Tasmania before the world, promoting the beauty of wilderness areas and subverting mainland assumptions that Tasmania was a cultural backwater: "dead slow ... [and] splendid for neurotics, invalids and babies" (*Captive* 114). Her efforts to promote Tasmania were motivated by a long held enthusiasm for its landscape, while her intervention also reflects government initiatives to promote the island for tourism. But the novels are also important because they provide an insight into isolated Tasmanian areas and thus serve a documentary function. This is particularly so for *Jewelled Nights*, which is informed by Bjelke Petersen's careful research into the language and customs in the Savage River area. These texts give an insight into aspects of life in the period between the wars not only in terms of documenting region but also in terms of understanding contemporary mores.

Bjelke Petersen's narratives are distinguished by a number of religious inclusions, from a melodramatic conversion episode in *The Captive Singer* to

extended rhetorical passages in *Dusk* and *The Rainbow Lute*. Such scenes serve an overt propagandist function to promote the futurist eschatology to which Bjelke Petersen subscribed. This fundamentalist discourse looks forward to a better time, but promotes conservative anti-modernist ideas, which are at odds with the progressive views about women her novels promulgate. Religious commitment also compromises the healing power Bjelke Petersen's narratives assign to wilderness, by insisting that divine intervention, conversion or reaffirmation of faith is required before a protagonist's health is fully restored or the romance drama is successfully resolved. The influence of religious discourse at times threatens to overwhelm the narrative but Bjelke Petersen's skill is such that in the end genre always reasserts its influence and allegiance to other interests re-emerge. Today, Bjelke Petersen's passionate commitment to evangelical Protestantism is probably the feature we find most difficult to reconcile with genre and indeed in her era it was an unusual inclusion. Bjelke Petersen's emphatic endorsement of these unconventional and ideologically conservative discourses is motivated by personal commitment and is symptomatic of her dismay at encroaching modernity, an increasingly secular society and the crisis in evangelical faith.

This project has followed the lead of the recuperation of previously neglected Australian texts by critics including Sheridan, Giles and Dixon. But examining novels such as Bjelke Petersen's extends the critical debate, for these texts move beyond the race – gender – nation nexus that earlier projects identified. Opening up the more conflicted and conflictual issues that Bjelke Petersen's romances embody promises to complicate our picture of early twentieth-century literary culture. The issues on which this thesis has focused identify new areas worthy of critical investigation, raising the possibility of exploring popular genres for evidence of ideological, political and regional innovation or placing region before nation in our approach to Australian texts. The fact that Bjelke Petersen's novels circulated simultaneously in regional, national and international spheres suggests that exploring the ways in which Australian writers functioned outside the nation is a further area for critical investigation. Perhaps Bjelke Petersen is the paradigmatic case for this: a Danish-born writer who fervently embraced an Australian regional identity and optimistically and confidently "put the atmosphere of [the] place on paper ... sending it broadcast over the world" (*Captive* 22).

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