

British Women's  
Writing, 1930 to 1960  
Between the Waves

Edited by Sue Kennedy and Jane Thomas





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SUE KENNEDY *and* JANE THOMAS

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*for Les Garry 1949–2020*  
*and*  
*Amy Lyson Kennedy 1915–1985*



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# Introduction

*Sue Kennedy and Jane Thomas*

Writers who cannot be slotted into one or other of these categories [modernist, postmodernist, realist] have tended to be at best viewed with suspicion, at worst dismissed as ‘middlebrow’, by many academics in the West. ... When [such categories] are treated as ultimate determinants of what is and what is not admirable in fiction ... they can blind us to many texts which we neglect to our very great loss. (Elizabeth Maslen cited in Mackay and Stonebridge. 2007, 33)

*British Women Writers 1930 to 1960: Between the Waves* brings together a diverse group of authors whose work falls outside mainstream aesthetic and cultural paradigms. Its aim is to recuperate, re-evaluate and reposition some of those texts which, to quote Gill Plain in her essay below, have ‘fallen between the gaps of twentieth-century canonicity’ (148). The volume cuts across period barriers and the socio-historical categories of interwar, war, postwar and peace to offer new insights into writing by women in the middle third of the twentieth century, conventionally dismissed as a culturally insignificant ‘no-man’s land’ between modernism and postmodernism.<sup>1</sup>

Our focus on this median point sheds a new light on what is commonly regarded as a quiescent period in feminist awareness and activity when women’s consciousness and energies for change lost momentum between the turbulent first and second ‘waves’ of twentieth-century feminism. In her survey of 48 wives from middle- and working-class families in London, the sociologist Hannah Gavron noted a claim made by the *Economist* in 1956 that ‘the ordinary woman still persists in the belief

that in marriage one ounce of perfume is worth a peck of legal rights' (cited in Gavron. 1966, 28). Her study, however, documents the very real 'conflict and stress' experienced by women in the 1940s and 1950s, stranded between the democratic impulse born of the legal and social victories enjoyed by their mothers' generation and the backlash of antifeminism identified by Margaret Mead in 1954, in which 'men under the guise of exalting the importance of maternity are tying women more tightly to their children' and to the ideology of the modern family (cited in Gavron. 1966, 130). No wonder then that one subject of her survey lamented 'I'm standing still. I don't exist' (129).

In its challenge to what Kristen Bluemel perceives as 'a monolithic twentieth-century literary history' (Bluemel and Lassner. 2017, 22) that disregards so many women writers of the period, *British Women Writers 1930–1960: Between the Waves* identifies the remarkable cultural, political and stylistic vitality of a group of authors who have been, for the most part, caught in the trough between modernism and postmodernism and first- and second-wave feminism. Neither well known nor widely studied, and often long out of print, the texts that form the focus of this volume reveal a literary-historical and feminist significance that has only recently been recognized.

Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge identify the years from 1930 to 1960 as 'a critically awkward phase of twentieth-century writing' (2007, 1) and, while their study considers male as well as female authors, we tread a similar path in a direction also indicated by critics such as Kristin Bluemel (2004 and 2009) and Petra Rau (2016), who applaud the advent of a revived interest in mid-century literature while recognizing the issues for feminist scholars of women's writing and writing about women (Bluemel and Lassner. 2017, 22).<sup>2</sup> The present collection distinguishes itself from modernist agendas with the aid of a bespoke neologism – a companion perhaps to Bluemel's 'intermodernism' – namely 'interfeminism'.<sup>3</sup> Bluemel introduced her term in 2003, using Stevie Smith – also examined here by James Underwood – as a case study to argue against 'a conception of periodicity' that excluded the work of 1930s and 1940s writers who eschewed 'contemporary critical fashions or reified avant-garde aesthetics and attitudes' (Bluemel and Lassner. 2017, 23–24). Bluemel extended its reach in the 2009 edited collection *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century*. Her proposition to 'adapt an existing critical vocabulary to [an] undervalued body of writing' accords with the tenor of this collection's readings of mid-century writing by women (Bluemel. 2004, 2). Despite



the similarity of purpose and the temporal overlap of the two critical terms, in this volume the stem noun ‘feminism’ takes precedence over ‘modernism’, given our focus on writing by women that has a diverse formal, contextual and stylistic range. For our purposes, ‘interfeminism’ acts first as a periodizing term for writing produced between the first and second waves of feminism,<sup>4</sup> while also ‘forging a connection or bridge’ between them by privileging writing revealing a feminist sensibility that may be profitably viewed through a twenty-first-century critical lens (Bluemel and Lassner. 2017, 23).

The term ‘interfeminist’ is deployed to theorize an approach to female-authored writing whose feminist credentials appear modest and, combined with its apparent stylistic conservatism, has contributed to its summary dismissal as popular, middlebrow women’s writing neglected by the academy and the publishing industry, which have yet to properly recognize its diversity, quality and impact. We have benefited enormously from the important work begun in the late-twentieth-century by feminist literary/historical academics such as Gill Plain, Jenny Hartley, Maroula Joannou, Karen Schneider, Phyllis Lassner, Alison Light, Elizabeth Wilson and the path-breaking research of Nicola Humble, Jane Dowson, Victoria Stewart, Lyndsey Stonebridge, Clare Hanson, Marina Mackay, Susan Watkins, Kristine Miller and Eve Patten among others. The publication in November 2017 of volume 9 in Palgrave’s *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1945–1975*, edited by Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins, broadened the historical perspective on the diversity and value of women’s writing – albeit in a period that starts and finishes after the one covered in this volume. In that book’s expansive survey of the territory, Kristin Bluemel’s chapter ‘The Aftermath of War’ celebrates those twenty-first-century studies that have already ‘brought greater visibility to this body of writing, in part by locating it within gendered cultural hierarchies’ (Bluemel. 2017, 144).

Augmenting recent critical work the present volume showcases a diverse range of women’s writing that variously interweaves realism with other stylistic genres, combines the private with the public and the personal with the political, gesturing towards what Bluemel and Lassner, in the first volume of *Feminist Modernist Studies* in 2017 define as ‘a more historically grounded yet open-ended analysis of relations between art, culture, and modernity’ (Bluemel and Lassner. 2017, 24).

As Bluemel and Lassner contend, the critical impulse manifest in the relatively recent formation of the Feminist inter/Modernist Association (FiMA) supported by the journal *Feminist Modernist Studies* is, at first glance, heartening but the potential limitation implicit in the journal’s

title of ‘modernist’, without the ‘inter’, is less so. Nevertheless, two of that association’s emerging discourses closely accord with our aims. First, we support movement towards ‘the recovery of underexplored or “lost” women writers and producers of art/culture’. Second, we welcome the ‘opening-up [of] space for discussions about the limitations of period and genre on women’s literary and cultural history’ that encourages ‘FiMA members actively [to] rethink categories and definitions of modernism, modernity, and cultural studies from a feminist perspective’ (Flyer for FiMA, November 2017). We are most inclined towards Bluemel and Lassner’s more contrarian position identified above and we endorse Elizabeth Maslen’s cautionary note that the categorization of fiction through most of the twentieth century into realist, modernist and postmodernist pigeonholes has had the effect of devaluing what Hilary Radner has called ‘out-of-category’ writing (Maslen. 1996, 105) by authors who, as Maslen observes in the epigraph above, are ‘at best viewed with suspicion, at worst dismissed as middlebrow’. A representative selection of these authors is scrutinized in this collection. It is noteworthy that Maslen’s comments about the risks attached to categorization were a preface to her case for a discussion of the apparent anomalies of Storm Jameson’s writing; a position explored by Katherine Cooper in this volume.

The appellation ‘British’ in the collection’s title comprehends the nationalities of all the women writers examined here; including those from the Caribbean, Indian and African diaspora as well as those domiciled in England. The omission of writers and writing from the English regions and from Scotland, Wales and Ireland is not in any way a denial of their existence nor of their quality but is a recognition of the literary emphasis on the impact of the historical moment on a sense of Britishness that is, in effect, metropolitan Englishness. The primary focus on London and the South of England (aside from Jameson’s exceptional writing set in Europe), and on the colonial bastions of ‘Britishness’, necessarily excludes distinctive narratives from Ireland, Scotland and Wales although the suffering experienced during and after the war in industrial cities and ports in other regions of England is represented in Chris Hopkins’s examination of Edith Pargeter’s description of the life of a Wren in Plymouth and in Liverpool, and Maria Elena Capitani’s analysis of Shelagh Delaney’s depiction of austere postwar Salford.

The focus here is on writers who, as far as we are aware, identified – and were recognized – as women. However, from an interfeminist

## INTRODUCTION

point of view, many of them were engaged in challenging or, in the case of those contributors to *Women's Weekly* identified by Eleanor Reed (some of whom were actually men), actively constructing the social norms that facilitated this recognition. At the same time, as Kristin Bluemel observes, the domestic space as charted by postwar women writers is 'often representative of human relationships that take place in and around it'. It is also where women writers 'contested at close range, from the inside, easy assumptions made about home life' (Bluemel cited in eds Hanson and Watkins. 2017, 144). Ideas imaginatively gleaned from female experience during this period, at home and abroad, at the very least reveal the nature of the mid-century condition of women and those with whom they engaged. As Salman Rushdie rightly asserts, 'description itself is a political act ... so it is clear that describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it' (Rushdie cited in ed. Michael R. Reder. 2000, viii). In the case of Penelope Mortimer, as Jane Thomas suggests, what could be regarded as an obsessive preoccupation with the domestic space, and women's (and men's) entrapment within its 'bright prison', can be read as a series of subversive iterations with transformative potential. The weight of Rushdie's statement (perhaps ironically in a feminist forum) can be brought to bear not only on the overtly political writing in the 1930s of Storm Jameson, Vera Brittain and Nancy Mitford considered here by Natasha Periyana, or the social commentary of class-based manipulation provided by Eleanor Reed's examination of *Woman's Weekly* from the year 1930 but also on Maroula Joannou's consideration of the experiences of British colonial women writers in her account of female migrant voices in postwar London.

The volume's structure is roughly chronological with three or four essays in each of four Parts. Part I reflects aspects of the state of play before or, in the case of Maroula Joannou's essay, immediately following the Second World War, starting with the 1930s, a period marked by economic, social and cultural decline and severe political dangers. This period is considered under the heading 'Visions of "This Island": 1930–1960' through two contrasting perspectives: the metropolitan and the colonial. The ambiguities revealed in Eleanor Reed's close analysis of 1930s' issues of *Woman's Weekly* offer important insights into changes in social class and economic structures. The magazine was designed to appeal to the newly developing 'lower-middle-class' woman endeavouring to manage the 'servantless household' – a concept that Reed suggests was advanced with the contrivance of the magazine's producers. The manipulation of women's domestic aspirations is shown to exist in uneasy parallel with

the emergent creeds of fascism and pacifism that compelled several women writers to articulate the struggle to align their beliefs with growing collective anxieties. Periyar's scrutiny of the early 1930s novels, letters, articles and other archival resources related to Vera Brittain, Storm Jameson and Nancy Mitford underscores the ambivalence felt by politically aware women confronted with a perceived crisis of civilization. Such a volatile mid-century period also revealed a British empire in decline which, among many other things, resulted in the migration after the war of British writers to London, the literary and cultural capital of the empire. Maroula Joannou's exploration of British women's writing from outside the United Kingdom is channelled through the 'unsettled and unsettling' voices of migrant women whose choice it was to pursue their writing and political life in the metropolis after the war. Joannou demonstrates how the work of Doris Lessing from Southern Rhodesia, Phyllis Shand Allfrey from Dominica, and Rumer Godden, Attia Hosain, and Kamala Markandaya from the Indian subcontinent, much of it autobiographical in tone, works to 'separate and conjoin the colonial past with the metropolitan present' (54).

Writing that emerged from the middle decade of our period, the 1940s, is understandably, if not always conspicuously, imbued with experience of 'the war' – a term that Petra Rau suggests 'refers to the Second World War rather than any contemporaneous deployment of troops, say in the Middle East' (Rau. 2016, 2). Part II, 'Women Bearing Witness: The Temperature of War', concentrates on a decade dominated by a war that inspired a multifaceted literary response from women to equally varied and unprecedented events. This set of essays examines ways in which women authors, either personally or through their characters, resisted propaganda and challenged expectations that supported normative attitudes and behaviours. Their work features female protagonists in reaction to societal and sexual conventions in what Lara Feigel has called an 'abnormal pocket of time' (Feigel. 2013, 4). Sue Kennedy detects a contentious challenge to sexual and maternal paradigms in Marghanita Laski's *To Bed with Grand Music* (1946). The unthinkable reality that some women enjoyed a 'good war' is explored in a novel that vacillates between judgement of and sympathy for a protagonist who manifests an inchoate feminine agency in her engagement with an exchange economy, trading sexual services for scarce goods; reminiscent of eighteenth-century 'infamous commerce'.<sup>5</sup> Problematized by a persistent maternal anxiety bolstered by newly popularized ideas in child psychology and psycho-analytical theories, the reception of Laski's protagonist is contrasted with

that of Amber St Clare in Kathleen Winsor's 1944 novel *Forever Amber*, set 300 years earlier.

The London Blitz – a 'synecdoche for the experience of being bombed' that was felt across the United Kingdom during the war – was mythologized at the time and indeed still is memorialized in ways that, if not wholly authentic, serve to sustain a sense of national pride (Rau. 2016, 5). Lola Serraf uses Susan Ertz's novel *Anger in the Sky* (1943) to reconsider the 'Myth of the Blitz', a concept initiated by Angus Calder in *The People's War* (1969), which, intentionally or not, succeeded in bolstering what he was attempting to debunk. When Calder revised his ideas in 1991 in *The Myth of the Blitz*, almost half a century after Ertz had described its devastating effects not only on London but also on outlying rural English life, he began to deconstruct the image of a wholly patriotic country united in adversity. *Anger in the Sky*, surprisingly for a work that has been characterized as a 'propaganda novel', explores conflicting intellectual arguments for and justifications of war, and airs differing perspectives on British pressure for active American military involvement. Serraf rejects the categorization of Ertz's novel as a work of propaganda by foregrounding opposing discourses articulated through the conflicting voices of her characters.

Elizabeth Bowen is perhaps the only novelist examined in this volume to have gained a place in the mid-century 'canon'. Ana Ashraf's exploration of Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948) adds new perspectives to those identified by Serraf in *Anger in the Sky* in its examination of the conflict between love and patriotism in the ambivalent testimony through which the ideology of war is at once destabilized and shored up by the machinery of propaganda. Insights into the experience of women's wartime military service emerge from Chris Hopkins's discussion of work by Edith Pargeter, Nancy Spain, Eileen Bigland and Vera Laughton Matthews. Documentary and fictional writing contribute not only to representations of the realities of war for women in the military, but also to intersecting discourses on gender, class and society at a time of crisis and transition.

In contrast to the emphasis on writing about women, Part III, 'Women Writing Men: Interwar, War and Aftermath', examines novels that expose the effects of war on masculinities and the consequent impact on women's lives. In her examination of Pamela Hansford Johnson's trilogy, *Too Dear for My Possessing* (1940), *An Avenue of Stone* (1947) and *A Summer to Decide* (1948), Gill Plain's observations on how women take on the responsibility for the exculpation of men reveal women

exercising a ‘heroic, perverse or even sacrificial maternity’ (148) towards adult male characters. These novels explore the expectations incumbent upon women to make strenuous adjustments to assuage the unease of homecoming male combatants, or indeed non-combatants, readjusting to postwar life. Plain observes that in the ‘Helena’ trilogy, Hansford Johnson ‘negotiates, with varying degrees of comfort, a simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the normative’ (148). In common with Storm Jameson, Hansford Johnson vocalizes a male point of view in these novels. Lucy Hall looks at how the domestic domain is reconfigured by or for men in the interwar and postwar periods in three novels – Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), Dorothy Whipple’s *They Were Sisters* (1943) and Elizabeth Taylor’s *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) – in which masculine power is reasserted by alienating, excluding or repositioning women within the home. Katherine Cooper explores Jameson’s difficult-to-categorize writing through three of her novels: *Europe to Let* (1940), *The Black Laurel* (1947) and *The Hidden River* (1955) demonstrating how our understanding of gender, war and writing continue to shape responses to women’s war writing and the processes of recovering it. She offers a renewed assessment of the importance of Jameson’s vision to the history of war writing and specifically of women writing about war. Jameson’s decision to set these novels in wartime Europe rather than in Britain, and to ‘cross-write’ from the viewpoint of a male protagonist, makes her work especially distinctive. The prosecution of the conflict demanded a worldwide British engagement that led to other important examples of women’s writing, for reasons of space not included here, a prime example being Olivia Manning’s wide-reaching trilogies covering wartime experiences in the Balkans and the Levant.<sup>6</sup> This volume’s focus however, with the considered exceptions of Jameson’s out-of-category, European-based male protagonists, Hansford Johnson’s cross-channel domiciles in Bruges, Joannou’s colonial women, resettled in London but writing of homeland experiences, and Chris Hopkins’s exposition of the travels and travails of servicewomen within the United Kingdom, is closer to home.

In Part IV, ‘New Realities for Women: A Forward Glance’, demonstrates how novels, drama, poetry and film of the 1950s into the 1960s and onwards anticipate some of the material, emotional and psychological conditions for women that prefigure the crises of subjectivity that characterized second- and even third-wave feminism. These literary and cultural products display a progressive impulse in women’s writing that includes innovations in genre, style, and social comment

while remaining stubbornly outside the dominant aesthetic categories. Barbara Comyns's deviation from the traditional fare of women's fiction anticipates gothic and magic realism – later comprehensively refined by Angela Carter – and introduces a surreal visual element that further distinguishes her work from the characteristic 'woman's novel'. Focusing on Comyns's first three novels *Sisters by a River* (1947), *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* (1950) and *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1956), Nick Turner's engagement with the (so far) scant scholarly work on Comyns makes a strong case for a broader re-examination of a body of writing that has been overlooked, at least partly as a result of the difficulties of categorization. Maria Elena Capitani positions Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) as part of the short-lived phenomenon of 'kitchen sink drama', but rejects as unconvincing the identification of Delaney as an 'angry young woman'. Capitani observes how *A Taste of Honey* has the unique capacity to hold a mirror to a crucial transitional moment in British social and cultural history at the same time as it expresses the 'suffering of ambivalence' of motherhood, to use Adrienne Rich's term (1995, 21). Capitani foregrounds the way in which the play's themes gesture towards more of the preoccupations of the 1960s; specifically, homosexuality, mixed-race sex, teenage pregnancy and the survival techniques of an 'underclass'. James Underwood re-examines Stevie Smith's equivocal position as a writer possessing Virginia Woolf's pre-requisite qualities of the 'elusive, enigmatic, impersonal' (234) and identifies gendered and literary forces that have shaped Smith's reception during and after the period 1930 to 1960. Underwood explores perceptions of Smith's personality and the alleged difficulties attached to reading her poetry and fiction. Offering a poetic context for her work and supplementing recent commentary on Smith, in particular the charge of eccentricity that emerges in discussions of her work, Underwood makes an important contribution to Smith scholarship. In the final essay, Jane Thomas rescues Penelope Mortimer's early novels, *A Villa in Summer* (1954), *The Bright Prison* (1956), *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* (1958) and *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962), from the constraints of biographicalism and the shadow of Betty Friedan's liberationist project to demonstrate what was truly original and avant-garde in her work. Focusing on a hitherto unremarked intertextual connection between *The Pumpkin Eater* and Carol Ann Duffy's 'Whoever She Was', Thomas reveals Mortimer's extraordinary and illuminating grasp of the signifying practices that constitute the gendered self, gesturing towards the second wave of feminism and beyond.

Having aligned the volume with the recent work of Kristin Bluemel and Petra Rau, we note that the contributors to the collection also commonly refer to the earlier work of feminist academics, much of it listed above, that underpins studies of the history of British women's writing and informs the current recuperative impulse. In many respects this volume contributes to and extends the spirit of Jane Dowson's 2003 edited collection *Women's Writing: 1945–1960: After the Deluge* (2003), but the authors of the essays included here introduce a fresh impetus with new readings of novels, many of which have been forgotten or submerged, and advance an eclectic theoretical reach. Contributors bring innovative interpretations to the table, making use of close readings underpinned by a range of theoretical concepts and, importantly, introducing original archival research to the discussions. A selection of some of the authors included here illustrates the volume's recuperative heft: Susan Ertz, Edith Pargeter, Barbara Comyns, Marghanita Laski and Penelope Mortimer have all suffered from critical neglect: an oversight we have sought to address here. In addition, as Reed argues, insufficient recognition has been given to the power wielded by contributors to the popular and long-running magazine *Woman's Weekly* as 'shaper[s] of social identity'. Other authors such as Pamela Hansford Johnson and Storm Jameson, who enjoyed more success earlier in their careers, have slipped from view and are ripe for rediscovery. Recent studies of postcolonial literature have not paid enough attention to the women writers explored by Maroula Joannou – the exception being Doris Lessing. The poetry and novels of Stevie Smith have been awarded more serious attention only in the last few years and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* enjoyed a brief resurgence after Delaney's death in 2011 and more recently a National Theatre production toured the UK followed by a season back in the West End. It remains a staple on some English school examination syllabuses.

The 'in-between', mid-century focus of *British Women's Writing 1930–1960: Between the Waves* is the keystone to its recuperative agenda, and highlights a new awareness of women's position stimulated, in part, by a growing resistance to the exigencies of reconstruction following two world wars. Women who had actively participated – at home and abroad – in a period of global upheaval and enjoyed unprecedented liberties were encouraged now to dissipate their energies in homemaking and child-rearing amid the dubious gains of affluence and burgeoning consumerism. Their increasing awareness of, and frustration with, the domestic and feminine imperative fed the energy and revolt



of second- and third-wave feminism. It is worth reiterating our position that the use of the neologism ‘interfeminism’ – like ‘intermodernism’ – seeks to forge connections between political and cultural monoliths. It also helps to map uncharted cultural space and reveal the dynamism and innovation of a period of assumed literary and political quiescence. In addition to engaging with writing by avowedly feminist writers, it signifies a multifaceted response to dramatic and undramatic events and social change in the lives of women and men before, during and after the Second World War. The fresh interpretations of a varied body of women’s writing offered here reveal ‘vital figures and cultural forms that disappear in discussions of modernism or postmodernism’ (Bluemel. 2009, 6), and offer a challenge to what Claire Seiler has termed ‘an overdetermined middleness’ – mid-century, middlebrow, middle-of-the-road – that has contributed to an underestimation of the period and of some aspects of women’s writing (Seiler. 2014, 126).

Fuelled by a growing impulse to evaluate the writing of women who remain neglected, ignored or sidelined *British Women Writers 1930–1960: Between the Waves* addresses the disparity in coverage that, as Elizabeth Maslen suggests, ‘can blind us to many texts which we neglect to our very great loss’ (Elizabeth Maslen cited Mackay and Stonebridge. 2007, 33).

### Notes

- 1 The term, ‘no-man’s land’ was used in 1999 by Tyrus Miller in his study, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press), in relation to writers at work between modernism and postmodernism.
- 2 Bluemel and Lassner present a contrarian view in the first issue of the journal *Feminist Modernist Studies: ‘Feminist Inter/modernist Studies’, Feminist Modernist Studies*, 2017, vol. 1:1–2, 22–35.
- 3 Bluemel coined the term ‘intermodernism’ to describe the work of writers and artists ‘who did not identify themselves or their work with modernist aesthetics and cultural politics’ (Bluemel and Lassner. 2017, 23).
- 4 There is a view, perhaps oversimplified but useful to the periodizing process here, that the achievements of first-wave feminism culminated in suffrage for women in 1928. The onset of the second wave is generally placed in 1968 following popular pressure in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States followed by the liberalization of laws relating to, among many other issues, abortion, homosexuality, divorce and gender equality in employment and pay. The Women’s Liberation Movement in the UK and USA moved into

prominence in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, and actively campaigned on these and many other issues initiating a new wave of bolder writing by women that gave explicit voice to the personal and political issues that gained prominence in the next two decades and onwards.

- 5 For a full description of this term see Laura J. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth Century British Life and Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015).
- 6 For example, Olivia Manning chronicles wartime life in the Balkans and the Middle East in *The Balkan Trilogy* and *The Levant Trilogy*, now known as *The Fortunes of War*, that testify to her importance as a woman writer of war fiction that represents the decline of empire, expresses critiques of war, colonialism and imperialism, although her work may not engage so readily with feminist concerns. Eve Patten's 2012 publication, *Imperial Refugee: Olivia Manning's Fictions of War*, and Deirdre David's *Olivia Manning: A Woman at War* in 2014 mark an effort to recover Manning's writing and re-examine its literary worth.

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PART I

**Visions of 'This Island', 1930–1960**



## CHAPTER ONE

# Lower-middle-class Domestic Leisure in *Woman's Weekly*, 1930

*Eleanor Reed*

This essay explores the status of domestic leisure in issues of the popular magazine *Woman's Weekly* during 1930. Launched in 1911 and still running over a century later, it is the third oldest women's magazine currently published in Britain. Initially aimed at women who had left domestic service to marry and run homes of their own<sup>1</sup> by the mid-interwar period, its target audience seems to have been drawn from the lower middle classes; unmarried clerical workers and suburban housewives on limited incomes who aspired to middle-class status. Owing to the so-called Servant Problem and the increasing availability of labour-saving technologies, middle-class housewives were beginning to employ domestic appliances to produce status-defining domestic leisure. Produced during a period of upheaval within the British class system, the magazine both initiates and reflects the aspirations and anxieties of a readership eager to cement its position in an expanding, diversifying and competitive middle class. *Woman's Weekly's* lower-middle-class distinctiveness emerges through comparison to *Good Housekeeping*, a glossy domestic monthly targeting middle-middle-class housewives with larger budgets. While journalist Thomas Crosland and social theorist Pierre Bourdieu have charged lower-middle-class culture with being an inauthentic copy of leisure-class culture, scrutiny of *Woman's Weekly* magazines published during 1930 challenges this and suggests instead that they contribute to the production of an ideologically distinctive lower-middle-class domestic culture in which their readers can take pride. This culture is, however, problematized by its suspected source; a

situation, explored below, to which Stevie Smith's 1936 *Novel on Yellow Paper* alludes.

Engaging speculatively with class relations between *Woman's Weekly's* readers and its producers, this essay's concluding discussion touches on the question of the identity of the producers. Sadly, records of the magazine's interwar staff no longer exist, having been lost or discarded, perhaps, during ownership changes (Barrell and Braithwaite. 1988, 210). Though frustrating for researchers, this archive's absence seems apt for, during 1930, the magazine hides or alters many of its authors' identities. Comprised mostly of advice columns, fiction, craft projects and advertisements, *Woman's Weekly* is a multi-vocal, communally produced text. Interestingly, virtually every fiction writer is named, allowing readers to relate personally to their work and perhaps to develop their own literary preferences. Indeed, Laurel Brake argues that periodicals advertise fiction writers' work (Brake. 1997, 56); doubtless Margery Land May, Grace Mack, Phil Forsyth and Frederick Skerry, whose *Woman's Weekly* fiction is discussed below, hoped to profit from exposure in the magazine as, too, the magazine hoped to profit from their popularity among its readers. Most of *Woman's Weekly's* other authors, including the writers of etiquette tips and craft projects, advertising copywriters, photographers and illustrators are, however, anonymous. Regular advice columnists write under pseudonyms including The London Girl (gossip and fashion), Cecile (cookery) and Mrs Marryat (agony aunt). These familiar personalities maintain continuity between multiple issues and, in all likelihood, multiple writers, some of whom may even have been male – as Margaret Beetham observes of Victorian periodicals, pseudonyms and anonymity 'allowed all kinds of literary cross-dressing' (in Beetham. 2015, 226). Each speaking with their own distinctive voice, The London Girl, Cecile, and Mrs Marryat foster a personal rapport between *Woman's Weekly* and its readers. As my conclusion suggests, however, these friendly voices may conceal an ulterior social agenda on the part of the magazine's producers, whose identities they mask.

In using *Woman's Weekly* to challenge claims that lower-middle-class culture is a cheaper, bogus version of leisure-class culture, this essay contributes to debates surrounding middlebrow literature. A case for the inclusion of periodicals in studies of early to mid-twentieth-century literary culture is articulated by Patrick Collier, who argues that they are 'agents in and commentators on many kinds of reading material and reading life that were possible in these years' (Collier. 2015, 106). Scholars who have incorporated magazines into discussions of



middlebrow literature include Janet Casey (2012), Alice Wood (2010) and Nicola Humble (2001). Humble's study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* flags up thematic and functional similarities between middlebrow novels targeting female readerships, and domestic women's magazines. Both forms of literature are concerned with the home, courtship and marriage, and both help their readers to navigate Britain's shifting class system. Humble claims that the 'feminine middlebrow' helped its readers to negotiate 'new class ... identities' during the interwar years, forging 'a new middle-class identity' through 'obsessive attention ... to class markers and manners' (Humble. 2001, 5, 11). Her assertion that the interwar middlebrow 'shaped its readers' is echoed by Mary Grover, who argues that novels by Warwick Deeping formed, as well as expressed, interwar readers' tastes and values (Grover. 2009, 34). Demarcating and policing the boundaries of 'correct' social conduct, explicitly by dispensing etiquette advice and implicitly by promoting certain lifestyles and values, *Woman's Weekly* adapts its readers' social identities to fit the changing cultures within which it is produced. Indeed, through forging and re-forging these boundaries the publication helps produce its own social contexts; to quote Margaret Beetham, a magazine is 'a place where [cultural] meanings are contested and made' (Beetham. 1996, 5). Magazines may have an even stronger and more lasting bearing on their readers' social identities than novels. Read regularly and repetitively over lengthy periods of time, weekly publications such as *Woman's Weekly* have the potential to make a more sustained and insidious impression on their readers' values and selfhoods than novels, which begin and end within a single cover. It is with *Woman's Weekly's* middlebrow function as a shaper of social identity that this essay is concerned and, in exploring how this domestic publication challenges accusations of lower-middle-class inauthenticity, it offers a new perspective on the interwar feminine middlebrow. Close readings of *Woman's Weekly* romance stories draw this popular literary genre into the middlebrow debate.

*Woman's Weekly* magazines in 1930 appear during a period of tremendous upheaval within the British class system, and the publication's distinctively lower-middle-class culture is arguably an agent in this upheaval. Between 1918 and 1939, Britain's class system underwent cataclysmic changes. Financially poleaxed by high postwar taxation and mourning its male heirs' battlefield deaths, the interwar aristocracy was rapidly conceding social, political and economic primacy to the ascendant middle classes, whose own composition was altering, supplemented from above by impoverished members of the upper classes who

lost status with income and bolstered from below by a growing wave of white-collar workers. The latter comprised the lower middle classes: council school teachers, technicians, shop or sales managers, commercial travellers and clerks who, enjoying salaried rather than waged incomes, stable employment, prospects of promotion, the means to save and often pensions, shared many of the established middle classes' attitudes and aspirations, despite their closer economic proximity to the working classes. Ambitious and upwardly mobile, by the end of the 1930s many sought to confirm their middle-class status by buying or renting smart modern houses in fast-expanding suburbia. Full-time housewives, encumbered by fewer children but mostly unable to afford paid domestic help, sought to maintain middle-class domestic standards in these new homes, drawing practical advice from an expanding range of domestic magazines aimed at the suburban market.<sup>2</sup> *Woman's Weekly* is one such publication; it is evidently popular, by 1936 claiming a circulation of over 500,000 (Cox and Mowatt. 2014, 63).

Within the turmoil of rapid upward and downward class mobility, the expanding and diversifying interwar middle classes developed acute status anxiety. As plummeting upper-class fortunes severed class from economic status, occupational diversification dissolved professional distinctions and middle-class lifestyles were altered by social and technological change. Perceiving the acquisition of leisure-class culture as proof of their social ascendancy, the upper middle classes felt threatened by the lower middle classes, blaming them for destabilizing a class system based on inherited privilege by designating themselves middle class through occupation and income, and fearing that, in turn, lower-middle-class culture would subsume their own. Class indeterminacy intensified status anxiety among members of the middle classes who, confronting radical redefinitions of what being middle class meant, fought desperately to preserve rank. Alison Light describes the interwar middle classes as 'a profoundly restless and heterodox grouping' characterized by acute awareness of difference (Light. 1991, 98, 12), and Raphael Samuel defines the 'Middle Class between the Wars' as 'a society of orders each with its own exclusion rituals and status ideology' (Samuel. 1983, 30). Their use of difference to confirm their own status while ruling out their peers resulted in what Evelyn Waugh describes as a relational middle-class hierarchy on which individuals positioned themselves using criteria chosen to confirm their own superiority: '*everyone* (everyone, that is to say, who comes to the front door) *thinks he is a gentleman ... everyone draws the line of demarcation immediately below his own heels*' [original

italics] (Waugh. 1956, 74). Waugh's scheme of classification functioning primarily as self-elevation resembles that constructed by Paul Furbank, who describes the process as a social transaction in which class status is designated according to the relative class positions of the classifying and classified individuals as perceived by the former – '[social classification is] a judgement and a speculation, and these will inevitably be coloured by who is doing the judging and speculating and with what motive' (Furbank. 1985, 13). Chief among the lower middle classes' status anxieties was the need to distinguish themselves from the working classes, whose incomes, although waged rather than salaried, were similar in size to their own. By selling lower-middle-class housewives a share in the leisure-class culture that was being acquired by the ascendant upper-middle classes, *Woman's Weekly* magazines issued during 1930 soothe this anxiety.

The magazine's project to distinguish its readers from working-class housewives by helping them to participate in the upper-middle classes' annexation of leisure-class culture presupposes that status can be attained through the acquisition of material distinctions. Journalist and author Thomas Crosland believed this impossible, suggesting in his 1905 critique of the suburban lower middle classes that they were unable to afford genuine leisure-class culture and would be unable to recognize it even if they could. Aware that they will be classified by their taste but their inferior breeding prevents them from distinguishing between genuine leisure-class and cheap reproduction, Crosland's hapless 'Suburbans' are victims of what Pierre Bourdieu designates 'cultural allodoxia ... the mistaken identifications and recognitions that betray the gap between acknowledgement and knowledge' of the culture towards which they aspire (Bourdieu. 1986, 321). This gap, manifest in the lower middle classes' pretensions to familiarity with 'legitimate' (high) culture they do not actually possess in a bid to claim cultural legitimacy, is purportedly narrowed by middlebrow cultural works, which Bourdieu defines as accessible, bogus versions of high cultural forms consumed by the lower middle classes in imitation of their leisure-class superiors. In order to successfully disseminate phoney versions of leisure-class culture, Bourdieu maintains that middlebrow culture requires the complicity of its consumers and producers, who both need its 'bluff' to work (323). Peddling do-it-yourself fashion tips and home-dressmaking instructions for converting last season's frock into the latest model, *Woman's Weekly* 1930 appears to fit Bourdieu's description of a middlebrow cultural work, and to substantiate his and Crosland's claim that lower-middle-class

culture is ersatz leisure-class culture ('Is This *Your* Problem, Too?', *WW*, 10 May 1930, 801). Close readings of domestic discourses in *Woman's Weekly* adverts, advice columns and romance fiction suggest, however, that this may not after all be the case.

Self-evidently, *Woman's Weekly* is targeting the 'house-proud-on-a-budget' during 1930. While the magazine's low cover price (2d) and poor material quality (flimsy paper, black and white print, limited number of photographs) point to a readership in straitened economic circumstances, advice columns responding to requests for cleaning tips, home-beautifying craft and DIY projects indicate that they take pride in making their homes as attractive as funds will allow (e.g. 'A Little House and its Problems!', *WW*, 18 October 1930, 647; 'Delphiniums Made From Beech Masts!', 15 February 1930, 263). Readers' awareness that their peers may judge their domestic standards is raised in a domestic advice column by Honor Wyatt, who laughingly points out the necessity of ensuring that one's shoes are tidied away when guests arrive<sup>3</sup> ('Share Your Personality with Your Home', *WW*, 20 September 1930, 457). Within a climate of intense middle-class peer scrutiny, her light-heartedness is laced with anxiety. In addition to maintaining passable middle-class domestic standards, *Woman's Weekly* readers aspire to release from housework. Capturing their attention with bold fonts and striking pictures, advertisements for cleaning products promise to increase housewives' domestic leisure by decreasing the amount of time they spend doing chores. 'What ridiculous drudgery with mops, boiling water, and the nasty lavatory brush; and how unnecessary', declares a Harpic advert, implying that the product will transform lavatory cleaning from an arduous, unsanitary chore involving hard scrubbing with the prospect of scalds into the quicker, cleaner act of sprinkling powder into the pan (*WW*, 22 March 1930, 464); 'who would have thought you could do it so easily and cleanly' exclaims an advert for Zeno grate polish, pledging to reduce another prolonged, filthy household task to the work of a moment (*WW*, 4 January 1930, iii). Adverts for mechanized domestic appliances entice readers with similar claims. 'Banish weariness from wash-day, and let the "ACME" Wringer give her leisure' (*WW*, 8 March 1930, 387); 'a "quick run round" with the Ewbank [carpet sweeper] immediately removes the dust and dirt' (*WW*, 22 February 1930, 309). Beauty columns, fiction and holiday features testify to the leisure time that readers will acquire with these desirable purchases.

Readers' aspirations to become more upper middle class and to distance themselves from working-class culture coalesce in a series of

advertises for Reckitt's Blue and Robin Starch, appearing in the magazine from March 1930 onwards. The series is fronted by Mrs Rawlins, a fictional cook and fan of both laundry products, who appeals to her reader's aspiration to be a leisured mistress of servants by addressing her as 'Mum' and by sharing her expertise mostly in passing, rather than by stating that she expects her to do her laundry unaided. 'That frock's come out champion. You must speak as you find, Mum, and I always find Robin Starch smooth and easy to work with' (*WW*, 5 April 1930, 593). Authenticating her respectful mode of address, Mrs Rawlins's 'working-class' speech places the reader in a position of class superiority to herself. The cook's verbal classification of the reader is reinforced visually, by the perspective from which the photograph illustrating the advert is taken – positioned behind the camera, she is in the room with the cook, superintending her work (593). Addressing the reader as her employer rather than her equal, Mrs Rawlins soothes her distinctively lower-middle-class status anxiety by distinguishing her from working-class women who work as domestic servants. Marketing Reckitt's Blue and Robin Starch as labour-saving, leisure-producing commodities, Mrs Rawlins implies that a leisured status can be acquired.

While the 'Mrs Rawlins's adverts in *Woman's Weekly* position readers as members of the servant-employing middle classes, by 1930 servant keeping was ceasing to be a reliable distinction of middle-class status. Ann Oakley observes that supporting an idle, leisured housewife had become a 'mark of [middle-class] prosperity' for Victorian families, although by the beginning of the twentieth century working-class wives were increasingly choosing full-time housewifery over paid employment. Until the First World War most middle-class housewives could distinguish themselves from the latter by their ability to afford paid domestic help (Oakley, 1974, 49–52). However, as Simon Gunn and Rachel Bell point out in their *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl* (2003), following the war fewer young working-class women were prepared to forgo the wages and independence they had earned in factories for servants' pay and conditions. Despite efforts by the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment to encourage them into domestic service, what the middle classes had begun calling the Servant Problem worsened throughout the 1920s. By the middle of the decade demand outstripped supply and servants, aware of their value, were becoming more forthright in their dealings with their middle-class employers. Witness E.M. Delafield's Provincial Lady, battling to propitiate a series of obstreperous cooks and housemaids, grumbling about their poor

work ethic and struggling to replace them when they give notice. Her 1930 *Diary* records the 'servant question' as a recurring topic of conversation at middle-class social gatherings, and among her circle a household's ability to attract and keep servants is a means of scoring social points (Delafield. 1993, 8, 22, 41). Thus, Mrs Rawlins's cheeriness and professional pride make her many middle-class housewives' dream employee at a time when such willing domestic labourers are becoming increasingly scarce. Addressed as her mistress, the *Woman's Weekly* reader can, in fantasy, participate in middle-class housewives' servant-related frustrations and wishful thinking, and even feel smug about having employed such a treasure.

Against the backdrop of the Servant Problem, Mrs Rawlins's relationship with 'Mum' charts the beginning of a significant shift in middle-class housewives' reliance on their domestic employees. In one advert, the cook evokes nostalgia for an era before the fall of stately homes and the rise of the Servant Problem by reminiscing about 'pickin' up the rights and wrongs of ironing' in 'big kitchens' (*WW*, 12 July 1930, back cover). But while Reckitt's Blue and Robin Starch thus gain extra leisure-class cachet from being used by a cook who also served aristocrats, the photograph illustrating Mrs Rawlins's reminiscences places servant and mistress on a more equal footing by suggesting that they relate to one another as co-workers rather than as lady of the house and below-stairs subordinate. Unusually, both women are pictured. Rather than working, Mrs Rawlins is leaning against her worktable, watching her employer try out an electric iron: instead of supervising her cook from outside the frame, 'Mum' appears to be learning how to do her work. Rather than simply preparing to take over her servant's duties, the mistress is preparing to replace her with technology. By the end of the 1920s, the increasing availability of domestic appliances was allowing many middle-class families to address the Servant Problem by reducing their live-in staff or making do with weekly help with the rough work (Jackson. 1991, 84). Learning to use an electric iron, Mrs Rawlins's employer is preparing to make this change to her establishment. To *Woman's Weekly's* 1930 readership, however, this housewife's lifestyle remains aspirational: the magazine did not begin to advertise electronic labour savers until the mid-1940s, which suggests that until then these commodities were considered too expensive for the majority of its readers. The absence of electric irons from the magazine during 1930, coupled with letters from would-be maids seeking employment advice from Mrs Marryat, indicate much closer social proximity between the cook and

her 'employer' than the Reckitt's Blue and Robin Starch adverts suggest (e.g. *WW*, 8 February 1930, 227; 10 May 1930, 835). Despite promising to increase readers' leisure time and enabling them to participate in middle-class housewives' servant-related frustrations, cheap laundry products are ersatz leisure distinctions. Elevating their consumers in fantasy alone would appear to support Crosland's claim that lower-middle-class culture is a low-budget, inferior imitation of leisure-class culture.

The ersatz status of *Woman's Weekly's* lower-middle-class domestic culture is upheld by the disparity between the assumed economic statuses of *Woman's Weekly* and *Good Housekeeping* readers. The cover price, material quality and contents of *Good Housekeeping* 1930 all suggest that this publication targets a substantially more affluent readership. Sold for a shilling – six times more expensive than *Woman's Weekly* – it is printed in colour on robust paper that, almost nine decades later, remains tangibly superior to the browning, brittle pages of the two-penny magazine. Readers' comfortable economic circumstances are assumed: 'Our Shopping Service' enables those living outside London to order expensive off-the-peg clothing and domestic hardware, and advertisements for travel companies suggest that the latter think it financially worthwhile to advertise their services in the publication (e.g. *GH*, January 1930, 70–71, 172–173; Atlantic Transport Line advert, May 1930, 144; Great Western Railway advert, May 1930, 225). A motoring review outlining how to select a vehicle to match one's clothing and advertisements for cars address readers with far greater incomes than those who read *Woman's Weekly*. Priced at £180, the cheapest Ford car advertised in the September issue of *Good Housekeeping* costs just £12 less than the average salary earned by a male commercial clerk during the same year (Thomas, 'Colour and Coachwork', *GH*, September 1930, 90, 92, 94; Ford advert, September 1930, 97; Jackson, 1991, 337). While it is likely that many *Good Housekeeping* readers would be unable to afford cars that matched their outfits, and that the magazine's shopping service, motoring reviews and advertisements probably function partly as lifestyle fantasies, the absence of their equivalents in *Woman's Weekly* implies that readers of this magazine are assumed to be unable to afford even to dream.

Commensurate with the assumed size of *Good Housekeeping* readers' incomes, the magazine's domestic advice features address them as members of the servant-employing middle classes (e.g. Lawrence, 'Making the most of your Kitchen Garden', *GH*, February 1930, 126). The Servant Problem is a cause for concern, discussed in articles addressing readers

who, like Delafield's Provincial Lady, are struggling to employ domestic help. Observing that the pay and conditions of 'factory ... work' tend to be more enticing than those of domestic service, 'The Value of Training in Cookery and Housecraft' speculates that more effective 'co-operations between employers and employed' could '[improve] the status and efficiency of domestic service' (The Director', *GH*, September 1930, 46–47). More practically, 'The Gordian Knot of Domestic Service' suggests that readers solve the 'servant question' by embracing labour-saving devices that will 'attract a constant supply of the more intelligent and ambitious young working women' (Eaton, *GH*, February 1930, 150). Although this article explicitly anticipates that technology will solve the problem by making domestic service more attractive, as it appears alongside reviews of domestic appliances, it seems more probable that its reader will be equipping her home with devices to use herself. Emphasizing the labour-saving properties of the latest domestic appliances, these *Good Housekeeping* reviews prepare their middle-class readers to switch their reliance from servants to technology (e.g. 'Kitchen Cabinet and Enamelled Table' *GH*, April 1930, 90). Anticipating how impressed one's guests will be by cool drinks and desserts, adverts for Frigidaire refrigerators prepare readers to consider household appliances as status-defining distinctions (e.g. *GH*, June 1930, 97). Beside these expensive machines, the manually operated carpet sweepers and wringers advertised in *Woman's Weekly* during 1930 appear extremely modest indeed. In one essential respect, therefore, the distinction between middle-middle-class *Good Housekeeping* readers and lower-middle-class *Woman's Weekly* readers is economic. While servants and electronic or gas-powered appliances are evidently assumed too expensive for the latter, the former are supposed capable either of employing domestic helpers or, where paid domestic helpers are unavailable, of investing in technology that will ultimately replace them. Embodying the comfortably off Reckitt's Blue and Robin Starch housewife, who is aided in her domestic labour by Mrs Rawlins and her electric iron, readers of *Good Housekeeping* 1930 purportedly live the middle-class lifestyles to which *Woman's Weekly*'s lower-middle-class readers aspire. Relative to the electric washing machines advertised in *Good Housekeeping* during 1930, Reckitt's Blue and Robin Starch are indeed cheap substitutes for expensive, mechanized producers of domestic leisure.

Despite admitting that paid domestic help is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, *Good Housekeeping* appears reluctant to accept that its readers may be keeping house unaided. Features hedge around



servants' absence, portraying their unavailability as only a temporary inconvenience; a review suggesting that an ice cream maker's labour-saving properties are useful 'when maids are not available' implies, for instance, that the servants in question are only temporarily indisposed ('A quick and convenient Ice Cream Freezer', *GH*, August 1930, 90). Peer pressure on readers to keep up appearances of servant keeping materializes in an article about home entertaining, which addresses its readers as 'hostesses who have the help of one inexperienced maid, or ... a daily woman, and who yet sometimes wish to be as hospitable as their friends who have a staff of efficient maids' (The Director and Wilcox, 'Cooking and Catering for a Small Informal Dinner Party', *GH*, October 1930, 82). Presumably a face-saving measure, the article's assumption that its readers have even limited domestic help may well be optimistic, and instructions for the inexperienced maid, presented as guidance for the hostess overseeing her employee, could equally be followed by the hostess herself. Whether the majority of *Good Housekeeping* readers do indeed belong to the servant-keeping middle classes, or whether this article and others like it function, like *Woman's Weekly's* Mrs Rawlins adverts, as social fantasy, is impossible to establish. For the purposes of this argument however, this point is immaterial. The magazine's assumption that they do suggests that the ability to employ such servants as are available remains a crucial distinction of middle-class status during the mid-interwar period, and that middle-class housewives who are unable to find domestic help risk being declassed by their peers. Maintaining the pretence that its readers employ servants, *Good Housekeeping* performs Bourdieu's middlebrow trick of fooling its readers.

The absence of similar assumptions about servant keeping from *Woman's Weekly* classifies the status of their readership as below that of *Good Housekeeping's* readers. The lower-middle-class magazine's domestic advice columns make no pretence that their readers employ paid domestic help, openly assuming that they do their own chores. Advice columns respond to housework queries from readers, who ask on their own rather than on their maids' behalf (e.g. 'I Would Do It This Way!', *WW*, 10 May 1930, 811). Their apparent readiness to perform dirty, physically demanding tasks such as washing and painting a kitchen ceiling bespeaks an absence of scruples regarding rough housework ('When You Need a Hint', *WW*, 24 May 1930, 886). *Woman's Weekly* readers' evident lack of shame in their servantless status is heightened by the drawings adorning its domestic advice columns, of pretty housewives performing their chores in spacious, comfortable domestic interiors (e.g.

Cecile, 'Left-overs', 7 June 1930, 1016). Presenting servantless housewifery as a positive lifestyle choice rather than an embarrassing circumstantial necessity, these images encourage readers to take pride in their servantless status and in doing so, distinguish them from *Good Housekeeping's* reluctant hands-on housewives. It seems, therefore, greatly contradictory that *Woman's Weekly* acquiesces to readers' apparent desire to keep up the appearances of servant keeping by interleaving its domestic advice with adverts for hand creams and cosmetics promising to disguise the physical effects of rough housework. An image of fine, shapely hands adorned with rings and what look like pearls associates Cutex nail polish with leisure-class housewifery (*WW*, 14 June 1930, 1051); displaying her hands to a man in evening dress, the mannequin modelling Erasmic soap associates the product with an aristocratic lifestyle (*WW*, 3 May 1930, iii). But despite encouraging *Woman's Weekly* readers to hide the fact that they do their own housework, even hand cream adverts maintain no pretence that they are employing servants.

Work that roughens hands cannot be avoided in the well-kept home because you are without a maid.

Don't suffer the embarrassment of red and unsightly hands when you entertain your friends ...

You can do without a maid but you cannot have hands you are proud to show unless you use Glymiel Jelly. (*WW*, 25 January 1930, 143)

Warning *Woman's Weekly* readers that they will be classified by the appearance of their hands, the second advert produces, perpetuates and claims to alleviate the servant-related status anxiety experienced by *Good Housekeeping* readers. Although the absence of pretence around servant keeping distinguishes *Woman's Weekly's* housework discourses from those of middle-middle-class *Good Housekeeping*, challenging Bourdieu and Crosland's claim that lower-middle-class culture is ersatz leisure-class culture, *Woman's Weekly* readers' presumed desire to avoid 'housework hands' in order to maintain appearances of domestic leisure creates a point of conflict within their lower-middle-class domestic identity.

The conflict between *Woman's Weekly* readers' aspirations towards leisured housewifery and their pride in their servantless status materializes in the magazine's romance fiction, which presents both lifestyles as desirable. Published weekly, popular magazine romances offer critics a more temporally immediate gauge of their culture than novels, which can take months or years to produce. Embedded within *Woman's Weekly's* advice columns and advertisements, the magazine's romance stories form

as well as reflect its cultural contexts. To the extent that popular romance narratives reward desirable or 'correct' behaviour with true love, the genre is considered a potentially effective vehicle for conveying certain values or beliefs, especially to women. Kaye Mitchell (2012) argues that fantasy identification with popular fictional characters may influence the formation of readers' identities, and Michel Mattelart (1982) argues that romances use sexual desire to integrate female readers into ideological structures. The status of romance stories as conduct fiction in popular women's magazines has also been acknowledged by critics including Margaret Beetham (1996), Penny Tinkler (1995) and Janice Winship (1987). Embedded within the magazine's 'factual' discourses, *Woman's Weekly* romance fiction may therefore influence readers' reception of the values underpinning the latter. Analyses of two *Woman's Weekly* romances illustrate popular romances' contribution to the magazine's conflicting attitudes towards leisured and servantless housewifery during 1930. By equating servantless housewifery with moral superiority the first story enables *Woman's Weekly's* lower-middle-class readers to challenge their socially competitive middle-class peers.

'Pink Aprons' (Margery Land May) makes servantless housewifery desirable by associating housework with marital happiness, rejecting domestic leisure in order to do so. Having witnessed his brother Hal and Hal's wife Kate struggle to make ends meet, Roy refuses to marry Jean until he can afford 'the home and the clothes and servants I'd want my wife to have' (*WW*, 30 August 1930, 287–290). Jean agrees to wait and together they spend four years furnishing a home while Roy works his way up in business, but a week before their wedding he is made redundant and forced to accept a junior position in a different company. Anticipating that it will now be years before he can afford for Jean to be a leisured housewife, he ends their engagement. The following evening, he visits the house they furnished for what he believes is the final time and is greeted by a cheerful fire, a table laid for two and Jean, 'tending steaming pots on the stove' (290). Running into his arms, she declares it her dearest ambition to do his housework. Their marriage, we feel confident, will take place shortly after this happy *denouement*.

Roy's initial refusal to marry Jean until he can afford to buy her the material trappings of leisure recalls the Victorian middle-class domestic ideal that a man's economic status should materialize in his wife's personal appearance and lifestyle – Jean's home, clothing and leisure, he implies, will display the upward class mobility he achieves through professional promotion. To Jean however, domestic management without

servants' help means partnering her hardworking husband. Their differing attitudes are articulated in their responses to a shop window display of cheap pink aprons: whereas to Roy these aprons represent domestic servitude ('darning socks, and cooking meals, and wearing yourself out with housework') to Jean they mean marital togetherness and mutual support ('sharing struggles and sorrows ... expressing love though service') (*WW*, 30 August 1930, 288). Jean's attitude receives the endorsement of a hardworking husband from Hal, who declares that his love for Kate was deepened by her willingness to perform rough domestic labour and share his worries while he worked to establish himself professionally. Their relationship, he explains, is based on

faith in one another, steadfast and sure because it has been tried. And understanding because we've seen one another through rough places. ... when things ease up a bit, you have the happiness of sharing what you've achieved, and courage to face the uncertainties of the future ... if the bottom falls out of things she'll stick and carry on with you. (290)

'Pink Aprons' suggests that lower-middle-class servantless housewifery is superior to its leisured equivalent because it nurtures and articulates a deep, mutually supportive marital bond; by implication, the materialistic lifestyle aspired to by Roy at the beginning of the narrative would have been reflected in his marital relations with Jean. Rewarded with the promise of strong, everlasting love and the satisfaction of supporting one's husband as he works to attain class promotion, lower-middle-class servantless housewifery as it is portrayed in 'Pink Aprons' seems far more desirable than worldly domestic idleness. Bolstering their husbands through difficult times, servantless housewives can claim moral superiority to their materialistic, leisured peers whose love, economically conditional, is less certain.

The romantic fates of secretary Marjorie, who marries a wealthy yacht owner, and clerical worker Susan, who becomes engaged to a research scientist with a title and an independent income, counter, however, the domestic values implied by Jean's projected future (Grace Mack, 'Paradise Ahead', *WW*, 10 May 1930; Phil Forsyth, 'The Man Downstairs', *WW*, 26 July 1930). These fantasies of escape into luxurious domestic idleness reinforce the conflict between *Woman's Weekly* readers' desire to acquire leisure-class distinctions as proof of having achieved middle-class status and their non-leisure-class pride in doing their own housework. 'In Terms of Business' by Frederick Skerry (*WW*, 17 May 1930) explicitly undermines the values underpinning the narrative of

'Pink Aprons'. Forced by her father's death to support herself financially, hardworking antique shop owner Molly is critical of her leisure-class suitor Walter's lifestyle, telling him that 'we can't all live on money someone else has earned' and that 'I'd have more respect for *you* if you'd work for a living' (842). Despite loving Walter and craving financial security – her lack of business acumen, surfacing in her reluctance to profit from hard-up clients, is causing her to lose money – Molly refuses to marry him until he has proven himself capable of earning a living. He accepts her challenge and brokers a deal for two valuable miniatures on behalf of an elderly spinster in reduced circumstances, but rather than make a profit on the sale he gives his client the full amount paid for them by a London dealer. Walter thus proves himself as poor at conducting business as Molly is. Molly, however, relieved that the man she loves is not prepared to profit at the expense of a woman considerably poorer than himself, paradoxically not only agrees to marry him, but also to give up her business and live in comfort off the fortune accumulated by his father. By agreeing to marry a man whose inherited wealth will presumably pay for her to live in idleness, Molly embodies the model of materially driven, leisured housewifery rejected by hardworking, supportive Jean.

Suggesting ways in which lower-middle-class housewives might rank themselves above members of the servant-employing middle classes, with whom they are unable to compete materially, *Woman's Weekly* during 1930 is complicit in producing the stratified, relational interwar middle-class hierarchy described by Light, Samuel and Waugh. At the heart of the distinctively lower-middle-class domestic culture produced by the publication is a conflict between its readers' desires simultaneously to reject domestic leisure, and to acquire it as proof that they, like the upper-middle classes, are annexing the besieged upper classes' influence and prestige. Rather than attempting to resolve this conflict, I suggest that it is a key distinction of the magazine's culture. Relative to *Good Housekeeping's* anxious attempts to maintain appearances of servant keeping, *Woman's Weekly's* open assumption that its readers can afford neither domestic help nor expensive labour-saving devices, and its positive attitude towards servantless housewifery, contradict Crosland and Bourdieu's claims that lower-middle-class culture is a cheap reproduction of leisure-class culture for socially aspirant dupes who lack the breeding to spot inauthenticity. This distinguishes the magazine from the middlebrow culture proposed by Bourdieu and constructed by *Good Housekeeping*.

*Woman's Weekly's* distinctively lower middle-class culture is potentially problematized, however, by the class distinction between its producers and target readers. This distinction is suggested by Pompey Casmilus, the narrator of Stevie Smith's 1936 *Novel on Yellow Paper*. Secretary to a press baron, Pompey speaks as an insider in the popular domestic magazine industry and claims that mass publications put the interests of their producers before those of their readers. She argues that romance plotlines are driven by commercial considerations, suggesting that editors' loyalty to advertisers makes them reluctant to publish fictional depictions of characters being exploited by hire purchase companies. The aristocratic magazine owner's inability to understand lower-class readers leads them to base their publication's 'Policy' (i.e. values, ideology) on 'imaginary' conceptions of their readers' desires (*Novel on Yellow Paper*, 46). Domestic advice, Pompey implies, is given by upper-middle-class columnists such as Harriet, a 'chic' (20) interior designer whose expensive modern flat and holidays in Greece are demonstrably well outside the budgets of her target readers; 'buyer[s] of two-penny weeklies' like *Woman's Weekly*.

Pompey's assessment of class relations between popular domestic magazine producers and readers may well have its basis in Smith's own experiences as a secretary in the offices of magazine publishers Pearson Newnes. According to Kristen Bluemel, Sir Phoebus is a 'disguised Sir Neville Pearson', and, as Laura Severin suggests, Harriet is the editor Narcissa Crowe-Wood (Bluemel. 2012, 44; Severin. 1997, 4). *Woman's Weekly*, too, was owned by an aristocrat, Lord Rothermere, during 1930. Its former cookery editor Sue McMahon<sup>4</sup> believes that an interwar Cecile published her own cook's recipes in her cookery column, suggesting that one member at least of the magazine's staff belonged to the servant-employing classes. In the absence of records of *Woman's Weekly's* interwar producers, however, a firm assessment of their class status relative to that of their readers would be conjecture. Even speculating that they are superior in terms of education is difficult since, although they are reasonably well-educated, it would not necessarily be to a higher level. While readers who worked until marriage as domestic servants probably left school at 12 or 14, those who worked as typists would have extended their compulsory elementary education, in secondary school or at evening classes (Tinkler. 2001, 37–40). Although formal training in journalism was available to women during the interwar years, features in *The Woman Journalist* expect some readers of this trade journal to be self-taught (e.g. E. Almaz Stout, 'Hints on Serial Story Writing for Beginners', March 1926, 9–11). Nevertheless, while Pompey's fictional

revelations do not prove conclusively that the two-penny *Woman's Weekly* was produced by out-of-touch members of the upper and upper-middle classes for their social inferiors, they do highlight the probability that some of its producers may have belonged to sections of the interwar middle classes that, anxious to preserve their own status, feared the rise of the lower middle class. It is therefore tempting to associate the magazine's ambivalence towards domestic leisure with upper-middle-class desires to preserve leisure-class distinctions for themselves by convincing lower-middle-class housewives that they do not want servants in the first place. *Woman's Weekly* readers' pride in performing their own housework without servants' help and their sense of moral superiority to their idle, leisured superiors could potentially, I have argued, be founded in the upper-middle classes' anxiety that an increasingly prominent lower-middle class culture would subsume their own.

### Notes

- 1 In an email message from Sandy Gale, a current producer at *Woman's Weekly*, to the author, 17 March 2017.
- 2 For fuller accounts of the changes in social class and income structures see Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Alan Jackson's *The Middle Classes 1900–1950* (Melksham: Redwood Press, 1991); Ross McKibben's *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 3 Since it is highly unusual for the writer of a *Woman's Weekly* domestic advice column to be named, it seems probable that readers were expected to recognize Wyatt – perhaps from her journalism, for in 1930 she had yet to publish a novel.
- 4 In an email message to the author from Sue McMahan, a former cookery editor, 20 June 2016.

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*Magazines*

Selected features from *Woman's Weekly*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *The Woman Journalist* (all 1930).

*Emails*

Gale, Sandy. Email message to the author. 17 March 2017.

McMahon, Sue. Email message to the author. 20 June 2016.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Pacifism, Fascism and the Crisis of Civilization

Vera Brittain, Storm Jameson  
and Nancy Mitford in the 1930s

*Natasha Periyar*

In June 1940 Storm Jameson wrote: ‘This moment must have happened again and again in civilisation – the moment when the rigidifying process had advanced so far that the alert minds could not move against it, and the enemy broke in’ (cited in Overy. 2009, 264). Jameson’s letter expresses a sense of disillusionment at the failure of peace and the seemingly ineluctable processes that drive ‘civilisation’ to war. As Richard Overy suggests, the sentiment that “civilization [was] in crisis” became a populist cliché of the inter-war years ... For the generation living after the end of the First World War the prospect of imminent crisis, a new Dark Age, became a habitual way of looking at the world’ (2009, 3).

In the early 1930s, Vera Brittain, Storm Jameson and Nancy Mitford engaged with the potent discourses surrounding the perceived crisis in civilization that embodied the nation’s ‘collective anxieties’ (Overy. 2009, 3). During the early to mid-1930s, when pacifism and fascism were defining their creeds and positioning themselves as responses to the decline in civilization (Ceadel. 1980, 108; Overy. 2009, 224; 267), Jameson’s *No Time Like the Present* (1933) and her edited collection *Challenge to Death* (1934), Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* (1933) and Nancy Mitford’s *Wigs on the Green* (1935) all defined a crisis in

civilization informed by a feminist critique of masculinized militaristic traditions. Central to these women writers' analyses of political responses to the crisis in civilization was an exploration of the relative weight of the intellectual or idealistic appeal of pacifism and fascism. For Mitford, who attended British Union of Fascist meetings in Oxford in 1933 and Olympia in 1934, the success of fascism lay in its popular spectacle and its embrace of the anti-rational. Brittain and Jameson, who were supporters of the League of Nations Union and became Sponsors of the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) in 1937 and 1936 respectively, worked dialogically as they evolved a critique of the rational in examining the relative success of the appeal of pacifism. The work of Brittain, Jameson and Mitford signals how interfeminism's political analysis was embedded within broader debates surrounding the nature of interwar democracy from which women writers evolved a sophisticated political critique that isolated the objects of their political activism from their analysis of its efficacy.

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* and Storm Jameson's *No Time Like the Present* were both published in 1933 and draw on autobiographical experiences to explore how pacifism could shape a response to a crisis in civilization. The two books are closely linked by their conversation about the efficacy of pacifism's political vision. Attention to Brittain and Jameson's texts demonstrates the lines of influence of their pacifist thought and the ways in which their conception of the efficacy of the social vision provided by pacifism was embedded in a critique of leadership that had its origins in an exploration of the appeal of heroic military ideals.

Jameson's *No Time Like the Present* (1933) offers a sharp, urgent critique of war. As a member of 'Class 1914' writing from the vantage point of 1932, her record is shaped by the perspective of disillusioned maturity (102). It is, as Martin Ceadel suggests, 'an outspoken anti-war polemic' and, indeed, contemporaries commented on the text's vociferous tone (1980, 107). Sylvia Townsend Warner noted that it was written with the 'white-hot appearance of coldness ... with no politeness whatsoever' (Birkett, 2009, 119). Jameson defended her tone to Brittain, writing in 1934 that on reading *No Time Like the Present* 'Amabel Williams-Ellis made me cross by telling me ... that I was suffering from "bourgeois despair." ... I decided it was true but she was an idiot to think that by labelling it she made it less justified' (VB Archive, Box 145, 15 January 1934).

Jameson evokes with bitterness the social values that she finds in evidence in contemporary Britain. She particularly criticizes a 'mechanical

civilisation' (Jameson. 1933, 188) of 'wireless sets, Schneider planes, atomic bombs, radium needles' (160), and suggests that even 'ideas are corrupted in a mechanised civilisation. All values now turn on quantity' (128). She concludes that '[e]xcept that we cry and laugh and have children we might near as well be machines' (169). Jameson's text is shaped by a sharp sense of the futility of military death: 'In 1932, what lying, gaping mouth will say that it was worthwhile to kill my brother in his nineteenth year?' (39). A searingly emotional depiction of Armistice Day 1921 in *Company Parade* (1934) reflects this sense of futility. Jacob Russell, Hervey's brother, shares the military career of Jameson's brother, Harold Jameson: both were given the 'Medaille Militaire, D.C.M., M.C.' (see Jameson. 1934 [2004], *Company Parade*, 261; *NTLtP*, 38–39). In the novel, a sense of the devastation of personal loss overwhelms the social function of memorialization identified by Adrian Gregory (1994 [2014], 226). The Last Post is described as a 'dreadful sound, a sigh issuing from all those murdered young men' (264), and Mrs Russell is inconsolable: "No," she cried. "Take it, take your victory. Take it and give me the living body of my son" (266).

While *Company Parade* refuses to condone the memorial rites that participate in the discourses of military heroism, *No Time Like the Present* disavows war's role as its inspiration: 'I do not believe that war is the best of all ways to breed heroes and mystics.' Jameson is compelled instead to believe that a 'finer civilisation', where men 'can fulfil their deepest longing without offering themselves to kill and be killed' (*NTLtP*, 237), is possible. The text is freighted with a sense of uncertainty regarding 'whether the change [in civilization] will be achieved by war, that is, collapse, fascism, revolution, or by a directed intelligence' (188), and ultimately emphasizes the need for 'our cooler intellect to devise a social order which does not require war as a solvent' (237).

Vera Brittain reviewed *No Time Like the Present*, published four months before *Testament of Youth*, describing it as a guide 'through the present welter of world chaos' (in Clay. 2006, 77). Jameson generously likened her book to John the Baptist crying in the wilderness to announce the coming of *Testament of Youth* (Berry and Bostridge. 1995, 362). Foreign reviews especially recognized *Testament* as 'a supplement to "No Time Like the Present"', which is described as Jameson's 'bitterly poignant plaint' that in 'some ways' is 'more effective' than Brittain's 'more accurate, if more pedestrian, guide to the tragic experience of the war generation' (VB Archive, Box 57. Walton. 1933). Another reviewer suggested that '[w]e account such books as [*Testament*] and Miss Jameson's [*No Time*

*Like the Present*] an incalculably powerful influence in the war against war' (VB Archive, Box 57. Loveman. 1933). Consideration of *Testament of Youth*, which Jameson read at proof stage in May 1933, demonstrates the differences in tone and perspective of the two texts; these are differences that inform the relationship identified in each text between the military values of war and the challenges pacifism faced as a social creed.

In the Foreword to *Testament of Youth*, Brittain comments: 'It is not by accident that what I have written constitutes, in effect, the indictment of a civilisation' (Brittain. 1933 [2009], xxvi). Brittain's archive demonstrates how the form in which she framed her 'indictment' evolved. Early planned titles included 'Incidental Adam' or 'This Was Their War (or 'When the Vision Died')'. Brittain also considered a series called 'The War Generation', which was to include two books: the first entitled 'A Tale That is Told' covering 1914–1918, and a sequel entitled 'We Who Were Left' covering 1919–1930. The latter was to be shaped by the emotional contours of Brittain's own experience, signalled by the planned inclusion of poems by both Brittain and Roland Leighton. Brittain's notes describe how she planned to 'include R.L.'s poems "Violets", "You Walk alone", "Goodbye, sweet friend", "Hedanville 1915" & own war poems'. The second volume was to include 'most poems written at Oxford, such as "Boar's Hill", "The Lament of the Demobilised etc' (VB Archive, Box 4a. 'Notes – outline'). Many of these poems found their way into *Testament*.

In addition to personal documents, Brittain's critique of civilization was informed by classical models. Hurst argues that *Testament* is a 'feminist reading [of Homer's *Iliad*] which emphasizes the women whose lives are obscured in the epic tradition', suggesting Brittain's reclaiming of epic heroic narratives (2006, 219). However, Brittain's article 'War-Book Women' explores the limitations of classical models for understanding women's war experience:

So far as women are concerned, the English and German war-books written by men may be divided into three classes – those which look upon the War as an exclusively male business, those which present woman in the exclusively Andromache-like role of 'smiling through her tears', and those which regard her as the meanest type of war-profiteer. (VB Archive, Box 4a. 'Notes – last three chapters')

Brittain argues that this second category of war book – 'which visualise[s] woman as meekly obedient to the typical injunction "watch and pray" – is likely, though the least uncomplimentary to women of the three, to prove most deceptive to future generations if left unchallenged' (Box

4a”, Notes – last three chapters’). The allusion to the *Iliad* in ‘War-Book Women’ also occurs in *Testament of Youth* itself, as Brittain refers to ‘the lovely lines from the Iliad which describe Andromache holding out the child Astyanax to Hector before Troy and “smiling through her tears”, suggesting that this episode ‘will be for ever associated for me with those poignant early days of the War’ (129).

Although they evoke the ‘early days of the War’, as ‘War-Book Women’ suggests, these classical models do not go far enough in capturing women’s full experience. Instead, Brittain looks to documentary sources to provide inspiration:

The true story of women’s work in the Great War remains to be written: at present it lies buried in Government reports ... Hidden there in dry statistics – and so far there only – is the tale of the women who worked on the land or in munition factories ...

Why are we, who served with the armies, so inarticulate that we cannot transform these dry memorials into literature?

Who will write the epic of the women who went to the War? (Box 4a. ‘Notes – last three chapters’)

This final question is one that Brittain later asks in *Testament of Experience* (1957), and it gives some indication of the value Brittain found in Jameson’s *No Time Like the Present*. Brittain celebrated the text as contributing an understanding of women’s experiences of ‘our present – and past – discontents’ (Clay. 2006, 77). In addition to classical texts, documentary sources shape *Testament of Youth*. As its Foreword notes, Brittain ‘made as much use as possible of old letters and diaries’ in the construction of *Testament* as she notes that these ‘documents renew with fierce vividness the stark agonies of my generation in its early twenties’ (xxvi). Brittain’s challenge came in ‘creating a matrix for these records’ (xxvi). The collage-like method through which she eventually constructed her text is clear from material in the Vera Brittain Archive. The archive demonstrates that as she was writing her text, she transcribed sections of letters from Roland, from her mother, Edward and herself, as well as compiling timelines of events and assembling cuttings from newspapers in order to inform her narration of events (Box 4a).

The combination of ‘contemporary opinions, however crude and ingenuous’, with ‘retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge’ gives *Testament* its power, however much these ‘difficulties of perspective’ delayed the book’s production (*Testament*, xxvii). Where Jameson’s *No Time Like the Present* is shaped by the disillusionment of age, Jean

Kennard has identified the ‘double perspective’ that Brittain deploys in *Testament of Youth* (Kennard. 1989, 133). I have explored elsewhere how Brittain advances her feminist-pacifist critique of public school militarism through this ‘double perspective’ (Periyán. 2018, 94). The text’s documentary basis is also one that significantly holds apart the idealistic perspective of youth and the informed perspective of experience to shape Brittain’s ‘indictment of a civilisation’ (*Testament*, xxvi). The method offers a rationalizing perspective while nonetheless maintaining the nobility and integrity of the motivations of the text’s youthful protagonists, mitigating the sense of futility that informs Jameson’s perception of military heroism in *No Time Like the Present*.

Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* was widely celebrated in the press for its vivid, emotional depiction of the sacrifice of the ‘lost generation’. Two extracts from the text which offer ‘retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge’ (*Testament*, xxvi) were particularly commented upon by newspapers and journals including the *Morning Post*, *The Sphere*, *John O’London*, the *TLS*, the *Yorkshire Post*, *The Listener*, *Evening Sentinel*, *Labour Woman*, the *Bookman*, the *Sunday Times* and the pacifist journal *The Friend*. These extracts articulate the difficulties the pacifist cause experienced in summoning an equivalent emotional currency to that provided by the potent, ennobling qualities called upon by war. The first extract from ‘Tawny Island’ explores the ‘pacifist’s real problem’, which is ‘still quite unsolved’ as ‘this glamour, this magic, this incomparable keying up of the spirit in a time of mortal conflict’ (*Testament*, 263–264). While the causes of war ‘are always falsely represented’,

its honour is dishonest and its glory meretricious ... the challenge to spiritual endurance, the intense sharpening of all the senses, the vitalising consciousness of common peril for a common end, remain to allure those boys and girls ... The glamour may be the mere delirium of fever, which as soon as war is over dies out and shows itself for the will-o’-the-wisp that it is, but while it lasts no emotion known to man seems as yet to have quite the compelling power of this enlarged vitality.

I do not believe that a League of Nations, or a Kellogg Pact, or any Disarmament Conference, will ever rescue our poor remnant of civilisation from the threatening forces of destruction, until we can somehow impart to the rational processes of constructive thought and experiment that element of sanctified loveliness which, like superb sunshine breaking through thunderclouds, from time to time glorifies war. (*Testament*, 264)

Where Jameson hopes for the ‘cooler intellect’ to replace the ‘solvent’ of war in the search for a ‘finer civilisation’ (*NTLtP*, 237), Brittain



recognizes the need to co-opt the romantic elements of war into the rational, logical activity of peace building to save 'our poor remnant of civilisation'. Brittain's recognition of the heroic qualities that war engenders, however misguided its cause, informs the representation of the text's youthful protagonists and was an insight lauded by reviewers. The *Times Literary Supplement* praised this passage as 'wisely said', and noted that war 'stirs men to thoughts and deeds that are as splendid as anything humanity knows' (VB Archive, Box 57. The *TLS*, 3 August 1933). The *Listener* cited this passage as 'the key to the whole book', claiming that never had such a sentiment been 'so well said, or the hour for saying it so ripe as the present one' (Box 57. The *Listener*, 6 September 1933). The reviewer for *The Sphere* also cited it, declaring: 'Never has the whole baffling problem been better stated, and by one who has had cause to suffer, as lover and sister, and may have cause to suffer, as mother' (Box 57. Roberts. 1933). For Mary Butts in the *Bookman* the passage demonstrated that war holds a particular 'ageless magic ... man would lose if the essence of that passion were denied him' (Box 57. Butts. 1933).

Another passage in *Testament of Youth* that attracted particular praise also evidences Brittain's reflections on the qualities that war incites in the young from the perspective of maturity. Brittain again distances herself from the pacifist movement, referencing a 'brave, lop-sided pamphlet' before suggesting that 'his [the pacifist's] task – our task – is infinitely complicated by the fact that war, while it lasts, does produce heroism to a far greater extent than it brutalises' (336). In similar terms to the passage in 'Tawny Island', Brittain recognizes that the 'young men and women' of the war generation 'disastrously poor in heart ... were continually re-dedicating themselves ... to an end that they believed ... lofty and ideal' (336) with the effect of producing 'stupendous patience ... superhuman endurance ... incredible courage. To refuse to acknowledge this is to underrate the power of those white angels which fight so naïvely on the side of destruction' (337). The dual perspective of the text allows Brittain to attribute a tragic naïvety to the doomed 'lost generation', while maintaining a critique of war. Storm Jameson's reviews of *Testament of Youth* in the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Sunday Times* particularly focused on this passage. In the *Yorkshire Post*, Jameson identified that Brittain 'uncovers that root of war which is stronger and more deadly than all the rest' in a 'memorable' passage (Box 57. Jameson. *Yorkshire Post*. 1933). In the *Sunday Times*, she noted: 'In the end war endures not because men are base, but because they are noble. Unless this is understood about war nothing is understood' (Box 57. Jameson. *Sunday Times*. 1933). The

sentiment clearly struck Jameson by its profundity, and her 1934 edited collection, *Challenge to Death*, seems informed by Brittain's conviction that pacifism needs to marshal 'that element of sanctified loveliness' that war engenders to its cause.

Vera Brittain was a strong influence on the shape and direction of *Challenge to Death*, as Jameson acknowledged in correspondence: 'I can't tell you all the gratitude I feel for the things you have done to help this book' (VB Archive, Box 145. 24 April 1934). The collection's origins came from a conversation with Philip Noel Baker in Hastings in October 1933 where they discussed 'getting some of the best writers to "do something" about war, peace and the League', and Brittain was at a dinner meeting in early 1934 where Jameson, Noel Baker and Lord Robert Cecil wooed potential contributors (Box 145. Letter SJ to VB. 5 November 1934). Not only did Brittain and her husband, George Catlin, go on to contribute, Brittain also secured J.B. Priestley (Box 145. 24 April 1934). In the very late stages of production, E.V. Knox belatedly dropped out of the final chapter on 'the destiny of England' (Box 145. 16 July 1934). After considering H.G. Wells as a replacement, Jameson expediently found that on rereading her epilogue it had 'something about the English destiny in it (as well as a great deal about England in a rather high-flown and Baldwinian manner)', and as the book was 'far too long', leaving that chapter out seemed desirable (Box 145. 17 July 1934; 31 July 1934).

Where *No Time Like the Present* puts the onus on 'intellect' to devise a new 'social order', Jameson's epilogue in *Challenge to Death* echoes *Testament* in suggesting the potent value of ideals, and the need to marshal 'that element of sanctified loveliness' that war engenders, as a rallying point for the cause of peace. Jameson identifies the significance of an idealistic vision in inciting men to military sacrifice: 'More than half a million English died in the last war. Not all of these were without a vision of their country – for which and not for some abstract notion of duty they died' (*Challenge*, 326). Rational arguments against war are, Jameson suggests, insufficient motivation for peace: 'You cannot prevent war by appealing to men's interests. ... To call them up for peace needs only the liberating force of an ideal, breaking into their minds.' Jameson urges the need to 'plan boldly for peace', and suggests a vision that includes a European union, the prizing of 'men more than machines' and education: 'people must be educated to stand the rigours of freedom' (327). Jameson associates the failure of a pacifistic vision with a failure of political leadership: 'Where the *rulers* have no vision, the people perish. ... Do not our rulers know that we are hungrier for a

faith than for bread?’ (328–329). A comparison between Jameson’s pacifist position in *No Time Like the Present* and *Challenge to Death* suggests how she absorbed Brittain’s recognition of the need to co-opt the emotional power of heroism previously marshalled for war for ‘the service of peace and of life’ to ensure that pacifism could offer a compelling social vision (Brittain. 1934, 62).

Nancy Mitford’s satire on fascist leadership, *Wigs on the Green*, was composed around the time of Jameson’s *Challenge to Death*. The novel was expediently adapted to accommodate family concerns, but the text maintains a critique of the pomp and ceremony of fascist spectacle and recognizes its potency as a vision that can effectively rally people to its cause. *Wigs on the Green* is shaped by Mitford’s close personal connection to British fascism. Mitford’s father, Lord Redesdale, was a member of the Anglo-German Fellowship, and her sister, Diana, was the mistress of Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, before marrying him in 1936. In August to September 1933, Diana and Unity Mitford were part of the BUF delegation sent to the Nuremberg Rally, and Unity became a keen devotee of Hitler (Griffiths. 1980, 171–175). The novel follows Jasper and Noel as they come to the rural village of Chalford to woo an heiress, Eugenia Malmains, whose grandparents are part of a laissez-faire aristocracy who have lost all connection to their community. Eugenia, whose enthusiasm for the fascist cause is inscribed in the eugenic overtones of her name, finds her purpose in the Union Jackshirts, a British fascistic movement. Eugenia is a close portrait of Unity. Nancy Mitford overtly acknowledged the resemblance between the two in her letters to her sister, some of which she teasingly addressed to Eugenia. On 8 May 1934 she wrote: ‘The book about you is going to be extraordinary’, and after it was released, she wrote: ‘I must say you are a wonderful noble girl, & everyone who has read my book longs to meet you’ (Mosley. 2007, 44, 61).

Diana’s relationship with Oswald Mosley strongly shaped the novel and caused tension between the sisters in the writing process. Correspondence suggests that Diana found the irreverent style of the book an ‘unsuitable medium’, while Nancy suggested that *Wigs on the Green* could not hamper Mosley’s cause, arguing that it was ‘absurd to suppose that anyone who was intellectually or emotionally convinced of the truths of Fascism could be influenced against the movement by such a book’ (Mosley. 2007, 60). While Mitford refused to adapt the tone of the book, she did adapt its content. The same letter notes that although it would be ‘impossible to eliminate the bits that you &

the Leader objected to' she had 'take[n] out everything which directly related to Captain Jack [a fictional portrayal of Mosley], amounting to nearly 3 chapters & a lot of paragraphs. There are now, I think, about 4 references to him & he never appears in the book as a character at all' (Mosley. 2007, 58; 58–59). The absence of a portrait of the leader of the Union Jackshirts shaped critical perceptions of the tenor of Mitford's satire. The reviewer for the *New Statesman* found Mitford's portrayal of fascism 'merciful', suggesting that 'perhaps she is a little too kind and ... the Union Jackshirts deserved severer castigation. One is sorry, too, that the founder of the movement should not join Eugenia Malmain on the centre of the stage' (Quennell. 1935, 964).

The need to cut the portrait of Captain Jack changes the target of Mitford's satire to the tools and forms of fascism. The novel lambasts utopian fascist rhetoric and its claims to provide an alternative to a civilization in crisis. Mitford tried her hand at this rhetoric in a July 1934 article in the *Vanguard* entitled 'Fascism as I see it'. The article suggests that allegiance to a 'great and good Leader' could lift the country 'from the slough of despond in which for too long it has weltered' (Mosley. 2010, xvi). Although Edgell Rickword, the founding editor of *Left Review*, described the article as 'a very well-developed case of leaderolatry' (cited in Mosley. 2010, xvii), Unity Mitford detected its satirical intent. She wrote to her sister in July 1934 warning her that 'you'd better not waste any more time' on *Wigs on the Green*,

Because if you did publish it I couldn't *possibly* ever speak to you again, as from the date of publication. And as for the article in the *Vanguard* I'm furious about it. You might have a little thought for poor me, all the boys know that you're my sister you know. (Mosley. 2007, 49)

Unity thus read the *Vanguard* article as one big joke on her sister's part – this appears as a strikingly audacious piece of irreverence in so public a forum. Mosley (2010, xvi) identifies strong similarities between Mitford's rhetoric in 'Fascism as I see it' and Eugenia's speech in *Wigs on the Green*:

the attitude of mind which we call Social Unionism is going to save this country from her shameful apathy. Soon your streets will echo 'neath the tread of the Union Jack Battalions ... soon we shall all be living in a glorious Britain under the wise, stern, and beneficent rule of Our Captain. (10)

Attention to the ways in which the *Vanguard* article was read in the broader context of *Wigs on the Green* suggests the novel's satirical intent:

the rousing, revolutionary rhetoric threatens to turn into a parody of itself as Mitford pushes the overblown bombast of fascism to its limits. In both 'Fascism as I see it' and *Wigs on the Green*, Mitford is appropriating and satirizing fascist rhetoric. Eugenia delivers her tubthumping speech (appropriately enough) on an 'overturned wash-tub' (*Wigs*, 7), with the implicit connection suggesting Mitford's ironizing of Eugenia's declamatory tones.

Fascistic rhetoric is a further target of satire in Jasper's speech, which echoes Eugenia's utopian terms. Once again, the context of the speech in the village pub, the Jolly Roger, undermines its rousing content:

So I say that we need a new spirit in the land, a new civilization, and it is to the Eugenias of this world that I look for salvation. Perhaps that new spirit is called Social Unionism ... Our need is desperate, we must hail any movement which may relight the spark of vitality in this nation before it is too late, anything which may save us from the paralysing squalor, both mental and moral, from which we are suffering so terribly at present. Germany and Italy have been saved by National Socialism; England might be saved by Social Unionism, who can tell? Therefore I say, 'Heil Hitler!' 'Viva Il Duce!', and 'Miss' – Miss, I'll have another beer, please. (48–49)

The message is earnest. But Jasper is clearly a little tipsy, he segues between fascist greetings to Hitler and Mussolini into calling for the barmaid, with the punctuation signalling that he initially includes her in his salute to fascist leader figures as Mitford undercuts the pomposity of fascist rhetoric. In Chapter 12, Jasper provides a more sober analysis of the appeal of national socialism. Fascist convictions are figured as an important response to a general malaise and dissatisfaction with culture and society:

I prefer national Socialism to the other sort, it is so much more romantic. Besides, I am inclined to think that the Western civilization we know needs putting out of its agony as soon as possible. It is old and tired, the dark ages are practically upon us anyhow, and I should prefer that they march in with trumpet and flag than that they should creep upon us to the tap of the typewriter. (98–99)

Jasper's speech is evocative of the discourse of the 'morbid age' identified by Richard Overy, with its references to declining civilization and the 'dark ages'. Where Overy suggests that the appeal of political radicalism in Britain was 'a means of projecting anxieties about the prospects for British society and political institutions onto civil and political conflicts

abroad' (2009, 270), for Jasper, foreign movements provide a solution to domestic problems as he finds that 'Germany and Italy have been saved by National Socialism' (*Wigs*, 49). Jasper finds the emotional appeal of fascism, which mobilizes spectacle ('the trumpet and flag') rather than intellectual ('the tap of the typewriter'), compelling.

Charlotte Mosley argues that Nancy Mitford 'shared with Fascism the belief that Western civilisation was decaying and in need of change', but far from the BUF's 'millenarian vision ... of a bright new Britain', Mitford 'looked back with nostalgia to a vanished past, where a public-spirited aristocracy still lived on the land ... a patrician point of view that threads through much of her writing' (Mosley. 2010, xvi). This perspective is reflected in Mitford's preface to *The Stanleys at Alderley*, which finds that 'The English people have liked, in the past, and they still like, to be governed by sensible men of ample means; not to put too fine a point upon it, they like a lord' (Mitford. 1939, ix). The preface argues, however, that the aristocracy 'divorced from the land ... fly, shuddering with strange new fears hitherto unknown in this country, into the arms of alien creeds' (ix). Judy Suh notes that Mitford's identification of fascism with 'alien creeds' in *The Stanleys at Alderley* renders nationalism a 'force against fascism rather than its potential source' and allows for a 'blind spot [which] permits Mitford to distance paternalism from fascism' (Suh. 2009, 146).

Fascism's paternalistic qualities are mitigated in *Wigs on the Green* through the expedient measure of cutting the portrait of Captain Jack, which gives Eugenia centre stage as a proxy leader figure. The links between nationalism and fascism that are divorced in *The Stanleys at Alderley* are blurred in *Wigs on the Green*, where Mitford renders the nationalistic ends of the pageant staged in the novel explicitly fascist by tying it to the cause of Social Unionism and the Union Jackshirts. Jasper's identification of fascism's appeal of the 'trumpet and flag' reflects Benjaminian ideas surrounding the aestheticization of politics in fascist spectacle. The end of the novel depicts the staging of a pageant at Chalford Park in which popular culture is co-opted for fascist ends and the aristocratic pile is reconnected with the community.

*Wigs on the Green* reworks the nationalistic pageant play, which Jed Esty describes as 'consistent and formulaic', conventionally culminating in a revolutionary final scene where 'the besieged and glorious townsfolk resist the Cromwellian usurper' (Esty. 2003, 59). In the novel, this siege against Cromwell in favour of the royalists is transformed into a fight between the pacifists and fascists as the pageant becomes fascistic

rather than royalist in tone. The line between the pageant's action and the novel's action is crossed when 'another unrehearsed incident took place' (*Wigs*, 157). The unarmed Social Unionists, in their fancy dress for the pageant, are defenceless as 'atrocities too horrible to name were perpetrated upon their persons' (157) by the ironically violent pacifists. In this 'din of battle', 'the Pacifists must win the day, unless something quite unforeseen should happen to turn the tide of war against them' (158). At this moment, Eugenia appears:

Like a whirlwind, Eugenia Malmain dashed into the fray, seizing a Union Jack from off the platform she held it high above her head and with loud cries she rallied the Comrades to her. The Pacifists fell back for a second in amazement, never had they seen so large, so beautiful, or so fierce a woman. That second was their undoing ... from now onwards the fight began to go against them. The Social Unionists, all rallying to Eugenia, presented at last a united front. Led by her, they shouted their fighting cry: 'We defend the Union Jack.' (158)

Lady Chalford, one of the pageant's spectators, thinks that this is part of the action: 'How wonderfully realistic that was' (158). The line between fascist spectacle and fascist historical victory is re-established. The brawl will become an historic testament to the success of the Union Jackshirts: 'Their names would go down to history ... they had been privileged to fight beneath the Union Jack in the Battle of Chalford Park' (159).

Judy Suh argues that the middlebrow reader of Mitford's text is distanced from the 'undiscerning lowbrow' concerns of the pageant. Instead, this 'independent-minded reader ... sympathizes with an aristocratic ethos', as they 'can truly perceive the absence of a genuine, cross-class, popular culture of the type that aristocratic hospitality had once supposedly provided' (2009, 57). However, the pageant itself is depicted as filling this very cross-class space. Esty notes that its ability to do this is the source of its very power: 'The most striking feature of pageantry is its communitarian ethos; broad participation was integral to the genre's self-definition and to its cultural success' (2003, 58). Indeed, the success of the spectacle/battle in *Wigs on the Green* is such that 'members of the public ... now hastened to become recruited to the Social Unionist party' (159). Just as earlier in the text, where Mitford acknowledges the appeal of fascism as a response to a sense of frustration with political inertia, here there is an acknowledgement of the tremendous appeal of fascistic spectacle as a powerful tool for recruiting

and unifying the mass. While finding the bombastic methods fascism uses risible, Mitford nonetheless depicts them as successful, supporting her 1934 claim to her sister Diana that the novel was 'far more in favour of Fascism than otherwise' (Mosley. 2007, 60).

After the Second World War, interfeminist writers such as Mitford, Brittain and Jameson reassessed and reimagined the ethics surrounding the efficacy of pacifism and fascism's political responses to the interwar crisis in civilization. In 1951, Mitford disallowed her publisher to republish *Wigs on the Green* on the basis that 'Too much has happened for jokes about Nazis to be regarded as funny or as anything but the worst of taste. After all, it was written in 1934, I really couldn't quite have foreseen all that came after' (Mosley. 1996, 249). Jameson resigned from the PPU in March 1939, on the basis that democracy was a value worth fighting for, but Brittain remained a loyal member. She found her 'representative[s]' leader in Canon Dick Sheppard, a figure she memorialized in a hagiographical portrait in *Born 1925* (1949), her 'novel about Dick Sheppard' (Brittain. 1934, 62; Berry and Bostridge. 1995, 457). The novel begins in the year *Testament of Youth* ends, and follows Robert Carbury, a charismatic pacifist preacher who was awarded the Victoria Cross in the Great War. Brittain's description of him shortly before his death imbues him with an 'element of sanctified loveliness', as he has a 'strange appearance of transfiguration' (Brittain. 1949 [1982], 312). The moment of Robert's death suggestively reworks some of the language and tropes of Brittain's analysis of the challenge facing pacifism in the 'Tawny Island' section of *Testament of Youth*. This notes that although the 'glamour' of war may be exposed for the 'will-o'-the-wisp' that it is, it nonetheless supplies 'that element of sanctified loveliness which, like superb sunshine breaking through thunder-clouds, from time to time glorifies war' (*Testament*, 264). *Born 1925* deploys this language and imagery of light and dark to describe the moment of Robert's death: 'Robert's eyes closed, but opened again for a second to see the soft elusive lights still playing will-o'-the-wisp amid the clouds. Then a darkness spread over the sky, and the lights faded away' (322). The echoing suggests that Dick Sheppard and his PPU provided for Brittain a vehicle that co-opted the heroism and nobility that she felt war had inspired to the purposes of peace. Brittain retrospectively gives to pacifism the allure that she felt war had so cruelly misappropriated.

Mitford, Brittain and Jameson's acts of critical repositioning regarding the efficacy and registers of pacifism and fascism to combat the crisis of civilization illuminate how sharply interfeminism was shaped by



the historical contours of the Second World War. The reinterpretation of the political ideals of the 1930s in the postwar period suggests how embedded it was in broader debates surrounding the status of democracy. The resistance to the satirizing of fascism by Mitford and the co-option of the ennobling discourses of war in Brittain's postwar exploration of pacifism demonstrates how the political realities of the mid-century prompted a re-interrogation of the literary forms that could convey feminist political critique.

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- Box 4a, 'Notes – Rough notes on the outline of T. Of Youth but with different titles'
- Box 4a, 'Notes for the last three chapters of Test. Of Youth. Folder 1', Vera Brittain, 'War-Book Women'
- Box 57, V. Brittain Scrapbook No. 1 & No. 2, *TLS*, 3 August 1933.
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- Box 145, Letter SJ to VB, 5 November 1934.

## CHAPTER THREE

# ‘Unsettled and Unsettling’ Women

## Migrant Voices After the War

*Maroula Joannou*

The 1950s are often viewed as an inauspicious time in English letters with the narrowness or contraction of English literary culture loosely corresponding to Britain’s diminishing status as a world power after the Second World War. High modernism had ended with the death of Virginia Woolf (1941) and W.B. Yeats (1939) but many of the critically acclaimed works of postmodernism were still to come. Jed Esty talks of ‘the inner logic and stylistic contours of a major literary culture caught in the act of becoming minor’ (2004, 3), citing authors such as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and John Wain, who were accentuating their Englishness and in so doing turning their backs on cosmopolitanism, Africa, and the fascination with the ‘primitive’ that featured strongly in early twentieth-century literary modernism. John Updike belittled the British novel of this time as ‘winsomely trivial’: ‘If the Post-war British novel features on the international stage as winsomely trivial, Kingsley Amis must bear part of the blame’ (1998, 293). As Marina Mackay and Lyndsey Stonebridge put it, ‘By the time that England had shrunk to the size of a campus novel, the novel (much like Britain itself) was in dire need of rescue from its own parochialism’ (2007, 1).

Even though Britain had escaped the purges of left intellectuals associated with Joseph McCarthy in the United States, the cultural dimensions of the Cold War were inescapable and these were inseparable from its political ramifications. Scepticism was widespread. So was suspicion of all modes of intense feeling, idealism or commitment,

whether religious or secular. Many writers and artists were determined to avoid what they saw as the mistakes of the 1930s (usually equating the latter with Auden and the poets of his circle who had disowned their prewar radicalism) and refused to espouse 'causes' of any description. As Sylvia Townsend Warner, who adhered to her socialist politics throughout the Cold War and wrote her last novel, *The Flint Anchor* in 1954, put it, 'We had fought, we had retreated, we were betrayed, and are now misinterpreted' (quoted in Rattenbury. 1982, 47).

But this is not the whole picture. In her autobiography *Walking in the Shade*, Doris Lessing vividly recalls her early days as an idealistic young writer who made the long journey from southern Africa to London in the late 1940s in an attempt to start a literary career. Lessing writes; 'the essence of this journey was that it was away from her [Lessing's mother], from the family, and from that dreadful provincial country Southern Rhodesia' (1998, 3). Lessing and other migrant authors often brought their political radicalism with them from the Caribbean, Africa or the Indian subcontinent, or were politicized in the Bohemian, left-leaning cultural and artistic networks in which they moved in the metropolis. For such writers the 1950s were a time of excitement and hope. While these 'unsettled' female artists and intellectuals differ markedly from one another, each desired to 'get away', to turn her back on the philistinism and repressiveness of her country of origin and to find a metropolitan reading public for her work. As Susheila Nasta suggests, escape was 'frequently seen as an important step in the process of decolonization, exile not beginning but ending with departure and representing a turning point in what had previously been a negative cycle of fragmentation and diaspora' (2005, 574).

The migrant women whose work is addressed in this essay – Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Rumer Godden, Attia Hosain, Doris Lessing and Kamala Markandaya – all made a significant contribution to the enrichment and expansion of Britain's literary culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Severally and individually they depicted fictional worlds that separate and conjoin the colonial past and the metropolitan present and in which the relationship between colony and metropole is essentially symbiotic. Though their subject matter, exilic childhood for example, was often unfamiliar to British readers, their style of writing was not. Lessing, for one, was a staunch admirer of nineteenth-century realism (1974): 'writing *Martha Quest*, a conventional novel, though the demand then was for experimental novels' (1998, 32). Not only did they discover different ways of living in London for themselves but

their writing, imaginative and discursive, contributed to more general attitudinal shifts and to the gradual broadening and transformation of the nation's cultural horizons. Hosain's *Cooking the Indian Way* (1967), for example, was an instant bestseller, encouraging the British to cook with unfamiliar ingredients and to venture beyond the insular cuisine of meat and two vegetables.

Like the pre-war writers Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, Nancy Cunard, and Warner, who all published new titles in the 1940s and 1950s, the women writers I discuss were politically on the left. Lessing was already a member of the Communist Party before she came to England. Hosain was close to the left-wing socialists in the Congress Party who supported the Communist Party of India and to the novelist Mulk Raj Anand and the Indian Progressive Writers Association, which influenced many aspiring new authors in India. Allfrey had worked as a personal secretary for Naomi Mitchison, joined the Labour Party, campaigned against Franco's Spain and written for the left-wing weekly *Tribune*, which published her 'Uncle Rufus' stories between 1941 and 1944. Markandaya and Godden were liberal politically and strong upholders of freedom of speech and universal human rights.

Lessing grew up in Southern Rhodesia, a self-governing British Crown colony. After a childhood on the veldt, a modicum of formal education, and a disastrous early marriage, she left her first husband and their children to marry a German Marxist, Gottfried Lessing. In 1948, she moved to England with the manuscript of her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) in her luggage. In addition, Lessing published three volumes of short stories set in Africa; *This Was the Old Chief's Country* (1951), *The Sun Between Their Feet* (1954) and *The Habit of Loving* (1957), as well as the first volume of her *Children of Violence* sequence, *Martha Quest* (1952), and the sequels *A Proper Marriage* (1954) and *Landlocked* (1958) in the 1950s. Lessing's achievement in her 'African period' is to illuminate the cracks and fissures of a dehumanizing social system and to show the consequences of economic injustice and racism in the colonies to a white readership in Britain largely ignorant about racial segregation abroad: 'Indignation about the colour bar in Africa had not yet become part of the furniture of the progressive conscience' (Lessing, 1998, 9). *The Grass is Singing*, 'execrated in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia' (1998, 3), dramatizes the deteriorating state of mind of a poor white woman, Mary Turner, whose isolation, emotional desperation, and increasing physical and mental dependency on a black houseboy culminate in a nervous breakdown.

Lessing's African writings explore the tensions between rich and impoverished settlers and between the Afrikaners and the English; liberals and racists, black servants and white masters, young and old, the educated and the illiterate are all depicted in socio-economic systems over which they have little understanding or control: 'Africa belongs to the Africans; The sooner they take it back, the better. But – a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it', she wrote in 1956 (II). As the title *This Was the Old Chief's Country* intimates, much of her short fiction is concerned with how Europeans can find ways of living in the African veldt while acknowledging the rights of the indigenous peoples.

Stories are sometimes told from the perspective of an adolescent who occupies a marginal position in the adult world and whose lack of adult prejudice enables the author to develop a critical distance through her control of the child's shifting point of view. The news that the huts where Chief Mshlanga lived had been demolished, his proud people evicted to a government reservation and their fertile land reserved for white settlement alone, is related from the point of view of a shocked observer in 'The Old Chief Mshlanga' (1951). Yet it was preconceptions derived from English reading books that initially prevented this same child narrator from developing a healthy life-enhancing response to the natural African landscape around her: 'Because of this, for many years, it was the veldt that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun, and the wind spoke a strange language. The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and the rocks' (1951, 8). In 'No Witchcraft for Sale', the menial status of a kitchen boy contrasts with the remarkable powers he holds as a traditional healer. When he refuses to disclose the whereabouts of a plant with the power to heal venomous snake bites to a pharmaceutical company representative, he demonstrates the importance of the ancestral knowledge and wisdom that is not 'for sale' to the white man.

*Martha Quest* (1952) is a feminist coming-of-age story about a young woman defined by her rebelliousness and questioning intelligence. Lessing situates her protagonist's many predicaments carefully in their social and political context emphasizing, from the outset that Martha's restlessness is symptomatic of her age, nationality, time and gender: 'She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and, therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past' (*MQ*, 20).

The London to which Lessing, Markandaya, Hosain, and Godden in the first instance, migrated after the war was a grim, bomb-damaged

city with fog in the winter, rationing and chronic shortages of essential goods. Some areas were in ruins. Lessing remembers there were 'No cafes. No good restaurants. Clothes were still "austerity" from the war, dismal and ugly. Everyone was indoors by ten, and the streets were empty' (1998, 4–5). Postwar Britain was learning to adjust to the loss of its pre-war status as a major world power. While the Festival of Britain and the reconstruction of Coventry Cathedral symbolized the revival of the nation's intellectual and cultural life economic recovery was slow and the country reliant on the Marshall Plan and massive loans from the United States.

Yet the attractions of London for the aspirant writer far outweighed the drabness of the physical ambience. While the market for new poetry and fiction in their own countries was severely restricted, the reading public's curiosity about the new migrants was fuelled by a thriving postwar publishing industry and perspicacious literary agents with promising debut novelists on their lists. Many books by authors from the Commonwealth were issued by prestigious London publishing houses such as Michael Joseph, who published Lessing, Macmillan (Rumer Godden), and Chatto & Windus (Attia Hosain). *A Morning at the Office* (1950) by the unknown Guyanese writer Edgar Mittelholzer, was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. In her memoir *Stet*, Diana Athill writes that 'For a time during the fifties and early sixties, it was probably easier for a black writer to get his book accepted by a London publisher, and kindly reviewed thereafter, than it was for a young white person' (2000, 103).

The position of London as a social and cultural haven for English speaking exiles and émigrés questions the extent to which it is possible to separate English literature from the literature of the rest of the world as globalization destabilized, de-territorialized, and decolonized Englishness. The BBC with its Home, Third and Eastern Services and broadcasts drew on contributors from all over the Commonwealth (its mission: 'nation shall speak peace unto nation'), broke down distinctions between metropole and periphery, and enabled Black and Asian voices to resonate simultaneously in Britain and across the world.

'Caribbean Voices' (first broadcast in 1943), which the Jamaican poet Una Marson, who had moved to London in 1932, was instrumental in getting on to the airwaves, was a magnet for West Indian poets and novelists. As Laurence Breiner put it, 'the existence of the program [*sic*] implied not only the respectability of writing by West Indians, but the respectability of their spoken language as well' (1998, 91). Elspeth

Huxley, whose best-selling memoir *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959) was based on her life among white settlers on her father's coffee plantation in Kenya, worked for the BBC's war propaganda department liaising between the BBC and the Colonial Office. From 1952 to 1959 she served on the BBC's General Advisory Council. The Eastern Service of the BBC, later integrated into the BBC World Service, brought together South Asian and British contributors to make programmes such as 'Through Eastern Eyes' and 'Open Letters'. Both Kamala Markandaya and Attia Hosain found work in broadcast journalism. Markandaya was scheduled to chair a radio discussion, 'Asian Club'. Hosain presented a woman's programme for the Indian Section of the Eastern Service of the BBC from 1949. She was also involved with the English regional service, which broadcast to India, Ceylon and Pakistan, and with programmes made in Urdu in Pakistan and in Hindi for the Indian Civil Service.

In 1948, the SS *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury carrying some 500 passengers from the Caribbean. Many settled in London and the Midlands, where labour shortages were acute, and took up the jobs in manufacturing, public transport and the newly formed National Health Service, which were to prove essential to Britain's postwar economic recovery. As James Proctor puts it, 'it is important to distinguish between 1948 as an *initiator* rather than an *originator* moment, in terms of black settlement in Britain', since this erases the Black British presence beforehand and privileges Jamaican male settlement, as well as concealing other contradictory narratives of migration from the Caribbean (2000, 3). Anna Snaith has discussed the critical neglect of two published poets and political activists: the Indian Sarojini Naidu and Una Marson. Marson had at one time worked for the BBC and produced the first black theatrical play in London in 1936 (Snaith, 2014). Jean Rhys, who was born in French-speaking Dominica, had been part of the modernist avant-garde in Paris and London in the 1930s and dramatized the 'voyage in' to England from the West Indies made by Anna Morgan, a young white woman, in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). Her magnum opus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) was still to come.

Women's voices were a structuring absence in the literature produced by the 'first generation' of migrants from the Caribbean in the 1940s and 1950s. The fiction of George Lamming and Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), Samuel Selvon, C.L.R. James and V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad) and Wilson Harris (Guyana) was not overly concerned with home, gendered or family relationships. Beryl Gilroy, although living and teaching in England in the 1950s, had yet to publish. Much later, the late



Andrea Levy, herself the daughter of a Windrush immigrant, produced an international bestseller with *Small Island* (2004), which dramatized the fraught relationships between Jamaican immigrants and their white working-class English hosts in 1948.

Like Rhys, whom she first met in England in 1936, and corresponded with intermittently, Phyllis Shand Allfrey was born in Dominica of white descent. Allfrey's father, Francis Byam Berkeley Shand, was the Crown Attorney. Her family, whose ancestors included the Empress Josephine and Thomas Warner, who landed in St Kitts in 1624, belonged to the island's slave-owning plantocracy. Allfrey left the Caribbean and married an Englishman, Robert Allfrey, in 1930. She wrote *The Orchid House* in Sussex and published it in 1953 in Dominica. In the novel, three sisters return to their island home to care for their father, whose drug-induced physical and mental deterioration is indicative of the more general decline of the white elite. In his prolonged absence, the women derive strength from their mother. 'But with or without men they were Madam's daughters and that means to say they could be sufficient unto themselves' (1953, 12).

Joan, the character most resembling Allfrey, is determined to tackle the corruption of the press, the landowners, and the Catholic Church. With Baptiste, the son of her mother's black servant, she attempts to launch a new political alliance for the starving labourers. But, Lally, the family nursemaid, knows radical change to be a chimera: 'The gentlemen over in Whitehall believed that they were governing our island. This was not the case. Father Toussaint and Marse Rufus were the real rulers. People challenged them now and again, but those people always lost' (1953, 194). For black and white to work together on a basis of equality is demonstrably folly: 'I wish you wouldn't walk three paces behind me, and keep on saying, "Yes, Miss Joan", in that reverent way', Joan admonishes Baptiste (153).

Two years after *The Orchid House* was published, Allfrey and the black trade unionist E.C. Loblack founded the island's first organized political party, the Dominica Labour Party. Allfrey, then one of the most powerful women on the island, was sent to Trinidad in 1958 as Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in the short-lived Federal Government of the West Indies. She was later expelled from the party she had helped to found, and died in relative obscurity. As David Dabydeen suggests in his 2005 review article in the *Guardian*, the 'substantial reason for her invisibility is her whiteness'. Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out that Allfrey herself 'began to acknowledge whiteness as a problem' for the

first time, troubled by the emphasis on ‘blackness as the only possible source of West Indian literary authenticity’ in cultural exchanges (1996, 255). She quotes Allfrey herself:

‘I sigh thinking how during Federal days I believed that West Indies could be the best small nation of *mixed* people in the world. After all, I have been here for 365 years since Thomas Warner came. *Then* I strolled to the Trinidad Library and found my one novel on a shelf for “white people’s fiction.”’ (1996, 255)

The Partition of India created the two independent states of India and Pakistan. As Attia Hosain notes; ‘In 1947, earlier than expected, and perhaps accelerated by the momentum of the war itself, came Independence and the Partition of the subcontinent of India. Together with the raising of the national flags and celebrations came the enforced migrations of more millions than ever before, of massacres and infinite loss’ (quoted in R.K. Kaul and Jasbir Jain. 2001, 194). Trekking to safety across newly delineated borders; Hindus and Sikhs seeking refuge in India and Muslims fleeing from Hindu-dominated India into Pakistan, fugitives of all religious faiths and denominations and none, found themselves caught up in terrifying scenes of communal violence, rapes, looting, arson, vendettas, abductions and forced conversions. For many exiles like Hosain, being ‘in London did not lessen the anguish. It sharpened it. There was no family from which to draw strength, no advice beyond rumour and cold definition of statistics’ (2001, 194).

As Homi Bhabha argues, ‘literature haunts history’s more public face, forcing it to reflect on itself in the displacing, even distorting, image of art’ (1997, 454). Both Markandaya and Hosain write of the Partition in their fiction, sometimes elliptically, but Hosain’s only novel, the elegiac *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) set in a Taluqdar family home in the undivided India of her formative years, speaks plangently of the sense of loss. As Annette Burton puts it, this novel is ‘in short, a historical argument about the impossibility of dwelling comfortably at home in the wake of the unspeakable violence of the past’ (2003, 106).

Rumer Godden was born in Sussex but grew up in Narayanganj, a town on the Brahmaputra river in Bengal where her father managed a steamship company. Godden dramatized the British retreat from India in a sequence of novels *Black Narcissus* (1939), *Breakfast with the Nikolides* (1942), *The River* (1946) and *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953). From her first and most successful, *Black Narcissus*, Godden makes clear the futility of transposing alien Christian ideas to India in the ill-fated attempt

of a few English nuns to establish a convent and school in a disused palace. When a wealthy young Indian the nuns have befriended seduces a convent-educated young peasant girl, the erotically suffused ambience of the convent where the lovers meet intimates the nuns' transience. They prepare to depart and the monsoon rains wash away all traces of their existence. Godden's semi-autobiographical *Kingfishers Catch Fire* is concerned with the reception of European values and practices more generally. Her liberal idealistic heroine, Sophie Barrington Moore, abandons the well-intentioned plans to set up house in the snow-capped mountains of Kashmir. The simple good taste of her home is lost on the local inhabitants and a litany of misunderstandings with both the Hindus and Moslems culminates in a failed attempt to poison her food by a disaffected family retainer.

Godden was at pains to distance herself from the insularity and narrow-mindedness of the Anglo-Indian community. But even those writers who regarded themselves as progressive in English domestic politics like George Orwell, or E.M. Forster, whom Godden admired, found it difficult to envisage a time when their presence in India would be neither necessary nor welcome. Godden is no exception. The sense of time running out for the British in India was inescapable by 1946, but Godden is not an explicitly political writer. There is no mention of the impending Partition in *The River*; no sense of foreboding, unrest, or threat. Instead, the river with its 'tides and weather warnings, with steamers, launches, flats, motor-boats, any kind of boats' (2012, xi), carries the metaphorical freight of departure. The family friend, Captain John, has been 'unbearably hurt' as a POW but there is only one fleeting reference to the Second World War in the novel; 'they had not been sent away out of the tropics because there was a war; this war, the last war, any war, it does not matter which war' (2012, xi). But as her biographer, Anne Chisolm notes, 'it is impossible to read *The River* now without relating its theme to the realization among countless British families that their life in India was over, that the ever-rolling stream of time was carrying them away' (1998, 198).

Godden's focus is on the contradictions and tensions in the daily lives of the English for whom India is home. She was a multiculturalist *avant la lettre*, and the characters in her Indian fictions, her children in particular, often grope for an alternative perception of what being English in India might be like. The adolescent girls, through whom *The River* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* are focalized, share the author's fascination in multi-faith dialogue, Indian spirituality and mysticism.

In *The River*, Harriet and her brothers and sisters ‘kept Diwali because it is an irresistible festival and no one could live in the country in which it is held and not be touched by it’ (1946, 10). The themes of her Indian ‘coming-of-age’ narratives are the loss of innocence, the European’s expulsion from Eden, and the duplicitous behaviour of adults. Godden’s vulnerable, questioning adolescent girls; Emily in *Breakfast with the Nicolides*, Harriet in *The River* and Sophie’s daughter, Theresa, in *Kingfishers Catch Fire*, must live with the consequences that adult sexuality, self-centredness and self-delusion inflict upon their own lives. Children are habituated to the beauty and lushness of the Indian landscape but also exposed to the dangers of cobra stings and rabid dogs. The natural world that envelopes them is depicted knowingly and without sentiment: ‘Birds are little live landmarks and more truthful than flowers; they cannot be transplanted, nor grafted, nor turned blue and pink’ (Godden. 2012, 31).

Like Lessing’s child-narrator in her story ‘The Old Chief Mshlanga’ or the adolescent Martha Quest, Godden’s girls are endowed with discernment beyond their years. As the chilling reasons for her parent’s estrangement (domestic violence and marital rape) are revealed, Emily is sent to their neighbours, the Nikolides, returning home to discover that that her pet dog has been killed by her emotionally distant mother in a thinly veiled act of revenge upon the country she detests and the daughter with whom she has little rapport. In *The River*, Harriet is stymied by Latin nouns and verbs: ‘It is strange that the first Latin declension and conjugation should be of love and war’ (2012, 3). ‘War and love. How many children, wondered Harriet, yawning, had had to learn those’ (2012, 7). When Bogey, her little brother, is killed by a cobra, a grieving Harriet – guilt-stricken because she kept her knowledge of the serpent’s presence in the garden to herself – is inexorably and inappropriately drawn to a much older man, Captain John. The lessons of love and war have indeed been learned and in consequence childhood innocence destroyed forever.

Like Lessing and Allfrey, Godden cannot be extricated from a history of white privilege. If the lacunae in her work are to be properly understood she must be situated in a context in which support for the British presence in India had prevailed across the entire political, literary and cultural spectrum for centuries with very little dissent. As Stephen Slemon puts it, white women colonial writers are ‘unsettled’ or ‘unsettling women’, whose problematic speaking position textualizes the inescapable contradictions of complicity and resistance:

The Second-World writer, the Second-World text, that is, have always been complicit in colonialism's territorial appropriation of land and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition even at those moments when they have promulgated their most strident and most spectacular figures of post-colonial dissent. (Slemon. 1990, 38)

Phyllis Lassner suggests that their 'in-between' state enables the white woman writer to 'see English political and social culture from a critical distance', while 'sometimes struggling and then failing to find a place for themselves within it or outside' (2004, 12). The ability to describe and critique European privilege and folly situates these women between the Scylla of their failure to represent the consciousness of the colonized majority and the Charybdis that to do so would inevitably serve their own purposes as white women.

Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya were members of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, educated, widely travelled Indian elite. Hosain was accepted and welcomed by the London intelligentsia and made friends with Leonard Woolf, Henry Green and William Sansom. Her reputation as a respected cultural commentator committed to improving cross-cultural understanding made her *persona grata* in the citadels of English culture such as the British Council, the West End Theatre, and the BBC. Sahgal, author of the memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), belonged to the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty. Her uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, was India's first Prime Minister, her cousin, Indira, the third. Her mother was Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Ambassador to the UN, and supported (until his death in Lucknow prison in 1944) by Sahgal's father, Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, a classical scholar whose temper was aroused by the 'purdah mentality' or 'any view which countenanced the seclusion or repression of women or denial of privileges to them' (Sahgal. 1954, 43). Mahatma Gandhi, 'Bapu' or 'Gandhiji', with whose assassination *Prison and Chocolate Cake* ends, was a loved, if infrequent, presence in the family home. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* is an account of growing up with both parents committed to the Gandhian ideals of non-violent civil disobedience during India's freedom struggle in the 1940s: 'Our growing up was India's growing up into India's political maturity – a different kind of political maturity from any that the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace' (1954, 32).

The Quit India movement (1942) when anti-British feeling was at its height also forms the backdrop of Markandaya's second novel. *Some Inner Fury* (1955) centres on Mira, a young middle-class Indian journalist

who becomes politicized during the nationalist struggle and falls in love with an English civil servant. Born a Brahman, the highest caste of Indian society, Markandaya accompanied her father, an official on the Indian railways, on his travels around India, England and Europe before reading History at Madras University. Like Mira in *Some Inner Fury*, she worked in India as a journalist. In 1948, she migrated to London and married an Englishman, Bernard Taylor. Not as widely known as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, Markandaya was among the first Indian novelists to write in English about life in southern India – for British readers, very different from the more familiar India of the Raj. She also writes about the plight of the rural peasantry, and the conflict between tradition and modernity at a time of rapid industrialization and economic change. Marriage is the context in which Markandaya explores differing attitudes to western rationalism and Indian mysticism and the underlying causes of marital disharmony in *A Silence of Desire* (1960). Suspecting his wife of infidelity, Dandeker, an anglicized government clerk, uncovers Sarojini's clandestine visits to a 'Swami' or Hindu faith healer whom he initially believes to be a charlatan. But when the gynaecological operation to which Sarojini eventually agrees is successful, he undergoes a change of heart, realizing the importance that faith and spirituality exert in his wife's physical well-being.

Markandaya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), an unusually sympathetic account on the feminization of rural poverty in India, was a global success and translated into 17 languages (Benson. 2005, 965). It is narrated retrospectively in the first person by Rukmani, the long-suffering child bride of a simple tenant farmer whose traditional way of life is destroyed by the arrival of a tannery in the village. Her two oldest sons obtain work there but are dismissed for inciting industrial unrest and take flight to Ceylon. Her fourth child is murdered by the tannery guards for the alleged theft of an animal hide. Their daughter Irawaddy is abandoned by her husband because she is childless, returns home and turns to prostitution to feed the entire family.

The peasant life that Markandaya depicts in *Nectar in a Sieve* is an unbroken cycle of hunger, toil and deprivation. Rukmani embodies the traditional wifely virtues of patience and fortitude represented by the Goddess Sita, whose selfless devotion to her husband led her to share his many years in exile: 'Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons of the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?' (1954, 153). Rukmani contributes to the economic wherewithal of her large and

fractious family by selling vegetables and writing letters. Her six sons are ironically of little help to her, absent when needed most in her old age. After the monsoon rains have destroyed their rice harvest, husband and wife depart for the city, but fall prey to robbers and thieves in the temple where they seek shelter. Destitute and landless her husband dies, leaving Rukmani dependent on a street urchin and the charity of the one European outsider in the village.

In contrast to Samuel Selvon, who was admired for the naïve authenticity of his West Indian peasants' vernacular in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Markandaya depicts her uneducated Indian peasants with a sophistication that does not self-consciously draw attention to the novelty of their spoken language and owes much to her knowledge of English Romanticism. The title *Nectar in a Sieve* comes from the last two lines of the sonnet 'Work without Hope' (1825) by the Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 'Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve / And hope without an object cannot live.'

The tannery brings nothing but noise, pollution, dissension and harm, pushing up the price of foodstuffs, driving the peasants off the land and setting master against man. While honest work produces no hope of self-sufficiency the city provides no refuge for the desperate, the deracinated and the dispossessed. One of the crucial questions about *Nectar in a Sieve* is the extent to which Markandaya is interested in the potential for hope in Rukmani's redemptive selflessness and love for others or if her book offers only a despair that assumes that human beings are powerless in the wake of consumerist capitalism and globalization that are seen to work relentlessly to the benefit of some but not others.

Like all diasporic groups the Indian diaspora was riven with hierarchies that intersect in a complicated fashion with the host and homeland cultures. As *women*, Hosain and Markandaya were living on the margins of their societies (in India as well as England) in relation to their race and expectations about the behaviour of their sex. Both defied Indian convention and contracted marriages for love; Hosain to her first cousin Ali Bahadur 'Sonny' Habibullah, and Markandaya to an Englishman, Bernard Taylor. Cosmopolitan, educated to degree level, and to some extent anglicized, they nonetheless remained closely attuned to the politics of the Indian subcontinent, to which they returned on occasion, writing sensitively about the sensibilities and subjectivities of women in India and Pakistan; whether the simple child brides in Hosain's short stories 'The Street of the Moon' and 'The Daughter-in-Law', or the

stylish women from India's expanding urban professional middle classes, for example, the journalist Roshan in *Some Inner Fury*.

Hosain, a feminist committed to equal rights, who attended the 1933 All-Indian Women's Conference, was particularly sympathetic to those women who have modernity thrust upon them involuntarily, like the perplexed young bride in 'The First Party'. Markandaya's sensitive depiction of a literate, loyal, resourceful, intelligent peasant woman in *Nectar in a Sieve* has now acquired the status of a literary classic. Their repossessing the idea of India as home while living in London threw the old models of metropolitan core and imperial periphery into crisis. As Simon Gikandi contends in *Maps of Englishness*, 'Englishness emerges in the space between metropole and colony, between the centre and the periphery, and in response to difference' (1996, x, xii). 'Colonials, the children or grandchildren of the far-flung Empire, arrived in England with expectations created by literature' (Lessing, 1998, 22). But migrant writing revitalized British writing, reshaped its contours, and transformed the imperial capital's sense of its identity. Somewhat ironically, as Susheila Nasta suggests, it was through the encounter with London that it became possible to 'inscribe a more fully realised picture of the world back home – to depict the complex background to a history of racial admixture, cultural dislocation and economic exploitation' (2005, 574).

Hosain was born in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh where her English educated aristocratic Muslim family had lorded over vast feudal estates for generations. Her father, Sheikh Shahid Husain Kidwai, was a close associate of Motilal Nehru, father of Jawaharlal Hosain, and she became the first woman from a Taluqdar family to graduate from the University of Lucknow. A secular intellectual, she chose to live in England largely because she found it impossible to contemplate living in the Islamic republic of Pakistan. *Phoenix Fled and Other Short Stories*, in which she deals suggestively with the violence of the Partition in both the title story and 'After the Storm', was published by Chatto & Windus in 1953. As Lakshmi Holmström notes, the 'influence of The Progressive Writers is everywhere', apparent in Hosain's preoccupation with the wretched of the earth, poverty and exploitation. 'But almost equally, the perspective of the responsible *taluqdar* broods over the work, highlighting certain (inherited) obligations and responsibilities' (1999, 19).

In her introduction to the Virago edition, Anita Desai suggests that Hosain is 'reproducing whether consciously or not, the Persian literary style and mannerism she was taught when young, and reading her



prose brings one as close as it is possible, in the English language to the Urdu origins and Persian inspiration' (1988, xiv–xv). As Desai notes, the stories are often concerned with traditional notions of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame). In 'Gossamer Thread', an unnamed husband who prides himself on his books and progressive politics refuses shelter to a Marxist friend seeking refuge from the police. Sanctuary is offered to the fugitive by his simple, uneducated wife who demonstrates that honour and decency matter more than protestations of progressive ideals. In 'Time is Unredeemable', Bano contracts a hurriedly arranged marriage with a reluctant husband who is about to sail to England to study. In pleasurable anticipation of his return she invests in the trappings of European modernity, acquires a new coat and make-up, and invests in English lessons to find that he has become a changed man and the consequence of his long absence abroad is his intense irritation with her naïve attempts to please. 'The First Party' is concerned with 'laija' or modesty. A young bride kept in purdah is taken to a party where she feels a 'sick horror at the way the men held the women, at the closeness of their bodies, their vulgar suggestive movements' (in *Phoenix Fled*, 1953, 21). The shocked realization that her husband is one of the violators of her own sense of modesty reinforces her belief in the rightness of what she has been taught to hold dear. At the same time, her understanding that her life is inseparable from his reduces her to confusion and despair.

The Nationality Act of 1948 extended the rights of residence to colonials, and London became a mecca for the poor and dispossessed fleeing from poverty in the Caribbean and escaping the human consequences of the Partition. Writing in the *Independent* in 1988, Hosain recollects the dreadful 'stories of massacres and migration, of tragedies and sorrows' heard from afar. The 'highest wall, even if invisible, divided my brothers, my relations, my friends. Only in England could they meet.' The realities of exile were harsh. 'Protective layers of privilege, of family name and relationships nurtured through generations were stripped away'. Yet for all the political and economic troubles in the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, and even the rigid racial divisions in Southern Africa, which Lessing's prose eloquently evokes, the socially privileged women I have discussed lived in Britain by choice rather than necessity, sheltered by their elite status; anchored to their adoptive country by husbands, children, and lovers, sustained by the cultural and literary networks they helped to create.

These women were enabled to participate fully in British cultural and intellectual life because they were part of the postwar globalization of the

economy, communications, transportation, education, and culture, not rebels against it. While the reality of diasporic living could be loneliness, separation and exile, the metropolis also represented new horizons, new freedoms, and new opportunities for professional recognition and fulfilment.

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PART II

**Women Bearing Witness:  
The Temperature of War**



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ‘The Lure of Pleasure’

#### Sex and the Married Girl in Marghanita Laski’s *To Bed with Grand Music* (1946)

*Sue Kennedy*

There was a diffused gallantry in the atmosphere, an unmarriedness: it came to be rumoured about the country, among the self-banished, the put-upon and the safe, that everybody in London was in love – which was true, if not in the sense the country meant. There was plenty of everything in London – attention, drink, time, taxis, most of all space. (Elizabeth Bowen. *The Heat of the Day*. 1948, 89)

In *The Heat of the Day*, Elizabeth Bowen’s haunting novel of London in mid-war, the intoxicating strangeness of an extraordinary moment in history, is powerfully rendered. Bowen evokes the sense of existing in what Lara Feigel, in her study of the lives of writers in wartime London *The Love Charm of Bombs*, has called ‘an abnormal pocket of time’ when ‘London became a city of restless dreams and hallucinogenic madness; a place in which fear itself could transmute into addictive euphoria’ (Feigel. 2013, 4). The capital, as Bowen observes in the postscript to *The Demon Lover*, appeared to be suspended in ‘a state of lucid abnormality’; a perverse situation that in its very proximity to death is conducive to desire (Bowen. 1945, 197). Marghanita Laski’s provocative novel *To Bed with Grand Music* (1946), published two years before *The Heat of the Day*, addresses this fantasy of fulfillable desires through the story of

a young woman taking full advantage of the 'plenty of everything' in London during the war. It offers what historian Juliet Gardiner describes as an 'ahead-of-the pack telling of an aspect of the civilian's war it was not yet acceptable to reveal' (*TBGM*, xv). Like Bowen's, Laski's novel is set in London in the middle to final years of the hostilities, after the worst of the Blitz, in a city that was the epicentre of strategic operations and suffused with the atmosphere of dissolution that Bowen and Feigel identify. Although official propaganda promoted the idea of a civilian's war or, as it came to be known, the 'People's War', as a time when those on the home front were exhorted to 'keep smiling through',<sup>1</sup> Laski's novel pushes against the grain to reveal something other in a counter-narrative of the protagonist's libidinal life.

That the publication of *To Bed with Grand Music* at a still raw moment in the postwar period was a bold action is confirmed in Laski's use of the pseudonym 'Sarah Russell'. It was risky not only because of the threat to the author's reputation contained in the novel's taboo subject matter, but also for fear of recognition by and of the woman whose real story inspired it. There is no use, then, in seeking autobiographical clues in the novel since Laski and her children were safely domiciled with their grandmother in Oxford and later in Abbots Langley for most of the war. All the same, there is an aura of authenticity in a novel whose vision poses a challenge to an already creaking ideology of feminine conduct. Laski's daughter's account of her mother's inspiration states that she was both 'fascinated and upset at seeing what the war had done to this person' (*TBGM*, xxi). The judgement suggested by this comment is, I contend, not wholly realized in a novel that advances the author's fascination with situations that oppose and destabilize the norm.

Laski, an atheist, a public intellectual and a campaigner for nuclear disarmament, was a writer who tested alternatives to dominant narratives, but her erasure of the preferred image of the 'People's War' in *To Bed with Grand Music* was unwelcome, to say the least. In 1944 she had more safely put out her political satire, *Love on the Supertax*, in her own name (albeit under the radical imprint, the Cresset Press, founded by her husband John Howard), and would almost certainly have anticipated the shock value of this, her next novel, though not to the extent of withholding it. Evidence of Laski's contrarian approach to public moralities is found in her notorious resistance to censorship during the legal challenge to the republication of *Fanny Hill* in 1964. Her response to a question about the justification for republishing it rested upon the importance of preserving archaic words in the English language;



a lifelong preoccupation of hers. Pressed for an example, she mischievously offered ‘*chaise-longue*’, an item of furniture illustrated in explicit sexual scenes in Cleland’s novel (*TBGM*, xx).<sup>2</sup> The correspondence with eighteenth-century morality is evident, too, in Juliet Gardiner’s claim that the narrative is ‘a female rake’s progress in wartime Britain’, though perhaps an even better comparison would be to Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (*TBGM*, v). There is indeed a plausible connection with the ‘infamous commerce’ of eighteenth-century prostitution in which the desiring woman at the outset embraces her own pleasure, but later attends to business, and a profitable one at that.<sup>3</sup> The difference in Deborah’s case is in the outcome; she is not ‘undone’, either by death or poverty, although guilt and remorse appear at times, albeit fleetingly.

Laski’s exposé of the uncomfortable truth that some women both enjoyed and profited from the war was only later documented by chroniclers of the period. In the 1980s historians like John Costello in *Love, Sex and War* collected the testimony of women who ‘conceded that the old dual standard of feminine fidelity was no longer acceptable to wives’ who were confronted with abstemious sex lives and precarious futures (Costello, 1985, 28). Contemporary reviews of *To Bed with Grand Music* were hostile – as Gardiner puts it, ‘the waters closed as the war ended’ (*TBGM*, xviii). In his commentary on the novel in the *Islington Tribune*,<sup>4</sup> Gerald Isaaman refers to newspapers whose reviews reflected this position, at the time trumpeting the ideal of self-sacrifice and the rekindling of hearth and home. The *Sunday Pictorial* declaimed, ‘it has no place in the homes of the nation striving to regain the precious normality war took away’, and the *Sunday Times* condemned it as ‘a novel of wartime decadence’. To be sure the novel throws down an unpalatable challenge to the dominant ideology of female sexual conduct, yet the development of the protagonist Deborah Robertson’s character shows a woman with strengthening agency who achieves her desires in a manner that prefigures the demands and methods of a second wave of feminism, but in an interfeminist chronology still refers back to soon-to-be-outdated sexual mores.

This essay critically dissects the contentious representation of one woman’s resistance to her expected wartime trajectory in *To Bed with Grand Music*. The radical nature of Laski’s novel is highlighted by comparisons to two contemporaneous novels, Noel Streatfeild’s *Saplings* (1945 [2011]) and Kathleen Winsor’s English Civil War and Restoration period classic *Forever Amber* (1944 [2002]), both of which deal separately with the libidinous behaviour of a woman who is also a mother. The

narrative is imagined using a historical lens in the case of *Forever Amber*, and in *Saplings* the woman's situation is observed from a moralistic perspective more appropriate to prevailing ideas of motherhood in the mid-twentieth century. In *To Bed with Grand Music*, the fate of a young woman, Deborah Robertson, the wife of Graham and mother of a toddler named Timmy, is interrogated through Laski's ambivalent portrayal of her as exploiter and exploited. This presents to the reader the question of whether she may be judged simply as a bad mother and amoral hedonist, as a victim of circumstance or as a woman demonstrating a visionary resistance to social prescription and proscription. The author's scant attentiveness to public opinion – remembering that the novel was written during and published just after the war – is confirmed in the creation of a character who refuses the obligations of the home front, behaves as a negligent parent and is unfaithful to her husband with many sexual partners. Yet Laski's shifting viewpoints and insights into the character's psyche leave room for equivocation as to whether Deborah is deserving of admiration, however reluctantly given, or of censure for her transgressions in a narrative that in many ways is closer to eighteenth century than mid-twentieth century in tone. The novel is in essence a narrative of personal development that tracks the pathways to change from indecisive, easily influenced girl to clear-sighted autonomous woman.

Once her husband is posted abroad, Deborah finds the role of married mother with a young child tedious and unfulfilling. In times of war a woman's 'happiness duty', to use Sara Ahmed's term,<sup>5</sup> expands from that of faithful wife and loving mother to a communal responsibility on the home front: responsibilities that Deborah is disinclined to embrace. Nevertheless, while Rosalind Coward's term 'the lure of pleasure' pervades her story, the novel does not wholly invite the attribution of Deborah's actions to a raw hedonistic impulse (Coward. 1984, 13). This reading proposes other connotations to her transgressive conduct by identifying a series of critical moments when she must choose one path over another, prey to persuasion while ostensibly exercising free will. Deborah's progress, should not, I suggest, be judged as entirely capricious. It is guided initially by the will of others and only later by her own consciously refined feminine skills.

Deborah's destabilization as wife and mother begins on the eve of Graham's posting when he fails to promise 'physical' faithfulness; a term that separates sex from love. Implicit in his position is a caveat that whatever sexual needs must be fulfilled, for either of them, their

relationship remains paramount. He is, in effect, offering her a similar freedom to that of a man. As John Costello's study confirms, this was an understanding in many wartime marriages but to Deborah it is deeply disquieting and leads her to doubt the value of her promise of faithfulness if not reciprocated. Her ideal, however unrealistic, would be Graham's total denial of his sexual needs during his absence on the principle of 'if I can do it, he can' (*TBGM*, 2). This is the first of the critical moments that unsettle the constancy of the so-called happily married woman. While Graham's pragmatic masculine attitude echoes wartime propaganda that the dangers of war heighten sexual appetites that must be fulfilled for the fighting man, the lack of reassurance from Graham strikes a blow to her commitment to marriage and motherhood.

The presence of libidinous motivation in the characterization of the 'bad mother' is echoed in Noel Streatfeild's *Saplings* (1945). Published almost contemporaneously with Laski's novel, Streatfeild's also characterizes a woman whose sexual desire for her husband is stronger than her motherly inclinations, but with less advantageous outcomes. The novel tells the dramatic story of Lena's dissolution as she seeks solace in sex and alcohol after her husband is killed, buried in the rubble of the family home. The judgemental tone of this novel is clear; it displays none of the more sophisticated ambivalence embedded in Laski's telling of Deborah's story. Lena's sentence for her sexual and maternal transgressions allows no room for special pleading. Her deviation from the norm results not only in her own physical decline but also in adverse psychological effects on the children that reflect the mid-century apprehensions fed by developing psychoanalytical theory. The effects of the instability of maternal attention and the quality of primary care on a child's security and well-being had been the subject of psychological research during the war including, in 1941, *The Cambridge Evacuation Survey: A Wartime Study in Social Welfare and Education*, edited by the pioneering child psychologist Susan Isaacs, which attempted to assess the complex psychological effects of the war on pre-school and school-age children.<sup>6</sup> The negligence of relatives unconcerned about Lena's children's well-being contrasts with the way that Deborah's mother, Mrs Betts, and the mother's help, Mrs Chalmers, are protectively aware of the risks inherent in Timmy's situation; a concern that unwittingly clears Deborah's subsequent path.

The circumstances of war posed a threat to the foundations of marriage in areas not openly challenged at other times. Like Lena, Deborah's attachment to her child(ren) is dependent upon the relationship with

her husband. On Graham's departure Deborah feels constrained by Timmy and rails against the impediment of motherhood. Her strong physical desire for Graham, with whom she has enjoyed a passionate and, so far, exclusive relationship is now tested by an unwelcome hiatus. Deborah's irritation with her baby son is of great concern to the boy's grandmother, whose appraisal of her daughter's frustrated sexuality leads her to an urgent rationale for action. Mrs Betts's astute summary of the relationship with Graham reflects the age-old Madonna/Magdalene binary of virgin/whore that she speaks of as the 'mother type' and the 'wife type':

'I don't mean this for any disparagement of you, but I do think that there are fundamentally two types of women in the world, the mother type and the – the wife type.' She hesitated over the last epithet, unable to say the word that was really in her mind. 'And I don't think you are really the first sort. I'm quite sure that when Graham is at home, the baby is secondary to your life with him. Isn't that so?' (16)

Her mother's description of Deborah as the 'wife type' as opposed to the 'mother type' endorses the impression of her daughter's maternal shortcomings at the same time as it acknowledges her sexual nature. Mrs Betts's disquisition on female desire expresses a surprising understanding of Deborah's situation when deprived of sex, even though she herself had never experienced 'the incomprehensible urge that the girl must have inherited from her father', uncertain whether 'other women had these desires and managed to suppress them' or simply never felt them (92). This supports Cate Haste's observation in *Rules of Desire* (1992) of prevailing attitudes towards sex at this time as 'something in which men indulged but women tolerated, with little value put on women's sexual satisfaction' (Haste, 1992 [1994], 109). Popular impressions of sexuality would soon change, however, accelerated by the war and the spread of psychoanalytical thought. An awareness of the theories propounded by Marie Stopes in her book *Married Love or Love in Marriage* in 1918, which supported the idea that women's sexual needs were comparable to and as variable as those of men, is reflected in Laski's engagement with the new sciences of sexology that were soon to be explored comprehensively in America in the Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Along with the popularized work on child deprivation mentioned earlier, these were theories that had been widely voiced in the media. Motivated by concern about the consequences for the child of what is interpreted as symptoms of Deborah's sexual frustration, her mother and Mrs Chalmers plan to

rescue Timmy by encouraging Deborah to take a job as a diversion from her evident ennui. The plan falters as it becomes clear that she is more attracted to helping the war effort in London, rather than closer to home in Winchester. The child's grandmother weighs her feelings about the relative harm in the two possible courses now before her:

I can see quite clearly what will happen to her if she goes to live in London – but I can see equally well the irremediable harm she will do my baby if she stops here. The question is, which is more important to me, my daughter or my grandson? Do I mind more if my daughter goes to the bad or my grandson has his nerves upset and his character ruined? (19)

The grandmother's decision may have been peremptory, but Laski renders her dilemma as emblematic of situations confronted by women during the war. The outcome of Mrs Betts's deliberation frees Deborah to take a new direction towards the excitement of London – and her worldly art school friend, Madeleine – released from child-rearing responsibilities. Sacrificial maternity in the guise of duty induces in Deborah an 'uncontrollable ecstasy of release' – Laski's playful analogy with sexual climax – as Mrs Betts and Mrs Chalmers relinquish the daughter to gain the 'ultimate possession of Timmy'. While Deborah is 'now able to see everything the way she wished to see it', a statement that gives an impression of her character as self-justifying, the urgency of Mrs Betts's dispatch of her daughter conceals an emotion in Deborah that might have developed differently, given time (*TBGM*, 19–20). As Rosalind Coward asserts: 'Female dissatisfaction is constantly recast as desire, as desire for something more, as the perfect reworking of what had already gone before' (Coward, 1984, 13). The consequence of unwittingly facilitating Deborah's return to the status of single girl is access to the spoils of the London life she had enjoyed as an art student with her friend Madeleine, despite its inherent dangers.

Deborah's maternally sanctioned release positions her as a sacrificial victim for the sake of Timmy's well-being. The question remains as to whether there might have been another way of protecting the boy and still supporting Deborah that was overlooked by the anxious, and possibly culpable, grandmother. Deborah herself later considers 'whether she had translated a normal sense of loss at Graham's absence into a false desire for more than he had ever given her' (114). Such clear-sighted perception, though quickly put aside, anticipates Coward's link between dissatisfaction and desire. Instead of working through the separation (whatever the outcome), Deborah is subject to a manipulative process

that offers much of what one would really like if freed from constraint – the infamous ‘soft sell’. Feeling vindicated by contemporary psychological theories, Deborah’s ‘glow of maternal renunciation’ as she takes the train to London (20) portrays her as making a heroic emotional sacrifice for Timmy’s sake. Yet Laski’s sardonic tone is unsettling to the reader. In truth, the two older women could see no option but to condone the alteration of the young woman’s vision, with the effect that Deborah’s needs accommodate their wishes in much the same way as hers will be adapted to serve Madeleine and her men friends in the early stages of her adventures in London, before she learns to exercise her hard-won agency.

Relieved of the responsibilities of wife and mother, Deborah discovers the exchange value of her sex, enabling her to profit from the war. Prefiguring Luce Irigaray’s ideas in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she engages in a masquerade in which she ‘submit[s] to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain “on the market” in spite of everything’. Leaving behind the domestic sphere, Deborah enters a male-dominated public realm. Accessing the new economic value-system she becomes ‘enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men’ (Irigaray. 1985, 33–34).<sup>8</sup> The connection with Madeleine (the correspondence with Mary Magdalen is surely not accidental) brings Deborah into contact with a sequence of lovers, officers, diplomats and ‘Yanks’ in the city that hosts a new cohort of transient young people anxious to exploit Bowen’s ‘plenty of everything’ available in the capital. Thus, the displaced wife and mother enters an arena of moral flux that brings her to the moment when, intoxicated and wilfully forgetful of her train back to Timmy, she returns with a naval officer to a borrowed flat, where, feeling ‘somehow absolved from all responsibility’, she has sex with him (24). An alternative interpretation of this scene, however, would suggest that the absolution of responsibility is achieved, not through her own agency but by an irresistible set of masculine ploys and the influence of alcohol. While the novel delivers a mildly taboo-breaking account of the night’s encounter it still issues a moral corrective (although not the fate of the ‘fallen woman’ that Lena faces in *Saplings*) in the form of Deborah’s apparently genuine self-disgust and remorse. A ‘morning-after’ outburst reiterates her stance of ‘love before immorality’ in which she is disconcerted to find the tenet that she clings to in some form for most of the narrative ‘mocked at, even held against her’. Peter’s scornful declaration of his view on ‘immorality’, and the assertion that she ‘wanted it last night as much as I did’, are a profound shock (29).

Passing the responsibility back to Deborah he pays no heed to however intoxicated he knew her to be, nor to his part in making her so. While he articulates justification for his own sexual freedom by citing reciprocal female desire, nowhere in the confusion of drunkenness is the question of consent clarified. The atmosphere of wartime licence and the willing acceptance of alcohol and charming company override that requirement.<sup>9</sup>

Deborah's silence after the event is typical of a woman bearing the blame and consequent guilt alone. Yet her silence implies an acceptance of fault in circumstances that might otherwise be construed as victimhood. Although Deborah's ignorance of the effects of spirits and of the ease of giving way while intoxicated might constitute an excuse, she now carries a lonely burden. In the subsequent period of atonement Deborah reapplies the mask of the Madonna. But when, feeling a 'longing for her unjudging, adoring baby', she experiences an unpalatable rejection as Timmy's first delight at seeing her is followed by a show of distrust, she is shaken by her neighbour's recital of popular child psychology. Betty Marsden opines; 'he's distrustful of you, of course, because you went away from him, and he doesn't like to entrust his security to you again' (33). This suggestion of maternal betrayal pushes Deborah towards the desperate promise that 'Mummy will stay with you always', and, indeed, for weeks Timmy is positioned as adult suitor, giving attention and pleasure to Deborah, rather than receiving it; perhaps therapeutic for her, but not for the child (34). As a traumatized, immature woman her need at this moment is for the care and support of an understanding confidant. In this scenario, Timmy's adoration is beneficial to neither of them. Swayed briefly by the paradigm of motherhood that 'here in her home with her child was the only wholly satisfactory life', she regains some equilibrium until, going against her vow never to leave him, she turns down another job offer in Winchester in favour of one in London (35). Before her return to the capital the use of the child to evoke the emotionalism attached to Christmas shocks even herself with the self-excusing thought, "at least I can have Christmas with Timmy" in 'an orgy of sentimentality' (37, 42). The narrative suggests a manipulation of Timmy's adverse reactions to her coming and going to justify her return to London, confident that he is happy in the familiar setting and care of the competent Mrs Chalmers. Unable to commit fully to child-rearing and homemaking, Deborah feels 'the lure of pleasure' promised in London. All the same, she is conflicted; conscious of her maternal shortcomings, a mother who misses Timmy's touch while not understanding her urge to leave him.

The connection with the friend who makes Deborah 'wild with envy of the glamour every word of Madeleine's life brought before her' allows a second lover, Joe, to release Deborah from her atonement living alone in a shabby flat on a diet of baked beans (46). With the skill of his profession (he is a lawyer) and an expansive charm, Joe convinces Deborah of his devotion both to her and to his wife back in America, using the same rationale for preserving her relationship with Graham. They conduct their affair in a reciprocally loving way, taking advantage of privileges and commodities available to 'Yanks' in London: access to good food in restaurants, cosmetics and clothing denied to others. But still, living two lives, in London and at home, Deborah is 'not wholly happy in either'. She is flattered by Joe but when he visits for the weekend, she still sees the relationship as 'threatening, potentially dangerous', and in her home setting she cannot 'achieve a satisfactory synthesis of the situation', failing to please either of the two males, Timmy or Joe (70–71).

Joe's departure is the next critical moment in Deborah's progress. While the regret expressed before he leaves appears genuine, Joe accepts responsibility for harm done to her. A virtuoso performance had coaxed Deborah into a position of counterfeit love, but she is now dismayed to hear the 'open assumption of persuasion [that] suggested intolerable weakness' contained in Joe's advice to go home, away from Madeleine's influence. Deborah cannot countenance such advice; she needs to hold on to the view that any 'change of intention is due to uninfluenced new conviction'; in other words, she must believe she makes her own choices. Deborah's confrontation with the chastening 'vision of herself passing from man to man, passing ever more shoddily from the wife of Graham and the mother of Timmy' is epiphanic (77–78). Yet faced with the choice between returning to convention or continuing along her chosen but transgressive path, she opts for the materially profitable route through a series of affairs of differing intensity and reducing emotional significance, setting aside desire and sexual pleasure in favour of the business of acquisitiveness, wilfully ignoring the duplicitous advice of her lover and, more surprisingly, of Madeleine:

'Deborah, why don't you go home? If all you've said to me is true, and I firmly believe it is, can't you see where it's going to lead you? ... But you surely want to go back and live with your husband when the war's over and you've got a baby to keep you company while you wait for him.' (82)

This seemingly sincere advice endorses the primacy of a life that Madeleine herself avoids, and so Deborah doubts the motivation of the woman with



whom she is determined to compete. Clear now about what she wants, she sets out decisively to achieve it through a process she describes as ‘training and education’, using her newly acquired sexual agency to gain the skills of the ‘good mistress’ (101). Expressed in this way it is characterized as a career choice approached with due professionalism. Having identified objectives, she appoints Pierre, the archetypal Frenchman whom she has prised away from Madeleine, to be the tutor she hopes will reveal ‘the secret that Madeleine seemed so carelessly to hold’ – the secret of performing the role of the good mistress (102). Pierre’s definitions reflect, ironically, Mrs Betts’s typology of the mother and the wife: ‘I think that being a good mistress is very much the same thing as being a good wife, only in one case the emphasis is perhaps more in the kitchen, in the other, in the bedroom’ (102). Laski offers Pierre as the embodiment of the hypocrisy of the double standard, representing the male view that unbridled female sexuality is a threat to hegemonic masculinity, bearing out Sonya O. Rose’s observation of the fear that “sexualised femininity” might jeopardise the “traditional” gender order’ (Rose. 2003, 135). Pierre enjoys the benefits of unconventional morality at the same time as he advocates conventional morals as ‘a very necessary framework for society’; conventional morals clearly applying solely to women. Deborah’s refusal of this duality cuts her decisively adrift from gendered modes of behaviour as she irretrievably abandons the ‘mother type’ for the spoils of the enhanced talents of the ‘wife type’ (106–107). Deborah subdues her scruples at being handed from man to man, and stakes a claim to her place in the exchange system. With a shift in tone, Laski inserts the critical tipping point, mentioned earlier, as Deborah pauses to consider ‘whether she had translated a normal sense of loss at Graham’s absence into a false desire for more than he had ever given her’ (114). Yet instead of initiating a reconsideration of her situation, the need for self-justification grows less urgent as Deborah acquires a brand of personal agency that bears the hallmark of enterprising female assertiveness that is either judged unfeminine or more positively characterized as self-assured autonomy.

Deborah’s material needs are severely hampered, like most other people’s, by the extreme shortfalls of wartime. Andrea Adolphe’s observation that, more than sex, make-up or clothing, it is food that primarily fulfils the young woman’s desires, is highly credible (Adolphe. 2015, 395). The moments in the novel when Deborah experiences ‘the heights of bliss’ with attractive men are in restaurants and at parties rather than in ‘the solitary pleasures’ – a coy euphemism for sex – that must follow (111).

The hierarchy of desire is thus rearranged. While certain to incur disapproval from many quarters, Deborah's approach to satisfying the most pressing of appetites is worthy, if not of unqualified celebration, then at the very least of a recognition of its skill and effectiveness.

In this novel Laski is developing the satirical style she introduced in *Love on the Supertax* (1944), later refined in *Tory Heaven* (1948), in which she plays with inverted scenarios that oppose dominant models to dramatic effect. Its narrative of audacious resistance to gendered norms, while received with shock and disgust, opens eyes to realities judiciously obscured at a difficult moment in history. The figure of a woman driven by desire, sexual and material, who exploits feminine attributes to fulfil ostensibly transgressive needs is more favourably received in historical fiction than in a vehicle such as Laski's, published as British women were being exhorted to return to the domestic idyll. As Diana Wallace observes, 'it is often in the "escapist" historical fiction that we can see the strongest traces of female rebellion against the limitations of gender roles', although such female rebelliousness could only safely be countenanced with a cushion of at least a hundred years (Wallace. 2005, 79). The problems for the first readers of *To Bed with Grand Music*, a novel that relates contemporaneously a period of tumult, may be illustrated by a comparison between Laski's novel and Kathleen Winsor's hugely popular *Forever Amber* (1944). Both are works of the 1940s that reflect times of conflict; Amber's story set during the English Civil War and the Restoration, Deborah's in the Second World War. The hostile reviews of Laski's novel cited earlier demonstrate Louise M. Rosenblatt's theories that show how response involves interplay between reader, text and historical context, mediated more through the timing of the action than the date of publication (Rosenblatt. 1995). If, as Steven Dillon argues, *Forever Amber* 'could be read into a contemporary wartime setting', the response to the heroines, Amber and Deborah, would be influenced by the context of the novels and reactions to their stories would differ significantly (Dillon. 2015, 59). The perception of Amber's escapades 400 years earlier in a morally corrupt England contrasts with that of Deborah's passage through a similarly licentious period altogether too close to present circumstances.

While the two stories display similar themes, for Amber a journey that begins as romantic becomes one of desperate struggle, though tempered by the material rewards gained through her beauty and charm. Deborah's transgression is more of a challenge for the wartime reader since she is not seen to be facing the same hardships, nor do her actions seem as

excusable as Amber's. Deborah's considered choice is actively to seek the scarce assets of shortage-stricken London, consciously exploiting her sexual capital, while Amber is beset by events that, at times, are out of her control. Amber's lapses are viewed more sympathetically through the medium of the historical romance where sexual amorality/immorality both titillates and evokes sympathy in readers (and viewers of the film adaptation).<sup>10</sup> Her enduring, though ultimately doomed, love for the dashing cavalier stands in opposition to Deborah's perceived promiscuity and faithlessness. In a *Guardian* retrospective review in August 2002, Elaine Showalter suggests that female readers were 'awed by Amber's courage, daring and strength', and although this entails relinquishing her baby, sympathy is sustained for a woman trying to overcome adversity in 'a rebellion other women identified with'. Amber is more readily forgiven at a safe historical distance and, importantly and differently from Deborah, even giving up her child to the competent care of another woman is perceived as heroic sacrifice rather than neglect of maternal responsibilities. Showalter goes on to credit Amber, the 'adventurous, highly-sexed heroine', with raising the spirits of women in wartime Britain who, like her, were in a struggle to survive in material and sexual terms and would be happier to confront historical fiction than some of the painful realities before their eyes (Showalter. 2002). Deborah's story, even as it reveals a similarly enterprising spirit and audacious sexuality, runs the risk of being perceived as a betrayal of domestic and maternal imperatives, of the home-front spirit of self-sacrifice and most scandalously of all, of the secret pleasures taken by some women, to be as warmly embraced as Amber's.

The conclusive critical shift in Deborah's developmental journey sets her direction for the remainder of the war. Many of her affairs have been with men from another country in relationships destined to be conditional, but the affair with Anthony Naysmith, significantly an Englishman, plants ideas of permanency. The discovery that this relationship is set up by Madeleine and Anthony's mother with the aim of destroying his marriage is the tipping point thrusting Deborah decisively away from 'conventional morality'. Believing she might marry this lover, richer and perceived as in every way superior to Graham, Deborah is now the one betrayed by Madeleine and Anthony's mother who, Madeleine explains, 'comes of a generation when all men had mistresses but never took them to meet their mothers' (133). Anthony himself 'looked on Deborah as a member of a social class perfectly adequate for a mistress but in no way sufficient for a wife' (130). Deborah

is humiliated to have been so 'accurately and contemptuously judged' (135) yet, in the discomfort of this self-awareness Deborah is shown once more to be a victim of dominant values, subordinated to a patriarchal class system underpinned by the sexual double standard. Her response to this offence is pragmatic; she hardens her resolve to make this her 'last dabble in emotion', reflecting ruefully that 'Joe was wrong and Graham was right' (138–141).

Her status from here on reflects the eighteenth-century paradigm of 'infamous commerce'. She leaves behind the persona of the desiring woman to obtain the material rewards of scarce luxury items, superior food and entertaining company, although ostensibly not for cash. Interestingly, she finds some consolation in female friendship, but of a type in which 'each found the other immeasurably useful' (143). Adopting inverted gender roles, Deborah, Sugar Harman and Madeleine together become 'frankly predatory' as they enjoy the remainder of the war with a succession of 'gay and witty temporary soldiers and civil servants', including the Yanks famously 'oversexed, overpaid and over here' (191–192). Paul Ferris reports in *Sex and the British: A Twentieth-Century History*, that while a significant number of women found their own solutions to sexual and material deprivation this was bitterly resented by professional prostitutes who complained that "[t]here are too many gifted bloody amateurs here for a decent pro to get a living" (1993, 146). Remarkably, though, there is no sign of Deborah having to confront pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases in the years of her sojourn in London, suggesting that she was indeed no 'bloody amateur' and that she and her sexual partners were at least competent in contraception.<sup>11</sup>

Laski's representation of widespread changes in sexual attitudes in the wartime period anticipates Helen Gurley Brown's advice in *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962. Like Brown's controversial book, the representation of Deborah's story resists what Imelda Whelehan, in *The Feminist Bestseller: From 'Sex and the Single Girl' to 'Sex and the City'*, calls 'the normal economy of heterosexual relations at the time and foreground(s) women's right to pleasure, among other things'. Deborah's skilfully contrived path is comparable to that laid down in Brown's prototype self-help manual. Her detailed regimen 'explodes the myth of natural, effortless sex appeal, replacing it with the notion that femininity ... is an asset hard won' (Whelehan, 2005, 26–27). Deborah's consciously undertaken training programme shows the amount of effort needed to succeed. Although much of what Brown advocates seems to be focused on the ultimate destiny of monogamous 'settling down', Susan Douglas suggests that in

Brown's guide 'we see some startling stirrings of female liberation. And for her [Brown], liberation came through sex, by throwing the double standard out the window' (Douglas, in Whelehan, 2005, 29). While Deborah's challenge to the double standard makes far more profit in the material than the personal or political arena, her claim to the right to pleasure prefigures radical change in attitudes to female sexuality.

Laski's vacillating account of Deborah's plight, located in this interfeminist period 'between two waves' of agitation, encourages an interpretation that positions Deborah initially as victim but later as a woman with the new-found agency to allow her to access limited commodities by exploiting her sexual capital. At the same time as Deborah's narrative may evoke censure – even after 70 years – the portrayal of her psychological and emotional ambivalence gives a daring account of the conflicts faced by some women during the Second World War. Although Laski's daughter's comment that her mother was upset at the story of someone known to her would imply a judgemental stance, her status as public intellectual and innovative writer testifies to the profound interest in humanity that pervades the range of her fiction. Written before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the novel offers a tentative endorsement of a woman's freedom to express her sexuality, unlike Streatfeild's explicit condemnation of the damage the highly sexed Lena inflicts on herself and her children. Laski's novel presents the motivation for Deborah's licentiousness as not uncomplicatedly selfish; she is driven by unusual circumstances to wrench personal benefits from the grip of precarity. There are, nevertheless, moments when the pull of the nuclear family regains its force, and she feels the 'unexpected thrust' to return and 'find Graham beside her in the cottage, home and everything unchanged, Timmy an intimate acquaintance, a part of her mind and body'. But by now she knows 'there's no going back, no profit in examining motives, in totting up gain, nothing but going forward to gaiety, and loss and loss' (185).

Deborah's conflict illustrates how the potency of female conditioning during this 'abnormal pocket of time' persists, even as she forges a different way of being that is characterized by individualistic and carefully calculated actions. Her dissatisfaction with traditional feminine roles is the product of extraordinary conditions that introduce the unexpected opportunity to re-programme her femininity to acquire what was out of reach to most other women by exploiting the opportunities of a carnivalesque 'world turned upside down'. As a British housewife later insisted: "We were not really immoral, there was a war on"

(Costello. 1985, 23). Heedless of the potential for negative responses from her readers, Laski draws Deborah's character with a degree of compassion, aware that there were significant numbers of women who behaved similarly – including her real-life model. Rather than a 'female Rake's Progress', I suggest that Deborah's narrative is a female *Bildungsroman* in which a path to personal development is identifiable and desires fulfilled. Whether or not she provokes the disapproval or even the dislike of readers, ultimately Deborah is no longer a victim but a woman possessing agency, an individual who, without doubt, enjoys a 'good war' and is, in the end, more rewarded than punished. In this complex and ambivalent novel Laski lays down a marker for women's personal territory, prefiguring many of the impulses of second-wave feminism.

### Notes

- 1 A line from Vera Lynn's famous wartime song 'We'll Meet Again' (Ross Parker and Hughie Charles. 1939).
- 2 Laski later wrote *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1953), which was credited with being the first neo-Victorian novel and further evidence of her imaginative powers.
- 3 See Laura J. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 4 Published in February 2010. See <http://archive.westendextra.com/reviews/books/2010/feb/book-review-bed-grand-music-marghanita-laski> (accessed 15 May 2017).
- 5 See Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), in which Ahmed points to the imperative that falls upon women to behave in a way that will make other people happy. In wartime that would cover even broader demands of social behaviour and self-sacrifice.
- 6 Susan Isaacs and Cyril Burt were the UK pioneers of Child Guidance and offered advice on good parenting and progressive schooling from the 1920s onward.
- 7 See Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953).
- 8 Luce Irigaray in 1985 develops and expands the idea of 'masquerade' that Joan Rivière introduced in her psychological study published as 'Womanliness as Masquerade' in 1929.
- 9 The scenario previsions the 'Me Too' movement 70 years on when women

- began to voice their outrage about men's feelings of entitlement to sexual relations without consent.
- 10 *Forever Amber*, directed by Otto Preminger in 1947, featuring Linda Darnell, Cornell Wilde and Richard Greene, was a hugely popular movie made following the success of the novel.
- 11 The absence of any reference to contraception or pregnancy suggests that Deborah behaves as women of the 'sexual revolution' would behave; well-versed in contraceptive measures, later revolutionized by the Pill.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Supporting and Resisting the Myth of the Blitz

Ambiguity in Susan Ertz's *Anger in the Sky* (1943)

*Lola Serraf*

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification ...: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes. 1973, 142–143)

At a time when some historians suggest that the term myth better encapsulates the meaning accorded to the memory of the Blitz, little credit is given to wartime writers for their capacity to explore beyond the British government's overwhelming propaganda. This essay presents Susan Ertz's neglected novel *Anger in the Sky* (1943) as an exemplary case for a critical analysis of the representation of the Blitz in literature, highlighting how one woman writer negotiates the tension between the imposed public values of community and solidarity and the individual anxieties of the British people during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War evoked different responses from women writers from those after the Great War when, as Vera Brittain observed, 'the terrible barrier of knowledge by which war cut off the men who possessed it from the women who [...] remained in ignorance' collapses on a home front now served by more effective news communications (Brittain. 1933,

215). Phyllis Lassner observes that women's writing became more direct and immediate war recording was no longer dominated by a strong 'feminist anti-war' message, as many women became 'torn between their rejection of any form of state violence and anxiety about the destruction of their own nation' (Lassner. 1998, 27). Susan Ertz explores this ambiguity, criticizing American isolationism while questioning the legitimacy of war itself, in an ambivalent patriotic discourse.

Born to American parents in 1894, Susan Ertz moved back and forth between England and the United States during her childhood but chose to live in London when she was 18. She did canteen work for American soldiers in the First World War and married a soldier in the British Army in 1932. She was a prolific writer of novels, most of which are today out of print. After the war, along with those of many other women writers, Ertz's novels were ignored, although Hamilton Basso asserted in 1947 that Ertz was 'a better writer on almost every count than several of her contemporaries who have managed to acquire larger and noisier reputations' (Basso. 1947, 99). Yet even with the recent increased interest in Second World War women's writing, little attention has so far been given to her work. As Miriam L. Berg rightly says, the author has been 'unjustly neglected' despite Ertz's ability realistically to depict a social setting at a specific moment in history (Berg. 1980, 5). Focusing on the transformations taking place in British society in the inter-feminist period between the wars and during the Second World War, Ertz was particularly interested in the tension between private feelings and social responsibility. In most of her novels, characters face 'the conflict between unfaithfulness to a moral obligation and personal conscience' (6). Berg claims that 'one of Ertz's primary assets is her ability to portray the ideals that engender the emancipation of women, nonconformity, freedom of thought, intellectual honesty, and the dignity of the individual' (6).

Susan Ertz was an innovative writer who created in *Anger in the Sky* strong, independent female characters as critically thinking participants in their times. Ertz shows a clear awareness of the constructed nature of the 'Blitz spirit' that emerged as the country faced the joint threat of invasion and devastating air raids. This notion, as argued by Angus Calder in *The Myth of The Blitz* (1991), promoted solidarity, patriotism and unshakeable high morale. However, as Calder suggests, the idea of a 'People's War' was largely the result of insistent government propaganda delivered through Winston Churchill's speeches, BBC radio broadcasts, newspapers, posters, films, and cinema newsreels. Calder makes the case for a critical rethinking of our collective memory of the Blitz, stating

that we have underestimated ‘how frightening and confusing the period from April 1940 through to June 1941 was for the British people’, since ‘the myth stands in our way, asserting itself, abiding no questions’ (1991, 18). By analysing political speeches and Mass Observation reports he attempts to deconstruct the image of a wholly patriotic country united in adversity, concluding that the literature of the time offers very little material for us to understand individual experience during the Blitz. Calder asserts that ‘the writer, who can (most can’t) step outside conventional discourses and paradigms, is in a position to defy the myth’s status as an adequate and convincing account of human feeling and behaviour’, yet he also states that very few writers ‘work[ed] outside the myth’s paradigm’, with the notable exception of poets like Louis MacNeice who dared to ‘express with both eloquence and caution the challenge and hope involved for citizens as they tried to order their war experiences’ (1991, 143–144).

Similarly, Mark Rawlinson suggests that much British wartime writing is ‘related to the negation of apocalyptic projections’, and participates in the construction of a mythical national memory in the way it ‘mobilises the manpower and morale on which the sovereignty of the country depends’ (Rawlinson. 2000, 71–72). Rawlinson sees war in much of 1940s fiction depicted as an enriching spiritual experience through which people come to bond with each other; thus, the enemy or the wounded body is absent from texts narrating the Blitz. Other studies on women’s war writing have identified writers as active participants in the larger construction of a mythical ‘Blitz spirit’. According to Jenny Hartley in her pioneer study *Millions Like Us* (1997), popular novels written at the time mainly show ‘typical Blitz-fiction characteristics’ and adopt a ‘positive approach’ to them (21). She refers to narratives dominated by the figure of the powerful working-class matriarch who fearlessly participates in the war effort, featuring such characters as Mrs Barton in Phyllis Bottome’s *London Pride* (1941) and ‘Ma’ in Eileen Marsh’s *We Lived in London* (1942). Hartley observes how, in Jane Nicholson’s *Shelter* (1941), the bombings are seen to bring about positive change where ‘the Blitz kills but is also the scene of fresh life, new friendship and above all community’ (Hartley. 1997, 21). However, in *British Literature of the Blitz* (2009), Kristine Miller puts forward radically different arguments from those of Calder, Rawlinson and Hartley. She contends that the literature of the Blitz functions not as ‘a coherent collective defence of the war but as an expression of imaginative freedom to disagree about the People’s War’. To Miller, representations of the Blitz ‘in both literary

and popular genres expose the conflict between social classes and within gender relations that underwrote and undercut the polished rhetoric of the People's War'. In her view Blitz narratives fulfilled a 'basic cultural need to imagine the paradox of a unified nation composed of individuals often at odds with one another' (Miller. 2009, 11).

Set in England at that moment in time, *Anger in the Sky* (1943) is Ertz's only 'Blitz novel'. Partly located in the country, partly in London, it tells the story of Mrs Anstruther, whose large Elizabethan house, the ancestral home of the Anstruthers, is 'filled to capacity with a collection of fifty to sixty evacuees, bombed-out friends and relatives' (Hartley. 1997, 58). Building intricate relations between the many characters, the novel depicts the war as an ambivalent period where people are torn between blindly supporting their country's actions and questioning the rationale of the war itself. Nevertheless, the novel was generally, and in my view mistakenly, considered to be a propaganda novel. After its publication for instance, E. Drew, writing in *The Saturday Review*, stated: 'It is a book full of encouragement and goodwill and good feeling ... it seems a little unduly hopeful about the good effects which will result from the war' (Drew. 1943, 24). In the *Atlantic Monthly*, critics were suspicious of the utopian England Ertz appears to describe: 'The strength of this story lies in its warm-blooded picture of that classless community which England has (temporarily?) become in its own defence' (quoted in Robert Calder. 2004, 201). Calder made it one of the case studies in his book *Beware the British Serpent: The Role of Writers in British Propaganda in the US, 1939-1945*, in which he discusses the government's efforts to mobilize authors for supporting the war in Britain and for making the case for US intervention, particularly through the creation of the Authors' Planning Committee in 1939 (47). This essay contends that these readings are incomplete and obscure another dimension to the novel which offers a more ambivalent and daring depiction of the People's War. As a dual citizen of Great Britain and America, married to a British soldier, Susan Ertz presents us with a narrative that raises serious questions on ideas of patriotism, the sense of duty to the nation and its imperialist past, and the fundamental imperative that British values must be defended, exposing the problems that arise as soon as these are contested.

*Anger in the Sky* may also be placed in the group of 'village novels' published during the war by virtue of its rural setting, far from the terror of bombs falling every night on the cities. Along with such novels as *The Oaken Heart* (1941) by Margery Allingham and *The Castle on the Hill* (1942) by Elizabeth Goudge, Ertz's novel is accommodated in the

genre of countryside fiction greatly appreciated by mainly working- and middle-class readerships in the 1940s. Many authors chose to remove their narratives from the urban landscape and focus on smaller settings where very little seems to happen and not much disturbs the peace of the quiet English countryside. In wartime, this resurgence of rural literature is linked to another myth, the myth of pastoral England, a country whose name ‘itself rings with the mythologizing precepts of Arcadia, the bucolic, and with a palpable sense of a lost Golden Age’ (Rhowbotham. 2013, para. 4). Phyllis Lassner observes that these novels convey strong images of sustained ‘domestic traditions and community stability’ (1998, 130). Calm and beautiful, the spacious fields and comforting harmony of English country cottages form the backdrop to a literature of escapism for readers suffering the Blitz. In her memoir *Trumpet Voluntary* Gladys Bronwyn Stern recalls; ‘That-Village-in-Wartime novel [was] my happiest form of escape fiction ... very little sob-stuff, a little more snob-stuff, and perhaps rather too much musing dialogue’ (Stern. 1944, 70–71). Yet Ertz’s village novel’s ‘relative safety and insularity’ (Lassner. 1998, 130) cannot be understood as completely detached from the conflict; rather, it needs to be approached as a war novel in much the same way as Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* (1948) is considered. As Kate McLoughlin argues in *Authoring War* the ‘pastoral’ is ‘in many instances’, ‘founded on, or enabled by war’ (2011, 97). Recalling Paul Fussell’s translation of the classical tag ‘*Et in Arcadia ergo*’, ‘Even in Arcadia I, Death, hold sway’ (Fussell. 1975, 245–246), McLoughlin states that ‘intrusion and interaction ... characterize the relationship between the bucolic and the bellicose’ as ‘war is immanent in the rural, insofar as its sounds may penetrate the quietude at any moment’ (2011, 98). Although *Anger in the Sky* is set largely in a country area where its characters are relatively safe, it holds a stronger politically dissenting message than would typically be associated with the escapism of the rural novel. Geographically removed from the direct zone of conflict, the war nevertheless intrudes into the life of Mrs Anstruther and those around her.

As already stated, the novel has so far been little studied, but the two most significant analyses of it as an authentic war novel present radically opposed views. On the one hand, Jenny Hartley writes that the novel symbolizes the unity of the British people during the war, an illustration of the Blitz spirit. In *Millions Like Us*, she refers to ‘the motif of the open house’ in female wartime literature as one that ‘kept pace with the ideals of “home-made socialism”’. To Hartley, ‘the open house is the emblem of the nation’s adaptation to war’, as ‘the

values it exemplifies are those of hospitality, tolerance and community' (Hartley. 1997, 54). She sees recurring images of strong women making difficult decisions in welcoming those in need as representing a deep feeling of solidarity between the inhabitants of the countryside and the destitute, bombed-out families of the cities. On the other hand, Phyllis Lassner highlights (albeit only briefly) how women writers like Ertz subvert the rural novel genre using 'the unlikely setting of the "static" village and its country houses to conduct heated debates about war aims and their connection to domestic social relations and cultural identity'. Lassner points to the powerful social messages of the novel, particularly relating to issues of 'class exclusions and snobbery' (1998, 133–134). These opposing analyses of the novel epitomize the ambivalence that characterizes women writers' wartime works. Many show equivocality towards political and social issues, torn between supporting and challenging conventional public discourses. I seek here to highlight the treatment of the specific issue of patriotism in *Anger in the Sky*, first focusing on the author's exploration of the legitimacy and the superficiality of the People's War rhetoric in the novel, before moving on to the tension between patriotic, pro-war opinions and the pacifist discourses that run through the novel.

A key expression that appears repeatedly in accounts of the Blitz published before late twentieth-century reassessments is 'high morale'. The collective memory of the period is centred on the idea that, during the Blitz, British citizens remained calm, even cheerful, in the face of nightly aerial bombardment. The impression is one of people who never lost faith in the government and in the military and bravely carried out their daily tasks without fail every morning after the air raids. The 1940 propaganda films *London Can Take It!* and *Britain Can Take It!* (both produced by the Ministry of Information and directed by Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt), which show people walking cheerfully past bombed-out houses, provide an example of the means through which the government spread moral obligations of courage and solidarity. In a BBC speech in April 1941, 'Westward, Look, The Land is Bright', Churchill stated that 'it is where the ordeal of the men, women and children has been most severe' that he found their morale 'most high and splendid', adding that he felt 'encompassed by an exaltation of spirit' and 'joyous serenity'. Writing in the early postwar period, Richard M. Titmuss suggests in *Problems of Social Policy* that 'there was no panic, no rush to safety' during the air raids, and morale was sustained throughout the eight months of the blitz (Titmuss. 1950, 343). Angus Calder, in his 1969

study *The People's War*, also claims that morale 'did not collapse', and talks about those brave civilians who 'preferred to stay', 'night by night', setting 'an example of calm and courage which others, in their turn, felt constrained to follow' (Calder. 1969, 166–167). People were apparently 'taking it' – a phrase that in 1955 Terence O'Brien judged 'reflected the reality of the situation' (O'Brien. 1955, 401) – and carrying out their daily tasks in defiantly joyful mood.

The driving force behind keeping people's spirits high during the blitz lay above all in fostering a sense of belonging to a nation. Titmuss, who goes so far as to claim that 'the mental health of the nation improved' during the war, attributes this to a universal will to work under the stress of national necessity (quoted in Jones et al. 2004, 463). The idea that all civilians were united in the fight against the enemy, against fascism and against Hitler was an essential component of what is regarded today as 'Blitz culture'. The values of essential 'Britishness' were suddenly amplified in every social setting. Reports of the disasters of the war, minimizing the number of deaths and the defeats, were combined with and moderated by a focus on the cultural values of solidarity and a sense of nationhood. This idea is at the core of what Michael Billig describes as 'banal nationalism'; national identity anchored in daily routine, recreated and asserted in the customs and traditions of a community. 'Nationhood provides a continual background for [...] political discourses, for cultural products, and even for the structuring of newspapers. In so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations' (Billig. 1995, 8).

Against this background, *Anger in the Sky* offers different perspectives on the time, questioning the unity of attitude of the nation's citizenry. The ambivalence of the novel's political positioning is reflected in the dialectical opposition of pairs of characters. The strongest example of this is found in the attitudes of the owner of the country house, Mrs Anstruther, compared to those of the Londoner, Sibyl Ellsworth. Mrs Ellsworth is an elderly lady living in London who appears to represent fanatically the spirit of high morale; her mind is set on remaining defiantly in her apartment, even as she watches the destruction of neighbouring buildings. The way she explains the absence of any desire to escape the Blitz illustrates the heroic image of the stoic British citizen, convinced of the nation's invincibility: "London is my home", she says "and I mean to die in it, if I can. ... We decided, once and for all, not to uproot ourselves. If this building is hit, *tant pis*" (*Anger*, 176). She typifies, or rather parodies, the image of the courageous Londoner who

will not surrender to feelings of fear. During a particularly violent raid, this frail little woman maintains that “panic is such a ghastly, pitiable thing, far, far worse than death. Fear is worse than death. I made up my mind not to feel fear, and, above all, not to cling to life. Here I stay. If they want me, here I am” (177).

Sibyl Ellsworth’s views on Britishness in *Anger in the Sky* sit well within Churchill’s propaganda framework, and reinforce George Orwell’s idea of ‘positive patriotism’<sup>2</sup> as she narrates her newly found love for her nation – and all the cultural and social heritage attached to it – which must be defended come what may. She proclaims:

‘I began to love all the things I’d belittled before. Our patience, our love of fairness, our steady progress towards equity and justice, our love of freedom – even when it deteriorates into mere *laissez-faire* – above all, our good humour. I fell in love with our great men and began to study some of them with a new interest – Shakespeare, Milton, Baxter.’ (183)

Mrs Ellsworth’s British pride enables her, perversely, to enjoy the bombings and even to go so far as to pity the countries that will never get to experience the Blitz.

‘When the bombings began in earnest I felt a kind of exaltation because my love was being so much more than justified. When I saw that these people were not going to be broken, nor their spirit quenched, it was the best moment of my life. It was worth having lived for. ... I’m almost sorry for other countries that have not had to endure this extremity of danger and suffering. ... I’m glad I’m here; here in London, here in this flat. I wouldn’t be anywhere else for the world.’ (184)

At first glance, when considering Mrs Ellsworth, one would think that Ertz’s characterization certainly contributes to wider political and social propaganda promoting the invincibility of and support owed to the nation, in line with Jenny Hartley’s categorization of the book as part of a ‘literature of citizenship’ (1997, 15). However, Sibyl Ellsworth is not a character with whom the reader would necessarily sympathize. She is a caricature of English jingoism. Her comments lack credibility and her rhetorical declarations remind us of Churchill’s carefully scripted speeches. The solemn tone and the repetitions in that last sentence, ‘I’m glad I’m *here*; *here* in London, *here* in this flat’, sound unnatural to the man she is addressing who stares at her with disbelief before running to take cover from falling bombs. Sybil is a character purposely exaggerated to lead the reader to question her sincerity. She is the illusory reflection of the myth she supports.



Susan Ertz's awareness of Britain's long tradition of national myths, legends, and the pervasive sense of heroism is illustrated in the novel in the creation of a community around specific values. Following Roland Barthes's work *Mythologies* (1973), and Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991), Patrick Wright revisits the definition of myth in *On Living in an Old Country* (2009). He points out that in times of peace people's everyday lives offer them little connection with these myths, denying the possibility of gathering around national symbols. This results in a nostalgia focused in 'objects and places that offer the possibility of outlet for people's "subjective surplus"', that is, the 'subjective experience which finds no realisation in the constrained and rationalized activities of much modern everyday life' (2009, 23). In times of war however, the 'old country' is raised on a pedestal constantly looking back to the glorious past of a precious nation. The national myths of a country become more popular than ever as they legitimate war on a common enemy. Thus, while the nation is threatened, 'personal actions can count in a different way; routine can have a greater sense of meaning and necessity'. In the case of the Blitz, collective memory supports a myth of 'British or English moral pre-eminence, buttressed by British unity'; an idea personified in Mrs Ellsworth (Wright. 2009, 24). Staying put in her flat, quoting Shakespeare, suddenly takes on for her a much more important meaning of resistance, an emotive meaning that is not based objectively on any rational argument for promoting the war effort.

In contrast to the caricature of Mrs Ellsworth, a closer look at the novel's main character, Mrs Ruth Anstruther, reveals Ertz's grasp of the constructed nature of the impression of British good spirits and new-found patriotism and challenges the legitimacy of the People's War rhetoric. Mrs Anstruther, physically removed from the war in a small village but very involved in the larger political and social debates around it, shows fear and doubt; attitudes that historians who attempt to debunk the myth of the Blitz say were more common than generally assumed. Ruth Anstruther mistrusts the superficiality of the Blitz spirit – a position supported later in the twentieth century by historians and commentators, who argue that the image of a nation united in adversity and resisting hardship was almost entirely constructed by the political propaganda of the late 1930s and 1940s. In *Anger in the Sky*, 'Mrs A.' is, for example, aware of Churchill's tendency to turn defeats into victories and of his extraordinary capacity to transform a catastrophic situation like that of Dunkirk into the country's 'finest hour'. She is fed up with 'reticence, stubbornness and understatement', as she thinks 'they're the very things that might lose us

the war'. She reflects on the contrived and largely unjustified 'belief in British invincibility'<sup>3</sup> that shelters her peers: 'We underrate our enemies so, England might well emblazon on her coat of arms, "the reports are greatly exaggerated". It seems to sum up the national temper' (117).

How, Mrs A wondered, do such gentle spirits as Miss Lubbock and her mother survive wars? [...] Miss Lubbock was as certain as most of her kind that Britain could not lose the war. The ups and downs of the struggle meanwhile did not alarm her. The belief in British invincibility sheltered her and her mother and millions like them, like a great iron umbrella. (100)

Mrs Anstruther is irritated rather than amused by the constant 'Blitz humour' that appears in the form of jokes or cartoons in newspapers and in daily life. In his article 'The Death of British Humour' in the *Daily Mail*, Leo McKinstry (2006) reports that 'when the Luftwaffe was laying waste to large swathes of urban Britain', the spirit of the Blitz 'was based on the determination to "keep smiling through", even in the face of terrible adversity'. As Angus Calder records:

Shops became a favourite symbol of defiance. Big and small, they had their windows blown out. The West End stores would erect painted wooden fronts with only tiny panes of glass to replace them; the little fruiterers and grocers would often do without any glass at all. The impromptu signs became favourite blitz jokes. 'MORE OPEN THAN USUAL' was a common one. 'BLAST!' was the most laconic. One pub advertised, 'OUR WINDOWS ARE GONE BUT OUR SPIRITS ARE EXCELLENT. COME IN AND TRY THEM'. (1969, 174)

Ruth Anstruther expresses her misgivings about the ubiquitous jokes, which for her are a smokescreen to avoid serious reflection on Britain's war aims and strategy and on the disastrous consequences of the conflict to the home front. The narrative makes use of letters to her husband Oliver, posted in Cairo, to air some private, inexpressible doubts about such characteristic British humour:

I wonder if we aren't suffering from too great a sense of humour. The ability to see the comic side of everything leads to the inability to see the serious side of anything. Though I would confess it to no-one but you, I begin to weary a little of the humour of the cockneys after the raid, and though it is as a humour that brings tears to the eyes, I would welcome rage, indignation in its place. (*Anger*, 139)

Mrs Anstruther's suspicion of people like Sibyl Ellsworth, gives voice to a fear that this sudden resurgence of British pride in many citizens

bears a strong resemblance to, on the one hand, a cowardly denial of reality and on the other, simple arrogance. Putting her surroundings into perspective she observes that, during a conflict, war allows civilians to be heroes, and that some people actually rejoice in the egotistical pleasure of feeling useful:

A sort of pride seemed to uphold them; pride in their ability to ‘take it’, pride in the fact that they were ‘in the news’, were a part of the war front and were fighting back. They had been taken out of their normal grooves, out of themselves, and endless would be the stories exchanged, the tales handed on from one to another, the deeds of bravery or of comedy retailed. (162)

The astute representation of the opposing attitudes of these two women – the middle-aged country house owner, Mrs Anstruther, and the elderly Londoner, Mrs Ellsworth – reflects Ertz’s ability to see beyond the imposed myth of the People’s War and underscores the discrepancy between what people felt they ought to think and the expression of doubts and fears to their intimates.

On the face of it, *Anger in the Sky* appears to accept the necessity of war and the rightness of joining the fight for victory. Mrs Anstruther’s three children actively participate in the war effort, and she willingly opens her house to evacuees. Her son Lennox is determined to prove this war is necessary and that everyone who can put two and two together should be able to see the need to be involved in it. In a heated debate with his American friend Elliott Tully, who does not see the conflict in the same way as he does, Lennox states:

If there was ever a war for freedom, this is it, and you believe in freedom. If we should lose this war – and we may lose it; we’re fighting alone, and under every conceivable disadvantage – if we lose it, everything is lost. Civilisation will get a setback it may not recover from for centuries. (85)

This idea is reinforced by attacks on American isolationism. As Robert Calder notes, the *New York Times* suggested that one objective of Ertz’s novel was to ‘help unbombed Americans to understand the British point of view’, since an ‘American can only be impressed and sobered by the universality of war in England, [and] the apparent determination of most Britons’ (quoted in Robert Calder. 2004, 201). In *Anger in the Sky*, Viola, a young English woman and volunteer nurse in London, falls in love with the American non-interventionist, Elliott Tully. He is in love with her, yet she rejects him at first on the grounds of his lack of compassion for her people:

If you keep aloof, aloof from the war and from the world after the war, I don't see how we, the peoples who are fighting Nazism, and you who didn't fight it, can ever come together. Or not for a hundred years. Even if I were very much in love with you ... I don't think I'd marry you as things are. ... I'd always have to avoid thinking, 'My people died for the things we both cared for; yours made armaments and sent supplies.'  
(293–294)

Viola's patriotism and conviction that everything possible needs to be done to help Britain fight the enemy surpasses her own feelings, emphasizing the key wartime precedence of the collective over the personal. The imposed moral obligation to fight for victory overrides her individuality and every choice she makes is based on a judgement of whether it will contribute to the war effort.

While these specific aspects of the novel appear to support Churchill's war policy, the idea that Susan Ertz is a mere propagandist in the service of the People's War rhetoric is undermined by her representation of dissenting views. Bearing in mind she was herself half-American, one cannot deny that Ertz puts well-reasoned criticism of Britain's war aims into the voices of her characters. While sympathy is due to Viola, who rejects her lover for not wanting his country to join the war, Ertz allows Elliott Tulley, not only an American isolationist but also a man who scorns England's diplomatic strategy, the space to articulate a position worth quoting at length:

I am just old enough to remember the last war. You wanted us to come in and help – naturally – things were getting pretty hot for you and the French, and you were pretty near the end of your tether. Well, we came and we fought and we helped to win this war. Then we went home again without getting – or it seemed that way to us – so much as a thank you. ... Then, as soon as this war came in sight we knew it would begin all over again. We guessed you'd work hard to try to make the war look like a holy crusade – well, all right, maybe it is; we won't argue about that – and start telling us what we ought to do. So we got on the defensive right away. ... And there's something to be said from our point of view. You let Europe get into a hell of a mess – and after all, Europe's your affair, not ours – and then as soon as you're in a tight spot you turn to us and say you're fighting for freedom and democracy. 'Oh, yeah?' we say? 'Maybe you are, but if you care such a hell of a lot for them why didn't you do something about it sooner.' You've got a huge, vulnerable empire, and as soon as some big bully comes along wanting a slice of it you think we ought to take off our coats and help to lick him. (91–92)

Elliot is an intelligent, moral young man who puts forward cogent arguments while his opponent's emotive reaction is to leave the room, 'abruptly saying good night' (94). Yet her feelings remain firm in the conviction that she could not rest easy in the knowledge that her people had died while his 'made armaments and sent supplies', giving rise to a deep resentment felt by other rational citizens (294).

Discussing the issue of American isolationism also allows Ertz's narrative to challenge the British Empire's conduct. The American non-interventionist in the novel positions the conflict as an Imperialist war and suggests that Britain should accept her responsibilities after 'sprawl[ing] all over the globe' (93). Although the British characters feel uneasy at the mention of the colonies, they acknowledge only that "'we've been guilty of a bit of banditry in the past. [...]"', which they excuse as "'past history, and if we've sinned we've suffered for our sins. ... And by and large we've been civilizers rather than exploiters'" (87). Leaving aside the imperialist argument, however, Mrs Anstruther herself represents the scepticism and distaste for the established wartime discourse felt by someone who has lived through the First World War and is baffled by the vision of Western society repeating the same tragic scenario. She ponders the absurdity of the conflict: 'There are limits to human folly. After this, people will regard wars as scientists regard plagues. They'll use their brains to make war on war' (23): and 'War, war ... is this, she thought, what all man's ingenuity has come to ... hunted and being hunted?' (30). To Mrs Anstruther, war leaders are knowingly sanctioning murder; 'war is dreadful because it is *willed*. War is the evil in man coming to the top like scum on a pot of boiling jam' (141). Unlike Mrs Ellsworth, who is glad to be in London, Mrs Anstruther feels she is a helpless spectator to the destruction of humanity and condemns it in the strongest terms: 'Call it sacrifice or call it privilege to give your life for your country, look at it as you will; the end is the same. The end is the tragic and premature return to clay of those who have not yet lived' (30).

In *The Myth of the Blitz* Angus Calder states that any 'literate, thinking person' was confronted with a 'moral problem' during the war; 'day by day you either believed the evolving myth (which showed at each stage how Britain was invincible), or you relapsed into scepticism and fears', but when you recovered from such an aberration, the myth had already 'moved ahead to help you onwards' (Calder. 1991, 120). This implies an irreconcilable dilemma for people who have feelings that do not necessarily reflect the national norm. Mrs Anstruther's character embodies this moral problem; often quoting Wilfred Owen's poems

describing the horrors of the previous war, she is a strong, independent-minded woman who seems at a loss as to which principled behaviours to adopt. A pacifist at heart, she participates in the war as much as she can, even if she must sometimes consciously force herself to do so.

This conflict becomes still more apparent as Ertz confronts issues of social class. Mrs Anstruther opens her large country house to people in need, just as the privileged classes were said to do willingly in the broadcasts and newspapers of the time, yet she is uneasy mixing with the lower classes. In this way the myth of the English village as a true community and haven is challenged. The people who live in the large house belong 'to an exclusive and self-conscious society which, possessing both humiliations and advantages, demanded from its members something special in the way of uprightness, simplicity and courage' (*Anger*, 8). Mrs Anstruther feels morally obliged to welcome refugees rather than desiring them, in the way that the privileged, middle-class citizen struggles to live up to the expectations set by the People's War agenda. She experiences difficulties confronting the 'outside world', where, during the war, she is at an unfamiliar 'disadvantage' (9) and appears rather more prejudiced against the lower classes than Churchill's speeches suggest the British middle and upper classes were. In the village, newly arrived evacuated women mock her clichéd speech, and she herself wonders if she sounds 'hypocritical' when she explains that 'affection and mutual respect can bring us together whatever our lives may happen to be'. The response to that is sharp-tongued but perceptive: 'all the same, you sticks to your kind of folks and we sticks to ours [...] your kind don't think our kind is good enough, not good enough to be friends with' (29). Nevertheless, Mrs Anstruther is prepared to lead the effort and especially to welcome the children, though often 'feeling a sense of guilt, as if it were wrong to take so much pleasure in anything that was the result of war' (32). Dealing with one difficult boy, Percy, reassures her that this is indeed a tough war job. She understands her privileged status and puts up with the manageable disruption with equanimity. Guilt and awareness of privilege are symptomatic of the conflicted situations thrown up by war.

Susan Ertz's multifaceted novel presents the reader with an ambivalent discourse, which subverts at the same time as it supports the rhetoric of the Myth of the Blitz. The novel, while still too easily overlooked, may be slotted into the category that Elizabeth Bowen claimed as 'resistance writing'. Bowen believed that 'all wartime writing' is in effect 'resistance writing' – regardless of the political opinions put forward in texts – since

it is personal life putting up ‘its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it – war’ (1945, 97). It is in this context that Ertz’s novel succeeds. It articulates the uncertainty of feeling across the population in a way that challenges notions of British historic continuity and invincibility. Ertz refuses to be trapped within conventional perceptions, daring to step outside the Myth’s paradigms. While the novel ends with the romantic reconciliation of the young Englishwoman and the American dissenter – emblematic of the entry of the USA into the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese – it is much more than a testament to British citizens during the country’s ‘finest hour’. Crucially it represents a difficult equivocality in fiction, more widely sensed than is easily acknowledged, about that period. Ultimately, in engaging with competing discourses Ertz’s novel exposes the vacillation many thinking people experienced between private feelings and the imperatives of wartime propaganda that pervaded the public arena.

### Notes

- 1 This essay is based on a more detailed analysis carried out in the author’s unpublished PhD thesis: Lola Serraf, ‘Writing the “People’s War”: Evaluating the Myth of the Blitz in British Women’s Fiction of the Second World War’ (2018), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
- 2 Underlining the necessity to see the distinction between the negative forces of nationalism and the positive potential of patriotism, Orwell argued in 1941 that ‘a sense of collective identity is deep-rooted to the point of inextricability’: Chris Townsend, ‘Orwell on Patriotism’, in *The King’s Review*, 17 October. Retrieved from: <http://kingsreview.co.uk/orwell-on-patriotism/> (accessed 18 March 2016, para. 5).
- 3 Philippe Chassaing explains how this myth can be dated back to the sixteenth century when, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the Spanish Armada led by Philip II in 1588 was defeated after just a few battles. This episode, long considered one of England’s greatest military achievements, founded the myth of ‘British invincibility’ in the face of any threat of invasion, encouraging and exaggerating a sense of national pride: Philippe Chassaing, ‘L’Angleterre, ennemie héréditaire?’ *Revue historique des armées*, vol. 264, 2011, 5.

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## CHAPTER SIX

# The Ambivalence of Testimony in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948)

*Ana Ashraf*

'He was determined to leave by the roof,' she stated. 'He had the idea that someone he did not name to me had followed us back and was in the street waiting to make trouble ... I imagine that either he did not wish to give the person the satisfaction of an interview, or that he thought a quarrel outside my door might make embarrassments for me ... Yes, I should agree in calling it the decision of a man in an excitable state' ... She left the coroner's court with one kind of reputation, that of being a good witness. (*HoD*, 302–305)

In this passage at the end of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948), Stella Rodney is called a 'good witness'. Describing her as such, the narrative draws attention to the ambivalent nature of testimony. Far from being an isolated instance, this comment and the court scene it reflects are emblematic of the treatment of testimony and witnessing throughout the novel. Exploration of such paradoxical treatment leads to a better understanding of how, within the early postwar milieu, narratives of testimony challenged the dominant war narratives of patriotism, heroism and the ideological front that lends war its legitimacy. This ambivalence reflects what Allan Hepburn calls the 'intermodern narrative mode of the trial' (Bluemel, 2011, 13). With this in mind, Stella's testimony is analysed alongside Bowen's representation of events in the novel to evaluate the

significance of gendered time and the use of metafictionality, all of which emphasize the self-reflexive nature of the novel's representation of the function of testimony in literature.

Located in the bleak atmosphere of London after the Blitz, *The Heat of the Day* has been acclaimed by many critics and commentators for its singular portrayal of the war and its complex effects. For Neil Corcoran, 'it is an unillusioned treatment of the relationship between tiny human stories and the vast wreckage that is the public story between 1942 and 1944' (Corcoran. 2004, 172). Bowen's biographer, Hermione Lee, refers to it as 'a woman's view of a male world of Intelligence', quoting Phyllis Lassner's description of the novel as 'a subversion of the traditional spy novel' (Lee. 1999, 168). Victoria Coulson suggests that *The Heat of the Day* 'develop[s] a psychological analysis of war as a manifestation of internal conflict, in the form of civil war or treachery from within the state' (quoted in Poole. 2009, 378). Jessica Gildersleeve calls it a work representative of the 'narrative responsibilities of the survivor', suggesting that '[Bowen's] work is most importantly seen as an example of the inextricability of twentieth-century literature, suffering, and bearing witness' (Gildersleeve. 2014, 2). These critical comments, while pointing to the many interpretations attached to the novel, all suggest that *The Heat of the Day* bears witness, in diverse and complex ways, to the devastation of the Second World War with a particular focus on the middle years of a war that was not certain to be won. In this essay, the novel's self-conscious and enigmatic treatment of the very act of testimony, and the question of the possibility of bearing objective witness, are both subjected to a close scrutiny that adds to the wide-ranging commentaries mentioned above. In order to clarify the nature of witnessing within a literary text, I am guided particularly by the work of Jacques Derrida in *Fiction and Testimony* (Blanchot et al. 2001) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Crises of Witnessing* (Felman and Laub. 1992).

The essay examines two specific dimensions of testimony: first, the literal testimony of the main protagonist, and second, a more equivocal set of testimonies within the narrative. It analyses the juxtaposition of Stella's evidence in court, referred to in the fragment quoted above, and the testimony within the text delivered through the use of time, event and metafictionality. In other words, it demonstrates how the novel offers alternative testimonies through a complex depiction of time and timelessness, an undermining of the ontological status of 'happenings' or 'events', and a self-reflexive sense of fictionality. It addresses the way the novel re-evaluates the interrelation of political and personal spheres

of experience and examines how experimentation in aesthetic form foregrounds the ambivalence hidden in the process of witnessing. It considers, too, how a heightened sense of fictionality within the text problematizes the ultimate objective of testimony.

*The Heat of the Day* presents a love triangle between Stella Rodney, Robert Kelway and Robert Harrison whose relationships are tied up with the political atmosphere and events of the Second World War. The novel combines the elements of the traditional spy novel and the classic romance plot, to represent the 'woman's view of a male world of Intelligence' that Hermione Lee has described (1999, 168). Stella, the principal protagonist, is a middle-aged, divorced and independent woman who lost her two brothers during the First World War. Her age, class and nationality signal the ambivalent way in which the concept of 'middleness' is connected to historical temporality. As Claire Seiler observes, 'the idea of the middle came to inform the novel's mid-war setting and the characterization of Stella as an upper-middle-class, middle-aged woman of vague nationality' (Seiler, 2017, 127). The heightened sense of 'middleness' attached to Stella is representative of the mid-century generation – a generation situated historically between two world wars. Just as the 'lost generation' was the epitome of damaged youth during the Great War, the great loss of the Second World War is characterized in Stella's 'suspension, indecision, and uncertainty' (132). Her past is heavily laden with the sacrifice of her brothers in the First World War, and her present looks towards a bleak future as her son, Roderick, receives military training to equip him for war. Through her, *The Heat of the Day* represents the complexity of internal and external, private and public conflicts of war.

Stella's lover Robert Kelway, a man in his late thirties, is to remain in London for the rest of the war after being wounded in the Battle of Dunkirk in June 1940. In an attempt to repair his damaged sense of self, he seeks refuge in Fascist ideology and becomes a German spy. Robert Harrison, Kelway's counterpart in more ways than one, is a British spy who pressures Stella to choose between them, threatening to give away Kelway's spying activities to the authorities if she rejects Harrison's love. On the surface, Robert Harrison and Robert Kelway represent the binary opposition between 'us' and 'them': the counter-spy fighting for his country and the German spy fighting against his own country. However, throughout the novel, the dualism of 'us' and 'them' is undermined. Hermione Lee claims that Kelway upsets the traditional opposition of traitor and enemy that 'makes the novel's whole treatment of treachery

peculiarly unstable and strange' (Lee. 1999, 173). Robert Kelway is from an upper-middle-class family but he rebels against the conservative, lethargic social set-up of his own class. His family home, tellingly named Holme Dene in the Home Counties, is symptomatic of the political oppression for which he struggles to find an alternative. According to John Coates, it is the house in its 'tight, self-justifying, suspicious and yet impermanent organism "suspended in the middle of nothing", [that] supplies the background to Robert's tragedy' (Coates. 1987, 496–497). Lee makes a similar point suggesting that the house must stand as an 'aesthetic satire', whereby '[h]is father's impotence, his mother's regime and imprisoning nullity of Holme Dene have to justify his loathing of English democracy' (1999, 172).

Curiously, even though a traitor, Kelway does not use crude psychological violence to impose his will on Stella, whereas the opportunistic Harrison uses a form of mental manipulation that is more typical of fascist tactics. In contrast, while Harrison is ready from the beginning to make a bargain between loyalty to country and fulfilment of his desire to possess Stella, Kelway stays true to his anti-British ideology even when Stella discovers that he is a spy. As Gill Plain suggests, 'Harrison is an ambiguous figure, representing both the law of the father and a state of unlawful excess – nothing is quite what it seems' (2011, 179). Indeed, the consistent use of the same first name, Robert, for both men by Stella and the omniscient narrator also undermines the neatly drawn divisions between traitor and patriot. Unlike the plot of a classic spy novel the outcome does not depend on Kelway's or Harrison's choices but on Stella's response to those choices. As Lee points out, the story derives not from plot 'but from psychology: Is Robert Kelway a traitor, and if so, what will Stella do about it?' (Lee. 1999, 165). Stella's procrastination in believing Harrison's story about Robert Kelway enables Kelway to justify his treachery to her. In doing so, he reveals his disillusionment after Dunkirk: '[t]hat was the end of that war – army of freedom queueing up to be taken off by pleasure boats. ... The extremity – can they not conceive that's a thing you never do come back from? ... We're to be avoided – Dunkirk wounded men' (*HoD*, 272).

In addition to his condemnation of the fiasco of Dunkirk, Kelway expresses disbelief in the meaning of 'country' and his desire to adhere to the principle of force: 'I don't see what you mean – what do you mean? Country? – there are no more countries left; nothing but names. [...] We must have law – if necessary, let it break us: to have been broken is to have been something' (*HoD*, 267–269). In speaking his mind to Stella,

Kelway makes her witness to his identity, ideology and anger. “You’ll have to reread me backwards, figure me out – you will have years to do that in, if you want to. You will be the one who will have to see” (*HoD*, 270). His words are important in the novel on two levels. First, in relation to plot, Kelway allows Stella to be witness to his personal truth to enable her to see what the outside world is not willing to see. Second, on the level of narrative, his confession to Stella, his subsequent death and the court interpretation of his death highlight the ambivalent nature of testimony in fiction. The novel conveys the ambiguity of the act of testimony, especially when that testimony does not fit into the dominant narratives of patriotism, nationhood and heroism.

In his final visit to Stella’s flat, Robert Kelway admits to his role as a German spy in a conversation fraught with foreboding. The scene displays an interplay of inside and outside, light and dark, hour and no hour that creates an atmosphere of unreality comparable to the anonymity of the confessional. Robert is only able to tell, or to testify, in a room that is ‘absolutely unseeable at last, might now have been any room’ (*HoD*, 269), a ‘room [that] had the look of no hour’ (*HoD*, 277). The hour returns when Robert opens the window to look outside: the inside darkness and timelessness of Stella’s flat are contrasted with the ‘star-filled two o’clock morning sky’ (*HoD*, 269). Fearing Harrison’s interception of his departure by the front door Kelway attempts to escape by the roof. Stella witnesses his extreme fear and knows his state of mind, but she cannot know for sure if his jump was a ‘fall or leap’ (*HoD*, 291). However, in her court testimony, Stella concedes that Robert’s death was indeed the fall of an excited and drunk lover, concealing her own doubts from the court. Stella fulfils Nadine Gordimer’s description of a witness as ‘the one who was present and is able to testify from personal observation’ (Gordimer. 2009, 66). Hence when a witness testifies, tells or narrates what happened, listeners or readers are conscious of the epistemological gap – the missing information or knowledge – between themselves and the witness. According to Dori Laub in his study *Crises of Witnessing* ‘[t]he testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness’ (Felman and Laub. 1992, 85). However, Stella problematizes that position by withholding part of the evidence. She is only witness to Robert’s excited state of mind, not to the precise moment of his fall. Nevertheless, she is the only one to have met him just before his death and the only one who can testify through personal observation. Derrida clarifies what he sees as the ‘unique and irreplaceable’ position of the witness as: ‘I am the only one to have seen

this unique thing, the only one to have heard or to have been put in the presence of this or that, at a determinate, indivisible instant; and you must believe me because you must believe me' (Blanchot et al. 2000, 40). This is the essential paradox of the position of the witness. The witness is unique; no one else can bridge the epistemological gap. The witness is irreplaceable; no one else can testify in the same way. Stella Rodney is a unique and irreplaceable witness; no one else was with Robert right before his death. Although in court she corroborates the coroner's version of events – that it was an excited lover's drunken slip from the roof, this witnessing is rendered doubtful by the narrative since the reader is aware how much she holds back; in Plain's words 'how much of nothing there was' (Plain. 2011, 167). Stella's responses make few assertions and only innocuous speculation, they say only enough to confirm the preferred narrative.

No, I cannot tell you whom Captain Kelway may have had in mind: ... No, I cannot suggest any other reason, but one never knows ... we met in September 1940.... Yes, we saw one another frequently.... Yes, I have always tried to keep some drink in my flat, never to run quite out of it ... I'm afraid I cannot say; I have no idea how much other people do drink.... No, I don't think I remember any quarrels ... Yes, I did notice that Captain Kelway was in an excitable state. Possibly that was because we had been talking about the war; he had been taken off the active service list since Dunkirk ... I cannot say, I'm afraid; I did not notice. (*HoD*, 302)

While the questions are left out of this passage, it is implied that their scope is partial and specific. Stella interprets – and answers – these questions in a limited and literal manner, ignoring the larger implications they might have. The use of ellipses in this passage is suggestive of the cyclical and repetitive nature of the questions and of Stella's hesitations. The passage also shows how Stella answers most questions by echoing them, merely adding a 'yes', 'no' or 'I do not know'. She willingly goes along with the story the coroner provides for her – the 'official' narrative that will be made of this case. Stella is a unique and irreplaceable witness but not exemplary; she cannot say for certain whether it was a fall or a leap, yet she implies it was a fall.

As she herself works for the Ministry of Information, her involvement with a German spy who leapt to his death being pursued by a British agent would destroy her reputation, and much more. As Hepburn observes: 'By dissembling, Stella protects Robert's reputation and her own. By not disclosing the full truth, she inadvertently draws attention



to her possible culpability' (2011, 133). Her testimony serves not only her own interests but also those of the government.

Robert's death, whether by a fall or a leap, happens at a time when, following victory at El Alamein (October/November 1942), the British appear to be winning the war, with increasing hope of a Nazi defeat. Within this political and military context, it could only damage the nation's morale to bring out a story of deceit, treachery and spying – all the more so if the traitor is convinced of the moral righteousness of his acts. The coroner's portrayal of Kelway's death as an accident serves a propagandist narrative even as it depends on Stella's reputation, albeit inaccurate, as a *femme fatale*. Earlier in the novel we learn that her relatives had spread the story of her as the woman who left her husband at a time when he needed her the most. Rather than denying this false story, she acquiesces to it, admitting its fallaciousness to Harrison: 'No, not even that, unfortunately. Half-baked, bottomlessly unconfident in myself as a woman, frenziedly acting up' (*HoD*, 224).

Her adherence to this story is driven by the desire to be proactive rather than submissive; the subject of desire rather than its object. The wish to appear as a 'monster [rather] than look a fool' is confirmed in the court proceedings (*HoD*, 224). Stella's testimony is important not only for what it bears witness to, for the epistemological gap that is bridged or the facts it testifies to, but more importantly for what it leaves out. She acts on her own fears and uncertainty about being the 'injured' one, the one who could fall in love with an enemy spy, just as she found it more comfortable to be portrayed as the wife who left her husband. In this way, Stella's testimony protects both herself and Kelway from the negative consequences of public knowledge about the truth of the affair.

As already suggested, the novel proposes an alternative to Stella's testimony in court and its implications. The use of personal and political context, time and timelessness, the questioning of event or happening and the recurrent use of fictionality highlight the role of literary testimony in challenging the dominant narratives of war. The thrust of the novel relies on this contrast between historical and personal events described both in linear time and moments of timelessness. This analysis agrees largely with Allan Hepburn's description of *The Heat of the Day* as a 'domestic novel [which] registers the impact of war on a human, not epochal, scale. It works out the effects of history on characters during the war' (2011, 134). Throughout the novel the personal events and the dramatic actions of the characters are organically related to the political events. From Dunkirk to the Fall of France to the Blitz to the Battles of

El Alamein to the end of war, crucial historical milestones are integrated into the action of the novel. For example, it was in the first week of September 1940, when London was first hit by aerial bombardment and the city looked as if it might begin to disintegrate, that Stella waved goodbye to the friend who introduced her to Robert. This is a 'prophetic' moment since it foreshadows the disintegration 'of her solidity' as a result of falling in love with an enemy spy (*HoD*, 95).

Victory at El Alamein, a watershed moment in the progress of the war, manifests another example of the interlacing of the personal and the historical. A turning point for Britain in the timeline of the Second World War is paralleled with the turning point in the plot when Stella's return visit to Mount Morris after 20 years becomes pivotal to her psychological struggle. At Mount Morris she gets to know about the secret meeting between Cousin Francis and Harrison from Francis's servant, Donovan. In this way, Stella finds strong proof in Harrison's favour and concludes that if Harrison was truthful about his visit to Francis, he might be correct in accusing Kelway of treason. In other words, historical, linear time is not simply a passive background to the plot. Rather, the personal and the political meanings of events are linked in a progressive and temporal development. This multifaceted progression foregrounds the entanglement of Stella's position as witness with her mid-century temporality. As Claire Seiler asserts, 'here is the woman who embodies the century' (2017, 135). Situated in the middle of 100 years wrecked by colossal wars, both history and gender inform Stella's act of witnessing. As the witness of her time and of its destruction she embodies its ambivalence. On the one hand, after her return from Ireland, she rejects Robert Kelway's marriage proposal but, on the other, she continues to procrastinate over Harrison's proposition. In hesitating over this, she aligns herself with neither of the opposing sides. It is this entanglement with her times that makes Stella, to use Derrida's terms, a 'unique' and 'singular' witness. The literary rendition of the entanglement of the individual in *The Heat of the Day* exhibits what Hepburn describes as 'the intermodern preoccupation with the consequences of political commitment prior to and during the war' (2011, 134).

Added to the interrelation of personal and political chronology, *The Heat of the Day* deploys a shift away from linear temporality. This shift is observed by Plain as 'a catalogue of stopped clocks and disrupted time' (2011, 175). For example, the novel opens with an Orchestra performance in a park where Harrison and Louie are in the audience. The atmosphere of the park with this music is given a timeless effect as 'from above the

trees round the theatre there stole away not only colour but time' (*HoD*, 8). 'Disrupted time' is also found in the figure of Cousin Nettie who, sitting with her back to the window, appears to Stella's son as placed outside time. As Roderick recollects, 'years ago she must have ceased to look out of this' as 'this timeless colourless afternoon silhouetted the upper part of her figure' (*HoD*, 206). Similarly, observing Stella's room, Roderick notes: 'The room lacked one more thing: apprehension of time. Inside it the senses were cut off from hour and season; nothing spoke but the clock' (*HoD*, 56). On her part, Stella observes the mismatch of Roderick's anachronistic eyes with his military uniform; the restaurant where Robert and Stella meet has a 'shock-stopped clock' (*HoD*, 99). Such timelessness disrupts the linear temporality of the novel with moments of temporal confusion that act as bugle calls for the 'time being which war had made the very being of time' to capture the psychological impact of war (*HoD*, 100). At Roderick's homecoming, mother and son are said to 'feel' what they cannot admit to each other: 'both felt the greatness inherent in being human and in their being mother and son' at the same time, though, '[w]ariness had driven away poetry: from hesitating to feel came the moment when you no longer could. Was this war's doing?' (*HoD*, 55).

The emotional emphasis derives from neither the role of a soldier ready to wage war for his country nor that of a sacrificing mother who sends her son to war. Rather, it is the effect of a mother and son compelled by war to withhold their love for one another. Yet this withholding of love is not a failure of two individuals, it is a 'sign, in them, of an impoverishment of the world' (*HoD*, 56). Indeed, this failure of the outside world is affirmed in the silence of this room where 'the senses were cut off from hours and seasons' (*HoD*, 56). What would go unnoticed in the linear temporal narrative of heroism and war is recorded as a moment of loss between two generations. This third dimension of time meets the challenge that Shoshana Felman describes as 'issues of biography and history [that] are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but are re-inscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text' (Felman and Laub, 1992, xv). This double use of time in the novel again emphasizes the ambivalent nature of witnessing historical events. The question remains as to what constitutes an event. In other words, which events are worthy of description, are worth being documented and commemorated? The specific use of words like 'event' and 'happening' in *The Heat of the Day* highlights even more the ambivalence of testimony in the novel. Nothing happens outside time. Happening is event, occurrence, incident. To challenge what and how

an event is constituted is also to challenge the linear narrative of history. As Bowen tellingly contends in 'The Bend Back': 'the historic past' must be 'recreated in terms of art' (Lee. 1999, 56).

*The Heat of the Day* displays a constant tussle between happening, action and event in historical and political terms and a parallel, yet submerged, happening at a personal level. For example, while arguing with Stella about the nature of 'happening', Harrison says: 'You, I mean to say, have got along on the assumption that things don't happen; I, on the other hand, have taken it that things happen rather than not' (*HoD*, 32–33). The male characters in the novel show that war is a continuity of events, where 'things happen rather than not', where a wilfulness or an active force makes things happen. War to them is not an interruption of the prevailing will but a continuation or a natural outcome of that will. As Jacqueline Rose suggests, '[I]f, therefore, war neither simply threatens nor simply advances the cause of civilization, it is because it mimics or participates in the fundamental ambivalence of civilization itself' (Rose. 1993, 16). Like Harrison, all the other male characters feel and respond to this will or active force around them. So, Roderick upon his homecoming asks Stella, 'there is so much I want to know – For instance, what has been happening?' Upon Stella's reply, '[W]hy should anything happen?', he looks at her in not unnatural surprise (*HoD*, 53). One day, during the Blitz, Robert Kelway wakes up with a sense of loss for Stella and exclaims upon meeting her, 'I'm very glad you are here. I was certain something had happened to you.' When Stella retorts, 'Why should it?', he responds, 'because that would be exactly the sort of thing that *would* happen to me!' (*HoD*, 98). Even Cousin Francis, a character who does not participate directly in the action of the story, is trying to create an event, a happening, no matter how unsuccessfully, with his desperate plan to be involved in the war in spite of Irish neutrality and his determination to make Roderick the rightful heir to Mount Morris: 'He had waited two and a half years for Eire to reverse her decision: hopes of German invasion had for part of that time sustained him – he had dug tank-traps in the Mount Morris avenues – but as those hopes petered out he resolved to act' (*HoD*, 70).

The novel thus locates the personal actions of all the male characters within the greater framework of political happenings regardless of their ideological differences. Robert Kelway's personal choice to be an enemy spy in response to his disillusionment at Dunkirk is an act of political resistance. Harrison, regardless of his working-class background and lack of a substantial personality of his own, desires Stella and this desire

coheres with his political ambition to belong to an upper middle class that is too rigid to accept him. Cousin Francis's urge to participate in the war on the British side is an opportunistic attempt to find glory in the last war of his lifetime, and Roderick's identification with Mount Morris is an attempt to find stability and certainty after the war in the old-style big house that for people like Robert and Stella has become a thing of the past.

Despite Harrison's claim that things happen, Stella insists that nothing really happens. Her insistence is not necessarily a denial of the chronological sequence of events, it is more a protest that some events are given more significance over others. Indeed, the female characters in the novel show the many ways in which their war experiences are marginalized. Louie and Cousin Nettie are examples of this insufficient representation. Louie is a 27-year-old woman from Kent, whose working-class parents died in a bomb blast during the Battle of Britain. Although marriage brings her to London, very soon her husband leaves for active service. Stranded alone in a large city, Louie experiences acute alienation. Her position is not even that of a refugee: 'she had lately felt in London like a day tripper who has missed the last train home' (*HoD*, 145). Her marginal existence is amplified by her clumsy appearance, her defiance of social manners, her desperate attempt to retrieve her husband's love through other men's bodies, and her urge to find refuge from the domestic emptiness of her house in outside spaces. Cousin Nettie, for her part, prefers the mental asylum over the safe haven of a patriarchal household and a failed marriage. The responses of Cousin Nettie and Louie to events driven by force of duty and masculine action not only represent resistance to the all-pervasive sense of male historicity but also suggest an alternative sense of 'happening' that remains unnoticed in linear time. This affects Stella, too, as she observes during her visit to Mount Morris: 'After all, was it not chiefly here in this room and under this illusion that Cousin Nettie Morris – and who now knew how many more before her? – had been pressed back, hour by hour, by the hours themselves, into cloudland?' (*HoD*, 174).

Through this gap between linear time and timelessness, happening and 'non-happening', the narrative shows how patriarchal history cancels out the stories of ordinary women; a particularly pertinent phenomenon in this interfeminist period. It is Stella's testimony of unheard oppression, 'hour by hour, by the hours themselves', to which the text bears witness (*HoD*, 174). Stella, Cousin Nettie and Louie nonetheless do not remain passive in the face of these circumstances, they make proactive choices.

So, in opposition to the obvious monotony of her life as a working woman, Louie goes out in search of love and warmth and, in the end, becomes pregnant. Cousin Nettie, unlike countless women before her, does not find meaning in the 'loudening ticking of the clock' in the domestic space of the big house, but seeks refuge in a mental asylum (*HoD*, 174). Stella, although perceived by Louie as a 'soul astray', resists Harrison's attempt to blackmail her into a relationship with him, a man on the 'right side' (*HoD*, 248). The gap shown in the novel between happening and non-happening is not so much a result of an active-passive gender divide as symptomatic of a greater gender dynamic of signification at work. The non-happenings that Stella witnesses are not literally non-happenings, rather they are narratives running parallel to the mainstream but relegated to insignificance, just as a traditional narrative that represents 'events' in accordance with the dominant rhetoric would exclude other marginalized accounts. The novel captures this marginalization through the gendered awareness of Stella's witnessing and the retrospective lens of the author informed by the larger context of the mid-century polemics of gender, war and literary representation.

There are challenges in the novel, through repeated acts of storytelling, to the binary division of fact and fiction, history and story. Stella's identity is built around the 'story' of the betrayal of her husband, Victor. Referring to how she started to depend on the false story, mentioned earlier, of being a *femme fatale*, Stella admits to Harrison: 'Whoever's the story had been, I let it be mine. I let it ride, and more – it came to be my story, and I stuck to it. Or rather, first I stuck to it, then it went on sticking to me: it took my shape and equally I took its' (*HoD*, 224). When Roderick enters Stella's flat, he too is aware of a sense of fictionality: 'This did not look like home; but it looked like something – possibly a story' (*HoD*, 47). Likewise, when Stella thinks of Mount Morris's historic continuity without her playing any significant role in it, she ponders the question of whether 'her own life should be a chapter missing from this book [but] need not mean that the story was at an end' (*HoD*, 175). Similarly, Harrison's secret information about Kelway is called a story. Because the novel foregrounds the act of storytelling, its narrative tension depends largely on the stories people tell about each other; as Maud Ellmann observes, 'everyone seems trapped in someone else's story' (Ellmann. 2003, 162). Since Victor's relatives did not like Stella, they came up with a story that portrayed her as a culprit and, although this story does not match up with the reality of Stella's life, she starts to live her life according to this fictionalized version. Returning

from military training Roderick, too, experiences alienation; nothing in the flat seems to relate to his previous image of him and his mother. 'It was to be seen how, each time he came back like this, he was at the beginning physically at a loss' (*HoD*, 48). The luxurious things lying in a chaotic atmosphere intensify the unreality of the home space and subvert expectations of the domestic scene. Coates describes eloquently this lack of familiarity: 'Stella's flat has none of the "music of the familiar" which gives human emotion a context' (Coates. 1987, 487). When Roderick calls his home a story, his defamiliarization registers the effect of this war on the quotidian.

Most war novels attempt to create an impression of authenticity by claiming to give a truthful account of events and by clinging to a realistic tradition of storytelling. However, by using the motif of storytelling, *The Heat of the Day* challenges the self-conscious role of literature in the act of bearing witness, and invites a consideration of metafictionality in a novel about the war. Discussing the art of the novel, Bowen herself writes, 'Plot must further the novel towards its object. What object? The non-poetic statement of a poetic truth' (Lee. 1999, 36). The novel manifests how a poetic representation of events may stand in opposition to a chronological representation of the world and of the prevalent narratives of war. Literature, in its ability to refer back to its own fictionality, serves well the purpose of testimony to reach out to the 'poetic truth' rather than adhere to the stringent limitations of historical accuracy.

Ultimately, as a work of literature *The Heat of the Day* bears witness to the intricacy and ambivalence of acts of testimony through its plotting and narration. It reveals the inadequacies of institutionalized mechanisms for the corroboration of stories, made evident in Stella's court testimony. The limited nature of questions asked by the coroner, Stella's short and often fragmented answers and Kelway's testimony to Stella before his death all point to the difficulty of trusting the official, and conveniently propagandist, account of his fall or leap. The novel's opposition of the personal and the historical, of time and timelessness, of the subjective and the political invites suspicion of the chauvinistic narrative of war. Bowen's storytelling highlights the problematic contexts of literary testimony and demonstrates how the act of witnessing implicates those elements of anxiety and ambivalence that persist in the social and cultural milieu of mid-century writing.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Re-presenting Wrens

Nancy Spain's *Thank You – Nelson* (1945),  
Eileen Bigland's *The Story of the WRNS* (1946),  
Vera Laughton Matthews's *Blue Tapestry* (1948)  
and Edith Pargeter's *She Goes to War* (1942)

*Chris Hopkins*

The importance of popular reading in sustaining morale in Britain during the Second World War is still markedly neglected by cultural historians and literary critics, despite some renewed attention to the writing of the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Popular writing, like many other categorizations of literature or writing, is a slippery term and has been much discussed, but I use it here broadly to indicate books written during the war to cover topical matter for a wide readership.<sup>2</sup> Scott McCracken likewise starts with the obvious feature: 'fiction that is read by large numbers of people', but adds the important point that 'contemporary popular fiction is the product of a huge entertainment industry' (1998, 1, cited in Berberich. 2015, 3). That is equally true of the popular fiction of the 1940s, but for wartime fiction we need to add the overlapping context of what we might call an 'information' or 'morale' industry involving both official agencies such as the Ministry of Information and the Services, and the voluntary contributions of authors and publishers. Clive Bloom sees topicality, too, as a particular value in popular fiction, but also the feature which has limited its cultural endurance and artistic quality: '[it is] the barometer of contemporary imagination, a type of acute pathological and sociological exemplary instance which sums up all that

is interesting culturally [...] and all that is ephemeral artistically' (2002, 15; cited in Berberich. 2015, 4). I similarly assume that these works did not mainly aim at literary reputation, but do not assume that literary value or formal innovation is necessarily excluded. These kinds of text have been largely forgotten, as if they were only of topical interest – but for cultural, historical and literary reasons this is far from being the case. Certainly, Edith Pargeter's *She Goes to War* deserves to be remembered as a significant work. Popular writing covered almost every aspect of the war, with many novels/documentaries about the home front and civil defence as well as about the Services, yet this material has not been much studied despite its potentially large influence on wartime readers. The public discussions pursued in this body of writing about wartime social experience and its relation to visions of postwar Britain therefore remain under-explored.

If popular writing about servicemen is neglected, even more so is popular writing about servicewomen, though national service was an extraordinary experience that involved a significant number of women. This essay will focus on how wartime participation in the naval branch of the three British women's services was represented during and immediately after the war. It will explore the written forms in which Wrens were represented, by and to themselves and the public, and also put these representations into some contact with the wider context of wartime popular writing about the Royal Navy.<sup>3</sup> A good deal of substantial writing about Wrens seems to have been published towards the end of the war or just postwar, the majority is also documentary (though often including fictional devices), and indeed the line between fiction and non-fiction is often blurred, as it has been argued was often the case with the use of documentary and feature-film genres in wartime films about the Navy.<sup>4</sup> But these documentary texts are no less important for understanding how the idea and experience of female servicewomen opened up debates about society, class and gender roles. Indeed, though one might not necessarily expect a military and hierarchical organization like the Navy/WRNS to be a nurturing context for feminism, these texts suggest that many ideas developed in and from first-wave feminism had quite a strong presence in the Service – and it is notable that one of the authors, Vera Laughton Matthews, was not only one of the three most senior female military officers in wartime Britain, but had also been an active suffragette whose book is explicitly underpinned by her continuing activism (as Hannah Roberts points out, she was also an interwar editor for the feminist periodical *Time and Tide* – Roberts. 2018, 70). Other

authors discussed also show their similar engagement with feminism. This essay will deal with the documentary writing first, partly because it is important in its own right, but also because it forms a rich context for the only wartime novel written by a servicewoman about the Wrens – Edith Pargeter’s extraordinary *She Goes to War* (1942).<sup>5</sup> It is an unusual literary work in several respects and, I will argue, an early contribution to a genre of wartime naval fiction/documentary which, perhaps unexpectedly, engaged with the agenda of the ‘people’s war’.<sup>6</sup> Together, these texts about Wrens tell a significant story about neglected 1940s writing focused on women’s experiences and hopes in wartime Britain.<sup>7</sup>

The Women’s Royal Naval Service was created in 1917 as part of a solution to the overall British manpower shortage after the mass casualties in the Army of 1914 to 1916 – and perhaps incidentally spoke to a desire by women to make an active contribution to the war (for some preferably in uniform). The title of the service commonly used was based on the initials of its full title, with full stops all present and correct (W.R.N.S.), then WRNS and later as the recognizable word, Wrens. *The Times* identified this as a new word on 5 January 1918 (*OED*), and in 1939 the term was adopted in rank titles as well (Roberts. 2018, 85). The first Director of the WRNS, Dame Katharine Furse, is recorded as saying that she chose the service’s title above other options precisely because it produced the suitable (and non-distortable) term ‘Wrens’ (Scott. n.d., probably 1940, 28). However, in 1919 the service was wholly demobilized, being seen as a wartime-only expedient. In February 1939 the WRNS was re-formed and Vera Laughton Matthews was appointed Director, partly on her First World War record but perhaps more in recognition of her skilful interwar leadership in social and voluntary work. Strictly speaking the WRNS was at first not part of the Royal Navy, but of the ‘civil establishment’. Nevertheless, the service’s development was dictated by naval needs: the Royal Navy initially saw the WRNS as a small force that could take over clerical and stores jobs to free men for duties on ships and overseas, but the number of specialisms open to Wrens steadily increased throughout the war, and so too did the number of Wrens. The WRNS was the smallest of the women’s services, but nevertheless the numbers serving were significant: in 1939 there were 3,200 Wrens, by 1944 there were 73,000 (Noakes. 2006, 131). Given that every Wren will have had family and social networks, and the impetus to recognize the input of (nearly) all social groups to the British war effort, there was large potential public interest in the experiences of Wrens as well as of other servicewomen.

Indeed, there was understandably a huge wartime and immediately postwar appetite for fiction/documentary-fiction/autobiographical books about wartime experience, including of those in the Services. This appetite was willingly fed by publishers and authors, but was also, as Valerie Holman's study of wartime publishing, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in Britain 1939–1945* (2008) shows, led by initiatives from the Services' own publicity arms and from the Ministry of Information. The Royal Navy had enormous cultural status in Britain as a guarantor of liberty (Nelson's victory at Trafalgar was often invoked, as by Nancy Spain), and from the beginning of the war was a focus for sustaining morale. It is important to note the enormous number of popular texts written about the Navy during the war. Holman refers to the Ministry of Information's keenness early in the war to ensure that books on selected topics reached wider audiences by being allocated paper supplies and sold at less than the usual commercial prices. In addition to more or less official publications, there was a large range of other popular publications about the Navy giving personal accounts of men's naval life. Several male-authored works focus on the war as a people's war for democracy and social progress – an approach that, as we shall see, occurs in the only wartime Wrens novel.

However, there was relatively little specifically about Wrens early in the war. *The Royal Navy Today* had a short coda of two pages: it assures the reader that 'girls from every walk of life can take their place in the service, which follows the democratic traditions of the Royal Navy ... All officers are promoted "from the lower deck"' (Anonymous. 1942, 123). There were publications including material on the Wrens, but these tended to be books about women's contribution to the war effort generally, where Wrens were part of a composite picture. Thus, Peggy Scott's *British Women in War* (undated, probably 1940) had short sections on every conceivable role for women in the war, as well as a number of black and white plates – ten featuring Wrens. The best-selling author J.B. Priestley's *British Women Go to War* (again n.d., probably 1942), had a broadly similar structure, but with the luxury of 49 colour plates. Scott comments on the ability of Wrens to adapt to the 'masculine' collective expectations of the Service, but equally assumptions are made about their 'naturally' gendered inclinations:

The Wrens were made to understand that they were all part of a crew and had to be ready to 'man the guns', when necessary. Everything personal had to be put aside, which was not easy for women, who are more individual than men. (Scott. n.d., probably 1940, 27)

This is a curiously, but perhaps deliberately, confusing statement. It was generally assumed that servicewomen should not have combat roles, since this would be alien to their natures (see Noakes. 2006, 4, 7, 116, 127; however, Roberts argues that some Wren specialisms crossed this line: 2018. 151, 164–165, 178–179). This exclusion certainly applied to most Wrens (though one postwar novel by a male author explored a Wren breaking the combat taboo). So here the phrase ‘man the guns’ is a metaphorical usage, but one that allows the misleading excitement of a literal reading implying that women can be combatants in the Wrens and that they are in wartime no different from men. However, this impression of equality in war is rather cancelled out by the insistence on the ‘personal’ as the authentic domain of women. The section cannot quite resist a discussion of Wrens uniforms that again slides between suggesting the uniform’s ability to make women fully part of a ‘masculine’ institution (‘navy serge double-breasted coats, split at the sides in Naval fashion’), and its capacity also to continue to manifest ‘femininity’. Indeed, the description simultaneously suggests a modest expression of sexuality on the part of Wrens alongside a wish to be seen as professionals in control of their own images, while also making them subjects of the male/civilian gaze (‘the public’): “‘The only thing I don’t like about you” said a man-friend to a WRNS officer at a Port, “is your black stockings!” The public mostly agreed with him, but many of the Wrens liked them – for uniform’ (Scott. n.d., probably 1940, 27). J.B. Priestley adds his thoughts to the discussion in *British Women Go to War*:

Experts could have decided what colour and cut of uniform flattered the largest number of girls, and instead of seeing still more navy blue, light blue and khaki up and down the country ... our eyes might have feasted on some new and delectable combination of shades. (Priestley. n.d., probably 1942, 23)

Female writers about the Wrens certainly have things to say about the uniform, but Priestley’s lapse into seeing the service woman as the ‘decorative’ object of the male gaze (‘flattered’, ‘seeing’, ‘delectable’) is trumped by his mainly quite pragmatic discussion of the contribution of women to the war effort and the opportunities for personal and wider social and political change. He speculates about the effect on postwar social attitudes of military service, noting that the potential impact of servicewomen may be overlooked:

We are always wondering what the men in uniform will think and feel and do when they return to civilian life ... but we are apt to ignore the women

in uniform in these speculations, probably because we do not realise how many of them there are now ... In fact, I believe that the women may have moved further from their pre-war outlook than the men. The social consequences of their demobilisation, when it at last arrives, may be of the highest importance. (Priestley. n.d., probably 1942, 30)

Of course, Priestley is hoping for a much more democratic and less class-bound postwar Britain and (despite some slippage into gender stereotypical viewpoints) is hopeful that the collective social experience of servicewomen may make them key agents of progressive change. Most writing by women about Wrens also takes this view – that their service is a sign of progress in social and gender relations and a harbinger of change.

Nancy Spain's *Thank You – Nelson* (1945) is about the Wrens in their own right, and though published in the last year of the war it covers the period from 1939 till the London Blitz in 1940 or from when Spain joined the Wrens as a rating (a 'sailor' rather than an officer) until the point when she started training as an officer. It is autobiographical and humorous and proved to be a bestseller: as Spain's *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry notes, it 'paved the way for her subsequent light literary career' (2011). It is certainly an imaginative work that plays with ideas of fact and fiction, making clear in a foreword its own vein of fancy and equally a claim to be truthful testimony:

Everything in this book happened and happened when I was there to see. All the people in this book are *composite* ... which is to say they bear a vague resemblance to human beings. They are the sort of people whom novelists, who write from real life, 'put into books'. Collected together they have contributed to various 'types' as the R.A.F. puts it, who exist both in my imagination and 'on the books' of His Majesty's ships. If you are in the Navy you may have met 'Charlie' and 'Earn' and 'Foxy' and 'Sid' – but in case you have not I shall be proud to introduce them. (Spain. 1945, 5)

The book is given an official blessing (with some reservations) in a preface by the patron saint of the Wrens, Dame Vera Laughton Matthews. She commends the truth of the book, but makes clear that it is about the early days rather than today, when the Service is 'a real living integral part of the Royal Navy': 'among much that is admirable, praise-worthy and entertaining we read things that we would prefer not to know and others that we know and would like to forget' (7).

In taking its first-person protagonist from the lower decks to officer training, Spain's book is like a number of novels/documentaries by male

writers, including *Holiday Sailor* by ‘Tackline’ (1945) and J.P.W. Mallalieu’s *Very Ordinary Seaman* (1944). This reflects a wartime reality in that all new Royal Navy and WRNS recruits served as ratings before those who stood out could be selected for officer training. However, for Spain and these male authors, this situation also allows them to develop a distinct kind of narrative that contributes to a people’s war vision both by allowing for meritocratic promotion and by providing a temporary period in which class-mixing and participation in a community of equality is seen positively. Spain early on in her narrative identifies this need for wartime contribution and authenticity:

Before the war I had been a Free Lance Journalist. I admit that my life was eccentric, colourful, and a little artificial, and that it lacked responsibility either to a higher or a lower authority ... I felt that total warfare demanded a further responsibility of me. I wanted to work really hard. So I joined the W.R.N.S. (9)

Spain is allocated to lorry driving at a naval base in the north and positively enjoys working with what she represents as the rough-and-ready sailors and petty officers. She disapproves of Wren recruits with less flexible attitudes to class, such as the character she calls Glen Urquhart Suiting in a satirical homage to her smart clothes: ‘Glen Urquhart still looked glum. Aren’t there any officers here?’ ... Anyway she left before her fortnight’s Probationary Period was finished, to “drive Officers” in the M.T.C.’ (Motor Transport Corps).<sup>8</sup> The implication on the part of Spain’s character is that this woman’s motivation is not genuinely to contribute to the national struggle, but rather to seek a partner of a ‘desirable’ class (note the inverted commas around ‘drive Officers’). Spain’s book is structured in two parts corresponding to an important watershed: ‘Book the First – Sans Uniform’, and ‘Book the Second – Lady Sailor (avec Uniform)’. Presumably, the Glen Urquhart incident shows that before the communal identity provided by uniform, there were those who showed no wish to merge into the community of the people’s war.

Other markers of the book’s approval of the People’s War idea are provided by observations about social mixing and the relationship between social organization pre-war and during the war. Thus Spain is happily surprised as she approaches an armed trawler by boat that ‘instead of it being a skipper R.N.R. it was a lieutenant R.N.V.R. ... he told me that he was a bank clerk ... and that he had never been happier in his life’ (49). This is inverted snobbery – Spain showing her

preference for the ‘civilian sailor’ in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve over the recalled reservist who was once a regular Royal Naval officer. Developed at greater length is her testimony to the way in which the British government could address problems in war that it part-created and ignored in the ‘peace’ of the 1930s. She has to deliver supplies to ships in dock:

So many of the yards had fallen into disrepair and melancholy since the North-Eastern shipbuilding industry had been murdered [...]. So, also, had the men, women and children who lived by them [...] The noise of prosperity – even if of an artificial stimulus – clanged, banged, tooted, screamed ... as I looked at the faces of the boys who had known the lean years – old before their time, etched with the lines of boredom that unemployment leaves – I was desperately glad of the noise that split my ear-drums ... to them it was the return of Work and Self-respect. (Spain. 1945, 52, 57)

As in other texts, naval tradition (‘Proper Navy’) is frequently invoked by Spain. While she is in London for the weekend she is caught in the Blitz and surreally merging cinema and the actual sees the whole national spirit as Nelsonian:

That evening I went to some film ... *Lady Hamilton?* ... in Leicester Square. I know Nelson was about somewhere, even with the face of Laurence Olivier. When later, I read Clemence Dane’s poem [*Trafalgar Day*, 1940] I knew that other people had had the same extraordinary sensation. It was not so much that ghosts were walking, not so much that a pretentious thing called patriotism ... came to us at night as the noise of Goering and the *Luftwaffe* started. It was as though ... London drew a deep breath and said: ‘well, here it is. It is not going to get *us* down.’ (123)

The book’s title, *Thank You – Nelson*, is a tribute to Spain’s sense that it is a deeply rooted patriotism among ordinary people – one to which Wrens have a special connection – that will prevail. In the Painted Hall at Greenwich she sees depicted ‘the history of England of which Nelson is a part, and which I, and so many others like me, had taken for granted. And I knew that I, too, should in future feel a sense of responsibility’ (137).

Eileen Bigland’s *The Story of the WRNS* (1946a) is also wholly dedicated to the WRNS. It came out after war’s end (though Bigland was clearly researching it during 1944 and 1945), and its functions are partly different from those of the earlier texts. Bigland was a well-known professional author, who specialized in non-fiction such as travel writing, including books about Soviet Russia. As well as *The Story*



of the WRNS she published another book with the same publishers in 1946 – *Britain's Other Army: The Story of the ATS* (1946). Both books were commissioned by these two women's services probably as ways of celebrating the wartime experience of women viewed from the end point of victory. The acknowledgement in the Wrens volume makes clear that there has been official patronage, thanking the Director of WRNS and the Press Officer for arranging for the author 'to see every aspect of Service life' (*Story of the WRNS*, vi). Indeed, the first chapter starts with an account of Bigland's interview with Vera Laughton Matthews, in which the author realizes for the first time the extent of the WRNS and decides to document the service properly by visiting as many representative WRNS stations as possible. As is characteristic of many wartime factual or fiction works about the Services, male and female, the book starts with the experience of joining up, training and being posted to different specialisms and bases, before looking at service overseas and ending with the grand climactic chapter, 'D Day and After'. In addition, Bigland articulates the structure of the book through bird references in her chapter titles, playing on the word Wren. The first chapter is 'The Makings of a Wren', while 'Fledglings', 'Sea Birds' and 'Migration' refer to temporal progress, specializations and overseas service respectively (at one point in the book Wrens are said to be especially attached to the traditional naval belief that 'the spirit of Nelson lives on in the snow-bunting' (*Story of the WRNS*, 124) –perhaps because this links their own bird association with that of this central, semi-divine naval figure). The book is narrated as a first-person account of Eileen Bigland's travels through WRNS establishments and of her many conversations with Wrens. There is considerable stress on the ways in which service in the WRNS has helped to overcome pre-war gender stereotyping and obstacles for women:

I chose at random a girl with flushed face who was wrestling with a bunch of wires. 'Were you interested in wireless before you joined?'

'I didn't know anything about it. I was in a beauty specialists ... I never want to go back to my own job, I want to be a radio mech. for always [...] d'you think there'll be lots of openings for women after the war?' (Bigland. 1946, 31)

Equally, there is an emphasis on the diverse social origins of the Wrens – Bigland picks up a book from the dashboard of a Wren driver's car and sees that it is Jacques Maritain's *Introduction to Philosophy* (1931): "Er – did you have a job before you joined the Service?" – "Oh, yes.

I'm a barrister-at-law" (Bigland. 1946, 42). Others come from the other side of the track: 'The "tough babies" had come from homes set in the slums ... but the "tough babies" had taken to the dockyard like ducks to water ... and in Quarters they behaved delightfully' (55). It seems clear though that the behavioural expectations of the Service incline towards middle-class norms: 'the Wren officers had been a little apprehensive as to how they would shake down and mix with the others' (55). However, pre-war class status is to some extent swept aside by the Service, as is the low status habitually given to domains dominated by women's labour:

Remembering the peace-time view of domestic work as drudgery only fitted for those of low mentality, I marvelled at the zest with which this group of Wrens attacked their various jobs [as cooks and stewards]. Some of them had been to famous schools, most had never seen a potato or cabbage in the raw before they joined ... now, under a system which made training interesting and ensured that everyone took a turn at the rough work, they were growing into excellent and careful housekeepers. (Bigland. 1946, 62)

A considerable interest among Wrens in self-improvement is noted. Bigland reflects how 'seldom I had discovered trashy books in Wren Quarters' (123), is intrigued by the interest of some in the Soviet Union ('prodded by two Wrens I told them all I could remember of Russian women working in or besides ships' [83]), and is told how Wrens display lively if mischievous interest in current affairs lectures. The male naval commander who is responsible for providing lectures claims that:

They come to us and expect us to settle everything, from knotty points in geography to fierce political arguments ... but must they ask me for books I've never heard of, and persist in making me own up to abysmal ignorance of Polynesian customs, and try to ensnare me into admission of political beliefs I should never dream of holding? (Bigland. 1946, 98–99)

Of course, there is the fun here of teasing the allegedly superior sex, but nonetheless the engagement with politics in particular makes a serious point. Bigland especially notices postwar ambitions among the Wrens doing work traditionally regarded as feminine:

It was natural enough that girls employed in the more spectacular categories should think of all manner of technical jobs which might be open to women after the war, but somehow you didn't expect a questing spirit among Wrens who were doing work which had been done by women throughout the centuries. Yet ... every time I walked into a galley I was overwhelmed with questions about possible jobs in the far places of the earth. (70–71)

The passage suggests a postwar potential for undoing some class and gender stereotypes and for transforming a restrictive gender role into a possibility for geographical and social mobility (the Wren cooks mainly hope for postwar careers in the Commonwealth and Empire). *The Story of the WRNS* celebrates and memorializes the range of positive female experience that had taken place within the WRNS, and it advocates through its documentary form the war as a socially progressive one. Or at least potentially so – for Bigland also expresses some anxieties about whether wartime gain for women will once again be seen as only the temporary result of special circumstances. A Wren radio mechanic shows Bigland a cigarette lighter she has made in the workshop for her boyfriend:

I duly admired the lighter, but my thoughts were elsewhere. All these girls whom the Service was fitting for specialised and highly-skilled work; would they be allowed to continue to use their knowledge in the years to come, or would people – even the boyfriend for whom the lighter had been fashioned – say they must return to more feminine occupations? ... it was a knotty problem: it might become a grim one. For the first time I glimpsed the other side of the Wren's medal. (32)

Finally, in this group of documentary writings about the Wrens is Vera Laughton Matthews's own account of the Wartime WRNS, *The Blue Tapestry* (1948). In the foreword, she discounts the idea that it is 'a History of the WRNS', saying that 'it would be difficult to write a real history of that drama, staged in five continents and in which over a hundred categories [of Wren specialists] appeared in the cast'. Moving from history to drama (both seen as epic forms), Laughton Matthews then passes to another broad genre that she feels best describes her book: it is a 'story', and since it 'makes a story more real to have a live personality attached to it', it features characters and places that are representative of the whole. This leads Laughton Matthews to a metaphor that in fact structures the whole book and stresses the collective experience of the WRNS:

In a beautiful piece of tapestry a vast number of threads of varying colours combine to produce the finished picture. All threads are of equal strength; all colours are equally necessary to the pattern, though some may be more obtrusive [...] It is for this reason that I have chosen the name of 'The Blue Tapestry' for this story of the Women's Royal Naval Service. (10)

Each of the part and chapter titles refers back to the metaphor: there are three Parts ('The Loom', 'The Warp', 'The Weft') divided into 13

chapters, with titles including ‘The Frame is Set Up’, ‘The Threads are Secured’, ‘The Weaving School’ and finally ‘The Design is Finished’. The association of woman with needlework is of course evoked in this image, which sees the WRNS as a work of female creativity, though we might also note that there was a long tradition of embroidery being done by male sailors in their leisure time, so that the metaphor might be seen as integrating female and naval traditions seamlessly.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, Laughton Matthews’s story of the WRNS explicitly engages with feminism and she sees the success of the Service as related to women’s social progress. It may come as a surprise to learn that one of the three most senior female officers in Britain’s 1939–1945 Services has been a Suffragette, but issues about the rights of women are kept prominently in view: ‘At the age of twenty I was caught up in the Woman Suffrage movement ... I can never be too thankful that I was born just early enough to be able to take part in the campaign’ (28). Laughton Matthews links this progress to other political issues too, recounting how in 1947 she and the Labour prime minister Clement Attlee shared their memories of supporting votes for women before the First World War (28). This opening context is stressed, as also are the obstacles put in the way of the WRNS by some naval personnel, the support from others, and a number of victories against gendered assumptions. It was at first proposed that senior female officers of the women’s services should not be paid, but act as unpaid volunteers, as if service for women was a kind of philanthropy. However, Laughton Matthews was treated as at least the same rank as a male rear admiral but paid only two-thirds of the salary, a ratio applied to all servicewomen on the grounds that they would not face combat, though this was in fact a victory on her part over even meaner provision (54, 80). Laughton Matthews also tells the story of how she overcame a Royal Naval assumption that married women with children could not serve in the WRNS by making clear that this was her own status (83). In short, the whole narrative sees women’s progress and the progress of the WRNS as closely woven together, though Laughton Matthews does reject the idea that Wrens should be issued with condoms, arguing that this would undermine the commitment to national service and tempt the worst kinds of Naval Officer to regard ‘the Wrens as born for amusement purposes’ (119–120). Perhaps because it is so focused on gender, *Blue Tapestry* is less obviously interested than other narratives so far discussed in the overcoming of class boundaries. However, Laughton Matthews is pleased to hear a Wren officer quote her own words back

to her: ‘ You don’t only have to turn out good Wrens; you have to turn out good citizens, and if you don’t do that you have failed’ (280).

This body of documentary about Wrens seems to have been widely read (there are certainly a large number of second-hand copies of all three books available). They provide both a rich context and comparison for the only wartime adult novel about the Wrens I have found – and a very individual novel too.<sup>10</sup> Edith Pargeter’s *She Goes to War* (1942) has had some critical attention, to which I hope to add by putting it into the context of other wartime representations of the WRNS, and the wider context of wartime popular writing. The novel is another story of wartime service in the WRNS, this time told through the letters of Wren Catherine Saxon (the epistolary form is itself unusual for a 1940s novel) to two men, Nick and Tom, a family friend and her lover respectively. Its narrative has immediate resemblances to *Thank You – Nelson* in that it follows its protagonist from enlistment to training to service. Like Spain, Edith Pargeter served in the WRNS, in her case from 1940 until July 1945, when she left the Service with the rank of Petty Officer and a British Empire Medal for ‘whole-hearted devotion to duty’ (Lewis. 1994 [2004], 14). She worked as a teleprinter operator first at Devonport and then in Liverpool, under Western Approaches Command. Pargeter was already an established writer, with ten novels since her first in 1936 (152). She was later to achieve fame with her Brother Cadfael detective stories, published under the name of Ellis Peters. Elizabeth Maslen judges that:

the story of a WREN in England, her friendships and love-life [are] ingredients which offer no affront to expectation, until she offers us in the final pages a savage attack on the mishandling of the Crete retreat in the letters her protagonist receives from her lover after his death in the debacle. (Maslen. 2001, 4 – the text prints ‘Cyprus’ but this is clearly in error)

However, I think the novel is even more unusual than this suggests, and that it pushes some of the existing patterns we have already seen in Wren narratives to a much more radical point. Victoria Stewart seems closer to the mark when she writes that Catherine and Tom Lyddon ‘eventually share a desire for a social, if not socialist, revolution’ (2006, 28). Pargeter’s biographer, Margaret Lewis, also sees the novel as radical, saying that Tom ‘shapes her tentative and undeveloped views of the political and social changes she sees as necessary in British society’ (1994, 29). In fact, Lewis’s sense that the novel is specifically left-wing in its sympathies seems right to me, though she interestingly quotes Pargeter’s own comment that

‘she was never political’, but that ‘when there is genuine feeling, a writer’s politics will emerge of themselves’ (16).

The novel is best seen as engaging precisely, but more radically, with the people’s war ideas that we have seen in other Wrens texts. The protagonist Catherine, in her first letter to Nick, reflects on her own lack of engagement and social responsibility. She is a journalist and explains why she has joined the WRNS:

My job was the women’s page and the local gossip ... We were dancing at a Red Cross ball [and] they showed a short Ministry of Information film in the middle of the evening. it wasn’t remarkable in itself, but it came as a jolt after that molasses of music and gin and slow foxtrots ... this was no uprush of patriotism, only an inept kind of self-disgust because the whole scene ... just became monstrously unreal and precarious all in one breath. (Pargeter. 1942, 2–3)

As so often, her fellow Wrens are a social mixture, and at first she does not find it easy to mix (‘the most formidable factor in the splitting-up process is class’, 47), but this social unease prompts her to meditate upon social structures:

The proud boast of ‘equal opportunity’ is heard a good deal now, but ... [it] is so much poppycock. So it would be even with a standard scheme for free education, unless the family incomes ... could be standardised too ... What’s the cure? Some drastic alteration in the educational establishment? (48, 47)

The Service itself provokes Catherine’s dislike of hierarchy and its social boundaries: ‘We have a stunning canteen ... democratic enough to serve Wrens [as well as Naval Officers], but drawing the line at naval ratings. A pity ... because so far the naval ratings are by far the nicest and most satisfactory part of the navy’ (23).

One notes the word ‘democratic’: this dislike of hierarchy may be a hangover from civilian life, but could also be the beginnings of something more profound. Indeed, she soon uses the word again in criticism of the government’s response to the war in not evacuating civilians from around the naval base at Plymouth: ‘[in this] apathetic democracy of ours, nothing will be done until it’s too late to do anything’ (35). This sounds very much like the kind of criticism of lack of political will and social responsibility being voiced in the early part of the war, and often by left-wing commentators: ‘Are we, collectively, doing all we can?’ she asks (45). Certainly, the wish for an equal education for all and a standard income seem to be specifically part of a socialist programme.

Even the phrase ‘equal opportunities’ at this date has a socialist ring; the class-based critique is developed by Catherine throughout the novel, and the Conservative war leader Churchill’s military strategy is not immune from criticism. In a letter to Nick dated 1941, where Catherine doubts Britain’s commitment and military efficacy, she slightly rewrites one of the most famous Nelsonian phrases to give it a more collective edge: ‘you know and I know that we expect more of England ... than the wishful thinkers who sit down contentedly in the middle of things as they are. And if this war is won in the end, it is we who will have won it’ (132). In her last letter to Nick, Catherine sees military victory as only the first step towards a fairer Britain and a more equal world:

When we have taken that strong point there will be still be more to do, and it will be useless the old men shouting at us then that we’ve done our part, that we can throw away our guns and rest, that the war is over. The war will not be over. (239)

This seems in tune, for example, with the Labour supporter and author of *Love on the Dole* Walter Greenwood’s argument in the Labour paper the *Sunday Pictorial* in 1944, that once the war is won, Britain must ensure that it wins the peace by bringing about a new social order (1941, 7).<sup>11</sup>

It is a feature of *She Goes to War* that we mainly read only Catherine’s letters and so get only her perspective (though her responses allow us to reconstruct the replies we do not have direct access to). The exception to this is Tom’s delayed letters from Greece and then after his death, ones sent during the disastrous German defeat of British, Australian and New Zealand forces on Crete (May to June 1941). This gives the novel a chance to show Tom’s sacrifice and also the horror and bravery of combat against fascism. But we might also note that Catherine’s language in the previous quotation is highly militarized – in her political struggle, she has mentally at least thrown aside the prohibition against women as combatants. Stewart comments on the role that the recipients of Catherine’s letters play in the novel: ‘The novel sees Pargeter making an interesting attempt to incorporate the figure of a Spanish Civil War veteran, who joins the British Army in 1939, into a narrative of a young woman’s experience in wartime’ (Stewart. 2006, 27). Indeed, the off-stage Nick and the partly off-stage Tom are important – and both have important connections to specific wars: Tom to the Spanish Civil War, Nick to the First World War, which has left him paralysed and bed-bound. Stewart says that ‘the Spanish war is established as a

comparison with the current conflict, and as a means of romanticising [Tom]' (28). This seems right, but there is also an important 1930s-style political parable being constructed through the figures of Nick and Tom. Nick sacrificed himself in a war that should have ended war and led to a more just world, but that catastrophically failed: he is left with the utterly disabling after-effects – though he notably does begin to recover some movement over the course of the novel. Tom has fought, in principle, a more just war in Spain – the war between fascism and communism, between the past and the future, as leftists saw it. Stewart suggests that Tom's rhetoric, despite its 'forward-looking revolutionary tone', 'desires changes that, according to Catharine, ought to have happened at the end of the First World War' (30). This is exactly the case, but I think that the novel suggests that by replacing the mistaken sacrifice of the First World War and the 'apathy' of the pre-war years with a more revolutionary programme, a truly worthy Britain will be achieved. Catherine is not named 'Saxon' for nothing: her political progress represents the hoped-for progress of Britain.

These Wren narratives are by no means uniform (as it were) in their visions of social and gender roles or in their visions of wartime and postwar Britain. But they share a range of progressive views presented in a creative variety of written forms. They are certainly worthy of greater attention, may cast new light on women's representations of the experience of wartime service at the time, tell us a great deal about how aspects of the People's War idea were embedded in popular wartime writing and add a particular interest in equality for women. This essay has no space to deal with some curious 1940s narratives about Wrens written by men, but one might briefly note that they represent, in the form of a backlash, something of the anxiety which some men felt about the invasion of military service by women. One of these, Neville Chute's *Requiem for a Wren*, with its complex and disturbing ambiguities about the servicewoman, is perhaps the best remembered. Its male narrator's confident but external reconstruction of the life, emotions and experience of a deceased Wren, and its partial context in hostile male responses to servicewomen, suggest how important it is that the very different imaginative and documentary testimonies of actual Wrens are retrieved and reread. These texts represent a lost element in the history of British feminism, and indeed interfeminism, in the unexpected location of a wartime military institution.



## Notes

- 1 Especially Mark Rawlinson's *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), and Gill Plain's *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
- 2 Key discussions of the issues can be found in Chris Pawling, ed., *Popular Fiction and Social Change* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984); Tony Bennett, ed., *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading* (London: Routledge, 1990); Walter Nash, *Language in Popular Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990); Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002); Christine Berberich, ed., *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury 2015).
- 3 There are other relevant representations of Wrens beyond written texts, but space does not permit discussion here. Examples include Lee Miller's collection of photographs in *Wrens in Camera* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1945), and the feature film *Vacation from Marriage* (1945, directed by Alexander Korda, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer British Studios; also called *Perfect Strangers*).
- 4 See Chapter 1 in Jonathan Rayner, *The Naval War Film – Genre, History, National Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 32–53.
- 5 A status confirmed by the Buckmaster Bibliography of Books about the WRNS – see Ursula Stuart Mason, *Britannia's Daughter: The Story of the WRNS* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), 171–173.
- 6 Examples by male writers are discussed in my forthcoming essay: Chris Hopkins, 'The Ship and the Nation: Royal Navy Novels and the People's War 1939–1953' in *Literary Decades: the 1940s* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2021).
- 7 The WRNS has its own historiography, with a resurgence of recent interest, but this does not much engage with the texts and textual forms which represented Wrens to themselves and others during the war and immediate postwar period and so does not trace the narratives about identity being created and circulated at the time. Key works are: Mason, *Britannia's Daughter*; M.H. Fletcher, *The WRNS: a History of the Women's Royal Naval Service* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1989); Jo Stanley, *Women and the Royal Navy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); and Hannah Roberts, *The WRNS in Wartime: the Women's Royal Naval Service 1917–45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018). Penny Summerfield's *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (London: St Martin's Press, 1998) also has some material on the WRNS, and a more popular account is Virginia Nicholson's *Millions Like Us: Women's Lives During the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2012), especially chapter 5. Both, for different readerships, make much use of the insights gained from oral history interviews.

- 8 A civilian organization providing uniformed female drivers and cars for government service – see the website <http://mtcwomenwwii.blogspot.co.uk/>.
- 9 See <http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=311> (accessed 2 April 2020).
- 10 A series of fiction books for girls was published by Lutterworth Press, London, not listed in the Buckmaster Bibliography of works about Wrens: Dorothy Carter's *Wren Helen* (1943), *Wren Helen Sails South* (1944) and *Wren Helen Sails North* (1946).
- 11 See further discussion in my book *Walter Greenwood's Love on the Dole – Novel, Play, Film* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018, 184).

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PART III

**Women Writing Men:  
Interwar, War and Aftermath**



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ‘We Must Feed the Men’

#### Pamela Hansford Johnson and the Negotiation of Postwar Guilt

*Gill Plain*

Austerity Britain was a place and a period shaped by contradictions. As the nation struggled to repurpose a war economy for the daunting challenge of reconstruction, a profound yearning for an ill-defined concept of ‘normality’ co-existed alongside a radical appetite for social and political change. This was a period paradoxically comprising optimism and exhaustion, idealism and fear, and – as I will argue in this essay – it was a period perversely resistant to narratives of female agency.

Much has been written about the transitions in gender roles brought about by conflict, in particular in relation to the First World War and suffrage. Rather less attention has been paid to the aftermath of the Second World War, beyond the recognition that women returned to the domestic sphere and a nostalgic, anachronistic ideal of the home. The work of historians such as David Kynaston suggests that for many women this was a voluntary return, a desire – shared by many demobilized servicemen – to reclaim private space, personal autonomy and something once understood as ‘normality’ (Kynaston. 2007, 51, 80, 98–99). Women who had been uprooted from their homes or conscripted to exhausting factory work were understandably keen to reassume the conventional plot trajectories of femininity, not least because such narratives had been promised them from the outset of conflict (Rose. 2003, 128). As the war drew slowly to its conclusion, writers, film-makers, newspapers and magazines all recognized the symptoms of war-weariness. In the cinema,

plots foregrounded romance and its rewards, abandoning the uniformed heroines of *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Gentle Sex* (1943) for the mothers and lovers of *The Way to the Stars* (1945) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945). Even documentary features took the hint. In Humphrey Jennings's *Diary for Timothy* (1945), a film tracking the final stages of the war in parallel with the first six months of a new-born baby's life, four very different men are used as symbols of the imagined future nation. The only female figure is Timothy's mother, who, once liberated from her hospital bed, is required to do nothing more strenuous than hold a baby in one hand and a sherry in the other. By contrast, Jennings's men – a farmer, a miner, an engine driver and a pilot – are all being repurposed. They will have battles to fight in peacetime, building a better world. Tim's mother is doing what women have always been obliged to do: returning to the setting of default maternity, feeding the men and making men to be fed.

Yet this snapshot, while capturing the dominant cultural trend towards the reinstatement of domestic heteronormativity, does not do justice to the complexities of demobilization, or of women's postwar lives.<sup>1</sup> After the initial pleasure of release, some women found boredom, frustration and disillusionment emerging: the consolations of romance had to be set against stasis, uncertainty and new modes of dislocation. Many women found themselves profoundly disorientated by the long-awaited return of husbands and lovers who had been met, and in some cases hastily married, in radically different circumstances. Such reunions all too often ended in tears. Demobilized men bore little resemblance to the husbands and lovers who departed for war; and they in turn struggled to recognize the women to whom they returned, not least because these women had, in their absence, made choices and acquired a degree of autonomy ill-suited to the resumption of conventional gender relations. Adjustments needed to be made – and, as Alan Allport has so persuasively demonstrated, it was women who were expected to make them, or risk sometimes fatal consequences (2009, 1–3).

In the cultural emphasis on domesticity, and in the numerous narratives that condemned non-conforming women to death, it is hard not to discern an absence of new possibilities for women. And this absence permeated late-war and postwar writing by women. The gradual perception that heteronormativity was an unstable concept and that home could not fulfil its much-vaunted promise generated expressions of ambivalence, literary manifestations of uncertainty and a pervasive sense of loss. From the aching melancholy of Stevie Smith's *The Holiday* (1949), to the dislocation and lassitude of Mollie Panter-Downe's *One Fine Day*



(1947), to the unusually explicit mourning of Agatha Christie's *The Hollow* (1946), women's fiction writes over and through a series of inescapable absences. These fictions bear witness to a complex and evasive sense of personal and cultural loss: the loss of loved ones, agency, structure, and a wider, often homosocial, community. It was as if, after the wartime emergence of new possibilities, women felt themselves being smothered by a blanket of returning heteronormativity and patriarchal expectations. I have written elsewhere about a 'literature of lost possibility', a body of fiction that mourns briefly glimpsed alternatives opened up by war: a set of possibilities beyond the heterosexual matrix (Plain. 2013, 176–185). My thinking was particularly influenced by Judith Butler's potent articulation of reciprocity in *Precarious Life*:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are ... When we lose some of those ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well. (Butler. 2004, 22)

Butler's formulation succinctly encapsulates the disjunctions, ruptures and dislocations of the postwar. It articulates the loss of both self and other, and it speaks to a fundamental *uncoupling* enacted by war.<sup>2</sup>

But if the war enacts an uncoupling, what new plots can culture devise to heal the rift in heteronormativity? For men, the answer seems to be risk. However much individual men might have yearned to go home, they were confronted when they got there by redirected narratives of agency and purpose. The uniforms of wartime were absent, but men were still expected to embrace adventure and to assert their masculinity through purposeful activity beyond the home.<sup>3</sup> But for women, as I suggested earlier, there seems to be an equal and opposite absence of *plot*. This absence speaks to a lack of cultural concern with the postwar rebuilding of women, and to the unquestioned assumption that women would go home and comfortably reset themselves into normative domesticity and default maternity. The psychology of the postwar, manifest in these assumptions, suggests the precarious nature of women's citizenship. British culture seemed, in the preoccupations of its newspapers, films and novels, to recognize that it might be necessary to 're-programme'

men who had just spent six years learning to kill. Yet irrespective of the fact that many women had spent the war years being trained to perform 'male' roles, it was assumed that they would 'naturally' revert to being women.<sup>4</sup> The dominant cultural understanding of gender insists (perhaps anxiously, but nonetheless powerfully) that femininity is essential and inescapable. Elizabeth Bowen neatly summarizes the situation in the *Heat of the Day* (1949) when Stella proposes to inform the authorities of Harrison's blackmail, putting the good of the nation above her desire to save her treacherous lover Robert. Her public-spirited intention is, however, immediately trumped by Harrison's deployment of gender stereotype: 'If you hadn't gone round by Robert's to drop the word to him, it would none the less be assumed you had – a woman's always a woman, and so on' (1962, 41).

How, then, in a culture prioritizing the reconstruction of men, can women's stories be written? What plots can be imagined when the only re-programming culture seemed willing to offer was a crash course in maternal anxiety, fuelled by the resurgence of pronatalist discourse and a growing rhetoric of delinquency? By way of answer, I will explore the postwar work of Pamela Hansford Johnson, which negotiates, with varying degrees of comfort, a simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the normative. In her trilogy *Too Dear for My Possessing* (1940), *An Avenue of Stone* (1947) and *A Summer to Decide* (1948), women do what they are supposed to do – to an extreme that borders on the gothic in its melodramatic intensity – and in so doing expose the impossibility of the very conventions they accept. When the possibilities of plots seem to be shutting down to almost Victorian levels of limitation, Hansford Johnson's female characters adopt – or perhaps indulge in – what might be termed heroic, perverse or even sacrificial maternity. That is to say, in these novels, 'maternity' is redirected so as to assume not simply private domestic significance, but public cultural urgency. In so doing, the books say rather more than they might have intended about the damage of war, and the difficulty of reinstating 'normative' heterosexuality.

The disappearance of Hansford Johnson from twentieth-century literary history is not entirely surprising. Her realist fiction, which might arguably be termed 'middlebrow', belongs neither to the categories of interwar modernist experimentation, nor to the emergent 'postmodernisms' of the 1950s and 1960s. Like the late 1940s more broadly, she has fallen between the gaps of twentieth-century canonicity, and her writing is consequently difficult to classify.<sup>5</sup> She began writing in the 1930s and by the end of the war was an established literary figure. Her

books sold well, and she was, by 1968, sufficiently well regarded to merit inclusion in the British Council 'Writers and their Work' series. Isabel Quigly's short survey praises her for being able to 'write credibly in the first person as a man', and compares her to Graham Greene, another 'unclassifiable' novelist and 'chameleon-narrator' (1968, 6–7). Both writers, argues Quigly, resist the revelation of their own standpoint, remain detached from characters and situations, and combine a 'basic seriousness and moral preoccupation with an entertaining style' (7).

Greene's reputation has fared better than Hansford Johnson's, but Quigly's observations are nonetheless perceptive. Although not an explicitly political writer, Hansford Johnson was an acute observer of interpersonal relations and cultural pressures, and the postwar volumes of her trilogy, *An Avenue of Stone* and *A Summer to Decide*, paint a disturbing portrait of a denuded world. The trilogy as a whole curiously circumnavigates or displaces the war: the first volume was written in 1940, the second in 1947 and the third in 1948.<sup>6</sup> All three novels are narrated by Claud Pickering, who starts the series as a 13-year-old boy, and ends it a 39-year-old man. He is the novels' emotional constant and nexus of intimacy, and as a first-person narrator he is, with varying degrees of reliability, the focalizer through whom we perceive pretty much everything. There is – unusually for a trilogy – a fourth book, *Winter Quarters* (1944), a fictional second cousin that is different in design and focus but features many of the same characters. In effect, Hansford Johnson puts the family saga on hold to create a multifocal third-person wartime group narrative.<sup>7</sup>

My focus, however, will be on the postwar novels, which paint a remarkable portrait of the psychic condition of Britain, providing an acutely observed record of austerity and its aftermath.<sup>8</sup> *An Avenue of Stone* gives us the immediate postwar embodied as passivity and drift, depicting, in characters such as John Field and Evan Sholto, the awful uselessness of the returned soldier; *A Summer to Decide* sees this uselessness and passivity curdle into criminality and a claustrophobic, almost gothic, confinement. Although both books are narrated by Claud, in plot terms they focus on the more spectacular personalities of his friends and relatives. Indeed, Claud is a muted figure almost effaced from the story he tells. Seemingly a resilient and adaptable figure who has been sustained in peace and war by his love of art, he describes himself as seeking 'safety in apathy' (*Summer*, 195), a phrase that nicely encapsulates the etiolated psychology of the postwar.<sup>9</sup> While not actually nostalgic for war, he is exhausted and without resource:

All in all, the interest of life seemed suddenly to have run dry, and I could not imagine from what new source it might spring again. It was not, indeed, a good world for renewals, was like a patient awakening sickly from a major operation, still leaden with the anaesthetic. (*Avenue*, 133)

Excitement, such as it is, resides in the family melodrama, and in *An Avenue of Stone* the central character is Claud's bold, brassy stepmother Helena, a former singer who – having made a stultifying second marriage – has acquired the improbably dignified status of Lady Archer. Helena plays this role up to the point of her husband's death, after which the novel charts the re-emergence of the many conflicting selves oppressed by her marriage of convenience and conformity. Integral to this reawakening is the quasi-maternal, semi-desiring relationship she develops with John Field, a former soldier, who from diffident, seemingly benign beginnings, comes like a cuckoo to invade the family nest.

Helena's reawakening is a deeply equivocal affair, not least because of her inappropriateness. Although 67 at the opening of *Avenue*, she is a symbol of youth and the lost energies of a pre-war world. She refuses the interpellation of old age and is hungry for life (*Avenue*, 20). But while her vitality offers hope to Claud (21), there is no place in respectable, middle-class British culture for old women who refuse to act their age, as Helena ruefully acknowledges: 'it's miserable to get to a stage when you have to remember your age all the time in case you say something out of period' (57). Helena belongs in a different era and the compromised climate of the postwar seems to seep into her bones, creating a curious sense of dread in the novel. Neither past nor future seem viable options, and Helena invests instead in the timeless dyadic intensity of her passion for Field, a passion she believes will be the last meaningful 'event' of her life (131). For Claud, increasingly distanced from Helena, the relationship portends a disaster he is powerless to avert. Having carelessly brought Field home and introduced him to the happily widowed Helena, the boy who had once been the centre of the story becomes the narrator condemned to watch helplessly, from the sidelines, as Helena is slowly consumed by the serpent he has introduced into the garden.

The relationship between Helena and Field in *An Avenue of Stone* gives a first taste of Pamela Hansford Johnson's resistant plotting: this is an uncomfortable instance of heroic, or perhaps 'sacrificial' maternity. Helena gives everything, emotionally and financially, to Field, seeing him as a child who needs feeding up and looking after (143–144). She recognizes a failure to attain adulthood in him, and he

reveals an astonishing capacity to manipulate women with his faux naïve, sycophantic vulnerability. The book both avoids and insists upon the possibility of sexual desire in the relationship: Helena attributes her behaviour entirely to maternal leanings, while the unpleasant Mrs Sholto spreads gossip about the relationship, turning Field from cuckoo to gigolo. But the exploitation of Helena by Field is as nothing to the marriage between Helena's daughter Charmian and Evan Sholto, another former soldier, whose bizarrely repulsive uselessness is encapsulated by Helena's insistence on calling him the 'boiled owl'.<sup>10</sup>

Towards the end of *A Summer to Decide*, Hansford Johnson provides some insight into why Evan Sholto is so lacking in resource and, perhaps unsurprisingly, his mother is to blame. Evan is revealed to have been an indulged only child, growing to (im)maturity in the aftermath of the First World War, and in his spectacular fall from grace it is hard not to see profound contemporary anxieties about the fate of a new 'fatherless' generation. The spectre of delinquency looms large in the postwar (Kynaston. 2007, 364–369), and is manifest in representations of children, teenagers and returning soldiers – all of whom women were expected to mother. The cinema provides effective illustration of these fears and pressures. *The Blue Lamp*, the most popular British film of 1950, figures the delinquent youth – both male and female – as a threat to society (Harper and Porter. 2003, 249). As the plot unfolds, hysterical teenage femininity is set against dignified maternity, leaving little doubt but that women's place is in the home. Other films, however, asserted that young women could take up the mantle of maternity and provide necessary nurturance to damaged men. In *The October Man* (1947), an unpretentious thriller directed by Roy Ward Baker, a wounded hero struggles to clear his name after a false accusation of murder: only the unquestioning support of his girlfriend enables his survival as he struggles to believe in his own adulthood. Indeed, his fear for much of the film is that his accident (a head injury sustained in a bus crash stands in for the war) has unleashed a pre-Oedipal violence, and that he has regressed from the ideal of self-control so central to mid-century constructions of British masculinity. Popular culture thus amplified the anxieties emerging from social change, population anxiety and new psychological theories of child development to create a climate that demanded women embrace both biological and symbolic forms of maternity.<sup>11</sup> These modes of maternity might take a variety of forms – perverse, sacrificial or heroic – but the need to protect newly vulnerable *adult* children is perhaps why they achieved a degree of public cultural urgency. Uncritical devotion

to damaged masculinity might only have been a temporary sticking plaster over the gaping psychological wound of war, but it nonetheless permeates postwar fiction – and Pamela Hansford Johnson gives us a distinctly ghoulish, arguably sado-masochistic manifestation of this state of resentful dependency in her depiction of the marriage between Charmian and Sholto.<sup>12</sup>

Charmian married Sholto in haste – after the wartime death of another lover – but rather than repenting at leisure, she over-invests in her conjugal bonds. Uncritically besotted with her husband (or perhaps so needing the *role* of wife), she forgives his infidelity, puts up with his awful mother and resigns herself to profound unhappiness. She defends him, tolerates him and offers the developmental interruption of war as justification for his failures (*Avenue*, 59). Both Charmian and Ellen, who will become Claud's romantic interest, are given speeches suggesting that middle-class respectability and gender conditioning insist that, irrespective of – or perhaps because of – escalating postwar divorce statistics, women cannot leave the men who have been to war (*Summer*, 129). Even after the birth of Charmian's daughter – which radically redirects her affections – and the disaster of the criminal proceedings, she will not leave Evan (279–280), and she becomes instead one of a number of women in the novel competing to take the blame for the failings of weak, manipulative men. Field's morally upright wife Naomi asks 'how do I know that my priggishness didn't drive John to be ... well, the opposite?': a question that figures her husband not as an adult possessed of choice and agency, but as a child reacting to an over-bearing parent who has tried to impose the law-of-the-father (289). Naomi is filled with guilt for ceasing to be the uncritical mother and assuming the role of the father to the postwar man-child; Evan's actual mother, by contrast, over-compensates with a surfeit of the semiotic: demanding to be allowed to suffer instead of her son, she claims they are one body and she still feels the pain of bearing him (237, 277).<sup>13</sup>

As the novel approaches its conclusion, the distanced, measured narration that has characterized the trilogy begins to fracture. The central characters are isolated in a house in Kent, and a setting that should have been rural and restorative becomes increasingly claustrophobic, creating a space more suited to melodrama or the gothic. Evan, regressing to a perverted version of childhood, becomes a mad man in the attic, while his mother grows ever more monstrous in her genteel respectability, dropping pearls of spite wherever she goes (283). And yet all the characters ultimately pull back, with appropriately middle-class restraint,

from anything so excessive and embarrassing as a grand gesture or a defining act. As Ellen, figured throughout as the epitome of moderation and good sense, observes, the postwar is 'a reserved sort of world' (363). A 'repressed sort of world' might have been more appropriate, not least because, trapped in the pseudo gothic family drama, even she is contaminated by a toxic emotionality. Drawn into melodrama, she comes close to enabling Evan's suicide – a discrete and muted murder for a world of 'submerged scenes' and bitter recriminations (336). Ellen does not go through with her project, and Claud's somewhat patronizing response to her agonized decision perhaps more than anything sums up the lack of agency evident in postwar women's plots: 'You can't kill anybody, my darling, though it's nice of you to try' (341).

The gothic turn that ends *A Summer to Decide* emphatically foregrounds male breakdown. Yet the spectacular collapse of masculinity hides a series of sub-narratives that point to the damage war has done to women. This is implicit in Charmian's serial over-investment in others. Her obsession with her daughter – Claud describes her as having 'sunk herself so surely in Laura that she would never be free again' (III) – becomes a fantastical refuge that compensates for the fact that, unlike her husband, middle-class society will not permit her to regress to the blissful irresponsibility of infancy. The power of postwar gender guilt is equally evident in the half-glimpsed, and significantly less gothic, narrative of Claud's relationship with Ellen. Ellen's sacrificial maternity takes the form of caring for her hypochondriac father,<sup>14</sup> and her guilt focuses on the death of her first husband, a fighter pilot. Having not liked her husband much, she feels somehow more culpable for his death. But Ellen has a job, and a stronger sense of self-preservation than Charmian, and in a statement that troubles our comfortable acceptance of Claud's narrative authority, suggests that he too is suffering from a form of male regression. Turning down his offer of marriage, she announces: 'You are not grown up enough yet' (246).

The picture of postwar gender relations provided by these two novels suggests why thrillers and crime films were such a popular dimension of postwar popular culture. New roles for men, new narratives of man-making and heroism, were desperately needed in a culture in which the military had, perversely, destroyed male self-sufficiency and conventional masculine agency. There is a telling contrast between the pre-war world of *Too Dear for My Possessing* and the postwar world of the rest of the trilogy. In the first, Claud – having made an ill-judged marriage to the deeply conventional Meg – is urged by all around him to be kind

to her, to protect her from the reality of being unloved by her intellectually ambitious and mildly bohemian husband; in the second, women compete to protect and be kind to the damaged egos and subjectivities of the former soldiers, John Field and Evan Sholto.<sup>15</sup> These are men who must be nurtured, spoiled, protected from the perception of their own failure – even to the extent of women condoning their infidelities. The extent to which these men are actually damaged (Field is revealed, gradually, to be an arch manipulator and passive-aggressive master of ceremonies) is debatable, and it might be argued that the aftermath of war has simply given a new legitimacy to male egotism; but however the novels are read, ‘damage’ forms a keynote, plaintively persisting behind the spectacle of Helena and the overt criminality of the black market.<sup>16</sup>

The depiction of the increasingly desperate urge to exculpate men, and relieve them of responsibility, creates an equal and opposite emphasis on female responsibility. This, in turn, suggests that the condition of male damage is paralleled by one of female *guilt*. This guilt is multifaceted, emerging from a combination of social pressure and the trauma of bereavement. Women feel guilt because men died, leading to an obligation to serve those who remain (however worthless); and they feel guilt because some women had a ‘good’ war and forgot to prioritize. Crucially, though, both Pamela Hansford Johnson and a number of her contemporaries suggest that war has generated a second childhood in men.<sup>17</sup> After the uncanny experience of moving from being schoolboys playing at soldiers to the wartime assumption of a maturity very few of them could possibly have achieved – a situation neatly anatomized by Terence Rattigan in *Flare Path* (1942) – the postwar sees a widespread psychic collapse.<sup>18</sup> What has been called the limited ‘symptom pool’ of British culture ensured that this pain seldom found direct expression, but the literature of the postwar demonstrates its distorting and violent impact on the domestic and familial.<sup>19</sup> In this context women become mothers not only to their children, but to the strange boy-men who returned from the war. That this state of hyper-maternity might be fundamentally damaging to women is evident both in the psychological distortion of Charmian and in the belated ray of hope that Hansford Johnson permits to her central female character at the very end of *A Summer to Decide*. With the timely death of Mrs Sholto saving Charmian from a future of sado-masochistic maternal co-habitation and gothic confinement, and Evan safely incarcerated for three years, she takes advantage of still-potent middle-class privilege to dump the baby with a nanny and returns to Bruges – where the trilogy began.



Writing to Claud in the last words of the novel she tries to explain her new-found sense of peace:

... somehow I feel I am in refuge here, *because I am in the past.*

However hard I try, I'm overcome by this sense of being young – that I'm really young, a young girl with no worries and everything before me.

And that's ridiculous because, as you know, I am nearly twenty-five. (364)

Freed from masculinity and maternity, Charmian now has regressed to girlhood – something she dreamt of in the depths of her misery (268) – a psychological transition that suggests both the extent of *female* damage caused by war, and the absolute impossibility of articulating this damage in a postwar preoccupied with the reconditioning of men. In the normative framework of postwar realignment, neither men nor women can *articulate* the developmental crisis caused by war: but as far as society is concerned, and within the very limited parameters of British expressive possibility, the 'plot' can only be one of narrative remasculinization. Women's future is maternal stasis; men's is rebirth – a legitimized second childhood.

In making this argument I am not attempting to dismiss male wartime sacrifice, nor the courage it took many men to contain and manage their wartime experiences in a culture still wedded to ideals of male emotional restraint. Similarly, it should be acknowledged that many women, in wartime and its aftermath, resisted the coercive force of heteronormativity and lived outside its parameters. Rather, this essay aims to demonstrate something of how culture recovers from war, and how popular narrative becomes complicit in – and simultaneously undermines – the dissemination of 'legitimate' narratives. In the late 1940s, one of the key ways in which Britain recovered from the devastating impact of the Second World War was through the reassertion, in more or less subtle forms, of gender normativity. If home and nation are symbolically linked, the stability of one speaks to the restored stability of the other. Yet the precariousness of this reasserted heteronormativity is all too evident in novels such as those of Pamela Hansford Johnson, who suggests, in her deployment of physical and psychological violence, a postwar generation probably unfit for adulthood and definitely unfit for parenthood.

Men regress to childhood and women are conscripted to mother them. Where, then, does that leave the child? Michal Shapira has traced the immense impact of the Second World War on cultural conceptions of childhood, arguing that it was in the crucial years 'before, during and

after World War II' that 'the child's psyche and parental relationships [were reified] as central to the normal development of the future adult citizen' (2013, 6). Psychoanalysis was integral to postwar debates and social policy, its insights woven into the fabric of the welfare state. Yet as Allan Hepburn has recently argued, the extent to which it was actually possible to imagine the child as anything more than a symbol of the future or repository of hope (or despair) is open to question (2016, 103–127). Children as children, he notes, are largely absent from fiction of the immediate postwar (and when they do turn up, in *Lord of the Flies*, their return is hardly reassuring). The psychic landscape of Pamela Hansford Johnson's trilogy perhaps goes some way towards accounting for the absent child, as do the many other fictions that depict this nexus of male regression, female guilt and the displacement of actual children by a generation still mourning its own lost childhood.<sup>20</sup> And this returns us to Judith Butler and the pervasive but often ill-defined perceptions of loss that characterized the postwar. For the generation tasked with rebuilding Britain, responsibility is unwelcome and almost unbearable, not least because beneath the trauma of war lies the unresolved, and largely unrecognized, grief of an abruptly foreclosed childhood.

### Notes

- 1 For a nuanced account of population anxieties and the national implications of falling birthrates see Pat Thane, 'Population Politics in Post-War British Culture', in eds Becky E. Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters, *Moments of Modernity* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1999), 114–133.
- 2 A particularly appropriate example here is Elizabeth Berridge's 'Chance Callers', in which a young couple – he a former POW believed dead, she his 'widow' – struggle to relearn each other when they are unexpectedly reunited. The self-conscious, brittle, reunion of the young is paralleled against the consuming grief of an older generation, the retired captain who loses his brother – and constitutive other – in the second half of the story.
- 3 The resurgence of the thriller genre, and films such as *They Made Me A Fugitive* (1947) – in which a former RAF pilot is tempted by the excitements of criminality – suggest that boredom was a recognized problem in the readjustment of some men to civilian life. Yet the cultural pressure to readjust and adapt is equally evident in novels such as J.B. Priestley's *Three Men in New Suits* (1945), which proposes a redirection of male energy into political and social reconstruction.
- 4 Some novels, such as Nevil Shute's *Requiem for a Wren* (1955), grapple with the problem of women's postwar readjustment – but Shute's novel, like the texts examined in this essay, drifts inevitably towards an articulation of women's

- guilt, and a need for atonement, as an appropriate female reaction to having transgressed gender boundaries and become active agents in war.
- 5 For a discussion of mid-century problems of periodization, the canon and 'modernism' in what they term the 'long 1930s', see Leo Mellor and Glyn Salton-Cox, 'Introduction', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 57:3, 1–9.
  - 6 *Too Dear for My Possessing* is one of a number of Second World War fictions that deal with the conflict through retrospection. Not unlike L.P. Hartley's *Eustace and Hilda* trilogy (1944–1947) or even Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), the book is shaped as a *Bildungsroman*. Looking back to the interwar years, to childhood and youth, it ends with the inevitability of war.
  - 7 While major characters such as Claud, Charmian and Helena feature in the novel, they do so only as components of a larger, cross-class community picture of Britain at war. The book is an interesting variant on the documentary realist style and is structurally comparable to novels such as J.B. Priestley's factory novel *Daylight on Saturday* (1943). In her recent biography of Hansford Johnson, Wendy Pollard observes that the novels are commonly referred to as the 'Helena trilogy', a reputation based on the character's 'force' (Pollard, 2014, 137). Helena dominates the narrative in spite of her early death in the final volume.
  - 8 A point reiterated by assessments of the trilogy: Pollard, *Pamela Hansford Johnson*, 152. Pollard also traces the autobiographical aspects of the novels, including the difficulties adjusting to civilian life experienced by Hansford Johnson's first husband, Neil Stewart (138).
  - 9 In *An Avenue of Stone*, Claud is writing about Picasso. The choice of artist is significant. Picasso, along with Matisse, was the subject of a controversial 1945 exhibition at the V&A, and his work prompted violent reactions, which might be aligned with attitudes towards modernity and the postwar settlement. See Charlotte Mosley, ed., *The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996) for contrasting responses to the event.
  - 10 Reputedly slang for hungover, this is a magnificently appropriate description of Sholto, a stolid but supposedly good-looking man who blinks at the world in a bewildered fashion, and whose plot trajectory comprises drinking, adultery, rudeness, scrounging, criminal enterprise, more drinking and prison. Possibly his only significant acts are the impregnation of his wife, and – while awaiting sentencing – the contemplation of suicide.
  - 11 For the influence of attachment theory and the 'importance of full-time motherhood', in particular in the work of John Bowlby, see Michal Shapira, *The War Inside* (2013, 203–214).
  - 12 It is notable that the maternal ideal of the *October Man* gradually evolves in the 1950s into a maternal problematic, and to tropes of resentment and the scapegoating of women. Films as diverse as *The Long Memory* (1953) and *Dunkirk* (1958) show the damage done to men by women's betrayal or maternal failings. In the first film, the betrayal is a literal one; in the second, Richard

- Attenborough's boat owner is emasculated by his wife's needy dependency. Her inability to look after the baby renders him publicly impotent.
- 13 It is difficult to isolate succinct quotations from Hansford Johnson's fiction. She works rather through the cumulative impact of suggestive phrases and domestic details – as for example in Field's repeated use of the word 'terrific', which begins as an evocation of diffidence but evolves into a representation of banality, and ultimately a combination of egotism, solipsism and selfishness. 'We must feed the men', an entirely prosaic cliché spoken by Mrs Sholto, thus mutates into a coercive statement of women's duty to subjugate and sacrifice their needs to the demands of the male ego. Women must feed men and must be fed to men.
- 14 Hansford Johnson was a great admirer of Dickens, and Ellen's plot has significant echoes of *Little Dorrit*.
- 15 One of the reasons Claud so dislikes Evan is because he causes Charmian distress, and as he watches them bickering, Claud thinks: 'Charmian, if she were to be happy, must be treated by a man with comradeship but considered in secrecy as a child, and in this manner cherished' (*Avenue*, 224). It's a telling aside which speaks volumes to Claud's continued investment in a pre-war gender sensibility (men protect women) that does not fully understand the gender reconfigurations of the postwar ('we must feed the men'). Whether this is a factor in Ellen's judgement that he is not grown up yet is harder to determine. Hansford Johnson leaves Ellen's reasoning opaque.
- 16 Damage is also present in such shocking marginalia as the suicide of Nina Crandell – a lively, attractive young woman, introduced once, and then killed off-stage, apparently out of an inability to live with the atomic age, but later revealed to have despaired at her husband's adultery. War, the threat of further war and the fundamental instability of 'peace' are messily conflated with private traumas, and characters struggle to work out how to live in a cultural climate that perversely combines torpor with the urgency of last days.
- 17 Or – as in the case of Claud – somehow effaced them from narrative centrality.
- 18 In *Flare Path*, the pilot hero is simultaneously an inspired leader of men and a vulnerable child-man utterly dependent on his older wife, who sacrifices her career and desires for his nurturance. Rattigan offers a disturbing vision of what becomes of such boy-men in his postwar drama *The Deep Blue Sea* (1953).
- 19 In *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), William Watkin quotes Elaine Showalter's use of the concept of the 'symptom pool' as part of a subtle discussion of the social construction and conventions of grief (29, 28–50).
- 20 Comparable examples might include Marghanita Laski's *Little Boy Lost* (1949), in which the central character Hillary resents the boy he has gone to rescue from a French orphanage largely because the child interrupts and complicates the memory of his lost wife; Elizabeth Taylor's *Palladian* (1946), in which a

very literal child sacrifice is enacted; and even Christie's *Crooked House* (1949), in which the child becomes the generic criminal scapegoat that enables the young couple to have to a future.

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## CHAPTER NINE

### Men of the House

Oppressive Husbands and Displaced Wives in  
Interwar, War and Postwar Women's Fiction  
(Daphne du Maurier, Dorothy Whipple,  
Elizabeth Taylor)

*Lucy Hall*

In 1938, at the height of apprehension about the imminence of another European conflict, Virginia Woolf responded to a letter that asked: 'How in your opinion are we to prevent war?' (Woolf. 1938, 1). Woolf's answer to this daunting question from 'an educated man' to a woman was rather longer and further reaching than he might have expected. In *Three Guineas* she set out to forge a direct link between the oppression of women and the origins of an authoritarian, fascist mentality not only in Europe but also in the seemingly benign British home. Having been raised in a society that socialized masculinity in a way that promoted its unquestioned superiority, Woolf elaborates on the systematic confinement and control imposed on middle-class women by their male counterparts. For Woolf, the gender prejudices of the British middle class are but another version of a radical political fascism that results in the violent hyper-masculinity of Nazism. Woolf contends that: 'the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; ... the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other' (258). Vehemently refuting the popular rhetoric that distinguished English national character from the extremes of Germany with its disposition to power-hunger, *Three Guineas* traces the origins of fascism, in the home

as well as in the home country, and its relation to the oppression of women. It is this petit bourgeois fascism that lies just below the surface of the domestic narratives under scrutiny here; narratives in which female characters are controlled and, to a greater or lesser extent, forcibly excluded not only from a male-dominated social order, but also from the domestic space itself.

This essay examines how three novels by women published before, during and just after the Second World War reframe wider social concerns over gender and power through the prism of the domestic space. Although not polemical or overtly political in their subject matter, the authors discussed here embody the modest, reserved type of mid-century perspective that characterizes a number of interfeminist texts. The novels: Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters* (1943) and Elizabeth Taylor's *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) portray husbands and 'love interests' who reassert masculine power by alienating, excluding, invading or repositioning women in their 'rightful place' – in the home.

While Woolf and other women of a similar social status viewed domesticity as something negative to be overcome or risen above in the 'search for self-betterment' (Light, 1991, 10), the constructs of femininity and female identity of the Victorian period were still deeply entrenched in the ideology of the British middle class. The polarization of public and private, exterior and interior, masculine and feminine spheres persists from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Despite the disdain towards domesticity shown by middle-class, 'modernizing' women like Woolf, as much as the home could be a suffocating, oppressive space it was also one of the few possible arenas in which women could exercise control. According to middle-class gender roles, men were expected to participate in the world of business or politics outside the home, leaving women dominion over their children, the management of servants, the organization of household tasks and interior decoration. In the interwar years and during and after the Second World War the domestic sphere had become an increasingly anxious and politicized domain, aggravated by what became known as the Servant Problem, bound up with tense renegotiations of gender identity and the symbolic significance of domestic space. These new conditions undoubtedly had the greatest impact on women. Along with the imminent threat to lives and homes, the mobilization of the civilian population, and the sudden need for women to take on conventionally 'male' jobs, came a radical (if temporary) reconfiguration of traditional gender roles. Consequently,



as Sonya O. Rose writes: 'there was significant public apprehension (at least on the part of some men) that women's wartime responsibilities and opportunities would permanently transform the gender order' (Rose. 2003, 124). As the distinctions between public and private and between gendered spaces began to merge and dissolve, a residual cultural anxiety over the disruption of gender and power dynamics ran well into the postwar, resulting in the compulsion to reassert traditional forms of masculine authority in the public and private arenas. In his study of masculinity in popular culture, Antony Easthope states that the masculine ego functions on the basis of defence and mastery, defending the ego from a perceived threat from within while simultaneously exerting control over the external threat of the feminine 'other' that jeopardizes the necessary unity of the masculine mind and body:

Masculinity aims to be one substance all the way through. In order to do this, it must control what threatens it both from within and without. Within, femininity and male homosexual desire must be denied; without, women and the feminine must be subordinated and held in place. (Easthope. 1990, 169)

For Easthope, the masculine ego is obsessed with power and needs to control all aspects of its surroundings. This is particularly true of the feminine 'other' that threatens the coherence of the ego and the cultural default of patriarchal hegemony. This is particularly relevant to wartime configurations of gender. As Margaret and Patrice Higonnet observe in 'The Double Helix': 'In both world wars many women gained economic independence and assumed familial authority' but this perceived female dominance of the wartime home front was followed by an emphasis in the postwar period on re-asserting masculine authority and the re-subordination of women, confining them to maternal and domestic roles (1987, 32).

The relationship between women and the domestic space plays an integral part in the alienation and fear experienced by the narrator of Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel, *Rebecca*. After her marriage to the mysterious older man, Maxim de Winter, the young and inexperienced narrator is thrust into the alien world of an ancestral home with its ingrained traditions and hierarchies. Manderley is as memorable as any of du Maurier's human characters; an obtrusive presence in the plot that returns to haunt the naïve narrator in her dreams long after it is razed to the ground. For her, Manderley is a menacing site of incomprehensible traditions and rigid hierarchies. Du Maurier develops the narrator's

tentative interactions with the domestic regime to expose the precarious dynamics of the new marriage.

Despite the nostalgic tone of the narrator's memory of the house in the novel's famous opening sequence, the reader is aware throughout the novel that she is never truly at home there. From the outset the new Mrs de Winter is intimidated by the sheer size of her home and by the established codes of propriety that stifle her every move. Her discomfort accompanies her inability to shake off the oppressive presence of Maxim's first wife – the mature, sophisticated Rebecca. The fact that Rebecca is dead before the beginning of the narrative merely heightens her power, saturating the house and its grounds with a ghostly aura so strong that, for the duration of the novel, she is more convincingly the mistress of Manderley than the narrator. The servants Frith and the sinister Mrs Danvers constantly reiterate the ways of her predecessor: 'Mrs de Winter always used the morning room'; 'I rather think Mrs de Winter would have ordered a wine sauce, Madam'; 'Mrs de Winter always used the alabaster vase' (*Rebecca*, 87, 92, 145). The narrator becomes increasingly unnerved, convinced, quite rightly, that she is being compared and found wanting. Smothered by these appeals to past convention, her already unstable position in the household is further undermined, convincing her that she is an interloper and a fraud. 'She's still the mistress here, even if she is dead', the sinister housekeeper and Rebecca's former confidante, Mrs Danvers, tells the narrator. 'She's the real Mrs de Winter, not you. It's you that's the shadow and the ghost. It's you that's forgotten and not wanted and pushed aside' (257). The more alive Rebecca seems, the more ghost-like the narrator becomes, precisely because of her displacement within the home; a lack of identity reinforced by the fact that the reader only knows her as the second Mrs de Winter; never discovering her real name.

The narrator's anxieties are not in the least assuaged by the infantilizing attitude of a husband who uses epithets such as 'my child' (122) rather than her name. This namelessness emphasizes the protagonist's lack of identity as Maxim's proper wife and her inability to fully inhabit this role until the myth of Rebecca has been dispelled. Maxim's patronizing language, although inoffensive enough at first glance, undermines the narrator's confidence in her role as the new mistress of Manderley. Overshadowed by the illusion of the powerful and competent Rebecca, the narrator must learn the conventions of her new home like a child learning by rote and correction. This becomes uncomfortably apparent in an episode following the accidental breakage of a valuable Cupid

figurine. 'Perhaps, if such a thing should happen again, Mrs de Winter will tell me personally, and I will have the matter attended to?' Mrs Danvers says directly to Maxim (150):

'Naturally', said Maxim impatiently, 'I can't think why she didn't do so yesterday. I was just going to tell her when you came into the room.'

'Perhaps Mrs de Winter was not aware of the value of the ornament?' said Mrs Danvers, turning her eyes upon me.

'Yes,' I said wretchedly. 'Yes, I was afraid it was valuable. That's why I swept up the pieces carefully.'

'And hid them at the back of a drawer where no one would find them, eh?' said Maxim, with a laugh, and a shrug of the shoulders. (149-150)

Maxim's reaction confirms the narrator's infantilized position. Undermining her in front of the housekeeper he effectively withholds the authority due the mistress of the house. By overlooking his wife and supposed social equal to engage directly with Mrs Danvers, a servant, he is complicit in that disempowerment. Master and servant discuss the narrator as though she were not there or could not fully understand – as one would perhaps treat a child. She is rendered so ineffectual in her new role that when Mrs Danvers is not actively intervening, the duties of running the home fall to Maxim. 'How I loathe servants' rows', he complains to his young wife in exasperation. 'I wonder why they come to me about it. That's your job, sweetheart' (148). Thus demeaned, the new wife is placed on a level with a 'between-maid', a position below Mrs Danvers in the house hierarchy. Maxim's failure here is in allowing Mrs Danvers's sly suggestion that the narrator is an interloper in the feminine world of the morning room to pass unchecked.

A large part of the displacement that the narrator experiences at Manderley is down to the enduring memory of Rebecca, assiduously preserved by Mrs Danvers and aggravated by Maxim's reticence. A constant feeling of dread blights the new wife's interactions with her husband from her arrival at Manderley to the discovery of Rebecca's body later in the novel. Her failure to confess to breaking the ornament stems from anxiety about upsetting Maxim by inadvertently reminding him of his first wife. 'I became nervous,' she frets, recalling her husband's reaction to her discovery of Rebecca's beach-house, 'fearful that some heedless word, some turn in a careless conversation should bring that expression back to his eyes again' (127). The narrator's fear is rooted in unknowing. Unable to discuss Rebecca with her husband, her ability to avoid upsetting him is pure conjecture and so the idea of Rebecca

gains more influence. As Maria Tatar puts it, in *Rebecca* 'secrets become a source of power' (2004, 79). And it is not only Rebecca's power that increases with this active withholding of information but Maxim's, too. By hiding information from his second wife, Maxim places her at a disadvantage. His motivation might be as much protective of the young woman as it is self-preservation, but her infantilization imposes an exclusive hierarchy of knowing. He warns her: "There is a certain type of knowledge I prefer you not to have. It's better kept under lock and key" (211).

The presence of forbidden knowledge and female sexual transgression makes *Rebecca* the cultural offspring of Perrault's 'Bluebeard', as Tatar and others have observed (Tatar, 2004, 67–88).<sup>1</sup> This affinity is especially pertinent when considering how important the spatialization of secrecy within the domestic scene is to the narrative. In the folktale Bluebeard's murderous secret is not only psychological but also physically located in a locked room, forbidden to the wife who otherwise is free to roam over the home. Like Bluebeard, Maxim's secret – that he killed Rebecca – is also physically manifest in the secrecy surrounding the beach-house and the west wing of Manderley. By creating forbidden zones within the home, Maxim deliberately restricts the narrator's control of a locus that would normally come under her command. Prohibited knowledge goes hand-in-hand with prohibited space, and both operate in an exclusionary way to ensure that the narrator knows her place both physically and hierarchically. The punishment for the narrator's contravention of these limitations would be, not death, but the loss of her husband's love. The significance of these seemingly arbitrary restrictions to the narrator's standing in Manderley becomes clear only when they are finally overcome. When Maxim confesses his secret, the narrator's response is now level-headed and pragmatic in comparison with her justifiable paranoia earlier in the novel. Once the truth about Rebecca is revealed, Mrs Danvers loses her power (she obliterates herself and the house in dramatic fashion), and the second Mrs de Winter finally assumes the care and control of a husband, broken after the revelation of his crime and the loss of Manderley.

The degree to which the happiness of the narrator is dependent on her husband's whims and her treatment at the hands of the household staff is an anxiety that also animates Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters*. 'The conduct of our lives depends so much on the people we live with', commiserates Lucy, one of the eponymous sisters. 'With women', replies her husband, 'it depends far too much' (52). Echoing Virginia

Woolf's concerns in *Three Guineas* over the dangers of women's reliance on their husbands and fathers for income and protection, this conversation near the beginning of the novel voices the issues of helplessness and dependency that arise in Whipple's work and in other middlebrow domestic narratives by women during the interfeminist 1930s and 1940s. But while Maxim de Winter's role in alienating his new wife from the home is part negligence and part self-preservation, the same cannot be said for the domestic tyranny perpetrated by Geoffrey Leigh, the husband of Lucy's sister Charlotte in *They Were Sisters*. Geoffrey dominates the Leigh household, terrorizing his wife and children with his volatile moods and exerting power and control through complex games of emotional manipulation that breed both fear and dependency in his family. Unlike Maxim's expedient interventions, Geoffrey's dictatorship over the home is contrived to deny Charlotte her role as mistress of the house. His grip over the Leigh home is manifest in his complete takeover of those areas traditionally allocated to the wifely role. Her disempowerment is not too dissimilar to that experienced by the narrator of *Rebecca* when confronted with the inhospitable world of Manderley, but the control that Geoffrey wields over his home and family is all-consuming and entirely self-appointed; in the words of the housemaid, 'the master's the mistress here' (*Sisters*, 76). Geoffrey ensures that the house is run to his exacting standards, inspecting spoons for the slightest smudge, insisting on his children's neatness, even turning grocery shopping into a display of supreme exhibitionism. Charlotte is excluded from each of these activities, stripped of any potential power she might wield against her husband. Geoffrey's reach extends to the domestic staff who, although they should be under Charlotte's control, are chosen carefully for their allegiance to her husband.

In the period affected by the Servant Problem, the appeal of better wages for women in factories and offices was beginning to make ideas of a servant class outmoded and led to anxiety over the availability of servants in the middle-class home (a situation, as described in Eleanor Reed's essay elsewhere in the collection, that was exploited in the 1930s by magazines like *Woman's Weekly*). The scarcity of efficient and willing household employees makes the servant an oddly powerful figure; a phenomenon found in other middlebrow narratives. For example, Julia Davenant, the protagonist in Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945), imagines old servants as unfriendly ghosts, watching her as she attempts to carve out a space for herself in another woman's home, servants who are old-fashioned in style of dress but contemporary in temperament:

The ghosts of servants seemed to hover in the place – Mrs Beeton servants, with high caps and flying bows to their aprons. But the ghosts haunted they did not help or encourage. (*AML*. 2012, 9)

The sense of hostility from Julia's imagined ghosts, enhances her growing feeling that she is an unwelcome interloper in the Lippincote's house, and echoes the disturbing dynamic between the narrator and Mrs Danvers, eerily ghost-like herself, in *Rebecca*. Mrs Danvers's power over the narrator is asserted through the systematic manipulation of the young woman's inexperience and desire to fit in, exploiting her dependency on the housekeeper as her guide through the bewildering customs of Manderley. As Judy Giles notes in her essay 'A Little Strain with Servants', this animosity between Mrs Danvers and the narrator is emblematic of wider social concerns over class and fundamental changes to the management of the domestic sphere (Giles. 2003, 41–42). Mrs Danvers capitalizes on the inverted power dynamic between maid and mistress, stoking the narrator's concern over Rebecca's continuing hold over her husband.

While the insidious wearing down of the second Mrs de Winter is more closely linked to Mrs Danvers's own fixation on Rebecca than an adherence to Maxim's authority, the collusion between insubordinate housemaids takes a more alarming turn in *They Were Sisters*, becoming a vehicle for masculine control in the domestic sphere. Charlotte, worn down from years of emotional manipulation at the hands of her husband, is ever aware of the 'watchful eyes and ears of the maids' (*Sisters*, 76). The maids of the Leigh household are extensions of Geoffrey's power over his family, acting as spies tasked to inform on Charlotte's failings. Like the second Mrs de Winter, Charlotte is under surveillance by her own staff. In the Leigh household, the servants' unsettling gaze is directed over the domestic space by the man of the house's version of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon.<sup>2</sup> As Anthony Easthope observes: 'visual dominance, seeing and knowing everything comes from a particularly masculine perspective ... To keep in sight means to keep under control' (Easthope. 1990, 43). Charlotte has no authority over the staff, who answer only to her husband, nor is she able to hide from her husband's gaze, even when he is not there. This creates a claustrophobic atmosphere in which she is never unobserved and never outside her husband's control:

In addition to the day to day running of the home, Geoffrey dominates the details of its décor. After a rare holiday away with her sisters, Charlotte contemplates returning home. It was a man's house. She had given in

to Geoffrey in everything, even in the furnishing of the house, and she skimmed over the intimation again that there was something hotel-like in Geoffrey's taste, and that the morning-room, his room, the most used room in the house, was very like a bar-parlour with drinks perpetually on the sideboard, quantities of brass, jokes on the poker-work and pottery tobacco-jars, pipe-racks, spill-holders, ash-trays and calendars, jokes of the irate golfer, purple-faced colonel and comic curate variety. (*Sisters*. 2012, 75)

Going further than Virginia Woolf's complaints about the cloistering of women in the domestic sphere, in Whipple's novel Charlotte is denied control even over this. She has completely surrendered to her husband's taste, which is clearly incompatible with her own. Geoffrey's personality overwhelms the house, estranging her from her home to the point that it feels hotel-like, as though she were an anonymous guest. Her exclusion from decisions about furnishings is just one of many factors that disqualify Charlotte from control over the feminine domain.

In an essay on gendered coding of the nineteenth-century home, Juliet Kinchin notes that the morning room (or drawing room) is traditionally a feminine space 'characterized as light or colourful, refined, delicate and decorative', while smoking and dining rooms are commonly masculine spaces (Kinchin. 1999, 13). Geoffrey's co-option of the morning room as his lair, rather than any other room in the house, is loaded with significance. While *Rebecca* is about the contestation of rival femininities, *They Were Sisters* represents masculine appropriation of feminine loci. The gendered coding of the drawing room at Manderley reflects Rebecca's aesthetic taste and retains a feminine aesthetic despite Maxim's reluctant intervention in household affairs. In contrast to Charlotte's description of Geoffrey's morning room/den, the narrator of *Rebecca* observes a room that fulfils Kinchin's observations about gendered space:

This was a woman's room graceful, fragile, the room of someone who had chosen every particle of furniture with great care, so that each chair, each vase, each small, infinitesimal thing should be in harmony with one another, and with her own personality. (*Rebecca*. 1992, 89)

This description of a 'woman's room' directly opposes that of the Leighs' drawing room. While the morning room at Manderley is the epitome of Rebecca's taste – carefully considered and coordinated – the assortment of bric-a-brac chosen by Geoffrey Leigh, in his 'man's house', seems thrown together and characterized by an oppressive and exclusionary air of stuffy masculinity. The objects and décor that characterize the drawing room transform the home's interior into something more like a

pub or gentlemen's club, places which by their nature are not only devoid of femininity but resentful of its presence.

A common concern of wartime literature is displacement from the home – closely connected to the physical destruction of houses during the Blitz and the mobilization of families. Whipple also expresses a sense of dislocation, albeit in a pre-war milieu. Geoffrey runs his home in a distinctly more forceful manner than Maxim de Winter's careless interference. Geoffrey does not take over Charlotte's duties because she is unable to perform them, he does so to ensure that she cannot undermine his own control in either the public, male sphere or the private, female sphere: 'Geoffrey managed the house; Charlotte was merely his anxious subordinate, reprimanded more severely than the maids if things were not kept up to the standard Geoffrey required' (*Sisters*, 76). Just as the narrator of *Rebecca* struggles to assert her position as the mistress of Manderley, Charlotte is demoted to the lowest position in the domestic hierarchy. Where Maxim de Winter's interference in the running of the home is reluctantly taken on to compensate for his new wife's lack of confidence Geoffrey Leigh proactively usurps his wife's position in the home.

Mid-century middlebrow writers in addition to Whipple explore and at times subvert gendered domestic roles. In her influential study, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, Alison Light examines at length the 'realignment of sexual identities which was part of a redefinition of Englishness' between the wars (1991, 7). As Margaret and Patrice Higonnet observe, the 'overfeminization' of the home front in wartime tended to produce a 'gender-linked structure of subordination' (1987, 34). It is tempting to account for Geoffrey's desperation for dominance as a part of this cultural shift, although in Whipple's novel his running of the family home suggests not so much a fear of feminization as a redefinition of masculinity to suit his own requirements. In *They Were Sisters*, published in wartime but with a pre-war setting, a reframing of gender roles produces an extreme model of masculine domination and female subordination. To rebalance the negative portrayal of masculinity in the novel, Whipple offers the gentler figure of Charlotte's sister Lucy's husband, William, who embodies an alternative, more positive example of domestic masculinity. Lucy and William form an equal partnership, a modern marriage, in contrast to Geoffrey's totalitarian regime, which sees his wife confined to one turret-room in an inverted private domain, masculinized to the point where the woman is physically expelled from her habitual realm to languish, in Gilbert and Gubar's famous term, as a 'madwoman in the attic' (1979).



The concerns that arise in *They Were Sisters* over the expulsion of the feminine and the assertion of masculine control assume greater clarity in the postwar period. As Easthope observes, war is quintessentially masculine territory, historically as well as psychologically. The field of war, devoid of female presence, is a space removed from the effeminacies and weaknesses that the masculine ego reviles, and is an outlet for masculine aggression that desires to stamp out feminine attributes (Easthope. 1990, 66–68). Geoffrey exercises power over his family by commandeering the home, removing the possibility for other personalities to co-exist and dominating the space as an empire of his own. However, he does not desire to stamp out the feminine altogether, rather to manipulate it. His emotionally tortuous habit of feigning illness after outbursts of rage is calculated to play on his family's sympathy and ensure their loyalty. He may restrict his wife's use of and authority over the domestic space, but he makes no attempt to rid himself of her presence altogether until his daughter has proved to be an adequate replacement.

Although written during or just before the Second World War, Whipple's and du Maurier's narratives are set in the interwar period and grapple more with the emasculation of a period still deeply affected by the First World War than with the disruption of gender roles during and after the Second. By comparison, Elizabeth Taylor's *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) is a postwar novel that deals directly with the social and psychological fallout of that conflict. In *A Wreath of Roses*, Taylor raises other concerns over a wife's subordination in the portrayal of the relationship between Arthur and Liz but, most emphatically, she represents another version of Geoffrey Leigh in her characterization of the murderer Richard Elton in a monstrous magnification of the assertion of hyper-masculinity.

Initially intrigued by the mystery surrounding Richard, the emotionally aloof and independent Camilla embarks on a tentative mission to unravel his secrets and to have a bit of an adventure before returning to the all-female environment of a girls' school. There are clues to Richard's cruelty throughout the novel, but it is not until the tense final pages of the book that Camilla is exposed to its excesses. Alone in an abandoned house, Richard reveals the aggression that, until now, has simmered below the surface:

He put his hand on her throat, touched the throbbing pulse with his fingers. She tried to speak but the words seemed too heavy to utter.

'Love was nothing,' he said, and kissed her mouth. They stared at one another. 'Nothing touched me. Making love exasperated me. Every depravity

angered me. I was cruel to that girl. She had frightened little ways, and I frightened her till she died.'

'You couldn't have done that,' she whispered.

'No. I strangled her.' (*Wreath*, 201–202)

Taylor's representation of the figure of Richard Elton reiterates the masculine desire for control seen in Geoffrey Leigh and exposes a frightening potential for violence. Richard's monstrosity derives from the compulsion of the masculine ego to suppress the 'other' that threatens to destabilize its authority. Not content with the hands-off method of control deployed by Geoffrey, the fear of femininity and the threat it poses to Richard's gendered integrity must be violently eradicated.

What makes Richard's violent suppression of the feminine of special interest to this discussion, however, is the domestic setting in which violence is threatened. Richard does not expel Camilla from the home, he takes her to an empty house, curiously, an abandoned vicarage. Here the eerie atmosphere gives rise to a physical manifestation of her repressed psychological fear of Richard.

'What was that noise?' she whispered.

'Only thunder.'

'It sounded like someone moving furniture about on the bare floors. What would happen if anyone came?'

She went slowly upstairs in front of him, a little afraid. Rain swept across the landing window. The banisters were coated with dust.

At the turn of the stairs, he came close behind her, and put his hands round her waist. Fear leapt through her at his touch. She stopped and turned round, her hands clutching the banisters. She could feel sweat breaking out over her body.

'I don't want to go any farther,' she whispered. Her lips stiffened so that she could scarcely speak. 'I can't bear this house a moment longer.' (*Wreath*, 200)

The Gothic aura of the empty house ignites the intuitive unease that Camilla has so far resisted. In a narrative that has taken place in the relative safety of the bright, well-populated English countryside, this sudden change in atmosphere is unnerving.

This alienation from the house can be juxtaposed with Camilla's unease with the domestic role that she sees her friend Liz locked into. Blocking her escape physically, Richard hems Camilla in, captive in an uncanny version of the domestic space. In her discussion of Elizabeth Bowen's short story 'The Demon Lover' (1945), Lucie Armitt notes that 'architecture can embody a sense of personal emptiness' (2011, 70) and in

this respect, the empty house is symbolic of Richard's personality. "He is like this empty cobwebbed house", she [Camilla] thought. "Room after room is full of echoes, there's nothing there" (204). The house's association with Richard's psychopathy elevates the tense experience of entering an unknown space to a feeling of terror. The house in which Camilla and Richard are intruders becomes a catalyst for Richard to exert his violent power; an externalization of his inner monstrosity.

After the Second World War women were encouraged to redirect their energies onto home and family despite the new freedoms many of them had enjoyed during the conflict. Returning from overseas, men often experienced a different sense of displacement in a society that had successfully operated for so long without them.<sup>3</sup> During this inter-feminist period, a new set of gendered issues began to ferment. Many women suffered a conflict between guilt and resentment; guilt associated with reintegrating their men into a changing society and resentment at the cost to their freedoms this might exact when the social and cultural emphasis on women resuming traditional domestic and familial roles was designed to reassert masculine hegemony in peacetime.

In addition to literature, popular film of the period deals with the violent suppression of the transgressive woman. Whether it be the criminally adventurous Barbara of Gainsborough's 1945 film *The Wicked Lady*, or Moira Shearer's ballerina, torn between domesticity and career in Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), women who do not conform to social conventions of the time are punished with death.<sup>4</sup> This impulse is present in *Rebecca* where Maxim de Winter's murder of his first wife is as much to do with the destruction of the transgressive woman as it is with personal vengeance. Although Rebecca appears to be the ideal wife, her private life undermines the public persona. 'She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through', Maxim tells the narrator. 'Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal' (284). Her lack of the feminine attribute of 'tenderness' and her private inappropriateness to the role of mistress of Manderley pose a broader threat to Maxim's position as master of the house and head of the local community. Rebecca transgresses a different set of unwritten rules from those the narrator tries desperately to navigate, posing not only a threat to the stability of the house and all it symbolizes, but also to the legitimacy of the family line, since Maxim suspects that she is pregnant with another man's child (292).

Turning again to the postwar context of *A Wreath of Roses*, the public's obsessive interest in violent forms of masculinity is exemplified

by an enthrallment with the serial killer Neville Heath, a case that, according to Nicola Beauman's biography of Taylor, influenced the characterization of Richard Elton. Heath was described in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as 'a bright, personable young man with charm and ability ... he attracted many women', but he was 'a liar, braggart, cheat and imposter' (quoted in Beauman, 2009, 197).<sup>5</sup> In his 1951 account of the 1946 trial, MacDonald Critchley expresses his perplexity at the fascination with Heath's crimes, particularly the interest shown by women in a criminal who could pose such a direct threat to them. Yet as Alan Allport observes in *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* (2009), the disappointment of homecoming frequently resulted in cases of violence against women and, shockingly, he reports that this was often culturally tolerated. Aggressive forms of masculinity highlight a desire for power and control that is not simply the sensational territory of newspapers but is implicit in the rhetoric of postwar readjustment. This gendered violence can be read as an attempt to put the insubordinate, transgressive woman back in her place.

Perhaps equally as concerning as Richard Elton's devious means of retaining power, and the terror this causes Camilla, is how this man's need for control is reflected in the same novel, albeit in a more subdued manner, in the relationship between Camilla's friend Liz and her husband, Arthur. As the Jekyll to Richard's Hyde, Arthur, a respected vicar and family man, is the antithesis of the violent compulsions that motivate his counterpart. Yet although he may not perpetrate acts of physical aggression, from early in the novel Arthur is associated with images of violence. Over-wrought and anxiously trying to soothe her teething baby, Liz imagines her husband thinking of his sermon, 'ready to flay – who would it be this time?' (*Wreath*, 96). Even though, at this moment, Liz is desperate for her husband's presence to help ease her anxieties over their child, the words that accompany Arthur's imagined actions and the world in which they are performed are violent and disconcertingly reminiscent of Richard's more direct impulse to physical harm. The parallel that Taylor draws between Richard and Arthur is best seen in the repeated action of placing his hands around his wife's neck that Arthur performs. 'Women's necks are so frail', he says, 'I'm always afraid their heads will break off' (*Wreath*, 188). Arthur's words here forge a connection with the undercurrent of violence that surfaces in the novel, simulating the act of strangulation that Richard has used on his victims.

By placing the family patriarch in proximity to the sadistic killer, Taylor alludes to Virginia Woolf's notion, conceived during the anxious

build-up to war, of the Fascist's connection with the middle-class British male's oppression of the woman in the private sphere. In Taylor's depiction of the similarities between Arthur and Richard, there is a sense in which the public 'monstrous male' is derived from the 'private brother', to use Woolf's terms (Woolf, 1938, 191). Arthur is a reflection, however dim, of Richard's extreme methods of exercising power and control over his female victims. It is surely no coincidence that Taylor locates Richard's ultimate threat to Camilla in an abandoned vicarage, drawing a further disturbing connection. Liz is no less a victim of Arthur than Camilla could be of Richard, a dangerous parallel that Camilla herself notes when Liz raises her concerns over her friend's liaison:

I'm sorry, but I think that Richard man is bad. I think he does harm, I'm afraid he will do harm to you.

Camilla's response is unequivocal:

I'm afraid Arthur will do harm to you, too. ... He won't let you grow or change. He will never allow you to throw out new shoots, but will contort you into something he wishes you to be, a sort of child-wife. It's a kind of murder. (*Wreath*, 145)

For Camilla, Arthur's constant patronizing of Liz and reduction of her world to her role as a vicar's wife is almost as harmful as the physical threat Richard may pose to herself – 'a kind of murder'. While Richard's power resides in a visceral act of suppression, Arthur wields his seemingly benign power over Liz by denying her an identity outside of himself to the point that 'Liz' can only be defined by what she is in relation to 'Arthur' – wife and mother. The only role outside the domestic zone is her occasional (and dreaded) duty connected to Arthur's job as a vicar which falls under the umbrella of wifely duty.

A similar effacement of identity to that suffered by Liz in *A Wreath of Roses* is present in du Maurier's and Whipple's novels, each also depicting the creation of a kind of child-wife. However, while the second Mrs de Winter and Charlotte Leigh are compromised by their estrangement from the home, the threat to Liz's identity originates in her limitation within the domestic sphere. Arthur's power comes not from expelling the woman from her home, but from keeping her firmly in it.

Writing during a time of great social upheaval, du Maurier, Whipple and Taylor demonstrate a sensitivity to the precarious position of women in a society that persists in devaluing their contribution in spite of the advances made as a result of the Suffrage movement and the reforming

pressures of first-wave feminism. In their portrayal of male characters who restrict the woman to or alienate her from the home, these novels expose women's disempowerment when faced with the extremes of male anger and resentment, growing disturbingly more overt after the Second World War. These narratives of masculine control in the domestic sphere articulate wider cultural concerns over the reconstruction of gender roles and expectations in a postwar society, reconfiguring them as private, domestic wars fought on the battlefield of the home. As Kristin Bluemel observes, the domestic space in postwar women's writing is often representative of human relationships that take place in and around it. It is a space where women writers 'contested at close range, from the inside, easy assumptions made about home life' (Bluemel, 2017, 144). Daphne du Maurier, Dorothy Whipple and Elizabeth Taylor are each, in their own way, active participants in the denial of such easy assumptions.

### Notes

- 1 See Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 104–106; Maria Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and his Wives* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 37–88. Helene Meyers suggests that Rebecca is a reimagining of *Jane Eyre* (1847), another Bluebeard-style narrative: *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 34.
- 2 Jeremy Bentham designed the panopticon in the late eighteenth century as a means of surveillance and control in institutional buildings, prisons, factories, asylums and so on. It was also intended for officials and the public to keep watch over the gaolers. It consisted of a rotunda with an inspection house at its centre from where a single guard could observe inmates.
- 3 See Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) for a fuller exploration of this phenomenon.
- 4 *The Wicked Lady* (1945) directed by Leslie Artiss was based on Magdalen King Hall's novel *The Life and Death of the Wicked Lady Skelton* (1944). *The Red Shoes* (1948), a Hans Christian Anderson story, was directed by Powell and Pressburger and starred Moira Shearer. Both films received great critical and popular acclaim.
- 5 Sean O'Connor's account of the case, *Handsome Brute: The True Story of a Ladykiller* (London: Simon & Schuster), was published in 2013. O'Connor reconsiders whether the case is symptomatic or emblematic of the postwar atmosphere.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# British Women Writing War

## The Novels of Storm Jameson

*Katherine Cooper*

In their collection *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (1987), Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jensen, Sonja Michel and Margaret Weitz and their contributors set out some of the complexities and contradictions around gender and the two world wars. Feminist literary scholars and historians writing for the collection – including pioneering critics of women’s writing such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar – explored the ways in which gender continued to inflect our understanding of the First and Second World Wars. Writing that ‘the realities of the two world wars contradicted the myth that war compels men to go forth and fight in order to protect women who remain passive and secure at home’, the editors acknowledged that the traditional associations of men and women with, respectively, war and peace is simultaneously deployed as a stabilizing or civilizing force during wartime, when society appears most at risk (Higonnet et al. 1987, 1). This created a double-bind for women writers of the world wars who were documenting and celebrating freedoms won while operating within conservative constructions of gender in other areas of their lives. Nearly 40 years on from this definitive collection, the contradictions inherent in this push–pull wartime narrative of freedom and oppression continue to complicate how we read and understand women’s writing of this period. This essay explores the work of Yorkshire novelist and activist Margaret Storm Jameson to demonstrate how our understanding of gender, war and writing persists in shaping responses to women’s war writing and the processes of recovering it. I suggest that

our very strategies of recovery are underpinned by the gendered politics of war and the preconceptions about experience and authority that have always governed responses to war narratives, both critical and fictional.

Jameson's work raises many questions about women's war writing. Her tendency to cross-write, her preoccupation with male experience, her desire to write about European and not British experiences of war, all bring her into direct conflict with the authoritative modes of war writing. This essay focusses on a selection of Jameson's key war novels: *Europe to Let* (1940), *The Black Laurel* (1947) and *The Hidden River* (1955), to explore how her use of male protagonists and her choice of European and not British settings for her novels challenge the continuing assessment of war writing as a largely male genre, and one predicated on lived experience of the events depicted. It will illustrate how Jameson's work differs from that of her contemporaries and why this might prove illuminating in thinking about the politics around women writing war, suggesting that much scholarship seeking to appraise women's war writing has often been shaped by the very structures it was attempting to disrupt. The essay questions the ongoing impact of the complex politics of reading and recovering women's war writing and how we might move beyond them to seek new understandings of women's writing about war more generally.

The reception and understanding of Jameson's work offers a model for charting and challenging the appraisal of women's war writing and the sort of authors we can incorporate into the canon of 'war writing'. As scholarship of war writing around the two world wars has historically been preoccupied with the soldier-poet paradigm – a First World War trope that automatically designates war writing as male and inscribes it with unassailable authority based on military experience – women's writing about war has often been disregarded and side-lined as detailing experiences that were at best peripheral or at worst unreliable. Since the 1980s however, attempts have been made to resurrect and recover women's voices from the cacophony of narratives around the two world wars, and yet some of the prejudices and preconceptions associated with the privileging of experience, particularly male experience, have lingered. Feminist literary scholars and historians wishing to 'challenge the assertion that the two world wars were exclusively male enterprises' (Higonnet et al. 1987, 3) have often been forced to work within the parameters laid out by earlier critics, navigating and responding to the increasing importance placed on authority and experience in creating war narratives. I suggest that authors such as Jameson challenge and

transgress prescribed boundaries of gender, experience and authority to the extent that their work becomes unwieldy for critics of both war writing and women's writing, leading to further critical neglect.

It can be argued that war writing is the only genre in which lived experience holds such unassailable sway. When analysing or discussing literature that deals with love, sex or death, rarely do critics base their analysis or their selection of writers on whether they may have lived through such experiences. Indeed, undergraduates studying literature are often discouraged from foregrounding biographical considerations or authorial intent when examining works. Nonetheless, as Kate McLoughlin shows in *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq*, while the depiction of war is 'impossible', 'it quickly becomes apparent that the chances of success are greatest if the account in question is *salient* and, crucially, *credible*' (2011: 7). War writing, as McLoughlin expounds, has been predicated on experience and personal accounts and this has *de facto* excluded women who were traditionally disbarred from military service and therefore first-hand experience of conflict. In fact, as Gill Plain suggests, 'the equation of women with peace and creativity is as old as the association of women with a domestic sphere detached from the politics of public life. Society has long constructed women in opposition to war' (Plain. 1996, ix), a factor that further problematizes women's representations of conflict. The association of women with the domestic sphere and their historic exclusion from the public spheres of politics or fighting renders their narratives of conflict lacking in both the experience and authority traditionally expected from war narratives.

In fact, by the time of the two world wars, women's confinement to the domestic sphere was under increasing pressure from growing feminist movements. By the beginning of the First World War in 1914, practical considerations began to open up new opportunities for women: workers were needed to replace men sent away to fight, money was needed to run households in the absence of soldier husbands, brothers and fathers, and even jobs on the Front Line opened up as the need for 'manpower' undermined gendered norms. Zeppelin raids on London increased pressure on the civilian population, and women at home began to feel and experience more of war itself through bombing raids, food shortages and civilian deaths. However, just as women's increased presence in the workplace, and in the war itself, became more pronounced, the male voice of experience as authority reached a pinnacle with the soldier-poets of the First World War. As serving soldiers, the public critiques of war

by well-known writers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were accepted in a way that those of non-combatants could never be. Their work became a 'truth' of war that even war correspondents could not hope to achieve. As Paul Fussell declares in his seminal study *The Great War in Modern Memory*, these are the writers who have 'successfully memorialised the Great War as a historic experience with conspicuous imaginative and artistic meaning' (Fussell. 2000: ix). Their authoritative accounts of the Front Line and of ordinary men forced to fight under horrific conditions came to define war literature from that point on, anointed by critics such as Fussell and Samuel Hynes, who drew attention to their own experience of fighting in the Second World War as if to authenticate their critical perspectives.<sup>1</sup> Later studies such as Claire Tylee's *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writing* (1990), Dorothy Goldman et al's *Women Writers and the Great War* (1995), Higonnet's *Lines of Fire* (1999), Sharon Ouditt's *Women Writers of the First World War: An Illustrated Bibliography* (1999) and Angela K. Smith's collection *Women's Writing of the First World War: An Anthology* (2000) have done much to counteract the focus on male experience and authority. They draw attention to accounts like Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), which describe women's experience on the front line as nurses or fulfilling crucial roles on the Home Front. Nonetheless male experience still holds sway and the voices of Sassoon, Graves, Owen, Brooke et al. continue to dominate popular and critical discourse on the subject.

These attitudes prevailed into the Second World War as readers, critics and other writers sought out accounts based on military experience, experience of battle and even of service on the Home Front, which foregrounded the male perspective. While Cyril Connolly, Arthur Calder-Marshall, George Orwell and other leading male writers of the period asked: 'Why Not War Writers?' in 1940, their efforts still represented a privileging of male experience of war. In asking for male writers to be given relief from war service to write, they had failed to consider the question: 'Why Not Women Writers?'. A male voice remained the ultimate authority on narratives of warfare. While, as Gill Plain points out, the Second World War was, in contrast to its predecessor, 'rarely regarded as a literary war', there remained a bias towards male experience and authority (Plain. 2013, 233). In fact, even as women entered the public sphere of the workplace, 'combat, still reserved exclusively for men, became the benchmark of cultural value in British society' (234). The First World War veteran Robert Graves

voiced his own fears about female voices being allowed into the male realm of war writing, lamenting in *The Listener* that the poet of the Second World War 'cannot even feel that his rendezvous with death is more certain than that of his Aunt Fanny the firewatcher' (1941). Graves betrays here his anxiety that female experience of total war may come to rival male experience and the idealized male conflict narrative. His words indicate something of the hostility among authoritative male voices at the time towards women writing about war, as well as the impact of so-called total war – in which civilian populations experienced bombing and substantial loss of life. As a result, critical studies in the decades following the war continued to foreground male-authored testaments.

By the 1980s and 1990s, scholars began to revisit this period and rediscover female authors whose work had been marginalized or forgotten. Feminist critical studies, such as Gill Plain's *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power, Resistance* (1996), Jenny Hartley's *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (1997) and Phyllis Lassner's *British Women Writers of World War Two: Battlegrounds of their Own* (1998), sought to address this absence from the critical field through the recovery of writers such as Lettice Cooper, Betty Miller, Stevie Smith, Phyllis Bottome and even Jameson herself, as authoritative witnesses to the experience of the Second World War. These studies, coming out of second-wave feminist thinking, helped to foreground women's writing and women's experience in the interfeminist period. As such, they fulfilled a crucial role in bringing long-forgotten writing to critical attention and making the case for the importance of women's home front narratives. They set out to combat the privileging of male experience and authority within war by looking at women's representations of their own lived reality of war. They brought back into public view important works such as Betty Miller's *On the Side of the Angels* (1944), which examines the lives of the wives of those serving in the military faced with the uncertainty of war and its impact on their home lives; Rose Macaulay's highly evocative fictionalized account of the bombing of her flat during the Blitz in 'Miss Anstruther's Letters' (1942) – her only short story of the war – and Elizabeth Bowen's invocation of the oppressive atmosphere of the Blitz and its impact on day-to-day relationships and interactions in *The Heat of the Day* (1948). These works, along with several others, revealed new ways of thinking about women's writing and new horizons for feminist literary criticism. They pushed the boundaries of war writing and women's writing to increase the scope of

inclusion and to suggest that women could, and had, very successfully written about war.

More recently, studies including Steve Ellis's *British Writers and the Approach of World War Two* (2014), Allan Hepburn's *Around 1945* (2016), Petra Rau's *Long Shadows: The Second World War in British Fiction* (2016) and Ian Whittington's *Writing the Radio War* (2018) have repositioned women's writing within different critical frameworks and contexts, from their work with the BBC to their role in discourse around the beginning, middle and end of the war. As Rau suggests in her 'Introduction', the fact that the writing of the Second World War more generally is coming to 'renewed prominence within the academy is perhaps thanks to the emergence of fields of study that are attentive to its specificity' and a 'weakening of the boundaries between the popular and the literary' (Rau. 2016, 9). This weakening of boundaries, and gaining of new perspectives on the Second World War in particular, is freeing up women's war writing from the confines of either women's or war writing, allowing it to be examined in an entirely different light, as neither high nor low, authentic nor unreliable, female nor male. This has led to the examination of a wider range of novels by women writers from new perspectives beyond the criteria of experience, authority and gender.

This essay continues to engage with the conditions under which women's war writing is considered while retaining an awareness of the shaping force of previous critical responses on contemporary and future academic discourse around these writers. I acknowledge, however, that this remains an ongoing project for critics of war literature generally, and especially those working from an interfeminist perspective.

The privileging of male authority and experience in war studies has influenced how women's war writing is perceived and even the conditions under which it is recovered and re-presented. As Jenny Hartley observes 'when women writers did achieve literary recognition it was because they confirmed the criteria established by the male elite' (Hartley. 1997, 8). Where women's voices of the two world wars have been recovered, they have often had to answer to the demands for authority and experience, leading even feminist critics to adopt the same criteria in examining and making their case. The longstanding gender politics of war writing have had a lasting impact on the way that we have read and continue to read women's war writing. While this is not to undermine any of the important work already done in this area, it is essential to identify and explore this impact and the role it might play in future critical work.

Storm Jameson's work offers just such an opportunity for exploration. In addition to representing compelling perspectives on the war in the UK and Europe, Jameson's war novels open up debates around experience, authority and gender, and provide ways of rethinking how we look at women's war writing. Jameson's own trajectory, both critical and literary, has been complex – even in her lifetime her work fell from favour with readers and critics alike. As I will show, however, her war novels, while representing perhaps the most fruitful stage of her career, also offer a fascinating insight into how the politics of authority and experience within war writing and women's war writing can influence the longevity and recuperation of certain authors. The very elements of her work that have led to its exclusion from studies of war writing – her gender, her authority, her experience – offer interesting intersections from which to think about how women's war writing is appraised and how previous critical approaches may have limited the ways in which we understand it.

Jameson sits uncomfortably within war studies and women's writing because of the tendency of her work to cross boundaries between experience and imagination, men and women, Britain and Europe, and public and private. The unwieldy nature of these novels makes them simultaneously a tricky subject for critical accounts of the Second World War and an illuminating case study for examining the ways in which ideas around gender, authority and experience continue to influence thinking about women writing war. Enabled by her reputation as a novelist and her penchant for transgression, she became in 1938 the first female President of English PEN (the first female President of PEN International was only elected in 2016). Yet even taking into account a number of recent critical biographies and growing critical interest, Jameson remains somewhat outside the traditional canon of writing from the Second World War. Her war novels are largely absent from wider critical studies of the period. In part, of course, this is attributable to their tendency, by Jameson's own admission, to 'sag in the middle under the weight of my great ideas' (Jameson, 'Letter to John Montgomery, 6 December 1951'). However, it is also due to a wider, longer-established trend in the appraisal of women's war writing to display, however unconsciously, an implicit bias towards lived experience that privileges the work of male authors and problematizes the work of those women who step beyond the boundaries of gender or experience.

Jameson, particularly during the interwar period, was a prolific producer of what Nicola Beauman refers to as 'the woman's novel' (Beauman. 1983, 3). Her portrayals of women and women's issues remain

an extremely fruitful area of enquiry because of their ambivalent and often contradictory stance towards feminist issues. By the end of the 1930s, however, her desire to represent war saw her move steadily towards male protagonists. This was necessary to allow Jameson to represent a wider experience of war untroubled by the perceived limitations of gender – male characters are free to travel into parliaments and council offices, prisons and back streets, fascist movements and army barracks. What sets Jameson's novels of the Second World War (and the period shortly before) apart from those of her contemporaries, both female and male, is their tendency to engage with the war from two perspectives that were outside her own immediate experience. As Diana Wallace observes, historical fiction has always allowed women writers to 'adopt male narratives and protagonists, and to write about the 'male' world of public and political affairs' (Wallace. 2004, 7). Yet Jameson cross-writes during this period in order to expound certain ideas about Europe, about Britishness and about the causes of the war both in human and political terms. She also uses her middle name 'Storm' on her books, rather than 'Margaret', and wrote three of her novels under the male pseudonyms William Lamb and James Hill simply to avoid the charge that a female novelist should not be tackling such topics as nation and war.<sup>2</sup> In crossing these invisible boundaries, Jameson was able to represent what she hoped would be a fuller and more truthful picture of the war. She could never have predicted its negative impact on the later critical reception and even the future availability of her work.

One of Jameson's recurring male characters is David Renn, who appears in the *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy (*Love in Winter*, *Company Parade*, *None Turn Back*) of the 1930s as well as in *Before the Crossing* (1947) and *The Black Laurel* (1947). He features throughout her novels of the 1930s, as a First World War veteran, on the fringes of the General Strike, a policeman, a political activist and a spy. In *Europe to Let* (1940) it is David Esk who travels through Europe. In her exhaustive biography of Jameson, Jennifer Birkett describes Esk as 'a Jameson persona' – a manifestation of the writer herself in male form – exemplified by his being named after the river that runs through Jameson's home town of Whitby (Birkett. 2009, 190). As a veteran of the First World War, Esk observes the growth of fascism, the persecution of the Jews, the spread of Nazi ideas through city after city and dreads the return of what he calls 'the ineffable silliness of war' from the seasoned perspective of one who has seen and experienced it before (*Europe*, 168). His previous experiences are crucial to his narrative, memory and current experience,



underpinning all his musings on the latest European atrocities. For David Renn, it is also his memories, his contacts and his experience and, crucially, his maleness that grant him access to the tables of profiteers and businessmen, ministers and politicians and, in *The Black Laurel* (1947), that allow him to examine first-hand the real atrocities of the Holocaust as he visits a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia (*Laurel*, 313). In foregrounding the experiences of such men, Jameson is able to make direct comparisons between the wars and critique the systems of war – from the arms trade to the rise of fascist politics – with a level of authority that might not be credible in a female protagonist without the war experience of these two former soldiers. Further, within these accounts Jameson's privileging of male viewpoints gestures towards a knowingness about the ways in which authority in wartime is inextricably tied to a type of experience that is inescapably male.

Similarly, in *The Hidden River* (1955) Jameson turns again to male experience – this time of the French Resistance – to demonstrate the growing divisions in French society after the war and the implications of war for the French male patriot. Focusing on one family's discovery of a German informant in their midst, Jameson makes clear the link between a French nation desperate to show its strength and resilience in dealing with traitors and a man seeking to show his own strength and loyalty as a patriot. When Jean Monnerie murders his brother for betraying their cousin Robert, and his role in the Resistance to the Nazi occupiers is revealed, the act of fratricide is viewed as a sacrifice to the nation, echoing not only the ongoing tendency of war to see younger men sacrificed by their elders but also the manoeuvrings within the French state itself to establish a stable and enduring Fourth Republic following Nazi occupation. Monnerie justifies the killing by explaining to his English friend that he had to 'stop him from carrying his rottenness about with him everywhere' (*Hidden River*, 185). The novel critiques the ideal of the dutiful male patriot who sacrifices the future of his family (its youngest son) for the Republic, as a symbol of a nation that is similarly keen to sacrifice its own future to attain a futile revenge for the betrayals of wartime: as Monnerie explains to his horrified English friend, 'surely even you can understand that it was an act of war ... it's only an accident that it happened yesterday and not six years ago' (*Hidden River*, 185–186). As I have argued elsewhere, the novel offers a critique of the postwar purges that sought to rid France of all who collaborated with the Nazis, at whatever cost to the integrity or cohesion of the nation itself (Cooper. 2020, 121–129). The use of the male

patriot as the ideal Republican citizen is essential to making this point. Only the male patriot can symbolize a problem at the heart of the nation – Jameson makes this clear by calling the treacherous younger brother François. The novel therefore chronicles the sacrifice of a younger nation to the ideals of the older, a problematizing of the desire to celebrate the victory of the French nation and to begin a bright new future with the settling of old scores. To sacrifice, or to have the sacrifice made by, a female character would carry quite different connotations and quite different symbolism in the context of Jameson's story.

However, those seeking to recover women's writing of this period sought to foreground female experience and often looked askance at accounts that privileged a male perspective. Critics such as Jenny Hartley, in her study of women's writing of the Second World War, *Millions Like Us*, have argued that 'Jameson's personification of the writer was emphatically male – only in men's clothing could the image of the writer carry sufficient gravitas' (1997, 10). Jameson seems to represent for Hartley a 'treacherous' abandonment of the feminist cause, rather than a writer forced to engage with the gendered politics of recording wartime experience in order to write the novels she wished to write and to consider the issues she wished to consider. Understandably this made Jameson's war novels a difficult inclusion in studies dedicated to recovering female experience of war through women's writing. It can be argued that such studies were unknowingly reproducing the associations between experience, authority and gender enforced by a male canon because they privileged writers who wrote about their own lived *female* experience of war, over which they, of course, held irrefutable authority. This represents a perspective grounded in the politics of second-wave feminism that contemporary critics now see as limiting. Jameson's traversing of these boundaries and her challenge to norms of authority and experience meant that her novels were difficult to consider within any study that sought to look at the gendered elements of war writing. However, I would argue that this is precisely why she merits inclusion.

Hartley observes that '[t]he 1980s and 1990s have preferred versions of the women's war which are upper class or glowing with sex or both. This has pushed the work published by women at the time further into the background' (8). She suggests here, rather provocatively, that even those studies seeking to recover women's war writing still do so in accordance with the expectations of women's writing of this period more generally, and specifically that it is predominantly middle and upper class and romantic in nature. What Hartley describes does correlate with the

tendency to view women's writing as being only that which is concerned with women's lives, and her phrasing here betrays the tendency that she attributes so robustly to Jameson – namely to view women's writing of women's experience as frivolous or shallow. This is precisely the narrowly gendered reading that has influenced the reception of Jameson's work and the ongoing neglect of her war writing. Her war novels are not sufficiently feminine (or feminist) for critics of women's writing, and yet as war writing they lack the authority of male experience and hence, are largely disqualified from older, more male-dominated studies. Herein lies the double-bind facing women war writers: to depict male experience of war is to be a gender traitor, yet not to do so is to fail to capture the truth of the experience. Women writing war can never please everyone and often end up pleasing no one.

Not only has this failure to please influenced the way that we read and understand the work of women writing about war during this period, it has also influenced the work that is available. One interesting case to consider is that of Virago, which has been so effective in republishing forgotten female authors and bringing them to wider public attention. When Virago came to republish Jameson's novels it selected – though worthy and important in their own right – those that concentrated on female experience: *The Mirror in Darkness* trilogy (1934–1936), which traces the experiences of one woman, Mary Hervey Russell, as she navigates divorce and single parenthood in the interwar period, albeit with the First World War and the General Strike in the background, or *Women Against Men* (1933). The more complex (and admittedly much longer) novels of the late 1930s and 1940s that deal with Europe and war, and often switch between male and female perspectives, such as *Europe to Let*, *Cousin Honoré* (1940), *The Fort* (1941) or *Cloudless May* (1943), were not selected. This is in keeping with the rest of Virago's output and is influenced by a range of factors from marketability to the publishers' commitment to represent not only women's writing but also female experience. However, I would suggest that it might also represent a further indication that even the publishing of women's war writing remains inflected with preconditions of authenticity and experience, which limit the ways in which it is considered and appraised.

The other element of Jameson's work that resists the associations of war writing and authority is her tendency to cross not only gendered boundaries but also national ones. While critics such as Jed Esty detect the 'Anglocentric turn of the 1930s and 1940s' (Esty, 2004, 5), or what Marina MacKay refers to as late modernism's compulsion

‘to scrutinise the political and moral claims of insular nationality’ (Mackay. 2007, 2) during the early years of the war, as I have described elsewhere, Jameson looked resolutely outward, setting her novels in France, Czechoslovakia and even Germany (Cooper. 2020). One of her own characters, the Polish soldier Giermyski in *The Black Laurel* (1947), insists that the English will never understand the European experience because if Europe is a house, ‘you English have the most comfortable room’ (123). For Giermyski, England, as an ‘island nation’, can never comprehend the hardships of repeated invasion and encroachment by one’s neighbours. England has always been the invader, itself protected by the seas that surround it and far removed from the real experience of war. Again, Jameson responds to her critics, knowingly demonstrating that she is aware of the limited grasp that the English have of the European experience, equally knowingly highlighting her own lack of authority on these matters. As Petra Rau notes, this acknowledgement of the limitations of an insular nationalism offers ‘a corrective to the home front issues of British battlefields’, and yet this, I would assert, is the reason she (as Rau also observes) ‘remains largely out of print’ (2016, 9). Jameson’s deliberate eschewing of war writing’s traditional preoccupation with experience and the authority rendered by it, produces yet another exclusionary overlap. Both her gender and her Britishness serve to exclude her from writing about certain experiences of the war, and her refusal to conform to ‘the rules’ of war writing place her always outside or beyond the scope of both the canon of war writing and certain critical responses to it.

Jameson went to great lengths to verify her information and to make sure that she depicted war experience accurately. Her commitment to depicting truth, whether beyond the bounds of her experience or not, stemmed from her early involvement in the social realism and documentary movements of the 1930s. She writes in *Civil Journey* of the need for the writer to be willing to ‘sink themselves for the time’ in the experience about which they wish to write (1939, 266). As such she visited Europe before and after the war, gathering material for her work and visiting friends. She sought advice from serving and former soldiers, such as her husband, Guy Chapman, and wrote to her friend Irene Rathbone’s brother, Colonel J.F.W. Rathbone of the Legal Division Control Commission for Germany, in order to check details of her accounts of military courts in *The Black Laurel*. She also learned a great deal about Europe from her work with International PEN at this time, as Jennifer Birkett notes (Birkett. 2006, 86–89). Nonetheless her gender and

her nationality – as well as her responsibilities as wife, mother and the first female President of English PEN – prevented her from getting any real experience of the war zone or of the military processes going on within it.

Hartley's suggestion that 'Jameson's personification of the writer was emphatically male' (1997, 10) implies less about Jameson's personification of the writer and more about the persistence and pervasiveness of the assumption that, in the case of war writing, the author with *authority* must invariably be male and must have first-hand experience of war. Jameson's move beyond her own experience to express a male and a European perspective on the war shows her imagination as a writer and her desire to be led by ideas rather than constrained by notions of authenticity, experience and gender. Her work represents a way of scrutinizing the assumptions we make about war writing and female experience, past and present. While ideas about authenticity and experience will always cling to war writing, it is essential that critics move beyond these to examine the ways in which they themselves respond to women's war writing, particularly that which transgresses the boundaries of gender, class or nation. Through this not only can we hope to recover more work by key women writing about war during this period – and new studies are already underway on Sylvia Townsend Warner, Edith Wharton and May Sinclair – but we can also build on and build up what has already been undertaken.

### Notes

- 1 Fussell dedicates *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) to a sergeant who died next to him in France in 1945. Samuel Hynes has written both critically and autobiographically about his experiences of war, placing his own experiences alongside those he examines.
- 2 Jameson's novels *In Loving Memory* (London: Collins, 1937) and *No Victory for the Soldier* (London: Collins, 1938) were also written as James Hill and under male pseudonyms.

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PART IV

**New Realities for Women:  
A Forward Glance**



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Barbara Comyns and New Directions in Women's Writing

*Nick Turner*

Of those British women novelists who emerged after the Second World War, few have had a more uncertain reputation than Barbara Comyns. Although admired today by writers such as Helen Oyeyemi, Alan Hollinghurst, Sarah Waters, Jane Gardam and Margaret Drabble, some of whom have written introductions to recent reprints by Virago and Capuchin, Comyns is nonetheless a name with which many contemporary readers are unfamiliar. Her writing is notable, too, for its almost total absence from critical studies of the mid-century British novel. In an introduction to the first Virago reprint of *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* in 1983, novelist Ursula Holden remarked upon the 'resurgence of interest in this writer' and, in her obituary for Comyns in 1992, proclaimed that the author was 'a true original, and her death marks a loss to English writing'; sadly, a loss not widely acknowledged. Comyns's writing continues to be largely overlooked by academia apart from an article by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik in the journal *Gothic Studies* in 2004, the forthcoming and welcome literary biography by Horner, plus a few entries in surveys of twentieth-century British fiction or of women writers.

Given that Horner and Zlosnik position Comyns as an early exponent of magical (or magic) realism<sup>1</sup> – although in the three early novels examined here their strangeness fits better under the label of surrealism – I suggest that something important has been missed. In the entry on Comyns in the *Dictionary of British Women Writers* (1989), E. Levy acknowledges that the author's prose is 'brilliantly paced', but finds the

work too bizarre and offbeat, questioning whether the reader would find it easy to identify with the characters and complaining of authorial aloofness: 'there is much to be said for beating in time with the rest of humanity at least occasionally' (1989, 61). This encapsulates a problem that has for too long dogged Comyns's novels and their reputation; they are so idiosyncratic and eccentric that they unsettle both readers and critics (although one of the novelist's earliest admirers was Graham Greene). This fear of difficulties around reader engagement would go some way to explaining the drawn-out path to publication of her first novel *Sisters by a River*, written in 1941 but not published until 1947.

In recent decades there has been an increased interest in neglected women writers of what Kristin Bluemel has called the intermodernist period and what this volume identifies as interfeminist, accompanied by cultural studies of the middlebrow and women's writing of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Figures such as Sylvia Townsend Warner, hard to categorize as a writer and not (yet) canonical, are now attracting scholarly attention, while writers who work more clearly within generic boundaries, such as Barbara Pym, Angela Thirkell and Nancy Mitford, have more often been considered for their treatment of gender, marriage and class. Others, such as Elizabeth Taylor, have been acknowledged, among other qualities, for their formal innovation. Yet while many of these writers look backwards for their influences, Comyns, like Warner, prefigures movements that are yet to take shape.

Horner and Zlosnik's use of the female Gothic as a lens through which to read the novels *The Vet's Daughter* (1959), *The Skin Chairs* (1962) and the much later *The Juniper Tree* (1985) demonstrate that Comyns was 'a female novelist who was particularly gifted at adapting Gothic devices and at rewriting myth and fairy tale in the mode of magical realism' (2004, 99). But the strangeness of the first three novels considered here, *Sisters by a River* (1947), *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* (1950) and *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1954), places Comyns in the vanguard of a distinctive mode of writing. She anticipates, albeit in her singular way, later feminist writing, foregrounding the marginal woman as subject in her characterization of oppressed and vulnerable female characters. This essay shows how the novels of Barbara Comyns carve a starkly different path from those described by Nicola Beauman as the 'woman's novel' of the 1930s and 1940s and distinguish Comyns from either late modernism or documentary realism (Beauman. 1983).

In her 2000 introduction to *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, Celia Brayfield notes that Comyns engages with surrealism in a way that

allows us to consider an apparently minor tradition in British women's writing, fiction she suggests, that resembles 'Beryl Bainbridge on acid' (3). Building on these ways of reading Comyns, I argue that in her early works she ushers in new developments in women's writing in three distinct ways. First, she portrays domestic space, settings and movement and the concomitant notions of marriage, motherhood and family life, in a way that challenges the heteronormative status quo. Second, she aligns the animal world closely with the human world, abused by it but also morphing into it. Third, she produces a brand of comedy that is strange, black and anarchic, far removed from the comedy of manners. The focus on Comyns's first three novels pays due critical attention not hitherto seen outside introductions to the reprints, making a case for her presence as an interfeminist writer.

The vigour of Comyns's straining against form and genre is apparent in her first published work, *Sisters by a River* (1947). Described as both a novel and an autobiography – Celia Brayfield calls it a 'memoir' in her introduction to *Spoons*, indicating already a generic uncertainty (3) – the story proceeds by way of often unconnected fragments or vignettes, describing the bizarre and sometimes violent life of the narrator's eccentric, middle-class family in the village of Bidford-upon-Avon in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. The setting, with its rural Midlands world of visiting aunts, may evoke that of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), but the narrative mode sets it apart from Eliot's realism. Although the story moves from the first-person narrator's earliest memories to her leaving home as a young woman, it does not progress in a linear fashion – many chapters work as asides and the book closes with a letter from the narrator's sister, written many years later. It also leaves spelling uncorrected, giving the impression of a childlike, quasi-stream-of-consciousness; an inventive (if annoying to some readers) device. The innovative mix of styles does not follow a single literary mode, but, although resisting categorization, it contains a blend of surrealism and an incipient magical realism, with glimpses of modernist and postmodernist tropes.

Ursula Holden points to the novel's origins, noting that 'Barbara Comyns did not write *Sisters by a River* with the intention of publishing it; she wrote it to amuse her children' during the war. Holden explains how the work was therapy for Comyns at a difficult time, put in a drawer for two years, offered unsuccessfully to several publishers on the advice of a friend, until finally serialized in the magazine *Lilliput* as 'The Novel Nobody Will Publish' (Holden. 1985, v). Whatever Comyns's

intention may have been when writing the novel, introducing it as mere entertainment, as something for children, does it a disservice. Holden points out that the content and form of the novel were at odds with public taste at the time: 'it was submitted in the mid-forties, a time not noted for striking or disturbing writing', a time when 'post-war readers needed reassurance, non-violence, soothing' (Holden. 1985, v). Certainly, comparing *Sisters by a River* to other successful novels of 1947, such as Mollie Panter-Downes's *One Fine Day*, Angela Thirkell's *Private Enterprise* and even Elizabeth Taylor's *A View of the Harbour*, shows Comyns's boldness; more violent than soothing in both content and texture. The narrative voice has the exuberance of childhood, but the apparently innocent perspective registers every degree of feeling inherent in the 'cruelty and misunderstanding between children and adults of a middle-class English family' (Holden. 1985, v). Spanning a period from around 1914 to the late 1920s, the novel, aided by its childlike innocence and humour, bears witness to a patriarchal society in which women and children are victims. This is apparent in the character of 'Barbara's' mother, who is deaf – indeed Comyns's own mother was struck deaf – but the fictional character serves as a symbol of women's enforced silence and entrapment; something Angela Carter would later use in her 1965 novel *The Magic Toyshop*. Grandmother, another principal female character, is at the opposite extreme of female stereotyping; a grotesque, domineering figure of power:

Granny was pretty filthy to the maids ... she always thought of them as a kind of slave and said they were disloyal if they had an evening out, she was grim to the governesses too. Once she mesmerised one of the maids and made her climb into the pigsty and kiss the pig. (*Sisters*, 19)

So Grandmother becomes an abuser in the same way as male characters; joining other female anti-heroines of myth, fairy tale and literary history, wicked queens and aunts like Lady Macbeth or Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Ultimately, however, the negative stereotype of the old woman as a figure of fun, deserving of abuse in the eyes of society, is fulfilled when she, too, becomes the victim:

When I was about four I can remember a rather dreadful thing happening ... for some reason I had been put to sleep in the same bed as Granny ... there was a frightful din about the room, Daddy, Mammy and Granny were all shouting and moping and mowing, then Mammy and Daddy started to push the poor old thing out of the window, Mammy got a bit frit and started to scream, but it was dreadful to see Daddy pushing and heaving

away and Granny getting more and more out of the window, there were awful ghaspings and groanings going on from Granny. [*sic*]. (*Sisters*, 19–20)

As Horner and Zlosnik note, in Comyns's work 'these narrators present dark events unquestioningly, a perspective which renders such events at once bizarrely comic and gruesome' (2004, 8). The scene is indeed comic in its slapstick physicality, absurd as a dream; the message, however, remains that children may be witnesses to family abuse, a disturbing feature for publishers and readers of the time.

On the whole, Comyns represents powerless and marginalized females in the novel with sympathy. 'Barbara' writes of how, for her siblings, the shock of their father's death 'put all our periods out of gear' (145) – a taboo-breaking reference for fiction in the 1940s – yet it is the death of the father that will finally allow 'Barbara' some liberation. Comyns attends to women's real lives and experiences differently from the manner of the social narratives of war and austerity related by some of her contemporaries. For example, the conditions the female servants had to endure are reported in a way that, without bluntly asking for sympathy, suggests that they are important simply because their stories are included. Thus,

We had a poor little cook called Lilly ... she was only four foot three. She had had a sad life and been abandoned by her parents when she was a young child and been brought up by relations who did not want her, she already had a little boy when she came to us, but she was a very good cook so Mammy didn't say anything about it, but after a time she started another ... her sister refused to have her home and no where [*sic*] could be found for her, so eventually she had to go the workhouse. (*Sisters*, 90)

Life in the early twentieth century, before the Welfare State, was still as precarious for the poor as it was in Dickens's world. A two-page chapter devoted to the 'Maids Lav' emphasizes the appalling sanitary conditions provided for servants at the time.

The maids never grumbled about their lavatory, although we had some good ones with chains in the house, Daddy would have shot them if they had dared to use them so they never did even when it snowed, it wasn't even a two-holer, just a rough piece of wood with a hole and bucket underneath. (*Sisters*, 30–31)

The narrator tells dispassionately of a poor family where, one after the other, the children are drowned. The fate of the Drinkwater children – a blackly humorous choice of name – serves as a metaphor for the

inescapable plight of the working classes, as contrasted with the dawn of the Welfare State in 1947, the year the book was finally published.

Comyns's second published novel, *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, was completed in the mid-1940s, prior to the publication of *Sisters*, but not published until 1950. This, too, is written in the first person and is strongly autobiographical, this time narrating the author's experiences as a poverty-stricken artist's wife in Bohemian London during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Here, 'Barbara' becomes Sophia, the narrator. The novel opens with her marriage to Charles and follows their transitory existence in different flats, different jobs, Sophia's unexpected pregnancies, an affair, the break-up of the marriage, work as a cook-housekeeper in the country and final happiness with a new husband.

This novel is different from the first in that, as well as using standard spelling, the narrative is linear, allowing it to play with the form of a *Bildungsroman* – appropriate given the author's admiration for Dickens manifest in the use of names such as Bumble Blunderbore and Peregrine Narrow. Comyns's work is indeed comparable to Dickens's for its movement, its caricatures and its vitality. Horner and Zlosnik argue that 'Comyns' Gothic *Bildungsromans* are more reminiscent of Dickens's work than they are of the classic Female Gothic plot, 'which is still often defined as the flight of a young woman from a male persecutor in some form' (2004, 91). In *Spoons*, however, marriage is the beginning, not the end, and the narrative works to undo assumptions of marriage as closure. As Holden observes, 'Hers [Sophia's] is a world where the fittest survive' (1983, 5). Horner and Zlosnik agree that it is a post-Darwinian world that 'combine[s] a Chagallian surrealism with characters who exhibit a Dickensian energy and grotesquerie' (2004, 91).

Strikingly, although Sophia is an adult, the innocence of the child in *Sisters* remains, making for a narration that combines the comic with the pathetic and records pain and struggle with joy and wonder. Heidi Macpherson observes Comyns merging 'child-like naivety with stylistic innovation' (1999, 146). Thus, when it seems that Sophia's wedding to Charles might not take place, she reflects: 'I never expected to see him again. I couldn't help wondering what would happen to all our beautiful furniture' (*Spoons*, 18). Bathos links the descent from love to the loss of material goods. When the marriage does go ahead, 'the landlady before the last shouted out, "Would you like a kitten born on your wedding day?" as I passed, so I shouted back "Yes" just as I reached the altar' (23). Such small, often incongruous, comic details are characteristic of Comyns's style.



Normality, the mundane and the domestic, are just as bizarre in *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* as in the first novel. Sophia's landlady has a room with 'plaster feet all over the walls' (*Spoons*, 16); at the butcher's, she asks for a 'small joint of bones stuck together' (25), which, although startling in a domestic context, is exactly what it is. In the same way, pregnancy and motherhood are represented in bizarre comedic terms. Sophia reads questions from mothers in a magazine that include 'was it true that if you eat apples before your baby is born, you would have a dwarf?' and 'why does my baby cry after eating sardines?' (48). (There is even a hint later on that perhaps Sophia does feed the baby sardines, in that she fears the flat smells so strongly of fish that people will assume she has given birth to a mermaid). When her baby, Sandro, is born, she knows little more about infants than Charles, who 'hated the idea of moving and suggested we kept the baby in the cupboard, but after reading all those magazines I knew it wasn't a good idea' (49). After the birth, 'Charles said he had borrowed some money to send telegrams to his relations saying we had a boy of six ounces. I told him it was six pounds not ounces, but he said a few pounds either way wouldn't make any difference' (71).

Women's comic fiction of the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s was still ruled by the English Austenian tradition; the comedy of manners, of wit and irony. Although there are some exceptions, found for example in the work of Stevie Smith and Stella Gibbons – in particular the prodigious *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) – there is still a preponderance of middlebrow and domestic comedy, sometimes satirical but ultimately reflecting the status quo. Comyns's style is different, radical and transgressive. Black humour that places the comic beside the violent, distressing and painful was considered unfeminine, although already evident in the work of novelists such as Ivy Compton-Burnett and Molly Keane in the 1930s. Yet Comyns's comedy has a wildness and celebration of nonsense that distinguishes it from the work of other mid-century British women writers.

Barbara Comyns's work is remarkable, too, for the way in which it blends literature with the visual arts. The writer was herself an artist, with a great interest in the Surrealist movement.<sup>3</sup> The strangeness of Surrealism is evident throughout her writing to the extent, as already noted, that Horner and Zlosnik identify 'Chagallian surrealism' in her work (2004, 91). Of course, Surrealism influenced the magical realism of later decades, but as a literary style it was not readily accepted by the British writing establishment of the 1940s and 1950s. For their celebration

of the fantastic and of childlike ‘nonsense’, Comyns’s novels would better fit the tradition of Lewis Carroll (and perhaps it is no coincidence that the heroine of *The Vet’s Daughter* is named Alice). In *Spoons*, Sophia, like Barbara, is a sculptor who exhibits her work, although motherhood later prevents her continuing with it. Sophia’s reflection on the novel she is writing contains a wider comment on radical art: ‘I know this will never be a real book that business men in trains will read’ (*Spoons*, 54). Such self-reflective artistry aligns Comyns with other outsider figures of the literary scene such as Stevie Smith and the artist and writer Leonora Carrington (despite her spending much of her life in Mexico), with whom Comyns enjoyed a brief acquaintance. Smith, Carrington and Comyns were all unconventional literary and visual artists.<sup>4</sup> Levy’s criticism of Comyns, quoted above, is symptomatic of widespread distaste for Surrealist narrative among British critics, and it is telling that Smith and Carrington have also had uncertain reputations, their odd style dismissed at worst as childlike or *faux naïf* in Smith’s case or too sexually daring in Carrington’s. In an obituary for the *Independent* in August 1992, Teresa Grimes recalls a revealing example of Comyns’s unusual mindset:

When Barbara gave me instructions on how to get to her house she said, ‘You’ll know it because there’s a pig in the window.’ This sounded like something out of one of her books, but it was true – there was a pig in the window – a larger-than-life pink plaster pig. (Grimes. 1992)

Instances of surreal (and pig-related) humour abound in Comyns’s work where her imagination is drawn to the strange and illogical. For example, in *Spoons* the narrator catches a character ‘in the act of hiding some bacon in her petticoat’ (1983, 218).

As already suggested, the comedy masks real suffering, and *Spoons* can be read as an unsentimental account of women’s lives in 1930s Britain. However, Horner and Zlosnik assert that Comyns’s heroines, ‘while being honest, are often naïve to the point of colluding with their own oppression’ (2004, 99). Their innocence promotes the sense of women as passive, infantilized victims. For instance, Sophia has no idea about preventing pregnancy: ‘I had a kind of idea if you controlled your mind and said, “I won’t have any babies” very hard, they most likely wouldn’t come. I thought that was what was meant by birth control, but by this time I knew that idea was quite wrong’ (37). Her innocence is again highlighted when, attending a clinic, Sophia thinks the specimens are glasses of lemonade (42). The description of her experience of childbirth

reflects that of many poorer women (including, one might assume, Comyns herself) in the 1930s; a shocking state of affairs that sees women insulted and dehumanized. Sophia refers to the maternity ward as a 'torture chamber', a place where, in the throes of labour, the nurse calls her a 'dirty woman' (*Spoons*, 64). Far from magical realism, and certainly not comedy, Comyns is here writing social realism about women as victims, a theme that runs in some form throughout her work. Sympathy for other mothers in the hospital, all working-class women, is real, albeit reported in her characteristic minimalist manner: 'There was a little dark woman whose husband was a costermonger. She had had six children and they had all died at birth' (73).

In *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, life is presented as transient and unpredictable in a tone that communicates the narrator's own uncertainty – there is a chapter that ends ambiguously with 'I think' (43). A pattern is set from the start where, echoing the novel's title, storybook romance is emphatically proved to be impossible: 'I had hoped they would give us a set of real silver teaspoons when we bought the wedding ring, but the jeweller we went to wouldn't, so our spoons came from Woolworths, too' (13). The 1930s life of the young mother is one of poverty, aggravated by exhaustion and, in a time before effective vaccines or antibiotics, by influenza and other diseases. In contrast to Eva, her sister-in-law, who is a 'managing, domestic kind of woman' (52) – a figure closer to the world of the feminine middlebrow – Sophia fails in the first test of domesticity, burning all their saucepans within a few weeks of marriage. In the wake of such negative outcomes, Sophia empathizes with the damaged, and wonders if her child will also be disfigured: 'I began to think mine would at least have a hare lip. I kept seeing people in the street with them, and everywhere I looked there were hunchbacks and cripples' (35). Such a response might seem exaggerated but it reflects at first hand the conditions of the time for the poor and needy; more in the manner of nineteenth-century chroniclers of social ills than of a twentieth-century surrealist.

Comyns's third novel, *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, published in 1954, marks something of a departure in narrative style and content, though still containing the familiar mix of grotesque characters, surreal and black comedy, family drama and violence. This novel is an historical fable or allegory, using melodrama and elements of *Grand Guignol* to tell the story of a devastating flood followed by a spate of suicides and fatal poisonings. Partly based on a story the author had heard about a flood in a village near her Warwickshire birthplace, it has another source in a

specific happening in France, as Avril Horner reveals in a biography of Comyns (forthcoming):

Both national and regional newspapers carried the story of a tragedy that had hit the village of Pont-Saint-Esprit in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France. It was reported that four people had died and about 50 were in hospitals or in asylums with ergot poisoning, a condition caused by eating bread made with rye contaminated by a parasitic fungus. The symptoms were alarming and included psychotic episodes as well as physical pain. Barbara decided that she would base her next book on the tragedy. (Horner, *A Writer's Life*)

Above the heading for Chapter One, the book announces itself as set 'about seventy years ago', yet the coronation of a King George is mentioned, meaning that it can be set no earlier than 1910–11. Comyns appears to be manipulating realistic presentation of time, subtly indicating that this is not an historical novel. In the form of a non-realistic novel the flood is symbolic, a parody of the Biblical Flood that causes rather than purges evil. The novel (which was banned in Ireland in 1955) has a pessimistic view of human nature and shows some parallels with the more celebrated *Lord of the Flies*, published the same year.<sup>5</sup> As Teresa Grimes writes in her obituary of Comyns in the *Independent*, 'It is typical of Barbara Comyns's writing that such violent and savage events are treated in a pragmatic, down-to-earth way. The book is a vivid portrait of the bizarre nature of "ordinary" life and the comic madness of families' (Grimes. 23 August 1992).

Comyns uses a third-person omniscient narrator for the first time in *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*; a narrative technique that allows some distance from the four vulnerable female characters: Emma and Hattie, the daughters of a household that resembles the one in *Sisters*, and the two servants Norah and Eunice. The evil related by the narrator suggests that the innocence of the narrators in the earlier novels is ironic; a conscious device to highlight victimhood in a parody of innocence. Although Horner and Zlosnik argue that 'Comyns' narrators are always girls or young women and their entanglement in abusive, controlling or unsatisfactory relationships invariably forms the main dynamic of the plot' (2004, 91), this is not quite the case in this novel. Emma, for instance, shows some degree of snobbishness towards the lower classes, something not much seen in Comyns's work. The unnamed village is depicted in anti-pastoral mode, informed more by John Clare's registering of rural poverty and the social

concerns of Dickens than by Wordsworthian idealization. Birmingham and London are distant civilizations. The novel becomes communal through the use of polyvocality. Loosely shifting points of view introduce villagers following traditional occupations, unaffected by industrialization: baker, butcher, miller, the dressmaker Lolly Bennet, who is the village old maid and 'almost a dwarf' (*Who was Changed*, 17), Fig the gardener, and Mrs Fig the village layer-out, as well as the village bachelor, the Dickensian drunkard Lumber Splinterbones (23). Comyns demonstrates the little-acknowledged phenomenon that, in this community, women's work is at least equal to, and possibly more vital than, men's.

The village appears to be self-sufficient and thriving – the baker's cakes are sought for miles around – until rumours abound of poisoned bread and the village is consumed by fear and suspicion. A dark side to the village is evident even before the flood. It is a tragic world – Grumpy Nan, who drowns, was already dying of cancer, Old Toby, the baker's assistant, has been horribly disfigured by an accident years before, Aunty Kate 'suddenly went crackers in Rochester cathedral' (133) and Ebin appears with Grandmother's truss on his head as a 'sordid crown' – all expressed with Comyns's absurd comic touch (136).

The action centres once more on an eccentric, middle-class home in which the lives of the young women are as restricted as those in the earlier novels. Pregnancy is again exposed as a very risky business, threatening a maid's job until she is reprieved by a miscarriage (64–65). The conventions of marriage are ridiculed when 'to ask permission to marry seemed fantastic' (126). Comyns the artist portrays the young doctor's interest in Emma not as romantic but as that of a painter entrapping a female muse in the male gaze. He sees Emma as an 'El Greco Madonna' (101) and thinks that a 'long talk about Gauguin would be quite a good idea' (134). Although he frees her from the Willoweed house there is scant indication of romance in this imagined world. After the flood, Ebin Willoweed returns to his work as a journalist, in which, profiting from the disaster, he exposes journalism as another blight of contemporary life, showing it as a male-dominated, ruthless, capitalist practice. Although Comyns addresses many concerns, contemporary and historic, the novel is not a clear-cut case of ideal versus exploitative worlds. It lays bare not only how outside influence corrupts but also how city and country equally host good and evil. Similarly, as regards a gendered capacity to inflict pain, Horner and Zlosnik assert: 'Cruelty in her novels does not observe stereotypes; like her early Female Gothic

predecessors, she represents women as being as capable of exploitation as men' (2004, 99). They observe that

[T]here are few characters in literature as comically horrific as grandmother Willoweed ... a formidable figure who emotionally terrorises her family (including her grand-daughter, the sensitive young heroine, Emma) and who tries to control the whole village in which she lives. (2004, 91)

This figure, possessing a voracious appetite that marks her as grossly unfeminine, is compared to a 'lizard' and a 'swollen wasp' (*Who was Changed*, 47). Comyns deploys female monstrosity to embody rural superstition and inward-looking conservatism. As with the father's death in *Sisters*, only Grandmother Willoweed's death brings freedom to those under her sway.

It is not surprising to find animals in a novel with a rural setting, but Comyns's animals are more than background. Her descriptions of the animal and human populations are intensely visual, with the detail of a Breughel painting, and all actively involved in the scene. Animals from the tiniest insect to farm animals, while not full characters, are living creatures whose existence is significant. Thus, when the flood destroys the village, the lost lives of birds and animals are also recorded, if not regretted. The narrative tells how Emma saves a slug (12) and reports the story of a lemon-sized bumblebee (16). There is the vision of a crushed mouse in a trap (92), of mice gnawing apples as Ebin and the baker's wife make love (4), and when Grandmother's cat is killed the detail is as graphic as it is for the human deaths: 'one eye had been squashed right out of its head' (70). Finally, once things return to "normal" in the village there is 'the usual slaughter of rabbits' (113). Comyns's communities are 'red in tooth and claw'. In turn, insects, birds and animals inform her representation of humans, and vice versa, illustrating the fluid, transformative nature of her imagined world. The butcher is 'like some poor bewildered bull' (54) and Ebin muses 'if only women walked like cows' (78). She merges animal and human in 'two unheeding figures rolling and grunting on the grass' (84), and in Old Toby, who 'smelt dreadful and he crawled' (87). The use of the characteristics of the animal world is unsentimental and objective (perhaps inviting an eco-critical reading). This novel foreshadows the more overt portrayal of animals as victims in *The Vet's Daughter* (1959).

Comyns's artist's eye is used to advantage in the visual impressions evoked in her writing and in the way that colour and perspective make patterns in the text produced, for example, by the stained-glass window

in the Willoweed house. Through it, Grandmother Willoweed 'saw her son all crimson following a yellow baker's wife. Then they changed colour and both became green and disappeared from sight' (35). These refracted views illustrate what Horner and Zlosnik identify as the 'Chagallian' nature of Comyns's work and her painterly perspective (Horner and Zlosnik, 91). The use of strong colour is characteristically Impressionist, with echoes of Van Gogh: the 'sticky yellow sky' (*Who was Changed*, 53), Ebin's 'yellow motor-car', which is like a 'yellow monster', and the 'yellow sand' (56). There is an almost psychedelic effect to Comyns's deployment of colour shifts; the car changes when seen through the yellow glass (120), and the morning room is 'bright red' (131). The use of primary colours communicates the psychic intensity of the tale aided by vibrant, visual phraseology such as 'great curly-headed dahlias blazed away' (143), and a 'woman melted into the shadows' (83).

I have noted Comyns's interest in Surrealist art, her innovative style and the variety of narrative modes deployed. Her sense of movement is a further distinction. The first three novels are driven by disruptive forces, volatility, impermanence. *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1954) opens strikingly:

The ducks swam through the drawing-room windows. The weight of the water had forced the windows open; so the ducks swam in. Round the room they sailed quacking their approval; then they sailed out again to explore the wonderful new world that had come in the night. (1)

The water is destructive but it is also associated with fluidity and liberation; the walls of the domestic world are broken, nature invades and this is, if only temporarily, celebrated by the animal world. Human, middle-class households such as Charles's sister's home in *Spoons* are experienced as unnatural, unwelcoming places; the house as a prison. In contrast to the sustaining value of home, community and the domestic world found in the novels of middlebrow writers like Thirkell and Delafield, domestic space in Comyns's novels is chaotic, untidy, dirty yet at the same time necessarily a home. While reflecting Comyns's own life, the impermanence of the home can be read as a comment on the entrapped condition of women, the dramatic levitation in *The Vet's Daughter* (1959) acting as the climax of spatial unease and ultimately of escape. As Lucy Scholes suggests:

In the same way that actual family members often represent some level of threat to Comyns' heroines, so too the domestic environment, rather than being a place of safety, is actually more often the site of danger, trauma and exploitation. (Scholes. 2016)

Horner and Zlosnik agree that Comyns's work shows that 'England of the present and recent past is stalked by monstrosity and this monstrosity is most often found within the bourgeois home' (2004, 99). Revealing and in some way disrupting this monstrosity is a thematic concern in Comyns's writing. Teresa Grimes's assessment in her obituary in the *Independent* rated Comyns's style alongside some British films made contemporaneously with her work:

Her blend of savagery and innocence fits a tradition of British films such as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Went The Day Well?* (1942), and Powell and Pressburger's *Gone to Earth* (1950) and *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), in which the tranquil surface of rural life in picture-postcard villages is disturbed by wilder, unrestrained and independent forces. (23 August 1992)

After *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, Comyns went on to write *The Vet's Daughter* (1959), considered to be her best novel, where she refined her use of the Gothic and experimented with magical realism. However, nothing in her subsequent career allowed her to become part of a new canon of women's writing. She left England for Spain soon after this, not returning until 1974, when women's writing had moved on to different thematic preoccupations. Of course, Lucy Scholes is right to note that 'Comyns's protagonists' lack of agency means it is impossible to hold them up as models of feminism – but the novels themselves are a clear form of protest, whether this was a conscious move on Comyns's part or not' (Scholes, 2016). Comyns's heroines – Sophia, Emma, Hattie and 'Barbara' – are vulnerable female victims. Whatever the author's intention, the novels can certainly be read as resistant, as Horner and Zlosnik maintain:

The focus in Comyns' novels is always the trauma of coping with the family romance in the widest sense, as experienced by a young, sensitive woman and, as such, it brings to the foreground issues of abuse, emotional exploitation and the way in which a vulnerable individual can be psychologically constrained and oppressed. (2004, 91)

Even without this element of protest, it is true that Barbara Comyns was ahead of her time. Ensnared 'between the waves' of feminism she predates the second wave and the social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, yet portrays vividly the victimization of women (and it is worth noting that it was not until 1962 that Doris Lessing published *The Golden Notebook*, it was in 1965 that Margaret Drabble published *The Millstone*, while Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* did not appear until 1967).



Despite the female characters' apparent weakness and terrible suffering, the books make us shudder and laugh at the same time. There may just be a plausible argument that Comyns's work might be read as feminist, even though

[R]eading her diaries, I found little to suggest she was much of a feminist, though she does mention Margaret Thatcher's election as leader of the Conservative Party in February 1975, after which she writes: 'I hope we shall have a woman Prime Minister soon.' (Scholes. 2016)

Through readings of her first three novels, I venture to speculate that the reasons for the author's neglected status stem from their combination of childlike hyper-honesty and an uncomfortable feeling for visceral comedy that put her out of contention as a writer of the 'woman's novel'. From her first novel Comyns's writing can be seen, like that of Ivy Compton-Burnett, to 'clearly challenge that twentieth-century sentimental narrative which celebrated the domestic and the familial' (Horner and Zlosnik. 2004, 91). Horner and Zlosnik see that Comyns exposes the family as 'a site of exploitative manipulation' (2004, 91) and, in listing more of the reasons for its neglect, they, too, support the case for a re-evaluation of her work:

[t]he generic hybridity of Comyns' writing, like that of Carter, was at odds with the somewhat prescriptive notion of authentic women's writing ... that held sway during the 1980s. Indeed, the combination of realism, the Gothic and magical realism might well have been perceived as resulting in a rather fey and whimsical treatment of the oppression of women – a subject considered deadly serious by second-wave feminism ... Yet such hybridity allows Comyns to question notions of subjectivity in a highly effective manner. (2004, 99)

Horner and Zlosnik see Comyns avoiding a clear feminist script, acknowledging instead wrongs perpetrated across a wide spectrum of humankind and, indeed animal-kind. 'Comyns' work does not recognize political correctness. ... In her fictional world, men as well as women, (and animals, too), become victims and a woman's ability to hold on to her own space and her own identity is in constant tension with the need to love and be loved' (2004, 99).

In all her fiction, Barbara Comyns's blend of the savage and the innocent, the calm and the wild, social protest and feminism, realism and magic realism, makes hers a work of contradictions; perplexing for readers and critics. It is not social satire, Woolfian modernism, sustained

social realism, dystopia, or comedy of manners; it is *sui generis*. When something as subversive as Comyns's work is unleashed it is a mark of its originality that its appeal has (so far) been limited; but its surreal comedy and pathos, its portrayal of oppressed women, its boundary-breaking content and form, signify an important presence in interfeminist British women's writing.

### Notes

- 1 The term 'magical realism' (or magic realism) has a range of connotations in literature, art, film and photography; too wide to do justice to here. References to Angela Carter's fiction in this essay highlight the regrettable neglect of Comyns's writing that predates Carter. Matthew Strecher's definition of magical realism is a good entry point to a more rigorous study: 'What happens when a highly detailed realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe': Matthew C. Strecher, 'Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki'. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 25:2, 97.
- 2 See, for example, Kristin Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism: Literary Cultures in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Phyllis Lassner, "'Between the Gaps": Sex, Class and Anarchy in the British Comic Novel of World War II', in ed. Gail Finney, *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy* (Reading: Gordon and Breach, 1994); Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991); Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).
- 3 Although her paintings were never sold, she was acquainted with some surrealist artists and attended the famous International Surrealism Exhibition of 1936 at the Burlington Galleries in London; some of her works remain in the possession of her family.
- 4 Avril Horner, in her forthcoming biography of Barbara Comyns, reveals that in 1936 Comyns 'briefly became friends with Leonora Carrington' and that 'the two women shared a belief that the mysterious and the magical are always present just beneath the surface of everyday life. They also shared a passion for surrealist art': Avril Horner, *Barbara Comyns: A Writer's Life* (forthcoming), Chapter 4.
- 5 'The novel was banned by the Irish Censorship of Publications Board in February 1955 under the heading "indecent or obscene". No further details were given. The prohibition expired in 1967' (Horner, *A Writer's Life*). The reasons for the ban remain unclear as so many books were banned at that time in Ireland.

In the introduction to the Dorothy Books 2010 reprint, Brian Evenson suggests they 'saw only one part of her vision – disgust, death and decay – and not its broader sweep'.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### A New Reality

Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958)

*Maria Elena Capitani*

In his chronology of postwar Britain, Arthur Marwick sees 1958 – the year Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* was first staged at the Theatre Royal, Stratford – as particularly significant, blending the last vestiges of the austere 1950s with the dawn of the 'Swinging Sixties'. In his comprehensive volume *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States*, Marwick contends that 'the critical point of change came, as precisely as one could ever express it, in 1958–9', going on to postulate 'a "long sixties", beginning in 1958 and ending, broadly speaking – many of the new trends of the sixties continued throughout the seventies, and right on to today – in 1973–4' (Marwick. 1998, 7). Straddling two eras of social and cultural sensibilities, *A Taste of Honey* has the unique capacity to engage with a crucial transitional moment in British history and the context in which the play was written and produced.

By the end of the 1950s, Britain had been fully released from food rationing, salaries had doubled and unemployment was relatively low. As a result, purchasing power increased substantially and a larger number of people – including the newly identified category of teenagers – could participate in the consumer market for the first time. The shortages suffered during postwar austerity were giving way to the rampant consumerism of the so-called age of affluence. As Mark Donnelly makes clear:

[W]hen Harold Macmillan declared that most people in the country had 'never had it so good' in July 1957, he identified what for many was a reality.

The deep social divisions of the thirties, the strains of war and the dull ache of post-war shortages gave way to a more comfortable age in the mid-fifties. A booming economy, soaring stock market values, low unemployment, a wealth of accessible consumer choice and improved welfare services were the defining features of a new age of affluence. (Donnelly. 2005, 22–23)

Although Macmillan's famous declaration frequently appears in its shortened (and misleading) form of 'never had it so good', what the Conservative prime minister in fact said was that *most* people benefited directly from these improved conditions. Yet a significant portion of the population was excluded from prosperity, especially in the regions away from the South East and most acutely in the North of England. As Dominic Sandbrook points out in his programme notes from the 2014 revival of *A Taste of Honey* at the National Theatre, '[i]n towns like Shelagh Delaney's native Salford ... change came very slowly, if at all. ... although consumerism was rapidly transforming everyday life, millions of people still lived in remarkably similar circumstances to their parents and grandparents' (Sandbrook. 2014).

In *A Taste of Honey*, Delaney highlights the social gulf between people who had easy access to money and those leading uncertain lives in deprived areas. The play revolves around a small group of working-class characters for whom times were still hard. In her commentary to the Methuen students' edition of the play, Glenda Leeming notes that Delaney's grim setting well exemplifies how, in the late 1950s, certain areas were still affected by the devastating consequences of the war: '[h]ousing was still scarce, many bomb sites still derelict, where houses destroyed in the war had not been rebuilt', and so many people were forced to live in unsuitable, often squalid housing (Leeming. 2005 [1982], xxv). This is the plight of the two female protagonists in *A Taste of Honey*, a play originally conceived by the nineteen-year-old Delaney as a novel and, perhaps apocryphally, written in a fortnight in reaction to Terence Rattigan's *Variation on a Theme*. As John Harding observes,

[I]t was rather fashionable at the time to denigrate Rattigan. *Variation on a Theme*, covertly about a homosexual relationship, had toured the country in early 1958 before opening at the Globe Theatre in London on 8<sup>th</sup> May. It was a failure, the first flop in this gifted playwright's career. (2014, 28)

After seeing Rattigan's drawing room comedy in Manchester, Delaney – who, despite her youth had very strong ideas about what she wanted to see on the stage – thought that 'if this was drama, she could do better herself' (J. Russell Taylor, in Leeming. 1982, xx). Consequently,

she completed a first draft of *A Taste of Honey* and sent it to Joan Littlewood. The decision to send the play to London rather than, say, to the repertory company at work in the Manchester Central Library Theatre, is perhaps not, according to John Harding, as strange as it might seem. In his 1959 review of the play in *Encounter*, ‘A Taste of Reality’, the novelist and journalist Colin MacInnes called Delaney a ‘splendid young prophetess’, showing ‘typical good sense’ in pushing it directly before ‘the conspirators in Stratford, E. 15, who then carry her voice into “the heart of Theatreland”’ (MacInnes. 1959, 71). Innovation in theatres across the UK was inhibited by the difficulties of financial survival in the austere postwar climate. So, Harding suggests, it would be a mistake to cast Delaney as simply a naïve hopeful; she knew the library theatre, had worked there, and could see that its viability was based on the patronage of a middle class who would pay only for ‘safe’ productions.

Initially, Joan Littlewood, the visionary director of the Theatre Workshop company, declared that Delaney’s manuscript was badly structured and thoroughly incoherent and that the plot was virtually non-existent. However, she realized that the writing had a lot of dramatic potential and admitted that it offered many good lines, some ‘funny, quirky expressions’ and a couple of believable characters (Harding. 2014, 48). Delaney’s early draft was rewritten and transformed, through improvisation and the addition of a jazz band on the stage, into the play that opened on 27 May 1958 at the Theatre Royal and transferred to London’s West End in early 1959 for a successful run before opening on Broadway in 1960.

A two-act play divided into four scenes and driven by a simple plot, *A Taste of Honey* focuses on the troubled relationship between a forty-year-old single mother, Helen, described in stage directions as ‘a semi-whore’ (*TOH*, 7) – although Delaney herself points out that she is not a prostitute – and her teenage daughter, Jo. The two protagonists, having no permanent home, are moving into ‘a comfortless flat in Manchester’ (7) so small that they must share a double bed, despite their strong desire to be independent of one another. In Delaney’s play familial roles are far from conventional: Jo is the more responsible of the two, while Helen appears as a woman living a precarious, nomadic existence preoccupied with her physical appearance and having a good time with her lovers. Jo is anxious to leave school to find a decent job and gain the financial independence to get away from her mother, expressing the Woolfian desire for a room of her own:

JO: We're sharing a bed again, I see.

HELEN: Of course, you know I can't bear to be parted from you.

JO: What I wouldn't give for a room of my own! (8)

When the money-making, mysteriously one-eyed car salesman Peter Smith, one of Helen's many former lovers, proposes marriage, Helen accepts half-heartedly. After all, she says, '[h]e's got a wallet full of reasons' (34). At the same time, Jo is in love with a young black seaman, who – out of the blue – asks her to marry him, offering her an engagement ring. As Helen goes off with her fiancé, Jo is abandoned over Christmas and invites the sailor to stay with her. Inevitably, this loving relationship must end; the young man goes back to sea leaving Jo pregnant.

The second act opens some months later. Jo, whose '*pregnancy is quite obvious*' (46), is now alone in the same flat, working in a shoe shop by day and in a bar in the evenings to pay the rent. She enjoys the easy company of her friend Geof, an implicitly homosexual art student, and invites him to stay with her. Geof is happy to settle down with Jo, to clean the house and look after her and the expected baby but, in the last phase of Jo's pregnancy, Helen suddenly reappears, her marriage with Peter having failed. She bullies Geof into leaving the flat then, shocked at the discovery that the baby may be black, rushes off to the pub:

JO: Are you going?

HELEN: Yes.

JO: Are you just going for a drink?

HELEN: Yes.

JO: Are you coming back?

HELEN: Yes.

JO: Well, what are you going to do?

HELEN: Put it on the stage and call it Blackbird. [*She rushes out.*] (87)

Once again left alone by her irresponsible and egocentric mother, Jo '*smil[es] a little to herself*' (87) as she remembers Geof's tenderness, unaware of his unceremonious eviction. Her poignant final lines are from the nursery rhyme he used to sing to her:

Little miss, pretty miss,  
 Blessings light upon you.  
 If I had half a crown a day,  
 I'd gladly spend it on you.

*Curtain.* (87)



The linear plot and dramatic structure of *A Taste of Honey* do not seem particularly experimental or subversive today. Despite its overall traditional architecture, however, Littlewood's staging techniques, based on improvisation, were innovative at the time. In the late 1950s, the incorporation of jazz music into a play (Johnnie Wallbank's Apex Trio was on the stage) had radical potential; jazz being 'associated with intellectuals, art school students, beatniks and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament supporters' (Harding, 2014, 56). However, Delaney's controversial piece is most interesting from a thematic point of view. Her daring portrait of the everyday struggles of marginal and unvoiced characters like the single mother, her pregnant teenage daughter, a sailor of Nigerian origin (albeit via Cardiff), and a homosexual art student shocked a still conservative Britain – a country looking back rather than forward. All the same, the play was welcomed by many progressive commentators. In his *Encounter* review Colin MacInnes defined *A Taste of Honey* as the first staged in England – to his knowledge, at least – 'in which a coloured man, and a queer boy, are presented as natural characters, factually, without a nudge or shudder' (MacInnes, 1959, 70). Even as Delaney's piece foregrounds people from the lower classes, this astute observer of 1950s society finds it refreshing that her witty drama

entirely escapes being a 'working-class play': no patronage, no dogma – just the thing as it is, taken straight. In general hilarious and sardonic, the play has authentic lyrical moments arising naturally from the very situations that created the hilarity; and however tart and ludicrous, it gives a final overwhelming impression of good health – of a feeling for life that is positive, sensible, and generous. (70)

However, in a class-ridden society governed by strict gender roles, Delaney's personal position was marginalized and virtually untenable. She was not just an unknown nineteen-year-old girl from Salford but, as Jeanette Winterson's programme notes for the 2014 National Theatre revival point out, she was 'Britain's first working-class woman playwright'; a label that placed an almost intolerable burden on the aspiring dramatist. As a fellow Lancashire writer and long-time admirer, Winterson imagines the young female playwright coming down from the North to find herself in a circle of middle-class men, where nobody taught her how to cope with unexpected and overwhelming success:

She's only just turned 20. She's had little formal education. She's barely been beyond Salford. She doesn't have a family or a background that can support her through the shock of success. She can't be one of the boys. Harold

Pinter and Peter Hall could go out drinking with Kenneth Tynan – the most influential theatre critic in the world in the 1950s and 60s. Sam Beckett befriended Pinter. Arthur Miller persuaded Olivier to ask Osborne to write for him. (The result was *The Entertainer*, 1957.) Joe Orton was spotted by Kenneth Williams who agreed to star in *Loot* (1966). Joan Littlewood did her best to help but she couldn't give Shelagh what gender and class made impossible: a community of equals. (Winterson. 2014)

In an all-male theatre environment, dominated by such figures, Delaney is '[t]he odd one out, not because she's working class, less educated or less talented – but because she's a woman. A roomful of men and one very young woman' (Winterson. 2014). The girl from Salford was the first, and youngest, working-class dramatist to portray 'the distaff side' and to represent women's reality through fresh eyes (Wandor. 2001, 60).

One such reality is the mother–daughter love–hate relationship, 'conveyed to the audience in the first forty lines of the piece', that is pivotal throughout the play and prevails as the closest kind of emotional bond (Gillett. 1963, 191). The first duologue of the action gives a sense of the antagonism between two women who, though constantly bickering, cannot live without each other, trapped in a suffocating relationship of mutual interdependence and confined within an asphyxiating domestic space:

HELEN: Well! This is the place.

JO: And I don't like it.

HELEN: When I find somewhere for us to live I have to consider something far more important than your feelings ... the rent. It's all I can afford.

JO: You can afford something better than this old ruin.

HELEN: When you start earning you can start moaning.

JO: Can't be soon enough for me. I'm cold and my shoes let water ... what a place...and we're supposed to be living off her immoral earnings.

HELEN: I'm careful. Anyway, what's wrong with this place? Everything in it's falling apart, it's true, and we've no heating – but there's a lovely view of the gasworks, we share a bathroom with the community and this wallpaper's contemporary. What more do you want? Anyway, it'll do for us. Pass me a glass, Jo.

JO: Where are they?

HELEN: I don't know.

JO: You packed 'em. She'd lose her head if it was loose. (*TOH*, 7)

The opening scene reveals the distinctive personalities of this 'comedy duo'. Despite her age and maternal role, Helen is an exuberant woman governed by her emotions, while the clever and more sensible daughter

tries to provide her mother with the rationality the older woman lacks. The first lines of the play 'set up the two characters as comic sparring partners, with Helen as the voluble, excitable one and Jo as the sardonic, wise-cracking one, constantly deflating Helen's extravagant statements' (Leeming. 1982, xviii). Although the teenage daughter calls her mother by her first name and most of their remarks aim to tease and hurt each other, the audience detects signs of unspoken affection in many of Jo's and Helen's lines. Indeed, the tension permeating their conversations, so skilfully crafted by Delaney's ear for humour in dialogue, reveals at a deeper level a strong mutual attachment between parent and child. In this light, Arthur K. Oberg suggests that in deploying a distancing strategy she uses language as a powerful weapon, so that from the very start she manages to explore and stage the inherent contradictions in human bonds, representing their essence and throwing light on what is written between the lines:

When Helen and Jo suddenly begin talking *of*, instead of *to*, one another, Shelagh Delaney adapts a primarily aesthetic device of distancing – common to so much of popular art, whether music-hall or *commedia dell'arte* or Brecht – in order to reveal a state of personal relationships ... Helen and Jo resort to language, a potentially communicative art, for disguising how deeply they feel. (Oberg. 1966, 163)

Offending each other while trying to hide their deepest feelings behind a verbal screen, the two characters enact the ambivalent nature of their love–hate relationship. Jo accuses Helen of shirking her parental duties, a truth Helen does not deny:

Jo: You should prepare my meals like a proper mother.  
HELEN: Have I ever laid claim to being a proper mother? (35)

Nor does Helen defend herself from the charge of being more interested in sex and alcohol:

HELEN: The extent of my credulity always depends on the extent of my alcoholic intake. Eat, drink and be merry-  
Jo: And live to regret it. (34)

The absence of a nurturing figure has forced Jo to become at once more cynical and more responsible, seemingly detached and independent. She has had to cope with difficulties alone, with the help of her knowing sarcasm. Her isolation is evident in the second act, when Geof tentatively explores the possibility of a heterosexual relationship with Jo. She

discourages him, saying that she does not reciprocate his tender feelings, while strongly asserting her self-sufficiency:

GEOF: ... what would you say if I started something?

JO: In my condition I'd probably faint.

GEOF: No, I mean after.

JO: I don't want you.

GEOF: Am I repulsive to you?

JO: You're nothing to me. I'm everything to myself. (57)

The sense of abandonment that Jo has endured throughout her life, aggravated by the absence of an adequate maternal or a paternal figure in her dysfunctional family, has inhibited the formation of a mature identity. Jo's lack of confidence and self-esteem is linked to her unresolved conflict with Helen's dominant and narcissistic personality, which has tended to swamp her own. While having numerous love affairs has made the mother confident about her sex appeal, the young girl is less secure: 'After all, I'm not very experienced in these little matters' (39). A competitive edge begins to emerge between the teenage daughter and her eternally youthful mother, exemplified in Jo's questioning her sailor boyfriend about Helen's attractiveness:

JO: ... Well, do you think she's beautiful?

BOY: Yes.

JO: Am I like her?

BOY: No, you're not at all like her.

JO: Good. I'm glad nobody can see a resemblance between us. (37-38)

Ostensibly, Jo is determined to detach herself from her mother, to perform what Adrienne Rich has described as 'maternal splitting', a function of 'matrophobia' that is not the fear of one's mother but the fear of becoming *like* one's mother (Rich. 1995 [1976], 236). Jo's fierce denials of any possible resemblance between her and her mother, added to her efforts to emphasize her individuality at every opportunity throughout the play, are evidence of her, at times ambivalent, wish for this split. Despite Jo's best efforts to affirm her 'claim for uniqueness' (Esche. 1992, 76), the girl's life resembles her mother's more than she would wish to acknowledge. Like Helen, Jo is a lonely individual confronting tough times and mistaking sex for love. They both become pregnant after their first sexual encounter, and each resists the paradigm of motherhood. The familial and social determinism in which Delaney's play is rooted is emphasized in its circular structure. Early in the play,

Helen philosophically anticipates future events, accepting that 'we all end up same way sooner or later' (13) and towards the end Jo declares: 'So we're back where we started' (81). The tragedy facing them both is the impossibility of escape.

The dialogue with the sailor is not the only conversation during which Jo's fear of personal and sexual inadequacy, as compared to her mother, leads her to goad a man into offering reassurance. Towards the end of the first act, Jo's clumsy attempt to flirt with her mother's 'toy boy' goes nowhere:

JO: ... I let my natural beauty shine through. ... Don't you like shiny faces?  
 PETER: I suppose they're all right on sweet young things but I just don't go for sweet young things –  
 JO: Do you fancy me?  
 PETER: Not yet.  
 JO: You prefer old women.  
 PETER: She isn't old.  
 JO: She soon will be. (32–33)

In comparison to the two strong women, the three male figures in the play (Peter, Jo's boyfriend and Geof) fulfil only a secondary, supporting function. According to Michelene Wandor, they 'come and go according to the needs of the female gender-driven story, and we do not follow the men's emotions or dilemmas' (Wandor, 2001, 61). Delaney herself declared that she was primarily interested in the female duo and that the male characters were subsequently developed to explore Jo and Helen's strained relationship: 'When I started this play I had only two people in it – the mother and daughter. Then I realized there had to be other characters so that these two could reveal themselves more fully. It built up on its own from that' (in Leeming, 2005, xiv). So it is that Delaney's men are not represented as fully rounded characters, but as one-dimensional satellites revolving around the two women at the core of the drama. In particular, the comic figure of Peter, with his dirty jokes, constant drunkenness, black eye-patch, cigar in mouth, is a caricature rather than a fully developed character. His equivocal presence is useful in confirming Helen's sex appeal and parental negligence, and in providing an additional source of tension. As Leeming observes, 'he seems to exist less as a personality in his own right than as a catalyst in the relationship between Helen and Jo, causing them to reveal more about their feelings for each other' (xv). Indeed, in her occasional flirting with Peter, showing up her mother in a bad light, Jo reveals a bitter

jealousy and emotional distress. Moreover, this '*brash car salesman*' (16), as Delaney describes him, belongs to a world of material profit outside Helen's and Jo's microcosm of deprivation, from which the former attempts to escape by the vicarious use of her men friends' exploitation of a growing commercial arena.

Indicated in the script simply as 'Boy' – a depersonalizing device – and referred to casually as Jimmie later in the play, Jo's boyfriend is also a stereotype serving the dramatic storyline. As a seaman, he can only temporarily offer the girl the tenderness and attention she is so desperate for, later to vanish leaving her pregnant, alone and 'afraid of becoming a mother because she has not herself been properly mothered' (Wandor. 2001, 61). It is significant that, when they first meet, the boy's blackness fires Jo's vivid imagination and, although Jimmie comes from Wales, she 'foreignizes' him to render him more exotic:

Jo: Sometimes you look three thousand years old. Did your ancestors come from Africa?

Boy: No. Cardiff. Disappointed? Were you hoping to marry a man whose father beat the tom-tom all night?

Jo: I don't care where you were born. There's still a bit of jungle in you somewhere. (25)

In the second act of the play, after being deserted by her sailor, Jo talks about him with Geof who is curious to know more about her mysterious first love:

GEOF: What was that boy like?

Jo: Which boy?

GEOF: You know.

Jo: Oh! Him. He wasn't a bit like you. He could sing and dance and he was as black as coal.

GEOF: A black boy?

Jo: From darkest Africa! A Prince.

GEOF: A what?

Jo: A Prince, son of a chieftain.

GEOF: I'll bet he was too.

Jo: Prince Ossini! (53)

Jo enters a world of fantasy conveyed to the audience through language that conjures up an exotic romance. Even as this description is a product of Jo's imagination, she is aware of the sailor's unreliability from the outset (and Jimmie is set to disappear from her life without a trace), and wilfully accepts the precariousness of their love story. Yet in a

play featuring flawed models of parenthood, the boyfriend cannot be considered an entirely negative figure. Glenda Leeming throws light on the maternal symbolism attached to Jimmie and Geof:

As in the novels of Dickens, there is a pattern of failed or substitute parents, which shows that the normal parental responsibilities are not functioning properly. Helen herself is a bad mother, and Jo is to be a mother but rejects the role, at least at times. It is a commonplace of popular psychology to say that dislike of milk (especially with the skin on it) symbolises rejection of one's mother: Jo dislikes milk, and interestingly both her boyfriend and Geof, who give her the care and affection lacking in her mother, try to make her drink glasses of milk. (Leeming. 1982, xvi–xvii)

Equally of interest to an understanding of Jo's personality is the theory conceived in 1926 by the psychoanalyst Karen Horney in her article 'The Flight from Womanhood' (Horney. 1926, 324). Jo's journey to maturity, complicated by her faulty nurturing and nomadic lifestyle, is brought to a premature crisis when pregnancy exposes her unreadiness for her 'biological destiny'. She is repulsed by the idea of breastfeeding: '[I]t's cannibalistic. Like being eaten alive' (56). Her fear erupts violently: 'I'll bash its brains out. I'll kill it. I don't want this baby, Geof. I don't want to be a mother. I don't want to be a woman' (75). Symptomatic of their complex relationship, Helen and Jo constantly switch roles, each of them at different moments being the one who wishes to escape only to be blocked by the other, neither accepting that of mother.

In contrast to Peter and 'Boy', however, Geof is a better developed, sympathetic character who might indeed serve as a surrogate mother to Jo and to the baby. Like the other two he contributes to the characterization of the female protagonists, shedding light on their conflicted personality traits. Geof's gentleness and lack of sexual interest in women makes Jo feel safer and more self-confident: 'I'm sick of love. That's why I'm letting you stay here. You won't start anything' (53). On the other hand, Helen's attitudes are made clear in the series of insults she throws at him – 'Bloody little pansy' and 'What an arty little freak!' (79) – that demonstrate the ingrained homophobia of the time. Helen's deep-rooted prejudices had been made evident in the second scene of the first act when she suspects her daughter is seeing someone. Her assumption that it is a man is challenged provocatively by Jo:

HELEN: You're a bit late coming home from school, aren't you?

JO: I met a friend.

HELEN: Well, he certainly knows how to put stars in your eyes.

JO: What makes you think it's a he?

HELEN: Well, I certainly hope it isn't a she who makes you walk round in this state. (26–27)

Compared to her mother, who abuses Geof and goads him into leaving the flat, Jo has a less hostile and more open reaction to her friend's homosexuality. Yet when she believes that the art student has been thrown out of his room by the landlady because of his sexuality, she cannot resist probing, displaying the prurient curiosity, shared by many, about what 'people like him' do:

JO: ... Come on, the truth. Who did she find you with? Your girl friend? It wasn't a man, was it?

GEOF: Don't be daft.

JO: Look, I've got a nice comfortable couch, I've even got some sheets. You can stay here if you'll tell me what you do. Go on, I've always wanted to know about people like you.

GEOF: Go to hell.

JO: I won't snigger, honest I won't. Tell me some of it, go on. I bet you never told a woman before.

GEOF: I don't go in for sensational confessions.

JO: I want to know what you do. I want to know why you do it. Tell me or get out.

GEOF: Right! [*He goes to the door.*]

JO: Geof, don't go. Don't go. Geof! I'm sorry. Please stay.

GEOF: Don't touch me.

JO: I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.

GEOF: I can't stand women at times. Let go of me.

JO: Come on, Geof. I don't care what you do.

GEOF: Thank you. May I go now, please?

JO: Please stay here Geof. I'll get those sheets and blankets.

GEOF: I can't stand people who laugh at other people. They'd get a bigger laugh if they laughed at themselves. (47–48)

Jo's initial reaction shows ignorance and a consequent lack of respect for Geof's sexual orientation. However, Jo's insolent curiosity does not suggest an abiding form of homophobia that would prevent her from establishing a close relationship with Geof. In this scenario, conventional gender roles are subverted. Jo vehemently rejects the idea of motherhood, while her gay friend shows an aptitude for the role: 'Geof ... becomes a dual substitute mother, looking after Jo, and preparing cot and clothes for the baby. He has all the feelings which, according to conventional gender expectation, Jo should have' (Wandor. 2001, 61). Indeed, this 'big



sister', as Jo ironically calls Geof, does his best to provide a favourable environment for the child:

JO: What a pretty little dress.

GEOF: It's got to wear something. You can't just wrap it up in a bundle of newspaper.

JO: And dump it on a doorstep. How did Geoffrey find out the measurements?

GEOF: Babies are born to the same size more or less.

JO: Oh, no, they're not. Some are thin scrappy things and others are huge and covered in rolls of fat.

GEOF: Shut up, Jo, it sounds revolting.

JO: They are revolting. I hate babies.

GEOF: I thought you'd change. Motherhood is supposed to come natural to women.

JO: It comes natural to you, Geoffrey Ingram. You'd make somebody a wonderful wife. (55)

Jo and Geof form an asexual alliance that challenges traditional patterns to propose an alternative kind of bond based not on heteronormative expectations but on mutual need. Jo feels safe with her gay partner precisely because she feels he will always be there for her but will never place her under sexual pressure. Sadly, however, this unconventional family will ultimately be disrupted by Helen's return to re-establish '[t]raditional motherhood imperatives', however flawed (Wandor. 2001, 62).

There is no doubt that, as Nicholas de Jongh wrote in the *Guardian* after Delaney's death in November 2011, the sympathetic characterization of the gay student 'was ground-breaking. Until then playwrights tried to evade the censor's veto by resorting to subterfuge and innuendo' (de Jongh. 2011). The Wolfenden Report of 1957, which suggested that homosexual acts between consenting adults in private should no longer constitute an offence, was to have a crucial role in the decriminalization of homosexuality and in promoting a more liberal climate. Harding points out that '[b]y the time the play was submitted on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1958, the censors were having to take cognisance of a significant development in the nation's approach to sex and morality' (Harding. 2014, 44). In this regard, Delaney's play tested to what extent the Lord Chamberlain had changed his mind about the onstage representation of homosexuality. For de Jongh,

it is highly probable that Delaney's treatment of the subject and the favourable critical and public response to *A Taste of Honey* played a significant

role in persuading the Lord Chamberlain partially to relax his ban on homosexuality and gays a few months later. Shelagh Delaney ought to rank as a gay heroine. (2011)

More significantly, Colette Lindroth claims Delaney as a feminist heroine, in a play that puts two strong women before the audience:

Feminists ... should find her [Delaney's] rebellious, sexually independent female characters intriguing. Tough, unsentimental, often unlucky but always resilient, their insistence on aggressive self-definition came well before that stance became fashionable. (1996, 124)

Remarkably for her time, Delaney packed many of the issues of second-wave feminism into her first play: exposure of the sexual double standard; a challenge to heteronormative expectations; the vexed state of mother–daughter relationships; the yearning for a space of one's own; a woman's desire to control her own life and her own body.

Given its focus on marginal characters and controversial issues like single motherhood, interracial relationships and homosexuality, *A Taste of Honey* was undeniably a revolutionary piece of writing. When it was first staged in 1958, two years after John Osborne's *cabier de doléances*, *Look Back in Anger*, opened at the Royal Court, Delaney was immediately grouped with the new wave of emerging – and socially enraged – male playwrights and novelists, including Osborne himself, John Arden, Harold Pinter, Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine, Colin Wilson. Where else was there for her at the time? She was unique. Yet the 'splendid young prophetess' from Salford hated being defined as an 'angry young woman'. Lindroth notes that '[t]his label stuck to Delaney for years, but it was a link and an attitude she denied, insisting that her aims and interests were quite different from theirs' (1996, 122–123). Rather than suffering from the 'Jimmy Porter syndrome', Britain's first working-class woman dramatist was not angry. Indeed, for Winterson at least, 'she was restless ... and oddly full of optimism. *A Taste of Honey* isn't a cynical play; its characters are each different kinds of survivors in a world that throws no lifebelts' (Winterson. 2014).

In offering a portrait of different shades of loneliness and marginalization, Delaney's taboo-breaking play stages the resilience of working-class people with a northern urban lyricism free from sentimentalism and auto-commiseration, destined from the very first to alter the landscape of postwar British theatre. Thanks to *A Taste of Honey*, successfully adapted for the screen by the dramatist herself and produced by Tony Richardson in Salford for release in 1961, Delaney 'emerge[d] from

complete obscurity to become a national celebrity' in just six months (Harding, 2014, 67). Yet as an unknown female writer from the grim and unpopular north of England, things were not easy for her, especially at the beginning of her career. Harding points out that 'Shelagh Delaney's gender was clearly an issue with many male reviewers and commentators. Their blatantly sexist treatment of both her and her work was remarkable, even for the time' (Harding, 2014, 180). For Jeanette Winterson, after the overwhelming success of *A Taste of Honey* and the relative failure of her second play, *The Lion in Love* (1960), Delaney could not help but disappear from the public scene, precisely because she was let down by the callous and uncaring attitude of a middle-class, male-dominated theatre establishment. Winterson's admiration for the writer she claims as her heroine is grounded in the similarities between their personal and literary journeys:

Delaney was born in Salford in 1939 [actually 1938–2011]. I was born in Manchester in 1959. Same background, same early success. She was like a lighthouse – pointing the way and warning about the rocks underneath. She was the first working-class woman playwright. She had all the talent and we let her go. (Winterson, 2010)

The 20 years separating Delaney and Winterson saw many radical changes. In her taboo-breaking first work Delaney writes, from the vantage point of the stalling social and economic recovery of the north in the late 1950s, about the sexuality of her rebellious and outspoken female characters before the second wave of the feminist movement exploded onto the scene in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless, the feminist theatre scholar Sue-Ellen Case has added a note of caution, suggesting in 1991 that *A Taste of Honey* should not be seen as part of a wider project with social and collective resonance. She considers that, from an historical point of view, Delaney should be regarded as

an isolated playwright, writing before the commencement of the feminist movement and its critique, but with the impulse towards staging the oppression and promise in the lived experiences of women. Delaney makes sexual pleasure and the woman's body the site of struggle, but cannot really articulate how their condition is produced. (Case, 1991, 239)

Almost 20 years on, however, Selena Todd sees Delaney's significance rather differently. In her recent thoroughgoing literary biography, she extends Harding's ten-year perspective to include the rest of Delaney's

life and career up to her death in 2011. Todd argues unequivocally that Delaney's 'story belongs in the history of feminism, though not to the history as it's usually told, which assumes middle-class women were the sole agents of change' (Todd. 2019, 8). Writing in the 'interfeminist' period of the mid-twentieth century, Delaney expresses both 'the oppression and promise in the lived experiences of women' (Case. 1991, 239) but it was for other women artists and feminists to take that discourse further in the second wave. Jeanette Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, was released in 1985 into a differently austere environment than that experienced by Delaney, but Winterson remains influential in the third wave. While Lucie Armitt concedes that Winterson's literary journey has gradually abandoned an exclusively woman-oriented perspective, veering towards a typically postmodern gender fluidity, she states:

Winterson's crucial role in the shaping of contemporary literary feminism will certainly remain strong, for in the very power of her writing and her presence as an author of high renown she undoubtedly plays a key role in maintaining the wider collective reputation of contemporary women's writing. (Armitt. 2007, 25)

That such an important literary figure as Winterson should place Delaney in high regard is significant, particularly as she laments Delaney's later trajectory, clearly less propitious than her own. Isolated she may have been, but Shelagh Delaney undeniably wrote her own extraordinary chapter in the history of women's (play)writing. An astute observer of late 1950s' northern England, in *A Taste of Honey* she bravely and gracefully investigated and represented gender roles and sexuality within a distinctively working-class, though still reactionary, context. This innovative and daring author, in Winterson's words, 'deserves a major re-write in all those his-stories of postwar drama because Shelagh Delaney is the start of the possible' (Winterson. 2014).

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Stevie Smith

#### Poetry and Personality

*James Underwood*

Should we still consider Stevie Smith a ‘neglected’ writer? The label has undoubtedly been true at various points during the last century, but there has been something of a Smith revival in recent years, with a number of sophisticated book-length and shorter studies of her work, and the landmark publication in 2015 of her *Collected Poems and Drawings*, edited by William May. Though she may be better known as a poet, her fiction seems to have been more successfully integrated into narratives of twentieth-century literature, having been related to a number of important contextual, thematic, and stylistic preoccupations, including modernism, the politics and atmosphere of the 1930s, and the war that followed. Critical assimilation of her poetry has been slower and more difficult. Though not neglected, she remains a problematic figure in accounts of twentieth-century British poetry. As William May has written, ‘Reading Smith’s poetry is often an exercise in bafflement’ (2010, 21). ‘Exercise’ is an apposite word, suggesting as it does an activity that is difficult – a strain on our critical abilities – and also, perhaps, one that has been ‘set’ for us by the poet herself. There is no doubt that Smith’s poetry is ‘difficult’, but then there are plenty of difficult poets who have been assimilated without too much trouble, most obviously the man who argued that ‘poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*’ (Eliot. 1955, 118).

Why is Smith taking longer, then? Critics have suggested a wide range of explanations. For May, it has something to do with the unsettling

experience of feeling Smith peering over your shoulder as you read her: 'It is not that Smith's work has been overlooked, but more exactly that her own readers unwittingly feel the presence of the overlooking author when assessing her work' (2010, 17). For Marsha Bryant, our misunderstanding of Smith's extensive engagement with children's culture has left her needing to be rescued from the 'literary nursery' (2011, 51). Laura Severin contends that Smith's 'politics of "passive experiment"' has rendered her contributions to political discourse invisible (Shuttleworth. 2003, 134). And Kristin Bluemel has argued that we require an entirely new category of literary history if we are to properly comprehend the achievement of a writer like Smith: 'I recommend that we allow "intermodern" women's writing ... to function more visibly as theory within our critical conversations' (in Shuttleworth. 2003, 66–67). This essay supplements these discussions by focusing on the problem of personality. For if there is one word that has, more than any other, come to be associated with Smith and her work, it is 'eccentric'. While certain variations on this word – such as 'unique' – may be intended as praise (does not every artist wish to stand apart from his or her contemporaries?), the perception of eccentricity has in practice often worked as a kind of sticking plaster, offered in lieu of actual integration into the streams of twentieth-century literary history.

This essay takes Virginia Woolf's reflections on writers' personalities as a starting point for thinking about the unaccountability of personality in literary criticism. It argues that personality can function as a too-easy circumvention of difficulty, and looks at some of the strategies of Smith and of others to mitigate its dominance. In particular, Philip Larkin's efforts to secure Smith's place in literary history are discussed in order to explore a number of issues that are pertinent to the position of the mid-century woman writer, and to literary criticism more generally; and in order to identify ways in which Smith's work might be better served.

In an essay on 'Personalities', Virginia Woolf asks the reader to try a thought experiment. Wondering to what extent our impressions of a writer's personality might influence our attitude to their work, she considers the Ancients, of whom not much is known. Conjuring Aeschylus and an eagle, she imagines the bird dropping a rock on his head: 'it splits his skull open, and that is all' (Woolf. 1972, 274). 'Similarly with Sappho', she continues, who 'leapt from a high rock into the sea'; 'Both anecdotes have something barren and academical about them, something detached and unilluminating' (274). That changes, however, if we conduct the same experiment with more contemporary



writers. Imagine Tennyson, she asks us, 'run over by a taxi-cab; or George Eliot gathering her skirts about her and leaping from a cliff'. The image now is more vivid, and she feels certain that 'it is through that veil that we should have been forced to read *In Memoriam* and *Middlemarch*' (274). The point, for Woolf, is that '[t]he ordinary reader resents the bareness' of Ancient Greek literature, precisely because '[t]here is nothing in the way of anecdote to browse upon, nothing handy and personal to help oneself up by; nothing is left but the literature itself, cut off from us by time and language, unvulgarized by association, pure from contamination, but steep and isolated' (274–275). In contrast, she allows herself to fantasize about walks and foreign travel with Keats, 'a lovable human being':

He was vigorous but gentle in all his movements, wearing neat black shoes, trousers strapped under his insteps, and a coat that was a little shabby at the seams. His eyes were of a warm yet searching brown, his hands were broad, and the fingers, unlike those of most artists, square at the tip. (273)

Then the return to reality:

So we could go on making it up, page after page, whether accurately or not does not for our present purpose very much matter. For the point we wish to make is that we are ready supplied with a picture of Keats, and have the same liking or disliking for him personally that we have for a friend last seen half an hour ago in the corner of the omnibus that plies between Holborn and Ludgate Hill. (273)

'How much of it', she wonders, '... enters into our feelings for books, and how difficult it is to be certain that a sense of the physical presence of the writer, with all which that implies, is not colouring our judgment of his work' (273). Her provisional conclusion is this: 'We must then go humbly and confess that our likings and dislikings for authors in their books are as varied and as little accountable as our likings for people in the flesh' (276).

Personality can be a messy matter for literary studies, a discipline that ostensibly scrutinizes texts, but often, whether consciously or not, scrutinizes the humans behind them. The relation between life and art, or the role of biography in interpreting literature, is a longstanding debate in the discipline. But there is a difference between 'biography' and 'personality'. Consider the following two statements, either of which might feasibly be made about Smith: 'Stevie Smith was an English writer'; 'Stevie Smith was a very English writer'. One is a biographical fact, the other a much more subjective assertion; scholars might quibble

about how the first statement conditions our understanding of Smith's work, but the second one generates far more questions and debates. If biography is always threatening to bleed into our reading of a particular writer, then personality is an even more porous problem – for precisely the reason that Woolf identifies, namely the sheer unaccountability of it. For what rigorous basis in truth does Woolf's idea of Keats enjoy, and, whatever the answer to that question, what relevance does it have to the great odes of 1819?

Perhaps we should not be so neurotic about this; the humanities are, after all, fundamentally human-centred. But impressions do matter – hence the idiom 'first impressions count' – and their unaccountability must be especially acute in the case of a mid-century woman writer struggling to gain access to literary culture. As Jane Dowson has said of Smith's output during the 1930s, 'She wrote prolifically but encountered rejection after rejection from publishers' (1996, 138). Valentine Cunningham describes how Smith was 'resigned to her poems being locked out of the male pale' in his account of the literature of the 1930s, a decade dominated by the notion of the Auden generation (1988, 151). Bluemel writes that this label has made it 'difficult to discuss interwar British writers in terms other than those provided by [the] account of young Oxbridge poets' (Shuttleworth, 2003, 65). Smith's lack of resemblance to a fashionable poetic 'type', then, seems to have hindered her emergence during the 1930s; but recognition would be sporadic at best, long after those poets had left the pitch, as Dowson and Entwistle show: 'After her first three collections (1937, 1938, 1942), she struggled to get her poems in journals, let alone in book form, until *Harold's Leap* (1950). This was followed by another vacuum before *Not Waving but Drowning* (1957), although there were always plenty of poems' (2005, 110). For Dowson, there are general and specific gendered reasons for this: it was difficult for women to 'penetrate literary circles; they lacked the publicity and promotion which are achieved through making the right social connections; they could not easily integrate into their respective socio-literary milieus as they were often pressed by social duties, cultural constraints and family responsibilities' (1996, 15). In the case of Smith, 'As a single woman looking after an ailing aunt, [she] was limited in her ability to engage socially with London poets. As a woman, she felt an outsider to the literary world' (15). But perceptions of personality have surely compounded these structural issues – for you would not have to actually meet Stevie Smith at a literary sherry party in order to come to some conclusion about her oddness:

Now Vole art dead  
And done is all thy bleeding. (Smith. 2015, 129)

Mr Over is dead  
He died fighting and true  
And on his tombstone they wrote  
Over to You. (Smith. 2015, 299)

More than many, Stevie Smith might recognize Woolf's musings on the unaccountability of personality, having witnessed her reputation as an eccentric take hold within her own lifetime. Ogden Nash, to whom she is often compared, questioned 'Who or What is Stevie Smith? / Is She a Woman, Is She a Myth?' (quoted in May. 2010, 130). Unlike Circe or Kathleen Ni Houlihan, she might understandably feel a little indignant at the question. In a letter to Ann and Anthony Thwaite, she wrote: 'it's odd being told so often I am eccentric because I never once have felt that I am, but a plain down-to-earthier as ever was!'.<sup>1</sup> We do not necessarily have to accept the characterization of plainness, but it is worth noting Smith's feeling that personality was something put upon her rather than something she projected to the world. There is perhaps no better encapsulation of this than in her association with cats. Responding to a query about them from Ann Thwaite in 1968, Smith writes:

Many thanks for your letter ... but I don't know ... about cats, I mean. I quite like the animals but I've never had one (bar an ancient tom we had when I was a child, called, most unsuitably, 'Fluff'). I seem to have a name as a 'Cat Lover' but I fear I do not deserve it. Nor do I know anything about the rearing of cats. Cat poems I have in plenty, but they are often a shade sharp in tone. e.g. Monsieur Pussy-Cat, Blackmailer.<sup>2</sup>

This is a little disingenuous: Smith was the author of *Cats in Colour*, a book about 'sweet little catsy-watsies', complete with photographs and cute captions (1981, 134). Indeed, it is in her introduction to that book that she remembers her cat Tizdal, 'just such a kitchen fat cat as I love' (136). It does seem that Fluff was not alone.

There is a serious point to be made here, however, namely the way in which cats have been folded into the mix when it comes to Smith's figuring in the popular imagination. It should be pointed out that Ted Hughes has many poems about cats, but he is a poet much more likely to be associated with the big kind. T.S. Eliot, of course, wrote an entire book of poems about them; but he is much more likely to be associated with sober scholarship than with Rum Tum Tuggers. Smith's

biographers Jack Barbera and William McBrien tell us that ‘After *Cats in Colour* appeared, literary editors connected Stevie with pets and she reviewed a fair number of books about cats’ (1985, 232). She was, then, to some extent a participant in her own feline identity formation; but her letter to Thwaite at least suggests some impatience and frustration with the association. After all, it does align her with that stock character of English culture, the ‘crazy cat lady’. And the gendered implications of this hardly need stating, particularly when the comparison with fellow cat poets like Hughes and Eliot is reiterated. If all three writers have cat poems ‘in plenty’, why is it Smith who is the “‘Cat Lover’”? Answering that question surely returns us to the issue of personality, and the ways in which our impressions of a writer and their work blend unaccountably. Whether in the popular or scholarly imagination, Hughes is the hulking, virile jaguar; Eliot the serious doyen of twentieth-century letters; Smith is the cat lady. This is one version of a wider problem in literary criticism that Alison Light diagnoses:

It is still the case that poetry by women is subject to the kind of *ad feminam* readings ..., which reads the work as thinly veiled sexual biography, either celebrating what the reader believes femininity to be, or praising the poet for avoiding its ‘pitfalls’ ... The notion that ‘the woman is the style’ reproduces that double bind of femininity whereby womanliness is either a kind of handicap or a specialism in the way that being masculine is not. ... As Eavan Boland has observed, poetry about motherhood is ‘women’s poetry’ but poetry about war is just poetry. No-one seems to fear that writing endlessly about father figures – whether they be literary influences or an old man digging potatoes – will limit or ghettoise the poetry. (1994, 249)

Personality is one manifestation of what Light calls the ‘very different climate in which women have written’ (249–250). One of Eliot’s biggest contributions to twentieth-century literary discourse was, of course, his theory of impersonality: the idea that ‘Poetry is not ... the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’ (1955, 30). This notion dominated literary studies for most of the period this volume covers; it formed part of the backdrop to the literary culture in which Smith emerged as a writer. ‘But, of course’, Eliot continued, ‘only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things’ (30). Escape might prove difficult, though, depending on who you are. I would contend that, when faced with a body of work that is difficult to interpret, the critic has two choices: head to the library, or recall what we know about the poet. The more difficult the poetry

is to understand, the more necessary these choices become. *The Waste Land*, with its overt erudition and end notes referencing *Prothalamion* and *Pervigilium Veneris*, practically implores us to consult the library. But which of these options is more likely when the critic confronts a poem like the following:

Aloft,  
In the loft,  
Sits Croft;  
He is soft. (Smith. 2015, 218)

Which of the thousands or millions of books in the library is likely to offer up the key to the meaning of soft, aloft Croft?

Ultimately, it is our sense of the poet's personality that will be the more tempting strategy for dealing with poetry like this. But when our impression of a poet results in a critical vocabulary comprising words like 'eccentric', 'unique' and 'idiosyncratic', the danger is that we will not so much interpret Smith's poetry as isolate it, dealing with it in the same way that we 'deal' with a snotty tissue. May has discussed the peculiar ways in which Smith has been recognized-but-not-really-recognized, recalling, for example, one critic's decision to lump her in with R.S. Thomas, not because of any particular synergies but because 'both their works are "*sui generis*" and "impossible to categorise"' (2010, 207). But as Smith told one interviewer, 'I'm alive today, therefore I'm as much part of our time as everybody else. The times will just have to enlarge themselves to make room for me, won't they, and for everybody else' (quoted in Sternlicht. 1991, 35). On the exclusion of women writers from what she calls the 'national voice', Light has written that Smith 'was a real woman in a real place and I am loathe to place her poetry outside history' (1994, 257). To put Smith back into history, into the national voice and into literary history, is an important goal for literary criticism. The problem with personality is that it emerges somewhere between the 'real woman' and the poems on the page. In that sense, it exists in a kind of no-man's land, a lawless realm where it can act upon us with impunity.

For Smith, one way to deal with the imposition of an eccentric persona was to effectively seize the means of production, which she did by way of performance – not just of her poems, but of the authorial self behind them. As May notes, 'By 1957 ... Smith's readership was vanishing, and she had become an invisible presence in Britain's literary scene. It was only through poetry performances and broadcasts during the 1960s that

her poetic reputation once again began to grow' (2010, 5). Accounts of these performances include the following by Seamus Heaney, in which he remembers

her voice pitching between querulousness and keening, her quizzical presence at once inviting the audience to yield her their affection and keeping them at bay with a quick irony. She seemed to combine elements of Gretel and of the witch, to be vulnerable and capable, a kind of Home Counties *sean bhean bhocht*, with a hag's wisdom and a girl's wide-eyed curiosity. She chanted her poems artfully off-key, in a beautifully flawed plainsong that suggested two kinds of auditory experience: an embarrassed party-piece by a child half-way between tears and giggles, and a deliberate *faux-naïf* rendition by a virtuoso. (1980, 199)

With her Peter Pan collars and 'an appearance that increasingly helped sustain the myth of a slightly eccentric, childlike personality' (Spalding, 1988, 208), Smith harnessed the power of vocal and physical performance to subvert expectations of poetry and femininity, making her, in May's words, the 'impresario, rather than victim, of her own literary reputation' (2010, vi). Critics have productively explored the radical potential of this move. Severin in particular has been instrumental in uncovering this 'alternative radical tradition of British poetry, one that rejects fractured form in favour of multiple framing devices. Exceptional and groundbreaking, this hybrid art form ... lifts poetry off the page, maximizing poetry's transgressive powers through the rejection of the print page's promise of autonomy and authority' (2016, 4). Such work represents a crucial strand of the critical conversation about Smith, and restores to this artist some of the agency she has been historically denied. We might, however, feel somewhat ambivalent about the potential for performance to better place and explain Smith's contribution to literary history. It entails at least a couple of problems, the first of which is a practical one: it shifts the focus towards the spectacle of the poet, but that spectacle is unavailable to most of us. Although it is true that testimonies and indeed recordings of some of Smith's performances do survive – and therefore deserve a place in the conversation – consuming these is not exactly the same as a direct encounter with a Smith performance or indeed with her written work. Is it too text-centric to suggest that, for the generations of Smith fans coming to her work since the 1960s, it must and will be on the basis of her published writings that her legacy endures?

Smith's performance of eccentricity is also arguably a direct response to charges of eccentricity; though empowering and subversive in some

ways, it is also constrained by a frame of reference imposed, as we have seen, on the poet. Print and performance also make different demands on the artist and their audience; while the act of performance can open up a host of new possibilities for the artist, there is also loss involved. So many of a poem's effects rely on the way it is presented on the page: line and stanza lengths, enjambment, eye rhymes, italicization, a wry set of quotation marks, certain kinds of pun, and so on. Performance cannot fully convey these things, and in some cases, cannot convey them at all. It is why some poems work better for readings than others: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, for example, functions much better in performance than Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*; this is not to say that *Howl* lacks complexity (it does not), but that these poets, with their different ideas, contexts and imagined audiences have approached their art in very different ways. Dowson makes a similar point in relation to Smith: citing one critic's excited description of her musical performances, she writes '[i]t is true that the delights in reversal sometimes correspond to the dimensions of the musical score, but the cleverness of the syntactical complexities, rather than their effects, is rarely acknowledged' (1996, 139).

While performance was a significant strand of Smith's artistry, its potential to mitigate the effects of the personality problem is limited: most of us remain shut out from the experience; however much it represents an attempt to 'rewrite' eccentricity and marginality, it arguably re-inscribes those notions; and its engagement with textual intricacy is restricted, creating alternative texts for us to study, rather than fully apprehending the brilliant complexity of the 'originals'. In addition to considering the ways in which Smith sought to fashion her own persona and her place in literary history, we must acknowledge that for the mid-century woman writer, such a process has also been dependent upon a range of arbitrary or chance factors. Philip Larkin's championing of Smith brings to the fore a number of these issues, and I wish to look at the different ways in which Larkin sought to secure space for Smith within literary culture and history. One particularly significant intervention was his 1962 review for the *New Statesman* of her *Selected Poems*. As May points out, this was the first 'in-depth critical piece' on Smith for 20 years (2010, 124); Spalding tells us that Larkin had been permitted to write at length, and describes the review as 'the one that changed people's attitudes to Stevie' (1988, 257).

Discussions of this piece, however, tend to be at best lukewarm about Larkin's contribution. For Spalding, Larkin's tone is 'singularly ambivalent': he is a self-appointed 'knight-errant', keen to rescue Smith

from her mis-readers, but in his more ‘gratuitous’ remarks, ‘one hears the superior tone of the “masculine” critic’ (1988, 257). For May, Larkin’s ‘attempt at critical resuscitation backfires: the phrases most often quoted from the review, such as descriptions of her as a “lighthearted purveyor of *bizarrierie*” or as “*fausse-näive*” are the ones which his article had been intent on refuting, or as relegating to describe her less successful work’ (2010, 125). It was, therefore, a ‘totemic failure’ (125). But what characterizes Larkin’s review – and what is most useful about it – is his decision to look beyond perceptions of eccentricity: he eschews discussion of the Stevie Smith myth in favour of a more direct engagement with her work. Larkin seems to have had a very clear sense of why he wanted to do so: ‘I am not aware that Stevie Smith’s poems have ever received serious critical assessment’ (1983, 153). Caveats do need to be made, however. It is true that Larkin allows a note of bemusement to creep in. He feels compelled early on to disclose that Smith has ‘written a book about *cats*, which as far as I am concerned casts a shadow over even the most illustrious name’ (153). He is also sceptical about Smith’s drawings, which he sees as a ‘hallmark of frivolity’ (153). An ideal reviewer would have considered the hermeneutic relationship between Smith’s poems and drawings more positively. He or she might also have felt less obliged to state their reservations before proceeding to the good bits. It is also unfortunate that the *New Statesman* titled Larkin’s review ‘Frivolous and Vulnerable’, words lifted from an excerpted passage of Smith’s 1949 novel *The Holiday*.

But if we allow these aspects to cloud the piece, we miss what is most useful about it. Unusually for Larkin on the subject of contemporary poetry, he is full of praise for Smith’s work, describing her poems as ‘completely original’ and exceeding ‘95 per cent of present-day output’ (1983, 153). There is a wonderfully evocative description of Smith’s mode: ‘It is typical of Miss Smith that she sees something poetic where we do not, takes a pot-shot at it, and when she holds it up forces us to admit that there was something there, even though we have never seen anything like it before’ (155). Though ‘pot-shot’ might imply a certain amateurishness – with all the accompanying gendered connotations of the inexpert ‘poetess’ – it is in fact we who are the amateurs for having missed what she was able to see so clearly. She is responsible for nothing less than expanding the possibilities of the poetic. But there is more to Larkin’s review than plaudits. In this wide-ranging piece, Larkin produces a kind of provisional primer for Smith’s verse. His assessment takes in Smith’s Anglican-inflected tussles with religion,



religious doubt, and death; her voice and its development; questions of imagination and inspiration; and her influences, intertexts, and inheritance of an extremely varied literary tradition. By turning away from the personality and shifting focus to the work, the review opens up a number of potential entry points for more sustained treatment – and a survey of the scholarship on this poet would show that all of these aspects have indeed been explored with greater depth and sophistication by subsequent critics. Though normally reluctant to play the scholar, Larkin's review is remarkable for the ways in which it seeks to institute the 'serious critical assessment' he wished to see. And 'serious' becomes a key word in the piece. Perhaps the most useful contribution is the way in which it situates Smith's work within a very particular understanding of light verse. Though this label, too, might suggest the amateur, the trivial – the frivolous – Larkin knew it to be a total misnomer. When he writes that 'the silliness [is] part of the seriousness' (155), he is aligning his view of the genre with Auden's revisionist *Oxford Book of Light Verse*:

Light verse can be serious. It has only come to mean *vers de société*, triolets, smoke-room limericks, because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, and which have persisted, more or less, ever since, it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing-robcs. (Auden. 1952, ix–x)

Though that anthology first appeared in 1938, Auden's view was by no means widely accepted by the time Larkin penned his piece on Smith. Even in 1978, when Larkin's friend Kingsley Amis assembled a *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, it was necessary for the position to be restated. In his introduction, Amis argues that 'all light art is likely to deliver, now and then, a jolt to the gentler emotions, the more telling for its unexpectedness' (1987, ix), and he quotes with approval A.A. Milne's contention that

Light verse ... is not the relaxation of a major poet in the intervals of writing an epic; it is not the kindly contribution of a minor poet to a little girl's album; it is not Cowper amusing (and how easily) Lady Austin, not Southey splashing about, to his own great content, in the waters of Lodore. It is a precise art which has only been taken seriously, and thus qualified as art, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (vi)

Larkin corresponded with Amis on his selections for the anthology, and seven of his own poems were included. This was, then, a debate in

which he was implicated and invested, and he recognized that light verse is a serious art, as much a part of the true poet's arsenal as the Horatian ode or elegy. To liken Smith's verse, then, to Edward Lear or Ogden Nash is not to section it off in the second division of English poetry, but to suggest a means of properly attending to it; far from being 'frivolous and vulnerable', Smith's poems 'speak with the authority of sadness', and rank with the best (Larkin. 1983, 158). Though far from a perfect assessment, Larkin's review made a number of important contributions that have gone on to form part of Smith's critical heritage. It did so at a crucial time, when she was in danger of being forgotten; and although it failed to get to grips with every aspect of her work, most notably her drawings, it did not explain away difficulty simply by casting the poet as an eccentric.

Severin points out that writers' reputations are not 'magically conferred', and Larkin, who was an accomplished librarian as well as major poet, understood that libraries and archives actively construct, as well as reflect, literary history (2016, 48). His professional activities before and after Smith's death in 1971 represent a concerted effort to shore up her place in literary history, for the long term. When Smith's *Collected Poems* was published posthumously in 1975, Larkin was asked by both John Gross at the *Times Literary Supplement* and Claire Tomalin at the *New Statesman* to supply a review. He declined on the basis that he had 'already taken up [his] position' on Smith.<sup>3</sup> But he was irked by the following information in Gross's letter:

P.S. I don't know whether this will inflame you into writing, but I am sure it will at any rate stir your librarian's ire. I have just looked up the 20<sup>th</sup> century volume of The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature and as far as I can make out there isn't even an entry for Stevie Smith – nothing between Sydney Goodsir Smith and Stanley Snaith.<sup>4</sup>

Having verified this, Larkin sent a teasing reply: 'I have confirmed Stevie's absence from the NCBEL – how amazing! Particularly when they see fit to include straw dogs (whatever they are) such as – but discretion, discretion'.<sup>5</sup> Responding to Tomalin, he asked her to pass on this 'odd fact' to her next choice of reviewer.<sup>6</sup> Rather than repeat his 1962 musings on Smith, Larkin was already in the process of securing for her an archival legacy.

Lisa Stead has written that archives 'are sites whose physical and ideological boundaries are continually being reconstituted as the status of a writer or an area of study changes, and as institutional

policy, cultural policy, funding bodies and managements shift in influence' (Smith and Stead. 2016, 2–3). These factors often interrelate in fascinating ways: a change of policy, taste and/or management can significantly alter the status of a writer. During the 1960s and 1970s, Smith was subject to such a meeting of personal tastes and wider policy shifts. In 1963, Larkin co-founded an Arts Council committee set up to oversee the ongoing acquisition of a National Manuscripts Collection of Contemporary Poets (later Writers). This initiative was forged in response to the exodus of British literary archives to America, where massive financial investment shamed the comparative lack of interest this side of the Atlantic. The committee purchased the papers of contemporary British writers, reselling them at a discount to the British Museum and, later, to other public institutions. Larkin, who became chairman of the committee, would later talk about the 'magnitude' of this 'responsibility' (1983, 108).

In 1972, the year after Smith's death, he used the scheme to acquire some of Smith's papers for the University of Hull archives. These included an annotated typescript of *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) – on yellow paper, of course – and a roller blind that had hung in the home of a friend, and onto which Smith had at a party written a stanza composed by the Emperor Hadrian on his deathbed.<sup>7</sup> The typescript featured in a British Museum exhibition, and Larkin gives an amusing account of 'illegally' sneaking it out of the university library so that he could work on a commentary for the exhibition catalogue at home over the Christmas vacation.<sup>8</sup> (The catalogue's author, Jenny Stratford, sent the following comment to Larkin: 'perhaps novels on yellow paper will proliferate. I see The University of Texas forbids the use of any other colour paper in its "Academic Research Center"'.)<sup>9</sup> In 1979, Larkin was unsuccessful in acquiring more of Smith's papers at an auction, but tried hard to identify the successful bidder, with the intention of urging them to be a responsible custodian and allow public access.

The Stevie Smith archive at the University of Hull has continued to grow, even after the death of the poet-librarian who inaugurated it. As Stead argues, 'Archives reveal the often obscured, yet inescapably significant, influence of the process of archiving on the materials available for study and their presentation, and about the nature of the impulse to archive' (Smith and Stead. 2016, 4). While the stories recounted here are merely the sub-plots, or 'behind-the-scenes' tales of twentieth-century literary history, the purpose of bringing them to light is not to bolster Larkin's role as Smith's 'knight-errant' – an improbable image in any

case – but to raise a number of points that are pertinent to the position of the mid-century woman writer: that fame and status are hard-won and often arbitrarily (even if deservedly) conferred; and that revival and recovery depend very much on there being materials to be revived and recovered, which again may depend on a range of arbitrary, accidental or lucky factors. It also returns us to the issue of personality, since archives can play an important role in demystifying and de-mythologizing a writer and their work. Although a graffitied roller blind may not be the most helpful example of this, a number of items in the Hull archive, such as Smith's letters to the Thwaites, have underpinned some of the thinking in this essay.

Another potential example is the series of illustrations chosen for publication in *The Frog Prince* (1966).<sup>10</sup> We know that Smith considered her drawings an inseparable part of her art, threatening to walk away from her publisher Andre Deutsch if they would not include illustrations in her 1957 collection *Not Waving but Drowning*. The archived illustrations for *The Frog Prince* show the care with which she considered their presentation: they include notes, some in her hand, some in the publisher's, detailing which poems they should be paired with, where on the page, and how they should be enlarged, reduced, and edited. To see these drawings in the archive is to see them in their original forms: Smith frequently drew on 'found' materials, such as in the margins of letters, or on scraps of paper. What this means in practice is that her drawings are necessarily constrained by the borders of the material on which they are doodled. If some of her women appear awkwardly, even claustrophobically angular, jagged, and elongated, this may simply be because they have been drawn on a narrow strip of torn paper, or into the margin of a page – see, for example, the drawing of Helen of Troy accompanying 'I had a dream ...' (Smith. 2015, 489). In other words, the 'eccentricity' of their appearance is contextualized by seeing them 'in the wild' (that is, in their original form). But looking at these drawings in the archive also tells us something more significant about the relationship between Smith's poems and her pictures. That the drawings often exist on random materials (rather than in the same place she drafted her poems) implies that text and image are not conceived together, or even in quick succession, but rather assembled *ex post facto*, in an act of collage. This is verified by Barbera and McBrien's biography:

Although on occasion she would do a drawing for a specific poem or write a poem inspired by a drawing, that was not her usual practice. She doodled

on the backs of envelopes, memo pads and other scraps of paper, and if she liked her doodles she saved them in a box. When she collected enough poems to make a book, she would search through the box and try to find drawings to go with her poems. 'I take a drawing', she said, 'which I think "illustrates" the spirit or the idea in the poem rather than any incidents in it.' (1985, 194–195)

As they point out, however, 'the rarest combinations are those in which Stevie's poems seem to be completed by the drawings she placed with them' (195). If text and image are brought into constellation as a retrospective act – retrospective, that is, to their separate composition – what is at stake here for the reader? One answer is that it puts the reader into the uncomfortable position of having to guess the poet's ideas and intentions at the moment of pairing; to guess how exactly this drawing illustrates 'the spirit or the idea' of that poem. This also leaves the reader exposed to the embarrassing possibility that the poet is laughing at our attempts. Larkin has not been alone in finding this perplexing. But the practices of collage (intended not just in the narrow sense of assembling different physical materials) and juxtaposition have been central to modernist and postmodernist aesthetics: one thinks, for instance, of the found materials used by Picasso and Braque; Surrealism's preoccupation with juxtaposition; B.S. Johnson's novel *The Unfortunates* (the 'book in a box'). Recalling the literary climate in which Smith worked, Barbera and McBrien contend that 'It would have been as unlikely for [T.S. Eliot] to decorate his serious poems with doodles as it would have been for him to sing them' (1985, 199). That may be true, but Eliot's 'heap of broken images' in *The Waste Land*, that most serious of serious poems, represents yet another form of juxtaposition, leaving the reader bewildered and working hard to try and 'connect / Nothing with nothing' (1969, 61, 70). In short, the conviction with which Smith insisted on an enigmatic verbal–visual practice throughout her publishing career aligns her with some of the major currents of European modernism and postmodernism.

Recognizing this situates her work in an intellectual and artistic context rather than one of personality. But for Barbera and McBrien, 'doodles are personal' (1985, 198). This may be so if one thinks of them as cute or charming, in the way that Quentin Blake's illustrations for Roald Dahl are, for example. While Smith's drawings are very recognizably hers, there is also something coldly impersonal about so many of them. Though they have none of the verisimilitude of classical

sculpture, her figures often share with that form a kind of blank or lifeless stare. Look, for instance, at the animal in the drawing that accompanies 'Conviction (IV)', or the women who illustrate 'Childe Rolandine' and 'Yes, I know' (Smith. 2015, 199, 380, 531): work it out for yourself, they seem to tell us. Even where there is expression, such as in the enigmatic and perhaps even slightly menacing grin of the figure accompanying the famous 'Not Waving but Drowning', it seems to be unsettlingly at our expense (347). My point is that these drawings do not suggest or reveal an authorial 'personality' in the way that Quentin Blake's do. Quite the opposite, in fact: the author seems to vanish into the white space between the words and the image, leaving us with very little to hook onto.

We can, in these circumstances, fall back on the usual vocabulary of personality – 'eccentric', 'unique' and so on – or we can engage in the kind of rigorous textual and visual analysis that (post)modernist aesthetics demand (exemplified, for instance, by Bluemel's searching analysis of Smith's doodles: 1998). In her biography of Smith, Spalding describes how colleagues at Newnes perceived her: she 'was not well treated by the firm, was often sent on errands that an office junior should have done and was the butt of office jokes. The slightest eccentricity, even a glimpse of her greying pink bloomers, became a subject for mirth' (1988, 181). However unintentional, the critical conversation about Smith has at times been in danger of treating her similarly, as a kind of amusing novelty in the realm of literary history. The resort to wholly unaccountable impressions of personality that Woolf describes has not, in the case of Smith, been enabling. But this raises one last question: though it is perfectly possible to ignore Smith's personality, is it fair? As Light rightly points out, Smith was 'a real woman' (who very obviously had personality in abundance), and while it would be wrong to reduce her work to what Dowson calls 'merely a gendered artefact', it seems just as wrong to have to read it with the lifeless, impersonal detachment of an Eliotic/Practical Criticism model, simply as a reaction to overly gendered and overly personal criticism (Dowson. 2011, 1). This gets to the heart of a problem posed by Dowson: 'how do we talk meaningfully about poetry by women?' (2011, 1). But it should not be difficult to keep both these things in play. After all, knowing that the ageing Auden used to turn up for poetry readings in his slippers has never prevented anyone from giving his work the serious and comprehensive treatment it deserves. If Smith is to be properly woven into the tapestry of twentieth-century literature, then personality

cannot be allowed to dominate – or simply replace – actual literary criticism. One of the most talented poets of her generation, Smith's example presents us with a fascinating case study of the challenges still facing the mid-century British woman writer.

### Notes

- 1 Stevie Smith, letter to Ann and Anthony Thwaite, 25 November 1962. Letters from Philip Larkin and Stevie Smith to Anthony and Ann Thwaite, University of Hull Archives, Hull History Centre (hereafter Hull), U DP/214/3.
- 2 Stevie Smith, letter to Ann Thwaite, 22 May 1968. Letters from Philip Larkin and Stevie Smith to Anthony and Ann Thwaite, Hull, U DP/214/3.
- 3 Philip Larkin, letter to Claire Tomalin, 1 July 1975. Papers of Philip Arthur Larkin, Hull, U DPL2/2/14/32.
- 4 John Gross, letter to Philip Larkin, 2 September 1974. Papers of Philip Arthur Larkin, Hull, U DPL2/2/14/30.
- 5 Philip Larkin, letter to John Gross, 23 September 1974. Papers of Philip Arthur Larkin, Hull, U DPL2/2/14/30.
- 6 Philip Larkin, letter to Claire Tomalin, 1 July 1975. Papers of Philip Arthur Larkin, Hull, U DPL2/2/14/32.
- 7 Stevie Smith, bound typescript with MS corrections (*Novel on Yellow Paper, or Work it Out for Yourself*), c. 1935; stanza by Emperor Hadrian ('anima, vagula, blandula') written on a large roller blind [1969]. Papers of Florence Margaret Smith (Stevie Smith), Hull, U DP156/1 and U DP156/3.
- 8 Philip Larkin, letter to Jenny Stratford, 22 January 1974. Papers of Philip Arthur Larkin, Hull, U DPL2/3/84/8.
- 9 Jenny Stratford, letter to Philip Larkin, 3 April 1974. Papers of Philip Arthur Larkin, Hull, U DPL2/3/84/8.
- 10 Stevie Smith, drawings for *The Frog Prince* [1966]. Stevie Smith Papers, Hull, U DP209/6–17.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### ‘Whoever She Was’

#### Penelope Mortimer, Beyond the Feminine Mystique

*Jane Thomas*

Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one’s personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a liveable life. (Butler. 2004, 2)

So you look back to congratulate yourself. But there’s nothing there. It is all the same as it was before. You have been busy with handfuls of air, moving shadows, disciplining emptiness. (*DGAH*, 67)

Lamenting the current neglect of Penelope Mortimer’s novels, Lucy Scholes blames ‘the damaging effects of the term “woman writer” and Mortimer’s own heavy dependence on her lived experience in her fiction, which left her readers unable ‘to separate the life from the art’. Quoting Mortimer’s public assessment of her legacy in 1993: “ex-wife of John Mortimer, mother of six, author of *The Pumpkin Eater* [in that order] – accurate as far as it went, but to me unrecognisable”, Scholes makes a plea for the rediscovery of ‘the fascinating story of her life, and her once highly acclaimed books’ – ironically, also ‘in that order’ (Scholes. 2018).

The Mortimers (Penelope was married to the flamboyant and famous playwright, novelist and barrister John from 1949 to 1971) lived their lives very much in the public eye, and her earlier novels from *A Villa in Summer* (1954) to *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962) appeared to invite the

reader behind the scenes of the couple's apparently enviable lifestyle. Mortimer's later novels from *My Friend Says It's Bullet-Proof* (1967) through to *The Handyman* (1983) constitute a 'second phase', focusing on the single woman as survivor of cancer, divorce or bereavement, and are summarized by Scholes as 'reflecting [Mortimer's] own battle for self-realization' (Scholes. 2018). *The Pumpkin Eater* (republished in 2011 by *New York Review of Books*) continues to be celebrated for its insight into the female zeitgeist of postwar Britain, predating the book that is largely credited with igniting second-wave feminism, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), by almost a year. Although, as Rachel Cooke notes, Mortimer had had the idea for *The Pumpkin Eater* as early as 1956 (Cooke. 2015), the fortuitous appearance of Friedan's book may have contributed to the runaway success of Mortimer's novel.<sup>1</sup> *The Pumpkin Eater* was adapted for the screen in 1963 by Harold Pinter, directed by Jack Clayton and starred Peter Finch and Ann Bancroft. It was reissued by Penguin Classics in 2015 and dramatized for Radio 4 in the same year, with Helen McCrory as Mrs Armitage. 'Almost every woman I can think of will want to read this book', declared the oft-quoted Edna O'Brien in a prescient review of *The Pumpkin Eater* in 1962 (cited Cooke. 2015) but it seems that few, outside a small enlightened group, want to read much else by Mortimer except for the equally, if not more, brilliant *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, published some four years earlier and reprinted by Persephone in 2008.

This essay will argue that Mortimer's literary reputation has suffered as much as it has gained from readings shaped by biographicalism and a feminism that pins her too closely to Friedan's ground-breaking study. In one of the few more substantial critical appreciations of Mortimer's novels, Roberta Rubenstein notes that Mortimer 'sensitively and artfully explore[s] many of the problems of women in patriarchy that have since become central issues in feminist thinking [giving] narrative form to "the problem that has no name" a decade or more before Betty Friedan diagnosed the condition in 1962' (1987, 15). While the comparison with Friedan is undoubtedly useful, it obscures just how prescient Mortimer's early novels (1954–1962) were. In addition to their engagement with the myth of feminine fulfilment, they examine the paralysing network of feminine discourses of marriage and especially motherhood that Hannah Gavron identified in *The Captive Wife* (1966), as the most intractable and frustrating and that was to form the central thesis of the American feminist, sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* in 1978. Caught between two 'waves' of

feminist activity – one apparently dead and the other struggling to be born – Mortimer also went some way towards defining the productive role played by gender, especially femininity, in the formation of subjectivity long before Judith Butler gave the term ‘gender performativity’ to third-wave feminism (Butler. 1988).

I also offer this essay as a supplement to Rubenstein’s perceptive analysis of Mortimer’s fiction, in order to extend the discussion of Mortimer’s examination of feminine subjectivity and to suggest that her narrative experimentation is more extensive than Rubenstein claims. Mortimer’s careful and deliberate structuring of plot and narrative draws attention to the artfulness, rather than the ‘authenticity’, of her writing and contributes to a more dynamic and transformative impulse than she is usually credited with.<sup>2</sup> Her novels also speak to a younger generation of feminists, prominent among them the poet (and Poet Laureate 2009–2019) Carol Ann Duffy. A hitherto unremarked intertextual relationship between Duffy’s prize-winning poem ‘Whoever She Was’ (*Standing Female Nude*, 1985) and Mortimer’s *The Pumpkin Eater* explores the ways in which formulaic iterations of the performative maternal role *produce* feminine subjectivity at the same time as they erase it, testifying to the enduring relevance of Mortimer’s work.

Mortimer’s novels powerfully communicate a sense of entrapment at the intersection of conflicting female roles and of how her characters’ recognition of their plight leads either to a more knowing reincarceration in the feminine domestic ideal or to nervous collapse. In 1966, a year after the author’s suicide, Hannah Gavron’s *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* was published. Gavron’s study of young mothers in the Kentish Town district of London in the mid-twentieth century identified an impasse at the heart of female domestic life. She suggests that the legal emancipation of English women during the previous 100 years, which led them to regard themselves as ‘individual, self-sufficient, independent’ persons, had been seriously undermined by the new ideology of marriage and the family and the ‘high standards of care and involvement’ it necessitated. The demands placed on the modern woman conflicted strongly with the expectations of the ‘new woman’ of the 1920s and 1930s: newly enfranchised, educated and ready to embrace the freedoms fought for by her mother’s generation. Gavron also notes how magazines, advertisements and pop songs of the time ‘extol the virtues of love as a solution to all problems and as a basis for all thought’ (Gavron. 1966, 24), while the tyranny of domestic and family life militates against this ideal. The ‘problem’ of women, Gavron concludes,

represents a network of conflicting roles which interact with each other, thereby aggravating the situation. At the centre of the network is 'Woman' about whose capabilities and responsibilities, conceptions and norms have radically altered in the last sixty years. (Gavron. 1966, 142)

*The Captive Wife* isolates four main measures of success for women in the 'new mass society': marriage, money, consumption and motherhood. Of these it is motherhood that presents the most serious problems of role and expectation for the women surveyed; 'the middle-class wife expects to be an independent person in her own right, and thus finds that the presence of young children frustrates her from fulfilling what she considers to be her rightful role' (1966, 72). Rather than self-fulfilment, happiness and security, 'the advent of children brings ... isolation, confusion and insecurity' (130). When combined with motherhood, marriage 'became a kind of prison' and wives 'felt their freedom had been restricted before they had really been free at all' (133–134).<sup>3</sup> The incompatibility of these roles leads to 'conflict and stress' (142) and Gavron quotes George Carstairs, psychiatrist and Professor of Psychological Medicine who, in his Reith lectures of 1964, pointed to 'a higher incidence of neurotic illness among women than men'. Studies of the time suggest that female suicide in the UK peaked in the 1960s (Thomas and Gunnell. 2010).<sup>4</sup> Gavron's 'captive wife' appears becalmed between the promise of first-wave feminism and the realization of that promise in the second wave.

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* had likewise identified the plight of the trapped American housewife and mother: 'The ones in their forties and fifties who once had other dreams gave them up and threw themselves joyously into life as housewives. For the youngest, the new wives and mothers, this was the only dream (1963 [1997], 27). She notes how the 'new happy housewife heroines' seem younger and more dependent than the 'spirited career girls of the thirties and forties': They have no vision of the future, except to have a baby. The only active, growing figure in their world is the child. The housewife heroines are forever young, because their own image *ends* in childbirth (44). For Friedan, this transformation is both reflected and perpetuated in the women's magazines of the period, something that Mortimer picks up in the hated Irene Douthwaite, who tells the 14-year old Mrs Armitage, "You really ought to read them, you know. They'd do you much more good than that old *Jane Eyre*" (PE, 78).

Mortimer's own large family (unusual at a time of falling birth rates) is presented in her autobiography as the result of carelessness, limited

contraception options, biological oppression and a need for self-comfort: 'If only one lived in another age', she writes in a diary entry for 26 March 1956, 'if only everything wasn't imprisoned in this body, belted and covered and clamped' (original italics: *About Time Too*. 1993, 55). Her use of nursery rhymes to furnish the titles of *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* and *The Pumpkin Eater* sets both novels firmly in a discourse of maternal fulfilment that offers no lasting satisfaction and is seemingly perpetuated in the younger generation. Ruth Whiting returns to an empty house after the long summer holidays with a delicate musical box, bought as a present for her friend Jane Tanner but which she keeps for herself, whose desolate rendition of 'Bye Baby Bunting' not only echoes normative gender roles but also implies Rex's infidelity and forms the soundtrack to Ruth's nervous breakdown brought about by her increasing sense of redundancy as a mother.<sup>5</sup> Jane Tanner, her 'urban, brisk' intelligence vanquished by the tyranny of 'Baby', is seen manically wheeling the pram in a parody of 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush' (*DGAH*, 36) in an attempt to get the child to sleep:

What happened to her during the six hours of labour nobody ever knew. Something snapped or something fell into place or her brain, under pressure, tossed about like the coloured pieces in a kaleidoscope, settling in an entirely different pattern. Whatever it was, when she came out of the nursing home she was fat, cosy, middle-aged and had already formed the habit of breaking, in the middle of a sentence, into an irrelevant chant, as though possessed by some voodoo: 'Duzzy-wuzzy, cosy-wozy, woops-a-daisy, there's my popsy-wopsy, tiny belch for Mumsy-wumsy?' There was nothing to be done about it. Jane, the wives said with satisfaction, had fulfilled herself. (*DGAH*, 37)

Almost two decades later Nancy Chodorow challenged the seemingly 'natural' connection between women and mothering arising from women's childbearing and lactating capacities and their responsibility for extended childcare. She also focused on how 'women's mothering is reproduced across generations' tracing the cause back to the psychodynamics of the family and 'the sexual division of labour in which mothers are more involved in interpersonal and affective relationships than men' leading sons and daughters to reproduce the same 'division of psychological capacities' (Chodorow. 1978, 3–7). In the mothering role women 'produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother', and 'these capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother–daughter relationship itself' (7) through the process of internalization of gender roles.

Mortimer's early novels, *A Villa in Summer*, *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* and *The Pumpkin Eater*, clearly show the sexual division of labour in the institutionalized family of the late 1950s. In *A Villa in Summer*, Andrew returns home with a new car and Emily sees him

suddenly in a new light, cast by the headlamps of the car: a contented independent man with a mechanical turn of mind, coming home after his day's work to the little woman and kids. She was momentarily, absurdly, jealous. (*AVS*, 72)

In an attempt to save their marriage, the couple go back to their inadequate flat in the city, abandoning the spurious promise of domestic satisfaction offered by the villa in the country. However, peering through the letterbox the hall porter sees nothing but 'a slice of empty sunlight and the slow settling of dust, lately disturbed', (272) as if the return to their previous way of life has annihilated them both. The annihilatory power of conventional familial roles is gestured to in *The Bright Prison* (1956) when Mark returns home to the crumbling Victorian house that symbolizes the outmoded institutions of marriage and domesticity and is presented as both fortress and prison. Standing outside in the fog 'he was ... not wondering whether or not he was going to go in; he was merely paralysed for a few moments by reluctance at the prospect of climbing the steps, opening the front door, allowing himself to be swallowed up again' (*BP*, 224). Though husband and wife are briefly distracted by infidelity, both eventually return to the 'bright prison' of their marriage, which closes on them like a trap:

for a moment after they moved together there was one shape against the brightness, looking inward. ... Then the door slammed shut, the sound of it in the dense silence loud and in some way curiously final. (*BP*, 224)

In *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* and *The Pumpkin Eater*, there is no redemption for the isolated and lonely wife, imprisoned in the home until her husband's return and dreading her future as her children grow up and become independent of her. Rex Whiting commutes home most weekends from his job in the City, leaving Ruth to face 'the despair of giving in, of letting herself go in the emptiness' (*DGAH*, 14). Alienated from his children, especially his daughter Angela, he delegates the responsibility for her health, welfare and sex life to his wife: "It's your responsibility. You're the woman. If anything happens to Angela, you'll be entirely to blame" (*DGAH*, 28). In *The Pumpkin Eater*, Jake Armitage conducts his life quite separately from his wife and family from

his London office in St James's or on location abroad where, like Rex, he takes refuge from the constraints of family life in infidelity. In the meantime, his wife, known only as Mrs Armitage – an appendage to her husband – wrestles with her numerous, anonymous children.

On one outing with the children, and receiving the first intimation of Jake's adultery with Philpot, the live-in nanny, Mrs Armitage catches sight of a young woman alone and dragging a pram through the mud and was 'irrationally convinced that she had come to give me some message from the outside world; but that like a rescue craft she had looked, seen nothing, and gone home' (*PE*, 34). Like her older counterpart, the girl appears trapped in the mothering role 'kicking the [pram] wheels viciously because they were stuck up with mud' (*PE*, 34). It is as if each woman recognizes herself in the other but is unable to communicate. This is a bleak prognostication for the younger woman, who might have offered some hope from the future to her beleaguered counterpart. At the end of the novel we learn that following the departure of another nanny, under similar circumstances to Philpot perhaps, the eldest daughter Dinah, as if making Chodorow's point, stays off from school to look after the children during her mother's absence. *The Pumpkin Eater* is characterized by its ambivalent portrayal of children and the inadequacy and guilt of their mother, who comes to recognize them not as a means towards wholeness and fulfilment but as a threat to an, as yet, inchoate sense of integrity. For Mrs Armitage '[t]hey were an army, self-contained. I was suddenly frightened of them; afraid that when they came back they would find me here, trespassing, and judge me coldly' (*PE*, 139). The unnamed army of children is known only as 'them' or 'they', unindividuated because they are the embodiment of the seductive but treacherous discourse of mothering through which Mrs Armitage is induced to recognize herself. It is this very army that Jake will use to besiege her in the glass tower: 'What could I do against my children? Tell them to go away, leave me alone? Oh clever Jake, wily Jake ... "For God's sake," I said out loud, "they're breaking in ..."' (220).

Chodorow's solution to the reproduction of gender norms, and especially the reproduction of mothering, lay in the institution of a system of equal parenting that would induce the child to identify with both parents, and the parents to escape from the destructive gender extremes fostered by the traditional heteronormative family. Later feminists such as Anne Hockmeyer criticized Chodorow's object-relations model of gender development, not least because it offered no challenge to conventional stereotypes of female identification: 'the caring

balanced perspective, which is valued even when this perspective works against women and is not reciprocated by men'. Women, she claims, remain in the role of 'victim' whose fate once again 'lies in the hands of men who will redeem the situation, in this case by entering the parenting arena' (Hockmeyer. 1988, 26–27).

In 1990 Judith Butler used the idea of gender performativity to explain how gender signification 'is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects' (original italics: Butler. 1990, 145) including the desire for recognition that, for Butler following Hegel, is the only way 'that any of us become constituted as socially viable beings'. Butler insists that because the terms of this recognition are socially articulated they are, therefore, changeable (Butler. 2004, 2). The critical task for feminism is 'to locate strategies of subversive repetition ... to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them' (Butler. 1990, 147). The question is not 'whether to repeat, but how to repeat, indeed, to repeat and ... to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself' (Butler. 1990, 148). I make no claims here for a radical reassessment of Mortimer's early novels as giving 'narrative form' to Butler's groundbreaking thesis on queer theory, and the need for a radical proliferation of genders. Mortimer's female protagonists clearly identify as 'women', as the only 'acceptable' subject position available to them at that time. Simultaneously however, they recognize and struggle to articulate the ways in which heteronormative, binary conceptions of gender threaten to undo them as 'selves' while failing to offer viable alternatives. They also appear sensitive to the discursive constructions of gender and the transformative power of iteration through narration with variation, even while those iterative possibilities are limited by the social and historical contingencies that their daughters seemingly fail to recognize.

Mortimer's novels can be read as a series of discourses on the role of narrative (through which experience is processed), and of storytelling (through which those insights are disseminated). Any attempt at a simple autobiographical reading of her work is deftly undercut by her demonstration that the narratives that make sense of experience apply to our lives as much as to our art, and that 'truthfulness' is a conditional concept determined, above all, by 'recognition'. Her narrative styles focus attention on the iterative quality of writing and experience, creating a powerful impression of life for middle-class women in mid-twentieth



century in England and, despite its images of stasis and entrapment, it has at its heart a transformative impulse linked to the therapeutic role of storytelling. The narrativizing process allows the raconteur to share and interpret her existence in an attempt to understand how she has been constituted as a 'woman' in a particular time and place and, through the process of iteration, to move towards a different and possibly better outcome for others, though it may be too late for herself. In the first phase of Mortimer's writing, the moment of recognition grants a clear-eyed awareness of her situation to the female narrator – whether first-person 'confessional' or third-person limited – who, although denied the chance to profit from her own epiphany, seeks to communicate her insights to the next generation of women, and to the reader.

In her introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing* (2006), Jo Gill quotes Foucault's analysis of confession in relation to 'specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves and others'. It is:

A ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive console, and reconcile. (Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self' (1981), cited Gill. 2006, 4)

She concludes that far from exemplifying 'an expression of personality', confessional writing displays 'strategies of evasion, displacement and obfuscation ... the possibilities of non-disclosure or of self-invention', which are equally, if not more, important. In her analysis of the 'confessional poetry' of some of Mortimer's American contemporaries (Plath, Berryman, Lowell and Ginsberg), Elizabeth Gregory notes how gender roles 'are among the few behaviours subject to discipline in all three of confession's pre-poetic domains: the church, the clinic and the court' (Gregory. 2006, 35). She also points to how 'confessional work puts into play a *reality trope*, the blurring of the border between reality and fiction such that it seems as though poet and speaker are one' (36, original emphasis), which, rather than effecting access to a pre-linguistic feminine 'real', reveals 'the constructedness of life-scripts generally' (37).

Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* opens in that most familiar of confessional arenas, the doctor's consulting room, where our first-person narrator – Mrs Armitage – is encouraged to articulate what is wrong with her in order to elicit the appropriate corrective: "I'm not an analyst,

Mrs Armitage. I simply want to find out how you should be treated.” “Treated for what?” “We don’t know yet, do we?” (*PE*, 13). Mrs Armitage regards the relationship between confessor and confessant as a kind of inquisition: “Are you trying to make me feel I’m wrong? Because I do that for myself.” The aporia at the centre of their conversation centres on the exact nature of her assumed transgression and how it will be brought into being through the truth-producing ritual of the confession: ““Well,” I said, “I will try. I honestly will try to be honest with you, although I suppose really what you’re more interested in is my not being honest, if you see what I mean.” The doctor smiled slightly’ (9).

These opening lines are echoed in the conclusion leading Roberta Rubenstein to describe it as ‘a frame, a “monologue” spoken by Mrs Armitage to a psychiatrist-like doctor [in] the narrative present, within which she recounts key events of her life’. The narrative of Mrs Armitage’s past is ‘framed by the present’ in such a way as to ‘involve the reader if not ... the central character’ (Rubenstein. 1987, 24) in the insights gained by the protagonist’s dishonest honesty: what she doesn’t say as much as what she does. While Rubenstein’s insights illustrate Mortimer’s narrative experimentation there are issues with this interpretation, not least in the relationship generated between the first-person narrator and the reader. Although the doctor concludes his first consultation with ““We shall, I think, make progress””, there is nothing in his analysis so far to reassure Mrs Armitage or the reader of this (*PE*, 14). The doctor’s role as Interlocutor and Inquisitor is to induce Mrs Armitage to normalize or ‘cure’ herself by becoming what Huck Gutman describes as ‘a defined personage in the social order’ (Gutman. 1988: 2). Her eventual ‘capture’ in the glass tower by Jake and the children, functions as a reversal of the classic fairy tale of princely rescue, and the menace suggested by the language of encirclement and breaching of the tower’s defences by the children implies the reinstatement and reluctant re-inscription of the protagonist in her acceptable gender roles of wife and mother. Whatever progress there is will be for the next generation to make, or perhaps the reader who has been conscripted into the ritual of confession. Indeed, it is the reader, I suggest, rather than the doctor-analyst, who is directly addressed in the novel’s closing lines, which are visually separated from the narrative by a row of three asterisks:

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I have tried to be honest with you, although I suppose that you would really have been more interested in my not being honest. Some of these things happened, and some were dreams. They are all true, as I understand truth. They are all real, as I understood reality. (*PE*, 222)

Through the interrogation of the distinction between honesty and dishonesty, truth and reality, Mortimer's narrator also invites us to examine our desire for a happy ending – Jake and Mrs Armitage resolve their marital differences and live happily in the fairy tale tower on the hill with their army of children – and demonstrates that such an interpretation would be dishonest in the narrative reality of the novel.

In *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, Ruth attempts to gather up her fragmenting subjectivity by making herself the subject of her own narrative, as if by placing herself as a stable, recognizable 'other' to her fractured self she might continue to live a life she has come to regard as fundamentally unliveable: "She took to drinking alone. She began talking to herself. That evening while her daughter was out with a young man called Tony—" (*DGAH*, 10–11). Here Mortimer draws attention to the textuality of the text and to the organizing process of narrativization itself. Ruth also rehearses a different version of the scene to perform at social gatherings. "I just met my daughter—" She could hear her little laugh, rather too eager, too insistent that this was a joke, "Rushing past on the back of someone's Vespa." ... The implication would be, you know what these teenage girls are, one simply has no control over them' (9) and the script goes perfectly to plan (41). It is as if Ruth, and other of Mortimer's female characters and narrators, look for recognition not only in the opaque and reflective surfaces that abound in her novels (windows, mirrors) but also in the reflective and constitutive function of language itself. In a schizophrenic splitting of her subjectivity, Ruth has tried to invent a sympathetic, non-judgemental and significantly non-gendered, listener for her confession:

Perhaps it would be less dangerous if she imagined someone else was with her. At first this was difficult, because she did not know who to imagine; the listener wavered, was neither a man nor a woman, vanished entirely and was only an empty chair, its white paint glistening in the harsh light. If she did not look at the chair, it was easier. (*DGAH*, 14)

Through the telling and retelling of their stories by and within the narratives of her novels, Mortimer's female characters try to find the

solution to problems that cannot be properly articulated in the available discourses, and for the variation that might signal the change. Her narratives also challenge the power relationships inherent in traditional confessional arenas, wresting control away from the judging and normalizing authority of the patriarchal interlocutor to place it back in the hands of the female narrating subject and the true object of that narration, the reader.

In his analysis of Philip Larkin's technical mastery, John Osborne describes the narrative loop – deployed, most famously perhaps in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) – as a postmodernist technique in which the narrative resists closure and invites us to 'straightaway circle back and recommence the reading process' (Osborne. 2014, 199).<sup>6</sup> A variant of the 'narrative loop' features in nearly all of Mortimer's novels. *A Villa in Summer* (1954) sees Emily and Andrew Addams return to their inadequate seventh-floor London flat following a brief sojourn in a villa in the countryside, which promised the idyll of family life, but which becomes the scene of emotional devastation and marital breakdown. As Andrew abandons her for his job in the city and a dalliance with the predatory 'Swinger' Alice Thompson, who runs the village 'alternative' school with her equally predatory husband, Emily feels 'like someone locked in a cabin while the boat sank' (*ViS*, 205). A year later, and desperate to find Emily 'so he could go on living', Andrew retraces his exact steps to their previous flat in the City to find her waiting for him as before, but this time 'they clung together, holding in their hands everything that had been lost' (272).

The bleaker *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* begins with Ruth Whiting returning home from seeing two of her children off to boarding school at the end of the summer holidays, to a world 'without discipline or purpose. This was why she did so much shopping [...] the packages furnished the silent carriage, the empty car; they had to be unpacked and put away, made use of in the following days; they were her guarantee for the future' (6). The final chapter sees her making the same journey some months later:

A fussy little woman with too many parcels, she drove correctly and carefully home to an empty world, slowing up at corners, meticulously indicating left and right to the following and approaching darkness. What remained? (*DGAH*, 239)

Although Ruth deceives herself that she 'had gone back to the beginning', but with a renewed relationship with her remaining daughter Angela, the

house is empty. Just as she deprived Ruth of her illusions of motherhood at the start of the novel, 'rushing past on the back of someone's Vespa' (9) instead of lighting the fire in the lonely house, Angela is fetched, after Christmas, 'by a young man in a Morris Minor with "Betsy II" painted on the bonnet' (238). Ruth is left to face not only the departure of her children but also her complicity in the illegal abortion of Angela's baby. Angela's final, emphatic departure from the family house forces Ruth to recognize her own inescapable confinement in the moribund feminine roles that once promised to articulate her:

Isn't there a game I can play? Pretend that I'm ...

No, there is nothing.

Shall I go back to the Tanners'? Talk about Robert's divorce and Baby's back teeth and the rumour that Meg Wilmington-Smith is pregnant at last ...

No. It's all over. You can't go back. You can only go on to the end, which is this gate, this white lawn with yesterday's snowmen standing in the dark. (239)

At the moment of recognition, Ruth's imaginary confessor finally achieves coherence, authority and a voice laying bare the stark reality of Ruth's subjection through a splitting of her self:

I'm free. I don't have to get out of this car. I don't have to come back.

You're getting confused with Angela again. It's Angela who's free. She doesn't owe anything.

Neither do I.

Then prove it. All you have to do is turn the key.

But where shall I go?

To another dream, another hiding-place.

But the dreams have all gone. The hiding-places aren't there.

So you must live without them.

And pay? Pay for everything?

At last. From your heart, for everything. (240)<sup>7</sup>

The bleakness of *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting's* conclusion, which echoes Joyce's 'The Dead'<sup>8</sup> in its symbolic representation of paralysis through snow, and mournfully conjures up the absent children in the image of yesterday's snowmen melting on the lawn, is relieved by the evocation of Angela who, though repeating Ruth's story of unwanted pregnancy, has avoided its conclusion. Angela briefly takes the place of Ruth's insubstantial, imaginary listener and, through the retelling of her story and the facilitation of her daughter's abortion, Ruth and Angela combine

to break the cyclical reproduction of mothering, but at the expense of their own newly found fragile relationship. Angela disappears into a future at an elite university while Ruth, protected by 'her trivial armour' of parcels, hat and gloves, negotiates the careless detritus of family life once again to re-enter the empty home.

Mortimer's penultimate novel *Long Distance* (1974) reviews the domestic plots of her previous work 'at a long distance from everything I knew, seeing it very clearly' (239). It opens with a quotation from George Santayana's *The Life of Reason* (1905–1906): 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Our unnamed female narrator is a visitor to, or an inmate of, a large mansion or institution where time has been abolished and the surroundings are uncharted. Eventually she decides that 'the purpose of this place is to repeat experience until it is remembered: a gross over-simplification, no doubt' (*LD*, 101). At one point she is placed in what appears to be a chaotic and filthy family home and realizes that her role is 'to make order, find a place for everything and put everything in its place' from basement to attic. The seventeenth-century proverb, now a commonplace idiom for order and self-management, is soon revealed as a tautology with no meaning outside of its own logic. Faced with the 'Herculean task' of turning the chaos into order the narrator wonders 'perhaps they think I am the only one who can do it?' (84). She quickly becomes a prisoner of her own efficiency, dedicating her energy to tasks that will soon require to be done again: 'Fool that I am, I assume that since I have done the washing up, the washing up is done.' Where the chaotic house is imagined as a scenario of 'infinite freedom', the ordered house becomes a self-imposed incarceration which, while it offers fleeting satisfaction and security, signals the death of the evolving subject in its unremitting round of domestic tasks:

For just two minutes I sit doing absolutely nothing. This was impossible before, in the place where there was infinite freedom. I now find that it is a positive act. I sit; my mouth drops open; my eyes glaze; my mind becomes a blank screen, only shuddering now and then with unformed thought. It is the next best thing to being dead; if perfected it can slip into death with no interruption whatever, not even the flick of an eyelid. (90–91)

The narrator contemplates escape, 'but, as always, cannot believe in an alternative' (84).

When asked if she would like to leave the chaotic house in *Long Distance* the narrator replies, "You know I do. But you can see for yourself – there's so much to be done" (92), and the children who

threaten to undo the order she has imposed become necessary to validate her in her assumed role:

They are coming! They are coming with their satchels bouncing on their backs, their weapons of sport, their ripped sweaters and torn blazers! They are coming, with their ink stains and wounds, new bandages and socks round their ankles! Their mouths are already open, to be crammed with food; they throw their bodies recklessly up the steps, the invaders, the marauders, the victors ludorem! ... I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. I step forward to find knives, anything to protect myself. They have arrived. My gaping mouth is a smile; my hands, warding them off, welcome them. (91)

While recognizing that she is not responsible for the chaos, or its restoration to order, the narrator is afflicted with a 'continuing *mea culpa*' and the 'Herculean' domestic task is regarded as a form of expiation. Leaving the house would imply the rejection of guilt but also the loss of the self-justifying role of indispensable manager of that chaos and the guarantor of family stability. However, while the narrator is reduced to a state of suspended animation, the children and baby move forward into a future without her and she is eventually returned to the mansion to face her own desolation.

This episode reprises and supplements Mrs Armitage's experience in *The Pumpkin Eater*. Retreating to the glass tower at the end of the novel, she waits for three days 'until they came for me'. Her impulse to escape is displaced by her inability to imagine a preferable future: 'I wasn't convinced of this at all. I wanted to postpone the future; to stop things happening to me' (PE, 216). Mrs Armitage's 'them' includes her children and her husband Jake, whom she is dreading and relying on – not to rescue her but to reclaim her as wife and mother: 'I waited for him as you wait on a hill, in a tower, in the mist for an enemy ... he had already so weakened me that I was falling back on myths, words, mysteries to replace what I had lost' (217). The glass tower surrounded by mist offers no escape except suicide or surrender, both options entailing the death of possibility. Trying to persuade herself against the evidence that Jake might change, Mrs Armitage concludes: 'It's amazing how vanity clings on to the very end, you open your dead eyes to look in the mirror which they are holding to your mouth' (219).

In Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Whoever She Was', the female narrator iterates many of the 'myths, words, mysteries' that cohere around the subject position of 'Mummy' (*Standing Female Nude*, 1985: 35). This

'chant of magic words repeatedly' functions as a surreal litany of images of motherhood from a composite film that 'is on a loop', where the ritual repetition serves not to soothe and reassure but to distance the narrator still further from what speaks her: 'Whoever she was ... / She cannot be myself'.<sup>9</sup> The first line of the poem 'They see me always as a flickering figure' sets the first-person narrator against an indeterminate collective known only as 'they', which includes, but also goes beyond, the children who call her 'Mummy', to suggest the whole field of recognition in which the mother figure functions. 'They' has connotations of affirmation as well as threat as in the line 'Making masks / from turnips in the candlelight. In case they come', where the third person plural suggests the children for whom the Halloween lanterns are made, and the monsters they are meant to keep at bay. The narrator's 'Mummy's never wrong' repeats the cliché of adult infallibility, and the conviction that the subject position 'Mummy' speaks the truth about her. Recognition of this implies the paralysis or even death of the subject. Duffy's poem ends with a direct quotation, in italics, from Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater*: 'You open your dead eyes to look in the mirror/ which they are holding to your mouth' (original italics). The 'chant of magic words' that bewitches and seduces the female narrator of Duffy's poem at the start of the poem becomes 'telling stories/or pretending to be strong': another polysemic phrase suggesting bedtime rituals, telling lies or spinning yarns for others to hear.

In a brilliant modern retelling of a classical myth (a strategy also adopted by Carol Ann Duffy in her later collections, *The World's Wife* (1999) and *The Feminine Gospels* (2002)), Mortimer's penultimate novel *Long Distance* reimagines Hercules as a housewife, and also her own namesake, Homer's Penelope – wife of Odysseus – who fends off suitors by cunningly unravelling the burial shroud she is weaving for Laertes which, when completed, will signal her willingness to take another husband. Penelope thus becomes complicit in her own entrapment in a patriarchal myth of the unwavering faithful wife. To ward off change, the narrator of *Long Distance* undoes by night the order she has achieved during the day: 'As a result of this cunning notion, the level of disorder appears to remain the same, or at the most only slightly lower' (*LD*, 95) thus ensuring her voluntary incarceration in the family home for a little longer. Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Penelope' rewrites Homer's myth to portray a woman artist engaged in a lifetime's industry, continually reimagining a girl, a maiden and finally settling on 'a woman at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content / most certainly not waiting' (*The World's Wife*, 1999, 71).



The female narrator of Mortimer's *Long Distance*, compelled to repeat experience until it is remembered, eventually breaks free from the constraints of her past and from the 'you' who has held her in thrall since her arrival at the mansion. In common with Mortimer's earlier female narrators, she breaks the traditional relationship between male confessor and female confessant to tell and retell her story to herself, to the next generation of women and to the reader, inviting us to recognize not only how we make sense of experience through the narratives available to us, but also how we might introduce the variation that makes the change for ourselves and for others. *Long Distance* ends with the narrator reconstituting the mansion to her own design and bringing in children 'to be taught'. "They'll grow up, too" warns Dominic, to which the narrator responds, "I sincerely hope so. That would be the point" (LD, 236). Describing herself as finally 'in order', the narrator's next act is to 'visit Gondzik's child and tell her a story' (LD, 239).

### Notes

- 1 Lucy Scholes describes *The Pumpkin Eater* as 'as close to autobiography as a novel can be while still professing to be fiction: 'Penelope Mortimer: A Writing Life', *New York Review of Books*, 2 December 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/12/02/penelope-mortimer-a-writing-life/> (accessed 27 February 2019).
- 2 Scholes ('Penelope Mortimer: A Writing Life') quotes Elizabeth Coxhead's 1962 assessment of Mortimer in *Books and Bookman* as "one of the Top Women in Literature today"; however, reading her work, you would never know there had been a movement of women's emancipation – and indeed, for the married women of the middle classes, there hasn't. She is the one to whom our society has given a thoroughly dirty deal, by shutting her up in a suburban house or flat with a family of small children and a lot of gadgets, and no intellectual outlet – except, of course, to write novels'.
- 3 Mortimer titled her second novel *The Bright Prison* (1956), a decade before the publication of Gavron's *The Captive Wife*.
- 4 On 15 December 1965, shortly after completing *The Captive Wife*, Hannah Gavron gassed herself 'with utmost efficiency' in Primrose Hill, North London – just a few streets away from where Sylvia Plath had done the same some three years earlier.
- 5 Answering a phone call from her bullying husband, Ruth notes: 'If the cradle could be held steady, it could be played with one hand' (DGAH, 13) – an oblique reference to 'Rock-a-bye Baby' perhaps.

- 6 Mortimer utilizes a version of the narrative loop in most of her novels, including her later fiction. In her final novel, *The Handyman* (1983), Phyllis's unhappy experience as a widow inspires the novelist Rebecca Broune to write a new novel which, like *The Handyman* (London: Allen Lane) begins by describing the exact moment of Gerald's death.
- 7 There is an interesting echo here of the 'Old Spanish Proverb' quoted by Winifred Holtby at the start of *South Riding* (London: Collins, 1936): "Take what you want," said God. "Take it – and pay for it."
- 8 James Joyce, 'The Dead', in *Dubliners* (1914).
- 9 The narrator's comment echoes Mortimer's assessment of her failure to identify with her public persona, quoted at the beginning of this essay.

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