

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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Contemporary
Literary Criticism

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Volume 130

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Linda Pavlovski
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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *CLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Beryl Bainbridge

1933-

(Full name Beryl Margaret Bainbridge) English novelist, short story writer, nonfiction writer, and screenplay writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Bainbridge's career through 1999. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 4, 5, 8, 10, 14, 18, 22, and 62.

INTRODUCTION

English author Beryl Bainbridge is best known for creating spare, morbidly humorous fiction that examines the bizarre, often violent, turns of events that reflect the tenuous, menacing quality of modern life. Drawing upon her stormy upbringing in working-class Liverpool, Bainbridge was initially known as a writer of thrillers that chronicled ordinary lives in postwar England, as in *Harriet Said* (1972) and *The Bottle Factory Outing* (1974). In subsequent novels, however, she has reenacted historical events—the Polar expedition of Robert Falcon Scott in *The Birthday Boys* (1991) and the sinking of the *Titanic* in *Every Man for Himself* (1996)—to great effect and critical acclaim.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bainbridge was born in Liverpool in 1933, the daughter of Winifred Baines and Richard Bainbridge, a salesman. Her childhood was decidedly unhappy; her class-conscious mother was discontented with her working-class husband, who was moody, dictatorial, and bad-tempered, and the couple often clashed. Bainbridge began dancing at age six and worked steadily as a child performer. When at age 14 she was expelled from school for drawing a rude picture, her parents sent her to ballet school. However, she ran away to London the next year. After several years of acting, including appearances on stage, television, and radio, she returned to Liverpool and married artist Austin Davies in 1954. While pregnant with the first of her three children, Bainbridge began work on her first novel, *Harriet Said*. This book was completed in 1958, but editors were so appalled by its gruesome plot and amoral child characters that Bainbridge could not find a publisher for it until more than a decade later. Bainbridge put the book aside and continued to write, publishing *A Weekend with Claud* (1967) and *Another Part of the Wood* (1968). After her divorce from Davies in 1959, Bainbridge held various jobs, including a stint in a wine bottling company, which



inspired *The Bottle Factory Outing*. In 1970 Bainbridge began working as clerk for publishers Duckworth & Company, where fiction editor Anna Haycraft befriended her and published *Harriet Said* in 1972. The following year, Bainbridge received a Booker Prize nomination for *The Dressmaker* (1973; published in America as *The Secret Glass*, 1974), based on the paternal aunts she knew as a child in Liverpool. Bainbridge subsequently earned Booker Prize nominations for three additional works: *The Bottle Factory Outing*, *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989), and *Every Man for Himself* (1996). Bainbridge has also written several television scripts, among them adaptations of her novels *Sweet William* (1975) and *A Quiet Life* (1976). In 1983 she traveled with a television crew throughout industrial England, recording her observations in the nonfiction work *English Journey* (1984). In 1986 Bainbridge began writing a quirky weekly column for the London newspaper *Evening Standard*; these columns were subsequently collected in *Something Happened Yesterday* (1993). Bainbridge continues to live and write in London.

MAJOR WORKS

Bainbridge draws upon her maladjusted family and working-class upbringing as inspiration for much of her work. Portraits of disappointed, temperamental, manipulative men based on her father recur in her stories. Elaborate plotting, alternating points of view, and bizarre humor also characterize her fiction, in which the central dramatic device almost always involves a death or violent act. Bainbridge based *Harriet Said* on a news story about two Australian girls who murdered the mother of one of them. The unnamed thirteen-year-old narrator, in league with her manipulative friend Harriet, chronicles how the two girls ensnare their married neighbor Mr. Biggs in a carefully planned seduction and proceed to frame him for the murder of his wife. The book's complex narrative structure begins with the aftermath of the central crime. The narrator then recounts the events leading to the climax and neatly ends the story where it started. Bainbridge experimented with stream-of-consciousness techniques in *A Weekend with Claud*, a departure from her usual spare style. A photograph serves as the unifying motif of the novel, prompting Claud—the first of Bainbridge's manipulative, predatory male characters—to recall his relationship with a woman named Maggie. The book recounts Maggie's disappointing interactions with Claud and three other men in her life. *Another Part of the Wood* concerns Joseph, a selfish, insensitive man who brings his mistress, his son Roland, and some friends to a cabin for a weekend, setting off events that lead to Roland's death. Bainbridge considered both *A Weekend with Claud* and *Another Part of the Wood* artistic failures. As a result she revised and re-issued them in 1981 and 1979, respectively. In *The Dressmaker*, Bainbridge fully realized the minimalist writing style for which she is known. As in *Harriet Said*, the book begins and ends with the cover-up of the same murder. Seventeen-year-old Rita lives with her aunts Margo and Nellie, who are inspired by Bainbridge's own Liverpool relatives. Bainbridge creates an unnerving portrait of Rita, Margo, and Nellie's lonely, colorless lives during World War II. Rita falls in love with an American G.I. named Ira, with whom Margo also becomes involved. When Nellie finds Margo and Ira together, she stabs Ira, causing him to fall down the stairs to his death. In *The Bottle Factory Outing*, central characters Brenda and her friend Rita experience misadventures while planning an outing with their co-workers at the bottle factory. Bainbridge explores their desperate self-deceptions in a grotesque comedy of errors resulting in Freda's death and Brenda's discovery of her body. A typical bizarre Bainbridge plot twist has Brenda pickling Freda's body and sending it to sea in a barrel in order to minimize trouble for everyone. In *A Quiet Life*, Bainbridge's most autobiographical novel, the central characters Alan and his sister Madge are reunited as adults. Bainbridge uses Alan and Madge to explore the alternate reality that people create which enables them to endure their lives; Alan and Madge revisit events of their childhood, but Alan has reconstructed his story in order to cope with his past. *Young Adolf* (1978) was Bainbridge's first work of historical fiction. Based on an unproven account that

Adolf Hitler traveled to England in his youth to visit his brother and sister-in-law, who actually lived in Liverpool around 1910, the novel chronicles a series of comic incidents that influence Hitler's later life.

An Awfully Big Adventure follows the experiences of a teenager named Stella, who serves as an apprentice at a Liverpool theater during the production of *Peter Pan*. In her innocence, paralleling that of Peter Pan, Stella triggers comic misunderstandings and misalliances in the theater company. Bainbridge's based her next novel, *The Birthday Boys*, on Sir Robert Falcon Scott's failed attempt to be the first man to reach the South Pole in 1910. In a framework constructed from alternating journal entries by each of the expedition's five members, Bainbridge explores Scott's delusional self-confidence during the ill-conceived trek and the crew's relationships among each other and with Scott. The title derives from the crew members' childish insistence on holding birthday celebrations in the middle of the Antarctic. Bainbridge presents each man as a representative of different facets of British society and of human personality, as they begin the expedition with high expectations and gradually freeze to death in the bleak Antarctic landscape. *Every Man for Himself* takes place on the *Titanic* as Morgan, a wealthy young American, travels on the doomed ship with several friends. Morgan interacts with characters such as the sinister Scurra; the beautiful and unattainable Wallis; and the earnest Adele. The rich on the *Titanic* show their true colors when the ship begins to go down, coinciding with Morgan's learning the truth about his life and parentage. *Master Georgie* (1998), another novel based on historical events, begins in England in 1846 and ends during the Crimean War in 1854. The story revolves around young George Hardy, described in alternating narratives by Myrtle, a Liverpool orphan rescued by and taken to live with the upper-class Hardy family; Dr. Potter, a geologist married to George's sister; and Pompey Jones, a street child who is befriended by Myrtle and George. Bainbridge once again uses the motif of a photograph to structure the novel, presenting each chapter as a photographic scene that relates to George and Pompey's interest in photography. Each character is inexorably linked to the selfish, careless George, and each relates a facet of George's character and his impact on themselves and the world as they journey toward disaster in the war.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bainbridge is recognized as an accomplished raconteur of middle- and lower-middle class postwar English life and death. More recently she has won distinction for her reinterpretations of historical events, particularly in *The Birthday Boys* and *Every Man for Himself*, both of which received critical approbation. Her talent for intricate plotting, true-to-life dialogue, convincing characters, and ability to convey volumes of meaning in a single sentence has earned her strong praise from critics, inspiring comparisons to Franz Kafka, Harold Pinter, and Iris Murdoch. Many

CRITICISM

Colin Thubron (review date 23 September 1984)

SOURCE: "An Unsentimental Journey," in *Washington Post Book World*, September 23, 1984, pp. 11, 13.[In the following excerpted review, Thubron contrasts Bainbridge's *English Journey* with J. B. Priestley's 1933 book of the same title.]

In the autumn of 1933 the British novelist and playwright J. B. Priestley undertook a celebrated expedition through his own country, which resulted in his *English Journey*. At a time when most literary travelers were wandering the Mediterranean or were still describing an England of hedgerow land and cathedral close, Priestley confronted the country head-on. With no more than a glance at Salisbury and the Cotswolds, he plunged into the Midlands and the North: Birmingham, the Black Country, his childhood home of Bradford, the Potteries, Liverpool, Tyneside. Here was the demoralized heart of an England still locked in the Depression. At worst its sordidness and decline were unrelieved—a wilderness of derelict factories and rotting suburbia. At best it achieved, in Priestley's prose, the somber majesty of an industrial Gehenna.

Priestley's strength is that he himself belonged to this world. "If I declare that Coketown is a horrible hole," he wrote, "I do not merely mean that it cannot be fitted into some private fairy-tale Merrie England of my own: I mean that it is a damned horrible hole. And I hope you will take my word for it." He recorded what he found without condescension or maudlin pity. His tone is robustly independent, worldly, anti-Puritan, commonsensical. His compassion is grounded in reality, and leavened by a North-country humor and business sense. His familiarity with urban drabness makes him sensitive to differences which would elude a writer from another background. He is never facile: he does not always equate people with place. Viewing from a tram the fly-blown anonymity of Birmingham, he wonders "if this really represented the level reached by all those people down there on the pavements. I am too near them myself, not being one of the sensitive plants of contemporary authorship, to believe that it does represent their level. They have passed it. . . . They have gone and it is not catching up." . . .

Not all the questions roused by Priestley are answered in Beryl Bainbridge's own *English Journey*, published half a century later. She is too much her own woman—which is nothing at all like Priestley's man. Whereas he wrote with a magisterial fullness, generalized, pontificated, indulged a masculine kindliness and an earthy poetry, Bainbridge is wry, introverted, idiosyncratic. She writes a clipped, impressionistic diary. She is eccentrically funny. Where Priestley presents himself as a down-to-earth man of the world, Bainbridge makes much of her female scattiness,

 PRINCIPAL WORKS

- A Weekend with Claud* [revised edition, 1981] (novel) 1967
Another Part of the Wood [revised edition, 1979] (novel) 1968
Harriet Said (novel) 1972
The Dressmaker [also published as *The Secret Glass*, 1974] (novel) 1973
The Bottle Factory Outing (novel) 1974
Sweet William (novel) 1975
A Quiet Life (novel) 1976
Injury Time (novel) 1977
Young Adolf (novel) 1978
Winter Garden (novel) 1980
English Journey, or the Road to Milton Keynes (nonfiction) 1984
Watson's Apology (novel) 1984
Mum and Mr. Armitage (short stories) 1985
Filthy Lucre, or The Tragedy of Andrew Ledwhistle and Richard Soleway (novel) 1986
Forever England: North and South [reprinted in 1999] (nonfiction) 1987
An Awfully Big Adventure (novel) 1989
The Birthday Boys (novel) 1991
Something Happened Yesterday (nonfiction) 1993
Collected Stories (short stories) 1994
Every Man for Himself (novel) 1996
Master Georgie (novel) 1998

and from behind this camouflage peers out with offbeat wit and shrewdness.

But she has not Priestley's attachment to place, to social issues, to people at large. To her, things often appear more ridiculous than important. Salisbury Cathedral she describes as "too big, too separate"—and the reaction typifies her. She relates best to the intimate. She is not a natural traveler at all. Priestley meets hazards in the grand Victorian manner (in other words, he scarcely mentions them), but exertion makes Bainbridge ill. She gets in traffic jams; she has too much luggage; there are never any porters at the stations.

Is Priestley's expansiveness a symptom of his time—and Bainbridge's enclosedness of hers? Partly, perhaps. Certainly Bainbridge's desire to share her problems and ineptitudes is typical of the modern traveler, while Priestley's book belongs to an age where travel writing was still about the places traveled through, not about the author traveling through them. But there is also a powerful contrast in individual temperament. Bainbridge loves the untypical. Her narrative is laced with zany conversations. Even her memories are quirky (there's a lovely description of a demented stagedoor Johnny who courted her when she was in repertory theater). Her efforts to summarize places—to assess the wholeness of things—are no more than hesitant genuflections to Priestley. She avoids both his pedagogy and his breadth.

At heart she dislikes all modernity. ("There should be a rule against change. Memories have to live somewhere.") She even feels a sentimental nostalgia for Priestley's England, which he deplored. Certainly the 1980s England she discloses is no lovelier than his. At best it is orderly, vulgar and a bit absurd. At worst it is a demoralizing slum. The crowded factory staff of Priestley's time have been shredded thin by automation (robots mesmerize and appall her) and the familiar specter of unemployment now hovers over a landscape of black and Asian minorities.

Yet Bainbridge's chief loathing is reserved for motorways and modern shopping precincts; for all sameness. And perhaps it is in this, at last, that the two authors concur—condemning a world where (in Priestley's words) "everything and everybody is being rushed down and swept into one dusty arterial road of cheap mass production and standardized living." Priestley looked forward to a brighter future while Bainbridge stares back at a romanticized past. The present, as usual, goes unloved.

David Punter (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: "Beryl Bainbridge: The New Psychopathia," in *The Hidden Script: Writing and the Unconscious*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, pp. 59-77.

[In the following essay, Punter examines the presentation of psychological trauma in Bainbridge's novels and the

struggles among her characters, particularly those who are female, to deal with both familial and cultural forces of alienation, deprivation, abuse, and rejection.]

Beryl Bainbridge has acted Krafft-Ebing in response to the self-aware Freudianism of many of her fellow-writers; where Lessing, Carter, Barth, have paraded analysis, she has presented herself during the 1970s as a meticulous chronicler of 'everyday' events, who would raise an innocent eyebrow at any mention of psychosis, whether attached to writer, character, reader or text.¹ The calamities she depicts are, so the surrounding authorial fiction goes, conventionally implicit in our lives: they are a mechanical consequence of our upbringing, and either they will spring out, fully armed, at a later date; or, indeed, they have happened already, and only a thin skin of self-protection prevents us from remembering the terror of adolescence or of poverty. We do not need psychological sophistication to see through to the depths: events are hideously transparent, naturally manifesting the results of age-old cultural trauma. Yet of course in her descriptive and guileless way she forces us back to the schoolroom, back to early occupational experience: did we not then, she asks, experience the fear of being alone, of being unversed in the ways of our parents/employers? Were we too not brought on to a scene where everybody else understood the conventions, and then victimised for not possessing that unobtainable knowledge?

The question below that runs again in terms of gender, and has a curiously symmetrical relation to the question Nabokov poses to his audience. Where he asks whether we too shared, long ago, his experience of dividing the world (of young girls) into the 'knowing' and the 'unknowing' (and he is not so unsubtle as to be referring merely to carnal knowledge), Bainbridge asks whether we shared in the more dire experience of *being known* (as inferior, as junior, as incomplete); and whether, if as readers and particularly as male readers we claim not to remember such a time,² we are thereby collaborating in a great refusal, a refusal of understanding which perpetuates hegemony and the transmission of fear between the sexes. The central characters in Bainbridge's fables of psychosis are mostly small, by nature or by nurture:³ they experience, indeed, the undeniable fact that, through murder, rape or anger, they produce large effects in the world, but there is a gap between cause and effect, between desire and achievement; and is this not, runs the apparently supplementary but really more important question, something which has been specifically done to women? Are not these acts of moral and carnal outrage precisely the inverted reflection of what a masculine culture has visited upon women, and are not male desires in the end fulfillable only through violence, of one kind or another?

None of this is to deny that Bainbridge writes about victims; but when her victims turn, there is a gleefulness in the outcome, even with the young Hitler. All of this, all this grotesquerie and bloodshed, is after all only to be expected while you (the reader?) capitulate in subjecting

others to inhumanity. Thus there is in Bainbridge a wish for rebellion, but no special interest in the rebel: the excitement is more pure than that, more focused on downfall and the upturning of a deadly world. The time for the Other, the inversion, to emerge is, of course, the traditional moment:⁴ it is the moment of celebration, the bottle factory outing, the particular exemption granted in the form of injury time. It is at these moments, when we most hopefully imagine that some form of ritual is going to crown our efforts and achievements, that the voices of those whom we have suppressed in our facile forms of organisation, of those whom we have never prepared to understand the pleasures of our parties, will be raised; in a scream which, at first, we may mistake for participation, but which is eventually revealed as a cry of anguish and fury, the inarticulate sign for all that has been swept under the carpet in order to prepare the (primal) scene for a confirming ritual.⁵

During the 1970s, the furrow Bainbridge has ploughed has appeared a lonely one, in that she has consistently refused the displacements which have become conventional in the 'new fiction', the construction of a mythicised future or the return to a putatively explanatory past; she has also refused to parenthesise her fiction, to frame it within a satisfyingly self-conscious exploration of the writerly task. Her stories stand on their own, largely unweighted by a tacit compact between writer and reader: the signifier remains uncompromisingly rooted in the signified, resisting that increasingly convenient tendency towards play which could convince us that these traumas and psychoses are merely 'effects of the text'. If anything, they are the effects of Liverpool, as a sign for the anti-metropolitan, as the standing rebuff to the existing modes of economic and social organisation, as the continuous 'harbour' of a freer interplay between the material and the aesthetic, as, implicitly, the place where art is determined by the mere resources available and the imagination which seeks to soar over the Mersey is more or less severely punished. For every success which emerges from the North-West, Bainbridge suggests to us, there are a hundred enactments, not of failure, but of simply not breaking through: a hundred endeavours hurled against the wall of deprivation, which receive only the answer, 'Not here, dear', or, at least, 'Not now'. Bainbridge country is a land where the most bizarre of denizens may be found, but only on sufferance: anything can be entertained, but only a few transplants 'take', in either direction. Mostly, we will be condemned to tread the same gravelly roads, only as time goes on they will be all the more bitterly sprinkled with the detritus of hope.

The volumes are therefore slim, and motionless: they stack, like the early recordings of forgotten pop groups, redolent of spent sweetness, of untasted deadly nightshade, of ambitions carried through in thought only. The fact that, so often, the narrator comprehends a larger portion of the story than any one character does not serve as a guarantee of readerly wisdom, real or to be attained, but as a reminder of interpretations unmade, of understandings un-

reached, of all the moments we *could* have seized to construct patterns which might have continued to inform us. It is thus that childhood and adolescence are the essential terrain: for it is only back there, in the painful remembrance of the fear of parental absence, that we can be brought to admit to the continual defeat of expectation. If, Bainbridge says, these fables appear to resonate with present experience, that is by chance: it is too late to learn those lessons, and when the lessons were on offer we were usually looking out of the window. All that remains is a 'quiet life', a life in which those peremptory voices are content to remain silent, having weighed up their chances of audibility; yet it is also within those quiet lives that our secrets are held, every moment of collapse held sequestered in the continuing story of a locked family, an individual reduced to silence by the pressures of conflict. Each family, each place of work, stands as a silent monument to our past; each gesture we made is replicated at large in the frozen posture of some group locked into fear, incomprehension, worst of all guilt. Behind the net curtains, our own past survives; we can be brought, by the narrator, to see it, but the possibility of learning has probably been eclipsed, many years ago. These situations survive as hieroglyphs, encapsulated signs in the language of the unconscious, visible warnings on the road; but we give them little credit, and cannot predict the future moment when we too will see ourselves in the waxworks, will realise that our movement, our escape to the bright lights, has been illusory, that we too are being observed in our role as monitory sculptures, turned to permanent stone in the very moment of indignity.

In *Harriet Said* (1972), the narrative plays delicately around the problem of signification: that is to say, the central characters are clearly enacting a script, but we are never certain whose, and thus the meaning of events remains in doubt. At a fairly obvious level, Harriet is the succubus, the ever-present whispering self who eggs the narrator on (harries her) to mate with her father (the Tsar) and kill her mother (Mrs Biggs—who is, just before her death, 'huge and menacing',⁶ the frozen statue of adulthood before whom the narrator initially quails, but who has to be reduced to dust.)⁷ Yet at every turn Harriet's plans are in fact undercut by the narrator's; this blank and terrible 'I' takes Harriet's words and injunctions and twists them to an unconscious but preformed plan of her own. Thus there is an inversion: Harriet becomes the blank slate on which the narrator inscribes the record of her own desires, the ambiguous authority who can be invoked to justify any practice. If the unconscious is indeed structured like a language, the narrator's ritual progress through puberty is depicted as a dramatised encounter with that language, and as a subjugation of it: Harriet ends up baffled and threatened by the power of the narrator (who is, of course, structurally the only agent who can confer meaning) to distort her comparatively puny imaginary crimes into a realised tale of sex and murder. Thus the narrator acts as a pure 'embodiment': she exists to give carnal form (and the form of carnage) to the promptings of the unconscious. She is thus herself empty (nameless); and the

fear we experience as readers springs from our uncomfortable proximity to a superior shaping power (Bainbridge incarnated) before whose unseen plans we can manifest only a shudder. What *Harriet* says is significant only insofar as it provides the pretext for the narrator's interpretation: Harriet offers, for instance, the category of humiliation (the Tsar/father must be 'humbled'),⁸ but it is the narrator who connects this empty signifier with the available contents of the unconscious, and carries the desire through to a dreadful completion before which the prompter can only stand aghast—for a moment, before she begins again to act her role and fabricate cover stories after the event. Yet for the narrator, it is vital to maintain the claim that Harriet is the true 'agent':

How could I not understand her? I would have given all the power of my too imaginative mind and all the beauty of the fields and woods, not to understand her. And at last I gave in to Harriet, finally and without reservation. I wanted the Tsar to be humiliated, to cower sideways with his bird's head held stiffly in pain and fear, so that I might finish what I had begun, return to school forgetting the summer, and think only of the next holidays that might be as they had always been.⁹

What is thus enacted is the story of the girl-child's revenge against the father (the real father is constructed as a caricature, compounded of practical ineffectuality and swearing, absurdly laying claim to a power which is actually wasted beyond recall), in its full duplicity: the narrator constructs a false Other (the script of Harriet) in the name of which (in the name of the sister) she is then freed to humble and mutilate the masculine.¹⁰ As well as an absent father, the text also presents us with an actual absent sister (Frances); we are invited to suppose that the narrator acts under an imperative to fill in those blanks in the familial text, even though violence is the only sign under which they can come to have meaning: only through death can life be affirmed.

The narrator is stout and imaginative, body-full and fantasy-full: Harriet's dry and slender presence provides only a frame within which this over-present femininity can perform a drama, *the* drama. And yet there is no fullness in the narrator's response: the subjugation of the male and mother-murder contain a meaning to which she (so we are invited to suppose) has no conscious access. It is only by reference to the mythical authority of Harriet that she can convey to us the significance of her actions. Before this mirror (and filling the empty reflection with her own wishes), she can experience fullness, but in so doing she renounces the claim to interpretation: thus we are drawn into a circle of shared naivety, and invited to examine the Others we erect as justifications, as objective correlatives, for our crimes.¹¹

How often had Harriet recoiled from me, telling me I was ugly, that I must modify and govern the muscles of my face. It was not that my feelings illuminated and transformed me, as Harriet became transformed in diabolical anger or joy, it was more a dreadful eagerness and vulnerability that made my face like an open wound, with all the nerves exposed and raw.¹²

Thus Harriet provides the pretext on which the 'wound', the assumed castration, can be made manifest, and the Tsar can be 'un-manned'; we suspect that this 'ugliness' is the outward sign of something quite different, of the unmanageability of female trauma, something before which Harriet, like the Tsar, cowers. We are thus presented with a drama of female omnipotence: if, as Cixous claims, the feminine consciousness is plural, in part a defensive linking of many in the face of the demanding, phallic 'one',¹³ then we should not be surprised if this plurality begins to act like a team of bent detectives, endlessly covering for each other in an unscripted spiral so that the excuses for crime are themselves multiplied as the alibi becomes totally secure. Like Macavity, the narrator was never there, and so the story of her own burgeoning sexuality and its links with violence is again buried. There is no growth possible in the text, only an increasing complexity of cover stories:

At last I was allowed to go to bed. I lay in the dark wide-eyed. I had avoided real displeasure, I had been kissed, I had explained the broken window. They would never trace it to me, the more so as Harriet had been home early. I had lied very well and cried effortlessly; I would look white and ill in the morning. I thought of the beautiful night and my god-like strength in the church and I began to smile when I remembered the Tsar's banged nose under the lamp. Harriet could not have managed better.¹⁴

It is thus, Bainbridge suggests, that the girl-child grows to maturity: fragmenting, developing a spurious self-management, endlessly referring desire to a hypothesised Other (Harriet is the spurious plural, 'Woman'), and thus becoming, paradoxically, the means for enacting the necessary vengeance for the thousands of years of male domination.

The construction of the female superego, and its purposes (which are quite different from those of the male equivalent), are again the ground against which *The Dress-maker* (1973) takes its form, and here again we are given a story which we are invited to see through: coupled with female vengeance, we are invited to a view of female 'transparency', as the writer's own revenge for generations of pornographic scopophilia. The tiniest of devices is significant:

Afterwards she went through into the little front room, the tape measure still dangling about her neck, and allowed herself a glass of port.¹⁵

In the 'allowance' to her self, a severance of the female subject already suggests that one part is going to be capable of anything; there is a ridding of scruple, a preparing for the feast, and this premonition is confirmed by the description of the fleshy young male American:

A great healthy face, with two enquiring eyes, bright blue, and a mouth which when he spoke showed a long row of teeth, white and protruding. It was one of those Yanks. Jack was shocked. Till now he had never been that close. They were so privileged, so foreign; he had never dreamt to see one at close quarters in Nellie's