

If the Dress Fits

Female Stereotyping in Rosanna Leprohon's "Alice Sydenham's First Ball"

The pages of *The Literary Garland* (1838-1859), one of Canada's early literary periodicals, echoed with romance, sentiment, melodrama and "taste." Amongst the poetry "of Victorian gift-book calibre," (*Oxford Companion* 454), and the ornate engravings, fiction appeared mainly in serial form, for example, Susanna Moodie's *Jane Redgrave: A Village Story*, *Literary Garland*, (1848), but also in short tales, moral anecdotes, and descriptive sketches which skirt the borders of fiction. Buried in the "plethora of formulaic romantic-historic fiction" (*Oxford Companion* 454), one story transcends formula, giving to the Cinderella fairy tale both a contemporary social setting, and an ironic tone worthy of Austen. "Alice Sydenham's First Ball," by R.E.M. (*Literary Garland* January 1849:1-14) conceals a subversive discourse on the ideal heroine beneath the "formulaic restraints" (Baym) of a conventional romantic overplot.

Behind the initials (R.E.M.)¹ is Rosanna Leprohon (1829-1879), a prolific contributor to the *Garland*, and subsequent author of *Antoinette de Mirecourt: or Secret Marrying and Secret Sorrowing* (1864). With this novel and two others, *Le Manoir de Villerai* (1859) and *Armand Durand* (1868), Leprohon achieved remarkable popular success in the Anglo/French literary world between 1860 and her death in 1879, but her shorter periodical writing vanished from the literary canon for over one hundred years. In the 1970s selections from Leprohon's work began appearing in various anthologies, including two of her short stories: "Alice Sydenham's First Ball"² and "Clive Weston's Wedding Anniversary"³.

Appearing in mid-century (1849), “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball” is a pivotal document; it retains the didactic intent of much magazine fiction intended for young women readers, while anticipating the changing mood of fiction *outside* the magazine, with a new social realism, a more rebellious and self-aware heroine, and a newly ironic relation to the reader inscribed in the text—the narratee. In keeping with the *Garland’s* stated mission to instruct and uplift, the story offers moral and social lessons for the unsophisticated young woman, retaining the “conduct book” trappings that served to make fiction palatable to a conservatively Protestant reading public. Its main lesson seems to be the futility of false appearance in social climbing; in this it parallels other lessons inculcated by *Garland* fiction.⁴ A close look at the text of “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball,” however, reveals that it contains contradictory messages, details that subvert its own prescriptions. While the plot codes the heroine (and implicitly the ideal young woman) as dutiful, passive, and male-dependent, Leprohon provides a sub-narrative, a dialogue between narrator and sophisticated narratee, which looks ironically at such a code, and ends by glorifying what the story purportedly deplores, by calling attention to the female initiative, action and power that its conventional plot denies.

What is conventional in “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball” is its Cinderella pattern.⁵ The plot changes Alice from nobody to somebody, with careful attention to the role of costume in such a transformation. The story’s three stages mimic the triangular form of the fairy tale: the initial situation of the heroine (genteel, poor, half-orphaned); the complicating action (attendance at a ball, social humiliation, rescue by a male character); and the happy ending (Alice is rescued both morally and financially, gaining lessons in conduct together with economic backing from a long-lost uncle). This pattern corresponds to Nina Baym’s conception of “overplot”—the heroine’s struggle in nineteenth-century American novels. A virtual rehearsal for this plot occurs in Leprohon’s earlier *Garland* serial, *The Stepmother*. A comparison of this earlier version of the Cinderella story to Leprohon’s later treatment in “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball” reveals much about the possibilities of layering subversive meaning beneath a hackneyed, sentimental plot.

The heroine’s initiatory ball forms only one episode in the longer text of *The Stepmother* (in the second instalment, Vol V #3), which follows Amy Morton for more than six years before conferring a happy ending, Amy’s marriage to Charles Delmour. Over the course of five instalments, Amy is

pitted against her stepmother, Louisa Morton, who, if not the wicked stereotype of fairy-tale, is unquestionably an undesirable role model. Amy attends a ball with Louisa, and is made to wear undesired finery, a costly bracelet that Mr. Morton had given Louisa (*Stepmother* V (3):136). Uncomfortable in the lavish social setting, Amy is subjected to ordeals of unwelcome flirting and of overheard scandal about her beloved cousin Charles. Like Alice, Amy has her vision of the world altered by experiences at a pivotal ball. Unlike Alice, Amy makes discoveries about other people, whereas Alice's are primarily about herself.

The girls' experiences are alike, however, in several ways. First, both are led to the ball by false female mentors: Amy's worldly stepmother, and Alice's snobbish chaperone, Mrs. Graham. This betraying female figure has her origins in the wicked stepmother of the fairy tale (Huang 13). Leprohon's heroines both dress plainly, Amy from choice (V (3):135), Alice from economic necessity. To offset this plainness, each young woman adds a borrowed trinket, involuntarily assumed at the last minute. At the heart of each story is a social ordeal imposed by ballroom society, and a social "death" for each self-effacing young woman. Also similar are the age and character of their male rescuers; Colonel Westly, a friend of Amy's father, anticipates Uncle Weston of *Alice*. Both heroines are thus rescued from social distress by comfortably unthreatening male figures. In the course of this rescue, each young woman comes to see her fancied Prince Charming in a new and unattractive light. Alice finds Henry St. John to be rude, snobbish, opportunistic; Amy hears gossip linking Charles with her despised stepmother in a past liaison. At the end of the ball, each heroine confronts her image in the mirror, Alice to see the failure of her toilette, and Amy to find herself "wan" and "corpse-like" (140) because of her double "death," both social and emotional, at the hands of malicious ballroom gossip. Slain by the casual word, each heroine is resurrected by a male mentor and restored to family, identity and a potential happy ending.

These similarities are sufficiently numerous to confirm that one ballroom episode is the literary rehearsal for the other, and that both are indebted to Cinderella's ball. In *The Stepmother*, Leprohon uses the motif without irony as a serious illustration of Amy Morton's simple virtue and of the evils of malicious gossip. In its second incarnation, the ballroom episode is layered with contradictory messages, one for the conventional "romantic reader" or the seeker of acceptable moral lessons, and the other for a more sophisti-

cated narratee, at whom the subtleties of narrative mediation are directed. Leprohon's revision of Cinderella's ball exploits the "decidedly bourgeois" (Huang 8) concerns of the literary fairy tale, while harnessing the "essentially ambiguous and dialogic" strengths of the folk tale beneath (Huang 28).

The episode at the Wentworths' ball is curiously unsatisfactory in *The Stepmother*. The reader is frustrated with the dangling detail of the borrowed bracelet; even its significance as index of Louisa Morton's vanity and lack of care for her husband is eclipsed in the next instalment when a tiara becomes a much more serious bone of contention. The Wentworths' ball is only one of three important ballroom events in *The Stepmother*; Amy does not attend the second, choosing to stay home with her dying father. Closure of the incomplete ball motif awaits the final episode of the serial, when attendance at a third ball reunites Amy and Charles after several years apart.

Such narrative irresolutions do not mar the revised version of the incident in "Alice Sydenham's First Ball"; though relatively short (less than 33 pages, about 6000 words), it includes both a complete "overplot," and an under-narrative which challenges and betrays the moral and social certainties of the main story. With a minimum of narrative moralizing, Leprohon creates considerable ironic distance from her conduct lesson and from her heroine, allowing humour and satiric social comment to enter the gap between the conventional expectations of the heroine and the actual figure of Alice.

"Figure" here can be taken both literally and metaphorically, for, unlike other heroines in the magazine fiction around her, Alice occupies a body that extends below the neck. Using the vocabulary of female costume, Leprohon legitimizes areas of discussion normally taboo to the mid-Victorian audience, and briefly foregrounds the heroine's body as the locus of conflict between social expectations and physical realities. In a serial of the same period (*Florence, or Wit and Wisdom*, *Literary Garland*, February to December 1849), Leprohon articulates her concern with revising the "figure" of the heroine. Florence is presented as anti-romantic, despite her conventional role in the plot:

It may sound very well in romances, especially those of the sentimental school, to discourse about aerial form and pale interesting faces, but place one of those heroines and all her delicate languor, her elegant listlessness, in real contact with a rival of less poetic mould, whose bright pure tint and sparkling eye so eloquently speak of health and animation, and in whose favour will the contrast be? (Vol. 7, May 1849: 209).

Like Florence, Alice Sydenham is made in that “less poetic mould,” a consciously revisionist heroine. Her flawed ballroom *toilette* has more than one layer of meaning: on one level it is simply admonitory, condemning vanity, romantic dreams and filial disobedience. On another level, it admonishes, not the heroine herself, but the society that demands such artificiality in all female costume. This double intention places Leprohon in an ironic relation to her own material, and divides her readers into the conventional and the initiated. Her attention to the relationship between *costume* and *custom* signals Leprohon’s revision of the Cinderella motif, and her awareness of the distance between the fairy-tale world of sentimental didactic fiction and the mid-nineteenth-century world of change, compromise and covert meaning in which her layered narrative unfolds.

A precis of the plot of “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball” reveals Leprohon’s debt to the earlier serial, *The Stepmother*, as well as its descent from the Cinderella story. Alice is poor and socially marginalized as the story opens, living in genteel poverty with her mother in Montreal. Rescue from the sidelines seems imminent with the arrival of an invitation from a former school friend of a higher social station. Alice’s mother is reluctant to give permission for Alice to enter society, fearing the expense of outfitting the girl for a formal ball, as well as the unrealistic social expectations it may arouse in her. Unlike the stepmother, Louisa Morton, of *The Stepmother*, Mrs. Sydenham is not presented as vain and frivolous. She functions less as blocking parental figure than as assistant fairy godmother, ultimately facilitating the transformation that will allow Alice to appear at the ball.

The ball, however, proves a painful experience for Alice, whose dress and decorum both wilt under social snubs and female rivalry. At the height of her discomfort, she discovers a male protector, not the Prince Charming of the fairy tale, but an irascible old man, who proves to be her long-lost and conveniently wealthy uncle, James Weston, from Britain. Saved from social oblivion by a male relative, and offered an escape-route to European society, Alice is pushed by the plot in the conventional direction, towards Europe, economic security, and a role defined by the patriarchal family, whether as wife or niece. The precarious social identity assumed for the evening of the ball dissolves in the horrific whirl of the ballroom, a dissolution imaged in the disintegration of her makeshift toilette and the loss of a

borrowed trinket, and is restored only with this connection. As in the fairy-story, the “Prince” redresses old wrongs and confers the new social identity that validates the heroine’s own intuitive sense of self-worth. This précis of its plot seems to place “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball” squarely in the tradition of sentimental magazine fiction, offering wish-fulfilment to female dreams, along with salutary lessons in female duty.

Here, however, Leprohon steps away from the conventional to take an ironic look at female wish-fulfilment and its fairy-tale archetype, to cast doubt on the efficacy of the standard lesson of female duty, and, most important, to revise the picture of the heroine. The first two revisions are closely connected. In didactic magazine fiction, the fulfilment of the heroine’s dearest wish usually comes only after she has exhibited the requisite sense of duty, and decorum. Leprohon’s Alice expresses the lesson of duty taken from her misery at the ball:

Poor, unpretending as we are, how wrong, how foolish of me to thrust myself into a scene so utterly removed from our present sphere; but I acted contrary to mamma’s wishes, her earnest remonstrances, and I have been justly punished. (115)

Despite this conventional voicing of the lesson learned, Alice is far from fully penitent. She still feels resentment at the injustice of her treatment, and protests vehemently to Weston: “But surely, I have not deserved the entire, the bitter contempt I have met with” (115).

Together with this rebellion on the part of the heroine is the rebellion of the plot which contrives to *reward* Alice for precisely the qualities most denigrated in the voiced moral: wilfulness, spirit, and a sense of humour. Her discovery of rich uncle Weston is the direct result of her disobedience. The positive impressions of her character that Weston receives at the ball are all based on nominally prohibited character traits: her show of pride (117), her sense of humour (115), her common-sense and hearty appetite (114). The normal heroine of contemporary magazine fiction was, on the contrary, rewarded for her superior spirituality.⁶ Towards the end of “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball” Leprohon tries to mitigate the moral rebellion of her plot by appending an additional moral in the mouth of Weston himself: “Truly, Alice, may it be said that out of seeming evil springeth good. . .” (125). In the story’s final paragraph, Leprohon’s narrator also steps in to curb the subversive tendencies of the plot by making the ball into “an antidote against . . . vanity” (127) in Alice’s future social career. Even this final

paragraph, however, cannot conceal the fact that Alice is transformed by that ball into the member of high society she so wished to be, fulfilling her dreams by disobeying her mother, showing her spirit, and setting a new standard for the behaviour and form of the heroine.

Alice is the most spirited of Leprohon's heroines, in contrast to the rather priggish Amy Morton, and begins her rebellion against the social norms to which she nominally aspires even as she plans her attendance at the ball. Side-lined by poverty, she has to scrounge the materials to approximate the correct "toilette" for a ball. The resulting imperfections in the outfit are predictable, and serve to highlight the poor fit between Alice herself and customary appearance and behaviour that the outfit represents. Not being made in "the poetic mould" of the heroine, Alice finds her new dress too tight:

Slight, graceful as Alice's figure was, the milliner had thought fit to improve on it, and accordingly had made the dress so tight that, when strained to the utmost, the lower hooks were still nearly an inch apart. (101)

The socially-approved tiny waist imposed by the milliner reflects mid-nineteenth-century pressure on women to be small, sickly and helpless. The "stylish circumference" (Banner 48) of the heroine's waist was 18 inches.⁷ "Why, it [the balldress] would not fit an infant" exclaims Mrs. Sydenham (101), voicing the standard—infancy—along with her criticism of it. The fairy-tale Cinderella usually conforms to this exacting standard of female delicacy; the smallness of her glass slipper makes it a unique motif of adolescent sexuality (Huang 3)⁸. Even in the early nineteenth century, the feminine ideal of beauty included a heavy element of infantilization (Banner 53), against which both Alice and her mother rebel. Alice, despite the "slight" form, is robust and healthy, and her physical dimensions challenge the confining waist, just as her moral sensibility and sense of self rebel against the passive role imposed by her sex and her poverty. Going to the ball means adopting the costume of confinement, infancy and helplessness.

The milliner functions as an ironic fairy godmother, possessed of no magic wand, and fumbling her way towards the imperfect version of the society ball-gown. The scantiness of the garment can also be seen as reflecting the prick of female poverty, and the resultant shortage in the purchased dress length. Like Mrs. Sydenham in the household, and Alice with her dress hooks, the milliner too strives to "make ends meet." This almost physical pun is typical of the subtle allusion Leprohon makes to the interrelation of costume and custom.

Alice's embonpoint is the happy result of her unfashionable appetite. Having fasted all the day of the ball, she displays a healthy hunger at evening's end, when Weston offers "coffee and chicken" (114). Leprohon, tongue in cheek, draws attention to this improper display of womanly appetite: "we beseech our romantic readers to close their eyes to this passage, for 'twill shock every sentiment of their exquisitely refined natures" (114). Hunger is out of place in the world of the Victorian heroine, not just because it leads to unfashionably ample waistlines, but because of its associations with vulgar, lower-class behaviour, and more covertly, with unmentionable sexual appetites. "Hunger," as Michie points out, "is both dangerous and potentially liberating . . ." (Michie 18-23). Contemporary women did deplore the cult of slenderness and the gentrification of hunger, their very protests serving to underline the tenacious stereotype of the "fragile and submissive maiden" (Banner 45).⁹

Seemingly ignorant of or uncaring for such stereotypes, Alice partakes "heartily" (114) of the food at the ball, and thus magnifies the chink in her social armour to a yawning gap, refusing the bodily annihilation that should (according to the dictates of ballroom justice) accompany the social murder that she has just suffered at the hands of the ballroom belles. Alice has courted social danger, but may have thus achieved a degree of liberation that we are quietly expected to applaud. Leprohon's aside, by evoking the "romantic" reader, in effect classifies us as the normative *non*-romantic reader, and so engages us in a conspiracy of approval of Alice's appetite, managing to suggest that the contrary attitude is old-fashioned, and relegated to a dated realm and genre of "romance." As in *Florence*, Leprohon claims new generic ground, with new parameters for the heroine's face, form, and activity.

Revealed more and more as a healthy, modern young woman, and not as the wasting heroine of romance suggested by the story's title, Alice flouts other romantic conventions too. Further problems with her toilette serve to highlight the futility of social hypocrisy, normally the mainstay of the ballroom society she strives to enter. Her sash, for instance, proposed by the desperate milliner as a remedy for the gaping waist of the dress, proves inadequate to its task of concealment: "Sure, Miss," advises the milliner, "you can hide it [the gaping waist] with your sash" (101). The result, however, is "ungraceful" and "awkward" and the "subterfuge of the sash" is revealed as ineffective. The attempt at social deception produces social awkwardness, not the grace which is natural to the unspoiled Alice. Her gloves, too, reflect

the impossibility of self-transformation through clothing, that staple of the Cinderella story. The gloves are of poor quality (101); one finger tears immediately and has to be mended, but the flaw remains evident. The contour and complexion of a lady's hands were still leading indicators of social class in the nineteenth century¹⁰; here, the attempt to conceal that condition and thus to pretend to higher social rank ends in failure and ignominy.

This complete failure of the hoped-for sartorial transformation dawns on Alice when she confronts her reflection in the mirrors of the ballroom (106). Here she sees the ramshackle social self hastily constructed for the evening, displaying all its awkwardness and artificiality against the background of other flawless toilettes and more practiced social masks. She also finds her appearance reflected unfavourably in overheard remarks such as, "Ciel! Quel tournure!" (106).

This double mirror of the self is painful to Alice, who sees only too well the falsity of her transformation. Ironically, Mrs. Graham, her chaperone, had earlier declared a monopoly of the mirrors to be a decided advantage of their late arrival at the ball: ". . . we shall have the mirrors entirely to ourselves. That is some consolation" (103). Alice, in contrast, had left home without even a glance in the mirror, revealing the spontaneity and naturalness which are initially punished and then rewarded by the unfolding plot. With hindsight, Alice sees the ironic truth in Mrs. Graham's remark, for she is the only woman at the ball to see herself reflected so clearly and honestly: "One ill-dressed, flushed, awkward-looking girl, with long black hair, hanging in immense uncurled masses around her neck and shoulders" (106). One glance has shown the faulty dress, the unladylike display of emotion, and the inappropriate coiffure. Other belles at the ball sport "ringlets" (108), but Alice's luxuriant locks are not tamed in this manner. Their very abundance and vividness in colour hint at undesirable wells of passion and spirit in their possessor.¹¹ The failure to discipline her hair into the approved shape is a crime which threatens to expose the pretences underlying the whole code of courtship behaviour. Alice must be ostracized because her very appearance threatens the psycho-cultural construct of sanitized, sexless femininity.

The revision of the heroine extends to behaviour as well as appearance. Seeking refuge from a wallflower's fate, Alice retreats to an ante-room and hides behind some curtains at the approach of other partygoers. Concealed

behind the draperies, she is forced to eavesdrop on her own social condemnation (108) and to overhear a conversational anatomization of ideal female behaviour. She hears nothing about herself that the mirror has not already shown her, but she does gain new insight into social hypocrisy. Her marginalized social position is cleverly imaged by Leprohon in the isolated “recess” (108) with its “small opening in the fold of the curtain” (108) through which she listens unobserved as the other belles audition for the role of perfect heroine.

The scene Alice witnesses from her recess contains details which direct attention away from the didactic intent. On one level Leprohon teaches Alice the cruelty of society, but on another level, she anatomizes that cruelty, showing its origin in the restrictiveness of the code of female behaviour. This radical proposition subverts the story’s overt lesson of proper feminine behaviour.

All the characters in the group are playing roles: even as the young women discuss the ridiculous figure of Alice in the ballroom they are gesturing in self-congratulatory tones towards their own figures. Thus one belle exclaims “My ringlets are all out” (108), and uses this pretended self-denigration to call attention to the beauty of her own “glossy auburn” tresses, even as the group collectively condemns Alice’s “abundant locks” (108).

Beneath the general jockeying for the men’s attention, a discourse is conducted on the proper figure and role of a young society woman, advancing and rejecting three possible feminine roles: child, ingenue and damsel in distress. In the course of the story Alice plays all three roles; here Miss Templeton tries out the mask of the child, the pattern of infantilization in behaviour as well as in physical dimensions, that the age legitimized:

“Nay, let us not leave this sweet spot so soon,” returned Miss Templeton. “I really shall change the hangings of my morning room, and adopt this beautiful shade. And what a charmingly mysterious recess! Do you remember the words of the old song,

I’m weary of dancing now, she cried,
Here tarry a moment, I’ll hide, I’ll hide.

Shall I follow her example?” and with the graceful etourderie of a child, she sprang forward, and grasped the purple draperies in her small hand. (110-111)

Miss Templeton’s forced gaiety and spontaneity are not received favourably by the company. The sophisticated Miss Aberton goes so far as to feel “disgust”

(111) at the “*enfantillage*” (111) of the other. Even as Henry St. John defends Miss Templeton: “Nay, do not check Miss Templeton’s delightful enthusiasm” (111), Leprohon makes it clear to all levels of the audience that he is being sarcastic. Such a mask of naturalness and “naive eagerness” (111) is unconvincing in such world-weary company; the infant’s role for the heroine is dismissed by the company and the narrator alike.

Miss Templeton passes on to the role of the ingenue, offering a sarcastic description of Alice Sydenham to pique St. John: “Ah! she indeed is a bright specimen of that sweet, silent sensibility, that fascinating, rural timidity, so highly eulogized by boarding-school teachers and middle-aged people, and so signally distinguished by Mr. St. John” (111). The alert reader must penetrate layers of irony to locate Leprohon’s attitude towards the ingenue with the “sweet silent sensibility” which is asserted as the feminine ideal. Clearly we are not meant to approve of Miss Templeton, nor to admire what she admires; Miss Templeton is, however, being sarcastic—*she* does not really admire such sweetness and timidity, but is validating a set of opposite values, despite her earlier play-acting. If the feminine ideal being asserted here is precisely the “sweet silent sensibility” of the Victorian “angel in the house,” it accords with an appropriately didactic reading of the conversation. Leprohon, however, complicates the irony by having Miss Templeton name the admirers of such a female type: “boarding school teachers and middle-aged people.” Clearly Miss Templeton does not admire or identify with that group. Is the reader therefore meant to align herself with those groups in defining the feminine ideal? Leprohon’s tone suggests not; she is doubly ironic, exposing Miss Templeton while also questioning a received idea. Leprohon’s ideal reader shares her sense of humour, and willingly engages in a conspiracy to find current views of feminine behaviour old-fashioned. Like Alice behind the curtain, the reader is eavesdropping on a re-definition of the heroine; the roles of child and ingenue are rejected by characters and narrator alike, in a double irony which problematizes the sweetness and silence of Alice in her recess.

Before Alice’s emergence, the bantering belles advance the third female role—damsel in distress—accusing Viscount Howard of being Alice’s “*preux chevalier*” (112). She is mockingly imagined as sending “signals of distress” (112) from a “remote corner.” The surface dramatic irony deflects attention from another level of irony; Leprohon ridicules the courtly rescue itself in the un-romantic figure of Uncle Weston.

In the course of this overheard dialogue, Leprohon fulfils the didactic imperative by giving Alice “her first terrible lesson in the world’s ways” (112). Beneath the moral, however, Leprohon poses a question about the ideal female role, advancing and rejecting three possibilities, under cover of her condemnation of Miss Templeton’s “egotism” (112). None of the roles—child, ingenue, damsel in distress—is adequate for either Alice or the other belles. The conversation reveals that the belles share a covert awareness of the hypocrisy of these stereotypes. In this ballroom society there are gaps between the manifest ideal of female behaviour, and an actual condition of latent discontent with its restrictions. The seemingly incidental dialogue actually serves Leprohon’s purpose in revising the heroine’s role, as she uses familiar scenes and characters from sentimental fiction to ironize the icons of that fiction.

Having rejected the prevailing model of the “sweet” heroine, Leprohon’s subtext is firmly established in opposition to the dominant codes, both didactic (rebellion = punishment; submission = reward), and romantic (sweetness = loveliness = marriage = happy ending). Some attempt is made to explore an alternative mode of the female heroic, as Alice reacts to her ballroom experience, but Leprohon’s story succumbs ultimately to the imperatives of the conventional plot.

Although Mr. Weston is the plot mechanism through which she is returned to social status and identity after her humiliation, Leprohon does allow Alice herself some agency in the recreation of the self after its disintegration. Once more she uses dress as a metaphor for the social self, allowing Alice to strip away her social pretensions, as she strips the traitorous dress of its ornament. “Despoiled” (126) of its ribands on the next day, the dress images the healthy self-healing that follows the painful ordeal of social dissolution. Its materials are saved “to some more useful purpose” (124) in a phrase whose ironic undertones show Leprohon once more with her tongue in her cheek. The ironic tone calls into question the very notion of “useful purpose” in female costume. For the naive reader, the simple moral lesson is still available: Alice would have spent her money more “usefully” on the books and music (99) she originally intended to buy. On another level this lesson is ironically undercut by our knowledge that books and music would never have led Alice to Uncle Weston and his money. Once more the overt moral of the story is subverted by the pattern of events.

Alice’s voluntary shedding of the social costume shows her moral health

as well as the intact sense of self preserved through the dissolution of her image in the ballroom mirror. The involuntary stripping at the hands of the belles begins the process, but Alice takes ultimate control of the costume change that follows the ball.

This is just one of the story's ironic alterations of the Cinderella archetype. Alice's active role in the figurative return to "rags" from "riches" runs counter to the instantaneous, midnight reversion of Cinderella in the French literary version of the tale. It is closer to the resourceful costume changes of the earlier folk-tale Cinderellas—Germany's *Aschenputtel* or Scotland's Rashin Coatie (Opie 118). Even the initial transformation in preparation for the ball is rife with ironic details, all serving to distance the story from the fairy-tale idiom and bring it closer to nineteenth-century "realism" than is usual in the magazine story of the time. Possessed of no fairy godmother, Alice must make do with the inadequate substitute of the cheap milliner, the "priestess of fashion" (Leprohon 100), and two maternal aides: her real mother and Mrs. Graham². The latter proves a false maternal ally, whose chaperonage conceals her real enmity towards Alice and her cause. Leprohon's version of Cinderella then, needs *three* ordinary women to take the place of one fairy godmother. In a further ironic distancing from the world of fairy-tale, Alice must *herself* assume the role of fairy godmother, contributing part of her own costume, the gloves, shoes and flowers. As the gloves tear and the flowers are trampled by Alice herself (113), the story comments on the impossibility of magical transformation in the real nineteenth-century ballroom. Clumsily destroying her own rose, Alice sees the destruction of the "roseate" visions of social success she had entertained before the ball. Again, Leprohon allows one set of readers a standard moral reading of the incident, stressing "mortification" and "humiliation" (113) as the natural result of social pretension. Another layer of meaning, however, accrues to the reader who catches the irony in Leprohon's tone as Alice continues across the ballroom:

Half blinded by [tears], she hurried on. At length her haven was all but won, when suddenly—how closely is the sublime blended with the ridiculous, the mournful with the mirthful, in this changing world of ours—in her feverish haste, she stepped on the outstretched foot of [Mr. Weston]" (113-114).

The close association between trampling a rose and trampling Mr. Weston's foot produces a humour for which the initiated narratee has been prepared

by the ironic phrasing that links the sublime to the ridiculous, in a parody of incidental moralizing. Such humour and irony assert the difference between this story and other didactic pieces, especially the earlier version of the ballroom episode in *The Stepmother*.

The conflicting impulses in the story seem to pull in three directions characterized by didacticism, wish-fulfilment and irony. Leprohon never resolves the contradictions, retaining each layer of meaning with its separate audience. The conjunction of “conventionalism and protest” (Foster 11) has been identified as common in mid-Victorian women’s fiction, showing the unease of the female author in the face of an ideology contravened by her own act of writing.¹³

The strong imperative of the romantic plot pulls Alice towards the happy ending, even as the didactic impulse resists rewarding her disobedience, and the ironic voice questions her aspiration towards socially-sanctioned female roles. The amassing of didactic vocabulary in the story’s final paragraph (*profited, bitter lesson, taught her to value, proper worth, antidote against . . . vanity, trials and humiliations*) may be Leprohon’s attempt to rein in alternate readings by appeasing those very boarding-school teachers and middle-aged people earlier scorned by the text. The valour of the effort, however, suggests how fully Alice had escaped from the acceptable bounds of the heroine of magazine fiction. Beneath the verbal endorsement of the sweet, silent heroine, the story rewards Alice for a contrary set of heroine’s qualities: common sense, robust health and appetite, spirited intelligence, determination and rebellion. Recent scholarship suggests that this dialogic presentation of the heroine may be inscribed in early versions of the Cinderella tale:

[T]he Cinderella myth has functioned as a double-edged (or multi-edged) ideological weapon. On the one hand, the code of propriety is carefully woven into a myth that romanticizes women’s subordinate and domesticated role within the patriarchy; on the other hand, the Protestant individualism that is simultaneously programmed into the plot inevitably arouses in women . . . a sense of individual dignity and an urge for self-realization” (Huang 25).

In presenting a heroine who is “resourceful rather than remorseful” (Stone 231), Leprohon posits a narratee eager to accept such a re-vision of female roles, in direct contradiction to the conduct-book lessons of the surrounding magazine fiction.

Perhaps Leprohon’s most surprising contravention of the code of senti-

mental fiction is her hint that ballroom vanity and egotism also spring from latent rebellion against prevailing ideals of sweetness, silence and sensibility for young women. The plot itself reveals the futility of such qualities in the battle for a husband. The ruthless economic imperative of the “good” marriage dictates strategic subversion of the moral norm for young women, and places the successful heroine in a necessarily oblique relationship to the dominant code. To conceal the “imperfection” of the heroine, then, becomes the imperative of the narrative voice, an aim which Leprohon fulfills by layering her narrative signals. The vocabulary and character stereotypes of conduct-book fiction, satisfactory to the keepers of propriety, coexist with (and are undercut by) ironic details appealing to other narratees. It is Leprohon’s apparent unease with the “sweet, silent sensibility” of the model heroine which creates this layering of narrative address and brings us the lively and surprisingly modern heroine of “Alice Sydenham’s First Ball,”

NOTES

- 1 R.E.M. stands for Rosanna Eleanor Mullins; Leprohon is the name of the author’s husband. At the time of her first contribution to the *Garland*, Leprohon was only 14 years old and unmarried. The initials (a common form of signature in the *Garland*) are thus the conventional barrier between the young lady and public life. See Mary Markham Brown, *An Index to the Literary Garland: Montreal 1838-1851*, p. v.
- 2 *Nineteenth-Century Short Stories*, ed. David Arnason (1976).
- 3 *The Evolution of Canadian Literature: Beginnings to 1862*, ed. Mary Jane Edwards (1973).
- 4 For example, the destructiveness of female wit in *Florence, or Wit and Wisdom*, *Literary Garland* 7(1849); or the perils of vanity and materialism in *The Stepmother*, *Literary Garland* 5(1847).
- 5 Marian Cox defines the basic pattern of the Cinderella story as requiring an ill-treated heroine and eventual recognition by means of a shoe. Though Alice’s own shoes do not figure largely in the plot, her uncle’s *foot* does.
- 6 See Joseph Satterwaite’s study of fiction in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*: “The Tremulous Formula,” *American Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1951):99-113.
- 7 See Michie for a discussion of the “aesthetic of deprivation” (20-21) by which fictional heroines effected their own erasure from the text by bodily diminution.
- 8 The material of Cinderella’s slipper varies from version to version of the tale, but is always unusual and precious: gold, satin, fur, red velvet. Glass may have been a clever variant of the French storyteller Perrault, intuiting the narrative and symbolic effectiveness of a slipper which *could not be stretched*, (Opie 121)
- 9 Anna Jameson in her *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838) deplors the then current male idolatry of the fainting female, excoriating those men who “cannot endure to see women eat” (258). Harriet Beecher Stowe notes a similar tendency in American society: “We in America have got so far out of the way of a womanhood that has any vigour of outline or opulence of physical proportions, that, when we see a

- woman made as a woman ought to be, she strikes us as a monster" (Quoted in Banner 47).
- 10 Michie describes the heroine's hands as "one of the centers of value in the nineteenth-century novel" (Michie 98).
 - 11 Michie notes that hair often functions in the description of the Victorian heroine as a synecdoche for sexuality (99-100). See Banner for a discussion of the propriety of curled hair for nineteenth-century women (Banner 37).
 - 12 Binary maternal figures—kind godmother, evil stepmother—occur in many versions of the Cinderella tale (Huang 13).
 - 13 See Susan K. Harris for an analysis of similar contradictions in American women's fiction of the same era.

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