

Border Crossings in Isabella Valancy Crawford's Story-Paper Fiction

Scholarship on the nineteenth-century short story has lagged behind studies in modern short fiction, while criticism of early Canadian short stories, especially before 1890, has been sparse and sometimes condescending. The reasons for this are both obvious and complex—not least, the continuing influence of modernist aesthetics over our sense of what is valuable in short fiction.¹ Nevertheless, the short story flourished in the nineteenth century, before Joyce and his contemporaries forged models that cast most of its early practitioners into shadowy areas of literary history. This essay argues that there are good reasons for examining some of the short fiction shaped by traditions of melodrama and romance that the modernists rejected. More specifically, it seeks to show that the little-known stories of Isabella Valancy Crawford reveal a vigorous creative response to the demands of the literary marketplace and prevailing conventions of short fiction in the 1870s.²

Chiefly known for her poetry, Crawford contributed more than thirty stories to popular Canadian and American “story papers” between 1872 and 1886.³ Her earliest work appeared in 1872 and 1873 in two ephemeral Canadian weeklies, *The Hearthstone* and *The Favorite*, but she fell out with their publisher, George-Édouard Desbarats, and over the next twelve years wrote fiction almost exclusively for the prolific New York publishing firm of Frank Leslie.⁴ At least twenty-three stories by Crawford appeared in Leslie publications, notably *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner*, and it was not until a few months before her death that she again wrote fiction for the Canadian market, producing two stories, “Extradited,” published in the *Toronto Globe*

in 1886, and “In the Breast of a Maple,” published posthumously many years later. What is of interest here are the effects of these border crossings on work composed for Canadian periodicals on the one hand and American papers on the other.

In looking abroad for a more stable and lucrative market than her own country afforded, Crawford is far from unique among nineteenth-century Canadian writers. The first editions of John Richardson’s *Wacousta* (1832), Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), and Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) were published in England, and by the post-Confederation era, as Nick Mount remarks, “Traffic in literary goods and influences moved more freely across Canada’s borders in this period than in any other, and like other forms of economic and intellectual traffic was especially fluid across the country’s only land border” (13).⁵ Crawford’s experience, however, illustrates hazards as well as advantages in the international market for fiction. The ambiguous position of Canadian writers in the Atlantic triangle of English-speaking nations is manifest in the publication history of one of her earliest tales: “The Silvers’ Christmas Eve” first appeared under her name in *The Favorite* in 1872, was pirated, significantly altered, and published anonymously in 1874 under a different title in a British monthly magazine, and shortly thereafter re-crossed the Atlantic to make its third appearance (again anonymously) in the *New York Times*. It is indicative of Canada’s status on the international literary scene that the pirated version has expunged all signs of its Canadian origin.⁶

It is similarly noteworthy that while Crawford’s fiction for Canadian periodicals is usually set in Canada, not one of the stories that she wrote for Leslie’s magazines is. Their settings range from the American West, New York City, upstate New York, and New England, to the coast of Brittany, London and the English countryside, Rome and the Campagna, and the Scottish Highlands. They are populated by Americans of all classes and occupations, British aristocrats, Cockney servants, West Country English lasses, French villagers, and dashing Italian military officers, but nowhere in them is a Canadian or a reference to Canada to be found. In effect, Crawford herself excluded Canadians from her fiction for Leslie’s firm as ruthlessly as the British literary pirate who excised all traces of Canada from “The Silvers’ Christmas Eve.”

Canada had only recently and partly emerged from colonial status, and held small interest for American and British editors who assumed (as did many Canadians, well into the twentieth century) that life in the United

States and Europe was what counted where contemporary manners and cultural activity were concerned.⁷ One ramification of this state of affairs was that Crawford's stories for the American papers became more formulaic and perfunctory over the twelve years in which she produced them. No doubt this deterioration reflects pressing financial need and hasty composition, but her work may have become increasingly vulnerable to the levelling norms of magazine fiction precisely because of its disconnection from the immediate materials of her Canadian experience. It may be no coincidence that several of her early Canadian stories for *The Favorite* and her two late Canadian stories are among her best.

The Canadian border was, however, only one of many that Crawford's fiction crossed: it also breaches boundaries between popular and elite literature, poetry and prose, and humor and melodrama. In the 1870s, the gap between popular and elite literature had not widened to the extent evident under the impact of modernism in the early twentieth century. Writers such as Tennyson (her favorite poet) and Dickens (possibly her favorite novelist) appealed to a broad reading public through exploiting popular modes of romance and melodrama.⁸ Crawford attempted to do the same, but lacked the more secure position that these writers achieved and the privileges that they enjoyed in the world of nineteenth-century publishing. Following the death of her father, an improvident small-town doctor, she found herself at the age of twenty-six living in a Toronto boarding house, supporting herself and her mother largely on what she could make by writing fiction for the readiest market available to her.⁹ Whether through personal preference, editorial constraint, economic exigency, or (more likely) a combination of all three, most of this work is tailored to the demand of the story papers for sentiment, romantic love, melodramatic crisis, and happy endings.

The basic element of romance in Crawford's fiction is the courtship tale of lovers challenged or estranged by difficulties who eventually realize their hopes in the happy ending of marriage.¹⁰ The basic element of melodrama is, of course, the villain who conspires against them. While these conventions occur in innumerable narratives that precede and follow the story-paper era, the fiction published in this medium relies heavily on them and typically presents cursory and banal renderings of the plot. As a critic of works of "story-paper literature" put it succinctly in 1879: "the surprising thing to learn is that there is really so much less in them than might be expected" (Bishop 389). It must be admitted that this judgment applies to some of Crawford's stories; however, as Michael Peterman has suggested, "if the Leslie operation undervalued

aesthetic matters, Crawford often found ways to be creative” (74). Her best stories resist, subvert, and enliven the clichés of romance and melodrama through her command of irony, handling of perspective, and poet’s sense of language. I propose to demonstrate how this is so by considering three examples: “Peaches” (1873), written for *The Favorite*, and “River-Lead Cañon” (1874) and “Beepringle’s Lass” (1876), both published in *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner*. These three pieces illustrate her resourcefulness in handling the formula of story-paper short fiction and also reveal through their respective settings in Canada, the United States, and England a conscious attempt to engage the national and literary ethos of each country.

“Peaches” is one of Crawford’s shortest stories but its brevity yields a wealth of complex meaning. In generic terms, it reflects Crawford’s predilection for poetry by drawing upon the pictorial and linguistic richness of the Tennysonian English idyl, a form that Robert Pattison has described as marked by “self-consciousness and eclecticism” (18). The opening paragraphs create a mellow rural atmosphere and artfully frame the discovery of love in the countryside with an awareness of the city and the greater world beyond, much in the manner of Tennyson’s “The Gardener’s Daughter” (1842) and its famous topographical coordinates: “Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite / Beyond it, blooms the garden that I love” (33-34).¹¹ Crawford is highly conscious of but not in the least anxious about this influence. At the outset, an allusion to Tennyson’s “The Talking Oak” (1842) replaces that imperial arboreal icon with its Canadian counterpart, a “lordly grove of rustling maples ‘hidden to the knees in fern’” (81).¹² This adaptation of the Laureate’s poetic mode and imagery at once acknowledges the Canadian writer’s affiliation with English literature and affirms the authority of her own position and the attractions of her own landscape. Her nationalist viewpoint is amplified a few sentences later when the hero reports that the heroine’s first glance “prostrated him mentally as a ball from a rifle in the hands of one of our ‘Canadian Team’ would have done physically” (81)—a reference to a much-lauded contingent of Canadian militia that won the Kolapore Challenge Cup in 1872 at an annual tournament in Wimbledon, England, for marksmen from different parts of the Empire.¹³ The humorous use of this source of Canadian pride for a romantic simile accompanies the acknowledgement, in this bucolic setting, of mixed realities: the river bears not only “the white wings of fairy fleets” but also “the jetty smoke of great steamers” (81). Moreover, there is throughout the narrative an undercurrent of sexual responsiveness and an awareness of the faintly ridiculous binaries

of gender. The hero is the first to blush when he encounters the heroine, whom the narrator calls, with tongue in cheek, “the Divinity,” and her answering blush contributes to the martial imagery when she puts right his assumption that she is the usual inexperienced maiden of romance: “Mrs. Lawrence,’ corrected the Divinity, a flying squadron of dimples, bannered by a blush, sweeping across that face” (81).

The plot of “Peaches” is simple and perhaps predictable. Hugh Pentrith, a young engineer, arrives in what appears to be the orchard region of southern Ontario to oversee the installation of a bridge and is smitten by a young widow, Rowena Lawrence, who lives with her grandmother in a home beyond the peach orchard beside the village hotel. Leaping ahead several months, the narrative describes how Rowena, now betrothed to Hugh, spies him one evening in the hotel parlor embracing “a fair-faced Juno, crowned with glimmering golden hair” (83). She returns her engagement ring with a peremptory note, and he decides to decamp, declaring to the grandmother his anger over Rowena’s lack of trust, his refusal to explain himself, and his intention “to leave Canada forever next week” (85). Then a sudden shriek impels him to action:

Hugh hurled himself round the corner and met flying towards him a little figure lapped about in golden flames, waving above the bright head in cruel, graceful, slender tongues, and whirling and writhing into the crisp air.

He opened his arms and caught her, crushing the flames down, and yet blinded and cruelly scorched by them as he sprang towards an open cistern, which he remembered mechanically.

It was full, thanks to the autumn rains, and in a second he had plunged with her into it.

By every rule of romance the cistern ought to have been a river, and Hugh ought to have laid Rowena dripping on the grass, pressed a frantic kiss on her brow and departed by express train for the Rocky Mountains.

He did nothing of the kind. He fished her out of the cistern, and when he saw what the flames had done to the pretty white neck, the dimpled arms and the poor little hands, he forgot that one side of his own face was cruelly scorched, and his arms literally masses of raw, hideous blisters; he forgot everything but the fact that she still lived and breathed faintly, and that he had saved her. (85-86)

Clearly, Crawford is able here—as in many stories—to have her romance and mock it too. This she achieves principally through her narrator, a colleague in Hugh’s head office named Compass (signifying perhaps not only his engineering profession but also his comprehension of things and ability to assess their value). As a surrogate for Crawford, he provides the distancing effect that Pattison regards as characteristic of the idyl (19-20), cultivating

lyrical grace and urbane irony in his narration just as he does a combination of sympathy and amusement in his perspective on romantic love.

In the final part of the narrative, having recovered from their injuries, Hugh tells Rowena that the Junoesque woman at the hotel was in fact his sister, who had been passing hurriedly through the village with her husband. Following a break in the text, an unidentified voice—proxy for the reader, it seems—demands: “Pray, what have peaches to do with all this nonsense, may I ask?” To which the narrator responds:

Well perhaps not much. They met under the peach blossoms, and Hugh thinks that except for that peach preserve attending to which Rowena’s dress took fire, she might never have stood beside him crowned with a rosy coronal of the same rich blooms, while he slipped on the third finger of her left hand a plain gold ring, with the sapphire set with pearls to guard it.

That is the reason I call this humble tale “peaches,” and as that delectable fruit has a kernel, so this has a moral which you are heartily welcome to if you can find it. (87)

This challenge to readers is a rather different and certainly a less threatening proposition than Mark Twain’s notice at the outset of *Huckleberry Finn* that “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (2). Mr. Compass’ valedictory remark is of a piece with his arch narration and invites us to wonder what moral he has in mind. Is it one of the aphorisms uttered in the text, perhaps the grandmother’s admonition that “love is as sharp to wound as hate” (85), or the proverb “*L’homme propose et Dieu dispose*” (85)? Is it some cautionary wisdom about the danger of jumping to conclusions, or the attendance of folly upon romance, or the role of chance in human affairs? Or is it perhaps an oblique comment on the necessity of attending to the texture and implications of the entire story rather than reducing it to a moral? The pleasure of eating a peach is in savouring the flesh rather than swallowing the pit, and the pleasures of Crawford’s story are certainly more inherent in its sensuous language, allusiveness, and complex narrative effects than they are in any moral that might be extracted, or, for that matter, in the familiar plot of romantic love in adverse circumstances and a heroine to be saved from peril.

The editors’ introduction to Crawford’s *Collected Short Stories* suggests that if there is a significant difference between stories published in *The Favorite* and those later published in Leslie’s American papers, “it may be the predominance of humour in the former and melodrama in the latter”

(Early and Peterman, *Collected* xvi). In “Peaches,” one manifestation of this difference is the absence of the stock villain of melodrama, who does, however, make a notable appearance in her next story, “River-Lead Cañon,” with which she made her debut in *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner* in the autumn of 1874. While this tale has a comic frame narrative focused on the unassuming Bolling family, its highly melodramatic main plot features the standard figures of villain, heroine, and hero. Perhaps inspired by the recent success of Bret Harte’s stories about California’s mining camps, Crawford seems to have deliberately designed “River-Lead Cañon” for American readers; certainly she addresses some of their preoccupations in the 1870s by setting it in the town of Miningville, “an excrescence of civilization in the wilderness” (88) where the national imperatives of westward expansion, dynamic capitalism, and class mobility are very much in the foreground. A remarkable paragraph near the beginning describes the railway’s penetration of the immense reaches of the West and contains a memorable variation on the image of “the machine in the garden” that Leo Marx has identified as a crucial motif in nineteenth-century American literature:

A railway—track-slim and curving as a serpent—ran to it through leagues, leagues, leagues of forest fastnesses; past leagues, leagues, leagues of terrible gray cliffs; past leagues of wide waters flecked with the wing of loon and bittern; past leagues of cranberry-swamps; past solitary farmhouses waiting in the wilderness for the onward stride of commerce and civilization to bring markets and companionship—shrieking to the lonely fields of heaven through nights of rapid flight through sighing forests, while antlered phantoms scud from before the panting engine, and the yell of the wolverine and the hoarse shriek of the owl answer the devilish notes from the escape-valves—bellowing through rocky defiles, the very homes of thunderous echoes; shooting past deserted lumber-shanties—gaunt skeletons looming through misty dawn or gray nightfall—shrieking, whistling, roaring, dropping trains of fire, belching columns of steam and smoke, the incarnation of Toil and Tumult hurrying through the still and solemn woods, an artery of Life before whose stream repose will give way to action. (89)

This passage is striking in its elision of the pastoral “middle ground” that Marx describes as typical of early American writing and in its vivid depiction of the epochal encounter in nineteenth-century America of two forms of the sublime: the immemorial and formidable sublime of the wilderness, and the new but equally terrifying technological sublime of the thriving national “Life” that is about to transform it.¹⁴ Clearly, this is a very different landscape from the idyllic setting of “Peaches,” although the northern inflection of its topography and fauna may owe as much to Crawford’s Canadian point of view as they do to her Romantic and Transcendentalist antecedents. Also

worth noting here is the alignment of her syntax, as an enactment of human expressive power, expansiveness, and control, with the inexorable force and momentum of the railway itself.

As the story opens, a telegram to Mr. Wreather, supervisor of the Cañon Mine, announces that its owner, Mr. Stormer, is about to arrive by rail with his daughter Olympia. When Stormer returns to New York, Olympia remains for an extended visit with the Bollings. In a casual ramble beyond the town, she is saved by a mysterious miner named Masters from a fall into the gorge where the mining operation is located (the “river-lead” of the title is a reputedly unsafe shaft in the canyon wall beside a powerful river that runs through the area). On a second excursion, she is escorted by Wreather on a Sunday morning to the deserted canyon, forcibly held by him in the river-wall lead, and threatened with death unless she promises to marry him. Wreather, “a human grinding mill” (91), admits that years earlier he framed her fiancé, George Leighton, for the theft of money from her father’s safe. Then, in a scene that may remind readers today of the B Western films of early twentieth-century Hollywood, he reinforces his demand by lighting a slow match that leads to a powder keg under the river wall of the mine shaft. While he becomes mesmerized by the twisting course of the ignited fuse, Olympia hears a footstep outside and flees. As the explosion floods the canyon with the river’s torrent, she is plucked from impending death a second time by Masters, whom she now recognizes—one is inclined to say “of course”—as the long-lost and heavily-disguised Leighton.

While this summary might reasonably be taken to suggest that “River-lead Cañon” is little more than a farrago of implausible coincidence and banal melodrama, a disposable thriller calculated to please its mass-market audience, the story does offer the mitigating features of Crawford’s stylistic flair, deft handling of structure, and ability to imbue even the most clichéd plot with some depth of implication through her allusive prose and manipulation of symbolic landscape. It also resists one of the most familiar conventions of melodrama by avoiding a climactic struggle between its villain and hero, notwithstanding young Joe Bolling’s notion that Masters might be “incited to bestow a thorough ‘licking’ on the obnoxious Wreather—‘a consummation devoutly to be wished,’ according to Joe’s views” (97). While the narrative lacks the sustained irony of “Peaches,” its colorful prose successfully infuses its romance motifs with realistic detail. The central melodrama involving Olympia is effectively framed by the story’s focus in its opening and closing sections on the rustic Bollings, whose enhanced fortunes and improved

grammar in the epilogue signify the passage of Miningville from raw frontier town to middle-class prosperity.

The sweltering mining “cañon” initially seems to invite but in fact resists association with the infernal. It retains the green vigor of natural growth, and its “rolling clouds of visible heat—iridescent waves of molten gold . . . tinged with a mellow red” (96) carry positive, even erotic, implications; indeed, the chasm is symbolically female in its physical contours and as the site of Olympia’s peril, loss of composure, and defense of her integrity. Perhaps jeopardizing the oft-declared mission of the *Chimney Corner* to serve up fiction suitable for the entire family, the account of her near-fatal tumble into the abyss and rescue by “Masters” is eroticized to the point of suggesting a sublimated sexual act: “She sat up on the aromatic carpet of pine-needles, and rubbed her bedazzled eyes. The fall had loosened her hair, and it slipped sunnily down her shoulders; her cheeks began to light slowly into wonderful bloom; she looked up at Masters, doubt in her confused gaze” (102).¹⁵ In the symbolic design of the story, the counterpart to this ambiguous and hazardous gorge is the safe space of the hospitable Bolling home, where Mrs. Bolling embodies maternal good sense and domestic comfort.

In light of Crawford’s teasing invitation to look for a “moral” in “Peaches,” it may be useful to apply the same question to “River-Lead Cañon.” In the first part of the story, Wreather remarks sententiously that “it’s the business of every man when an individual neglects his duty,” while little Joe Bolling is “impatient of moral axioms” (90). As in the case of “Peaches,” a less summary meaning is intimated through imagery that shows how the contradictions of experience are as apt to complicate as to clarify moral issues. Perhaps the most significant duality is between Christian and classical allusions. The latter have to do largely with natural elements and Olympia’s patrician bearing, while the former evoke the Biblical story of the Fall. The insinuation into the wilderness of human enterprise is repeatedly couched in the image of a serpent. Moreover, Wreather mentions “the curse of labor” (107), his name recalls the description in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* of Satan in serpent form (9.516-18), and the knotted bouquet of ferns and roses that Olympia lets drop to the floor of the mine-shaft when Wreather reveals his malice recalls the garland “Of choicest Flow’rs” (9.840) woven by Adam for Eve that falls from his hands when he learns of her transgression.

Like the similar sequence of allusions to *Paradise Lost* in Crawford’s narrative poem *Malcolm’s Katie*, this motif in “River-lead Cañon” challenges rather than reprises the story of the Fall: it emphasizes Olympia’s steadfast

innocence, just as the poem stresses the significance of Katie's constancy as an inversion and repudiation of Eve's original sin. At the same time, it suggests a critical perspective on the transformation of nature by the relentless press of human activity and the energies of capitalist enterprise, particularly in the paragraph in which Olympia approaches River-lead Cañon in its hushed Sunday-morning state:

The cañon was quiet, for man was not there, and the roar of the river beyond was one of those voices of nature which belong to solitude and enhance repose. A canopy of golden Summer mist lay over it—a glorious veil or shade of splendor, like the hand of God above the cleft in the rock where the future lawgiver lay concealed. Here and there, like a torn tapestry, the faint sweet pink of the wild-rose hung upon its walls, and the scarlet flame of the cardinal-flower quivered like a tongue of fire. Ferns, damp and cool as the tresses of naiads, waved lightly, although there was no perceptible breeze, and Olympia, with her hands full of ferns and roses, was glad to feel the shadow of the gothic arch of the river-lead upon her, and enter the cathedral gloom of the cave, where the dripping from the river made a fairy tinkle and a grateful coolness. (106)

This convergence of classical and Biblical allusions is suggestive rather than didactic: despite the reference to God's apparition to Moses (Exod. 33-34), there is no authoritative pronouncement on morality here. Nor, despite the apocalyptic signs ("hand of God," "torn tapestry," "tongue of fire") and the subsequent release of nature's violence in the flood, is there a transformative revelation. The counterpoint of classical with Christian imagery relativizes these traditions rather than valorizing a particular system of values. At the same time, the passage creates a vivid sense of satisfaction in natural things and intimates their numinous significance, thus providing an enlarged perspective on the harsh wilderness and tumult of civilization described at the outset of the story. The meaning of nature in "River-Lead Cañon" is fluid, multifaceted, and irreducible to the binaries of the natural and technological sublimines memorably evoked in the opening pages. Thus, while there can be no denying that Crawford gave her mass-market readership what it wanted in the more explicit pieties and melodramatic plot of "River-Lead Cañon," she also seeds richer meanings in the texture and undercurrents of its narrative.

While Crawford located most of her stories for Canadian publications in Canada and most of those for Frank Leslie's firm in the United States, she also set several stories in England, a circumstance that points to the continuing prestige of fiction about English life and the fascination of aristocratic figures for North American readers. As the narrator of a nearly contemporary tale by Bret Harte observes, "the democratic reader

delights in the nobility” (108). Crawford’s best “British” story is probably “Beepringle’s Lass,” published in the *Chimney Corner* in 1876. Like “Peaches” and “River-Lead Cañon,” it undertakes an imaginative treatment of a specific national setting and employs a formal strategy that puts into complex perspective the more obvious implications of its characters and action. Of crucial importance in this respect is its movement from the richly allusive, mythologically suggestive style of its opening pages to the diminished social comedy, dialect, and merely serviceable prose of its conclusion. The narrative moves from its epigraph, “Hapless little maid of Arcady!” (an adaptation of a lyric from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Thespis*) through three episodes and an epilogue.¹⁶ In the first section, John Dillon, the wealthy squire of a West Country estate called “Arcadia,” having become lost in the labyrinthine forest on his property, encounters Phyllis Beepringle, the simple-minded daughter of his tenant, and rescues her from an attack by the fierce “yalla bull” that haunts the domain. In the second, Dillon’s neighbour and love-interest, Lady Psyche Darolles, makes her debut at Queen Victoria’s court, where she is upset by her Blimpish cousin Colonel Grey’s misconceived jest that he has seen Dillon “spooning” with a pretty farm girl. In the third, Psyche herself wanders into the forest on Dillon’s estate and encounters Phyllis, whereupon the two young women are confronted and Phyllis is killed by “t’ yalla bull” before it can be shot by gamekeepers who have been instructed to hunt it down. The epilogue sees a repentant Colonel Grey take pains to resolve Psyche’s misunderstanding and reconcile her to Dillon, and closes with an exchange of observations on the lovers by two servants in Psyche’s London residence.

The opening of “Beepringle’s Lass” describes the semi-pastoral domain of Dillon’s “Arcadia” and is replete with mythological and literary allusions, notably to the story of the Minotaur, an analogy that underlines Dillon’s limitations (he is sardonically introduced in the first sentence as “my hero”), and to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, *Henry VIII*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. These last four references, in the space of a few short paragraphs, to the various Shakespearean forms of tragedy, history, romance, and comedy anticipate ways in which the story will problematize genres and blur their boundaries. At the outset, however, the predominant atmosphere is that of the last-named play: as if the glistening forest in which Dillon goes astray and the mention of Puck were insufficient, a recalcitrant donkey also appears on the scene. This “green world” is of course the landscape of enchantment familiar in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, a space of disorientation and redemptive possibility removed from the rational

and conventional world; however, as events prove, the imaginative and erotic energies that it unleashes can be as destructive as they are creative.¹⁷

The detailed description of Dillon's estate yields more than the romance motifs mentioned above; it is also littered with signs of history: "a ruined arch, Gothic, with a fragment of old wall clinging to it, black with ivy, and a few huge old stones beside it, half buried in heath and moss, showing where a pillared aisle had stood when the heath had been a battlefield and the ruin an abbey" (182).¹⁸ There is more to this scene than a superficial sense of the picturesque: the residual markers of a feudal culture are prelude to the examination of a contemporary society stratified by class. Country squires are invested with unquestioned authority and their tenants with delegated authority over still more powerless figures like the orphan boy and bound laborer Tony Scriptur, while Tony in turn struggles to enact his small measure of assigned authority in watching over Miller Beepringle's daughter. In generic terms, the courtly imperatives of Shakespearean romantic comedy are called into question in "Beepringle's Lass" through intimations of a more historical perspective and a realignment of sympathy from high-bred lovers to the vulnerable and abject figure highlighted in its title. This displacement of attention and value from "high" to "low" is reinforced by the manifest vapidity of the royal court, the very locus and epitome of precedence, where Psyche makes a debut that is singularly lacking in significance before "a stout, cheerful royal lady in mauve satin" (196). Just as different Shakespearean genres are evoked and dissolved in Crawford's text, so are the structures of class called into question through their implications for the title character and her fate.

As an "innocent" in a twofold sense—without guilt, and limited in her mental faculties—"Beepringle's lass" is sexually attractive in the perception of others while remaining asexual in her childlike attitudes and behaviour. In her innocence, she is oblivious to the forces of class and commerce that shape the lives of other characters: when given coins, she makes them into a necklace rather than using them as a medium of exchange. More importantly, she becomes the centre of unfounded scandal when Psyche is led to think that Dillon may have taken sexual advantage of her simplicity; in what may be an allusion to Shakespeare's famous sonnet on lust, Psyche feels that that this surmise involves "terrible baseness, indeed; it was black as night; it was deep as any hell" (198).¹⁹ For Psyche, the consequence is a psychological and moral passage beyond innocence: a "haggard precocity of mind" (198).

When, at the crisis of the story, Phyllis is crushed beneath an emblem of aggressive virility, the narrative insinuates an allegory of the destruction of girlhood in the awakening to and attraction of masculine power; she plays an unwitting part in this denouement when her “short, shrill laugh” draws the bull’s attention to the two nymphs in the wood. Her requiem is contained in an exchange between the gamekeeper and his son who has shot the beast:

“T’ squire woan’t like thic,” remarked the old gamekeeper, ruefully, “nor t’ miller. Poor wench!”

“Poor little maid!” said Jerry. “Well, she be easier spared than some.”

“Mebbe,” said old Byber, gruffly. “Roll off t’ bull, lad.” (202)

Class relations are registered here in the precedence of the squire’s reaction over the bereaved father’s. The merest questioning of norms by which individuals are valued is concentrated in old Byber’s fleeting “mebbe,” and the narrative proceeds to Psyche’s reconciliation with Dillon after Colonel Grey apologizes for his damaging jest at Dillon’s expense. To Dillon’s remark that he had sensed something amiss between them, Psyche replies, “But it’s right now,” (203) an observation that does not extend to the dead girl whose beauty had inspired Grey’s folly. The story ends with a droll exchange between two Cockney servants, one of whom offers a piece of advice to his companion: ““When there’s lovers hin a ’ouse, sneeze hin the passidge, hand hagin hon the door-mat, yer safe for a tip from ’im sooner or later. Good form or bad form, sich things *his*, hand will be huntil civilization his more general”” (204). The young lovers survive their estrangement, the social order remains intact, and its privileges and practices continue; however, the customary happy ending of romantic melodrama and the formal completion of comedy are undermined by the death of “Beepringle’s lass,” the lingering question of what readers should make of it, and the story’s decidedly critical sense of what “civilization” entails.

“Extradited,” published in the Toronto daily *Globe* more than a decade later, marks Crawford’s return to Canadian materials in her fiction a few months before her death. It is by far her best-known story, a fact that can be attributed to its reprinting in 1973, its Canadian setting, and its divergence from the style of her work for Frank Leslie’s firm.²⁰ Rather than orchestrating allusions, myths, and genres in the context of a melodramatic love story, it undertakes direct psychological analysis and pivots on the issue of moral choice central to classic realistic fiction. It is tempting to praise “Extradited” for its realism and regard it as a promising development in Crawford’s fiction cut short by her death at the age of thirty-six. This assessment carries some

weight but runs the risk of reinforcing a view of her previous short fiction as merely conventional and inferior. In fact many of these earlier stories reveal a versatile imagination that draws upon a broad and eclectic range of materials to transform the popular modes in which she chose—or was obliged—to work. In the best of them, evocative landscapes, reverberant allusions, and an adroit manipulation of genre allow her to extend the scope of typical story-paper fiction and imbue it with depth and significance. As the foregoing discussion is intended to show, she fashioned stories that could appeal at once to a mass readership whose needs were met by the formulas with which she complied and to readers who could find other dimensions in her work. These stories are also astute in evoking the cultural terrain as well as describing the physical settings of different countries in which she set them. Commercial necessity confined most of her short fiction within a conventional framework, just as inauspicious circumstances restricted her personal experience and opportunities during her years in Toronto. Still, a potent intellect, fertile imagination, and practical ingenuity enabled her to create stories that look, and move, beyond those limits.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Gadpaille, Metcalf, and New. For a more sympathetic treatment of early Canadian short fiction, see Lynch and Robberson, and McMullen and S. Campbell. Davey contends that the development of English-Canadian short fiction “occurred almost entirely outside the early twentieth-century Anglo-American theory of the unified and autotelic story” and that its investigation “requires a much more pluralistic and eclectic view” of the form (142-43). Tallack’s study of the nineteenth-century American short story similarly challenges the modernist bias of twentieth-century short-story criticism.
- 2 The most useful critical comments on Crawford’s short fiction are those of Waterston, and W. Campbell (brief discussions of “Extradited” and “In the Breast of a Maple”), Dellamora (an interpretation of “Extradited” as a story of “male same-sex romance” [25]), and Peterman (an account of Crawford’s relations with Leslie’s firm together with an appraisal of her 1882 story “Fair Little Jealousy”).
- 3 Most of Crawford’s short fiction has only recently become readily available with the publication of Early and Peterman’s edition, *Collected Short Stories of Isabella Valancy Crawford* (2009), which provides full bibliographical details. All citations in this essay to Crawford’s short stories are to this edition. On the phenomenon of the nineteenth-century American story papers, see Bishop, Cohen, and Noel.
- 4 For details of Crawford’s lawsuit against Desbarats for payments owed to her, see Early and Peterman, Introduction, *Winona* 9, 23-27.
- 5 On the difficulties of publishing in nineteenth-century Canada and the recourse of Canadian writers to publishers in England and the United States, see Davies, Mount, Parker.
- 6 See Early and Peterman, Introduction, *Collected* xxxiii-xxxiv.

- 7 Doyle asserts that “in the imaginative literature of the United States, as in other expressions of the thought and experience of that complex nation, Canada has perennially figured as a vague, peripheral, and ambiguous concept” (1), and notes “the comparative paucity and insignificance of the images of the northern country in the American literary tradition” (2). The career of the Nova Scotian writer James De Mille (1833-80), who set most of his fiction outside Canada and published all of it in the United States, is instructive in this context.
- 8 On Crawford’s relation to Tennyson, see Devereux, Livesay, and Waterston. Tennyson is by far the most quoted contemporary writer in Crawford’s *Collected Short Stories*, with 29 references to 14 for the runner-up, Longfellow. While Dickens is less frequently cited, his influence is palpable in the comic names of characters, the use of dialect, and the ambivalence of stories such as “The Silvers’ Christmas Eve” and “The Lost Diamond of St. Dalmas.”
- 9 For a useful biography of Crawford, see Farmiloe. On Crawford’s probable sponsorship by James McCarroll, a sometime Peterborough resident and editor for Frank Leslie’s firm, see Early and Peterman, Introduction, *Winona* 17-19.
- 10 See Early and Peterman, Introduction, *Collected* xvi-xxiii.
- 11 On Tennyson’s English Idyls, see Culler, O’Donnell, and Pattison.
- 12 See Tennyson, “The Talking Oak”: “Hail, hidden to the knees in fern, / Broad Oak of Summer-chace” (29-30).
- 13 See “The Canadian Team at Wimbledon,” part of the extensive coverage of the team’s triumph in the *Canadian Illustrated News* in August 1872.
- 14 On the technological sublime, see Marx 190-209.
- 15 See, for example, a statement in the *Chimney Corner* in late 1875: “The Chimney Corner is so long established, and so well known, that it is scarcely necessary to expatiate on its advantages as a family journal. It combines with attractive fiction, so universally desired, many instructive elements. It aims to elevate the taste and impart information in an agreeable form, while it constantly entertains and pleases the mind and the eye. It has for this reason been a favorite in all American homes, from its happy combination of all the elements required for a pure, high-toned, yet entertaining weekly visitant” (Editorial note).
- 16 Crawford’s version differs significantly from the refrain of Gilbert and Sullivan’s song: “Happy little maiden, she— / Happy maid of Arcadee!”
- 17 On the green world in Shakespeare’s romances, see Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 182-84 and *A Natural Perspective* 140-46.
- 18 This landscape perhaps owes something to the “Abbey-ruin” described near the beginning of Tennyson’s *The Princess*; see especially the Prologue, lines 89-95.
- 19 Compare Shakespeare, Sonnet 147: “For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night” (13-14).
- 20 Originally published in the *Globe* on 4 September 1886, “Extradited” was edited by Petrone in 1973 for the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* and subsequently included in her edition of Crawford’s *Selected Stories* (1975). It has since been anthologized at least four times (Early and Peterman, Introduction, *Collected* xli-xlii).

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