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“W/rites of Passion: Thea Astley's Sunshine Coast Transition from Poetry to Fiction.”

Abstract

*During 1947 and 1948, Thea Astley's life changed in ways that permanently affected her writing. In August 1947, she obtained a transfer to Imbil State School, west of Noosa. In November she re-sat failed University of Queensland exams in economics and history, and graduated with a BA in the following April. In January 1948, Astley took up a secondary teaching post at Pomona Rural High. On 27 August, she married Jack Gregson at the Gympie Registry Office. She transferred to Brisbane for the remainder of 1948, and early in the New Year moved with her husband to Sydney. This article contrasts poetry about love and place that Astley wrote during these transition years with the themes and tone of her novel, *A Descant for Gossips*, published in 1960 and set in Pomona ('Gungee') and its environs. Dedicated 'To John', Astley's love poems display a passionate lyricism and a commitment that, though usually nervous and conditional, encompasses moments of settled happiness and clarity. In *Descant*, by contrast, moments of fulfilment in the love affair of teachers Helen Striebel and Robert Moller are suffused with guilt. Similarly, Astley's youthful response in her poetry to the beauty of the ranges and the coast collapses a decade later in *Descant* into a dystopic rendition of Gungee as a town that punishes defiance and crucifies difference. The article concludes by speculating about causes for the transformation.*

Karen Lamb tells us in the 2015 biography, *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather*, that convent-educated Astley first met Jack Gregson, a married Protestant, at a Brisbane chamber music concert 'sometime in 1947'.¹ Their meeting probably took place during the August school holidays, when Astley, a primary school teacher, was in transit between the Townsville Central State School and Imbil State School, located in the hills behind what is now the Sunshine Coast, although that name was not in use at the time.² This dating is supported by letters of 11 March and 27 June 1947, which Astley wrote from 3 Park St, Pimlico Townsville to her Catholic mentor Martin Haley in Brisbane;³ by an interview that she gave to the *Gympie Times* in 1983;⁴ and by the detailed scheduling of Elsie Ford's travels in Astley's first novel, *Girl with a Monkey*, published in 1958.⁵ Astley said later that this novel was 'a transcription of the very last day I spent in Townsville'.⁶ In November 1947, Astley resat failed University of Queensland exams in economics and history, and graduated BA in the following April.⁷ In January 1948, with degree requirements completed, she took up a secondary teaching post at Pomona Rural High. On 27 August 1948, two days after her twenty-third birthday, in defiance of her parents and her Catholic upbringing,⁸ Thea married Jack, who by then had obtained a divorce, at the Gympie Registry Office.

The year of her courtship and marriage, from August 1947 to August 1948, was a turning point not only in Astley's personal life but also in her literary career. It provided her with material that she used both in the poetry that she wrote at the time and afterwards, and in her second novel, *A Descant for Gossips*, published in 1960 and centred in Pomona, with trips southwards to Brisbane, northwards to Gympie and Tin Can Bay, and eastwards to Tewantin and Noosa. This article considers Astley's renditions, in poetry and later in prose, of her year of courtship and marriage in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, and suggests that both the year and the place played a pivotal role in her transition from poet to novelist.

Astley's poetry

Astley's poetry, a selection of which was published in August 2017,⁹ survives in two exercise books in the University of Queensland's Fryer Library. She planned the later book (Fryer 97/41) as a publishable collection dedicated, according to a handwritten note inside the front cover, 'For John'.¹⁰ The book contains:

1. Ten poems, handwritten in greenish ink, probably in a single sitting, with dates ranging from 1945 to 1950
2. Twenty poems typed and pasted in, undated except for the second, 'Echo Point 1948'; two of the poems in this format were published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*¹¹
3. Twelve poems handwritten in blue, greenish and mostly black ink, of which the first is dated '1947'; two of the four published poems in this format appeared in 1956–1957 editions of the *Herald*¹²
4. Three poems on typed sheets ready for submission, of which 'Invocation for Frederick Delius' and 'A Last Year's Hero' are fair copies with minor editing of handwritten drafts in [Section 3](#).

Astley's retention of this collection of forty-three poems to her death on 17 August 2004 suggests that she never entirely abandoned her plan to publish it. The first poem, obviously an invocation, 'Let Me Plant a Tune or Buy a Singing Bird', is dated to 1945 and two of the *Herald* poems appeared in 1957. The collection thus overlaps the first decade of Astley's relationship with Gregson. The seventeen poems that refer to an intimate relationship, one titled 'John' and others addressed to 'dear' or 'my dear', match the dedication. The collection preserves Astley's best surviving poems and shows that poetry continued to be her creative focus for the six years that followed the newly-weds' move to Sydney in January 1949. She later recalled that she wrote *Girl with a Monkey*, which was commended in a 1956 literary competition in the *Herald*, 'about 1955', just before she turned thirty.¹³

Dated January 1948, Astley's poem 'Echo Point'¹⁴ probably refers to the lookout above the Albert River in Queensland's Lamington Park. Astley's financial, employment and moral constraints rule out the better-known Blue Mountains site. The speaker finds protection from 'black-towered fright' and an unexpected joy in love, conveyed in music and flower metaphors. Brian Matthews described Astley's early fictional protagonists as 'islands of self-consciousness seeking in assertive, almost desperate avowals of identity, bastions against encroaching chaos'.¹⁵ In these poems 'chaos' mostly manifests as the random changes brought by time. By contrast, the horse-riding fantasy 'Those Were the Months' is a straightforward celebration of new love in a summer beach setting — 'with salt/Driving the horses crazy and our hearts/Pounding together'.¹⁶ Childhood holidays at Kirra, which briefly interrupted Cecil and Eileen Astley's marital miseries,¹⁷ explain their daughter's habitual literary renditions of the beach and the sea as places of freedom and hope, though not always of fulfilment.

Other poems in Astley's planned collection explore feelings of loneliness and exclusion that at the time she tried to purge also in a letter to Haley.¹⁸ She later transferred these feelings to the many outsiders who inhabit her fiction. In 'Tomorrow' and 'John', ascribed respectively to 'Pomona 1948' and to 'Pomona, Wednesday, June 1948', and therefore written during the school terms that preceded Astley's August wedding, small-town isolation intensifies the speaker's fear of time and dismay at love's absence. In 'Tomorrow' her fear is not of chaos, but of a continuing monotonous struggle:

The roads will still wind brightly
As today, cruel ribbons into sunlight,
As today, trees bear green benison
As today, and hours move empty,
And a lovelessness, and the little town.¹⁹

In recreating the wind echoing through a wooden Queenslander by night, ‘John’, an intensely personal poem, interweaves passionate loneliness with the loneliness of passion denied: ‘I cry out your name and hear only/the shutters swing back, and back’.²⁰ In both poems a tired after-work tone quenches the hope suggested by ‘unexpected glories in the morn’ (‘Tomorrow’, line 7). Astley’s attitudes to teaching fluctuated throughout her career, but when interviewed by Suzanne Lunney in April 1974, she referred to her first appointment, to the infant class at Mount Crosby State School, as a foretaste of ‘penal servitude for life’. Other poems inspired by her premarital relationship with Gregson, such as the intimate ten lines that begin, ‘You know now. I’ve not said’, find a child-like fragility in love, and plead against parting: ‘Remember, love’s a child —/You must not go’.²¹

Astley further revealed to Lunney how, from the ages of fourteen to eighteen, she suffered ‘tortures of the damned’ from Catholic teachings about ‘purity and chastity’. As if in revolt against such repression, Astley’s poems of her early twenties and later contain the strongest affirmation of consummated passion to be found in her whole *œuvre*. In novels written after *A Descant* teenage sexual encounters — such as that between George Brewster and Nita Kruger in *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962) — turn out to be fleeting and forgettable. In *The Slow Natives* (1965), the teenage sex drive manifests in Chookie Mumberson’s near-rape of a little girl. By contrast, as many as seven epithalamions among Astley’s poems celebrate a newfound and youthful joy in what they refer to as ‘the flesh’. In the accomplished sonnet, ‘I beg you all might soon dissolve but this . . .’, the speaker renounces a state ‘Poised on metaphysical beliefs’, in which she longed for death of ‘the flesh’ but above all for an end to ‘heart’s grief’, in favour of the Shakespearean bravado of the closing couplet: ‘There is no love but us, and what love spares/Niggardly from the hungry tiger years’.²² A second marriage poem, ‘No more need these lips song-sue . . .’ finds shelter in lovemaking and a new truth in the fulfilment of passions:

Passions rise to a stark
 Monument of minutes for the lover,
 And bend all truths into this strange new one.²³

Astley’s most moving statement of settled and caring love, however, simply titled ‘Poem’, begins: ‘You are my quiet music, you/ My house roof under rain . . .’;²⁴ but such restfulness is qualified by other poems that warn of love’s fragility. The most skilful of these is the Petrarchan sonnet, ‘The Flesh can Bear a Hurt . . .’, in which the bleak emotions traversed for an octave and most of a sestet reverberate through the closing proclamation of love’s resurrection and continuance: ‘Love once quoted dead/ Lives, though the pirate years swarm in for plunder’.²⁵

A Descant for Gossips

In 1960, when Astley published *A Descant for Gossips*, she had been married for twelve years and was mother to a five-year-old son. The love affair between teachers Helen Striebel and Robert Moller in the novel differs from her poetry collection in ways that implement but also go beyond the change in genre. While Astley’s love poems are true to their traditional Latin, French and English models in their foregrounding of the speaker’s and recipient’s feelings,²⁶ *A Descant* directs the reader’s attention outwards as much as inwards, in order to deal with specifics of character and place. The fictional love affair’s confrontations with small-town gossip no doubt build on the rigorous observation the fiancés faced when, as ‘You know now. I’ve not said . . .’ suggests, Jack visited Thea in Pomona.

Successively known as Caroorra, Cooroora Siding and Pinbarren Siding, in 1900 Pomona was given the name of the Roman goddess of fruit and orchards.²⁷ If, as is likely, Astley knew of the latest renaming, her scurrilous invented name of ‘Gungee’ — possibly a combination of the slang terms ‘grunge’ (a filthy substance) and ‘scungy’ (unpleasant, mean,

dirty, miserable) — adds defiance to her overall condemnation of the town's citizens. *A Descant* retains some of Pomona's street names, but disguises looming Mount Cooroora under the name 'Bundarra'.²⁸ Genuine local industries like the butter factory and sugar mill explain the presence of such figures as Alec and Jess Talbot, fellow boarders with Helen at one of Gungee's two hotels. Helen's lonely excluded walks and those of the novel's tragic thirteen-year-old protagonist Vinny Lalor are still traceable on the town map. The lovers' failed escapes by car and rail motor from Gungee-Pomona's malicious surveillance are likewise true to the region's wider geography: together with Vinny, Helen and Robert drive southwards to named sites and suburbs in Brisbane; as a couple, they journey northwards through Gympie to Tin Can Bay; finally, they drive eastwards by night through Tewantin to Noosa and the coast.

The wooden, rationalising quality of the lovers' interchanges in *A Descant for Gossips* may explain why Astley's later books represent mature love — whether married or unmarried — satirically rather than empathetically. The spontaneous joy and restfulness that refresh her love lyrics collapse into transitory triumphs in Robert's and Helen's affair. As usual in Astley's fiction, the lovers' most passionate meeting of minds and bodies takes place on a beach, in this case at Smooger Point, which they reach by rowing a dinghy across Tin Can Bay:

After they had beached the boat they carried their lunch bag up the grassy dunes until they found a hollow, tree-hedged, sea-sound-muffled. Hardly could they restrain eyes or hands from each other's person, so sharp was their present tenderness, their infatuation, though it was more than that really — yet going through the primary process all the same of divining one's own godhead in the other.²⁹

However, like all the love scenes in *A Descant*, this degenerates too quickly into wordy analysis. The lovers discuss their mature age — 'We are too old for this sort of thing'; the shortness of time; the tawdriness of the shack in which they consummated their love the night before; and the regrettable requirement for physical expression — 'Don't let's pretend that this is all such a beautiful magic we have no bodies.' The (unsurprisingly) delayed love-making that follows means that in returning they are caught by a launch crewed by Gungee gossips.³⁰

Such undercutting typifies the story of Robert's and Helen's love. The true marriage of their minds is through their shared love of music and other arts — poetry in Robert's case and painting in Helen's. Musical references uplift the affair at crucial points.³¹ Nevertheless, except when they come together at Smooger Point, the lovers meet in sordid surroundings: the cluttered staff room of Gungee High School; Robert's home, 'so full of Lilian', his wife who is slowly dying in a Brisbane hospital;³² a sleazy Queen Street lounge bar, in which 'The pedestrian platitudes bubbled up like beer and settled between the groups in tarnishing rings';³³ the shack with 'the faded orange silk bedspread and the ripped horsehair sofa' rented overnight at Tin Can Bay;³⁴ and a dingy Noosaville milk bar: 'They settled for fried eggs with the sullen, the grudging permission of an eighteen-year-old youth.'³⁵

The narrator protests much, but ultimately fails to convince this reader at least that Robert is 'kind', 'ironic' and 'gentle' — 'his mouth had the nobility of self-humour'. His large body, 'slightly flabby with his gabardine trousers slipping untidily below his relaxed stomach muscles',³⁶ nicotine-stained fingers and teeth, and habitual pontificating make him a flawed Romeo. Without irony, on either the author's part or his own, Robert declares what he calls his 'dishonourable intentions' as follows:

'There's one thing I must make clear, Helen,' he said, and did not touch her in spite of his wishes, but she felt she had been touched all the same, 'that after tonight I'm afraid I can't reject the situation between us any longer. I have decided that I shall have to reject Lilian —

not in so far as there are oranges and magazines and the exchange of platitudes, but in so far as you are concerned with me. Quite suddenly, Helen, I seem to have lost the wish to control my impulses towards you.’³⁷

The inauthenticity of such stately deliberation in a constricted domestic setting is obvious when compared with the speaker's simple urgent questioning in Astley's short poem, ‘You know now. I've not said’: ‘What can be *said*/When moon-daubed streets and stars displace/All sense and careful wisdom from my head?’ [my italics].³⁸ Robert does most of the talking throughout the affair — a feature that resonates with Astley's explanation that she first concentrated on male characters because she thought that no one would read ‘books written by a woman, because it would be like listening to a woman for three hours, which would be intolerable’.³⁹

Unlike that of the speaker in Astley's lyrics, moreover, Robert's passion seems to be resistible. When the Education Department is egged on by the pompous Gungee headmaster to punish Helen (but notably not Robert) for their scandalous affair by transferring her to Camooweal in north-west Queensland's desert country, the relationship fizzles out. Neither lover will take the action or make the sacrifice needed to maintain it. In contrast with the qualified but energetic exploration of love in Astley's Pomona poetry, this lukewarm over-intellectualised affair deadens romance. One wonders, indeed, which passages Astley's mother Eileen can have found to cross out as sacrilegious in the advance copy of *A Descant for Gossips* that she posted back to her daughter.⁴⁰ Passionate love between adults in Astley's later novels mostly adheres to the pattern she established in *A Descant*: such passion is transitory; in marriage it is killed by varying combinations of boredom and betrayal, quite often aggravated by violence.⁴¹

The guilt over their relationship that Robert and Helen suppress by rational talk is the energy that powers the Gungee gossip machine. Robert's ambivalent characterisation and betrayal of his wife suggest that he is a blueprint for the self-deceived philanderer George Brewster, the protagonist of Astley's next book, *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962). It seems that in striving to escape from the Church's control through her fiction, Astley circled back, if not into the clutches of Catholic sexual guilt, then at least to ethical certainty about the loyalty that one human being owes to another. In *The Acolyte* (1972), Bathgate, who in contrast to Robert tenderly cares for his dying wife, is one of Astley's most admired characters. It is significant too that soon after the publication of *A Descant for Gossips*, and a few months before her father Cecil's death, Thea and Jack took the trouble to validate their marriage under Catholic ritual.⁴²

‘Descant’

Astley's poems and novel set near the Sunshine Coast mark her first turning away from personal relationships and individual moral issues towards the political satire that was to become, for the new generation of readers, the most accessible feature of her writing.⁴³ With the publication of *A Kindness Cup* in 1974, she became the first novelist to expose the full horror of Queensland race relations. The distance that Astley travelled during this period, from an intensely subjective focus to an equally committed response to gender and racial issues, is summarised in the contrast that ‘Descant’, a poem that she published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1956 under the pseudonym ‘Philip Cressy’,⁴⁴ makes with the penultimate chapter of *A Descant for Gossips*. ‘Descant’ begins:

For three nights now we two have lain
Under rain-stippled roof and heard
These points of silence barricade

The house, the room, the whispered word. ⁴⁵

Although she was writing in a place unimaginably distant from seventeenth-century London, Astley's ambition in this poem is the same as the speaker's in John Donne's 'The Good Morrow': to create through the intimate union of lovers a world that is separate and complete in itself — 'Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one'.

In medieval music, a 'descant' was an improvised voice interwoven with a fixed melody. In Gregorian chant, the improvising voices were governed by rules and named *discantus supra librum*. Chapter XI is the heart of Astley's novel, in that it is literally a 'descant upon the book'. ⁴⁶ The written melody or 'book' of Robert and Helen's dialogue in bed as they struggle to accept their love's ending interweaves with the voices of nine other Gungee couples — also mostly in bed — who, while bickering, hating, punching and (once) raping each other, comment upon, gossip about, judge, seek to profit from and (twice) defend the lovers. The chapter thus ingeniously extends Astley's earlier poetic focus on the intimacy of lovers into a succinct satire of gender relationships in a town at the back of Queensland's Sunshine Coast. This passage marks the beginning of a lasting shift in Astley's work from the monophonic voice of her lyrical poetry and early fiction towards a polyphonic or contrapuntal texture that reflects an increasing preoccupation with the social world first given full expression in *A Kindness Cup*.

Conclusion

As outlined above, the year between August 1947 and August 1948 that Astley passed at Imbil and Pomona was the year of her courtship and marriage. If Lamb is to be believed, Astley was a virgin before her honeymoon, which was followed by her definitive change of residence to New South Wales. Because it signalled her rejection, if not of her Catholic faith and Christian principles, then certainly of institutional demands, Astley's civil wedding caused a break with her Queensland family that lasted until the birth of her son in 1955. Whether her marriage fulfilled the sexual and emotional yearnings glimpsed in her poems is open to speculation, but her retrospective fictional treatment of the transitional year suggests otherwise.

The comparisons carried out in this essay have shown that while Astley's unpublished volume of poems sustains a qualified trust that passionate love can bring fulfilment, the novel that ten years later she set in the same place scrutinises, and ultimately nullifies, this trust. *A Descant for Gossips* achieves this in part by responding imaginatively to fiction's demand that sexual love have a social setting. The attention that the narrative pays to the human context compromises and ultimately destroys the affair, as Gungee's gossips divert attention from nature's beauty to the seedy indoor settings of Robert's and Helen's love scenes. A more fundamental difference however is that while passion clearly energises the poetry, the love relationship in *A Descant for Gossips* is intrinsically tepid and lack-lustre. Internal as much as outward dynamics destroy it.

The year of her courtship that twenty-two-year-old Thea Astley passed at Imbil and Pomona inspired a collection of intensely private poems in which romantic optimism and sexual fulfilment triumph over anxieties and fears, although they do not eclipse these negative feelings entirely. Published more than a decade later, *A Descant for Gossips* rethinks love relationships in the light of Astley's first-hand experience of marriage and gender inequalities in 1950s Australia — inequalities that both her family life and profession as a teacher seem by then to have driven home with force.

Moreover, the transitional year that I have represented here as a w/rite of passion continued to underpin the descants of Astley's fiction, and its debt to her early poetry, as she

expanded the range of her ironic and satirical modes. When, in *An Item from the Late News* (1982), Astley summed up the Queensland region that had proven so momentous for her personal, professional and creative life, she focused on a third issue that she had come to see as being as important as gender and race, namely the impact of development on the environment. The displaced epithets and transferred metaphors that she used to make her point confirm Astley's lifelong commitment, if not to poetic composition, then certainly to poetic language: 'It's go now, often and often, on the coast miscalled Sunshine of the vanishing sand, the varicosed bitumen, the high blood pressure of high rise.'⁴⁷

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Endnotes

1 Karen Lamb, *Thea Astley: Inventing her own weather* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2015), p. 87. [Google Scholar](#)

2 'The name Sunshine Coast was launched in December 1958 at the inaugural dinner of the Sunshine Coast Branch of the Real Estate Institute of Queensland, held at the Hotel Caloundra' (<https://library.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/sitePage.cfm?code=place-name-origins>). Brisbane residents continued to call the region the 'North Coast' for at least a decade after the REIQ meeting.

3 UQ, Fryer Library 48, items 11–12: Astley refers in the March letter to her recent transfer from Hermit Park to Townsville Central State School: 'The school is smaller than Hermit Park — about 300 kiddies in all. I much prefer it.' The letter, dated 27 June, confirms her visit to Brisbane in August 1947: 'Today six weeks I'll be home. Flying, straight after school on the Friday. Will there be any writers' meetings on? I'll want to go.'

4 'A "pity" book not filmed in Pomona', *Gympie Times*, 20 September 1983; Astley refers to the ABC's filming at Romsey in Victoria of its three-part serial version of *A Descant for Gossips*. She denies that any of the book's characters are from Pomona — 'Certainly not my Pomona headmaster who was Mr Bunny Horne, a delightful man as was his family. My headmaster in *A Descant for Gossips* was a combination of loathsome headmasters I had experienced during my years of teaching but these did not include Mr Horne . . . Nor did they include my headmaster at Imbil the year before . . . I really thought Pomona — all around there — was a beautiful place and I used the layout extensively in my book.'

5 Elsie revisits Townsville, the city of her first teaching appointment, in 'this last week of August'. Thea Astley, *Girl with a Monkey*, new ed. (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 2. [Google Scholar](#) The narration oscillates between the day of Elsie's return on her twenty-second birthday (p. 1), and her life in Townsville from February to early August (p. 23). Astley's own twenty-second birthday fell on 25 August 1947.

6 Thea Astley, interviewed by Suzanne Lunney (Walker), 16 April 1974, NLA Transcript TRC275, 1974; <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1269005>.

7 Lamb states that Astley 'was now a graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a teaching diploma' when the Education Department appointed her to Townsville for the 1947 teaching year (*Thea Astley*, pp. 73–4, 77); but Sheridan refers to Astley's interview with Lunney, in which she mentions that she had to re-sit failed exams in economics and history at the end of

1947, 'and so her Bachelor of Arts was not conferred until April 1948'. Susan Sheridan, *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making Their Mark* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2011), pp. 59, 75 [Google Scholar](#). That Astley was still working externally towards her degree while teaching in Townsville is confirmed by her letter to Haley dated 27 June 1947: 'Your papers have been arriving almost as regularly as my lecture notes, this afternoon's post unfolding a *Bulletin*.'

8 In a letter to Haley from 'Rural School, Pomona, Tuesday', dated in a different hand 'Aug. 1948', Astley writes, 'Truly I don't think it would be much use sending me books on dogma or doctrine, though I am grateful for your kindness in offering to do so. I feel I don't want to be perplexed.' Lamb, *Thea Astley*, p. 77, reads Astley's refusal of books as evidence that Haley 'did not ply her with books of dogma and doctrine', and that 'she valued his friendship all the more' because of this, but surely her refusal implies that Astley had grown wary of Haley's mentoring of young Catholic intellectuals on matters of faith.

9 Cheryl Taylor (ed.), *Thea Astley: Selected Poems*. Introduction Susan Wyndham (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2017) [Google Scholar](#).

10 Inserted in this exercise book is an incomplete photocopy of Astley's short story, 'Seeing Mrs Landers'. Brian Buckley and Jim Hamilton (eds.), *Festival and other stories* (Melbourne: Wren Publishing, 1974, pp. 35–9) [Google Scholar](#); and handwritten drafts of poems that Astley noted in red biro as 'written while at Correspondence School 67 ~~or~~ 66 [sic]'. In *A Boat load of home folk* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1968), pp. 74–7, Astley attributes versions of these poems to the island agent Jim Stevenson, who escapes from a stultifying marriage by way of an affair.

11 Astley attributes her typed sonnet, 'Magnetic', alternatively titled 'The Island', to the *Sydney Morning Herald*; 'Sulpicia ill' appeared in the *Herald* on 19 October 1957, p. 12.

12 Astley attributes the sonnet that she dates '1947' to the *ABC Weekly*. She notes the publication of 'Droving Man' in *Australian Poetry* 1956 and the *Bulletin*. ('Droving Man' was Astley's most frequently republished poem.) As Astley also notes, 'A Last Year's Hero' appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* [16 July 1957, p. 18] and in Hal Porter (ed.), *Australian Poetry* [Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1957, p. 15] [Google Scholar](#).

13 Thea Astley interviewed in Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986), p. 58. [Google Scholar](#)

14 *Thea Astley: Selected Poems*, p. 97.

15 Matthews Brian, 'Life in the eye of the hurricane: The novels of Thea Astley', in Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni (eds), *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 43 [Google Scholar](#) (first published *Southern Review* 6.2 (1973), 148–73).

16 *Selected Poems*, p. 111.

17 Lamb, *Thea Astley*, p. 14.

18 Quoted by Lamb, *Thea Astley*, pp. 80–1.

19 *Selected Poems*, p. 98.

20 *Selected Poems*, p. 99.

21 *Selected Poems* p. 111.

22 *Selected Poems*, p. 114.

23 *Selected Poems*, p. 110.

24 *Selected Poems*, p. 124.

25 *Selected Poems*, p. 84.

26 The Queensland settings of 'Echo Point' and 'John' owe more to Romantic poetry than to Astley's social world.

27 See <https://library.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/sitePage.cfm?code=place-name-origins>.

28 Thea Astley, *A Descant for Gossips* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1968 [1960]), pp. 22, 95–6. [Google Scholar](#)

29 *A Descant*, pp. 128–9.

30 *A Descant*, pp. 129–32.

31 During their drive to Brisbane, Robert sings Brahms' setting of Daumer's lyrics, 'Wie bist du meine Königin' as part of a coded courtship of Helen in Vinny's presence (*A Descant*, p. 59). Before their beach lovemaking, he evokes 'Bist du bei mir' (p. 131), an aria incorrectly attributed to Bach that survives from Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel's lost opera *Diomedes, oder die triumphierende Unschuld*, performed 1718. The words are as follows:

Bist du bei mir, geh ich mit Freuden
Zum Sterben und zu meiner Ruh
Ach, wie vergnügt wär so mein Ende
Es drückten deine schönen Hände
Mir die getreuen Augen zu.

32 *A Descant*, p. 46.

33 *A Descant*, p. 79.

34 *A Descant*, pp. 128–30.

35 *A Descant*, p. 173.

36 *A Descant*, p. 43.

37 *A Descant*, p. 45.

38 *Selected Poems*, p. 111.

39 Astley, interviewed by Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, p. 56.

40 Lamb, *Thea Astley*, p. 126.

41 The marriages of the Leversons in *The Slow Natives*, the Seabrooks in *A Boatload of Home Folk* (1968), and the Cordingleys in *Beachmasters* (1985) are eroded by boredom and suppressed antagonism. In *The Slow Natives*, Iris betrays Bernard, but more often in Astley's fiction the husband betrays the wife: Stevenson in *Boatload*; Holberg in *The Acolyte* (1972); Truscott in *Inventing the Weather* (1992). As well as being unfaithful, some of Astley's husbands exploit doting wives, such as Lissie in *The Well Dressed Explorer* and Hilda in *The Acolyte*. Yet other husbands, such as Buckmaster Snr in *A Kindness Cup* (1974) and Wal in *Drylands* (1999), are violently abusive.

42 The marriage was validated in Epping, Sydney, on 1 March 1961; Cecil Astley died in Brisbane on 24 June in the same year (Lamb, *Thea Astley*, pp. 136–8).

43 ‘None of these early novels [of the 1950s and 1960s] could be described wholly as satire, but the critical modes of irony and satire were — and have remained — Thea Astley’s preferred ones’ (Susan Sheridan, ‘Thea Astley: A Woman among the Satirists of Post-War Modernity’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 18.42 (2003), 263.

44 ‘Descant’, *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 September 1956, 14. ‘Philip Cressy’ references the given name of Astley’s much loved brother (Lamb, *Thea Astley*, pp. 103–4).

45 *Selected Poems*, p. 132.

46 My argument elaborates Bruce Clunies Ross’s statement in his persuasive defence of Astley’s ‘musical style’: ‘*A Descant for Gossips* (1960) is a musical descant transposed to the universe of language, where it becomes the perfect medium for gossip, which is a contrapuntal elaboration of the truth’ (“‘Words Wrenched out of Amusement and Pain’: Thea Astley’s Musical Style’, in Sheridan and Genoni (eds.), *Thea Astley’s Fictional Worlds*, p. 119).

47 *An Item from the Late News* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1982), p. 6.