

From polite society to the Pilbara: The ingénue abroad in *Evelina* and *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots*

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The romance novel—persistently at once one of the most popularly successful genres from the eighteenth century to today, and one of the least critically respected—demonstrates surprising consistencies, and a habitual attention to gender politics that reflect the gendered assumptions and aspirations of the societies out of which it emerges. This paper explores the commonalities between two novels that, despite being produced in different times and places, nevertheless when read together share distinct concerns and tropes, often to a surprising extent. By reading Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Loretta Hill's *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* (2012), and paying close attention to their similarities and differences, this paper demonstrates continuities of convention over more than two centuries. Both novels take young, inexperienced women for their heroines, and through them introduce their readers to daily life in specific, closed communities: respectively, fashionable London of the late-eighteenth-century "Season", and the fly-in, fly-out mining society of the West Australian Pilbara region. In this study of two novels, one published in Georgian England, and the other in early twenty-first-century Australia, it is possible to recognise the ways in which such fictions are capable of idealising, reproducing and reinforcing gendered stereotypes, and at the same time of revealing the oppressive effects of such stereotypes on the imagined lives of men and women.

Introduction

By reading one novel in light of another, this paper seeks to investigate the extent to which generic conventions, themes and concerns relating to gender persist despite differences in temporal and geographic contexts, and what their persistence might tell us about the similarities and differences between the societies that produced these novels.

The eighteenth-century novel exerts a persistent influence on fiction to the present day, an influence that is sometimes direct, and sometimes

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refracted through nineteenth- and twentieth-century readings and adaptations of the earlier material. Novels as disparate as J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004), and Francis Spufford's *Golden Hill* (2016), for instance, are themselves works of historical fiction informed by the literary culture of the long eighteenth century. Other writers of recent decades, most famously Helen Fielding in her *Bridget Jones* novels (1996-2016), seek to repurpose aspects of eighteenth-century literary culture to address contemporary concerns: in their fiction, a close intertextual relationship may be displaced by a more diffuse indebtedness to eighteenth-century fiction, especially the plots and conventions of its premier form, the novel of romance. Juliet Wells has suggested that *Bridget Jones's Diary* and similar novels belonging to the genre known as "chick lit", "frequently invite us to view their works as descendants of women's literary classics" (2006, 48). It is therefore not surprising that scholarly discussions of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and chick lit more widely have explored their relationship to classic works of women's fiction.

With its focus on young women's experience, its marriage plots and its studies of manners, eighteenth-century romantic novels present rich sites for analysing representations of gender in fiction. This paper argues that romance novels of the present day can be analysed productively through the same lens, making visible the ways in which gendered experience is discursively constituted in fiction. This paper follows the comparative approach utilised by scholars studying works of women's fiction in conjunction with their contemporary literary counterparts, especially those belonging to the chick lit genre. As Caroline J. Smith (2008) has noted:

Loosely defined, chick lit ... consists of heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists. At its outset, the genre was narrowly defined in that the protagonists depicted in these texts were young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas (2).

Originally a pejorative term, dismissive of novels aimed at women and their readership alike, "chick lit" has since been embraced by some readers (such as the chicklitclub.com and chicklitcentral.com) and practitioners (see Whelehan 2005; Harzewski 2011; Smith 2008; Montoro 2012). A number of studies have compared Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* with novels by Jane Austen, especially *Pride and Prejudice* (Case 2001; Marsh 2004; Whelehan 2005; Whelehan 2002; Harzewski 2011). *Bridget Jones's Diary*

has also been investigated in conjunction with nineteenth- and eighteenth-century novels (Case 2001) and contemporary British novels (Marsh 2004). Other theorists have explored the links between novels by Jane Austen and chick lit texts beyond *Bridget Jones's Diary*. For example, Vitana Kostadinova (2015) discusses the representation of female lifestyles in the *Pride and Prejudice* transmedia video-log adaptation *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* while Marina Cano López (2010) compares Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Alexandra Potter's *Me and Mr Darcy* (2007). In assessing the value and utility of employing an intergenerational methodology, López argues that "both texts shed light on each other". Using a similar comparative approach, Vivien Jones (2010) examines claims that Jane Austen's novels act as postfeminist precursors to chick lit. Jones notes the analytical value in reading contemporary texts in conjunction with those of the past: "The best—and not just the best—adaptations and appropriations of classic texts invite us to read their originals afresh" (79).

Scholars have increasingly drawn on an ever-widening range of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's novels in which to discuss the origins, influences and continuities evidenced in chick lit. For example, Juliette Wells (2006) traces chick lit's early literary influences including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels by Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Frances Burney. Wells is noteworthy in comparing the themes of a young woman's maturation and frequent embarrassment in front of a prospective suitor in Burney's *Evelina* in relation to *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Plum Sykes's *Bergdorf Blondes* (2004). Further intergenerational literary analyses include Elizabeth Hale's (2006) discussion of "underlings" and "long-suffering female professionals" in the chick lit novel *The Nanny Diaries* (2002) in comparison to Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847). Similarly, Kerstin Fest (2008) examines working women in *Agnes Grey* and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1938) in relation to *The Nanny Diaries* and *The Un-Domestic Goddess* (2005). Such analyses uncover connections and offer intertextual insights between classic works of women's fiction and their highly popular contemporary counterparts.

The focus of this research is two novels that, while written and published in very different contexts, nevertheless reveal similarities in content and approach, suggesting that the shadows cast by eighteenth-century fiction are long. The novels—Frances Burney's *Evelina, or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) and Loretta Hill's *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* (2012)—share surprising correlations, despite the obvious differences in the circumstances of their production and reception. This research uncovers resonances between these two novels in order to

investigate what they can tell us about the discursive representation of everyday gendered experience in fiction.

Burney could not have imagined the world of the twenty-first-century Pilbara, and there is little evidence to suggest that Hill has encountered Burney's novel, which today is best known to eighteenth-century specialists, and a popular choice for undergraduate English classes investigating the eighteenth-century novel. Despite this lack of overt or explicit intertextuality, the novels share many commonalities, illustrative of what Rob Pope (1998; 2012) terms "implied" and "inferred" intertextuality. Implied intertextuality, as Pope explains, "comprises all those passing allusions to other texts (including texts in the same **genre**) and all those effects (especially ironic and satiric) which seem to have been deliberately contrived by the writer so as to be picked up by the alert and similarly informed reader" (original emphasis 1998, 246). Inferred intertextuality, "refers to all those texts which actual **readers** draw on to help their understanding of the text in hand" (original emphasis Pope 1998, 246).

This paper illustrates these two variants of intertextuality, whereby *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* is read in conjunction with Burney's *Evelina*. The aim is to provide a mutually illuminating reading of both novels while revealing similarities and differences in genre, form and theme. Both novels are based around romance plots, but include elements of comedy, social realism and the picaresque. Both are written by young women who are early in their careers as novelists; and both authors use their privileged knowledge of a specific social environment as the raw material for their narratives. Both Burney and Hill take as the basis of their plots the experience of a naïve young woman entering into a culture that is largely alien to her. Burney's teenage *Evelina*, having been brought up in rustic isolation, is largely unprepared to navigate the various threats of elite London society. Hill's heroine *Lena*, a newly graduated engineer, finds herself reassigned from a corporate city office to a construction site in Western Australia's remote north. Both novels court readers' interest through their exposure of what are largely closed societies: in detailing the lived experience of, on one hand, the entertainments and activities of the fashionable London "Season" of the 1770s, and on the other, the geographically isolated, male-dominated environment of a Pilbara mining development, both novels entice their readers with privileged imaginative access to these otherwise inaccessible communities. Early responses to both novels also demonstrate that members of these communities were drawn to these fictionalised accounts, praising their veracity and accuracy,

and appreciating the sense of recognition and shared experience that such texts offer (*Gentlemen's Magazine* 1778, 425).¹

As fictions produced by women, taking women as their central characters, and belonging to a genre typically aimed at women readers, *Evelina* and *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* demonstrate preoccupations with gendered experience, and the difficulties encountered by women in the societies they anatomise. The novels focus on a day-by-day recounting of their heroines' struggles to be accepted in their societies despite being, as beautiful young women, peculiarly subject to sexualised and gendered harassment and discrimination. *Evelina* recounts her experiences in detailed, first-person letters, while the free indirect speech of Hill's novel closely tracks its protagonist's thoughts, feelings and actions. Notably, however, Hill's novel also began as a kind of epistolary non-fiction, emerging from e-mails she wrote to family members during her time working in the Pilbara (McLean 2012). In a 2012 interview, Hill explained that, "When I got home my mum printed all my e-mails and collected them into a file and said here, turn this into a book. It's just too funny. I drew a lot on those e-mails when writing" (McLean 2012). With this shared grounding in the discursively mediated lived experience of young women, the two novels are useful sites from which to analyse representations of gendered experience as this is mediated through genre across very different contexts and time periods.

Genre

Evelina was a highly successful novel when it was published in 1778, although some of the generic elements from which it borrows are more closely associated with earlier eighteenth-century literature. Most striking, perhaps, is Burney's use of the epistolary mode, a method of textual construction most famously employed by Samuel Richardson, whose final novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, had been published in 1753. A popular mode in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, production of epistolary fiction peaked in the mid-eighteenth century, largely in response to Richardson's success. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, novels-in-letters had largely gone out of fashion. Burney's decision not to cast her second and later novels in the epistolary mode is usually cited as evidence of the decline of the novel-in-letters (as is Jane Austen's decision to recast the

¹ The very brief, early reviews of *Evelina*, conforming to the critical interests of the period, attend to its morality as much as to its realism. The novel's fidelity is nevertheless repeatedly singled out for praise. One anonymous reviewer commended the novel for "exhibiting [...] many such characters as occur in the world, not raised so high as to be extravagant, nor sunk so low as to be disgusting" (Anonymous 1778, 425).

lost early versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, widely believed to have been epistolary, in the non-epistolary form known to us today) (Bray 2003, 108).² *Evelina* can also be read as a kind of foundling-tale, a *Bildungsroman* that, like Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) includes many elements of the picaresque. While *Evelina* herself behaves with a dignity and decorum very different to that of typical picaresque heroes, the novel's secondary characters frequently exhibit a degree of bawdiness, vulgarity and violence that was becoming increasingly rare in late eighteenth-century fiction (See Zaczek 1997, 141).³

One of the novel's major attractions for contemporary readers was its depiction of life in the elite circles of the late eighteenth-century London "Season", a round of balls, routs, plays, operas and other "polite" entertainments. In her first published novel, Burney drew on her own experience of the cultural life of the metropolis. A daughter of the eminent musicologist Charles Burney, she was closer than most to both the aristocratic patrons of fashionable culture and to the actors, musicians and promoters who made late eighteenth-century London so vibrant. Even as a young woman (she was 25 when the novel was published) Burney understood that her intimate knowledge of "the most fashionable Spring Diversions of London" gave her access to a great deal of novel and appealing subject matter, "a fair field open for a Novelist", as she wrote to her eventual publisher (Troide et al. 1998, 215). This is the setting, but at *Evelina's* heart is the marriage-plot, overwhelmingly the most common structure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction. Such plots—in which the young heroine must negotiate potential social disaster in order to first identify and then marry a more-or-less idealised hero—are clearly recognisable as the forerunners of present-day romance novels.

The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots can be classified as a red-dirt romance novel, a sub-genre of "chick lit" itself a sub-genre of the wider romance genre. "Red dirt romances" use northern Australia's red-dirt landscapes as a backdrop for the developing relationship between two lovers (O'Mahony 2015). Unlike many of the urban and metropolitan focused chick lit novels, red-dirt romances use remote non-agricultural settings for their narratives.⁴ Red-dirt romances exemplify one diversification within the

² See, for instance, Bray 2003, 108.

³ What the critic John Gibson Lockhart called 'the gradual improvement in national taste and delicacy' in fiction was the subject of comment by contemporary readers. (See Zaczek 1997, 141).

⁴ Red-dirt romances also differ from another best-selling Australian subgenre, "the rural romance". Rural romances employ a farming or agricultural setting for their narratives (See O'Mahony 2014a; O'Mahony 2014b and O'Mahony 2017).

wider chick lit genre that saw many novels push beyond the original narrow definition by featuring heroines of various ages, ethnic backgrounds and in settings well beyond the city. Like the majority of chick lit novels, *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* is structured as a romance (O'Mahony 2015). The novel utilises the eight required elements common to all romance novels, as theorised by Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), to chart the developing relationship between Lena Todd, a newly graduated engineer and the site boss for the client company, Dan Hullog.

The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots is the first work of commercial fiction by author Loretta Hill and was inspired by her own experiences of working remotely as an engineer (Hill 2018). She was born and grew up in Western Australia, graduating from The University of Western Australia with degrees in engineering and commerce. Soon after, she found herself working on a remote mining site. In a "Meet the Author" event held in Fremantle in February 2013, Hill recounted how engineering was a "backup plan" while she waited to be discovered as a writer. While Hill states that her novels are "not autobiographical", they are clearly coloured by her experience of the Pilbara's landscape and her firsthand knowledge of the machinations of Western Australia's mining industry ("Mine of Inspiration" 2012). Her novels depict a small slice of mining life in Western Australia's north amid the resource boom of the early 2000s, which saw a dramatic expansion in investment and infrastructure development in the mining industries, with marked consequences for Western Australia's economy and culture as a whole.⁵ While the impact of the resource boom was thus felt in the lives of many throughout Western Australia, the relatively small numbers of people directly employed in the remote north—the so-called fly-in, fly-out workers, or FIFOs—meant that very few readers would share Hill's personal experience of this powerful industry.

⁵ Hill explained to journalist Tiffany Fox about the importance of her novels to readers: "I think it is very important that we have stories set in WA, particularly to do with mining because there are so many people who work in that area and it is the backbone of our economy" (2012).

Strange Society, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World

Both *Evelina* and *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* take for their starting point a young woman's entrance into an unfamiliar society, where she must make her professional or social debut. Much of the comedy of both novels occurs in the early sections while the heroines are learning the conventions of their new societies, often through a process of trial and error. In *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* Lena meets Dan, the novel's hero, while committing a serious breach of Occupational Health and Safety protocols, while *Evelina* first meets Lord Orville, her eventual suitor, at a ball where she commits a serious breach of etiquette (dancing with one man after rejecting another), to the consternation of those around her, and her own mortification. Both heroines offer poor first impressions to their heroes. Dan is enraged by Lena's breach of workplace protocol, at first assuming she is one of the "admin staff" who has journeyed to the wharf for a "stickybeak" (Hill 2012, 33). After being confined to the office donga with menial tasks, Lena sneaks onto the jetty where the main construction work is happening. Dan accosts her after noticing she is missing the required personal protective equipment; only then does she admit she has not undertaken mandatory safety training. Dan tells her she is a "silly girl" (Hill 2012, 34) before she is embarrassingly marched off the wharf. Later when Lena queries Dan about his general attitude towards her, he replies:

My problem is this...you are the least experienced person on this site and you don't seem to know it. You've got no life experience, no prudence and no ability to see beyond your own little bubble. You're naïve, stubborn and reckless. And the only reason you've had it so easy so far is because you're so damn good-looking. (Hill 2012, 101)

Lord Orville, meanwhile, pronounces *Evelina* 'A poor weak girl!' (Burney 1778, 37), and while he defends her impolite behaviour, this is more the function of his own innate gallantry than any proof of his esteem for a very young woman incapable of behaving appropriately in polite society. *Evelina*'s error, and Orville's defence of it, have grievous potential consequences: although ultimately the issue is resolved without violence, *Evelina*'s chaperone warns her that the man she has slighted "would think it a provocation sufficiently important for a duel, if his courage equalled his wrath" (Burney 1778, 84). *Evelina* concludes that "really, I think there ought to be a book, of the laws and customs *à-la-mode*, presented to all young people, upon their first introduction into public company", *Evelina* itself, of course, constitutes just such a book (Burney 1778, 84).

The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots is unique in its representation of a young contemporary woman navigating the male dominated mining and construction industry in remote Western Australia.⁶ The heroine, Lena, learns by experience through her dealings with her co-workers, and the remote site's initially alien living conditions and work practices. As one of only a handful of women on the worksite, Lena unsurprisingly attracts much attention from her male co-workers from the moment she arrives. Their constant and intense scrutiny inhibits her ability to acclimatise and fit into the workplace as a professional. While Lena has previously worked without difficulty in her firm's metropolitan office, on arriving in the Pilbara she quickly discovers that her gender and sexuality are uncomfortably conspicuous. When she arrives on site, everyone stares at "her perfectly respectable shorts" that suddenly feel "inappropriately short and her smart business shirt much too fitted and much too pink" (Hill 2002, 14). When she announces she is the new site engineer, the men respond sceptically, with her boss telling her, "Get yourself a uniform and boots—steel-capped. Tie up your hair and— ...I don't suppose there's anything you can do much about the rest of it" (Hill 2002, 17). The way Lena's city-sculpted attire is deemed inappropriate for the worksite strikes the reader as humiliating. In an act of self-defence, Lena undertakes a radical transformation, a make-under, in an effort to fit in and be accepted by her peers. She decides she "didn't want to be constantly playing second fiddle to her sex" so the next day dons "her oldest, droopiest pair of cargoes", adds "a boring ponytail" and "no make-up" in the pursuit of appearing "plain, frumpy and utterly unworthy of a second glance" (Hill 2012, 21-22). Her aim to "fit-in" by undoing the signs of urban femininity suggests an attempt to refocus attention away from her body and status as a token woman toward her professional role as an engineer. Lena's decision to dress differently suggests her awareness of how the gendered body, especially the feminine body, can be read by others and her efforts to obfuscate such difference.

Evelina, meanwhile, endures a painful cosmetic transformation designed to exaggerate her gendered appearance, and to "*Londonize*" (Burney 1778, 25) her so that she might conform to the fashionable expectations of the society into which she has been introduced. "I have just had my hair dressed," Evelina writes to her guardian,

You can't think how oddly my head feels; full of powder and black pins, and a great *cushion* on the top of it. I believe you would hardly know

⁶ Loretta Hill has since written sequels to *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* called *The Girl in the Hard Hat* and *The Girl in the Yellow Vest*. Georgina Penney has also written a mining romance, *Fly-In Fly-Out* (2015).

me, for my face looks quite different ... my hair is so much entangled, *frizled* they call it (Burney 1778, 27-28).

Both heroines must learn to conform to the gendered dictates of their new societies. Lena and Evelina, moving in the Pilbara and in London respectively, quickly learn that their gender and presumed sexual availability are their most conspicuous attributes. Their sexual status at once gives them a degree of privilege, or at least instant notoriety in societies to which they are strangers, but it also renders them vulnerable to verbal and even physical assault.

Much like Lena, Evelina is repeatedly propositioned throughout the novel. Her status as a sexually available young woman and her lack of an obvious male protector leave her intensely vulnerable to sexualised harassment. At the Vauxhall pleasure gardens, Evelina is terrified into leaving her companions after sustained physical attacks:

A large party of gentlemen, apparently very riotous, and who were hallooing, leaning on one another, and laughing immoderately, seemed to rush suddenly from behind some trees ... we were presently entirely enclosed. The Miss Branghtons screamed aloud, and I was frightened exceedingly; our screams were answered with bursts of laughter, and for some minutes we were kept prisoners, till at last one of them, rudely seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature.

Terrified to death, I struggled with such vehemence to disengage myself from him, that I succeeded, in spite of his efforts to detain me; and immediately, and with a swiftness which fear only could have given me, I flew rather than ran up the walk, hoping to secure my safety by returning to the lights and company we had so foolishly left: but before I could possibly accomplish my purpose, I was met by another party of men, one of whom placed himself so directly in my way, calling out, "Whither so fast, my love?" – that I could only have proceeded by running into his arms.

In a moment both my hands, by different persons, were caught hold of, and one of them, in a most familiar manner, desired, when I ran next, to accompany me in a race; while the rest of the party stood still and laughed.

I was almost distracted with terror, and so breathless with running, that I could not speak; till another, advancing, said, I was as handsome as an angel, and desired to be of the party. I then just

articulated, "For Heaven's sake, gentlemen, let me pass!" (Burney 1778, 197)

There is, apparently, no escape from such harassment, which sees Evelina running from one frightening encounter to another, until she is finally able to re-join her party and secure her exit from the gardens. Her protests are wholly ineffectual, and her physical struggles merely made the subject of further persecution. Such scenes are repeated throughout the novel, underscoring Evelina's vulnerability at every turn. There is, seemingly, no place she can go, no activity she can undertake that is free from gendered harassment. Through almost incessant reiterations of similar scenes, the novel demonstrates that no public space, and almost no private one, is safe for the young heroine. Gendered persecution is all but ubiquitous, and the novel presents both its relentlessness and its sheer quotidian banality. It is only Evelina's unfamiliarity with society that allows her even to mark this constant harassment: other women in the novel, more habituated to the routine violence of encounters with men, hardly seem to notice it.

Surveillance / Sexism / Scrutiny

In addition to her unfamiliarity with London society, part of Evelina's vulnerability stems from her uncertain social status. She often appears to others as an "unprotected" woman, one without an obvious father figure, who is thus peculiarly liable to men's sexualised aggression. The novel reveals that Evelina's claims to belong to the society in which she moves are themselves suspect: her father disputes the legality of his marriage to her mother, and refuses to acknowledge Evelina as his daughter. While Evelina's claims to legitimacy are ultimately upheld, crucially she only achieves this recognition once her marriage to Lord Orville is imminent. That is, she gains a father (and the secure legal position of daughter) only to immediately replace him with a husband (and the secure legal position of wife).

Likewise, *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* sees Lena constantly concerned about her status and legitimate claim to work as an engineer. While Evelina worries about her true origins, Lena's preoccupation partly centres on her university qualifications. Initially, Lena's concerns are shrouded in mystery. The reader learns that she is keen to prove herself a "good engineer" (Hill 2012, 4) and her prime motivation is an incident that occurred while pursuing her engineering degree. Readers learn that after the breakdown of a relationship with one of her university lecturers, Kevin, Lena was led to believe that she had only passed some of her subjects because of his

help. He cryptically suggests that she benefitted from “having a boyfriend who mark[ed] your assignments and exam papers” and that had he not helped her, she “never would have made it through” (Hill 2012, 105). Lena interprets these statements to mean that ultimately Kevin’s interference with her results enabled her to obtain her qualification. While Kevin assures her that her “degree is perfectly intact” (Hill 2012, 106), Lena believes the qualification to be worthless. She views her relocation to the Pilbara as way to prove herself and obtain “all that she had lost. Energy. Confidence. Innocence” (Hill 2012, 32).

Lena’s initial concerns about legitimacy relating to her university qualification extend into a more profound, daily concern in terms of her role as a female engineer. Lena explains that she feels that she has “too much to prove—more than the other engineers who didn’t wear skirts and clips in their hair. She could be as good as any of them; and here was her chance to show it” (Hill 2012, 3). In essence, what Lena craves is to become a “good engineer” (Hill 2012, 2). Yet, the workplace sexism directed towards her binds together her femininity and her presumed lack of skill as an engineer. Through Lena’s imagined story, Hill seeks to represent the lived experience of women engineers. Gendered assumptions about men’s and women’s aptitude are shown by Hill to infect attitudes within the profession. According to Hacker (1981) engineers value being “adept” rather than “inept”, where “ineptness” is often associated with femininity. Thus, an engineer who appears to lack the appropriate skills and knowledge often faces ostracism or teasing. Further, as Frehill notes, “[e]ngineering work, by definition, requires *application* of the theoretical principles of math and science. It is imperative to ‘prove oneself’ by ‘doing’” (1997, 131). In the novel, Lena’s physical exclusion from the construction site initially prevents her demonstrating her ability to apply the theoretical principles of engineering. She asks her boss, Carl, “What does an engineer from Perth come here to do?” implying that she expects to work in the role to which she was appointed, not as an office girl. Carl responds, “you forget that you’re also young, female and fuckin’ inexperienced”. Lena replies, “believe me ... I’m never allowed to forget it” (Hill 2012, 37). Carl’s comment emphasises Lena’s gender in a way that suggests that being a woman impedes her ability to perform her professional duties. He emphasises her lack of experience and age while suggesting that she must somehow prove herself as competent and capable. Yet, he intentionally excludes and isolates her from the site where the application of her skills and knowledge should occur. Carl’s efforts to undermine Lena extend beyond verbal harassment; he appears to intentionally withhold opportunities for her to

demonstrate her professional skills, and in so doing disprove his sexist assumptions.

Lena experiences workplace sexism, harassment and discrimination for much of the novel. From her first day on site, she is repeatedly subjected to an array of sexist behaviour from men at all levels of the organisation. How Lena is treated spans across the three main types of sexism as identified by Benokraitis (1997): "blatant", "covert" and "subtle". "Blatant" sex discrimination refers to acts that "intentionally" and "visibly" treat women unequally, "covert" sex discrimination are acts that are "hidden, purposeful, and often, maliciously motivated" and "subtle" sex discrimination is "typically less visible and obvious" than blatant forms (Benokraitis 1997, 7-13). For example, Lena experiences what Benokraitis terms sex discrimination by "collegial exclusion" where "women are made to feel invisible or unimportant through physical, social, or professional isolation" (Benokraitis 1997, 23). After arriving on site, Lena is tasked with what she describes as a "data entry job" (24) confining her to the office and making no use whatever of her engineering qualification. Carl, Lena's boss, provides no explanation as to why she has been given this job. After six days, unsurprisingly Lena is so frustrated that she takes herself out onto the wharf, where much of the "real" site work is happening. Another example of subtle sexism sees the men on site reaffirm Lena's "difference" by assigning her the nickname, "Madame Engineer". The name serves as a reminder that while she may be a well-qualified professional, her ability and competence is less important than her sex. The novel's characters give voice to stereotypes that are known to carry weight in the engineering profession. Indeed, as Bastalich et al. argue, thinking through what it means to be an "engineer" is a highly gendered process, whereby "to be an engineer is to be a man" (2007, 390). Despite Lena donning a work uniform and requisite "steel-capped boots" in an attempt to hasten her workplace assimilation, such measures fail to obfuscate the "difference" to which her nickname and its repeated use on site constantly reaffirms.

Lena's experience of casual and everyday occupational sexism in the novel is rarely acknowledged as such. The language used toward and about Lena, the professional limitations placed on her, and the catcalling and incessant requests for romantic or sexual contact from her colleagues clearly fulfil what are now the widely understood criteria of sexist behaviour and workplace harassment. Yet, Lena is peculiarly unwilling to explicitly identify such behaviour as sexist, or as harassment. While this can be baffling for the common reader, especially in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and #metoo movement, it likely reflects some of the industry practices

which *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* sets out to explore. Frehill (1997) has analysed subtle forms of sexism in the engineering industry. She notes that surveys of female engineers have revealed that some women view sexist behaviour by male colleagues as “‘obnoxious’ rather than as a form of discrimination” (Frehill 1997, 132). Furthermore, research undertaken by Bastalich et al. with female and male engineers revealed that individual women had different strategies for dealing with sexism (2007, 390). As Bastalich et al. discovered, some female engineers “spoke about ‘ignoring’ sexism, or finding it ‘entertaining’ or ‘amusing’” while others “emphasised the importance of ‘not reacting’ (or getting upset) when teased and tested, even when this reached extreme levels” (2007, 385).

In *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots*, men in powerful positions repeatedly encourage Lena to pursue formal complaints and “official” routes for dealing with workplace sexism and harassment. In doing so, they exemplify what Sarah Projansky in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* has identified as a “men can be feminists too” style of postfeminism, in which men appear to make “better” feminists than women (2001, 67-68). Within the novel, this “men can be feminists” style of postfeminism is represented in opposition to Lena’s attitude towards dealing with sexual harassment. Lena’s line manager Carl, and Dan – who is both the head of the client organisation and Lena’s love interest – both demonstrate clearly feminist credentials by suggesting that she pursue the formal, structural procedures for dealing with sexism. Dan encourages Lena to report sexual harassment however she declines, explaining: “Dan, if I reported every guy who tried to take advantage of me like that, I’d be here till the cows came home” (Hill 2012, 192). Her belief in the futility of making formal complaints about how she is treated implies that the twinned problems of sexism and sexual harassment are institutionalised, and that no effective attempts have been made to address these problems through leadership, formal policies and procedures. It should be noted, however, that this situation can only be inferred from Lena’s comments and assumptions, and that the novel never explicitly addresses the structural problems its plot implies. Lena’s attitude reflects the tendency to “ignore” the behaviour, despite Dan imploring her to treat the situation seriously. Lena however is not swayed, stating, “You ... need to trust me. Let me handle things in my own way” (Hill 2012, 192). Dan warns her she should not feel “shame” in “rock[ing] the boat” (Hill 2012, 193). Lena’s decision or apparent “choice” to deal with the situation herself reflects a postfeminist attitude to sexism, whereby responsibility for the issue is seen to be accepted by the individual rather than acted upon at an organisational level. The men in power also fail to address the problem before them; they

demonstrate a lack of commitment to addressing workplace sexism and choose not to enter a complaint on Lena's behalf, or at least reprimand their colleagues. The scale and persistence of harassment depicted in the novel creates the impression of a workplace in which such behaviour is not only tolerated but tacitly approved. Despite this, *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* represents a protagonist who prefers postfeminist, individualist solutions to address (or rather ignore) her workplace problems, rather than identifying and seeking formal redress for structurally located sexism and inequality.

The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots, while imagining what appear to be almost untenable scenarios of workplace harassment and discrimination, nevertheless does not, as a novel, appear to take such harassment terribly seriously. No permanent harm befalls Lena or her career, and while the threat of sexual violence seems to hang over the novel, it is male characters like Dan who seem to recognise these risks, of which Lena remains largely unaware, suggesting that in some ways she is as naïve as her colleagues believe. While the sexual harassment in *Evelina* is equally serious and prevalent, Evelina herself is not only sensitive to such behaviour and made frightened and uncomfortable by it, she is also keenly aware of those times when she is threatened with sexual assault, and her fear is palpable. It is ironic that a novel written two centuries prior to the theorising or penalising of such behaviour nevertheless seems better able to articulate the ways in which such harassment impacts on the lives of its victims.

One striking way in which these novels resemble one another is in the near-ubiquity of harassment they present. Almost all of the novels' male characters respond to the heroines with sexual invitations or outright violence. The exception, in both novels, lies with the heroes: Dan and Lord Orville are conspicuous in *not* harassing Lena and Evelina, respectively. While both Dan and Orville at first openly criticize the heroines, this criticism is for the most part directed toward their inappropriate behaviour, rather than, say, their appearance. Neither Dan nor Orville participates in the boorish, aggressively sexual behaviour of their male counterparts, and it is this distinction that marks them as desirable love interests to the reader. Gerard A. Barker (1985) notes that *Evelina's* Lord Orville closely resembles that paragon of eighteenth-century fiction, Samuel Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison. Novel readers of the period were trained to recognise Grandisonian elements as pointing to the hero of even the most doubtful plot, such was the cultural pre-eminence of Richardson's novel. Lord Orville is immediately recognizable as a Grandison figure because of

his gentlemanly behaviour, especially in contrast to *Evelina's* other male characters.

Twenty-first-century readers lack a similarly universal archetype of idealised fictional masculinity, however it is clear that novelists can still rely on the existing cultural understanding of their readers as a kind of shorthand in characterisation. If anything, Grandison's survival as an archetype through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, especially in the form of Darcy in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), means that Richardson's hero still exerts a kind of indirect influence on contemporary romance. Romance novelists conspicuously utilise Darcy as a model for their own heroes. In *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots*, the reader and heroine immediately notice the hero's similarity to other romantic heroes and his difference from other men in the novel: he is handsome, powerful and commands respect from all around him. It is evident, however, that on the Cape Lambert construction site it is not difficult for a mature, respectful and fairly sensible man to stand apart from the others. The majority of men on site appear to enjoy the constant surveillance of Lena and compete for who can have the most offensive interaction with her. Lena cannot go anywhere on site without being escorted or attracting unwanted male attention, including a barrage of offensive pick-up lines. In the mess hall, Lena notes the "sleazy grins", the feeling that everyone knew who she was (Hill 2012, 20) and the many winks. When she meets her co-workers, the "barge boys", she describes them as "friendly, abrasive and completely sexist" (Hill 2012, 21). The novel's hero captures most succinctly the kind of workplace men such as the "barge boys" create:

They smoke anywhere they like. The toilet dongas are a breeding ground for disease. They litter. They forget to wear their PPE [personal protective equipment], or the PPE they do have is damaged or inadequate. They drive their utes too fast. There is a speed limit, you know. They break things. Last week someone backed his ute into the conveyor and bent one of the struts! Luckily, no serious damage. They don't wait thirty minutes after hot work before clearing the site. They don't tag damaged equipment, they just chuck it in a container so some other person can re-discover it and not tag it all over again. They don't read safety memos! (Hill 2012, 90)

With so many male foil characters around, it is not surprising that the heroes of both novels appear attractive. That Orville and Dan are attractive is clear: it is evident from more than just the novels' marriage-plot style conclusions that the novels' heroines desire these men.

What the heroines are to *do* about their desires, however, remains a fraught and delicate matter, even in the twenty-first century.

Sexuality

While seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century novels represented women's sexual desire, as the genre's conventions began to ossify in the mid-eighteenth century it became less and less acceptable to express female desire outside explicitly pornographic genres. Not until the literary and later sexual revolutions of the twentieth century would women's desire come to be depicted, without censorship, in mainstream fiction. For convention-bound Anglophone romance fiction, dominated for much of the twentieth century by a small number of publishers, this revolution was both belated and constrained. Thus, it is unsurprising that Burney does not seek to convey any aspect of her heroine's sexual desires: Evelina's sexuality, such as it is, is merely a collection of fantasies and assumptions imposed upon her – and her young, female body – by others. The novel ends with her marriage and implied sexual experience, but it decisively ends *prior* to this event: "All is over", writes the heroine, "the fate of your Evelina is decided!". She is married, and "the chaise now waits which is to conduct me ... to the arms of the best of men" (Burney 1778, 406). The novel cannot encompass a heroine with a sexual life – even one sanctioned by law and custom – and so it ends.

One might expect that a novel published in 2012 would manage such matters very differently, and to a certain extent this is the case. From the moment that Lena meets Dan, it is clear that she is deeply attracted to him. Readers encounter in Dan the familiar hallmarks of a romantic hero with his "masculine voice", "drop dead gorgeous" looks: he is "tall" with "broad shoulders" (Hill 2012, 32). Such phrases clearly differentiate him from the rabble of men Lena has so far encountered on the worksite. From such descriptions, Lena's physical attraction to Dan is unmistakable. However, their interactions, both professional and personal, establish clear differences in opinion, experience and stature that prevent Lena from acting on her desires for much of the novel. Lena holds a conflicted view of Dan, summed up best by her description of him as "Mr Tall, Dark and Obnoxious" after they first meet. Her bifurcated opinion of Dan is emphasised via the narration that repeatedly describes Dan with reference to specific body parts such as his "magnetic gaze" (33), "deep velvet voice" (77), "his solid male back" (51), "incredible muscles" (60) and his uncharacteristic stubble (112). Readers interpret a kind of bridled attraction in these phrases

whereby Lena's focus on isolated body parts may be a preventative measure against succumbing to the overwhelming effect (or its potential) of her attraction to him. To see Dan fully may mean losing herself to intense attraction.

For much of the novel Lena grapples with a number of barriers that curtail her attraction; while she admits the attraction (via the novel's use of free indirect discourse), she cannot act on it. This is partly because Dan is the project client and a relationship between them would be unprofessional whilst creating conflict with her co-workers; it is also due to the fact that Lena finds Dan insufferable and arrogant. In following romantic tradition, Dan's overly protective paternal gestures are first misconstrued as the traits of an arrogant and obnoxious man, however later revelations make clear that Dan's scrutiny of health and safety protocols, alongside his efforts to protect Lena from workplace dangers, stems from his trauma over the death of his brother in a workplace incident.

These barriers prevent Lena from expressing her intense attraction to Dan for much of the novel, creating a kind of titillating but stifled eroticism. Recognition of Dan's exemplary physical attributes serves as a precursor to a more frustrated display from Lena as she experiences jealousy at the thought he may have a girlfriend (63), inquires about his personal life (100), fantasises about kissing him (150) and fears swooning at his touch (153) before eventually admitting to herself that she "has feelings for Dan" (203). While Lena and Dan eventually resolve the barriers between them and declare their love for each other, the novel defers from depicting unbridled sexual attraction: the reader remains outside the bedroom door. Lena eventually secures a metaphorical marriage when she and Dan are proclaimed "Mr and Mrs Cape Fuckin Lambert" (340) by one of their co-workers in the mess hall. In response Lena describes herself as "the happiest girl in Western Australia" (341). There is, however, an irony at work in the public and private roles that Lena plays. Lena becomes an ideal romantic heroine by navigating the barriers and impediments to love, yet her journey is largely devoid of a sexual dimension. Most of the male characters openly construct and view Lena as a sexual object, yet the narrative constructs her as an almost desexualised heroine who is unable to express her intense attraction to Dan beyond the euphemistic descriptions of his physicality and the relatively gentle effects his presence has on her own body. Lena's restraint may be read in a number of ways including in the context of being treated as a "girl" in terms of the novel's title and the environment in which the story takes place (via her nickname "Madame Engineer"), and in the conclusion as being a "Mrs" to Dan's "Mr".

While on a remote worksite it appears acceptable for a woman to be sexually objectified and harassed by her 350 male co-workers, in the context of the novel it is not acceptable for Lena to project herself as a mature independent woman with a mature sexuality. In this respect the narrative's primary preoccupation is with proving Lena's professional and public worth rather than allowing for her expression of adult sexuality. It would seem that Lena is permitted to be a "girl" and a girl only, affirmed strongly by the novel's title, narrator, setting and seemingly by the hero.

Conclusion

Reading these two novels together provides further evidence for the claim that many generic conventions of romance established in the eighteenth century persist into contemporary chick lit today. Their representations of incessant, inescapable harassment and discrimination in their heroines' daily lives also underscore the shortcomings of a teleological view of progress in the area of women's rights. The quotidian experiences fictionalized in *The Girl in the Steel Capped Boots* bear a depressing resemblance to those of *Evelina*. The world of *Evelina* might be equally as horrifying as it is exotically fascinating – unfortunately, the same may be said of the contemporary world Lena inhabits, in a democracy in which women, at least theoretically, enjoy legal equality. What is at stake in both novels is women's agency – ultimately, neither novel is able to present a model for how women might enjoy full autonomy as individuals.

Two issues – the novels' intertextuality and their representations of gendered violence and discrimination – may themselves be inextricably bound together. The social mores of the eighteenth century informed what could be acceptably presented in fiction, especially in its depictions of women and gender relations. Through this fiction's dominating generic influence these attitudes still, to an extent, persist in the generic conventions of Anglophone romance fiction. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider how far this is itself a problem of intertextuality in the romance genre, a genre whose very conventions may indeed work to normalize scenes of sexualized violence and entrench retrograde gender norms.

Evelina and *The Girl in the Steel Capped Boots* highlight the lived experience of sexism through sheer weight of detail, as their heroines log every leer, every snide or dismissive comment, every grope and threat of rape. They humanize and make immediate and particular the everyday burden of being young, female and vulnerable to harassment in a closed,

self-policing society. Even as they stake their claims to novelty on the day-to-day experiences in communities rendered exotic through being remote from most readers' first-hand knowledge, they expose the deep injustices present in these societies through their heroines' naïve interactions. By encouraging the readers' identification with their heroines, these novels offer imaginative access to the inner lives of young women, whose everyday experience of gendered violence might, it is to be hoped, draw attention to the sheer banality of discrimination faced by young women "entering the world".

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