Introduction: ‘Principles as Light as my Purse’

In 1907, Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp made her first professional appearance in print. In the process of doing so, she negotiated with three (male) authority figures. First and foremost, she needed to persuade her father, Harold Beauchamp, that her recently expressed commitment to ‘give all [her] time to writing’ was not merely a passing adolescent fantasy, and that she should be permitted to leave Wellington behind in order to make a name and a living for herself in London. She was now intent on proving that outside readers would take an interest in her work, and soon found a willing advocate in Tom Mills, a journalist on the New Zealand Evening Post who advised her to send her poems to Harper’s Magazine (who subsequently rejected them) and her prose to the Australian Native Companion, edited by E.J. Brady. On reading the series of short symbolist vignettes that were very clearly influenced by the work of Oscar Wilde, Brady reputedly found it hard to believe that an 18-year-old girl had written them, and sought clarification that she was not, in fact, his regular New Zealand contributor Frank Morton in disguise. He received a response that acknowledged the Wildean tone of the vignettes, but dismissed all other charges:

I am sorry that [they] resemble their illustrious relatives to so marked an extent – and assure you – they feel very much my own – This style of work absorbs me, at present – but – well – it cannot be said that anything you have of mine is ‘cribbed’ – Frankly – I hate plagiarism.

The precocious youngster went on to present herself in terms that she clearly deemed appropriate to the pose of the budding artist that she had begun to adopt: ‘I am poor – obscure – just eighteen years
of age – with a rapacious appetite for everything and principles as light as my purse. Brady duly responded with a cheque for £2, and ‘K. Mansfield’ (as she initially requested to be known) completed her first transaction. Within a year, Katherine Mansfield had left New Zealand behind, travelling first to London and then to numerous locations across continental Europe, where she would fulfil her ambition of becoming an author. The following chapters will trace the ways in which she did so, by locating her work in the worlds of British periodicals and book publishing with which she interacted between 1910 and 1922, a crucial time span in the emergence and consolidation of literary modernism in Europe.

In her early negotiations with Brady, Mansfield adopted a pose as a poverty-stricken ‘artist’ who both invited and resisted the commodification of her work. She began her career by equating poverty with obscurity and, by implication, with artistic integrity, but her increasing engagement with professional spheres of publication in the years that followed necessitated a renegotiation of such simplistic renderings of herself as an ‘artist’. By the end of her career she would be dismissed by Wyndham Lewis as ‘the famous New Zealand Mag.-story writer’, and in the years following her death, she would come to be perceived as ‘the brassy little shopgirl of literature who made herself into a great writer’, as Frank O’Connor has described her. However, I will argue that these categories – of literariness and popularity – need not be seen as mutually exclusive throughout Mansfield’s career. In fact, the achievement of her literary success was dependent to a significant extent on her willingness to challenge a distinction made by many other ‘modernists’ between the ‘popular’ and the ‘literary’, such as Eliot’s Criterion, which aimed for – and achieved – deliberately low circulation figures.

Apparently unbeknown to Mansfield, E.J. Brady also received a letter from Harold Beauchamp around the time that she had told him of her poverty, ‘obscurity’ and the lack of encouragement she had received up to this point:

My daughter, Kathleen, has shown me the letters you have written in respect of her literary contributions and I desire to thank you sincerely for the practical encouragement you have given her. At the same time, I should like to assure you that you need never have any hesitation in accepting anything from her upon the assumption that it may not be original matter. She herself is, I think, a very original character, and writing – whether it be good or bad – comes to her quite naturally. In fact, since she was eight years of age, she has been producing poetry