

## TRACES OF HERSTORY: REINVENTING WOMANHOOD IN THE KATE FANSLER MYSTERY SERIES BY AMANDA CROSS

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Although the American writer and Columbia professor Carolyn Gold Heilbrun (1926-2003) is best known for her best-selling mystery novels, published under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross, she also authored remarkable pieces of non-fiction in which she asserted her long-standing commitment to feminism. Taking Heilbrun's essays in feminism and literary criticism as a basis and her 1990 novel *The Players Come Again* as substantiation to my argument, this paper will illustrate the ways in which her detective novels became an instrument to reach a mass audience of female readers who might not have read her theoretical work, but who were perhaps finding it difficult to reach fulfillment as women under patriarchy. My aim is to reveal the extent to which Heilbrun's seemingly more superficial and much more commercial novels were used a catalyst that informed her feminist principles while vindicating the need to repair women's historical invisibility.

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“As long as women are isolated one from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own” (Heilbrun 1988: 46). Although the American writer and Columbia Professor Carolyn Gold Heilbrun (1926-2003) is best known for her best-selling mystery novels, published under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross, she also authored remarkable pieces of non-fiction in which she asserted her long-standing commitment to feminism. Works such as *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979), *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women* (1990) and *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty* (1997) explore the ways in which womanhood is experienced within a literary and cultural tradition that lacks models of female achievement with which women can identify. Taking her essays in feminism and literary criticism as a basis and her 1990 novel *The Players Come Again* as substantiation to my argument, this paper will try to illustrate the ways in which her mystery novels became an instrument to reach a mass audience of female readers who might not have read her non-fiction but who, like the author herself, were perhaps finding it difficult to reach fulfillment as women under patriarchy. My aim is to reveal the ways in which Heilbrun's seemingly more superficial and much more commercial mystery novels were used a catalyst that informed her feminist principles while vindicating the need to repair women's historical invisibility and male appropriation of women's voices.

According to Jeanne Addison Roberts, Carolyn Heilbrun's production offers scholars an unusual “opportunity to observe both the formulation of feminist theory and the embodiment of theory in fictional creation”, as her non-fiction books have run parallel to a prolific career as detective novel writer Amanda Cross. Her views as a feminist theorist, Roberts argues, can be perceived in her novels “as an innocuous-

seeming forum for re-education" (Roberts 1995: 94). In *Writing a Woman's Life*, as Nancy Miller remarks, Heilbrun herself explained her own reinvention as a crime fiction writer, as she "becomes the biographer of Amanda Cross, telling the story of her own creation as a writer of detective fiction" (Miller 2006). Her search for women's voices and stories in order to provide future generations of women with a model for self-fulfilment through which they can (re-)define their lives is in many ways materialised in her creation of Kate Fansler:

Amanda Cross could write, in the popular, unimportant form of detective fiction, the destiny she hoped for women, if not exactly, any longer, for herself: the alternate life she wished to inscribe upon the female imagination. ... My hope, of course, is that younger women will imitate her ... in daring to use her security in order to be brave on behalf of other women, and to discover new stories for women (Heilbrun 1988: 119, 122).

Like her tenured scholar/detective Kate Fansler, Carolyn Heilbrun was Professor of Humanities at Columbia University. Both indeed represent a model for a pioneering women professor at a time when academia was still male-dominated: in an article about feminism in literature studies at universities, Carolyn Heilbrun writes: "male fears are palpable. ... More students are women. The pressure for studying women authors and hiring women professors increases. These male fears are profound, and no less so for being largely unconscious. Meanwhile, the old familiar habits of male dominance and scorn of female interests in the profession make these attitudes appear natural and right" (1985: 24). In *Reinventing Womanhood*, Heilbrun similarly argues that the few women who had achieved success in the professional world had identified with the male-dominated sphere they had managed to inhabit through great effort, thus rejecting their womanhood and becoming "honorary men ... token women rather than women bonded with other women and supporting them" (1979: 31). Instead of identifying with male roles that deny women essential aspects of their womanhood, Heilbrun contends that women should appropriate these male models and transform them to find their own path towards self-fulfilment: "Woman must learn to call whatever she is or does female. For whatever she is or does *is* female. Ultimately, there are no male models, there are only models of selfhood from which woman chooses to learn. ... The hardest in the life of woman is to learn to say: Whatever I am is woman" (1979: 140).

Kate Fansler embodies the American "bourgeois / liberal privileged form of feminism" that was criticized for providing further advantages to a very reduced group of white, middle-class, heterosexual and educated women with "impeccably elite class credentials" (Munt 2004: 35). Described in Jean Swanson and Dean James' anthology *By a Woman's Hand* as "the most literate and literary [sleuth] since Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey" (Swanson and Dean 1994: 55), Fansler is not only a university professor but also has considerable wealth and is married to former Assistant District Attorney and Law Professor Reed Amhearst. Despite the character's obviously privileged status, Anne Cranny-Francis nevertheless acknowledges that "Cross's major achievement with this character is to create an acceptable female professional who can begin the process of reconstructing the range of narrative roles available to women" (Cranny-Francis 1990: 162-63). As she remarks, a female character performing a traditionally male role transforms both such role and also the plot itself. Therefore, a female detective character that is to be credible both as a detective and as a woman, that is, "more than just an honorary male ... requires a radical reassessment of the characterization of the detective and the narrative ... And the same is true of the contemporary amateur female detective" (Cranny-Francis 1990: 143).

Jeanne Addison Roberts aptly notes that “the interplay between her [Heilbrun’s] theory and her practice continues to be instructive and intriguing” (1995: 102). Heilbrun’s belief in women’s possibility of re-creating themselves is to my mind clearly reflected in the female characters portrayed in *The Players Come Again*: all the female characters involved in the plot become reconciled with their past and find their way towards a more authentic self in their middle age after having led largely unfulfilling lives. The plot of *The Players Come Again* revolves around the mystery surrounding the life of Gabrielle Foxx, wife of the renowned writer Emmanuel Foxx. Foxx had achieved his greatest prestige and popularity with his novel *Ariadne*, in which he allegedly reinterpreted the Greek myth of Theseus from the perspective of its female protagonist. The novel had become highly controversial because of its explicit sexual content and had been simultaneously praised by scholars and critics for its unique insight into the female psyche. When Kate Fansler receives a very generous offer to write Gabrielle’s biography, she is intrigued by the publisher’s interest in the life of a completely unknown and apparently uninteresting figure. Her sleuth instincts are soon aroused after reading the memoirs of Anne Gringold: as the daughter of one of the domestic workers at the Goddard house, Anne’s memoirs recall her childhood friendship with Dorinda Goddard and her cousin Nellie Foxx, the daughter of Emmanuel and Gabrielle’s son Emile and Dorinda’s aunt Hilda Goddard. After spending her childhood and youth feeling ashamed of her working-class mother and longing to belong to the more privileged Goddard circle, Anne realizes at middle age that her mother had been “her own woman” (Cross 1990: 47). As she reflects, in many ways she had been much more independent than the rich women she worked for, and being a domestic servant “only made her a fool in my eyes” (48). Only as she writes her memoirs does she become conscious of the qualities she inherited from her mother, “though such a thought would hardly have occurred to me” (59).

Dorinda Goddard replicates Anne’s recognition of her bonds with her mother, with whom she had always felt at odds, in a similar process of coming to terms with her past and looking for a more authentic self beyond male-defined roles. Only as she grows older does Dorinda realize that her mother “did cope, beautifully” despite her feeling of inadequacy in the exclusive Goddard circle. Like Anne, she could never appreciate her mother’s virtues while she was young: “my aunt Hilda scorned her; so did I, until quite recently. She wasn’t a glamorous person” (110). Despite her youthful rebelliousness and unconventional behavior, Dorinda had sunk “into a dreaming sleep for many years, disguised as sex object, mother, hostess, housewife” (221). After a long and unhappy marriage, a divorce, and her children’s growth into adulthood and independence, Dorinda had discovered the possibilities this new stage in her life might offer and had started thinking honestly about who she was and what she really wanted of life. As Kate reflects, Dorinda “had only now resurrected herself” (221).

Dorinda’s mother Eleanor Goddard, aged 92, recalls her memories of Gabrielle in her conversations with Kate and similarly admits that “Dorinda has always been a puzzle to me. ... Even as a baby, she and I never seemed to be in touch. ... Odd to only begin really talking to your daughter when she’s over sixty and you’re older than God” (116). Eleanor significantly equates her daughter’s search for her true identity with a positive evolution in their mother-daughter relationship: “perhaps if one can begin to trust one’s mother in one’s sixties, one is ready for anything” (114). Eleanor possibly identifies with Dorinda’s midlife awakening because she has been through that experience herself: after spending her life trying to live up to the standards of supportive wife, loving mother and perfect hostess that her husband’s elitist circle expected of her, “being my own person only became possible as an idea or a reality after Sig [her

husband] died" (174). This process of recognition and self-(re)definition is simultaneous with Dorinda's, Anne's and Nellie's joint effort at recovering Gabrielle's story, what Dorinda calls "a sort of three-musketeerish pact to revive Gabrielle without reviving her as wife and mother, [but] on her own" (164) in a fictional enactment of Heilbrun's aim at recovering women's voices.

Gabrielle Foxx's story resembles that of the characters and that of Eleanor and Dorinda, as well as that of many women whose lives were spent next to a career husband. The first portrait of Gabrielle the novel provides is an earlier photograph of the Foxx couple in which Emmanuel confronts "the camera's gaze in triumph ... staring forth, if not in arrogance, certainly with astonishing reassurance", while Gabrielle is distractedly looking through the window as if wanting to ignore the fact that she is also being photographed: "she seemed simultaneously to allow herself to be stared at and to deny its necessity. He looked, she was looked at" (11). The photograph acknowledges Gabrielle's awareness of her status within patriarchal arrangements, both as object of the male gaze and as a mere appendix of her renowned writer husband. The portrait of the young Gabrielle thus provides an apt metaphor for one of the main issues in the novel, that is, the invisibility of women's lives/stories under patriarchy and the need to recover their voices, not only for their sake but also for the benefit of others. In the very few cases in which women are placed at the center of the narrative, as is the case of Foxx's protagonist Ariadne, the female narrator Anne Gringold cannot help sensing that the novel does not reproduce a woman's thoughts but actually a man's fantasy of the female psyche. (Cross: 42) Even when they are accounted for, women's stories are nevertheless told by men, thereby reminding the reader that even language itself is mediated by patriarchal oppression: "Later I would wonder if those words forced from her were indeed her words, or, like the words of masochistic women in pornographic novels, men's fantasies, really, women saying what men wanted them to say, pretending to feel what men wanted them to feel" (73). In a photograph taken years after Emmanuel Foxx's death, Kate notices how Gabrielle stares at the camera in an entirely different attitude of self-assertion: "Gabrielle had aged, but she looked straight at the camera, as though to say 'Yes, look at me, I am here'". (12)

Gabrielle's story, although untold, seems to have inspired the characters that attempt to restore her memory, thus substantiating Heilbrun's claim that recovering women's stories will not only make justice to those lives who had been silenced in the past, but will also create bonds of solidarity and constitute a source of empowerment for future generations of women. In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Heilbrun writes: "Since women in the past have a dreadful tendency to disappear into a cloud of anonymity and silence, one does feel impelled in some cases, like this one, to recover their voices and their stories" (Heilbrun 1988: 136). In *The Players Come Again*, Gabrielle's silent voice can finally be heard towards the end of the novel, together with the disclosure of the family secrets she had kept until her death. Anne discloses that, before her death, Gabrielle had entrusted her with several boxes containing all her writings, which had remained in the vaults of a London bank for decades. Kate wonders what Gabrielle's pile of papers might consist of, considering the extreme anxiety and restlessness she had shown when asking Anne to hide them in a secure place. Kate's literary training and detecting abilities soon provide her with a plausible answer: "Wasn't she writing Foxx's novel as she thought it ought to be written?" (185). Those documents, once properly ordered and classified, turn out to be the novel Gabrielle had written in response to her husband's celebrated *Ariadne*, the edition of which Kate accepts to undertake. By publishing the manuscript that Gabrielle had written, Heilbrun makes her claim for the need to rescue women from their immemorial invisibility in auto/biographies, in literary

accounts and in history at large. Woman, Heilbrun claims in the words of her characters, has never been "the subject of her own story" (7).

Gabrielle's version of *Ariadne* describes Crete as a matriarchy where "the priests and the queen were women" but in which men are nevertheless treated with respect and considered equals: "they were neither slaves nor concubines nor housekeepers nor mere objects of affection or desire" (202-3). Ariadne's civilization lives in constant fear of an imminent invasion by the Greek army and the brutal violence of their patriarchal rule. As the oracle tells Ariadne, "there was no chance of avoiding that. The old ways were gone, women would be enslaved or made into objects of male desire, largely powerless" (204). Theseus, as the representative of this new order, is not described by Gabrielle as a hero but as cruel and thirsty for power: she reinterprets the famous scene in the myth in which Theseus forgets to change the black sails in his ship to white so that his father will know he is returning alive. In Gabrielle's novel, it was not Ariadne who made him forget (thus causing his father to kill himself) but "Theseus himself, eager to take his father's place, eager to sail under the colors of manhood" (205). Similarly, Ariadne is not abandoned on the island by Theseus but instead chooses "to stay within sight of home and be her own person" (167). However, as Kate and Anne reflect while reading the manuscript, "the rest of us ... haven't any home to stay in sight of, metaphorically speaking: no home of our very own" (167). In their effort at repairing literary and literal invisibility by making Gabrielle's novel public, Anne asks Kate: "Do you think all women really have a second chance, even if life hasn't given them a clear first chance?" Kate's optimistic answer echoes Heilbrun's view: "I have a feeling now that, for women at any rate, second chances may be coming back" (158-59).

The interesting ways in which Gabrielle's story and the female characters' lives intertwine find its parallel in the mutually enriching interaction between Heilbrun's theoretical work and her fiction as Amanda Cross. As Susan J. Leonardi notes, Amanda Cross uses "the writing of biography, a prototypical academic project, to parallel, explore and critique the detecting enterprise –and vice versa" (Leonardi 1995: 113). In *The Players Come Again*, the biography of Gabrielle Foxx becomes in fact the mystery, as no actual murder is committed in the novel. Only in the last pages the reader gets to know that, aside from her manuscript, Gabrielle had kept other secrets, namely that Nellie was not really Emile's but Emmanuel's and Hilda's daughter and that Emile had murdered his father.

As I believe this essay has illustrated, *The Players Come Again* demonstrates how Heilbrun's fiction as Amanda Cross served as a platform to make her theories on gender available to a mass audience of readers. The Kate Fansler series not only allowed the author to re-create herself through writing (Heilbrun 1988: 117) and provide other women with a feminist model of achievement they could follow, but also offered the female fans of Amanda Cross the chance to re-create themselves:

Particularly with the support of other women, the coming of age portends all the freedoms men have always known and women never –mostly the freedom from fulfilling the needs of others and from being a female impersonator. ... woman must be glimpsed through all her disguises which seem to preclude her right to be called woman. She may well for the first time be woman herself (Heilbrun 1988: 131).

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