

‘Mere bird-watching indeed’: Feminist Anthropology and 1950s Female Fiction

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British fiction of the 1950s is regularly characterized to be profoundly sociological. This categorization signifies that prominent writing from the decade is closely engaged with issues around class and class mobility, and that its structure and form are governed by a belief in the intrinsic ability of the novel realistically to represent social realities. Under these terms, a familiar canon has been defined to bookend the decade, including *Scenes of Provincial Life* (1950), *Room at the Top* (1957), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), *This Sporting Life* (1960), and *A Kind of Loving* (1960), and indebted to Richard Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* (1957) as an epoch-defining work of (notably literary) sociology. If sociology takes society as its focus, anthropology is the analysis of that society’s culture. The Mass Observation project, which from 1937 had rallied volunteers to observe and record their own lives to produce a collaborative ‘anthropology of ourselves,’ had changed hands in 1949, and its research thereafter tended to be carried out by market research and polling companies (Highmore 2000: 79). Nonetheless, postwar British culture retained a certain taste for the anthropological perspective, as populist practitioners like Keith Waterhouse and Colin MacInnes exploited an exoticizing tone in their forays into the unfamiliar territories of, for example, youth and immigrant culture. As Empire, the ‘traditional laboratory of the discipline’ of anthropology, continued its precipitous collapse, local field trips seemed expedient, and the vertiginous pace of cultural change in the 1950s filled them with novel observational data (Kuper 1985: 168).

The decade’s canon of fiction traced above is, of course, exclusively male in its authorship, and, as I have explored elsewhere, profoundly masculine in its concerns (Ferrebe: 2005). ‘What’s Gone Wrong With Women?’ yelled John Osborne in the *Daily Mail* in 1956, and if his article reveals anything beyond the misogyny that underpinned the Angry stance of its most celebrated progenitor, it

is an intense anxiety over the overbearing and conflicting symbolism of the feminine in 1950s culture: 'we are becoming dominated by female values, by the characteristic female indifference to anything but immediate, personal suffering,' Osborne petulantly claimed (1994: 256). Stephanie Spencer notes 'the uneasy relationship between individual women and the powerful construction of "Woman" in the immediate postwar period' (2005: 2); a construction at the nexus of national reconstruction, mass culture and consumerism. From 1947 to 1951 a group of professional women met to consider the whole cultural apparatus of gender in British culture, including the positioning of women in the economy, the workplace and the home, and their representation across a variety of media and texts. 'Is there a feminine point of view distinguishable in literature?' they asked,

Are women writers even to-day, when they write so much, influenced by a masculine pattern and masculine preferences? These questions might be discussed in sixth form classes with great advantage to the budding writer. Our literature and our social idea would gain enormously if we had more women writers with the confidence and originality to force their readers to open their eyes on a new picture of life – its values, joys, sorrows and sensations as they are experienced in the lives of women. (Campbell 1952: 43)

Though the Mass Observation archive has proven an opulent source for historians of women's history, little attention has so far been paid to the influence of anthropological approaches on female-authored fiction of the 1950s, and its potential to yield this 'new picture of life'. It is a decade routinely understood as a trough of effective feminist activity. Yet anthropology's defining strategies, that calibrate the influences of nature and culture, pragmatic effects and symbolic significances, hold clear affinities with the work of the feminist Wave that is to swell during the 1960s. We might at this point speculate as to how its methodologies are pertinent to a decade fraught, in Marjorie Ferguson's analysis, with tensions between 'individual and group norms, between traditional and emergent female roles' (Ferguson 1983: 77).

In 1956, the same year as the opening of Osborne's seminal play *Look Back in Anger*, anthropologist Audrey Richards published *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia*. Her analysis of a rite witnessed during a 1931 field trip broke ground not just in its focus upon an exclusively female cultural practice, but also in its attempt to relate the symbolism of ritual to the structure of society, and in its focus upon the importance of symbolism within kinship roles. Though influenced by the work of her mentor Bronislaw Malinowski, Richards' text notably initiates a new and self-reflexive technique that blends both

functionalist and structuralist methodologies. Edwin Arderner who, with his wife Shirley, was later to develop the 'muted-group theory' so inspirational to feminist scholar Elaine Showalter, cited Richards' book in his 1976 'Belief and the Problem of Women' as one that 'raised and anticipated many of the problems with which this paper will deal' (1). In the discipline of anthropology, he claimed, with rare exceptions like Richards, 'women anthropologists, of whom so much was hoped, have been among the first to retire from the problem' (1), so that the 'study of women is on a level little higher than the study of the ducks and fowls they commonly own – a mere bird-watching indeed' (1–2).

This chapter will assert that at least some of these missing 'women anthropologists' might be found, in the 1950s at least, in the field of fiction, with key disciplinary questions around culture, category and observation influencing and animating their styles and subject matter in previously unrecognized ways. The Arderners knew at least one fiction writer, Barbara Pym, well – Edwin's *Coastal Bantu of the Cameroons* was first published in 1956 by the International African Institute, where Pym worked, and the editor's introduction thanks Pym on Arderner's behalf 'for her help during the final editing of the manuscript' (vi). Hazel Holt, Pym's biographer, identifies a distinct mode of practice in Pym's work, noting how, even when her novels fell out of publication, her 'natural curiosity, her detective work, her "research into the lives of ordinary people" continued, to become (especially in her notebooks) what the keeping of field notes is to an anthropologist' (Pym, 1984: xv). It is Pym's third novel, the 1955 *Less Than Angels* which offers, in Muriel Schulz's words, an 'anthropology of anthropologists' (1987: 113). It opens with an extraordinary paragraph in which the observations of Catherine Oliphant, a young(ish) writer herself, meld the inappropriately ornate décor of a drab London counter-café (peacock mosaics, no less) with the Byzantine interior of an Italian church, concluding from its denizens' indifference that 'the cult of peacock worship, if it had ever existed, had fallen into disuse' (Pym 2012: 1). Immediately, Pym has established a foundational principle for her novel. Home, the passage emphasizes, is a site of anthropological significance, and one which can be transfigured by a combination of careful observation and creativity.

The cult of peacock worship parodies what Michael Cots identifies as the 'structuring principle' of the novel – the character Tom Mallow (1989: 66). Such central maleness is atypical in Pym's oeuvre (though Tom's predominantly absent presence, prefigured by the café customers' obliviousness to the peacock's masculine magnificence, undermines it). Yet this is an unusual Pymian novel in other ways too; the assigning of a merely marginal role to the Church, and the fact that, in Robert Liddell's words, it is so 'nearly a love-story', for example (1989: 59).

The critical focus of its ‘anthropology of anthropologists’ alights upon the discipline’s dominance by masculine principles, including the ruthless imposition of pre-ascribed categories of knowledge. Later in the novel anthropologist Alaric Lydgate hurries to point out ‘that his notes dealt almost entirely with religion and material culture and would therefore be of very little use to anyone writing a thesis on social and political structure’: as far as he is concerned, never the twain of social and political structures shall meet (Pym 2012: 88). Catherine, meanwhile, is doing more than mere bird-watching of that peacock: her humorous yet serious comparisons between counter-café and church refute those boundaries between religious and material culture, just as they uphold the everyday as a site of potential transcendence.

The novel’s construction of a devotional cult around Tom is a prescient parody of what Susan Sontag was later to identify in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s professional practice as the role of ‘the anthropologist as hero’ (Sontag, 1994). Needless to say, this role is gendered. Tom Harrisson shamelessly sold the Mass Observation project he co-founded as an opportunity for exotic adventures, in which the ‘wilds of Lancashire or the mysteries of the East End’ were promoted as being ‘as little explored as the cannibal interior of the New Hebrides, or the head-hunter hinterland of Borneo’ (Highmore, 2000: 79). In the anthropological community surrounding Pym’s fictional Institute, professional heroism can be acquired by only one route – being ‘in the field’ (and a necessarily foreign field at that) (Pym 2012: 16). The shared recognition of the glamour achieved by (international) fieldwork is one of the bonds across the generational divide between an older generation of colonial amateurs (like Alaric Lydgate) and the young, professionalized social scientists (like Tom Mallow). James Buzard has identified in ethnographic process ‘a narrative pattern of entrance (close association of culture and place) and withdrawal (dissociation of culture and place) – a pattern plainly amenable to masculinist romance’ (Buzard 2005: 27). It is amenable, of course, to imperial romance too.

Catherine’s professional practice (aside from her amateur, instinctive anthropological work) also involves the fostering of romantic glamour. Her income depends upon women’s magazines, a medium recognized as a site of the intense cultural production of gender: ‘These journals [. . .] are about femininity itself, as a state, a condition, a craft and an art form which comprise a set of practices and beliefs’ (Ferguson 1983: 1). In the course of the narrative we witness her progress on, amongst others, ‘The Rose Garden’, a love story, and an article on how to give an “‘in-expensive” cocktail party’ (Pym 2012: 21–2, 240). Pym makes, within Catherine’s experience, a direct connection between domesticity and romance

writing, telling us that Catherine 'loved housework when she felt in the mood for it and was often inspired with ideas for romantic fiction when shaking the mop out of the window or polishing a table' (22). Acting the housewife, it is suggested, makes Catherine able to write *for* housewives. Nonetheless, this *is* acting. By 1966, in *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers*, Hannah Gavron is asserting that:

the 'problem' of women 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. (142).

During the 1950s, the artificiality of that figure of 'Woman' was already apparent to all those able to recognize the conflicts inherent in the competing roles so vehemently promoted by the likes of *Woman* and *Woman's Own* – radiant housewife, efficient household manager, canny consumer and beatific mother among them. Catherine is well aware of her tendency to fall into a 'woman's magazine tone' in feminine moments, as when counselling Deidre Swan on how to keep herself occupied in Tom's absence: 'learn a foreign language in the long winter evenings' (Pym 2012: 175), she tells her with studied gaiety. Acting (and writing) feminine is lucrative for Catherine, and can be fun, but the act of transformation that it involves is one of concealment rather than revelation. Pym discloses at the very beginning of the novel that her writer-heroine must 'draw her inspiration from everyday life, though life itself was sometimes too strong and raw and must be made palatable by fancy, as tough meat may be made tender by mincing' (1–2). Berthold Brecht's condemnation of 'culinary' theatre – the easy consumption it facilitates, and its negation of the possibility of social critique – is brought to mind (Willett, 1964: 214).

Later in the novel, a description of Catherine's actual (rather than metaphorical) mincing machine suggests a more complex figuring of female creativity:

[H]er mincing machine, which was called 'Beatrice' [was] a strangely gentle and gracious name for the fierce little iron contraption whose strong teeth so ruthlessly pounded up meat and gristle. It always reminded Catherine of an African god with its square head and little short arms, and it was not at all unlike some of the crudely carved images with evil expressions and aggressively pointed breasts which Tom had brought back from Africa. (Pym 2012: 23)

This dense passage melds imagery of household industry and economy with Western Romance (is this Dante's 'Beatrice'?) and an imposing African aesthetic: it symbolises a domestic, visceral process of artistic transformation, and enacts

this transformation through its anthropologizing of the feminine everyday from a perspective located both within and beyond it. We are regularly alerted to the fact that Catherine is unable quite to 'do' domesticity (and thus femininity) correctly. Digby Fox and Mark Penfold, young anthropologists in the making, are horrified to find Catherine doing housework in the evening: 'People [by which they mean, of course, women] usually do that kind of thing in the mornings [...]. I don't know what my mother would say' (22). Catherine can observe how her sloppy footwear mars her outfit for the in-expensive cocktail party she is throwing to celebrate Tom's return – lapsing again into her 'bright magazine style' she registers the inappropriateness of '(oh dear!) those shabby blue espadrilles bought in the market in Périgueux on a fine June morning' (65). A token from an intensely felt (and foreign) experience is out of place in a domestic performance of femininity. 'Someone is always looking at you,' warned an advertisement for cosmetics in a 1956 edition of *Woman* magazine, 'Your beauty can never take time off' (58). Catherine's self-surveillance anticipates John Berger's analysis of female experience: 'From earliest childhood,' he claimed of *Woman* in *Ways of Seeing*, 'she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman' (Berger 1972: 46). In executing the vigilance necessary to maintain an acceptable performance of femininity, women are forced to occupy a space that is both within and without their lives and their culture.

Tom, it is emphasized, has become 'detribalized' (Pym 2012: 162, 165, 188): after so much time away from home, he too observes his native culture and its ritualized debutante dances and flower shows from the outside, as if they were part of the African community that he favours for study. He regards his personal life in the same way. Catherine, he notes, is 'without kinship ties,' which allows him to take her up and drop her 'without the likelihood of awkward repercussions' (142). When she is finally dropped (in order that Tom can involve himself with Deidre Swan), kinless Catherine is painfully aware of a lack of female support and consolation, for after a long relationship with an anthropologist, she seems 'to know more men than women' (155). She stands outside the feminine tribe, and because of this, she stands outside domesticity as it is currently culturally figured (in the gathering mass of women's magazines which her work, ironically, augments). When Tom is killed in Africa, 'accidentally shot in a political riot, in which he had become involved more out of curiosity than passionate conviction' (238), Deidre's family ask Catherine 'to stay with them for a little while and she thought that she might enjoy it, entering into the comfortable kind of life which

she had only seen from the outside' (248). And she does enjoy, temporarily, the Swan's careful observation of the routines of suburban life, before informing them with characteristic dryness that she must get back to her 'own squalor' (255).

Catherine, it seems, is an instinctive anthropologist of the everyday. Tom, the professional, feels the lack of her expertise when visiting his childhood home, as he imagines 'how Catherine would have enjoyed it, her bright eyes darting here and there, missing no detail' (183). She shares with Malinowski that 'intense interest and suspense with which an Ethnographer enters for the first time the district that is to be the future scene of his field-work'; she is perpetually 'on the lookout for symptoms of deeper, sociological facts', suspecting 'many hidden and mysterious ethnographic phenomena behind the commonplace aspect of things' (Malinowski 2014: 55). For Catherine, as for Pym, this interest is engendered by her own national environment, rather than unfamiliar foreign cultures. Deidre is studying for a degree in Tom's subject, though 'she did not always quite understand what she was doing and was beginning to wonder if it had been a mistake to embark on the study of anthropology rather than history or English literature' (Pym 2012: 8). Catherine, who despite her instinctual anthropological practice had felt acutely 'the general uselessness of women if they cannot understand or reverence a man's work, or even if they can' when she was with Tom (103), is very certain about the purpose of Deidre's education. Lapsing again into 'her woman's magazine tone', she brightly encourages the younger woman: 'you'll have your anthropological studies, just think how useful they'll be to Tom' (175). For the members of the 'Feminine Point of View' Conference, the education of girls – the inequity and limitations of a 'feminine' curriculum – forms a particular focus, and is identified as interfering with the conception of a more diverse range of heterosexual partnerships and of careers for women: the 'conventional marriage pattern is based on the stereotyped ideal of women [...], an ideal which is both cramping and unrealistic' (Campbell 1952: 55).

Tom's death robs Deidre of a 'career' as his wife. The life of his jilted childhood sweetheart, Elaine, has been left in stasis (and doggy spinsterhood) for much the same reason. The Conference concludes that the 'new picture of life' they seek in a female-authored, female-focused literature is there to be found in the work of Virginia Woolf and Mary Webb (Campbell 1952: 43). To this list we might reasonably add Jane Austen, a novelist to whom Pym is compulsively compared by reviewers. In the strangest moment in the off-beat *Less Than Angels*, Elaine is denied potentially reviving insight because, as she is 'not much of a reader', she has no access to Anne Elliott's poignant and angry words in *Persuasion*. Pym goes on to quote them anyway:

We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always business of some sort or other to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions. (Pym 2012: 189)

Less Than Angels does not end in marriage: in fact, there are no marriages functioning in it at all. In the final paragraph, Catherine is left busily burning Alaric Lydgate's traditional anthropological trophies – his masks and shields – to liberate him into a less masked and shielded life, potentially in a relationship with her ('what a difficult and peculiar couple they would make,' concludes Deidre's well-domesticated aunt Rhoda, 262). Deidre's future (and her future education) Pym leaves in the balance. Yet we already know that Deidre herself, though bored and bemused by the canonical (masculine, colonial) anthropological textbooks and field trip accounts, shows, like Catherine, a propensity for a domestic, female-authored anthropology.

Arjun Appadurai has observed how, in imperial discourse, native inhabitants were positioned as 'incarcerated' in their culture, while Western explorers, administrators, missionaries and eventually anthropologists were 'regarded as quintessentially mobile . . . [,] are the movers, the seers, the knowers' (1988: 37). When Tom walks Deidre home, the couple hear the sound of a cello drifting through the warm night air. Deidre explains:

'That's Miss Cumberledge [. . .] She plays in an orchestra and you often hear her practising.'

They stood for a few moments listening, looking up at the sky and the television aerials silhouetted against it.

'Almost beautiful, aren't they,' said Tom, pointing to them. 'A symbol of the age we live in.'

'So is Mrs Lovell putting out the breakfast cereals,' said Deidre as they passed her neighbour's house. They could see her through the uncurtained window, laying the table, placing coloured plastic mugs on it and in the baby's high chair, and taking giant packets of cornflakes from the sideboard. (Pym 2012: 153–4)

Though it is Tom's first visit to suburbia, he is undaunted by the environment's utter unfamiliarity. A mover, a seer and a knower, he immediately imposes a (phallic) symbol of contemporary life – the aerials are his metaphor for (mass media) society. But then, countering Tom's ingrained professional impulse towards overweening public structures, Deidre draws our eye downwards to the domestic – to the prosaic rituals of family life (equally 'modern,' with their plastic

cups and breakfast cereals), and a woman's role within them. In his exploration of the absence of women from traditional ethnography, Edwin Ardener invoked what he called the 'Hot Stove' argument; that 'women through concern with the realities of childbirth and child-rearing have less time for or less propensity towards the making of models of society, for each other, for men, or for ethnographers' (1975: 3). '[A]ll such ways of bounding society against society, including our own', he concluded, 'may have an inherent maleness' (6). Pym's sentence structure leaves ambiguity as to whether Deidre is claiming Mrs Lovell's quiet preparations as a 'symbol of [or model for] the age we live in', but the tableau she creates as she observes the life in which she participates exceeds the 'almost beautiful' in its thick description of an everyday experience.

As the widespread anxiety about the education of girls attests, women of the 1950s did not necessarily feel themselves to be well schooled for contemporary life. Yet one intensely educative experience is that tension between 'individual and group norms, between traditional and emergent female roles' identified by Ferguson, to which she adds a gulf between 'what women's magazines were saying and what women of many different kinds were doing' (Ferguson 1983: 77). Catherine's economic independence is predicated upon her 'magazine voice' and thus her ability to observe, and reproduce, the contemporary, profoundly traditionalist, 1950s feminine orthodoxies, fully aware in so doing of their arbitrary and constructed nature. Tom is taken aback at the idea of a male editor of one of her women's magazines: she, cognizant of the dissonance between those magazines and her own experience, responds lightly: 'Men do know *something* about women or at least like to form their tastes for them' (Pym 2012: 128). As we have observed, Catherine's detribalization maintains her in the position of an (albeit rather gloriously bohemian) outsider to her culture. Kuper notes how, 'After Malinowski, the anthropologists based their methods upon participant observation, which required intimate and free contact with the peoples they studied' (1985: 120). Deidre, a native of her suburban field, and a member (though a disorientated one) of the anthropological academy, has the power to refine Catherine's lonely work further, and to revoke Tom's habitualized method of superior detachment, the undesirability of which is underlined by his death 'as a spectator' rather than an engaged participant (Liddell 1989: 63). Professor Mainwaring, addressing the group of junior anthropologists (two male, two female) who are jockeying for Institutional field trip funding, concludes a discussion of anthropological celibacy in the field by quoting Alexander Pope – '*And little less than angel, would be more*'. '[H]is argument is not altogether appropriate here,' he glosses, before swiftly moving on (Pym 2012: 210). It is not,

for rather than a benign recognition of human failing, Pope's 'An Essay on Man' argues that Man (and specifically *he*) is overreaching, presumptive and destructive.

George W. Stocking's survey of British social anthropology characterizes Bronislaw Malinowski's approach to the 'natives' as one of "gentle irony" – a literary mode characteristic of much of modern ethnography, and of Pym's writing too (1999: 272). Deidre's mousey brother, Malcolm, spends most of his evenings at a local club, where young men lurk with mixed feelings about young women: 'Perhaps,' Pym ironizes gently, 'they intimidated the men. Certainly they often led them captive into marriage' (Pym 2012: 34). Yet beneath the humour generated by this cultural relativity lie darker social implications. Malcolm's and Deidre's aunt Rhoda is eagerly awaiting the next instalment in another narrative of capture: 'There had been a nasty murder, or series of murders; bodies of women had been discovered in a house in a not very nice part of London, and Rhoda, in common with a great many people in all walks of life, was anxious to read about the latest developments' (31). This is based, we can suppose, upon the much publicized case of John Christie. He had been hanged in 1953 for the murder of at least eight women, including his wife. For all the rueful pseudo-subservience of Malcolm's clubmates, female dominance of the domestic environment, Pym reminds us, is a tenuous one. Rhoda's lurid imagination, 'educated' by magazines and their crude pictures, extends, Catherine intuitively, to Africa, as she imagines the other woman's response to Tom's death:

Catherine saw past Rhoda's shocked face into her thoughts, the shouting mob of black bodies brandishing spears, or the sly arrow, tipped with poison for which there was no known antidote, fired from an overhanging jungle tree. (243)

Michael Cots notes of the novel's interplay between African and British culture that it is 'partly comic, but it is also handled to suggest cruel and disturbing forces' at work at home (1989: 67). These forces Pym casts as gendered as well as racial.

A similarly dark comic technique is used by Muriel Spark in the 1958 story 'The Black Madonna.' The collection in which it appears, *The Go-Away Bird*, moves between African and British settings with an ethnographic intent comparable with Pym's. 'The Black Madonna,' set in Whitney Clay, locates its exoticism in the northern new town's novelty of geometric urban patterns designed by the Town Planning Committee. The compulsive deference of its cultural processes of environmental naming are held up for inspection too. Raymond and Lou Parker live in flat twenty-two on the fifth floor of Cripps House, named after the late Sir

Stafford Cripps, who laid its foundation stone; Cripps House lies on Manders Road, 'named after one of the founders of the canning concern, Manders' Figs in Syrup' (Spark 1958: 3). Raymond is employed at the town's motor works; Lou had 'been a nurse before her marriage' (5). The pair have a car, no television (by choice), and a diverse social circle within the town, and their cultural activities, voting patterns, religious observances and reading matter (including *The Observer*, *The Catholic Herald*, and *Woman's Own*) are all meticulously observed. They are the only childless couple amongst the four other Catholic households and twenty-five total families living in the 'civic chambers' of the Council's block (5): their many siblings all have at least three children each.

The story begins with the ritual installation of its eponymous figure, which has been carved contemporaneously out of Irish bog oak. The Black Madonna functions as a devotional symbol both of the Virgin herself, and of the postwar investment in the role of public, contemporary art in rebuilding Britain – people come to Whitney Clay from London 'as if to a museum, to see the line of the Black Madonna which must not be spoiled by vestments', despite the regular congregation's opinion that she could do with dressing up a bit (2). After fifteen years of marriage, Raymond and Lou's worries about childlessness have settled to a lingering pain and a regular stipend sent to 'Poor Elizabeth', Lou's widowed sister, towards the rearing of her eight children in Bethnal Green (10). Lou gave up her career upon marriage at the age of twenty-two. She fills her life with constant civic and social activity: the Mothers' Union is 'the only group she did not qualify for' (5). The couple adopt Henry Pierce, a Jamaican working with Raymond, as a surrogate son, taking him on holiday to London. In time, the Madonna answers their prayers, both to restore Henry to the Faith, and to remove his less docile and poetic compatriot Oxford St. John to a job in Manchester (alone with Lou, Oxford once refers 'to that question of being black *all over*, which made Lou very uncomfortable', 13–14). These manifestations of grace, plus reports in the parish magazine 'pertaining to childless couples', lead them to decide 'to put in for a baby to the Black Madonna' (16). The echo of an institutional transaction is not, we can assume by Spark's strictly observed phraseological precision, accidental. The Parkers have put in the devotional duty, and they feel entitled to a reward. Hannah Gavron notes that 'the opinion is widely held, that to remain childless is for a woman to offend against her basic nature, and thus to do herself harm' (1966: 125). 'I don't see why I shouldn't have a baby', Lou says (Spark 1958: 17) and in the negative cast of her expectant statement Spark suggests the sanctified maternal instinct is (like Whitney Clay itself) a civic, cultural construct.

Spark's characteristically mobile narrative perspective includes the occasional, ruthlessly detached observation of her central couples' prejudices – as when, for example, 'Raymond noticed what he thought erroneously to be a box of contraceptives' next to Elizabeth's bed (12). Yet more generally, having established Raymond and Lou's political and moral perspectives to be class-based and, as such, contingent, she insinuates her critique by couching Lou's escalating hypocrisy in middle-class, third-person, free-indirect discourse. Lou, as she emphasizes herself and is echoed by the narrator, is 'not a snob, only sensible' (5). Yet when Henry uses the phrase 'slum mentality' in relation to Elizabeth, Lou snaps at him, 'thinking wildly, what a cheek *him* talking like a snob. At least Elizabeth's white' (13). The promiscuous Oxford she considers 'common', yet she cannot complain directly about his presence, for 'Raymond despised snobbery, and so did she' (14).

Lou conceives and delivers a healthy daughter, who is black. She rejects her baby outright, citing a purportedly biological dogmatism that overrides the maternal – race: "I can't go against my nature", said Lou' (24). Raymond demands that Oxford is tested, but his blood does not match the baby's. Henry reappears at the hospital, wanting to say goodbye before embarking home to Jamaica, and Lou throws him out. No test of his blood is requested or undertaken. The baby is put up for adoption, and the story ends on a final division between absolute certainties and cultural values – the priest, Lou says, said her daughter's removal was the right thing, though 'not a *good* thing' (27). The story is not without the possibility of mercy. Lou's compulsive observance of middle-class mores, her intoned denial of her snobbery and racism despite evidence to the contrary, we can intuit to be motivated by the 'hopeless childhood in Liverpool' of which we receive but a glimpse (10). That dirty, 'grey-white' early experience, scrubbed away by the job the nuns got for her to train as a nurse, surfaces in the doctor's tenuous suggestion to Raymond that the origins of their black baby daughter may lie generations back, in 'black blood in your family or your wife's' (23). Lou's sister Elizabeth, deprived of their financial support since Lou conceived, is delighted to invoke 'a nigro off a ship' as the possibility of a tainted inheritance visiting in retribution: 'well thats funny you have a coloured God is not asleep', adding 'your hubby must think it was that nigro you was showing off' (24–5). Encouraged into anthropological observation by the text's explicit acts of ethnography, we can position Spark's story as profoundly feminist in its study of a woman emotionally and morally debilitated by a culture that refuses her right to an identity which is not grounded in motherhood. But, in deference to the ambiguity that defines Spark's fiction, we can also read the baby (Dawn – a name

Lou chooses before the birth) as symbolic of a divine test, and one that is failed by Lou, as her maternity is made unholy by her refusal to submit to suffering or sacrifice.

Kinship and village life

Adam Kuper's genealogy of British anthropology reads the early 1950s as dominated by the so-called 'Manchester School', founded by Max Gluckman at the University of Manchester, and notes that '[v]irtually all the monographs on Central African rural societies which members of the school produced concentrated on village structure, and analysed the processes of conflict and conflict-resolution inherent in the structure of the community' (1985: 151). A Mancunian herself, Marghanita Laski produced a 1952 novel in just this mode, though her study is focused on a community, Priory Dean, just 'twenty miles away' from London (149). Her writing is furnished with thick description of housing, clothing and social behaviour that attend beadily to the suffocating nuances of class. On her retirement, Miss Moody, the draper, scandalously crosses the village's foundational social divide between the Priory Hill people (the 'gentry') and the low-lying Station Road people ('tradespeople'), by purchasing the loftily located Fernlea. When Miss Porteous, 'the cultural leader of Priory Dean society' (50), infiltrates the house, she is shocked to discover that:

The walls had been distempered a nice warm cream; the curtains at the casement windows were of that charming mock crossstitch mock-Jacobean linen, and the furniture, instead of being the tightly stuffed elaborately veneered walnut that most of the tradespeople bought, consisted of what [she] immediately sized up as *A Few Good Pieces*. (135)

Despite this surprisingly seemly defection, as the Second World War ends, the village remains a site of class warfare, with its battles pitched between gentry and tradespeople, and also between country life and an encroaching urbanity.

In postwar British social anthropology, the frequent debates around village and kinship structure might be characterized by the conflict of narratives of structural-functional stability, and a sense of culture and kinship (under the burgeoning influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss) as a more fluid 'language' of exchange. We might feasibly align this with a confrontation I have traced elsewhere within 1950s feminism. In it, the First Wave antagonism towards the patriarchal legal and social structures that bore its brunt (and cracked

beneath it) coalesces with a shifting attention towards a wider, textual framework of representation, as Second Wave thinking begins to swell (Ferrebe 2010). In *The Village*, Laski's writing works to conceptualize the relationship between environmental detail and the wider influence of village structure, conflict and cultural change in an explicitly ethnographic way. An anthropological study (fictional or otherwise) of village life therefore has marked potential in terms of exploring ideas around cultural relativity, diachronic change and the dynamism of social behaviours – as such, it offers an enticing field for those concerned with the role (and class) of women in society.

Laski's *The Village* is a study of kinship relations. The novel's central narrative focuses upon a battle between endogamy and exogamy, and the pressures brought to bear upon young Margaret Trevor and Roy Wilson, from Priory Hill and Station Road respectively. Yet barring that central (romance) narrative, it is predominantly a novel about the relationships between women. It opens the 'night the war ended', as Wendy Trevor and Edith Wilson, the mothers of the controversial couple-to-be, decide to make a last Watch, because, they believe of the Germans, it 'would be just like them to have a last raid, just for spite' (11, 13). Through this exercise, redundant in a practical sense, Laski begins with a utopian vision of how female relationships might operate across classes in the light of shared female experiences. Wendy confesses that she lost a baby whilst living in Kenya – Edith, holding her, acknowledges the same loss, and then:

She sat down beside Wendy, and again the two women sipped their tea, talking now in soft relaxed voices of the children when young, of their husbands, their parents, remembering the little things that had made up their lives, made them what they were. Neither had ever talked like this to anyone before and never would again. (27)

Yet beyond this night and its collaborative creation of a female culture, the novel characterizes the relationships between women as sites of the most stringent policing of ossified difference. When Mr Trevor passes Mr Wilson in the midst of the scandal of hypergamy, they share 'a glance that agreed that there it was, a rare old mess and none of their doing but that talking about it was the women's business, not theirs' (248).

The novel's feminist work is most apparent in its exploration of the kinship and class relationships between women in relation to issues around housework. The postwar establishment of the Welfare State made this mode of labour into a political issue, in response to the Beveridge Report's demand for the 'Recognition of housewives as a distinct insurance class of occupied persons with benefits

adjusted to their special needs' (Beveridge 1997: Section 30, paragraphs 107–17, n.p.). The 1951 General Election, which restored Churchill as Prime Minister, fielded an unprecedented number of female candidates (though the victorious Conservatives furnished the fewest), and was dubbed the 'Housewives' Election'. Bernard Shaw, supporting a Labour woman candidate, drew a direct link between (a ubiquitous female) housewifery and political savvy: 'Women who all have to manage homes and rear children are practical and know where the shoe pinches' (quoted Adam 2011: 230). One place the pinch was felt postwar (for the middle-class woman at least) was in relation to the availability, affordability and desirability of servants – a topic through which Laski, with her sharp anthropological eye, exploits the intersectionality of the personal, the political and the Political that will be so crucial to feminist thinking of the following decades. Edith Wilson used to 'do' for the Trevor household in its more affluent times. Wendy Trevor, her upper-middle-class family struggling desperately for money, now does her own housework 'incompetently and with a very bad grace':

To have sat down every week and polished the silver, to have read the recipe-books and produced appetising meals for her family would have meant, to her, willing acceptance of the servitude to which she was so unwillingly bound. (Laski 1952: 62)

Instinctively (for, beyond that last Watch with Edith, Wendy's life is devoid of political solidarity) she is aligned with Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein. In *Women's Two Roles*, published in 1956 and one of the decade's few unwaveringly feminist texts, they rail that 'the sentimental cult of domestic virtues is the cheapest method at society's disposal of keeping women quiet without seriously considering their grievances or improving their position' (166). 'Mummy's often said how bored she is,' muses Margaret (Laski 1952: 63), but Wendy, exhausted by their poverty and the attendant social shame, is unable to overturn her well-meaning husband Gerald's creed that women of their class 'didn't have to work' (65). She is, in the words of Kay Smallshaw in *How to Run Your Home Without Help* (1949), one of 'those who must be both mistress and maid' (2005: vi). From Gerald's point of view, this work should *not* happen both outside and inside the home – as Gavron notes, 'Women today are considered to have two choices, to work or to stay at home. This implies that staying at home does not involve work' (1966: 128). Because of the family's penury Margaret *will* have to work outside the home, and to her mother the least supportable shame of all is the fact that Margaret has no desire to, preferring housework or, at a pinch, a job as a cook: Wendy said, 'You must be mad' (Laski 1952: 63).

Margaret's falling in love with the lower class Roy Wilson is riddled with politically loaded implications. Part of his attraction for her, we might surmise, is that he shares her conception of the ideal (and traditionally gendered) home: 'Don't you worry, Mrs. Wilson, you'll have plenty to do keeping my home nice for me once the honeymoon's over' (182). For Roy, a wife freed from the necessity of going out to work is a marker of his financial success (Gerald, hearing of Roy's decent wage and burgeoning savings, gives 'a sharp, involuntary gasp', 209). Beveridge's idealized housewives, as a 'distinct insurance class of occupied persons', we might appreciate, are predicated upon the distinct middle-classness of the women involved. These demarcations manifest as both economic and ideological – their family can afford for them not to earn, and servants are undesirable (for their violation, we might speculate of the 'classless' ideal home). This is the class to which Roy aspires. Margaret's aspirations are difficult to read in terms of our own notions of political agency, but we can better understand them in the context of a decade at the end of which the victorious Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was able to announce with some resonance that the election had shown 'that the class war is obsolete' ('Conservative's Hat Trick', 1959: 6).

Laski locates Margaret at the nexus of competing female roles, both symbolic and practical. She is the novel's romantic heroine, and she strives for her right to be a housewife. She is also its hero, as a committed class rebel. Rather than explicitly confrontational, however, her commitment is asserted through a determined refusal to recognize the structuring principles within her own experience: 'The trouble with you, Miss Margaret,' Roy's sister Maureen tells her as she sits happily in their kitchen, 'is that you've got no sense of class' (Laski 1952:113). The ambiguity of 'class' here – recalling its function as both political and economic category – is telling (and likely to be deliberate, for Maureen is no fool). Margaret rejects the epitome of classiness (or at least its proxy – the village's Country Club that sports the sons of the upper middle class) for 'Station Road' tastes and the company of Roy, and her best friend Jill Morton. In so doing, she resolutely fails to acknowledge the social significance of the system that makes such hierarchical distinctions, and which is so live in the lives of her friends. It is Jill's reaction to the engagement to Roy that finally brings an end to Margaret's determined *nostalgie de la boue* (the novel is riven with references to earth). Jill, in her anger at Margaret's debasement, is forced to speak to her poorer but classier friend 'just like I would to a maid' in an attempt to disrupt her wilful ignorance of transgression inherent in the engagement (196). The female friendship offered as a more enduring version of the understanding borne on the night of the last Watch is defeated by the persistence of class amidst rapidly

changing social structures. Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (1884) repeatedly emphasized the distinction between class and wealth – a crucial distinction in Priory Dean – and was partially based upon Karl Marx's notes in response to the work of Morgan, the thinker credited with establishing the terms and parameters of the study of kinship. The origins of Marxist analysis, then, are underpinned by anthropological investigation, and Laski reworks that allegiance in her fictional study of female kinship. Stung by Jill's reaction, Margaret is ultimately provoked to acknowledge and articulate her position: 'If class is something that says that one kind of people can fall in love and another kind can't, then it's a wicked thing' (Laski 1952: 253).

Margaret wins her battle to marry Roy. Yet, as the narrator is quick to emphasize, 'She had won with an exhibition of power such as she had never imagined herself possessing and never would possess again' (253). The couple agree to emigrate. Laski lays repeated emphasis on the fact that Margaret is not (academically) bright: her private education provides no alternative path for her, defined as it is by headmistress Miss Latimer and her conviction that 'girls who weren't clever did something or other until they got married, and what it was they did didn't really matter very much' (57). Yet the plotting of such a path, through the expense of a private education that has, apparently, contributed to the crippling of the family's finances, was her mother's only clear political assertion. Miss Latimer tells Wendy, delicately,

I believe you told me, when the girls first entered school, that you and your husband had decided that it was your intention to, as it were, invest in your daughters' education rather than provide them with – er – I suppose one could say a dowry when they grew up. (58)

Margaret *must* marry, for reasons other than romantic inevitability: she is trained for nothing (or no job, at least, that her mother will countenance for her). Once again, during the 1950s, the messages around women's work are multivalent, as differing media profess the housewifely virtues as vehemently as the potential marital harmony (and economic benefits) if a woman goes out to work. Noel Streatfeild's 1950 debutante's manual, optimistically (in view of its teenage readership) entitled *The Years of Grace*, includes a 'Careers' section, in which proffered options include the Civil Service, teaching, nursing and secretarial work). Streatfeild suggests:

The best career for every woman is, of course, taking care of her husband and home. But not every girl marries the moment she leaves school, and in most

cases a good thing too. As well, some girls never marry at all. The days are over, thank goodness, when it was considered a disgrace not to get married, and girls married just to be married with all the misery that brings. (Streatfeild 1950: 289)

Her furious hedging captures the decade's conflict around women's careers – what girls should aspire to, and train for – exactly.

Debutantes at native dances

Audrey Richards's study *Chisungu* (1956) takes as its focus a Zambian tribe's girl's initiation ceremony. Richards's writing style makes use of a self-reflexive impulse (and an often disarmingly self-referential humour) to draw her reader's attention to her graceless presence as ethnographer in the ritual space. By implying the potential influence of her presence on the events described, she makes apparent the contradictions inherent in anthropological practice, freighted as it is by competing demands of subjective experience and objective analysis. David Scott has noted how, in anthropological writing across the twentieth century, a 'distinctive topos of female ethnographic authority develops around the scene of the native dance', and that this scene is one which repeatedly calls into question Malinowski's definitive practice of participant observation. 'Frequently describing a circle', Scott claims,

the women's dance functions as a handy metonym for the putatively closed circle of the native culture and occasions that necessary moment of crisis at which the ethnographer perceives that, though she has physically been in the territory of her studied people for some time, she has yet to step across that *epistemological* boundary dividing her internalized culture from theirs. (Scott 1989: 78, his emphasis)

In Pym's *Less Than Angels*, the academic Tom Mallow observes a debutante's ball, yet, tellingly, reads the event to be revealing only of the kinship ties he severed when he became 'detrribalized' from the social class that was his birthright (Pym 2012: 162). Richards's text, by contrast, revels in the Chisungu ritual as a dynamic symbolic practice requiring intense emotional engagement of both participants and participant observers: 'If the observations made here under the title of "pragmatic effects" mean anything,' Richards writes, 'they point to the number and variety of emotional attitudes which can be expressed by symbolic behaviour' (1982: 69). For Pym, it is Catherine Oliphant's insights into the ball's anthropological context that are revelatory in terms of their observation of cultural relativity and institutionalized snobbery:

She had often wondered why it was that anthropologists seemed to explore only the lower strata of their own society. Perhaps it was a kind of hidden fear that they might prove unworthy in some way, for she was sure that the experience of a debutante dance in Belgravia would be as rewarding for them as any piece of native ceremonial. (Pym 2012: 136)

Tom believes 'women had this almost superstitious fear of expressing their feelings in words' (152), yet it is Catherine's practice of an anthropological method that attends both to descriptions of 'symbolic behaviour' and 'the number and variety of emotional attitudes' which it expresses that provides the novel's most acute observations regarding social structure and gender politics (Richards 1982: 69). Catherine's insight, like Deidre's, comes from her transgression of what Scott calls the 'ethnographic principle of native ethnocentrism [which] mandates that being an insider means, above all, not seeing the *culture* of which one is a part' (Scott 1989: 78).

Women's fiction from the 1950s returns regularly to that 'distinctive topos of female ethnographic authority', the native dance, as a site yielding particular insight into gendered cultural practices (78). A number of writers of the short form make use of such a scene of initiation to explore the performances and paradoxes of adult femininity. Elizabeth Taylor's 1951 story 'You'll Enjoy It When You Get There', is an account of the social debut of an eighteen-year-old girl, Rhoda. Her mother laid low by a bout of jaundice (brought on, it is implied, by 'immoderate' drinking in a spare but telling sketch of the strains of maintaining a feminine social performance), Rhoda accompanies her father to the Norley Trade Banquet, an event involving a train journey north to the Midlands, and overnight stay in a 'great station hotel' (Taylor 1968: 207, 209). Rhoda's anxious attempts to mimic the mores of middle-class society and its stipulations of femininity offer the opportunity for a scrupulous record of the particularity of these rituals, and the inherent suggestion of their contingency. Taylor's third-person narration compromises the possibility of purely detached observation through its intense focalization through Rhoda, necessitating an empathetic identification with the feminine requirement, for example, elegantly to manage 'bag, bouquet and skirt' (212), daintily to consume the 'acid-tasting, red soup' (213), and to wear an attritional smile 'as if she were enchanted' (215). Her *gauche* attempts to overcome the Mayor's attraction to the competing (and much more successful) 'feminine flattery and cajolery' on offer in the dinner guest to his far side by regaling him with a paean to her Burmese cat are unsuccessful at first airing (212). When she repeats them verbatim to a tubby, ageing waltz partner

who is ultimately revealed to be the Mayor without his neck chain, her humiliation is complete. Scott's study goes on to define 'native ethnocentrism' to mean 'knowing how and when to dance but not grasping the ethnographic significance of the dance' (Scott 1989: 78). Rhoda, a native middle-class girl, grasps how and when and why to dance, yet still fails to execute an effective entry into the practices and institutions that define and constrict her mother's identity. The Mayor's patriarchal regalia – jewellery, of course, in a neat irony – 'was all she had had to distinguish him from the rest of the bald-headed and obese middle-aged men', her own father amongst their ranks (Taylor 1968: 217). Unlike Catherine, Rhoda is an ingénue, not an anthropologist. Rather, the story's free indirect discourse demands empathetic engagement at the same time as it conducts a dispassionate record of details. Taylor's text makes its readers into participant observers of a (failed) feminine rite.

In Attia Hosain's 1953 story 'The First Party', the unnamed protagonist's unfamiliarity with the urban Indian milieu into which her marriage has brought her is used to present the reader with a series of anthropological observations that again combine the analysis of symbolism with a scrutiny (and empathic engendering) of its emotional effects. Listening to the chatter of the female party-goers, the unnamed newly-wed, the narrative voice informs us,

found the bi-lingual patchwork distracting, and its pattern, familiar to others, with allusions and references unrelated to her own experiences, was distressingly obscure. [...] Their different stresses made even talk of dress and appearance sound unfamiliar. She could not understand the importance of relating clothes to time and place and not just occasion; nor their preoccupation with limbs and bodies, which should be covered, and not face and features alone. They made problems about things she took for granted. (Hosain 1988: 18)

Hosain settled in Britain in 1947, leaving India shortly after partition to avoid moving to the newly-created Pakistan. Through a varied sequence of settings and cultural allegiances, her collection *Phoenix Fled* maintains a focus upon kinship relations, and the schism between traditional and emergent cultures. In 'The Street of the Moon', the young wife Hasina, who ends the story forced to prostitute herself, represents a rebellious but ultimately abject modernity, but in 'The First Party', the new bride sits (albeit shakily on the edge of a chair) as a bastion of conservatism, experiencing a burgeoning repulsion for the 'new women' around her, the 'wicked, contemptible, grotesque mimics of the foreign ones among them for whom she felt no hatred because from them she expected nothing better' (21). The story turns upon a paradox – the wife's realization that

conformity to this new society, though abhorrent, is her traditional duty: 'now she saw her husband was one of the destroyers; and yet she knew that above all others was the belief that her life must be one with his. In confusion and despair she was surrounded by ruins' (22). 'The First Party' offers its reader a complex series of anthropological observations: it renders a Western-style femininity reproduced by Indian women in a pre-partition nation as it is perceived by the daughter of an older cultural tradition of gendered behaviour. As such, the femininity contemporary to the 1950s British reader – and by that token, *all* femininity – is revealed as mobile and contingent. At the same time, the fear engendered in the bride by a future she perceives to be disturbingly unrestricted – one in which familiar walls lie in ruins – can be read as a response not solely to social, domestic structures, but to national and imperial ones as well. Reflecting upon his own ethnographic experience and his contribution to anthropological theory, Clifford Geertz stressed 'the characteristic intellectual movement, the inward conceptual rhythm, in each of these analyses, and indeed in all similar analyses, including those of Malinowski – namely, a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view' (Geertz 1983: 69). Hosain's anthropological fictional practice reveals the supposedly 'private sphere' of female emotional experience to be radically implicated in the public processes of social, cultural and political change (and vice versa). Again, this is achieved through a technique of third-person narration with exclusive and intense focalization through the central female character.

The dynamics of anthropology then, are perpetual and dialectical, demanding emotional engagement, performative commitment and scrupulous observation. Though largely missing from the academy (Richards is a notable exception), a body of women authors of the 1950s were inscribing in their fiction an anthropology of their everyday experience of the cultural productions and expectations surrounding their gender. Inured as they were to the unmistakable artifice and conflicting roles of hegemonic feminine culture, the liminal role of participant observer, so problematic within the binary discourse of the patriarchy, was already embedded in their artistic practice. This anthropology of the feminine can, despite enduring accusations of the political apathy of women of the decade, be understood as an explicitly feminist act. Both Taylor and Hosain use initiation into a particular cultural context in order to expose a society's expectations of femininity. By contrast, Brigid Brophy's 1953 story 'His Wife Survived Him' uses an exit – from a party and the way of life it symbolizes – to effect its feminist critique. As the story opens, the central character, Patricia, is

caught in the middle of a cocktail party conversation (between two men) about female submission. One man intimates that women are failing society: he pronounces that they have a duty to resist patriarchy as everyone has a duty to resist a dictator, yet they give way to men because they have ‘no sense of morality’ (92). Patricia feels, the narrator notes wryly, ‘she could make no contribution, unless she told the little group they were discussing nothing less than history in its entirety, not to mention all personal relationships: and that would hardly be party conversation’ (93). Patricia’s sense of Geertz’s dialectic between the local and the global is clearly keen. Later she claims of these self-pronounced ‘moralists’ that ‘One could tell they had never encountered the problem they were discussing as a situation in their own lives’ (94–5). By contrast, she herself is able to move between participation and observation, dissociating herself at times in order to try ‘to listen to the party as if she were not in it’ (93).

That the personal is political (and vice versa), for Brophy as it is for Hosain, is not in doubt. As an institution that so clearly bridges that divide, marriage offers an ideal field study. Patricia is married to Gavin, a famous actor and an exemplar (according to one male party guest) of ‘masculine grace’ (97). Part of her role as ‘the wife, you know, of –’ (as she is routinely introduced) is to answer the love letters he receives from other women as fan mail (95). Gavin often talks about her task to people they have only just met; ‘He seemed to display it as something sweet in himself; evidence of the happiness of their marriage, their – what was the political jargon? – solid front’ (97). That phrase ‘political jargon’ suggests not only that to marry is to commit a political act, but also that the discourse of marriage – of an enduring marriage – is one that is theatrically exploited by politicians. ‘Solid front’ is thus rendered sinisterly superficial. The language of performance pervades the account of Patricia’s experience. Gavin’s masculinity – his self itself – is emphasized as something artful: it is a ‘statuette’ (98), a ‘little masterpiece’ (107). With a Promethean panache, he has ‘moulded his own figure as if it had been clay: and it was the more-than-realistic, the theatrical perfection of the figure which bound people to him regardless of their age and sex’ (98). Peacock worship, it would seem, is ubiquitous in these social circles. The prescience of Brophy’s gender analysis lies not just in this explicit demonstration of performativity, but also in Patricia’s ruthless confrontation of her own complicity in tending and adoring the masculine myth of her husband’s identity: ‘She asked herself if she was not the most responsible of all’ (98).

Answering letters in which women offer themselves to Gavin, Patricia perpetuates a chivalric ideal: ‘she said what she imagined an honourable man

would say' (103–4). One of these letters will arrive, after the party, from a woman who spends the evening gazing at Gavin, a model of ideal femininity in that from 'the face, as it attended to Gavin, you could read only Gavin's character. The woman's was the face to be affected, his to affect'. Her spectacular, specular beauty is 'of the type to which thought and emotion added nothing' – it is a reflecting surface (102). Patricia bears witness to this moment, and responds to it later in a letter 'from' Gavin: 'You will realise there is very little I can honourably say to you except that I have read your letter and not lightly considered it. Please be assured that it is destroyed' (113). It is this confrontation with the Platonic passivity of ideal femininity that provokes Patricia to act. Women, the narrator claims, 'had a resistance to mobility, even mobility suggested by a raging sea, and a bias towards the status quo. For them, adventure was to cultivate the old fields. For them endurance of pain was courage' (109). Having moved in and out of participation and observation in the 'continual dialectical tacking' Geertz identifies as characteristic of the anthropological impulse, Patricia decides to leave Gavin, to assert herself in an act of self-individuation amongst the conformative ritual gender practice both of the party and her marriage (Geertz 1983: 69). Yet Brophy does not afford us unmitigated heroic consolation of the existentialist creed. Contemplating her exit, Patricia 'had a notion a great blankness, a lack of direction and intention, would come down upon her once she had settled into the state of not being Gavin's wife, but to cease to be Gavin's wife – that was an act' (Brophy 1953: 114–15). That word 'act', though, in a story about the bad faith of actors, has ambiguous existential significance.

Brophy's style in 'His Wife Survived Him' is conspicuously experimental. Though the story adopts a combination of third-person narrative voice and focalization through the central female character, both voice and focalization sporadically drift beyond Patricia, providing a textual model of a more indeterminate selfhood in a blend of symbolic analysis and realist experience. Penelope Mortimer's 1956 novel *The Bright Prison* (the prison is marriage; the brightness, financial and social privilege) adopts a similar approach in the inclusion, in its latter half, of a plot development that functions on the level of psychic symbolism to the point of surreality. Again we might meaningfully trace a shift across the writing gathered here similar to that identified by Kuper in postwar anthropology: 'Many were ready to shift their interest from norms and action ['what really happens', in Malinowski's phrase] to symbolic systems' (1985: 168). Contemporary reviewers showed displeasure with this breach of the realist style that dominated so much 1950s fiction: Philip John Stead in the *Times Literary Supplement* considered the early part of *The Bright Prison* to be:

credible and just, but in the later chapters it hovers uneasily between fantasy and realism when the husband and wife find ephemeral partners who turn out to be already involved with each other. There is an arbitrary symbolism about this that quite unnecessarily takes away from the truth of the earlier writing. (Stead 1956: 590)

In fact, that 'uneasy' state between fantasy and realism is invoked with regularity throughout the novel, in its dedicated recognition of the role of myth and symbol in everyday experience.

Antonia and Mark Painton married thirteen years ago, conceiving their first daughter, Georgina, within a month. Their experience thereafter – three more children, a beautiful house, Antonia's domestic role, the servicing of Mark's legal career – has been dictated by convention: they 'did things not because they were right or wrong, pleasant or unpleasant, but because there was no alternative' (Mortimer 1956: 36). As such, the bright myth of their 'ideal' marriage now feels to both to be a tenuous thing, subject to disruption by any change: in their beautifully appointed dining room, the frame of their wedding photo shines, but the picture inside 'was dark, indistinct' (29). Change erupts with the sudden illness of their daughter Charlotte, and their insecurities are proven correct, as their ideal home swiftly becomes a deserted house, its cushions un-plumped by the absent housewife, and fog creeping in through an open front door, and drifting from room to room (109). To Antonia, the 'house no longer meant anything to her: it was a myth in which, disillusioned but without rancor, she no longer believed' (178). With Antonia's reckless abandonment of her domestic and maternal duties, Mortimer invokes a current of feeling approximating a postwar folk panic. John Bowlby's 1953 study *Childcare and the Growth of Love* came from his report commissioned by the World Health Organization after the Second World War, in which he was charged to consider the presiding assumptions and methods of institutions caring for homeless children. The risk of his concept of 'maternal deprivation' was taken up as rife in any situation in which a mother was absent. Christina Hardyment states judiciously that:

Bowlby cannot be blamed any more than Freud for the fact that the meat of both men's findings was borrowed from the world of the abnormal, where they were established from observation of extreme cases of psychic abuse, and applied over-enthusiastically to normal life. (2007: 228)

Nonetheless, as American anthropologist Margaret Mead was to note of the prevailing cultural insistence that a mother should never be separated from her child, this can be interpreted as 'a new and subtle form of anti-feminism in which

men – under the guise of exalting the importance of maternity – are tying women more tightly to their children' (1954: 480). Mortimer, like Pym's Catherine Oliphant, derives income from a 'bright magazine style' of writing – in Mortimer's case, pseudonymously, as 'Ann Temple', agony aunt of the *Daily Mail* (Pym 2012: 65). Her various voices of the 1950s – in newspaper columns and novels – testify to an array of competing valences of orthodox femininity, economic necessity and editorial line. Having castigated a correspondent weighing up the social pressures and financial implications of a baby for her reluctant tone when considering 'the miracle that transforms both of you into full and complete human beings, that links you with all the past and all the future so that you have the feeling if not the understanding of the permanence and the meaning and the purpose of life', she then soothes, 'Don't think I am unsympathetic with you' (Temple 1952: 2).

At the opening of *The Bright Prison*, Charlotte is turning seven, and a ritual gathering has been organized in the house, involving a guessing game in which the names of figures from history are attached, unseen, to each child:

Desultorily, the children wandered about the enormous nursery, the labels carefully pinned on net, taffeta and velvet. They looked at each other's backs and tittered a little and kept asking, 'Am I a man or a woman?' – the only distinction they seemed to recognise. (Mortimer 1956: 19)

That the category of gender is fundamental to identity is not an assumption confined to children. Reneging on her role of housewife and mother, Antonia is lost. So too is Mark when he ceases to return home from work to a redolent domesticity. Stead's disquiet at the novel's elements of fantasy might in part have been generated by Mortimer's notable determination to demonstrate the way in which parental sensuality, long since absented from the 'not very magnificent act' of intercourse, becomes bound up in the bodies of children (187). Of his daughter Charlotte, exquisitely beautiful and unintelligent, Mark 'only knew that the thought of her body hurt or offended gave him physical agony. She was his only sensual pleasure, the only thing in his life whose beauty and delicacy had not been ravaged by habit' (99). The bedroom of the widower David's daughter expresses his sublimated desires rather than the child's own preferences. Antonia discovers it to be a place in which:

the world of childhood had been made terrifying, obscene, by the elimination of all mystery, eccentricity or pain: wherever the eye searched it fell flatly on sexy rabbits; winged midgets simpered insanely round the walls; suffused by the rosy brothel light, the room was a cosy hell, a child's hell. (215–16)

Antonia instinctively rejects a role as surrogate mother to Annette (even as she explores the possibility of a relationship with David). At a drunken, surreal (adult) party, the mysterious (and appropriately named) Mr Teasedown teases Antonia, 'Presumably maternal attraction, like sex attraction, is discriminating? You don't want to fall into bed with every child you meet?' (200).

Mortimer's unflinching acknowledgement of the totems and taboos of upper-middle-class London society is part of a strategy of foregrounding cultural relativity in order to paint that (polite) society as underlain by inchoate impulses that threaten constantly to break through its civilized veneer. Antonia approaches the children at Charlotte's birthday party 'like someone approaching a group of wild animals, feeling that they might suddenly charge or, on a signal from their leader, break away, swarm delicately and savagely through the house, destroying it' (18). Mark, entering another (adult) party, notes its 'savage and indefinite roar, the sibilant undertone, the rise and slight shriek and immediate death of individual voices' (206). Previously, adrift, drunk and in a pub with Barbara, a young woman he meets in the hospital at which Charlotte is being treated for appendicitis, he lashes out at a dachshund in the arms of a 'terribly queer' young man (209). Looking around, he sees how every 'face was a mirror reflecting a strange and horrifying image, himself; nowhere could he see reflected the sober and loving man, husband, father, that he knew himself to be' (149). His wife, his speculum, has been misplaced. Rather than focalizing the narrative solely through Antonia, Mortimer opts for a technique of roving free indirect discourse that allows insight into the points of view of multiple characters, as well as their participant observations of the society that both includes and others them. So, for example, though Antonia provides the novel's empathetic centre, we also share Mark's disorientated terror at his faltering marriage, and David's detached observation of Antonia as 'the embodiment of all the mysteries which in his own marriage had remained unsolved, a native of a world he had briefly seen and at the time disliked, frightened then by the peculiar dangers, rigid laws, the terrifying possibility of instant destruction which now in middle age he found fascinating' (164).

Though the novel's central male characters are treated judiciously in that their reprehensible behaviour is made comprehensible, it is women – mothers and daughters – who lie at the centre of Mortimer's novel and its anthropological observation. Antonia's two eldest daughters diverge markedly in their response to received femininity – Georgina, at twelve, is an 'awkward, angular child impossible to think of as a woman' (87), while it takes her parents days to distinguish the suffering of Charlotte's illness from her characteristic, beatific

passivity. Annette, David's daughter, who has lost her mother so young, maintains a faux innocence that is more a comfort to her father than it is to herself – receiving a toy rabbit, she decides to call it Cuddlepie, rightly believing 'that her father liked these sweet names she found for her toys, she thought that she might placate him' (175). Both Mark and David locate a kind of tortured respite in an idealized femininity that can exist only in girls rather than grown women. Barbara, tantalizingly childlike and referred to as 'the girl' throughout the novel, dandles the potential, perhaps, of a new womanhood, but lapses ultimately into convention to give Annette a 'nice Mummy to bath her and put her to bed' (222). Hannah Gavron emphatically noted that, for the middle-class respondents to her survey, the 'impact of the birth of the first child on the young mothers in this sample was tremendous, because it changed them from being a new kind of woman to being the traditional woman' (Gavron 1966: 135). Barbara's own mother, in hospital, likes to see her daily, but not for long – after all, Barbara claims to Mark, 'It's terribly difficult to think of anything to say, especially to one's mother' (Mortimer 1956: 97). Antonia's own mother, having modelled domestic complicity all her life, is landed with the two youngest Painton children as their parents rove apart. Battered by Felicity's questions, she has but one response:

Why do you grow old, die, love, weep, grow hungry, why do you live at all?

'You must ask your mother,' Mrs Levington said.

'Does she know?' 'Yes,' Mrs Levington said. (195)

She promptly dies, desperately maintaining the idea that her own relentless battle ('food reduced to meals, dirt trapped, mending wrestled with, disorder vanquished, victory gained', 57) has made her daughter's life both easier and more meaningful. Yet Antonia's agonized confusion, and Barbara's dull detachment, belie that idea of a continuum of maternal wisdom or an enduring female history (or herstory). At Charlotte's party, one child, given Antonia's clue of 'a woman. In history. With red hair', can only proffer, hopelessly, 'Rita Hayworth?' (20).

The 'reformer's science'

The great national and social work of Britain in the 1950s – the Welfare State, and the rebuilding of Britain – was underpinned by a particular model of gender. The decade's femininity is easily identified – in media, cultural and policy texts – as a powerful organizing concept privileged to the extent that it purportedly overrides any other economic, personal or social differences. Yet Bronislaw Malinowski's observation on what he called 'savage society' might equally be

applied to its ideology, for it was ‘not a consistent logical scheme, but rather a seething mixture of conflicting principles’ (1926: 121). During a time in which debates around the proper education of young women were similarly seething, the experience of femininity had the potential to school female authors in the cognitive expertise that underpinned Malinowski’s professional practice – that of participant observation, in which the anthropologist operates at two levels simultaneously, engaging and scrutinizing. Anthropology’s inherent concern with incipient bias and the power structures of observation and reporting make it a mode of study that prompts attention to writing style and narrative voice, and the relationship of both with political power. The fiction considered here unanimously conducts its work in third-person free indirect narration, which enables and demands the ‘dialectical tacking’ that Geertz identifies as the ‘inward conceptual rhythm’ of the anthropological discipline (Geertz 1983: 69). It understands the female experience that it documents at both a symbolic and a lived level, balancing attention to the individual psyche and its cultural environment, and prefiguring a dual approach that is to underpin the work of the Second Wave. As Edwin Ardener was to put it, ‘Men’s models of society are expressed at a metalevel which purports to define women. Only at the level of the analysis of belief can the voiceless masses be restored to speech’ (Ardener 1975: 14). E.B. Tylor, holder of the first university post in anthropology in 1884, called anthropology the ‘reformer’s science’. The findings of his discipline, he anticipated would allow the ‘great modern nations to understand themselves, to weigh in a just balance their own merits and defects, and even in some measure to forecast [. . .] the possibilities of the future’ (Tylor 1896: v). 1950s feminist discourse may not often be explicit in its fiction, but women writing through the decade are nonetheless evincing a project that will realize at least some of these future possibilities.

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