DOI 10.1515/anglia-2015-0042 — Anglia 2015, 133(3): 466–488 DE GRUYTER

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"What are you like to come home to?" Domesticity in Postwar British Women's Poetry and Fiction, 1945–1960

Abstract: This essay presents readings of a wide range of British women's poetry and fiction of the immediate postwar period (1945–1960) that focus on the topic of domesticity. It explores the capacities of literary texts to intervene in a slow process of cultural change in gendered attitudes towards domestic life, homemaking and notions of women's place in the home. To illustrate the 'nadir of British feminism' (M. Pugh) as a structure of feeling, it also draws on advertisements and marital advice books from the 1950s. While poems by Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Jennings and Denise Levertov respond to the pressures of domesticity, novels by Elizabeth Taylor (*At Mrs Lippincote's*) and Josephine Leslie (*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*) point towards what might be called 'alternative domesticities', however imaginary. The essay argues that the possibility of women's personal freedom (within or beyond domestic settings) in the age of the 'angry young men' had to be translated into the defamiliarising strains of the 'female Gothic' and could only be imagined in the form of comic supernatural romance or satirical verse.

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Studies on British women writers of the immediate postwar period are still few and far between, and they rarely consider poetry and fiction together. For the most part, research in this field has focused on the phenomenon of the 'feminine middlebrow' between the 1920s and 1950s (Humble 2001), especially in fiction. In these texts, some of which were widely read when first published but have since sunk into oblivion, issues such as class, domesticity, gender and the family play a prominent role. In Britain – but not only there – academia has for a long time viewed middlebrow and popular fiction in a negative light: such publications were at best boring and at worst detrimental to society and its core values (Leavis 1939). Only in recent decades has this stigma begun to disappear, so that scholars now unashamedly study middlebrow fiction by both women and men, frequently from a cultural or gender studies perspective (Brown 2012; Macdonald 2011). In contrast to the novel as an art form, these texts, which were written for a much

wider audience, offer fascinating insights into dominant, residual or emerging cultural forms and ideological formations, giving access to the 'structure of feeling' that marks a particular period, to use Raymond Williams's felicitous phrase.[1]

However, the separation between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow writing is largely artificial and subject to changes in public taste and scholarly appreciation. This article will therefore draw on a wider selection of texts by British women writers between 1945 and 1960. I focus not only on popular and middlebrow fiction that responds to the ideological formation of domesticity in the postwar period, but also on poetry, where the conflict between home and work is endemic to the act of writing, affecting the woman poet's self-image as both woman and writer.[2]

Because of the well-attested return to traditional gender roles after World War II and the concurrent stereotypical identification of women with the idea of home and home-making, domesticity is a key theme in women's writing.[3] British female authors after World War II explored a wide range of possibilities regarding this issue, from idyllic celebrations of home to disturbing and devastating critiques of what would later be known as 'the feminine mystique' (Friedan 1963). While their male colleagues gained notoriety and fame by styling themselves as 'angry young men', women were either less vocal and outspoken in their social critique, or merely less successful in finding an audience in the media.[4] Yet their subdued voices resonate in the texts examined for this article.

The lack of research in this field may be due to the fact that the general idea of postwar British literature and culture has been dominated by the 'angry young

1 In *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, Williams uses the term "structure of feeling" to describe the relationship between individual works and "a general period or style" (Williams 1968/1973: 8–9); in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), he reformulates his concept into a theory of the interaction between various shared forms (residual, dominant and emergent) and the relationship of written works to human experience (cf. Hartley 2014: 122–126). It is important to realise that there is no singular "structure of feeling" in postwar Britain, but that this experience is plural and polyvocal.

2 Due to limited space, this analysis will not include drama. In the domestic settings of postwar plays, there was a significant shift from the drawing room to the kitchen ('kitchen-sink drama'), but the theatre scene remained overwhelmingly male, with few notable exceptions (Shelagh Delaney, Ann Jellicoe, Joan Littlewood).

3 Next to the pioneering study by Baker (1989), see the sociological work by Wilson (1980) and Pugh (2000), the latter of whom refers to the postwar period as the "nadir of British feminism" (284–311).

4 On the 'angry young men' phenomenon, see especially Hewison (1981); Ritchie (1988); Carpenter (2009). Weimann (1959) is an interesting contemporary reaction to the 'angry young men' from the other side of the Iron Curtain. From a gender studies perspective, see Segal (1988) and Gopinath (2013).

men' in fiction and drama, the (largely male) Movement in poetry, and the (also largely male) British New Wave in cinema – all based for the most part on the work of male middle-class, lower-middle-class or working-class authors such as John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, John Braine, and Alan Sillitoe. Their class bias was combined with a distinct gender bias that identified femininity with the growing materialist affluence and political stagnation of the 1950s as embodied in the 'Establishment' they despised. Misogynist statements by John Osborne ("the female must come toppling down to where she should be – on her back", qtd. in Sandbrook 2006: 215) or Colin Wilson ("women get in the way of a man's thinking, particularly so-called intelligent women with their bright chatter", qtd. in Sandbrook 2006: 215) have long gained notoriety. The focus on male writers subsequently led to women being excluded from the literary historiography of this period. Where twentieth-century women writers are concerned, there is a tendency to turn either to the more radical modernists or to the women writers from the 1960s onwards – Margaret Drabble, Angela Carter, A. S. Byatt. With a handful of notable exceptions (Sylvia Plath, Stevie Smith, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing), comparatively few women writers of the 1950s have made their way into literary histories or teaching surveys.[5] Even critical, cultural-materialist views of the period (such as Sinfield 1989; Nehring 1993) have tended to follow a male bias.

It is astonishing to see that earlier work of this kind, pursued in a decidedly politicised and combative mode of feminism, rarely challenged the general picture but rather strove to stylize a few exceptional women (especially Plath) into victims of patriarchy. Even Ina Schabert's magisterial history of English literature from the perspective of gender studies merely notes a lack of working-class women writers for this period (2006: 215) while focusing almost exclusively on masculinity and on male writers' evocations of what she calls "an idyll of literary masculinity" ("die heile literarische Männerwelt", 2006: 189, my translation). Quite in contrast to this, the last ten years have seen a number of publications that challenge this "idyll".[6] In so doing, they have renewed interest in neglected women writers, bringing those who were previously considered unworthy of serious academic attention, such as Elizabeth Taylor and Mary Renault, back into print.[7]

5 See, for example, Bergonzi (1993); Connor (1996); Mengham and Reeve (2001); Brannigan (2002); and Turner's study on canon formation (2010).

6 Bennett (2006); Brown (2012); Dowson (2003); Turner (2010); Gopinath (2013).

7 Next to studies of individual writers, topic-oriented discussions of women's writing in this period include Adolph (2009); Stetz (2001); Komporaly (2006); and Lassner (2004) on – respectively – food, humour, motherhood and postcolonialism. For more general surveys that go

In this essay I will focus on two novels from 1945, one by Taylor and one by Josephine Leslie, both of which address the crisis of domesticity at the end of the Second World War, yet develop strikingly different responses to that crisis. In addition, I will draw on a selection of popular British conduct books and advertising of the 1950s in order to illustrate the normative expectations concerning women's traditional role in the home. These expectations exert a particular pressure on a younger generation of emerging women poets who share an ambiguous relationship to the "domestic muse" (Dowson and Entwistle 2005: 134). I will trace this relationship in a selection of poems by Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Jennings and Denise Levertov.[8]

The Crisis of Domesticity in Postwar Women's Poetry

Postwar society, in the US as well as in Britain and many other European countries, was marked by a 'familialist' ideology which reinforced a male breadwinner model (Lewis 1992). The latter was achieved by "a concerted effort on the part of political and cultural authorities to turn workers into homemakers, unmarried women and widows into wives, wives into mothers, and mothers into full-time caretakers of others" (Stetz 2001: 71). Rather than championing "women's rights as individuals", the British welfare state based its gender ideology "on the assumption of women's dependence on the man in the family" (Rowbotham 1997: 247). In the period's conventional wisdom, the connection between domesticity and femininity was firmly established in the idea of marriage. As Mary Macaulay writes in her advice book on *The Art of Marriage* (1956: 71), "[a] wife's first duty is to make a happy and comfortable home for her husband and children". However, Macaulay also acknowledges the potential for conflict between this "duty" and other obligations of women in the social and

beyond the period under discussion here, see Maslen (2000); Philips and Haywood (1998); and Zeman (1977).

8 Levertov (1923–1997) became an American poet, but started writing as a British citizen in England before emigrating in 1948. Her work is included here to emphasize the continuities between English and American literature in the twentieth century and to forgo their premature separation into different areas of research. Sylvia Plath was not the only transatlantically mobile woman writer in this period; Leslie's popular novel *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* was published in the US as well as in Britain.

economic reality of postwar Britain, most notably the fact that many women chose to seek gainful employment and thus had to face duties other than housekeeping:

> When a woman complains that her husband neglects the home she should ask herself if she makes it pleasant and welcoming for him. Does she complain or criticize or nag? Does she make him feel really comfortable? Does she build up his self-esteem? And does she feed him as well as possible? A wife's first duty is to make a happy and comfortable home for her husband and children. If she cannot do this and work too, then she should put her home first and give up her work. If she is not prepared to do so she should not have married. Just as the success of the erotic side of marriage is chiefly the husband's responsibility, so the atmosphere of the home is chiefly the wife's. It is up to her to make it a place of warmth and joy and comfort to which it is a pleasure to return at the end of a hard day. (Macaulay 1956: 71)

The "hard day" mentioned in this passage is the husband's, not the wife's. His comfort, his "self-esteem" and not hers constitute the centre of concern. With the husband as the domestic 'centre of gravity', followed by his children, who are to be made to feel welcome and comfortable, it is the wife's duty to supply comfort and "feed [them] well". While these terse remarks hammer home the responsibilities incurred by a woman through marriage, the working woman, in contrast, is forced to consider herself as an aberration from the 'natural' order of things. Yet Macaulay is not entirely unforgiving towards women who neglect their duties or perform them unwillingly. Later in her book, she acknowledges that

> [h]ome and children inevitably mean a routine for the mother which must often seem dull and monotonous unless she regards it as part of her triumphant battle against the chaos and ugliness which would result without her efforts. It is the mother who most of all makes the happy atmosphere of the home [...]. Children are not happy without authority and most wives infinitely prefer their husbands to "wear the trousers". The familiar reply of countless mothers to childish requests "we'll ask Daddy when he gets home" indicates a father who represents strength, protection and wisdom to his children – gifts more precious than any bought with money. (1956: 109–110)

Against the "dull and monotonous routine" of household chores, Macaulay thus places the beneficial "authority" of the strong, protective husband, who not only has economic power (since he can buy "gifts"), but also – and much more importantly – the ideological upper hand. This superiority is also clearly evident in passages where Macaulay addresses the possibility of a husband's extramarital affairs (she refers to "the single woman friend"), telling the responsible housewife that "it is often partly her own fault when her husband is attracted by other women" (1956: 78), as well as when she discusses – and dismisses – the possibility of rape in marriage:

> The wife who loves her husband should sometimes be prepared to welcome his advances even though at the time she herself does not feel any great desire. It is a shocking thing to hear a woman say that she has not had any intercourse for years because she will not be raped even by her husband. Such an attitude would be impossible in any woman to whom loving and giving were synonymous. (1956: 68)

In hindsight, the "shocking thing" rather is to be reading sentences like these in a book published not more than sixty years ago. Yet, if Macaulay's text presents us with a standard view of the ideology of gender and domesticity in this period, unmolested by the social, economic, or indeed domestic reality of the time, other writers were quite willing to address problems and contradictions of gender and social role allocation. Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal's 1956 pioneering sociological study explored *Women's Two Roles* between home and work (Myrdal and Klein 1968; see Wilson 1980: 53). In fact, they begin their book with the "controversy" surrounding the question of "[w]hether married women should be employed outside their homes", regarding it as "the most topical issue concerning women in recent years" (1968: xv). In the US, in the wake of the Kinsey reports of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Judith Hubback's book *Wives Who Went to College* (1957) offered a more progressive view of 'career women', while Maxine Davis's *The Sexual Responsibility of Woman* (1957) claimed that "[t]he balance of relationships in modern marriage has changed, for man as well as for woman", to form "a mutual undertaking" (1957: 12).

As women were generally expected to work before they got married, the career girl became a regular character in British popular fiction of the 1950s. 'Career girl novels' flourished in Britain, promoting relatively new jobs, such as air hostess, as well as more traditional lines of work like nursing or journalism. With titles like *Air Hostess Ann* or *June Grey Fashion Student* (both from 1954), these novels appealed to younger middle-class female readers; they straddled the line between presenting new career options and reinforcing traditional expectations of femininity and matrimony.[9] Fiction and poetry of the period offer an array of imaginative responses to this work-home conflict, ranging from the idyllic to the satirical and from celebrating traditional ideals to undermining stereotypes by means of ironic distancing or Gothic defamiliarisation.

The crisis of domesticity, however, was not only caused by married women seeking employment; the disappearance of servants from middle-class households was also a factor, as it meant that an increasing number of married

9 On this genre of women's fiction, see Philips and Haywood (1998: 58–72). For a collection of essays comparing postwar sexualities and gender concepts on a global scale, see Bauer and Cook (2012).

women – including writers – now had to do the housework themselves. A genteel response to the dissatisfaction that consequently arose can be found in a poem by Frances Cornford (1886–1960), a granddaughter of Charles Darwin's who was awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1959. Among the undated occasional verse included in her *Collected Poems* of 1954, there is a "Charm for Obtaining Domestic Help" (Cornford 1954: 111) which registers an upper-middle-class discontent with the obligations of housekeeping in a comic fashion by resorting to a style of magical incantation:

SABAÓTH, ZAGOÚRE, PATOÚRE, ELOAÍ.
By these hidden Names I speak
Come and help us through the week!
ABLATHANABLA hear my spell,
Come on Saturdays as well!
By the hidden Names of power,
Come for half-a-crown an hour!
PAPHRO OSORONOPHRIS, BAROUKH, ADONAÍ, ELOAÍ.

Whereas Cornford represents the residual poetics of the Georgian period, younger lyrical voices brought a much keener edge to the economic and emotional 'structure of feeling' connected to the home as a workplace. This is most famously conveyed in Sylvia Plath's "Wintering", one of the 'bee poems' in *Ariel*, written in 1962. Yet already a few years earlier, Denise Levertov explored lyrical possibilities of voicing similar concerns, especially in "ZEST" from 1957 and "The Five-Day Rain" from 1960. Here we see a split between the roles of wife and mother and what Geoffrey Thurley has called "that other self that writes poetry and lives intensely" (Thurley 1977: 121).

THE FIVE-DAY RAIN

The washing hanging from the lemon tree
in the rain
and the grass long and coarse.

Sequence broken, tension
of sunlight broken.
So light a rain

fine shreds
pending above the rigid leaves.

Wear scarlet! Tear the green lemons
off the tree! I don't want

to forget who I am, what has burned in me
and hang limp and clean, an empty dress –

(Levertov 1979: 88, from *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, 1960)

The antithesis in this poem is between the "empty dress" that becomes a metaphor for female domesticity, "limp and clean" (l. 12) in the mundane, indeed almost 'kitchen-sink' realism of "[t]he washing" (l. 1), and the promise of intensity ("what has burned in me", l. 11) embodied in the "lemon tree" (l. 1) and its "green lemons" (l. 9), which the speaker exhorts herself to "tear [...] off" (ll. 9–10). The memory of that intensity, which the speaker does not "want / to forget" (ll. 10–11), also resonates intertextually with the aestheticism of Walter Pater, his condemnation of the mind-numbing formation of habits and his definition of "success in life" as burning "always with this hard, gem-like flame" (Pater 1873/1986: 152). Art, culture and nature form an uneasy alliance in this 'broken sequence' of what might be an uncompleted or fragmented sonnet, in which the "fine shreds / pending" (ll. 7–8) correspond with the "washing hanging" (l. 1) from the tree. Moreover, syntactically, "shreds" (l. 7) is associated with rain, which one would perhaps expect to fall in 'threads', but the word "shreds" clearly has a textile connotation that corresponds to "broken" (l. 5). Indeed the word interrupts an otherwise apparently effortless flow of images at this point. These images, piled up in quick succession – and with more than a nod to the imagist poetry of William Carlos Williams –, produce an impression of domesticity disrupted by art and of art disrupted by domesticity; a double-bind from which the poetic speaker finds it hard to tear herself free.

In her earlier poem "ZEST" (from *Here and Now*, 1957), Levertov capitalises her injunctions, seemingly visualizing the 'loudness' of advertising or propaganda by typographic means:

ZEST

DISPOSE YOUR ENERGIES
PRACTISE ECONOMIES
GO INDOORS, REFUSING
TO ATTEND THE EVENING LANGUORS OF SPRING

WORK BY A STRONG LIGHT
SCOUR THE POTS
DESTROY OLD LETTERS

FINALLY BEFORE SLEEP
WALK ON THE ROOF WHERE

THE SMELL OF SOOT RECALLS A
SNOWFALL.
UP
OVER THE RED DARKNESS DOLPHINS
ROLL, ROLL, AND TUMBLE, FLASHING THE
SPRAY OF A GREEN SKY.

(Levertov 1979: 40)

The poem contains seven injunctions, six of which can be taken to represent the housewife's domestic routine in a mixture of household chores and a self-imposed harnessing of psychic as well as physical "energies" (l. 1): dispose your energies, practice economies, go indoors, work by a strong light, scour the pots, destroy old letters. The last item on this agenda may not necessarily refer to love letters, but it is in any case a token of memory, of suppressing a past that may have been more hopeful than the present – similar, perhaps, to the intensity that the speaker of "The Five-Day Rain" refuses to forget. Here, this poetic intensity springs up after the seventh and last injunction, "walk on the roof" (l. 9), in the image of dolphins rolling and tumbling across a night sky of red and green, with an associated "spray" (l. 15) of even more primary colours in the whiteness and blackness implied by the words "snowfall" (l. 11) and "soot" (l. 10) respectively. While at first there are no colour words and no imagery except for the trite and conventional personification of "the evening languors of spring" (l. 4), the poem's final stanza suddenly explodes with colour. Memory ("recalls", l. 10) returns, and so does the poetic imagination that pushes the imperatives of the woman poet's day job aside – semi-ironically, "finally before sleep" (l. 8), thus alerting the reader that this outburst of poetic "energies" can only be temporary and that the cycle will repeat itself the next day. However, in contrast to "The Five-Day Rain", in which domesticity and creativity disrupt each other, the time sequence of "ZEST" promises a tentative solution to the problem of poetic and domestic "interdependence" (Dowson and Entwistle 2005: 133). The poem may even suggest that the "puritanical regime" of housework exists in order "to nourish not suppress the alternative sensual existence attending (or following) the 'walk on the roof'" (Dowson and Entwistle 2005: 133).

Other British women poets of the period, such as E. J. Scovell or Ann Ridler, come to similar conclusions about the "subversive domestic muse" (Dowson and Entwistle 2005: 134), but most of them tend to avoid "writing in an explicitly female voice" (Dowson and Entwistle 2005: 90). Still-active women poets from the previous generation such as Dorothy Wellesley (1889–1956), Lilian Bowes Lyon (1895–1949), Frances Cornford (1886–1960) and Frances Bellerby (1899–1975) cultivated a "gender-shy lyricism" (Dowson and Entwistle 2005: 89) that was

anything but experimental in form and content, producing poems that might just as well have been written in late Victorian or Edwardian Britain.

At the same time, Elizabeth Jennings (1926–2001) – the only woman poet to be acknowledged as a member of the Movement (see Buxton 2009) – began to emerge as a poet whose major work, while avoiding an explicitly feminine or feminist poetics, strove for "creative androgyny" (Dowson 2011: 76), for "a lyric persona that [...] speaks for everyman and everywoman" (Dowson 2011: 74). Her second collection of verse, *A Sense of the World* (1958), also contains strong poetic statements of self-imposed female isolation: "Her Garden", reminiscent of Marvell's garden poems, depicts a woman dying of an unnamed "disease" (Jennings 1958: 21, l. 7), the "decay" of "all her old rooms" (l. 5) in vivid contrast to the living flowers that she picks "[n]ot at the full noon [...] / For sudden shade indoors would make them wilt" (ll. 1–2). Here the reader has no direct access to the woman's inner life, since the poem is narrated in the third person; only the third stanza offers a glimpse of her emotions by means of psycho-narration: "she observes [...] / [...] forgetting how she felt / When [...]" (ll. 11–13). The poem creates a contrast between the woman's domestic interior and the "outside" (l. 21) of her garden in which she can experience "a mood / of peace" (ll. 18–19). Thus, although the garden exists separately from her living space, it is nevertheless a domestic setting and part of a larger private enclosure. The garden is walled in, making interaction with other people impossible: "no one can intrude. / When people pass she only hears the way / Their footsteps sound, never their closer breath" (ll. 8–10). With regard to form, the poem's rhyme scheme abcde, repeated in every stanza, perhaps accentuates the claustrophobic nature of this enclosure, as well as the daily repetitiveness with which the woman returns to her garden retreat.

Other poems in the same collection emphasize the pervasive mood of lost opportunities for communication, with titles such as "Absence", "Disguises", "The Parting", "A Fear" and "Ghosts", a sonnet in which "[t]he words we would not speak" and "[t]he deeds we dared not act" (Jennings 1958: 33, ll. 10–11) return to "haunt" (ll. 1, 14) and "bruise" the speakers' "nervous silences" (l. 12) in a domestic, both familiar and un-familiar (in the sense of *unheimlich*, uncanny) setting. Perhaps the most intense evocation of such uncanny domesticity is to be found in "Choices" (Jennings 1958: 43):

> Inside the room I see the table laid
> Four chairs, a patch of light the lamp has made
>
> And people there so deep in tenderness
> They could not speak a word of happiness.

Outside I stand and see my shadow drawn
Lengthening the clipped grass of the cared-for lawn.

Above, their roof holds half the sky behind.
A dog barks bringing distances to mind.

Comfort, I think, or safety then, or both?
I warm the cold air with my steady breath.

They have designed a way to live and I,
Clothed in confusion, set their choices by:

Though sometimes one looks up and sees me there,
Alerts his shadow, pushes back his chair,

And, opening windows wide, looks out at me
And close past words we stare. It seems that he

Urges my darkness, dares it to be freed
Into that room. We need each other's need.

Here it is as if the speaker were indeed a ghost returning to haunt the domestic family idyll with its well-tended lawn and its dinner table promising "[c]omfort" and "safety" (l. 9). The poem stresses the contrast between inside and outside, light and darkness, warmth and "cold air" (l. 10). The speaker, who has made a different life choice, remains excluded or excludes herself from the bourgeois domestic interior; the family's security and "happiness" (l. 4) contrasts sharply with his or her "confusion" (l. 12). The fact that communication between these spheres is impossible, despite "opening windows wide" (l. 15), suggests that the speaker is not physically present but a ghost or a vision from an alternative life that has come back to haunt the family or one of its members, possibly the husband ("he" l. 16). Only in the last stanza are the two spheres conflated in the first person plural: "We need each other's need." (l. 18) This unresolved communion of need, similar to the haunting in "Ghosts", leaves a story untold but effectively unsettles the domestic idyll "[i]nside" (l. 1) the home by casting a pall of "darkness" (l. 17) upon it.

In contrast to the contemplative and plaintive mood dominant in the poetry of Elizabeth Jennings, the early verse of Stevie Smith (1902–1971) responds to domestic unhappiness in a satirical rather than regretful or resentful manner. "Wretched Woman", for example, from *Harold's Leap* (1950), is an epigram accompanied by a line drawing of a woman cooking and crying while a small child is tugging at her apron strings:

Wretched woman that thou art
How thou piercest to my heart
With thy misery and graft
And thy lack of household craft.

(Smith 1985: 266)

The trochaic tetrameters invest this poem with a rhythm akin to that of the witches' speeches in *Macbeth*. Its archaic pronouns and religious register ("wretched woman", "piercest to my heart", "misery") make it sound like a blast from the past. In her failure, the modern housewife is likened to a sinner who receives no forgiveness but is instead berated by a puritan preacher for her "misery and graft", the latter being used here as a slang term for '(hard) work' (*OED Online* s.v. "graft, n.4."). Like "The Orphan Reformed" and "Lightly Bound" in the same volume, this poem knows no idyllic domesticity that in its absence could be lamented. The tone, here as elsewhere in Smith's oeuvre, is that of an unrestrained defiance against domestic 'bliss', reminiscent of the mischievous cruelty of nursery rhymes and the subversiveness of light verse.[10] The woman's tears in the drawing may well be tears of "Anger's freeing power", as the poem of that title (in *Not Waving But Drowning*, 1957) declares: "Often my tears fall in a shower / Because of Anger's freeing power" (Smith 1985: 320–321, ll. 25–26). Escape from domestic strain is never far for Smith's angry young women:

You beastly child, I wish you had miscarried.
You beastly husband, I wish I had never married.
You hear the north wind riding fast past the window? He calls me.
Do you suppose I shall stay when I can go so easily?

("Lightly Bound", Smith 1985: 266)

10 There is no space to examine Smith's poetics in more detail; cf. Dowson and Entwistle (2005: 109–124). For a reading of the cultural mood of the postwar era in Smith's 1949 novel *The Holiday* and its feminist poetics, see Niedlich (2010).

Haunted Homes: Alternative Domesticities in *At Mrs Lippincote's* and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*

For most women, however, simply to gather one's things and disappear was not a realistic option. This may have seemed somewhat easier during wartime, when traditional social structures imposed less of a strain on women, who experienced greater social entitlement as members of a working community on the home front. "War", says Julia Davenant, the intelligent and highly literate heroine of Elizabeth Taylor's first novel *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945), "only sharpens contrasts, makes one see one's position more clearly. Hence – revolutions at the end of them" (2006: 199). The revolution, however, does not take place in this novel – because of social decorum: "It is never done", Julia adds.

Though long-neglected and pigeonholed as middlebrow, *At Mrs Lippincote's* contains one of the most powerful portrayals of the upheaval of conventions and the erosion of an antiquated ideal of domesticity brought about by the Second World War.[11] Even though Julia decides to stay with her military husband Roddy and their son Oliver at the end of the novel – because she "would rather be a good mother, a fairly good wife, and at peace" than go through the "disillusion and destruction" contingent upon the existence of "a Madame Bovary" (Taylor 2006: 204) –, the family's wartime residence at the house of Mrs. Lippincote leaves nothing quite as it was before, and Julia is left with few illusions about domesticity, motherhood and connubial happiness. The strain of living in a stranger's house is exacerbated by the fact that the Davenants also have to put up with Roddy's unmarried cousin Eleanor, an unhappy school-teacher who becomes involved in a communist circle. Julia's experience of her new environment is filtered through her reading of novels – Flaubert certainly, but also Jane Austen, the Brontës and Virginia Woolf, whose works she discusses with the Wing Commander, who plays the Mr. Rochester to her Jane Eyre. The narrator stresses Julia's sharp intellect: for example, she despises literary clichés: when she reads *Little Lord Fauntleroy* to her son, the narrator notes that Julia is "easily sickened by stories of pretty widowed mamas and their little sons" (Taylor 2006: 36). She further emphasizes the freshness with which Julia reacts to new experiences, but

11 On British women writers and the Second World War, see the foundational studies by Schneider (1997); Hartley (1997) and Lassner (1998); on the domestic sphere in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, see Lassner (1998: 172–176) and Brannigan (2003).

also her inability to accept "generalisations" for what they are – according to the narrator, "merely conveniences, an attempt to oil the wheels of such civilisation as we have" (Taylor 2006: 26). Indeed, the narrator asserts: "Could she have taken for granted a few of those generalisations invented by men and largely acquiesced in by women (that women live by their hearts, men by their heads, that love is woman's whole existence, and especially that sons should respect their fathers), she would have eased her own life and other people's" (Taylor 2006: 26). This voice calling for acceptance of social norms is largely consonant with Julia's husband's sentiments on the matter and expressed in free indirect style in the following passage:

> Society necessarily has a great many little rules, especially relating to the behaviour of women. One accepted them and life ran smoothly [...]. Without the little rules, everything became queer and unsafe. When he had married Julia, he had thought her woefully ignorant of the world [...]. But [...] the root of the trouble was not ignorance at all, but the refusal to accept. 'If only she would!' he thought now, staring at her. 'If only she would *accept*.' (Taylor 2006: 105)

The narrator's own position on this issue remains ambiguous, however. Julia's self-realization of her marginal place in society ("I am a parasite. I follow my man round like a piece of luggage or part of a travelling harem" [Taylor 2006: 199]) remains at the end without concrete consequences and sounds like the literary cliché Julia professed to despise earlier. Taylor makes it understood that Julia is far from ignorant, but it seems that she knows the wrong kinds of things. The careful irony of the novel is that Julia has no use in her life for the knowledge that she has acquired through reading fiction. Instead, she perceives the world increasingly through conventions of the Victorian novel, so that Mrs. Lippincote's place takes on the characteristics of a haunted house, with Mrs. Lippincote's daughter as a potential 'madwoman in the attic'. Instead of breaking free, the otherwise utterly unsentimental Julia is trapped by Gothic sentiments.[12]

The return of elements from Gothic fiction in women's wartime writing (perhaps most famously in the work of Elizabeth Bowen) has often been observed; it paved the way for the postwar flourishing of ghost stories and the 'female Gothic', as in some of Iris Murdoch's fiction as well as, for example, the magic realism of Angela Carter (in *The Magic Toyshop*, 1967). For the most part, these

12 Lassner rightly draws attention to Julia's reading of nineteenth-century novels, but she regards this reading as liberating, whereas I would see the irony of Taylor's novel in the fact that, although Julia becomes "a critical reader, reinterpreting the conventions of romance and realist fiction" (Lassner 1998: 173), this new-found critical consciousness is of no practical use to her.

Gothic elements have been read as potent metaphors of sexual repression.[13] But what has been noted far more rarely (cf. Stetz 2001) is the potentially satirical use of Gothic elements as a critique of the conventional ideals of feminine domesticity in popular comic fiction as early as the 1940s. Comic ghosts are an undervalued sideline of the Gothic mode, from Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" (1887) to Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit* (1941) and beyond. It is to this tradition that *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* belongs, a novel by Josephine Leslie, which was published in 1945 under the pseudonym of R. A. Dick and later successfully adapted into a film, a radio play and even, in the late 1960s, into a US television sitcom.

The story told in Leslie's novel is quickly summarised: around the turn of the century, the widowed 34-year-old Mrs. Muir, who for most of her life "had been dominated by her husband and his relatives" (Leslie 1945: dust jacket), enjoys her new-found freedom in a cottage on the English coast. She can afford to buy this cottage because it is cheap – other potential buyers having been scared off by the fact that it is haunted by the ghostly voice of its previous owner, Captain Gregg. The novel develops into a humorous account of the cohabitation between the singularly unterrified Lucy Muir and the disembodied but otherwise hypermasculine captain. Captain Gregg is initially introduced as a Byronic anti-hero who is said to have committed suicide; it turns out later, however, that his death was accidental. When he first appears to Lucy in a dream, she imagines him as a kind of Mr. Rochester – tall, dark and handsome:

> A taller man than she had imagined [...], with broad shoulders and long legs [...]. He was not in uniform but wore a navy blue suit with a white shirt and a black tie, and he was smoking a pipe; she particularly noticed the hand that held the pipe, a brown well-shaped hand with a gold signet ring on the little finger [...], a firm hand full of life and power. The whole bearing of the man gave an impression of intense virility; there was nothing depressed about him nor neurotic, nothing that could in any way be associated with an unhappy nature [...]. He came very close, in her dream, and stared down at her with a surprisingly kindly expression in his blue eyes. (Leslie 1945: 26)

Perhaps because of her erotic attraction to the ghost (or to her mental image of the captain), Lucy is appalled to learn that the captain does not want her in the house, specifically because she is a woman: "I don't want anyone living in my house but men – and sailors at that", he tells her (Leslie 1945: 33). He also asserts

13 On Bowen, see Davis (2013); on the ghost story and the female Gothic, Wallace (2004); on the use of Gothic in Murdoch and Carter, Winsor (1981); Neumeier (1996); Ford (2003) and Gamble (2012); on magic realism in *The Magic Toyshop,* Smith (2006).

that he has "lived a man's life" and is "not ashamed of it" (Leslie 1945: 35). The ghost's own sexuality remains somewhat ambiguous throughout the novel, but he makes for a good conversational sparring partner and therapist for Lucy, with whom he has quite forthright exchanges about her past (which might also be read as Lucy's own projections, if we do not accept the novel's premise of the ghost's reality): "No, my dear, you were fond of your husband, but you didn't love him" (Leslie 1945: 36). As they get more used to each other, they also discuss, and dismiss, psychoanalysis (Leslie 1945: 42) and other new-fangled methods of soul-searching.

Because he has no corporeal existence, the captain can afford to transgress moral boundaries that would otherwise hamper their freedom of intercourse. Whoever wrote the original dust jacket (perhaps Leslie herself) was quite aware of the liberating implications of this relationship: we are informed that Lucy "is fascinated rather than scandalized by the captain's presence", that "[s]he is dismayed by his robust phrases and his shocking adventures but, under pressure of his kindly bluntness, she finds herself giving voice to things that she never dared admit before." The book's sense of romance is clearly aided by the fact that their affection for each other can never be physically consummated. When Lucy begins to fall in love with another man, the ghost prevents a disaster by warning her that Miles, her new flame, is already married; he also later helps her in dealing with the contrasting wishes and expectations of her two children, Cyril and Eva.

Leslie's novel subverts traditional gender roles in several ways: it is the woman who owns the house, initially setting out to live there "without a man's protection" (Leslie 1945: 11); her domestic relationship to the captain is affectionate, if never openly erotic; they form a sort of heterosexual couple without being man and wife. With the ghost's help, Lucy "rescues her charming, self-reliant personality from its years of seclusion" (Leslie 1945: dust jacket). She even becomes a writer, teaching herself to use a typewriter and collaborating with the ghost in preparing for publication his sensational memoir *Blood and Swash*.[14]

When, at the end of the novel, Lucy dies of old age, her final conversation is with Captain Gregg's ghost, who tells her that they shall soon be "together, as we were meant to be" (Leslie 1945: 174). Throughout the novel, the ghost has been a gentle but firm masculine presence without a body, at once a kind of

14 See Stetz (2001: 84–85) for a perceptive reading of this book within the novel and the significance of Lucy's role as a writer. She also suggests (89) that *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* is "the female equivalent of *Blood and Swash* – a sensational book, yet also a wise one".

lover and a father figure who provides advice, entertainment, and support to the widowed and single mother of two. Written and published at the same historical moment as *At Mrs Lippincote's, The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* is a comic alternative to Taylor's female Gothic – a comic fantasy of female wish-fulfilment. Whereas Taylor's heroine resigns herself to domestic "peace" instead of individual happiness, Mrs. Muir achieves such happiness in a heterosocial domesticity without sexuality, and even without an actual, physical male presence in the house.

A more realistic reading might point to the fact that, in the immediate postwar period, many women had to cope with the prolonged absence or actual loss of their husband or other male relations. *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* may be set around 1900, but it has a strong contemporary resonance (Stetz 2001: 70–71). Above all, it is a fantasy of a woman coping alone. It thus allowed readers to question the traditional gender roles that would be firmly reinstated shortly after the war, when an escape from the domestic order of things was for the most part only possible by resorting to fantasy – as demonstrated by the lurid confessional flashbacks in David Lean's melodrama *Brief Encounter*, which was filmed just after the war and perhaps captures this return to established sets of values better than any other artwork of the time.

More than a decade later, in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* (1958), it would take young Dora Greenfield several attempts to break free from her oppressive husband Paul before finally managing to leave him. Whereas Josephine Leslie was able to transcend the misery of loveless domesticity by supernatural means, and Stevie Smith's poetry succeeded in translating domestic despair into satirical anger, many women at this time apparently fought depression by resorting not only to middlebrow fiction but also to mild tranquilizers or food supplements. "Mother needs something today to calm her down", the Rolling Stones would sing in 1966 ("Mother's Little Helper", *Aftermath*, 1966). In the 1950s, an advertising campaign for Sanatogen, a protein-based food supplement, targeted depressed women with a specially designed message that pretended to take their problems seriously (and promised to solve them) while reinforcing the period's sex/gender system:

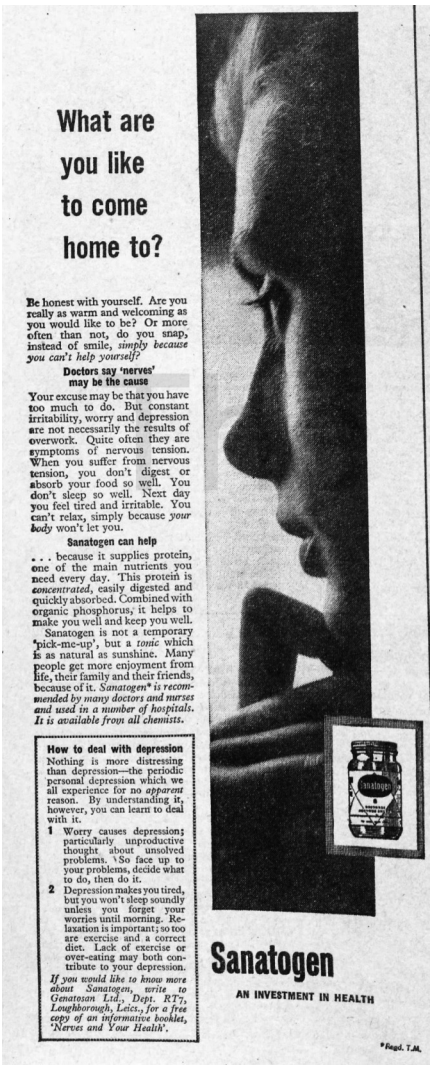

Figure 1: Advertisements, *Radio Times*, 4 Oct. 1957, 9; 1 Nov. 1957, 10.

In a boxed insert, the advertisement explained "How to deal with depression" and encouraged self-help:

> Nothing is more distressing than [...] the periodic personal depression which we all experience for no *apparent* reason. By understanding it, however, you can learn to deal with it.
>
> **1** Worry causes depression; particularly unproductive thought about unsolved problems. So face up to your problems, decide what to do, then do it.

> **2** Depression makes you tired, but you won't sleep soundly unless you forget your worries until morning. Relaxation is important; so too are exercise and a correct diet. Lack of exercise or over-eating may both contribute to your depression. (*Radio Times* 4 Oct. 1957, 9)

The main part of the advertisement, however, directly targeted women's insecure self-esteem in their role as loving wife:

> ***Are you the woman your husband married?***
> *Basically,* of course, you are the same person. But are you just as good company, just as good-natured as you were then?
> 'But I've more to do now,' you might say. 'I can't help feeling nervy and irritable at times.' But are you perhaps ignoring the fact that you feel upset and moody *far too often?*
> ***Doctors say 'nerves' may be the cause***
> Constant worrying, irritability and lack of energy are often symptoms of nervous tension. And nervous tension can prevent you from digesting and absorbing your food properly. So no matter how much you try to relax, your body won't let you.
> ***Sanatogen can help***
> [...] because it supplies protein, one of the main nutrients you need every day. This protein is *concentrated,* easily digested and quickly absorbed. Combined with organic phosphorus, it helps to make you well and keep you well.
> Ask a friend about Sanatogen. Many people get more enjoyment from life because of it. (*Radio Times*, 30 Aug. 1957, 12)

A variant of this ad, dated a few months later (*Radio Times*, 4 Oct. 1957, 9), furnished with a different illustration, and headed with the question "What are you like to come home to?", urged its female addressee to "[b]e honest with yourself. Are you really as warm and welcoming as you would like to be? Or more often than not, do you snap, instead of smile, *simply because you can't help yourself*?" There is probably no better illustration of the dominant gender norms of the 1950s than this ad, especially since a version that explicitly targets men also exists, and it does so in a strikingly different manner, posing the question: "Are you as happy as you would like to be?" For men, the pursuit of their own happiness and self-determination; for women, the joy of making their husband happy. Instead of addressing depression, or simply 'nerves' (an illness apparently not thought of as affecting men), the male version of this advertisement recommends its product against the flu.

Given this subjectivation of women by means of advertisements in the popular press, the urge to follow the north wind becomes understandable. In the 1950s, female escape from domestic constraints becomes a more frequent topic in novels written by women, from Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* (1952) to Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* (1958), although quite often this escape assumes the form of fantasy, as in Muriel Spark's female version of a robinsonade in *Robinson* (1958),

or in narratives of abjection and mental illness, such as the work of Anna Kavan (see Rao 1991) or Jennifer Dawson's *The Ha-Ha* (1961; see Zeman 1977: 109–130). The 'scandal' of single motherhood, for instance, is rarely depicted in a positive light, unlike in the defiant younger voices of Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) or Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* (1958), which was initially planned as a novel. Banks, born in 1929, and Delaney, born in 1938, stand for a younger generation of women writers who started out in the late fifties, exploring what might be called 'alternative domesticities' in a realist vein. As beneficiaries of the 1944 Education Act, they already belonged to the generation of Angela Carter (born in 1940), "the children of Nescafé and the Welfare State" (Carter 1988: 113) who would flourish in the 1960s to discover new degrees of personal and cultural freedom. For the older generation, such freedom inside or outside of domestic settings had to be either repressed and translated into the defamiliarising strains of the female Gothic or imagined in the form of comic supernatural romance or bitter-sweet satirical verse.[15]

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15 Research for this essay has been supported by grants from the Hesse State Ministry of Higher Education, Science and the Arts and from the German Research Foundation (DFG). I would like to thank Freya Buechter-Greiner for her astute comments on an earlier draft, and Dr Martin Spies for his help with archival material.

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